



Australian Government

body image

Feedback on the findings
from the National Strategy on
Body Image Online Consultation

September 2009

Feedback on the findings from the National Strategy on Body Image Online Consultation

Introduction

As part of the development of the National Strategy on Body Image, including the voluntary Industry Code of Conduct, the Australian Government recently conducted an online public consultation. The aim of the consultation was to capture a wide range of views and ideas on how to respond to issues that are associated with negative body image.

The consultation was divided into four main parts and respondents had the option of only answering the questions they were interested in. Each part sought views on key elements of the proposed National Strategy.

PART ONE

asked what the issues are that should be included as part of 'body image'.

PART TWO

asked how we can increase the capacity and resilience of individuals.

PART THREE

asked how we can change the messages given by our culture about what is beautiful and promote a framework which encourages a healthy body image, including through a Code of Conduct.

PART FOUR

provided an opportunity to share stories and thoughts on the issue, or outline concerns about any element of the strategy that is not otherwise covered in parts one and two.

Apart from the demographic data, this paper uses raw numbers when representing feedback from respondents. This is because not all respondents answered every question, and respondents were often given the option of choosing more than one answer. Numbers should not be interpreted as a percentage of overall responses.

Executive Summary

Summary of Part 1

Generally, respondents tended to be in favour of interpreting body image broadly. Responses indicated a real concern about the impact disabilities and ethnic diversity can have on body image. Respondents stressed the importance of including these issues when addressing negative body image.

Some respondents suggested a greater need for representation of people with characteristics such as scars and burns, which traditionally may have been concealed or not displayed in the media.

The response to this question is consistent with other themes that arose throughout the consultation about the need to promote a cultural view that places greater emphasis on what people can do and who they are in a more holistic sense, rather than have so much focus on people's appearance.

Summary of Part 2

While the ideas and programs in Part 2 are reported individually, most participants chose a variety of themes and messages to be included as part of addressing body image. A key theme that came through was the interaction and relatedness of many of these messages. For example, focusing on a person's health and wellbeing rather than their physical appearance is closely linked to respecting people as holistic and valuable individuals.

Importantly, there was not consensus on all issues. This was most noticeable in comments around the use of BMI as an indicator of healthy weight. Some people were strongly against the use of BMI while others tended to be more supportive of the role it can play as a guideline for healthy weight. Broadly, it could be said that there was a guarded understanding that BMI can be a useful indicator, but caution is needed when interpreting the results and using this as a solitary measure without considering other factors.

With regard to ideas on body image programs and initiatives, many respondents also noted programs and initiatives that are already in existence, such as the 'Go for your life' program that is run by the Butterfly Foundation and Dove in schools. While these have not been listed individually as part of this summary, they are being looked at as existing and working initiatives in the context of developing the Strategy.

Summary of Part 3

When addressing concerns about body image messages that are promoted from within industry, the majority of respondents preferred the inception of one broad code that is supported by additional guidelines that are specific to the media, advertising and fashion industries.

Respondents noted that measures could be used to increase the effectiveness of the Code. These included supporting the Code with an administrative body that could monitor the effectiveness of the Code and providing incentives and disincentives for businesses that followed the Code (noting that many felt that incentives were more likely to be effective than disincentives).

Summary of Part 4

Overall respondents recognised the need to consider emerging technologies when addressing body image. Online resources were regarded as a potential source for harmful ideas on body image, but also as a means of promoting the positive messages on body image, including the Code.

The overall message was that there is a need for a holistic and national approach to addressing body image and that this must be done in partnership with both community and key stakeholders.

The Consultation

Demographic information

The consultation ran for four weeks and received 150 responses, with 148 of them submitted in the online form. The majority of responses were received from individuals and community organisations, including young people, teachers, youth workers, social workers, lawyers and psychologists. While some responses were also received from people who work within and represent the media, fashion and advertising industries, the results are not considered representative of these industries as a whole.

Of the online submissions, 58% were from young people, the remaining 42% were from people older than 25 years of age. Of those young people who participated in the consultation, 53.5% were aged 21 to 25, 42% were from young people aged 16 to 20 and 4.5% of participants were aged 12 to 15.

People from all states and territories participated in the consultation. There was a strong response from New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria. The table below gives a breakdown of respondents according to the state/territory where they reside.

State/Territory	No of respondents	Percentage of respondents
NSW	35	23.5%
Victoria	25	17%
Queensland	19	13%
South Australia	34	23%
Western Australia	8	5.5%
Tasmania	8	5.5%
Northern Territory	2	1%
Australian Capital Territory	17	11.5%

PART ONE

WHAT ISSUES SHOULD BE INCLUDED AS PART OF 'BODY IMAGE'?

Consultation point 1: What should be included as part of body image?

Body image is about what a person thinks and how they feel about and value their own body. It is a very individual concern and the term 'body image' can mean different things to different people.

The consultation suggested that the most common factor thought of when talking about body image is the size and shape of a person and noted that the Strategy will address these issues for males and females. This question sought to gain an understanding of how broadly people wanted the Strategy to interpret body image and what issues people think the Strategy should be concerned with.

Question 1.1 What other aspects of appearance should be considered as part of the governments efforts to address body image?

Topic	YES	NO
Ethnic diversity	116	18
Natural skin colour (skin that is not tanned and promotes sun-smart behaviour)	126	10
Religious diversity	79	50
Physical disabilities	120	14
Other (responses included):	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diversity of gender and sexuality• scars and burns• birth marks	

PART TWO

HOW WE CAN INCREASE THE CAPACITY AND RESILIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS?

There are a range of individual characteristics that can interact with a person's immediate social environment (including their parents, family members, peers, teachers, etc) to influence how a person thinks and feels about their body. This is why it is important to make sure that young people, and those who influence them, are equipped to understand, deal with and help to address the problem of body dissatisfaction at a personal and interpersonal level.

Part 2 of the consultation asked respondents to identify ideas or messages that could increase the capacity and resilience of individuals to respond to negative body image messages. This included asking people to identify existing initiatives that are run by government and non-government organisations that are already addressing body image concerns effectively.

The consultation asked people:

- for their idea, program or message
- where it could be used
- the age for which it might be most appropriate
- if it is an existing idea, program or message, and if so, if there is any supporting information that could be used to better understand the idea.

The following lists the themes of messages, ideas and programs that were raised throughout submissions.

Ideas for messages that could be used to promote a more positive body image.

(Quotes are provided where they are indicative or help to explain a particular theme.)

- There is a need to accept all body shapes and sizes. The media, fashion and advertising industries need to better represent the diversity of people

'Some people are naturally larger or smaller than average, and they are all "real women". Some people have "hourglass" or "pear" or "apple" or other shapes. It's all normal human diversity.'

- Encourage people to recognise their own individual beauty, rather than look to external sources for how they should look

'People are so concerned with what other people think of them and thrive to be the most fashionable and follow the other sheep.'

- Increase the emphasis placed on health and wellbeing rather than physical characteristics
- There needs to be less focus on the Body Mass Index (BMI) as an indicator of healthy weight
- Expose the prejudice against larger body types and the message that being larger is unhealthy. There should be less focus on obesity.

NOTE – This theme was expressed in varying degrees across submissions and it is suggested that most respondents would acknowledge the serious health repercussions associated with obesity and being overweight. There was concern about the attention placed on obesity and how the messages associated with addressing obesity might be interpreted by people who are overly concerned about their body image or who suffer from disordered eating.

Messages around obesity and body image are not viewed as incongruent. As noted throughout submissions, both messages are primarily concerned with the health and wellbeing of people.

- Increase the importance placed on respecting people as holistic and valuable individuals
- There is a need to promote the role of family (particularly mothers) when communicating messages of positive body image
- Being thin should not be portrayed as an ideal or aspirational goal.

Ideas for programs and initiatives that could be used to promote a more positive body image.

- Use schools as a vehicle to promote positive body image messages. This could be done through including positive body image messages within the school curriculum and by emphasising an acceptance of different bodies within the school culture. It was suggested that this be done through:
 - Encouraging peer based discussions on body image
 - Helping students to be aware of and actively interpret media messages (digital literacy). This could include promoting a healthy scepticism towards advertising and media messages
 - Equipping teachers and school councillors with information on body image to help them identify the early signs of problems and respond to them
 - Promoting events within school that highlight diversity, self-esteem and self-respect and (where appropriate) relate these back to personal messages on positive body image
- Hold community workshops and other events which address negative body image and promote positive body image
- Develop and run a public awareness campaign on positive body image
- Introduce a code of conduct and monitor the body image messages sent through the media.

Particular locations where messages, programs and initiatives would be most useful

Location	Number
School	95
Social Groups	60
Home	44
Sporting	42
Work	33
Other (responses included):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public hospitals and doctor's surgeries • Youth groups, religious groups • Fashion industry training locations • Media-billboards, cinemas • Community groups • Festivals

Specific age groups that messages, programs and initiatives could be targeted toward

Age Group	Number
Less than 12	65
12-15	108
16-20	103
21-25	66
Over 25	47

PART THREE

HOW WE CAN CHANGE THE MESSAGES GIVEN BY OUR CULTURE ABOUT WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL AND PROMOTE A FRAMEWORK WHICH ENCOURAGES THE PROMOTION OF A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE, INCLUDING THROUGH A CODE OF CONDUCT.

There will always be a cultural view of what is considered beautiful. This is not, in itself, considered problematic. However, when this idealistic version of beauty becomes manufactured and unattainable, it can lead people to engage in increasingly unhealthy behaviours as they attempt to conform to this ideal.

The mass media, fashion and advertising industries play a significant role in developing, promoting and distributing our cultural ideals of beauty. For many people, the view of beauty that is being promoted as ideal is having a negative influence on their body image and wellbeing.

This part asked respondents for ideas on how to address the current unrealistic and sometimes unhealthy notions of beauty, and promote more positive body image messages, through a voluntary Industry Code of Conduct and other interventions. As the Government intends to work with industry in the implementation of these initiatives, respondents were asked for their thoughts about where industry was placed to respond to this issue and how initiatives could be most effectively implemented.

The following lists the themes of messages, ideas and programs that were raised consistently throughout submissions in response to the different questions.

Apart from a voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image, how else can we achieve cultural change around body image?

(Quotes are provided where they are indicative or help to explain a particular theme.)

- Educating community including young people, parents, health professionals and industry, with a particular focus on media literacy
'We have to educate the general public on the media.'
- We need to have an holistic approach that focuses on health and wellbeing, not just focus on skinny models or body shapes
- Introduce national sizing standards for clothes

- Regulate the diet industry, particularly the promotion and advertisements of fad diets. This is also related to food packaging and the messages people use to sell foods

'Advertisers would have to display a warning message like on the packet of cigarettes if they do not comply with code of conduct.'

- Run a social marketing campaign that promotes people being valued for who they are, rather than how they look. This campaign could counter established messages, such as 'thin is beautiful' and promote the importance of diversity, acceptance and being healthy.

What should a Code of Conduct look like?

(This question asked respondents whether a code should be generic for all relevant industries, specifically designed to fit different industries, incorporated within existing codes (such as those that exist for advertising and television), or a mixture of a generic code and specific codes.)

Options for codes	Number of responses
Option 1. One broad code that deals only with generic issues	2
Option 2. One code that deals with generic issues, but also has puts forward ideas that are specific to different industries	68
Option 3. A separate body image code for each industry that is covered	30
Option 4. Incorporate body image clauses within existing industry codes	18
Option 5. Other	10

The code would be most effective because:

(Respondents were then asked why they thought the option they selected would be most effective.)

Broadly, respondents' comments demonstrated an understanding of the benefits of each option. The majority noted the benefits of having a single code that was simple to point to for all industries, but were also concerned that this would not be sufficiently detailed to respond to the issues raised within individual industries and opted for Option 2. Options 3 and 4 tended to be accompanied by comments about the importance of being clear and specific about what is and is not appropriate behaviour within a particular industry. Many people indicated that they were cynical of the willingness industry has to promote positive body image messages. Many responses advocated the need to incorporate monitoring and regulation as part of the introduction of a Code to ensure accountability.

What issues should a code cover?

(Respondents were asked whether they agreed that the following topics should be included as part of a Code of Conduct. They were then asked for suggestions about what else should be incorporated within a code that was generic to all industries and specific to individual industries.)

Topic	YES	NO
Clearer notification of altered or enhanced images, including digital alterations	124	14
Better representation of diverse body shapes and sizes	127	8
Appropriate industry age limits	115	13

What are some other issues that you think are applicable to all industries and you would like to see covered in a body image code of conduct?

(The following are the recurring ideas that people felt were relevant to all industries.)

- Diversity in body images, including body shape and size, ethnicity, culture, age, religion and skin covered for religious reasons, gender and sexuality, and natural skin colours, to reflect the diversity of the Australian population and promote respect for all people, regardless of their appearances
- Age limits for models
- Focus on health and wellbeing and discourage pressure that is placed on people to diet and lose weight
- Encourage a focus on personal qualities and respect rather than appearance
- Address discrimination based on body size and appearance
- The need to disclose enhanced images and encourage less use of digital enhancement within photographic images
- Set a standard weight, size and/or BMI limit for models
- Recognition that the safety of young people, particularly those under 18 should be a primary concern. This includes the importance of discouraging and/or increased regulation around the objectification or sexualisation of children and young people, particularly girls and women
- Encourage more realistic portrayal of bodies and attainable ideals
- Encourage a focus on improving self-esteem.

What are the issues that you think are applicable to the media industry and that you would like to see covered in a body image code of conduct?

(The following are the recurring ideas that people felt were relevant to the media industry. Ideas covered in the generic responses are not repeated.)

- Media aimed at young people and children should disclose all digital enhancement in clear language
- Guidelines for reporting about body image and eating issues
- Within TV, there is a need to encourage much greater diversity in body image, including shape and size, ethnicity, religion, age and skin colour
- Discourage the focus and scrutiny that is placed on celebrities' weight and bodies
- Encourage consistency in body image messages in media publications – people noted publications or media may have a positive message on body image, but then follow this with a story on celebrity weight loss or an advertisement on diet foods
- Discourage labelling bodies based on weight or looks, particularly on magazine covers
- Encourage less focus on plastic surgery.

What are the issues that you think are applicable to the advertising industry and that you would like to see covered in a body image code of conduct?

(The following are the recurring ideas that people felt were relevant to the advertising industry. Ideas covered in the generic responses are not repeated.)

- Where images are enhanced to sell a product, there was a general feeling that these in particular should be disclosed and this should be closely regulated.
- Advertisements that focussed on weight loss should be more tightly controlled. This included comments on the following:
 - The glamorisation of unhealthy weight management- e.g. weight loss supplements and junk food
 - The use of "before" and "after" weight loss images
 - Full disclosure on the effectiveness and results of weight loss programs in both the short and long term. This should be accompanied by increased focus on health and disclosure on health outcomes in both the short and long term
 - There should be support for claims about the effectiveness of weight loss drugs and diets
- Within advertising, particular focus was given to messages that sexualise children, the need for more age-appropriate advertising and tighter controls around the use of sex appeal in advertising.

What are the issues that you think are applicable to the fashion industry and that you would like to see covered in a body image code of conduct?

(The following are the recurring ideas that people felt were relevant to the fashion industry. Ideas covered in the generic responses are not repeated.)

- Respondents suggested banning or restricting the use of models who are underweight or who have had unnecessary plastic/cosmetic surgery
- In addition to age limits, some people thought it important that models are age-appropriate, especially in discouraging the use of bodies that are or appear to be pre-pubescent to model clothes meant for post-pubescent women
- Sizing ranges should include a broad range of sizes
- Encourage the health, healthy weight and wellbeing of models
- Encourage diversity of models. It was recognised that sample garments need to be designed in a range of sizes for this to occur
- More use and promotion of plus size models
- Discourage the thin ideal and the glamorisation of underweight models.

If yes, what do you think these should be?

(Quotes are provided where they are indicative or help to explain a particular theme.)

- Hold and promote awards for businesses that follow the code
- Develop a Government website that lists and promotes organisations that abide by the code
'a program on body image similar to what Sane Australia has (a media watch program) that is quite good at promoting change in the standards of reporting around mental illness'.
- The Government could provide financial incentives
- Engage high profile industry members to help reinforce the importance of promoting positive body image.

	YES	NO
Do you think that monitoring the Code will make it more meaningful?	100	8

If yes how do you think this should work?

- The Government could introduce some form of monitoring or compliance body to oversee and enforce the code
- Introduce a reward system that delivered incentives to organisations that adhere to the code
- Annual reporting of compliance
- Complaints hotline and/or website
- Publicise compliance.

What else do you think could be done to make the Code meaningful?

- A Government advertising campaign, specifically on the Code and what it represents, could inform consumers and allow them to change their behaviours based on their beliefs. This would make conforming to a Code more important to industry
- Legislation (Note - *this is in contrast to a voluntary Code of Conduct and falls outside the scope of the Terms of Reference. The inclusion in this summary is reflective of responses to the online consultation only*)
- Use high profile ambassadors and advocates to promote the Code and communicate the impact body image messages can have on people.

PART FOUR

INVITED PEOPLE TO SHARE THEIR STORY AND THOUGHTS ON BODY IMAGE, OR OUTLINE ANY CONCERNS THEY HAD ABOUT ANY ELEMENT OF THE STRATEGY THAT WAS NOT OTHERWISE COVERED IN PREVIOUS PARTS.

Given the complex nature of an issue like body image, it can have far ranging implications not only on individuals, but the broader society in which individuals operate. Negative body image can impact on a person's self esteem, the way they view their world, their interactions with their peers and their immediate social environment, and their physical health and wellbeing. There are a multitude of reasons why people develop a negative body image, and therefore, any intervention that seeks to address body image effectively must do so in a holistic and multifaceted way.

While the previous parts of the consultation sought feedback on key issues that are being considered as part of the Strategy, this part gave respondents the opportunity to raise issues that may not have been raised in previous parts.

What are the new and emerging technologies that are likely to pose a problem to people's body image?

Respondents focused on the impact of technology which could potentially enable increased access to, and proliferation of, a wide variety of body image messages. Online issues, such as the creation of avatars, cyber bullying and popularity of pro-anorexia or 'pro-anna' websites were all seen as problematic by many respondents.

Innovations in plastic surgery, and software that can be used to manipulate images, such as Adobe Photoshop were also viewed as barriers to promoting positive body image.

Anything else?

Respondents focused on variety of issues related to body image including, the importance of incorporating positive body image messages into workplaces and suggestions that the proposed Industry Code of Conduct be publically available online.

Some respondents also stated that they had been personally affected by negative body image and the introduction of the Strategy is timely.