



# Gender Atypicality, Felt Pressure to Conform to Gender Norms, and Body Image in 6- to 10-Year-Old Girls

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## Introduction

“Gender typicality” is one component of *gender identity* that can have positive influences on psychological adjustment; “pressure to conform to gender norms” is another component of gender identity that can have negative influences (Egan & Perry, 2001)

Girls have poorer body image than boys (Harter, 2006); physical appearance is seen as a core component of femininity and affirmation of a feminine identity (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002).

Recent findings have linked gender atypicality to less rigid gender stereotypes in children (Patterson, 2012). We thus propose that gender atypicality may be associated with positive body image rather than negative body image.

<b>Purpose</b>	Application of Egan and Perry’s (2001) model on gender identity to body image in elementary-age girls.
<b>Hypothesis</b>	For girls who report low pressure to conform to gender norms, gender atypicality will be associated with more positive body image, whereas, for girls who report high pressure to conform, gender atypicality will be associated with more negative body image.

## Method

### Participants

120 girls, 6-10 years old,  $M_{age} = 8.29$ , 62% White

### Measures

**Perceived gender typicality.** Ten items with graphic scales representing perceived similarity to girls/boys (girls:  $\alpha = .587$ , boys:  $\alpha = .684$ ; Martin et al., 2017; see Figure 1).

**Pressure to conform to gender norms.** Ten items assessing pressure from parents and peers (parents:  $\alpha = .70$ , peers:  $\alpha = .757$ ; e.g., “How upset would your parents/other kids be if you looked like a boy?”). Responses were rated on 4-point scales ranging from (1) *not at all upset* to (4) *really upset*.

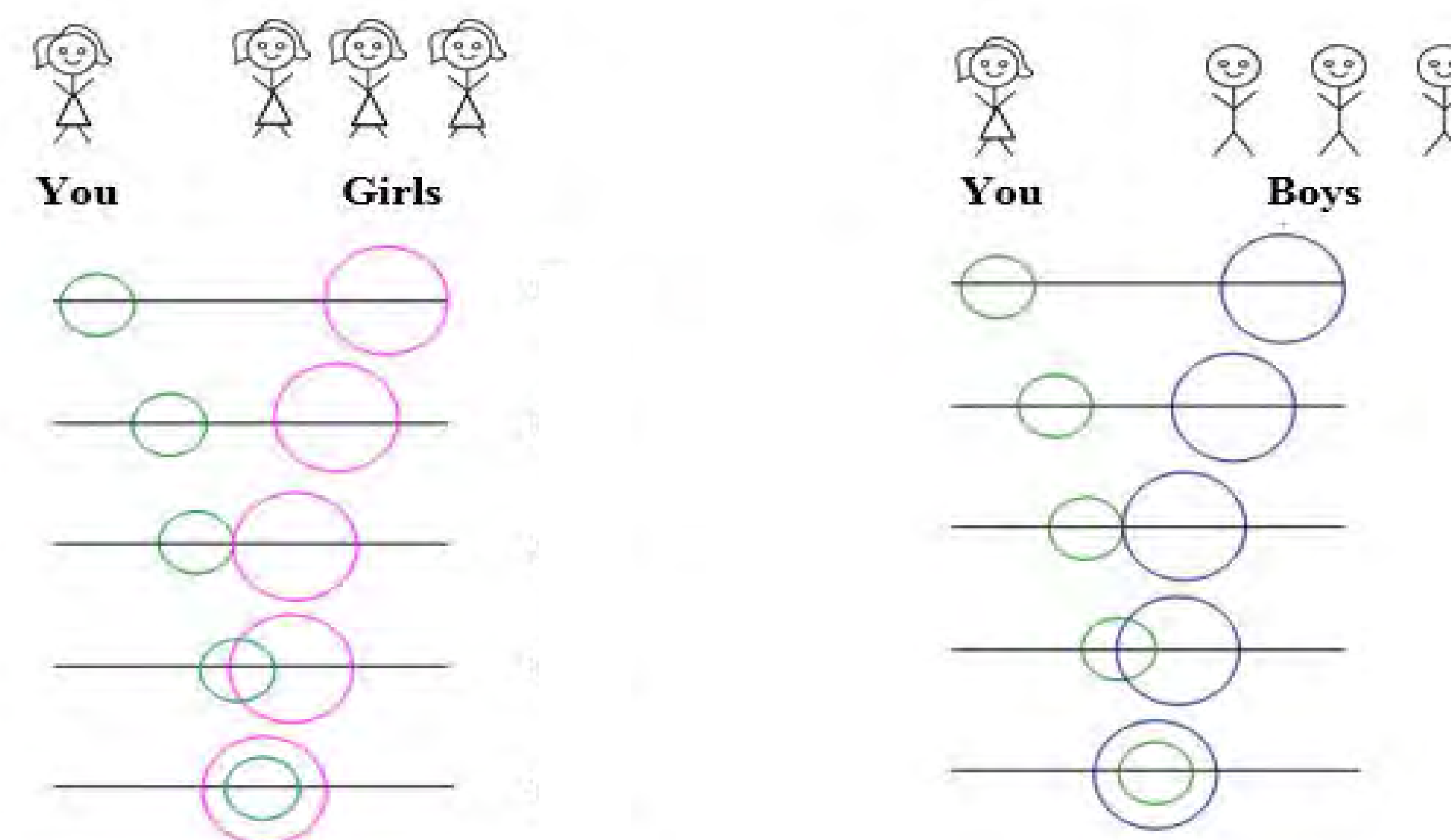


Figure 1. Graphic scales representing perceived similarity to girls/boys.

**Body image.** The Child Figure Rating Scale (Collins, 1991; Figure 2) was used to record girls’ actual, ideal, and disliked body size, and to compute a body satisfaction score (ideal – actual body size); Body esteem was measured using 9 items from Mendelson et al. 1996 ( $\alpha = .723$ ). Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert scale.

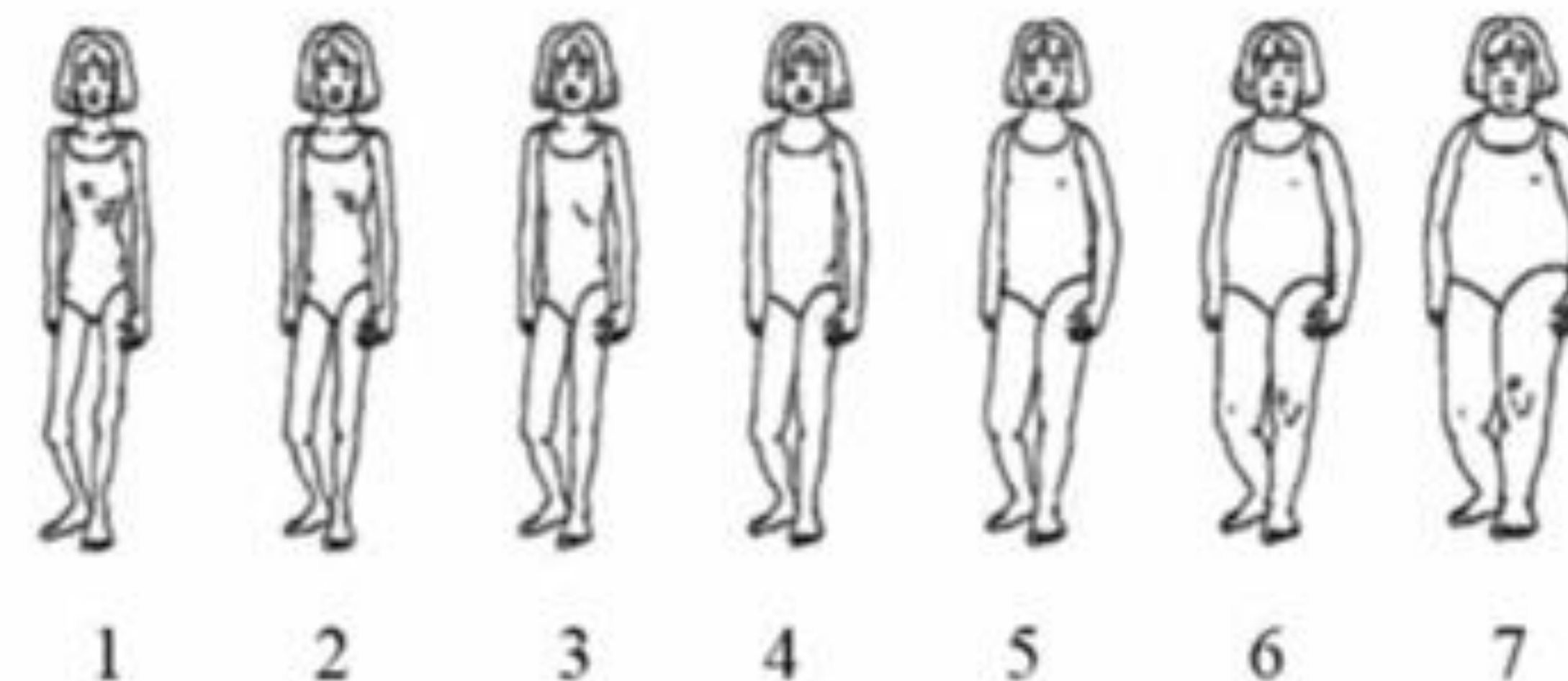


Figure 2. Child Figure Rating Scale.

## Results

Pressure to conform to gender norms was negatively associated with body esteem & similarity to girls was positively associated with body satisfaction (Table 1). While similarity to girls did not interact with felt pressure, similarity to boys did.

For girls who reported low & average levels of peer pressure to conform to gender norms, greater similarity to boys predicted selection of a smaller disliked body size, whereas less similarity to boys predicted selection of a larger disliked body size.

For girls who reported high pressure, similarity to boys was not a significant predictor for selection of a disliked body size (Figure 3).

Table 1

Intercorrelations for Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Perceived similarity to boys	-							
2. Perceived similarity to other girls	.050	-						
3. Felt pressure - peers	-.221*	.188*	-					
4. Felt-pressure - parents	-.103	.243**	.532***	-				
5. Body esteem	-.072	-.019	-.256**	-.228*	-			
6. Body size - actual	-.021	-.113	.216*	.175	-.249**	-		
7. Body size – most preferred	.147	.147	.008	.058	.075	.107	-	
8. Body size – least preferred	-.233*	-.016	.023	-.055	.046	-.248**	-.383***	-
9. Body satisfaction	.146	.190*	-.147	-.075	.218*	-.646**	.671**	-.130

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Body satisfaction was computed by subtracting actual body size from ideal body size.

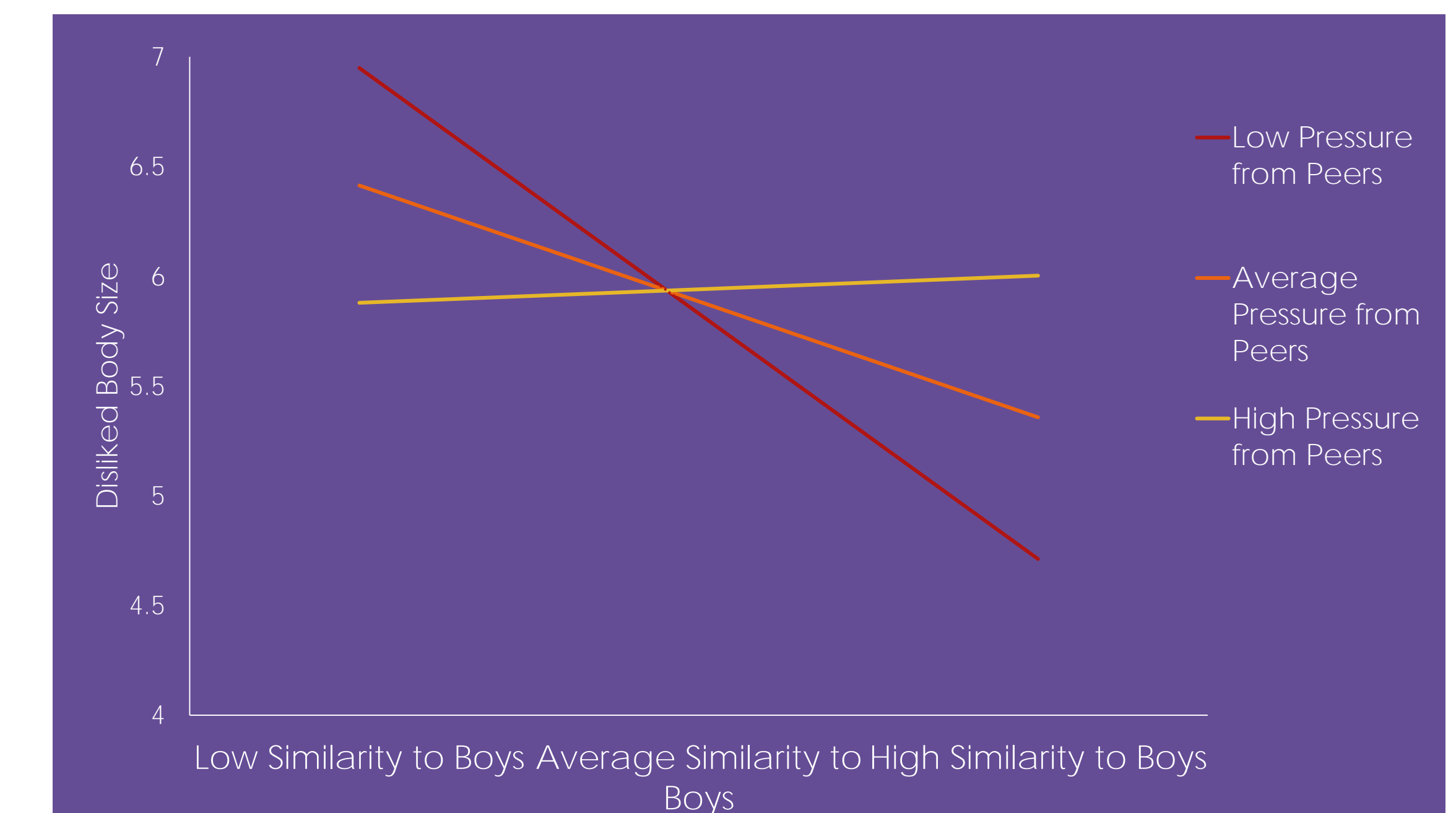


Figure 3. Disliked body size as a function of similarity to boys and pressure to conform.

## Discussion

Our results point to pressure to conform to gender norms as a body image risk factor. Findings extend Egan and Perry’s (2001) model to body image development in girls. Further work should examine body image flexibility among girls who endorse shared interests with boys.

Previous work has established a link between athleticism in self-identified tomboys and higher self-esteem (Halim et al., 2011). Girls who see themselves as athletic or instrumental have fewer appearance related concerns (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). We argue these patterns of positive self-appraisals may be most common in contexts that do not foster rigid gender typing.

Similarity to boys could protect body image by increasing acceptance of larger body sizes or reducing fear of fat.