



2022

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Recommended Citation

Madsen, Elizabeth (2022) "Socialization and Body Image," *Family Perspectives*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives/vol3/iss1/3>

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The Impact of Media Socialization on Body Image

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One's perception of their own body image can be affected by social media in a negative way and can lead to self-objectification, increased frequency of unprotected sex, increased mental health issues, lower levels of self-esteem, and decreased sexual satisfaction in both men and women.

In today's culture, we are constantly bombarded with images, descriptions, and ideas of what the "ideal" body should look like. Many of us have been impacted by these – often covert – messages. Exposure to body-focused media can have lasting and long-term effects, and, unfortunately, these messages are often absorbed by younger audiences (Coyne et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2020; Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Veldhuis et al., 2020). Media, including social media, greatly impacts children's perception of their bodies and the development of their body-image and self-esteem. And this perception affects children's sexual experiences later in life because it can lead to self-objectification, increased frequency of unprotected sex, body image issues, increased mental health issues, lower levels of self-esteem, and decreased sexual satisfaction and arousability in both men and women (Coyne et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2020; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015; Veldhuis et al., 2020).

Media

Media plays a big role in how all of us, including children and youth, view sexuality. Children and youth are constantly surrounded by the media; it is not surprising that the media shapes their beliefs and actions. It has been reported that about half of the top 20 most popular teenage shows in the United States feature sexual messages (Eyal et al., 2007). According to one study, sexual media influences adolescents by causing self-objectification, which can lead to high-risk activities such as increased frequency of unprotected sex (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015). This self-objectification can be harmful in other ways leading to issues such as mental health struggles, body image concerns, and low self-esteem among both boys and girls (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015).

Research has looked at different types of media and how it can impact individuals' perception of their bodies in a negative way (Coyne et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2020; Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Veldhuis et al., 2020). For example, Coyne and colleagues conducted a study on how music can impact how women feel about their bodies. In this study, the researchers had women listen to different types of music; some women listened to body positive music, and others listened to body objectifying music. They found that those who listened to

body positive music had higher self-esteem, on average, than those who listened to music that objectified bodies (Coyne et al., 2021). Interestingly, however, they also found that those who already struggled with body image concerns felt worse about themselves after listening to any type of music that involved body image (Coyne et al., 2021), showing that the media can make us more hypersensitive to appearance in general (Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021).

Another research study looked at how social media plays a role in body image issues and distorted eating among youth (Rodgers et al., 2020). This study with 681 adolescents found small correlations between social media use and a plethora of negative outcomes, including lower levels of self-esteem, increased depression rates, greater concern about appearance, and increased distorted eating among adolescents. It is apparent that media does not just impact adults, but children and adolescents as well.

Interestingly, multiple sources talk specifically about how Instagram has a negative effect on body image and self-esteem, particularly among youth (Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021). One study (Stein et al., 2021) looks at how Instagram usage relates to dissatisfaction with body image and the tendency to diet and restrict eating. They found that browsing Instagram's public content leads to higher rates of distorted eating and a more other-centered mindset as individuals begin to compare themselves to the seemingly "perfect" bodies of others (Stein et al., 2021).

The research from Stein and colleagues is congruent with a TED Talk that was given in 2019. In this TED Talk, the speakers speak out about the negative impact that Instagram is having on teenage girls. Teenage girls are more negatively affected by Instagram than teenage boys, and 68% of the one-billion Instagram users are women (Simpson & Simpson, 2019). While the amount of

time spent on Instagram does make a difference in how it impacts people, *what* is viewed on Instagram also makes a difference (Simpson & Simpson, 2019). The speakers emphasized that what we view on Instagram is largely dependent on *who* we follow. So, for example, while the parents of teenage girls might not be seeing hundreds of other young women posting filtered and edited pictures of themselves, teenage girls are (Simpson & Simpson, 2019). Because of this large discrepancy in what is viewed on Instagram, it can be hard to really understand the full impact Instagram is having on youth and adolescents. We do know, however, that there are some very harmful effects coming from the comparison that Instagram seems to feed (Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021). Instagram usage has been shown to negatively affect self-esteem and body image and to be linked to increasing levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and overall feelings of wellbeing. These findings are congruent with the findings about the negative impact of media in general that have been discussed in other studies (Coyne et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2020; Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Veldhuis et al., 2020).

Effects on Sexual Experience

The sexual experiences of both men and women are impacted by the way we view our bodies (Sanchez & Keifer, 2007). In the study by Sanchez and Keifer (2007), researchers found that physical intimacy was negatively affected by shame. Shame led to self-consciousness which inhibited sexual pleasure and ability to be aroused for both men and women (Sanchez & Keifer, 2007). We find that a central reason most of us struggle with sexuality is because we have been taught to criticize our bodies (Leavitt, 2019). Much of this criticism and body shaming can be linked to media consumption among not only adults, but children and youth,

as well (Coyne et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2020; Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Veldhuis et al., 2020).

Summary

The research is clear: media plays an important role in how we view our bodies (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015). We often draw conclusions on how we should look and behave based on what we see on social media, leading some to gauge even their own self-worth off of what they see online. Sadly, these messages are impacting children and adolescents at a surprisingly high rate (Eyal et al., 2007). When children and youth are socialized through the media to compare themselves to others, we run into many different

problems such as increased rates of anxiety and depression, distorted eating, increased frequency of unprotected sex, and lower self-esteem (Coyne et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2020; Simpson & Simpson, 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Veldhuis et al., 2020). This socialization from the media has lasting consequences on sexual relations later on in life and can be linked to lower levels of sexual satisfaction and arousability in both men and women (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007). Research shows that media – specifically, social media use among adolescents – is closely tied with a plethora of negative outcomes, and it is vital that we are aware of both the short- and long-term consequences that can arise from media consumption.

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