

BODY IMAGE AND SEXUALITY

Body image is a key component of our sexuality. Our sense of who we are as sexual beings is very much influenced by how we view our bodies, and how our bodies experience sexual desire and satisfaction. Researchers have explored the connection between body image and sexuality in various studies. Since women in our society, and in most societies worldwide, are more often judged by their appearance than are men, they have been the focus of many studies that consider the effects of a negative body image on sexual satisfaction. In this edition of Check the Research, we take a look at studies that can help us to understand how body image can affect how a woman experiences sexual desire and satisfaction.

"...WOMEN IN WESTERN CULTURES ARE OBJECTIFIED TO A GREATER DEGREE THAN ARE MEN, IN THAT WOMEN'S BODIES ARE LOOKED AT, EVALUATED, AND SEXUALIZED WITH GREATER FREQUENCY."

Wiederman, M. W. (2000). Women's body image self-consciousness during physical intimacy with a partner. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 37, p.60.

BODY IMAGE AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION

Studies indicate that poor body image can lead to lower levels of sexual satisfaction, characterized by avoidance of sex, lack of orgasm and general discomfort with sexual activity. One study of 187 female college students reported that women who were dissatisfied with their sex and dating lives were also dissatisfied with their body image (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001). A more recent online study of 154 women, aged 18 to 49 years, asked participants whether they focused on appearance-related flaws while engaging in sexual activity (Pujols, Meston & Seal, 2010). Those who reported having thoughts related to appearance-related flaws during sex reported less sexual satisfaction, whereas a high level of body self-esteem and few appearance-related thoughts during sexual activity were associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction. While many women were concerned with specific body attributes that could be altered through diet or exercise, others had irrational perceptions about their bodies that had little basis in reality. Comparisons with unrealistic ideals of female beauty could lead some women to develop a negative body image. Other reasons that could contribute to negative body image include traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse or sexual assault, medical conditions that result in changes to the body, aging, and emotional conditions such as depression and anxiety.

BODY IMAGE AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Many studies of body image have considered the experiences of heterosexual women. It is interesting to note that studies comparing body dissatisfaction among heterosexual women with body dissatisfaction reported by non-heterosexual women found little difference between the two groups. Researchers from one such study concluded that both groups measured themselves against similar cultural ideals of female attractiveness, and thus both suffered from similar pressures and expectations (Koff, Lucas, Migliorini & Grossmith, 2010). The study makes the point that "gender trumps sexual orientation," and that all women may be vulnerable to the affects of a negative body image related to unrealistic expectations of female attractiveness.



“...BEING A MEMBER OF A SOCIETY THAT PLACES GREAT VALUE ON PHYSICAL APPEARANCE, SPECIFICALLY ON A THIN, CURVACEOUS, RELATIVELY LARGE-BREADED IDEAL, PUTS WOMEN, REGARDLESS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AT RISK FOR BODY DISSATISFACTION “

Koff, E., Lucas, M. R. Migliorini & S. Grossmith (2010).
Women and body dissatisfaction: Does sexual orientation make a difference? *Body Image*, 7, p.258.

BODY IMAGE AND ETHNICITY

Since many body image studies have used White, heterosexual, female undergraduates as participants, some researchers question whether results of such studies can be generalized to other ethno-cultural populations with different characteristics. Studies that have looked at women of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds are thus important additions to the research on body image. One review of body image and ethnic identity (Grabe & Hyde, 2006) found that the problem of negative body image was common, to some extent, to women of all backgrounds. The researchers looked at 98 studies on the topic of body image and ethnicity. Studies included participants who were Asian, Hispanic, Black and White. While the specific concerns related to aspects of body image varied between cultures and societies (for example, some societal ideals might focus on weight, others on skin tone and others on breast size), any idealized standard of beauty could result in some women feeling inadequate and unattractive.

“...WOMEN FROM DIFFERENT ETHNIC/RACIAL BACKGROUNDS MAY VARY IN THE EXTENT TO WHICH THEY ARE DISSATISFIED WITH THEIR BODIES BECAUSE MEANINGS OF THE BODY DEPEND ON CULTURAL AND SOCIAL GROUP CONTEXT.“

Grabe, S. & J.S. Hyde. (2006) Ethnicity and body dissatisfaction among women in the United States: A Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132, p.622.

BODY IMAGE AND THE MEDIA

Since negative body image, or body dissatisfaction, has been associated with depression, eating disorders, and lack of sexual desire and sexual satisfaction, researchers have investigated ways that body dissatisfaction can be lessened. In this respect, one area of particular interest is the power of the media to shape women's views of their bodies. An innovative study of media effects on Canadian female undergraduate students employed a 75 second commercial designed to highlight and counteract the negative effects of unrealistic portrayals of female beauty in music videos (Quigg & Want, 2011). Previous research has shown that when people are made aware of the special advantages that models receive while being prepared for filming or photo shoots, they are less likely to compare themselves against such artificial portrayals of beauty and less likely to experience body dissatisfaction. The Quigg and Want study used a commercial produced by the manufacturers of Dove soap to test this hypothesis. The commercial "Evolution," uses time lapse photography to show how a model can be transformed from plain to glamorous with the help of make-up, hairstyling and photographic techniques. The study also used music videos, which often objectify parts of women's bodies (e.g., thighs, breasts, stomach) while presenting idealized views of female appearance.



Quigg and Want (2011) divided their research participants into three groups. One group viewed popular music videos broken up by four commercials that did not feature any people. Another group viewed the same music videos but also viewed the Evolution commercial as well as three other commercials. The third group viewed a nature documentary and four commercials all without any people featured in them. Participants in each group were then asked to rate their body image. The results showed that those who viewed the music video and the Evolution commercial reported higher levels of body satisfaction than those who viewed the music video and four commercials that did not feature people. However, those who did not view the music videos at all and viewed the wildlife documentary reported higher levels of body satisfaction than both music video groups. The researchers concluded that the idealized portrayals of female bodies as seen in the music videos had a negative effect on the reports of body image given by the participants. However, the Evolution commercial, by revealing how the media craft unrealistic standards of female beauty, seemed to counteract some of the negative effects of the music videos on body image

WHAT IS THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

The research discussed here clearly shows that a negative body image can affect a woman's sexual enjoyment. Women who compare themselves with cultural and media portrayals of female beauty often feel a sense of dissatisfaction with their bodies, which in turn can lead to sexual dissatisfaction. Studies have shown that when women are educated about how society and the media perpetuate unrealistic and artificial standards of female beauty, they become less critical of their own bodies.

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