The Dual Role of Media Internalization in Adolescent Sexual Behavior

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* Wellbeing
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## Sample

A three-wave panel study with intervals of 6 months among adolescents between 12 and 18 year old from 12 schools. Total sample of 1504 completed questionnaires at baseline, 1426 completed questionnaires at Wave 2, and 1433 completed questionnaires at Wave 3.

A final sample of 824 Belgian adolescents completed the measures used in this study for all three waves

# Abstract

Sexualizing media content is prevalent in various
mediatypes. Sexualizing media messages and portrayals empha\_x0002\_size unattainable body and appearanceideals asthe primary com\_x0002\_ponentsofsexualdesirability.Theinternalizationoftheseidealsis
positively relatedto self-objectificationand sexual bodyconscious\_x0002\_ness. In turn, self-objectification and sexual body consciousness
affect adolescents’ sexual behavior, albeitin opposing directions.
While objectifying self-perceptions are linked to higher levels of
sexual behavior, body consciousness during physical intimacy is
linked to lower levels of sexual behavior. Based on this knowl\_x0002\_edge,the presentthree-wave panel study of 824Belgian, predom\_x0002\_inant heterosexual adolescents (Mage=15.33; SD=1.45) pro\_x0002\_poses a dual-pathway model that investigates two different path\_x0002\_waysthroughwhichtheinternalization ofmediaidealsmayimpact
adolescents’ sexual behavior. An inhibitory pathway links media
internalization to lower levels of sexual behavior through sexual
body consciousness, and a supportive pathway links media inter\_x0002\_nalization to higher levels of sexual behavior through self-objec\_x0002\_tification. Structural equation analyses supported the proposed
dual-pathway, showing that the impact of media internalization
on adolescents’ sexual behavior proceeds through an inhibitory
pathway and a supportive pathway. Regarding the supportive
pathway, media internalization (W1) positively predicted sex\_x0002\_ual behavior (W3),through valuing appearance over compe\_x0002\_tence (W2). Regardingtheinhibitory pathway, mediainternal\_x0002\_ization (W1) positively predicted body surveillance, which, in
turn, positively predicted sexual body consciousness (all W2).
Sexual body consciousness (W2) is negatively related to sexual
behavior (W3). From a sexual developmental perspective,these
findings emphasize the importance of guiding adolescents in
interpreting and processing sexualizing media messages.

# Outcome

"The internalization of media appearance ideals, body surveillance, and sexual body consciousness function as a chain that can activate the sexual inhibitory system. Despite their impossibility to match these body types, individuals often internalize these unrealistic ideals of attractive sexiness as a standard for themselves. Individuals come to gauge their sexual attractiveness againstthosemediaimages of physical perfection (i.e., body surveillance), which, in turn, will increase the likelihood that they will be left concerned about and dissatisfied with their (sexual) physical appearance (i.e., (sexual) body consciousness since they have been taught that attractive
sexiness is an important prerequisite in attracting romantic partners. Although girls scored significantly higher on the internalization of media appearance ideals, valuing appearance over competence, and body surveillance, the present study showed that the observed relationships among our main variables did not differ across gender.
We expect that media internalization may indirectly add to adolescents’ lower levels of sexual agency within sexual contexts, via valuing appearance over competence. Since adolescents who lack control over sexual situations experience more difficulties in refusing (unwanted) sexual proposals so constraints on sexual agency can give rise to sexual risk behaviors, including unwanted sex. A lack of self-confidence about one’s bodily appearance during sexual intimacy eventually negatively predicted adolescents’ sexual behavior. Individuals’ objectified body consciousness would be associated with their diminished (healthy)sexual functioning, in that sexual body consciousness was positively tied to lower levels of sexual experience." (Rousseau et al., 2017, pp. 1692-1694)