



## The Sexualization of Adolescent Girls Via Influencing on Social Media: Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

Teenagers spend a significant portion of their day on social media, where they are always "connected" to read and be informed about their friends' latest projects and those of other celebrities. The so-called "influencers," who are the newest trend in online marketing and hold the power to influence their followers, now dominate social networking sites.

Young people try to rediscover themselves during adolescence through the various changes they go through. They thus frequently assess their own social status by comparing it to that of others. Adolescent girls are pushed to adopt an objectified view of themselves by the images and beauty standards displayed on social media and by social stereotypes surrounding women. Additionally, the phenomenon of sexualization is observed, where children are told that in order to be liked by their peers, they must emphasize their sexual attractiveness. The literature review led to the conclusion that there is a strong connection between the sexualization of adolescent girls and the sexualized role models that are promoted on social media. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that these can result in low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, and early sexual activity. These results show how serious this phenomenon is on a large scale and can be a valuable tool for experts, who can use them to make the right interventions, so that to manage and prevent the occurrence of these behaviors.

**Key Words:** *adolescence, sexualization, self-objectification, social media influencers*

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has gained an important role in the daily life of teenagers. Systematic use seems to be increasing (1). With the development of media, social networking presented a new phenomenon called micro-celebrities Influencers. These persons create a reputation around their name, derive their lifestyle, while advertising products and services (2).

Teenagers are fascinated by the life that Influencers display on their profiles, many times without filtering what is presented to them, and as a result of it, they are significantly influenced by their publications and suggestions. Research has shown that the behavior of teenagers is significantly influenced through social identification with Influencers (3,4). The continuous monitoring of their activity increases the risk of occurrence of FoMO (Fear Of Missing Out), while feelings of inferiority, jealousy and negative body image are observed (5,6,7).

The prevailing social norms for women's bodies are related to provocation and are presented as sexual objects in the media mass media (8). This results in the new girls being more focused in their appearance and trying to look sexy to be accepted (9,10). Thus young children are driven to self-objectification, and they believe that their value depends mainly on their external appearance, considering the characteristics of their personality to be of secondary importance (9). The above phenomenon also related to sexualization, whereby individuals find themselves attractive only when they are sexy and their value comes from looking sexual and being sexual (8).

The consequences of these phenomena have significant effects on the lives of adolescents. Increased risk of developing eating disorders, depressed mood, low self-confidence and dissatisfaction with their body image, are a few examples. Also, exposure to online space by publishing provocative material, can lead to online bullying, seduction, harassment (8,10,11). Physical and psychological changes affect teenagers and create a sense of insecurity about their image and their identity (12).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The literature search was done from online databases such as PubMed, Research gate, Google Scholar, as well as printed material. The keywords that were used to

for studies were "adolescents", "adolescence", "sexualization", "objectification", "adolescence", "adolescents", "girls", "adolescents", "teenagers", "sexualization", "self-objectification", "social media", "influencers". Then, with the "snowball" method, the relevant ones were investigated through bibliographical references. The selected surveys were taken from 2012 onwards, so that the used data to be up-to-date and reflect the characteristics of the current decade. The main inclusion criteria were: a) age group: adolescent girls, b) no geographical restrictions, c) language: English. Also, the examined studies investigated the role of parents because their importance is considered decisive during adolescence.

## RESULTS

### Objectification

According to research, there is a significant correlation between objectified standards in the media with the self-objectification of teenagers. Self-objectification correlates with girls' self-sexualization (13). Girls are more vulnerable to such phenomena, as female socialites representations mostly present women as attractive, beautiful, groomed to be acceptable and liked (14). Meier and Gray (2014) showed that the use of FB associated with increased exposure to photographic material promoting the value of external appearance, correlates positively with self-objectification among adolescent girls (15).

Video games or social media, compared to television, are significantly correlated with self-objectification. Results are likely explained by the high levels of interactivity and immediacy that characterize engagement with video games and online media (16). In an adolescent population from Austria, Belgium, Spain and South Korea, it was shown that the use of women's magazines and social media are related to these sexualized behaviors. In all countries, these attitudes were more associated with girls, as was ideal internalization of outward appearance (17).

### Internalized Display Standards

Exposure to sexualized images on Instagram appeared to be indirectly linked with the girls' self-observation through the internalized standard of the impossible female body. They give more value to their external appearance instead of their abilities (18). These images result in internalization standards of beauty, causing teenagers to observe their bodies in order to rate their appearance. Also, internalized

concern about body image is linked to the eating habits adopted by both adolescent girls and boys (19).

### **Internalized Sexualization**

Internalized sexualization is associated with early sexual initiation activity. A 2014 survey of teenagers showed that increased interest in external appearance is related to the initiation of sexual desire he kiss. Moreover, focusing on the external appearance was associated with the initiation of sex contact at age 12-18 (20). According to the literature, sexualization affects the attitude of girls towards relationships and knowledge of safe sex practices (21,22). An important consequence of the sexualization of adolescents is the sexual health of both girls and boys, as there is reduced condom use. Also, unrealistic standards of sexual performance and sexual activity that are perceived as attractive, create unrealistic expectations for sexual experiences (8).

### **Influencing**

Most social media users are inspired by influencers for various issues that concern them. Some of them are healthy habits (fitspiration) and the effort to maintain an ideal, thin, shapely body (thinspiration). It seems that social media content related to healthy habits, is of interest, mostly to teenage girls (23). In 2015 a study by Carrotte, Vella and Lim showed that about 50% of people who were viewing fitspiration posts were teenage girls (24). Prolonged use of social media can affect teenage girls' mood and cause negative emotions such as melancholy, low self-esteem, as well as negatively affecting their view of themselves and of those around them. (36,26,27). As teenage girls are in a process of personal formation identity, they get the message.

that they must perfectly match all the roles in their lives to succeed, which in reality is not possible. This social pressure leads to burnout, from taking on multiple roles (28).

According to Bandura's social learning theory, people adopt more often behaviors that are positively reinforced. Therefore, the more the likes displayed on social media, the more important the roleshares are considered, and worthy of imitation (28).

### **Discussion**

Adolescence is the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood. During this period, children undergo developmental changes, some of which can be observed, while others can not. Hormones increase, thus leading to

appearance of primary and secondary sex characteristics (12,29). The body changes, muscle and fat tissue increase. The relationship between adolescents and their parents also changes. From the absolute dependence, they are now marching towards their gradual independence, the peers now have a primary role in their lives. Conflicts are created equally between their inner world and outside (12,30).

The goal of this multi-changing period is to create personal identity, i.e. for teenagers to build a system of values and beliefs that will characterize and express them. According to Marcia, the type of identity that someone will form, affects her/his self-esteem, his autonomy, his level of self-awareness, as well as the manner facing the people around him. Some of the main factors that affect the formation of the identity type are the ties that prevail in family and the societies that raise individuals (29,30,31). Friends also contribute to identity formation. The teenagers that they tend to focus more on friends, the develop the feeling that they are part of a group and being accepted, and this feeling boosts their confidence. Important for them is equality, reciprocity of feelings, trust and loyalty among their friends (29,32).

Nowadays, social media have also entered the daily life of teenagers through which they communicate with their peers, they have the possibility to present themselves as they wish and also to satisfy their need for acceptance (33,34). But the sexualized norms that dominate these platforms are affecting the self-image of teenagers, the way they evaluate themselves. Through research it has been shown that girls' engagement with social media is greater compared to boys (15, 35). That was the reason, why in the present study, the population group of teenager girls was chosen to be investigated. As mentioned above, adolescence is a sensitive period in which every stimulus that teenagers receive, can affect them in terms of formation of their identity and most probably of their behavior (31).

Studies have shown that internalizing a sexually objectified image self-esteem is associated with increased body surveillance and body dissatisfaction (19,23,35). Furthermore, there is the risk of developing eating disorders, melancholy, low self-esteem and negative self-image (26,27,36). Skowronski's study has shown that the sexualized social networks, while they do not necessarily appear to display short-term effects on adolescent self-objectification, in the long-term of time they present such effects (18,19).

In recent years the trend "Instagram vs Reality" has appeared on the Instagram platform, by which users are trying to take down the model of the perfect and fully harmonious life projected on social media networking. So it's a kind of online activism where women post-edited and unedited photos of themselves, with makeup and completely natural,, as well as images with "perfectly staged" and spontaneous moments from their daily life. Followers see the difference between reality and what is displayed on Instagram on purpose, demystifying, thus, the flawless standard they believed that existed. The studies that have investigated so far this new trend, show that this helps to reduce any comparison in relation to the external appearance and body dissatisfaction (37,38).

A new trend is "body positivity". In this, the users post photos of their bodies showing how different they look according to the various levels of lighting and the way they pose for the camera. They are not afraid to show their imperfections, because the goal is to accept the body exactly like this is. They dispel the myth of the perfect and flawless role model. Studies have shown that this practice leads to body acceptance and appreciation, and by extension to the persons's self (39,40). There aren't many studies investigating the consequences of these new trends, therefore in the long term it is deemed necessary to proceed to further investigation to highlight their contribution.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the holistic approach to prevention and investigation of the adolescent's individual elements that make them susceptible to the influence of standards is important. To prevent or address the effects of sexualization and self-objectification of both adolescent girls and boys, participation in intra-school or extra-curricular activities is helpful, eg the educational programs at school and sex education (8,41). More research is needed to further understand individual differences, such as how trans people use social media and the challenges that face compared to heterosexual youth (42).

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