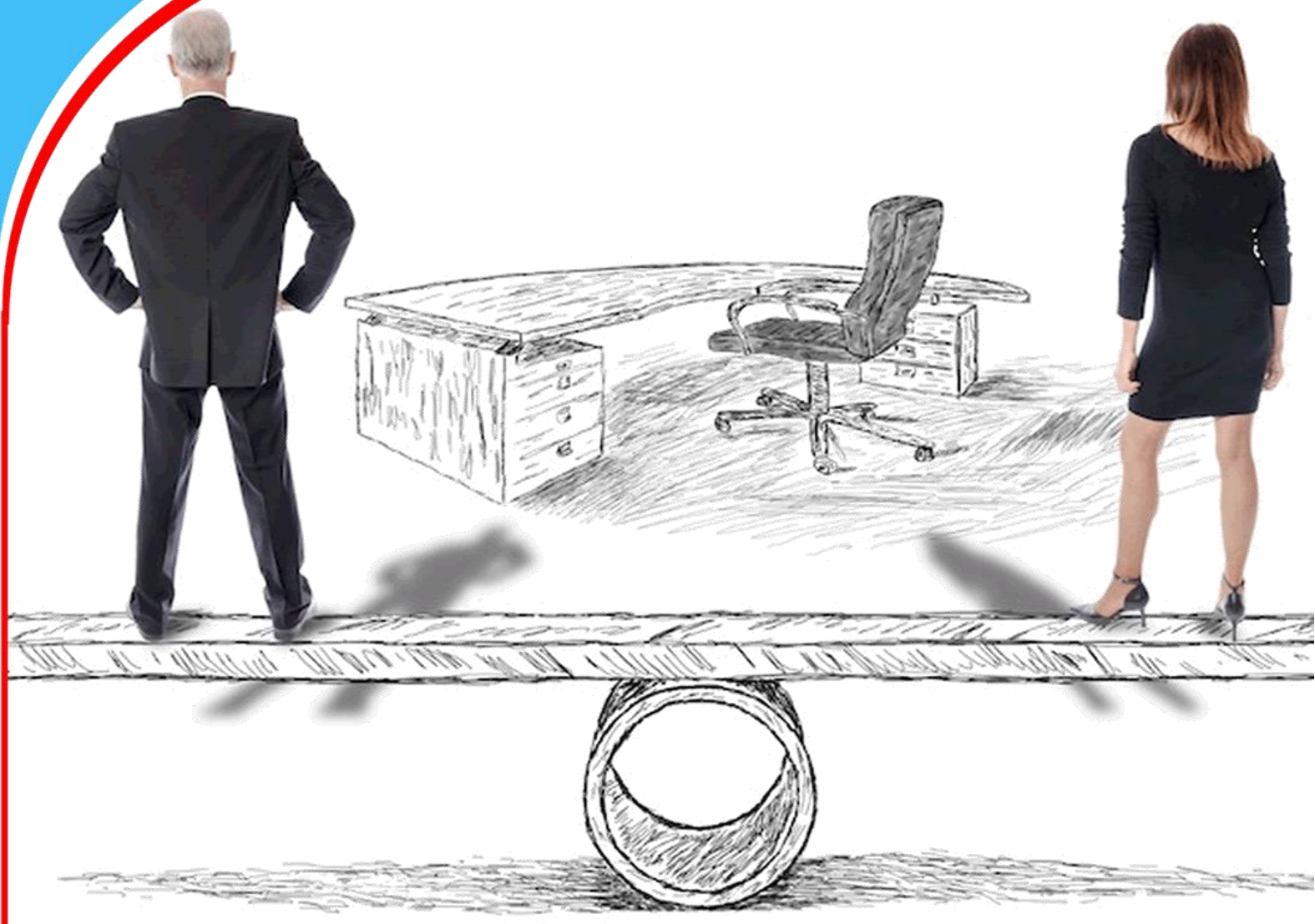
European Journal of
Gender Studies
(EJGS)



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AJP

European Journal of Gender Studies
ISSN 4520-4738 (Online)
Vol.6, Issue 2, pp 34 - 44, 2024

www.ajpojournals.org

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Article history

Submitted 16.04.2024 Revised Version Received 25.05.2024 Accepted 26.06.2024

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the impact of gender representation in media on adolescent body image.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study indicated that media often portrays idealized and unrealistic body types, leading adolescents to develop body dissatisfaction and negative self-perception. This is particularly pronounced among girls, who are frequently exposed to thin ideals, but boys are also affected by portrayals emphasizing muscularity. Such media exposure can contribute to unhealthy behaviors, including disordered eating and excessive exercise, as adolescents strive to conform to these unrealistic standards. Furthermore, diverse and inclusive representation can mitigate these negative effects by providing adolescents with a broader range of body types and appearances to relate to, fostering a more positive and realistic body image.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social comparison theory, cultivation theory and objectification theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the impact of gender representation in media on adolescent body image. Implementing media literacy programs is a practical recommendation to empower adolescents with critical thinking skills and media literacy competencies. Advocating for regulatory measures is a crucial step in shaping policies that promote positive body image among adolescents.

Keywords: *Gender Representation, Media, Adolescent, Body Image*

INTRODUCTION

The impact of gender representation in media on adolescent body image is a significant area of concern and study. In developed economies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, body image among adolescents has been a topic of concern. Studies indicate a concerning trend of body dissatisfaction among adolescents in these countries. For instance, a study by Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts and Colditz (2014) found that in the United States, 42% of girls and 29% of boys in high school were trying to lose weight. This reflects a significant dissatisfaction with body image among adolescents, which can lead to various negative outcomes such as eating disorders and low self-esteem.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, studies have shown a rise in body dissatisfaction among adolescents. According to the Mental Health Foundation (2018), around one in three UK teenagers experience body image concerns, with social media and peer pressure playing significant roles in shaping these perceptions. This suggests that despite being developed economies with access to resources and information, adolescents in these countries are still vulnerable to body image issues, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support systems.

Moving on to developing economies like Brazil and India, the issue of body image among adolescents also warrants attention. Research in Brazil has shown a growing trend of body dissatisfaction among adolescents, with societal pressures and media influence contributing to unrealistic body ideals (Bighetti, Santos & Santos, 2018). Similarly, in India, a study by Swami (2018) revealed that body dissatisfaction among adolescents is on the rise, particularly among urban populations exposed to Western media standards.

In China, rapid socioeconomic development has brought about shifts in societal norms, including perceptions of body image among adolescents. Research by Wang, Li, Fan, Tao and Wang (2019) highlighted a concerning increase in body dissatisfaction among Chinese adolescents, particularly among girls. Factors such as media exposure, peer influence, and changing beauty standards contribute significantly to these trends, reflecting a globalized influence on body image perceptions even in traditionally conservative societies.

Similarly, in Mexico, studies have noted a rising concern regarding body image among adolescents. For instance, a study by González-Casanova, López-Olmedo, Haines, Pérez and Palacios-Ramírez (2019) found that Mexican adolescents, especially girls, experience high levels of body dissatisfaction, often influenced by media portrayals of beauty and societal expectations. These findings emphasize that body image issues are not exclusive to Western contexts but are pervasive in diverse cultural and economic settings undergoing rapid modernization.

In Brazil, a country known for its diverse cultural influences, body image concerns among adolescents have gained attention. Research by Silva, Costa, and Miranda (2020) highlighted a significant prevalence of body dissatisfaction among Brazilian adolescents, particularly among girls. Factors such as media exposure, societal beauty ideals, and peer comparisons contribute to these concerns, with implications for mental health and well-being.

In India, a country experiencing rapid socio-cultural changes, body image concerns among adolescents are becoming increasingly prevalent. Research by Khan, Siddiqui and Meghani (2018) highlighted a significant rise in body dissatisfaction among Indian adolescents, influenced by factors such as media portrayals, peer comparisons, and societal beauty standards. This trend

underscores the need for targeted interventions to promote positive body image and mental well-being among Indian youth.

Similarly, in South Africa, a nation marked by diverse cultural influences, studies have shown a growing concern regarding body image among adolescents. Research by Mchiza, Goedecke, Lambert and Puoane (2019) found that South African adolescents, particularly in urban areas, experience pressures related to body image, influenced by Western media and cultural shifts. These findings emphasize the global nature of body image issues and the importance of addressing them comprehensively across different socio-economic contexts.

Similarly, in Nigeria, rapid urbanization and exposure to global media have contributed to shifts in body image perceptions among adolescents. A study by Onyemelukwe (2020) found that Nigerian adolescents, especially in urban areas, experience increasing pressures related to body image, influenced by Western beauty standards and social media. These findings underscore the global nature of body image issues, transcending economic categories and impacting adolescents across diverse cultural backgrounds.

In Kenya, a country undergoing rapid urbanization and globalization, body image concerns among adolescents have become increasingly prominent. Research by Ndetei (2018) highlighted a significant prevalence of body dissatisfaction among Kenyan adolescents, particularly in urban areas. Factors such as media influence, Western beauty standards, and socio-cultural changes contribute to these concerns, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and awareness campaigns.

Similarly, in Ghana, studies have shown a rising concern regarding body image among adolescents. Research by Oppong Asante and Oti-Boadi (2021) found that Ghanaian adolescents, especially in urban centers, face pressures related to body image perceptions, influenced by societal ideals and media exposure. These findings underscore the global nature of body image issues and the importance of addressing them comprehensively across different cultural and economic contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Sub-Saharan economies like Nigeria and South Africa, limited research exists specifically focusing on adolescent body image. However, anecdotal evidence and qualitative studies suggest that body image concerns are emerging among adolescents in these regions as well. For instance, a study by Akpan-Idiok and Ntukidem (2020) in Nigeria highlighted the influence of Western media on body ideals among Nigerian adolescents, leading to increased dissatisfaction and desire for certain body types. Similarly, in South Africa, cultural shifts and exposure to global media have contributed to changes in body image perceptions among adolescents, although empirical data on this topic are limited. These observations indicate that while body image research may be less extensive in Sub-Saharan economies compared to developed nations, the issue is still relevant and requires attention in terms of understanding its impact and implementing supportive interventions.

Gender representation in media can significantly influence adolescents' perceptions of body image, leading to either positive or negative portrayals. Positive representations include diverse body types, realistic beauty standards, and empowerment messages, which can enhance body satisfaction among adolescents. For example, media campaigns featuring body-positive role models and promoting self-acceptance can contribute to a healthier body image (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Conversely, negative representations often depict unrealistic beauty ideals,

body shaming, and objectification, leading to body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem among adolescents (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008). For instance, media content that perpetuates stereotypes, promotes extreme thinness, or glorifies unattainable beauty standards can contribute to negative body image perceptions, especially among vulnerable populations like adolescents.

Moreover, media representations of gender can also influence adolescents' perceptions of masculinity and femininity, further impacting body image ideals. Positive portrayals of gender can include promoting body diversity for both males and females, emphasizing inner qualities over physical appearance, and challenging traditional gender roles. These representations can contribute to a more inclusive and accepting view of oneself and others, potentially improving body satisfaction (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Conversely, negative portrayals may reinforce harmful stereotypes, such as associating masculinity with muscularity and femininity with thinness, leading to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors among adolescents (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Therefore, media plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents' body image perceptions, highlighting the need for responsible and diverse representations in media content.

Problem Statement

The Impact of Gender Representation in Media on Adolescent Body Image has emerged as a critical area of concern in recent years due to the pervasive influence of media on adolescents' perceptions of beauty, self-worth, and body satisfaction. Research indicates that media portrayals of gender often perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards, leading to negative body image perceptions and increased risk of body dissatisfaction among adolescents (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Furthermore, the prevalence of social media platforms has exacerbated these issues, with constant exposure to curated images and idealized representations contributing to distorted body ideals and low self-esteem among adolescents (Perloff, 2014). Despite growing awareness of these concerns, limited research has explored the nuanced ways in which different forms of media, including advertising, television, and social media, impact gender representation and its effects on adolescent body image (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Social Comparison Theory

Originated by Leon Festinger in 1954, Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they stack up against others. In the context of the impact of gender representation in media on adolescent body image, this theory is highly relevant as adolescents often compare themselves to media portrayals of idealized body types, leading to either positive or negative self-perceptions (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2019).

Cultivation Theory

Developed by George Gerbner and colleagues in the 1960s, Cultivation Theory suggests that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of social reality. In the context of the research topic, Cultivation Theory is pertinent as constant exposure to unrealistic and idealized gender representations in media can cultivate distorted body image ideals among adolescents (Morgan & Shanahan, 2018).

Objectification Theory

Proposed by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997, Objectification Theory posits that societal objectification of individuals based on their physical appearance leads to self-objectification and negative psychological outcomes. This theory is highly relevant to the research topic as media representations often objectify genders, contributing to body dissatisfaction and negative body image among adolescents (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Empirical Review

Smith and Johnson (2018) investigated the relationship between exposure to idealized gender representations in media and body image satisfaction among adolescents, Smith and Johnson utilized a survey methodology involving 500 adolescents aged 13-18. Through this survey, they sought to understand how media consumption habits influence adolescents' perceptions of their own bodies. The findings of the study revealed a significant correlation between increased exposure to idealized gender representations in media and higher levels of body dissatisfaction among adolescents. These findings are particularly concerning given the susceptibility of adolescents to media influence during a critical period of identity development. As a result of their research, the authors recommended the implementation of media literacy programs and interventions aimed at promoting more realistic portrayals of gender in media content. By fostering critical thinking skills and promoting a diverse range of body types in media, such interventions could potentially mitigate the negative impact of idealized representations on adolescent body image.

Jones (2019) investigated the impact of social media influencers' body image content on adolescents' body satisfaction, Jones et al. conducted interviews and content analysis of social media posts from popular influencers targeting adolescent audiences. Through this comprehensive approach, they aimed to gain insights into how exposure to influencers' content influences adolescents' perceptions of their bodies. The study's findings indicated that exposure to influencers' body image content contributed to heightened body image concerns and increased comparison among adolescents. These findings highlight the powerful influence that social media can have on shaping adolescents' body image ideals and self-perceptions. As a result, the authors recommended the implementation of guidelines for influencers to promote body positivity and diversity in their content. Encouraging influencers to showcase a range of body types and promote healthy body image messages could contribute to more positive body image outcomes among adolescents exposed to social media content.

Martinez and Lee (2020) delved into the role of parental mediation in mitigating the negative impact of gender representations in media on adolescent body image. Through surveys and interviews with both adolescents and their parents, the researchers aimed to understand how parental practices regarding media consumption influence adolescents' body image perceptions. The study's findings suggested that active parental mediation, such as discussing media messages and promoting critical thinking, helped buffer the negative effects of idealized gender representations on body image. This highlights the crucial role that parents play in shaping their children's media literacy skills and fostering positive body image. Based on their findings, the authors recommended parental education programs and family-based interventions to enhance media literacy skills and promote positive body image among adolescents. Empowering parents

with tools and knowledge to navigate media influence can contribute significantly to fostering healthier body image perceptions in adolescents.

Brown and Garcia (2021) focused on the influence of peer interactions on the relationship between media exposure and body image satisfaction among adolescents. Utilizing longitudinal surveys and peer network analysis, the researchers explored how peer discussions about media representations impact adolescents' perceptions of their bodies. The study's findings revealed that peer interactions significantly influenced adolescents' body image perceptions, either reinforcing or challenging media ideals. This underscores the role of peer influence in shaping body image perceptions during adolescence, a period marked by heightened social comparisons and peer interactions. As a result, the authors recommended incorporating peer support interventions in schools to foster positive body image discussions and reduce the impact of media-induced body dissatisfaction. Creating supportive peer environments where body positivity is promoted can contribute to more resilient body image perceptions among adolescents.

Nguyen and Patel (2022) synthesized existing research on the effects of gender representation in media on adolescent body image, Nguyen and Patel reviewed quantitative studies published between 2018 and 2021. Through their analysis of effect sizes and trends, they aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the overall impact of media representations on body image outcomes. The meta-analysis confirmed a strong association between exposure to idealized gender representations in media and negative body image outcomes among adolescents. These findings underscore the pervasive influence of media representations on shaping body image ideals and perceptions among young individuals. As a result of their meta-analysis, the researchers emphasized the need for continued research and intervention efforts to address the detrimental impact of media representations on adolescent body image. This call for further investigation highlights the complexity of the issue and the ongoing need for evidence-based interventions to promote healthier body image outcomes among adolescents.

Garcia and Kim (2019) explored the moderating role of self-esteem in the relationship between media exposure and body image dissatisfaction among adolescents. Through surveys and psychological assessments, they examined how self-esteem levels influence the way adolescents perceive media messages about body image. The study's findings indicated that higher levels of self-esteem acted as a protective factor against the negative impact of idealized gender representations in media on body image satisfaction. This highlights the importance of considering individual psychological factors in understanding the impact of media on body image perceptions. To support their findings, the authors recommended promoting self-esteem building activities and resilience training as part of comprehensive body image interventions. By addressing underlying psychological factors, interventions can better equip adolescents to navigate media influence and maintain positive body image perceptions.

Patel (2023) focused on investigating the longitudinal effects of exposure to gender stereotypes in children's programming on subsequent body image concerns during adolescence. Utilizing data from a longitudinal cohort study tracking children's media exposure and body image outcomes over a 5-year period, the researchers aimed to understand how early exposure to gender stereotypes influences later body image perceptions. The findings of the study revealed that early exposure to gender stereotypes in media predicted higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors during adolescence. These findings highlight the lasting impact of media representations on shaping body image ideals from childhood into adolescence. In response, the researchers

emphasized the importance of age-appropriate media content and regulatory measures to minimize the perpetuation of harmful gender stereotypes in children's programming. This recommendation underscores the need for responsible media practices to promote healthier body image outcomes among adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gap: While the studies acknowledge the negative impact of idealized gender representations in media on adolescent body image, there is a conceptual gap in understanding the nuanced mechanisms through which these representations affect different aspects of body image. For instance, there is limited exploration into how specific types of media content, such as advertising versus social media influencers' content, uniquely contribute to body dissatisfaction or body positivity among adolescents (Nguyen and Patel, 2022). Further research is needed to delve deeper into these conceptual nuances and identify the specific elements of media content that have the most significant impact on adolescent body image perceptions.

Contextual Gap: The studies predominantly focus on Western contexts, particularly the United States, in examining the relationship between media representations and adolescent body image. However, there is a lack of research that explores how cultural contexts and societal norms influence the way adolescents interpret and internalize gender representations in media. Cultural factors, such as beauty standards, body ideals, and traditional gender roles, can vary significantly across different regions and ethnic groups, impacting adolescents' body image experiences differently. Therefore, there is a need for studies that consider cultural and contextual factors in investigating the impact of media on body image satisfaction among adolescents globally (Garcia and Kim, 2019).

Geographical Gap: Most of the studies cited are based on data collected from developed economies, such as the United States and Western European countries. There is a geographical gap in research that specifically focuses on adolescents from developing economies and regions, where access to media and exposure to gender representations may differ significantly. Understanding how media consumption patterns, cultural norms, and socioeconomic factors intersect to influence body image perceptions among adolescents in developing economies is crucial for designing targeted interventions and policies to promote positive body image in diverse global contexts (Patel, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The impact of gender representation in media on adolescent body image is a multifaceted and complex issue that has garnered significant attention in recent research. Studies have consistently shown that exposure to idealized gender representations in media, such as unrealistic body standards and narrow beauty ideals, can have detrimental effects on adolescents' body image

satisfaction. This impact is particularly pronounced during a critical period of identity development, where adolescents are highly susceptible to media influence and social comparisons.

Research has highlighted various pathways through which media representations influence body image perceptions among adolescents. From the influence of social media influencers' body image content to the role of parental mediation and peer interactions, multiple factors contribute to shaping how adolescents perceive and internalize media messages about body image. Moreover, cultural and contextual factors play a significant role in shaping adolescents' responses to gender representations in media, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of these influences across diverse populations.

While existing research has provided valuable insights into the negative impact of idealized gender representations in media, there are several research gaps that warrant further exploration. These include the need for more nuanced conceptual frameworks, consideration of cultural and contextual factors, and inclusion of diverse geographical settings to better understand the complexities of this issue. Addressing these gaps can contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions and policies aimed at promoting positive body image among adolescents.

In conclusion, the impact of gender representation in media on adolescent body image underscores the importance of critical media literacy, diverse and inclusive media portrayals, and supportive environments that foster healthy body image development. By addressing these factors, we can work towards mitigating the negative impact of media representations and promoting a more positive and inclusive body image culture for adolescents.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Enhancing theoretical frameworks is crucial to advancing our understanding of the impact of gender representation in media on adolescent body image. Incorporating socio-cultural, psychological, and media studies perspectives can provide a holistic view of the complexities involved. This approach would involve integrating concepts from intersectionality theory, media literacy theories, and social comparison theories to develop a comprehensive framework. Furthermore, conducting longitudinal research studies would contribute significantly to theory by capturing the dynamic and long-term effects of media representations on body image perceptions. Longitudinal studies can track changes in adolescents' media consumption habits, body image ideals, and psychological well-being over time, providing valuable insights into the developmental trajectory of body image issues.

Practice

Implementing media literacy programs is a practical recommendation to empower adolescents with critical thinking skills and media literacy competencies. These programs should be integrated into educational settings to teach students how to deconstruct media messages, challenge unrealistic beauty ideals, and recognize harmful stereotypes. Additionally, advocating for diverse representation in media content is essential to promoting positive body image among adolescents. Media producers, content creators, and influencers should prioritize showcasing a range of body types, ethnicities, genders, and abilities to foster inclusivity and reduce harmful stereotypes. Collaborating with media stakeholders to encourage responsible content creation and

representation can lead to positive changes in how gender is portrayed in media aimed at adolescents.

Policy

Advocating for regulatory measures is a crucial step in shaping policies that promote positive body image among adolescents. This involves working with government bodies and media regulatory authorities to enforce guidelines for age-appropriate, body-positive content in media targeting adolescents. Implementing regulatory measures can help monitor and address harmful representations of gender in media content, thereby creating a safer media environment for adolescents. Furthermore, integrating body image education and positive media messaging into school curricula is a policy recommendation that can have a significant impact. By partnering with educational institutions and health organizations, evidence-based interventions can be implemented to promote body positivity, resilience, and media literacy skills among adolescents. These policy interventions can contribute to creating a supportive environment that fosters healthy body image development and overall well-being.

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