

**The Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Populations: An In-Depth Look at Female  
Sexualization**

by

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### **Abstract**

Social media has become an integral part of adolescent growth and development, with sexualized social media at the forefront as an influencing factor. As adolescents engage in the content found on social media and take part in identity exploration, their mental health can be impacted. With various social media platforms marketed towards adolescent populations, and imagery focused on appearance and social acceptance, there has been an increase in negative mental health outcomes amongst this demographic. This capstone explores how sexualized social media impacts adolescent mental health, with a specific focus on body dysmorphic disorder. An informative newsletter for mental health professionals is proposed as a method to enhance their knowledge and ability to reduce the impacts of sexualized social media on adolescent mental health.

*Keywords:* adolescent, adolescence, body image, body dysmorphic disorder, depression, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, feminist theory, self-image, sexualization, social media

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## Chapter One: Introduction

“In *Girl World*, Halloween is the one night a year when girls can dress like a total slut and no other girls can say anything about it” (Waters, 2004, 25:26). This iconic quote found in the movie *Mean Girls*, brought attention to the dynamics of female sexualization among adolescent populations and was one of the first movies in current day pop culture to step into the space of highlighting how culture and media influence young people during this developmental period of life. Media has been at the forefront of the adolescent experience, especially over the last fifteen years as social media and technology have been on the rise.

With social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik Tok, adolescents are constantly being influenced by the imagery around them. These platforms allow users to share pictures and videos, in most circumstances of themselves and in turn receive ‘likes’, comments, and potential shares with other individuals around the world. Instagram is a photo and video sharing platform where people can upload photos or videos to share with their follows, users are also able to interact with posts others have made available for viewing (Meta, 2022). Snapchat is another photo and video sharing platform where users are able to send messages. This platform gained popularity among adolescent populations as it allowed the user to send videos or pictures which disappear after a few seconds. The Snapchat platform specifically gained recognition as a means of sending sexualized imagery (Benner, 2016). The latest trend in social media is an platform called Tik Tok. Tik Tok’s popularity grew exponentially over the past two years, gaining notoriety during peak pandemic times. It is currently marketed as the world’s leading destination for short mobile videos (TikTok, 2022). Content on the platform has a wide range, as users can post anything from tutorials, to lip syncing, to opinion posts and more. Videos found on the platform tend to be quite short, ranging from a few seconds up to one minute. Users are

able to record and edit videos within the app and reach large audiences when posting content (Geysler, 2022). The culture of social media has transformed and adapted to include a more sexualized ideal, especially in terms of body image and self-objectification. A recent systematic review (2016) took a look at how adolescent girls interacted with social media and the frequency of sexualized interactions. This study found between 25%-35% of adolescent girls had used social media to send and/or receive photos or texts of a sexual nature (Ng, 2016). Over the past decade social media has transformed to include various platforms, many which have a higher emphasis on curating one's self in order to appeal to the masses, as noted in an article posted by USA Today (Brown, 2019). The article highlighted the number of social media users and the large increase which took place between 2010 – 2021. Prior to 2010, approximately 0.97 billion individuals utilized social media platforms and as of 2021 the number has increased to over three billion users (Brown, 2019). It is more common than ever to find imagery that is considered sexualized being targeted towards adolescents. This includes content depicting sexual acts, revealing clothing and idealization of certain body types (Hatton & Trautner, 2011).

Social media has become deeply rooted into the daily lives of adolescents with 92% of teens indicating daily use of social media platforms and 24% stating constant usage (Trekels et al, 2018). The focus and research question for this paper will be identifying and understanding how sexualized social media impacts adolescent mental health, with an in-depth look at how sexualized social media has influenced self-image and body dysmorphia. For the means of this paper, I will utilize Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and feminist theory to dissect the research on how sexualized social media impacts adolescent mental health.

### **Overview of the Topic**

Forbes magazine noted, content found in social media responds to demand and is a reflection of culture, in order to remain relevant, the next generation of users is kept in mind (Bakhtiari, 2021). Throughout western culture, mainstream media tends to depict women and girls in a sexualizing manner (Ng, 2017). This exposure to media portrayals of sexualized women and girls teaches adolescents that women are sexual objects (APA, 2007). Social media and adolescent development have increasingly become a topic of interest in relation to areas of research and academic advancement, as countries around the world have begun taking a comprehensive look at how various forms of media influence adolescent development and the behavioral outcomes because of it (Hausmann et al., 2017). There is a large body of research linking sexualized media to body image concerns (Skowronski et al., 2022).

In Western society, sex appeal has become greatly valued and young women actively and publicly expose their sexualities in a variety of ways (Davis, 2018; Hausmann et al., 2017; Skowronski et al., 2022). Evidence of public interest in relation to sexualized content came from the popularity of celebrities who gained exposure due to their highly sexualized images (Choi & DeLong, 2019). In recent years this has been defined as ‘The Kardashian Phenomenon’ by pop culture and media outlets such as Allure magazine (Sicardi, 2021) and Los Angeles Times (Ryan & Tschorn, 2010). The Kardashian family rose to fame when Kim Kardashian’s sex tape was leaked in 2007, which led to the rise of celebrities using sexual appeal to gain notoriety (In Touch, 2022; Ryan & Tschorn, 2010). By using sexual appeal and personal image the Kardashians have been known to influence social media, including the way it is used and the content which is being posted (Sicardi, 2021). This influence of celebrities benefiting from sexual appeal was also mentioned in the article by Choi and DeLong (2019) as consumers are noted to participate in hyper sexualized cultural trends as a result of viewing media and imagery

of celebrities taking part in such trends (Choi & DeLong, 2019; In Touch, 2022; Ryan & Tschorn, 2010).

In relation to the ‘Kardashian Phenomenon’, the content the Kardashian family posts has been suggested to influence the number of public interests for plastic surgery, as the American Society of Plastic Surgeons saw an increase of 3,233% for lip fillers following Kylie Jenner's disclosure of having a lip augmentation in 2015 (Sicardi, 2021). Furthermore, the passive consumption of sexually objectifying content on social media platforms have been shown to lower body satisfaction and self-esteem (Plieger et al., 2021).

The developments of social media and its links to health outcomes has become a new area of research (Hausmann et al., 2017; Hjetland et al., 2021). Social media has been seen to increase body image concerns and mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety within adolescents, due to the sexualized nature of media (Hausmann et al., 2017; Trekels et al., 2017). This has led to research focused on how media has shifted to include a more sexualized representation of society, and the longitudinal impacts on adolescent mental health (Skowronski et al., 2020). Adolescents make up a large proportion of social media users and quantitative studies have found associations between frequency and duration of social media use and mental health issues (Hjetland et al., 2021). A study conducted in Norway found 47% of adolescents spend at least two hours on social media every day and over 90% of adolescents are active participants on one or more social media platforms (Hjetland et al., 2021).

The last decade has seen an increase in adolescent mental health problems, which include anxiety and depression and social media use has been linked as a contributing factor (Plaisime et al., 2020). One article published by the Child Mind Institute (Miller & Bubrick, 2022) noted links between high levels of depression in adolescents and the influence of social media

platforms. The article noted 33% of students who were studied displayed depressive symptoms and 92% of the adolescents accessed social media on a regular basis (Miller & Bubrick, 2022). The increase of mental health problems has also been seen in the area of suicide and suicidal ideation as a result of social media influences (Twenge et al, 2018; Miller & Bubrick, 2022). One study found an increase of 65% for the rate of suicide amongst adolescent girls, as a result of depression that was linked to social media usage (Twenge et al., 2018).

### **Purpose Statement**

The goal of this capstone paper is to understand how sexualized social media impacts adolescent mental health, with an in-depth look at how sexualized social media has influenced self-image and body dysmorphia. Exploring the connections between media and how it influences adolescent behavior will give insight to the experiences of this demographic and the mental health repercussions that follow. This capstone paper will be written with mental health professionals in mind, as it can be used as a tool to guide practice and understanding around current day implications which arise from the use of media. It is important for mental health professionals who engage with adolescent populations to have a foundational understanding of how media influences many of their behavioral responses. It is essential to understand the way social media affects adolescent populations as it has become such an ingrained part of their life. Understanding the potential negative implications of social media usage may support mental health professionals in developing strategies to support their clients.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

For this capstone paper, I will be utilizing feminist theory and concepts within Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. I was drawn to these theoretical and conceptual frameworks as I believe they allow unique perspectives into the space of adolescent psychology.

When looking at the impact of sexualized social media and adolescent mental health, feminist theory and Erikson's stages of psychosocial development can be used in conjunction to gain a deeper understanding of how certain mental health challenges manifest in adolescent populations as a result of social media consumption. Feminist theory allows the reader to identify the structures of power related to sexualized social media and Erikson's theory puts into perspective the challenges adolescents are facing during this time of development and how the influence of social media can be heightened due to the dynamics of peer relations. Feminist theory can be defined as a concept which looks at systems and structures that work against individuals, with a focus on intersectionality and gender-based differences (Arinder, 2020). Feminist theory also focuses on the experiences faced by marginalized groups while considering sexual orientation, race and class all of which are relevant within the work of adolescent psychology (Arinder, 2020; Egbert et al., 2020). Within the parameters of this paper feminist theory will be used as a foundation to explore systematic issues which intersect the topic of social media and adolescent sexualization. Feminist theory shows up in the space of psychotherapy as feminist therapy, this person-centered approach focuses on societal, cultural, and political issues faced within the counselling space (Dunn et al., 2017).

Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development is a theory introduced in the 1950's. It is built upon Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual development as it draws parallels between life stages and the influence of social dynamics (Orensteind & Lewis, 2022). This theory includes eight stages, each with a specific conflict one must resolve in order to build a stronger sense of self; 12 to 18 months and the conflict of trust vs. mistrust, 18 months to three years old and the conflict of autonomy vs. shame and doubt, ages three to five and the conflict of initiative vs. guilt, ages five to 12 and the conflict of industry vs. inferiority, ages 12 to 18 and

the conflict of identity vs. confusion, ages 18 to 40 and the conflict of intimacy and isolation, ages 40 to 65 and the conflict of generativity vs. stagnation, and people aged 65 and older and the conflict of integrity vs despair (Erikson, 1950; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development will be used to identify the key aspects of adolescent development, specifically the stage of identity vs. role confusion. This stage of identity vs. role confusion encompasses the ages of 12 to 18 years and highlights the significance of relationships of peers, and role models (Erikson, 1950).

### **Contribution to the Field**

Over the last decade there has been an increase in research pertaining to the impact and influence of media and technology amongst adolescent populations, as shown by articles written by the Journal of Youth and Adolescence, Journal of Mental Health, and Journal of Clinical Medicine (Austermann et al., 2021; O'Reilly, 2020; Overbeek et al., 2018; Sylwander & Gottzen, 2019). However, there continues to be a gap in terms of how social media has led to self-sexualizing behaviors and how it impacts adolescent mental health. Although there is now a substantial body of research suggesting positive attributes linked between the exposure to sexualized social media and self-image, most studies have been cross sectional, focusing solely on the female experience. Much of the current research has utilized television and print media to assess these issues however lack the assessment of whether or not social media influences body dysmorphia and self-image (Sevic et al., 2020).

This capstone will serve as a foundational tool for mental health professionals which compiles relevant information and research that can be used to better understand the influence sexualized social media has on adolescents and their mental health. Concluding this capstone will be a proposal for a newsletter which will serve as a potential tool for mental health

professionals working with adolescents who may be struggling with body image concerns or body dysmorphic disorder as a result of sexualized media use. The information provided within the newsletter can be used to further educate mental health professionals around changes in technology and the influence it has on adolescent populations.

### **Reflectivity and Positionality Statement**

In conducting the research necessary to fulfill the requirements of this capstone project, I found myself experiencing many emotions and thoughts around how I wanted to shape this paper, and the information which I personally felt was relevant to the topic and to the field of psychotherapy. As a settler on the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish and Semiahmoo people, along with being a first generation Canadian brought up within the Indo-Fijian culture, my personal experiences and perspectives have shaped and influenced the information shared within this document.

Going into the process of writing this paper, I reflected on the work I have done as a child and youth worker, specifically working with adolescents in a mental health treatment facility. Thus far in my work, I have noticed connections between social media and adolescent self-sexualizing behavior, which then impacts their mental health. This has shown up as youth coming into the treatment facility dressing provocatively or participating in activities not suited for their age, as they have seen it on media. These behaviors would then influence their mental health, leading to emotional dysregulation, damaged relationships with peers and family, along with varying other repercussions. As a lot of my knowledge and awareness of how social media is linked to self-sexualization has been negative, I had some worries around my personal bias influencing information delivered within this capstone project. Particularly in using a feminist lens, I wanted to challenge my biases and highlight the positive outcomes related to social media

and reclaiming one's body through the concept of self-sexualization as an empowering tool. My unique perspectives as a woman of color will also be an influencing factor in this paper. Having grown up as part of a generation where social media was at the forefront of my adolescence, I was aware of the representation I was seeing on these platforms. At the time of my youth, seeing people of color in influencer roles was quite rare and Eurocentric beauty standards were at the peak of social media trends. Whilst going through the current research and articles utilized for this paper, my attention has been drawn to the ethnic backgrounds of the individuals who are being studied and how beauty standards have changed.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Adolescent*: a young person who is developing into an adult: one who is in the state of adolescence (Trekels et al, 2017)

*Adolescence*: the period of life when a child develops into an adult: the period from puberty to maturity terminating legally at the age of majority (Trekels et al, 2017)

*Body Image*: a subjective picture of one's own physical appearance established both by self-observation and by noting the reaction of others (Skowronski et al, 2022)

*Depression*: is a common mood disorder which causes symptoms that affect how you feel, think, and handle daily activities such as sleeping, eating, or working (NIMH, 2018).

*Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development*: a psychoanalytic theory which identifies eight stages of development one should pass through infancy to late adulthood (Erikson, 1950).

*Feminist Theory*: a worldview which emphasizes the power imbalances faced by individuals due to systems of oppression and hegemonic masculinity (Dunn et al, 2015)

*Mass Media*: a diverse combination of platforms and technologies used to share messages, imagery, and content with large populations (Arriaga et al, 2021).

*Self-Image:* the thoughts and perspectives an individual has about themselves, the way they perceive themselves in the world (Moradi, 2010)

*Sexualization:* when a person's values come only from their sexual appeal, and all other aspects of the individual no longer hold value (Skowronski et al, 2020)

*Social Media:* online platforms used to connect, share and interact with others through the form of 'likes', posting pictures or videos (Franchina et al, 2018).

### **Outline of Capstone Project Chapters**

Many of the studies reviewed within this paper address the behavioral outcomes associated with adolescent media use, and specifically look at female sexualization. Some of the areas researched involve sexualized self-appearance, cultural influences, and mental health repercussions. Both the use of social media platforms as well as mass media such as television and movies will be addressed. Chapter two is comprised of a literature review covering the areas of social media usage among adolescent populations, what constitutes as sexualized social media, and sexualized social media's influence on adolescent mental health. Next, the chapter will dive into some of the mental health outcomes of body dysmorphia and negative self-image associated with sexualized media usage, specifically looking at ties to body dysmorphia and self-image. Lastly, therapeutic approaches to working with adolescents struggling with body dysmorphia and self-image will be discussed, as well as how social media can be utilized in a positive manner in therapy.

Chapter three will discuss the importance of developing an understanding for social media usage in adolescent populations and potential solutions for closing this gap. A proposal for a newsletter targeted towards mental health professionals will be the focus of this chapter. The goal of this newsletter is to provide mental health professionals with up-to-date information

surrounding the evolution of social media and its usage amongst adolescent populations. It will focus on new and upcoming social media platforms, trending ways adolescents are interacting with these applications, and the ways it may impact their mental health. There will also be a section on current and emerging therapeutic approaches which are being used to treat body dysmorphia and body image concerns, and how mental health practitioners can incorporate therapeutic techniques into their practice. The information provided within this newsletter can better support mental health professionals in creating treatment plans for their clients as it allows the professional to build upon their knowledge and incorporate new skills into their therapeutic practices.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This chapter reviews the current literature pertaining to sexualized social media use among adolescent populations and its impact on self-image and body dysmorphia. Relevant studies are analyzed to understand the developments in sexualized social media and how adolescent populations are being affected. The connection between body dysmorphia and sexualized social media use is assessed by reviewing studies focused on outcomes related to body dysmorphia. Lastly, therapeutic approaches for adolescents who may be experiencing body dysmorphia are discussed.

### **Adolescence and Social Media**

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Tik Tok are now a part of most individuals daily lives, especially amongst younger generations (Cataldo et al, 2021). These platforms are incorporated into the lives of adolescents and have led to changes in the way adolescent society operates (Plaisime et al, 2020). Over 93% of American teenagers now connected to the internet and 73% belonging to at least one social media platform (Plaisime et al, 2020). Across many studies social media use amongst adolescence has been linked to a host of mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and issues around self-image (Hausmann et al, 2017; Pew Research Centre, 2018; Plaisime et al, 2020). When asked teenagers have described these platforms as a tool for connecting and maintaining relationships, being creative and as a method of learning (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). When surveyed 81% of teenagers reported feeling more connected to their family and friends through the use of social media, however 45% of teenagers shared feeling overwhelmed from the pressures associated with social media use (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Negative self-image was identified to be one of the main stressors related to adolescent social media use and the need to post content in

relation to appearance and maintaining socially acceptance (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Pew Research Centre, 2018).

An article published by Newport Academy found 1/3 of adolescents who had depression used social media constantly whereas 18% of adolescents who used social media constantly did not have depressive symptoms (Newport Academy, 2022). Another study published in 2018 identified adolescents aged between 14 -17 who used social media 7 hours per day were more than twice as likely to have been diagnosed with depression, treated by a mental health professional, or taken medication for a psychological or behavioral issue, these findings were compared to adolescents who used social media for approximately 1 hour per day (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

The influence of media was first tackled by George Gerbner who introduced cultivation theory (1976). According to the theory, spending large amounts of time engaging in the virtual world would contribute to the user's perception of reality, typically altering their way of thought and creating the notion of what is portrayed in media to be reality (Gerbner, 1976). This phenomenon has continued to impact the way social media is perceived as in current times exposure to celebrities who gained popularity from their highly sexualized images and performances such as Kim Kardashian are highlighted and shown as a means of gaining social status (Ward et al., 2018). Many researchers and mental health professionals believe the continuous overstimulation of social networking shifts the nervous system into fight or flight mode which can worsen mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety (Heffer et al., 2019; Twenge et al., 2018).

### **Adolescence and Sexualized Social Media**

For decades, the message from media to adolescents has been that in order to be accepted by society you must look a certain way, whether that be thin, muscular, or sexually appealing (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). Over the years, the content shared on social media has depicted an ideal body type which many individuals are unable to achieve, thus the gap between real bodies and idealized bodies in the media has increased (Eckler & Cameron, 2020).

With the prevalence of sexualized content in social media it is common for adolescents to interact with these sources early on. Online sexualized experiences include using pornography, sexualized social media, nude image exchange, and sexual chatting. All of which have become a part of everyday societal culture (Mass et al., 2019). Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik Tok have been ranked as some of the most used social media platforms by adolescents as indicated by the Pew Research Centre (2018). In the United States, adolescents aged 13 -17 were studied and the results indicated 72% used Instagram, 69% use Snapchat and 69% use Tik Tok on a regular basis (Pew Research Centre, 2018; University of Minnesota Extension, 2021). Adolescents tend to gravitate towards social media usage as it matches their developmental needs of finding out their identity and establishing social status (Doble, 2018).

For the purposes of this capstone project, the social media platforms of Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik Tok will be used to better understand the impact social media has on adolescent mental health specifically how sexualized media consumption links to body dysmorphia. As mentioned in chapter one, these social media platforms mainly focus on sharing pictures and videos. Although social networking sites are not sexual in nature, with many platforms invoking guidelines around the nature of content being posted, social media sites do serve as a platform for sharing appearance related content, often showcasing imagery which can be considered sexualized in nature (Karsay et al., 2018).

### **What is Sexualized Social Media?**

As sexualized portrayals of women and men are becoming more common in today's media, so is concern that the focus on appearance these images promote encourages not only sexual objectification but also thoughts of negative self-image and body dysmorphia (Fasoli et al., 2018; Skowronski et al, 2022). Sexualized imagery found across social media platforms has been described as the active exposure of sexuality, commonly displayed as women wearing lowcut cleavage revealing tops, crop tops which emphasize the midriff, and exposure of undergarments by Choi and DeLong (2019). Improving one's personal attractiveness has been an ongoing cultural phenomenon, especially in Western culture where attractiveness and social acceptance are fueled by sexual appeal (Choi & DeLong, 2019; Nowatzki & Morry, 2009).

A cultural trend related to sexualized media use was noted by McNair (2002). This trend identified an increase of members from the public taking part in hypersexualized trends, such as creating content similar to those of celebrities who gained popularity from their own sexualized imagery (McNair, 2002). In current social media trends, an example is young women posting pictures or videos where they are intentionally engaging in sexually appealing activities as a means of gaining followers and publicity (Smolak et al., 2014; Trekels et al., 2018). This hypersexualized culture stems from the increased popularity of pornographic content within mainstream culture (Choi & DeLong, 2019). The stylized pornographic imagery, often seen in music videos or celebrity campaign ads often consists of staged sexualized images or activities, this first gained notoriety within mainstream culture when Demi Moore posed naked for the cover of a 1991 issue of *Vanity Fair* (Choi & DeLong, 2019). These contributions to social media have been an active part of creating a hypersexualized culture and influencing social media users to partake in similar activities as form of fitting into society (Choi & DeLong, 2019;

Ward, 2016). This self-sexualization can be defined as a person's value being obtained from their sexual appeal and their status is based on their physical attractiveness (APA, 2007).

When it comes to understanding how sexualized social media affects self-image it is important to take into account cultural contexts which may be present. Although sexual attractiveness has been found to be an aspect of the feminine ideal across many cultures, it is argued that an ideal appearance and how it is presented is constructed socially (Moradi, 2010). What is considered to be sexual by some cultures may not be by others. Studies have found sexualized imagery created in the United States as less sexual when compared to France and overly sexual when compared to Asian cultures (Trekels et al., 2018; Yan & Bissel, 2014). For the purposes of this capstone paper, the North American understanding of sexualized social media and content will be used, specifically utilizing the definition provided by Trekels et al. (2018) and Smolak (2014).

### **Sexualized Social Media, Self-Image, and Body Dysmorphia**

As sexualized portrayals of women and men are becoming more common in today's social media, there is concern that the message of a sexualized appearance as the societal norm is influencing thoughts around self-image and body dysmorphia (Fasoli et al., 2018). Self-image can be defined as the personal view an individual has of themselves, this self-image describes the characteristics of the self which include ideas around appearance and intelligence (Cleveland Clinic, 2020). This concept plays a significant role when looking at how sexualized social media impacts adolescent mental health. Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik Tok are used to provide content such as pictures of one's face or body with the aim of acquiring validation through likes and comments, this type of activity puts importance on self-image and can lead to self-objectifying views (Salomon & Brown, 2018; Sevic et al., 2019).

The use of social media is popular in the realm of body image and promoting lifestyles which emphasize the way a person looks in order to gain notoriety, such platforms can also play a negative role in the lives of individuals especially when they are exposed to unrealistic and unattainable body images (Cataldo et al., 2021; Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2015). A content analysis was conducted on Instagram in relation to body image and lifestyle by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018), this analysis found 63.7% of images posted represented women and 25% of the images portrayed a toned and muscular body ideal with the individuals often posing in revealing outfits (Carrotte, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

Several studies have suggested that content targeted towards body image and sexualization have been found to decrease body satisfaction in consumers, mainly those who are young women (Cataldo et al., 2021). Data suggested that female adolescents are more vulnerable than males to the negative psychological outcomes related to sexualized body image ideals and that young women with low self-esteem tend to be the ones interacting with this type of social media the most (Cataldo et al., 2021; Carrotte et al., 2017; Raggat et al., 2018; Trekels et al., 2017). This pressure to obtain unrealistic and unobtainable body shapes contribute to a general sense of inadequacy as individuals are unable to meet such targets (Raggat et al., 2018). The information presented indicates the importance of bringing awareness and educating mental health professionals who are working with adolescent populations as a means of preventing and protecting adolescents from the impact of negative self-image.

With pressure to look a certain way and self-image being influenced by sexualized social media, body dysmorphic disorder also referred to as body dysmorphia can be a potential outcome for adolescent mental health. Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), as described in the DSM- 5, is a preoccupation with one or more perceived defects or flaws in physical appearance

that are not observable or appear slight to others (APA, 2013). At some point during the course of the disorder the individual has performed repetitive behaviors such as excessive grooming, reassurance checking, mirror checking, and comparing their appearances with that of others (APA, 2013). Sufferers of BDD experience significant psychological distress, embarrassment, shame, and hopelessness related to body image. BDD is prevalent in adolescents and young adults, and slightly more common in females than males (Ayub et al., 2020). It is estimated that approximately 2% of the general population suffers from BDD and 2.5% of females experience BDD (APA, 2013; Arabyat et al., 2022; Skowronski et al., 2021). BDD typically begins in adolescence, the age of onset is between 16 and 17 years of age (APA, 2013). BDD has serious consequences that affect quality of life. BDD disrupts social functioning and romantic relationships and can result in challenges with education and occupational attainments (Walker et al., 2021)

BDD in adolescents is an area of research which has lacked study in comparison to other areas of adolescent mental health and has only recently moved to the forefront of adolescent psychiatric research (Trekels et al, 2018). One study published by the Journal of Psychiatry Research (2006) found 94.3% adolescents studied reported moderate, severe, or extreme distress due to body dysmorphic disorder. It was noted that since self-perception and body image are important factors of adolescent development, it often connects to the higher rates of BDD within this population (Philips et al, 2006). In more current research, social media and its influence on BDD has been studied, with results linking higher rates of BDD to social media usage (Ahmadpanah et al., 2019; Alsaidan et al, 2020; Ryding et al, 2020; Walker et al). BDD was significantly associated with spending longer times on Instagram and Snapchat and adolescents

were more likely to compare their appearance with social media influencers and celebrities (Alqahtani et al., 2021).

A systematic review conducted by Holland and Tiggemann (2016) found that the use of social media platforms focusing on body shape and beauty standards were associated with greater body image dissatisfaction and more disordered eating behaviors. Furthermore, using social media for uploading pictures, seeking feedback, and comparing one's appearance to others led to symptoms associated with BDD (Ahmadpanah et al., 2020; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Skowronski et al. (2022) also looked at how exposure to sexualized images on Instagram linked to body image concerns amongst adolescents. The purpose of their research was to examine associations between adolescent's use of sexualized social media and conceptualization of body image concerns, specifically thoughts around being thin for adolescent girls and muscular for adolescent boys. Results suggested that sexualized images on Instagram contributed to adolescent body image concerns, more so in comparison to traditional media outlets as users typically follow similar accounts to those of their peers. This increases the chances of users discussing the bodies of individuals they see on social media platforms and intensifies the links between sexualized images and self-objectification. (Skowronski et al., 2022; Tiggemann, 2018; Wang et al., 2020)

### **Behavioural Outcomes**

When looking at the outcomes associated with sexualized social media use, the *Tripartite Influence Model of Body Image* was used to identify the internalization and externalization of behaviours linked to this topic. The *Tripartite Influence Model of Body Image* guided some of the research used in this capstone paper and links to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, specifically to stage 5: identity vs. confusion, the model was first introduced by

Clark and Watson (1991) and then further developed and specified for body image by Thompson and Heinberg (1999). It argued that beauty ideals are reinforced by three primary sociocultural influences: peers, parents, and the media. Internalization of appearance and appearance comparison are at the forefront of this model and used to gauge the severity of body dissatisfaction (Altafe et al., 1999; Dayan et al., 2019)

The exposure to sexualized social media has been shown to impact thought patterns and behaviors, which can be grouped into internal and external responses (Vogel et al., 2021). Internalizing behaviours can involve social withdrawal, and difficulty coping with anxiety or depression, whereas externalizing behaviours can include aggression, acting out, or other observable behaviours (John Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2019). Internalizing behaviours tend to be more common and when studied, adolescents who spent more than three hours a day on social media were more likely to report high levels of internalizing behaviours compared to adolescents who do not use social media at all (John Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2019). Research has also shown that sexualized images in the media has led to adolescents' internalization of the content they are viewing and an increase in depression, self-objectification, and decreased body satisfaction (Ward, 2016). Social media use has been linked to increased cases of depression with one study linking the use of social media over the course of three weeks resulting in loneliness and feelings of depression in comparison to a controlled group (Hunt et al., 2018).

Some of the external behaviours linked to sexualized social media use identified in a meta-analysis by Coyne et al. (2019) were permissive sexual attitudes, risky sexual behaviours, and earlier sexual initiation within adolescence. There were significant findings indicating that

media can have a negative impact on sexual attitudes and behaviours along with early sexual experimentation leading to poor mental health (Coyne et al., 2019).

A more drastic and externalizing behaviour linked to adolescent sexualized social media is the physical alterations made based on what they are seeing online. The Tripartite Model was used in current research related to the topic of sexualized social media use among adolescents, body image, and the increased desire for cosmetic surgery. Physical appearance is an important aspect of personal identity and its relation to one's self-image begins early in life (Walker et al., 2021). With the importance of physical appearance being displayed on social media, it has become more influential than ever especially among adolescents (Walker et al., 2021). Initially, studies found adolescents partaking in low-level appearance change such as dying their hair and altering their clothes, over time these changes have started to become more long lasting and drastic as seen by taking part in cosmetic procedures (Walker et al., 2021).

The *American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* and the *American Society of Plastic Surgeons* found a steady incline in the number of cosmetic procedures that were taking place amongst younger people (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2017; American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2022). According to the *American Society of Plastic Surgeons* approximately 64,470 cosmetic surgical procedures were performed on people between the ages of 13-19 in 2015 and 161,700 minimally invasive cosmetic procedures were performed (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2022). Highlighted is the heavy influence social media and pop culture have on the type and frequency of cosmetic procedures. Due to social media trends, rhinoplasty, Botox, fillers, and face lifts were seen to be the most common procedures (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2017). Further studies show social media being used as a space to obtain information regarding these procedures and to look at before and after

pictures. It was noted that the upward trends of cosmetic surgery amongst adolescent populations correlated to body dissatisfaction and negative thoughts an individual has about their appearance (Arabyat et al., 2022).

Individuals who suffer from BDD tend to engage in cosmetic procedures as a form of treatment (Walker et al., 2021). Most often this results in negative outcomes, such as dissatisfaction with the results of the surgery and profoundly negative thoughts around body image (Walker et al., 2021). Other behavioral outcomes associated with sexualized social media use and body dysmorphia include emotional distress, suicidal ideation and difficulties functioning in everyday life. An article published by the Psychiatry Research Journal (2006) found that amongst two hundred adolescents surveyed, 94.3% reported moderate, severe, or extreme distress due to BDD. In addition, 80.6% adolescents had a history of suicidal ideation and 44.4% had attempted suicide. Participants also experienced high levels of impairment in school and psychosocial functioning (Didie et al., 2006).

### **Psychosocial Development and Social Media Use**

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1950) has been integrated throughout this capstone paper in accordance with how sexualized social media use impacts adolescent mental health. Stage five of Erikson's theory looks at identity vs. confusion and focuses on the formation of self-identity. From early adolescence to emerging adulthood self-concept and identity are at the forefront of the human experience (Egbert et al, 2020). During this time, adolescents tend to gravitate towards social media to fulfill their developmental needs such as intimacy, self-expression, and exploring their identity (Schonning et al., 2020; Skowronski et al., 2022; Tiggemann, 2018).

Adolescence is seen as a transitional time which involves substantial changes in a person, these changes include social identity development, cognitive development, establishing and maintaining relationships along with forming autonomy (Laird et al., 2018). Based on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development this period of adolescence is characterized as identity vs. confusion since during adolescence, individuals explore their independence and develop a sense of self (Erikson, 1950).

Studies that looked at the relationship between adolescent social media use and adolescent identity formation found two consistent commonalities. These commonalities were developmental consequences and psychosocial opportunities (Ebergt et al., 2020; O'Day & Heimbreg, 2021; Sebre & Miltuze, 2021; Skowronski et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2018). Developmental consequences refer to maladaptive cognitions and poor identity development processing styles (Sebre & Miltuze, 2021). Psychosocial opportunities refer to adolescents using social media platforms as a means of connecting with peers and creating relationships (Skowronski et al., 2022). One study found negative associations between identity formation and time spent on social media as well as negative associations in communication styles when a majority of communication was being conducted over social media platforms (Sebre & Miltuze, 2021).

The *Model of Psychosocial Development and Social Media Use* is pertinent to the research question of how sexualized social media use impacts adolescent mental health and the influence it has on self-image and body dysmorphia. This model was created by Karimtar (2020) and influenced by the work of Erik Erikson (1950), comparing social media communication and in person communication as independent concepts which influence self-identity formation. Psychosocial wellbeing and the sexual self are considered to be essential

outcomes of adolescent psychosocial development. Karimidar's model uses three critical aspects of adolescent psychosocial development. The first aspect is achieving a sense of trust about who they are and what they want to be in order to develop a sense of self and identity. The second aspect is acquiring a sense of intimacy with others to create and manage meaningful relationships. And the third aspect is using social media as a way to discover their sexual orientation and engage in healthy sexual relationships. Karimidar's model found that exposure to sexualized media content can affect the sexual identity formation of adolescents, sexual presentation in social media can differ vastly, and ever-changing trends can be of influence (Karimidar, 2020; Oosten et al., 2019).

According to Erikson (1950), the main task of adolescence is to solve the crisis of identity versus role confusion. This crisis is solved by obtaining positive peer relations which enables the individuals to create a strong sense of identity (Mitic et al., 2021; Rageliene, 2016). Research shows that a stable and strong sense of identity is associated with better mental health of adolescents. Good relationships with peers are also linked with better emotional and psychological well-being of adolescents (Erikson, 1968; Rageliene, 2016). An adolescent's social system encompasses the relationships they have with family members, peers, school staff and anyone else who is a part of their community (Karcher & Sass, 2010). From a developmental stance the family plays a central role in the child's life during their early years, however once in adolescence the influence of peers takes over and plays a pivotal role in further development (Somerville, 2013). Research on adolescent cognitive development has found peer relations to play an important role in socio-emotional and cognitive development, with supportive peer relationships equating to academic performance, strong sense of self and social competence (Wong et al, 2018).

### **Feminist Theory and Body Image**

The theoretical lens of feminist theory was utilized in conjunction with Erikson's theory for the purposes of guiding this capstone paper. In relation to sexualized social media use and the impact on adolescent mental health; feminist media theory explains how gender and systems of power contribute to self-image and body dysmorphia. Feminist media theory, as defined by Steiner (2014), applies philosophies and concepts found within feminist theory. Feminist media theory focuses on the role gender plays when it comes to the type of content that is being found on social media and who it is being marketed to. One of the main beliefs in feminist media theory is that content would be different if women-controlled media production (Steiner, 2014).

When looking at self-image and body dysmorphia, feminist theory provides a lens to understand why being female puts women at risk. Feminist theorists highlight societal factors and gender beliefs specific to Western cultures that put women at risk for developing body image and eating concerns (Borowsky et al., 2016; Sevic et al., 2019). Through self-objectification and sexualization found on social media sites, a woman's experience of her body is influenced by constant self-evaluation and comparison to societal standards (Trekels, 2018).

Scholars have suggested that holding a feminist identity can be a protective factor for female identifying individuals against body related issues (Borowsky et al., 2016). One study looked at whether or not having feminist beliefs impacted the prevalence of body image issues and body dysmorphia, this study found that 14.5% of participants identifies themselves as feminists, 49% held feminist beliefs but did not self-identify as a feminist and 36.5%. Those who identified as feminists reported significantly higher body satisfaction than women who did not embrace feminism (Borowsky et al., 2016). Therefore, feminist theory could be used as lens to

guide therapeutic practices when working with adolescents who may be struggling with body image and body dysmorphia.

### **Therapeutic Treatment for Body Dysmorphic Disorder**

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a debilitating illness with an increasingly high prevalence among adolescent populations (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). BDD typically begins during early adolescence with most individuals developing symptoms before age 18, this condition affects approximately 2.2% of the general population (Enander et al., 2019; Rautio et al., 2022). Individuals experiencing BDD demonstrate a preoccupation with one or more perceived defects about themselves, most often influenced by social media (Sevic et al., 2019). Common symptoms of BDD include concerns regarding one's appearance and preoccupation with skin, nose, hair, face and stomach (Rautio et al., 2022). A 2022 study (Rautio et al.) looked at 172 children and adolescents with BDD and found common BDD related behaviors present within the group, with 91% comparing themselves with others, 76.8% attempting to hide their appearance, 64.7% applying makeup and 61.6% seeking reassurance from peers in relation to their appearance (Rautio et al., 2022).

Responses to BDD differ between individuals, as some opt for therapy and others seek cosmetic procedures as an attempt to fix their perceived defects and remove negative assumptions related to physical appearance (Enander et al., 2016; Hartmann et al., 2022). Many of the procedures tend to have poor outcomes and lead to worsening of BDD symptoms causing distress (Ayub et al., 2018; Pearlman et al., 2022). If left untreated, this disorder has been associated with functional impairment across many areas of one's life, this can manifest as substance use, suicidality and high rates of psychiatric hospital admissions (Enander et al., 2016; Kollei et al., 2011; Philips et al., 2013).

The two most common and researched methods of therapeutic treatment include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). This capstone focuses on CBT along with the more recent findings of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for BDD, both of which are therapeutic treatments that mental health professionals can utilize within their practice.

CBT for BDD incorporates aspects of the individual's biological, psychological, and social cultural factors into the therapeutic treatment. The CBT model proposes that individuals with BDD focus in on small aspects of appearance as opposed to seeing the big picture (Hartmann et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2018). This can manifest as reacting to perceived flaws with strong negative emotions, avoiding social situations and attempts at neutralizing negative feelings through ritualistic behaviors such as checking themselves in the mirror excessively (Prazeres et al., 2013; Veale, 2004; Wilhelm & Steketee, 2013).

CBT for BDD typically begins with an assessment and psychoeducation, during which the mental health professional explains CBT theory, the diagnosis of BDD, and the individualized CBT treatment plan specific to BDD (Greenberg et al., 2022). A cognitive-behavioral assessment is completed on the client in order to analyze suitability for the treatment model, the assessment focuses on three main factors: beliefs, behaviors, and social avoidance / anxiety (Veale, 2004). Therapeutic techniques utilized in CBT to treat BDD include: cognitive restructuring and exposure with response prevention (Hartmann et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2018; Wilhelm et al., 2013). Cognitive restructuring strategies include identifying negative thought patterns, evaluating them, and then creating alternative thoughts. Clients are encouraged to monitor their appearance-based thoughts both in and outside of the session and to identify any negative feelings which may be associated with them. Once the patient has been able to identify

maladaptive thought patterns the mental health professional can work with them to evaluate and restructure the thought (Greenberg et al., 2022; Veale, 2004).

Exposure and response prevention (ERP) is an important aspect of CBT for BDD as it allows the client to take on challenging aspects of their life head first. Initially the BDD model is used to identify the client's rituals, such as excessive mirror checking or avoidance of social encounters due to their negative self-beliefs. Once these rituals have been identified the client works with the mental health professional to create a plan on addressing exposure and outcomes related. For example, a client who is aversive to social encounters may be encouraged to connect with friends at least once a week. It is important the first exposure be mildly challenging with a high likelihood for success. The mental health professional should also account for the client's feelings in relation to the exposure. As sessions go on, the exposures become more challenging, pushing the client to learn coping mechanisms which then reduce thought patterns associated with BDD. (Phillips & Rogers, 2011). Ritual prevention is another component of ERP for BDD, this concept encourages clients to monitor the frequency and contexts in which rituals arise and then learning how to eliminate the rituals. A ritual may be putting on a full face of makeup before leaving one's home, regardless of the reasoning behind leaving the house or the duration of time one will be out in the community, in order to reduce and eliminate the ritual, a client would be encouraged to wear less makeup when leaving the house and then eventually be given the task of wearing no make-up at all and running errands (Greenberg et al., 2022; Hartmaan et al., 2021; Phillips & Rogers, 2011; Veale, 2004; Wilhelm et al., 2013).

CBT for BDD has mainly been used for treatment in adult populations where programs ranged between eight to 12 weeks and session lengths varying from 90 minutes to two hours, results indicated client improvement and a decrease in BDD related symptoms. (Phillips &

Rogers, 2011). Similar approaches are used when working with adolescents who are dealing with BDD as treatment consists of twelve sessions, taking place twice a week for the first 4 weeks and then followed by one session a week for 4 weeks. The course of treatment is similar to that of CBT used amongst adults, however a strong emphasis is placed on re-establishing peer connections and favorable activities (Greenberg et al., 2010; Phillips & Roger, 2011). When working with adolescents it is common for parents to take a more active role within the treatment and encourage their child throughout the process (Ayub et al., 2020; Greenberg, et al., 2010).

In recent years CBT for BDD has been adapted into an internet-based modality as a way to engage adolescent populations (Enander et al., 2019). A 2019 study (Enander et al.) assessed the efficacy of using internet-based CBT for BDD in adolescents and found sustained long term benefits for users with 69% of participants seeing a change in BDD related symptoms and 56% of participants going into remission (Enander et al., 2019). Internet based CBT for BDD was highlighted as an ideal therapy format for adolescent populations in a 2021 study (Hartmann et al.) as it can be used independently and is highly accessible as modules can be completed any time in any place (Hartmann et al., 2021).

CBT for BDD has been identified as an effective method of treatment as six randomized clinical trials have shown positive response rates between 48%-82% (Greenberg et al., 2019; Veale et al., 2014, Wilhelm et al., 2014). The article also stated 12 weeks of CBT for BDD was more effective in comparison to other psychotherapy approaches for BDD as 56% of individuals who took part in CBT claimed positive results and reduction in symptoms related to BDD and only 6% of participants who took part in alternative forms of psychotherapy saw positive results (Enander et al., 2016). Wilhelm et al., 2019).

A new therapy which has recently become a part of BDD treatment programs is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes, 2004). ACT is a form of behavioral and cognitive therapy based on the belief that individuals are able to identify the downfalls of their current situation and make changes towards them, ultimately leading to a healthier life (Callaghan & Bower, 2012; Hayes, 2004; Hong et al., 2018). ACT was developed by Steven Hayes as an alternative to traditional CBT, influenced by Hayes' personal experience with panic attacks (Cullen, 2008; Grossman, 2022; Hayes, 2004). The goal of ACT is to demonstrate that avoidance is not effective and works with the individual to develop coping mechanisms and emotional acceptance (Philips, 2017). ACT for BDD works to increase psychological flexibility in the experience of problematic thoughts and feelings around body image (Linde et al., 2015). ACT aims to create mindfulness, and acceptance of challenging body image experiences, in order to reduce body image concerns (Hong et al., 2018, Philips, 2017). ACT teaches the individual psychological flexibility through acceptance, cognitive defusion, present-moment-awareness, self-as context, value driven behaviour, and commitment to value-driven behaviour (Ackerman, 2017). ACT also encourages non-judgmental self-awareness and acceptance of thoughts in order to improve body image (Ackerman, 2017; Callaghan & Bower, 2012; Hayes, 2004; Hong et al., 2018; Philips, 2017).

A study conducted by Linde et al. (2015) analyzed 21 patients who took part in a 12-week treatment program which utilized ACT with individuals who had BDD. The results found 95% of participants saw a reduction in symptomology from pre- to post treatment and 68% of participants showed clinically significant improvement when followed up at 6 months post treatment (Linde et al., 2015).

Another study written by Habibollahi & Soltanizadeh (2016) looked at the efficacy of ACT on clients with BDD sampled 30 participants who attended an eight-week ACT program where each session was 1.5 hours. The results showed significant improvement in clients overall mental health and significant reductions in negative self-image and body dissatisfaction (Habibollahi & Soltanizadeh, 2016). In both studies sample sizes were small, however results yielded similar results, showcasing the effectiveness of ACT for individuals with BDD. ACT has been shown to be a successful form of therapy as client retention is high, with 90.5% of participants completing the entirety of the program (Linde et al., 2015). This information will be used as a foundation in addition to emerging therapeutic trends in the area of supporting clients with BDD for the purposes of a newsletter proposal geared towards mental health professionals. This newsletter will be discussed further in chapter three, where information will be compiled on how mental health professionals can address BDD in clients who are actively consuming sexualized social media and therefore being influenced by the nature of the content they are engaging with.

### **Positive Outcomes of Sexualized Social Media**

The literature review thus far has focused on the negative repercussions sexualized social media use has on adolescent mental health. However, there are positive outcomes of social media usage, including positive body image. Positive body image is a layered concept which includes the appreciation of one's body, the way it looks, the way it works. It focuses on loving one's self the way you are even if not entirely satisfied by every single aspect of your body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Individuals with positive body image care for themselves in non-destructive ways and are able to distinguish between positive and negative media influences (Eckler & Camerson, 2020). Social media can positively impact body image in a number of

ways, including health, wellness, and fitness. Around 2013, the social media movement of fitspiration emerged and resulted in content and imagery geared towards promoting healthier messages such as self-care, well rounded diets and motivating users to adapt a healthy lifestyle (Talbot et al., 2017; Tigeemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Through these frameworks social media users can maintain a healthy and positive outlook on their body image (King University, 2019).

Social media also promotes positive body image as platforms have created more inclusive spaces for various types of bodies. For example, trends of anti-dieting have become more popular on social media platforms such as Instagram as influencers and content creators are trying to undo the harm of unhealthy and dangerous diet culture (New York Times, 2022). Body positive influencers have taken to showing off their imperfections as a way to boost self-confidence and eliminate unattainable body standards (New York Times, 2022).

Body image advocacy on social media is important, as it can have a positive impact on those experiencing body dysmorphia (Eating Disorder Hope, 2019). Recent studies on body positivity and social media found that brief exposure to body positive Instagram posts resulted in improved body image and mood in young women when compared to appearance focused posts (Cohen et al, 2019). Another report, (Eckler & Cameron, 2019), focused on building positive body image with the use of social media. This report detailed individual's experiences using social media platforms and found common themes related to body positivity, such as being a part of a community and feeling connected to others who had similar experiences of not feeling represented in mainstream media. The report identified positive behaviors and proposed strategies to support healthy interactions with social media, these include blocking posts, unfollowing negative influences, being more mindful of the content you are interacting with, and seeking out what makes you feel uplifted (Eckler & Cameron, 2019).

Another study, (Cohen et al, 2019) explored the effect of viewing body positive content on social media and its aims to challenge mainstream beauty ideals. Young women were surveyed after viewing body positive content Instagram. Researchers concluded that after viewing positive content, the women not only felt better about their bodies, but they were also in better moods. The study concluded that people tend to emulate what they see, or adjust their expectations of themselves based on what others are doing or how they look (Cohen, et al., 2019).

Based on the findings within this literature review, it is important for further research and developments to occur as social media is ever evolving and the influence it has on adolescents' populations can have drastic outcomes. Chapter three of this capstone research paper will revisit the purpose of this project and discuss findings along with limitations of the research. As alluded to earlier a proposal for a newsletter will be discussed. The aim of this newsletter is to distribute relevant and emerging information on social media and therapeutic trends in treating BDD to mental health professionals.

### **Chapter Three: Analysis and Conclusion**

The previous chapter reviewed current literature on adolescents using sexualized social media and the impact it has on their mental health. Much of the literature reviewed thus far has alluded to negative impacts as a result of sexualized social media use, particularly influencing body dysmorphia. This chapter will review the purpose of this research, discuss the highlights and limitations found, explore some personal reflections, and offer a proposal for a newsletter for mental health professionals working with adolescents with BDD.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this capstone project was to explore current literature surrounding how sexualized social media impacts the mental health of adolescents, specifically the influence it has on self-image and body dysmorphia, and to increase awareness on the topic amongst mental health professionals. The literature review identified the following areas of relevance for mental health professionals to keep themselves up to date: adolescence and social media, adolescence, and sexualized social media, what is sexualized social media, sexualized social media, self-image and body dysmorphia, behavioural outcomes, psychosocial development and social media use, feminist theory and body image, positive outcomes of sexualized social media, and lastly, therapeutic treatment for body dysmorphic disorder.

This capstone was inspired by the work I have done as a child and youth worker, directly engaging with adolescent clients. Throughout my time in this field, I have had first-hand experience working with adolescents who engage with social media on a daily basis. Some of my interactions with these youth highlighted the impact social media had on them and was a big motivation for the focus of this capstone.

#### **Highlights of the Literature Review**

Many of the articles in the literature review focused on how the frequency of social media use influences one's self-image and mental health. More recent studies looked at the influence social media has had on the physical body, specifically at how adolescents are using social media to guide their desires around plastic surgery and changes to their appearance. It was noted that in recent years the number of plastic surgeries has increased, especially amongst adolescent populations, with procedures such as lip fillers and rhinoplasties becoming ever so common (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2017; American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2022). This information was particularly insightful, as mental health professionals working with adolescent populations may not be aware of the significant impact plastic surgery and body modification is having on the younger generation especially when it comes to mental health outcomes such as BDD.

Another highlight of the literature review was the influence of relationships, particularly looking at peer relationships and social media use. When looking at the connections between adolescent social media use and peer relationships, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development was used as a way to identify how adolescent development can be impacted by these relationships. Based on the information found in Rageline (2016) and Amering et al (2021), it can be said that unhealthy peer relations in conjunction with social media use can bring upon mental health challenges within adolescent populations. Since social media is a tool which many individuals use as a means of staying connected with others, adolescents tend to be easily influenced as they are not only connecting with their peers but other members of society who can have damaging impacts. As mental health professionals working with adolescents, it is important to factor in their interactions with external systems. With social media being a newer

phenomenon, the virtual space can often be forgotten as an external system that can impact self-image and mental health.

While there were few articles that discussed the positive outcomes of social media use amongst adolescent populations, Cataldo et al (2021) highlighted the increase in healthy behaviours and lifestyle adaptations which resulted from social media use. The body positivity movement was also a notable positive outcome from social media usage, supporting adolescents in accepting their bodies.

### **Limitations of the Literature**

Literature on adolescent social media use and mental health continues to be an area of development and has several gaps as shown by the literature review conducted in chapter 2. Areas which lack adequate and up to date information are developments of new social media platforms, longitudinal impacts of social media use and body image, as well as the use of emerging therapeutic techniques. A majority of the articles reviewed were systematic reviews or meta-analyses of research that had been conducted mainly between the years of 2013-2018 (Cataldo et al., 2021; Choi & DeLong, 2020; Shannon et al., 2022). Based on the research articles reviewed, only one utilized a longitudinal approach (Sevic et al., 2019). A variety of longitudinal studies focused on social media use and adolescent mental health could help mental health practitioners identify patterns and support the learning of potential cause and effect relationships (Schonning et al., 2020).

Another limitation is that the literature did not take into consideration environmental factors such as sociocultural demographics and geographical location. Many of the studies reviewed were conducted in countries throughout Europe and North America, which does not allow for information on adolescents in developing areas of the world (Shannon et al., 2022).

A third limitation of the current literature is that newer social media platforms such as Tik Tok have not been studied as well (Benner, 2016; Skowronski et al., 2020). Also, in some articles, the social media platforms researched remained unnamed, potentially leading to some confusion for the reader as it is difficult to identify which social media platforms are causing detrimental impacts and how different social media platforms can have different impacts. Even though the social media platforms Instagram and Snapchat were mentioned, the research did not indicate the number of adolescent users. Furthermore, social media platforms and trends are rapidly changing, and it can be difficult for research to keep up (Shonning et al., 2020).

Across the studies reviewed, the majority focused on the frequency and duration of social media use rather than the ways adolescents were interacting with the platforms (Cataldo et al., 2021; Choi & DeLong, 2019; Trekels et al., 2018). Individuals can interact with social media in many ways such as posting pictures, connecting with peers, or just scrolling through the content they are provided with. Some users may be involved with cyber bullying which in turn would result in various outcomes and experiences. These variables are important to note, and be aware of, as it can skew the results when conducting a study and can also contribute to misinformation for those who are using the information for further practice and application (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Another area which lacks research is the positive mental health outcomes related to adolescent social media use. Many of the articles focused on the deficits and negative influences of adolescent social media use. Some researchers have said that the focus on pathology and detrimental results of social media use has contributed in creating a culture of fear when it comes to using social media platforms (O'Reilly et al., 2018). It is difficult to analyze the reasoning behind the current research and the negative connotations attached to them.

### **Personal Reflections**

This portion of the capstone will outline some of my personal thoughts and reflections as they came up throughout the writing process. As a person of colour reading the articles used in the literature review, I found it difficult to pinpoint when adolescents of a minority background were being studied. I believe it is important to identify that those impacted by systems of oppression will have different experiences in comparison to individuals who have not experienced oppression in the same context. Speaking from my own personal experiences of using social media as an adolescence, people of colour tend to be depicted differently than people of the majority. These differences often highlight negative stereotypes which are then being consumed by adolescent populations and resulting in different behaviors and outcomes. More research specific to adolescents of colour and their experiences interacting with sexualized social media should be conducted, as it would allow for a more realistic understanding of the mental health outcomes which are present within the population. People of colour (POC) make up the majority in certain geographical areas, especially those with lower socioeconomic levels. Understanding how the adolescents in these areas are engaging with social media is important as it can support mental health practitioners in their approaches when working with these individuals. Another important point pertaining to social media trends and people of colour is that many current trends are based off of black and Latino culture and are often recreated by non-POC social media influencers. It would be important to know how POC adolescents perceive these images and the way it could potentially impact their mental health.

### **Recommendations**

As a result of this literature review, one of my recommendations is for mental health practitioners to provide psychoeducation for their adolescent clients in regard to social media

usage and the impact it can have on their self-image and mental health. Understanding the possible impacts of engaging in social media could help adolescents change the way they engage online, lowering the risk of developing issues with self-image and mental health, especially BDD.

In an effort to increase awareness and support mental health professionals to keep up to date and learn about the potential impacts of social media use of self-image and mental health, I have proposed a monthly newsletter. This newsletter titled ‘mind.body.media’ will include information on current research, new findings, emerging therapeutic techniques, ways to engage youth, up and coming social media platforms and trending topics or challenges adolescents may be interacting with on social media. It will also include specific information for working with adolescents who are struggling with body image and body dysmorphia as a result of using social media. This newsletter will be a yearly subscription with a new edition coming out quarterly and would allow other mental health professionals to contribute. Mental health professionals would be able to submit their work for publication and collaborative efforts would be encouraged.

It can be difficult to keep up with information especially on a topic that is constantly evolving, my goal with this newsletter is to provide a clear and concise document mental health practitioners can use as a means of bettering their practice. See Appendix A for an example of what the newsletter would like, including the various sections and highlights of what will be included.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, current literature suggests that there are both positive and negative effects on the mental health of adolescents resulting from social media use. Based on the literature discussed above, one can say that social media tends to have more negative outcomes when

compared to ones that are positive, especially in the area of adolescent mental health and social media use. Many factors contribute to these outcomes, and the resulting impact depends on the environment surrounding the user. With further research and understanding of the implications, it would be possible to adjust our therapeutic practices to reduce the potential harms of social media and enhance the mental health of adolescents. The contribution of a newsletter aimed towards mental health professionals will be a step forward in increasing their knowledge of the current literature. By gaining knowledge on sexualized social media and adolescent mental health, mental health professionals will be better prepared to support youth. The information gained through the newsletter will aid mental health practitioners in the work they do with adolescents who may be dealing with BDD and other body image related concerns as a result of social media use. By having the additional knowledge supported by the newsletter, mental health practitioners will be able to identify and treat concerns of BDD and body image concerns in a more efficient manner, leading to overall better mental health for adolescents.

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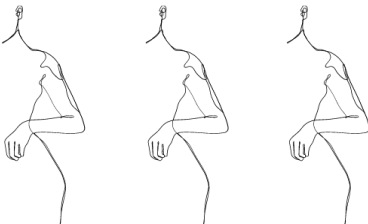
## Appendix

### Newsletter


NEWS
RESEARCH
TOOLS
MORE INFO

# mind.body.media

## NEWSLETTER



The newsletter would start off with a short snippet of current research related to sexualized social media and adolescent mental health. This section would feature new authors and individuals would be able to submit their work to the newsletter to be featured.



### Emerging Ideas

This section would highlight areas of development within therapeutic models. It would provide resources to trainings and relevant information focused on working with adolescents who have BDD.

### Latest Trends

This section would include topics such as: new social media platforms, social media trends, new externalizing behaviours to look out for (plastic surgery/body modification trends)

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