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## The cult of the body and its psychological consequences among adolescent girls

### Abstract

Taking into consideration the problem of “the cult of the body” among young women, the sociocultural context of their upbringing should be analyzed. Nowadays, it can be observed that many young women actively participate in promoting “the cult of the body”. The aim of the aforementioned actions is to get a slim, attractive figure consistent with the trends of women’s attractiveness promoted in the media. The analysis of the social networking sites and blogs indicates that more and more often women themselves are encouraged to promote their attractive, thin image in the Internet. This article will attempt to characterize the phenomenon of “the cult of the body”, in which adolescent women are engaged and which shapes their image of the body and has a potential influence on psychological and physical aspects of their existence. The analysis of the results of the research takes into account the analyzed subject and developmental conditioning of the time of adolescence in the context of sociocultural changes.

**Keywords:** “the cult of the body”, physical appearance, mass media, body image.

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### INTRODUCTION

Many researchers, theorists and contemporary thinkers consider “the cult of the body” to be the phenomenon of our times, significant for the contemporary culture. Although there is no unequivocal definition, it is intuitively regarded as the body admiration, placing the body in the center of interests, granting it a high position in the value hierarchy. “The cult of the body” is the expression of the body-centered culture, in which humans are perceived through the prism of their corporeality [1]. “The cult of the body” may be considered from two opposite sides - on one hand it glorifies the established and media-promoted, culture-influenced canon of beauty, on the other hand it condemns, sometimes brutally and in a devaluating manner, all the deviations from the canon. “The cult of the body” obviously penetrates and emerges in the social life and influences the criteria of self-evaluation and of the evaluation of others.

The manifestations of the references to one’s own body in the source literature are conceptualized in various ways. In social and clinical psychology the term “the body image” is often used. This notion appeared for the first time in the 1920’s in Shindler’s work [2]. In his understanding the body image is the depiction of our body created in our minds: the way our body looks like for ourselves. Nowadays, the majority of researchers understand this term more broadly, adding to the concept of the body image not only the cognitive but

also the affective and behavioral phenomena. This is how, for example, Gorgan [3] understands the term, underlining that the concept of the body image is used to explain various phenomena including the perception of physical attractiveness, the inability to estimate one’s own weight and body size as well as the attitude towards one’s own appearance. In the cognitive theories the term “body image” is widely used and defined as a sensual image of the body sizes, shapes and forms as well as of the feelings associated with the whole body or with its certain parts. The experience of, and the reference to, one’s own corporeality is also conceptualized as body scheme, body self [4]. The aforementioned definitions both include at least two elements - the spiritual perception of the physical status quo together with the emotional state resulting from its multifaceted interpretation. Thomson, on the other hand, goes even further, stating that the body image is a generalized evaluation of self-appearance, the conviction about what others think about it and emotional states experienced this way [5]. The terms: the body self-perception and the attitude towards the body can also be found in the literature [2,4]. Due to high convergence in the definitions, the above terms concerning the experiencing of one’s own body will be used interchangeably.

The depiction of one’s own body develops from childhood together with the development of the identity and gender roles. The perception of one’s own corporeality comes into prominence during adolescence.

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### Adolescence as a critical period in shaping the phenomenon of “the cult of the body”

Adolescence is the period when the intense physical changes of the body occur, including: the rapid growth of the body and its organs, the intensive development of the systems responsible for reproductiveness, the evolvement of the primary and secondary sexual characteristics. The intensity of the changes varies between the two sexes. The occurrent metamorphosis may often cause a series of adaptive difficulties among young people, including difficulties in creating an adequate image of oneself and adequate self-assessment [6]. The diverse pace of development among the two sexes and within each of them, together with the focus on changes occurring in the body, appear in the context of the omnipresent phenomenon of “the cult of the body”, which constitutes a potential source of various psychological problems, which will be analyzed further in this article.

In the emotional sphere of adolescents both dysregulation and intensity of the experienced emotional states are observed. Also observed are defiance against norms and existing rules as well as the inclination for conflicts and negativity. The development of feelings aims at achieving emotional maturity, characterized by the transition from emotional dependency to independence, from the uncontrolled expression of emotions to controlling them, from the uncontrolled succumbing to emotions to mastering them, from egocentrism to sociocentrism [7].

During adolescence the norms and rules, primarily acquired externally, begin to become mentally implemented. The norms are accepted in consonance with the standard of one’s own, definitely less dependent conscience [8,7]. Obviously, the moral area is the key adaptive mechanism to be developed by an individual in order to cope with the pressure of the propagated attitude and behavior associated with “the cult of the body”.

During social development, adolescents manifest a strong need for the contacts with peers and with the opposite sex. Adolescents become prone to strengthen their relationships with other members of the peer groups [9]. It is noteworthy that the strong dependence on the peer group favors the development of the negative phenomena associated with “the cult of the body” - the behaviors and comportment of adolescents, which evolve from this cult are propagated and intensified in the peer group.

Due to the crucial role of the influence of the peer group, a young individual progressively becomes independent of the family, which is aimed at achieving autonomy [10]. The influence of the family environment still remains very strong [11]. For this reason, it is vital that all the influence of pedagogical nature on the prevention of unhealthy and destructive behaviors, ensuing from “the cult of the body”, is aimed also at the family environment.

Havighurst appreciates the role of the corporeality in fulfilling the developmental tasks of young people. The task of acceptance of one’s own body by adolescents is very interesting in the context of “the cult of the body”, vividly implicating the fact that the problems associated with this matter occur during adolescence. Ziółkowska [13] called this period the “sensitive stage for the expression of anorexia” not without a reason, justifying the presented claims with four theses:

- The girls at this stage focus on their own body and assess its attractiveness.

- The girls reveal the need for comparing themselves with currently promoted canons of women’s attractiveness.
- In the hierarchy of values the appearance constitutes one of the main components of the overall self-assessment.
- During this period the girls are particularly prone to the influence of the mass media and the peer group, at the same time without having enough criticism towards the presented content.

When summing up the characteristics of the youngsters’ development during adolescence, it should be noticed that the character of the developmental changes in this period, in particular physical, social and emotional changes, makes adolescents especially susceptible to the impact of the content associated with “the cult of the body”.

### The manifestations and the consequences of the influence of the phenomenon of “the cult of the body” among the adolescents

The modern culture and mass media promote the admissable values, in which human body and its esthetics also become a product. The ideals of beauty are promoted, for example on the Internet, on TV screens, on the covers of magazines and in the streets. The ideal of beauty for women is slim figure, while the model for boys is a muscular body with broad chest, broad shoulders and narrow waist. As the studies indicate, young persons are aware of those “requirements” of the physical attractiveness [14].

Such a beauty standard is promoted by the mass media, which have a great influence on the attitude and behavior of the adolescents. The more frequent the contact with the content promoting the slim silhouette among women, the higher the risk of the need to live up to the standards [14,16]. The beautiful body we see on the posters is becoming a norm. Consequently, women are expected to meet the aforementioned standards. Wolf [15] calls it “the terror of beauty”.

The commonness of the idealized image of women’s body and the development of social networking sites provoke thought on the potential consequences of the influence of “the cult of the body” on the behavior of women during adolescence. The results of the research on the analyzed topic will be presented below.

### Dissatisfaction with the body and anxiety about the looks

Studies indicate that women during adolescence and early adulthood experience dissatisfaction with their looks much more often. They also more often internalize the content associated with the “cult of the body” [16]. In this group a much more frequent tendency to perceive one’s own body in a dysfunctional manner was observed. As the research of Meyers and Biocci indicates [17], 95% of healthy women overestimate their body weight by 25%, while 40% of women overestimate the size of one of their body parts (cheeks, waist, hips, thighs) by at least ½.

Bordo, on the other hand, reports that 75% out of 33 thousand women thought they were overweight, although only 25% were overweight according to medical standards, while 30% were underweight [16]. Disorders concerning the perception of one’s own body constitute a risk factor for the development of eating disorders, from which adolescent and young women also suffer more often. Discontentment and non-acceptance of one’s own image activates behavioral reactions which result in

behaviors aimed at improving or changing the image such as slimming attempts or performing plastic surgery procedures [16].

The research confirms the thesis that the slim figure ideal determines the behavior of young people and has an influence on lifestyle. The majority of adolescents at school is of the opinion that slim figure has a great influence on the life of a contemporary man and is a valuable asset in both professional and private relations [19-21]. The research conducted by Joško and Kamecka-Krupa [18] indicates that almost half of the surveyed girls think they are too fat (45%) and employ various ways of “cutting weight” such as dietary restrictions (30%) and extensive physical exercise (around 45%). The conviction that underweight is better than overweight and that slim people are more attractive is mainly upheld by girls in junior high school [18]. This indicates that this group is to the greatest extent under the pressure of the mass media, which revolve around the ideal body image [19,20], of advertisements [21,22] as well as of the expectations of the peers.

### Social networking sites as a source of knowledge

Social networking sites may also be the proof for the existence of “the cult of the body”. They are not only the place where we find information concerning exercise or diet. They also provide support for the women in cooperative struggle for slim figure as well as clearly communicate that ideal body is the most important [23,24]. The behavior of the members of the aforementioned sites is aimed at “the cult of the body” as a superior value with the help of which perfection in other areas of life may be achieved [24].

The development of highly-visual social media (HVSM), such as Instagram, Snapchat or Facebook and their significant popularity among adolescents are observable on the Internet [25]. Marengo, Longobardi, Fabris, Settanni [26] conducted research among adolescents in which they looked for the relationship between the frequency of time spent on HVSM and increased concerns about one’s own image as well as the internalization of the message coming from HVSM. The results indicated a positive correlation between the time spent on HVSM and the concerns about the body image as well as internalization of those concerns. The adolescents who spent more than 2 hours a day on HVSM demonstrated greater intensity of the concerns about the body image and internalized the standards of physical attractiveness coming from the social media. The presented results indicate that time spent on social networking sites may be a risk factor for the increased anxiety concerning the perception of the body image and may have influence on the way of social adjustment of adolescents [26].

Similar research concerning the influence of the social media on shaping the negative body image among adolescent girls was conducted by Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo [27]. The subject of their research was girls at the age of 12-14, who were highly active on social media. The results showed that girls actively using the social media had concerns about their own looks and compared themselves to their peers more often. It is noteworthy that the study group was characterized by a high level of “self-confidence” variable, which proved to be a protection factor against the excessive influence of the idealized body image among girls [27]. The aforementioned research results confirm the influence of the social media on shaping the body image among adolescent girls and that the girls actively participate in promoting behaviors aimed at

propagating the idealized image of woman’s figure on the Internet.

### Eating disorders

It has been proved that frequent contact with the ideals of beauty presented by the mass media is associated with the increased occurrence of eating disorders. Lucas, Beard, O’Fallon and Kurland [28] studied the prevalence of anorexia nervosa among girls at the age of 10–19 during 50 years and discovered that it was changing in parallel with changes in fashion and in the image of an ideal body.

Promoting the pattern of slim body preceded times when the rate of anorexia nervosa was higher. The results of the research indicate the relationship between the woman’s ideal body image and the symptoms and signs of eating disorders. A higher risk of exposure to the influence of mass media propagating the ideal of slim body was associated with an increased frequency of dieting, exercise and the prevalence of eating disorders [29-31].

Wrong perception of one’s own attractiveness and a strong need to control one’s own appearance and body mass among young women may have a significant influence on the development of impaired body image and may have negative influence on the occurrence of abnormal behaviors concerning the need to satisfy hunger. The phenomenon of “the cult of the body” may be another factor that will intensify the development of abnormal attitudes towards one’s own body and the perception of femininity in the contemporary world.

### Attitudes and beliefs

“The cult of the body” phenomenon may undoubtedly have an influence on shaping the attitude and value system of adolescents. Therefore, there should be a reference to the theory of objectification [32], which directly describes the process in which girls internalize sexualizing cultural messages. This theory focuses especially on how the objectification of woman’s body, which becomes a culturally accepted “object”, influences girls’ life and development. According to that theory, girls internalize and replicate this objectified perspective within their own schemes. This process, called “self-objectification”, is associated with accepting someone else’s perspective concerning one’s own physical self and with continuous scrutiny of one’s own body, aimed at adjusting to cultural standards of attractiveness[32].

The culture passes down a series of information and ways of making a change in the body image so that it fits the standards of attractiveness and meets social expectations. Through the internalization process, the cultural values are accepted by certain individuals creating their basic norms referring to the perception of their own body, which then determines a specific way of interpreting the accessed information and reacting to life events [33]. Fredrikson and Roberts [33] explain the internalization of the slim figure ideal among women by referring to the concept of “self-objectification”, which is accomplished by referring a woman’s value to her looks through the influence of the media and environment (family, peers, partner). During the time of socialization, women externalize the experience of being judged by others, the effect of which is self-objectification that narrows the perception of women’s own body to the category of an observer [21]. Those phenomena take place during adolescence. As a result, young people experience themselves as constantly monitored objects which

need correction and control. This often brings a series of negative consequences such as intensified anxiety or destructive, unhealthy behaviors.

### Changes in self-esteem

The image of an ideal woman, strongly accentuating the sensual and physical aspects of her femininity, may have a significant influence on shaping the self-esteem among teenage girls. Self-esteem plays a significant role during the time of juvenescence and its decrease may cause girls to be more susceptible to cultural message, which emphasizes the physical features of the looks that are socially desirable and valued [22]. In consequence, young women are expected to meet those norms.

A highly intensified phenomenon is a man's judgment on the basis of their looks, which is frequently a factor superior to the spiritual values. Adolescent girls frequently post their pictures on various social networking sites. The photographs become an object of other people's judgment. This evaluation concerns the perception of the body, looks determine popularity and on their basis self-esteem is often built [22].

The research showed a decrease in self-esteem among adolescent girls [34,35], with which the perception of physical attractiveness is often associated. In particular, the research conducted by Tolman, Imperr, Tracy, Michale [36] showed that girls who objectify their body more, have lower self-esteem. The research also indicates that self-objectification is associated with negative results in psychical health among teenagers. For example, Tolman and others [36] noticed that girls who treat their body in a more objectified way in their early youth, suffer from depression more often and have lower self-esteem.

### Sexualization of woman's image

"The cult of the body" is directly associated with shaping mass culture, which is the main source of sexualization of woman's image. The media and advertisements are predominated by the image of a perfect woman. They emphasize sensual and biological qualities both in men and women [37]. By creating the canon of beauty they strengthen a wrong belief that a perfect body is the most important. Everything that the adolescents can access has an influence on how they begin to perceive themselves [38].

Sexualizing content and self-objectification may lead not only to the feeling of shame and anxiety but also may evoke the feeling of disgust with one's own corporality. The girls may feel ugly, fat and "untouchable". In the research in which the college students tried swimming suits on and evaluated them, with no regard to their size, they reacted with the feeling of "disgust, reluctance and aversion" in comparison to students who tried on sweaters [33]. The researchers assumed that being alone in a dressing room and looking at one's own body led to the fact that young women imagined being watched by critical observers and this is why they felt not only shame but also disgust.

Convincing empirical evidence, which completes the empirical research on self-objectification, indicates that exposure to watching the media ideals of sexual attractiveness is associated with greater discontent with one's own body among girls and young women [39,40]. In the studies into those harmful associations, at least 38 researches, 32 surveys and 2 interviews have been conducted, the results of which are representative of larger groups. For example, Hargreaves and Tiggemann [41]

showed the advertisements with the "ideal of beauty" and the advertisements with no emphasis on the looks to young people from high schools. Among girls who were shown the first type of advertisements an increased dissatisfaction with their looks was reported.

## CONCLUSION

The issue of "the cult of the body" should be analyzed in a broader sociocultural context. The contemporary culture trends identify slim figure with happiness, professional success and prosperity in life. The phenomenon of "the cult of the body" exerts pressure to cultivate only the physical aspects of femininity, which may lead to distortion of the body image. The studies confirm that internalization of the women's ideal of slim figure leads to self-objectifying and perceiving self-attractiveness through the prism of the outward appearance. The ideal of slim figure determines the behavior of young people and has an influence on their lifestyle, perception of one's own attractiveness and one's own body image as well as shapes self-assessment and self-esteem. Distorted perception of one's own attractiveness and a strong need to control one's own looks and body mass among teenagers may have a significant influence on the prevalence of unhealthy behaviors.

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