

Ethnic identification helps Latina adolescents resist media barrage of body images

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A strong sense of ethnic identity can help Latina girls feel positive about their body and appearance, a new study concludes, even as this group slips further into dissatisfaction with themselves when compared to a media-filled world of unrealistic images of thin white women.

Identification and pride in their ethnic background can act as a partial buffer against a deluge of advertisements, magazines, television shows and movies that show white women in sexualized roles, researchers said, and help teenage [girls](#) feel more comfortable with themselves and their appearance.

Scientists say anything that can help is necessary as sensitive young teenagers compare themselves to an onslaught of thin and glamorous models portrayed by the media, and suffer as a result. One out of every two advertisements featuring women depicts them as sex objects.

Some past research has suggested that women of color were less vulnerable to concerns about body image, but the latest studies found that Latina girls are reporting [body dissatisfaction](#) at a rate similar to that of Caucasian girls.

"We're in a perfect storm of dissatisfaction," said Elizabeth Daniels, an assistant professor of psychology in the College of Liberal Arts at Oregon State University–Cascades.

"This is a serious problem among girls, and our media environment and

consumer culture has been making it worse for some time," said Daniels, who is an expert on gender, [body image](#) and youth development. "The issue of young teenagers feeling bad about their appearance is so prevalent that we now call it normative. In other words, it's normal to feel dissatisfied with your body."

Most adults have more real-life experience to help protect them, Daniels said, but impressionable adolescents too often feel seriously unhappy with their appearance, think about their bodies constantly, and are easily persuaded to buy the latest beauty products that advertisers tell them will help. For some, severe dissatisfaction can turn into an eating disorder.

But in this research, which studied 118 Latina girls ages 13-18, scientists found that a stronger sense of [ethnic identity](#) helped some girls feel positive about themselves. The analysis was done by showing images of white women taken from advertisements to separate groups of girls. Some images were "sexualized" in settings, such as wearing bikinis or lingerie; and others had more conventional, fully-clothed poses. The girls then created statements about how they visualized themselves.

Those who included reference to their ethnic identity – by saying something like "I am Latina" or "I am Hispanic" – tended to view themselves overall more positively. But Daniels pointed out that while the association with ethnicity appears to be helpful and partially protective, it's not a panacea.

"Media images are typically very idealized, done with white women, using lots of makeup and photo techniques, and they create a great pressure on young women to live up to this ideal," Daniels said. "They see more than five hours a day of this unrealistic depiction on television and elsewhere, and it's a tall order for them to just ignore it. Even the model, Cindy Crawford, once said that 'I wish I looked like Cindy Crawford.'"

However, this study indicates that cultural pride can help. One participant in the study wrote in her statements that "I am a proud Latina" and "I am not a skinny toothpick and proud of it."

The new findings were recently published in *Body Image*, a professional journal, by researchers from OSU and Gallaudet University.

The researchers also cautioned that the buffering effect of ethnic identity might not stand up when Latina girls are exposed to Latina media models – instead of the [white women](#) that dominate traditional advertising. Girls with strong ethnic identity might be especially vulnerable to the negative effects of viewing idealized media images of Latina women, the report concluded.

More information:

ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/handle/1957/44107

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