

Physical appearance of video game characters affects girls' body image dissatisfaction, shows study

March 29 2023, by Beatriz González



Body-shape pressure affects mainly girls rather than boys. Credit: Stas Knop / Pexels

What impact does watching television or playing video games have on body image satisfaction? Does the physical appearance of the characters in series, films and video games have any effect on the self-image of

children aged 5 to 9? According to the study *Body Satisfaction and Screen Media Usage in Spanish Schoolchildren*, conducted by researchers at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), the answer to this question is yes.

Following an analysis of the answers given by 792 students under the age of 10, the researchers concluded that there is a correlation between television and video game consumption on the one hand and satisfaction with one's own facial features and general body image on the other. One of the main findings of the study was that the physical appearance of video game characters affects body image dissatisfaction among girls.

Specifically, negative correlations were found by the research between playing video games and girls' satisfaction with their own eye and skin color and general body image. However, no equivalent correlation was found among either video game-playing boys or any schoolchildren, regardless of gender, who watch television.

The authors have suggested a variety of possible reasons for these results.

On the one hand, according to J. Roberto Sánchez-Reina, a researcher at the UPF's Department of Information and Communication Technologies, body-shape pressure affects mainly girls rather than boys, which means that boys are happier with their bodies, even if they are different from the ones of the characters they see or interact with. "Sadly, girls are subjected to body-shape pressure by the people around them (friends and family) from an early age. The media increases this effect by normalizing body standards: beauty is white, thin and feminine," said the researcher.

Both boys and girls thus absorb and accept these stereotypes and, just as they would with any other forms of expression, use the body images they

see in the media to interact with the world. Although representations are starting to become more diverse, he believes that body standards still exist. This is why, although female characters are starting to break gender stereotypes, "many of them still conform to these body standards. Yes, they are the central characters, they are courageous and empowered, but many of them still conform to body standards. Until these depictions, as expressions of our language and culture, stop simplifying the diversity of women's bodies, girls will continue to aspire to fit within these body standards," said Sánchez-Reina, who is also a course instructor of the UOC's Master's Degree in Strategy and Creativity in Advertising.

Furthermore, as noted by Mireia Montaña Blasco, another author of the study, director of the UOC's Master's Degree in Strategy and Creativity in Advertising and researcher at the Learning, Media and Entertainment group (GAME) of the UOC's Faculty of Information and Communication Sciences, the media focuses on women's physical appearance instead of their skills or personality, which can make girls feel that their value is based solely on their physical appearance and that, in order to be accepted, they must conform to beauty standards. Also, women are often depicted as perfect and slim, "which can cause girls who do not fit those standards to feel insecure about their own bodies. Boys, on the other hand, are often portrayed as strong and muscular, which can make them feel more confident about their own bodies," said the UOC faculty member.

In terms of how the characters they are exposed to affect their self-image, an effect can only be seen in children who play video games, with no effect as a result of watching television. The main reason for this is the different amounts of attention required by these two types of screen. "Video games require much more attention than watching television. In the case of video games, you're interacting, so they have a greater impact than television," said the researcher Mònika Jiménez-Morales, director

of the UPF's Bachelor's Degree in Advertising and Public Relations. "Furthermore, although TV advertising clearly has a huge influence, children of certain ages, such as those in our sample, pay less attention to certain types of advertising," she added.

How to redress the negative influence of screens

In the researchers' opinion, neutralizing the harmful effect of screens on children's self-image is key to improving their self-esteem. According to Mireia Montaña-Blasco, the solution is to educate the media and provide skills training with a holistic approach that covers a variety of aspects.

"We must encourage body positivity. Children must learn to accept themselves and love their bodies the way they are instead of comparing themselves against unrealistic beauty standards. In addition, we must highlight body diversity, promote self-esteem and fight against [social pressure](#) to conform to specific beauty ideals. It is similarly important to teach them digital skills, ensure they know how to use [social media](#) critically and responsibly, with the ability to identify misleading information," said the researcher, adding that we must also foster healthy lifestyles, "educating them about nutrition and explaining that they must do exercise on a regular basis, as this will help them feel good both physically and mentally."

She agrees with J. Roberto Sánchez-Reina, who said that, although great progress has been made in the field of media literacy, the constant presence of social media in our everyday lives has led to "the need, now more than ever, to educate children about screens and the way we perceive images. However, some adults don't see the need to talk to young children about these matters. These conversations are often put off while waiting for children to reach cognitive maturity. Their skills are underrated because it is assumed that they don't understand everything they see and hear. Adults remain absent (and trusting) while

children are subtly indoctrinated through their use of screens by discourses and stereotypes that constrain body diversity."

The study also opens up new lines of research, as previous studies on the possible influence of audiovisual screens on body image focused on body shape, ignoring other variables such as eye, hair or skin color. The findings of this study, however, suggest that the idealization of the body is not restricted to its shape.

The study (in Spanish) is published in the journal *Revista Mediterránea de Comunicación*.

More information: J.-Roberto Sánchez-Reina et al, Body satisfaction and screen media usage in Spanish schoolchildren, *Revista Mediterránea de Comunicación* (2023). [DOI: 10.14198/MEDCOM.23406](https://doi.org/10.14198/MEDCOM.23406)

Provided by Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

Citation: Physical appearance of video game characters affects girls' body image dissatisfaction, shows study (2023, March 29) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-03-physical-video-game-characters-affects.html>

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