

Subtitle:

How do we make sure kids know how to use social media appropriately? Whose job is that? Let's find out.

At the end of my first few blog posts I always say what the researchers of the articles I talk about recommend to nip body image issues amongst adolescents in the bud. The general consensus is that there should be school-based prevention **and/or** intervention programs... and that's all. They don't really go into a deep explanation about why or how these programs should be implemented. However, I found a study where they did just that! It is from 2021 by the researchers, Kurz, Rosendahl, Rodeck, Muehleck and Berger, and it's called "School-Based Interventions Improve Body Image and Media Literacy in Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis". This study is a meta-analysis, which I'll break down for you real quick. Basically, a meta-analysis is the study of a bunch of pre existing studies. So, these authors gather up a bunch of already done studies, and compare/contrast them to draw more conclusions. Research on research. I am also going to be referencing another study from 2018 by the researchers O'Reilly, Dogra, Whiteman, Hughes, Eruyar, and Reilly, and this one is called, "Is social media bad for mental health and wellbeing? Exploring the perspectives of adolescents".

So, the first study that I mentioned in the previous paragraph had a total of 7392 participants ranging from 10-15 years old. In the introduction of this study, the researchers declare this as what they are studying, "existing school-based interventions designed to enhance media literacy in order to reduce body dissatisfaction and to promote a positive body image". They also researched control groups, or the groups of kids that did not participate in these intervention programs. There are two quick things I want to break down. First, school based interventions (at least in the context of this study) are basically school-wide or grade-wide presentations where the school will bring in experts on the subject to educate students. Second, is the term media literacy. There is often a little bit of confusion on exactly what that means. [Media Literacy Now](#), an organization which seeks to educate everyone as well as fight for media literacy legislation, defines media literacy as three things, "Decode media messages (including the systems in which they exist), assess the influence of those messages on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and create media thoughtfully and conscientiously". Basically, media literacy is how to consume and use media safely. All in all, the researchers had a major finding.

First and foremost, they discovered that school-based intervention programs do in fact increase media literacy and decrease body dissatisfaction in comparison to the control groups. However, that came with a few catches: the main one being that the programs with more of an emphasis on body satisfaction/body image were less effective in general than media literacy programs, but became equally as effective the groups were split by sex, i.e. a program for boys and a program for girls. The researchers speculate that this is because of social reasons, like it might just be too awkward to hear about body image in front of the opposite sex. While I don't think that's not true, I also want to refer back to one of my [previous blog posts](#), where I discussed the difference between how girls and boys manage their own social media. In that post I also discussed how girls often have internal reactions to body image issues while boys have external reactions. Also, the "perfect" or "ideal" body type is very different between boys

and girls. For girls, thinness is key, but not too thin where you don't have a chest or butt. For boys, muscles are key, but not too muscular where you look scary big. So, body dissatisfaction is just completely different between the sexes (I mean, it's absolutely different based on every individual, but that's a whole 'nother thing). Therefore, it does not surprise me at all that these intervention programs worked better when girls and boys were separated.

To talk more about the media literacy side of things, I want to start referencing from that second study that I stated in the first paragraph. There are tons of major findings from this study that I want to unpack in a later post, but the main thing I'm going to talk about now is what adolescents deem to be "dangerous" media, because after all, using "dangerous" forms of media is not very safe. The researchers of this study first define "dangerous" media as, "online pornography; peer- to-peer abusive behavior in the form of sexually provocative or antagonistic comments; privacy violations; and the undue influence of third parties such as advertising bodies,"... I mean yeah, it makes sense to me. Clearly, pornography and cyberbullying are "dangerous" parts of the media. However, almost all of the young participants directly attributed "dangerous" media to social media, but, social media that then leads to other "dangerous" websites. So, they don't necessarily think that the "dangerous" things are on social media platforms, but more so that these platforms are a gateway to the more "dangerous" things. Many participants reference extremely gory websites where you can literally see people being murdered, either through body cam videos of police officers, or CCTV footage of any random shop or building that happened to catch a violent crime being committed. So, it's a bit interesting. The researchers and many adults define "dangerous" things that affect adolescents online to be bullying or pornography, while the adolescents themselves define "dangerous" things to websites that show literally explicit, dangerous things. I feel like there's some kind of psychological or philosophical explanation behind that, but I don't want to get too off track by going down that rabbit hole. So, it's not to say that these adolescents are "media illiterate", because they are able to identify that the "dangerous" websites they talked about are not safe. However, that's where the school-based intervention programs would come in, because contrary to popular belief, young people (for the most part) are media literate. They know right from wrong when it comes to using or consuming media. The problems arise when it comes to outside influences, like peer pressure.

This is where my personal opinion comes in. I think the current school-based media literacy programs are too old school, speaking in terms of middle school or high school programs. Of course elementary school kids need to be taught media safety, but middle and high school kids know what websites they shouldn't go on. Instead of these programs basically consisting of "Don't cyber bully. Don't watch porn. Don't go on websites that have videos of people getting killed.", there should be programs that tell the stories of other kids around their age with unfortunate endings, i.e. suicide caused by cyber bullying. An interesting movie to show either at school to students or at home to your own children is *Cyberbully* (2011). It's definitely a hard watch, but that is a lot of people's reality.

To wrap this all up, I do believe that schools should implement intervention programs for media literacy, mental health, and body image. They are scientifically proven to work, but in my extremely humble opinion (sarcasm) they need to be updated.