



## The Big Picture



Did you know that the average person spends around eight hours plugged into media and views over 5,000 adverts per day? The messages that our media-saturated world communicates about femininity and masculinity can be concerning. Recent research<sup>1</sup> highlights that 96% of images used in advertisements sexually objectify women by measuring their worth and value solely on their sexual attractiveness and ignores their personality, talents and giftings. Many advertisers use women's bodies in sexualised poses to sell items like cars, handbags, perfumes – even crisps!

The objectification culture present in media such as magazines, TV shows and music videos can impact how girls and women view themselves and how boys and men understand and relate to women. It teaches girls that their bodies are projects to be improved upon, as their worth depends on their physical attractiveness. Secondly, it encourages young women to self-objectify themselves. The UK Government-commissioned *Sexualisation of Young People Review*<sup>2</sup> found: 'Exposure to the sexualised female ideal is linked with lower self-esteem, negative moods and depression in young women and girls.' Thirdly, it damages and distorts relationships between men and women as women are seen as sex objects. The increasing pornification of the media (and the easier availability of porn) fuels sexist attitudes and behaviours and also creates a conducive context for violence against women.

<sup>1</sup> Caroline Heldman, 'The Sexy Lie' at Tedx: <http://ed.ted.com/on/GvKYBTag>

<sup>2</sup> Dr Linda Papadopoulos: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/sexualisation-of-young-people.pdf>

## What You Should Know



The impact of the media's sexualised portrayal of girls and its message that physical appearance is the sole indicator of a person's worth can manifest itself in a number of ways in your youth group.

For girls, it can lead to an unhealthy perspective on their bodies as they aspire to be skinny and beautiful. This could result in skipping meals, refusing to participate in physical activities (they don't want to look sweaty) and self-harming behaviour. For guys, it can damage their ability to build healthy relationships with girls; encourage increasingly sexualised language and behaviours like sexting and impose pressure to conform to an unrealistic body type.

The Gospel offers us an alternative counter-cultural message to contemporary media: our worth and value is inestimable and unchanging as it is derived from our Creator. However, Christians have not always been effective in communicating this to young people and, in the face of negative messages from the media juggernaut, in believing it themselves. Youth workers are incredible role models for young people; your words and actions matter. Do you fixate about your appearance in front of young people? Do you model positive and healthy platonic relationships with members of the opposite sex? Do you speak positively about each other and refute gender stereotypes?

## Experts in the Field



- **Shape Your Culture** ([www.shapeyourculture.org.uk](http://www.shapeyourculture.org.uk)) is an online community which encourages young people to change the culture around them and resist pressure to conform to certain beauty ideals. It runs innovative workshops and projects encouraging young people to use their voices.
- **The Girls' Brigade England & Wales** ([www.girlsb.org.uk](http://www.girlsb.org.uk)) has an extensive, practical programme selection to equip girls to explore issues like self-esteem, sexuality and ambition and develop confidence, worth and hope.
- **Koko** ([www.thekokostory.com](http://www.thekokostory.com)) is a blog for teenage girls by GB Ministries. Developed in response to the issues teenage girls face worldwide, koko aims to help them explore life together – inspiring, challenging and encouraging them. Girls can access it individually and the videos are also great discussion starters.

# Katherine's Story



Katherine\* is always trying her best to develop innovative and dynamic activities for the young people she works with. Once, she organised a pamper night for the girls, complete with face masks, make-up, nail polish, and an opportunity to swap clothes, with some girly magazines lying around. While the girls were pampering themselves, the male youth worker took the guys to a climbing wall. It seemed like the night was going well; the young women were chilling, laughing and chatting. A few were looking through the magazines and Katherine overheard their conversations. They were discussing celebrities in photos and commenting negatively about their appearances and body image. Soon the discussion turned to each of the girls – and they proceeded to point out all the negative parts of their bodies. A few girls commented about how they were following the latest diet to lose weight. When Katherine asked them directly how they felt after looking at magazines, the girls replied 'I'm not rich enough', 'I'm not pretty enough' and 'I'm not enough'. Katherine was shocked to witness their low self-esteem and how it impacted their lives.

Pamper nights have become a common part of girls' ministry. By focussing on physical appearances, there is a danger that we are reinforcing the media's message that a girl's value depends on her physical attractiveness. This activity can undermine any Gospel message about true worth at the end of the night. The popularity of pamper nights also comes from a misconceived idea that girls don't like physical activities like climbing, but many girls will find it liberating to push through their comfort zones. Youth workers have an incredible opportunity to enable girls to see how powerful and incredible their bodies are; they are there for more than beautification.

*\* Name has been changed to protect identity.*



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# Getting Stuck In



As our culture becomes even more media-saturated, youth workers have a key role in improving young people's media literacy.

- Help young people become critical rather than passive consumers of media by honing their analytical skills. Give them space to analyse and discuss the messages being produced about gender and sexuality in the latest magazines, music videos and pop songs. Ask them to discuss the following questions: Do you think that women are portrayed differently from men? Do you feel that women and girls are being objectified? What are the main messages about being a girl and guy which are being communicated? Allow some time for group feedback and discussions.
- Empower young people to shape their culture by creating their own media - an e-newsletter, printed magazine, vlog or even a podcast. If they are angry about the negative messages in the media, help them explore what are the positive messages about worth that they want to promote? This activity will help develop their agency, increase their self-confidence as well as unlocking their talents.
- It is still a man's world in national newspaper journalism. A study by Women in Journalism found that 74% of news journalists on UK national newspapers are men. Helping more young women become journalists will change the media culture. Invite a female journalist to come and talk to the group about how she entered journalism and her experiences.
- Ditch the pamper nights which encourage girls to fixate on their looks and do something daring like a wilderness weekend away. Challenge everyone to leave their beauty products and technology at home and reconnect with nature. Push young people beyond their boundaries and cultivate courage through team outdoor pursuits. This will help them discover how incredible their bodies really are.
- Be more intentional about the media that you use within your youth group. Even pop songs in the background can reinforce gender stereotypes.