

Bodies at Church: Latter-day Saint Doctrine, Teaching, and Culture as Related to Body Image

Setting the Stage

Most people have a complicated relationship with their body, with many of us wishing we looked different. Fad diets, intermittent fasting, excessive exercise, weight loss injections, and liposuction abound as we search for perfection. This brief offers findings from a complex study of body image in Utah. Sarah M. Coyne, the first author, researches the effects of media on body image, particularly among women. Lauren A. Barnes, the second author, is a licensed therapist who works with many individuals who are struggling with body image, eating disorders, and other mental health issues. As Brigham Young University (BYU) professors, both have had many conversations with students about their struggles with body image, and the authors found themselves reflecting and asking many questions: What is going on at BYU here in Utah? Could religion affect the development of body image? The authors decided to dive deeper. Coyne recently oversaw the largest study ever done regarding the potential connection between Latter-day Saint religion doctrine, culture, and body image, and some of the findings are shared here. This article also provides recommendations for individuals, parents, friends, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on how to improve body image among girls, young women, and women here in Utah and beyond.

Religion and Body Image

Historically, religion has some deep statements on the purpose of the body, ranging from “carnal and devilish” to “holy” and even “temple of God.”¹ Beyond the larger purpose of the body, many religions teach specific “body rituals” that dictate what foods are appropriate to eat; what clothing or jewelry should be worn; whether tattoos are acceptable; and when, what types, and how much food to eat.² Religion has quite a bit to say about the body. The Latter-day Saint Church is not unique in this aspect, as many other religions also dictate one’s relationship with the body. In fact, one of the largest longitudinal studies looking at individuals and how their food habits impact overall health involves a very large sample of Seventh-day Adventists.³

Religion, in general, tends to be protective of body image. In fact, individuals who report being more spiritual or religious tend to have much more positive body image than those who report lower levels.⁴

Given the established trends, Latter-day Saint individuals should have very high body image. However, as researchers, the authors have noticed an interesting paradox among the people they interact with. Most people they speak with about this topic have some degree of body dissatisfaction, and many

struggle with diagnosed eating disorders. Within the state of Utah, including young adults at BYU, individuals are regularly engaging with cosmetic surgery or enhancements to improve appearance, despite prophetic guidance to not be obsessed with “nipping or tucking.”⁵ Utah’s capital, Salt Lake City, employs more plastic surgeons per capita than Los Angeles and is usually ranked in the top three within the country at any given time.⁶ Billboard advertisements promoting cosmetic procedures line the main interstate between two of the most populous counties, with slogans including, “Diamonds were a girl’s best friend, then Botox came along,” and “God’s remodeling His temple. Isn’t it time to remodel yours?” Utah has also ranked the highest for Google searches for “breast augmentation.”⁷ Scholars and reporters from national media outlets have expressed bewilderment about Utah’s culture of cosmetic surgery and appearance obsession, including *Forbes Magazine*, which in 2007 named Salt Lake City one of “the vainest cities in America.”⁸

Two driving questions arise: What is going on and why are we seeing this apparent paradox? And could the link between religion and body image not be as straightforward as is shown by the current research literature? The purpose of the current research was to dive deep into doctrine, culture, practices, and teachings around body image in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church).

Overall, there were 126 qualitative (face-to-face) interviews with members of the Church—women and men—and another 1,333 individuals completed online surveys discussing their feelings regarding Church and their own body image.

Church Doctrines and Teachings

Very little research has investigated the specific teachings, doctrine, or culture that may or may not be related to the positive change associated with religiosity. Almost none looks at religion with a nuanced eye, recognizing that it might be “both/and” depending on what is happening. What is it about religion that might promote positive body image? Are there things lurking beneath the surface that might be more damaging in nature? Coyne and Barnes asked these questions to participants and found that there are many aspects of religiosity that might be positive or negative, depending on the individual (see Appendix A for how participants described several Church teachings and practices).

In terms of doctrine and teachings, a few standouts were described by the research participants. The belief in a divine heritage, Jesus Christ’s Atonement, and the Plan of Salvation were related to better body image in this study.⁹ In other words, the Church’s teachings around the divine nature of the

body and the role of the body in the Plan of Salvation promoted positive body image. Many participants reported leaning on the Atonement of Jesus Christ during hard times.

One woman in the study stated,

“When you [have an eating disorder] and when you’re literally on the ground and suffering in such a way, you can feel Him there with you, comforting you, picking you up.”

Additionally, the belief in an embodied Heavenly Mother was particularly related to high body image for women. One young woman described it this way:

“I knew that I had Heavenly Parents, and I was made in their image, and if I was made in their image, . . . I could feel their love. And if they loved me, then I should love myself and that includes my body. And so, I think that [belief] really helps me to have like a positive image about myself.”

Even though Heavenly Mother is rarely talked about in Church settings,¹⁰ the strong belief in Her is likely healing for women. In fact, developing a belief in a Heavenly Mother is one of the most important things Coyne has done to heal her own body image struggles as a woman. She recalled thinking:

“My body is like Hers, and I feel like she ‘gets it’ when I struggle with my own body image or when my body is not working as it should. As women, our body experiences things such as menstruation, infertility, childbirth, and even aging and menopause. There is something uniquely empathetic and connecting in knowing and believing in an embodied Heavenly Mother with those feminine aches, losses, pains, and joys. I don’t feel alone and knowing She is up there, which has been so important to me in my own body acceptance journey.”

Church Practices: Modesty, Garments, the Word of Wisdom

Compared to doctrines, participants described certain Church practices that tended to be more mixed in nature. One of them—the elephant in the room—is modesty. In Utah, meaningful conversations around modesty in the Utah and Latter-day Saint culture are finally emerging, particularly through the work of Dr. Julie Hanks and others.¹¹

Participants in the study conducted felt very mixed toward modesty in relation to their own body image. The two words most used to describe feelings of modesty were “worthy” and “judged.” Only 30.0% described modesty as having a positive impact on their own body image, with 47.0% feeling negative. The researchers explored reasons for this in a larger, previously published study.¹² Essentially, participants were taught about modesty in a way that was directly linked to their body image. Participants felt better about their own bodies when they were taught modesty in a principle-based way (as a form of respect, empowerment, humility, etc.). However,

these individuals felt worse about their bodies when discussions around modesty focused on practices (e.g., “cover those shoulders and knees!”) or focusing on how women dress to directly prevent men’s sexual thoughts.

Author Perspective

Dr. Sarah M. Coyne remembers having one experience as a youth that made her feel uncomfortable around her body, though it was meant to be positive. She was taught that she had divine nature and that her body was temple. To teach this concept, young women (youth) leaders asked them to bring a picture that they would then put under a transparent picture of the temple—probably with the intention of reminding them of their worth. She explained,

“The picture I chose to bring was of me walking down the staircase to meet my Junior Prom date (who I had a major crush on). I had never felt more beautiful in my entire life. The dress had spaghetti straps, but my mom was fine with me wearing it since it really was quite modest all around and fit the occasion. My best friend, Toni, had done my long blonde hair in a beautiful updo, complete with cascading golden curls. She also did my makeup, and, as I walked down those stairs, I felt a confidence that I hadn’t experienced as an awkward adolescent with low self-esteem. I knew that the picture of this moment is what I wanted to use.

When I brought it to the lesson, my leader gave me a look and asked, ‘Are you sure that is the picture you want to use?’ My face turned red, and I felt a knot forming in my stomach because I knew she was judging me for wearing a dress with spaghetti straps. I whispered, ‘Yes,’ and she sighed and said, ‘Okay,’ and took the picture. I displayed the picture of me with the temple for the next few years on my dresser, but always felt a sense of guilt when it caught my glance. This dissonance about the comment from my leader implying my immodesty while also feeling so beautiful likely impacted the development of my body image over those transformative and impressionable years. I thought my experience may not be too unique to other women and girls within our religion.”

In recent years, conversations about modesty in the Church seem to be moving more toward principle-based decisions founded in personal agency. For example, the *For the Strength of Youth* (a pamphlet published for youth in the Church)¹³ section on modesty (and most others) recently changed to be more principle-based. Principle-based learning and agency-based practice are critical shifts that can be helpful.

Other Church practices, such as wearing garments and the Word of Wisdom, also tend to be more mixed in nature. For example, 40.0% described wearing garments as a positive

experience for their own body image. One young man in the research sample described the relationship like this:

“As far as my body goes, I think [the garment] reminds me, or at least it’s made me feel more connected to God, I guess. And it gives me that reminder that my body is, it’s a vessel, it’s sacred.”

However, 30.0% of participants described wearing garments as having a negative effect on their body image, describing them as making them feel frumpy or unattractive. Another 30.0% reported garment wearing as neutral. Many religions throughout the world engage in some kind of clothing being worn, some of whom see it as an obligatory action to engage with the religion. In addition, the Word of Wisdom tended to be mostly positive on participant body image (57.0%). One young man in the study talked about the desire to “keep a healthy body and [to] know that my body is like a gift from God is a good motivator to exercise and eat well. . . . it makes me more grateful for my body and makes me respect it.”

Church Culture

Beyond beliefs and practices, Church and local culture might be related to body esteem. Many study participants talked about “Utah culture” as being particularly “toxic” in terms of body image. One middle-aged woman described it this way:

“I will be honest, whenever I go back to Utah, I feel so ugly because I don’t have the latest hairstyle, I don’t have my hair done, my nails aren’t done. It’s all kind of silly things, but I find that at least many of the people I know place a lot more emphasis on some of those material things, and I feel like a lot of the people that are involved in that are members or my friends in the Church. And so, I don’t know if that’s a cultural thing in Utah.”

Although the authors found that study participants (all Latter-day Saints) in and outside of Utah had similar body image, there certainly was a perceived difference in culture. Participants also rated Utah as being far less diverse in terms of race, clothing, and body shape and size.

Study participants also reported better body image when they attended congregations with high levels of support and acceptance as well as what they called “diversity,” which may cover ethnic, body, and other forms of diversity. Individuals described having worse body image when they attended congregations that included a focus on physical appearance, competition, pressure to conform, high comparisons, and judgement. In fact, some participants felt that a common teaching to wear one’s “Sunday best” to Church services may be implicitly taught in a way that emphasizes physical beauty instead of the gospel principle of respect toward self and God. Thus, the problematic impact on body esteem could be amplified by a competitive culture in which churchgoers focus on their own physical attractiveness while comparing themselves to others in their congregations.

Overall, it is not simply attending church and being religious that might impact body esteem. Instead, study results show that individual congregation culture matters, even within the

same religious faith. Practices of faith and religion may vary both within and between geographic areas. See Appendix B for a graph related to how participants rated their current congregation culture.

Cosmetic Surgery

The study also explored cosmetic procedure and surgery rates reported by Church members. Interestingly, the wider Church does not have much to say on the topic of cosmetic surgery in their formal policies. The Church’s website begins by saying, “The Church has no official position on cosmetic plastic surgery.”¹⁴

While most Latter-day Saints within the study claimed to not have had cosmetic surgery or cosmetic enhancements, a significant percentage did. Of 1,333 participants who completed the survey (82.0% women, ranging from 18–80 years old), approximately 14.0% had had major cosmetic surgery, and 20.0% had undergone cosmetic enhancements. The most common cosmetic surgeries for women included breast augmentations, tummy tucks, liposuction, and buttock augmentations. The most common types of cosmetic enhancements included laser hair removal, chemical peels, Botox injections or other soft tissue fillers, microblading, and dermabrasion. Percentages reported by study participants were higher than the national average, where only 4.0% of Americans reported having had cosmetic surgery, with the vast majority of those being performed on women.¹⁵ There were varying levels endorsed by participants ranging from enhancements to procedures to surgeries.

Some people felt that getting cosmetic surgery was a religious decision and even prayed about it. One woman in the sample who got a rhinoplasty (i.e., nose surgery) and breast augmentation said:

“I prayed, asking God if it was the right thing to do. I felt very comforted that it was right, and there was nothing that I was doing to offend God.”

Beyond using faith as a specific reason when deciding on cosmetic surgery, religion likely also played an implicit role, perhaps so subtle that most did not even know it was happening. This study looked at multiple facets of religion in this context. Religious salience tended to be related to lower levels of cosmetic surgery and enhancements. In other words, if religion played a large role in a respondent’s life and daily decision-making process, they were less likely to undergo anything cosmetic related to altering or adjusting their body. Attachment to God was similar—if one had a healthy, secure relationship with God, then that individual was far less likely to undergo cosmetic alterations.

In this research sample, the people who were most likely to have had cosmetic surgery were those who were wealthy (probably obvious) *and* who also had the highest religious salience (less obvious). This was completely in opposition to the previous finding. These individuals were highly religious, and religiosity impacts their daily lives—however, they may erroneously believe that religion is tied to perfection in a variety of ways, including physical appearance or finances, and

they may attempt to conform to what is referred to as the “thin ideal” in United States culture. Perhaps, appearing to be a perfect, worthy, righteous member of the church means “looking the part” as well. Again, this was not the norm as most members had no cosmetic surgery. However, it might be what some call Utah’s “perfection culture” that quietly whispers, “You aren’t good enough the way you are.”

Another finding relates to the “costly grace” that predicts both cosmetic surgery and enhancements. Costly grace is the belief that individuals have to earn God’s love—that God’s love is predicated upon one’s actions and that an individual can easily lose His love (and His grace) if they are not doing the things they know they should be doing. Costly grace is generally seen as an unhealthy form of perfectionism and is related to higher levels of cosmetic procedures.¹⁶ Many of the people interviewed for this study said that they had bought into the concept of costly grace, which, unfortunately, had made them unhappy through the years since they felt like they could never truly measure up.

Recommendations

Based on findings from this research, Coyne and Barnes have several recommendations for individuals, parents, friends, and local church leaders that they think could improve body image within the Latter-day Saint culture, particularly in Utah.

1. Focus on the doctrines of divine nature, the role of the body in the Plan of Salvation, the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and Heavenly Parents. Coyne and Barnes found that these doctrines tended to be most impactful in terms of developing a positive body image. These doctrines can be taught and emphasized when discussing the body (i.e., soul) in all classes starting from nursery age.
2. Have open conversations around how Church practices (e.g., garments, the Word of Wisdom, modesty) are related to body image. The participants had much to say on these topics, but they often mentioned that they struggled to talk about their own feelings in a larger setting for fear of being judged poorly and rejected by others. Open and honest conversations around certain practices might be healing and let others know that they are not alone in their wonders and struggles.
3. Focus on principles when teaching about modesty as opposed to practices. Discussions around respect, humility, and empowerment will be more impactful than those that focus on specific practices. Again, the changes in the latest *For the Strength of Youth* guidelines are a step in the right direction. Congregation leadership may consider

allowing youth to attend activities and services wearing whatever they feel comfortable wearing, given the activity. Individuals should eliminate discussions that focus on women dressing modestly in order to protect men’s thoughts and prevent their inappropriate and derogatory actions; doing so shames and objectifies women. This practice was universally viewed as negative in the study.

4. Create a Church culture that emphasizes acceptance, love, and warmth. Congregations can take a careful look at their culture and engage in honest dialogue with members around current practices and then seek to make changes to improve connection within the membership.
5. Celebrate and encourage diversity. Where racial diversity does not exist, wards could consider displaying artwork that celebrates and includes other cultures, body types, clothing styles, and various skin tones. This might also apply to discussions around body shape and size or dress (both inside and outside of Church).
6. Focus on attachment to God as a primary way to reduce body image concerns. Again, the study found this in the context of both a Father and Mother in Heaven. Latter-day Saint congregation leaders and members may ask the question, “How is this lesson/talk/activity helping my members feel more secure in their relationship to God?”
7. Teach the real meaning of grace. In the study, the belief in costly grace was consistently related to poor body image and the desire for cosmetic surgery. Grace is not grace if people have to earn it. However, in the researchers’ experience, well-meaning lessons often focus on the need to earn God’s grace through our choices and behaviors.

Through this research process, Coyne and Barnes found that every person is on a journey with their own body image. In fact, most of us likely do not even consider religiosity or spirituality when thinking of the way we feel about our body. Yet, considering the ways that religious practice may have affected or continues to affect your relationship with your body may be helpful.

Overall, body image is a complex issue that needs ongoing research within the state of Utah and beyond. The research is clear, however, that the negative impacts on those who struggle with body image bleed into many other aspects of their lives. Yet, much can be done to encourage women’s educational efforts, confidence, and overall health and wellbeing, which can help girls and women combat negative body image and focus on traits and strengths beyond physical appearance. Doing so will strengthen the positive impact of women in homes, communities, and the state as a whole.

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³ See numerous studies in the database at Adventisthealthstudy.org.

⁴ Coblenz. (2019); Demmrich et al. (2017); Weinberger-Litman et al. (2018); Wilhelm et al. (2018).

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Acknowledgements: Thanks to Susan R. Madsen for her editing and feedback. This project was funded with an Eliza R. Snow grant from Brigham Young University.

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APPENDIX A Impact of Beliefs & Teachings

Participants were asked to rate how each of the categories below impacted their own body image on a 1 (extremely negative)-to-5 (extremely positive) Likert scale. The numbers in the table represent the percentage of participants marking each response.

Category Label	Extremely Negative	Negative	Neural/No Influence	Positive	Extremely Positive
Beliefs					
Divine Heritage	1.98	5.40	23.82	46.19	22.60
Embodied Heavenly Father	1.83	6.17	34.81	43.26	13.94
Embodied Heavenly Mother	2.13	6.25	30.62	38.54	22.47
Physical Bodied in Plan of Salvation	2.21	7.76	29.60	43.76	16.67
Body is a Temple	3.05	15.08	23.84	43.72	14.32
Jesus Christ’s Atonement	1.90	4.49	32.72	38.81	22.07
Perfection	13.00	34.45	32.85	15.06	4.64
Priesthood	6.01	18.02	52.32	16.43	7.22
Law of Chastity	9.44	26.41	26.94	27.55	9.97
Practices					
Modesty	16.01	31.33	22.71	23.86	6.10
Word of Wisdom	3.12	13.40	27.04	44.25	12.19
Multiply & Replenish	8.09	23.97	32.83	26.56	8.55
Calling of Parenthood	4.95	16.59	27.78	39.67	13.01
Wearing of Garments	8.24	22.27	28.60	27.23	13.65

APPENDIX B Ward Culture and Body Image

Participants were asked to rate how much each item reflected their current congregation culture using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = none to 5 = extreme amount). Averages are shown below in various categories.

