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By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

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More than half of young women ages 16 to 25 are stressed out and conflicted, largely because media messages urge them to be both a "hot" girl and a successful career woman, market research suggests.

Pop culture's fascination with svelte and seemingly perfect celebrity images is so at odds with the notion of the strong, independent and career-oriented young woman that it is causing angst, says Ian Pierpoint, senior vice president of Synovate. The international research firm surveyed 1,000 young women in the USA.

Fifty-four percent said they're feeling pressure about their future and anxiety about their body image. They want to look "hot" — a catchword often used by celebrity heiress Paris Hilton — but they also want to be viewed as smart and independent. They look forward to their 30s, when they believe their anxiety will lessen.

The survey's aim was "to understand what it's like to be a young woman nowadays, but it turned into a study of being stressed," Pierpoint says. The survey also found:

- 39% believe they are growing up too fast.
- 76% want to have both a successful career and a family.
- 33% say they look "hot" when they wear clothing that shows a little skin.

Body image is a major concern. Synovate plans to pursue similar questions with young men later this year. Other researchers have examined gender and its effect on body image.

"Young women are taught from the moment they're born that the way they should experience their bodies is as someone looking at them, as opposed from internally," says Nita Mary McKinley, a professor of interdisciplinary arts and sciences at the University of Washington-Tacoma who has studied body image for more than a decade.

Concern with body image also appears to aggravate conditions of those under psychiatric care, according to research published last month in the journal *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*.

Child psychologist Jennifer Dyl of Bradley Hospital in East Providence, studied 208 young women ages 12 to 17 who were patients in psychiatric hospitals in 2004. Those with negative feelings about their body image were more likely to be depressed, anxiety-prone and suicidal than others with psychiatric illnesses who were less concerned about their appearance, she says.


Age may be a factor, however. McKinley's 10-year follow-up research, published in February in the journal *Sex Roles*, found that a decade later (ages 29 to 31) men and women felt better about their bodies and were less concerned with what others thought.

Altering that thinking isn't easy, says Audrey Brashich, author of *All Made Up: A Girl's Guide to Seeing Through Celebrity Hype and Celebrating Real Beauty*.

"A lot of girls are preoccupied by it and are sad they care and don't want the pressure, but they find themselves caring about it anyway."

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