

Study shows why people read magazines featuring envy-inspiring models

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New research reveals why people read fitness and fashion magazines featuring photos of impossibly thin or muscular models -- models whose appearance highlight the readers' own flaws.

Many previous studies have found that people who are unhappy with their [physical appearance](#) feel even more dissatisfied when they are shown photos of models who have "ideal" bodies.

"So you have to wonder: why do we still buy those magazines and watch those television programs when they should just make us more dissatisfied?" said Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, associate professor of communication at Ohio State University.

In the new study, Knobloch-Westerwick found the answer through an ingenious experiment that measured how long people looked at pictures of models in an online magazine.

Results showed that people who are dissatisfied with their appearance will indeed avoid these photos of ideal bodies – unless the photos are surrounded by articles suggesting that they, too, can look like those models.

"A lot of these magazines and television programs will tell you that if you go on this diet, or do this exercise program, you will lose weight or gain muscle," Knobloch-Westerwick said.

"That's the key. People will view these photos if they feel like they can achieve this ideal. In that case, these models with the ideal bodies can serve as source of inspiration to improve one's own body shape."

Knobloch-Westerwick conducted the research with Joshua Paul Romero, a former graduate student at Ohio State. The study appears in the current issue of the journal *Media Psychology*.

The study involved 169 young adults who took part in a two-session study.

In the first session, the participants completed a questionnaire about life satisfaction. Included were questions about body satisfaction, along with questions about other aspects of life, which were added so that participants would not guess the purpose of the study.

In a separate session, they came to the lab, where they were told they would be evaluating a magazine shown via computer.

The 21-page magazine included 16 pages of advertisements. Of those pages, half featured models with [ideal body](#) shapes and half had models with more average shapes. (The models were put in those categories by people who judged them in pre-tests.) Each participant viewed a magazine featuring models of only his or her gender.

Participants viewed one of two magazines – the ads were identical in both versions, but one magazine featured articles about diet and exercise while the other had general interest articles unrelated to health or body improvement.

Participants browsed the magazine on a computer for five minutes. A software program unobtrusively measured exactly how long they spent on each page of the magazine.

The researchers found striking differences in how long people lingered on the ads with the ideal-body models – at least for those who were not satisfied with their bodies.

People who indicated they were dissatisfied with their appearance spent about 50 percent more time looking at the ideal bodies when the editorial content was about body improvement, compared to when it was not (59 seconds in the body-improvement magazines vs. 40 seconds in the general interest magazines).

"If the articles inspired them to go on a diet or start an exercise program, they would spend more time looking at the ideal bodies," Knobloch-Westerwick said. "If the articles gave them no inspiration, they tended to avoid the photos."

On the other hand, people who were satisfied with their bodies spent about the same amount of time on the ideal body images, regardless of which magazine they read.

"It didn't make a difference to people who were satisfied with their bodies. They didn't feel the need to avoid the ads with the ideal bodies, and they didn't need them for inspiration either," she said.

There was no difference in how men and women reacted to the images, she said. It all depended on whether they were dissatisfied with their bodies and which magazine they read.

These results help explain why [fitness](#) and beauty magazines are so popular, even if viewing the photos of ideal bodies may result in self-deflation in other contexts, Knobloch-Westerwick said.

In most other studies, people were forced to look at photos of ideal bodies and then asked how these images made them feel.

Under that situation, it is no wonder that the photos made people more dissatisfied, she said. But it is also not a realistic portrayal of how people act in real life.

"We didn't force people to look at photos and ask how they felt. We put them in a realistic situation and gave them the choice to look at what they wanted, and we simply recorded how they reacted."

Of course, there is the question of what happens to people if they are motivated by health and beauty magazines to improve their bodies, but then fall short of their goals.

That will be the focus of her next study, Knobloch-Westerwick said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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