

Media's focus on ideal body shape can boost women's body satisfaction -- for a while

April 11 2011, by Jeff Grabmeier

When researchers had college-age women view magazines for five straight days that only included images of women with thin, idealized body types, something surprising happened: the readers' own body satisfaction improved.

But the boost in body image came with a catch. Those women whose body satisfaction improved the most also were more likely to report that they engaged in dieting behaviors such as skipping meals or cutting carbohydrates during the course of the study.

That suggests these women may be inspired by the images they view and become momentarily hopeful that they can improve their own [body shape](#) and possibly even achieve the same thin-ideal bodies they see in the magazines, said Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, co-author of the study and associate professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"The media are saturated with images of idealized body shapes, which may make viewers and readers aspire to achieve the same," Knobloch-Westerwick said.

"But it is a losing battle. Women are motivated by these fitness and beauty magazines to try to attain these supposedly perfect bodies, and may even get a short-term body image boost when they start dieting. However, research shows that most diets fail and they're eventually going to be back being unsatisfied with their bodies."

These results contradict hundreds of previous studies suggesting that the media obsession with promoting ideal bodies only damages women's satisfaction about their weight and their body, Knobloch-Westerwick said.

But this study's design included a more realistic simulation of how women actually use the media, she said. The women viewed full magazine pages with text, instead of only photos of ideal bodies, as in many of the earlier studies. As a result, the findings can help explain why fitness and beauty magazines remain popular, even though their images may make many women ultimately feel inadequate and unsatisfied with their bodies.

"The magazines attract women because they give a short-term boost in [body image](#), but they also set up unrealistic expectations. When women don't achieve the body they want, they are disappointed and then likely come back to the magazines for more advice and inspiration," she said.

Knobloch-Westerwick conducted the study with Josselyn Crane, a former graduate student at Ohio State. Their study appears online in the journal *Communication Research* and will be published in a future print edition.

The study involved 140 female college students who agreed to be part of a 10-day online study, which supposedly was about magazine journalism and advertising evaluations. The students were not told the true purpose of the study so that it would not impact how they responded.

On a Friday, the participants completed a questionnaire that asked about their media use and their height and weight (which was used to calculate their body mass index). They were also asked about their body satisfaction, as well as their satisfaction in several other areas of their life, including school, work, finances and romance, to veil the actual

interest of the study. In addition, the participants answered questions about their age, ethnicity, car ownership and other factors. Many of the questions weren't necessary for the research, but were included to distract participants from the true nature of the study.

Participants were told the extensive questions were necessary because the answers may influence their evaluations of the magazines and ads they would view.

The following week, Monday through Friday, the women went online each day and answered some of the same questions and then viewed 16 magazine pages per day, including articles and ads, and completed questions after each page.

After those five sessions, on the following Monday, the women reported body satisfaction and body-shaping behaviors such as dieting or exercising.

The women were split into three groups. Two of the groups viewed magazines featuring photos of the thin-ideal body type. All the stories and photos came from real magazines, and focused on the models' physical beauty.

Women in one of these two groups were asked questions designed to get them to compare themselves to the thin-ideal women, such as "I would like my body to look like this woman's body." The second group was asked questions that didn't require them to compare themselves to the thin ideal.

The third group viewed magazines featuring women with an average body type, and articles on random topics such as payday loans and raising healthy kids.

One striking, although not surprising result, was that women in the study indicated that their body weight was the aspect of their life they were least satisfied with.

"Out of a list of more than 20 different aspects of their life, their body weight is the biggest issue for these young women," Knobloch-Westerwick said.

The results showed that women in both groups who were exposed to the thin-ideal images for five straight days showed an increase in [body satisfaction](#) at the end of the study. No change was seen in women who viewed the magazines featuring women with average body types.

The women who viewed the thin-ideal images – but who were not asked questions that encouraged them to compare themselves to the models pictured -- tended to show increased dieting behavior over the course of the study.

But there was an interesting difference in the group of women who were encouraged to compare themselves to the thin-ideal images. Women in this group who had a high BMI – indicating that they were overweight – tended to increase their dieting behaviors over the course of the study.

However, low-BMI women did not increase their dieting.

"When low-BMI women were asked to compare themselves to the thin ideal, they may have felt that they were already at a good weight and so they didn't need to diet," she said.

Overall, Knobloch-Westerwick said the results show that magazines which highlight the thin ideal are good at motivating women in the short run. But the question is, to what end?

"If the message was just how you could improve your health by eating right and exercising, that would be great," she said. "But a message that says you can easily drop 10 pounds in a month, get great thighs by exercising five minutes a day and look like a supermodel – those kinds of messages just set you up for failure and disappointment."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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