

Study finds young women's satisfaction with own body image suffers after viewing ultra-thin TV characters

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For 10 television seasons Friends was a top-rated feel-good sitcom, which, thanks to syndication now enjoys eternal life. But could something so good actually make people feel bad? Ryerson University researchers think it could— when it comes to body image representation and the show's slender and beautiful cast members Jennifer Aniston and Courtney Cox Arquette.

Specializing in the effects of media on children and adults, Dr. Stephen Want, an Assistant Professor in Ryerson's Department of Psychology set out to measure just how television shows made university-aged women feel about their overall [appearance](#).

The recently published study, The Influence of Television Programs on Appearance Satisfaction: Making and Mitigating Social Comparisons to Friends was co-authored by fellow professor Kristin Vickers and former student research assistant-turned-alumna Jennifer Amos.

“Our study showed two things,” said Dr. Want. “First, people have the tendency to make rapid comparisons of themselves to images on television programs even when they don't think they are being affected. Second, when we are reminded that ‘real life’ doesn't resemble what is seen on TV, and we can look at things with a critical eye, the comparisons become less relevant.”

According to Dr. Want, the project fills a gap in contemporary body-image research. “There's a lot of talk about the effect of media images on people's satisfaction with their appearance. But the term ‘media images’ is used as a catch-all phrase. Most research focuses on fashion magazines and television commercials; we wanted to see if other images on TV achieved the same result.”

To find out if television programs, meant to serve

an entertainment function, might impact a viewer's [body image](#) in the same way more commercial content does, researchers recruited 76 undergraduate women and assigned them to one of four groups. Each group viewed a 10-minute clip of Friends in which thin and physically-attractive characters played a prominent role, but their physical appearance was not especially emphasized. And, unlike some episodes - where Monica's adolescent weight problem is occasionally mentioned - this particular segment contained no appearance-related jokes or references.

The goal was to gauge participants' satisfaction with their overall appearance after watching Friends. Before viewing the segment, however, two of the groups were asked to read “intervention” material. One script (“Appearance”) detailed tips and techniques employed by the television industry to make people look better on camera. The other document (“Weight and Shape”) discussed the overrepresentation of thin characters on television, the effort required to maintain a low body weight and the health implications of a low body-mass index.

Both sets of intervention materials were intended to convey the message that idealized images of women on TV are unrealistic and unattainable. Dr. Want equates the comparison of everyday women and TV stars to that of an everyday athlete and an athlete who has taken performance-enhancing drugs; it's an unfair comparison.

The researchers found that watching the segment had a significantly adverse effect on the participants' satisfaction with their own appearance. Reading the intervention material, however, seemed to mitigate some of those feelings. In particular, the Weight and Shape script

proved very successful in balancing the participants' view of themselves.

The Influence of Television Programs on Appearance Satisfaction: Making and Mitigating Social Comparisons to Friends appeared in the May 2009 edition of the journal Sex Roles. Dr. Want's research was funded by Ryerson's Faculty of Arts and by a Ryerson Research Assistant Program grant.

Provided by Ryerson University

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