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Media Images of Objectified Women Can Have a Harmful Effect on Men

What is this research about?

Evidence suggests that media representations of women's bodies can have a harmful effect on how women view their own bodies. It is well-documented that images of thin, objectified physiques can take a toll on the self-esteem of women, encouraging them to pursue thin bodies of their own through unhealthy dieting and eating habits. Increasing numbers of men also are becoming preoccupied with the size of their bodies. Unlike many members of the opposite sex, though, men seem to want to gain weight – in the form of muscle. But like women, men may be vulnerable to the influence of media images. There is evidence to suggest that representations of men's bodies – in magazines and toys – have grown increasingly muscular over the past 25 years. Do images of muscular bodies, then, have an impact on the wellbeing of men, motivating them to want larger physiques? And do images of women, as sex objects, also shape the wellbeing of men?

What you need to know:

Even mild images of objectified women can make men feel hostile and anxious.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers from York University and Brock University looked at ninety male undergraduate students between the ages of 17 and 28. They presented the men with slides of objectified male and female bodies, taken from popular magazines. The male bodies were 'strong' and 'muscular' and the female bodies were 'thin' and 'sexy.'

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that men who looked at images of objectified women felt more anxious and hostile than men who looked at images of muscular men. However, viewing these images did not affect how men felt about their own bodies. Surprisingly, these findings build

upon previous research that suggested that pornographic images can make men feel hostile. This present study, however, suggests that men may not need to see explicitly pornographic images of women to feel hostile; mild images of scantily clad women may have the same effect.

How can you use this research?

This research is especially relevant in our media-saturated culture. It expands our understanding of how images of objectified women can have a bad impact on the wellbeing of men. Future studies should look at more variables, including the age, education, and sexual orientation of the men being studied. They should also present men with images drawn from forms of media that are more powerful than slides – such as TV images.

About the Researchers

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