There are a growing number of fitness and sport magazines targeted at men (Alexander, 2003). Although many of these magazines claim to promote what the body can do rather than how it looks, they are often heavily focused on muscular male bodies (Boni, 2002). In fact, skimming or reading magazines such as *Men’s Health* can increase concerns about muscularity and physical appearance for men (Hatoum & Belle, 2004).

Some men may adopt magazine images of “the athletic body” as their personal ideal. This is known as *media internalization*, which can be broken down into four categories (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004):

- **information** — the importance of appearance information from the media
- **pressure** — feeling pressured to strive for societal ideals of physical appearance
- **internalization-general** — adopting and accepting unrealistic ideal images
- **internalization-athlete** — adopting and accepting an athletic physique

Previous research has shown that media internalization is related to changes in reasons for exercise (Homan, 2010).

Magazines and large scale campaigns like ParticipACTION publicize that exercise improves health, fitness, mood, and enjoyment. However, the media’s use of athletic body images can foster appearance reasons for exercise by presenting unrealistic physiques that males try to achieve.

**Study: Athletic Magazine Images, Internalization, and Reasons for Exercise**

The purpose of this study was to explore the priming effects of viewing men’s fitness and sport magazine images on media internalization and reasons for exercise for men of various ages.

A total of 280 men between the ages of 18 and 60 years (average age = 36 years) were randomly assigned to view either a series of images of either athletic males or images of cars. Following this, a survey assessing internalization, reasons for exercise, and self-reported leisure time exercise was completed.

**Summary of Study Findings**

Based on leisure time exercise scores, the majority of males (76%) were categorized as active. The key findings were:

- Men who viewed the athletic male images had the highest levels of internalization-general.
• Older men (>44 years) had the lowest levels of internalization-general and internalization-athlete.
• Men reported more health and fitness reasons for exercise than appearance reasons.

Consumer Acceptance of Athletic Body Ideals

Active men in this study did not accept, nor internalize, the “ideal” athletic body images presented in fitness and sports magazines.

It is believed that men, regardless of their physical activity participation, do not accept fitness and sport magazine images without scrutiny (Labre, 2005). They consider what is attainable and realistic before internalizing the images, resulting in fewer psychological concerns or problematic behaviours to achieve an ideal athletic body (Arbour & Martin Ginis, 2006).

However, it was interesting to find that active men can still experience levels of internalization-general after viewing fitness and sports magazine images. This is of concern because magazines are commonly displayed around fitness and recreation centres where men participate in physical activity.

Age Differences Towards Media Acceptance

Older men in our study experienced the least amount of internalization. This supports research suggesting the influence of media decreases with age (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Older individuals prefer to compare themselves to more realistic figures, such as friends, peers, or family, rather than to media images (Bessenoff & Del Priore, 2007). As a result, older men may not relate to the images displayed in fitness and sport magazines and are therefore protected from internalization.

Media Influence on Exercise Reasons

It was encouraging to discover that active men in our study reported more health and fitness reasons for exercise. This indicates that active men may have stronger internal motivations to exercise for health benefits than for appearance-driven reasons.

In particular, older men report the least amount of appearance reasons for exercise. It is said that older men understand that changing one’s outer appearance does not necessarily translate into feeling better about themselves (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005).

Men of all exercise levels can consider this principle to help reduce pressure to meet media-driven appearance ideals.

Conclusion

Based on our findings, active men may not necessarily internalize all aspects of the ideal athletic body portrayed by fitness and sport magazines, but they are still vulnerable and can be influenced even by brief exposures to athletic body images.

Reducing the availability of male-focused fitness and sport magazines in fitness and recreation centres may be one way for active men to limit media internalization. Without the constant visual reminder of ideal athletic physiques while being physically active, men may have a greater opportunity to exercise for health, fitness, mood, or enjoyment reasons.

Key Terms

Media internalization: an individual’s acceptance and adoption of body ideals portrayed by the media.

Priming: a memory effect in which exposure to an unobtrusive and subtle stimulus influences a response to a later stimulus, without conscious awareness.

About the Author

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The full thesis associated with this article can be accessed at http://search.proquest.com/login.proxy.library.ualberta.ca/docview/1220887967?accountid=14474
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