

# Warning Labels on Magazines?

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“WARNING: Looking through this magazine may lower your self-esteem or lead you to be less satisfied with your girlfriend.”

Should fashion magazines and men’s magazines carry such a warning? There’s ample research suggesting that the answer is “yes.”

When we’re exposed to images of unrealistically beautiful people, real people (like us) seem less attractive by comparison. It is as though media images of beautiful people provide a stark contrast to reality.

The typical research on contrast effects goes something like this: Researchers recruit a sample of college student women. Why students? Convenience. Most psychologist researchers are college faculty members.

The sample is randomly divided into two groups. One group is shown a series of models taken from popular fashion magazines. The other group is shown images taken from nature magazines. Both groups complete measures of body satisfaction immediately afterwards.

It’s probably no surprise that women who view the fashion models feel less satisfied with their bodies than do the women who

view nature slides.

In similar research college student men view either slides of beautiful, nude women from men’s magazines or scenes from nature magazines. Instead of completing measures of their own body image satisfaction, the guys indicate how satisfied they are with their current female partners.

You can guess the results: Their girlfriends did not seem as attractive after viewing a series of sexy models. The guys actually rated themselves as less in love with their girlfriends after viewing the nude models compared to the nature scenes!

Interestingly, fashion magazines and men’s magazines have been criticized for objectifying women—presenting them as objects of sexual appeal rather than real people. Few people seem concerned about contrast effects.

Because only beautiful women are used in most magazine, frequent exposure to these magazines makes it feel as though these beautiful people are common. Being observant during a trip to the grocery store leaves one wondering where all the beautiful people are. (I heard there’s one store for

these folks, but I’m still waiting for my invitation.)

Also, models in magazines do not even look that way in real life, and especially not every day. The women have been made up, but even that is not good enough. The images are digitally enhanced to remove imperfections that make-up and lighting can’t hide.

So, what can we do? We might consider how much we willingly expose ourselves to unrealistic images of women. Why do we do it? How do we feel afterwards?

If we continue to view these images, perhaps we should at least consciously remind ourselves that these women are the rare minority. That’s why they’re models and we like to look at them. If more women looked that way it wouldn’t be as desired.

We might also remind ourselves that even professional models do not really look that way. If we ran into these women at the grocery store, we probably wouldn’t recognize them standing next to us in line-- as we flipped through the latest fashion magazine and saw their photos.