

Use of Children in Product Advertisements in Selected Magazines

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Concern over the influence of the content of various media, particularly advertising, on children remains high. However, it appears there have been no attempts to systematically explore how children are portrayed in printed advertising. Articles in marketing and retailing industry trade publications report increased use of children in print advertising and a trend toward portraying children who appear in print advertisements in a more adult manner (Enrico, 1987; Jordan, 1987; Wallach, 1986). "How-to" articles directing advertisers in the correct uses of children to target particular markets are another indicator of the increased use of children in advertising (Moog, 1985). Children also play a more prominent role in ads for adult products because children have a stronger influence on the buying decisions of their parents (Enrico, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of children in magazine advertisements and compare changes over time. A second purpose was to determine whether there were differences in the use of children in advertisements for different target audiences.

Methods

Magazines were selected for inclusion in the study based on six classifications (Youth, Women's, General Editorial, Men's, Home Service and Home, and Women's and Men's Beauty and Grooming) from the Standard Rate and Data Service (1987) publication of consumer magazines. Within each classification, those with the highest circulation for each five-year interval beginning in 1953 and continuing through 1988 were identified. Final selection was based upon the consistency of appearing as number one or number two in circulation over the entire period. Only three magazines consistently achieved these positions. *Better Homes and Gardens*, *McCall's*, and *Glamour* were selected from the categories of Home Service and Home, Women's, and Women's and Men's Beauty and Grooming.

Advertisements appearing in the April, August, and December issues of each of these three periodicals were analyzed for each year from 1953 through 1988. If a monthly issue was unavailable, the prior month's issue of that periodical was used. The sample included all advertisements that were at least one-half-page in size and contained one or more children whose face(s) was(were) visible and appeared to be 12 years of age or younger. Advertisements with multiple parts each less than one-half page in size but totaling at least one-half page, were included. If an advertisement appeared in more than one magazine or in a different issue of the same magazine it was counted each time. The total sample consisted of 2,045 advertisements from 324 issues.

The researchers developed a 30-item content analysis instrument that identified ten categories of products and four categories of intended user. All coding was done by the researchers in two-person teams.

For ease of discussion and based on the pattern of initial frequencies, the 36 years for which data were collected were collapsed to nine, four-year analysis periods. Trends were identified by comparing percentages over the nine periods.

Findings and Discussion

Categories of Products

The percentages of advertisements containing children for each of the ten product categories are shown in Table 1. Children were most frequently portrayed in advertisements for Personal Consumables (20%) which included food, candy and gum and beverages. They were also frequently portrayed in advertisements for Domestic Durables (18%) which included appliances, a variety of vehicles, furniture, tools and china and silverware.

Among advertisements that contained children, only 9% featured products categorized as Toys/Hobbies -- including books, musical instruments, records, toys and sports equipment. This was the only product category that showed any discernible change over time. In the 1969 through 1972 period, the percentages of children in advertisements for Toys/Hobbies showed an increase that continued throughout the remainder of the period studied. The data seemed to

support the assumption that children have increasingly been portrayed in advertisements for products aimed at them (Enrico, 1987).

It is more difficult to determine whether children have assumed a larger role in advertisements for products aimed at adult purchasers. Domestic Durables was the second most frequently advertised product category containing children and can be assumed to represent products aimed at adults. However, from 1953 through 1972 this category showed a decreased use of children. After that time, the percentages of print advertisements that contained children in this product category did not show a trend. Children were more likely to appear in advertisements for Domestic Durables during the first 4-year period than during the last 4-year period. The percentage of advertisements that contained children in this product category from 1985 through 1988 was slightly more than one-half that of the 1953 through 1956 percentage.

Intended User of Advertised Product

Four categories of intended users were included in the analysis: (a) for use by children under age 12, (b) for use by persons over age 12, (c) for use by persons of any age, and (d) not for human use, e.g. pet food. Table 2 shows the percentages of advertisements for each category of intended user.

One category of intended user, not designed for human use, contained insufficient data (2%) to allow meaningful information and was excluded from further discussion. In the remaining categories of intended users, 19% of the advertisements were for products designed for use by children under age 12, 12% were for products designed for use by persons over age 12, and 73% were for products designed for use by persons of any age. During the 1953 through 1956 period, the percentage of advertisements that were for products designed for use by children under age 12 was 5%. In the last four-year period this figure increased to 34%. This finding provides evidence that children were increasingly used in advertisements for products aimed at them.

A reverse pattern exists for the category of products that were designed for use by anyone. Except for a slight increase in the 1977 through 1980 period, the percentage of advertisements in this category, which contained children, decreased steadily over the survey period. The other category of intended users revealed no consistent trends.

Table 1. Percent of Advertisements with Children by Product Category

Product Category	1953-	1957-	1961-	1965-	1969-	1973-	1977-	1981-	1985-	Total
	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	
Personal consumables	(n) 29	(n) 39	(n) 32	(n) 27	(n) 48	(n) 38	(n) 98	(n) 57	(n) 50	418
Domestic durables	(n) 10	(n) 14	(n) 16	(n) 14	(n) 30	(n) 18	(n) 34	(n) 27	(n) 22	20
Toys/hobbies	(%) 74	(%) 63	(%) 36	(%) 31	(%) 21	(%) 36	(%) 56	(%) 20	(%) 33	370
Personal care	(n) 26	(n) 23	(n) 18	(n) 16	(n) 13	(n) 17	(n) 19	(n) 9	(n) 15	18
Personal apparel	(n) 10	(n) 8	(n) 16	(n) 11	(n) 10	(n) 20	(n) 28	(n) 37	(n) 42	182
Domestic consumables	(%) 4	(%) 3	(%) 8	(%) 6	(%) 6	(%) 9	(n) 10	(n) 17	(n) 19	9
Service	(n) 26	(n) 25	(n) 18	(n) 23	(n) 12	(n) 28	(n) 13	(n) 15	(n) 11	171
Materials	(%) 9	(%) 9	(%) 9	(n) 12	(n) 8	(n) 13	(n) 5	(n) 7	(n) 5	8
Travel	(n) 6	(n) 19	(n) 25	(n) 19	(n) 12	(n) 12	(n) 17	(n) 19	(n) 34	163
Other	(n) 2	(n) 7	(n) 13	(n) 10	(n) 8	(n) 6	(n) 6	(n) 6	(n) 9	8
Total	(n) 24	(n) 31	(n) 31	(n) 25	(n) 13	(n) 13	(n) 25	(n) 8	(n) 4	162
	(n) 9	(n) 11	(n) 7	(n) 13	(n) 5	(n) 7	(n) 11	(n) 3	(n) 4	8
	(n) 4	(n) 6	(n) 5	(n) 11	(n) 17	(n) 37	(n) 13	(n) 12	(n) 9	114
	(%) 1	(%) 2	(%) 3	(%) 6	(%) 11	(n) 17	(n) 5	(n) 6	(n) 4	6
	(n) 23	(n) 12	(n) 9	(n) 13	(n) 2	(n) 1	(n) 1	(n) 0	(n) 1	62
	(%) 8	(%) 4	(%) 5	(n) 7	(n) 1	(n) 0	(n) 0	(n) 0	(n) 0	3
	(n) 0	(n) 5	(n) 3	(n) 7	(n) 6	(n) 3	(n) 7	(n) 6	(n) 6	43
	(%) 0	(%) 2	(%) 2	(n) 4	(n) 4	(n) 1	(n) 2	(n) 3	(n) 3	2
	(n) 5	(n) 65	(n) 43	(n) 32	(n) 22	(n) 27	(n) 30	(n) 39	(n) 29	373
	(%) 31	(%) 24	(%) 22	(n) 16	(n) 14	(n) 13	(n) 10	(n) 18	(n) 13	18
	(n) 280	(n) 272	(n) 199	(n) 200	(n) 158	(n) 212	(n) 289	(n) 212	(n) 223	2,045
	(%) 14	(%) 13	(%) 10	(n) 10	(n) 8	(n) 10	(n) 14	(n) 10	(n) 11	100

Note. Sum of advertisements in individual Product categories exceeds columnar totals because more than one Product category may be represented by an advertisement.

Children were most frequently portrayed in advertisements for products designed for use by anyone; however, the percentage of advertisements containing children for products designed for use by anyone from 1985 through 1988 was only about two-thirds of the 1953 through 1956 level.

Implications for Consumer Educators

Understanding the depiction of children in print media is important because people believe in and respond to such portrayals. The findings from this study help consumer educators understand how the use of children in print advertising has changed over a 36-year period and provide a base for classroom research that explores the effects the portrayal of children has on children and adults.

Prior research has shown that a curriculum focused on advertising can significantly change children's attitudes and behaviors (Desmond & Jeffries-Fox, 1983; Meyer, Donohue, & Henke, 1978; Singer, Zuckerman, & Singer, 1980). Consumer educators could develop a curricular unit focusing on print advertising. Such a lesson unit could help young people develop skills that enable them to critically view printed advertisements, understand the use of stereotypes in advertising, and comprehend the concept of target audiences.

Classroom research ideas include the analysis of advertisements from the magazines used in this study or other magazines for a different time period. Another possible study could determine whether there are any correlations among the age, sex, and race of the children portrayed in advertisements and the presence of other models, activity and product categories.

Consumer educators also have a responsibility to ensure that guidelines for the portrayal of children in print advertising are based upon accurate, responsible portrayals of children. This project can lead to achievement of that objective.

References

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Table 2. Percent of Advertisements with Children by Intended User Category

User	1953- 1956	1957- 1960	1961- 1964	1965- 1968	1969- 1972	1973- 1976	1977- 1980	1981- 1984	1985- 1988	Total
< 12	(n) 15 (%) 5	18 7	26 13	25 13	34 22	48 24	61 21	74 35	76 34	377 19
> 12	(n) 42 (%) 15	35 13	26 13	23 12	1 10	40 20	19 7	12 6	24 11	237 12
Anyone	(n) 239 (%) 86	226 83	158 79	156 78	116 74	143 68	203 70	127 60	125 56	1,493 73
Not for humans	(n) 5 (%) 2	5 2	1 1	3 2	3 2	5 2	13 5	5 2	2 1	42 2
Total	(n) 280 (%) 14	272 13	199 10	200 10	158 8	212 10	289 14	212 10	223 11	2,045 100

Note. Total percentages exceed 100 percent because more than one intended user may be represented

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