

The Portrayal of Children in Advertisements in Selected Magazines

A content analysis of advertisements in selected consumer magazines was conducted to determine how children were portrayed from 1953 through 1988. Children appeared in approximately ten percent of all advertisements contained in the magazines. The majority of children were white, school aged, and female. Children were most frequently pictured as inactive and appeared in advertisements for personal consumable items. The advertisements primarily used children to promote products designed for use by persons of any age. Children were unlikely to be portrayed as miniature adults but were frequently used as decorative props in advertisements.

Janelle K. Hood, University of Akron¹
Barbara M. Heinzerling, University of Akron²
Tomasita Chandler, University of Akron³
Douglas Hausknecht, The University of Akron⁴

Introduction

In his book *The Hurried Child* (1981) Elkind expressed considerable concern that the concept of childhood was being threatened. Elkind charged the media (including, but not limited to, advertising) had increasingly portrayed children as miniature adults. Other authors have charged that clothing and aristocratic attitudes portrayed on model children in advertisements invite unfortunate comparisons with children in general. (Jordan, 1987, Fawcett, 1994).

Enrico (1987) pointed out that "kids aren't only taking on new roles and images in ads for products targeted to them, they're also playing a bigger role in ads for adult products." (p. 47) He suggested that one reason for the increased use of children in advertisements aimed at adults is that children are increasingly influencing the buying decisions of their parents. "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) However, it appears there have been no attempts to systematically explore how children are portrayed in print advertising.

A number of studies have used content analysis to determine how other populations have been portrayed in print advertisements. African Americans (Cox, 1969; Humphrey and Schuman, 1984; Kassarjian, 1969; Shuey, King, and Griffith, 1953), women (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Venkatesan and Losco, 1975; Wagner and Banos, 1972), men (Wolhete and Lammers, 1980), and elderly adults

(Hollenshead and Ingersoll, 1982; Ursic, Ursic, and Ursic, 1986) have all been the subjects of such studies. Generally, the purpose of each of these studies was to identify stereotypes of the population under study and/or to determine the frequency or accuracy with which that particular population was portrayed.

Purposes of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to describe the portrayal of children in print advertising by using content analysis. The variables tested included demographic characteristics of children such as age range, sex, and race/ethnic origin; presence of other models; activities engaged in by children; categories of products and services promoted using children; the use of children in advertisements for products designed for use by children and for products designed for use by adults; and the portrayal of children as miniature adults or their use as decorative props.

Methodology

The selection of magazines for use in the study was done by first selecting six classifications of magazines (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. Those magazines with the highest circulation within each classification for each five-year interval beginning in 1953 and continuing through 1988 were identified. The

final magazine selection was based upon the consistent appearance of certain periodicals as either number one or number two in circulation over the entire thirty-six year period. Only three magazines consistently achieved these positions: Better Homes and Gardens, McCall's, and Glamour were ultimately selected from the three 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 coded for each year beginning in 1953 through 1988. If one of these monthly issues was unavailable then 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 who appeared to be 12 years of age or younger. Advertisements with multiple parts, with each part less than one-half page in size but totaling at least one-half page, were included. When an advertisement appeared in more than one magazine or in a different issue of the same magazine it was counted as a separate advertisement. A five-point Likert type scale was used to determine whether 1) the children were portrayed as a "miniature adult" and 2) if the children were primarily used as a decorative prop in the advertisement. The term "miniature adult" was defined for this study as: "miniature adult", a child dressed in clothing considered appropriate for a young adult or adult or a child posing in a sexually suggestive manner or with make-up or hair style that would be considered appropriate for a young adult or adult (Elkind, 1981). "Decorative prop" was defined as a child who is inactive and pictured primarily for display or aesthetic purposes (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976).

The researchers developed a 30-item content analysis instrument. All coding was done by teams of at least two persons. Based on the pattern of initial frequencies, the 36 years for which data were collected were collapsed to nine, four-year survey periods.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Children

Over the 36-year period of the study there were a total of 29,370 advertisements in the selected issues of the three magazines used in this study. There were 2,045 advertisements that were at least one-half page in size and contained one or more children whose face(s) was(were) visible and who appeared to be 12 years of age or younger. The smallest percentage of advertisements that contained one or more children during a four-year period was approximately 6% for the 1969-1972 survey period while the highest percentage

was nearly 10% for the 1957-1960 survey period.

Use of children in print advertisements was highest in the early part of the survey period, 8% from 1953 through 1956 and about 10% from 1957 through 1960, and then dropped steadily over the next 12 years. Use of children in print advertisements began to rise again in the 1973 through 1976 survey period (6%) and continued through 1980 (7%) when the percentage of printed advertisements containing children again began to decline. The percentage of advertisements containing children in the final survey period was 6%. (See Table 1)

When comparing the three age groupings of infants, preschool, and school age children, it was evident that school age children appeared in printed advertisements more frequently than did either infants or preschool age children through eight of the nine survey periods. However, by the last survey period

Table 1
Percent of Advertisements with Children

| <u>Period</u> | <u>Total Ads</u> | <u>Percent With Children</u> |
|----------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| 1953-56 | 3412 | 8.21 |
| 1957-60 | 2742 | 9.88 |
| 1961-64 | 2598 | 7.66 |
| 1965-68 | 2889 | 6.92 |
| 1969-72 | 2853 | 5.54 |
| 1973-76 | 3267 | 6.49 |
| 1977-80 | 4347 | 6.65 |
| 1981-84 | 3679 | 5.76 |
| <u>1985-88</u> | <u>3583</u> | <u>6.22</u> |
| TOTAL | 29370 | 6.96 |

there was no significant difference in the percentage of advertisements which included preschool age children and those which included school age children. (Table 1)

Approximately 63% of the advertisements contained female children while nearly 58% of the advertisements contained male children. In each of the four survey periods from 1953 through 1968, print advertisements were more likely to portray female children than male children. From 1969 through 1972 male and female children appeared in exactly the same number of advertisements. However, in the latter part of the survey period from 1973 through 1988, print advertisements were more likely to contain male children. (Table 2)

White children appeared in nearly 95% of all advertisements that contained children. Three categories of race/ethnic backgrounds, African American, Asian, and Hispanic, had too few advertisements in each survey period to support statistical analysis. No minority

Table 2
Percent of Advertisements with Children by Category

| Category | 1953- 1956 | 1957- 1960 | 1961- 1964 | 1965- 1968 | 1969- 1972 | 1973- 1976 | 1977- 1980 | 1981- 1984 | 1985- 1988 | TOTAL |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| <u>Age^a</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Infant | 18 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 16 | 8 | 13 | 16 | 16 | 15 |
| Preschool | 45 | 50 | 42 | 47 | 42 | 52 | 38 | 42 | 51 | 45 |
| School | 54 | 51 | 61 | 63 | 53 | 53 | 62 | 55 | 49 | 56 |
| <u>Sex</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 55 | 53 | 47 | 47 | 58 | 66 | 66 | 64 | 67 | 58 |
| Female | 61 | 67 | 73 | 74 | 58 | 60 | 58 | 58 | 58 | 63 |
| <u>Race</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| White | 98 | 99 | 96 | 97 | 91 | 88 | 93 | 94 | 96 | 95 |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 15 | 19 | 14 | 15 | 21 | 10 |
| <u>Others</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Adolesc. | 4 | 4 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Adult | 77 | 67 | 50 | 53 | 50 | 47 | 47 | 46 | 35 | 54 |
| <u>Activity</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Inactive | 26 | 32 | 36 | 45 | 33 | 48 | 30 | 30 | 38 | 35 |
| Hobby/ Sports | 25 | 34 | 26 | 31 | 22 | 23 | 30 | 31 | 34 | 29 |
| Care | 26 | 25 | 27 | 24 | 37 | 24 | 34 | 33 | 23 | 28 |
| <u>Product</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| P. Consume | 10 | 14 | 16 | 14 | 30 | 18 | 34 | 27 | 22 | 20 |
| Durable | 26 | 23 | 18 | 16 | 13 | 17 | 19 | 9 | 15 | 18 |
| Toys | 4 | 3 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 9 | 10 | 17 | 19 | 9 |
| <u>User</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| <12 | 5 | 7 | 13 | 13 | 22 | 24 | 21 | 35 | 34 | 19 |
| Anyone | 86 | 83 | 79 | 78 | 74 | 68 | 70 | 60 | 56 | 73 |
| <u>Portrayal^b</u> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Min. Adult | 5 | 7 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 6 |
| Dec. Prop. | 57 | 51 | 67 | 59 | 48 | 59 | 37 | 45 | 41 | 51 |

^a Numbers reflect percentages of ads containing children in that period.

^b Ads for which ratings were "Neutral" were dropped from the Portrayal analysis.

children were portrayed in these advertisements before the 1961-1964 survey period although white children appeared in print advertisements in all nine of the survey periods. (Table 2)

Significant differences in percentages were found for advertisements that contained children in the presence of both adolescents and adults. Adolescents rarely appeared in advertisements with children (5%). This appears to be consistent with a study by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) on how 4,448 adolescents spend their time and with whom on a typical day. They found that adolescents spend more than half of

their waking hours with friends and classmates and only 5% of their time with their parents or siblings. In contrast, adults appeared in nearly 54% of the advertisements that contained children. However, the percentage of advertisements containing children and adults was highest at the beginning of the survey period, and except for a slight increase between the third and fourth survey periods, declined steadily. (Table 2)

This may indicate that these advertisements are mirroring what is happening in our society. According to Schickedanz, Schickendanz, Hansen and Forsyth (1993), "with the increase in dual-wage families and single

families being a national trend, thousands upon thousands of latch key children now go home to an empty house after school and take care of themselves until a parent gets home" (p. 541).

Activities

This variable was broken into eight Activity categories. Advertisements most frequently portrayed children as Inactive (35%), engaged in Active Hobbies/Sports (29%), and in Personal Care activities (28%). The remaining activity category (Household Activities) contained less than six percent of all advertisements that portrayed children.

The portrayal of children engaged in Active Hobbies/Sports was uneven from 1953 through 1969. However, beginning in the 1969 through 1972 survey period, a pattern in the percentages of advertisements in this category (31%) emerges. This figure begins at 22% in the 1969 through 1972 survey period and then gradually rises throughout the remainder of the survey periods to a high of 34%. (Table 2)

Categories of Products and Services

Ten categories of products and services were identified in the instrument. Eight product categories revealed statistically significant differences in percentages over the 36-year survey period.

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, vehicles, furniture, tools, and china and silverware. For the total survey period, only 9% of all advertisements containing children were in the Toys/Hobbies category. However, this low percent for the total masks an increase which began in the 1965 through 1968 survey period and peaked to 19% in the last survey period.

It has been suggested that children have increasingly been portrayed in advertisements for products aimed at them and in advertisements for adult products (Enrico, 1987). The data from analysis of this variable seemed to support the assumption that children have increasingly been portrayed in advertisements for products aimed at them. It is more difficult, however, to determine whether children have assumed a larger role in advertisements for products aimed at adults. The category of Domestic Durables is the second most frequently advertised product category containing children and can be assumed to represent products aimed at adults. From 1953 through 1972 this category showed a decline and then became irregular. Children were more likely to appear in advertisements for Domestic Durables

during the first survey period than during the last survey period. (See Table 2)

Intended User of Advertised Product or Service

The instrument included four categories of Intended Users of the products/services advertised.

Nineteen percent of the advertisements were for products/services Designed for Use by Children under Age 12, 12% were for products/services Designed for Use by Persons over Age 12, and 73% were for products/services Designed for Use by Persons of any Age. The greatest change was in products/services designed for use by children under 12. The percentage of such advertisements rose from a low of 5% in 1953-1956 to 34% in the last period, with some fluctuation in the intervening periods.

A reverse pattern existed for the category of products that were designed for use by anyone. Except for a slight increase between the 1973 through 1976 and the 1977 through 1980 survey periods, the percentage of advertisements in this category decreased steadily over the entire survey period (Table 2).

Portrayal

Children were found to be portrayed as miniature adults in only 6% of all advertisements containing children. Children were most likely to be portrayed as miniature adults in the 1961 through 1964 survey period (9%). The percentage of advertisements that portrayed children as miniature adults was lowest in the 1973 through 1976 survey period (1%) and increased to 5% and 8% during the last two four year survey periods.

In contrast, children were used as decorative props in over 51% of the advertisements over the survey period. There was a greater use of children as decorative props from 1953 to 1968. After that time period the percentages fluctuated from a low of 37% in 1977-80 to 41% in the last period.

Discussion

Understanding the portrayal of a population in mass media is important because people believe in and respond to such portrayals. The findings of this study showed that advertisements containing children made up less than ten percent of the total sample of advertisements in each survey period. Although the percentages of advertisements with children differed over the 36-year period no obvious trend could be identified.

Children of African American, Asian, and recognizably Hispanic backgrounds appeared in too few advertisements in each survey period to support meaningful statistical analysis. In their study of the

portrayal of African Americans, Humphrey and Schuman (1984) found a long term rise in the proportion of advertisements that included African Americans. Similarly, the present study found a long term rise in the percentage of advertisements that included African American children. The Humphrey and Schuman study also concluded that African Americans were under represented in magazine advertisements when compared with the African American population of the United States. Although the current study measures the number and percentage of advertisements containing children rather than the number of people in advertisements, it appears that African American children were similarly under represented.

In several of the content analysis studies of magazine advertisements reviewed prior to this study the goal was to determine what role was portrayed by the specific population under study and how that role had changed over time. For example, Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) analyzed the roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements and were to some extent able to determine whether the roles portrayed in magazine advertisements were accurate. It was possible to compare the percentages of women portrayed as homemakers or in a working role to census data. However, no readily available data exist that can be used to compare the roles portrayed by children in print advertisements to their actual roles. In the present study, the activity category was used to identify the role of children. In the first survey period over 15% of the children were shown participating in household activities. Such portrayals declined to less than 2% by the last survey period. These findings are similar to those reported by Swagler, Sweaney and Marlowe (1989) from a content analysis of children's portrayal of household tasks in television advertising. Advertisements in the magazines used in this study were most likely to portray children in inactive roles, i.e. posing, sitting, watching, and riding.

Implications for Consumer Educators

Concern over the influence of the various media, and particularly advertising, on children remains high. However, most adults seldom consider how the media, including advertising, influences them or their interactions with others (Pollay, 1986). Even less consideration is probably given to the portrayal of specific populations in printed advertisements.

The results of this study demonstrate that marketers have recognized children as a market. Children are no longer used as just decorative objects in advertisements for adult products but instead are used in

advertisements to market products that were developed for use by them.

The findings from this study can help consumer educators understand what the portrayal of children in print advertising is, how it has changed and that these changes may have implications in the lives of children. Children must be assisted in developing skills which enable them to critically view printed advertisements and understand the use of stereotypes in advertising. 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.

References

- Belkaoui, A., & Belkaoui, J. M. (1976). A comparative analysis of the roles portrayed by women in print advertisements: 1953, 1970, 1972. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 13(5), 168-172.
- Courtney, A. E., & Lockeretz, S. W. (1971). A woman's place: An analysis of the roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 8(2), 92-95.
- Cox, K. K. (1969). Changes in stereotyping of negroes and whites in magazine advertisements. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 33, 603-606.
- Csikzentmihalyi, M. & Larson, R. (1984). *Being adolescent: Conflict and growth in the teenage years*. New York: Basic Books.
- Elkind, D. (1981). *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Enrico, D. (1987, November 30). Images of children in advertising: Like father, like son. *AdWeek's Marketing Week*, p. 47.
- Fawcett, A. W. (1994, February 14). 'Sunday best' becoming more of a daily ritual. *Advertising Age*, 65(7), pp. S10, 214.
- Hollenshead, C., & Ingersoll, B. (1982). Middle-aged and older women in print advertisements. *Educational Gerontology*, 8, 25-41.
- Humphrey, R., & Schuman, H. (1984). The portrayal of blacks in magazine advertisements: 1950-1982. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 48, 551-563.
- Jordan, K. (1987, November 30). Kiddie fashion ads: Children of a lesser god? *Ad Week's Marketing Week*, p. 54.
- Kassarjian, H. H. (1969). The Negro and American advertising, 1946-1965. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 6(2), 29-39.
- Moog, C. (1985, February 14). Cashing in on children's smiles. *Advertising Age*, pp. 29-30.

- Pollay, R. W. (1986). The distorted mirror: Reflections on the unintended consequences of advertising. Journal of Marketing, 50(4), 18-35.
- Schickedanz, J.A., Schickedanz, D.I., Hansen, K. & Forsyth, P.D. (1993). Understanding Children. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.
- Shuey, A., King, N., & Griffith, B. (1953). Stereotyping of Negroes and whites: An analysis of magazine pictures. Public Opinion Quarterly, 17, 281-287.
- Standard Rate and Data Service. (1987). Consumer magazine and agri media rates and data. (69) 12. Oak Brook, IL: Author.
- Swagler, R., Sweaney, A. and Marlowe, J. (1989). Children's participation in household tasks as portrayed by national television advertisements in the U.S.A. Journal of Consumer Studies and Home Economics, 13 271-281.
- Ursic, A. C., Ursic, M. C., & Ursic, V. L. (1986). A longitudinal study of the use of elderly in magazine advertising. Journal of Consumer Research, 13, 131-133.
- Venkatesan, M., & Losco, J. (1975). Women in magazine ads: 1959-1971. Journal of Advertising Research, 15(5), 49-54.
- Wagner, L. C., & Banos, J. B. (1973). A woman's place: A follow-up analysis of the roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements. Journal of Marketing Research, 10(5), 213-214.
- Wolhete, M. & Lammers, H. B. (1980). An analysis of male roles in print advertisements over a 20-year span: 1958-1978. In J. C. Olson (Ed.), Advances in Consumer Research: Vol. 7 (pp. 760-761). Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research.

Endnotes

1. Instructor, School of Home Economics and Family Ecology.
2. Professor, School of Home Economics and Family Ecology.
3. Professor, School of Home Economics and Family Ecology.
4. Associate Professor of Marketing, College of Business Administration