Female Gender Images in Adolescent Magazine Advertising

Julie Napoli & Marie Murgolo-Poore

Abstract

Since the late 1960s, research into gender stereotypes in advertising has been prolific. The emergence of more magazines that target children and adolescents raises the question of whether the female images portrayed in these publications reinforce prevailing stereotypes of women and portray diversity in ethnicity. This study examines the female images shown by advertisers in the Australian editions of Barbie, Girlfriend and Dolly magazines. Findings indicate there is limited diversity in physical attributes as well as ethnicity of the models portrayed in these publications. Limitations are noted and future research issues are discussed.

Keywords: Gender, Stereotypes, Advertising, Body image, Childrens magazine

1. Introduction

Since the late 1960s, research into gender stereotypes in advertising has been prolific. Advertisers have, to a degree, responded to the feminists' call and attempted to portray women in more equal and diverse roles in advertisements (i.e. in positions of power and responsibility). However, in more recent times researchers have shown women are increasingly portrayed as objects of sexual desire that are also attractive, thin and young (Lambiase et al, 1999). This has generated further research into the impact of these images on individuals' self-esteem and self-image, particularly amongst adolescent females (Cattarin et al, 2000; Lerner, Orlos, & Knapp, 1976; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Martin & Gentry, 1997).

Adolescent females growing up in Western society are often exposed to unrealistic images of women. These largely set the standard for the image an individual should aspire to and, as a result, we are seeing an alarming number of young women and children on the dieting merry-go-round (Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994). Even women who fall within the normal weight range perceive themselves as too heavy and continue to pursue this ideal (Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994). A 1990 survey of high school students in the United States found that 11% of the students suffered from eating disorders (Dunn, 1992). Furthermore, at least 9 out of 10 eating disorder sufferers are female (Wolf, 1991).

This female obsession with body image and physical attractiveness has been linked to several factors, such as adolescent turmoil, family history and pubertal timing, which, in turn, have been associated with anorexia or bulimia nervosa (Williams & Currie, 2000; Nylander, 1971). However, chronic dieting has also been directly attributed to the social pressure on females to achieve a nearly impossible thinness, constantly reinforced by the female images portrayed in the media and advertising (Stephens et al., 1994). As more magazines target children and adolescents, researchers have questioned whether the female images portrayed in these publications reinforce prevailing stereotypes of women and support unrealistic body ideals.

The primary objectives of this study were to examine the ethnic and physical attributes of females portrayed in magazines targeting children and young teenagers, and to identify whether the advertising images featured in publications targeting adult females are perpetuated in those targeting youth. The research involved a content analysis of advertisements taken from the Australian magazines Barbie, Girlfriend and Dolly. These publications were selected as they specifically target the 5 to 15 year demographic.
2. The Feminine Ideal

Throughout the ages, women have typically viewed their bodies as “objects”, with physical beauty determining how they and others judge their overall value (Martin & Gentry, 1997). Lerner, Orlos and Knapp (1976) suggested that a woman’s sense of self is primarily derived from body attractiveness. Twenty-five years later, Henriques and Calhoun (1999) reported that white women look primarily to their appearance to boost their self-esteem. Boys, on the other hand, tend to view their bodies as “process”, so power and function are more important criteria for evaluating their physical self (Lerner, Orlos & Knapp, 1976). These perceptions seem to result from a socialization process that begins at a very early age, continues throughout childhood, and is reinforced in adolescence (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Young women are frequently exposed to messages and images that reinforce the body ideal, which become the standards of thinness and beauty for defining oneself and others (Pesa, Syre & Jones, 2000). Girls, in particular, have a greater likelihood of being negatively affected by the feminine ideal, and this is more pronounced when their bodies are undergoing dramatic changes and when adult definitions of “beauty” become relevant social norms (Martin & Gentry, 1997).

Naomi Wolf argues that in today’s modern world, women will only be accepted by meeting rigid standards of slimness, beauty and fashion (Craig, 1997). During the last three decades, fashion and advertising models have grown steadily thinner, yet the average weight (in relation to height) of women under 30 years of age has actually risen (Colburn 1992; Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994). The social ideals and standards set for female beauty seem to be increasingly unrealistic and perhaps more unattainable by the vast majority of women.

3. The Feminist Movement and Advertising Practices

The feminist movement has had a tremendous impact on the role and status of men and women in western society. Since the early 1960s, many now well-noted feminists (such as Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer) challenged traditional, male-dominated societies by questioning the social restrictions placed on women and demanding action from political groups as well as from women themselves. Friedan, in fact, placed much of the blame for women’s unhappiness on the post-war consumer society and on advertisers’ exploitation of women (Craig, 1997). During this time, advertisers were criticized for their stereotypical portrayal of women in advertisements. Subsequent empirical and academic research in this area has shown these claims were not entirely unfounded (cf. Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Dominik & Rauch, 1972; Wagner & Banos, 1973; Courtney & Whipple, 1974; O’Donnell & O’Donnell, 1978; Goffman, 1979).

Analysis of advertisements appearing in magazines throughout the 1960s and 1970s typically showed women as homemakers who did not make important decisions (nor undertake any other important act), subordinate and inferior to men, or as sex objects (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Dominik & Rauch, 1972; Wagner & Banos, 1973; Courtney & Whipple, 1974; O’Donnell & O’Donnell, 1978; Goffman, 1979). Furthermore, portrayals of adult women in American advertisements have emphasized passivity, deference towards men, lack of intelligence or credibility, and punishment for high levels of effort. In contrast, men have been portrayed as constructive, powerful, autonomous and achieving (Butler & Paisley, 1980; Courtney & Whipple, 1984; Kolbe & Abanese, 1996). Of particular concern are findings from research on stereotyping in advertising to children that report similar results (Macklin & Kolbe, 1984; Schwartz & Markham, 1985). Research on the portrayal of minority groups in advertising also gained momentum during the 1970s, paralleling feminist research on women’s issues (Griffin & Sturdivant, 1973). These studies showed that African-Americans were generally portrayed in negative roles, undertaking menial work, receiving charity or experiencing social problems. Even when blacks were featured in non-stereotypical roles, they rarely played a central role in the advertisement (Bush, Resnick & Stern, 1980a, 1980b).

The advertising industry has, to a degree, responded to these criticisms and pressures by portraying women in more diverse and equal roles (i.e. in positions of power and responsibility). Yet there is still some way to go. For example, daytime commercials still tend to portray women doing household chores, whilst weekend sports advertisements frequently exploit images of women as objects of sexual desire (Craig, 1997; Zhou & Chen, 1997). Similar studies of print advertisements have also shown an increase in the sexually explicit portrayal of both women and men over time (Lambaise et al, 1999; Piron & Young, 1996; Ferguson, Kreshal & Tinkhan, 1990; Soley & Kurzbad, 1986).

The use of young, attractive models in advertisements is also prevalent. Ford et al. (1998) and Gilly (1988) found that women are still portrayed as being more concerned with appearance and younger than men. Generally,
The societal implications of the negative stereotyping of women and minority groups in the media may be profound. The repeated portrayals of African Americans as objects of social concern in public service advertisements, for example, reinforces the image of a population group dependent on government assistance and incapable of conforming to the mainstream work ethic (Stern, 1999). This, in effect, not only creates discrimination and sets up barriers that exclude whole groups of people, but also suggests that the world is one homogeneous group and that all those who differ are not worthy of inclusion (Vandergrift, 1993). Adolescents, in general, are very susceptible to such cues and will often use outside information (including advertisements and the mass media) to form or reinforce their own self-identity (Ashbach, 1994; Freedman, 1984; Strasburger, 1995). Negative portrayals of racial minorities in the media have been shown to have a particularly detrimental effect on the self-esteem of minority youths, making them feel largely unconnected to society, or even invisible (Kern-Foxworth, 1994). As such, advertisers should be aware of these effects and endeavor to ensure that gender images reflect the diversity that exists in race, body shape, social class, education and other variables.

5. Research Propositions

Whilst much of the research in this area has focused on either gender stereotyping in advertising, cross cultural comparisons or advertising effects on an individual’s self-concept, few, if any, studies have compared the images across publications targeted toward 5- to 15-year-olds. The primary objective of this study was to examine the ethnic and physical images of females portrayed in magazines targeting children and young teenagers. More specifically, this study examined: (a) the ethnicity of the female models portrayed in each publication and whether this accurately reflected the cultural diversity that exists in western society; (b) the age category and publication type in which the physical image of the model begins to resemble the “ideal” women (i.e. the “supermodel” image). With the introduction of magazines targeting very young consumers, we could expect one of two outcomes: (i) advertisers would adopt a socially responsible attitude and provide young consumers with more realistic images of women and girls; or (ii) advertisers would follow their traditional practices of using attractive models to market their products. Based on the literature reviewed, we proposed that:

P1: Female models used in advertisements will typically be Caucasian in appearance and there will be no

attractive people are perceived as smarter and friendlier than unattractive people, whilst people who are obese or overweight are often thought to be lazy, sloppy or stupid (Vaughn & Langlois, 1983, cited in Burton et al., 1995). The physical attractiveness of a model or product endorser has also been shown to have a positive influence on a recipient’s attitude toward the advertisement (Kamins, 1990), attitude toward the advertised brand (Kahle & Homer, 1985), purchase intention (Baker & Churchill, 1977), and actual purchase (Caballero & Pride, 1984). Blair (1994) argued that this caters to society’s expectations of what a woman should look like, and reinforces male dominance in society.

4. Advertising Effects on Self-Concept

In many ways, the issue confronting advertisers has shifted from creating equality in the gender roles portrayed to showing a broader range/scope of female images in advertisements. Advertisers have been accused of unintentionally imposing a sense of inadequacy on women’s self-concepts (Pollay, 1986). It has been claimed that advertising generates cynicism, insecurity and conformity, and has neglected higher order moral values (Pollay 1986). Cattarin et al. (2000) examined the effects of media-driven images of attractiveness on the level of body image and mood disturbance amongst females. Their findings suggest women experience distress (in terms of anger, anxiety and depression) when viewing media images that reflect the current societal bias towards thinness and attractiveness. Similarly, Stice and Shaw (1994) found exposure to ultra-thin models in advertisements and magazine pictures produced depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity and body dissatisfaction in female college students. One could argue that female images portrayed in advertisements are simply a mirror of Western society’s preoccupation with the feminine ideal, and that these criticisms are unjustified. Richins (1991) and Martin and Kennedy (1993), for example, found no relationship between self-perceptions of physical attractiveness and exposure to attractive models in advertisements. This suggests self-esteem and body dissatisfaction are moderated by other variables, such as body weight (Pesa, Syre & Jones, 2000), body image (Heinberg, Thompson & Stormer, 1995; Cash & Hicks, 1990), gender (Burton, Netemeyer & Lichtenstein, 1995; Fallon & Rozin, 1985), the motives for comparison (Cattarin et al., 2000; Martin & Gentry, 1997), and age (Martin & Gentry 1997; Gigrus 1989).

The societial implications of the negative stereotyping of women and minority groups in the media may be
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P2: Female models used in advertisements will typically be Caucasian in appearance and there will be no relationship to the type of publication.

P3: Female models used in advertisements will be typically of thin/small build and there will be no relationship to the age of the model used.

P4: Female models used in advertisements will be typically of thin/small build and there will be no relationship to the type of publication.

P5: Magazines targeting older teenagers will feature more idealistic (“supermodel”) female images compared with those targeting younger children.

P6: The older the model featured in the magazine the more closely her physical appearance will resemble the idealistic (“supermodel”) feminine image.

6. Method

Advertisements for the study were gathered from three primary Australian publications – Barbie, Dolly and Girlfriend. These magazines were selected as they specifically target females between the ages of 5 and 15 years, with Barbie targeted at the younger readers and Dolly at the older readers. This allowed us to explore whether young readers are exposed to similar gender images as older readers.

As an exploratory study, the basis for the selection of specific issues of each publication was largely one of convenience. All magazines were published in either 1999 or 2000 and only those advertisements that featured clearly analyzable female models were counted. The resultant sample included ten issues of Barbie (which included 65 advertisements in total), eight issues of Girlfriend (total of 107 advertisements), and six issues of Dolly (total of 57 advertisements) (see Table I). Categories for analysis were formulated after an extensive review of the relevant literature, and included the age of the central character, race, physical attributes (eye/hair color, body size/shape), masculine/feminine gender traits (derived from Ito, 1978; Williams & Best, 1990), and the degree to which the model portrayed supports the ideal supermodel image.

Two Caucasian female coders analyzed each advertisement. A pretest of the instrument was completed before gathering and analyzing the data, and this was used to clarify the coding categories, instructions, key terms and definitions for the coders (Ford et al., 1998). The coders worked independently of each other and the authors, separately coding each advertisement. Each coder only coded duplicate advertisements once. Depending on the items coded, inter-coder agreements ranged from 75% to 90%, which was acceptable for this type of study (Kassarjian, 1977).

7. Results

In total, 229 advertisements were analyzed; of these, 25% appeared in Dolly magazine, 47% in Girlfriend, and 28% in Barbie (see Table I). The majority of models featured (71%) were aged 13 years or older, with 94% of younger models appearing more frequently in the Barbie magazine ($\chi^2=187$, d.f.=2, p<.001). This is consistent with the target market of this magazine, which typically comprises young girls between the ages of 5 and 12 years.

In examining the ethnic origin (or race) of the central

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Total number of issues</th>
<th>No. ads analyzed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbie</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolly</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
character featured in the advertisements, results indicate that 95% of all models were Caucasian, with blue eyes (34%) and blonde hair (65%). Furthermore, this is independent of both the publication type ($\chi^2=4.24$, d.f.=2, p<.120) and models’ age ($\chi^2= .32$, d.f.=1, p<.571). Zhou and Chen (1997) found a similar pattern for ethnicity of characters in an analysis of Canadian magazines. As such, the findings supported Propositions 1 and 2. (See Table III).

Not surprisingly, female models portrayed in child and teen magazines have either a thin (80%) or athletic (20%) shape, and are also rated as attractive (90%). Again, this is independent of the publication type, with all three magazines featuring models of similar size and shape ($\chi^2=7.51$, d.f.=4, p<.111), and a similar age category of the central character ($\chi^2=3.12$, d.f.=2, p<.210). Propositions 3 and 4 are therefore supported – female models across all age groups, featured in magazines targeting both children and adolescents, typically have a thin, small build.

Analysis of the level of realism versus idealism of female images across publications showed the female models featured in all three publications appeared to fit closely with the idealistic female image (see Table IV). Although Barbie magazines featured models with slightly more realistic physical female images, no significant differences were found across publications. However, in examining differences across age categories, older female models (those over 13 years of age) were more likely to resemble the “supermodel”/idealistic female image (see Table V). Hence, propositions 5 and 6 are also supported.

8. Discussion and Implications

These findings suggest female images portrayed in magazines targeting young teenagers and children typically represent only one ethnic group in Australian society – those of Caucasian origin. In reality, this is not the case. Approximately 23% of people now living in Australia were born overseas, and a further 27% of people born in Australia have at least one overseas-born parent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Although 14% of the Australian population either has a southern

Table II Female Gender Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model’s Age (n=229)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Hair Color (n=229)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 6 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Blonde</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 – 12 years</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 – 17 years</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 years or older</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnic Origin (n=229)</th>
<th>Model Shape (n=229)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Thin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. Asian, African, Hispanic, etc.)</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eye Color (n=229)</th>
<th>Model Size (n=229)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Large/Slightly Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>Small/Slightly Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
European (e.g. Italian, Greek, Yugoslav) or Asian heritage (e.g. Chinese, Philippine, Vietnamese) models from these cultures rarely featured (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Consistent exposure to the dominant image of models with fair skin, blonde hair and blue eyes may reinforce prevailing stereotypes of women and support unrealistic body types. Even Barbie magazine, which has a strong following amongst young girls, appears to reinforce the feminine ideal image, arguably failing to recognize or reflect the diversity that undoubtedly exists amongst its readers.

Advertisers still have some way to go in terms of deconstructing stereotypes of women (and men). One of the main questions this study raises is how consistent use of these stereotypes will affect the self-esteem, confidence, body image and self-identity of young females in the future. Given that the age at which young girls receive this message has decreased, it may be timely to reexamine the responsibilities advertisers and the media have to their audiences. Although advertisers clearly use their communications to achieve commercial goals, they arguably also need to recognize and address social concerns (Pollay, 1986). Continuing reinforcement of existing stereotypes may perpetuate a “norm” for physical appearance that fails to reflect the diversity that characterizes youth markets.

Advertisers and the mass media may be limiting their opportunities by failing to adequately represent the many diverse segments that exist in the market place. Adoption of a more comprehensive range of female images may help advertisers to realize potential commercial benefits.

### 9. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, there is a disproportionate number of advertisements used from one publication (Girlfriend) compared with the others – this may affect the reliability of results. Second, the number of advertisements used from each publication was relatively small, and limited to magazines published only in 1999 and 2000. Third, the sample was restricted only to publications in Australia. Future research could be conducted to explore how the use of thin, attractive, Caucasian models affects a child’s self-perception, particularly those of other ethnic backgrounds. This present study could also be extended to include a broader range of publications that target children and adolescents, and future works could also examine differences across cultures. For example, what

Table III: Publication/Age by Model’s Age, Ethnic Origin and Shape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Model</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Model’s Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 12 years</td>
<td>Dolly</td>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;12 yrs</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;13 yrs</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi Square N/A \( x^2 = 187; d.f. = 2, p < .001 \)

Ethnic Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Origin</th>
<th>Dolly</th>
<th>Girlfriend</th>
<th>Barbie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi Square \( x^2 = .320; d.f. = 1, p < .571 \) \( x^2 = 4.24; d.f. = 2, p < .120 \)

Model’s Shape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model’s Shape</th>
<th>Dolly</th>
<th>Girlfriend</th>
<th>Barbie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi Square \( x^2 = 3.12; d.f. = 2, p < .210 \) \( x^2 = 7.51; d.f. = 4, p < .111 \)
types of images are females exposed to in cultures where larger body sizes and shapes are considered the norm? What impact does this have on their self-identity? Do smaller and thinner people in such societies feel ostracized or marginalized? As well as examining the impact of these images on young females, it may also be of interest to examine how this affects the perceptions young males have of women. Finally, future studies could also explore changes that have occurred in the portrayal of men in the media, and the subsequent impact on the male self-concept.

As a final point, responsibility for creating a healthy attitude towards body image amongst adolescents does not rest solely with advertisers or the media. Creating a society that accepts all types of people, regardless of gender, age, race, weight or body shape, is equally important in ensuring that children grow up with a strong and healthy sense of self. The process could very well begin in the education system, if not at home. Parents and educators alike need to instill young girls with a sense of self-worth that is independent of physical appearance or attractiveness. Perhaps this is the next challenge for the feminist movement.

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pre-adolescents and adolescents. The Journal of Advertising, 26 (Summer), 19-33.


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