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Advertisements: Interpreting Images Used to Sell to Young Adults

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Advertisements: interpreting images used to sell to young adults

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to identify images used in advertising directed toward young adults, investigate what young adults thought of these images, and explore how young adults used these images.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analysis of 674 apparel and cosmetic advertisements located in four fashion magazines (*Elle Girl, Seventeen, YM*, and *TeenVogue*) resulted in eight categories. Participants ($n = 32$) viewed advertisements representative of the categories and answered questions related to their thoughts about the model depicted in the advertisement and their use of the images.

Findings – Participants' used the models as a point of comparison. Participants primarily commented on their own weight relative to the thin models and expressed a need to lose weight to appear like them. With two categories of advertisements depicting average weight models participants noted that the model appeared realistic. However, they did not draw comparisons between themselves and these models.

Research limitations/implications – Young adults do make comparisons between themselves and models used in fashion advertising. These comparisons were primarily downward. Use of average-sized models may not be a solution to negative impacts on body image, as these participants did not make use of the average-sized models as a point of comparison.

Originality/value – Young women do compare themselves with models used in advertising. They recognize average weight women in advertising but do not make the same types of comparisons with these models, suggesting that the use of average weight models may be a solution to advertising's impact on developing negative body images in young adults.

Keywords Advertising, Adolescents, Social processes, Fashion, Magazines

Paper type Literature review

Advertisements: interpreting images used to sell to young adults

Magazine racks and newsstands offer a variety of fashion magazines. A few new additions to the range of offerings (e.g. *Teen Vogue, Teen Elle*) specifically target teenagers[1] and young adults. Generation Y has become a market that stores cannot ignore (Earnest, 2002). The estimated spending power of teens was "expected to top $190 billion by 2006, a figure that surpasses the gross domestic product of many countries in the world. In addition, families with teens spent $100 billion on them" (Mintel, 2006). Teenage Research Unlimited estimated that young adult spending is increasing by almost 8 percent annually (Earnest, 2002). Since teenagers influence

increasing amounts of spending it is not surprising that the number of magazines directly targeting teenagers has also grown.

The intended readership of magazines such as *Teen Vogue, Seventeen,* and *Elle Girl* are adolescent girls. The magazine's design, the products featured in the advertisements as well as the models are intended to appeal to and influence this market segment. Several researchers support the idea that advertising sends powerful messages to young adults and teenagers (Frisby, 2004; Groesz *et al.*, 2002; Mann, 1994; Martin and Kennedy, 1993, 1994b; Ogle and Thornburg, 2003; Posavac *et al.*, 1998; Richins, 1991; Stephens *et al.*, 1994). However, few researchers have actually documented that fashion advertisements are a point of comparison and have an impact on their young readers. To address this void, our study was designed and conducted in an effort to understand the specific effects that fashion advertisements have on young adult females and how the images in the advertisements are used and interpreted by them. Our overall research goal was to identify the type of female images that are presented through advertisements in fashion magazines targeting young adults and to examine how young adults interpret and use those images. To meet this overall goal we conducted a two-part study. In the first part, our focus was on determining the type of images presented in teenage fashion magazines and assessing what differences if any, existed between images used to sell young adults versus those used to sell adult women. In the second part of our research our focus was on investigating what meanings, if any, young adults attached to the images identified in Part 1, and how these images were used.

Images of women in advertisements
When individuals read advertisements they look at illustrations, read headlines, and read copy in that order (Bovee and Arens, 1986). As a result, message decoding of an advertisement relies heavily on the images presented (Kang, 1997). In his work examining images of women in magazine advertisements, Goffman (1978) concluded that women are weakened by their advertising portrayals in five areas: relative size (women are shown smaller or lower than men), feminine touch (women are constantly touching themselves), functional ranking (lower status occupations than men), subordination (women are lying down at inappropriate times), and licensed withdrawal (women are never quite part of the scene).

Kang revisited Goffman's work by examining magazine advertisements from *Vogue, Mademoiselle*, and *McCall's* in 1979 and in 1991 to determine what gender behavior patterns were prevalent and whether the portrayal of women had changed. Overall, the portrayal of women had not changed. In addition, magazine advertisements in 1991 contained more female nudity and women wearing body-revealing clothes than advertisements in 1979. Thompson (2000) like Kang (1997) also found an increase in the use of female nudity and women wearing body revealing clothing in fashion advertisements published in *Gentlemen's Quarterly* and *Vogue* between 1964 and 1994.

Ivas (2000) analyzed images of women in print advertisements in *Vogue, Harper's Bazaar*, *Elle*, *Vanity Fair*, *House Beautiful*, and *House and Garden* from 1990 to 2001. She determined women were used in six different categories in these advertisements. The first category was female used as a prop, canvas, or silhouette for displaying a product. The second category was female as a prop representing non-fashion items in

unrealistic settings. The third was female realistically wearing or using the fashion product. The fourth was female unrealistically wearing or using fashion product. The fifth was female form used to promote cosmetic products. The sixth category reflected females as props for other females promoting apparel or accessories. Thus, our first research question was whether women were used in the same or similar ways in fashion advertising directed at young adults and teenagers.

Social comparison

One use young adults might make of advertisements is as a basis for social comparison. Rudd and Lennon (1994) explain how individuals try to re-create themselves in response to viewing advertised images or ideals including those in magazines. Their premise is that people engage in social comparison to continually assess their aesthetic value as well as others. When one compares themselves to the cultural standard or an ideal and then comes close to this standard, her esteem level can increase, resulting in a strong social identity. However, if one compares herself to the cultural ideal and is far off from achieving the standard, she may choose a coping strategy in order to reach the ideal (e.g. purchase advertised products) or may experience a decrease in self-esteem.

Advertisements and social comparison

A few researchers have found that young adults and adolescents do compare themselves to models presented in advertisements (Jung, 2006; Crane, 1999; Martin and Kennedy, 1993; Richins, 1991). Jung (2006) found that repetitive exposure to attractive models (perfect bodies and flawless appearance) had a negative impact on college women by increasing anxiety and depression. Martin and Kennedy (1993) found that preadolescent and adolescent girls compared their physical attractiveness with models positioned in advertisements and that this practice escalated with increasing age. Continuing in this line of research, Martin and Kennedy (1994a) found two dominant motives for girls to compare themselves to models in advertisements: self-evaluation and self-improvement. In subsequent research with college-aged men and women, Martin and Kennedy (1994b) found gender differences in the use of people in advertisements. Women showed greater tendencies to compare themselves with models as compared to men and that this tendency played a greater role in contributing to women's self-esteem than to men's. However, the researchers did not find evidence of detrimental effects on female participants' self-perceptions of physical attractiveness or self-esteem.

In contrast, Currie (1997) did find evidence that advertising negatively impacts self-perceptions of teenagers. Girls between the ages of 13 to 17, were asked to share what came to mind or "what they saw" when they looked at images taken from *Seventeen*. The girls freely acknowledged that magazines set unrealistic beauty standards and could make readers feel bad about themselves. Many girls expressed the desire to be like the magazine models. Ogle and Thornburg (2003) found that the impact of teen magazines on young girls could also be positive. In their analysis of *Girl Zone* (*GZ)* an on-line teen magazine, they noted that GZ presented content that encouraged girls to celebrate their physical effectiveness as well as their attractiveness.

Methods

Part 1 – data collection

To answer our first set of research questions we conducted a content analysis of apparel advertisements presented in four teenage magazines – *ElleGirl, Seventeen, Teen Vogue,* and *YM* from January 2003 until June 2003. These dates were selected because *Teen Vogue* was launched during this time period. All advertisements for either cosmetic products or apparel were included for analysis. Duplicates of advertisements across the four magazines were eliminated resulting in a data set of 674 advertisements.

Initial coding of advertisements was done using five[2] out of the six categories developed by Ivas (2000). The categories were as follows:

(1) female as a prop: female depicted is used as a merchandising fixture to display apparel product;

(2) female realistically wearing apparel;

(3) female unrealistically advertising apparel (apparel products are displayed as a component of fantasy or unrealistic world);

(4) female as a prop to advertise cosmetic or fragrance: female forms in this category may include full body, face only, or close-ups of body parts as they are needed by the product; and

(5) no female used in the advertisement (See Table I for category descriptions).

Data were coded by two individuals. To calculate the inter-coder reliability the following formula was used:

$$\text{Inter-coder reliability} = \frac{\text{Number of agreements} - \text{number of disagreements}}{\text{Number of agreements}}$$

$$\text{Inter-coder reliability} = 674 - 53/674 = 92.13 \text{ percent}$$

Findings. The total number of advertisements that fell into each of these categories was as follows:

(1) female as a prop ($n = 7$);

(2) female realistic fashion item ($n = 131$);

(3) female unrealistic fashion item ($n = 28$);

(4) female as a prop for cosmetic or fragrance ($n = 211$); and

(5) product only ($n = 176$).

Three additional categories emerged. These categories were labeled:

(1) female in active role ($n = 7$);

(2) female animation ($n = 23$); and

(3) female athlete ($n = 5$) (See Table I).

The first new category, female in active role, included ads that featured females positioned with either another female or a male in a typical activity such as walking to class, applying acne medicine, and hanging out with friends. The second new category,

Category	Description
Female as a prop	Female is used as a merchandising fixture to display a product. An advertisement showed a female holding a huge painting that covers up everything but her long slender legs to promote a shaving product
Female realistically wearing apparel	Female form presents apparel item in way that resonates with actual life. An advertisement showed the typical model wearing apparel in an everyday setting
Female unrealistically advertising non-fashion	Female form is used to display the non-fashion item as a component of an unrealistic world. Example is an advertisement for hair products that used a drawing of a female with an enlarged head of curls to promote hair twisters
Female as a prop to advertise cosmetic or fragrance	Female form may include full body, face only, or close-ups of body parts as they are needed by the product. A typical advertisement showed a very glamorous and skinny woman clinging on to a huge bottle of perfume
Product only	This type of advertisement displayed products only, text only, or a male or masculine form. A typical advertisement consisted of a picture of the product only with text
Female animation	Animation or cartoon-like depiction of a female. An example was feminine products being advertised using cartoon figures engaged in a soccer game
Female in athletic role	Depicts a female engaged in athletic activities or athletic gear. Vans alternative wear used a teenage female wearing athletic gear leaning against a chain-link fence in their advertisement
Female in an active role	Shows a female positioned with males or females in action or in motion. Differin acne gel utilized this method by using a female actively walking up the stairs in her high school. She is posing as she turns around and holds up the number two with her hands

Table I.

female animation, included ads where a female figure was illustrated using caricatures or cartoon-like figures. The last new category, female athlete, showed a female engaged in an athletic activity or wearing athletic apparel.

Conclusions. For the most part, the same or similar female images used to sell fashion-related items to adult women were being used to sell in the teenage magazines under investigation. However, in teenage magazines, females were also portrayed in active roles, in animated form, and as athletes. These last three categories of images were not found by Ivas (2000) in her investigation of advertisements located adult fashion magazines.

Part 2–Data collection
To obtain participants for part two, purposive sampling was used (Touliatous and Compton, 1992). This technique allowed us to focus on females who routinely read the magazines under investigation (*Teen Vogue, Elle Girl, Seventeen, YM*). Participants were undergraduates recruited from introductory courses at two institutions within the USA. One was located in the Southwest and the other in the West. Wintre *et al.* (2001, p. 1) reviewed over 1,700 research journals and found that "68.31 percent were found to

employ undergraduates exclusively as subjects" and generated valid results. We received Institutional Review Board approval for use of human subjects in research at both institutions. This approval included both use of undergraduates and use of a small compensation (ten extra credit points) for participation. Participation was on a volunteer basis and names of participants remain anonymous. We used a questionnaire to collect data. Each participant responded to a brief set of pre-screening questions[3] to assess whether or not they read any of the magazines on a regular basis and whether they looked at the advertisements contained in the magazines. This process resulted in two individuals being eliminated from participation.

Instrument. To meet the second research objective, participants ($n = 32$) were asked to interpret one representative advertisement from each of the categories identified in part 1 that contained a model. After viewing an advertisement, participants responded to open-ended questions that asked them to describe their thoughts and feelings about how females were portrayed. Participants were asked to share whether and how they viewed these advertisements with respect to having an impact on their lives, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Emphasis was placed on assessing connection between these ads and thoughts about self and inclination to purchase advertised product. Next, participants were asked to indicate their age, education level, and ethnicity. Participants were also asked to share how they obtained spending money and to provide an estimate of how much they spent on apparel and other fashion-related goods on a monthly basis.

Data analysis. After reading over all the participants' responses, we used Van Manen's (1990) line-by-line method to identify major concepts. We carefully looked at each detail or response in a reply and related it to the experience of viewing the advertisements. We grouped similar responses together. Once all responses were grouped into a category, we analyzed each category to determine the underlying theme(s). For reliability purposes, two coders were used. To calculate the inter-coder reliability the same formula noted earlier was used:

$$\text{Inter-coder reliability} = \frac{5{,}020 - 620}{5{,}020} = 87.6 \text{ percent}$$

Findings

Participant characteristics

Participants were females ranging in age from 18 to 21 years. Participants varied in ethnicity ($n = 14$ Asian/Pacific Islanders; $n = 10$ Caucasians; $n = 7$ Hispanics; $n = 1$ African American). Participants received spending money as a result of their part-time employment (59 percent) or received money from parents (59 percent). The greatest percentage of participants (29 percent) indicated their monthly spending on apparel was over $100 per month.

Interpretations of advertisements

Female as a prop. When asked what the advertisement meant, 94 percent of participants' responses referred to the model's beauty. For example, participants commented about the model's facial features as attractive and her hair as beautiful. (101H) "Pretty, with wonderful hair." (101W) "[She] has a pretty, exotic face." "She's

very feminine, pretty, yet friendly" (AF4). "It's apparent she *loves* her hair" (101N). Participants did not reveal any comparative statements when responding to the advertisement. Overall, most participants' comments about the model in the advertisement were positive. Participants (50 percent) indicated they were likely to purchase the advertised product.

Female as a prop to advertise cosmetics or fragrance. Participants' interpretations of this advertisement revealed their belief that the female body was being exploited to promote the product being advertised. "The model is too skinny and appears to be very materialistic because she is clinging to the bottle" (101W). Participant 101T stated, "She's really skinny and almost naked." The model in the ad was repeatedly described as extremely thin, nearly nude, glamorous, and unrealistic. Participants' remarked on body image. They indicated the model's body type was thin and emphasized her body as being the typical model's body. In addition, participants' (84 percent) comments reflected comparisons between the model and self with this advertisement. "It would be nice to look that skinny, but I never could" (101I). "She's very skinny – I'm fat" (101XM). "Only models and a few people could look like that" (101VM). "It makes me feel that I need to loose a lot of weight – she has really nice legs"AF4). "God! Why didn't you make me that thin!" (101AA). Even though many participants made negative comments about the model in the advertisement (i.e. model is too skinny) and compared themselves to the model, 56 percent indicated they were likely to purchase the advertised product.

Female unrealistically advertising apparel. When asked to interpret this advertisement participants' responses indicated the model was sexy. "She looks like she is trying to look sexy in her clothes" (AF2). "...You need too have a nice body, like to dress and know what's in fashion" (AF5). When asked about the female model used in the advertisement, participants' responses centered on the model's physical appearance, referring mainly to her filthiness (dirt smears on her body) and her sexy body. "She's looks dirty and she's too thin" (101U). " Only really skinny girls can look good in Bongo [jeans]" (101Z). Most participants' responses revealed they made comparisons between themselves and the model in this advertisement. Their statement contained emotional elements including how they felt, how they perceived themselves, and how they wished they were. For example, in expressing how she felt, one participant wrote, "I'd feel monstrous next to her" (101I). Other participants expressed desires. "I want to lose weight in my tummy and my arms" (101C). "If I had bigger boobs, I would look like that!"(101J). "[It] lowers self-esteem. If I don't look like that, I feel unattractive." (101B). However, only 28 percent of the participants indicated that they would purchase the advertised product.

Female realistically advertising apparel. Interpretations of this advertisement revealed the female model was viewed as average, typical, and natural. "She's normal, not too skinny and looks like the average girl next door" (101BB). "She's pretty but not too flashy" (101AA). The model in the advertisement was described as attractive, realistic, not emaciated, All-American, and young. When asked how they used the advertisement, participants' commented on the model's overall physical appearance. Comments made indicated they compared themselves to this model. "I feel fat and not as pretty as her, I couldn't pull off her look." (101H). "She just looks like a normal teenage girl." (AF2). "I compare myself to the model a little, she's relatable, not intimidating" (101A). Approximately a third of the participants (31 percent) indicated it

was likely they would buy the advertised product. For this advertisement, they provided reasons why they would purchase. "Yes, [I would purchase the item] if it is cheap and comfortable"(101W). "If it [the jeans] looked good on me too!" (101M).

Female animation. When asked what the advertisement meant, participants' simply responded the advertisement was a caricature. "It's a cartoon, not real." (101E) "She's fairly odd looking, but maybe that's because she is a cartoon." (001T) "She looks like she was taken from a Japanese video game" (AF4). Participants described the models as diverse, sporty, animated, and unrealistic. Comments from some participants revealed they did not compare themselves to the model in the advertisement. Others participants' comments revealed they did engage in some form of comparison. These participants continued to pay attention to the model's body size and build even though they recognized the model was not real. "The bodies in the ad are not proportional so I feel the same way." (101R). "She makes it acceptable to be flat-chested." (101J). Most participants (59 percent) indicated they were likely to purchase the advertised product.

Female athlete. Interpretations of this advertisement focused on recognition of the model's natural look. "She's more of a natural beauty; she looks like a healthy weight" (043T). "She's a good role model because she is working out and exercising" (101H). "I think that athletic bodies are more attractive and are held in high regard in society" (101I). Responses also revealed that participants viewed this model as less feminine than other models. "Very masculine, skater-girl look." (036T). "She looks preteen, active, and ordinary." (101J). Participants described the model as alternative, natural, in need of make-up, and realistic. "I am happy she is more of a natural beauty, looks a healthy weight." (039T). Participants comments demonstrated they did not make comparisons between themselves and the model in this advertisement. Only one of the participants indicated they would likely purchase the advertised product.

Female activity (non-athletic). Participants' responses to this advertisement centered on comments about the model's body size. "She looks healthy and happy which is important, also she is curvaceous – something not often seen in ads." (039T). Participants described the model in the advertisement as older, realistic, dorky and as having a rounded body. When asked how they used the advertisements, several participants' commented on the model's natural and alternative look. "I'm happy that she's more of a natural beauty... that she looks like a healthy weight." (043T) "She's a typical teenager she's nothing glamorous to look at" (008T). "Her hair and clothing are somewhat outdated, but she's a good representative of an everyday student" (016T). Some participants did compare themselves to the model. They commented on her seemingly average and realistic appearance. (023T) "She looks kind of homely. I feel like I look better than her." "I think the girl looks like she doesn't have a good image because of the baggy sweatshirt" (034T). "I don't care for her – nothing draws your attention to her. She's very plain looking." (005T). Of the participants, 41 percent indicated they were likely to purchase the advertised product.

Conclusions

When viewing the majority of the fashion advertisements, participants not only compared themselves to the models but most also indicated they felt inadequate when looking at the advertisements. This finding is consistent with research by Crane (1999), Martin and Kennedy(1993), and Richins (1991). Most participants either aspired to have the physical characteristics depicted by the model in fashion ads or commented on

their inability to achieve a perfect physique. For example, a participant (101C) commented, "I wish I had skinny legs like that," and another (101I) explained, "I would love to be very thin and super model gorgeous" (101S). When viewing the advertisement of an average female in an active role, where the model was actively and realistically promoting the product, participants' were quick to criticize her flaws and the model's inability to meet their expectations for a female representation in fashion advertising. However, participants actually reported feeling better about their own appearance after they compared themselves to this model.

Why might these participants be critical of an average looking model? One explanation is that these participants have become so accustomed to the use of extremely thin models in fashion advertisements, fashion shows (i.e. Victoria Secret), and other mediums in fashion used to gain publicity that when a heavier or representative model is used, the participant reacts negatively because the model no longer represents an ideal. For example, an example of realistic advertising was used in the 2005 *Nike* and *Dove* campaigns. In these advertising campaigns women with real curves were used to sell products. These campaigns were launched in an attempt to "celebrate real beauty" and to relate to the average female. Interestingly, these advertisements sparked controversy among the American public. The models in the campaign were criticized for not meeting the standards that readers held for models in fashion magazines. For example, one individual criticized the practice saying, "The model would look better if she lost at least ten pound." (Dove, 2006). Another individual explained her feelings concerning the advertisements. "Ads should be about the beautiful people. They should include the unrealistic, the ideal or the unattainable look for which so many people strive... I see 'real people' all the time. I don't need 'real people' to sell me things" (Dove, 2006).

Only one category of advertisements, animation, did not serve as a consistent basis for social comparison. Participants' comments revealed their inability to compare themselves was a result of the abstracted image of the female body. A participant (AF1) commented, "You can't relate to [their] body image because they are not real people and you can't identify." In addition, most participants did not like this advertisement. They shared that animated models should be used to target pre-adolescents or children. A participant (101I) stated, "... she would be a good model for young girls."

Interest in buying the advertised fashion-related product was connected with positive comments made about the model seen in the advertisement. In addition, if the participants made social comparisons between themselves and the model, they also indicated they were interested in purchasing the advertised product. The model used in the advertisement appears to be influencing intention to purchase the advertised product. This finding supports the practice of introducing new or modified products as brand extensions. The positive thoughts and feelings concerning the model and the products apparently endorsed by the ideal model are likely to be transferable to other products connected with the model.

Results from our research suggest possible future research directions. For example, researchers may want to investigate whether women of all body types do prefer ideal images versus realistic images of women in apparel advertisements. Also of interest, would be a study wherein researchers are able to investigate what the experience is of consuming an advertised product? If a purchase is motivated by an advertisement, do self-attributions change as a result of purchasing and using the product? Is consumer satisfaction tied to advertising images?

Limitations

The first limitation was that only four magazines were included. If a wider variety of teenage magazines were used it is possible that additional categories of advertisements may have emerged. Our second limitation was use of only advertisements located in print magazines. Many advertisements are distributed using the Internet and could also serve as a point of social comparison. Marketing using the Internet opens up additional opportunities for research concerning the influence of advertisements on young adults and teenagers. Our third limitation is use of participants during their late adolescent years and young adult years. Other researchers may want to interview females about their use of fashion advertisements during their young and mid-adolescent years.

Notes

1. A teenager is an individual between the ages of 13-19.

2. Ivas's (2000) category of female as a prop to advertise non-fashion products was eliminated because of our research focus.

3. Questions included the following: Do you regularly read fashion magazines? How often do you read them? Why do you read these magazines? Do you look at the advertisements?

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