Portrayal of Women in Modern Print Advertisements
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Abstract
This paper explores the relationship between female-focused advertisements in magazines and the messages they convey about gender roles in modern society. There has been a desire for advertisements that portray women in a less decorative and more realistic framing for decades. Using numerous existing research studies which took place in the past several decades as a basis, a content analysis was executed to examine the topic of modern advertisements. The results of this content analysis portrayed women in female-targeted magazine advertisements as empowered figures. Implications and future research possibilities are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Advertisements, Portrayal, Women
Women have been featured in advertising since the earliest days of its inception. Throughout the decades, the role that women have served in these advertisements has seemingly advanced with the demands and roles of women in society. Especially during the feminist movement of the 1960s, there was a demand for women to be placed in more progressive roles that featured them less as domestic accessories and more as individual, empowered members of a household.

The modern era of advertising portrays woman as sexually free, morally independent, and autonomous individuals. However, whether the core nature of advertising has changed is unclear. Are women truly portrayed in advertisements less and objects and more as unique entities, or has advertising just disguised its old messages in new contexts? No actual progress would be made if the same advertisement trend of treating women as accessories, ornaments, or decorations used merely to sell products was still the trend in today’s advertisements.

Through an in-depth content analysis, the present study seeks to explore the current role of women in advertising. The research conducted involves 179 surveyed themes from nine different periodicals using defined aspects of each image. From there, the results were analyzed to determine what the most common products advertised towards women are, what amount of ads targeting both genders exclusively feature a woman, the most common level of dress, and whether advertisements are putting more emphasis on women or a product. It is from these results that the researchers attempted to quantify the current trends in women-focused magazines.

Literature Review
The portrayal of women in a sexual angle has been a frequent subject of division within advertising since the late 1960s resurgence of feminism brought women’s portrayal to light in a more serious sense. J.H. Ferguson, P.J. Kreshel, and S.F. Tinkham found that the initial complaints were unrealistic portrayals of sex objects, mere housewives, and often incompetent people for the purposes of selling products. To explore the changes, Ferguson et al. analyzed 15 years of a magazine called *Ms.*, which presented itself as a magazine for women (1990). Though the study occurred in 1990, it sets a reasonable baseline for how an analysis of women-oriented advertising should be conducted and presents useful information and content to evaluate.

Recent advertising strategies have portrayed women as sexually empowered. Halliwell, Maison, and Tischner’s (2011) study explored the effects of sexually agentic framing on weight dissatisfaction and self-objectification. It found that women’s exposure to the framed advertisements led to dissatisfaction with the women’s weight, and women objectified themselves more after viewing the sexually agentic images than other images. Advertisers tend to pay more attention to the models than the framing of images, which becomes a problem for viewers’ self-image. The authors identified self-objectification as “the internalization of an observer’s view of the self” (Halliwell et al., 2011, 39). The study was the first study to look at slogans that frame the ideal of thinness in women. It built upon other literature by extension in order to better understand the strategy of framing in advertising. The study also has an area for improvement: it could have included “nonsexualized framings of women” (Halliwell et al., 2011, 43) as the researchers suggest. This inclusion would enable them to more accurately compare the different conditions. This study connects to our current study because it looks at how advertisers
sexually portray women. While Halliwell et al.’s study examined advertisements between 1994 and 2001, the present study focuses on more recent years.

It is not at all uncommon to open up a magazine or view an ad on television and see a woman portraying typical gender roles. Modeled after another content analysis done in the 80s, researchers constructed a more current trend of how women are portrayed in print media advertising, how it has changed since the 1960s, and how gender influences content of an advertisement (Carpenter and Edison, 2005). While the study looked at several different aspects of print media from headlines to sexual contact between models, the main purpose was to look at how female models are portrayed as opposed to male models. Carpenter and Edison used dress and depiction to categorize the male and female models in 571 advertisements. Through extensive content analysis, Carpenter and Edison found that in 2004, 44% of females were dressed demurely, while 78.5% of males were dressed demurely—this meaning that over half of them were shown either in suggestive dress, partially-clad dress, or nude while not even one-fourth of male models were shown in the same ways. This concluded that women are shown more often as sexual objects than men are. They are found that suggestive dress on women had increased over the last 40 years while it has decreased on men over the same period of time (Carpenter and Edison, 2005).

Ismail Aysad Güdelki and Ibrahim Çelik make this study much more relevant to the world we live in today with their 2014 study into the use of sex and women in advertising for Cosmopolitan Magazine. This study strongly dove into the use of women in advertising, finding that in 1990, almost 100% of women used in advertisements were in a sexual role (Ferguson et
al.), and that in more recent issues of *Cosmopolitan*, sexual objects and imagery were attached to almost all advertising featuring a woman (Güdelki & Çelik, 2014).

Similarly, researchers took a look at how women were depicted in print media regarding gender roles. Carpenter and Edison found that there was a significant difference between how women were portrayed in roles to how men were portrayed in roles in ads from 2004. While over half of women (64.6%) in the ads were portraying decorative roles, less than one-third of men (28.9%) were portrayed as decorative, ergo women are seen to fulfill a more object/complementary type of gender role in print media (Carpenter and Edison, 2005).

Generic roles that women tend to fill in advertisements are mothers, good wives and sexual objects (Patterson, O’Malley, and Story, 2009). Patterson et al. have analyzed content that shows women as being unintelligent consumers or dependent on men. Historically, women are shown as objects to be viewed, used, and as components that lack personality (Patterson, O’Malley, and Story, 2009). This probably has something to do with how women’s body image issues have been on the rise for years.

All of these studies suggest that within the last 30-40 years, while culture has attempted to influence away the sexualization of women as an advertising topic, it has made very little headway in accomplishing great change. The disparate time periods of each study shows that this can be generalized as a theme across years, or even decades, of women-focused advertisements in periodicals.

Not only do advertisements portray women in different frames but they also portray men and women in gender roles. Conley and Ramsey (2011) studied how women are portrayed as silenced, flawless, and objectified. They found that women were portrayed as submissive and
passive, compared to men, and that ads emphasize the need for women to take up as little space as possible. They also found that women’s different types of magazines and men’s magazines each portray women differently (Conley & Ramsey, 2011, 475). The study offered operational definitions of each coding category the researchers used, such as “silenced” or “flawless.” The study connects to our present study because it offers an example of content analysis that we could replicate. It uses magazines from 2006-2008 (Conley & Ramsey, 2011), so we could update it by using more recent magazines.

Ferguson et al.'s (1990) study of a single magazine over a long period of time with a rigidly defined series of parameters allowed a strong look at whether or not the magazine was able to uphold its stated goal of rejecting sexist advertising. The study used a tiered system of measuring the content it analyzes and was able to provide its results in a format that provides insight into the levels of sexism and sexualization at both a latent level that would be present in it by default as well as a manifest, or explicit, sort of sexualization that would come from focusing deliberately focusing their advertisement to present itself in such a manner. The long period of time that the analyses covers also allows it to see the changing face of sex and image in advertising from a detached manner using the standards of the time.

Gudekli’s study of the magazine, by contrast, shows the use not only of women in magazines, but also how they are used in relation to other objects and the symbolism of what they are interacting with. This provides a clear picture of not only the women themselves, but also their portrayed relationship with products and objects in a targeted marketing format. The conclusion it arrives to puts forward that the social change of empowering women has not only failed to reduce the use of women as sex objects in advertisement, it asserts that it may have
increased this frequency by the normalization of women's sexuality in the mainstream as a whole.

However, the weakness in all of these studies is their age or limited focus on magazines which are meant to tailor their content towards reaching and persuading women. Further research using a larger pool from a more diverse array of topics and focuses could provide different results related to the portrayal of women as sexual objects in advertising in publications from this year. The present study uses a wide array of periodicals to study how women are portrayed in print advertisements, especially in relation to products and men. The independent variables used for the present study were portrayal, level of dress, products aimed towards women, and the focus of the advertisements as they were placed in the magazine.

The following research questions were developed for this study:

RQ 1. What is the most common product category advertised towards women?
RQ 2. How many advertisements, which are targeted at both genders, exclusively feature a woman?
RQ 3. Of the advertisements targeting both genders, what parts of the woman’s body were shown?
RQ 4. What is the most common level of dress in…
   a) Lifestyle magazines?
   b) Fashion magazines?
RQ 5. In ads which exclusively feature a woman, is the focus on the woman or the product?
Method

This study consisted of a content analysis of 179 advertisements from popular American fashion and lifestyle magazines from the year 2016. The unit of analysis was an advertisement with the following parameters: must include only one woman, include no children, and span no longer than two pages. The magazines were chosen based on their relevance to the study, meaning the magazines targeted women of various ages. *Esquire* was also included because it provided the researchers with advertisements targeting men. The following fashion magazines were analyzed: *Essence, Glamour, InStyle, Marie Claire, and Vogue*. Additionally, the following lifestyle magazines were analyzed: *Esquire, Good Housekeeping, More, and Women’s Health*. The inter-coder reliability test included approximately .05 percent of the entire dataset. The inter-coder reliability was .98, which exceeds the minimum of .75 expected of Scott’s pi. A codebook was created to conduct the content analysis. The following operational definitions were created and used for the study:

**Products:**
- Professional service= a human will provide service to the consumer
- Beauty & hygiene= cosmetics, toiletries, or other personal care items
- Fashion/accessories= clothing, shoes, or other items to adorn one’s body
- Household items= decorations or utilitarian items intended for a home
- Recreation= items used for the purpose of entertainment
- Vehicle= any four-wheeled automobile
**Women’s advertisement= marketing imagery, primarily targeting women**
**Sexism= imagery and slogans in advertising meant to show women as inferior to men**
**Level of dress**
- Fully clothed= wearing (or assumed to be wearing) clothes that cover breasts, midriff, upper thigh, and/ or buttocks
- Suggestive= emphasizing breasts, midriff, upper thigh, and/ or buttocks
- Partially clothed= wearing underwear or bathing suit
- Nude= not wearing (or assumed to be not wearing) any clothing
- Not applicable= only a specific body part is shown
**Position= any and all forms of embracing or touching**
- Submissive= body position indicates that the man is in control of the woman
- Dominant= body position indicates that the woman is in control of the man
The operational definition of both genders was based on the content of all prior studies referenced and used as a baseline to choose subject matter. As with prior studies done, a woman is defined as an individual who presents her gender as a female, while a man is defined as an individual who presents his gender as a male for the purposes of interaction. Prior literature focuses on the dynamic that female-presenting individuals operate under during their use within the advertisement.

The operational definition of “level of dress” was defined using Carpenter and Edison’s original research into the dress level. The researchers narrowed down and categorized the dress level of women based on the most common attributes that were showing in the advertisements that were chosen for the content analysis. The definition of level of dress was, therefore, defined as the amount of clothing worn or unworn by those depicted in advertisements (Carpenter and Edison, 2005).

To define sexism, the core tenants of Ferguson et al.’s (1990) study of Ms. were used when going through the material and applying it. From this, the categorization of submissive, neutral, and dominant were defined by the perceived level of power or control portrayed when a woman and a man were present in an advertisement at the same time. Power and control are implied or inferred from the positioning, posture, and stance the woman takes as well as her level of physical contact with a man while both are featured simultaneously. Therefore, ads that were deemed sexist were those advertisements which had an implied diminishing of the autonomy or control of the woman when portrayed in relation to a man.
Results

RQ 1 states: What is the most common product category advertised toward women? The total number of ads targeting women was 129 out of a possible 179. It was found that the most common product category advertised specifically toward women is Beauty and Hygiene at 88 out of 129, or 68.22%. The total number of prints advertising a product in the beauty and hygiene category to any audience is 105 out of a possible 179, or 58.66%. Using a chi-square test, it was found that a significant relationship exists between product category and target audience (Chi-square[10] = 41.000, p<.05) because the value for p was .000. Figure 1a outlines the total number of ads in each of the product categories that were coded and the perceived target audience of those. Figure 1b shows the strength of the relationship between the variables in terms of the chi-square test.

Figure 1a:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking to which gender(s)?</th>
<th>Type of product:</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Fashion/accessories</th>
<th>Household items</th>
<th>Recreation</th>
<th>Vehicle</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professio nal service</td>
<td>Beauty &amp; hygiene</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both men and women</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ 2 states: How many advertisements, which are targeted at both genders, exclusively feature a woman? Found algebraically, the total number of ads coded as targeting both men and women (32), 24, or 75% of them exclusively featured a woman (one female model). As stated earlier, all 179 ads chosen featured women either alone or with a male(s). It was not determined whether a significant relationship exists between these two variables (target audience/gender of model). 26 out of the 32 (81.25%) of ads targeted at both genders were for beauty/hygiene products, fashion/accessories, and household items. These could be considered female-related categories, but not exclusively. 6 out of 32 (18.75%) ads targeted at both genders were for professional services, recreation, and vehicles. These could be considered neutral or male-related categories, but not exclusively. Figure 2 gives an idea of the ratio of ads that exclusively feature women out of all print ads that were intended for audiences of both genders.
RQ 3 states: Of the advertisements targeting both genders, what parts of the woman’s body were shown? Found algebraically, the most common portion of the female body shown in the ads targeting both genders was the head and torso (group as one option) with 13 out of 32, or 40.63% followed closely by full body at 11 out of 32, or 34.38%. It was not determined whether a significant relationship exists between these two variables (target audience/portion of body). Figure 3 lays out the counts of each portion of the female body shown in ads targeting both genders.

Figure 3:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Portions</th>
<th>Counts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head and Shoulders</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head and Torso</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Body</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Body Part</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Body</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ 4** states: What is the most common level of dress in lifestyles magazines versus fashion magazine? Of the 179 total print ads coded, the number of ads that were coded from lifestyle magazines was 99 while number of ads coded from fashion magazines was 80. The categories coded constituting level of dress were as follows: fully dressed/assumed to be fully dressed (1), suggestively dressed (2), partially dressed (3), nude/assumed to be nude (4), and not applicable (5). It was not determined whether a significant relationship exists between these two variables (magazine type/level of dress). Found algebraically, the most common level of dress of female models in lifestyle magazines was fully dressed at 53 out of 99, or 53.54%. Figure 4a shows the counts for each level of dress in lifestyle magazine print ads. Also found algebraically, the most common level of dress of female models in fashion magazines was fully dressed at 52 out of 80, or 65%. Figure 4b shows the counts for each level of dress in fashion magazine print ads.
ads. Figure 4c shows combined counts for each level of dress of all coded print ads (lifestyle and fashion).

Figure 4a:

![Lifestyle Magazine](image1)

Figure 4b:

![Fashion](image2)

Figure 4c:
RQ 5 states: In ads which exclusively feature a woman, is the focus on the woman or the product? It was found that more print ads show the woman as the focal point of the ad, rather than the actual product being advertised. Using a chi-square test, it was found that a significant relationship exists between the gender of the model and the focal point of the ad (Chi-square[10] = 41.000, p<.05) because the value for p was .000. Figure 5a compares the number of ads in which the product was the focal point to the number of ads in which the woman was the focal point of the ad. Figure 5b shows the strength of the relationship between the variables in terms of the chi-square test.
Figure 5b:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chi-Square Tests</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>41.000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>34.083</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>179</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. 10 cells (55.6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .10.

Discussion
Through the results themselves, namely the data collected for RQ 4 regarding level of dress, the present study found that fully-dressed models in print ads were most common in both magazine types. Considering the magazine types analyzed were, for the most part, targeted at females, it is not extremely surprising that the results did not show much in the way of sexualized women, or exploitative dress or positioning. It is important to keep in mind that when advertisements are created, there are often multiple versions of the same advertisement meant for different audiences or even print mediums. This could allow an ad for the same product with the same model to be used with different intentions. Mediums are important to think about when it comes to ad creation. Depictions of women in male-targeted magazines may end up being more sexualized or exploitative.

The study somewhat replicates, and supports, the past research of Halliwell et al. (2011) by showing women as empowered, because the women are the focus of most advertisements in the present study. The women are also mostly fully clothed in the advertisements in the present study, which suggests that advertisers sexually portray women as empowered. The advertisers for the magazines from 2016 likely portray women in a rather unsexualized manner because of the magazines’ target audience. A future study could examine whether or not women are sexualized in male-targeted magazines, because the only male-targeted magazine in the present study did not offer very many advertisements featuring women.

The present study also replicated Conley and Ramsey’s (2011) research, which focused on how women are portrayed in comparison to men. The present study used magazines from the year 2016 to create a more updated version of Conley and Ramsey’s 2006-2008 findings. Conley and Ramsey found that women are portrayed as submissive and passive, and that women’s and
men’s magazines each portray women differently (2011). The present study did not support Conley and Ramsey’s finding about submission, because the results about submission were not statistically significant. Perhaps the results would be statistically significant if the researchers had studied more men’s magazines, because the women’s magazines and only one men’s magazine might have limited the results. For that reason, the present study also did not support the finding about portraying women differently based on magazine type.

References


**Appendix**
Research Instrument: Code Book

1. Coder:
   A. Katherine Lehman
   B. David Whittier
   C. Alaina Fritz
2. Magazine type:
   A. Fashion (Essence, Glamour, InStyle, Marie Claire, Vogue)
   B. Lifestyle (Esquire, Good Housekeeping, More, Women’s Health)
3. Magazine name:
   A. Essence
   B. Esquire
   C. Glamour
   D. Good Housekeeping
   E. InStyle
   F. Marie Claire
   G. More
   H. Vogue
   I. Women’s Health
4. Issue/Volume/Year
5. Page number
6. Type of product:
   A. Professional service
   B. Beauty & hygiene
   C. Fashion/accessories
   D. Household items
   E. Recreation
   F. Vehicle
7. Speaking to which gender(s)?
   A. Men
   B. Women
   C. Both men and women
8. Speaking to which age groups?
   A. Younger than middle aged
   B. Middle aged or older
   C. Both age groups
9. Level of dress:
   A. Fully clothed (or assumed to be fully clothed)
   B. Suggestive (emphasizing breasts, midriff, upper thigh, and/or buttocks)
   C. Partially clothed (wearing underwear or bathing suit)
   D. Nude (or assumed to be nude)
   E. Not applicable (specific body part)
10. Physical portion(s) shown:
    A. Head and shoulders
    B. Torso and head
C. Full body
D. Lower body
E. Specific body part

11. Woman is portrayed:
   A. Alone
   B. With male(s)

12. If the woman is portrayed alone:
   A. The product is the focal point of the ad.
   B. The woman is the focal point of the ad.
   C. Not applicable

13. If the woman is portrayed with male(s), their contact is:
   A. Sexual
   B. Non-sexual
   C. No contact
   D. Not applicable

14. If the woman is portrayed with male(s), the woman is portrayed in relation to the man as:
   A. Submissive
   B. Neutral
   C. Dominant
   D. Not applicable

Figures

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Figure 4a:

![Bar chart showing different body portions and their counts]  

Figure 4b:
Figure 4c:

Figure 5a:
Figure 5b:

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