Children's Representation in Advertising: A Content Analytic Look

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the ways that children and display typography are presented in printed advertisements with either children or adults as target audience in Cyprus. The images were collected from four local weekly magazines over a two-year period. A series of variables common to similar investigations were used to provide a coding scheme. The contribution of this study lies on the investigation of gender stereotypical portrayals of children. Moreover, the current study extends the visual analysis of the advertisements into an analysis of the display typography of the advertisements. The data revealed that a stereotypical view of female children is present in these images and this is not only expressed in gender stereotypical traits but also in letterform characteristics. Differences in the typographic elements were also found concerning target group. These findings set the directions for future research.

Key Words: Advertising, children, gender, typography, content analysis.

1. Introduction

Advertising occupies a special position within the economic organization of a modern society but it is not just an economic entity (Kang, 1997). These images are actually a reflection of society and are therefore prevailing cultural ideas, values and attitudes. Moscovici (1984) proposed the concept of social representations which are a system of values, ideas and practices which serve a function; first, to enable individuals to give meaning to material and social world; and secondly to provide a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of the world to promote communication among the members of a community. Advertising deals with these ideas, values and practices and gives them "cultural form through its signifying practices" (Sinclair, 1987). These signifying practices provide the words and images with a meaning that is diffused into the belief systems of a society as a code for communication.

Since advertising reaches millions of individuals daily, it has become a target for heavy scrutiny by researchers interested in the effects of these images on the formation or depiction of a social group in a stereotypical manner. Specifically, advertising has been accused of stereotyping images of women. Massé and Rosenblum (1988) analyzed six popular magazines in the United States and found that in men's magazines, female figures are regularly marked as a functionally subordinate since they were portrayed far in the rear of the picture or on a different scale from that of the main frame. They argued that this promoted the picture of the "little woman". Furnham and Bitar (1993) examined the portrayal of men and women in British television commercials attempting to replicate past research. Their analysis revealed that women were more likely to be portrayed at home and men in occupational settings although this pattern seemed to follow a declining trend in comparison to previous studies.

In a more recent study, Valls-Fernández and Martínez-Vicente (2007) analyzed 400 Spanish television commercials female characters were again more likely to be shown at home whereas male characters appeared more often in outdoor or workplace environments. Their data however suggested that female characters appear in all work categories even though male characters appear more often in the higher-status professions. Therefore, the general idea is that gender stereotyping in television advertising continues although portrayals of women become more realistic.

Advertisements used to give only a partial view of women in stereotyped situations (Flick, 1987) but the use of gender as a positioning variable in advertising strategy has been changing in recent years as the definition of gender roles loosens in society (Elliot, Eccles & Hodgson, 1992). However, the study by Nassif and Gunter (2008) in which they analyzed television advertisements in Britain and Saudi Arabia confirmed that in the UK gender stereotyping appears to be on the decline in advertising but remains firmly entrenched in advertisement in male-oriented countries such as the Saudi-Arabia. These differences possibly reflect important differences in the social representations of gender between nations and support the view that advertisements have the power to communicate these cultural ideas, values and practices.

Despite the great amount of research of the representation of women in advertising, one distinct pattern of gender representation in commercials that if not missing is more or less superficially addressed is the image of females as young adults or even children. We actually know very little about the extent to which representations of male and female characters in younger ages match the general picture of adult men and women in advertisements. In a study conducted by Stern and Mastro (2004), one-week of prime-time television commercials were randomly sampled from six major broadcast networks in the United States. The analysis revealed that female children are portrayed in a rather traditional gender-stereotypic fashion. In detail, they are infrequently shown, typically associated with domestic products, overwhelmingly situated in home settings and more passive than female characters of older age groups.

Other studies however, have concentrated specifically on the nature of gender role portrayals in advertisements that are addressed to children or which appear during children's television. A study of children's television advertising in the run-up to Christmas in the UK revealed that boys and girls were equally represented in the advertisements but male voice-overs were more numerous than female voice-overs. They also investigated the roles of the male and female characters and found that boys played more active and boisterous parts while girls occupied more passive and quieter parts (Smith & Bennett, 1990). A study by Smith (1994) was concerned with differences between television advertisements featuring only one sex of actors. The sample consisted of ads in one week of children's programming broadcast on four television networks and one independent television station. More ads featured boys than girls and placed boys in settings outside their homes more often. Ads showed girls at home in the majority of the time and were depicted limited in their movements. For Smith, the setting of the advertisement was considered to be the most sexually stereotyped variable studied in his analysis. In contrast to other studies, girls were not found to be limited exclusively to passive roles. Some girls were indeed found to be physically active and not limited to their rooms or home-making types of activities. Furnham, Abramsky and Gunter (1997) also analyzed television commercials from weekend children's television in both UK and United States and found that male figures (both children and adults) enjoyed more central and authoritative roles than female characters in both British and American children's television.

Other studies were concerned with gender differences in character's representation in children's books since they are probably one medium which can express and model social representations of gender. Crabb and Bielawski (1994) examined gender-typed portrayal of material culture in children's books published between 1937 and 1989. Their results indicated that a large proportion of female characters were shown in household activities whereas male characters were depicted in nondomestic activities. Poarch and Monk-Turner (2001) attempted to replicate Crabb and Bielawski's study by examining 22 non-award-winning "easy-to-read" books. The data demonstrated that both male and female characters were most likely depicted in a leisure activity. However, female characters were pictured in household activities far more often than male characters. Some of the male characters were shown in a variety of household activities but this most the least likely kind of activity employed by male characters.

Although the cumulative effects of this exposure are difficult to determine, several studies suggest that advertisements profoundly influence how people perceive and relate to one another. Davidson, Yasuna and Tower (1979) had 5-6-year-old girls view one of three television networks which were either high or low stereotyped or neutral. Their results indicate that girls who viewed the low stereotypical program had significantly lower sex-role stereotype scores on a 24-item measure than did girls in the high and neutral conditions. Another study by Kimball (1986) found that children who were raised in community without television had lower gender stereotypical perceptions than did children who were raised in comparable communities with television. Moreover, stereotypical attitudes increased once television was introduced.

It is important therefore to investigate gender-role portrayals in advertisements targeting children in order to reveal whether there is a stereotypical depiction of gender groups. In most of the research studies however, the unit of analysis is the characters in children's books or the advertisements during children's television. What is missing is a focus on children's representation solely in advertisement which target both adults and children. An investigation of this king should aim to reveal whether there is a stereotypical view of children in ads addressing to either adults or children.

Although scales such as the Bem's Sex Role inventory (Bem, 1985) are used in psychological and sociological studies measuring individual's assessment of masculinity and femininity, the majority of marketing gender studies evaluate gender as a binary variable (Wolin, 2003).   Some studies were indeed concerned with gender stereotyping in children's book. Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993) investigated the personal traits of characters in children's literature as indicative of gender stereotypes and found that female characters are presented as more dependent and passive while male characters as more independent and instrumental. Other studies revealed that there is a trend of decreasing sexism in children's literature but they still provide support of gender bias (Oskamp, Kaufman &Wolterbeek, 1996; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus and Young, 2006). Although these findings follow the gender-typical direction, they concern both human (adults and children) characters as well as nonhuman (e.g. animals) characters. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the general representation of children in advertisements and extend the existing research by examining whether children as characters in the ads are given masculine or feminine traits. This would serve as an examination of gender not as a binary concept but in the form of social representation of gender and gender knowledge expressed in attitudes and behavior of these children.

Moreover, this study is not only concerned with characters in the pictures of advertisements but also with the display typography (if any) in each picture. Specifically, the typographic dimensions of the headline in each advertisement were analyzed based on a coding scheme developed by the researchers. Typography is a major executional element of word-driven advertising and has the potential to significantly influence motivation, opportunity and ability to process advertising messages (McGarthy & Mothersbaugh, 2002). According to Van Leeuwen (2006), typography can be used ideationally to represent actions and qualities. It can also enact interactions and express attitudes towards what is being presented. The premise of typography is that different elements i.e. different typefaces or fonts carry different connotations and can have differing influences on the readability, assimilation, interpretation and impact of the words and concepts they represent (Thangaraj, 2004). Given the potential importance of typography it is surprising how little research has been conducted to examine the typographic elements in advertisements. So in the present research work, the analysis of the letterforms used in the advertisements served for the investigation of possible relations between gender representations and typography. In addition, since the advertisements used were addressed in two different groups (adults or children) it was examined whether the different target group was reflected in different typographic elements.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The advertisements of four weekly magazines (TV Mania, Down Town, OK, Tiletheatis) distributed free every weekend with Cypriot newspapers over a period of two years (2009-2010) were examined. The four newspapers were chosen since they constitute the top four in sales according to the latest research of RAI Consultants Public Ltd in Cyprus. The repeated ads were excluded from the final sample. Two hundred and sixty six full-page advertisements were collected from the four magazines. These advertisements were chosen based on the inclusion of children as characters in the advertisement but not necessarily as 'lead' characters. Four hundred and seventy three characters were displayed in the advertisements.

2.2. Coding procedure

The content analysis method was used to examine the advertisements. Content analysis is the scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative and generalizable description of communications content (Kassarjian, 1977). A series of variables common to similar investigations were selected to provide a coding scheme. Therefore, the following system was used to determine characteristics of children as well as the typographic elements of each advertisement. The variables of 1) gender, 2) age, 3) color of eyes, 4) hair color, 5) facial expression, 6) gaze and 7) location in the picture describe the characteristics of each child in the advertisements. The setting (indoors or outdoors) was also taken under consideration.

Since the activity of the characters was related to stereotypical image of the two gender groups, the activities as identified by Smith (1994) were also included in the coding frame.

The activities were:

1) playing with a toy (masculine, feminine or neutral), 2) physical activity, 3) antisocial activities (aggressive or negative social behavior), 4) passive activity (activity not involving physical, athletic-type movement), 5) performance (an activity done before an audience) and 6) other activities not fitting in the previous categories. The category *Posing* was added to the categories adapted by Smith (1994) since a lot of characters were simply posing without engaging in any other activity.

The typographic dimensions were based on the work by Van Leeuwen (2006) so the coding scheme included the following variables: 1) case, 2) slope, 3) color, 4) typeface, 5) weight, 6) expansion, 7) curvature, 8) connectivity, 9) texture and 10) meaning. The presence of a partner (either child or adult) was also noted down for each character.

An important part of the content analysis was the identification of advertisements reproducing gender stereotypes. Specifically, six adjectives for males and six adjectives for females were used to describe a stereotypical representation (if any) of a male or female character respectively. The choice of these attributes was based on the work by Maccionis (2001) on traditional gender stereotypes. The masculine stereotypes were 1) independent, 2) confident, 3) strong, 4) brave, 5) active and 6) competitive. The feminine stereotypes were 1) dependent, 2) caring, 3) shy, 4) content, 5) passive and 6) helpful.

The type of product was also examined in line with the study by Crabb and Bielawski (1994). The three main categories were 1) *Home Products* (products used for food preparation, cleaning, repair, family care or as home equipment), 2) *Production products* (specifically construction, telecommunication, agriculture and transportation companies) and 3) *Personal products* (including clothing, medicines and cosmetics, leisure, education, insurance and banking).

Although all advertisements included children as characters, the target group of each advertisement was identified. More in detail, each advertisement was classified as having children or adults as target. For example, the advertisement of chocolate milk was classified as having children as target audience while the advertisement of a furniture company was classified as having adults as target audience.

3. Results

3.1. Product type by target group

A percentage of 50.7% of these advertisements were targeting children, 38.4% had as target the adults and the rest 10.9% had both children and adults. A crosstabulation of the target audience by the type of product indicated that there are significant differences $\chi^2(4, N = 237) = 79.86, p = .00)$ as shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Product type by target group

		Home	Production	Personal	Product type Education	Other	Total
Target	Children	22	0	95	18	0	135
	Adults	58	12	28	1	3	102
Total		80	12	123	19	3	237

As can be seen from the table, when the target is adults the children characters are presented in advertisements of *Home products (*more often *Food* in 19% of the ads and *Home Equipment* in 15.7% of the ads). When the target of the advertisements is children, then these advertisements are more often of *Personal products* (mostly Clothes since this is the case for 58.2% of these ads).

3.2. Differences in characteristics based on the target of the advertisement

The investigation of the characteristics of children in advertisements of different target groups revealed that there are no significant differences in the characteristics of the children when the target group is considered. However, the existence of a partner differentiated the two categories of advertisements $\chi^2(3, N = 177) = 54.22, p = .00)$ (Table 3.2). When the children where the target, the partner of the character was more often another child (68.6%) than an adult (5.9%) whereas when the adults were the target the partner was more often an adult (34.6%) or a children alone (37.8%) than a child with one or more children as partners (10.2 %).

Table 3.2. Partner of children by target group

		Partner				
		None	Another child	Parent	Both	Total
Target	Children	22	0	95	18	135
	Adults	58	12	28	1	102
Total		80	12	123	19	237

3.3. Differences in typographic dimensions based on the target of the advertisement

A next step was to examine the effect of the target group on the display typography of each advertisement. The investigation revealed that the target group has an effect of the choice of typeface $x^2(4, N = 198) = 12.20$, $p = .016$) and color $x^2(16, N = 198) = 36.99$, $p = .002$) of the message of each advertisement. Particularly, there was an increased use of *Script* typeface when the target was children (25.3%) in comparison to its use when the target was adults (7.3%) even though the typefaces *Sans-Serif* were the one most frequently used independent of target group.

White color was the most common color used in advertisements with either target group (27.3% for children and 32.5% for adults) but differences occurred concerning the use of *Black* colored or *Multicolored* text (p=0.016). In detail, when the target was adults, the use of *Black* color more often (34.1%) in comparison to its use in advertisements targeting children (13.1%). In addition, advertisements with children as target group use more often a *Multicolored* text (14.1%) in comparison to advertisement of products for adults (2.4%).

The target group of the product was also found to have an effect on the general meaning of the written text in the advertisement $x^2(13, N = 198) = 24.19$, $p = .029$) (p=0.029). On the one hand, when the target group was children, there was an increased frequency of the categories *Education/Knowledge* and *Quality* in comparison to their use in advertisements of adults as target group. On the other hand, in advertisements targeting adults, there was more use of the category *Hygiene* in the meaning of the text in comparison to the presence of such meaning in advertisements for children products.

3.4. Stereotypes

Almost one third of the characters in the advertisements (29.4%) were found to reproduce a stereotype (9.9% masculine and 19.5% feminine). The superiority of the feminine stereotypes was more clearly evident when the target group was the adults since 34.6% of the advertisements depicted a character reproducing a feminine stereotype while only 15.7% of the advertisements targeting children depicted feminine stereotypes. The most common feminine stereotype was concerned with a representation of girls as content (52.8%) or passive (20.2%). This is in line with the finding that girls are more often depicted doing a *Passive activity* in comparison to boys ($x^2(8, N = 207) = 17.46$, $p = .026$).

The advertisements with a masculine or a feminine stereotype were compared on the basis of their typographic elements on a crosstabulation. Interestingly, a female stereotype was accompanied by greater use of *Low case* ($x^2(2, N = 113) = 7.95$, $p = .019$) and *Bold letters* ($x^2(5, N = 113) = 15.99$, $p = .01$). There was also a trend for greater use of *Rounded* letters ($x^2(1, N = 113) = 2.92$, $p = .069$) in comparison to advertisement with male stereotypes.

4. Discussion

The current study had two levels of analysis, the individual level which concerned each character of an advertisement and another level which dealt with the advertisement as a whole. In the individual level, it was investigated whether the characteristics of children as characters in advertisements targeting either adults or children differ. It was also examined whether these images of children reproduce gender stereotypes. In the second level, the display typography in each ad was analyzed and relations were found with the target group and the feminine stereotypes.

The results indicated that children are more often present in advertisements of *Personal* products targeting children and in advertisements of *Home* products targeting adults. When the target was children, the majority of the ads were of clothing companies and stores.

Therefore, it is expected that the use of children in ads for personal products for young ages since their presence will make these products more likable to children. On the other hand, when the target audience is adults, children are presented in ads for *Home* products because these products are inevitably connected to the idea of family and caring of the family. Thus, the presence of children probably aims to the sensitization of the adult targets towards these issues. The presence of more than one child in an advertisement targeting children probably makes the product again more desirable. Nevertheless, the presence of an adult in advertisements targeting adults probably aims to reducing the social distance between children and adults and promote an image of the adults as more innocent and honest. The presence of a child alone could be an effort to convince the target about the sincerity of the meaning and the reliability of the product. Concerning the typographic dimensions of the advertisements, the ones for children products were expressed with more frequent use of *Script* typeface and *Multicolored* text. On the contrary, when a product for adults was being advertised, then the text was more often *Black* in comparison to ads of children products. McGarthy and Motherbaugh (2002) argued that typefaces have the effect of forming inferences about the brand which arise from the characteristics of the typeface itself.

The visual properties of typefaces such as *Script* are conceptualized as communicating unique semantic associations to individuals which might be distinct from the content of the written text. Childers and Jass (2002) claimed that semantic associations may be activated through three paths: 1) through consistent use in a particular situation, 2) through direct relation and 3) via associations with abstract connotative dimensions. For example, the script typeface (like the one used to convey the Johnson and Johnson company logo and like the ones used in the ads of this study) may activate "gentleness" associations through consistent use on products associated with gentleness. Through the direct route, the typeface may convey the concept of "thin", given the delicate style of writing. Finally, through the connotative route, the script typeface may convey "elegance" to consumers. The more frequent use of the *Script* typeface in ads targeting children in comparison to ads of products targeting adults might serve the purpose of promoting the product as appropriate for younger ages (like the gentleness of Johnson and Johnson products are suitable for infants and young children). On the other hand, since the majority of these ads were about clothes, it could be argued that there is an effort of presenting such product as both elegant and appropriate for children.

The use of a *Multicolored* text is expected in the ads of products for children because colors are part of children's everyday lives (for example in their drawings, story books, and colorful toys). Therefore, these colors transform the product in the printed image into a product of everyday life related to play or other joyful activities. On the contrary, in the ads of products for adults, there is more use of the *Black* color which is the color used in newspapers and books which are sources of not simple information but of reliable knowledge. So the rationale behind the use of black color in these ads is the increase of reliability of the meaning of the text. The present study confirms that gender stereotypical portrayals are presented in a declining trend in printed advertisements but still in a remarkable percentage (almost in 30% of the ads). The results are in line with previous studies demonstrating a representation of girls as more passive. It is also interesting that female stereotypes are more often present than male stereotypes and this is expresses by more use of *Low case* and *Bold* letters in the headline in relation to masculine stereotypes. According to Van Leeuwen (2006), bold letters are used to increase salience but at the same time can be used to signify ideational and interpersonal meanings. He argues that bold can be made to mean "daring" or "assertive" but it could be the opposite case. The use of bold when a feminine stereotype is present can be to mean "timid" or "insubstantial" which relate to the weak and shy nature of females.

The results from this study contribute to the existing literature by revealing that stereotypical portrayals of females exist even for females of very young age even though this stereotypical view has a declining trend. This study also contributes to consumer research since it suggests that typography should be viewed as "more than a design afterthought" as Childers and Jass (2002) support. Future research is therefore recommended that takes under consideration the independent elements of typography and their relation to persuasion as well as target audience.

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