

Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertisements

Julie M. Stankiewicz · Francine Rosselli

Published online: 15 January 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2007

Abstract This content analysis examined the depiction of women in 1,988 advertisements from 58 popular U.S. magazines. Advertisements were coded with respect to whether women were presented as sex objects and/or as victims using a scheme developed by the researchers. On average across magazines, one of two advertisements that featured women portrayed them as sex objects. Women appeared as victims in just under ten percent of the advertisements. Men's, women's fashion, and female adolescent magazines were more likely to portray women as sex objects and as victims than news and business, special interest, or women's non-fashion magazines. The implications of viewing advertisements depicting women as sex objects and as victims, especially sexualized victims, are discussed.

Keywords Print advertising · Content analysis · Sexual objectification · Victimization

Introduction

A woman stares straight ahead, expressionless, as a man holds her body against him and moves his hand up her uncovered leg. Her eyes are engulfed by thick black circles, which gives her a deadly appearance. Yellow and red light reflecting off the man and woman's faces suggest an eerie scene. The man in the picture is clearly sexually aroused; the woman seems to be feeling either fear, or nothing at all. This is the description of an advertisement for Custo clothes

that appeared in the October 2002 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* magazine. In the November 2002 issue of *Elle*, a cologne advertisement, which used the slogan "Dior Addict," pictured a woman in her bra and underwear apparently enduring withdrawal symptoms. She is thrashing her body, and is literally covered in beads of sweat. Her bra is coming off on one side, exposing nearly all of her breast. She is a sex object, who is completely powerless and out of control. Both of these images reflect a recent trend in advertising to simultaneously sexualize and victimize women.

The primary goal of this research was to determine the extent to which women are presented as sex objects and as victims in print advertisements. Although the sexual objectification of women in advertisements has been widely researched, no empirical investigations have yet been conducted to document the pervasiveness of the victimization of women in advertisements. To explore this, a content analysis of how frequently women are presented as sex objects and as victims, or potential victims, in magazine advertisements was conducted. In addition, the presentation of women as perpetrators of aggression was explored.

Advertising is a pervasive form of media to which people do not often give conscious attention and, therefore, its social messages are likely to remain unquestioned. Researchers estimate that the average American sees approximately 37,000 television commercials every year (Bretl and Cantor 1988). Of course, people are also exposed to advertisements every time they open a magazine or newspaper, or drive down a highway where billboards are present. According to Kilbourne (1999),

Advertisers like to tell parents that they can always turn off the TV to protect their kids from any of the negative impact of advertising. This is like telling us that we can protect our children from air pollution by

J. M. Stankiewicz · F. Rosselli (✉)
Department of Psychology, Wesleyan University,
Middletown, CT 06459-0408, USA
e-mail: frosselli@wesleyan.edu

making sure they never breathe. Advertising is our *environment*. We swim in it as fish swim in water. We cannot escape it...advertising's messages are inside our intimate relationships, our homes, our hearts, our heads (pp. 57–58).

Advertisements provide a gauge for what is desirable and what is normal. In Goffman's (1974, 1979) terms, advertising serves to define, or frame, reality. For these reasons, the social impact of advertising cannot be overstated.

Research has shown that violence against women is a serious public health and human rights concern (World Health Organization 2000) and that the simultaneous presentation of women as sex objects and victims in various forms of media increases acceptance of violence against women (Malamuth et al. 2000). The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) reported that the sexualization of women and girls is related to numerous societal problems, and that increased awareness of sexual imagery and its consequences is important for improving the physical and emotional welfare of women and girls. In light of this, it seems imperative that portrayals of women in advertising receive further empirical study.

Violence Against Women

According to the WHO (2000), large-scale studies conducted worldwide show that between 10 and 50% of women attest to having been physically assaulted by an intimate partner. In 1998, interpersonal violence was among the top 10 causes of death for women between the ages of 15 and 44. Nationally representative studies confirm that reducing violence against women, and reducing sexual violence in particular, should be regarded as one of the nation's foremost social priorities. Eighteen percent of the 8,000 women who participated in the National Violence Against Women Survey between November of 1995 and May of 1996 reported having experienced a completed or attempted rape during their lifetime (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). These researchers estimated that 876,000 rapes and 5.9 million physical assaults are committed against women in the U.S. each year, and concluded that, "Given the pervasiveness of rape and physical assault among American women, it is imperative that violence against women be treated as a major criminal justice and public health concern" (p. 11).

Fisher et al. (2000) echoed similar statements. In a telephone survey conducted with a nationally representative sample of nearly 4,500 female college students, they found that 2.8% of the participants had been the victim of a completed or attempted rape within the 7 months prior to

the study. If the results are projected over a 5 year college career, the data indicate that 20 to 25% of women may experience a completed or attempted rape while in college. The researchers emphasized the alarming frequency of rape and sexual coercion, especially considering that the data describe only a 7 month period. In addition, more minor forms of sexual victimization, such as sexist remarks and catcalls, were reported by approximately 50% of the respondents, suggesting that these are rather usual experiences among college women.

Research conducted with men similarly shows that rape and sexual coercion against women are widespread problems. Malamuth (1981) reviewed numerous studies in which men (mostly college students) have been asked to rate the likelihood that they would rape a woman if they could be assured of not being caught and punished, and found that across various conditions (e.g., after reading a pornographic depiction of rape, after viewing an interview with a rape victim, or after having no prior "exposure treatment") an average of approximately 35% of the men reported some likelihood of raping a woman. Consistent with Malamuth's review are the results of a more recent study. Osland et al. (1996) surveyed a group of 159 college men with the Likelihood to Rape Index, and found that 34% reported some likelihood to rape or force sex on a woman.

The Trivialization of Violence Against Women

Considering the percentage of men who admit willingness to rape, the number of rapes reported by women may at first seem relatively low. Fisher et al. (2000) found that less than five percent of completed and attempted rapes experienced by the college women they surveyed had been reported to authorities. Women's reasons for not reporting rape and sexual assault reflect their perception that such crimes are trivialized in American culture. The most common reason cited by rape victims for not informing law enforcement officials that they had been raped was the fear that the occurrence was not serious or harmful enough. Other reasons victims gave for not disclosing rape to authorities included uncertainty that a crime was committed, fear that the police would not treat the incident as a serious offense, and fear that the police would treat them with hostility.

These fears do not seem ungrounded in light of Burt's (1980) landmark study, in which she showed that there is a prevailing tendency to excuse male perpetrators of sexual violence, thus trivializing their crimes, and to shift responsibility to the victims. Burt's interviews, conducted with a random sample of 598 men and women, revealed that rape myths, which she defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists—in creating a climate hostile to rape victims," are

widely held by Americans (p. 217). More than 50% of Burt's participants agreed that "In the majority of rapes, the victim was promiscuous or had a bad reputation" (p. 229). Approximately one-half of her participants also agreed that a woman who goes home with a man on a first date is indicating her willingness to have sex with him, and that one-half of the time when a woman reports that she has been raped, she is simply lying in order to avoid blame for an illegitimate pregnancy or to seek revenge on a man.

The tendency to trivialize sexual violence within our culture is also evident in the responses of the legal system toward rape. In 1993, the United States Senate Judiciary Committee issued a report that concluded that the national justice system had not been fulfilling its obligation to defend rape victims and prosecute rapists. In that report, Senator Joseph Biden, Jr. wrote, "The disparity in how our system prosecutes rape, in contrast to other violent crime, mirrors the disparity in our society's attitudes toward these acts" (Cordes 1993, p. 86). The study showed that approximately 25% of convicted rapists never go to prison and that rape prosecutions are significantly more likely to be dismissed than are murder and robbery prosecutions. In response to this report, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed by Congress in 1994 to ensure that perpetrators of violence against women are held accountable for their crimes (National Organization for Women 2004). The VAWA was reauthorized in 2005 with additional programs intended to reduce sexual violence against young women and girls, who are at greatest risk of experiencing sexual victimization (Young Women's Christian Association 2006).

The Sexual Objectification and Victimization of Women in Media

Many factors may be invoked to explain aggression against women and the trivialization of sexual violence in American culture. One factor that may contribute to the trivialization of sexual violence that has received much empirical support is media imagery that presents women as both sex objects and as victims. The sexual victimization of women in pornography, non-pornographic films, and in music videos has been shown to increase attitudes supportive of sexual violence (e.g., Kalof 1999; Malamuth and Check 1981; Ohbuchi et al. 1994). Although the effects of sexual violence in advertising have not yet been studied, there is evidence that exposure to sexually objectifying advertisements produces anti-woman attitudes (Lanis and Covell 1995; MacKay and Covell 1997). "At the very least, [such imagery in] advertising helps to create a climate in which certain attitudes and values flourish, such as the attitude that women are valuable only as objects of men's desire, that real men are always sexually aggressive, that

violence is erotic, and that women who are the victims of sexual assault 'asked for it'" (Kilbourne 1999, pp. 290–91).

The depiction of women as sex objects who are also victims of aggression inculcates the idea that submission is a desirable trait in a woman. Such images speak directly to the hostility toward women that exists within American culture. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (1996) reported a tremendous increase in the representation of violence against women, particularly sexual violence, in the media. For example, televised pornography increased 10-fold in Europe between the mid 1980s and 1996 and the pornography market in Europe has "established links to forced prostitution and traffic in women, which is also increasing at an alarming rate" (p. 9). Wolf (1991) argued that since the 1970s, beauty images have increasingly incorporated violence against women as explicit examples of female subordination. During the mid 1970s, "the punk rock scene began to glorify S and M...Fashion models adopted from violent pornography the furious pouting glare of the violated woman" (p. 136). Such imagery "played out anxieties from the sex war, reproducing the power inequality that recent social changes had questioned: male dominance, female submission" (p. 137).

The Sexual Objectification and Victimization of Women in Print Advertising

According to Kilbourne (1999), the sexual victimization of women that was once limited to pornography, has found expression not only in films and television shows, but in advertising as well. The body positions, facial expressions, and sexual power relationships between men and women that occur in advertising have often been adopted from violent pornography. To support her contention that men's dominance and women's subordination are eroticized in popular culture, Kilbourne provides examples of specific advertisements in which women are portrayed as physically and emotionally vulnerable, and in which men are unambiguously portrayed as overpowering women.

Given the documented rise of violent sexual imagery in pornography during recent years (Wolf 1991), as well as the link between such imagery and the trivialization of violence against women, sexual violence in advertising is a topic worthy of investigation. Although Kilbourne (1999) proposed that the sexual victimization of women is glamorized in advertisements, there is an absence of empirical research that tests this claim. In contrast, interest in women's sexual objectification in advertising has received ample attention.

Since the late 1970's, numerous researchers have concluded that advertisements portray women as having less social power than men (e.g., Goffman 1979; Kang 1997; Umiker-Sebeok 1996). However, the specific ways in

which women are presented as less powerful than men have changed over time (Lindner 2004). In recent decades, advertisements have reflected women's expanding roles in the professional world and have more frequently portrayed women as influential in business settings. However, as this shift occurred, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of images that present women as less sexually powerful than men and as objects of men's desire. For example, in their comparison of magazine advertisements from 1983 to those from 1958 and 1970, Sullivan and O'Connor (1988) found a 60% increase in images that portrayed women in decorative and sexualized roles. Kang also found a significant increase in the percentage of magazine advertisements between 1979 and 1991 that displayed women's bodies through nudity and body-revealing clothes. Plous and Neptune (1997) directly compared the body exposure of the men and women featured in print advertisements and found that exposure of women's bodies occurred approximately four times as often as exposure of men's bodies. More recently, Millard and Grant (2006) reported that approximately 30% of advertisements in three popular U.S. women's fashion magazines featured nude or scantily-clad women, and Lindner reported that more than half of advertisements in a popular U.S. women's magazine portrayed women as objects.

Summary and Hypotheses

The primary objective of the present study was to examine the depiction of women in print advertising along three dimensions: (1) the extent to which women are portrayed as sex objects, (2) the extent to which women are portrayed as victims, and (3) the simultaneous presentation of women as sex objects and victims. As a secondary aim, we also examined the extent to which women were portrayed as aggressors, either sexualized or not sexualized. Finally, this research investigated whether the presentation of women as sex objects, victims, or aggressors, varied by magazine type.

It was hypothesized that women would be depicted as sex objects in approximately one-half of the advertisements that featured women. The particular way in which objectification is defined, and thus the resulting rates at which women are portrayed as objects, varies by study. The objectification of women in advertisements also varies by magazine type. For example, Lindner (2004) found that 59.2% of the advertisements from a women's fashion magazine presented women as sex objects, but only 8.2% of the advertisements from a general interest magazine did so. Krassas et al. (2001) reported that 48.8% of the pictures in a women's magazine, and 70.9% of the pictures in a men's magazine, presented women as sex objects. Baker

(2005) also reported that sexualized women were more likely to appear as purely decorative objects in men's magazines compared to women's magazines. Because our sample comprised a wide range of magazine types, including men's and women's magazines as well as special interest and news magazines, it was expected that the average rate of objectification in this study would be approximately 50%—less than the high rates found in men's magazines, but higher than the low rates reported for general interest magazines. Looking only at the average rate of objectification across magazines can be misleading, however, as previous research clearly demonstrates that the extent to which women are portrayed as sex objects varies by magazine type. Such differences were expected to be replicated in the present study.

Because much of the editorial content within men's magazines is explicitly sexual (Krassas et al. 2003; Taylor 2005), it was expected that women would be portrayed more often as sex objects in men's magazines than in other magazine types. Such differences have been demonstrated by Baker (2005) and Krassas et al. (2001) as noted above. Because much of the content of women's and adolescent girls' magazines is related to fashion, beauty, and the development of sexual skills intended to please men (Farvid and Braun 2006), it was also expected that women's and adolescent girls' magazines would present women as sex objects more frequently than magazines that concentrate on broader social issues (e.g., *Newsweek*), entertainment (e.g., *Entertainment Weekly*) or special interests (e.g., *Parents*). Such a finding would be consistent with, and also extend, Lindner's (2004) comparison of images of objectification in a women's fashion magazine with those found in a general interest magazine.

Kilbourne (1999) provided several examples of magazine advertisements in which women are victimized, thus it is clear that such images do exist. Unfortunately, no prior empirical studies have attempted to document the extent to which women are presented as victims, either sexualized or non-sexualized, in print advertising. Therefore, it would have been presumptuous to make specific predictions concerning the prevalence of such images. However, it was hypothesized that women would appear as victims less often than as sex objects. Because many other types of media that portray women as victims, such as pornographic films, are clearly marketed to men more than women, we also expected that images of victimized women, particularly sexually victimized women, would be most likely to appear in men's magazines.

With respect to the presentation of women as perpetrators of aggression, a lack of prior empirical research also precludes any specific predictions concerning the prevalence of these images. Previous research does clearly demonstrate a tendency for women to be portrayed as less

powerful than men (Goffman 1979; Kang 1997; Lindner 2004; Umiker-Sebeok 1996). Therefore, it was predicted that although women might occasionally be presented as aggressors, they would more frequently be presented as victims, rather than perpetrators, of aggression. It was not clear whether the depiction of women as aggressors would vary by magazine type.

Method

Advertisements from 58 magazines were examined for the study. These included men's, women's, news and business, entertainment, teen, and special interest magazines. Magazines were selected on the basis of their circulation rates and gross revenue. Twenty of the periodicals chosen had been rated by the International Federation of the Periodical Press (2001/2002a, b, c) as among the top 10 men's, women's, or general interest magazines by circulation worldwide. Forty of the periodicals used had been listed by the Ad Age Group (2001) as among the top 100 magazines by gross revenue.

Among the top 100 magazines by gross revenue was only one magazine targeted toward an African American audience and only three directed at adolescent girls. In order to ensure that the sample of magazines selected for this study targeted a diverse readership, additional magazines aimed at each of these demographic groups were selected, despite the fact that they were neither among the top periodicals by gross revenue nor circulation. These magazines were selected on the basis of their availability. All of the magazines used were summer 2002 issues, with the exception of *Teen Vogue*. The spring 2002 issue of this periodical was used because it was the latest available at the time of the study.

The women's magazines that were used included *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Essence*, *Glamour*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Honey*, *InStyle*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, *Self*, *Vogue*, and *Woman's Day*. Men's magazines included *Black Men*, *Details*, *ESPN*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Maxim*, *Men's Fitness*, *Men's Health*, *Men's Journal*, *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Stuff*, and *Vanity Fair*. News and business magazines included *Black Enterprise*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *US News and World Report*. Entertainment magazines included *Ebony*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *National Enquirer*, *People Weekly*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Source*, *Star*, *TV Guide*, *Us Weekly*, and *XXL*. Special interest magazines included *Martha Stewart Living*, *National Geographic*, *Parents*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Smithsonian*. Adolescent girls' magazines included *Cosmo Girl*, *Elle Girl*, *Girl's Life*, *J-14*, *Seventeen*, *Teen People*, *Teen Vogue*, *Twist*, and *YM*.

A total of 4,136 full-page advertisements were examined. Full-page advertisements were defined as pages in which one, and only one, single advertisement dominated at least one entire page, and in which there was minimal or no magazine content. Therefore, classified advertisements, fashion spreads that had more than one salient picture on the page, and pages that consisted of a variety of products placed together (e.g., *Cosmo's* best bathing suits), were not considered full-page advertisements in this study. Pages that advertised more than one product were coded if it was clear that all of the products on the page were promoted by a single company. Promotional pages (e.g., Ford's fight against breast cancer) were coded as well.

Of these advertisements, 1,988 featured women and were coded by the first author. All images of women and women's body parts in these advertisements, whether or not they were pictures of real human beings, were coded. The few advertisements that contained female cartoon characters were, therefore, included. The only exceptions, in which full-page advertisements featuring images of women were not coded, were those in which women appeared on the covers of books, movies, or boxes of a product that took up a miniscule portion of the page. This was done so that pictures of women that were not salient would not skew the results of the study. Advertisements were coded, using a schema developed by the first author, as to whether or not they presented women as sex objects, as victims, and/or as aggressors.

A woman was defined as a sex object if her sexuality was being used to sell a product. Whether or not a woman or a woman's body parts were coded as "sex object" was determined by facial expression (e.g., a woman's looks suggested sexual desire), posture (e.g., a woman was positioned with her legs spread open), activity (e.g., a woman caressed another person in a sexually suggestive manner), make-up (e.g., a woman wore bright red lipstick), camera angle (e.g., the camera angle emphasized a woman's breasts, hips, buttocks, lower abdomen, or inner thighs), and the amount of skin shown. It was not necessary for the woman in the advertisement to meet any particular number of the stated criteria to be defined as a sex object. Instead, it was the overall impression of the coder assisted by the listed criteria that determined whether the woman was coded as a sex object. It was important to allow subjectivity into the ratings because a scantily-clad woman is not always sexualized, and often fully-clothed women are sex objects. Therefore, it was possible that a woman wearing a bikini might not be coded as a sex object, whereas a fully-dressed woman with a sexually suggestive posture might be defined as a sex object. Previous content analyses have similarly used subjective criteria to determine whether women were portrayed as sex objects. For example, Lindner (2004) defined objectification as being

“portrayed in such a way as to suggest that being looked at is [a woman’s] major purpose or function in the advertisement” (p. 414).

A woman was considered a victim if any of the following criteria were met: (1) A person is involved in an unambiguous act of violence (e.g., shooting a gun, hitting, yelling) against a woman or against a woman’s wishes, (2) a man is dominant and overpowering a woman in a sexual act, or is watching a woman in a sexually aggressive manner, (3) a woman appears lifeless, zombi-like, or unconscious (with the exception of a woman who appears to be peacefully sleeping in an appropriate place), (4) a woman is lied to, tricked, or watched without her awareness in an inappropriate setting, (5) a woman is in bondage (e.g., wearing a leash, tied to a bed) or is wearing heavy makeup that makes her appear injured or sick, or (6) a woman is distressed. Women were considered distressed if they were visibly afraid, angry, depressed, disgusted, or vulnerable. Vulnerability was determined by facial expression, body position, relation to other characters in the advertisement, and setting. Any of the above was sufficient for coding a woman as victimized. The perpetrator of the violent act did not necessarily need to be visible in the advertisement.

A woman was considered an aggressor if she was committing an act of violence or appeared ready to commit an act of violence (e.g., was holding a gun), was dominant over a man in a sexual act, or was watching a man in a sexually aggressive manner.

A subset of ten magazines was randomly selected, with the constraint that at least one magazine from each category be represented, for coding by a second independent rater unfamiliar with the hypotheses of the study. All advertisements featuring women ($N=270$) from these ten magazines were coded by the second rater with respect to whether or not women were presented as sex objects, as victims, and/or as aggressors using the criteria described above. Interrater reliability was 92.22%.

Results

The percentage of full-page advertisements that featured women in which women were presented as sex objects, victims, or aggressors was computed for each magazine. The percentage of advertisements within each magazine that presented women simultaneously as sex objects and victims, or simultaneously as sex objects and aggressors, was computed as well. In addition, the percentage of advertising pages that portrayed women as victims who were *not* sex objects, or as aggressors who were *not* sex objects, was computed. Table 1 summarizes the mean percentage for each of these seven judgments for all magazines in a given category. Independent samples ANOVAs, with follow-up Tukey tests if warranted, were used to assess differences between magazine types. In most cases, the distribution of values was non-normal and the variances between magazine types unequal. To correct for this, square root transformations were performed prior to analyzing differences between magazine types. The descriptions that follow identify those instances in which transformed values were analyzed.

Women as Sex Objects

It was predicted that approximately one-half of the advertisements featuring women would present them as sex objects. It was also expected that the average rate of sexual objectification would vary greatly by magazine type, with men’s magazines having the highest rates and special interest, entertainment, and news and business magazines having the lowest rates of objectification. Consistent with our prediction, on average, across magazine categories, 51.80% of advertisements that featured women portrayed them as sex objects (see Table 1). Also, as predicted, differences between magazine categories were observed, $F(5,52)=22.64$, $p<.005$. The percentage of advertisements that portrayed women as sex objects was significantly

Table 1 Mean percentage of coded advertisements within magazine category presenting women as sex objects, victims, and aggressors.

Magazine Categories	Sex Objects	Victims			Aggressors		
		Total ^a	Sexualized	Non-sexualized	Total	Sexualized	Non-sexualized
Men’s	75.98	15.36	12.95	2.72	6.95	6.23	0.71
Women’s	55.71	12.62	8.96	3.76	0.71	0.51	0.20
Adolescent Girls	64.15	8.84	6.43	3.83	3.01	0.18	2.83
Entertainment	44.43	6.83	2.88	3.95	5.32	4.46	0.86
News and Business	8.09	0.64	0.64	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Special Interest	18.16	1.66	0.61	1.66	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mean	51.80	9.51	6.90	2.98	3.23	2.43	0.81

^a Because some advertisements presented both sexualized and non-sexualized women as victims, the total victim percentage does not necessarily reflect the sum of the percentage of sexualized victims and non-sexualized victims.

higher in men's magazines than in any of the other magazine categories, $p's < .05$, except adolescent girls' magazines. On average, only 32.36% of advertisements in men's magazines included images of women. However, when women did appear in advertisements in men's magazines, they were portrayed as sex objects 75.98% of the time. In addition, the percentage of advertisements that presented women as sex objects was significantly lower in news and business and in special interest magazines, than in any of the other categories, $p's < .005$, though these two categories did not differ from one another. Contrary to predictions, the percentage of advertisements that presented women as sex objects in entertainment magazines was not reliably different than the percentage of such advertisements in women's or adolescent girls' magazines.

The majority of advertisements featuring women in adolescent girls' magazines and women's magazines presented women as sex objects. Initially, all women's magazines were grouped together. However, an examination of the means within this category revealed a distinct pattern. In women's fashion magazines (i.e., *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Essence*, *Glamour*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Honey*, *InStyle*, *Marie Claire*, *Self*, and *Vogue*), 63.39% of advertisements portrayed women as sex objects. However, in women's non-fashion magazines (i.e., *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, and *Woman's Day*), only 36.53% of advertisements portrayed women as sex objects, a statistically reliable difference, $t(12)=4.39$, $p < .002$.

Women as Victims

It was predicted that women would be depicted as victims less frequently than as sex objects and that the depiction of women as victims would vary by magazine type, with men's magazines containing the greatest percentage of such images. As can be seen in Table 1, the percentage of advertisements depicting women as victims ranged from under 1% to just over 15%. Across magazine categories, an average of 9.51% of advertisements that featured women portrayed them as victims, far less than the 51.80% of advertisements that portrayed women as sex objects, $t(57)=14.57$, $p < .001$. Analysis of the transformed scores revealed differences between magazine categories, $F(5,52)=4.99$, $p < .002$. Women were more likely to appear as victims in men's magazines than in news and business or special interest magazines, $p's < .05$. Men's, women's, and adolescent girls' magazines did not significantly differ in the percentage of advertisements depicting women as victims. A separate examination of women's fashion magazines revealed that 16.57% of advertisements in this subset presented women as victims, compared to 2.74% in women's non-fashion magazines, $t(12)=2.30$, $p < .05$.

The percentage of advertisements in which sexualized and non-sexualized women were presented as victims were examined separately. Approximately 73% of the time, women portrayed as victims were also portrayed as sex objects. As shown in the table, an average of 6.90% of advertisements that featured women portrayed them simultaneously as sex objects and victims in accordance with our definitions. Analysis of the transformed values revealed differences between magazine types, $F(5,52)=4.77$, $p < .002$. Men's magazines contained a higher percentage of images of sexualized women as victims than did news and business, entertainment, or special interest magazines, $p's < .05$. Men's, women's, and adolescent girls' magazines were not reliably different in the percentage of advertisements that presented sexualized women as victims. In women's magazines, 12.54% of advertisements in fashion magazines, but none of those in non-fashion magazines, met the stated criteria for portraying sexualized women as victims.

The simultaneous presentation of women as sexualized and distressed reinforces the association between women's sexuality and the experience of physical and emotional pain. Therefore, such images may function to normalize violence against women. However, presenting a woman as distressed is qualitatively different from presenting her as lifeless, in bondage, or as a target of violence, manipulation, or sexual aggression. Because of this, additional descriptive analyses examined the percentage of coded advertisements that simultaneously sexualize women and present them in accordance with a more restrictive definition of victim that excludes "distressed."

Even with this narrower criterion to define victimization, advertisements that portrayed women simultaneously as sex objects and victims were still observed. In men's magazines, 8.78% of advertisements that featured women portrayed them as both sex objects and as victims in accordance with the stricter definition. In women's ($M=2.78\%$), adolescent girls' ($M=1.91\%$), and entertainment magazines ($M=2.45\%$) such images exist, but at relatively low frequencies. In women's fashion magazines, 3.89% of advertisements portrayed women as both sex objects and victims according to the stricter criteria. In news and business, special interest, and women's non-fashion magazines, there were no images of women (sexualized or not) that met the narrower definition of victim.

Overall, on average, only 2.98% of advertisements that featured women portrayed them as victims who were *not* sex objects. As can be seen in Table 1, the percentage of advertisements depicting non-sexualized women as victims ranged from zero to just under 4%. Analysis of the transformed scores, excluding the magazine category with a mean of zero, yielded no significant differences between magazine types, $F < 1$. Again, because the depiction of a

woman as distressed is qualitatively different from the other criteria we used to define victimization, additional descriptive analyses examined how frequently non-sexualized women were presented as victims in accordance with the stricter definition. Overall, across magazine categories, less than 1% of advertisements that featured women portrayed non-sexualized women as victims in accordance with the narrower criteria. Men's ($M=1.85\%$) and entertainment ($M=1.55\%$) magazines were the only categories in which women were presented as victims in accordance with the stricter criteria, but not as sex objects, in more than 1% of advertisements.

Women as Aggressors

It was predicted that women would be depicted as perpetrators of aggression less frequently than as victims. On average, across magazine categories, 3.23% of advertisements that featured women portrayed them as aggressors (see Table 1), a significantly lower rate than that found for the portrayal of women as victims, $t(57)=4.54$, $p<.001$. Because women were never presented as aggressors in news and business or special interest magazines, these two magazine categories were excluded from analyses examining differences by magazine type. Analysis of the transformed scores revealed differences between magazine categories, $F(3,43)=4.71$, $p<.007$. Women's magazines contained significantly fewer advertisements depicting women as aggressors than did men's magazines, $p<.005$, and somewhat fewer of these images than did entertainment magazines, $p<.09$.

When women were presented as aggressors, 75% of the time they were also portrayed as sex objects. Overall, 2.43% of advertisements across all magazine categories met the criteria for presenting women simultaneously as sex objects and aggressors. Analysis of the transformed scores revealed differences by magazine type, $F(3,43)=6.36$, $p<.002$. Men's magazines were more likely to portray sexualized women as aggressors than women's and adolescent girls' magazines, $p's<.007$. Non-sexualized women were almost never presented as aggressors. Overall, less than 1% of coded advertisements portrayed women as aggressors who were *not* sex objects. In adolescent girls' magazines, 2.83% of coded advertisements featured non-sexualized women who were aggressors. None of the other magazine categories depicted non-sexualized women as aggressors in more than 1% of coded advertisements.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to document the extent to which women are presented as sex objects and as victims in

magazine advertisements. Four of the periodicals originally characterized as women's magazines (i.e., *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, and *Woman's Day*) differed qualitatively from the other 10, which were termed "women's fashion magazines." Magazines from these two subcategories often differed in the ways they portrayed women.

In accordance with our hypothesis, we found that, on average, across magazine categories, one in two advertisements that featured women portrayed them as sex objects. This is consistent with Sullivan and O'Connor's (1988) finding that 47% of women in their sample of magazine advertisements were depicted in "purely decorative roles." The percentage of advertisements in the current sample of general interest magazines that portrayed women as sex objects (8.09%) was nearly identical to the percentage of advertisements that Lindner (2004) reported objectified women in *Time* magazine (8.2%). Also, the percentage of advertisements in the current sample of fashion magazines that presented women as sex objects (63.39%) was only slightly higher than the percentage of advertisements that Linder reported objectified women in *Vogue* magazine (59.2%).

Women were most likely to be depicted as sex objects in men's, women's fashion, and adolescent girls' magazines. Three of four advertisements that featured women in men's magazines portrayed women as sex objects. Approximately two of three advertisements that featured women in women's fashion magazines and adolescent girls' magazines presented women as sex objects.

Consistent with predictions, the victimization of women in advertisements was not as prevalent as women's sexual objectification. Nevertheless, the percentage of advertisements that presented women as victims was disconcerting. Overall, 9.51% of advertisements that featured women portrayed them as victims. However, this number is somewhat misleading; images of female victimization were virtually absent from news and business magazines, whereas they comprised a substantial percentage of coded advertisements in men's, women's, and adolescent girls' magazines. In men's magazines and women's fashion magazines, women were presented as victims in just over 15% of coded advertisements.

The findings of the current study support Kilbourne's (1999) claim that pornographic imagery (i.e., imagery that combines women's sexuality and victimization) appears in mainstream advertisements. More than 70 percent of the time women were portrayed as victims, they were simultaneously portrayed as sex objects. In men's magazines and women's fashion magazines, women were presented as both sex objects and victims in roughly 13% of advertisements that featured women.

As described in the results section, the prevalence of images of female victimization was also examined after

narrowing the victim criteria by eliminating the subcategory “woman as distressed.” There were images in men’s, women’s, adolescent girls’, and entertainment magazines that portrayed women as victims in accordance with this stricter criteria. In fact, 9% of advertisements that featured women in men’s magazines portrayed women simultaneously as sex objects and as targets of violence, manipulation, or sexual aggression, as lifeless, or in bondage. On the basis of this data, it seems that women’s submission is eroticized in a subset of advertisements that present women as sex objects.

To determine if women are ever portrayed as perpetrators, as opposed to victims, of violence, the extent to which women were presented as aggressors was assessed. Consistent with expectations, women were three times more likely to be portrayed as victims than as aggressors. Women were portrayed as aggressors primarily in a subset of advertisements that presented them as sex objects. Women presented as aggressors were sexualized 75% of the time. Men’s magazines depicted women as aggressors (who were almost always sexualized) in approximately 7% of coded advertisements. However, even in men’s magazines, women were twice as likely to be presented as victims than as aggressors.

Backlash against women’s increasing power in society may serve as one explanation for the pervasiveness of sexually objectifying imagery and the existence of sexually violent imagery in advertisements. Feminist writers Faludi (1991) and Wolf (1991) have argued that there is a considerable amount of hostility toward women in American culture and that the fundamental cause of this hostility is that women have elevated their position within society’s power hierarchy. For example, during the past four decades, women have achieved dramatic educational and economic gains. According to Herman and Castro (1998), the percentage of bachelor’s and professional degrees awarded to women in 1970 were 43.1 and 5.3%, respectively. By 1990, 55.4% of bachelor’s degrees and 38.1% of professional degrees were earned by women. Between 1973 and 1990, the wage gap between men and women’s earnings narrowed from 56.6 to 72%.

Increasing prospects of equality for women have been met with oppositional reactions intended to maintain men’s dominance (Faludi 1991; Wolf 1991). Empirical research supports the contention that increasing equality for women has been countered by hostility and resistance. For example, Dall’Ara and Maass (1999) found that men were significantly more willing to sexually harass women believed to have egalitarian gender role beliefs than women believed to have traditional gender role beliefs. The authors concluded that women with egalitarian gender role beliefs may be at greater risk for sexual harassment than women with traditional gender role beliefs “because

they are considered a threat to the males’ dominant position” (p. 700).

The pervasiveness of media images of highly sexualized women, but not men, is hypothesized to maintain men’s dominance by designating women’s bodies as property that can be evaluated, ogled, and touched at the whim of men’s desire (Kilbourne 1999). In a cultural climate defined by increasing possibilities, in which women have earned advanced degrees and have infiltrated careers traditionally dominated by men, society has demanded that women become servants to popular images of beauty and sexuality. The sexual objectification of women has become ubiquitous in media images because, during a time in which “many women have guilt feelings and uncertainties about their entry into public life, and many men have fears about women’s empowerment, those images or articles that show women being put, or putting themselves, *back under control* are most likely to get a strong audience reaction” (Wolf 1991, p. 4). The extent of sexually objectifying imagery found in the current study, therefore, may function to compensate for images of women’s increased independence.

Implications, Future Directions, and Limitations

The fact that it is women who are sexualized in magazines geared toward both men and women indicates that women’s bodies are constantly on display to be judged. When women are portrayed as sex objects in two of three images, the message to both men and women is clear: A woman’s value lies largely in terms of her appearance and sexuality. In addition, women are things to be looked at, rather than actors with their own sexual desire. Viewing women primarily as objects, useful only for the gratification of men, may in turn make sexual violence against women appear justifiable (Kilbourne 1999).

Research has consistently shown that exposure to both violent and nonviolent pornography results in attitudes supportive of sexual aggression among men (Malamuth et al. 2000). In addition, viewing images of sexually objectified women has been shown to increase men’s acceptance of rape myths, interpersonal violence, and gender role stereotyping (Lanis and Covell 1995; MacKay and Covell 1997). Finally, the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) recently reported numerous negative consequences of presenting young women and girls as sex objects in media images. For example, sexualization is associated with the development of eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, and negative feelings regarding sexuality.

The fusion of women’s sexuality and victimization within print advertisements also suggests that men and women may be socialized to associate sex with violence

against women. If men and women do link sexuality with women's distress, sexual violence seems both normal and justifiable. Considering that women are portrayed as sexualized victims in a substantial portion of advertisements, future research should examine the social effects of such images.

There were several limitations of this study that future research may address. The sample of magazines did not include magazines targeted specifically toward adolescent boys. Future research may clarify what magazines and other media are most popular among adolescent boys and how the presentation of women in these media affects boys' sexual attitudes and behaviors. Thus far, research has shown that exposure to lad magazines, a popular genre of lifestyle magazines targeted toward young men (e.g., *Maxim*), correlates with permissive sexual attitudes, expectations of sexual variety, and aggressive sexual schemas (Taylor 2006).

In addition, images of men were not examined. The presentation of masculine ideals in advertisements may impact the ways in which men interact with women as well as men's self-esteem. For example, evidence shows that exposure to unrealistic images of male models increases body dissatisfaction among men and may lead to drug abuse and eating disorders (Baird and Grieve 2006). Reading men's magazines may also exacerbate unrealistic beauty standards for women (Hatoum and Belle 2004).

Future research may also examine the presentation of women and men of different races. Baker (2005) found that white women are objectified more often in magazine advertisements than black women and that magazines targeted toward white audiences are more likely to portray women as submissive than magazines targeted toward black women; however, more research on this topic is needed.

Finally, it is important to distinguish sexualization from healthy sexuality (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls 2007). In the current study, no attempt was made to identify positive models of sexuality. Future research might improve upon this study by differentiating between healthy and unhealthy models of sexuality in media images.

The current study provides an indication of the extent to which women are portrayed as victims in magazine advertisements at a single point in time. Future research should examine whether images of women's victimization in advertisements are more prevalent now than they were in past decades. Considering that violence in pornography has increased during recent years (Wolf 1991), it seems logical that sexual violence in other media forms may have risen as well. A documented rise in sexually violent imagery would provide support for the argument that images of women's submission have coincided with women's increasing power in society.

Finally, the current study was limited to magazine advertisements. Television commercials, billboards, and advertisements on the internet surely influence sexual attitudes. The impact of imagery in these advertisements demands further study.

Despite the limitations of the current study, it is evident that women are frequently portrayed as sex objects and sometimes portrayed as victims in media images. Considering the potential negative impact of such imagery, heightened awareness of media stereotypes of women is imperative (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls 2007). Research in the field of eating disorders has shown that media literacy is effective in counteracting the effects of media imagery by decreasing the body dissatisfaction and the internalization of unrealistic ideals that often accompany eating disorders (e.g., Coughlin and Kalodner 2006; Watson and Vaughn 2006; Wilksch et al. 2006). Future research should explore the potential effectiveness of media literacy education to reduce the negative effects of unhealthy and unrealistic sexual, and sexually violent, images of women in the media.

Acknowledgement This research was funded by a Christian A. Johnson Fellowship awarded to the first author from Wesleyan University. In addition, the authors would like to thank Sharron Riley for her assistance in coding advertisements.

References

- Ad Age Group. (2001). *Top 300 magazines by gross revenue*. Retrieved May 29, 2002, from <http://www.adage.com/page.cms?pagelid=522>.
- American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: Executive Summary*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>.
- Baird, A. L., & Grieve, F. G. (2006). Exposure to male models in advertisements leads to a decrease in men's body satisfaction. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 8, 115–121.
- Baker, C. N. (2005). Images of women's sexuality in advertisements: A content analysis of Black- and White-oriented women's and men's magazines. *Sex Roles*, 52, 13–27.
- Bretl, D. J., & Cantor, J. (1988). The portrayal of men and women in U.S. television commercials: A recent content analysis and trends over 15 years. *Sex Roles*, 18, 595–609.
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38, 217–230.
- Cordes, R. (1993). Rape not treated as a serious crime, Senate report says. *Trial*, 29, 86.
- Coughlin, J. W., & Kalodner, C. (2006). Media literacy as a prevention intervention for college women at low- or high-risk for eating disorders. *Body Image*, 3, 35–43.
- Dall'Ara, E., & Maass, A. (1999). Studying sexual harassment in the laboratory: Are egalitarian women at higher risk? *Sex Roles*, 41, 681–704.

- Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Farvid, P., & Braun, V. (2006). 'Most of us guys are raring to go anytime, anyplace, anywhere': Male and female sexuality in *Cleo* and *Cosmo*. *Sex Roles*, 55, 295–310.
- Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2000, December). *The sexual victimization of college women*. U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/182369.htm>.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender advertisements*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hatoum, I. J., & Belle, D. (2004). Mags and abs: Media consumption and bodily concerns in men. *Sex Roles*, 51, 397–407.
- Herman, A. M., & Castro, I. L. (1998, June 10). *Equal pay: A thirty-five year perspective*. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved March, 2003 from <http://familyleavesurvey.homestead.com/files/EqualPay35yearspectiv.pdf>.
- International Federation of the Periodical Press. (2001/2002a). *Top 50 general interest magazines worldwide (by circulation)*. Retrieved May 29, 2002, from <http://www.fipp.com/Data/top50general.pdf>.
- International Federation of the Periodical Press. (2001/2002b). *Top 50 men's magazines worldwide (by circulation)*. Retrieved May 29, 2002, from <http://www.fipp.com/Data/top50mens.pdf>.
- International Federation of the Periodical Press. (2001/2002c). *Top 50 women's magazines worldwide (by circulation)*. Retrieved May 29, 2002 from <http://www.fipp.com/Data/Top%2050%20Womens.pdf>.
- Kalof, L. (1999). The effects of gender and music video imagery on sexual attitudes. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 139, 378–385.
- Kang, M. (1997). The portrayal of women's images in magazine advertisements: Goffman's gender analysis revisited. *Sex Roles*, 37, 979–996.
- Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Krassas, N. R., Blauwkamp, J. M., & Wesselink, P. (2001). Boxing Helena and corseting Eunice: Sexual rhetoric in *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* magazines. *Sex Roles*, 44, 751–771.
- Krassas, N. R., Blauwkamp, J. M., & Wesselink, P. (2003). "Master your johnson": Sexual rhetoric in *Maxim* and *Stuff* magazines. *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 7, 98–119.
- Lanis, K., & Covell, K. (1995). Images of women in advertisements: Effects on attitudes related to sexual aggression. *Sex Roles*, 32, 639–649.
- Lindner, K. (2004). Images of women in general interest and fashion magazine advertisements from 1955 to 2002. *Sex Roles*, 51, 409–421.
- MacKay, N. J., & Covell, K. (1997). The impact of women in advertisements on attitudes toward women. *Sex Roles*, 36, 573–583.
- Malamuth, N. M. (1981). Rape proclivity among males. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37, 138–157.
- Malamuth, N. M., Addison, T., & Koss, M. (2000). Pornography and sexual aggression: Are there reliable effects and can we understand them? *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 11, 26–91.
- Malamuth, N. M., & Check, J. V. P. (1981). The effects of mass media exposure on acceptance of violence against women: A field experiment. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 15, 436–446.
- Millard, J. E., & Grant, P. R. (2006). The stereotypes of Black and White women in fashion magazine photographs: The pose of the model and the impression she creates. *Sex Roles*, 54, 659–673.
- National Organization for Women. (2004). *The violence against women act: Celebrating 10 years of prevention*. Retrieved January 17, 2005 from <http://www.now.org/nnt/fall-2004/vawa.html?printable>.
- Ohbuchi, K., Ikeda, T., & Takeuchi, G. (1994). Effects of violent pornography upon viewers' rape myth beliefs: A study of Japanese males. *Psychology, Crime, and the Law*, 1, 71–81.
- Osland, J. A., Fitch, M., & Willis, E. E. (1996). Likelihood to rape in college males. *Sex Roles*, 35, 171–183.
- Plous, S., & Neptune, D. (1997). Racial and gender biases in magazine advertising. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 627–644.
- Sullivan, G. L., & O'Connor, P. J. (1988). Women's role portrayals in magazine advertising: 1958–1983. *Sex Roles*, 18, 181–188.
- Taylor, L. D. (2005). All for him: Articles about sex in American lad magazines. *Sex Roles*, 52, 153–163.
- Taylor, L. D. (2006). College men, their magazines, and sex. *Sex Roles*, 55, 693–702.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (1998, November). *Prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved June, 2002 from <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/172837.pdf>.
- Umiker-Sebeok, J. (1996). Power and construction of gendered spaces. *International Review of Sociology*, 6, 389–404.
- United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. (1996, January 23). Elimination of stereotyping in the mass media: Report of the Secretary General. (E/CN.6/1996/4). Retrieved December 30, 2002, from <http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/cn6/1996/ecn61996-4.htm>.
- Watson, R., & Vaughn, L. M. (2006). Limiting the effects of the media on body image: Does the length of a media literacy intervention make a difference? *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment & Prevention*, 14, 385–400.
- Wilksch, S. M., Tiggemann, M., & Wade, T. D. (2006). Impact of interactive school-based media literacy lessons for reducing internalization of media ideals in young adolescent girls and boys. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 39, 385–393.
- Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. New York: Anchor Books.
- World Health Organization. (2000, June). *Violence against women*. (Fact Sheet No. 239). Retrieved December 30, 2002, from <http://www.who.int/inf-fs/en/fact239.html>.
- Young Women's Christian Association. (2006, April). *Violence Against Women Fact Sheet*. Retrieved May 8, 2007, from http://www.ywca.org/atf/cf/%7B3B450FA5-108B-4D2E-B3D0-C31487243E6A%7D/ViolenceWomen3fs_06.pdf.

Copyright of *Sex Roles* is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.