

Children as Sexual Objects: Historical and Gender Trends in Magazines

William O'Donohue,¹ Steven R. Gold,² and J. Sean McKay²

Trained observers blind to experimental hypotheses rated how often children were depicted sexually in five magazines. Results indicated that children were portrayed sexually in approximately 1.5% of the advertisements containing children. The occurrence of the sexualized depictions of children was systematic in three ways: (1) girls were depicted sexually more often than boys; (2) there was some evidence that this phenomenon has not decreased over the past four decades but, instead, might be increasing slightly; and (3) these depictions occurred more frequently in magazines targeted toward women than toward men or toward both genders. Research on the possible effects on both men and women of the sexualized depictions of children is needed.

KEY WORDS: advertisements; sexual objectification.

INTRODUCTION

The incidence and prevalence estimates of child sexual abuse vary depending upon diverse methodological factors such as the population sampled (for example, clinic vs. college vs. general population), upon the definition of child sexual abuse, and upon measurement characteristics (for example, pen and pencil measurement vs. telephone vs. face-to-face interviews conducted by females). However, 8% to 54% of females and 3% to 25% of males report some sort of unwanted sexual contact before the age of 18 (Russell, 1986; Salter, 1992; Wyatt & Peters, 1986). Thus, the sexual abuse of children appears to be a significant social problem.

¹University of Nevada at Reno, Reno, Nevada 89557.

²Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois 60115.

Unfortunately, recent reviews of the literature suggest that it is not clear that effective therapies for offenders (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989; Laws & O'Donohue, 1997) or for the diverse and significant psychological sequelae experienced by victims (O'Donohue & Elliott, 1992) have been developed. Efforts at primary prevention appear prudent in the face of expensive and problematic tertiary intervention efforts. Moreover, what is particularly attractive about primary prevention is that the significant problems of sexual abuse are avoided rather than remediated.

Preventive attempts aim at eliminating all sufficient or necessary causes or eliminating factors that can contribute to an increased probability that abuse will occur. In a review of the child abuse prevention literature, O'Donohue, Geer, and Elliott (1992) found that all extant prevention programs targeted the child as the point of intervention. These prevention programs teach the child to perceive risk, say "no" and inform responsible adults about abuse attempts. O'Donohue *et al.* (1992) criticized this exclusive focus on the potential victim as the locus of prevention attempts and suggested that preventive efforts also target other points of intervention such as problematic male attitudes and sexual roles.

The depiction of children and implicit messages about children in the media may also be related to child sexual abuse, Venkatesan and Losco (1975) and Vincent, Davis, and Boruszkowski (1987) have pointed out that the depiction of woman as sexual objects, dependent, unintelligent, and submissive, in advertisements may play a role in perpetuating sexist attitudes and sexually violent behavior toward women. Feminists have further suggested that eliminating such sexist depictions of women in the media might help prevent future abusive treatment of women (Brownmiller, 1975; Darke, 1990).

It is possible that an analogous phenomenon occurs with children. Although some researchers have suggested that child pornography contributes to the sexual exploitation of children (Jarvie, 1992; Pierce, 1984; Tyler & Stone, 1985), to date few have addressed the possibility that the mainstream media contain messages that condone the sexualization of children and thereby increase the likelihood that children will be sexually abused. Finkelhor (1984) represents an important exception. He has indicated, in his four-preconditions model for sexual abuse, that the "erotic portrayal of children in advertising" may teach males to become sexually aroused to children. Certainly, this is not accomplished by direct messages that children should be sexually abused. However, the media's contribution to sexual abuse might occur through the depiction of children as sexual objects.

Informal observation suggests that this might be true. There have been some well-known cases of mainstream advertisements and films in which minors were depicted sexually (e.g., the recent Calvin Klein billboards, the Brooke Shield's jeans advertisement in the early 1980s, and her films *Pretty Baby* and *The Blue Lagoon*). However, it is possible that these were isolated incidents. Thus the general question this research addressed was, To what extent are children depicted in a sexualized manner in the mainstream media? This is an initial attempt to begin to evaluate Finkelhor's (1984) hypothesis empirically.

Magazines were chosen, as these were more readily accessible than other more transitory media forms (e.g., television) and because this is an influential and frequently used medium (Venkatesan & Losco, 1975). The first hypothesis was that the portrayal of children in a sexualized manner would have a nonzero frequency. The second hypothesis, influenced by the view that women are portrayed as sexual objects more than men, was that girls would be depicted sexually more often than boys.

Also of interest was whether such depictions might display a trend across the last four decades. It was hypothesized that there would be an increase due to an increase in sexual liberalization over the time period and that such sexualized depictions would increase each year in the four periods examined (1958–1959, 1968–1969, 1978–1979, 1988–1989). Finally, it was hypothesized that the frequency of these sexualized depictions would be related to the gender of the magazine's readership. Specifically and somewhat counterintuitively, it was hypothesized that magazines aimed at women (*Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*) would have more sexualized depictions of children than magazines aimed at men (*Playboy*, *Sports Illustrated*) or magazines aimed at both (*Newsweek*). This hypothesis was based on a previous finding that most depictions of women as sexual objects were aimed at women (Venkatesan & Losco, 1975). This might be due to the fact that these magazines have more advertisements, that these advertisements aimed at women contain more females, or that these advertisements were based on the presumption that women have accepted their social role and therefore want to be more successful as sexual objects. Finally, it was hypothesized that the more progressive woman's magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, due to its liberal stance concerning sexual matters, would have a greater frequency of sexualized depictions than the more traditional magazine, *Ladies Home Journal*.

METHOD

Materials

The materials used for this study were all the advertisements from five popular magazines. A variety of magazines was used to sample different kinds of targeted readership. Two of the magazines are aimed at men (*Playboy* and *Sports Illustrated*), two at women (*Ladies Home Journal* and *Cosmopolitan*), and the last was a magazine that is aimed at both men and women (*Newsweek*). These magazines were chosen for the following reasons: (1) they were published continuously in the four decades examined in the study; (2) the university library contained hard copies in its collections; (3) they are popular magazines which had a high circulation rate; (4) in all but one case (*Newsweek*), they clearly target a gender; and (5) they contain a large number of advertisements that furnishes a relatively large sample.

To assess the pattern of advertising across four decades (1950s–1980s), a uniform sampling of the last 2 years of each decade was used for each magazine. One exception should be noted, however. The years 1958–1959 for *Ladies Home Journal* were not available to the researchers. Only the years 1952 and 1954 were found, and therefore these were used to represent the 1950s for this magazine.

Procedure

Selection and Training of Raters. Four undergraduate and two graduate student raters who were blind to the experimental hypotheses classified all advertisements in the five magazines based on the sexual content of the advertisements containing children. Raters were students who were working in the first author's laboratory at the time.

In order to develop criteria for judgment of the sexual content of advertisements containing children, raters independently viewed advertisements containing a child who appeared 16 years or younger from various magazines. For the purposes of this study, a "child" was a person who was viewed by both raters as 16 years old or younger. Criteria determining the sexual content of the advertisement included the pose or posture of the child, an emphasis on presenting the child as adult-like or mature, the pairing of a sexually provocative adult with a similarly posed child, and the degree of nudity of the child; if nudity was present, it was included in the criteria if it was judged as aimed at being enticing, arousing, or sexually suggestive. Due to the complexity of judgment, none

of these individual criteria were regarded as necessary or sufficient. The raters were instructed to use these as guidelines. The judgments, then, were trichotomous: *child is depicted in a sexual manner*, *child is not depicted in a sexualized manner*, or *uncertain*. It was decided that uncertain cases would be excluded from further data analysis in order to avoid biases in positive findings.

After criteria for classification were developed, interrater reliability was assessed using different advertisements independently rated by the same two judges. Interrater reliability about judgments of the presence or absence of sexual content was assessed by the number of agreements divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements and multiplied by 100%. Interrater reliability was found to be at 99.3%, well within the acceptable range. The reliability was quite high and may be due to extensive training of raters as well as the high base rate of relatively easy judgments regarding clear examples of nonsexualized depictions.

Data Collection. An advertisement was given a score of 0 if it contained no sexual content and 1 for any degree of sexual content. Raters periodically rated the same magazines to serve as a check for observer drift (Kent, Kanowitz, O'Leary, & Cheiken, 1977). Twenty-four issues of magazines containing 73 advertisements depicting children were jointly coded at various points during the coding phase. The percentage agreement from these checks for observer drift was 98.6%, still well within the acceptable range. Data from all magazines were then collated by an independent researcher. This individual was another graduate student working in the first author's laboratory.

RESULTS

Some advertisements appeared more than once in any given magazine or across magazines for any given decade. To assess the number of instances readers were exposed to sexualized advertisements containing children, duplicate advertisements were counted each time they appeared in any magazine. To assess the number of distinct advertisements that contained sexualized depictions of children, duplicates were counted only the first time they appeared in a particular magazine for any given decade. Where these *corrected* numbers differ from the first set of data, they are presented in parentheses along with the *uncorrected* scores. However, since the purpose of the study was to assess the frequency at which advertisements contained sexualized depictions of children, the total, rather than the *corrected*, frequencies are used for analysis.

Table I. Frequencies of Sexualized Depictions of Children in Advertisements Containing Children in Five Magazines over Four Decades

	1958-1959	1968-1969	1978-1979	1988-1989
Playboy				
No. no sex	0	13	26 (24)	5
No. sex	0	2	4 (2)	1
% of total	0	13	13 (0.0769)	17
Newsweek				
No. no sex	159	255	294	75
No. sex	1	0	0	0
% of total	6	0	0	0
Cosmopolitan				
No. no sex	32	41	47	73 (68)
No. sex	0	3	1	13 (8)
% of total	0	7	2	15 (10.5)
Ladies Home Journal				
No. no sex	230	173	260	150 (147)
No. sex	0	2	4	6 (3)
% of total	0	1.1	1.5	3.8 (4)
Sports Illustrated				
No. no sex	99	106	158	104
No. sex	0	0	1	0
% of total	0	0	0.6	0

Note. Numbers in parentheses correct for duplicate occurrences of the same advertisements.

As shown in Table I, children were sometimes depicted in a sexualized manner in advertisements in the popular media. In the issues of the magazines surveyed, there was a total of 2336 advertisements containing children, and in 36 of those advertisements, children were depicted in a sexualized manner. Therefore, based on this survey, children were depicted sexually in about 1.5% of the advertisements containing children. This lends support to the first hypothesis that the portrayal of children in a sexualized manner has a nonzero frequency. The second hypothesis, that girls would be depicted sexually in advertisements more often than boys, was also supported. Of the 38 advertisements in this study that were found to have sexual content, girls were depicted in 34 (85%), while boys were depicted in only 6 (15%). A chi-square analysis showed that girls were depicted in a sexualized manner significantly more often than boys [$\chi^2 = 19.6(1)$, $p < .001$]. The third hypothesis, which posits that sexual depictions of children would increase over the four decades, was also supported. Table II

Table II. Frequency of the Sexualized Depiction of Children in Magazine Advertisements Containing Children over Four Decades

	1958-1959	1968-1969	1978-1979	1988-1989
Combined number	1	7	10 (8)	20 (12)
Mean % of total	0.2	1.2	1.3 (1)	4.7 (2.9)

Note. Numbers in parentheses correct for duplicate occurrences of the same advertisements.

shows that the combined number of sexual depictions for each decade increased slightly, but significantly, over all four decades [$\chi^2 = 19.91(3)$, $p < .001$]. The mean percentage of total child advertisements that these advertisements represented also showed an upward trend, although the percentage for 1978-1979 was nearly equivalent to the percentage noted in the previous decade.

The fourth hypothesis was also supported. As shown in Table III, magazines aimed at women (*Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies Home Journal*) did contain more sexually depicted child advertisements than did magazines aimed at men (*Playboy* and *Sports Illustrated*): 29 in women's magazines vs. 8 in men's magazines [$\chi^2 = 11.92(1)$, $p < .001$]. The fifth hypothesis was also supported by the data. Women's magazines had significantly more advertisements with children depicted sexually than did magazines aimed at both male and female readership [$\chi^2 = 11.76(1)$, $p < .001$].

The sixth hypothesis, however, was only marginally supported. This hypothesis stated that the more progressive magazine (*Cosmopolitan*) would have more advertisements that depict children in a sexualized manner than the more traditional women's magazine (*Ladies Home Journal*). As shown in Table III, although the progressive magazine did contain more such advertisements that depicted children in a sexual manner, the difference was not significant [$\chi^2 = 0.86(1)$, $p > .05$]. However, there were many more advertisements containing children in the *Ladies Home Journal* than in *Cosmopolitan* and therefore the nonsignificant result might be an artifact of a higher overall frequency of advertisements containing children. Thus to correct for this difference in base rates of child advertisements, the percentage of sexualized depictions of children in advertisements containing children was also examined. The suggestive advertisements in *Cosmopolitan* represented 8.1% of the total sample of advertisements using children, whereas those advertisements in *Ladies Home Journal* represented only 1.5% of the total sample of child advertisements from that magazine [$\chi^2 = 4.54(1)$, $p < .05$].

Table III. Frequency of the Sexualized Depiction of Children in Magazine Advertisements Containing Children by Type of Magazine

Category	Total number	% of Total
Magazines aimed at women	29 (23)	2.8 (2.2)
Magazines aimed at men	8 (6)	1.5 (1.2)
Magazines aimed at both sexes	1	0.13
Progressive magazine (CP)	17 (12)	8.1 (6)
Traditional magazine (LJ)	12 (9)	1.4 (1.1)

Note. Numbers in parentheses correct for duplicate occurrences of the same advertisements.

It may be useful to describe some of the advertisements that were judged as displaying children in a sexualized manner. One advertisement of a hot tub kit asked the reader to enjoy the "hot tub experience" and displayed two girls (approximately 5 years old) standing topless in a hot tub. Another, advertising the "bare facts" about a watch company, showed a girl, approximately 4 or 5 years old, standing naked and holding a watch. Other advertisements paired children with adults in sexually suggestion ways. One advertisement for a suntan lotion addressed itself to "the women" of the world and depicted both an adult female and a young girl presented identically in small matching bikinis, makeup, and similar positions. Cosmetic companies seemed prone to the same type of tactic. One company displayed four females, three adults, and one child in sarong-type clothing and makeup in sexually suggestive poses and stated that "the most unforgettable women" use their product. Finally, some advertisers used teenage sexuality as a means of attracting consumers. One clothing company displayed a teenage couple and the female was wearing a jacket that partially exposed her breasts. The girl was also wearing pants that were partially open. This picture was displayed with nothing other than the name of the company.

DISCUSSION

Although the frequency of sexualized depictions of children was not high, these results indicate that children at times were depicted in a sexualized manner in magazine advertisements. Across all magazines examined, the frequency at which children were depicted in a sexualized manner in advertisements containing children was 1.5%. The occurrence of the sexualized depictions of children was systematic in three ways: (1) girls were depicted sexually more often

than boys; (2) there was some evidence that this phenomenon has not decreased over the past four decades but, instead, might be increasing slightly; and (3) these depictions occurred more frequently in magazines targeted toward women rather than toward men or toward both genders.

It is beyond the scope of this study to assess the possible effects of this level of sexualization of children. It must be recognized that this level of sexual portrayal of children might not have any significant effects on the frequency with which children are sexually abused. Clearly, the vast majority of the advertisements with children did not display the child in a sexualized manner. This is commendable and does not engender concerns about negative effects. However, there are clear exceptions to this trend and any such portrayal is worrisome. It may be the case that any negative effect of the low level of potentially problematic advertisements is overridden by the large number of nonproblematic advertisements. Future work, perhaps patterned after the research of Malamuth and Check (1981, 1983) on adults' reactions to adult pornography, is needed on the impact on individuals to exposure to this kind of material. This research can test direct exposure to problematic advertisements and also examine the effects when this material is embedded in a series in which the majority of the advertisements do not contain sexualized depictions of children.

A search of the scholarly literature in advertising as well as consultation with an advertising expert failed to identify any material in this literature concerned with the sexualized depiction of children. There were articles in the popular press that covered the controversies concerning some specific advertisements, but there appears to be little scholarly examination of this issue. Ethical codes did not explicitly deal with this issue and thus this practice was not specifically designated as unethical. It is recommended that the scholars in this area attend to this issue and begin to consider how ethical codes should address this practice.

The finding that girls were much more frequently depicted in a sexual manner than boys was not surprising. This is consistent with previous findings that women are often depicted in sexualized ways in advertisements. Given that girls are more frequently abused than boys (Russell, 1986; Salter, 1992), this finding is to be expected.

Contrary to the notion that sexualized depictions of children may cause males to offend in the finding that these advertisements occurred at a greater frequency in magazines targeted at women. One area of research suggested by these findings is the impact of sexualized depictions of children on women. One possibility is that these advertisements help perpetuate and validate problematic gender roles, especially sexual objectification of females, as well as the bias that mainly the youthful are alluring. Thus sexualized depictions of children may function to condone viewing children in a sexualized manner and therefore may serve to disinhibit some of the protectiveness of older women.

Despite an increasing awareness of sexual abuse, there is no evidence to suggest that the sexual depiction of children is decreasing. With sexual liberalization and increasing explicitness in the mainstream media, it is not surprising that the most recent time period examined had the highest number of sexual depictions of children.

Before clear data exist on the impact of the sexualized depiction of children, it is premature to call for a moratorium on these materials. However, there is also a question of where the burden of proof lies. Given the possibility that these depictions in advertisements, as well as in popular films, and in other media may contribute to the likelihood that children are sexually abused, it is suggested that increased vigilance occur. Perhaps a voluntary ban on the part of advertisers and advertising agencies could occur.

The finding of a nonzero frequency of the sexualized depiction of children in advertisements raises a number of concerns: (1) What impact does exposure to this material at this frequency have on individuals? More specifically, does this contribute to pedophilic interests or actual abusive behavior on the part of some men? What effect does exposure to this have on females? Does it affect females' views regarding sexual abuse (for example, the manner in which they attribute blame?). Does it reinforce the view that youth is an all important standard of beauty for females? Does it contribute to a false sense of sexual competition between children and adults, particularly for females? What effect does it have on the child models? These important questions await further research.

REFERENCES

- American Humane Association (1988). *Highlights of official child neglect and abuse reporting 1986*. Denver, CO: American Humane Association.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women and rape*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Finkelhor, D. (1984). *Child sexual abuse: New theory and research*. New York: Free Press.
- Furby, L., Weinrott, M. R., & Blackshaw, L. (1989). Sex offender recidivism: A review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 105, 3-30.
- Jarvie, I. C. (1992). Child pornography and prostitution. In W. O'Donohue & J. Geer (Eds.), *The sexual abuse of children: Theory and research* (pp. 307-328). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kent, R. N., Kanowitz, J., O'Leary, K. D., & Cheiken, M. (1977). Observer reliability as a function of circumstances of assessment. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 10, 317-324.
- Laws, D. R., & O'Donohue, W. T. (1997). *Handbook of sexual deviance*. New York: Guilford (in press).
- Malamuth, N. M., & Check, J. V. P. (1981). The effects of mass media exposure on acceptance of violence against women: A field study. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 15, 436-446.
- Malamuth, N. M., & Check, J. V. P. (1983). Sexual arousal to rape depictions: Individual differences. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 92, 55-67.

- O'Donohue, W., & Elliott, A. N. (1992). Treatment of the sexually abused child: A review. *Journal of Child Clinical Psychology, 21*, 218-228.
- O'Donohue, W., Geer, J. H., & Elliott, A. (1992). The primary prevention of child sexual abuse. In W. O'Donohue & J. Geer (Eds.), *The sexual abuse of children: Clinical issues* (pp. 477-518). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pierce, R. L. (1984). Child pornography: A hidden dimension of child abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 8*, 483-493.
- Russell, D. (1986). *The secret trauma: Incest in the lives of girls and women*. New York: Basic Books.
- Salter, A. C. (1992). Epidemiology of child sexual abuse. In W. O'Donohue & J. Geer (Eds.), *The sexual abuse of children: Theory and research* (pp. 108-138). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Tyler, R. P., & Stone, L. E. (1985). Child pornography: Perpetuating the sexual victimization of children. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 9*, 313-318.
- Venkatesan, M., & Losco, J. P. (1975). Women in magazine ads: 1959-71. *Journal of Advertising Research, 15*, 49-54.
- Vincent, R. C., Davis, D. K., & Boruszkowski, L. A. (1987). Sexism on MTV: The portrayal of women in rock videos. *Journalism Quarterly, 64*, 750-755.
- Wyatt, G. E., & Peters, S. D. (1986). Methodological considerations in research on the prevalence of child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 10*, 241-251.