

What Do Couples Do? A Content Analysis of Couple Images in Consumer Magazine Advertising

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Abstract

The authors conducted a content analysis of couple images in advertisements in six consumer magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Men's Health*, *Esquire*, and *GQ*) published in 2005 and 2006. The results suggest that the typical couple image portrayed in ads in mainstream magazines was a young, heterosexual Caucasian couple with thin bodies and a trendy style either posing in front of the camera or enjoying leisure time in a relaxing setting. Men's magazines contained more financial or technology products, more foreign brands, more recreational activities, and more sensory messages, while women's magazines contained more beauty product, more group context, more safety appeal, and more ration messages.

Introduction

Advertising does not just tell us about the products; it also shows us the way we should live our lives. In one way or another, advertisers attempt to tie the product or service to our deepest and most basic psychological needs, such as security, self-esteem, respect, passion, and love. Therefore, we buy products not only for their material utilities but also for the symbolic meaning of those products as portrayed in their images (Elliot, 1997). These images can influence what consumers think, feel, and behave, sometimes in a very negative way (e.g., Pollay, 1986).

Many studies on social learning (Bandura, 1977) and media framing (Goffman, 1974) have provided evidence on how media portrayals affect an individual's perception of the portrayed subject. Research in social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) also suggested that individuals tend to compare themselves with idealized images in advertising, which leads to lower self-esteem and life satisfaction (e.g., Harrison, 2000; Zhou, Xue, & Zhou, 2002).

To better understand the impact of advertising images on individuals, it is important to study the content of mass media advertising. Many content analyses have examined various advertising images, such as gender, race, social status, and sexual appeal (e.g., Gould, 1994; Lindner, 2004; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Thomas & Treiber, 2000). However,

most of the studies focused on the descriptions of individual characteristics in advertising. The unit of analysis was always an individual model isolated from a group to demonstrate how individuals were portrayed in advertising in terms of physical features or social classifications. Few studies looked at advertising models in a group setting to find out how advertising describes our relationships with others, such as friends, family, or other social groups we belong to, which also has a strong impact on audiences.

Therefore, the current study is one of the few to examine human relationships instead of individual characteristics depicted in mass media advertising. The focus of this study is one of the frequently used advertising images — the couple image. There are many definitions for “couple” in different situations. In the current study a couple is defined as “two persons paired together” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008). Our goal is to examine all types of human relationships between two people in advertising, so they do not necessarily have to be romantically involved. Couple images in advertising are mostly used to represent love and companionship, one of the dearest needs in our lives.

For example, De Beers frequently uses images of lovers in its advertising campaigns to connect jewelry with love, and Clean & Clear has been using two “best friends forever” teenage girls in lots of ads. However, very little systematic research has analyzed relationships between two individuals in advertising. Few studies include couple images when examining sexual content or gender stereotypes in advertising (e.g., Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Thomas & Treiber, 2000), but couple images were not the focus of those studies.

A better understanding of couple images in advertising not only will tell us how they are being used as a persuasive strategy to sell products but also will lay the foundation for future research to measure their psychological impact on consumers. As the first study to explore the use of group images in advertising, the goal of the current research is to give a general examination of couple images in advertising in relation to a variety of important variables in advertising research, such as message strategy, sexual appeal, and stereotype issues. We will also look at differences by media type to see whether couple images are portrayed differently in different media.

Literature Review

Social Effects of Advertising

Based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals have a drive to make self-evaluation. As long as we live in a community and not in a secluded place, social comparisons are bound to occur (Wood, 1996). The importance of social comparison lies in its impact on a person’s perceived well-being, which depends on the chosen comparison target (Pettigrew, 1967). A substantial body of research shows that people are cognitive misers, and they like to use the most available information as references to do comparison (Richins, 1995). Considering the popularity and vividness of advertising images in our lives, it is reasonable to expect that many are in the top of our memory bins and have potential to be used as comparison references. Advertising images often titillate with idealized versions of

life, as they are frequently about the glamorous, the better, and the more. These idealized images can generate substantial psychological effects on their viewers such that viewers will self-compare with the images and may feel less satisfied with their own current circumstances, such as lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, or lower satisfaction with their body images (e.g., Harrison, 2000; Pollay, 1986; Richins, 1995; Zhou, Xue, & Zhou, 2002).

That is why it is important to examine the content of media advertisements so that we understand what types of comparison references are set up in advertising messages and what psychological effects they may lead to. Magazine advertising was chosen for several reasons. First, the majority of the variables measured in this study were from previous magazine advertising content analyses. Second, the magazine medium is extremely important for image-oriented advertising because of its high print quality and strong visual impact (Percy & Elliott, 2005). Therefore it is an appropriate medium to study advertising.

Advertising Message Strategies

An ad has to attract attention. One way to do that is to match advertising messages with consumers' needs. Several theoretical models have been established over the years to define advertising messages based on human needs, such as the FCB Grid (Vaughn, 1980), the Rossiter-Percy Grid (Rossiter, Percy, & Donovan, 1991), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). Recently, Taylor (1999) developed a six-segment message strategy wheel to measure advertising messages in relation to six human needs: ration needs (general information), acute needs (brand recognition under time pressure), routine needs (reminder for daily use), ego needs (self-benefit), social needs (social approval), and sensory needs (moment of pleasure). Different from previous motivation-based models, this model includes both consumer motivations and message characteristics, which makes it more appropriate for content analysis. Therefore, it was used in this study to identify message strategies related to couple images in advertising. Product category was also considered because a very important part of all message strategy models is based on the level of product involvement (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; Rossiter, Percy, & Donovan, 1991). The characteristics of the products and the relationships between the product and consumers will influence message strategies used in advertising. Our first two research questions were:

RQ1: What message strategies are used most and least in magazine ads featuring a couple?

RQ2: What product categories are advertised most and least using a couple in magazine ads?

Sex and Love in Advertising

One of the common themes in advertising, love and romance is the advertising appeal closely associated with couple images. It is often subsumed under sexual appeal in advertising research. It is true that romance novel, romantic fantasy, and romantic settings have been frequently used in advertising to arouse audiences (Biswas, Olsen, & Carlet, 1992; Gould, 1994; Stern, 1991), but we need to distinguish love and romance from sex to

examine its unique role in advertising and its impact on the audiences. A study done by Huang (2004) indicated that the impact of romantic love in advertising was different from the impact of sex appeals in advertising in terms of emotional responses and advertising attitude, which justified the importance of separating sex and romantic love in advertising research. Little research has been done in this area, and a lot of questions remain unanswered. Do advertisers use couple images for any other purposes than sexual appeal? How are the man and the woman portrayed as a couple in terms of sexual explicitness? To answer these questions, this study measured the sexual explicitness of the ad and the physical contact between the couple. The research questions were:

RQ3: Are sexually explicit images of men and women used in magazine ads featuring a couple?

RQ4: Are sexually explicit images of physical contact used in magazine ads featuring a couple?

Stereotypes of Couple Images in Advertising

Advertising stereotyping has been a prominent topic in the literature since the 1970s. Most discussed advertising stereotypes, including gender, age, race, body image, social status, and lifestyles/activities. For example, women were often depicted as dependent and decorative, sex objects, unemployed homemakers, and caregivers (Goffman, 1976; Leppard, et al., 1993), while males were portrayed in a more positive way (Brosius, Mundorf, & Staab, 1991; Kolber & Albanese, 1996). Previous research also suggested that older adults were typically underrepresented and negatively portrayed, and they were mainly used in advertisements containing a predominance of products designed to minimize the effects of aging, such as hair dyes, vitamins, and bladder control products (e.g., Baker & Goggin, 1994; Kubey, 1980).

The roles of minorities portrayed in advertising remain narrow and stereotypical, although the numerical representation of those groups has improved in recent years (Bristol, Lee, & Hunt, 1995; Thomas & Treiber, 2000). African Americans were often portrayed as domestic, sidekick, hypersexed, or athletic (e.g., Chapko 1976; Staples & Jones 1985), and Asian Americans were often depicted with technology-based products and in business settings (Taylor, Landreth, & Bang, 2005). In addition, a number of researchers have linked the idealized body images in advertisements to chronic dieting, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders in American females (Peterson, 1987; Solomon, 1992). Recently, men have become more and more concerned with body image (Grogan & Richards, 2002). Another stereotype in advertising is a glamorous image of our lives. Research has shown that advertisers frequently use appeals related to product consumption, such as luxury, leisure, and live for today in their messages (e.g., Chow & Amir, 2006).

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, most of those advertising stereotypes were examined with individual models, not in a social setting when paired with another person. The only study that focused on human relationships we could locate was Klassen, Jasper, and Schwartz's (1993) content analysis of ads with men and women pictured together.

There has not been an update study since then to examine human relationships between two models in advertising. Therefore, the current study examined stereotype-related issues using couple images in advertising. We were interested to find out what the typical couple image is in advertising in general. Our questions were:

RQ5: Are men and women portrayed in a stereotypical manner in magazine ads featuring a couple?

RQ6: In general, what is the typical couple image in magazine ads?

Another variable related to gender issue is media difference. Different media or programs usually contain different images. For example, only 8% of prime-time television commercials contain sexual images, while about 53% of magazines ads contain heterosexual couples (Lin, 1998; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999). Ads in men's magazines have been found to portray women more decoratively than ads in other types of magazines (Ferguson, Kreshel, & Tinkham, 1990). Therefore, media difference was included in the present study as another variable to explore the portrayal of stereotypical couple images in magazine advertising.

RQ7: Is there variation by magazine type regarding couple images in advertising?

Method

Sample

To assess the differences in the portrayals of couples to different audiences, the authors of this study conducted a content analysis of couple images in advertisements in six different consumer magazines published in 2005 and 2006. Three popular women's magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, and *Glamour*) and three popular men's magazines (*Men's Health*, *Esquire*, and *GQ*) were chosen based on the 2006 ABC report of consumer magazines with the highest single-copy sales (Magazine Publishers of America, 2008).

All these magazines belong to the same fashion/lifestyle category, which made them comparable. All full-page or larger ads featuring a discernible adult couple only and ads featuring an adult couple as main characters in a group were included (e.g., Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Soley & Reid, 1988), yielding 559 usable ads. Duplicated ads were included so we could understand the actual chance of magazine readers being exposed to such content during a certain period of time.

The operational definition for "couple" was "two adults (18 and older) paired by proximity and activity in the context of advertising," based on and revised from the definition in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2008). Therefore, the couple images coded in this study did not necessarily refer to two people involved in a romantic or sexual relationship. We chose this approach because it was difficult to identify whether two models were romantically involved and thus difficult to employ objective measures to achieve high intercoder reliability. In addition, by using a broader concept for "couple," we could look at

different types of relationships, not just romantic relationships, between two individuals portrayed in advertising.

Coding Categories

The coding categories in the present study were based on our research questions. Previously developed measurements for these categories were adopted in this study.

Product Categories. A 15-item product category scale was adopted from Mastin, Coe, Hamilton, and Tarr's (2004) study, which included beauty, children related, cleaning, fashion/accessories, financial services, food/non-alcoholic drink, health care, leisure, home appliance and furniture, pet related, PSAs, retail stores, technology, tobacco/alcohol, and transportation.

Message Strategies. We used Taylor's (1999) six-segment message strategy wheel to identify the communication strategies related to the use of couple images in each ad, which included six segments — ration (logical, practical need), acute (immediate, pressing, serious need), routine (regular, habitual, or customary need), ego (self-centered need), social (social interaction need), and sensory (bodily or sexual pleasures).

Sexuality of the Ad. The sexual explicitness of the ad was measured in two categories — dress and physical contact (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). Each discernible adult female or male model of the couple was classified into one of four ordinal categories of dress, depending on the style and amount of clothing worn: (1) demure, (2) suggestive, (3) partially clad, and (4) nude. The level of physical contact between the couple was classified into one of four ordinal categories: (1) no contact, (2) simple contact (e.g., holding hands), (3) intimate contact (e.g., kissing and embracing), and (4) very intimate contact (e.g., the depiction or suggestion of sexual intercourse or behavior).

Couple Stereotypes. The stereotypes of couples in advertising were measured in terms of age, race, body type, social status, and activities. First, models were identified by age (young, middle-aged, or elderly) and race (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, or other). Next, body type was defined as the physical appearance of the models. A three-dimension body type scale classified the models' body types into thin, muscular/athletic, or full-figured. Then Thomas and Treiber's (2000) social status measurements were adopted to identify the status of the couples in advertisements. Based on the visuals, words, and activities in the ads, each couple was identified as affluent, trendy, or everyday status. Finally, the authors developed a measurement for activities, which included work/office, work/house, recreation, leisure/relaxing, exercise, traveling, and posing.

Coding Procedure

Two coders, one male and one female, were trained in the coding categories. Three coding sessions were conducted until high intercoder reliability was achieved. Before coding the entire sample, the coders coded about 15% ($n = 78$) of the magazine ads. Using Cohen's Kappa analysis, average intercoder reliability across all variables was .94. (See Table 1).

<i>Table 1</i> <i>Intercoder Reliability</i>	
Variables	Cohen's Kappa
Product category	1.00
Model 1	
Gender	1.00
Age	1.00
Race	1.00
Body type	.98
Dress	.93
Model 2	
Gender	1.00
Age	.94
Race	.95
Body type	.93
Dress	.98
Physical contact	.96
Context (w/ or w/o group)	1.00
Activities	.90
Social status	.90
Message strategy	.89

Results

A total sample of 559 ads in six popular consumer magazines were analyzed in the present study, including *Cosmopolitan* (n = 106), *Vogue* (n = 69), *Glamour* (n = 141), *Esquire* (n = 81), *Men's Health* (n = 85), and *GQ* (n = 77). Most ads featured couples only (92.7%), while the rest placed the couple within a group (7.3%).

Message Strategies

Our first research question was to identify the message strategies used in magazine ads featuring a couple. It was found that the majority of the ads used social message strategy (39.4%), followed by sensory message strategy (26.1%) and ego message strategy (24.7%). The second research question was to explore whether couple images in advertising were related to certain product categories. The result indicated that couple images were used the most for fashion/accessories products (43.8%), followed by beauty products (27.9%) and healthcare products (10.2%). (See Table 2.)

Sex in Advertising

Our third and fourth research questions measured the sexual explicitness of the sample ads. About 63% of all the male models we coded were dressed in demure clothes;

only about 9% were dressed suggestively or partially clad. However, for female models, only 27.6% wore demure clothes, 38.6% were dressed suggestively, and 11.5% were partially clad. For models given full or partial face shots, their dress was coded as “can’t be determined.” In terms of physical contact, 27.2% of the couples did not have any contact, 38.6% had simple contact, 25.6% had intimate contact, and 8.6% had very intimate contact (see Table 2).

Couple Stereotypes

Research question five and six examined whether couples in advertising were depicted in a stereotypical manner. Our measurements included gender, age, race, body type, social status, and activities.

Gender. Most of the couples were male-female couples (83.5%, $n = 467$). There were 63 female-female couples (11.3%) — 60 in women’s magazines and three in men’s magazines. There were 29 male-male couples (5.2%) — four in women’s magazines and 25 in men’s magazines.

Age. Most couples were young (88.7%, $n = 496$). There were only 25 middle-aged couples (4.5%) and two elderly couples (0.4%). In addition, 23 couples consisted of a young female model and a middle-aged male model. The ages of the other 11 couples could not be determined because of insufficient information.

Race. Most couples were Caucasian (87.3%, $n = 488$). There were 11 African-American couples (2.0%), seven Hispanic couples (1.3%), and one Asian couple (0.2%). Forty-five couples (8.2%) were Caucasian models paired with models from other ethnic groups.

Body Type. Most male models were thin (43.6%, $n = 229$), followed by muscular/athletic (31.8%, $n = 167$) and “cannot determine” (23.6%, $n = 124$). Almost all the female models were thin (77.7%) except for those whose body type could not be determined (20.6%, $n = 122$). There were only five full-figured male models and three full-figured female models in the entire sample.

Social Status. The majority of couples appeared trendy (52.2%, $n = 292$). One hundred and thirty-six couples were identified as everyday (24.3%), and 68 couples were identified as affluent (12.2%). The social status of 63 couples (11.3%) could not be determined due to insufficient information in the ads.

Activities. In most ads the models posed in front of the camera without being involved in activities (49%, $n = 274$). A lot of the couples were portrayed in a leisure/relaxing setting (25.9%, $n = 145$), either at home or outdoors. There were also 97 couples involved in recreational activities (17.4%), and 24 were traveling (4.3%). Only five couples (.9%) were portrayed in a working setting, either in the office or at home. (See Table 2.)

Variables		Frequency	Percent (%)
Product category	Beauty product	156	27.9
	Fashion/accessories	245	43.8
	Financial services	8	1.4
	Food/non-alcoholic drinks	18	3.2
	Health care	57	10.2
	Leisure	7	1.3
	Retail stores	6	1.1
	Technology	18	3.2
	Tobacco/alcohol	24	4.3
	Transportation	17	3.0
Context	Couple only	518	92.7
	Part of a group	41	7.3
Gender	Male	525	47.0
	Female	593	53.0
Age (male)	Young	473	90.1
	Middle-aged	37	7.0
	Elderly	5	1.0
	Can't determine	10	1.9
Race (male)	Caucasian	482	91.9
	African-American	18	3.4
	Hispanic	12	2.3
	Asian	2	0.4
	Can't determine	11	2.1
Body type (male)	Thin	229	43.6
	Muscular/athletic	167	31.8
	Full-figured	5	1.0
	Can't determine	124	23.6
Dress (male)	Demure	329	62.7
	Suggestive	48	9.1
	Partially clad	48	9.1
	Nude	5	1.0
	Can't determine	95	18.1
Age (female)	Young	552	93.1
	Middle-aged	32	5.4
	Elderly	7	1.2
	Can't determine	2	0.3
Race (female)	Caucasian	539	90.9

	African-American	30	5.1
	Hispanic	8	1.3
	Asian	6	1.0
	Can't determine	10	1.7
Body type (female)	Thin	461	77.7
	Muscular/athletic	7	1.2
	Full-figured	3	0.5
	Can't determine	122	20.6
Dress (female)	Demure	164	27.6
	Suggestive	229	38.6
	Partially clad	68	11.5
	Nude	13	2.2
	Can't determine	119	20.1
Physical contact	None	152	27.2
	Simple contact	216	38.6
	Intimate contact	143	25.6
	Very intimate contact	48	8.6
Activities	Work/office	4	0.7
	Housework/yard work	1	0.2
	Exercise	1	0.2
	Leisure/relaxing	145	25.9
	Recreation	97	17.4
	Travel	24	4.3
	Posed	274	49.0
	Can't determine	13	2.3
Social status	Affluent	68	12.2
	Trendy	292	52.2
	Everyday	136	24.3
	Can't determine	63	11.3
Message strategy	Ration	48	8.6
	Acute	3	0.5
	Routine	4	0.7
	Ego	138	24.7
	Social	220	39.4
	Sensory	146	26.1

Media Differences

There were significant differences between men's magazines and women's magazines in terms of product categories, $\chi^2(10, 559) = 46.70, p < .01$. Women's magazines contained notably more beauty products and health care products than men's magazines, while men's magazines contained more financial services, technology, and transportation products than women's magazines. There were also significant differences between men's magazines and women's magazines in terms of context, $\chi^2(1, 559) = 4.98, p < .05$. About 9.5% of the

couples in women’s magazines were portrayed as part of a group, while only 4.5% of the couples in men’s magazines were in a group setting. There were significant differences between men’s magazines and women’s magazines in terms of setting and activities, $\chi^2 (7, 559) = 15.68, p < .05$. Although most couples were portrayed either posed or enjoying leisure time in the ads, there were more couples engaged in recreational activities in men’s magazines (23.5%) than in women’s magazines (12.6%). Additionally, there were significant differences between men’s and women’s magazines in terms of message strategies, $\chi^2 (5, 559) = 18.90, p < .01$. Ration messages were used more frequently in women’s magazines (11.2%) than in men’s magazines (5.3%), while sensory messages were used more frequently in men’s magazines (32.5%) than in women’s magazines (21.2%). However, there was no difference between men’s magazines and women’s magazines in terms of physical contact and social status of the couples. (See Table 3.)

*Table 3
Media Differences*

Variables		Men’s (%)	Women’s (%)
Product category*	Beauty product	22.2	42.0
	Fashion/accessories	51.9	49.0
	Financial services	2.9	0.1
	Food/non-alcoholic drinks	1.2	6.2
	Health care	4.9	18.5
	Leisure	1.6	1.2
	Technology	4.9	0.2
	Tobacco/alcohol	4.5	5.3
	Transportation	4.9	0.2
Country of origin*	Domestic	77.4	86.7
	Foreign	22.6	13.3
Context*	Couple only	95.4	90.5
	Part of a group	4.6	9.5
Physical contact	None	29.6	25.3
	Simple contact	33.3	42.7
	Intimate contact	26.7	24.7
	Very intimate contact	10.4	7.3
Activities*	Work/office	0.8	0.1
	Leisure/relaxing	22.6	28.5
	Recreation	23.5	12.7
	Travel	4.9	3.8
	Posed	2.9	2.0
	Can’t determine	44.9	52.2
Social status	Affluent	10.7	13.3
	Trendy	54.7	50.3
	Everyday	21.8	26.3

	Can't determine	12.8	10.1
Message strategy**	Ration	5.3	11.1
	Acute	0	1.2
	Routine	0	1.2
	Ego	21.8	26.9
	Social	40.3	38.6
	Sensory	32.5	21.2

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Discussion

How are couples portrayed in advertisements? Who are they? What do they do? What messages are they trying to tell us? These are the questions we attempted to answer in the present study. In general, based on the results, a typical couple portrayed in ads in mainstream men's and women's magazines is a young, male-female Caucasian couple with thin bodies and a trendy style. They were either posing in front of the camera or enjoying leisure time in a relaxing setting.

Social Appeal and Individuality

Because a couple means there is more than one person, it is reasonable to expect that social appeals would be used for couple images in advertising. The current study found that the most popular product categories related to couple images were fashion/accessories (43.8%) and beauty products (27.9%). Most of those products are advertised as a way to satisfy consumers' social need, which explains why the most popular message strategies used in the sample ads were social message strategy (39.4%), to show social rewards, such as success or popularity; and sensory message strategy (26.1%), to show appreciation of the companionship and moment of pleasure.

However, ego message strategy (24.7%) was also frequently used in the sample ads. Although lots of the couples were pictured together, there was no obvious relationship between the two models. According to the results, the majority (49%) of the couples were simply posing in front of the camera. More than a quarter (27.2%) did not have any physical contact. The only reason those couples are paired together is to represent different target audiences in terms of gender, age, race, or lifestyle. Therefore, the messages in those ads are actually focused on individuals. This is especially true for the same-sex couples. Results showed that the dominant message strategy used with same-sex couples was ego strategy (61%). It is also possible that, as one of the fundamental American beliefs, individuality has always been one of the dominant values in advertisements. It would be interesting to look at couple images in advertising in more collectivistic countries and see if different results could be found. In addition, how audiences perceive social and ego message strategies is also interesting. Can they tell the difference? How can this influence their perception of the product? All these issues should be explored in future studies.

Gender and Sex Appeal

Consistent with previous research, most female models were dressed suggestively (38.6%) or partially clad (11.5%), while most male models were demurely dressed (62.7%). However, the couples were having either simple physical contact (38.6%), no contact at all (27.2%), or intimate physical contact (25.6%). Only 8.6% of the couples were having very intimate physical contact that suggested sexual activities. That is to say, social appeal rather than sexual appeal is more popular when using couple images in advertising. In future research regarding couple images, we need more variables that are not related to sexuality to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this issue.

The stereotype image for women was confirmed in this study as female models were portrayed in a more decorative role. They were always young, thin, and suggestively dressed, whether they were paired with the opposite sex or same sex, a younger partner or older partner. While more men have been portrayed in suggestive dresses or decorative roles in recent years (e.g., Baird & Grieve, 2006; Kolber & Albanese, 1996), they are still in control when portrayed as part of a couple. This study found that, when paired with a woman, male models were rarely portrayed as sexual objects. There is no difference between male-oriented magazines and female-oriented magazines, which means it is a relatively universal approach when it comes to gender portrayals in advertising.

Idealized Couple Images

As mentioned earlier, a typical couple portrayed in ads in mainstream men's and women's magazines is a young, male-female Caucasian couple with thin body and trendy style; most of them are enjoying leisure time in a relaxing setting. It sounds like a beautiful picture. Everybody is good looking and having fun. But is it too beautiful? It may make you want to buy a ticket to Hawaii or put on some perfume for the evening, which is exactly what the advertisers want. But is that all? Advertising has always been criticized for using too many idealized images. Scholars argue that these idealized images can generate substantial psychological effects on their viewers such that viewers will self-compare with the images and may feel less satisfied with their own circumstances, leading to lower self-esteem and lower life satisfaction (e.g., Harrison, 2000; Pollay, 1986; Richins, 1995; Zhou, Xue, & Zhou, 2002).

In addition, most couples in the sample ads were Caucasian (87.3%). There were only 11 African-American couples (2.0%), seven Hispanic couples (1.3%), and one Asian couple (0.2%). Although a good number of couples (8.2%, $n = 45$) were Caucasian models paired with models from other ethnic groups, most were not interacting with each other. They were simply paired together to represent different target audiences. Therefore, the results of this study may not be applied to couple images in ethnic magazines.

Media Differences

This study found significant differences between men's magazines and women's magazines with regard to product category, message strategy, and activities, which suggests that advertisers do use different advertising strategies to appeal to different target audiences. Men's magazines contained more financial/technology products, more recreational activities,

and more sensory messages, while women's magazines contained more beauty product, more safety appeals, and more ration messages. There were also more same sex couples in women's magazines, mostly female-female couples, although there was no suggestion of sexual relationship between the models. Ego message strategy was the most frequently used strategy in this situation. In addition, compared with their male counterparts, female-female couples were more likely to have simple physical contact (47.6%), such as holding hands or hugging, while 86% of the male-male couples did not have any contact at all. This is consistent with findings from previous research in gender roles that suggest women are more dependent and rely on social networks, while men are more independent and work alone (e.g., Wolin, 2003).

Limitations and Future Research

Overall, the findings of this research provide information about couple images in advertising, which has not been studied thoroughly by advertising scholars. We can learn from this study how couple images are being used by different magazines for different products with different purposes, which should be important for both marketers and advertising researchers. As the first step to investigate the use of couple images in advertisements, however, several limitations should be noted when evaluating the findings of this research.

First, we analyzed only six magazines — *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Men's Health*. Although they are popular magazines with the highest single-copy circulation, they represent only a particular group of the mass media, which could have influenced our coding variables, such as product category and message strategy. Therefore, our results cannot be applied to all magazines. Future studies should include a more diverse group of magazines, such as African-American magazines, Hispanic magazines, teenager magazines, and elderly magazines, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this issue. Television commercials should also be compared with magazine ads because they speak to different audiences.

In addition, during our coding, several issues of *Vogue*, *Esquire*, and *GQ* magazines were missing from the library, so our sample did not include all the ads featuring couples in 2005 and 2006. Compared with women's magazines (n = 316), men's magazines (n = 243) featured fewer ads with couples. Although it was not a major concern in this study, future comparative studies between men's and women's media may want to include similar numbers of ads in each group.

As we mentioned above, one of the goals of the current research was to lay the foundation for studying the effects of couple images in advertising on consumers. In future studies, we could look at whether couple images can help ad/brand recall or ad/brand likeability, whether the use of couple images is more effective for certain products or for certain genders, or whether they will cause negative social comparisons between consumers and advertising models and influence their self-concept, life satisfaction, and so forth.

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