



Grooming ten-year-olds with gender stereotypes? A content analysis of preteen and teen girl magazines[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Extensive research shows a strong body focus in media aimed at teen girls and adult women; less is known about the content of media aimed at preteen girls. The present study investigated differences in the content of preteen versus teen girl magazines. Additionally, the content of independent compared to mainstream magazines was examined. Media frames, which are dominant themes present in media stories, used in content about the body were examined. Finally, the prevalence of appearance-focused versus non-appearance-focused content was assessed. Advertisements and general stories were analyzed. Results indicate that teen and mainstream magazines contained more appearance content than preteen and independent magazines. Appearance media frames were more common in teen than preteen magazines. Finally, teen and mainstream magazines contained more appearance-focused than non-appearance-focused content, whereas the opposite was true for preteen and independent magazines. Findings are discussed in terms of objectification theory and gender socialization practices.

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Introduction

The primary topics of media aimed at female viewers are altering the body to conform to beauty ideals and emphasizing sexual appeal (Slater, Tiggemann, Hawkins, & Werchon, 2012; Ward & Harrison, 2005). These topics are linked to the standard of female beauty which has become increasingly thin and sexualized over time (Daniels & Gillen, 2015; Sypeck, Gray, & Ahrens, 2004). Exposure to this ideal, which is distributed widely through media, is associated with a number of negative effects for girls and women including body dissatisfaction (see American Psychological Association [APA], 2007 for a summary). Whereas it is clear that attractiveness is a strong focus of media aimed at adolescent girls and women, it is not clear whether this appearance focus extends to media aimed at a preteen girl audience. It is important to investigate this possibility because preteen magazines may be grooming girls to develop a focus on appearance at younger ages. Further, magazine consumption is especially predictive of thin ideal internalization in children under age 18 (Levine & Murnen, 2009); therefore, it is advisable to know if media directed at

younger children contain appearance-focused content. Accordingly, the present study investigated the content of magazines (both editorial and advertising) aimed at preteen girls as compared to teen girls. In addition, the content of mainstream magazines as compared to independent magazines was examined.

A large body of research has examined the relationship between mass media exposure and primarily adolescent and young adult women's body perceptions. In general, these studies have found that media engagement is negatively associated with body satisfaction and positively associated with negative eating behaviors, with small to moderate effect sizes in most studies (Ferguson, 2013; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009). Adolescents, especially girls, may be uniquely impacted by media content. Both boys and girls experience major changes to their physical appearance during puberty and undergo significant cognitive advances that enable them to make comparisons between their bodies and those depicted in media (Daniels & Gillen, 2015; Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Jones, 2004; Smolak & Levine, 2001). Some work has found that, even at younger ages, engagement with media is related to body dissatisfaction among girls through the internalization of the thin ideal (ages 10–13; Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessner, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003) and as a foundation for peer appearance conversations (ages 9–12; Clark & Tiggemann, 2006).

Several studies have found that adolescent girls internalize media body ideals to a greater degree, and report higher rates of body dissatisfaction, compared to adolescent boys (e.g., Hargreaves

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& Tiggemann, 2004; Jones, 2001; Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2007; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004). Experimental research has also shown that exposure to magazine images of models predicts lower body satisfaction and self-esteem in adolescent girls (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005; Daniels, 2009a). Even girls as young as five show these patterns (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003). These findings suggest that girls, unlike boys, may begin to internalize cultural beauty standards portrayed in the media at a young age and continue to do so throughout development.

Theoretical Framework

Objectification theory provides an explanatory framework for how media impacts girls' self-perceptions. It proposes that female bodies are frequently sexually objectified within Westernized cultures, where women's bodies are depicted as objects or tools for the pleasure of others, specifically men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification can occur within interpersonal relationships and through engagement with media, e.g., viewing a naked female torso used to display a beer logo. Exposure to sexual objectification in the environment can result in viewing one's body from an outsider's perspective, termed self-objectification. Self-objectification entails focusing on what one's body looks like, an objectified view of the self, instead of what it can do, a non-objectified view of the self. Self-objectification is apparent in some girls as early as grade school (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007). A number of negative outcomes are associated with self-objectification including, for example, body surveillance (e.g., McKinley & Hyde, 1996), body shame (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998), and heightened risk for disordered eating (e.g., Slater & Tiggemann, 2010).

There has been very little research to date on the role of media in self-objectification among younger samples. One study, however, prospectively examined the internalization of beauty ideals presented in media (called media-ideal internalization), self-objectification, shame and anxiety about the body and appearance, dietary restraint, and binge eating among Italian teen girls and boys (ages 14–15 at Time 1) over a 3-year period (Dakanalis et al., 2015). Results demonstrated that media-ideal internalization predicted later self-objectification which ultimately predicted dietary restraint and binge eating due to increased negative feelings about the body. Cross-sectional research with Dutch teen girls (ages 13–18; *M* age = 15.6 years) found indirect relationships between consuming sexually objectifying media and self-objectification and body surveillance through the internalization of beauty ideals presented in media (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Finally, a cross-sectional study with preadolescent Australian girls (*M* age = 11.6 years) found that magazine and Internet exposure predicted self-objectification which predicted body shame which, in turn, predicted dieting and depressive symptoms (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015). Taken together, these studies suggest that consuming appearance-focused media has implications for increased self-objectification as well as problematic eating behaviors and impaired psychological well-being among adolescent and preadolescent girls.

Magazines

A national study of media use among U.S. youth ages 8–18 revealed that 35% read magazines in a typical day in 2009 and spent on average 26 min per day in that activity (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Younger children (ages 8–10) spent the same amount of time reading magazines per day as older children (ages 15–18). In contrast, a small-scale study of U.S. children ages 8–11 (*n* = 50) found higher frequency reading patterns (Jung & Peterson,

2007). A sizable portion of girls reported reading magazines sometimes (26.3%) and often (26.3%) compared to never (36.8%). Of girls who reported reading magazines, the most common frequency was 4–7 days per week (26.3%; followed by 0–1 days, about once a month, and 2–3 days). Finally, girls reported reading fashion (e.g., *Seventeen*, *Cosmo Girl*) and teen celebrity (*TeenBop*) magazines most often. Thus, some younger girls regularly consume magazines with a heavy appearance focus that are aimed at a teen audience.

Mainstream magazines, defined as those published by major media conglomerates (e.g., Hearst Corporation) and containing commercial advertising, primarily feature women in stereotypically feminine roles or as sexual objects (Collins, 2011). Content analyses have found that these magazines depict predominantly young Caucasian women, with increasingly thin body types (Sypeck et al., 2004; Wasylkiw, Emms, Meuse, & Poirier, 2009), frequently displayed partially clothed and in sexual or submissive positions (Collins, 2011). Similar findings have been found in mainstream magazines aimed at teenage viewers (Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2013). Content analyses of these magazines (e.g., *Seventeen*) demonstrate that general appearance and body problems are primary topics (Ballentine & Ogle, 2005; Davalos, Davalos, & Layton, 2007; Luff & Gray, 2009; Ward & Harrison, 2005). For example, a study of *Seventeen* magazine found that girls' bodies are depicted and described as problems that require maintenance to fix (Ballentine & Ogle, 2005). Acne, hair, odor, and hip/thigh fat are targeted as undesirable and unattractive features that require extensive body maintenance routines to eliminate. This emphasis on appearance has been a dominant focus in *Seventeen* since at least the early 1960s constituting approximately half of the magazine's content in 1961, 1972, and 1985 (Peirce, 1990). In addition, the presence of dieting and exercise information has significantly increased in mainstream teen girl magazines over the last fifty years (Luff & Gray, 2009), suggesting that these magazines increasingly focus on solutions to appearance-based problems.

To date, no content analysis to our knowledge has investigated whether this appearance focus, broadly-construed, found in magazines aimed at teen girls extends to both the editorial and advertisement content of magazines aimed at preteen girls. More targeted content analyses with a specific focus have begun to examine this issue, however. For example, Graff et al. (2013) found significant increases across time in sexualizing characteristics, specifically low-cut tops and tight-fitting clothing, in selected issues of *Seventeen* (teen target audience) and *Girls' Life* (preteen target audience) magazines from 1971 to 2011. In a study of advertisements in *Girls' Life* magazine, Velding (2014) found that beauty and cosmetics (9%) as well as clothes and accessories (9%) were the least common types of ad. However, regardless of product, there was an appearance-focus present in almost half of all ads analyzed (44%), for example, a sneaker with highly feminine design elements such as flowers and charms. Finally, in a review of media aimed at girls, Lamb and Brown (2006) reported that mainstream preteen magazines (specifically *Girls' Life* and *Discovery Girl*) do have an emphasis on appearance and contain thin girl models, but may also depict actual girls of various sizes instead of models and contain stories about real girls around the U.S. and the world. Taken together, the limited evidence currently available suggests that an appearance focus may be present in preteen girl magazines (specifically *Girls' Life*), but there may also be more diversity in types of advertisements and in portrayals of girls' bodies in these magazines. Accordingly, we predicted that mainstream magazines aimed at teen girls would have more appearance focus, which likely encourages an objectified view of the self in readers, than mainstream magazines aimed at preteen girls (Hypothesis 1).

No content analysis research to our knowledge has yet investigated whether independent magazines, defined as magazines published by small presses outside the major publishing industry

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