



Shifts in media images of women appearance and social status from 1960 to 2010: A content analysis of beauty advertisements in two Australian magazines

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 July 2015

Received in revised form 10 August 2015

Accepted 10 August 2015

Available online 5 September 2015

Keywords:

Ageing

Appearance

Body image

Older women

Beauty

Media influence

ABSTRACT

Ageing well and successful ageing have become important themes to describe how older individuals should keep ageing at bay. Products and services aimed at controlling ageing have become associated with ageing well. In this study we aimed to analyse the representation of older women in advertisements specific to appearance and ageing. In particular, we sought to explore how ageing for women was presented in the media over a period 50 years and when advertisements began to use the term 'anti-ageing'. A content analysis of 710 advertisements from two prominent Australian women's magazines, from 1960 to 2010, was conducted. Analyses showed that advertisements provided a narrow range of images representing women's physical appearance. The underlying messages were that ageing is problematic and that it had become unforgivable to show any signs of ageing. Text contained in advertisements for beauty products from the two chosen Australian magazines often gave specific and prescriptive advice to women on ways to avoid losing their youthful appearance. It was concluded that media relay powerful messages to spread and modify cultural beliefs informing individuals of a range of options that propose liberation from the problem of ageing.

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Introduction

The media is a powerful presence in today society with women in particular facing a barrage of visual imagery comparing youth with age (Derenne & Beresin, 2006). Alongside popular cultural lifestyle magazines showing glamorous, youthful models and celebrities there is a discourse on women moral obligation to maintain their bodies and to combat the physical signs of ageing (Featherstone, 2010).

We live in a society where age has become an encompassing identity (Cruikshank, 2013) with age seen as being problematic. Through in-depth interviews with 44 women aged 50 to 70, Hurd-Clarke and Griffin (2008) found a social obsession with youthfulness and discrimination against ageing was evident in the women's narratives. The women's experiences brought to light the pressures placed upon them to keep ageing

at bay. Consequently women masked the signs of ageing by colouring their hair, wearing youthful clothes, and some choosing to have cosmetic surgery (Maine, 2010). Paralleling this avoidance of showing one's age is the absence of older women in media images, which could further exacerbate the feelings of invisibility older adults speak of (Borland & Akram, 2007; Chrisler, 2007), and encourage masking one's age (Ballard, Elston, & Gabe, 2005; Chrisler, 2011).

Media relay powerful messages to spread and modify cultural beliefs informing individuals of a range of options that propose liberation from the problem of ageing. The implicit message being that one can control the visible signs of ageing, which are no one's fault but one's own (Calasanti, 2005). With Internet use becoming more prominent Calasanti (2007) examined 96 websites promoting anti-ageing products. Evidenced were websites promoting numerous products making unsubstantiated claims, marketed with disclaimers. These websites were explicit in framing ageing as a disease

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with one even stating that “ageing will make you physically and mentally disabled” (Calasanti, 2007) and hence ageing *should* be controlled.

Based on the notion of decline and loss, media increasingly presents ageing as frail or demented. In the same way the term anti-ageing encourages denial and assumes loss. Yet pitting age against youth presumes the superiority of the young (Cruikshank, 2013), thus creating the notion that individuals need to fit into a category that defines them by their chronological age (Gullette, 2004). Rather than being identified as man or woman, white or black our identity marker becomes “age”.

The significant changes to physical appearance such as weight gain, grey hair, and loss of skin plasticity reflect normal ageing processes (Jankowski, Diedrichs, Williamson, Christopher, & Harcourt, 2014) yet as women journey through the life course they encounter media images attaching high values to a youthful appearance, encouraging them to mask any visible signs of ageing (Twigg, 2004). Twigg argues that consumer culture has developed an approach that posits women as a project to be worked on, and a subject of self-scrutiny whereby changes to the body are continually monitored. Such pressures can be difficult to resist, as although many women may be aware that ageing is unavoidable, ageism and a high regard for a youthful appearance can compel women to engage in behaviours that mask the physical signs of ageing (Hurd-Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Jankowski et al., 2014).

Body and appearance dissatisfaction can be associated with comparing oneself to others (Bessenoff, 2006; Blaine & McElroy, 2002; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Tiggemann and McGill (2004) conducted an experiment whereby 126 professional Australian adult women, aged 18 to 25 years, viewed Australian magazine advertisements of either full-body, body-part or product images. Either appearance or social comparison was the focus for each of the intervention groups. Results confirmed that thin ideal internalisation and a tendency towards appearance-related social comparison moderated media effects on body dissatisfaction. However, internalisation was more central to predicting women's anxiety than general social comparison. Thus, the researchers found that when women were presented with advertisements the extent to which they compared their own overall appearance and body parts with the image, was predictive of negative mood and body dissatisfaction.

Reflected in magazines are the changing economic and cultural factors that can influence consumer behaviour (Zimmerman, Holm, & Haddock, 2001). They can be conceptualized as a culture site where discourses might offer specific ways of thinking about gender, women and their bodies in much the same way as self-help literature (Zimmerman et al., 2001). With this approach, advertisements use appeals linked to current societal expectations about women's appearance containing prescriptive advice that can influence consumer behaviour about appropriate conduct and gender roles (Lindner, 2004).

Contemporary advertisements emphasize age related physiognomy, with anti-ageing products presented as solutions to the problem of ageing (Coupland, 2007), yet there is very little research that focuses on the powerful underlying specific self-help messages about ageing that

women are receiving through these advertisements. Focusing on how women and ageing have been portrayed over a period of 50 years, the current study examined advertisements for beauty products featured in two prominent Australian women's magazines. The aims of the study were to determine:

- a) When advertisements changed their focus to draw attention to the ageing process.
- b) When the term anti-age first appear in advertisements for beauty products.
- c) What predominant prescriptive self-help messages about ageing were contained in the advertisements.
- d) What images models used in the advertisements presented to ageing women.
- e) What messages regarding women's place in society were shown across the years.

Research design and method

A content analysis of print advertisements aimed at women across five decades in two prominent Australian magazines was conducted. Explored were five key areas of interest: the ageing process; women's place in society; stereotypes of women; anti-ageing; and predominant prescriptive messages. Content analysis is a flexible method for analysing text data. This research method does not aim to give a literal description of the data but seeks to give a subjective interpretation of text using a systematic approach to classifying, coding and identifying key themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004). Attention to language and emerging patterns was considered in analysing the data in order to record codes and patterns that emerged. The data were coded and recorded according to the method outlined by Krippendorff (2004) whereby, as the data are coded and recoded the codes become more refined. A copy of the aims of the study was kept on hand while the coding procedure was conducted to enable the researcher to remain focused (Saldaña, 2012). Two researchers coded the advertisements with a reliability score across both coders of 90%. Those advertisements that did not have unanimous consent were further discussed to reach consensus and were then classified into what was deemed the appropriate category.

Materials

Although Australian readers enjoy many fashion and beauty magazines, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Harpers Bazaar* are the leading Australian publications. While there are no fashion magazines specifically aimed at individuals over 50 years, for the purpose of this study *The Australian Women's Weekly* (further referred to as *The Weekly*), and *The Australian Vogue* (further referred to as *Vogue*) were chosen to represent the changing face of print advertisements addressed to women during the 50 years from 1960 to 2010. The criteria for determining the choice of magazine for this study were based on circulation figures, appeal, age of target audience and affordability. *The Weekly* a traditional style women's magazine, was chosen because of its popularity among women of all ages, diverse readership and affordability. Launched in 1933, *The*

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