
The Portrayal of Children in Magazine Advertising: A Post-Apartheid Study

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ABSTRACT

A content analysis is presented of the portrayal of child actors in advertisements obtained from nine consumer magazines over a three month period in 1983, 1987, and 1997. A limited number of studies have investigated the portrayal of children in magazine advertisements, but no previous study looked exclusively at the *roles* children depict in advertisements. The primary objective of the present study was to describe the various roles children portray in full page magazine advertisements. Secondary objectives focused on the age and sex of the models and the use of children of different races in the same advertisement. The results indicate that children are portrayed in seven different roles in the advertisements. Suggestions for further research are offered.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa has been characterised by dramatic changes over the last decade. Apart from a new political order, significant transformation has been taking place in the social, educational and business spheres. These changes bring with them many new marketing opportunities. The redistribution of income and rapid westernisation of Black South Africans is of special interest to South African marketers. Like their counterparts in other countries, they are beginning to realise that the youth market is a segment that cannot be ignored.

The use of children as models in advertising is believed to be a very effective method advertisers apply to communicate with parents and other children. The child actor in the advertisement is used as a substitute communicator to convey the advertising message to potential consumers. In many instances children figure as symbols in the advertisement to attract the attention of both adults and other children and to lend a specific meaning to the advertising message. It can be expected that a child will identify more easily with a child model depicted in a social situation than with an adult. This article reviews how marketers in South

Africa portray children in magazine advertisements in two very distinct periods in the country's history, namely before and after the new government of President Nelson Mandela came to power in 1994. An empirical study was conducted to determine how frequently children appear in full page advertisements, the roles they play, the age and gender of the child model, and in particular if children of *different races* are depicted in the same advertisement. In order to put this topic into perspective, the following paragraphs will provide a global overview of marketing to children and how marketers address this issue.

MARKETING TO CHILDREN: AN ETHICAL MINEFIELD?

Advertising to children has been a major focus of public debate and concern in many countries over the years. Marketers face a dilemma when advertising to children. On the one hand they must be sensitive to ethical issues, on the other hand they must make full use of the opportunity to create powerful messages that will attract the attention of potential customers — and this includes the very lucrative youth market. How marketers in a few major countries address this issue is worth noting.

Young people in China have money to spend and are very brand conscious. According to Johnstone (1996) advertisers are increasingly looking to sway the minds of children in China.

At Saatchi and Saatchi plans were under way in 1996 to set up a unit in its Shanghai office aimed at developing a better understanding of how children in China respond to advertising. All advertisements in China are censored before they are aired or printed. The guidelines advocate respect for authority and filial piety, which corresponds in some sense with the African concept of *Ubuntu*. Almost universally, advertising in China shows visions of a healthy, happy family life, says Johnstone. A section of the new advertising law in China applies particular restrictions to children's products. Those producing pharmaceutical products cannot show children in a commercial, even if the product is for children. Products such as Tylenol cough medicine must be advertised by showing an adult recommending the product to a parent for use for his or her child.

In the United States virtually every advertising practice comes under the jurisdiction of the Federal Trade Commission (Bovée *et al.*, 1995). Groups such as ACT (Action for Children's Television) and CARU (Children's Advertising Review Unit) have been particularly active in the field of advertising to children. CARU was established in 1974 by the National Advertising Division of the

Council of Better Business Bureaus for the purpose of: (1) monitoring children's advertising for truth and accuracy, (2) evaluating proposed children's advertising, (3) promoting research into children's advertising, and (4) disseminating information to the public (Rajeev, Myers & Aaker, 1996).

The major issues are whether television advertising to children is inherently unfair, whether it causes children to make poor product decisions, whether it increases parent-child conflict, and whether it results in undesirable socialisation of children. The broader issues, particularly associated with toys and games that involve violence, are whether advertising of such games, or the games themselves, should be disallowed. A related question is whether advertising, even though it does not contain violent material, should be sponsoring television programmes that do depict violent scenes that can be seen by children.

The controversy surrounding the issue of children's advertising has not only generated an ongoing stream of research on the effects of children's advertising but has also encouraged the advertising industry to regulate this practise carefully. CARU revised its written guidelines in 1977 and again in 1983. The following are the five basic principles on which guidelines for advertising directed at children are based (Wells, Burnett & Moriarty, 1995):

- Advertisers should always take into account the level of knowledge, sophistication, and maturity of the audience.
- Realising that children are imaginative and that make-believe play constitutes an important part of the growing up process, advertisers should exercise care not to exploit that imaginative quality of children.
- Recognising that advertising may play an important part in educating the child, information should be communicated in a truthful and accurate manner with full recognition by the advertiser that the child may learn practices from advertising, which can affect his or her health and well being.
- Advertisers are urged to capitalise on the potential of advertising to influence social behaviour by developing advertising that, wherever possible, addresses itself to social standards generally regarded as positive and beneficial, such as friendship, kindness, honesty, justice, generosity and respect for others.
- Although many influences affect a child's personal and social development, it remains the prime responsibility of the parents to provide guidance for children. Advertisers should contribute to this parent-child relationship in a constructive manner.

According to Bradley (1995) advertising to children in Europe is either hamstrung, as advertisers see it, or regulated, as the governments concerned view it.

- In *Finland*, Santa's homeland, child actors may not speak or sing the name of a product in commercials. When it comes to advertising sweets, they must not appear on the screen at all; children munching sweeties are also out of order in the *Netherlands*.
- In neighbouring *Sweden* no child may be depicted playing with "war toys", and advertisements may not show the price of toys.
- On *Swedish* TV, all ads aimed at "gaining the attention" - rather a difficult concept to quantify - of children under the age of 12 are banned.
- In *Turkey*, children can only watch television commercials in the presence of an adult.
- In *France*, anyone under 16 is banned from enunciating a product name in an advertisement; they cannot wear the colours, logo, brand name or initials of any product; and they can only introduce a product in a commercial when "here exist a direct link between the product and child usage when shown together with adults".
- In *Greece* advertising of all toys was banned from 1987 until 1998, however, the ban continues on television for all toy ads before 11 p.m.
- In *Italy* commercial breaks are prohibited in cartoon programmes "aimed" at children.
- One of many regulations in the *United Kingdom* state that no product or service may be advertised, and no method of advertising may be used which might result in harm to children (anyone aged 15 or under) physically, mentally or morally, and no method of advertising may be employed which takes advantage of the natural credulity and sense of loyalty of children.

In **South Africa** the Advertising Standards Authority (1996) regulates the control of advertising to children. Some of the regulations relating to advertising and children are the following:

- No advertisement is allowed which encourages children to enter strange places or to converse with strangers in an effort to collect coupons, wrappers, labels or the like.
- No advertisement is allowed which leads children to believe that if they do not own the product advertised they would be inferior in some way to other children.
- To help in the fair portrayal of free gifts for children, television advertisements should, where necessary, make it easy to see the true size of a gift by showing it in relation to some common object against which its scale can be judged.
- While it is recognised that children are not the direct purchasers of many products over which they are naturally allowed to exercise preference, care should be taken that they are not encouraged to make themselves a nuisance to other people in the interests of any particular product or service. In an

advertisement offering a free gift, a premium or a competition for children, the main emphasis of the advertisement must be on the product with which the offer is associated.

- With regard to *safety*, the following regulations *inter alia* apply:
 - Children should not appear to be unattended in street scenes unless they are obviously old enough to be responsible for their own safety; should not be shown playing in the road unless it is clearly shown to be a play area or other safe area; and should not be shown stepping carelessly off the pavement or crossing the road without due care.
 - Children should not be seen leaning dangerously out of windows or over bridges, or climbing dangerous cliffs.
 - Small children should not be shown climbing up to high shelves or reaching up to take things from a table above their heads.
 - Medicines, disinfectants, antiseptics and caustic substances must not be shown within reach of children without close parental supervision, nor should unsupervised children be shown using these products in any way.

Concern about social issues and other possible negative effects of advertising on children has not been such a sensitive topic in South Africa compared to other countries, especially the UK and the USA. One issue which causes some debate from time to time, is that of tobacco advertising. Van Niekerk (1997) states that tobacco companies' expenditure on advertising is a direct cause of higher cigarette consumption in South Africa. According to research findings of the Medical Research Council at the University of the Witwatersrand, 95 out of 1350 (7%) five-year-olds in Soweto and Johannesburg have already smoked. Almost 20% of these youngsters indicated they would smoke when they are adults.

HOW MARKETERS USE CHILDREN IN ADVERTISING

The way marketers use children in advertising in various countries will obviously differ. Our attention will briefly focus on two of them, namely the United States and the United Kingdom. In the **United Kingdom** the use of children in advertising is a touchy subject for politicians and for the public. According to Jane Bainbridge (1996) the controversy surrounding this topic was boosted when an advertisement appeared in which a child was used to put across adult ideas. In a campaign for a sweet product the agency came up with a unique idea to entice children. The new sweet commercial was set in a child's brain (Green, 1996).

One of the more than 216 ready-to-eat cereal brands in the United States of America was in danger of losing market share. A campaign called the "Taste You Can See" portrayed children as "in the know" - able to see what adults cannot. In the spots according to Wells *et al.* (1995), children reversed roles with stereotypical adult authority figures and taught the adults why they prefer this specific brand. A study by Victor Viser (1997) focused on the images of children in American magazine advertising between 1940 and 1950. Because of the changing economic conditions and socio-cultural perceptions of children in the post-World War 2 United States, one of the hypotheses stated that measures of general emotions will indicate a happier, more excited child model in the advertisement in the post-war period compared to the pre-war period. The results largely confirmed this hypothesis.

Bové (1995) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) state the following reasons why advertisers in the USA recognise children (especially teenagers) as a consumer group in an extremely prosperous potential market:

- Teenagers spend more than \$60 billion of their own money; more than 65 percent of them have a savings account; and about 20 percent of teenagers have a credit card.
- They also spend a good portion of their family's money.
- Teenagers also influence fads and fashion in many different product categories. Examples are blue jeans and music.
- Whereas there were an estimated 29 million teenagers in 1995, it is expected that by the year 2010 (as the baby boomer's children become teenagers), the number of teens will increase to almost 35 million.
- Because teens are future consumers the marketers of branded products and services are increasingly trying to secure early brand awareness and preferences with teenagers.

To reach this lucrative market, advertisers have gone beyond television (the medium of choice) to specialised magazines for children, and even direct mail (Wells *et al.* 1995).

Unfortunately, advertisers in South Africa presently have a limited choice when it comes to selecting a specialised magazine in which their advertising messages can be conveyed to children. As far as could be established, only one magazine aimed at children exist in South Africa. *Career Guide* is aimed at pupils between 14 and 16 years old. The publication, which was launched recently, contains information on careers, tertiary study opportunities as well as advertisements applicable to children (Nasser, 1997). Advertisers can, however, choose from quite a wide range of consumer magazines in which child actors can be used in advertisements. The *modus operandi* of a research project which

was conducted to determine how South African advertisers address this issue will now be discussed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The *Audit Bureau of Circulations of South Africa Limited* served as basis for the sampling procedure. A non-probability sample of consumer magazines with circulation figures of 100 000 or more over two six-month periods in 1981 and 1985 provided the research instrument for the study. All the full-page advertisements of nine consumer magazines served as the sample frame for the study. A total of 5 133 advertisements were eventually included in the sample. A content analysis of the advertisements in which child actors are portrayed was conducted over three three-month periods in 1983, 1987 and 1997. During the 1987 study a content analysis of the portrayal of children in television advertisements, as well as focus groups with children and personal interviews with advertising agencies were also conducted (North 1987). The post-apartheid analysis of the magazine advertisements was executed between June and August 1997.

In order to minimise the possible sources of error (Dane, 1990) great care was taken to assure that the observations are reliable and valid. The same magazines were therefore studied in the three surveys. In total 63 editions of the nine magazines (three weekly, three bi-weekly and three monthly magazines) were used for the purpose of analysis. Four of the magazines cater for the Afrikaans community, three for the English speaking readers and two mainly for the Black community.

Berelson (1971) and Bush *et al.* (1983) emphasise the fact that a content analysis is as good as the exact description of the *categories*. In this study the way children are portrayed in the magazine advertisements constitute the categories. According to Millum (1975) the illustration in a magazine advertisement consists of four elements, namely, the *model*, the *product*, the *background*, and the *supporting elements*. These elements constituted the criteria according to which the categories (or the roles children play in the advertisements) could be described. The following categories were identified:

- The child acts as a *social being* in the advertisement (interacting, communicating, playing or being with members of his/her family or with friends or other people).
- The child is depicted as a *scholar* in the advertisement.
- When the child is participating or wearing suitable sports clothes he/she is a participant in *sport*.

- The child also plays the role of an *animal lover*.
- The child is portrayed as a *consumer* of the product.
- In some cases the child appears merely as part of the *background* in the advertisement.
- Children also act as models in *testimonial advertisements* (being very prominent in the illustration, but not consuming the product).

To record the data a *coding sheet* was designed on which all the relevant data was noted under the specific columns. As a quantitative content analysis was conducted in this study, the results of the survey were put down in numerical and percentage terms. The nature and extent of the data did not justify the execution of statistical analysis. Inferences were therefore made on inspection from the tables. (In two instances, though, statistical analysis were undertaken to confirm certain inferences.)

RESULTS

As the primary objective of this article is to describe how South African advertisers use children in advertisements in the post-apartheid period compared with the two earlier studies, special emphasis is placed on how marketers portray children of *different races* in the same advertisement. In order to put this issue into perspective, the following results will first be addressed:

- The frequency of the portrayal of children in the advertisements
- The age and gender of the child models
- The various roles children play in the advertisements

The frequency of the portrayal of children in advertisements

Unfortunately only a limited number of magazines that target the Black community is available on the market. A comparison of the number of Black and White models will therefore serve no purpose. Details of the frequency of the portrayal of children in the illustrations are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of the portrayal of children in magazine advertisements

Child models in illustrations	1983 (n= 2163) %	1987 (n= 1622) %	1997 (n=1348) %
Advertisements portraying children in the illustration	11,00	10,60	16,61
Advertisements without Children in the illustration	88,99	89,39	83,38

n= number of advertisements studied

The increase in the frequency of the portrayal of children in advertisements of approximately 50 percent from the first two periods to the third period is quite remarkable. Relative to the 1983 and 1987 data, the log-linear model applied to a contingency table (on a 5% level of significance) indicated that 1997 is positively associated with the portrayal of children in magazine advertisements. Marketers probably realise that the portrayal of youthfulness can increase the effectiveness of the advertisement. The findings of a study by Wiles *et al.* (1996), in which the similarities and differences between the values portrayed in magazine advertising in the U.S. and Sweden were examined, indicate that advertising more often portrays youthfulness. A majority of the models in the U.S. magazines (more than 40%) appeared to be 16 to 30 years of age. Almost 21 percent were 0 to 15 years of age. Marketers also seem to use children in advertising because they can be regarded as consumers in own right. They have unprecedented purchasing power and also exert a great influence on household buying decisions (Ward & Wackman 1972).

Gender and age of the models

The results of the three studies indicate that marketers do not favour one gender over the other. Obviously the nature of the product (e.g. type of clothes) will determine whether a boy or a girl will be depicted in the advertisement. In almost one third of the cases it was not possible to determine the gender of the child. (This is partly due to the fact that a large number of babies appeared in the illustrations.)

In order to determine the age of the models three broad categories were used: a pre-school phase, younger children in the primary school, and teenagers. The results of the studies indicate that marketers prefer to use pre-school and younger children as actors in the advertisements. The use of teenagers as models for the three periods was a somewhat disappointing 27% (1984), 24% (1987) and 11% (1997). Further research is needed to gain information on possible reasons why teenagers do not appear in advertisements more frequently.

Roles portrayed by children

The results of the three studies indicate that child models are portrayed as *social beings* in more than half of the cases. In seventy percent of these cases the child appeared with members of his/her own family. Acting as *consumers* of the product was the second most important role in which children are portrayed. In less than one percent of the cases children act as *animal lovers* and partake in *sporting* activities. A significant observation of the study was the fact that no Black children appeared in the advertisements as animal lovers. It is also not clear why marketers of sporting goods and equipment make much more use of children in these advertisements. Almost all the major sporting bodies in South Africa became professional over the last few years. Much is also being done to uplift sport in the disadvantaged communities and to encourage young Black people to participate in sport. Sponsorships and development programmes are common practices in South Africa nowadays.

Race of models portrayed in the advertisements

In his inaugural address as the new State President of South Africa, President Nelson Mandela stunned the whole world when he quoted from an Afrikaans poem by a well-known white South African poet, Ingrid Jonker. The title of the poem, "Die kind" (The child), perhaps gives some indication of how important children are to Mr. Mandela and his new government. The focus on the upliftment of especially Black children is further illustrated by the foundation of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund.

Marketing to this new generation and including children of all races in advertisements is therefore expected to be part of the advertising strategies of marketers in the new South Africa. Is this the case or not? The answer can (at least partially) be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Race of child models in magazine advertisements

Race of models	1983 (n=238) %	1987 (n=172) %	1997 (n=224) %
Advertisements portraying Children of different races in The illustration	5,04	1,16	10,71
Child models of one race in the illustration	94,96	98,84	89,29

n= number of ads portraying children

The tide has certainly turned! The results indicate that a dramatic increase in the portrayal of children of different races has taken place in the post-apartheid period (11%) compared to the apartheid era (5% in 1983 and 1% in 1987). The Wilcoxon rank sum test (normal approximation) confirmed that there was a higher incidence of ads in 1997 portraying children of different races in the same advertisement ($P=0.0001$). These figures firstly confirm the fact that the South African community is in a process of radical change, and secondly they probably indicate that marketers are beginning to realise that their advertising messages should reflect the true nature of the new South Africa. However, taking cognisance of the fact that Black people constitute 76 percent (1996 statistics) of the total South African population, the 89 percent portrayal of White models only can be seen as a disproportionate use of White children in advertising. Although the Wiles study (1996) did not look exclusively at children, the results also indicate an imbalance in the representation of race in the ads.

The discretionary income of Black people has increased considerably over the last few years, which opens up many opportunities for marketers. Not only can adults be targeted, but marketing efforts can also be directed to get the attention of the new young generation by building brand loyalty among the adult consumers of tomorrow.

By using children of a variety of races in advertisements marketers can convey their advertising messages to various target markets. These kinds of illustrations can also serve to influence Black consumers to adopt a Western lifestyle, which would encourage the consumption of products such as typically Western clothing and vehicles.

During the 1997 analysis of the advertisements in which children of more than one race are portrayed, the following significant observations were made:

- Children of different races interact socially (they laugh and play together). This was not the case in the 1983 and 1987 studies.
- Children of both sexes (e.g. a Black girl and a White boy) are depicted in the same advertisement.
- A very surprising result was the fact that while marketers increasingly use Black child models in traditionally "White" consumer magazines, using white models in a "Black" magazine, though, is the exception to the rule.
- In a few instances marketers made use of drawings in stead of photographs. In some of these illustrations the race of the child model is difficult to determine. In these cases it is believed that the marketer's intention could have been to create a "melting pot" that will reflect the true nature of the new South Africa. Further research will be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

CONCLUSIONS

The results presented here suggest that marketing to children and using children as models in magazine advertisements have changed quite drastically in the post-apartheid South Africa since 1994. Advertisements in which models of more than one race appear are beginning to reflect the ideal of a "rainbow nation". Children of different races not only appear together in the same advertisement, but they interact socially, and in some cases even quite intimately.

The dramatic increase in the portrayal of children of different races in the same advertisement which has taken place in the post-apartheid period (11% in 1997 compared to the apartheid era of 5% in 1983 and a mere 1% in 1987) furnishes proof of the fact that the South African community is in a process of radical change. Marketers are identifying and exploring the new opportunities that have opened up with the dawn of the new South Africa.

The results of the study also suggest that it is becoming common practice to portray children of different races and both sexes in the same advertisement. Advertisements in which only black models appear in a "white" magazine or white models in a "black" magazine were also identified. The social implications of these kinds of advertisements can be far-reaching.

On average South African marketers use teenagers in the advertisements in only 11 percent of the cases. They seem to prefer to use pre-school (especially babies) and younger children as actors in the advertisements. The reason why

they do not make more use of teenagers (for example to promote sporting goods) is unknown and is a topic for further research. Children of all ages playing the role of a participant in sport occurred in less than one percent of the cases.

Although the results are based on an analysis of one medium only, it is believed that they are representative of other mediums of advertising, for example television advertising. It is recommended that a repeat study of the 1987 study in which the use of children in television advertising was conducted be done to test the above-mentioned hypothesis. Further research is also needed to investigate children's advertising on the Internet. According to Fitzgerald (1996) the debate over how advertisers can target children in cyberspace (as a group, they are known as "cybertots") is heating up in Europe as well as the United States. Belch and Belch (1998) report that children's advocacy groups in the U.S. are very critical of marketer's online activities such as seeking household information from kids or using characters in advertisements to reach children. The report issued by the Center for Media Education is entitled the "Web of Deception". In the South African context, future research could focus on the following:

- the role (or possible influence) of culture in advertising to children;
- comparing the values portrayed in advertising to children of different races; and
- the "westernisation" of advertising practices when advertising to Black children only.

The Council of Better Business Bureaus (Bové 1995) suggests that marketers who are concerned about proceeding according to ethical guidelines when marketing to children should adhere to the following guidelines: the level of knowledge and maturity of the audience should be taken into account; positive social images, such as kindness, justice, generosity, and respect for others should be included, and, wherever possible, the advertisement should be as truthful and accurate as possible. The portrayal of children in mixed-race advertisements that reflect real-life situations can further the cause of truthfulness and accuracy in the South African advertising industry. And finally, the following guidelines are offered to marketers who wish to portray children in advertisements: be sensitive to feature children in commercials that advertise products primarily for the adult market segment; where applicable, children should be depicted in situations where positive parent/child or teacher/child relationships are enhanced; and marketers are urged to be sensitive when it comes to racial stereotyping and multicultural representation of children in advertising.

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