

The Presence of Violent Messages in Child-Oriented Magazine Advertising: Considerations for Australian Advertising Guidelines

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A review of the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) code for advertising and marketing to children revealed that the AANA fails to discourage the portrayal of violent, although, non-distressing messages. A content analysis of Australian child-directed magazine advertising found that advertisers are not promoting positive social behaviors, and are employing elements of violence in their child-directed marketing messages. As exposure to violent media potentially has negative social and behavioral consequences, it is suggested that the AANA develop a guideline regarding the depiction of negative social behaviors in child-directed advertising.

Key words: children, advertising policy, Australia, content analysis

Introduction

'How can I get my child to enjoy reading?' is an issue faced by many parents and guardians. Numerous sources (for example, ReadingRockets.org) suggest the need for reading materials that are relevant to the child and identify a range of additional literary sources such as: video game booklets, magazines, and comic books as a means of engagement. Many Australian parents appear to be adopting such an approach, with a recent poll revealing that 79 per cent of parents purchase magazines and comics to encourage their child to read (Sky News 2012). While parents look for ways to limit children's exposure to other media sources (for example, television, Internet), magazines can be considered an approved media source (Kervin and Mantei 2009) offering advertisers a valuable media alternative for communicating with children. However, it is suggested that parents should remain vigilant to ensure their children are not exposed to inappropriate messages.

For many years issues surrounding advertising to children has been of interest to academics, marketers, policy makers, and the community as a whole (Ji & Laczniak 2007; Friestad & Wright 2005). With increasing concern regarding childhood obesity (Yu 2011; Desrocher & Holt 2007) the focus of this attention has been on child-directed food advertising (for example, Lee 2009). Children's exposure to marketing messages, however, is not limited to the food industry. Advertising for other products and services also receive criticism from community action groups (such as the Australian Council for Children and the Media, ACCM) with the suggestion that advertising exposure can limit children's creative play, encourage violent play and can negatively impact a child's self-esteem and body image (ACCM 2009). Negativity towards child-directed advertising often stems from the notion that children lack the ability to understand marketing communication (see Oates, Blades & Gunter 2002). Marketers and advertisers, therefore, are expected to exercise a high level of social responsibility in regards to targeting children, and are also bound by national advertising codes. In Australia, advertisers communicating with child audiences are bound by fourteen codes developed by the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA). However, it is apparent that there is limited detail in the current codes regarding the depiction of violence in child-directed marketing communication.

Smith, Lachlan and Tamborini (2003) define violence in media as *"any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm*

an animate being or group of beings" (p. 62). While researchers continue to debate the impact violence in the media will have on children's behavior (see Ferguson & Kilburn 2009), a vast array of research has suggested that exposure to violent media content can result in aggressive behavior in both the short, and long term (see Anderson et al. 2003) including aggressive thoughts and emotions, the use of verbal or physical aggression to solve a conflict, lower likelihood of assisting victims of violence (due to de-sensitization) and/or and increase in fear or anxiety about the world (Anderson et al. 2003; ACCM 2009).

Age and sex have been found to moderate the effects of violent media exposure (Anderson, et al. 2003). Age has been shown to be inversely related to the effect violent media exposure has on aggression and anti-social behavior (Paik & Comstock 1994). As the ACCM highlights, children under eight years of age who are exposed to violent images are more likely to imitate violent scenes in their play (due to an inability to differentiate reality from fantasy, Oates, Blades & Gunter 2002), become very scared by 'scary' images and/or use violent images as a 'lesson' for a way to solve conflict later in life. Research has also suggested that males are more heavily influenced by violent media images than females (Eron et al. 1972). More recent research, however, has seen little difference in the effect size for males and females, with the *nature* of the aggressive behavior being the distinguishing factor between the sexes (Huesmann et al. 2003). Huesmann et al. (2003) found that exposure of violent media provoked indirect aggression (for example, malicious propaganda) in females, and physical aggression in males.

The present paper presents the results of a content analysis undertaken to examine the nature of child-directed magazine advertising in Australia. The findings deliver an independent perspective, devoid of the influence of regulating bodies such as the AANA and community groups (for example ACCM and Young Media Australia). We suggest that the results of this research will be of interest to policy makers, particularly those responsible for advertising and marketing communication to children. The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To determine the prevalence of advertising that depicts violence in Australian child oriented magazines; and
2. To identify the nature of the violence portrayed in advertisements contained in Australian child-oriented magazines.

AANA Code for Advertising Targeting Children

Formed in 1928, the AANA is "Australia's recognised authority on advertising and marketing communication ethics, practice and performance" (AANA n.d.). While the AANA have not yet developed an independent unit focusing on child-directed marketing communication (similar to the American Children's Advertising Review Unit, CARU), the association is committed to ensuring that advertisers develop and maintain a high sense of responsibility regarding advertising and marketing to children in Australia. As a result the 'Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children' was adopted by the AANA as part of the advertising industries self-regulation system. The AANA's code includes fourteen guidelines developed to oversee child-directed advertising and marketing in Australia. (refer to Table 1 for a brief description of the AANA guidelines).

Table 1. AANA Code for Advertising and Marketing Communications to Children

Code of Practice	Advertising or marketing to children <i>must</i>:
Factual Presentation	Not mislead, deceive, be ambiguous and must fairly represent in a manner that is clearly understood
Placement	Not be placed in media where editorial comment/program content is unsuitable for children
Safety	Not portray images/ events which depict unsafe uses of a product or unsafe situations that may encourage dangerous activities.
Sexualization	Not include sexual imagery, state (or imply) that children are sexual beings and ownership or enjoyment of a product will enhance their sexuality
Social Values	Not portray images that are unduly frightening or distressing and must not demean any person or group
Parental Authority	Not undermine authority/responsibility of caregivers. Not contain an appeal to children to urge their caregivers to buy a product for them Not imply product will make children superior to peers or persons who buy the product are more generous than those who do not Present prices in a way that is clearly understood by children
Qualifying Statements	Disclaimers/asterisks/footnotes <u>must</u> be displayed and explained
Competitions	Contain a summary of the basic rules, include closing dates for entry and make any statements about the chance of winning clear, fair and accurate
Popular Personalities	Not use popular personalities or celebrities (live/animated) to advertise products/premiums in a way that obscures the distinction between commercial programs and content.
Premiums	Not create a false or misleading impression about the nature or content of product nor that the product being advertised is the premium rather than the product Make terms of the offer clear Not use premiums as a way to promote excessive consumption of product
Alcohol	Not in any way be related to alcoholic products
Privacy	Include a statement requiring parental consent if personal information is to be collected
Food and Beverage	Not promote an inactive lifestyle or unhealthy eating/drinking habits

Note: Guidelines sourced from http://www.aana.com.au/childrens_code.html.

The Australian child-directed advertising guidelines developed by the AANA may be seen as very stringent, providing very specific and ‘tight’ control over the industry. However, despite concerns of Australian community organizations (for example, the ACCM) regarding the depiction of violence in the media, a distinct gap can be seen in the AANA’s code with the absence of guidelines pertaining to the presentation of (non-distressing) violent images (or the promotion of positive social behaviors).

While no known research has been conducted in the context of Australian magazine advertising (or beyond), the Federal Trade Commission of the United States of America’s (2009, p.8) review of industry practices regarding marketing violent entertainment to children; evaluated a selection of children magazines from 2008 and 2009. This examination revealed “at least two violent PG-13 movies were marketed through print advertising, stories, and feature covers in children’s magazines including *Scholastic*, *Nickelodeon Magazine*, *Time for Kids*, *National Adventures*”, indicating that in the US marketers do employ violent messages when communicating with child audiences. The absence of a guideline concerning the promotion of violent behaviour within the AANA’s code and the presence of violent messages within American child-oriented magazines led the researchers to question whether violent appeals are utilized by Australian advertisers when targeting children in Australian magazines. A finding that violence is used in Australian children’s magazines would be of concern to those involved in policy protection for advertising and marketing to children and warrant an investigation into the need for additional AANA guidelines.

Method

Sample Selection

This study analyzed the content of child-directed magazine pages from all full-page ads in two major children’s magazine titles from 2004 through to 2010, *Total Girl* (female-oriented) and *K-Zone* (male-oriented). Both magazines target children eight to 11 years of age, were identified as ‘what kids are reading’ (Eaton 2004), and experience high circulation and readership levels (greater than 270,000 readers) within Australia (Pacific Magazines 2011).

Content Analysis of Magazine Advertising

Content analysis is a common technique employed to analyze aspects of child-directed advertising (Lee, et al. 2009; Chapman, Nicholas & Supramaniam 2009; Kelly & Chapman 2007). As researcher bias is a primary concern when undertaking content analysis research, a coding instrument was developed which included predetermined options to increase inter-coder reliability (Kolbe & Burnett; 1991, Kassarian 1977). We first categorized advertisements as either: ‘containing elements of violence’ or ‘not containing elements of violence’. Those advertisements that were deemed to contain elements of violence were then further analyzed. The nature of the violence depicted within the advertisement was classified using categories drawn from Scharrer (2004, Refer to Table 2).

To reduce the impact of researcher bias we independently viewed all of the full page advertisements in the selected magazines (n = 154). Inter-coder reliability, measured using the co-efficient of reliability (Lee, et al. 2009), was 96 percent surpassing the 80% criterion

level (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken 2002). We reviewed advertisements to resolve discrepancies and achieve complete coder agreement

Results

A total of 9.8 percent of the advertisements contained at least one act of violence. The depiction of violence was most evident in male-oriented magazines (representing 19.2% of advertisements) with no advertisements employing elements of violence in female-oriented magazines. As a result, further analysis was undertaken for male-oriented magazines only. Violence was most evident in advertisements for video games (11.5%), followed by toys (5.1%), DVDs (1.3%) and oral hygiene products (1.3%).

Magazines targeting young males depicted violence through both copy and images (refer to Table 2). The majority of images portrayed violent acts including punching, throwing, pushing and tackling. Many advertisements illustrated violence without the use of a weapon, with no advertisements displaying the use of guns or bombs. It was also found that approximately half of the violent advertisements incorporated aggressive text (making reference to aggressive actions). For example, 'Zombies are nothing to be afraid of. Especially after you've beaten them silly with their own arms'. It is believed that violence is used to create drama and excitement for the product, encouraging children to 'Choose your weapon' when selecting a video game or to 'Pick your battle' when choosing an action figure.

Table 2. Display of Violent Messages via Images and Text in Australian Child-Oriented Magazines

	Violence in Advertisements	
	%	n
Weapons		
Guns	.0	0
Swords, Knives, Barbs	13.2	2
Bombs	.0	0
Other Objects	20.0	3
Total	33.3	5
Violent Act		
Punching (including fighting stance)	26.7	4
Kicking	13.3	2
Throwing (including other people)	26.7	4
Pushing or tackling	20.0	3
Total	86.7	13
Aggressive Text	53.3	8

Discussion and Conclusion

We found that violent appeals are indeed evident in Australian child-directed magazine advertising. However, violent appeals appear to be only employed in advertisements targeting young males. This is of particular concern as males have been shown to be more heavily influenced by violent media messages (Eron et al. 1972).

Current policy in Australia, whilst stringent on many aspects, fails to address advertising that depicts violent behaviour and thus the inclusion of such violent advertisements is not sanctioned. As a consequence, advertisers are free to use ads that have the potential to desensitize children from a very young age (Anderson et al. 2003). The risk of children developing aggressive behavioral disorders is said to increase with exposure to violence in the media (Bartholow 2006), with repeated exposure featuring heroes that 'win' and are rewarded, and/or violence which is placed in a humorous context posing further risk (ACCM 2009).

While the AANA code for advertising and marketing communications to children discourages the portrayal of images that are frightening or distressing to children (reflected in the 'Social Values' guideline), it appears that marketers can evade such guidelines by disguising this violence in cartoon or humorous forms. The present findings, therefore, have important implications for the regulation of advertising and marketing to young consumers. Whilst community organizations such as Young Media Australia offer information and help lines to guide parents and caregivers on limiting their children's exposure to violent media, their focus has been predominately centered around monitoring violence depicted on television (cartoons, movies, and in the news) and in video games. For some parents, reading magazines is a positive alternative to watching television and playing video games (Kervin & Mantei 2009). However, without regulation of violent advertising in magazines (and other Australian media), the onus falls on parents to monitor their child's intake of seemingly child-oriented materials.

In order to continue to protect the rights of consumers and ensure responsible advertising practice, we suggest that Australian advertising policy should follow the lead of the Australian community groups by considering the potential impact and of the portrayal of violence or negative social behaviour in advertising aimed at children. The inclusion of a guideline that requires advertisers to promote positive social behavior (friendship, kindness, honesty and respect for others), will ensure that these 'approved' forms of entertainment media remain free of harmful violent marketing messages that have the potential to limit creative play (ACCM 2009) and could result in aggressive short and long term behaviors (Anderson et al. 2003).

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