

***Biography***

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**Abstract:**

Magazines are among the most widely read literacy materials for students, and visual imagery in magazines is a significant element in communication. This pilot study analyzes the human images and advertisements in four popular children's magazines. Images were assessed for age, gender, action portrayed, and advertising status. Advertisements were also analyzed for type of product. Findings indicate significant gender and age differences, and more human images engaged in sports than any other activity. Advertisements incorporated significantly more male images and products most often promoted included computer games, candy and gum, and TV, movies, and videos. Implications for schools, teachers, and librarians are considered.

***An Analysis of Human Images and Advertisements in Four Popular Children's***

***Magazines***

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Children's magazines are widely read in America's homes, schools, libraries, and waiting rooms. While they are known to improve student fluency and vocabulary development, as well as interest in and motivation for reading (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988; Parrish & Atwood, 1985; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999), it is their visual imagery

that enhances their learning potential and appeal. Visual images are a nonverbal means of communication from which children take meaning long before they begin to read and write (Cramer, 2004). The significance of visual imagery has been recognized by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. Viewing and visual representation are considered two of the six language arts (Tompkins, 2005). Thus, while we know children learn from visual images in magazines, we know very little about what they learn.

Steeped in popular culture, children's magazines represent the ethos of adults in a form suitable for young people. They are intended in homes, schools, and libraries to enrich children's lives. But, magazines are intended also to make money, and publishers seek to appeal to a wide audience and to offend no one (Block, 2004). But what representations of adult society and popular culture occur in the visual images of these periodicals? Do they, in fact, contain images appealing to readers? This pilot study explores the subtle messages that children learn from the human images in children's magazines and considers the implications of those messages.

### **Background and Literature Review**

Magazines are consistently among the top three categories of reading material selected voluntarily by students of upper elementary to early high school age. They are the first choice for older students (Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Students, without regard to their gender, academic performance level, or income, report "light" reading materials to be interesting and motivating (Krashen, 1992; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). They tend to read for pleasure, rather than

for any instructional or academic purpose (Swisher, Pye, Estes-Rickner, & Merriam, 1991).

Magazine reading is associated with improved academic motivation and attitude toward reading (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Comics and magazines have been found to help students improve reading fluency, vocabulary development, and confidence in reading ability (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988; Parrish & Atwood, 1985). In addition, popular magazines expose students to low-frequency words less likely to be encountered in required academic reading. Specifically, they have been found to be a more frequent source of new vocabulary than either interaction with adults or watching television (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Consistent with these findings, improvement in skills and attitudes associated with magazine reading has been reported to motivate students to attempt more challenging reading required in school (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

Visual images in magazine content are believed to be important because most readers look at illustrations first, read headlines second, and conclude with text reading (Bovee & Arens, 1986). Illustrations, in their immediacy, are a nonverbal communication form that presumably supplements what children learn through written and oral language. Children view and learn from visual images before they can read and write (Cramer, 2004). Visual media experiences are, to say the least, prevalent in children's environments, including photographs, movies, commercials, book illustrations, video games, and the Internet. Indeed, more than ten years ago the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association acknowledged the importance of visual imagery in children's learning by expanding their four-category

typology for the language arts to include two additional categories: viewing and visual representation (Tompkins, 2005).

Visual imagery occurs frequently in popular children's magazines. It is apparent it is seen as integral to virtually all forms of content in children's magazines, including advertising. Advertising, of course, is a phenomenon in popular children's magazines of particular interest. Marketing to children using visual imagery via television, the Internet, and magazine advertisements is a \$15 billion dollar a year business according to the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (n.d.). The same group reported that in 2002 children ages 4-12 made \$30 billion in purchases. In the same year, youth ages 12-19 made \$170 billion in purchases. Advertisements have been cited for their ability to function as social symbols that represent a culture's thoughts, attitudes, and values (Kang, 1997). Through attention to advertising, children learn about brands, leisure time activities, and future purchases (Preston, 2004). Other studies indicate that by age eight children may understand deeper purposes in advertising, as well as that advertising content may not be altogether truthful (Chan, 2000; Martensen & Hansen, 1999). Conversely, younger children have been found less capable of understanding advertising intent, especially children younger than eight (Clark & Michael, 2003; Kunkel, Wilcox, Palmer, Cantor, Dowrick, & Linn, 2004).

Not only are pictures of humans found frequently in children's magazines, they have been noted also for frequent presentation of stereotypes (Goffman, 1979). In a recent study of *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, 80.9 percent of advertising imagery contained males and 19.1 percent contained females (Lynn, Walsdorf, Hardin, & Hardin, 2002). The male/female ratio was even more disparate (9:1) in an earlier study of humans

pictured in the same magazine (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998). At the same time, however, these findings aligned with circulation data. The estimated readership for *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, including subscribers and others believed to be readers, is 6.7 million children and youth. Seventy-one percent are male and 29 percent are female (PBA International, 1999).

Given the potential importance and high frequency of pictures of humans in popular children's magazines, their systematic study might be expected to have been undertaken in recent years. Certainly, study of issues related to human presence/portrayal in television visual imagery continue to occur. And, these studies have found gender role bias and stereotyping (Smith, 1994), as well as greater use of males in advertising (Furnham, Abramsky, & Gunter, 1997). Underlying such findings there is consistent regard evident for the power of modeling in human learning, perhaps especially in young humans (Berger, 1977; Akamatsu & Thelen, 1974; Schunk, 1987).

The current study is a response to multiple indications of the potential significance of human pictures in popular children's magazines. Founded on a few operational definitions, the study presents a systematic assessment of age, gender, action portrayed, and advertising status in human imagery.

### **Method**

All magazine issues in the study were 2004 or 2005 publications. The four most highly read children's magazines at that time were *Highlights for Children: Fun With a Purpose* (Highlights for Children, Inc.), *Boy's Life: The Magazine for All Boys* (Boy Scouts of America), *National Geographic Kids* (National Geographic Society), and

*Sports Illustrated for Kids* (Sports Illustrated for Kids) (La Guardia, 2004). Table 1 contains circulation, publication, and reader age-range information for each magazine.

Table 1

Circulation and Publication Information by Magazine

Magazine Title	Circulation	First Year of Publication	Age Range of Audience
Highlights for Children: Fun With a Purpose	2,800,000	1946	4-11
Boy's Life: The Magazine for All Boys	1,300,000	1911	8-18
National Geographic Kids	1,000,000	1975	6-12
Sports Illustrated Kids	934,000	1989	8-14

One year's issues of each magazine were assessed systematically for human pictorial information. All occurrences of magazine pictures with humans were considered. Assessed pictures included those in advertisements and those in non-advertisements. Original investigator intentions to engage in text analysis were not undertaken because of the apparent enormity of the task, as well as because of the great apparent suitability of human pictorial information for study. The data collection instrument was designed by the researchers. One issue of each magazine was selected randomly and used for instrument development. The four instrument development magazine issues were not then included in the study. Researchers sought to identify variables that were basic attributes of human imagery, educationally interesting, and able to be assessed efficiently and with measureable reliability. The instrument (Appendix A) was used to assess each qualifying picture. To qualify to be assessed, a picture had to meet a content criterion

and one of two size criteria. First, the picture had to contain a human or humans. Next, it had to equal or exceed 9 square inches of page space. This criterion was assessed through use of a 3" x 3" template that was placed over pictures. If the 9 square inch criterion was not met, a second criterion was applied. If the same pictorial content occurred repeatedly on a page in the form of three or more smaller pictures, that content was included as a single data record. For example, three 2 x 2 pictures of the same group of skate boarders on one page would be one assessed picture. More than one picture could be assessed on a page, and a single picture could extend across two pages.

The following human variables were assessed in each qualifying picture: gender, age, and type of action. Each picture was also assessed to determine if it was an advertisement. If it was, the type of product was noted. Other data were gathered, but are not reported in this study. (See Appendix A for the complete data collection instrument).

Humans in the assessed pictures were assigned to one of six age categories: infancy through early preschool, elementary school through pre-puberty, early puberty through beginning high school, late high school through early adulthood, and late adulthood. Preschool or younger age children and elderly humans were very infrequently pictured in the magazines assessed. Categories of human action pictured were: sports activity, academic activity, competent behavior that is not related to sports or academics (i.e. musical or artistic performance), healthy social/personal activity (i.e. bravery or health maintenance), play (recreation that is not competitive, such as on a swing set), and "other" (a human behavior not suitable for any of the previous categories).

An undergraduate, education major was trained to use picture selection criteria and to assess magazine content with the instrument. During training and initial data collection, the principle investigators checked informally and found the student's use of picture selection criteria and the use of the instrument criteria were reliable.

Reliability was checked more formally following the student's completion of assessments. Ten percent of the total records were sampled randomly. Each randomly selected picture was evaluated, this time, by a principle investigator. Reliability data was gathered for the following variables: gender, human action, age, and advertisements. Using Holsti's formula for estimating overall reliability, a value of .85 was obtained (Holsti, 1969). This estimate of reliability was considered sufficient to support the aims and data analysis of the current study.

After data was collected, variables in the categories of age, human action, and products were collapsed or deleted to further improve the reliability of the data. In the age category, "infancy through early preschool" was deleted because there were very few instances of human images within that age range. The age ranges "late high school through early adulthood" and "late adulthood" were collapsed for two reasons. There were few instances of "late adulthood" and it was very difficult to determine the age of adults. For example, gray hair did not necessarily mean a human was elderly. In the category human experience, "sports activity" and "high competence in sports activity" were collapsed because most of the images were professionals who displayed high competence in their sport. In other images of sports activity it was difficult to determine from a photograph whether the person was demonstrating high competence. "Overt academic activity" and displaying high competence in academic performance" were also

collapsed because the few images present of academic activity were of stellar performance. “Competent display of other kind of behavior” (not sports or academics) was collapsed with “pursuit of a worthy cause” and labeled “other action” to represent any competent action not related to sports or academics. “Other” represented any behavior that didn’t fit into any of the aforementioned categories, such as singing or listening to music. For the products variable, beauty products, books, card games, clothing, personal hygiene, and toys were collapsed into “other” because there were so few instances.

### **Results and Discussion**

*Sports Illustrated for Kids* contributed disproportionately more pictures to the total number of data records in the study. This should be considered in some of the findings that follow. In all magazines, the number of male only, female only, and male and female pictures were significantly different. There were significantly more pictures of males than females in both regular magazine content and in advertisements. In these magazines, gender differences were significant at a .001 level. In *Highlights*, there were no advertisements, but gender differences in magazine content were significant at a .005 level. Table 2 presents for each magazine, total number of human pictures, number of pages, number of pictures with males only, number with females only, number with males and females together, chi-square results, and significance levels.

Table 2

Picture and Gender Information by Magazine

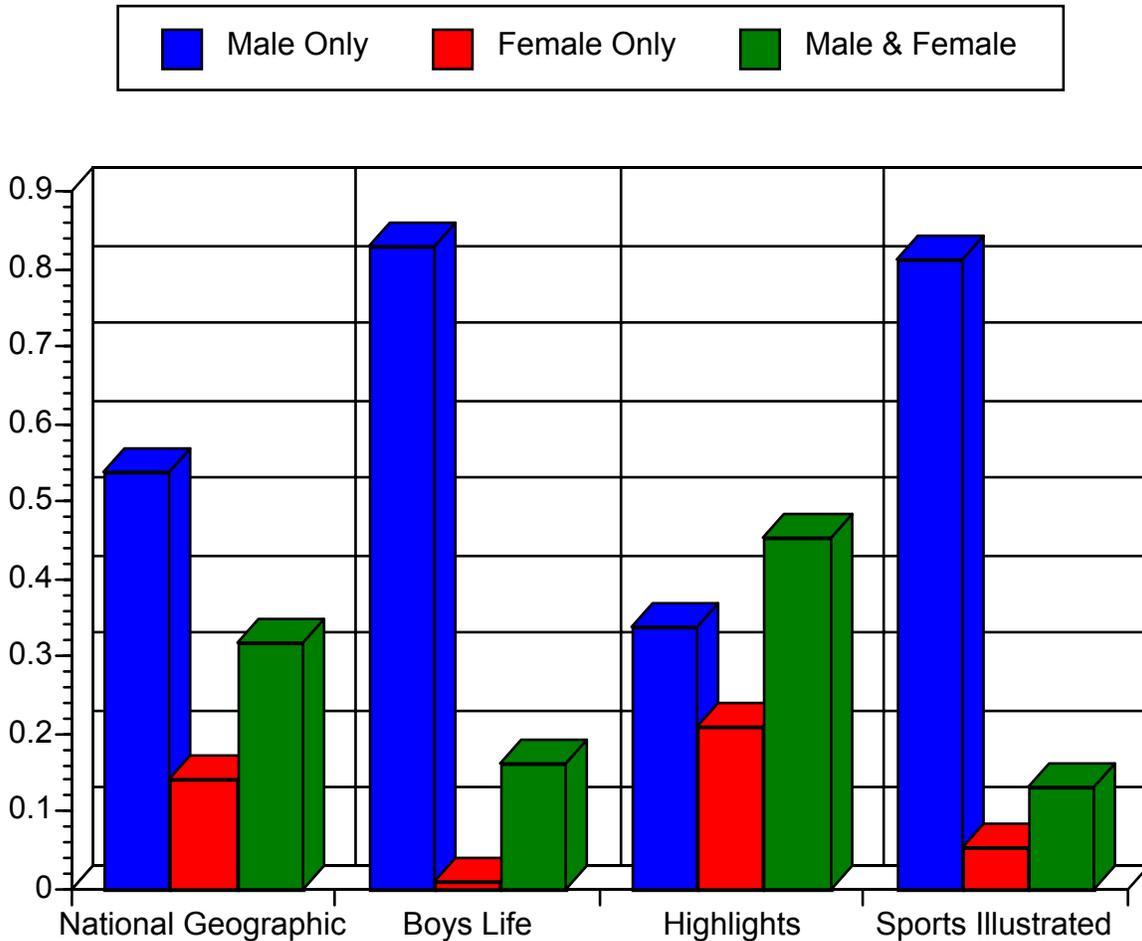
	Highlights for Children	Boy’s Life	National Geographic for Kids	Sports Illustrated for Kids
Number of	484	516	490	815

Pages Assessed				
Number of Pictures Meeting Selection Criteria	266	243	122	688
Number with Males Only	89	200	64	554
Number with Females Only	55	2	17	37
Number with Males and Females	119	39	38	90
Chi-Square	8.02	194.08	27.28	452.26
df	1	1	1	1
Level of Significance	<.005	<.001	<.001	<.001

Figure 1 presents gender breakdowns by magazine in the form of relative percentages. In *Boy's Life* and *Sports Illustrated for Kids* over 80% of human images were “male only,” with less than 1% being “female only” in *Boy's Life* and 5% being “female only” in *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. *National Geographic Kids* and *Highlights* contained more “male and female” images, 31% for *National Geographic Kids* and 44% for *Highlights*, while the difference between the percentage of “male only” and “female only” images remained significant.

Figure 1

Gender by Magazine



The difference in number of students in age categories across the four magazines was statistically significant (Two-way  $\chi^2 = 5.41$ , 6df,  $p < .001$ ). Figure 2 presents this information in relative percentage form. The age range most frequently depicted in *Boy's Life*, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and *National Geographic Kids* was "late high school through middle age." Although these three magazines are designed for readers in the youngest of the three age categories, there were relatively few human images representing that age category in these magazines. Age was treated differently in *Highlights*, where the age category "elementary school through pre-puberty" was most common.

Figure 2

Age by Magazine

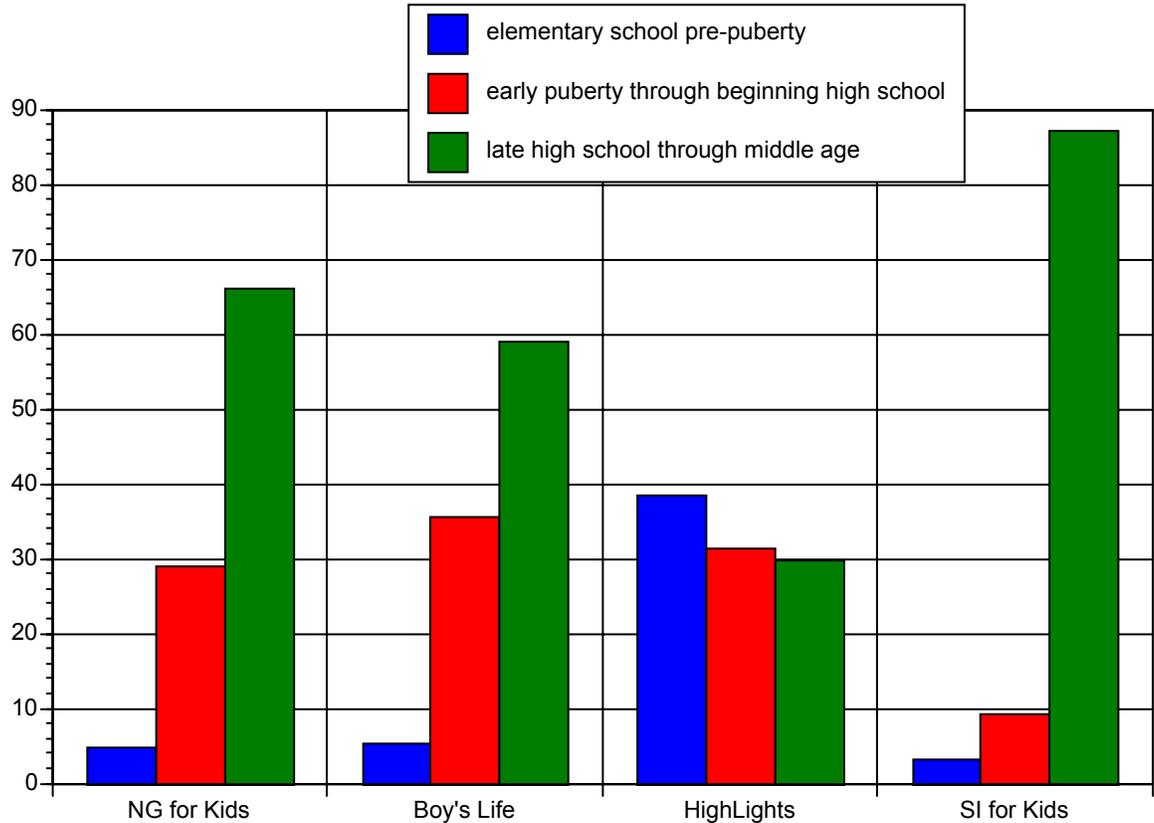
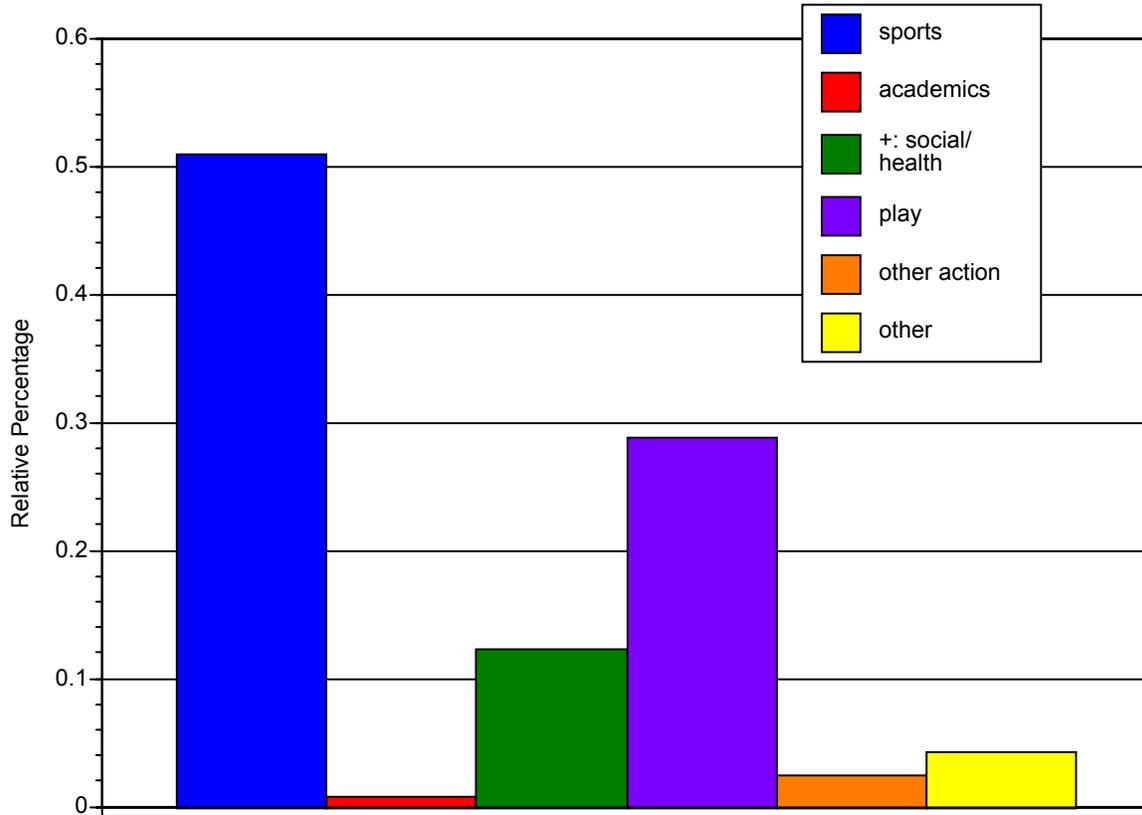


Figure 3 presents across magazines, the relative percentage of total pictures placed into each of the study's six categories for human action. More human pictures were placed in the sports category than in any other. The next largest category was "play" with just under 30 percent, followed by "positive social/health" with 12 percent. Academic activity was rarely pictured in the magazines assess in this study.

While the relative percentage of humans participating in sports action across magazines was over 50 percent, 601 of the 688 total sports images were from *Sports Illustrated*. Both *Highlights* and *National Geographic Kids* contained more pictures of humans in the "play" category than any other, while *Boy's Life* included more pictures in the "positive social/health" category.

Figure 3

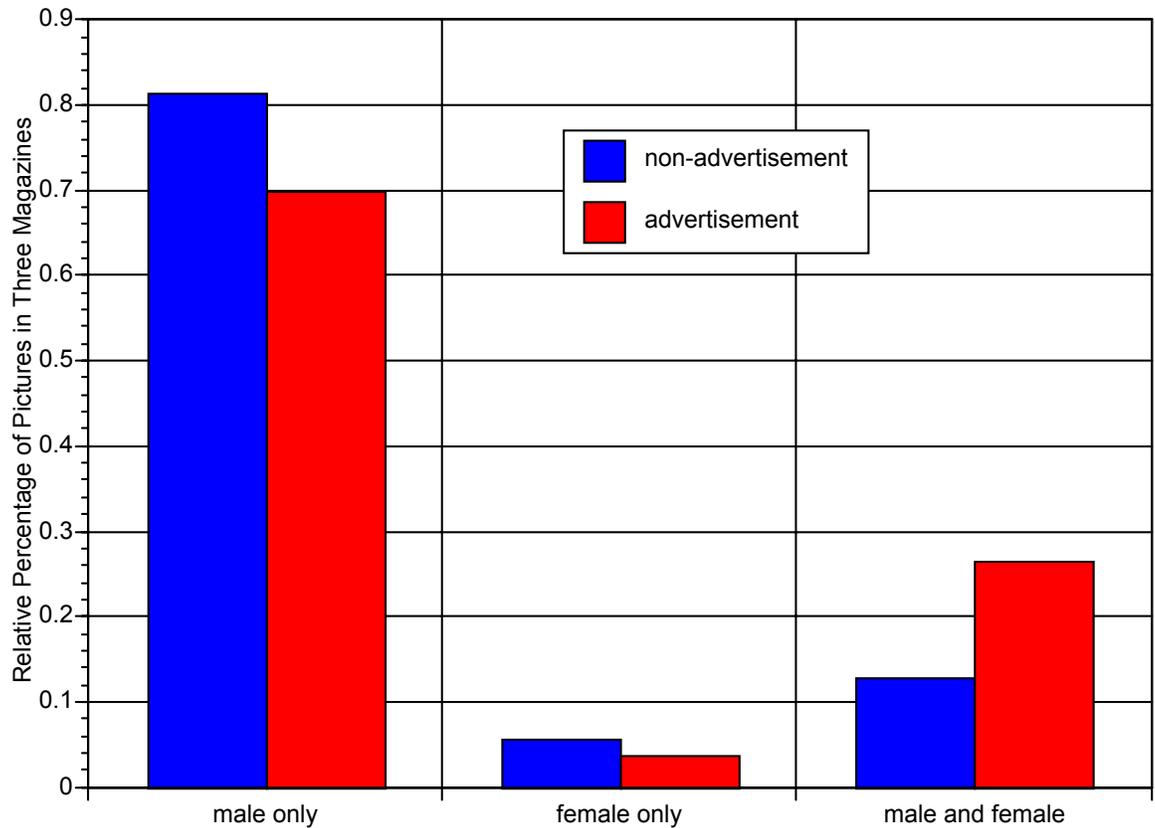
Human Experience Across Magazines



Advertisements were present in all magazines except *Highlights*. In the three magazines with advertisements, there were significantly more “male only” pictures than “female only” pictures in both advertising and non-advertising content. Over 80 % of regular content pictures and 70 % of advertising pictures analyzed males only. In both advertising and non-advertising pictures, females were more likely to appear if males were also present. Less than 6 % of regular content pictures contained females only, and less than 4 % of advertising pictures did. Figure 4 represents the percentage of advertising and non-advertising pictures that were “male only,” “female only,” and “male and female together.”

Figure 4

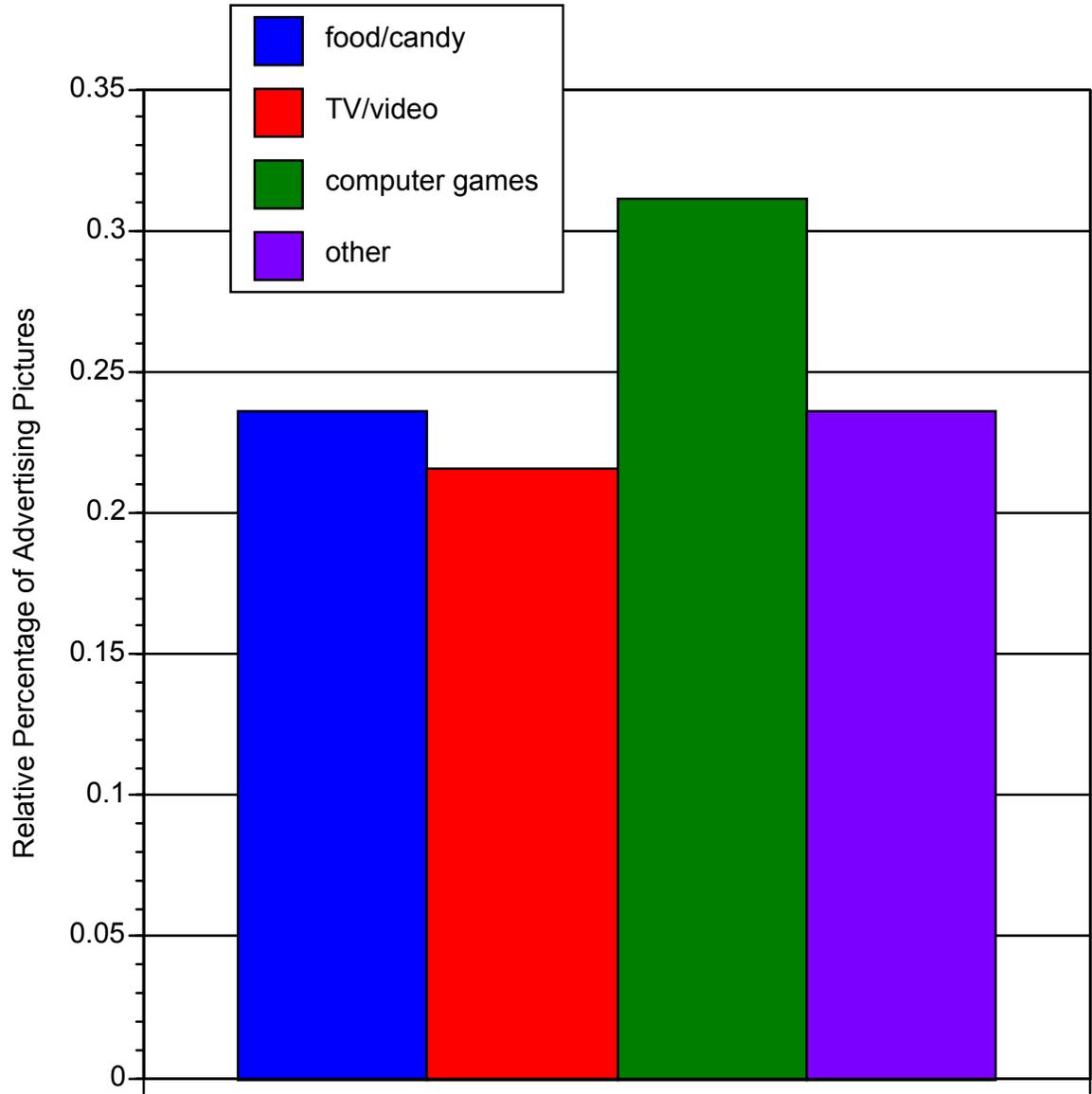
Gender and Advertising



The products promoted most often in the three magazines with advertisements were computer games, food/candy/gum, and TV/movies/videos. Products categorized as “other” included beauty and personal hygiene items, books and magazines, trading cards, clothing, and toys. Figure 5 shows across magazines, the relative percentages of products advertised in *Boy’s Life*, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and *National Geographic Kids*.

Figure 5

Products Advertised Across Magazines



### **Conclusions and Implications**

Children who read magazines demonstrate improved fluency, vocabulary development, interest in, and motivation for reading (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988; Parrish & Atwood, 1985; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Visual imagery in magazines is a significant element in communication. As one of the six language arts, viewing pictures helps students to comprehend and analyze information, supplementing what they learn through oral and written language. While we know children learn from visual images in magazines, we know little about what they learn. Children's magazines represent adult society and popular culture, their visual images transmit messages to children about gender, age, advertising, and the significance of how people spend their time.

Findings indicate significant gender differences. While differences in gender representation might be anticipated in a magazine such as *Boy's Life*, which is published specifically for boys, the pattern of disproportionately more picturing of males occurred in all four magazines. Female only pictures were uncommon, leaving few models for female readers. When boys and girls were featured together in *Boy's Life*, females were often portrayed as needy or helpless, with males as their rescuers. It is particularly troubling that there were few female sports figures represented in *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. What message does this send to readers and to young female athletes who wish find themselves represented in the pages of this magazine and/or to pursue a career in sports? Publishers are called upon to bring gender balance to children's magazines in advertising and regular content images. In addition, representation of females in strong, independent, non-stereotypical roles would model gender equity for male and female readers.

In three of the four magazines, there were significantly more human pictures in the highest of the age ranges. While adults are valued models for children, young people also benefit from same-age peer models. Publishers might consider the benefits of a more equitable balance of adult models with contemporary age models, so students have opportunities to view peers as examples of age-appropriate, exemplary behavior.

There were more pictures of humans engaged in sports than pictures in any other human activity category, because of the significant number of sports images in *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. Humans were also pictured “playing” and participating in positive social behaviors. However, in the magazines studied, there were relatively few pictures of humans engaging in academic behavior of any kind. Images of children and adults reading, writing, and participating in school-related behaviors could be prized models for young magazine readers.

Finally, home environments have many competitors for children’s leisure time. In magazines with advertisements, the products promoted most often were computer games, food/candy/gum, and TV/movies/videos. It is interesting to note these magazines are advertising products that compete directly for time children could spend magazine reading. Reducing promotions for media-driven products and unhealthy foods, while increasing promotions for academic and nutritional products, might lead young readers to become healthier consumers.

Clearly, this pilot study has implications for schools, teachers, librarians, parents, and others who are concerned about education, equity, and the impact of popular culture on children. Research findings reinforce the patriarchal nature of our society. Young magazine readers may come to view those humans of most significance to be adult males

who excel at sports. They may also perceive academic pursuits to be of little value, since neither children nor adults spend any time reading, studying, or learning. The trivializing of academic pursuits is further highlighted by the promotion of products such as television, movies, and computer/video games, which are known to reduce the time children spend on literacy activities.

Teachers and librarians should keep these findings in mind when purchasing magazines for schools and classrooms. The impact of the four most widely read magazines can be offset with the inclusion of less commercial selections such as Cricket, Cobblestone, and YES Mag: The Science Magazine for Adventurous Minds, all of which won Parents' Choice Awards. In addition, findings can be shared with intermediate and middle grade students, in order to raise awareness and foster discussions on gender differences, gender bias, the effects of professional sports on our culture, and the impact of advertising on young consumers.

Since magazines are among the most popular reading materials for students, teachers might take advantage of this interest by incorporating them into classroom literacy activities. Students can be taught how to be effective critics of cultural influences and bias on learning and behavior. For example, teachers might choose to involve students in the analysis of one issue of other popular magazines such as American Girl, Ranger Rick, and Nick Magazine, so they might compare and contrast their results with those in this study. Students might also be encouraged to write letters to magazine publishers, informing them of classroom research findings, concerns, comments, and recommendations for change. Real life learning experiences such as

these help students to understand their opinions and ideas matter and can have far-reaching impact.

As this is a pilot study, future research projects can be designed to further validate results and study implications. Other widely read magazines might be selected for study, and magazines specifically designed for girls, such as *Girl's Life* and *American Girl*, might be analyzed and contrasted with those written for boys. Additional variables that could be analyzed include race and notoriety of those pictured. In addition, further studies could evaluate the impact of gender bias in magazines and magazine advertising on the beliefs and behaviors of young readers, and more closely examine the readership of children's magazines. Future research efforts might also undertake the challenges of analyzing magazine text in addition to visual images.

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Appendix A

Human Pictorial Information Probe (HPIP)

evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ date: \_\_\_\_\_ periodical: \_\_\_\_\_ p: \_\_\_\_\_

Other picture(s) association: select one: (y)yes (n)no

**1. number of humans**

select one: (s) single (m) multiple

**2. gender**

if individual select one: (m)male (f)female (cd)cannot determine

if group select one: (m)all male (f)all female (mf)male and female (cd)cannot determine

**3. age** (circle as many as apply if group)

1. infancy through early preschool
2. elementary school pre-puberty
3. early puberty through beginning high school
4. late high school through early adulthood
5. late adulthood (aging evident)
6. cannot determine

**4. category of human experience depicted**

(select at least one, but not more than two from below, if two selected, indicate if one more prominent)

1. participation in sports activity
2. participation in academic activity
3. display of other kind of behavior (not sports and not academic)
4. social positive

5. play

6. other

**5. representation of schooling**

1. positive

2. neutral

3. negative

4. none

**6. being identified** (as actual person)

1. type one identification -depiction of human in which personal identity did not occur

2. type two identification-unknown human previously of no significance

3. type three identification -significant human

**7. promoting a product**

select one: (y1)yes – identified ad) (y2)yes – mag content ad)  
(n)no

If yes to item seven, select product category (select one):

1. appearance/beauty products

7. TV/movies  
videos

2. books/magazines (including on-line)  
games

8. toys

3. card games / trading cards

9. computer

4. clothing/ shoes

10. other

5. food/candy/gum/drinks

6. personal hygiene