

Ascribed Beauty: A Content Analysis of *People Magazine*

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Courtlynn Noack
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Abstract

Throughout American history, men and women have gathered beauty and fashion tips from popular magazines. Media, especially magazines are creating society's view of beauty, unrealistic expectations of perfection, and deep-seated stereotypes. Through my study, I wanted to find out how skin-care product advertisements depict the American standard of beauty. In order to understand the effects these magazines have on American's view of beauty today, I analyzed 22 different skin-care product advertisements found in *People Magazine*. In conclusion, we found that portrayals of women in these advertisements display ideal beauty as wrinkle-free, joyful, youthful, and Caucasian.

Introduction:

The phrase, “A milk-white lamb that bleats for man’s protection,” written by poet, Keats, describes the ideal beauty of a women in the late 1800’s (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994: 52). In the American history of mass media, we have seen promotions of ideal beauty evolve tremendously for decades from the hourglass figure and boyish flapper to the unisex look found in the late 1960s (Peiss 2000). Today, we see a continuing pattern of companies promising beauty, health, and youth through the use of their products. It is important to study the mass media in regards to the idea of beauty because the media plays a large role in the socialization process of young men and women. In the mass media, consumers find role-models displaying re-touched images that could create unrealistic expectations of beauty and tightly held stereotypes in our society. These promises from advertisements have the potential to affect not only one’s perception of beauty but even one’s own self-value (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). With a content analysis of advertisements found in *People Magazine*, I will explore the idea of how skin-care product advertisements in popular magazines depict the ideal American standard of beauty.

Literature Review:

With the rise in technology, we have seen an increase and change in the effects of mass media on our society as a whole. Consumers are marketed ideal beauty through many types of media, but specifically through magazines. Throughout pages of

magazines, men and women are sold promises of “prescriptions for becoming more beautiful-through artful use of makeup, exercise, clothing selection, and so on” (Englis, Solomon and Ashmore 1994: 53). When these promises fail to produce the ideal outcome, consumers are left searching for the next best thing. Digging deeper into the impact of media, we see many different ways these advertisements are depicting and influencing the ideal American standard of beauty. These include the construction of beauty and the influence of American business, stereotypes found in the industry, and the way role models of impossible standards impact self-perception.

The American standard of beauty is constructed by our society’s mass media. Throughout history, society is found to gravitate to the social and cultural ideas of beauty of the current era (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). In order to keep up with current culture, consumers look to “cultural gatekeepers” of the mass media to help create their idea of beauty (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). “Cultural Gatekeepers,” by definition, are simply the creators of the media in which messages of current standards of beauty are indirectly taught to consumers (Solomon, Ashmore, Longo 1992). According to another study, “cultural gatekeepers” are highly influenced by the involvement of American business. As businesses become more involved in social developments, we see the rising influence these companies have on society’s culture. The involvement and success of these business practices eventually leads to an embodiment of the culture’s cultural figures, faces, and ideal fashion (Peiss 2000). From a discourse analysis, Weusten finds that consumers are being sold, from these businesses, the idea that a women’s worth is measured “in terms of her physical beauty rather than her contribution to society” (Weusten 2009: 129). Ultimately, our American society’s ideal beauty is a

culmination of two ideas compromising both “beliefs about various types of good looks, including what physical and other features define each type,” and “inferences about what personal qualities go with each type” (Solomon, Ashmore, Longo 1992: 25). This leads us to the idea of stereotypes found in the American beauty industry.

After World War II, a demand for beauty products increased drastically in the American culture. Companies began the ongoing marketing of beauty advertisements that would eventually lead to deep-seated societal and cultural norms (Jones 1980). The consumption and use of these beauty products spread across the country and the use of them quickly turned from a luxury good to cultural mandate. With the use of these beauty and hygiene products, Americans created a cultural hierarchy tied to moral, gender, social status, and racial superiority (Jones 1980; Peiss 2000). Today, inside advertisements in the media, we see a continuing array of stereotypes of beauty. According to one study, there is a strong idealized beauty that involves multiple groupings of women, called, “psychological multiplicity.” The same study identified women as part of a group and labeled them according to their beauty type which included: “feminine/classic beauty, sensual/exotic, cute/girl-next-door, sex kitten, and trendy” (Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994: 53). Only one study directly contrasts this idea of “psychological multiplicity”, and found that there is one specific, over-arching stereotype of beauty in America: young, thin, and sexy (Weusten 2009). These stereotypes created by the advertisements in the media have influenced an increase in violence specifically against women, racism, and classism (Andrew, Feder, and Klaver 1994).

With the rise of impossible standards in the beauty industry, we have seen significant impacts on consumer’s self-perception. Our society has created role-models

for its consumers with the use of our mass media. According to one study, there has become an “overwhelming emphasis on beauty, thinness, and sexiness,” in the media’s advertisements (Andrew, Feder, and Klaver 1994: 127). The idea of beauty has become a comparison hierarchy of physical characteristics including hair texture, symmetry, and complexion (Peiss 2000). Two studies found that these same images in our advertisements are influencing an environment that creates role models that exclusively exonerate femininity and the importance of a mirrored self-image (Andrew, Feder, and Klaver 1994; Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore 1994). One study mentions an attempt to combat the dangers of tying self-worth to physical beauty. The company, Dove, has begun an advertisement campaign titled, “Real Beauty,” that is working to create positive role-models who display and encourage a focus on inner beauty and less on physical beauty. Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign criticizes other companies’ advertisements with a focus on idealized beauty and instead has begun to incorporate education tools in their own. They use the slogan, “talk to your daughter before the industry does,” as a means of encouragement for women to teach their children ways to be less vulnerable to the media’s idealized beauty in advertisements (Weusten 2008: 132).

Methodology:

How do skin-care product advertisements in popular magazines depict the ideal American standard of beauty? Content analysis is the systematic analysis of manifest and latent indicators of research material which in return gives the researcher a better understanding of the material’s underlying messages. This form of analysis is most

suiting for the study of magazine advertisements, because it allows a deeper look into our society's idolization of beauty. With content analysis, I examined skin-care advertisements in *People Magazine* to understand the way American beauty is depicted, and the ways it influences our society's idea of beauty, stereotypes, and self-perception.

People Magazine was first published in March of 1974. Over the past 40 years, the magazine has built an exceptional reputation for itself being known as having the largest audience in American magazines with the highest revenue from advertisements. The magazine is also well known for its yearly announcement of the "Sexiest Woman Alive" and "100 Most Beautiful People". Because of the opportunity to influence such a high percentage of our society through various advertisements, *People Magazine*, would be perfect for the study. Access to *People Magazine* is increasingly easy for consumers because it can be found in grocery and convenient stores across the country as well as their online website. The goal of *People Magazine* has always been to focus on people rather than issues. Even the name itself indicates the content's purpose is to represent our society's standards, people, and their stories. The research will be looking at six different skin-care product advertisements found directly in *People Magazine*. Each advertisement was analyzed by its manifest and latent indicators to give the researcher a better understanding of the messages the magazine sends to its consumers. Though the analysis, many indicators of the ideal American standard of beauty were found including light, soft, and wrinkle-free skin.

To find articles advertising skin-care products, I chose to pick articles from *People Magazine* which solely published in summer months from the years 2014-2016. I chose this season because people are more likely to be looking for skin-care products in

preparation for their summer-body. While I analyzed the advertisements, I was sure to pay close attention to both the latent and manifest indicators. As I looked through the different advertisements found in *People Magazine*, I noted the manifest indicators of the model's demographics including: gender, age, body position, clothing, skin color, and hair style. During the research, I also paid close attention to the product that the advertisement was selling. Finally, I then noted the latent indicators which included stereotypes, metaphors, wordings, reasons for body position, and the overall underlining sexualization of the models in the advertisements.

Findings:

After analyzing the different advertisements in *People Magazine*, there were several reoccurring themes found throughout each of them. First, only prominent, household companies were featured in the magazine such as: Olay, Aveeno, Dove, and Curel just to name a few. Although each advertisement selected for the research involved some type of skin-care product which resulted in similar themes, there were a good variety of different ones found as well. Many advertisements offered skin improvement, skin nourishment, and anti-aging products. Some magazines even offered skin health and improvement advice in the advertisements. In *People Magazine*, each of the companies featured are known for carrying drugstore products. This is very intentional and beneficial for the advertising companies as well as the magazines because drugstore companies provide convenience and a low price. *People Magazine* is sold in the same

place as each of the products advertised, making it easy for the consumer to grab the item in the same store as it is being advertised while they are shopping for household essentials.

A closer look inside the advertisements displays exactly who the advertisements are trying to reach: women. Throughout the magazines, in every advertisement for a skin-care product featuring a person, there is a youthful, age-ambiguous adult woman. Every woman found on the advertisements was Caucasian with blonde hair and blue eyes or dark hair and dark eyes. The women with light hair and light eyes were displayed as youthful and adventurous in colorful backgrounds while the the dark haired, dark eyed women were displayed with their hair pulled up and surrounded by a dark background which created a seductive, sultrier feeling to the advertisement. The models were displayed with flawless, air-brushed skin and limited clothing to show it off. On every advertisement, the model had a full face of make-up in whatever situation they were in, this included one model who was standing in the shower with perfect eyeliner, mascara, and blush. The only advertisement found in the magazine that did not fit this description belonged to the company, Burt's Bees. This advertisement was clear to state that the model did not have make up on and displayed a woman with pulled back brown hair and freckles on her face. Although the model did have darker hair, in this specific advertisement, the colors were friendly and fun creating a youthful overall feel which suggested the benefit of being "natural".

The advertisements being sold in *People Magazine* offered a variety of skin-care products ranging from anti-aging creams to stretchmark repairing oils. An Olay advertisement selling an anti-again moisturizer, featured a woman with flawless, wrinkle-

free skin and the quote, “I never look back, I will just look younger.” They market products to women who have lost or gained weight resulting in stretch-marks. We see this in an advertisement for Bio Oil, with claims to be able to radically improve the appearance of stretch marks, scars and uneven skin tone. A common theme found in the advertisements is that the companies marketed to women who seem to feel as if they need to change their bodies. Many of these ads used reoccurring words such as diminish, smoother, softer, younger, brighter, and healthier insinuating that the use of the product will be able to fix any of these the consumer’s perceived imperfections.

With the use of the images and texts found on the advertisements, companies used a variety of strategies to sell their products to the specific consumers of *People Magazine*. Looking deeper, we find the companies are trying to sell products by using the idea that joy comes from being beautiful, using a medical approach, and promising a quick and easy fix for their perceived imperfections.

A look into skin-care product advertisements in *People Magazine* at first sight reveals a light and fun atmosphere. The women in the advertisements look flawless, they are dressed in perfectly matching outfits and look to all be filled with immense joy. Many of the women seem to be in mid-laugh and others’ faces dance with happy grins as they wash their bodies, shave their legs and put on lotion. Both Dove advertisements for ¼ moisturizing beauty bar reveal women with glowing, clear skin who seem to be caught in mid-laugh. These images are designed to give the consumer the idea that a product that ensures perfect skin will bring you joy and happiness.

In *People Magazine*, we see the companies use a medical approach for grabbing the customer’s attention and giving value to their advertisement’s argument. Words such

as: NutriumMoisture, nourishment, treatment, proteins, clinically proven, micro-sculpting, cells, and several different vitamins were found throughout the advertisements and were used to describe products in a medical way. We see this strategy played out specifically in the advertisement from Hylamide, an anti-age serum, where they used the words: peptides, hyaluronic acid, compounds, and palmitoyl tripeptide-38. The promotion itself states, “I’m full of boring-sounding science but I’m proven to work in five days.” The company, Curel, uses the idea of a medical approach by attaching a picture of the Rx prescription symbol and the National Eczema Association seal pictured in the advertisement. In one advertisement found in *People Magazine* Aveeno, Clean and Clear, and Neutrogena pair up to share skin-care tips. This advertisement showcases the only male found in any of the advertisements, Dr. Joshua Zeichner, a celebrity dermatologist who shares the “truth behind the little things we do that can have a negative important on our skin.”

Finally, the companies use the promise of quick and easy solutions to the consumer’s problem areas. In the company Nivea’s promotion for skin-firming body lotion, it promises firm skin in as little as two weeks. The company, Vaseline, claims to take your skin from extremely dry to hydrated in just days in their advertisement for intensive care, advance repair lotion while another company, Jergens, claims to “Lock in twice the moisturization. In half the time.” Other advertisements found in *People Magazine* claimed to fix problem areas in as long as five weeks to as fast as instantly.

Discussion:

In *People Magazine*, we see companies selling their products through the use of various marketing techniques, but when we look deeper into our findings, it is clear how these influence several deeply rooted sociological theories. A reoccurring theme found in *People Magazine* is the sociological theory of gender roles. In the articles, we see gender roles displayed in light of specific stereotypes. Similarly, in *People Magazine*, the advertisements display various stereotypes of women including feminine, sensual, cute, and trendy. Another example from the media displaying gender roles is the idea that women need to be focused on beauty. There were advertisements for skincare products including lotion, razors, creams, oils, and sprays and not one of them pictured men. This is played out in the literature when it mentions how products have turned from a luxury to a necessity.

In the findings, we also discussed how the products sold in *People Magazine* were drugstore brands meaning they would most likely be sold in grocery stores rather than high-end stores. The gender role in our society is that women do the grocery shopping in the family. The marketers take notice of this as they market products for women who may have stretch marks, or uneven skin tones due to having children. They also offer many products that promise quick and easy application or results because they know that mothers in the family don't have much time for themselves while they are raising their family.

Another theme found in the media is the sociological theory of ageism. An example of ageism in the advertisements is the way women are portrayed with wrinkle-free skin. These women are models for the ideal beauty and as consumers look to this magazine it is creating unrealistic expectations of smooth skin. In the cited articles, we

see this played out in Olay's advertisement with the phrases that read, "I will take beauty into my own hands." Not only do they they advertise explicitly anti-age products, but also products that help prevent wrinkles and signs of aging such as moisturizers and sunscreen. Tying back to gender roles, we see only age-ambiguous women advertised in these products. By the companies promoting the idea of "fixing" your skin problem, they are insinuating you are not enough of a woman with imperfections and they need to be fixed. We find this same idea in the articles cited where it mentions women's perceived self-worth being shaped by the advertisements around them.

Conclusion:

How do skin-care product advertisements in popular magazines depict the ideal American standard of beauty? With a quick look at the advertisements in *People Magazine*, it is easy to see that models are placed in staged backgrounds and re-touched to have flawless skin. The average consumer knows that the media photoshops women, but what they might not realize is the impacts the flawless model has on our society and especially women. With an analysis of the advertisements in *People Magazine*, this study took a deep look into past literature and current media to portray some issues that have risen from these portrayals of ideal beauty. The consumers of these magazines are left with the idea that being beautiful means to be young, and feminine with perfect, spotless skin. The companies used the strategies of a medical approach, the idea that true joy comes from beauty, and promising a quick and easy way to fix their imperfections.

Many themes found in the articles cited from the literature review promoted similar themes as to what was found in the media. With the use of a content analysis of *People Magazine*'s advertisements, this study is able to add to the already well researched topic. With a deeper look at the advertisements, we can see how the use of Photoshop can affect the consumer's construction of beauty, idea of stereotypes, and self-perception. The research was able to be more concise because this study was on advertisements found solely in the summer season, and the use of *People Magazine* was great for this specific research because thousands of men and women look to this magazine weekly for fashion and beauty tips from celebrities. Although *People Magazine* worked well for the study, it would have been ideal to use several different beauty magazines to incorporate a broader understanding of the topic. Another limitation of the study includes the fact that it was not done longitudinally. It was only looked at from the perspective of today's style. Finally, we were not able to answer questions regarding the idea of beauty regarding other ethnicities besides Caucasians.

With unlimited time and resources, I would choose a content analysis of the way several different fashion magazines displayed beauty from the early 1930s to present time. In the study, I would also include media from several different multi-cultural magazines to have a better understanding of all of American's idea of beauty in regards to the lack of representation found in today's magazines.

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