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Killing Us Softly? Investigating Portrayals of Women and Men in Contemporary Magazine Advertisements

Terri D. Conley[1] and Laura R. Ramsey[1]

Abstract

Our research aimed to systematically investigate how women and men are portrayed in magazine advertisements, deriving hypotheses from Jean Kilbourne's observed media analysis presented in her *Killing Us Softly* film series. A total of 790 advertisements in 19 magazines were coded. Results revealed support for many of Kilbourne's hypotheses. For example, compared to men, women were portrayed as more flawless, passive, and dismembered, particularly in women's fashion and men's magazines. Other hypotheses from Kilbourne's analysis were not supported; for example, there were no differences in the portrayal of female versus male models in defensive stances, as childlike, in bondage, or transforming into an object. These findings have implications for the readers of these magazines as well as instructors who use the *Killing Us Softly* film series in their courses. *Additional online materials for this article are available to PWQ subscribers on PWQ's website at http://pwq.sagepub.com/supplemental.*

Keywords

mass media, advertising, popular culture, body image, sex roles, instructional media

Research abounds concerning damaging portrayals of women in the media (for reviews, see Furnham & Mak, 1999; Goffman, 1979; Wolin, 2003). These images are associated with negative outcomes for women including lower self-esteem (e.g., Martin & Gentry, 1997), poor body image (e.g., Botta, 1999; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Halliwell, Malson, & Tischner, 2011; Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999), self-objectification (for review, see Moradi & Huang, 2008), and eating disorders (e.g., Harrison, 1997, 2000; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Our current research assesses media images of female versus male models and images of women across different types of magazines, utilizing Jean Kilbourne's (Cambridge Documentary Films, 1979, 1987; Media Education Foundation, 2000) analyses of the media as a guiding framework.

Killing Us Softly *Series and Associated Hypotheses*

Jean Kilbourne's video series, including *Killing Us Softly* (Cambridge Documentary Films, 1979), *Still Killing Us Softly* (Cambridge Documentary Films, 1987), and *Killing Us Softly 3* (Media Education Foundation, 2000) and *4* (Media Education Foundation, 2010), has been widely used in psychology of women and gender, social psychology, and communications courses for several decades to promote a discussion of how women and sexuality are portrayed in advertisements. Kilbourne and her colleagues have amassed a huge number of advertisements, and Kilbourne lectures in the videos on themes she has identified. Although Kilbourne recognizes that advertising portrays everyone inaccurately, her particular concern is that women are specifically targeted, and targeted in especially damaging ways, relative to men.

Kilbourne is not an empiricist, but she has certainly undertaken an observational analysis of advertisements. In this way, her investigations are similar to those of Goffman's (1979) research, and thus we believe they can similarly promote empirical research. In her documentary, *Killing Us Softly 3* (Media Education Foundation, 2000), Kilbourne generated a number of clear, specific, and testable hypotheses about how women, relative to men, are portrayed in advertising.

First, consistent with prior content analyses (e.g., Baker, 2005; Belknap & Leonard, 1991; Kang, 1997; Leppard, Ogletree, & Wallen, 1993; Paff & Lakner, 1997), Kilbourne reinforces the idea that women are portrayed more passively and less actively than men. In a related (and more specific) vein, Kilbourne argues that women are more often portrayed in physically defensive positions than men (i.e., reacting to a physical attack—be it playful or threatening—from someone else). Though the hypothesis that women are portrayed

[1] Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:
Terri D. Conley, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA
Email: conleyt@umich.edu

passively has been supported empirically, little prior research has compared portrayals of female and male models; moreover, the specific hypothesis about women being positioned in defensive stances (as if responding to an attack) has not been examined empirically.

Further, Kilbourne asserts that women are portrayed in subordinate roles to men. More specifically, she asserts that women are more often portrayed in positions where they are literally physically subordinating themselves to men (e.g., by serving as a footstool, kissing a man's shoe) than vice versa. She also identifies at least five specific instances of figurative subordination that emerge in advertisements whereby advertisers: (a) suggest either through words or images that women (to a greater extent than men) should take up as little space as possible, reduce the amount of space that they take up, or be as unnoticeable as possible; (b) show women (to a greater extent than men) with their mouths covered or incapacitated, suggesting that women should be quiet or silent, or present advertising copy indicating that women (to a greater extent than men) should be silent; (c) depict women (to a greater extent than men) as small children, suggesting that women should be treated like children; (d) portray women (to a greater extent than men) in bondage or mock bondage situations; and (e) directly trivialize or eroticize violence against female models, but not violence against male models. That is, the ads depict violence against women without concern for the victim, depict violence against women as appealing to the woman, or depict violence against women as sexually appealing.

Although the general issue of subordination of women has emerged in prior research, we are aware of only one study that addresses any of these specific types of subordination. A content analysis by Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008) found that female violence victims were portrayed as sexual objects more than 70% of the time, suggesting that violence against women is eroticized in advertisements. They did not code directly for the trivialization or eroticization of violence against women, nor did they compare portrayals of women to portrayals of men, making it difficult to put their findings in context.

Kilbourne also makes at least seven additional assertions that have not, to our knowledge, been addressed in previous content analyses. (a) She argues that advertisers portray female (but not male) models as flawless. Kilbourne particularly notes that photos of female models are highly airbrushed to give the illusion of perfect skin. (b) Advertisers more commonly objectify women (relative to men) by showing them transforming into objects. Kilbourne suggests that women are *literally* objectified by making women's bodies into objects or making female models look like inanimate objects (e.g., a woman's legs are portrayed as a pair of scissors). (c) Advertisers dismember women's bodies to a greater extent than men's, showing only certain body parts, such as legs or breasts. (d) Ads trivialize women's (but not men's) desire for power or gender equality; that is, advertisers treat feminism and women's desires for equal rights as a gimmick or inconsequential. (e) Frequent portrayals trivialize eating disorders among women (but not among men) by making light of anorexia or similar illnesses. (f) Women (but not men) are characterized as "gold diggers." That is, Kilbourne argues that women are portrayed as using men to get to men's money or as using their ostensible seductive powers in the service of material gain. (g) Advertisements mock heavy women (to a greater extent than heavy men). Kilbourne argues that the brunt of society's aversion toward heavy people, as reflected in advertising, is directed toward women.

In sum, in her documentaries *Killing Us Softly 3* and *4* (Media Education Foundation, 2000, 2010), Kilbourne makes a number of clear, specific, testable hypotheses about portrayals of women in advertising. When viewing Kilbourne's documentaries in psychology and women's studies classes, students who have been trained in the scientific method may well wonder whether these ideas have been explored systematically. Although Kilbourne's basic premise that women are portrayed negatively has been supported in content analyses, most of her specific hypotheses have not been tested. This lacuna raises the possibility that Kilbourne merely selected a few extreme advertisements to display in her presentations but most advertisements are, in actuality, benign. Empirically testing these ideas adds weight to the discussion of gender portrayals in the media.

Comparing Types of Magazines

In addition to comparing how women and men are portrayed in individual advertisements, we also compared different types of magazines. Considering the intended audience of the magazine is important for two reasons. First, the audience of the magazine highlights who is being exposed to the advertisements. Because advertisements affect how people view themselves, knowing who is exposed to the hypothesized negative portrayals of women can help focus future research and interventions on the affected populations. Second, because advertisers are motivated to appeal to the audience so that they can sell their products, the content of the advertisements should reflect themes and messages that the target audience is expected to find desirable.

Kilbourne's analysis primarily targets women's fashion magazines, suggesting that these magazines are especially likely to adopt ads that are detrimental to women. However, empirical evidence is needed to substantiate this claim. The highest circulation magazines directed toward women fall into two categories: fashion magazines (e.g., *Vogue*) and home-related magazines (e.g., *Good Housekeeping*). We suggest that the messages provided by these two types of magazines are very different. In particular, home magazines cater to homemakers and/or women with families whose interests lie in gender-role traditional pursuits (e.g., crafts, baking, and home decorating). By contrast, fashion magazines cater to younger, unmarried women with fewer domestic interests.

Previous research has shown that women are more often sexually objectified and portrayed as victims in fashion magazines compared to home magazines (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). In a similar but more specific vein, we expect that the most noxious subtext identified by Kilbourne (e.g., portrayals of bondage and the eroticization of violence) likely happens in fashion magazines, rather than home magazines. Because society generally does not view housewives or mothers in sexual terms (Haddock & Zanna, 1994; Six & Eckes, 1991), magazines directed toward this group would probably not portray women erotically.

Similarly, advertisements in magazines that target a primarily female audience may differ from those in magazines targeting a male audience. For example, previous content analyses have found that advertisements in men's magazines portrayed women as more sexualized and dependent than advertisements in women's magazines did (Baker, 2005; Venkatesan & Losco, 1975), which contradicts Kilbourne's claim that women's fashion magazines portray women in a particularly sexualized way. Venkatesan and Losco (1975) suggested that advertisers believe that men are more likely than women to buy products that portray women in sexualized ways (and perhaps more subordinated roles as well). However, in their dated study, they did not differentiate between different types of women's magazines (home vs. fashion) but rather compared advertising content of "women's magazines" as a group to "men's magazines" as a group. To the extent that women's *home* magazines are less likely to portray women in sexualized terms than men, it might dilute the negative portrayals of women in "women's magazines" as a whole. Indeed, Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008) found that women's fashion magazines included significantly more sexualized portrayals of women than women's nonfashion magazines. Our current research adds to this previous research by assessing a broader range of categories and by comparing men's, women's fashion, and women's home magazines.

The Current Research

Our research directly tested Kilbourne's assessments of advertising by analyzing the advertisements that appear in high circulation magazines. Specifically, we examined whether women versus men were more frequently portrayed in the capacities delineated by Kilbourne, focusing on passivity, the five indicators of subordination, and the seven assertions about women's bodies, status, and roles outlined above. We also examined whether portrayals of women were similar in women's fashion magazines, women's home magazines, or magazines geared toward men.

Method

In this study, we investigated the extent to which themes related to the subordination and control of women (as outlined by Jean Kilbourne) can be found in contemporary advertisements. We content analyzed all of the advertisements in 19 high circulation magazines from November 2009. We directly coded the content to address the conclusions Kilbourne has drawn in her insightful and influential but less systematic analysis.

Identification of Magazines

We consulted the Magazine Publishers of America's (2006, 2008) rankings of magazine circulation to generate our list of magazines for coding. Our goal was to analyze magazines with the highest circulation because they are likely to have the broadest impact. To target deliberate magazine readers, we analyzed only magazines that were sent to paid subscribers, not those sent to members of groups or organizations as part of their memberships (e.g., we did not analyze magazines published by the American Association of Retired Persons or American Automobile Association, which are sent automatically and without additional charge to all members, even though these magazines have some of the highest circulation rates). Also, we excluded weekly magazines, which tend to be more news-oriented than the monthlies, which we targeted. We considered magazine titles from three general categories: women's home magazines, women's fashion magazines, and men's magazines.

For coding purposes, we included magazines that were in the top five (according to circulation rates) in either 2006 or 2008. Thus, we coded a total of 19 magazines. The six women's fashion magazines included: *Elle*, *Allure*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *InStyle*. The seven women's home magazines were: *Family Circle*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *Southern Living*, and *Woman's Day*. Finally, the six men's magazines were: *Golf Magazine*, *Maxim*, *ESPN*, *Men's Health*, *Golf Digest*, and *Field and Stream.* We coded the most recent issue of each magazine that was available at the time we began the coding process (i.e., November 2009).

Identification of Advertisements and Models

We coded only advertisements that covered at least one full page of the magazine and included at least one person whom the coders believed to be 15 years of age or older. Ultimately, 790 advertisements met these criteria and were retained for coding and analysis: 450 in women's fashion magazines, 204 in women's home magazines, and 136 in men's magazines. To systematically identify which model to code in ads in which more than one model was present, we coded the central or main model. When there was no central or main model, we coded the first model on the left-hand side of the page.

Coding Process

Kilbourne's assertions were identified by reviewing her documentary, *Killing Us Softly 3* (Media Education Foundation,

2000), and establishing coding categories consistent with her claims. The categories that we used for the current study (and associated examples) are listed in Table 1. The specificity of these coding categories mirrors previous content analyses (e.g., Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). Each advertisement was coded dichotomously (i.e., for the presence or absence of each coding category in each advertisement); thus, a single ad could have been coded as fitting several of the categories (or none at all).

Two coders independently coded every advertisement. Coders were considered to have agreed if they both believed a category was *present* in a given advertisement, or, if they both believed that a category was *absent* in a given advertisement. However, if one coder indicated that an advertisement displayed an instance of a coding category, whereas another indicated that this coding category was absent in the ad, this was coded as a disagreement. Cohen's κ was utilized to establish reliability between coders. Cohen's κ adjusts for the probability of agreement by chance and is a conservative estimate of agreement among coders. Cohen's κ for the agreement between coders was .98. This Cohen's κ level indicates an "excellent" (Fleiss, 1981) or "almost perfect" (Landis & Koch, 1977) level of agreement. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion between the coders.

Results

To analyze the data, we (a) conducted descriptive analyses addressing the percentage of ads that portrayed women in ways consistent with the categories, (b) conducted chi-square analyses to determine whether women (more frequently than men) were portrayed in ways consistent with the coding categories, (c) examined differences in how different genres of magazines portrayed women, and (d) considered differences between individual men's magazines.

Coded Categories

The coding categories and the percentage of advertisements that depicted female models in these ways are displayed in Table 2. The categories most frequently observed were portrayals of women in passive poses and with flawless skin. Categories *not* observed in our analyses include trivializing women's desire for power, mocking eating disorders, or portraying models as gold diggers. In addition, no ads featuring women displayed contempt for overweight models (although contempt for overweight male models was documented).

Portrayals of Female Versus Male Models

Female passivity was evident in the ads. Female models were portrayed in passive positions more often than male models were, $\chi^2(1) = 47.16$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). Correspondingly, female models were less frequently portrayed in active positions than male models, $\chi^2(1) = 45.42$, $p < .001$. Likewise, female models were portrayed as having flawless skin significantly more often than male models were, $\chi^2(1) = 94.24$, $p < .001$.

Other categories had lower frequencies but still demonstrated important differences. Surprisingly, men were shown as submissive to women more frequently than women were shown to be submissive to men, $\chi^2(1) = 6.34$, $p = .02$. Ads with female models were significantly more likely to have images or print copy implying a need to take up less space than ads with male models, $\chi^2(1) = 4.50$, $p = .035$. Women were dismembered (i.e., by showing only one body part) significantly more often than men, $\chi^2(1) = 9.19$, $p < .001$.

There were no differences between female and male models in the number of instances of portraying the model in a defensive stance, symbolic silencing, portraying the model as a child or childlike, portrayal of models in bondage-like scenes, trivializing or glamorizing violence, transforming into an object, contempt for heavy people, or portrayal of models in traditional gender roles. There were *no* observed instances of some of Kilbourne's categories. Specifically, no ads that mocked eating disorders, trivialized a model's desire for power, or portrayed models as gold diggers were identified.

Portrayals of Women by Magazine Type

Next, we utilized chi-square analyses to compare the portrayal of women in women's fashion, women's home, and men's magazines. We then followed these analyses with pairwise chi-square comparisons to determine which pairs of magazine types differed (see Table 3).

Women's fashion magazines. Flawlessness was the only category that was portrayed significantly differently by the women's fashion magazines compared to the other two categories. Magazines differed in their portrayal of female models' flawlessness, $\chi^2(2) = 37.10$, $p < .001$, such that female models were portrayed as significantly more flawless in women's fashion magazines than in women's home magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 36.84$, $p < .001$, and in women's fashion magazines than in men's magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 7.77$, $p = .01$. There were no differences in portrayed flawlessness between women's home magazines and men's magazines. Therefore, fashion magazines are the most likely to portray women as flawless.

Women's home magazines. For several categories, the advertisements in women's home magazines were significantly different than the other two types of magazines. Specifically, magazine types differed in their likelihood of posing female models in passive poses, $\chi^2(2) = 30.50$, $p < .001$, and active poses, $\chi^2(2) = 30.32$, $p < .001$. Women's home magazines portrayed female models less often in passive positions compared to women's fashion magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 28.72$, $p < .001$, and men's magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 7.08$, $p = .01$. Women's fashion magazines and men's

Table 1. Coding Categories and Examples

Coding Category	Definition	Examples From *Killing Us Softly 3*	Examples From Our Data
Passive	Model is presented in a passive pose	Model has her arms self-consciously crossed and is not engaged in an activity	Model is laying on a couch
Active	Model is presented in an active pose, as if actively engaging in an activity	Model is riding a bicycle	Model is tossing a golf ball
Defensive stance	Model is presented in a defensive stance, as if reacting to a (playful or otherwise) physical attack	Model is leaning away from the camera, with her hands out and her leg up to shield her body	Model is standing behind an object with a concerned look on her face, as if hiding from an attacker
Submissive	Model is in a physically submissive position to the other sex	Female model is kneeling next to a man sitting in a chair; his legs are propped up on her back	Female model is pinned down by a male model
Take up less space	Copy or image implies the model should take up less space (literally or figuratively)	Copy reads "The more you subtract, the more you add"	A measuring tape is tightened around a female model's hips
Silenced	Copy indicates that model should be silent or model's hand or clothes are deliberately covering mouth	Model's lips appear to be sewn shut	Model's hand is over her mouth
Childlike	Model is styled to resemble a child or is accompanied by copy suggesting model is a child	Model is in a dress styled like children's clothes and holding a lollipop	Model is on a swing set
Bondage	Model is presented in bonds or tied up in some way	Model has three large watches around her body	Model is encompassed in a snow globe, and her body is encircled by ribbons
Trivializing/glamorizing violence	Copy or image portrays violence as sexually alluring or romantic; no concern is shown for a model who is portrayed as the victim	A display for shoes is portrayed like a crime scene with a shoe over the female mannequin's throat	The copy "Blood is mere decoration" accompanies a photo of a woman wearing only jeans and a bra falling to the ground
Flawlessness	Model has flawless skin and/or appears airbrushed	Model has no blemishes and impossibly even skin tone	Extremely close-up image of a female model's face seems airbrushed to perfection
Literal objectification	Model is transformed/transforming into an object	Model has a beer label projected onto her stomach so she looks like a beer bottle	A female model's body dissolves into glitter
Dismemberment	Only one body part is shown or especially emphasized	Advertisement only shows the model's buttocks instead of her whole body	Only a model's nose, lips, and chin are in the ad
Trivializing desire for power	Copy or images trivialize the model's desire for rights/power	An ad portraying a sexually objectified woman has the copy "You have the right to remain sexy."	None found in the present study
Mocking eating disorders	Jokes or trivialization of eating disorders are present in copy or images	A female model is shown wearing a watch around her bicep with the copy "put some weight on."	None found in the present study
Portraying the model as a gold digger	Model is portrayed as using the other sex for money or resources	An ad showing an older man marrying a younger woman has the copy "She's after my money. Like I care."	Female model is wearing a skirt made of gold coins
Contempt for overweight people	Direct or explicit contempt for an overweight model	Copy that reads "I'd probably never be married now if I hadn't lost 49 pounds."	Ad portrays overweight models' reasons for not losing weight as noncompelling excuses
Traditional gender roles	Model is shown enacting traditional gender roles (e.g., women are cooking or cleaning, men are in an office setting or using tools)	Female model's thoughts are portrayed as being dominated by household chores	Female model is holding dish soap and a sponge

Table 2. Number and Percentage of Female and Male Models Portrayed in Advertisements Utilizing Coded Themes

Coding Category	Ads Depicting Women $n = 612$ (%)	Ads Depicting Men $n = 178$ (%)
Passive[a]	444 (73)	82 (46)
Active[a]	159 (26)	94 (53)
Defensive stance	0	2 (1)
Submissive[a]	0	4 (2)
Take-up less space[a]	24 (4)	2 (1)
Silenced	18 (3)	4 (2)
Childlike	6 (1)	0
Bondage	12 (2)	2 (1)
Trivializing/glamorizing violence	3 (0.5)	0
Flawlessness[a]	563 (92)	112 (63)
Literal objectification	31 (5)	5 (3)
Dismemberment[a]	98 (16)	12 (7)
Trivializing desire for power	0	0
Mocking eating disorders	0	0
Portraying the model as a gold digger	0	0
Contempt for overweight people	0	2 (1)
Traditional gender roles	18 (3)	4 (2)

[a] Percentages depicting women and men are significantly different.

Table 3. Comparisons Among Magazine Types in Portrayals of Female Models

Coding Category	Women's Fashion $n = 422$ (%)	Women's Home $n = 161$ (%)	Men's $n = 29$ (%)
Passive poses	333 (79_a)	92 (57_b)	24 (83_a)
Active poses	89 (21_a)	69 (43_b)	5 (17_a)
Symbolic silencing	13 (3_a)	3 (2_a)	5 (17_b)
Trivializing/glamorizing violence	0 (0_a)	0 (0_a)	2 (7_b)
Flawlessness	409 (97_a)	132 (82_b)	25 (86_b)
Dismemberment	59 (14_a)	37 (23_b)	4 (14_a)
Traditional gender roles	4 (1_a)	14 (9_b)	0 (0_{ab})

Note. The percentage of advertisements featuring female models in each magazine type that utilize the coded themes. Percentages across a row that do not share a subscript are significantly different. Only categories that demonstrated significant differences are included here.

magazines did not differ in their likelihood of portraying women in passive poses. Correspondingly, models were portrayed in more active positions in women's home magazines than in women's fashion magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 28.68$, $p < .001$, or men's magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 6.78$, $p < .001$. There was no difference in portrayals of women in active positions between women's fashion magazines and men's magazines.

Differences also emerged across magazine types in the extent to which they presented dismembered female bodies, $\chi^2(2) = 7.05$, $p = .03$. Dismembered images were more prevalent in women's home magazines than in women's fashion magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 6.86$, $p = .01$, and in women's home magazines than in men's magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 11.75$, $p < .001$. No differences in dismemberment emerged between fashion magazines and men's magazines. Finally, magazines differed in their likelihood of portraying women in traditional gender roles, such as cooking and cleaning, $\chi^2(2) = 31.16$, $p < .001$. Women's home magazines portrayed women in more traditional roles than women's fashion magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 28.85$, $p < .001$. Women's fashion magazines and men's magazines did not differ in their likelihood of portraying women in traditional roles, nor did women's home magazines and men's magazines differ on this dimension. In summary, women's home magazines were the least likely to portray women as passive and the most likely to portray women as active and dismembered. They had the highest percentage of portrayals of women in traditional gender roles, but this was only significantly different from the women's fashion magazines.

Men's magazines. Men's magazines had significantly different frequencies for two categories. First, differences between magazines emerged in the likelihood of symbolically silencing female models, $\chi^2(2) = 17.57$, $p < .001$. Men's magazines depicted silenced female models to a significantly greater extent than women's fashion magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 15.51$, $p < .001$, or women's home magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 11.86$, $p < .001$. There were no differences between women's fashion and women's home magazines. Second, magazines differed by type in their likelihood of glamorizing violence toward women, $\chi^2(2) = 25.70$, $p < .001$, such that men's magazines were more likely than women's fashion magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 18.17$, $p < .001$, or women's home magazines, $\chi^2(1) = 11.22$, $p < .001$, to use images and copy that make violence seem glamorous. There were no differences between women's fashion magazines and women's home magazines. In summary, men's magazines were the most likely to portray women as silenced and to trivialize or glamorize violence against women. No significant differences across magazine types were observed for the remaining categories (reactive stance, submissive, taking up less space, childlike, bondage, literal objectification, trivializing desire for power, mocking eating disorders, portraying the model as a gold digger, contempt for overweight people).

Differences Across Men's Magazines

We examined differences across individual men's magazines because, unlike the two categories of women's magazines, they varied widely. We found significant differences between magazines in their likelihood of portraying women as flawless, $\chi^2(5) = 22.69$, $p < .001$. More women in *Maxim* (90%) were portrayed as flawless than in *Field and Stream* (44%), $\chi^2(1) = 9.74$, $p < .005$, or *Golf Digest* (47%), $\chi^2(1) = 8.75$, $p = .01$. Likewise, more women in *Men's Health* (84%) were portrayed as flawless than in *Field and Stream*,

$\chi^2(1) = 11.37$, $p = .01$, or *Golf Digest*, $\chi^2(1) = 10.39$, $p = .01$. No other differences emerged.

Discussion

Our project aimed to systematically examine the conclusions drawn by Jean Kilbourne in her *Killing Us Softly* film series (Cambridge Documentary Films, 1979, 1987; Media Education Foundation, 2000, 2010). A total of 790 advertisements in 19 issues of popular magazines were coded, and our results revealed support for several of Kilbourne's hypotheses. As expected, women were portrayed more passively, less actively, and as more submissive than men. Ads promoted the idea that women should take up less space and portrayed female models with flawless skin and dismembered bodies. Additionally, women's photos, compared to men's, were more often accompanied by symbolic or explicit messages instructing them to take up less space.

However, a number of other observations reported by Kilbourne were not supported in our sample of ads. For example, women and men in the advertisements were not portrayed significantly differently regarding defensive model stances, the childlike portrayal of adults, bondage, or literal objectification (i.e., some or all of the model's body is transformed into an object). In general, very few models, female or male, were portrayed in these ways. Similarly, Kilbourne highlights advertisements that mocked women's desire to achieve equal rights, misrepresented eating disorders, portrayed women as gold diggers, or displayed explicit contempt for heavy women, but these themes were not represented. Instead, our content analysis suggests that these themes do not play a large role in current advertising in the most widely circulated subscriber magazines we analyzed.

Although advertisements portraying these themes were found to be rare, they were not nonexistent. Indeed, such advertisements may be more salient when they do appear, which could lead to the overestimation of their occurrence; similar biases have been identified in research from cognitive psychology (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Additionally, the salience of these ads may enhance their impact. If these advertisements are indeed more memorable, then the consequences of these ads, such as the internalization of messages about violence against women, may be greater than the consequences of other, less memorable advertisements. Regardless, the low frequency and similar portrayals of male and female models for these categories is noteworthy given that these findings do not support Kilbourne's analysis, at least for popular print ads. The atypicality of these themes is a factor that needs to be considered as we interpret the *Killing Us Softly* video series (Cambridge Documentary Films, 1979, 1987; Media Education Foundation, 2000).

In addition to examining Kilbourne's claims, our data speak to the differences between various genres of magazines. Specifically, we compared women's fashion, women's home, and men's magazines. We showed evidence that women's fashion magazines and men's magazines portrayed women as passive rather than active and physically flawless. In comparison, women's home magazines depicted women more positively in some ways, although they were also portrayed more traditionally in terms of work roles. Finally, advertisements in men's magazines were more likely to include images silencing women as well as to present copy and images trivializing violence against women.

Although women were portrayed somewhat similarly in women's fashion magazines and men's magazines, the implications of such images in these contexts may be different. Because viewing these kinds of images has been linked to disordered eating (e.g., Harrison, 2000), lowered self-esteem (e.g., Martin & Gentry, 1997), and poor body image (e.g., Groesz et al., 2002), women who read fashion magazines are at risk for these problems. On the other hand, men who view these images may be more likely to endorse unrealistic standards for women's bodies (Hatoum & Belle, 2004), stereotype women (Rudman & Borgida, 1995), objectify women (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010), discriminate against women (Rudman & Borgida, 1995), view women as less competent (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), and sexually harass women (Yao et al., 2010). Thus, reducing the presence of these ads in both women's fashion and men's magazines should have benefits to the individual readers and to society more broadly.

It is also interesting to contemplate *why* women and men are portrayed as they are in these magazines. In some cases, these results can be clearly tied to the purpose of advertising—to sell products. For example, physical flawlessness might appear in a fashion magazine advertisement for a beauty cream as a way to display the desired (albeit usually impossibly inflated) result of using the product. Note that although this tactic might sell the product, it is also selling a view of how women in American society are supposed to look. This trend becomes even clearer when flawless images of women are used in advertisements in men's magazines; instead of displaying the results of a product, these women are used as props to sell products that men are expected to buy (e.g., women are not using men's cologne, but women are often used to sell an image of what a man can expect when using that cologne). Thus, the connotations of the negative portrayals of women in advertising are different according to magazine type.

Finally, our investigation of magazine type questions who is choosing to expose themselves to these images. For example, the main readers of these fashion magazines are women. Thus, the major consumers of these magazine images are likely put in the unfortunate position of trying to live up to the images in the magazines. Given that the circulation for women's magazines is far larger than that of men's magazines, and that these magazines are subscription-based, it could be argued that women are participating in their own oppression by exposing themselves to these magazines. Of course, women are presumably drawn to the content of the

magazines not the advertisements that accompany the content. It is not clear from the present work how much the content of the magazine and the advertisements overlap in their portrayals of women. Indeed, some kinds of magazines, such as fashion magazines that include extensive editorial spreads that essentially advertise designer clothing, may contain quite a bit of overlap, to the point where readers do not distinguish between content and advertisements. Regardless, the pervasive advertising throughout magazines means that resisting exposure to advertisements would require boycotting magazines altogether. Women likely do have a deep ambivalence about consuming these images as they simultaneously inspire and demoralize (Wolf, 1991). Much more empirical work could be done to understand this ambivalence.

Our study focused exclusively on magazine advertisements. Although Kilbourne's analyses especially emphasize magazine advertisements, she addresses advertising from many different media formats. Perhaps the frequency of these images vary in television, billboard, less mainstream magazines, or newspaper advertising (e.g., weekly inserts by specific stores), or in the actual fashion layouts of women's fashion magazines, which are also a means to sell clothing (i.e., the designers and prices are always made available to readers). Content analyses of other advertising media could help discern how generalizable the present findings are to advertisements that appear on television, the Internet, and other media.

The present study sampled magazines with the highest circulation rates. By definition, advertisements in these publications should have the highest impact because they reach the largest number of people. However, these magazines are also consumed primarily by a White, heterosexual audience, and thus are likely to cater to that audience. Magazines that target other groups, such as African Americans (e.g., Plous & Neptune, 1997) or lesbians (e.g., Milillo, 2008), depict slightly different advertising themes, quite possibly due to the greater diversity of the models. Additionally, there is some evidence that these images may impact different kinds of women differently (e.g., African American women compared to White American women; Jefferson & Stake, 2009), so the *implications* of these images may vary depending on the target audience as well.

Likewise, using the popularity of magazines as our selection criteria resulted in a selection of men's magazines that focused predominantly on sports and health. In fact, with the exception of *Maxim,* which is a lifestyle and entertainment magazine for men, all of the men's magazines focused on sports or health. This narrow range of men's magazines should be considered when interpreting the findings comparing different magazine types because men's sports/fitness magazines may portray women in different ways than other kinds of men's magazines. It would be interesting to examine men's magazines that do not focus on sports or health. It would also seem important to consider magazines that are ostensibly gender-neutral as well, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New Yorker*. Because gendered magazines may be *more* likely to portray women and men differently than gender-neutral magazines, it is especially notable that several of Kilbourne's claims were *not* supported with the current data; therefore, her claims would seem to be even less likely to be supported in gender-neutral contexts.

Notably, since this research was conducted, a new version of the *Killing Us Softly* video series was released, *Killing Us Softly 4* (Media Education Foundation, 2010). In *Killing Us Softly 4*, Kilbourne retains many of the same claims about advertising and indeed uses many of the same example advertisements as in the third iteration of the documentary. Thus, we believe these findings are fundamentally relevant to the new version of the film. Interestingly, a few of the categories we coded have been eliminated from Kilbourne's presentation. In the most recent version of the film, Kilbourne does not mention women being portrayed in defensive stances, as gold diggers, or as directly mocking eating disorders. These categories had very low frequencies in our analyses, and we found no gender differences in the advertisements' portrayals of women and men on these dimensions.

In sum, our research offers strong evidence that magazine advertisements portray women as flawless and passive and encourage women to take up less space, particularly in women's fashion and men's magazines. Moreover, it is not the case that all models are portrayed in this way, but, rather, women are specifically targeted. Furthermore, not all kinds of magazines portray women in the same way. Although women's home magazines portray women more positively in some ways, women are portrayed more traditionally in terms of work roles compared to women's fashion and men's magazines. Efforts should be made to encourage advertisers to portray women more responsibly. Finally, this research offers a systematic evaluation of the claims made by Jean Kilbourne in her *Killing Us Softly* video series (Cambridge Documentary Films, 1979, 1987; Media Education Foundation, 2000, 2010). Several of these hypotheses were supported; some were not. Thus, our research highlights the importance of systemically testing popular claims.

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