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Publication Details

Kervin, LK and Mantei, J, Advertising in "tween" magazines: Exploring the considerations and opportunities, In Moulton, A (eds), Bridging Divides: National Conference for Teachers of English and Literacy, 2009, p 1-14, Kensington Gardens, SA: AATE/ALEA.

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Refereed Conference Paper

This paper was accepted for the conference via a blind refereeing process established by the Conference Planning Committee on behalf of ALEA and AATE

Title

Advertising in “tween” magazines: Exploring the considerations and opportunities

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Abstract

Many children in our classrooms have competence when interacting with visual and print based texts. While the familiarity may well exist, there is a need to examine children’s ability to sort through and make meaning from the myriad of messages, commercial and otherwise, which they encounter. While some argue that children are empowered by the ability to use and manipulate popular culture for their own purposes (Harding, 2004), others voice concern that this market is vulnerable to negative effects of media.

In Australia both the number of magazines targeting children, and the readership of these magazines, is high and increasing. For example, audited circulation for *K-Zone* was 66,320 in 2007 and for *Total Girl* was 64,450 (<http://www.bandt.com.au>); and readership was estimated at more than three times these figures ([http://www.pacificmags.com.au /Pages/Magazines/](http://www.pacificmags.com.au/Pages/Magazines/)). A marketing journalist (Curtis, 2004) commented that while television advertising aimed at children ‘raises tempers,’ ‘subtle marketing through children’s magazines has gained parental approval.’ Advertisers see magazines as the solution to communicating with children.

Children’s magazines often carry hidden advertisements in editorials, comics, games and puzzles (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998); and the Australian organization Media Watch monitors for ‘advertorials’ in print materials. In this paper we examine the prevalence, range and content of advertising material within two magazines (*Total Girl* and *K Zone*) and the considerations and opportunities this poses for critical reading.

Keywords

Visual and print based texts, popular culture, children’ magazines, advertorials, Total Girl, K Zone, critical reading.

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Advertising in “tween” magazines: Exploring the considerations and opportunities

Introduction

A new generation of children are in our classrooms. Descriptions of digital natives, clickerati kids and the Net Generation suggests children have competence when interacting with technology and associated visual and print based texts. While the familiarity may well exist, there is a need to examine their ability to sort through and make meaning from the myriad of messages, commercial and otherwise, via numerous media channels that include television, movies, music, radio, video games, and the Internet and print materials with which they are confronted. While some observers consider that children are empowered by the ability to use and manipulate popular culture for their own purposes, others see them as vulnerable to the negative effects of media.

Research before the 1990s showed that children learn behaviours and have their value systems shaped by the media; more recent studies have been focused on content and viewing patterns, with an acceptance of their multiple effects on children. Discussions about the negative impact of media on children overwhelmingly focus on television, as children spend the most time with this medium and it reaches the youngest ages. Television viewing often begins before the age of two. Both the content of television programming, and television advertising have been examined with regard to exposing young children to sex, violence, bad language, and promoting gender stereotypes and communicating commercial messages that may not be in the child's best interests. The intensity and frequency of children's current exposure to commercial messages regarding food, toys, clothing, movies and countless

consumer goods is unprecedented.

However, the focus to date has primarily been on television advertising. Over 20 years ago, advertising researchers cautioned that relying on television advertising as the sole, or primary medium for studying the influences of advertising on children resulted in an incomplete understanding of how children process and interpret advertising.

Print advertising has often been ignored in the literature despite the fact that the distinction between content and advertising can be subtler, and perhaps less obvious to children. Children's magazines often carry hidden advertisements in editorials, comics, games and puzzles. This is of particular concern considering the Australian organization Media Watch monitors for 'advertorials' in adult print materials, indicating that even adults may have difficulty distinguishing between the two. The difference may be even less obvious to children, hence leaving them more vulnerable to influence.

The opportunity to reach children and teenagers with print media has expanded over the last decade. A marketing journalist commented that while television advertising aimed at children "raises tempers", "subtle marketing through children's magazines has gained parental approval" (Curtis, 2004). Advertisers see magazines as the solution to communicating with children; and the journalist cites research by Egmont, a UK children's publisher, which found that parents see children's magazines as trustworthy and educational. These magazines, such as *K-Zone* and *Total Girl*, may be exploited as another avenue for the promotion of food, by way of both advertisements and free food samples. The marketing web site for Australian Consolidated Press states that: "Disney Adventures is a magazine PARENTS trust... READERS have proven to be responsive to advertising campaigns that have been specifically designed to fit in with the editorial content i.e. competitions, giveaways. We have seen record numbers of responses of these promotions -- **this is the essence of our magazine**" (emphases in original) (www.acp.com.au).

In Australia both the range of magazines targeting children, and the readership of these magazines, is high and increasing.

What does it mean to read critically?

What was once considered a focus solely for secondary classrooms, the ability to read critically is now promoted across the primary grades. Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resources model and their discussion of the reader as a text analyst has done much to increase awareness of this important reading role and Comber (2005) supports this discussion, observing, "... it's not reading performance which ultimately counts in children's lives but what they learn to do with texts".

Christie (2005) describes critical literacy as "... a term intended to capture a pedagogical concern to develop users of literacy who are critical and questioning about what they read, as

well as discriminating about how they use writing themselves” (p. 5). Blair-Larsen and Vallance (1999) emphasise the “... multidimensional thinking process” where the “... interaction of the reader, the text, and the context as readers make critical connections between their prior knowledge and new-found knowledge” (p. 37). Opportunity to engage with discussion about text, before, during and after the reading experience, is crucial in supporting students to make connections between the text, their experiences and their view of the world. Engaging with these processes in connection with texts that children are readily accessing, such as magazine texts, make for a powerful reading experience. Rather than an inquisition (Cramer, 1994) it is paramount that opportunities for critical reading be included in literacy learning experiences in supportive, inclusive and meaningful ways.

As teachers we need to understand what it means to be a critical reader and examine this within the context of popular text as we plan and implement appropriate and meaningful classroom experiences. Education Queensland (2002) identified that teachers need to be able to engage in “... explicit discussion of talk and writing about how written and spoken texts work, about their features, characteristics, patterns, genres or discourses” (p. 7) to teach sophisticated literacy concepts such as critical literacy. More effective teachers are identified as those who understand complex literacy processes, have a range of teaching practices to use within the classroom, structure the learning environment to incorporate these understandings as they continually monitor the learning gains of the students (Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005).

The study

The paper reports on a systematic analysis of advertising within two magazines, *Total Girl* and *K Zone*. One edition of each magazine was selected for detailed analysis of advertising content. Each of these editions were published in the same month, of the same year, and held the same number of pages.

Table 1: Magazine demographics

| <i>Magazine</i> | <i>Circulation</i> | <i>Cost</i> | <i>Target Audience</i> | <i>Standard pages</i> |
|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Total Girl</i> | 85 431 | \$4.50 | 8-11 years, girls | 116 |
| <i>K-Zone</i> | 90 024 | \$4.50 | 6-13 years, boys | 116 |

The magazine issues were manually examined and coded in two distinct ways.

Firstly, each magazine was analysed for examples of advertising. Items were recorded that mentioned or pictured a promoted product. From this process, eight categories for the advertisements were identified:

- Food, for example, snack foods, fast food, recipes
- Toys, for example, games, novelty items

- Fashion, for example, clothing lines, accessories
- Entertainment, for example, DVDs, books and music
- Sport, for example, promotion of sporting codes, sporting memorabilia
- Grooming products, for example, cosmetics, skin care
- Travel, for example, places to visit, holidays as prizes
- Charity endorsements, for example, charities that are supported by celebrities, charities supported through calendar of events.

Once instances of advertising were identified and categorised, each item was then analysed according to specific codes of advertisements. These codes, and a description of each, are described:

Table 2: Types of advertisements

| Type of advertisement (ad) | Description |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regular | These ads clearly promote a particular brand of product |
| Ad for premium | These ads promote a premium (gift) that the consumer receives with another item. Reader contributions to magazines frequently attracted a premium. |
| Competition | Ads that promote a competition that is accessed by either a) buying a particular product or b) receiving a product as a prize |
| Puzzles / Games | These are not identified as ads, but are clearly sponsored/ developed by a company. The brand name, logo or character is usually identified. |
| Promotion (not identified as an ad) | References to products are embedded within the text. These often feature in editorial spaces rather than separate ads. |
| Public Service Announcements | These ads promote a particular behaviour or idea and are branded by a particular company. |
| Product Association | The inclusion of images or description drawing attention to a product while not within the context of an ad |

Findings from two magazines

Our analysis revealed the instances of advertisements across the range of categories differed within the two publications.

Table 3: Advertisements in examined publications

| | Total Girl | K-Zone |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Food | 15 | 10 |
| Toys | 31 | 74 |
| Fashion | 23 | 0 |
| Entertainment | 34 | 63 |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Sport | 2 | 7 |
| Personal Grooming | 17 | 0 |
| Travel | 2 | 0 |
| Charity Endorsements | 13 | 1 |
| Total advertising instances | 137 | 155 |

From the 137 advertisements identified in *Total Girl*, 25 were coded with two or more types of advertisements evident within the one ad; 35 of the 155 advertisements in *K-Zone* were coded with two or more types.

Table 4: Types of advertisements in examined publications

| Type of advertisement (ad) | Total Girl | K-Zone |
|-------------------------------------|------------|--------|
| Regular | 40 | 63 |
| Ad for premium | 5 | 15 |
| Competition | 15 | 26 |
| Puzzles / Games | 7 | 4 |
| Promotion (not identified as an ad) | 53 | 60 |
| Public Service Announcements | 11 | 0 |
| Product Association | 19 | 18 |

Regular advertisement



Figure 1: Regular advertisements in K-Zone and Total Girl publications

In both magazine publications, regular advertisements typically featured either a toy or food item. In each example, the item was clearly branded and described. There was very little overlap in regular advertisements between publications; for example, Transformers appeared frequently as an advertised toy within K-Zone, whereas Total Girl included toys such as Butterscotch Pony and Digi Makeover.

Advertisement for premium



Figure 2: Advertisement for premium in K-Zone publication

A premium refers to something that is offered free or at a reduced price and which is conditional upon the purchase of another product. In *K-Zone* over a one page feature a copy of the *Guinness World Records Extreme* book is offered free when a subscription to the magazine is obtained. What is interesting is that this offer consumes a considerable portion of the page. The language used within the text to describe the magazine positions the reader carefully; ‘the hottest mag on the planet’, ‘the number one kids’ mag’ and ‘so you never need to miss an issue’.



Figure 3: Advertisement for premium in *Total Girl* publication

A double page advertisement in *Total Girl* reads “Join the Shrek fun at McDonalds” and features large images of Shrek, Donkey and the logo for the Shrek 4D Movie. On the bottom right corner of the left page an image of the “Far Far Away Pasta Happy Meal” is presented and halfway down the right page the text reads “For your change to win, see your happy meal box for entry form and details”. Information about McDonalds is given less emphasis than Shrek and associated sponsors (including Movie World, Activision and Nintendo).

Competition



Figure 4: Advertisement through competition appearing in both publications

A double page competition run by the Disney Channel appears in *Total Girl* offering the winner the opportunity to live like Hannah Montana for a day (p. 2-3). Readers are encouraged to share their 'secret identity' in 100 words or less to win the competition. Prizes include a \$1000 shopping trip and makeover with their 'bestie' (first prize) and a prize pack containing a range of entertainment and personal accessories (second prize). The description of Hannah Montana depicts the double life of Miley Cyrus; a 14 year old girl who is a student by day and pop star by night. This description sets a stimulus platform for entrants to consider as they compose and submit their 100 words or less response about their secret identity. Entries can be submitted through postal mail or by logging on to a website.



Figure 5: Advertisement through competition in *K-Zone* publication

A one page competition run by Allen's appears in *K-Zone* offering the chance to win \$10000 with the purchase of any marked pack of lollies. Marked packages contain a collector trivia card and the chance to find a marked 'Homer ticket' in promotion of *The Simpsons*. While this advertisement is also featured in *Total Girl*, it is somewhat in contrast to the other competitions included within *Total Girl* (for example, the previous description). The only activity required is to check the package for the winning ticket, and the opportunity to enter the draw for a daily prize through entering details on a website.

Puzzles/Games



Figure 6: Advertisement through puzzles and games in *Total Girl* publication

Puzzles and/or games were identified in each publication. Each example features the colours, logos and characters from the product packaging and associated advertising and in most cases the puzzle questions and solutions were associated with the product. Both *Total Girl* and *K-Zone* includes a 4 page spread of puzzles where the reader has to help Paddle Pop lion through a maze to reach his favourite paddle pop, spot the differences between two pictures depicting paddle pop lion, three children and a range of paddle pops, and a word search puzzle featuring words related to the major competition prize. Interesting are the subtle changes with colour and font in the different publications.

Promotion



Figure 7: Advertisement through promotion in *K-Zone* and *Total Girl* publications

Each magazine included a number of promotions where the advertising categories were explicitly promoted. In each magazine, the monthly planner pages include such examples. *K-Zone* profiles the month over a double page and includes a food promotion for Yoghurt Pops; explicit reference to sporting codes such as NRL, Rugby Union, Soccer and Supercars; and connections to Spongebob Squarepants, Dinosaurs 3D Imax movie, the Harry Potter movie and Gwen Stefani for entertainment. Focusing on the same month of the same year, *Total Girl* profiles the same month, over one page, and includes food promotion for Aeroplane Jelly and Kinder Surprise; explicit reference to crafts such as beading and lettering styles; and connections to the Harry Potter book, the challenge to win a shopping spree through the Tiara Club book series, a museum exhibition and Christina Aguilera for entertainment. The physical differences between these two calendars provide interesting examples of critical reading. In *Total Girl* there is significantly more text to read than that represented in *K-Zone*. Further the font choices, layout designs and colour choices all impact upon the meaning making processes and expectations of the target readers.

Public Service Announcement



Figure 8: Advertisement through public service announcement in *Total Girl* publication

Street's Paddle Pop's "Win a BMX" provides a list of activities to complete and items to find within the neighbourhood. The feature includes the Street's logo, images of paddle pops both wrapped and unwrapped with a bite taken out of each, an image of a bicycle and a cartoon depicting the Paddle Pop lion riding a BMX. The activities promote interaction with friends as the checklist is completed and added to, and bicycle safety. There is more information about the features of the prize bicycle than the food product sponsoring the announcement.

Product Association

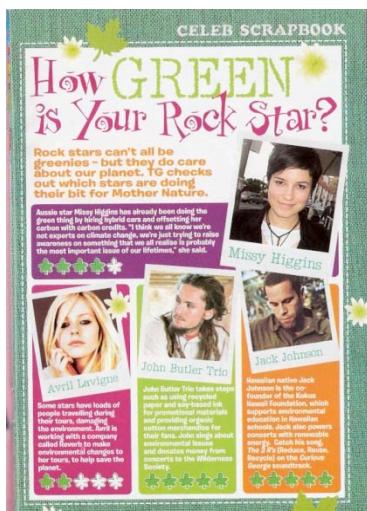


Figure 9: Advertisement through product association in *Total Girl* publication

Over a two page spread, seven musical artists are promoted in connection with the charities they support. While this section is not an advertisement; the decision as to which musicians to

include, and their images; works to promote their music. In the profile of one artist, a specific song and album title are provided with the reader encouraged to “catch his song”.

Classroom implications and considerations

It is clear from our analysis that the range of advertisements encapsulated within the magazines present complex texts that require much from the reader. The layout of the pages alone calls on the reader to be flexible in their approach to making meaning from the text as the enormous range of colourful items compete for attention. Aside from the obvious challenges of simply decoding these magazines, deeper and more important considerations lie with the interpretation of the messages which *K-Zone* and *Total Girl* promote. Embedded within each magazine are strong messages about what it means to be a boy or a girl and, of course, what it is to be cool. The magazine advertisements provide the how to of achieving these aims - the food to cook, toys to buy, movies to see, tricks to play, activities that make you look cool, the way to look and smell, facts to know, the right music and the ‘hot’ stars to be a fan of. Readers are told the price and location of the products that their favourite musicians/movie stars promote. The pressure is strong to be a *Total Girl* or a *K-Zone* kid and this is cause for educators to consider their role in the empowerment of these readers.

Children’s magazines appear to be growing in popularity and are promoted as appropriate reading resources as many parents and teachers would prefer children to read magazines over nothing at all. While this may be the case, there is a need to consider the advertising they contain. The volume of advertising material revealed through our analysis of the two magazines draws attention to the strategies a reader requires in interpreting such texts. The quantity of advertisements in each magazine exceeds their total number of pages (*Total Girl* 137 advertisements in 116 pages; *K-Zone* 155 advertisement in 116 pages). These findings oblige educators to carefully consider how children are prepared for and engaged with critical reading.

The range of categories for advertisements presents some important considerations for critical reading. The issues of gender that emerge across the two publications need to be examined with young readers; why are boys targeted with toys and entertainment? Why are girls targeted with fashion, personal grooming and charity endorsements? And what are the implications for those readers who do not fit this mould behaviours and for boys to remain in their childlike state, yet *K-Zone* and *Total Girl* target the same age group.

The types of reading activities within the advertisements varied across the publications. *Total Girl* included more puzzles, games and public service announcements than *K-Zone*. Alternatively, *K-Zone* included more advertisements with premiums and competitions than *Total Girl*. These decisions provide insight into each editorial team’s perception of the types of reading activities with which the readership engages. As teachers, we need to consider how

appropriate it is for girls to be positioned as having a preference for puzzles and community service activities and how appropriate it is that boys are positioned as having a preference for getting something free or competing with others for a prize. These are strong gender messages that require awareness and critical reading skills as children explore and shape their identities as emerging adolescents.

Those in the tween market are usually limited by their parents in the ways that they spend their money and in their access to products, simply because of their age, lack of income and mobility. Enabling the purchase of a magazine could be perceived as a parent's endorsement of the product and its messages and allowing/providing them as reading material in the classroom provides further endorsement from the teacher. These are powerful adult groups in a child's life. It is important that classroom literacy experiences promote critical appraisal of all texts and that children learn to consider and interpret them, regardless of their origin. Rather than prohibiting the use of such texts in classrooms, the teacher is encouraged to embrace the opportunity to develop in children these analyst skills.

Concluding remarks

Critical analysis of advertising in tween magazines develops a better understanding of the ways that such texts attempt to manipulate them with what to have and how to be. Classrooms provide the learning environment where the purpose and intention of advertising in children's magazines can be explored, their messages interpreted and discussed and revealed for what they really are. This knowledge equips children not only beyond the texts of the classroom, but also beyond their childhood years as they continue to apply that critical lens to the texts of adulthood. Consumers who can make observations and decisions about the ways a text attempts to position the reader are empowered to reject manipulation in favour of informed choices and be true to the person they are.

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