

## Body Grammars in advertising to young children\*

Gramáticas corporales en la publicidad dirigida a menores

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### Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the representations of body image in advertising addressed to young children. Based on the content analysis of television advertising aimed at young children (5 to 9) in Spain, this work examines the character portrayals in advertising and discusses the implications of such representations in children's body imaginaries. Results show four condensed clusters that connect depicted body image in advertising with the cultural images of consumption, health, beauty, and youth. With this regard, this study suggests that the prescription of depicted body image in advertising may reinforce the transference and acquisition of discourses that appeal to modern bodily values. Media representations constitute and integrate the social imagery concerning the body as they provide body grammars that make sense of the body, its image, and identity

**Keywords:** Advertising; Media Representations; Body Image; Content Analysis; Child Audience.

### Resumen

Este artículo presenta un análisis de la representación mediática de la imagen corporal en publicidad dirigida a menores. A partir del análisis de contenido de la publicidad televisiva dirigida a niños de 5 a 9 años en España, este trabajo examina la imagen corporal en la publicidad y discute las implicaciones de dichas representaciones en los imaginarios del cuerpo entre los menores. Los resultados muestran cuatro grupos de imágenes que conectan la imagen corporal con los imaginarios de consumo, salud, belleza y juventud. A este respecto, este estudio sugiere que la prescripción de imagen corporal en la publicidad refuerza la transferencia y la adquisición de discursos que apelan a los valores corporales de la modernidad. Las representaciones mediáticas constituyen e integran la imagen corporal en la medida que proporcionan gramáticas corporales que dan sentido al cuerpo, su imagen e identidad.

**Palabras Clave:** Publicidad; Representación Mediática; Imagen Corporal; Análisis de Contenido; Audiencia Infantil.

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### Introduction

Children build their body in a media consumption culture (Buckingham, 2011). Compared to former generations, today's children grow up closely familiar with media discourses that promote the body care and the body cult: images and narratives that influence in children's body image construction.

Television advertising —among other mediators— provides children with discourses and representations that help them to build the world they live in (Buckingham, 2015). Hence, children categorize, appropriate, and reformulate advertising discourses arranging a homogeneous and homogenizing construction of the body and its representations (Sánchez Reina, 2018).

Advertising performs as a mediator in the interpretation and appropriation of the body literacies: the transference and acquisition of knowledge and rationalities concerning the body image. It operates as a source of information as well as a transmitter of the regulative body ideals (Sossa Rojas, 2011).

Body image representations in the media have become accessible and active resources from early childhood. Through the dissemination and consumption of images and narratives, children consume adverts that promote body products as well as appealing and unrealistic body portrayals. Children as young as three already associate character's physical traits with beauty and gender canons (Herbozo *et al*, 2004; Dittmar, Halliwell and Ive, 2006; Lemish, 2003). Advertising effects on children's body image may prevail during adolescence and adulthood (Grogan, 2016).

Researching body image representations aimed at children via television advertising is an almost unexplored topic. While several studies have focused on the media message, there is still a dearth of research concerning advertising to children. With this regard, considering the intrinsic relationship between advertising consumption/exposure and children's construction of their body image, this paper

aims to study the representations of body image in television advertising addressed to young children (5 to 9 years old) in Spain and the connection of such representations with the modern body values.

### Body image and children

Body image is a common concern among children. Whether as part of a process of physical development or as a consequence of body pressure, children grow up aware of their body and appearance. Children's cognitive development is essential to make active their body image (Smolak, 2011). However, not all children reach body image maturity at the same time (Biolcati *et al*, 2017). Socializing agents such as family, friends, and the media may play a key role in the constitution of children's body image (Fingerson, 1999; Sama, 2011).

Children's body concerns are usually connected with physical traits such as the shape of the face, the color and texture of the hair, the body type and skin complexion (Chan *et al*, 2011; Young-Hyman *et al*, 2003). Both boys and girls associate people's physical appearance with sociocultural narratives, practices and identities connecting people's body image with race, age, gender and social class stereotypes (Amoroso *et al*, 2017; Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003; Lemish and Götz, 2017).

The transition between the first and the second childhood (ages 5 to 7) is a critical period when children experience the first body image concerns (Holmqvist, Frisén and Anderson-Fye, 2014). According to Smolak (2011), children as young as five may already show a preoccupation with the size of their tummy or muscularity. Some authors such as Berg (1997) consider the fear of physical maturation may be a major reason to manifest these concerns. For their part, Kater, Rohwer, and Levine (2007) argue children's desirability with the appearance may be strongly equated by sociocultural factors.

Body image discontent has increasingly become a major issue among young children. Different

studies have warned about the growing number of children (5 to 9) who experience body image concerns (e.g. Bird *et al*, 2013, Davison, Markey and Birch, 2000, Smolak, 2011). According to these studies, both boys and girls are dissatisfied with any aspect of their bodies (weight, height, skin color or hair texture). Similar to the adolescent and adult population, body image concerns are mostly present among young females (Children's Society, 2017).

Excessive preoccupation with body image may affect children's well-being and development. Scientific research is convincing, body pressure exerts power on children's perceptions and attitudes toward their bodies at different levels (Grogan, 2016). Different studies suggest that children's preoccupation with the body may be connected to lower self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction (Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive, 2006). To this respect, it has been widely argued that body image concerns may encourage children to follow unhealthy habits and attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Children's anxieties and preoccupations with their bodies may also influence their expectations and body projects. While girls strive to achieve the ideal thin, boys dream of muscularity (Holmqvist, Frisén and Anderson-Fye, 2014). With this regard, according to Jongenelis, Byrne and Pettigrew (2014) children may care about their body and appearance and may self-objectify in a very similar way young people and adults do.

Body image concerns among children include the preoccupation with their weight and appearance as well as other physical traits. Recent studies have underscored a growing concern for skin color and face appearance (Patton, 2006; Shin and Shin, 2008). Especially in non-Caucasian countries, both boys and girls consider the Western model of beauty as a desirable body image (Ogunbiyi, Omigbodun, and Owoaje, 2009). Moreover, similar studies have discussed the negative attitudes afro-descendant children have to their hair color and/or texture (Maldonado, 2018; Piedrahita, 2013).

Different factors have been correlated in achieving a healthy body image (Grogan, 2016). Concerning this issue, children's socialization with the media has been observed as a key factor (Carrillo,

Sánchez & Jiménez Morales, 2011; Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive, 2006; Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). The growing implication of advertising in people's body image and the increasing use of body imagery in the consumer culture make necessary an overview of its mediating role among the child audience.

### **Advertising to children**

Current studies affirm that children consume an average of two and three hours of audiovisual content in a day (Hudders *et al*, 2015; Kantar Media, 2017). Depending on the type of media—conventional or digital— children are more or less exposed to different advertising formats. Television advertising is still the most powerful device to reach children (De Pauw *et al*, 2018). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children and adolescents may consume an average of 400 000 advertisements a year (Jordan and Romer, 2014).

Children are tackled by advertising messages that foster both body care and the body cult, and the use of the body imagery to sell almost anything.<sup>2</sup> According to different studies such messages may transfer and perpetuate the body values that interfere in children's health and socialization (Carrillo, Sánchez & Jiménez Morales, 2011; González, Luna and Carrillo, 2011).

Children's consumption of advertising can be understood as an activity to satisfy informational demands concerning products and brands (Gunter, Oates and Blades, 2004). Moreover, advertising may also perform as a source of information concerning the body and its image. As advertisers appeal to children with images, slogans, and jingles, they disseminate information regarding the body and its appearance. They provide representations and grant preferential readings that to some extent disseminate body canons and stereotypes.

Advertising's discourses and representations mediate in children's attitudes, perceptions, and socialization toward the body and its image. They become part of the regulative ideals that configure the body landscapes within a society. As argued by González, Juárez and Ludeña (2012) advertising comes to mediate in people's bodies performing as expert knowledge that regulates in the transference

1 For instance, in a study conducted by Kamtsios (2008), it was found that a high percentage of children (12 y/o) with body image concerns, follow a regular diet and do physical activity in order to keep their bodies on the shape. On their part, (Strasburger *et al*, 2013) have demonstrated a correlation between body image pressure and restrictive eating among minors. Similarly, other authors have discussed the implication of body pressure in children's socialization, for instance, children's attitudes to racial stereotypes (Klaczynski, Daniel and Keller, 2009; Reel *et al*, 2008) and obesity stigma (Baxter, Collins and Hill, 2016, Su and Aurelia, 2012).

2 Most body prescriptions in advertising have come moderately. By persuading the audiences with beauty and gender stereotypes which normalize the body ideals. Toy advertising may provide children with such narratives. In contrast, some advertising campaigns such as those appealing adolescents with beauty products have explicitly praised on the values of beauty and 'the perfect' body image. To mention an example, see Asepxia (Genomalab, México) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPBLcAG56V8>

and acquisition of the body policies and the bodily practices.

Children's relation with advertising has traditionally been documented from two perspectives: on the one hand, a psychological approach which aims to study advertising message as an influential factor at a cognitive level. On the other, a socio-cultural approach which addresses the social implications of its message.

At a *cognitive level*, advertising has been pointed as an influential factor in the construction of body image. In this line, research has suggested that advertising operates in emotional and rational levels which alter the self-body image perception and satisfaction (Grogan, 2016; Grabe, Ward and Hyde, 2008). Moreover, it has been argued that advertising may influence children's perceptions and attitudes toward the body image of their peers (Botta, 1999).

At the *social level*, advertising has been observed as a mediator in children's socialization and identity processes. Existing research suggests children's relation with advertising may not necessarily be reduced to the simple exposition and identification of the cognitive effects (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Buckingham, 2011; Kondo and Steemers, 2007). Instead, researchers should focus on studying the material effects of its message: the sense children make of advertising and the way they appropriate from its images and narratives to explain the world they live in.

Children's identity and self-image get constituted along with the body imagery provided by media and advertising. Analyzing the effects of such representations may encompass the study of the cognitive effects and/or the social implications of its message. In comparison to previous works (e.g. Amoroso *et al*, 2017; Herbozo *et al*, 2004; Lemish and Götz, 2017), this study focused on the study of representations as both cognitive and social grammars with material implications at the individuals and the social structure. The following section focuses on the theoretical approach that frames in detail such perspective.

### **Analyzing representations in advertising**

Advertising is structured by collective representations prompted to be shared within targeted audiences (and within society in general). These visions of the world represent interpretations of reality that the producers of information (corporations and advertisers) share and —through different processes of mediation— become significant means, culturally appropriated by the audiences (Martín Serrano, 2004).

In words of Moscovici (cited in Meier and Kirchler, 1998: 756) "Representations are usually defined as ideas, thoughts, images, and knowledge about a 'social object'." They constitute the commonly held knowledge and ideas of a collective or social category which allows the mutual understanding between two referential systems and/or individuals. Representations incorporate individual experiences and the commonly shared knowledge, norms and values within a group.

Media are one of the major transmitters/communicators of representations. They contribute to the dissemination, appropriation, and reconfiguration of social representations through their discourse. The knowledge communicated by these representations influence individuals, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Along with other factors of influence, media representations influence the generation of individuals' concepts and determines their attitudes (Meier and Kirchler, 1998).

Media representations emerge as part of enculturation processes of public communication to (re)produce cultural representations as well as the (un)desired roles, values, and schemes for action (Martín Serrano, 2004). In order to make sense of media representations, producers of information integrate them into meta-narratives: the exteriorization and internalization<sup>3</sup> of both social and media imaginaries employing encoded messages such as advertising (Velarde Hermida, 2001).

Analyzing body image in advertising can be focused on the *structuring* and/or the *structured* character of its representation. To this respect, following Martín Serrano, (2004) exploring body image representations may observe the *body grammars* articulated by both the producers of who prescribe the information and media consumers who make sense of it.

Body image representations in advertising are supported by character portrayals and the features that comprise such depictions. Like any other representation, body image in characters is supported on a) *constitutive* and *prescribed* features (Martín Serrano, 2004). Constitutive features refer to the permanent or steady elements that provide information regarding the characters. These are essentially connected to their nature (sex, age, ethnicity, species, physical traits, etc.). On the other side, prescribed features are conceived as the suggested elements connected to the constitutive

<sup>3</sup> Exteriorization might be understood as the vision of the world prescribed by the producers of information. Internalization, on its part, might be referred to as the picture that individuals appropriate and incorporate to their knowledge and actions (Velarde Hermida, 2001).

features and about which identities emerge (roles, actions, psychosocial traits, social contexts, etc.). Both dimensions provide a vision of reality that exteriorizes and internalize the normative/regulative order of the body image in media and society.

### **Methodological considerations**

This study aimed to analyze the body image representation in television advertising aimed at young children by observing the constitutive and prescriptive features in the character portrayals. High-impact advertising addressed to children (5 to 9) in Spain was selected for this study.<sup>4</sup>

The study of representations in advertising may involve different research methods and techniques. Regarding this study, quantitative and qualitative content analysis was conducted (Oleinik, 2011).

A sample of 154 ads was collected according to the report provided by Kantar Media (2016). A protocol of analysis was intentionally designed to observe the character's body image portrayals (Añaños *et al*, 2016). The protocol was validated by two members of the research team. Both analysts independently analyzed a random subsample obtaining an average Kappa de Cohen index of 0.82. The study encoded the information for 427 characters in a final sample of 133 ads. Data were processed in the SPSS 11.9 software. After statistical analysis, information was qualitatively observed in conceptual matrices to identify relevant clusters.

### **Body image portrayals to children**

After observing the prescriptive and constitutive of character portrayals and the qualitative analysis of the advertising message,<sup>5</sup> this study identified four referential models or clusters of analysis described as follows.

#### *The white body*

Whiteness prevailed as a dominant trait in analyzed advertising. The majority of depicted characters (88.3%) were encoded as white/Caucasians. In contrast, the proportion of dark skin characters was inferior to the ten percent. Characters resembling the American/North-European body image (blond hair, blue/green eyes, white teeth, and friendly smile) were identified as an appeal to children; these representations were used for the promotion of almost product (e.g. cereals, shampoo, cars, videogames,

4 The selection criterion was based on advertising impact (GPRs, Gross Rating Points) corresponding to advertising campaigns from the second term of 2015 (Kantar Media, 2016).

5 Full details of qualitative analysis (trends and statistical differences) can be seen in Sánchez Reina (2020).

etc.). Advertising for body care products was more likely to commodify this image. Nevertheless, the image of white boys and girls was also observable in toy advertisements. Whiteness in advertising was mostly attached to specific psychological traits, roles, and actions: advertising's narratives were composed of children, adolescents, and adults who eagerly comprise food brands and products that positively influence on themselves, their feelings and emotions. Advertising portrayals endorse scenes that reiterate cultural values and friendship. More than two-thirds of analyzed advertisements prescribe products/services as a means to fulfill satisfaction and happiness. The portrayals of family and friends appeal to the child audience to dream about their fantasies and desires. Hardly advertisers openly claim children to buy the sponsored products. Instead, they focus on the consumption of experiences where products or brands lead daily life.

#### *The slender body*

Content analysis also revealed that slenderness figured as the body norm in this advertising. The study showed that most of the depicted characters were encoded as slim (75.2%) and with average musculature (73.1%) whereas other body types remained in short proportions. Regardless of the target audience or the advertised product, advertisers claim on the slender body the image of the standard consumer. Slender bodies were visually emphasized with the performance of actors (psychological traits, roles, and actions). They were mostly associated with characters complying with the beauty, health or gender stereotypes, for instance, women exercising to promote sports clothes, happy children eating sweets and snacks, athletes running to show anti-dandruff shampoo, etcetera. On the contrary, bigger size bodies were mostly connected with counter-narratives: silly and funny characters that play as supporting characters or antagonists. Likewise, they were associated with fictional or animated characters (e.g. the laughing cow). Depicted images in analyzed advertisements operate in concordance with the modern culture where slenderness holds both the market and body values. Slim characters are portrayed as referent models of attitudes and actions while different shape characters are scarcely represented or negatively connected to body stereotypes.

#### *The young body*

According to this study, adults led the narratives in analyzed advertisements. In comparison to children who performed as main or supporting characters in less than thirty-percent (26.0%),

the study concluded that young adults (men and women in their twenties and forties) were the main prescribers in analyzed advertising. These characters were mostly encoded playing familiar roles: e.g. family relatives, teachers, celebrities, etc. Nevertheless, the observation of psychological traits and mood revealed that a huge number of adult characters mimic children's attitudes and performance. As observed in different adverts, adults cope with children in their actions and emotions. Family portrayals depict lovely family scenes: parents, who eagerly have fun with children as companions (no hierarchies are visible). Indeed, some adverts reverse the roles of children and adults. Moreover, adults are infantilized. Although some adverts do not show child characters, adult adopted childish roles and attitudes.

### *The gendered body*

Gender representations were also salient information in this study. As observed in the analysis, the representation of male characters was to some extent greater than that of the female characters (H: 54.8%; M: 41.0%). Although men and women stood in the same proportion for the categories of leading and supporting actors/actresses the study observed the subordination of female characters in some aspects. For instance, male characters were mostly depicted in adult ages while female characters were portrayed as teenagers or girls. Concerning the roles, male characters were mostly encoded as performing active actions in outdoor spaces (e.g. playing sports, buying, working, studying) while female characters were located indoors performing passive actions (modeling, sleeping, daydreaming, standing in the background). Concerning their physical traits, the analysis showed that female characters were more constrained to be depicted under the terms of stereotyped body image. Although female characters were shown with more diverse facial traits, their bodies were subjected to the slender body image.

### **Discussion**

Consistent with prior research (Gilmore & Jordan, 2012; Furnham, Abramsky & Gunter, 1997), this study has observed the prescription of whiteness as the predominant body image in advertising to children. To his respect, aligned with the cited works, we agree that the disseminations of such representations may influence children's construction of their reality as the cultural imagery of whiteness prevails connected to stereotyped discourses and representations.

As observed in the analysis, whiteness operates as a body grammar that structures advertising

narratives by assigning roles, attitudes, actions, etc. to their characters. In this sense, as argued by Echeverría (2010) advertising performs as a manner to discursively construct and reproduce the images of consumption and consumerism supporting on whiteness the images of cultural and economic capitals. Conversely, other ethnic diversity and minorities are depicted in relation to the cultural whiteness. Teaching children to praise whiteness is not a new issue, though. For a long time, media producers have placed on the white body moral values and virtues (Burton & Klemm, 2011). Nevertheless, in the rise of global societies and communications, marketers and corporations insist on targeting children with images that prescribe and amplify the white spectrum by promoting it as of the image of modernity (global capitalism) while fetishizing ethnicities (Izquierdo, 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising to find out that children from non-white countries are more susceptible to advertising nor Afroamerican children experience body image dissatisfaction to a higher extent (Padgett & Biro, 2003).

In line with previous research (Herbozo et al. 2004; Götz & Herche, 2012), results in this study manifest the modern paradoxes and ambiguities concerning the body and health culture. While the ministries of health deal with children's eating attitudes and health issues (e.g. obesity, anorexia, bulimia, etc.), children consume unhealthy advertising which promotes unreal body image portrayals. Most advertisers persuade children with fantasy narratives and idle characters that embellish their brands and products. In contrast to other body shapes and body types, slenderness is portrayed as a positive cultural model in advertising (Jiménez, Montaña & Vázquez, 2019). Regardless of the promoted product, advertising to children disseminates a pro-slimming culture (praising and fetishizing the slender body as a normalized and normative body ideal. To this respect, consistent with Carrillo, Sánchez, Jiménez Morales (2011), this study supports the idea that while advertisers appeal to children with slim characters, other body shapes will remain absent from the collective imagery. The finding should be carefully observed as depicted body image may become a mirror to construct children's body image (Grogan, 2016).

Another significant finding in this study suggests the prevalence of adult characters in advertising to children. Similar to Gómez-Espino (2005) adults are depicted as potential buyers while acting like children in the world of enjoyment. Nevertheless, although adult characters have been overrepresented (in comparison to children), the psychosocial features

of these characters portrayed images connected to children's imagery. In line with Jiménez Morales (2006), advertising narratives show young adults as referential models of adulthood. These images are connected to materialistic values in society which children appropriate as part of the dynamic game of consuming advertising (Buckingham, 2011).

Consistent with prior research, this study has evidenced the male domination in advertising to children. Like in Götz & Lemish (2012), the representation of male characters has been significantly higher than that of female characters. Moreover, although men and women show the same proportion of primary and secondary roles, the study revealed that women were mostly depicted in subordinate roles. This trend is much similar to that present in adult advertising (i.e., Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015; Uribe *et al*, 2008). If qualitatively observed, children's advertisements show similar depictions (boys who perform the main roles and actions while girls come along with them, supporting the action or demonstrating the products). Furthermore, this study shows gender stereotypes in advertising influence in the depiction of body image and appearance of characters. While femininity is constrained to the beauty canons and ideals, male representations are diverse. Although male characters are also subjected to normative ideals, female physical appearance is not scrutinized in the same way.

### Final considerations

This work provides a better understanding of the body image representations in television advertising aimed at young children (5 to 9). The analysis of the high impact advertising addressed to Spanish children during the second half of 2015 contributed to a better understanding of an almost unexplored topic. Similar to prior studies, this work concluded that advertisers mostly address a consistent body image to children: white, slender and young bodies.

According to the analysis, these images are structured in narrative contexts which may contribute to the reproduction of ethnic, body and/or gender stereotypes. Like in similar research, this study underlines the prescription of such body canons is connected to the cultural imagery of globalization and consumption. Since body diversity is scarcely represented, advertising offers a constrained vision of body image and body identity. While whiteness and slenderness are portrayed as signs of beauty, success, and distinction, other body images are hardly envisioned as images of consumption (and the related social imaginary).

This study has been limited to the study of television advertising. Future research should consider other advertising formats and media content aimed at young children. Moreover, other research techniques and methods should be implemented to triangulate the collected data. A qualitative approach may offer more useful insight to draw children's perception of advertising body image portrayals. Ethnography may let researchers figure children's appropriation of advertising image and discourse as well as the children's learning of body image literacies with the media.

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