A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Two Mainstream Black Magazines

Vanessa Hazell
Yorkville University
Juanne Clarke
Wilfrid Laurier University

The present study examines the portrayal of Black men and women in the images and texts of advertisements featured in Black-oriented magazines. A comparative content analysis is conducted on ads featured in Essence and Jet magazines for 2003 and 2004. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses reveal that Black people are portrayed both positively and negatively. Ideologies of racism and White supremacy continue to pervade advertisements featured in Black magazines, and this is problematic because new images and texts concerning Black people will be based on such negative attitudes. It is not enough to increase the number of positive portrayals of Black people; negative portrayals must also decrease and eventually be eliminated altogether.

Keywords: media analysis; Black portrayals; race; gender; White ideals; Black ideals

The mass media are a resource that is widely available. They have far-reaching effects on many different members of society. They affect how people perceive and understand various issues (Clarke, 1992). This is most likely due to the media’s availability in many different forms (e.g., television, radio, magazines). Advertisements too are widespread in our society—from television commercials to pages in newspapers and magazines to Internet pop-up windows. Ads subtly perpetuate and reinforce societal beliefs and expectations concerning gender and race through both their

Authors’ Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Juanne Clarke, Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5.
images and texts (McLaughlin & Goulet, 1999). And the texts and images presented in the media directly reflect the values and interests of the advertisers, who are usually White men (Colfax & Sternberg, 1972). As a result, people who are not White or male tend to be portrayed in a stereotypical and unfavorable light. Unfortunately, these images and texts become a part of the culture of a society and become the basis on which new images and words are created (Baker, 2005). In this way, the dominant ideology of White supremacy maintains and legitimates the power of White males over females and other races in our society (Bristol, Lee, & Hunt, 1995). These texts and images are often internalized by members of society and thus have a large influence on people’s views and attitudes concerning people of a particular gender or race, as well as on people’s views and attitudes concerning themselves as members of a particular gender and race (Baker, 2005; McLaughlin & Goulet, 1999).

Ads perpetuate and reinforce traditional gender roles and gender inequality by portraying how ideal men and women act and present themselves (Baker, 2005). In our society, ideal men are dominant, strong, successful, and sexually appealing. Ideal women are physically beautiful, submissive, and sexual objects (Baker, 2005). These ideal images are used in selling products both to men and women. For example, in selling products to men, the image of the ideal woman is used as a status symbol—if men purchase the product, they can hope to become more appealing to women possessing the characteristics of the ideal woman (Baker, 2005). In selling products to women, the image of the ideal woman serves as a role model—by purchasing the product, the female consumer can become closer to the ideal woman and thus become more desirable to men (Baker, 2005).

Magazines Directed Toward White Audiences

In the 1950s, Black people were greatly underrepresented in magazine ads (Humphrey & Schuman, 1984). A “hierarchy of skin color” existed at this point in American history, and this was reflected in the media; Black people with lighter skin tones were seen as being more socially and culturally acceptable than dark-skinned Black people (Bristor et al., 1995). According to Dates (1990, as cited in Leslie, 1995), Black people who did not fit into White people’s standards of beauty (i.e., light skin, long, straight hair, thin lips, thin figure) were excluded from advertisement images.

After the civil rights movement, the portrayal of Black people in the media slowly began to change (Leslie, 1995). Colfax and Sternberg (1972) conducted a content analysis of ads featured in Reader’s Digest, Look, Life, and Ladies’ Home Journal from 1965 to 1970. In 1965, approximately 5% of ads
included Black models and 3% of all the people presented in the ads were Black. By 1970, Black people were being presented in magazine ads more frequently and in a broader range of ads. However, they were still being underrepresented compared to their proportions in the general population.

Humphrey and Schuman (1984) conducted a content analysis of ads featured in *Time* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* from 1950 to 1980 to examine changes in the portrayal of Black people. The researchers considered three models in interpreting their findings. The first model stated that Black and White people would be presented in the same manner. The second model stated that this portrayal would reflect the real-life differences between these two racial groups. The third model stated that the portrayal of Black people would be greatly influenced by White people’s attitudes toward Black people. The third model was most applicable to their findings.

Humphrey and Schuman also found that the proportion of ads featuring Black people increased throughout the years, from 1% in 1950 to up to 10% in 1982. However, Black people were still being underrepresented in ads up to the 1980s. That is, Black people consist of 12% of the U.S. population, yet fewer than 12% of the ads in *Time* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* featured Black people.

Bowen and Schmid (1997) also conducted a content analysis of ads, in the magazines *Cosmopolitan, Esquire, Family Circle, Fortune, Good Housekeeping, Life, New Yorker, Sports Illustrated,* and *Time* from 1987 and 1994, to update previous findings. The researchers found that although the number of ads featuring Black people increased—up to 10.6% in 1992—Black people were still being underrepresented. Moreover, White people were being overrepresented in magazine ads as compared to the readership of the particular magazine (e.g., the White readership of *Cosmopolitan* is 84.7%, yet 97.3% of the ads in this magazine feature White people).

Returning to the classic study, Colfax and Sternberg (1972) found that Black women and children were portrayed in magazine ads much more often than Black men. The researchers believed that this was due to the fact that these groups were seen as less threatening to a White audience than Black men were. However, Humphrey and Schuman (1984) found that Black men and women were represented in a relatively equal number of magazine ads. In contrast, Bowen and Schmid (1997) also found that there was a greater number of Black females than Black males, although the proportion of Black males had increased while remaining stereotypical.

Colfax and Sternberg found that in 54% of the magazine ads, Black people were portrayed in lower status occupations, whereas White people were rarely portrayed in lower status positions. The majority of White people were depicted as consumers, whereas the majority of Black people were depicted as the products themselves. Finally, they found that in 1965,
80% of the Black people in the ads were portrayed as musicians. However, this percentage declined to 41% by 1970, as Black people began to increasingly be presented in high-status positions.

Building on Colfax and Sternberg’s study, Humphrey and Schuman found that in 1950, Black people were never portrayed in dominant roles and were portrayed in subordinate positions in 62% of the ads. Furthermore, they found that all of the ads featuring Black people portrayed them in low-skilled labor positions (e.g., laborers, cooks, servants). By 1982, only 14% of the ads featuring Black people portrayed them in low-skilled labor positions. In contrast, White people were portrayed as high-status, idle consumers in magazine ads from 1950 to 1982. In addition, it was found that Black people were overrepresented in the occupation of professional athlete.

Bowen and Schmid (1997) confirmed most of the previous researchers’ results, finding that Black people were most often portrayed as athletes, musicians, and in family settings. They also found that Black people were being used as links to attributes of the product being advertised, as Colfax and Sternberg (1972) found. Furthermore, Colfax and Sternberg found that the number of White people always outnumbered the number of Black people in the ads.

Another noteworthy finding by Humphrey and Schuman (1984) is that White people and Black people did not engage in informal interactions in any of the ads in the 1950s. By 1980 though, Black people and White people were portrayed in relationships of equal status 89% of the time, and 65% of the time, they engaged in informal interactions.

Magazines Directed Toward Black Audiences

Leslie (1995) conducted a content analysis of the portrayal of Black people in *Ebony* from 1957 to 1989. He found that the percentage of ads featuring natural Black hairstyles increased, while ads featuring straightened hair decreased and ads featuring a variety of Black hairstyles also increased. In addition, ads featuring Black people adhering to White standards of beauty decreased, as did ads featuring Black people adhering to Black standards of beauty; ads featuring both types of Black models increased.

Gender and Race and Media Portrayal

Up to this point, the social characteristics of gender and race have been considered separately in media portrayals, but in reality, gender and race
often interact in how people are portrayed in the media. For example, although White women are often stereotypically presented as possessing the characteristics of the ideal woman discussed previously, the manner in which Black women are presented in the media differs from this ideal. White women tend to be presented as submissive, whereas Black women tend to be presented as dominant (Baker, 2005). Another stereotypical portrayal of Black women is that of the matriarch, as authoritative heads of the household or single mothers (Baker, 2005). Black women are also often portrayed as Sapphire, as identified by Collins (2000, as cited in Baker, 2005). Sapphire is independent, headstrong, and overly expressive (Baker, 2005). Finally, according to Jewell (1993, as cited in Baker, 2005), Black women are often portrayed as Jezebels—captivating, seductive, and sexually aggressive, with European features that adhere to White standards of beauty.

McLaughlin and Goulet (1999) compared the portrayal of women in White-oriented magazines (i.e., *Cosmopolitan, Us, People*) and Black-oriented magazines (i.e., *Ebony, Essence*) for October 1996. The researchers found that women were presented in submissive poses much more often in White-oriented magazines. Women in Black-oriented magazines were portrayed as financially strong and holding occupational status. Images of single-parent families were prevalent in Black-oriented magazines, and family images were scarce in White-oriented magazines. Finally, the researchers found that approximately 50% of the ads featured confident, full-facial images of women.

Baker (2005) compared the portrayal of women in magazines geared toward White women (i.e., *Cosmopolitan, Vogue*), magazines geared toward Black women (i.e., *Essence, Honey*), magazines geared toward White men (i.e., *GQ, Maxim*), and magazines geared toward Black men (i.e., *Black Men, King*) for the year 2002. She found that the majority of female models featured in White-oriented magazines were White and that most female models featured in Black-oriented magazines were Black. In addition, Baker noted that women were more often portrayed as dominant in magazines geared toward Black women than in magazines geared toward White women. Furthermore, she found that White women were much more likely to be objectified (i.e., with their faces hidden and emphasis being placed on their physical attributes) than Black women in magazines geared toward White men, White women, and especially Black men. When Black women were presented with men in Black-oriented magazines, these women were portrayed in higher positions than the men with whom they are featured. In terms of physical characteristics, Baker found that overall the Black women featured in the ads had medium complexions, straight hair, and curvy figures.
More specifically, when featured in White-oriented magazines, Black female models with lighter skin tones, straighter hair, and thinner figures tended to be presented.

Little has been said up to this point about how White and Black men are portrayed in the media. This is because few studies have examined this topic. What is known is that the portrayal of men tends to be stereotypical and the stereotypes concerning White men and Black men differ. White men are often stereotypically presented as possessing the characteristics of the ideal man discussed previously. Black men are stereotypically defined as intimidating, aggressive, or even hostile, and Humphrey and Schuman (1984) and Bowen and Schmid (1997) have documented that Black men have been overrepresented as musicians, athletes, and oversexed (Colfax & Sternberg, 1972).

**Statement of Purpose**

The present research seeks to complement and extend previous research on the portrayal of Black people in magazine ads. A comparative content analysis was conducted on ads featured in two magazines geared toward Black audiences for 2003 and 2004. This study examines not only the images featured in ads, as previous studies have done, but also the texts of these ads. It is expected that these texts will reflect an ideology of White supremacy with associated racialized gender stereotypes. Based on previous research, the following were hypothesized:

1. White women will be more likely to be portrayed as submissive, dependent, and objectified than Black women.
2. Black women will be more likely to be portrayed as dominant and independent than White women.
3. Black women will be portrayed more often with physical characteristics that adhere to White standards of beauty (i.e., light complexion, thin nose, thin lips, thin figure, long straight hair) than Black standards of beauty (i.e., dark complexion, broad nose, thick lips, larger body size, naturally curly hair).
4. Few ads will portray Black people and White people interacting in informal, social, or intimate settings.

Only ads concerning “health” and body issues were examined to limit the focus.
Sampling Procedures

Two mass-circulating magazines were selected for analysis—one magazine was geared toward Black women (i.e., Essence) and the other magazine was geared toward Black men and women (i.e., Jet). Jet is published weekly and has a readership of more than 9 million, whereas Essence is published monthly and has a readership of more than 7 million (Essence Communications, Inc., 2006; Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 2006). No magazines that were directed solely to males were selected because of a lack of this type of magazine featuring health information.

Issues from March 2003, July 2003, September 2004, and November 2004 were selected, with each issue representing different seasons. Every other ad in the issues of Essence was coded, producing an average of 21 ads that were coded per issue. Every other ad was also coded for Jet for the month of March, except for the March 10, 2003, issue, which only contained 4 ads. The March 17, 2003, issue was unavailable. The July 14, 2003, and July 21, 2003, issues of Jet were also unavailable, therefore all of the ads in the available July issues were coded. The first 4 ads from the September 6, 2004, September 13, 2004, and September 20, 2004, issues of Jet were coded, and the first 5 ads from the September 27, 2004, issue were coded. Because the November 8, 2004, issue of Jet was unavailable, all of the ads from the remaining November issues were coded. This provided the researchers with a total of 18 issues of Black magazines to content analyze.

Method

A deductive method of content analysis was used in examining the images and texts of the ads. The ads were examined and their themes were noted. Independent coding categories were devised based on these themes and the findings by previous researchers on the portrayal of Black people in print media. A coding category was also devised to document the racism evident in the texts of the ads. The following coding categories resulted and were used in creating a coding sheet: products advertised, audience of the ads, picture of a product or person, physical characteristics of the model (i.e., gender, race, skin tone, hair, nose, lips, body type), occupation, model featured alone or with others, number of Black models, number of White models, interaction between models (i.e., formal or informal), dominant or submissive, model presented as a consumer or product, and messages implied from text. The ads were then reexamined and the coding sheets were completed with the information provided by each ad.
Data Analysis

The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to provide an in-depth analysis and description of the images and texts that are found in ads featured in the magazines. Each coding category is discussed and illustrated in turn in the following data analysis.

*Products advertised.* Thirty-seven ads in total were coded from the 2003 issues of *Essence*, and these ads consisted primarily of hair care ads, skin care ads, drug ads, and organizational ads (i.e., ads from various organizations). In 2004, the number of ads coded from *Essence* increased to 45 ads, which were mostly accounted for by an increase in the number of food ads and general health care ads. The number of ads from the other categories remained relatively consistent from 2003 to 2004. Thus, it appears that the health issues that are of most importance to Black women are hair care and skin care.

The 30 ads coded from the 2003 issues of *Jet* consisted mostly of hair care ads, skin care ads, feminine hygiene ads, and organizational ads. Thirty-four ads were coded in 2004, with the number of all categories of ads increasing, except for hair care, feminine hygiene, and general health care. Thus, it appears that health issues concerning Black women are more greatly emphasized than those concerning Black men in *Jet* magazine. These health issues were predominantly hair care and skin care, mirroring those found in *Essence*. The most popular category of ads geared toward Black men in *Jet* was also hair care. Thus, it can be concluded that minor health issues received more attention in the ads in Black magazines than major health issues.

*Audience of the ads.* Most of the ads featured in the 2003 issues of *Essence* were geared toward women, which was not surprising as this magazine is geared toward a Black female audience. It was surprising though to find that in 2004 most of the ads were geared toward women of all races. In this way, the needs and interests of Black women are slowly becoming neglected in a magazine that is supposed to be geared toward them. In addition, the number of ads geared toward men and women of all races, boys and girls of all races, and Black men and women increased from 2003 to 2004. This appears to indicate that the types of audiences being targeted by advertisers in Black female magazines are expanding. These findings replicate Colfax and Sternberg’s (1972) finding that Black women and children were portrayed in magazine ads more often than Black men and Bowen and Schmid’s (1997) finding that Black women are portrayed in magazine ads more often than Black men.
In general, the ads in *Jet* were geared toward a larger range of audiences than the ads in *Essence* magazine. In both 2003 and 2004, most ads were geared toward women of all races, followed by men and women of all races and Black women. This finding replicates Humphrey and Schuman’s (1984) finding that the number of Black men and women featured in magazine ads is relatively equal. This is most likely due to *Jet’s* targeted audience. However, despite their target audience, in 2004, no ads were geared solely to Black men. This appears to indicate that the importance of targeting this group has decreased as advertisers have deemed it satisfactory to target Black men through ads aimed at men of all races. By doing so, the specific needs and interests of Black men are being neglected.

*Ads featuring product or person.* In both 2003 and 2004, most of the ads in *Essence* featured both a model and the product being advertised. Ads featuring the product only or a model only were the second most common ads, and very few ads featured neither a model nor a product (e.g., ads with text only). This pattern of results was also found in *Jet* magazine. Because most of the models in Black-oriented magazines are Black (to be discussed), these findings appear to support Colfax and Sternberg’s (1972) and Bowen and Schmid’s (1997) findings that Black models are often associated with the attributes of the product they are advertising. As a result, Black models are still being objectified in Black-oriented magazines in the present.

Fifty-seven models were featured in the 2003 issues of *Essence*, consisting of 51 female models and 6 male models. The number of models featured in the 2004 issues of *Essence* rose to 62, with the number of female models decreasing to 46 and the number of male models increasing to 16. There were fewer models featured in *Jet* magazine: in the 2003 issues, only 26 models were featured, 16 of which were female and 10 of which were male; in the 2004 issues, 43 models were featured, 33 of which were female and 10 of which were male. Thus, it appears that significantly fewer male than female models are featured in *Essence* magazine, presumably because the magazine is geared toward women. The proportion of women to men in *Jet* was significantly larger than in *Essence*, most likely because *Jet* is geared toward both men and women.

*Racial characteristics of the models.* In both *Essence* and *Jet* magazines, most of the models were Black, with other races being represented significantly less frequently. This finding replicates Baker’s (2005) finding that most models in Black magazines are Black. In the 2004 issues of *Essence*, the number of White models increased. This appears to indicate that advertisers
are deeming it acceptable to advertise products with White models to Black women, possibly because Black women are willing to buy products geared toward White women to live up to White ideals. More racially diverse models were featured in Essence magazine than in Jet magazine, as the latter only featured Black, White, and mixed Asian-Black models, whereas the former also featured Indian and Asian models.

In the 2003 issues of Essence magazine, most of the models had light complexions, whereas a significant and equal number of models had medium or dark complexions. In 2004, though, most of the models had dark complexions, with the number of models with medium and light complexions following closely behind. Most models in Jet magazine in 2003 had medium skin tones, followed by dark and light skin tones, and most models in 2004 had dark skin tones, closely followed by medium and light skin tones. Thus, it appears that the number of models adhering to White standards of beauty in Black magazines is decreasing as the number of models adhering to Black standards of beauty is slowly increasing.

Hair characteristics. There were a wide variety of hairstyles featured in Essence and Jet magazines. In the 2003 issues of Essence, the hair of the female models were equally likely to be long (i.e., shoulder length or longer) as to be short or chin length and tended to be black and curly or wavy. In 2004, most of the female models had hair that was long, black, and straight. These findings appear to indicate that Black models are adhering to White standards of beauty in terms of their hair (i.e., long, straight, curly, or wavy hair rather than naturally coarse hair). Black standards of beauty in terms of hair (i.e., shorter hair, curly/coarse hair) were less prevalent, but most Black models did have black hair rather than lighter hair colors, and the discrepancy between the number of models with long hair and the number of models with short hair was relatively small.

The female models in the 2003 issues of Jet tended to have hair that was long, black, and straight. In 2004, female Jet models tended to have hair that was long and black and were almost equally likely to have straight hair as to have curly hair. These results are similar to those found in Essence magazine, also demonstrating that Black models are adhering to White standards of beauty in terms of their hair. The 2004 trends indicate, however, that Black standards of beauty are becoming more widely accepted as curly haired models become more prevalent in magazine ads.

Most of the male models featured in both Jet and Essence magazines in 2003 and 2004 had short black hair. In the 2003 issues of Essence, most of these models also had facial hair, but this trend decreased in 2004. Perhaps this
is because Black men are perceived to be less threatening without facial hair and would thus be more conducive to selling products. Because of the shortness of the male models’ hair, it was too difficult to determine hair texture.

Facial characteristics. Most of the female models in both Essence and Jet in 2003 and 2004 had averaged-sized noses and lips. Although the second most popular facial features in 2003 issues of Essence were large noses and lips, in 2004 the second most popular facial features in Essence were small noses and small and large lips. The second most popular facial features in both 2003 and 2004 issues of Jet were also small noses and large lips. This appears to indicate that advertisers are featuring more models with smaller noses and lips who thus better adhere to White standards of beauty. Black standards of beauty were also prevalent, however, as more models with large lips were featured in the ads. This supports Leslie’s (1995) findings that both the number of Black models adhering to White standards of beauty and those adhering to Black standards of beauty have been increasing.

Male models in the 2003 issues of Essence magazine tended to have average- or large-sized noses and lips. In 2004, most of the male models had average-sized noses and lips, but the second most prevalent nose size and lip size were small. Thus, the same trend for female models is occurring for male models, as smaller facial features become more prevalent because of the perpetuation of White ideals of beauty. Most of the male models in Jet magazine also had average-sized noses and lips in 2003, whereas in 2004 most of the males had average- or large-sized noses and average-sized lips. Thus, Jet magazine appears to be more accepting of Black ideals of beauty than Essence, as their ads featured more male models with larger facial features.

Body types. The bodies of female models in Essence tended not to be shown (e.g., only a head or bust shot). This finding supports McLaughlin and Goulet’s (1999) finding that most of the ads presented in Black magazines emphasize the faces of female models to portray them as self-confident and dominant. In 2003, the second most prevalent body type in Essence magazine was an average body type, but in 2004 the thin body type was second most popular. Furthermore, no ads featured models with larger body sizes, despite the fact that Black people are more accepting of this body type. Thus, these findings indicate that White ideals of thin body types are being imposed on the Black population.

Similar findings were found in Jet magazine. In 2003, most female models were presented either without their bodies being shown or with an
average body type. In 2004 though, most female models had a thin body type, closely followed by an average body type. This appears to indicate that White ideals of beauty are even more prevalent in magazines geared toward both Black men and women. Furthermore, the number of models featured without their bodies decreased in 2004 relative to the number of models with other body types. Perhaps this is because facial and bust shots are intimidating to men as a result of the dominance portrayed by the women in the ads.

In terms of male models, in both 2003 and 2004 and in both Essence and Jet magazines, male models tended to have average-sized bodies. The second most prevalent ads were ads that did not feature the bodies of the male models at all. It appears that facial or bust shots of men were not the most prevalent type of ads, most likely because of how Black men are viewed as intimidating by the White population. This could also explain the lack of ads featuring male models with larger body sizes.

Occupation. Most of the models in both Essence and Jet in 2003 and 2004 were not portrayed in any occupational positions, and those that were tended to be depicted in stereotypical jobs. Models tended to be represented in familial roles (e.g., mothers, wives, husbands) and as athletes (e.g., basketball players, boxers). In Jet, models also tended to be portrayed as members of the community (i.e., friends, neighbors) and as entertainers (e.g., singers, actresses), and in 2004 issues of Essence, a significant number of male models were depicted as bodyguards. These findings support Bowen and Schmid’s (1997) findings. It is interesting, though, that in the 2004 issues of both Essence and Jet, models began to be featured in nonstereotypical job positions such as students, artists, and therapists. Thus, it appears that the occupational roles portrayed by models in Black magazines are shifting toward less stereotypical job portrayals.

Model featured alone or with others, number of Black models, number of White models, and interactions between models. In both Essence and Jet magazines for both 2003 and 2004 issues, the models were significantly more often featured alone than with other models, although this discrepancy was smaller in the 2004 issues of Jet. Thus, it was not surprising to find that the majority of ads in Essence and Jet did not involve interactions between models, although the number of interactions between models increased slightly from 2003 to 2004 in both Essence and Jet. When the models were featured with others, it was most likely with other Black models, and these interactions were more often informal than formal. This
finding replicates Bowen and Schmid’s (1997) finding that Black and White models rarely engaged in social contact in magazine ads. It is interesting that when White models were featured interacting with others, it was with non-Black models, despite the fact that *Essence* and *Jet* are geared toward Black audiences. Thus, it appears that racial segregation is still evident in magazine ads in the present.

**Dominant or submissive.** Most of the models in the ads featured in the 2003 and 2004 issues of *Essence* and *Jet* were portrayed both as dominant (i.e., higher relative authority, size/height, physical position) and submissive (i.e., lower relative authority, size/height, physical condition, and the characterization of “soft or delicate”). This finding provides some evidence for Baker’s (2005) finding that Black women tend to be presented as dominant in magazine ads and for McLaughlin and Goulet’s (1999) finding that women are presented submissively less frequently in Black magazines than in White magazines. Perhaps the primarily Black female models were presented dominantly because of leftover stereotypes of Black women as dominant and to appeal to the Black female audience, who strives to be self-confident, and perhaps they were also presented submissively to appeal to the White female audience, who strive toward submissiveness as an ideal of femininity.

**Model presented as a consumer or a product.** Most of the ads in both *Essence* and *Jet* featured the models as both consumers and products, with the ads portraying the model as a consumer and focusing on a particular characteristic of the model to demonstrate the effectiveness of the product. Although in the 2003 issues of *Essence*, non-Black models were featured both as consumers and as products, in 2004 the majority of non-Black models were portrayed solely as consumers. Non-Black models featured in both 2003 and 2004 issues of *Jet* magazine were also overwhelmingly portrayed as consumers. These findings partially replicate those of Colfax and Sternberg (1972) and Bowen and Schmid (1997), who found that White people tended to be portrayed as consumers whereas Black people were presented as links to product characteristics. Thus, although Black people are being presented as consumers, it appears that the historic tendency to portray them as objects persists into the present.

**Messages implied from text.** An average of 12 ads per year featured in *Essence* and *Jet* magazines had underlying racist messages. These racist messages are the result of the advertisers pushing a White ideal of beauty and demonstrate an insensitivity for Black people’s means of achieving
White ideals of beauty. These ads mostly concerned fading dark spots or blemishes and thus reflected an ideal of lighter skin as more beautiful than dark skin; alleviating redness, which would not be a concern to Black people since their skin is typically too dark; and making hair wavy or straight and thus closer to the ideal of straight hair as more beautiful than coarse hair, and/or softer, shinier, and more manageable, implying that natural Black hair is difficult to manage.

**Discussion**

The media are a widely circulated resource that not only provide readers with information but also perpetuate societal beliefs, which are dominated by an ideology of White supremacy concerning race and gender. Ads in particular, although seemingly harmless, have great power in distributing societal messages concerning race and gender to the population and thus in this way shape people’s perceptions and understandings of people of particular genders and races. The present article sought to examine how Black people are portrayed in ads featured in magazines geared toward Black men and women. It was found that their portrayal was both positive and negative.

The overall message that advertisers are sending to Black readers is mixed. Although it is positive that advertisers are becoming more accepting of Black ideals of beauty by featuring mostly Black models in ads geared toward Black individuals, featuring an increasing number of darker skinned models, portraying Black models as self-confident and dominant through head shots, increasingly featuring them in nonstereotypical occupations, and portraying them as consumers, there are also a number of ways in which Black people are being negatively portrayed in magazine ads. Most of the ads pertain to minor health concerns, thus it appears that Black readers are not being provided with the health information they need on major health issues, at least not in ads. Coupled with the fact that magazine ads in Black magazines are increasingly being oriented to White audiences, Black readers are not being provided with health information that is of particular concern for Black individuals. This is quite problematic because Black people could deal with major health concerns earlier on in its course and thus have a better prognosis if they are made aware of these health concerns early, instead of seeking medical attention when the illness has already progressed into the later stages, resulting in unnecessarily high rates of disability and mortality.

In sum, it appears that ideologies of racism and White supremacy continue to pervade ads featured in Black magazines. Magazine ads are increasingly
being geared toward other races, and the number of White models is increasing, despite the fact that these magazines are supposed to be geared toward Black audiences. This insensitivity leads to the neglect of the specific needs and interests of Black readers. Furthermore, White standards of beauty prevail in these ads, with female models featuring long, straight hair, medium-sized nose and lips (with small noses and lips second most popular), a thin body type (when their bodies are shown), and as submissive. This devalues Black standards of beauty and thus undermines Black culture’s values of beauty. Furthermore, a significant proportion of these ads demonstrate an insensitivity toward how Black people can attain these ideals. In this way, these magazine ads can have a devastating impact on Black readers who are being taught to pursue a White ideal of beauty but are not given the means to attain it. This can have a significant negative impact on the body esteem and self-esteem of young Black girls in particular who encounter these ads.

Furthermore, Black models are still featured with stereotypical jobs and are often segregated from White models in magazine ads. They were mostly featured alone in the ads, but when they were featured with others, these individuals were Black and their interactions were informal. As well, they were often objectified by being associated with the products they advertised, whereas White models were more often featured as consumers. Thus, it appears that historic negative attitudes toward Black people persist, with racism continuing to be perpetuated and reinforced in the present. This is particularly problematic because in this way negative attitudes toward Black people have become, and continue to be a part of, Western culture. These attitudes are not only harmful for non-Black individuals who have the wrong impression of Black people but also for Black individuals, who may internalize these negative attitudes and perceive and think negatively about themselves.

In terms of gender, magazine ads continue to perpetuate an ideology of sexism, in which women are presented as physically beautiful (according to European standards), submissive, and as sexual objects and men are presented as dominant, strong, successful, and sexually appealing. Although these are ideals for White individuals, they were evident in the ads featured in Essence and Jet, despite the fact that most of the models are Black. Stereotypes for Black women were also evident however, as they were also presented as dominant, Jezebels, and in familial roles. Thus, although ideals for Black females persist, ideals for White females are also being imposed on Black females, perhaps as a means of making ads more appealing to a White audience. Black men did not have much of a presence in Black-oriented magazines, and when they were featured, they adhered to White
ideals. They were most often featured with average body sizes, medium sized-nose and lips, short black hair, no facial hair, as both dominant and submissive, and both as consumers and products. Perhaps because Black males are perceived as intimidating in Western society, advertisers feel compelled to have Black male models adhere to White ideals of masculinity to appeal to a White audience.

Although the present study has brought to light these important findings, it is not without its limitations. First, no magazines were sampled that were geared solely toward a Black male audience; therefore, it was not possible to obtain information on how Black and White models are presented in ads geared solely toward this audience. Such a sample could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of how White and Black male models are portrayed in the media. Future research could examine this further. In addition, because convenience sampling was used, some magazine issues from the proposed sampling time period were not available. Therefore, the present study would have benefited from sampling a larger number of ads to provide more solid support for the current findings. Future research could examine how Black men and women are portrayed in other forms of media.

Thus, although a number of significant positive changes have taken place in the portrayal of Black people in the media since the 1950s, it does not mean that it is no longer a source of concern. Black people are still being presented in a stereotypical, unfavorable manner, and White ideals are still being imposed on them. It is not enough to increase the number of positive portrayals of Black people; negative portrayals of these individuals must also decrease and eventually be eliminated altogether. Audiences must demand that Black ads are not influenced by an ideology of racism and to ensure that Black culture’s values are represented and respected. By doing so, societal beliefs and expectations concerning Black people can improve and Black people can feel more positively about themselves.

References


Vanessa Hazell is currently completing her MA in counseling psychology at Yorkville University, located in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. She has research interests in media analysis, psychological well-being, psychosocial risk and protective factors, and coping styles. She completed her honor’s undergraduate psychology thesis in 2005 under the supervision of Dr. Christian Jordan, examining the relationship between explicit and implicit self-esteem and the self-serving bias. This is her first publication.

Juanne Clarke is a medical sociologist at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, with a particular interest in the ways that health, illness, and medicine are portrayed in mass print media. She has recently published in *Social Science and Medicine, Health Communication*, and the *Journal of Health Communication* on these topics.