

# **An Examination of the Technological Aspects and Changes Influencing Healthy Girl-Produced Media and How Female Adolescents' Perceive Beauty**

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**Abstract:** This paper is a report on the findings of a pilot study conducted on validating a visual perceptions instrument to be used in examining how perceptions of feminine beauty. Findings indicate that purposively selected academics can categorically agree on standardized ways to analyze and hence discuss media images. Our normed and validated instrument contributes broadly to multiple academic fields, including the study of educational technology, while simultaneously having the potentiality to enact positive influences for girls' self-efficacy and healthy development. While an abundance of literature on feminine beauty exists, our instrument fills a critical need for studies in the area of adolescent perceptions of beauty.

## **Introduction**

Scholars are increasingly focusing attention on adolescent development and popular media (Bosacki, Elliott, Bajovic, & Akseer, 2009; Sheridan-Rabideau, 2009.). Recognizing a gender spectrum in child and adolescent development, researchers are also shifting attention to the unique experiences of girls and the undergirding factors that may contribute to their overall health and wellbeing (Caton & Field, 2010; Kuperminc, Thomason, DiMeo, & Broomfield-Massey, 2011). In this study, we report the findings from a pilot study that establish that norms and validates our author-created visual perception instrument. This instrument measures perceptions of feminine beauty.

Critics have long argued that popular magazines targeting girls, such as *Seventeen*, *YM* (formerly *Young Miss*), and *Sassy* emphasize clothing, makeup, and the importance of finding a boyfriend, at the expense of content that validates internal resources and divergent interests (Phillips, 1998). Preadolescent and adolescent girls are thought to be particularly vulnerable to the influence of media images on body image and satisfaction (Jung & Peterson, 2007). Feminists contend that girls' tween, teen, and young adult magazines have the potential to cause emotional, physical, social, and cultural harm by promoting unrealistic feminine ideals of beauty, gender-locked materialism, and the heteronormative idea that one's value is derived by attracting males. Additionally, Durham (2007) highlights the notion that sexuality is denied to "girls with larger bodies, girls of color, girls with disabilities, or girls who otherwise fail to meet the body criteria set by the magazine" (p. 23). When girls compare themselves to the often unattainable and unrealistic standards of commercialized and commoditized beauty that main stream media portray, they are left with diminished self-esteem and increased body dissatisfaction (Martin & Gentry, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Wolf, 2002). These gender-based magazines could be complicit in contributing to eating disorders through the use of ultra-thin models, though the effort to demonstrate a direct, causal link has produced mixed results (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Beyond the specific problems of eating disorders and poor body esteem, researchers have also correlated girls' media consumption with poor self-esteem in general (Racine, DeBate, Gabriel, & High, 2011). Social learning theory explores the potential for magazines to influence readers, as the adolescent is understood as an observational learner who compares self to others (Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1990). Interestingly, girls tend to spend more time than boys reading print media (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010); however, the female market in gaming and virtual images is growing (Aragon & Sampaio, 2001; Bayerl, 2000).

## **The Study**

In the 1990s, a few small, independent publishers developed alternatives to traditional magazines by producing publications with content largely generated by and for youth such as *Teen Voices* and *New Moon Girls Magazine* (NMGM) (Phillips, 1998). These magazines elected to fund themselves through subscription fees rather than advertising, setting themselves apart from popular magazines that dedicate as much as 50% of their pages to paid sponsors. Such reconstructivist practices shift control over the content from advertisers to primary stakeholders. In the context of a feminist critique of advertising (Stern, 1993), the rejection of ad revenue represents an effort to (re)position the publication's voice as independent and reader-centric as opposed to consumer-centric. In the case of NMGM, girls' voices are privileged over those of advertisers.

While scholars have a long history of analyzing and critiquing popular magazines, alternative magazines for girls and adolescents have received less academic attention. We selected NMGM as the focus of our research because the girl-centered space emerged in reaction to the dominant culture's magazines targeted at girls and young women. As such, NMGM has branded itself as a publication by girls for girls, with content that is driven largely by girls' notions of what may interest readers consciously avoiding advertisers' interests and adult notions—and perhaps misconceptions of what girls want. Instead, NMGM magazine mirrors and reflects an authentic girl-mediated range of feminine topics and interests. Founded in 1993 by Nancy Gruver, NMGM operates with an adult editor guided by the girls' editorial board (GEB). Consequently, the GEB determines each issue's themes, article topics, and visuals. Since its inception, the magazine has evolved to maintain relevance and currency, notably with a recent rebranding for a more contemporary look.

Clearly, academia has an overdue need to look holistically and systematically at the content of NMGM in the context of cultural studies, which “is centrally concerned with culture as constituted by the signs, meanings, and representations that are generated by signifying mechanisms in the context of human practices” (Barker, 2004, p. xvii). From this framework, we seek to better understand NMGM, its creators, and readers by examining the human images in the magazine as cultural signs and representation. Our analysis of the images in NMGM is part of a larger study that includes a historical review of the magazine as well as survey data from subscribers.

Our aim in this study was to develop high-quality instrument to understand the context and perceptions of the images in NMGM, utilizing a generalizable mixed methods approach. More specifically, we sought to understand and bridge the categorical nature of feminine images within and beyond the magazine. Additionally, in order to understand NMGM more deeply, we first must understand feminine media images in popular media (past and present celebrities, historical figures, artist, etc.). We started by collecting images from NMGM, current magazines geared towards females, and other sources of popular media (i.e. internet). Next we sorted all images into 5 categories (listed below) and created an online survey in which we randomly presented an image and then asked participants to sort the images into the category they thought the image best fit. By asking these questions, we serve the larger research agenda of understanding NMGM and its readers in a cultural context.

## **Methods**

This research involved a pilot study that also served to validate and instrument measuring perceptions of feminine media images across the following categories: (1) main-stream media images of female beauty, (2) girl-produced images of female beauty, (3) “classic” Western images of female beauty, (4) “classic” world-view images of female beauty, and (5) non-traditional female beauty images absent from the previous four categories. We hold a philosophy that all girls are beautiful; thus, an image of any female who would not neatly fit in the first four categories innately would belong to the fifth category. A university research-support center consulted with us on the PI-created survey's validity and reliability. The center helped us to establish face and content validity before we field-tested the pilot instrument. Then via the pilot study with academic experts as participants we established reliable and validated categories and questions within the beauty perception instrument. Participants in this pilot study included male and female academics in university settings with research agendas in gender studies, multiculturalism, psychology, qualitative visual methodologists. Within these areas of expertise we preferenced participants who were also parents of pre-adolescent and/or adolescent females.

## **Findings**

To validate our instrument and subsequently collect data, we randomly divided the purposively selected

participants into two testing groups. The values for Fleiss' kappa for group one were .61 and .50 for group two. According to Landis and Koch (1977), values of .61 indicate substantial agreement among raters, and values of .50 indicate moderate agreement. Both cases served to validate the classifications in our instrument. These results indicate that there was significant agreement among the academic experts in sorting the images into the five categories created by the researchers. The (1) main-stream media images of female beauty, (2) girl-produced images of female beauty, and (3) "classic" Western images of female beauty had the highest levels of categorical agreement. While still validated, in contrast, the final two categories (4) "classic" world-view images of female beauty, and (5) non-traditional female beauty images absent from the previous four categories had lower categorical agreement.

## Conclusions

Our normed and validated instrument and ongoing research could contribute broadly to multiple academic fields while having the potentiality to enact positive influences for girls' self-efficacy and healthy development. While an abundance of literature on feminine beauty exists, our instrument fills a critical need for studies in the area of adolescent perceptions of beauty. Finally, we believe the study will make a positive difference in the lives of our potential participants and potentially for all girls who consume massive amounts of female images that often have pre-ascribed assessments embedded into the entwined media messages that typically accompany such female images.

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