Reviewer's report

Title: Health Disparities and Advertising Content of Women's Magazines: a cross-sectional study.

Version: 1 Date: 4 February 2005

Reviewer: Elizabeth Whelan

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General

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1) p. 7 “Better explanations are needed for the methodology categories, for example, what is “health promoting” or “health diminishing.” The line can be very fuzzy when it comes to foods, and standards are needed (and may in fact be somewhat arbitrary). How are you defining “junk foods”? For example, how “sugary” does a cereal need to be in order to be considered as a “mixed health value” item as opposed to a “health promoting” item?

How are you defining “medical quackery”? Would an unproven weight control system be classified as quackery and “pseudo-treatment” (as in Table 3) or as health promoting? What about other products providing misleading claims, which may be under your positive category of “vitamins and supplements”?

These areas are essential to clarify in order for the study to indicate results of any meaning. Of course these areas are subject to disagreement, but if you let readers know the judgment calls that you made, and why you made them (such as providing a table indicating how foods were classified) “then readers can further understand your assumptions. If there were borderline items in these classifications, I would say that you should separate them in Table 3.

2) p. 8 “Coding of faces: A few issues must be clarified in your classification. Were there any ads with multiple faces, and if so, how were they classified? Were there any “asian” faces? What about issues of deciding who looks “black”?

As the last question involves subjectivity, this brings me to my question about your methods of a “consensus process” also mentioned on page 8. Please describe how it worked to give confidence in how subjective decisions, such as the above, were made.

3) In order to make claims of “more likely”, “more common”, etc from your sample, you should indicate statistical evaluation. For example, regarding the claim on page 12, the ratio of black to white faces in negative ads (23:4) versus positive ads (30:8) in African American magazines are not very far apart. What statistical standards did you use for these? If you are just indicating levels, then that should be clearer in the phrasing and its limitations explained to the reader.

(Examples of this that I found are: p. 9 “more likely to be exposed to health-diminishing advertisements”; p. 10 “prescription ads were more likely to be multi-page ads”.)
all categories of food and beverage advertisements were more common; p. 12
negative health ads were more likely than postive ads to contain Black faces.

--- Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct) ---

4) p.4 Torodkar (42) citation I do not understand the direct relevance of this study to the context that it is in. Greater number of food commercials themselves is not necessarily bad or health diminishing please explain or edit.

5) p. 4- Smith and Malone - sentence needs citation

6) p.4 For a survey of 22,000 households found that magazines is that source 47 or 48? Which of these is the source for sentence among the respondents? The sources are from 8 years apart and it therefore does not seem that they would be related to the same survey. Source 47 is from 1992 and seems to be less relevant to prove your point about sources of information. If 47 is the source, perhaps you can find a more recent study, or leave that out and just use Gallup information.

7) p. 4 Give citation/rational behind it is likely that readers give more serious consideration especially as this sentence asserts the whole rationale behind classifying faces by race and comparing their contexts, a more full explanation of this aspect of advertising is certainly necessary.

8) On p.5 and perhaps in other places as well there is a discrepancy between capitalizing the words Black and White this should be consistent.

9) p. 6 How is general interest magazine defined/classified? Is there an outside classification of this? Please clarify.

10) p. 12 In the example you use of the paper plate ad, the photo is not of a health diminishing food it related to quantity of food. The previous sentence can say health diminishing message in reference to the example, but the fact that it was a health diminishing food, per se, is not evident. What if it was a giant plateful of healthful salad?

11) Table 3 What is the (19-10) next to healthy foods and beverages in the chart?
12) References: 22 Prat CA PC seems incorrect. I think it is Pratt CA and Pratt CB. Please check; 49 and 54 are incomplete. I recommend checking through the citation list again for any other such errors.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

13) p. 5 Were other magazines used in the Pratt study (22)? And perhaps other demographic issues were at play? For example, in the data you have (obviously the Pratt study was from longer ago), the median age of LHJ is about 10 years higher than of Ebony and Essence, and median income of LHJ is about $12,000 higher. I am somewhat skeptical about comparing these with the goal of showing that magazines aimed at blacks have differing ad content, especially with a total of only 3 magazines. If the contrast of content was so large, then perhaps you can cite numbers rather than just saying a deluge in order to convince the reader that there was such a large difference.

14) p. 7 The sentence beginning with For this analysis, prescription drugs seems to better belong in your description of health promoting medical treatments or products.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions.

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests:

I DECLARE I HAVE NO COMPETING INTERESTS.