

The media and body image: critical analysis of the media

A mídia e a representação do corpo: leitura crítica dos meios de comunicação

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Abstract *This paper provides theoretical and practical frameworks to perform carry out media education activities with young people. The goal is to improve the critical skills of young people in relation to the media, particularly in terms of body image and the issues media addresses. Thus, an experience report is described for an activity carried out at a high school for application in educational settings, centering on the construction of the female image.*

Keywords: *Media literacy; Consumption; Body image; Beauty; Magazine*

Resumo *Neste texto são oferecidas referências teórico-práticas para o desenvolvimento de ações de mídia-educação com jovens. O objetivo é elevar a criticidade na relação do jovem com a mídia, principalmente quando há entrelaçamento entre a estetização do corpo e os temas pautados pelos meios de comunicação. Assim, expõe-se um relato de experiência desenvolvida em escola de ensino médio e apresenta-se uma sugestão de atividade a ser aplicada em ambientes educativos, ambas com foco na construção da imagem feminina.*

Palavras-chave: *Mídia-educação; Consumo; Representação do corpo; Beleza; Revista*

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Introduction

The media plays a key role in society, forming the most expressive system of information, image, identity and expression through which people learn about content and values. It plays the role of mediator between the public and what happens in society, but rather than reflecting reality, its messages merely represent it, invalidating the media's comparison to a "transparent window" through which one views the world (TRAQUINA, 2012).

Considering media democratization, Comparato (2000, p. 193) reports that social communication should be "a matter of public interest relevant to the people, making any direct or indirect form of private control of mass media entirely inadmissible". Nevertheless, it is common in democracies for the media to be made up of large industries funded by advertising that generate profit as well as direct and indirect employment. This means that media content is tied to market interests more so than the needs of the population.

This context has been instrumental in the growth of a global movement known as "media literacy", based on the precepts of citizenship, democracy, the right to information and freedom of expression.

International organizations such as Unesco and Unicef³ address the issue, which is also present in Brazil. The movement aims to expand freedom of expression and improve citizens' critical analysis skills in the face of media messages. Melo (2006) highlights the need for the communicator to engage in this process. Bucci (2008) argues that media corporations should seek to qualify receivers as part of their social commitment. An example is the National Newspaper Association's *Jornal e Educação* program involving media companies and journalism schools nationwide (PAVANI, 2003), as well as different Brazilian researchers

³ Unesco is the acronym for the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture; its activities aimed at media and information literacy can be viewed at <http://www.unesco.org/new/pt/brasil/communication-and-information/access-to-knowledge/media-and-information-literacy/>. Unicef is the acronym for the United Nations Children's Fund, whose work can be viewed at http://www.unicef.org/brazil/pt/resources_9474.htm.

and social players, such as Andi and the Alana Institute⁴. However, the complexity of the issue raises the question of how to address the media pedagogically. This study aims to contribute by providing frameworks for the development of media literacy activities, focusing on the relationship between adolescents and the media. One of the issues addressed is worrying in terms of its consequences: health, specifically in regard to the esthetics of body care disseminated by magazines. These publications continue to allude to the body as an object of consumption. Beauty and health are often treated similarly through ready-made and generalized recipes that become a benchmark for young people. As such, considering the role of the media in the non-formal education of adolescents⁵, it is important to equip them to critically analyze it. Promoting media literacy is a basic need in work and sociability and can be an important strategy to strengthen ties between education and the cultural baggage of children and young people.

In light of this scenario, the objectives of this study are to: 1) describe and discuss an experience report of media literacy initiatives aimed at critical and creative analysis of magazines conducted teenagers studying at a high school in an inland area of São Paulo state; and 2) propose an activity aimed at high school students questioning the representation of the female body.

The material follows the parameters compiled in an investigation into media literacy in high school, funded by the Research Support Foundation for the State of São Paulo.⁶

⁴ See the organizational websites for information at <http://www.andi.org.br/infancia-e-juventude/publicacao/midia-e-educacao> and <http://alana.org.br/project/crianca-e-consumo/>.

⁵ Non-formal education takes place outside the school setting in a structured and systematic format, such as mass media, social movements, museums and cinema.

⁶ The study investigated the cultural baggage of high school students and teachers regarding the media, and how they learn content and concepts related to the area. Pedagogical activities related to media education were created and evaluated, including written media tasks.

Background: beauty, health and the media

It appears that society is not fully aware that media messages contribute to shaping the culture and subjectivity of individuals. Content produced and distributed by a few ultimately serves as a benchmark for public opinion. At times the media exalts values that neglect the health needs of the population.

Marketing discourse promotes symbiosis between beauty and health, meaning it has become common sense to believe that striving for a beautiful body is a health issue. Advertising collaborates by associating beauty with happiness, well-being and professional and personal success. However, the search for beauty can have harmful consequences, including anorexia and the reckless consumption of amphetamine-based medication, whose continued use can lead to addiction and cause side effects such as high blood pressure and emotional distress. Added to this are the psychological problems faced by those who pursue and idealized an unrealistic beauty ideal. Plastic surgery has become commonplace, even among young people. Between 2008 and 2012, the number of surgical procedures performed on adolescents increased 141% according to the Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery (2013). This consumption behavior cannot be considered positive and reveals the lack of preparation of all those involved: the population, media and industry.

The beauty industry, in turn, is powerful and profitable. It invests heavily in advertising and is an important financial mainstay of the media. Beauty industry and media interests converge to generate profit, with advertising at the center. According to Sant'Anna (1998), the goal of advertising is to interest, persuade, convince and lead individuals into action, awakening emotions and encouraging them to satisfy their desires. In Brazil, the quantitative audience becomes a bargaining chip in advertising rates, meaning the choice of editorial content serves advertiser's interests, as is the case with teen magazines, whose pages reflect fashion trends.

Teenagers are immersed in the values revered by the capitalist society that views "rediscovery of the body as a sign of physical and sexual

freedom”. The body becomes an “object narcissistic worship [...] and social ritual”, prompting an obsession with resources that enhance or restore “youth, elegance, masculinity/femininity, among others” (BAUDRILLARD, 1981, p. 136), altering people’s moral and ideological perceptions. Baudrillard also explains that, for women, beauty has become an “[...] absolute and religious imperative. Being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature and a supplement to moral qualities” (ibid., p. 140). It is based on this viewpoint that advertisers and the beauty industry work to sell their goods and services.

Despite the fact that the ability to critically analyze advertising copy means there are no naïve consumers, and that images can affect people and be interpreted differently, beauty standards advertised in the media often make people feel inferior and insecure about their appearance, causing a constant feeling of emptiness and longing for something that never materializes. The reaction of many women, especially teenagers, is to pursue the standard of beauty suggested in advertising, which leads to the proposed discussion: education for the critical and creative use of media.

Media education

Media interferes in reality, provides selective versions of the world, and creates representations and stereotypes. On the other hand, as the product of human action, media content has educational potential that could be used to improve the quality of life of Brazilians. The media is essential in promoting dialogue and providing access to information. Since information is a decisive factor in personal and community development, it is important to understand it and know how to contextualize and use it selectively. Critical analysis of information can be developed through media education.

Media education, educommunication and media literacy are terms used to characterize an interdisciplinary field of knowledge that centers on devising ways to teach and learn about aspects relevant to the insertion of media into society. Thus, media literacy is the expected result of

educational initiatives that involve achieving critical understanding of messages, the role of communication and active participation in social communication.

On an international scale, it is important to note UNESCO'S commitment to global development objectives that, since the 1960s, have seen the organization dedicate itself to promoting freedom of expression and universal access to information and knowledge, fostering the organization of sustainable spaces for intercultural dialogue. This is based on the premise that free and balanced access to information and knowledge is a vital component in empowering citizens and ensuring their participation in society. For the Organization media education is fundamental, prompting young people to reflect on the social role of media and participate in the media sphere (FRAU-MEIGS, 2006).

Media literacy is nothing new among Brazilians. Activities have been developed at the interface of communication and education by Brazilian communicators and educators since the early 20th century, exemplified in the fact that Brazil's first radio station, Rio de Janeiro's *Rádio Sociedade*, was founded in 1923 by Edgar Roquette-Pinto for educational purposes (FERRARETTO, 2000).

Thus, it is important to underscore that media education should not be limited to formal education or teachers. Considering the expansion of individual critical awareness, political training and civic education, Melo (2006, p. 171) encourages journalists to carry out educational activities in schools. To that end the authors suggests: encouraging young people to compare narrative structures used by different channels; analyzing opinions and social reference standards publicized in the media (also proposed in the present study) and; creating newspapers.

The author argues: "school newspapers are excellent tools in exercising citizenship, that is, providing practical learning opportunities for social and political participation" (MELO, 2006, p. 171). Professional educators and communicators share a common objective: contributing to improving the quality of life of Brazilians. Thus, communicators act as educators.

Nevertheless, there are few systematic procedures and referential frameworks in place capable of guiding this work. As a result, activities in Brazil are fragmented, where experiences demonstrate the evolution of media education paradigms unlike those observed in countries such as England, Canada and Australia, where experiences demonstrate the evolution of media education paradigms (BUCKINGHAM, 2003) as follows:

- 1930s: media education means inoculating against its harmful effects;
- 1960s: based on cultural studies, it is suggested that conditions be created to prompt reflection on how people coexist with media;
- 1980s: media studies are officially included in school education as a specific subject or in activities proposed in other areas of the curriculum;
- Currently: From the perspective of cultural studies and in conjunction with technological innovations, concern centers on equipping young people to consciously and effectively take advantage of the benefits that media can provide.

However, even those paradigms considered overcome continue to co-exist in teaching practices, demonstrating the difficulties experienced in addressing the issue.

Theoretical and methodological framework for media education

A primary concern among educators is outlining the objective of educational intervention. British studies have proposed using the following key concepts to guide media:

Linguagens	Compreender que é a linguagem que produz significado, e não uma suposta expressão por si só e, conseqüentemente, até mesmo a notícia não é transparente em relação à realidade, mas sim uma recriação de um fato, mediada por forças de caráter técnico, político e simbólico.
Instituições de mídia	Compreender que as notícias produzidas pelos jornais todos os dias são feitas conforme as normas de um processo institucionalizado aparentemente objetivo mas que, no fundo, sustenta pressupostos ideológicos
Audiências	Investigar o papel da audiência na formatação de uma mensagem e refletir sobre o poder de persuasão do texto, o poder do receptor e o modo como audiências diferentes se apropriam do mesmo conteúdo de modo diferente
Representação	Avaliar em que medida a formação de uma identidade pessoal se relaciona com as representações mais comuns nos meios de comunicação e em que medida podemos afirmar que determinadas representações são as verdadeiras ou apenas são tidas como verdadeiras, porque são predominantes na mídia

Figure 1: Key concepts in media education

Source: Media in Education (ANDRELO, SIQUEIRA, 2013)

The concept of “representation” will be described in greater detail as the focus of learning, both in the experience report and the proposed activity, as well as the text analysis method. After all, gender stereotypes play a central role in discussions.

The concept of “representation” is supported by the theories of Hall (2005) and Masterman (1989) and encompasses the meanings proposed by media institutions, calling into question how the media portrays certain groups, communities, experiences, ideas or themes based on an ideological perspective or specific value that, in the case of advertising, awakens the desire to consume.

Hall (2005) warns that one should not adopt the stance of the existence of a single reality against which a media text can be compared, or allow a truth that it proclaims to be adopted. After all, ideological, political and market forces control the media according to their own interests.

As such, systems of representations combine to create cultural meaning through media texts aimed at shaping common sense, demonstrating that certain practices are natural. For example: media representations of the act of celebration are constantly linked to the consumption of alcohol and although some people do celebrate in this way, this concept should not be accepted as representative of the act of celebration.

Media products come in different genres, including: news, advertising, docudramas, comedy, musicals, and reality shows. Whether productions are fictional or not, they create expectations in the receiver by establishing different relationships with reality. However, receivers often have difficulty identifying the boundaries between fiction and reality and, in addressing the concept of representation, young people are expected to acquire this skill by reflecting on the following aspects:

- Realism: identifying how the media attempts to seem real. By identifying the different genres and media content, their roles and objectives, the text is analyzed to determine where it should be real and understand why some appear real and others less so.
- Presence and absence: noting who is included and excluded from the media world. Who speaks and who remains silent, what is said and what is omitted.
- Bias and objectivity: establishing whether the texts convey partial views of reality and are marked by moral and political views.
- Stereotypes: understanding how the media depicts certain groups and if it does so realistically.
- Interpretations: Analyzing how industries accept certain representations as true and reject others.
- Influences: determining how proposed representations of the world affect our perception of certain groups, professionals or subjects.

With respect to establishing the methodology, elements such as the key concept to be studied, time, age of students, and available resources should be considered. Well-defined approaches in the field of media education include text and context analysis, case studies, text production,

simulating media production and translation routines (ALMEIDA, 2013).

For the purposes of this study, we opted for text analysis, which is performed in three stages:

- A. Description (denotative) – the elements comprising the text analyzed are listed, prompting thorough observation of the parts and details in the image assessed.
- B. Meaning (connotations and associations) – the elements (music, sound effects, silence, lighting) that make up the text are analyzed separately, drawing external and subjective correlations with the context. Intertextuality is also important: recalling other texts referred to in the material assessed.
- C. Judgment (value or ideological judgments) – determine whether textual elements are associated with qualities identified as positive (e.g. natural, sexy, scientific, attractive), noting the existing appeal. The process concludes with findings on the effectiveness of the appeals and arguments in the material assessed.

Regardless of the methodology selected, it is important to always acknowledge and validate the student's previous knowledge to prevent a gap from developing between young people and adults, since adult preconceived notions regarding adolescent media preferences will only hamper dialogue (BUCKINGHAM, 2003). The goal of the activities presented is to reflect on the beauty industry.

In regard to the audience chosen for analysis and the subsequent activity, it is noteworthy that adolescence marks the onset of cognitive development phase that Piaget (1976) denominates the formal operational stage. This means they are ready for abstract, conceptual thinking and can consider different points of view under a same phenomenon, forming the basis for the development of logical, hypothetical, systematic and scientific reasoning. As such, they are ready to reflect on the motivations that drive the creation and publication of advertising messages, but need guidance during this process.

In the pedagogical approach to advertising copy, based on the theories of Vygotsky (1992), learning was considered to be highly social, a product of interaction between subjects and culture. The author reports that there are two stages of development: real and potential. Thus, education-oriented mediation ensures subjects progress beyond their current development. Reflexive activities developed collectively and led by a more experienced subject will therefore promote the emergence of individual and collective critical thinking. During adolescence teenagers need the support of their peers, and the knowledge generated in their community tends to be collectively validated, which applies to the activity proposed here.

It is in this educational context that advertising text can be included. After all, from a social constructivism perspective, pedagogy should also be based on learning by discovery and thus consider student interest fundamental since they learn through motivation and active experience. It is therefore important to stress the decisive contribution of new education, since it is a constant presence in media studies programs. It centers primarily on the student-teacher relationship and young people constructing knowledge about their motivations and questions (GONNET, 2001).

Malitza (1984) proposes a pedagogical method that involves teaching with the help of previous organizational elements. It is based on the premise that learning depends on an individual's personal experience, the subjective addition of new information to prior knowledge. According to this method, each lesson should be preceded by the presentation of an organizational element, introducing students to the context in which they absorb new content. The examples chosen for analysis have the advantage of providing new content with an affective component, appealing not only to the individual's cognitive structure but their socio-affective experience, interests and motivation, in addition to being accessible to all ages and lending themselves to every possible type of content. The amount of detail disclosed provides a number of supporting points to assimilate meaning.

In regard to advertising copy in particular, it is well-known that “through diversity advertising traces a picture of certain society, its economy, complexities, culture, habits...” (own translation) (CLEMI, 2000, p. 8) More than that, advertising copy is neither transparent nor open to only one interpretation. “Advertising is more complex than it seems.

The messages it conveys can sometimes be interpreted differently and have greater reach than one might think” (own translation) (CLEMI, 2000, p. 8).

This context raises the possibility of advertising as educational content, since it requires children and adolescents to develop critical skills in the face of advertising messages. As advocated by the CLEMI (Centre de Liaison de l’Enseignement et des Médias d’Information), an authority affiliated to the French Ministry of Education, young people should adopt an active stance and as opposed to passively addressing the advertising phenomenon.

As explained in the next section, the activities presented involved the following situations: all were carried out in a group and based on an approach that respects the culture the adolescents are part of. In other words, there was no prior discussion regarding the esthetic concepts in teen magazines or the role of advertising. The subjects were collectively afforded the right to analyze and reflect on the examples selected. Subsequently, once the media education methodology was applied to the material, discussions were systematized, as demonstrated in the next section.

Experience Report

Magazine covers summarize the concept of body esthetics, displaying pictures of famous people. The activity was proposed when an academic analysis of the covers of several women’s magazines found all of these featured white models, sixty percent of whom had blue or green eyes (FERRARINI, 2011). The comparison of different covers reveals the mass production adopted by editors: the layout is almost

always the same, with similar content and beauty standards portrayed in the models used.

Thus, a number of magazine covers were studied and compared by a group of high school students of both sexes. The activity encompassed two analyses: of the media itself and the representation of the body and beauty. Analysis followed three stages: denotation, connotation and judgment. First, the students described all the elements of the covers, such as the headlines; the photo or illustration, indicating gestures, clothes, accessories, physical characteristics and background, with colors and lighting. Next, connotative or associative analysis was conducted, reflecting on each element in isolation, making external and subjective correlations with the context and relating the covers to each other, identifying similarities. Finally, students made value or ideological judgments. Associations were observed with qualities that are socially recognized as positive (natural, sexy, scientific, transformative, attractive), noting the existing appeal.

Below are two magazine covers that illustrate the analytical route.



Figure 2: Nova Magazine, editions 454 and 453 of July and June 2011, respectively

Source: Nova Magazine website (2013).

Denotation: tall, slim women with light-colored eyes, healthy hair, smiling, most of the body displayed, wearing low-cut tops, short skirts and women's accessories. The topics addressed are: behavior, sex, diet, beauty and fashion tips, formulas to achieve the ideal body, and the personal life of celebrities. The articles publicized promise the formula for success and happiness.

Connotation: the picture on both covers is centered, occupying the foreground. The impression is that the models are undressing. Lighting emphasizes the breasts, partially exposed. The models seem relaxed and happy. In both cases, they are surrounded by headlines, but it is noteworthy that those written in a larger font refer to sex and the body.

The position of headlines on the same subject coincides on both covers, indicating that the same layout was used, a typical labor saving technique.

Judgment: the women give the impression of being satisfied because they have achieved the female ideal and are professionally successful, enabling them to wear designer clothes. They are in a loving and sexually fulfilled relationship and have achieved and maintained the perfect body according to fashion standards. The body standard publicized corresponds to that of European or American women.

The discussion moved toward reflection about what it means to be beautiful and have a healthy body. The teacher provided information on the idea of beauty throughout history, indicating how the media collaborates to disseminate these representations. This fact became evident over the course of the analysis by clearly exposing the concept of capitalist industrial production used by the editors responsible for the publications under analysis. The students understood that the concepts were constructed by media language and no longer viewed them as something natural. At the end of the activity a number of students voluntarily admitted that they were no longer as captivated by the content of the magazines.

However, at the time the activity was carried out there was no time available to further enhance the learning process. The students could

have been encouraged to perform a practical task and reformulate the magazine cover, suggesting themes related to health and beauty based on precepts they considered ethical. Additionally, headlines could have been reworded and an alternative image (illustration or photograph) selected. If this had been done in groups, each team could orally present their different proposals and justify their selections, comparing the alternatives and reflecting on the choices made by the different groups.

Proposal for a didactic activity

Based on the report and theoretical framework, an activity was proposed to prompt critical and creative analysis of media, primarily with regard to representations of the female body in advertisements, considering the key concept of representations and the text analysis methodology. However, at this point the perspective is qualitative as opposed to quantitative. It is important to show the students that advertisements use appeals and arguments to win over consumers by targeting specific audiences and employing different strategies.

Advertisements were selected that use women to sell dietary supplements, a relevant topic for discussion with young people.

Table 1 presents the proposed activity:

Activity	- Analysis of advertisements that use the female image.
Level	- High school students.
Skills to be acquired on different levels: body image, developing creativity, media education etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand how the advertisements construct representations of the female body; - Identify the elements that comprise the adverts, analyzing the appeals used; - Select, organize, relate, interpret data and information represented in different ways (text, photo, illustration, etc.); - Develop the ability to argue, research and work in a group; - Apply concepts from different areas of knowledge to understand the production of advertisements;

Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote critical analysis of media, specifically advertisements; - Differentiate between verbal and nonverbal language; - Reflect on the media's construction of the female body image; - Establish relationships between the appeals used by the adverts and the conditions needed to maintain a healthy lifestyle.
Content assessed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Representation of the female body; the role of advertising in constructing these concepts and the verbal and nonverbal language (a combination of these elements in compiling the adverts).
Activity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. After presenting the adverts, students separate into groups to describe the different elements in them: texts and font size; images; colors. 2. On a separate occasion students should reflect on each element, making subjective correlations with the context (why was that particular woman chosen? How was she portrayed?). 3. Judgment: making a value judgment and reflecting on the ethical aspects involved in compiling the material, particularly regarding the appeal used; students should reflect on how the woman is represented in each advert and whether this corresponds to reality, as well as how the advert can influence reader behavior from a health perspective. 4. Based on the discussion, students develop a proposal for a new advertisement, selecting one of the techniques presented guided by ethical and health principles. The new advert can be created in practice, but is not essential; planning alone is sufficient.
Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advertisements that use the female image.

Table 1: Pedagogical form

Source: compiled by the author

Figures 3 and 4 show suggested advertisements for the activity:



Figure 3. Advertisement for the supplement MHP (Maximum Human Performance)

Source: by Marina, 2015.



Figure 4. Advertisement for Diet Shake

Source: Diet Shake, 2015.

The analytical path followed will reveal aspects of the stereotypes attributed to women in Brazilian society. The theme can be expanded by demonstrating the existence of similar stereotyping processes linked to different ethnicities, unconventional sexual preferences, people deemed slim, overweight, short etc.

Final considerations

The media's central role in society, the social responsibility of media corporations and communicators and the lack of transparency in media products justify the need for media education activities aimed at civic education. The goal is not to immunize young people against what is publicized in the media, but rather to create critical and creative thinkers who analyze newspapers, magazines, websites, radio and television broadcasts.

In addition, working with the concept of media education underpins important debate at schools on subjects such as sexuality, beauty and the environment, among others. It is important to note that educational material is a necessary element in implementing an educational media literacy policy.

Given the non-formal educational potential of media, the issues it addresses cannot be debated at school without considering the baggage that students and teachers bring with them, which is often the result of what they see in the media.

In this respect, the notion of representation stands out, that is, how the media portrays people, social groups, places, objects and situations. This concept is particularly evident in the field of advertising, where the minimal space and time available means appeals are used to sell products and services. Understanding this notion is vital to for critical and creative analysis.

The experiment conducted with high school students using women's magazine covers reported briefly in this article allows a number of reflections. It is important to underscore the adolescent's interest in

analyzing the material and their spontaneous declarations at the end of the exercise, indicating changes in how they analyze familiar products.

Several topics can be educationally addressed using media literacy, raising critical thinking levels among young people to enable them to commit to their own health despite the seduction of advertising language.

The goal in media education is to build a media/advertisement/society relationship guided by democracy toward social development and conscious consumption. In a country the size of Brazil, the media plays a vital role in facilitating dialogue and the population's participation in in collective, political and cultural issues.

Making media education accessible to citizens is a key factor in creating the critical mass needed to consolidate dialogue and constructive intercultural exchanges and ensure that Brazil occupies a strategic on the competitive international stage.

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