

SEX STEREOTYPES IN COMMERCIALS TARGETED TOWARD CHILDREN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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This article reports the results of a content analysis of 467 commercial characters in the programming between children's cartoons. Replicating and expanding upon Smith's (1994) research, the findings reveal that being in a major role, having active movement in an individual activity, and being in an occupational setting all significantly increase the likelihood of an actor being male. It is suggested that media perpetuation of these stereotypes over time, which exists in spite of decreases in real-world sex-typed behaviors, may be related to a reliance of advertisers on cognitive shortcuts they anticipate their viewers will use while viewing their commercials.

INTRODUCTION

There are distinct differences in the ways in which women and men are portrayed on television, particularly in commercials. Those different portrayals are based on traditional, gendered expectations of female and male characters. Although adults constantly may be reforming their perspectives on gender, basic foundations have been laid. While commercials may not influence their definition of what is

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“masculine” or “feminine,” they may simply reinforce what adults believe. Children, on the other hand, are still forming their values and beliefs. They are more vulnerable to many types of images or stereotypes presented to them, particularly those with audio and visual reinforcement. Commercials during children’s shows tend to support roles of women and men that are deemed appropriate by popular culture and act as agents of socialization for that generation’s children. Cartoons and the commercials within them provide excellent opportunities for subtle indoctrination of children.

This research examines the images of females and males as presented in commercials within and between cartoons through content analysis. This article discusses the implications of studying children’s television for sex stereotypes and details the history of sex stereotypes as presented in the television media. Then, using logistic regression techniques, I determine whether factors within commercials targeted toward children are linked to the presentation of a character as male or female. The findings are placed in the context of those of previous research commenting on the importance of replication in social science. The article concludes with suggestions for what these findings mean to the gendering of contemporary American television-viewing children.

Why Study Commercials Between Children’s Cartoons?

Why is it important to examine the media for signs of gender stereotyping? Children’s attitudes are influenced by what television portrays, even when the children know why the portrayal occurs (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994; Signorielli and Lears 1992). Specifically, sex role stereotypes are transmitted through advertising and received by children (Signorielli and Lears 1992; Thompson and Zerbinos 1997). As a result, children who watch more television have more sex-typed attitudes (Kimball 1986; McGhee and Frueh 1980). In fact, Kimball (1986) reports a natural experiment comparing children in towns with and without television, which shows distinct differences in sex-typed attitudes in the differing towns. She discovered that prior to the introduction of television in a town, children

had low perceptions of sex-typed roles in comparison with nearby towns that had television. Two years after the introduction of television, there was no difference among the towns' children's perceptions of sex roles (Kimball 1986).

Bandura (1994) suggests that television's representations of the social world reflect "ideological bents and ... heavy exposure to this symbolic world may eventually make the televised images appear to be the authentic state of human affairs" (p. 75-6). Television influence should be studied, as "many of the shared misconceptions about ... gender roles ... are at least partly cultivated through symbolic modeling of stereotypes" (Bandura 1994:76). Observational, or social, learning of socially-constructed gender differences is retained by children in particular as they are more impressionable than adults and have fewer life experiences to call upon for explanation.

How do presentations of women and men in the media become accepted by children to the point that they believe women and men have nonoverlapping roles in society as a whole, even as most children do not see this "separate spheres" ideology reflected in their own families' experiences (Signorielli and Lears 1992; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000)? Erving Goffman (1974) suggested that humans attempt to understand the world around them by using cognitive filters or frames. In addition, the media constructs frames which viewers use to help them make sense of the world around them. Advertisers specifically use framing to capture the symbolic nature and importance of common rituals (Rook 1985) and to allow consumers to place themselves in social roles to which they aspire (Soloman 1983). The framing techniques used by advertisers show their audiences the position of men and women in connection with their product and reinforce stereotyped norms of activity for gender display, including consumption. In providing what is perceived to be common situations in advertisements, advertisers can shape the beliefs of viewers (children) by taking advantage of their framing capacity. It is important that we study the television commercials aimed at children in order to see whether the images targeted at children's social filters are sex stereotypical.

Sex Stereotypes in the Media: A Time Line

If sex stereotypes were found in the media in the past and are measured in this article, what types of character presentation would be considered sex-typed? Females would be traditionally feminine, depicted as weak, controlled by others, emotional, warm toward others, affectionate, sensitive, frail, passive, domestic, and romantic. Males would be traditionally masculine, shown as having a recognizable job, independent, assertive, intelligent, athletic, active, strong, competent, technical, responsible and confident (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995).

Content analysis of the media, of television in particular, became very popular in the 1970s. In adult-oriented commercials, the images of women and men fell sharply along stereotypical lines. Women used products, were in the home, and were people-oriented, while men were authorities on products, worked for pay outside of the home, and were independent (Courtney and Whipple 1974; McArthur and Resko 1975; O'Donnell and O'Donnell 1978). In cartoons and children's programming during the 1970s, male characters held all major roles, while female characters held minor, or no roles (Busby 1974; O'Kelly 1974). Few characters were shown doing cross-gender activities (O'Kelly 1974).

In the commercials of the 1980s, several changes were seen in presentation of gendered characters. Similar numbers of both women and men were portrayed in commercials and in prominent roles of those commercials (Brentl and Cantor 1988; Lovdal 1989), which was a distinct difference from the 1970s. Both women and men were shown physically at work and working, but there were significant differences in the types of jobs they performed (Allan and Coltrane 1996; Brentl and Cantor 1988), as women were shown at lower status jobs than were men (waitress versus attorney). There was a decrease in the number of women portrayed at home, however, they were still overrepresented (Allan and Coltrane 1996; Lovdal 1989). Women continued to advertise products that were for indoor use only, while men advertised products for outdoor use only (Lovdal 1989).

In the media presentations in the 1990s, women were more likely to be shown in the domestic roles of mother or

wife than any other role, such as employee (Coltrane and Adams 1997; Craig 1992; Furnham and Bitar 1993). Both women and men were shown at work, but men were portrayed as having higher status jobs (Coltrane and Adams 1997; Craig 1992). Men were shown performing activities outdoors more often than women (Brabant and Mooney 1997). In these commercials, men had the product knowledge, while women were the product users, regardless of the use of the product (Coltrane and Adams 1997; Craig 1992; Furnham and Bitar 1993).

In the 1990s, children's programming and interjected commercials, female and male characters were shown as possessing stereotypical personality traits and behaviors (Smith 1994; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). There were more males than females in all role categories (Furnham, Abramsky, and Gunter 1997; Smith 1994; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995).

As the data examined in this research were collected in the 1990s, I anticipate finding that characters in major roles will be more likely to be male than those characters in minor roles (Hypothesis 1). Being in a major role may imply that one sex is more important than the other. Previous research found that boys were shown engaging in individual activities while girls were portrayed as group members participating in an activity (Smith 1994). Thus, I anticipate finding that the character will be more likely to be male if the activity is an individual activity rather than a group activity (Hypothesis 2). Sex differences existed in activity type, whether it included a great deal of movement (mostly boys) or was sedentary (mostly girls), portrayed on the commercial, reflecting sex stereotypical views of which sex is more likely to take on active roles (Smith 1994; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). Based on these findings, it is expected that characters in activities with high amounts of movement will be more likely to be male than those characters who are portrayed with low amounts of movement (Hypothesis 3). Even when girls or a gender neutral audience were the target of the programming, more males as characters were shown, particularly when the product advertised was food (Furnham, Abramsky, and Gunter 1997; Smith 1994). Therefore it is expected that characters advertising toys, food, games, and other products will not have the same likelihood of being male. I expect

characters advertising food to have a higher likelihood of being male than characters advertising all other types of products (Hypothesis 4). This may imply that girls are supposed to consume less food relative to boys, which satisfies the emergent dieting culture among young women in the 1990s (Frost 2001).

Based on findings for commercials and other programming both in the 1980s (Allan and Coltrane 1996; Brentl and Cantor 1988; Craig 1992; Lovdal 1989; Mooney and Brabant 1990) and in the 1990s (Brabant and Mooney 1997; Smith 1994), I hypothesize that characters portrayed in an outdoor setting will have a higher likelihood of being male compared to those shown on the job (Hypothesis 5) and that characters portrayed in the home will have a lower likelihood of being male compared to those shown on the job (Hypothesis 6).

This research is in some ways a replication and expansion of several previous studies. Smith's (1994) research is the most recent analysis of advertisements targeted toward children. This project, then, serves two important purposes. First, this research is an expansion of Smith's (1994) work which focuses specifically on commercials within and between children's programs. Do the findings within this subsample of programs (i.e., animated shows only) mirror those of the population of children's programming? Second, and more importantly, this project plays a crucial role in the scientific endeavor, that of replicating previous research projects. Sociology as a science tends to focus on reporting new findings or contributions and ignores the need for verification of previously published results beyond studies which question those previously published findings (e.g., Cancio, Evans, and Maume 1996; Farkas and Vicknair 1996; Maume, Cancio, and Evans 1996).

There are two main purposes for replication in science. First, the scientist is attempting to vary the conditions so as to find the true relationship under study, and second, the scientist is interested in obtaining accurate measurement (Blalock 1968). Replicating the same study will provide information into the reliability of measures and the extent to which the phenomenon is stable over multiple samples. Further, if the measures we use in replication are the same measures and provide the same or similar findings in these varied conditions, then we have reliable measures

(Lin 1976). Science is not only a process of acquiring new knowledge, but also verifying what we think we know. This study tests the above hypotheses based on what previous research has reported through replication in a subsample of the population of children's programming, namely, that of animated television shows.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data Collection

The data for this research project were collected via content analysis. The sample of commercials was drawn from cartoons on ten different television networks in two television broadcasting areas in a southeastern state. Commercials included in the sample were broadcast during morning and afternoon cartoons during the week, Saturday morning cartoons, and Sunday afternoon cartoons. Cartoons that aired in the evenings were not used, as they were not considered to be specifically aimed at children as viewers. The data were collected over a period of one month in 1995. Each commercial was included in the analysis only once, regardless of the number of times it aired. The total number of commercials aired at least once was 167, which included 478 total characters to be coded for analysis. The characters were coded for gender, role within the commercial (major or minor), activity (both number of people involved in the activity and level of movement), product type, and location of the character (home, work, or outdoors).

Measurement of Variables

Individual characters within the commercial were the units of analysis. The dependent variable, sex of the character, was recorded for each individual portrayed within the commercial. Major or minor role in the commercial was measured by length of time shown in the commercial relative to the length of the commercial. If the character was shown for less than one-half of the length of the commercial, they were coded as a minor character. For the purposes of analysis, the reference category was being portrayed in a major role.

Activity was categorized as individual or group based on the number of actors involved in the activity, with individual action as the reference category. The same activity was then separately measured as either active or passive. Activities were considered passive if the character was in a seated position with only minimal, slow arm gestures, or if vertically positioned with no movement beyond standing. Reading a book, playing with a Barbie Dreamhouse, and playing a computer game were considered passive. An activity was considered active if it had more movement than allowed for a passive activity. Any activity such as running, dancing, or playing sports was considered active. Driving or riding in a kid-sized battery operated car was considered active, as was pushing a Barbie car while playing dolls. Eating was considered passive unless extensive movement accompanied the movement of the food to the mouth. For analysis, active movement was the reference category.

There were four categories for type of product: food, games (any product that was intended for some type of competition, including card games, computer games, and board games), toys (any product that was intended for the users to be creative with the product's use), and other, which included movies, television shows, books, and anything else that did not fit into another category. Food was the reference category for the regression analysis, although comparisons among all products were tested.

Location was defined as outdoor, home, or work, with work as the reference category.

Analytic Technique

As the dependent variable of this research had two categories, male or female, I used logistic regression as my analytic technique. Long (1997) suggests using logistic regression techniques for limited or categorical dependent variables because OLS regression makes the assumption of a continuous outcome variable and would provide inaccurate predicted effects. The logistic regression coefficients are interpreted as the effects of the predictor variables on the log-odds of a character being male. To aid in interpretation, the coefficients were exponentiated to determine the effects of

predictor variables on the odds of a character being male. For example, if the effect on the log-odds was .85, then the effect on the odds would be $e^{.85}$, or 2.34. This would suggest that a one unit increase in the predictor variable would lead to the character being two and one-third times more likely to be portrayed by a male than by a female. I also examined the effects of the predictor variables on the probability of a character being male.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides the distribution of the characters on each of the coded variables. The characters were almost equally split as male and female, with slightly more males (53%). The marginal odds of an actor being male were 1.12 to 1. Over half of the characters were seen in a major role (57%). Most of the characters in these commercials were portrayed in group activities, with only 31% shown in individual activities.

TABLE 1 Frequency Distributions of All Variables (N = 478)

Variable	Percentage
Gender	
Male	53
Female	47
Role in commercial	
Major	57
Minor	43
Activity number	
Individual	31
Group	69
Activity movement	
Active	48
Passive	52
Product	
Toys	34
Games	28
Food	17
Other	21
Location	
Outdoor	25
Work	18
Home	57

However, the characters were almost equally split between active and passive activities, with only a few more in passive activities (52%). About one-third of the characters were shown in commercials advertising toys. A little more than one-fourth of the characters advertised games, while 17% advertised food and 21% advertised other types of products. The majority of characters were portrayed in a home, with about one-fourth shown outdoors and less than 20% shown in a work setting.

As shown in Table 2, most of the predictor variables have statistically significant bivariate effects on the odds of a character being male. Being in a minor role, portrayed in a group setting, and being shown as passive all individually decrease the odds of a character being male by about one-half. Only when advertising food products in comparison with toys is a character significantly more likely to be male than female. All other comparisons (including the comparisons with games, food, and other products as reference groups) do not have significant effects on the odds of a character being male. Additionally, being shown in a home decreases the odds of a character being male to one-half of

TABLE 2 Bivariate and Multivariate Effects on the Odds of a Character being Male (N = 478)

Variable	Bivariate effects on odds	Multivariate effects on odds
Role in commercial (minor = 1)	.57 [†]	.48 [†]
Activity number (group = 1)	.45 [†]	.40 [†]
Activity movement (passive = 1)	.49 [†]	.49 [†]
Product type (food = reference)		
Games	.95	1.20
Toys	.42 [*]	.65
Other	1.24	.59
Location (work = reference)		
Outdoor	1.16	.33 [†]
Home	.49 [†]	.24 [†]
Intercept	—	2.33 [†]
Model χ^2	—	68.26 [†]
R ² Analog	—	.10

* $p < .05$, one-tailed tests

† $p < .01$, one-tailed tests

those of a character shown at work. No other location comparisons has significant bivariate effects on the odds of a character being male.

Further, Table 2 shows that the logistic regression model does significantly predict the likelihood of an actor being male or female in the commercials between children's cartoons (Model $\chi^2 = 68.26$, $p < .05$). All included variables are significant predictors except the type of product advertised.

Actors in a minor role are about 50% less likely to be male than those in a major role, all else equal, supporting Hypothesis 1. Actors participating in a group activity have odds of being male .40 times those of actors participating in individual activities, while passive characters have odds of being male about half those of an active actor, holding all else constant. These findings support Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Product type does not significantly influence the likelihood of an actor being male overall. Hypothesis 4 suggests that characters advertising food would have a higher likelihood of being male than characters advertising all other types of products. This hypothesis is not supported by the data. Multiple comparisons tests suggest that there are individual differences in the effects of a product being advertised on the likelihood of an actor being male (results not shown here). Characters advertising games are twice as likely to be male than are characters advertising toys and other products. No other comparisons among categories of products advertised are significant predictors of whether the actor would be male or female.

Actors shown in outdoor settings or inside of a home are less likely to be male than those shown in a work setting, all else equal. These findings do not support Hypothesis 5, as actors shown in an outdoors setting have the odds of being male about one-third of the time those of an actor shown at work instead of having greater odds as hypothesized. Additionally, actors shown in the inside of a home have the odds one-fourth of the time of an actor shown at work of being male, supporting Hypothesis 6. Multiple comparison tests show that there is no statistically significant difference in the likelihood of an actor shown in an outdoor setting versus in a home in their likelihood of being male.

As it is important to examine the likelihood of a character portraying a particular role in a particular setting, I calculated the predicted probabilities of an actor being male in a trimmed model that included all significant variables in the model (role, activity number, activity movement, and location). These calculations are shown in Table 3.

The predicted probabilities of an actor being male show which type of character is more or less likely to be male based on their role in the commercial, the number of people in the activity and the amount of movement shown in the

TABLE 3 Predicted Probabilities of Character Being Male (N = 478)*

Marginal probability of being male = .53			Probability of being male
Major Role			
Individual	Active	Outdoor	.78
		Home	.74
		Work	.91
	Passive	Outdoor	.62
		Home	.57
		Work	.82
Group	Active	Outdoor	.63
		Home	.58
		Work	.83
	Passive	Outdoor	.44
		Home	.39
		Work	.69
Minor Role			
Individual	Active	Outdoor	.64
		Home	.60
		Work	.84
	Passive	Outdoor	.45
		Home	.41
		Work	.70
Group	Active	Outdoor	.46
		Home	.42
		Work	.72
	Passive	Outdoor	.28
		Home	.25
		Work	.54

*Calculated from a trimmed model that included only the significant variables in original logistic model.

commercial, and the location of the commercial. There are several trends to note in these probabilities. First, characters have a higher probability of being male if they are in a major role, in an individual, high movement activity, regardless of location. However, over all the categories, individuals shown in a work environment have a higher probability of being male than those shown in an outdoor setting or in the home. This effect is strongest when the character happens to be in a commercial that shows them doing a passive, group activity. For example, if the character has a major role in a group activity with little movement, the probability of their being male is only .39 if the activity is in a home, but is .69 if the activity is in a work setting. Even more telling, if the character has a minor role in a group activity with little movement, the probability of their being male is .25 if the activity is in a home, but is .54, or two times higher if the activity is in a work setting. These probabilities show that the more stereotypically female the role the character plays, the lower the probability of the character being male. Thus, the role that has the highest probability of being male is a major role in which the individual is alone in a high movement activity in a work setting (.91); the role that has the lowest probability of the character being male is a minor role where the character is in a group participating in a low movement activity in a home setting (.25).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is to examine contemporary commercials within and between children's cartoons for any example of sex stereotyping of characters. Using logistic regression, I have determined that advertising aimed particularly at children continues to portray female and male actors in sex-typed ways. Further, this project shows the importance of replicating published research, both for determining reliability of measures and the extent to which the findings represent social reality as shown in multiple samples.

Comparing these results to those found in past research shows both continuation of sex stereotyping of characters in commercials and some changes. First, similar to Allan and Coltrane (1996), the activity of the commercial does

influence the gender of the individual portrayed in the activity. All characters shown as active participants had a high probability of being male, regardless of whether they were playing a major or minor role or were in a group or individual activity. Strong support for Smith's (1994) and Craig's (1992) results also is found in this research, as the most influential factor in determining the gender of an actor in one of these commercials was the location of the commercial itself. Being in a work setting as opposed to a home or outdoors setting dramatically increased the probability of an actor being male.

Comparing these results to those found in analyses of 1970s programming, the situation for stereotypes presented on television seems to be changing, at least in commercials during cartoons. The ratio of females to males in commercials has increased from 1:2 to 1:1.12. There has been an increase in females shown in job settings. The ratio of females to males in major roles has increased from 1:2 to 1:1.28. There has been a decrease in the percentage of females shown in domestic settings from 76% to 66%.

However, comparing these results to those in the analyses of 1980s and early 1990s programming shows that removal of stereotypes in programming has made both small steps forward and stagnated at the same time. This research shows no significant effect of the type of product advertised on the gender of the character presented in the commercial, which differs from previous research (Courtney and Whipple 1974; Lovdal 1989; O'Donnell and O'Donnell 1978; Smith 1994). Females continue to be overrepresented in passive roles. Additionally, more males than females are portrayed in work settings and the characters portrayed in a work setting have probabilities of being male close to twice those of characters in a home setting in many cases.

While the optimal method of observing whether the changes noted above are the result of actual changes in commercial programming would be a meta-analysis of all research conducted on sex stereotypes in commercials in a manner similar to the cross-cultural analyses by Furnham, Abramsky, and Gunter (1997) and Furnham and Mak (1999), this research provides a unique addition to the literature on images presented in electronic broadcasting. It is unique in that it focuses on the advertisements embedded within and

between animated children's shows, while Smith's (1994) research examined commercials around all kinds of children's programming. Therefore, all comparisons of research on sex stereotypes in television advertising would be descriptive in nature. However, as this project largely replicated Smith's research, it shows the need for continued replication of this kind of analysis, as some of the findings in Smith's research were not reproduced in these analyses. The differences could be a function of the more narrowly defined sample of television programming from which the advertisements were drawn, or they could show a change in advertisers' methods of advertising their products to children. What we can see is that this research adds to our body of knowledge regarding the latent content within advertisements. As suggested by Rook (1985) and Soloman (1983), advertisers appear to be continuing to use the interactions depicted in their advertisements to frame consumption in accepted or desired social roles. In the case of advertisements targeted toward children, the social roles are gendered consumers. If children want to be good (read: socially accepted) girls and boys, then they will want the gender-appropriate products and they will relate to one another in the appropriate (gendered) manner as depicted in the commercials.

We cannot overlook the perpetuation of traditionally gendered portrayals in television commercials. How can we account for these continued stereotypes? I suggest that advertisers, while understanding the convergence of gendered behaviors, also know that their time is limited in attempting to sell their product on television. They prey on the cognitive shortcuts that individuals take when attempting to understand new situations (Glick and Fiske 1999). If they present a product in an environment rife with sex stereotypes, the person watching the commercial will not have to work hard to understand the situation; they will only have to understand the product and how it can be used. This argument is a logical one if the person watching the commercial has a full arsenal of stereotypes and gendered ways of behaving stored in their memory that can be conjured up when presented with a new image. Can this be said of children? As suggested above, it could be that advertisers are attempting to socialize their child viewers into accepting

some sex-typed activities and behaviors in order to sell their products. Moreover, as some of the presentations of sex-typed behaviors have changed over time, some advertisers seem to be willing to change their portrayals under the condition that they will sell more of their product. These speculations suggest that researchers also may need to examine the social processes within advertising agencies as they decide how to create commercials targeted toward children.

One caveat must be included. The data for this research were collected prior to the boon of role-playing board and computer games which recently have flooded the market. These games are unlike traditional games in that the goal is not to win in a competition, but simply to use strategy to complete a mission or solve a mystery. While it can be said that these games themselves are not inherently gendered, they are targeted toward a gendered audience. There are role-playing games where the main character is Nancy Drew trying to solve a mystery that occurred in a house and there are games where the main character is challenged to save the world from certain destruction. The nature of the game may not be gendered *per se*, but the games may continue to support gendered behavior in children based on sex stereotypes. Based on unstructured observations, these types of computer games do not seem to be marketed as widely during animated children's programs as are other games. However, future research could examine whether the advertisements for this type of product are sex typed as well.

What, if anything, can be done about the continued sex-typing of characters in media presentations, particularly those aimed at children? The majority of American consumers, if presentation of sex-typed characters were important in their everyday lives, could make a tremendous difference simply by refusing to purchase those items sold by sexist advertisers. It may be the case that most consumers do not notice the sex-typed behaviors in the advertisements or do not believe that they, as individuals, can truly make a difference. Through replication of published research and continued publication, social scientists can document the slow change in the media and, through our public documentation, put pressure on advertisers to change the images they use to sell products.

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