

THE PORTRAYAL OF MEN VS. WOMEN IN TV ADVERTISING

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a content analytical study of 644 prime-time TV ads to determine the present role of women vs. men, and to see if the roles of women have changed. Results indicate a greater awareness of working women in diversified occupational roles and more women are used as product representatives yet the stereotyped housewife role is still predominant.

Background

The predominant use of TV advertising in the U.S. is to inform and persuade people to buy those products or services advertised. With the limited time and high cost associated with television advertising, the use of sex role stereotypes is one way to quickly identify the product with a particular type of individual.

Beginning in the 1960s and escalating into the 1980s the method of portraying women in advertising has come under increasingly severe attack from feminist groups and academic researchers. Both agree that the continued use of negative sex role portrayal of women will, in the long run, not accurately reflect society and will be detrimental to a product's success. A number of research studies have analyzed the content of advertising to determine the use of sex roles in both print and television advertising.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the current sale of prime-time television commercials: (1) to determine the present use of, and roles of, women versus men in commercials and (2) to see if the roles of women in commercials have changed from previous research.

Methodology

To accomplish the purpose of this research, television ads from the three networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) were simultaneously videotaped during prime time (7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. C.S.T.) on the evenings of February 16 to February 20, 1981, and February 23 to February 27, 1981. Additionally, the researchers chose to analyze commercials which could be viewed by the largest and most diverse demographic population, i.e. those commercials shown only during prime time.

Taped commercials were then analyzed as to their content. Six students at Southwest Texas State University were selected to rate the videotaped commercials. In an attempt to achieve valid results, the raters were given an explicit set of instructions and a practice session to become familiar with the analyzing procedure.

The commercials were independently analyzed by each rater and the ratings combined. If any disagreement occurred between raters, the viewing was halted and the disagreement resolved before the next commercial was viewed. Each commercial was analyzed according to origin, product, male and female roles, voice-over, sex of product representatives, use of humor, and setting of the ad. Each category was carefully defined and in cases where a clear distinction between category selections was not apparent the category "other" was utilized.

Results and Discussion

A total of 644 ads were viewed and analyzed by the method described above, of which 94 percent (N=607) were network and 6 percent (N=37) were local in origin. The sex of the voice-over announcer was almost exclusively male while the sex of the product representative(s) was mixed and a large percentage of the product representatives was both male and female (21.3%).

A total of 190 instances were recorded in which the male or female character was portrayed as working (some commercials portrayed multiple working characters of both sexes). Of these, 76 (40%) showed women working and 114 (60%) showed men working. Results indicate that both men and women are shown most often in mid-level business roles. However, men are shown far more in upper-level business roles than women (15.8% vs. 5.3%) and as blue-collar workers (11.4% vs. 5.3%). Women were portrayed as professionals about as often as men but with a higher degree of relative frequency (21.1% for women vs. 14.9% for men) and were shown more often as secretarial/clerical than men (5.3% vs. 0.9%).

Where the commercial depicted instances in which the characters were shown in nonworking roles the male was shown most often engaged in a recreational activity (27.3%) and the female shown most often in a family-related activity (36.8%). Both male and female were shown about equally as decorative (background) or shopping.

In ads that portrayed both male and female characters the researchers attempted to analyze the relative power positions of the female as equal, dominant, subordinate, or merely background. In the majority (60.1%) of the ads (N=323) the male and female characters appeared as equals, i.e. neither seemed to dominate the other. However, in 26.6 percent of the instances analyzed the dominant character was female. In only 8.4 percent of the instances was the female subordinate to the male and in only 5 percent of the ads was the female a background figure only.

Analysis of products advertised and the sex of product representatives indicates that commercials for food products were shown most often (28.7%) followed by personal hygiene products, auto/gas/oil, household, institutional, and drugs/medicine. Males as product representatives appeared most often in food commercials (25.4%) while females appeared most often in personal hygiene commercials (38.9%).

Results of this study are mixed as to the changing roles for women in televised commercials. There is a greater recognition that working women are now found in a variety of occupations, yet less than 12 percent of the commercials actually showed working women. Women are still cast predominantly in family situations with the voice of authority male. Yet women are just as likely to be the product representative and the woman is much more likely to be dominant or equal to the male. Women still seem to be confined to promote a narrow range of products, although there is a modest move into more traditionally male-oriented products. The emphasis on youth is still apparent with the majority of both male and female characters younger than 35 years old. However the female is far more likely to be younger than the male and indicates that the older, wiser male is instructing the younger female in product use.