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THE PORTRAYAL OF MEN AND WOMEN IN AMERICAN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS*

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SUMMARY

The characteristics of adult male and female models in randomly selected television commercials were systematically coded, and several significant sex differences were discovered. More men than women are presented in television commercials, the basis for the credibility of those men and women who are presented differs as do their roles, their location, their arguments on behalf of a product, and the rewards they reap for using a product. These sex differences, which tend to portray women in a relatively unfavorable manner, are discussed in the context of research which suggests that peoples' sex-role behaviors and attitudes may be influenced by televised models.

A. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a growing concern that the relatively stereotyped sex-roles which prevail in our society have undesirable consequences both for the psychological health of the individual and for the egalitarian ideals of our society. Any attempt to emancipate men and women from these stereotyped sex-roles must first consider how they are normally acquired. Among the possible sources of influence on sex-role stereotypy are the mass media; for, according to social learning theory, "observational learning from live and symbolic models (i.e., films, television, and books) is the first step in the acquisition of sex-typed behavior" (9, p. 57). Empirical evidence is of course necessary to evaluate adequately the assertion that the media mold sex-typed behavior, and two kinds of data are needed. First, it must be systematically demonstrated that the behavior of male and female media models is sex-stereotyped; and, second, it must be demonstrated that people model their own behavior after that of like-sex media models.

Some evidence that the behavior of media-models is sex-stereotyped has been reported by Child, Potter, and Levine (2) who investigated the characteristics of male and female central characters in children's readers.

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Numerous sex differences in the behavior of these characters led the authors to conclude that "the treatment of female characters follows closely that of preparing girls in the stereotypes of the preceding century" (p. 17). A more recent investigation (11) has revealed that nearly three decades have not substantially altered the stereotyped portrayal of males and females in children's readers. While the evidence presented in these studies is quite convincing, it would seem desirable to have additional documentation of sex-stereotyped behavior on the part of media models if one is to consider seriously the possibility that the media mold sex-typed behavior. The present study sought to determine the extent to which a stereotyped portrayal of the sexes can be found in the medium of television.

Television seems a particularly important area to investigate inasmuch as it has the widest audience of any medium in this country, reaching 95% of the nation's homes (3). It is watched by all kinds of people regardless of race, creed, national origin, social class, sex, or age. What's more, it is watched with extraordinary frequency. According to Looney (6), the American child during his preschool years spends more time watching television than he will spend in the classroom during four years of college—64% of the average preschooler's waking time is spent watching television. In the course of his life, television will have consumed 10 years of his time.

Within the television medium, the present study focused on commercials. It would be worthwhile to investigate male and female models in regular programming as well, but commercials provided a much more manageable unit of analysis, and their frequency of occurrence certainly justifies separate treatment. Indeed, Embree (3) reports that approximately 20% of TV air time goes to television commercials, and by the age of 17 the average viewer has seen some 350,000 commercials (6). The question of concern in the present investigation is what are the characteristics of the male and female models in these 350,000 commercials which are "sold" along with the product? To answer this, randomly selected television commercials were viewed for the purpose of systematically identifying the characteristics of male and female models depicted in them.

B. Method

1. *Sample*

The sample of commercials coded was drawn from the weekday broadcasts of the three major television networks in the Spring of 1971. CBS was sampled on a Tuesday; NBC on a Wednesday; and ABC on a Thursday. Each net-

work was viewed for a total of six hours: 10:00 A.M.—12 noon (morning); 1:30 P.M.—3:30 P.M. (afternoon); and 8:00 P.M.—10:00 P.M. (evening).[1] Inasmuch as most commercials are lumped together in such rapid succession that it is impossible to code every one of them with thoroughness and accuracy, only every other commercial in each series of advertisements was coded. A total of 210 commercials were viewed during these hours, of which 199 could be coded according to the criteria outlined below.

2. *Coding*

All commercials in which there was an adult male or female central figure were coded. Those in which only children or fantasy characters appeared—e.g., animals, cartoon figures, Mr. Clean—were not included in the final sample. The following characteristics of each central figure were coded: sex, basis for credibility, role, location, arguments given on behalf of a product, rewards offered or reaped for using a product, punishments threatened or incurred for *not* using a product,[2] and type of product advertised.

a. Central figures. Adult males and females playing a major role in a commercial by virtue of either speaking or having prominent visual exposure were classified as central figures. No more than two adults could be coded as central figures for any one commercial. If there were more than two adults present, those appearing most central were chosen. When it was unclear which two figures were most central, the coder was instructed to pick one central figure of each sex. If there were only two adult figures altogether, both were always coded.

b. Basis for the credibility of the central figure. The basis for the credibility of a central figure was categorized as *product-user* when he was depicted primarily as a user of the product being advertised; the basis for his credibility was categorized as *authority* when he was depicted primarily as someone who "has all the facts" about the product being advertised.

c. Role of the central figure. The central figures were also categorized according to the everyday role in which they were cast. The roles coded were the following: spouse, parent, homemaker, worker, professional, real-life celebrity, interviewer or narrator, boyfriend/girlfriend, and other.

d. Location of the central figure. Central figures were categorized ac-

[1] A qualification imposed on these viewing times was that programs, such as TV specials, with only one sponsor would not be viewed. This occurred on Wednesday evening, and the viewing time was therefore changed to 8:00 p.m.—9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.—11:00 p.m.

[2] Since the frequency of occurrence of punishments was too low to permit analyses of the data, no further mention of this category will be made.

cording to the locale in which they were depicted. The locations coded were as follows: home, store, occupational setting, and other.

e. Arguments given by the central figure. Central figures were categorized according to the type of argument they gave on behalf of a product. Three types of substantiating arguments were coded: *scientific arguments* consisting of some sort of factual, concrete evidence in favor of using the given product; *nonscientific arguments* consisting of opinions and personal testimonials in favor of using the product; and *no argument* which was coded when the central figure offered no argument, but merely displayed a product or was being persuaded by another central figure to use it.

f. Rewards offered or reaped by the central figure. In coding these rewards a distinction was made between product users and authorities: for product-using central figures, the rewards coded were those *reaped* by them; for authoritative central figures, the rewards coded were those *offered* by them. Four main categories of reward were coded: (*a*) *social enhancement,* which included the subdivisions of opposite sex approval, family approval, friends' approval, social advancement, career advancement, and other; (*b*) *self-enhancement* which included the subdivisions of psychological improvement, attractiveness, cleanliness, health, and other; (*c*) *practical rewards* which included the subdivisions of saving time, saving labor, and saving money; (*d*) other.

g. Type of product associated with the central figure. Central figures were categorized according to the type of product with which they were associated. Four basic product-types were coded: (*a*) *Body products* which included appearance aids, body hygiene-cleanliness products, clothing, and health products; (*b*) *home products* which included exterior household goods, interior household goods, household cleaners, and laundry and dish detergents; (*c*) *foodstuffs*; and (*d*) *other* which included pet food and products, sporting and recreational items, automobiles and automotive products, insurance, and other.[3]

3. *Reliability*

An index of the reliability of the coding was provided by interrater agreement on the coding of a subsample of commercials which were viewed prior to the main study. Three raters, including the one who coded the commer-

[3] A tabular presentation of the various categories into which central figures were coded is available upon request from the first author at the address shown at the end of this article.

cials in the study proper, coded commercials during a two-hour session after they had carefully studied a written description of the categories and coding criteria to be utilized. To check for sex bias, one of these raters was a male. The coders agreed perfectly in their selection of 26 central figures from the 16 commercials which they viewed. Eighteen of these central figures were males, and eight were females. There was disagreement on one additional figure—two of the raters coded a male and one coded a female. The average percentage of agreement among raters regarding the characteristics of the 26 central figures whom they all coded was 91% for product, 92% for credibility, 91% for argument, 84% for role, 66% for location, and 83% for social enhancement.

C. Results

To assess differences in the presentation of male and female models, eight chi square analyses were performed on sex $\times$ category-subdivision contingency tables which reflected the frequency of appearance of males and females within each subdivision of the eight major coded categories (central figures, credibility, roles, locations, arguments, rewards, punishments, and products). Additional analyses were performed on the frequency of appearance of males and females within each subdivision of those subcategories which were nested within the major category of rewards: type of self-enhancement, type of social enhancement, and type of practical rewards.

When statistical significance was demonstrated in a data matrix with more than one degree of freedom, the category subdivisions were collapsed into a 2×2 (sex $\times$ category-subdivision) matrix in accordance with whatever subdivisions seemed to be contributing most of the overall effect. With the data thus reduced to a one degree of freedom matrix, the precise meaning of a significant effect could then be ascertained.

1. *Frequency of Male and Female Central Figures*

In the 199 commercials which were coded, a total of 299 central figures were tallied. Males comprised 57% of these central figures, and females comprised 43%, a difference which was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.62$; $p < .02$).

2. *Basis for the Credibility of Male and Female Central Figures*

Not only were there significantly more male than female central figures, but the basis of credibility for male and female central figures differed. Sev-

enty percent of the males were portrayed as authorities, while only 30% were portrayed as product users. Only 14% of the female central figures were portrayed as authorities, while the remaining 86% were cast as product users. This difference in the credibility-base of male and female central figures was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 88.75$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$).

3. *Role of Male and Female Central Figures*

A significant 2 × 9 (sex × role) chi square analysis indicated that male and female central figures were depicted in different roles ($\chi^2 = 111.74$; $df = 8$; $p < .001$), and the data were collapsed into a one degree of freedom matrix to determine exactly where this sex difference lay. Compared with the males, female central figures were more apt to be portrayed in a role which defined them in terms of their relationship to others—a spouse, parent, girlfriend, or housewife. Males, on the other hand, were more likely than females to be portrayed in a role which defined them independently of others—a worker, professional, celebrity, or narrator-interviewer ($\chi^2 = 60.74$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$). The magnitude of this effect may in part reflect the tendency for males to be portrayed as authorities and for females to be portrayed as product users: one very common "independent" role for men was that of the interviewer-narrator expounding *authoritatively* on the virtues of some product; and one very common "relational" role for women was that of the housewife *using* some product. Hence, to insure that the obtained sex difference in roles was not merely a restatement of differences in the credibility-base for male and female central figures, a sex × role analysis was performed in which housewives and interviewer-narrators were excluded. The magnitude of the effect was diminished in this analysis, but the basic finding held up ($\chi^2 = 3.94$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$): women still tended to be defined primarily in terms of their relationship to others (spouse, parent, or girlfriend), while men tended to be defined independently of other people (worker, professional, or celebrity).

4. *The Location of Male and Female Central Figures*

A significant 2 × 4 (sex × location) chi square analysis indicated that male and female central figures were depicted in different locations ($\chi^2 = 14.54$; $df = 3$; $p < .01$). One degree of freedom contrasts revealed that female central figures were depicted in the home proportionately more often than were male central figures ($\chi^2 = 8.24$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$), while male central figures were depicted in an occupational setting proportionately more

often than the females were ($\chi^2 = 8.65$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). One might attribute this finding to the fact that females were more often than males cast as product users—and where else does one use most products but in the home? But this explanation is inadequate inasmuch as the tendency for females to be depicted more frequently in the home and for males to be depicted more frequently in an occupational setting held true even when only male and female product users were considered (χ^2s = 3.00 and 13.14, respectively; $df = 1$; $p < .10$ and $p < .001$, respectively). Hence there was nothing inherent in the role of product user which confined one to the home. Rather it was the sex of the central figure which accounted for differences in location.

5. *Arguments Given by Male and Female Central Figures*

A significant 2 × 3 (sex × argument) chi square analysis indicated that male and female central figures gave different arguments in support of a product ($\chi^2 = 9.21$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$). A one degree of freedom analysis revealed that male central figures were significantly more likely than females to give any type of argument—scientific or otherwise. In fact 30% of the female central figures gave no argument at all as compared with only 6% of the male central figures ($\chi^2 = 27.69$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$).

6. *Rewards Offered by Authority Central Figures*

Male and female authorities did not differ in the rewards which they offered to the viewer for using the product they were advertising ($\chi^2 = 5.36$; $df = 4$; $p > .30$).

7. *Rewards Reaped by Product User Central Figures*

There were no significant sex differences in the general categories of reward accruing to males and females—i.e., males and females were equally likely to receive social enhancement, self-enhancement, practical, and other rewards ($p > .25$). However, there were sex differences in the type of reward received *within* the subcategory of social-enhancement ($\chi^2 = 21.21$; $df = 5$; $p < .001$). A breakdown of these data into a one degree of freedom matrix revealed that females were more likely than males to obtain the approval of family and the opposite sex as reward for using a given product, while males more frequently obtained the approval of their friends, social advancement, and career advancement ($\chi^2 = 12.81$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$). There were no

significant differences in the type of self-enhancement or practical rewards received by males and females who used a given product.[4]

8. *Product Types Associated with Male and Female Central Figures*

A 2 × 4 (sex × product type) chi square analysis indicated that male and female product users were associated with different types of products ($\chi^2 = 8.97$; $df = 3$; $p < .05$). A breakdown of the data into a one degree of freedom matrix revealed that female product users were more likely than males to be identified with home products ($\chi^2 = 6.12$; $df = 1$; $p < .02$). One-third of the female product users were portrayed using home products as compared with about one-eighth (13%) of the male product users.

In addition to these sex differences in the likelihood of being associated with a given product, one other finding stands out in the data on product types. Because males were portrayed much more often as authorities than as product users, while the reverse was true for females, there was a general and consistent tendency for males to appear as authorities on a product which was used primarily by females. For example, while males comprised only 16% of the home product users, they accounted for 86% of the authorities on these products ($\chi^2 = 34.41$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$). Similarly, males accounted for 78% of the authorities on body products, but only 33% of the body product users ($\chi^2 = 20.99$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$). And, they comprised a full 95% of the authorities on food products, but only 40% of the food product users ($\chi^2 = 25.45$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$).

9. *The Time of Day*

In the analyses of sex differences in male and female central figures as a function of time, data from commercials viewed in the morning and afternoon were grouped together and compared with data from the commercials viewed in the evening. The reason for this comparison is that it is in the evening that males are most likely to be watching television, while in the morning and afternoon, most viewers are female.

The analyses revealed that differences in the presentation of male and female central figures were quite constant across time. That is, whatever differences there were were as likely to occur in the morning and afternoon

[4] One sex difference was found *within* the subcategory of self-enhancement. Although the overall 2 × 4 (sex × type of self-enhancement) analysis did not reach an acceptable level of significance ($\chi^2 = 4.33$; $df = 3$; $p < .20$), the data were broken down into a 2 × 2 matrix for further analysis inasmuch as it looked as though there was a striking sex difference in the likelihood of gaining "attractiveness" as a type of self-enhancement. The analysis bore this out: females were significantly more likely than males to be rewarded with attractiveness for using a given product ($\chi^2 = 4.00$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$).

as in the evening. Only one significant effect as a function of time emerged. The tendency for the central figures to be predominantly male was greatest in the evening: 70% of the central figures in evening hours were male as compared with 52% in the morning and afternoon ($z = 2.70$; $p < .007$).

D. Discussion

The results of this study clearly indicate that the men and women presented to the viewing audience in television commercials differ in several noteworthy respects. The first of these is their frequency of appearance. Given that females constitute 51% of our population, one might expect that approximately one-half of the central figures in the media would be women. Since television commercials are especially geared to a consumer audience, one might expect an even greater proportion of the central figures to be women inasmuch as they are reputed to make 75% of consumer purchases in this country. But, women did not even comprise one-half of the central figures tallied in the present study—only 43% were women. Although male central figures held only a slight edge (52%) in the morning and afternoon hours when there are relatively few male viewers, their majority became a landslide (70%) in the evening hours when one might expect close to half of the viewers to be male.

Men not only outnumbered women in these commercials, but they also behaved very differently from them. Some of the observed sex differences in behavior bear a striking similarity to sex differences reported by Child, Potter, and Levine (2) in their study of children's readers. For example, just as female characters in children's books were less likely than the males to be knowledgeable, so were the female figures in television commercials less likely than the males to possess expertise. Whereas the male model was typically an authority or expert on the product being advertised, the female model was almost always a product user or consumer. Of course females, as product users, can have a kind of expertise. One can conceive of a female product user giving an argument in favor of using her brand, thus indicating some degree of knowledge even though she is not an authority. However, this was not the case; women were significantly less likely than men to present an argument in favor of using a given product. Hence, both in their credentials and in their behavior, the women in these advertisements were portrayed as less knowledgeable than the men.

Another similarity between the Child findings and the results of the present study concerns the rewards offered to males and females for using an advertised product. Consistent with the observation that male characters in

children's readers were more likely than the females to achieve success via personal advancement, male product users in these television commercials were more likely than the females to be rewarded with social and career advancement. Female product users, on the other hand, were more likely than males to be rewarded with the approval of family and husband or boyfriend, which is analogous to the finding that females in children's readers were more likely than the males to achieve success via nurturant relationships.

Other differences between men and women which were observed in the present study further reinforce current sex-role stereotypes. Less than half of the female models had their own, independent identity: 51 percent were defined in terms of their relationship to others—i.e., as a spouse, parent, or girlfriend—whereas only 36% of the male models were defined in this way.[5] The fact that relatively few women were portrayed in an independent role is further reflected by the finding that proportionately fewer women than men were depicted in an occupational setting. In fact, only 11% of the central figures depicted in such a setting were women. This figure is substantially lower than women's actual representation in occupational settings inasmuch as they comprise 37% of the labor force in this country (12).

One of the conditions necessary for the television medium to influence sex-typed behavior seems to be fulfilled—the presentation of male and female television models is indeed sex-stereotyped. The question remains as to whether or not people model their own behavior after that of like-sex television models. There is evidence that when other factors are held constant, people are more likely to learn the behavior of a same-sex model than an opposite-sex model (5, 7, 8). And, there is considerable evidence that at least under certain conditions people do imitate the behavior of television models (10). There is not much evidence directly related to the question of whether or not people imitate the *sex-role* behavior of television models, but a survey by Gerson (4) revealed that individuals at least believe that they manifest this kind of imitation. While Gerson's findings are suggestive, *direct* evidence assessing the impact of media models on sex-role behavior is needed, and research on this question is currently underway.

In addition to research evidence bearing on the possible effects of televised models on people's sex-role *behaviors*, there is some research which has interesting implications regarding the effects of these models on people's sex-role *attitudes*. Zajonc's (13) research on the effects of "mere exposure" has dem-

[5] In order to distinguish this finding from sex differences in the *credibility-base* of male and female central figures, the data on which these percentages are based excludes housewives and interviewers-narrators. See Results section for a further discussion.

onstrated that people react positively to things which are familiar to them. Thus television can affect our attitudes toward certain attributes and behaviors exhibited by men and women simply by virtue of exposing us to some of them more often than others.

Although defenders of advertising might protest that advertisements do not create sex-role attitudes, that they merely respond to existing ones, this is not true. Bem and Bem (1) nicely demonstrated that ads can indeed influence preferences. Over half of the women in their study preferred "female-interest" jobs when want ads were listed by sex. The identical jobs were preferred by only 19% of the women when they were not listed by sex. The same potential for influencing preferences exists for television advertisements.

While television commercials do not present particularly inspiring models for anyone, to say "this ad insults women" as feminists have of late seems particularly apt in view of the present evidence. The stereotyped portrayal of the sexes in and of itself provides good reason to be concerned about the characteristics of men and women depicted in television advertisements. The possibility that these characteristics will influence the sex-role attitudes and behavior of viewers provides even more cause for concern.

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