

Portrayals of Gender in Television Commercials and the Effects on Achievement Aspirations of Audiences

Though research on the effects of television commercials exists, very few studies look solely at gender within commercials and its effect on the future goals of viewers, and no studies examine this theory with males. For this study, a content analysis was performed on current prime time commercials. Then, twenty-four male and female undergraduate students at the University of New Hampshire were surveyed to examine the relationship between gender stereotypes in commercials and achievement particularly in the domestic and occupational sectors. The relationship between these variables was shown to be significant in the male groups, but not with females.

INTRODUCTION

Gender is one of the most studied social paradigms as it is the main paradigm that people use in determining how to act and interact with others. For this reason, it is important to look at the ways in which individuals receive messages about gender norms. This paper seeks to examine portrayals of gender in television commercials and the effects that such gendered images have on viewers. To clarify, gender refers to the social meanings attached to the sexes within a particular social system (Kramer, 2005). From a sociological standpoint, the research about television commercials affecting the gender perceptions of its viewers is extremely relevant. Because television advertisements transmit cultural ideas about gender, they help to socially construct gender. Commercials may affect the way that people think about their own gender, and contribute to the ongoing social stratification of genders in our society.

While television commercials are designed with the purpose of selling specific products, it is hard to deny the fact that the characters in the advertisements behave in ways that appear normal and make sense to viewers. They contain characters, events, and relationships that

viewers will most likely deem as authentic (Lewis, 1991). By relating to the characters within the commercials, individuals are able to make parallels between the televised world and their own lives. If gender roles within the commercials are perceived as realistic, an individual's ideas about the 'correct' way of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987) for him/herself and also other genders may be changed (Lewis, 1991).

Since commercials often offer lessons about appropriate gender behavior (Blakeney, Barnes, and McKeough, 1983; Coltrane and Messineo, 2000; Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 1986; Stern and Mastro, 2004), it is important to study what they are portraying and how the viewers perceive them. This study seeks to explore these concepts based upon three research questions. As no content analyses examining gender in commercials have been published since 2004, the first research question focuses on the content of more up to date commercials:

Q1: To what extent do the portrayals of males and females differ in television commercials, particularly in terms of numbers, product representation, and actions (domestic/non-domestic)?

In examining the effect television advertisements have on the viewers, two theories are prominent: social learning theory and cultivation theory. Social learning theory simply states that individuals learn through observation. In the case of television, people learn through observing the characters within the commercials. Cultivation theory points out that television creates a "shared cultural environment of images and representations within which we grow up and live" (Morgan and Rothschild, 1983). Based on these two theories and using the data from the content analysis, two more questions are proposed:

Q2: To what extent does viewing traditionally or non-traditionally gender stereotyped commercials influence one's achievement aspirations?

Q3: How do individuals perceive gender representations in television commercials and how well do they relate to televised portrayals of their gender?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Background

In 1939, RCA introduced the first consumer television receiver sets at the New York World's Fair (Bells, 2004). It is estimated that in 1939, fewer than two hundred televisions were purchased worldwide, but that by the mid 1960s the number had grown to over one hundred thousand televisions sold. Data from 1996 shows that there are over a billion televisions in operation around the world (<http://www.civilization.ca/hist/tv/tv02eng.html>). Very few alive today can remember a time when television did not infiltrate most homes in America.

Just two years after television was introduced to the world, the first television advertisement was broadcast in the United States. On July 1, 1941, the Bulova Watch Company paid \$9 to NBC for a 20-second spot aired before a baseball game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and Philadelphia Phillies. The commercial simply displayed a Bulova watch over a map of the United States, with a voiceover of the company's slogan (Bulova, 2007). Since then, commercials have evolved to include animation, music or jingles, catch phrases, and even special effects. Some television commercials have been played so frequently that they have been integrated into pop culture, such as commercials featuring the Energizer Bunny and Geico Insurance's infamous gecko. Television advertisements are used to sell everything imaginable, from household products, goods and services, and even political campaigns (Chabotte, 2007).

With over ninety-eight percent of Americans owning a television, and the average household watching said television for over thirty hours a week with one fifth of every hour airing commercials, television has become the most popular medium for advertising (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000). The role of advertising "is to verbalize...the possible meanings of things and to facilitate the exchange of meanings occurring in social interactions" (Leiss, Kline, and

Jhally, 1986); it provides a visual representation in order to negotiate between people, things, and social meaning. Television commercials permeate everyday life, yet they often create false images and cause social dissonance; as commercials are an extension of our message system, they reflect social asymmetries that exist in our culture (Yanni, 1990), such as the gender divide. Television commercials can be seen as scripts and rehearsed social routines, which may define certain social expectations (Geis, Brown, Jennings, and Porter, 1984). Since television in general, as well as television advertising, is so omni-present in our society, much research had been done on the topic, particularly in content analyses and the effects that such portrayals have on viewers.

Gender Portrayals

As of 2003, men outnumbered women in all aspects of television commercials. 54% of primary characters in the commercials were male (Scharrer, Kim, Lin, and Liu, 2006), and in looking at all characters shown, men outnumber female characters by more than 3 to 2 (Stern and Mastro, 2004). Men also were the voiceover more frequently, with 85.9% of the off-screen narration being a male voice (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000).

In a content analysis of the literature addressing gender and domestic chores in television commercials, Scharrer, Kim, Lin, and Liu (2006) concluded that male characters are more likely to be portrayed outside of the home, while female characters are more frequently shown in domestic settings, particularly the kitchen and bathroom. In those domestic settings female characters were more likely to be involved in housework and childcare than men. When men were shown performing domestic tasks, they were often depicted as incompetent, mostly meant to be a source for humor. These portrayals of failure and humor may reinforce traditional gender roles by implying that “men are somehow ‘naturally’ ill-suited for certain types of work, and therefore those chores are best left to women” (Scharrer et al, p. 216).

Along with this data, men are more likely to be portrayed in the workforce: in the workforce, men were twice as likely to hold high-level business roles, and four times more likely to have white collar positions than females (Hong, 1997). These depictions may lead to the viewer's belief that men are more competent in business roles, particularly those of high power. When men were shown taking care of children, they are more likely to appear outside, are more likely to be shown with boys, and are hardly ever depicted with an infant. To the extent that men are shown as more involved in family life, they still tend to depend largely on knowledge and activities that are stereotypically male (Kaufman, 1999).

Bartsch, Burnett, Diller, and Rankin-Williams (2000) looked at the products being sold in the commercials to research whether men or women were more likely to sell domestic products such as food, cleaners, cosmetics, etc., or non-domestic products, including things outside of the home, such as travel, credit cards, and automobiles. Their findings were that women were significantly more likely to be the product representative for domestic products at 59%, compared to men's 41%, and men (70%) were significantly more likely to be product representatives for non domestic products, showing an increase in gender bias for product representatives compared to commercials ten years prior (Bartsch, Burnett, Diller and Rankin-Williams, 2000).

In sum, the literature shows large and consistent difference in the way men and women are portrayed in commercials. Women are shown less in televised advertisements, and are still identified primarily by their family role as housekeeper and caretaker. Men are shown in stereotypical roles of authority and dominance (Craig, 1992), and when shown attempting non-traditional gender roles such as cleaning are often seen as incompetent, reinforcing the traditional role of women as caretakers (Scharrer et al, 2006), and these gender differences seem to occur

regardless of the age of the primary characters (Stern and Mastro, 2004). Such depictions could send the message that males and females should confine themselves to a more narrow set of traditionally defined activities, and promote inequality through exaggerations of difference between the genders (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000).

Effects of Gender in Commercials on Audience

While audience studies have shown that viewers do not automatically imitate what they watch on television, the imagery they see may lead to certain forms of understanding, interpretation, and experience (Press, 1991). According to social construction theory, people's responses are shaped based on interpretation of the world around them; they construct knowledge based on their understanding of what is happening in society (Searle, 1995). Because of their repeated prevalence, media images promote acceptance of current social arrangements, no matter how skewed the images are (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000). Thus, it is no surprise that exposure to television commercials has been associated with upholding traditional gender role attitudes (Blakeney, Barnes, and McKeough, 1983), as well as reporting behaviors in line with the gender stereotypes portrayed (O'Bryant, Corder-Bolz, 1978).

The bulk of research examining the effects of television commercials has focused on children. Research indicates a relationship between exposure to gendered images in television commercials and children's perceptions of gender roles (Klinger, Hamilton, and Cantrell, 2001; Morgan and Rothschild, 1983; Pike and Jennings, 2005). This suggests that children are not only aware of the gendered images in the advertisements, but have also learned gender appropriateness through modeled behavior.

Other than looking at children, many studies focus on the effects gender portrayals in commercials have on women. A study conducted by Geis, Brown, Jennings, and Porter (1984)

suggests that gender stereotypes that are implicitly enacted in television commercials, even though never explicitly stated, may inhibit women's achievement aspirations. The researchers showed commercials that featured gender stereotypes to one group, and to another group showed identical commercials, but where gender roles were reversed.

After viewing traditional commercials, women were significantly more likely to emphasize aspirations of homemaking, while women who had seen the reversed role commercials were significantly more likely to show a balance between achievement and homemaking, with a greater net achievement score (Geis et al, 1984). More importantly, the essays from the women who viewed the traditional gender role commercials were indistinguishable from the essays from the control group. This shows that the commercial stimulus was not creating the effect, but mirroring a cultural image of women's place in society, and in turn the effect could be eliminated by exposing women to reverse role commercials (Geis et al, 1984).

In contrast to the studies regarding the impact of gender in commercials on children and women, little to no research has been conducted investigating advertisements' effects on men. While the literature shows that television commercials often portray a hegemonic depiction of masculinity (Craig, 1992), the only potential detrimental effects of this that have been researched are in regards to body image, and this is often in concurrence with studies of female body image. No research has looked at how representations of masculinity in commercials effect men's perception of their own gender, of femininity, or of the relation between the two.

In sum, the fact that most of the literature shows uniformly traditionally gendered content has been shown to impact the audience in some ways. Children showed signs that they had been affected by the portrayals of gender, and traditional and stereotypical depictions of femininity in

commercials led to women having fewer aspirations for achievement. Perhaps the most interesting data is that when shown non-traditional feminine roles, women had higher aspirations. Although these effects in the laboratory were presumably temporary, the effects of constant repetition over a lifetime presumably are not, suggesting the impact that changing depictions of femininity could have on female viewers.

Conclusion

All of the literature examined found that there are significant differences in the depiction of masculinity and femininity in television commercials. Even in sheer numbers men dominate, appearing as characters more often than women, and also having more voice-overs in commercials. In terms of roles, similar to the still held gender ideology that women belong in the home and men belong at work, in commercials men are more likely to be portrayed outside of the home, participate less in domestic tasks, and promote products that are less domestic (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000; Scharrer et al, 2006; Stern and Mastro, 2004).

Through examination of the current literature on the topic, it can be seen that popular consumer culture is both producer and product of social inequality. Television commercials replicate the gender division still seen in our society today, and also lead to further divisions in expected gendered behavior, self-confidence, and future aspirations. Individuals young and old look to the television screen to help determine which gender related roles are likely to be met with social approval and which may incur social penalties. For this reason, it is important to recognize both blatant and subtle gender messages, and discuss how such depictions should/should not be replicated in daily life.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Advertisers set out to create commercials that will sell products, yet scholars have shown that in doing so, they also teach specific beliefs and schemas. For this reason, it is important to study the nature of what is being portrayed as it may impact the message viewers take away. In order to gather data on gender representations in current commercials, a content analysis was preformed. In particular, this analysis sought to identify which (if either) gender was portrayed more often as main and secondary characters, the types of products males and females were likely to represent, the behaviors and actions of males and females, and where these actions occurred.

Method

One week of prime-time television commercials was sampled from four major television networks (CBS, ABC, FOX and NBC) from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. nightly. Data collection occurred from Saturday, January 5, 2008 to Friday, January 11, 2008. As in other content analyses (Bartsch, Burnett, Diller and Rankin-Williams, 2000; Stern and Mastro, 2004), local commercials, political advertisements, public service announcements, movie trailers, and channel specific commercials were not included, totaling 598 excluded advertisements. Commercials that were shown more than once were counted each time they appeared, as this study did not aim to describe individual advertisements, rather the patterns of advertisements broadcasted. In total, 1,538 commercials were coded.

As the focus was representations of gender, the unit of analysis was the individual character. Using the technique of Stern and Mastro (2004), main characters were identified in each commercial, up to a maximum of three individuals per commercial. Main characters were determined by the first three characters with a speaking role, or characters on which the

commercial specifically focused. All other characters were counted only to use for reporting numbers of men and women and no other data about their appearance or actions were recorded. In total, 1,945 individual main characters were coded from the commercial sample.

This analysis coded for gender, product type, primary setting, and primary behavior. Gender was coded as either masculine or feminine. As done in Stern and Mastro's (2004) content analysis, the type of product being represented was divided into three categories: home products, away products, and both home and away products. Home products included household items such as food, cleaners, personal care items and furniture. Away products included things that are typically used outside of the home, such as credit cards, cars, restaurants, and travel. Both home and away products included things that could be used in either location, such as clothing, electronics, and sporting gear.

The primary setting each character was shown in was recorded as one of six possible categories: place of employment, home, outdoors, restaurant, other inside location, car, and none (where the character was only in front of a backdrop). The primary behavior each character engaged in was coded into one of four categories, including work (shown in a paid working position: white collar, blue collar, or professional athlete), domestic (shown in unpaid domestic work in the house such as cooking, cleaning, child care), recreation (shown in a recreational activity such as playing sports, watching television, shopping), and other (any actions that do not fit into one of the three aforementioned categories).

Results

Unlike many previous content analyses, the ratio of male to female main characters, while still unbalanced, was much closer, with males being 53.2% of the main characters, and females being 46.8%. Even when all characters shown in the commercials are taken into account,

males only outnumber females 55.5% to 44.5%. Of the 1,538 commercials, on a mean average, each commercial had a total of 2.66 males and 2.13 females.

In analyzing the data collected on the type of product the main characters represented, males were almost equally as likely to represent “home” and “away” products (37.2% and 38.7% of males, respectively), with the three highest specific products men were shown to represent being technology, banking, and food. Among women, 51.5% of the main characters represented “home” products, with “away” and “both home and away” products coming in a distant second at 24.7% and 23.8%, respectively. The three highest specific products females represented included food, technology, and toiletries. When looking at gender representations within each of the three product type categories, it can be seen that females (55%) outnumber males (45%) when it comes to representing “home” products, and that males (64%) far outnumber females (36%) in representing “away” products, and also “both home and away” products with males at 53.1% and females at 46.9%.

Table 1: Difference In Gender Portrayals Among Main Characters

	Males (%) (n=1034)	Females (%) (n = 911)
Type of Product		
Home	37.2	51.5
Away	38.7	24.7
Both Home and Away	24.1	23.8
Primary Setting		
Place of Employment	6.3	4.9
Home	20.6	26.2
Outdoors	19.3	14.6
Restaurant	5.0	6.8
Other Inside Location	2.1	14.4
Car	6.8	4.2
None	15.9	28.9
Primary Behavior		
Work	34.2	13.1
Domestic	2.1	15.2
Recreation	32.6	32.9
Other	21.2	38.8

The primary behaviors of the main characters were also coded and analyzed. Males were most likely to engage in “work” behavior (34.2%), followed closely by “recreation” behavior (32.6%). Only 2.1% of all of the main characters that were male were portrayed as behaving in domestic ways. Females were most likely to be portrayed as engaging in “other” behavior (38.8%), and were least likely to be shown working (13.1%). In thinking of the traditionally held stereotype that men work outside the home while women take care of the house and kids, data from this sample mirrors such beliefs. Of all of the main characters shown working, 75% of them were male, and of all the characters shown performing domestic tasks, 86.4% were female.

Along with what tasks the characters perform is *where* they perform them. When the main character was actually shown in a location, and not just in front of a backdrop, males were shown mostly in “other indoor locations” (26.1%) and females were most likely to be shown at home (26.2%). In examining the sample to see if it reflected traditionally held gender norms in terms of setting (females at home, males at work), the disconnect is less drastic than as was seen in primary behaviors. Of all characters shown at home, females made up the majority (52.9%), while males (59.1%) made up the majority those depicted at work. Men were much more likely than women to be shown outside or in a car.

Conclusion

While representations of males and females in television commercials was shown to be more equal than in previous content analyses, there is still an obvious gap between the genders. Males are more prevalent in terms of numbers, are more likely represent non-domestic products, and are more likely to be depicted working and at work or other “non-home” locations. Women appear less often in television commercials, are more likely to be representatives of domestic products, performing domestic tasks, and in a home setting. This data shows that the gendered

images prevalent in televised advertisements mirror the stereotypes still loosely held in our culture.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN: COMMERCIALS AND ACHIEVEMENT ASPIRATIONS

While there have been numerous studies conducted to analyze the content of television commercials, few have looked at the effects such content has on the viewers, especially in terms of gender. Of these, none could be found that included males in the study. This research seeks to expand upon the few studies previously conducted regarding gender and commercials by including both males and females, and specifically focusing on the link (or lack there of) of gendered images in commercials and one's aspirations for personal achievement.

Hypotheses

Because of previous research done within the literature, it is assumed that television in general, as well as television commercials, affects the viewer in many ways. In using both social learning theory and cultivation theory, as well as the information found in the literature, four hypotheses were developed to examine the effect gendered images in television commercials have on achievement aspirations. They are as follows:

H₀: There will be no difference in levels of achievement aspirations between female viewers of commercials with stereotypically based female gender roles and commercials with non-stereotypically based female gender roles.

H₁: Female viewers of commercials with stereotypically based female gender roles will report more domestic themes in terms of achievement aspirations.

H₀: There will be no difference in levels of achievement aspirations between female viewers of commercials with stereotypically based female gender roles and commercials with non-stereotypically based female gender roles.

H₂: Female viewers of commercials with non-stereotypically based female gender roles will report more occupational themes in terms of achievement aspirations.

H₀: There will be no difference in levels of achievement aspirations between male viewers of commercials with stereotypically based male gender roles and commercials with non-stereotypically based male gender roles.

H₃: Male viewers of commercials with stereotypically based male gender roles will report more occupational themes in terms of achievement aspirations.

H₀: There will be no difference in levels of achievement aspirations between male viewers of commercials with stereotypically based male gender roles and commercials with non-stereotypically based male gender roles.

H₄: Male viewers of commercials with non-stereotypically based male gender roles will report more domestic themes in terms of achievement aspirations.

Procedure

Data was gathered over a two-week period in April 2008. Participants were recruited through a mass email and personal connections, and were divided into six groups, three male and three female. For each gender, one group watched a series of commercials containing stereotypical actions for their gender, one group watched a series of commercials with non-stereotypical gender representations, and one group acted as the control group and watched no commercials. None of the participants were told that the study involved gender, only that the researcher sought to gain perspective on television/commercial viewing habits and perceptions. In order to protect anonymity and to match the multiple written parts of each group, every participant created a unique code, which they printed at the top of each handout.

The experimental groups were each shown five commercials. Females in the “traditional” group saw commercials of women cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, while those in the “non-traditional” group saw commercials of women in the workforce. Males in the “traditional” group watched commercials of men in the workforce, while males in the “non-traditional” group were shown commercials of men changing diapers, with their children, and cleaning. After each commercial, the experimenter stopped the videotape, and the participants were asked to briefly summarize the commercial and answer questions using an adaptation of the

Likert Scale referencing the realism, interest, and enjoyableness of the commercials, as well as if they were similar to other commercials on television. This activity provided a substitute for the long-term repetition that commercials would typically have over a lifetime, and also reinforced the cover story that the commercials were the actual interest of the study.

Following the viewing and rating of the five commercials, part two of the survey was administered to the participants in which they were asked to answer some demographic information and write a brief essay using the following prompt:

Finally, please think of yourself now, and think of yourself ten years from now in the future. What do you think will be your main concerns? What do you think you will like about your life then, and what do you think you might dislike? On the following lines, please write a brief paragraph telling about how you see yourself ten years from now.

After the completion of the essays, the participants took part in a short discussion using open-ended questions from the researcher. These discussions were the first time in the process that the concept of gender was mentioned and allowed for the researcher to collect qualitative data about the participants' thoughts on questions regarding representations of males and females in commercials, how well they do/do not align with the participant's own identity as male or female, and in what ways commercials could be changed to better represent gender. For the female experimental groups, these discussions were audiotaped. However, due to a technical problem, the participants in the male groups were asked to write out their answers in order to preserve the data. Each experimental group session lasted 30-45 minutes.

The male and female control groups were not shown any commercials. Instead, they were told that the researcher was hoping to gather data about television use among college students. The participants were asked to respond to questions regarding how frequently they watched television, list their top ten favorite television shows, and then rank their preferences of a list of

common recreational activities including television. They then were asked to write the “ten-years” essay in response to the exact same prompt as the experimental groups.

Sample

Participants in this study were 24 undergraduate students at the University of New Hampshire Durham campus. Of these 24 students, 12 were male and 12 were female. Data for this study was gathered from college students, as students were most convenient for the study as there were many ready, willing students to participate, along with being cost effective. The participants did not receive any benefits or compensation for their participation, nor were there any risks involved in completing the survey.

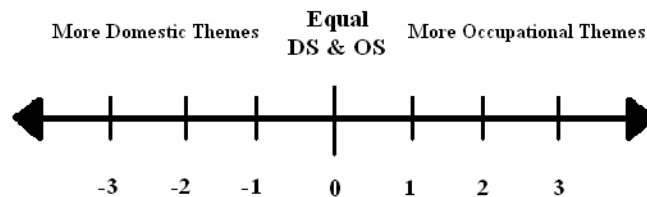
The sampling design used was convenience sampling. This design was used because recruiting students to partake in a somewhat lengthy study was difficult, and because the experimental groups required a television only a few locations could be utilized. An email was sent out to all Resident Assistants on campus, as well as to all residents of Stoke Hall, totaling approximately 720 students. From this email, all of the female participants were recruited. In order to obtain male participants, the researcher relied upon friends in buildings across campus. The participants were placed into “traditional” and “non traditional” experimental groups or the control group based upon which time block they volunteered for.

Limitations to the sample included not having the desired sample size, and having a very homogeneous population. Originally, the desired sample size was 30, having six groups with five participants each. However, due to time restrictions, and some participants not showing up to the session, the average group size was four participants. Also, not all of the groups had the same amount of participants, which may have impacted the results. The sample itself was very homogeneous; the majority of the sample was Resident Assistants, who have received a great

deal of diversity education. Along with this, every participant was Caucasian, and all were undergraduate students at one particular university.

Treatment/Measurement of Variables

The survey group that the participants were divided into (traditional, non-traditional and control) was the independent variable. The dependant variable was the Net Achievement score, as determined by the “ten years” essay that all of the groups wrote. The Net Achievement score was calculated using both a domestic score (DS) and an occupational score (OS). All of the essays were read for themes of a domestic nature, such as mentioning a spouse or partner, having children, owning a house, and related concerns/excitement. Every unconditional statement was given a score of 2, while every conditional statement (those which included words such as “might,” “maybe,” “possibly”) were given a score of 1. The essays were also read for occupational themes, including things such as higher education, work, and job related concerns/excitement. As with the domestic themes, unconditional remarks earned a score of 2 and conditional remarks a score of 1.



In order to obtain the Net Achievement Score for each essay, the total domestic score was subtracted from the total occupational score. A score of zero represents an essay that had an equal amount of domestic and occupational themes. A negative score results from an essay that has more domestic themes, and a positive score represents an essay that has more occupational themes.

Results

Data was entered into SPSS, and One-Way ANOVA tests were run to check all hypotheses. This test identified whether or not the difference in mean Net Achievement Score between the traditional, non-traditional, and control groups was significant. While most participants, both male and female, mentioned both domestic and occupational themes, total Net Achievement Score varied among all participants.

In looking solely at the results of the female groups, a large difference can be seen in the mean Net Achievement Scores. Participants in the Non-traditional group (those who were shown commercials of women in the workforce) had a mean score that was much further on the occupational side, at 1.50. While those in the Traditional group (who saw commercials of women cooking, cleaning, mothering) still had a score on the occupational side, it was lower than the Non-traditional group at .33. It is also interesting to note that the participants in the Control group who had no commercial stimulus had scores much more on the Domestic Achievement side, with an average score of -2.80.

Table 2: Mean Net Achievement Score within Female Participant Groups
essay score

participant group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Control Group	-2.80	5	1.095
Traditional Group	.33	3	2.517
Non-traditional Group	1.50	4	3.109
Total	-.58	12	2.875

In running a One-Way ANOVA test, it was shown that the differences in means between the three groups were significant at the .05 level, with a significance of .049. When running the Post-Hoc Bonferroni test to see exactly where the significant differences lay, it was seen that overall,

among all three groups, there was a significant difference. However, when comparing any two groups, there was no significance in mean differences based on the participant group.

Table 3: Female Achievement Score Between Participant Groups

Dependent Variable: essay_score

Bonferroni

(I) participant_group	(J) participant_group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound
Control Group	Traditional Group	-3.133	1.659	.275	-8.00	1.73
	Non-Trad.Group	-4.300	1.524	.060	-8.77	.17
Traditional Group	Control Group	3.133	1.659	.275	-1.73	8.00
	Non-Trad. Group	-1.167	1.735	1.000	-6.26	3.92
Non-Trad.Group	Control Group	4.300	1.524	.060	-.17	8.77
	Traditional Group	1.167	1.735	1.000	-3.92	6.26

The significance between the two experimental groups was not even approaching significance, at 1.00. This lack of significance may be attributed to the small sample size, the unequal number of participants in each group, the particular commercials shown to the two groups, or outliers.

When examining the essays, a great deal of qualitative data was collected along with the final number for domestic and occupational scores. In looking at actual excerpts from the essays, differences are apparent. For example, one female in the traditional group wrote, “In ten years, I see myself married with two children, living in a small house and looking for an upgrade.” A participant within the female non-traditional group expressed other sentiments, writing, “Ten years from now I see myself just finishing getting my PhD so that I can work as a French professor. I would like that job because I wouldn’t be stuck in an office all day long.”

In exploring the male results, again a difference can be seen in the mean Net Achievement Scores for each of the three groups. The Traditional group (shown commercials of men in the workforce) reported the highest amount of occupational themes in their essays, with a

mean score of 1.50. The other two groups reported more domestic themes, with the Non-traditional group (shown commercials with men as fathers) having a mean score of -3.50, much lower than even the Control group, which had a mean Net Achievement score of -1.50.

Table 4: Mean Net Achievement Score within Male Participant Groups
essay_score

participant_group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Control Group	-1.50	4	1.915
Traditional Group	1.50	4	2.380
Non-traditional Group	-3.50	4	2.887
Total	-1.17	12	3.070

As with the female analysis, a One-Way ANOVA was conducted, only this time, the Post Hoc Test was Tukey, as all three groups had an equal number of participants. In the initial ANOVA test, it could be seen that in fact the difference in means between the three groups was significant at the .05 level, with a significance of .49. However, unlike with the female results, the Tukey test revealed that the main significant difference was between the means of the Traditional and Non-traditional groups, thus suggesting that the commercial stimulus, or the critical thinking required by the groups about the commercials, produced an effect on the participants.

Table 5: Male Achievement Score Between Participant Groups

Dependent Variable: essay_score

Tukey HSD

(I) participant_group	(J) participant_group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound
Control Group	Traditional Group	-3.000	1.716	.241	-7.79	1.79
	Non-Trad. Group	2.000	1.716	.501	-2.79	6.79
Traditional Group	Control Group	3.000	1.716	.241	-1.79	7.79
	Non-Trad. Group	5.000*	1.716	.041	.21	9.79
Non-Trad. Group	Control Group	-2.000	1.716	.501	-6.79	2.79
	Traditional Group	-5.000*	1.716	.041	-9.79	-.21

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The essays from the male experimental groups also show a great deal of difference in how the participants envision their future. One of the males within the Non-traditional group, after seeing a series of commercials with men in a father role wrote:

I see myself in the typical American family situation: married, owning a house, possibly with small kids...for whatever reason, I pictured a white, one-story house with a small fence around the perimeter and two little girls (who look strangely like my little sister did) running about in the front yard.

Alternatively, one of the males in the Traditional group expressed the following for his goals, “In the future I think my main concern will be advancing my career...I think I will like making a difference in people’s lives by being a strong worker in the engineering workforce.”

When looking at other variables that could possibly affect the Net Achievement Score of the participants, such as the amount of television they reported watching on a regular basis and their age, males had no other significant factors. Female results, however, showed that the number of hours of television watched per day was a significant factor, with participants watching more television having more occupational themes in their essays. In comparing the Net Achievement Scores of males and females combined, it can be seen that the average score was -.88, indicating that the average pattern was to mention one more domestic theme than achievement theme.

Open Ended Discussion Questions

Like the essays written by the participants, the open-ended discussion questions at the end of all of the experimental groups resulted in a large amount of qualitative data. As is the case with most discussion groups, some participants provided a lot of insight and some were not as active. The answers to the questions varied between the genders and the traditional and non-traditional groups, however there were common themes across the board.

When the participants were asked how they felt about the representations of males and females in commercials and if the depictions of males and females are realistic, members from every group commented on the lack of realism of the characters. It is interesting to note that in both male and female groups, both genders mentioned not only the realism of their own gender, but also of the other gender. For example, one female in the traditional group said, "I feel that in a lot of commercials men are represented as 'pigs' and women as beauty queens in a perfect world." In this particular session, conversation continued about the portrayal of men as lazy, inadequate people for several minutes although the participants were all female. Also, one male wrote, "I feel as though they are always over the top representations that don't depict everyday people." Many participants commented on the lengths that companies go to in order to sell their products, using extreme versions of people.

Participants were also asked if they felt as though gender portrayals in commercials have an impact on viewers as many researchers have suggested that it is the way in which one interprets the televised images may change the degree of the effect. Most agreed that viewers are impacted by commercials, saying, "Yes, because it shows certain ways of acting," or "Yes, because it evokes a certain emotion to the viewers that makes them want to watch and enjoy it." All groups mentioned body image at one point or another, claiming that the people in commercials have unachievable body types, making the viewer feel self-conscious.

It was in the question about how commercials could be changed to better represent members of both genders that there was the greatest amount of disagreement. Many individuals stressed the importance of more equality between genders in commercials, saying things such as "They should show switching norms to set the precedent of less stereotypical gender roles" or, "They should represent both genders so that everything will be fair." However, many

individuals, all male, also commented that they would make no changes. One of the males in the non-traditional group wrote, “In these commercials, females were under-represented. Overall, I do not think this is a problem.” Another male participant had similar sentiments when he wrote. “I think TV does a good job gearing commercials at a variety of genders.”

DISCUSSION

One of the major predictions was that females who viewed traditional commercials would deemphasize occupational goals in favor of more domestic goals, compared to women who viewed the reversed-role commercials who would show an opposite tendency. While the mean Net Achievement Scores are higher on the occupational side for women who viewed the non-traditional commercials, those females in the traditional group also reported more occupational themes, with the interaction of the commercial stimulus shown to be non-significant. It was instead the control group, which was shown no commercials, that reported the most domestic themes, suggesting that maybe the commercial stimulus in general, or the act of thinking critically about the commercials in order to answer questions, produced higher levels of occupational goals in women.

The second major prediction was the same concept as used above, but for men. Thus, those men who viewed traditional commercials would emphasize occupational goals over domestic goals, and that those shown non-traditional depictions would favor domestic goals over occupation. Here, the results supported the hypotheses. Men in the traditional group reported on average 1.5 more occupational themes in their essays, while men in the non-traditional group reported 3.5 more domestic themes in their essays, with this difference being significant at .041. Unlike the female groups, the male control group did not report more traditional themes than the

other two groups, instead the participants Net Achievement Score averaged in between the traditional and non-traditional groups, mentioning a mean 1.5 more domestic themes than occupational themes in their essays. These results suggest that the male stereotypes present in commercials may be significant contributors to the number of social pressures that guide men into the workforce and away from more domestic roles. Perhaps more significantly, the results show that this effect could be eliminated by exposing men to reversed-role commercials, which may have reminded men of the alternative possibilities in society.

In asking open-ended discussion questions, the researcher hoped to gain insights as to what thoughts individuals have when thinking critically about commercials and gender depictions. While there were many common themes such as the unrealistic depictions of characters in certain situations, and recognition that viewers are impacted by televised commercials, there was some disparity when it came to way of better representing multiple genders and gender roles. This showcases the current disagreement within society that is present when it comes to discussing gender on a larger scale.

This study leaves great room for future research. Perhaps the biggest limitation was the small and homogeneous sample, and future research could happen on a broader scale to include members of different races/ethnicities, ages, education levels, and locations. More diverse samples could produce different results, and offer a multiracial perspective of gender differences in advertising. Also, as the effects on the participants viewing the five commercials are presumed to be temporary, future research could address long term exposure to stereotyped or reverse role commercials and their effects on viewers. Research could also focus on the effect that critically analyzing the content creates.

Findings from this research can be helpful for all who work in the media industry and all who are consumers of media. In seeing that televised commercials portray gendered stereotypes and roles that become normalized in our society, writers, actors, and television networks alike can determine what messages they want to send to their viewers. Television could potentially even be used in a way to spread more acceptance of “non-traditional” ways of “doing gender,” instead of just focusing on the rigid boxes of gender currently being shown. The findings reiterate the need to discuss the images presented in the television world, and clarify with one another what should and should not be carried over into reality. Those who are not aware of the unrealistic nature of media depictions messages run the risk of forming a biased picture of reality.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this research showed that television commercials still greatly mimic the common stereotypes in our society regarding life choices. Males are much more prevalent in commercials and are also significantly more likely to be shown in settings outside of the home, particularly in the workforce. Alternatively, females are much more likely to be shown in a home setting, representing domestic products, and performing domestic tasks. These stereotypes are considered outdated by many members of American society, yet still continue to pervade the media. These depictions not only defy the idea that diversity is becoming more accepted in society, but also completely ignore the fact that it is now a material need for both men and women to work and perform domestic duties, as most American families cannot survive on one income alone.

The experiment conducted using stereotyped and reverse-role commercials shows that the subtle implications of gender roles in commercials can influence self-concept and future goals, particularly in the case of males. Females were more likely to report non-traditional goals when watching commercials in general and thinking critically about the content. Although effects in the study were presumably temporary, one must keep in mind that individuals watch millions of commercials over the course of their lifetime. The effects of the constant repetition of stereotyped roles as seen in the content analysis is most likely permanent as they reflect the ideals of the culture. While commercials should not portray all women in the workforce and all men in the home, the fluidity of gender and gender roles needs to be better represented.

Despite the fictional nature of commercials and the intent solely to sell a product, aspects of televised portrayals may be interpreted as in some way similar to real life. Television commercials are capable of influencing viewers' beliefs about what exists, what is normal, what is right, and how they should behave within their gender. This cultural "norming" process is achieved through repetitive television images, which reinforce cultural messages that become accepted as mainstream thought. While commercials can be entertaining, they can become problematic when the wrong messages are sent to the viewers. Images of gender stereotyping set the stage for these biases to continue in a world that is supposedly becoming more accepting of diversity.

It is important to note that commercials are only part of the gendered messages from television, as such messages are reiterated in the programs as well, and television viewing in general is associated with gender role stereotypes (McArthur, Zebrowitz and Eisen, 1976). When coupled with television programs the messages of commercials are even more prevalent and pervasive. Also, television is only one source of socialization into gender role attitudes and

behavior. Individuals also receive messages from all levels of analysis, including family, peer groups, schools and other social institutions. In order to end the division of roles between genders and accept norms outside of the constrictive boxes of masculinity and femininity, change must occur at all levels.

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