The Stereotyped Portrayal of Men and Women In British Television Advertisements

Adrian Furnham and Nadine Bitar
University College London

This study examined the portrayal of men and women in a sample of British television commercials, attempting to replicate and extend past investigations done in America, Britain, Canada, and Italy. The aim was to update British research and to compare findings across cultures. One hundred and eighty daytime and evening commercials were content analyzed by two white raters, one male and the other female, to check reliability. The attributes of each of their central figures, who were over 90% white, were classified into 11 categories: Gender, mode of presentation, credibility, role, location, age, argument, reward type, product type, background, and end comment. The findings were that sex role television stereotyping in Britain was more or less constant across time, compared to studies done 5 and 10 years ago, but were weaker than in Italy and comparable to North America. The implications of such findings for the maintenance of sex roles are discussed.

It has now been demonstrated that television can, and does, profoundly influence both children and adults' perception of their and others' sex roles (McGhee & Frueh, 1975; Jennings, Geis, & Brown, 1980). In most developed countries television has the widest audience of any medium (Gunter & Wober, 1992); it is watched by all types of people regardless of race, national origin, social class, gender or age, and it is watched very frequently. Typical estimates of average time per person per week spent involved with television (defined as being present when a set is physically switched onto broadcast) shows relatively high levels of television use in the United States at around 31 hours with Britain somewhat lower at around 27 hours. Most

1To whom reprint requests should be addressed at Department of Psychology, University College London, 26 Bedford Way, London WC1, Great Britain.
other European countries show lower levels of use, e.g., Germany and France at 16 hours (Gunter & Svennevig, 1987).

Due to the fact that between 10 and 28% of television time is dedicated to advertisements, there has been concern and research about the characteristics of the male and female models that are "sold" along with the product (McArthur & Resko, 1975).

Because viewing television involves the observation of others' behavior and its reinforcement contingencies, television is considered to be a major vehicle through which children learn about appropriate behaviors, particularly gender-appropriate behaviors (Rak & McMullen, 1987). Furthermore, according to Gunther (1987), the impact of television upon social behavior may be greatest during commercials, which are often quick-paced, dynamic, and attention riveting. Furthermore, because their messages must be easily comprehended by the viewers, producers often use roles and situations that are easily identifiable by the audience and that are in agreement with prevailing cultural values—particularly those regarding gender-appropriate behavior (Manstead & McCulloch, 1981). Studies from various media indicate the extent to which the media portray men and women differently (Furnham & Schofield, 1986).

Studies from the 1970s show that magazine advertisements (Genderston & Herberman, 1974), children's books (Weitzman, Eiffer, Hokada, & Ross, 1972) and children's television programs (Sterniglitz & Serbin, 1974) also portray males and females in sex role stereotyped ways. Even in 1946, Child, Potter, and Levine, in their study of children's readers, found that male characters in children readers were more likely than females to achieve success via personal advancement, while females were more likely to achieve success via nurturant relationships. It is clear, then, that the mass media in general, and television programs in particular, constitute potentially powerful sources of information concerning the gender appropriateness of a wide variety of behaviors.

Various researchers have expressed concern about the roles portrayed by women in advertising. In the 1970s, researchers assessed the degree of stereotyping by analyzing the content of sex role messages (e.g., choice of language and other visible characteristics) in U.S. commercials, and on the whole found that although men and women were represented equally overall (Culley & Bennett, 1976; McArthur & Resko, 1975; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978; Downs & Harrison, 1985), differences were found in the types of product commercials in which men and women appeared. Further, female characters were depicted as younger and more likely to be married than male characters, and women were portrayed as unemployed, or employed in traditional female occupations (Schneider & Schneider, 1979). Women were found mostly in the home rather than in occupational settings.