Gender Differences in Advertising to Children – Content Analysis of Television Advertising

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Abstract

My research throws light on the representation of gender and stereotyping of their roles in advertising. A significant amount of research has been conducted regarding the ways in which children acquire gender appropriate behaviour (as we call it), and this research particularly considers the possible chance of influence of television advertising upon a child's perception and subsequent re-enactment of gender role-play. In the context of social learning theories, I have discussed the possible influences upon gender-roles of children in terms of family and peers as well as the media. Television teaches children a great deal about sex-typed behaviours, simply because it brings an abundance of readily observable models into the child's own home. The characters seen on television are attractive models that children would like to emulate because they are often physically beautiful/handsome and command impressive influence over their environments. This study has been undertaken to understand how girls and boys are portrayed in Indian advertising and does it have any relationship with our perception of gender roles.

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According to Bandura (1969), social learning theory indicates that children learn their appropriate sex-roles through observing the actions of others, as well as being either rewarded or punished for acting appropriately or inappropriately. That is to say that, children learn personality and behaviour patterns through the imitation of their own parents' attitudes and behaviours. It has also been observed by Bandura that children will acquire the patterns of behaviour more rapidly where there is an attractive model whose behaviour is rewarded.

Pearce (1989) argues that television teaches children a great deal about sex-typed behaviours, simply because it brings an abundance of readily observable models into the child's own home. However, it is important to acknowledge that television programming is not the only source of gender-example, since advertisements present to children any number of gender-appropriate behaviours that are lavished with many extravagant rewards. Schneider (1989) quotes a particularly worrying statistic in stating that during their viewing, children aged between two and eleven years of age are exposed to approximately 150 to 200 hours of television advertising each year. Boys reinforce one another through playing with action figures, given the chance to be aggressive and win in competitive games, while the latter have fun through playing with dolls, with the opportunity to be loved when they cuddle their toys or stuffed animals.
Macklin and Kolbe (1984) argue that the characters seen on television are attractive models for children to emulate because they are often physically beautiful/handsome, commanding impressive influence over their environments. Meanwhile research by Courtney and Whipple (1983) indicates that children are far more likely to imitate the behaviour of same-sex models than opposite-sex models, either due to reward from parents and peers, or due to more accurate recollection about the actions of their own gender. Furthermore, Bandura suggests that a child's exposure to televised models of behaviour is often more prevalent than their exposure to parental behaviour! Such research evidence only serves to emphasize the need for further investigation into the degree to which children are affected by the advertisements they watch every day of their lives. Courtney and Whipple found a positive correlation between the number of hours of television viewing and sex-typed answers given to subsequent tests, so one could argue that the possible influence of television is too powerful to ignore.

The effect on children's social learning from advertisements is that they are portrayed in a certain manner, exhibiting a certain kind of behaviour, eventually accepting without question the assumed images as 'real', taking cues regarding appropriate gender behaviour.

This research paper aims to examine which gender does television advertisements portray more and what role is that gender performing.

**Gender differences in children's reactions to advertisements**

The most basic of research has revealed that males and females respond differently to the images they see in television advertisements. Barthel (1988), for example, notes that it is regarded as more effective to target men with advertisements classed as neutral, because males will not use products even vaguely regarded as 'feminine', while women are more likely to use those products normally classed as 'male'. Since these attitudinal features are apparent in adulthood, I feel it is reasonable to presume that such views are likely to be formed, by the viewer, in childhood. Hence, the issues of gender portrayal in advertising remain at the centre of the debate.

A very interesting study of child-play conducted by Smetana and Letourneau (1984) that appears to echo Barthel's view of adult purchasing patterns in terms of gendered products, with males preferring male-specific products in contrast with more flexible female attitude. Their study revealed that when boys were playing in all-male groups, they consistently played with male rather than female sex-typed
toys. Girls, in contrast, were seen to play with more female-type toys. The most interesting findings emerged when the children were observed playing in mixed-sex groups, since the boys were completely unwilling to play with female-type toys whereas the girls had no objection to playing with toys that would generally be regarded as 'male'. Surely advertising companies much take these attitudes into account when creating their toy advertisements. With these behavioural differences in mind, I proceeded in the study of advertisements to assess whether such differences may be observed in terms of gender presentation on the screen.

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to examine the gender portrayals and stereotyping in children’s advertisements being aired on television. It considers the possible influences of television advertising upon a child's perception and subsequent re-enactment of gender role-play.

Hypothesis

The following hypotheses were constructed and they were checked against the sample collected:

1. More single sex advertisements are positioned towards boys than girls.
2. The sex of the narrator’s voice corresponds to the gender positioning of the advertisements.
3. Advertisements positioned towards girls show models engaged in more passive and fewer physical and antisocial activities than those models in boy’s advertisements.

Methodology

The basic premise of this study is investigation and analysis of Television advertising which can be done in two ways.

1. Content analysis: It is a systematic analysis of the content rather than the structure of a communication, such as a written work, speech, or film, including the study of thematic and symbolic elements to determine the objective or meaning of the communication.
2. Semiotic analysis: Semiotics can be applied to anything which can be seen as signifying something – in other words, to everything which has meaning within a culture.
The present study uses a Content Analysis approach for which a sample of advertisements have been collected consisting of a fortnight worth of commercials that aired from 3:00 - 5:30 pm during the week and 8:00 - 10:00 am on Saturday and Sunday. These timings of the day were chosen because these are the times when children are most likely to watch television.

The Channels used for the study are - Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, Pogo, Sonic. These are the channels exclusively for entertainment of children, so there would potentially be heavy viewing by children and as a result heavy advertising for children targeted products.

**Analysis of the data**

*Hypothesis 1: More single sex advertisements are positioned towards boys than girls.*

Out of the 96 advertisements collected, 38% have girls starring in comparison to the 62% which have boys. Hence, the issue of product positioning is an important factor in terms of gender representation.

*Hypothesis 2: The sex of the narrator’s voice corresponds to the gender positioning of the advertisements.*

It has been acknowledged a well-known fact from the data collected that male voice-overs have occurred more frequently as announcers or narrators than have female voices as 80% of the adverts used male voice in comparison to only 20% adverts which used female voice.

As per the research conducted and collection of the following advertisements, a higher frequency of male announcers is discovered. Indeed, these male announcers even feature in advertisements targeted exclusively at women. In many cases even if the product was regarded as “female”, most girl-positioned advertisements use male narrators and voice-overs, hence perpetuating the notion that ‘MEN KNOW BEST’.

*Hypothesis 3: Advertisements positioned towards girls show models engaged in more passive and fewer physical and antisocial activities than those models in boy’s advertisements.*

Perhaps one of the most effective ways to assess the level of activity in an advertisement is through an analysis of content. One of the most controversial aspects of physical activity in advertisements is that of violence. It was discovered that aggression was found to be limited almost exclusively to advertisements aimed at boys, with these advertisements also containing higher levels of action and movement than in those aimed at girls. The most common activities for girls were traditional, such as playing house, cooking and so on.
The analysis of the data shows that the given hypothesis stands true. Stating an example, in the advertisement for Britannia (a product which is broadly positioned for active kids) shows a boy learning to play cricket (a more active task) whereas for Pizza Hut shows a girl being very loving towards her father sharing a strong bond i.e. more family oriented (a more passive activity) with a very few exceptions whereby girls are being shown engaged in active activity as shown by the advertisements like CLINIC PLUS where the girl has been shown playing cricket and STARZ SHAMPOO showing a girl who is both sporty as well as beautiful.

_Hypothesis 4: Girls’ advertisements use more In-Home settings and Boys advertisements use more Out-of-Home settings._

Of the research highlighting this issue, the results have been as one might predict. It was found that in advertisements aimed at boys, males appeared away from the home setting far more than females did. Through the data collected we can say that the analysis stands true as the only 15.68% advertisements show girls in out-of-home settings.

5 Limitations

Following were some important limitations of this study:

i) Only nine TV channels were considered.

ii) The duration of the study was small.

iii) In spite of great care exercised some elements might have passed from the cognizance of the researcher.

iv) Repetitive advertisements were excluded from the study.

v) Subjective method was used to evaluate the advertisements.

vi) Usually, content analysis is weak from the point of view of generalizations. So no generalization can be attempted from the study.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that children's advertisements still portrayed boys and girls in stereotypical male/female roles. The results of the content analysis were discussed in terms of whether
they proved or disproved the hypotheses established and thus have come up with some intriguing results:-

- In support of hypothesis one, it was found that more advertisements were aimed at boys than at girls, in terms of the number of advertisements using boys and in terms of the type of products advertised. Of the different advertisements studied, 38% advertisements were aimed at girls in comparison to the 62% aimed at boys.

- The second hypothesis was also confirmed as correct, in that a definite correspondence existed between the sex of the narrator and the intended position of the advertisement. Of the thirteen advertisements for girls making use of a narrator, only two used female voices exclusively. In contrast, those advertisements for boys used only masculine voices. The logic behind this has been that in case of the ads for adults women are more likely to use a male targeted product than a man is to use a female targeted product.

- The question of activity levels in hypothesis three has proved to be right. Boys have been shown playing more aggressive roles and are into very active play whereas adverts for girl products showed them involved in more passive activities with a few exceptions where girls were also playing a very active role. One interesting thing is that only boys have been portrayed performing anti-social activities.

- In terms of setting, it was revealed that girls do indeed spend a significant amount of time in the home. Boys were seen mainly away from home. The out-of-home settings for girls were more limited and 'ordinary'. The boys, however, were shown in far more adventurous fantasy situations.

- Advertisements typically emphasize how women use cosmetic and household products, while girls play with dolls and domestic implements. Boys in contrast, play with vehicles and thrive on competition and war games while men are generally associated with cars and sports.

- The findings for this study indicated that children's advertisements still portrayed boys and girls in stereotypical male/female roles. Since previous research had shown that girls are more likely to use products that appear to be male-positioned, neutral products were typically advertised with male characters.

- Some typical gender role stereotypes that can be found in commercials aimed at children are:
  - Commercials with boy models *only* were found to feature more away from home settings.
Commercials with girl models only were more likely to be set in the home.

- Only boys were shown in anti-social behavior.
- Girls in commercials show only socially acceptable behavior.
- Boys are shown using more products and in different activities

References:


