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Are Gender Portrayals of Children in Advertisements Stereotypical?

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Are Gender Portrayals of Children in Advertisements Stereotypical?

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Presented at NYSCA 2003

Abstract: Advertising directed at children has been the topic of considerable research and debate. Several researchers have discussed the various concerns and criticisms of children's advertising, while attempting to sort out the factors likely to contribute to young readers/viewers responses to advertisers' persuasive attempts (Kolbe & Muehling, 1995). One of the main criticisms of advertising has been concerned with the use of stereotyped gender role portrayals by advertisers. This paper seeks to answer the question of whether or not gender role portrayals in advertisements featuring children are stereotypical. A review of the literature from the past couple of decades reveals that although some gender role portrayals have changed, many of them continue to be stereotypical.

Advertising directed at children has been the topic of considerable research and debate during the past three decades. Several articles and books have discussed the various concerns and criticisms of children's advertising, while attempting to sort out the factors likely to contribute to young readers/viewers' responses to advertisers' persuasive attempts (Kolbe & Muehling, 1995). Some of the criticisms of advertising have been concerned with the use of stereotyped gender role portrayals by advertisers. The purpose of this paper will be to address the question: Are gender portrayals of children in advertisements stereotypical? A review of the literature on the topic of gender role portrayals in advertising to children will be examined to answer this question.

Bandura's (1969) social learning theory indicates that children formulate gender role concepts through observations as well as through rewards and punishment. As defined by Bandura, social learning theory in childhood is the process of learning personality and behavior patterns primarily through imitating parents' attitudes and behaviors (Smith, 1994, p. 324). As the definition of social learning expanded to social learning theory, the focus included both imitation of others and expectancies of reinforcement for that imitative behavior (Rotter, 1982). Behavioral learning can be a slow process, but it has been shown that children more rapidly acquire patterns of behavior when an attractive model is shown whose behavior is rewarded (Bandura, 1969). The media have become a focus of study related to social learning, because the most readily available sources of

models for children to emulate aside from their parents are movies, books and especially television (Mayes & Valentine, 1979). Considering the number of hours of television that children watch, their exposure to televised models may even be greater than their exposure to their own parents' behaviors (Bandura, 1969).

It could be argued that children learn all sorts of behaviors from television that either sex could perform. However, research has indicated that children tend to imitate same-sex models with greater frequency than opposite-sex models (Courtney & Whipple, 1983). According to Smith (1994), "one argument for this occurrence is that peers and parents are more likely to reward children when they imitate same-sex models. Children also generally recall more about same-sex models than opposite sex models. This sex bias is especially true of boys and also especially pronounced when male models behave in sex-stereotyped ways" (p. 324). Courtney and Whipple (1983) also found that a positive correlation between hours of television viewed and sex-typed test answers existed.

The concern that behaviors observed and internalized from television advertisements may have considerable influence in shaping gender role concepts of young children is reflected in the number of studies in this area (Kolbe & Muehling, 1995; Smith, 1994). Expectations of sex roles and self-labeling processes have the potential to influence many aspects of a child's life from social interaction to occupational plans, and even to cognitive functioning (Macklin & Kolbe, 1984). Basically, children's social learning from television advertisements result in the advertisements showing children how they should behave. This is important because several studies over the past three decades have indicated that gender portrayals in advertising directed at children have been stereotypical. Therefore, the behavior taught by these advertisements to children is stereotypical gender roles and behavior. This is an important finding, because many gender role development theorists believe that despite intervention from influential adults like parents and teachers, children often remain very specific in their judgments about the gender appropriateness of behaviors, occupations and play objects (Katz, 1979; Bettelheim, 1987). For example, several studies have demonstrated that heavy viewers of television hold more traditional gender-stereotyped notions of proper role behavior than light viewers of television (Frueh & McGhee, 1975; Signorelli, 1989; Signorelli & Lears, 1992).

The bulk of the research on gender portrayals in advertising has focused on television. A brief review of this literature will be helpful in developing an understanding of the history of beliefs about gender portrayals in advertising directed at children.

In past studies of children's television advertising and gender, gender has been examined by either reporting the number of single gender ads or reporting the total number of males and females present in the ads. Studies that have measured gender presence in terms of numbers of single-gender ads have found more ads featuring only males than ads featuring only females. An early study found that 84% of single-gender ads were male-only ads (Doolittle & Pepper, 1975). A later

study of commercials aired in 1982 found that single-gender ads were 72% male only (Macklin & Kolbe, 1984). A study of commercials aired in 1987 found 76% of the single gender ads were male only (Riffe, Goldson, Saxton & Yu, 1989). Additionally, Smith's analysis of single-gender commercials found that 67% were male only (1994). Thus the ratio from 1975 to 1994 had improved from a nearly six-to-one ratio of male-only to female-only ads to a two-to-one ratio (Larson, 2001, p. 3).

In a more recent study by Larson (2001), a more equitable distribution was found compared to the studies from the previous decades. In terms of the numbers of ads, the results still significantly favor single-gender ads featuring boys (59%), but not nearly as dramatically as the results of Smith (1994) (Larson, 2001, p. 8). The current situation seems to be an improvement for girls in terms of representation. From the perspective of social learning theory, this increase in ads featuring girls means that girls have more models acting in advertisements than they did a few years ago. Despite the increase in the presence of girls in advertisements over the past three decades, the question of stereotypical portrayals still remains.

In a study of preschool children, Smetana and Letourneau (1984) found that when boys were in all male groups, they played more with male rather than female type toys. Girls, on the other hand, played with female type toys when in all female groups. In mixed male-female groups, however, boys were unwilling to play with female type toys, but the girls were willing to play with male type toys. Behavior studies show that both adult and child females tend to be more willing to use male-positioned products than males are to use female-positioned products (Smith, 1994, p. 326). Hume's (1993) interviews with fast food chain and advertising agency executives who showed a special interest in children and families as targets revealed that gender bias existed and continued to favor boys over girls. The executives understood that girls were more likely to show interest in boys' products than boys in girls' products.

This difference does not appear until a child understands the concept of gender constancy. Gender constancy means that the child is aware that he or she will always be male or female regardless of superficial changes such as haircuts or clothing (Smith, 1994, p. 325). The development of this awareness is generally achieved by age seven (Browne, 1998). Once children have reached the cognitive stage of gender constancy, they become more attentive to same sex models and they are more willing to model those characters' behaviors. Prior to gender constancy, children do not differentiate the sexes and are more willing to model behavior regardless of the model's sex (Ruble, Balaban, & Cooper, 1981).

In an experiment with four- to six-year-old children, Ruble et al. (1981) separated those children who exhibited gender constancy from those children who did not. The study found that when gender constant children saw advertisements showing models of only one sex, their subsequent behavior dramatically changed. Children either shunned or played with a toy depending on the sex of the models in the advertisements. Those children who had not reached gender constancy merely

modeled the play in the advertisement without concern for the sex of the characters.

Past studies suggest that children as young as four years of age are likely to choose gender-typed toys when they have seen them modeled on television by same-sex children (Ruble, et. al, 1981). Hence, children tend to accept sex stereotypes, identify with the stereotypical role of their gender, and punish other children, especially boys, who exhibit cross-gender behaviors and traits (Frueh & McGhee, 1975). However, Kolbe and Muehling (1995) found that those tendencies might not always affect product preference (as cited in Browne, 1998, p. 3).

Kolbe and Muehling's (1995) research extends past research efforts that have examined the effects of gender role portrayals on children. They empirically investigated whether children were aware of gender roles when exposed to advertisements containing either traditional/stereotyped or nontraditional/counter-stereotyped role portrayals. This study also examined whether these portrayals had measurable effects on children's evaluations of the advertised product and advertisements. Overall, the main question being addressed was whether children see and internalize gender-role information in television advertisements.

The results suggested that children processed gender information in the television advertisements and were aware of the gender of the actor in the advertisements. The children made judgments that reflected some processing of the gender role portrayal. Their findings suggest that role portrayals may have little effect on evaluation of the advertisement and the product by the child. However, children's gender appropriateness evaluation of the advertised product and advertising setting were influenced by the role of portrayal manipulations within the study. In other words, children were found to be aware of gender role portrayals, and these gender role portrayals did influence whether the product was evaluated as gender appropriate or not. Their results in measuring gender-appropriateness judgments among the different groups did suggest significant shifts in appropriate judgments, particularly among boys. They found that,

Boys who viewed the "female actor" ads were significantly more likely to indicate that the toy was appropriate for both genders than boys who saw the "male actor" ads. The majority of the latter group indicated that the advertised toy would be preferred as a play object for "boys" only. For girls there was a significant difference in their gender-appropriateness judgments, although the magnitude of change was not as great as that observed in boys. Exposure to the ad with the female actor in it tended to make the girls in the study less inclined to believe that the toy was appropriate for "boys" only. (Kolbe & Muehling, 1995, p. 56)

This finding is significant because it indicates that males may not respond negatively to female models in advertisements. While nontraditional presentations may have very little effect on product preferences, they do appear to have the

capability of altering the gender-appropriateness classifications of an advertised product (Kolbe & Muehling, 1995, p.61). Kolbe and Muehling (1995) argue that this finding is important from a social influence perspective, because boys who saw counter-stereotyped ads were more likely to indicate that the toy was for both genders than were stereotyped ad treatment males. The researchers do recognize that their findings are limited to non-gender specific products, and that the children in the subject age group do have concrete notions about gender and may hold rigid beliefs about the appropriateness and inappropriateness of behaviors and products for each gender. They state that dramatic changes in the preference of gender specific toys should not be expected given children's strongly held beliefs. Overall, their study suggests that some changes in gender appropriateness are possible, but are limited by the already strongly-held beliefs by children about gender and the lack of counter stereotypical advertisements presented on television. Therefore, gender role portrayals in the media continue to be of importance, because of their influence on children's decisions as to what is appropriate behavior for each gender.

The research discussed so far has illustrated a bias toward boys in advertising and has demonstrated the awareness of children of their sex differences at a given stage. Having established behavioral differences between boys and girls, the focus will now be on how advertisements portray the sexes in different ways.

In a content analysis of children's advertisements, Welch, Huston-Stein, and Plehal (1979) focused on the depiction of aggressive behavior in children. The researchers looked at a sample of 60 toy advertisements, thus limiting the scope of the products studied. Since they looked only at morning programming, the older school children's advertisements may have been missing. The results showed that aggressive behavior was limited almost exclusively to advertisements for boy's products. Boys' advertisements were also found to have higher levels of action and movement. According to Deborah Tannen (1990), aggressive behavior is stereotypically associated with males. Therefore, by depicting aggressive boys but not girls, these advertisements are reinforcing gender stereotypes. The level of action and movement is also stereotypical.

O'Kelley (1974) used content analysis to show that the most common girls' activities in children's advertisements were traditional. The girls played house, cooked and were stewardesses. Only 10% of the girls were pictured as being active, doing physical things such as gymnastics. Boys also exhibited traditional gender roles. For example, they played football and went camping. Verna's (1975) study of children's advertising also found girls to be more passive and less aggressive and competitive than boys, again reinforcing gender stereotypes. These studies may appear dated, but many of the findings have been supported by more recent studies. Things may have changed, but not by much. For example, in a review of children's television commercials conducted in 1983, Courtney and Whipple also found traditional roles to be the norm. Girls played with dolls and wanted to be popular and beautiful. Boys played with airplanes and mechanical toys. They sought power, speed and physical action. It is stereotypical to believe

that girls are preoccupied with dolls and beauty and boys with power and physical action.

An episode of the popular television show *Friends* (Junge & Zuckerman, 1996) illustrates the gender stereotype surrounding dolls. One of the male characters, Ross, had recently become a father. He was divorced from his wife, who had taken a lesbian lover. In this episode, Ross' ex-wife dropped the baby off so father and son could spend more time together. Much to Ross' dismay, his son was hugging a Barbie doll. The rest of the episode centered around his efforts to interest his son in GI Joe instead of the Barbie doll, which is stereotypically associated with girls. An "action figure," the GI Joe doll is stereotypically associated with boys. When confronted by another character that GI Joe is a doll, Ross quickly counters that he isn't a doll but an action figure. The change in language makes the toy more "appropriate" for boys. This example illustrates the stereotypes surrounding dolls. Girls play with dolls and boys play with action figures. By calling the doll an action figure, we signal its appropriateness for boys because of the emphasis on action. This example also illustrates the influence of parents in reinforcing gender stereotypes. Apparently, Ross' son had not reached the gender constancy stage yet, and was therefore unaware of gender differences and willing to play with anything. Ross, however, was uncomfortable with his son playing with a Barbie and reverted to gender stereotypes by encouraging the boy to play with an action figure instead. Another thing that this example shows is that television programs as well as advertising can be influential in perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes. Programs themselves could be and have been a topic of examination in the way that gender roles are presented in the media.

While researching this paper, I was reminded of my nephew, Trae, who at the age of eighteen months began playing with a doll with long curly hair that used to sit on his grandmother's shelf, adopting it as his baby. He calls her "baby," hugs her, shares his bottle with her and rocks her to sleep. While talking to his mother recently, I commented on how nice it was that he had his baby doll and that she did not discourage him from playing with it. Her response was, "I don't, because it teaches him nurturing." I thought this was great, but I wondered how things might change once Trae reached the gender constancy stage and is exposed to an increasing amount of media messages about gender roles. Despite the positive reinforcement of non-stereotypical gender behaviors by his mother, Trae will probably be influenced by the messages in the media. Unfortunately, these messages will be of stereotypical behaviors, according to research.

Smith's (1994) content analysis of children's advertising examined the differences between television advertisements featuring only male and only female models, respectively. Her results supported much of the findings of past research. She found that advertisements did feature more boys than girls and placed boys in settings outside their homes more often. Smith also found that the sex of the announcers corresponded with the sex of the characters in the advertisements. Therefore, the male voice was privileged over the female voice,

since girls are more likely to play with boy-oriented products than boys are to play with girl-oriented products. Smith summarized her findings as follows:

Most of the traditional male/female role expectations emerged in the gender-positioned advertisements. Girls stayed at home; boys roamed the world. Boys used a wider variety of products and performed more varying activities than girls did. Girls always behaved themselves; boys sometimes made trouble. Female voices narrated most girls' advertisements, and male voices narrated boys' advertisements. The most obvious sign of non-stereotyped behavior was in physical activity pictured in some of the girls' advertisements. (p. 335)

The increase in girls' physical activity in advertisements contrasts with earlier content analyses that found girls to be limited almost exclusively to passive roles (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Mayes & Valentine, 1979; O'Kelley, 1974). According to Smith (1995), for both boys and girls, the characters in the advertisements were most likely to be playing with toys or dolls. More interesting though is that she found that active activities and passive activities tied as the second-ranked activities for girls. Girls rode bikes, did aerobics, played ball, and jumped rope at the same frequency as they read books and watched television. The study indicates that representations of girls as active in advertisements has increased in the last decade. However, it should be cautioned that although some depictions have changed, the majority of gender role portrayals in advertisements appear to have remained stereotypical.

As Smith (1994) points out, limitations for girls' behavior as well as boys' behavior exist in television commercials. It is often easy to point out the limitations for girls' behavior, and this has received a lot of focus. However, it must be remembered that boys are also limited in their behavior by gender role stereotypes. For example, advertisements often show boy's as aggressive, physically active, and needing to win rather than nurturing or sharing. Advertising needs to adjust its messages concerning gender roles to prevent girls from being limited to their homes and boys from not being allowed to be kind and sharing.

Browne's (1998) content analysis of advertising on children's television in the 1990s confirmed the presence of gender stereotypes. According to Browne, results indicated substantial gender stereotyping, in keeping with a number of other studies mentioned here (Macklin & Kolbe, 1984; McArthur & Eisen, 1976):

Boys appeared in greater numbers, assumed more dominant roles, and were more active and aggressive than girls. (Browne, 1998, p. 12)

In commercials containing both boys and girls, boys were significantly more likely to demonstrate and/or explain the product even when the product used was not sex-typed. Girls were never shown using products designed for boys (e.g., guns or trucks), and no commercials showed boys using products targeted for girls. (Browne, 1998, pp. 6-7)

Gender role reinforcement was observed at the level of body language and facial expression; girls were portrayed as shy, giggly, unlikely to assert control, and less instrumental. (Browne, 1998, p. 12)

Larson's (2001) recent study lends further support for the idea of limited change among gender portrayals of children in advertisements. Larson's research analyzed mixed-gender ads as well as single-gender ads. As noted previously, he found a more equitable distribution of girls and boys featured in the commercials. However, single-gender commercials continued to portray girls in stereotypical domestic settings. According to Larson, girls-only commercials showed girls at home either indoors, such as playing in a bedroom, or outdoors in a backyard, significantly more than the boys or boys and girls together ads. In terms of the social learning theory, girls continue to see models of domesticity, although when they are with boys, they have additional models (Larson, 2001, p. 8). Girls were also oftentimes depicted as cooperative, whereas boys were portrayed as competitive or independent. Larson argues that these portrayals reinforce the traditional gender role models available for girls and boys.

Another interesting finding in Larson's (2001) research was the occurrence of violence and aggression in the commercials. According to Larson, most of the commercials did not contain violence or aggression, but more than 34% of the commercials featuring children and targeting young children did include aggression (p. 9). He compares his findings to the 12.5% found by Macklin and Kolbe (1984) and argues that there has been a nearly three-fold increase in less than 15 years (Larson, 2001, p. 9).

Klinger, Hamilton and Cantrell (2001) have recently studied the relationship between children and violence and/or aggression in toy commercials. The commercials in their study were rated as demonstrating stereotypic sex-role behavior. Male-focused commercials and imagined toy play with the boy-oriented toys were rated as more aggressive than were female-focused and neutral commercials, and their respective toys. The researchers suggest that boys are particular targets of aggressive content in marketing and more desensitized to aggressive content than are girls. They found that the aggressive content in toy commercials was attractive especially to boys, but also to girls. They cautioned that since children's programming is saturated with toy commercials, young viewers are at best consistently exposed to stereotypic sex-role behavior, and at worst, inundated with violent content.

Based on the research reviewed here, it would seem that little has changed in terms of gender role portrayals in advertisements over the past three decades. Although the representations of girls in advertisements are now more equitable in comparison to boys, these portrayals continue to be largely stereotypical for both the girls and boys. A disturbing finding is that change in gender portrayals to less stereotypical ones has been slow to occur, yet portrayals of violence and aggression have increased.

Through this review of some of the research that has focused on gender portrayals in television advertising directed toward children, it has been shown that advertisements on television continue to present stereotypical gender portrayals. This is disturbing because these advertisements have the potential to reinforce for children conventional sex-role definitions, meaning that children may come to believe life is supposed to be like it is portrayed in commercials (Ivy & Backlund, 1994, p. 116). Advertising may also influence how children develop an identity for themselves, relative to their own sex and gender, and how they come to expect certain behavior from men and women (Macklin & Kolbe, 1984). This is an important area of research and studies continue to investigate the impact of gender role portrayals in television advertisements.

It is interesting to note, however, that while criticisms of television advertisers' use of role portrayals are relatively abundant (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Macklin & Kolbe, 1984), there are no studies that I could find that deal with the use of role portrayals in advertising in children's magazines. This is an area that would seem to merit some future research. The falling ratings of Saturday morning television and the parental drive to encourage reading among children has resulted in a flood of magazines directed at children, such as Sports Illustrated for Kids, Cricket, Kid City, Crayola Kids, Boys Life and Hopscotch. The problem that exists is that we are not sure if gender portrayals in these magazines are stereotypical. If they are, there are serious implications because magazines are a high involvement medium and are supposed to be more credible than television. It would seem that a question that needs to be answered by future research is: Do advertisements in children's magazines present stereotypical gender portrayals? Based on the trend of advertisements in adult magazines to be stereotypical, the suspicion is that the answer to this question is yes.

The purpose of this paper was to examine the issue of gender role portrayals in advertising to children. It was established that this is an important issue, because children can formulate gender role concepts from advertisements. This is explained by Bandura's (1969) social learning theory, which describes how learning takes place through observation as well as rewards and punishment. The concern that behavior observed and internalized from television advertisements may have considerable influence in shaping gender role concepts in children has generated research in this area. A number of studies in this area were reviewed and indicated that gender portrayals in television advertising directed at children have been stereotypical. The studies span over thirty years and indicate that little has changed in gender role portrayals.

Since the majority of research has focused on television advertisements, it was suggested by this paper that advertisements in children's magazines be examined to determine if gender portrayals were stereotypical. It was hypothesized that based on the trend for magazine advertisements in adult magazines to be stereotypical, that the children's ads would probably also be found to be stereotypical.

It should be kept in mind, that although it has been shown that gender portrayals in advertisements tend to be stereotypical, the presence of advertising is not the problem. As Smith (1994) notes, advertising brings a wealth of information to children at the same time as it financially supports programming aimed at them (p. 335). Advertising is a part of our culture that will not go away. Advertising needs to adjust its messages concerning gender roles to reflect a non-stereotypical portrayal. Just as advertising can teach children stereotypical roles and behavior, it can teach them non-stereotypical roles and behavior. Advertising and the media can be useful in teaching change and discouraging stereotypes. Although things have changed, they have not changed that much. Advertising and the media need to reflect the changes that have occurred and possibly encourage more change by depicting non-stereotypical gender portrayals.

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