

## **The Effect of Television Day Part on Gender Portrayals in Television Commercials: A Content Analysis**

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*Gender portrayals in 2,209 network television commercials were content analyzed. To compare differences between three day parts, the sample was chosen from three time periods: daytime, when the audience is mostly women; evening prime time, when the sex of the audience is more evenly distributed; and weekend afternoon sportscasts, when men are a large percentage of the audience. The results indicate large and consistent differences in the way men and women are portrayed in these three day parts, with almost all comparisons reaching significance at the .05 level. Although ads in all day parts tended to portray men in stereotypical roles of authority and dominance, those on weekends tended to emphasize escape from home and family. The findings of earlier studies which did not consider day part differences may now have to be reevaluated.*

Since 1972, at least 18 gender-oriented content analyses of U.S. television commercials and another seven using non-U.S. advertising have been reported in academic sources. Growing from the concerns of the women's movement about negative stereotyping in advertising, these studies have consistently supported the contention that TV ads generally portray women in the traditional stereotypical roles of subservience allocated them by a patriarchal society.

Many of these studies have been summarized by Bretl & Cantor (1988). Additional research, such as Courtney & Whipple (1983), Gunter (1986), Kear (1985), Macklin & Kolbe (1984), Seggar, Hafen, & Hannonen-

Gladden (1981), Skelly & Lundstrom (1981), and Steeves (1987) has examined gender portrayals in other media texts.

Understandably, almost all of this earlier research has focused on images of women. Portrayals of men, when they have been studied at all, have often been seen as unproblematic and even as the laudatory standard by which female portrayals could be measured. With the exception of a single study by Meyers (1980), no major content analysis has been conducted primarily to investigate stereotyped presentations of men in television commercials.

Furthermore, past research has all but ignored the heavy reliance advertisers place on audience demographics in their design and placement of commercials. Instead, previous studies have tended to treat gender portrayals in television advertising as fixed and homogeneous. Consequently, previous researchers have generally selected commercial samples from only one or two day parts in which women are the primary audience, or have mixed their sample from several day parts with little or no distinction made between them. The result has been a failure to adequately consider whether and how gender portrayals in ads aimed at men differ from those in ads aimed at women.

Scheibe & Condry (1984, p. 32) did examine commercials by program type, including a limited comparison of those shown during soap operas with those shown during sports programs. Their research found major gender differences in the values promoted in commercials. For example, ads aimed at women stressed beauty and youth while those aimed at men valorized ambition and physical strength (pp. 42-43).

While content analysis is limited in the information it can provide about television gender representations, it can and should provide the essential starting point for further critical analysis. Fiske & Hartley (1978, p. 21) point out that content analysis, although not concerned with questions of quality, response, or interpretation, does serve the important function of establishing exactly "what is there" to be studied. By ignoring the importance of demographic targeting and day part placement of ads, previous research has given an incomplete picture of "what is there."

This content analysis comparing 2,209 TV commercials attempts to remedy the shortcomings of earlier work. By so doing, it will provide a foundation for further critical analysis of gender and television commercials. First, it considers the traditional stereotypes of both women and men seen in television advertising to be problematic, and attempts to fill in the gaps of past research by focusing on images of men as well as women. Second, it recognizes that television commercials are not homogeneous nor randomly scattered throughout the broadcast day, but vary greatly in form and content with the age, sex, and social situation of the audience the

advertiser intends to reach. For this reason, it uses the advertising industry's concept of "day part" as the major independent variable, and concentrates on differences between ads seen during the daytime, when women make up most of the audience, and those seen on weekends, when men viewers predominate.

## METHOD<sup>1</sup>

Three videotape recorders were used to simultaneously record selected hours of programming on the local affiliates of the three major networks during the period January 6-14, 1990. To examine gender differences in commercials aired at different times, three day parts<sup>2</sup> were separately sampled. The daytime day part (in this sample, Monday-Friday, 2-4 p.m.) consisted exclusively of soap operas and was chosen for its high percentage of women viewers. The weekend day part (two consecutive Saturday and Sunday afternoons during sports telecasts) was selected for its high percentage of men viewers. Evening "prime time" (Monday-Friday, 9-11 p.m.) was chosen as a basis for comparison with past studies and the other day parts. All programming and commercials on all three network affiliates were recorded simultaneously, resulting in a total of 30 hours of daytime (e.g. 2 hours per day  $\times$  3 stations  $\times$  5 days), 30 hours of prime time, and 39.5 hours of weekend television.

Each tape was reviewed and each cluster of commercials (i.e. each group of ads between two program segments) was cataloged and given a serial number. Clusters containing only promotional announcements, public service announcements, and/or advertisements clearly originating at the local station were disregarded. A total of 664 commercial clusters were thus obtained, with each cluster containing one to seven different ads for a total of 2,209 separate commercials. The day part in which each ad had originally aired was noted for later analysis; then the 664 commercial clusters were edited onto new video tapes in random order to reduce the possibility of coder bias. All program material, public service announcements, billboards, promotional announcements, and advertisements clearly originating at the

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed explanation of the method and results of this study can be found in Craig (1991).

<sup>2</sup>The term "day part" is commonly used in the industry to describe a period of the day (such as the "prime time" day part) when advertisers consider the audience to be relatively stable demographically. Television audience research services such as Nielsen and Arbitron typically report ratings estimates for a large number of day parts. The term is used in this study to underscore the importance of demographic targeting in the advertising industry. In order to facilitate sampling, the hours represented by the "day parts" used in this study do not precisely correspond with those reported by the ratings services.

local station were deleted. This procedure yielded a series of video tapes containing only the network commercials, randomized by cluster, with all clues removed as to their original program context and time of broadcast. Coders were also kept uninformed of the study's focus on day part differences.

All network commercials recorded during the sample period were included in the initial database, regardless of the number of times they appeared or the ages of the characters. Animated characters were also included and were coded based on the gender and age they appeared to represent. Repeats were coded since the aim of the study is to examine exposure to stereotypes rather than to specific commercials. Each commercial appearance must therefore be considered a separate exposure (Verna, 1975, p. 303).

### Categories

Coding categories were based on those which had proven effective in other recent content analyses, especially those of Bretl & Cantor (1988) and Harris & Stobart (1986). Modifications and additions to these earlier categories were made as considered appropriate to reflect the hypotheses of the present study.

### *Characters*

To get an overall view of the treatment of gender, each commercial was classified as to the apparent age and gender of all characters who appeared. The categories were "all male adult"; "all female adult"; "all adults, mixed gender"; "male adults with children or teens (no women)"; "female adults with children or teens (no men)"; and "mixture of ages and genders." For this and all other codings, children and teens were defined as characters who appear to be under 18 years old.

### *Primary Visual Character*

Bretl & Cantor (1988) defined "primary character" as "the character with the greatest amount of on-screen time" (p. 599). However, pretesting indicated a substantial number of commercials with only brief glimpses of many characters. Following the strategy of Dominick & Rauch (1972), a time-limit was imposed, so that for this study, the definition used was "the one visual character who appears on the screen longest, but for no less

than five seconds." Coders were instructed to indicate whether the primary visual character was an adult male, an adult female, a child or a teen, or whether no character meeting the established criteria appeared.

### *Role*

Harris & Stobart's (1986) categories were adopted with slight rewording (e.g. "spouse" became "spouse/partner") and the addition of the category "child/teen." The other categories were "celebrity," "homemaker," "interviewer/demonstrator," "parent/child care," "professional," "sex object/model," "spouse/partner," "worker," and "other."

### *Product*

Several studies (e.g. Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Culley & Bennett, 1976; Marecek et al., 1978; Scheibe & Condry, 1984; Bretl & Cantor, 1988) have examined differences in the sex of characters associated with various products. Harris and Stobart (1986) used the following categories: "services," "body," "home," "food," and "auto." Because of the special interest in male-oriented weekend ads, the present study added the categories "business products" and "alcohol."

### *Setting*

The setting categories used by Bretl and Cantor (1988) were adopted, except that instead of using their "unknown" category the present study used "other/unclear." The other categories were "kitchen," "bathroom," "other room of home," "outdoors at home," "outdoors away from home," "restaurant/bar," "business," and "school."

### *Primary Narrator*

Bretl & Cantor (1988, p. 605) list ten previous studies which investigated the sex of off-screen announcers or "narrators." The present study defined the primary narrator as "the voice, not attributable to any on-screen character, which is heard for the longest time." Voices which only sang were not considered narrators.

### *Statistical Analysis*

One subsample of 30 commercials was selected for a reliability check and coded by all three coders. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's alpha statistic (1980, Chapter 12) for three coders, with the results ranging from a low of .62 for "Primary Character Role" to a high of 1.00 for "Product Category." The mean alpha for the six reported codings was .82.

Statistical analysis was completed using the "Tables" subprogram of the MS-DOS version of the computer program SYSTAT, and the Pearson chi-square calculation was used to test for significant differences. For analyses of three-way interactions, loglinear modeling was conducted as suggested by Fienberg (1980) using the Tables "Model" command and the Pearson chi-square of the model is reported (Wilkinson, 1989, Chapter 28).

Initially, all 2,209 commercials were coded and analyzed. However, Bretl and Cantor (1988) compared results from earlier studies, and most of these findings were based on commercials in which only adult primary characters appear. To better allow comparisons to these studies, the sample was modified by dropping all commercials that were coded as having no adult primary visual character (i.e. those coded as "child or teen" or "none or unclear"), yielding a new sample of 1,431 commercials which had either adult male or adult female primary visual characters.

## **RESULTS**

### **Analysis of Age and Gender of All Characters**

To get an overall view of the treatment of gender, each commercial was categorized as to the mixture of age and gender of all characters, regardless of their importance to the ad or their time on the screen. The results are shown in Table I.

Significant differences in the age and gender of characters among the day parts were found. Although approximately equal percentages of ads during the evening hours portrayed either all adult male (18%) or all adult female characters (19%), commercials with all adult male characters were more than twice as likely to be found during weekend (33%) as daytime (14%) telecasts. Conversely, commercials with only adult female characters made up only five percent of the weekend sample, but 20% of that during the daytime hours. Commercials showing only adult men with children were relatively rare in all three day parts; however, those featuring only adult women with children made up 11% of the daytime and 8% of the evening

**Table I.** Percentages of Commercials with Characters of Various Sex and Age Categories in Three Day Parts<sup>a</sup>

Category	N	Percent		
		Daytime (N = 888)	Evening (N = 445)	Weekend (N = 623)
All male adult	406	14	18	33
All female adults	291	20	19	5
All adults, mixed gender	651	32	32	37
All children or teens	69	6	2	1
Male adults w/children/teens (no adult women)	54	2	2	4
Female adults w/children/teens (no adult men)	144	11	8	3
Mixture of ages and genders	341	16	20	18

<sup>a</sup>All numbers except N represent column percentages.  $\chi^2 (12, N = 1956) = 196.1$ ,  $p < .001$ . Figures do not include commercials without any visual characters.

sample. Commercials with only children or teen characters made up 6% of the daytime but only 1% of the weekend ads.

### Sex and Age of the Primary Visual Character

A more detailed analysis was made of the primary visual character in each commercial. Coders were instructed to indicate whether the primary visual character was an adult male, an adult female, a child or a teen, or if no character meeting the established criteria appeared. Twenty-seven percent of the overall sample had no identifiable primary visual character category, but an absence of codable primary visual characters was much more prevalent in weekend (33%) and evening (32%) commercials than in daytime ads (20%). Children or teens were primary visual characters in only a small percentage of the commercials sampled, but were much more likely to be found in daytime (11%) than in evening (7%) or weekend ads (5%).

In examining ads with only adult primary characters, men and women were found to appear in about equal proportions (52% and 48%) in commercials aired during the evening hours, but the findings for the other two day parts are significantly different (see Table II). During the daytime hours, only 40% of the adult primary visual characters were men, but during the weekend period, 80% were.

**Table II.** Percentages of Adult Primary Visual Characters by Sex Appearing in Commercials in Three Day Parts<sup>a</sup>

Category	N	Percent		
		Daytime (N = 668)	Evening (N = 300)	Weekend (N = 463)
Adult male	792	40	52	80
Adult female	639	60	48	20

<sup>a</sup> All numbers except N represent column percentages.  $\chi^2$  (2, N = 1431) = 185.1, p < .001.

### The Role Played by the Primary Visual Character

Results also indicate large differences in the roles played by primary visual characters in different day parts (see Table III). Primary characters in weekend commercials were more likely to portray celebrities, professionals and workers than those in daytime commercials, but were much less likely to portray children/teens, home-makers, parents, or spouse/partners. Primary visual characters were about equally likely to portray "sex object/models" in all three day parts.

Further analysis indicated that male primary characters were proportionately more likely than females to be portrayed as celebrities and professionals in every day part, while women were proportionately more likely to be portrayed as interviewer/demonstrators, parent/spouses, or sex object/models in every day part. In the daytime and evening, women were proportionately more likely to be portrayed as homemakers and proportionately less likely to be portrayed as workers; during the weekend, men and women primary characters were portrayed in about equal proportions in these two categories. However, women were proportionately more likely to appear as sex object/models during the weekend than during the day. Men were proportionately more likely to be coded as having some "other role" in all three day parts.

Analysis also revealed that in the evening, 12% of the male and 32% of the female primary visual characters were portrayed as spouses or parents. Further, a greater proportion of women primary characters portrayed spouses or parents in the evening (32%) than in daytime (28%) or on weekends (21%). Male primary characters were much more likely to portray spouses or parents during the day (17%) than during the evening (12%) or on the weekend (9%).

**Table III.** Percentage of Commercials with Primary Visual Characters in Various Role Categories During Three Day Parts<sup>a</sup>

Category	N	Percent		
		Daytime (N = 971)	Evening (N = 498)	Weekend (N = 740)
Celebrity	241	8	12	14
Child/teen	161	10	7	4
Homemaker	65	5	2	1
Interviewer/demonstrator	164	10	7	4
Parent	125	7	6	4
Professional	212	7	10	12
Sex object/model	126	6	5	6
Spouse/partner	153	9	7	4
Worker	95	3	2	7
Other role	266	14	9	11
No primary visual char.	601	20	32	33

<sup>a</sup> All numbers except N represent column percentages.  $\chi^2 (20, N = 2209) = 180.1$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Analysis of Products Advertised

The analysis also revealed major differences in the products advertised in different day parts. While virtually all the daytime ads fell into either the "body," "food," or "home" categories, only 30% of the weekend ads did so. On weekends, 29% of the ads were for "automotive," and 27% were for "business products" or "services" (the category "business products" was used in only nine cases and so was combined with "services"). In the daytime period, 44% of the ads fell into the "body" category, while only 15% of the weekend ads did so. Almost no ads for "alcohol" were found in the daytime or evening sample, but 10% of those in the weekend sample fell into that category.

Further analysis revealed that portrayals by the adult primary characters varied widely with the sex of the character, the day part, and the product category. Forty-four percent of daytime male primary characters appeared in food commercials, compared to only 20% of the daytime female characters. However, on weekends, men and women primary characters appeared in food ads with about proportionately equal likelihood. Men were most likely to be primary characters in food or body commercials during daytime and prime time, but equally likely to be primary characters in automotive, body, or business product/services ads on weekends. Women were proportionately more likely than men to be portrayed in a body ad in either daytime or prime time but less likely on

**Table IV.** Percentages of Primary Settings of Commercials Aired During Three Day Parts<sup>a</sup>

Category	N	Percent		
		Daytime (N = 971)	Evening (N = 498)	Weekend (N = 740)
Kitchen of home	175	13	8	1
Bathroom of home	56	4	2	1
Other room of home	322	20	14	8
Outdoors at home	111	5	4	6
Outdoors away from home	624	15	31	44
Restaurant/bar	75	4	2	4
Business	149	6	8	7
School	21	1	1	1
Other/unclear	676	33	30	28

<sup>a</sup> All numbers except N represent column percentages.  $\chi^2 (16, N = 2209) = 271.0$ ,  $p < .001$ .

weekends. On weekends, men were proportionately more likely than women to be the primary character in an alcohol ad, but proportionately less likely than women to be the primary character in an automotive or business product/services commercial.

### Analysis of Primary Setting

Table IV details differences in the commercials' primary location or setting in the three day parts. The results indicate significant differences among the settings of the commercials appearing in the three day parts. Of the categories depicting a specific location, most daytime commercials were set in the kitchen, "other room," or "outdoors away from home." A major percentage of both evening and weekend ads were set "outdoors away from home."

Additional analysis broke these settings down by both day part and sex for those commercials with adult primary visual characters. Sex differences related to setting were small in the evening day part, and did not reach significance at the .05 level. Daytime differences were significant, however. In that day part, women primary characters were proportionately more likely than men primary characters to appear in ads in all three "indoors at home" categories. Daytime men were proportionately more likely to appear in ads set in the two outdoors categories as well as at business locations. Men and women primary characters appeared with

about proportionately equal frequency in a restaurant or bar during the daytime.

Weekend differences also appear to be large, but the chi-square test is suspect due to a low frequency in more than one fifth of the cells. These low frequencies are due to the near absence of any weekend commercials with settings of kitchen, bathroom, or school. However, results from the populous cells are still of interest. In the weekend day part, men were proportionately more likely than women to be portrayed outdoors away from home, but women were proportionately more likely than men (12% vs. 4%) to be the primary visual character in restaurant/bar settings, and both men and women appeared in business locations with proportionately equal frequency.

### Analysis of Primary Narrator

Male narrators were found to clearly form a large majority in all day parts; however, significant differences in the proportion of male and female narrators among the day parts were found. While male narrators were heard on virtually all weekend ads with narrators (97%), a somewhat smaller percentage (91%) were found in the evening ads. For the daytime commercials, the percentage dropped even further (to 86%), but the narrators were still overwhelmingly male. Of the overall sample, 332 commercials did not have narrators, but even on this measure, there were day part differences. Twenty percent of all daytime commercials had no narrators, a much larger proportion than either the evening (12%) or weekends (11%).

Although the small number of women narrators in the sample makes further detailed analysis tenuous, the data does suggest that when women were heard as narrators it was overwhelmingly for products classified as "body." Sixty percent of the women narrators heard during the daytime and 62% of those heard in the evening were in commercials for "body" products.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the hypothesis that television commercials targeted to one sex tend to portray gender differently than ads targeted to the other sex. Large and consistent differences were found in the way men and women were portrayed in daytime ads aired during soap operas and the way they were portrayed in commercials during weekend

sports broadcasts. This means that the strategy of day part targeting goes beyond the relatively simple practice of matching a particular product with a particular broadcast time — detergent ads during soap operas or beer ads on weekends; it also means matching a particular image of gender with a particular audience.

Advertisers wish to make commercials a pleasurable experience for the intended audience. They construct the ads in ways that reinforce the image of gender most familiar to and comfortable for their target audience. Daytime ads, generally aimed at women homemakers, focus on the traditional stereotypical images associated with the American housewife. Products and settings were found to be those identified with home and family life, and generally involved cooking, cleaning, child care, or maintaining an attractive physical appearance. Men are portrayed as the primary characters in less than half these commercials, but when they do appear, it is generally in a position of authority and patriarchal dominance, such as celebrity spokesman, husband, or professional. The daytime men are almost always seen in ads for either “food” or “body” rather than other product categories, reinforcing the image that the housewife’s primary role is in meeting the needs of the male.

Commercials aimed at the weekend audience are quite different in both content and style. Products and settings were found to be generally associated with life away from the home and family, and the commercials frequently exclude women and children altogether. The ads and the sports programming in which they appear stress traditional stereotypes of masculinity such as the importance of physical strength and ruggedness, independence, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and daring. If family scenes are portrayed at all, they are only to remind men of their traditional responsibility as breadwinner or protector. The large percentage of weekend ads for alcoholic beverages (and their near-absence from the other two day parts) typifies the exploitation of male fantasy and escapism prevalent in the weekend day part. Automobile and truck ads also capitalize on these attitudes in such a way that the motor vehicle becomes the promised extension of either male strength, or sexuality, or both.

The women who appeared in weekend ads were almost never portrayed without men and seldom as the commercial’s primary character. They were generally seen in roles subservient to men (e.g. hotel receptionist, secretary, or stewardess), or as sex objects or models in which their only function seemed to be to lend an aspect of eroticism to the ad.

These findings are of special interest when compared with those for the prime time evening day part — the time period which has been the focus of many past studies. The evening audience is much more heterogeneous than that of either daytime or weekend day parts, and one would intuitively

expect that advertisers would select this time to air ads for products aimed at a more general audience. While this may have been true in past years, prime time has now become one of the few day parts when today's advertisers can reach what Nielsen calls "working women."<sup>3</sup> With more women working outside the home and thus away from the television set during the traditional woman-oriented daytime hours, prime time has become an increasingly important day part for advertisers seeking to sell those products, such as cosmetics, more heavily used by "working women."

It was not surprising to find, therefore, that gender portrayals during prime time are different from those of either daytime or weekends. During prime time, women were more likely to be portrayed in positions of authority and in settings away from home than they were in daytime. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to be portrayed as a parent or spouse and in settings at home than they were on weekends. In short, prime time commercials represent a more sophisticated and balanced portrayal of gender than either daytime or weekend ads. While this is doubtless a reflection of the more general nature of the audience advertisers are seeking to reach in prime time, it may also be that advertisers believe the "working woman" target audience is less than willing to accept the gender portrayals commonly seen in the other two day parts.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of the study is the magnitude of the day part differences found. In all but one comparison, differences were significant at the .05 level and in the majority of comparisons, *p* was less than .001. Large differences suggest that the television day part cannot be ignored as a variable in studying gender portrayals. Unfortunately, most past research has done just that. The results from studies such as those by Marecek et al. (1978) and Scheibe (1979), which indiscriminately mixed commercials from various day parts, must now be reevaluated. Likewise, the findings of the many studies which drew their sample only from prime time (e.g. Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Lovdal, 1989; Silverstein & Silverstein, 1974) must now be viewed with these results in mind.

This study was meant to quantify the images of men in network television commercials as a basis for further study. The limits of content analysis are well known, but the results do suggest several areas for further study. More close textual analysis needs to be conducted to examine the way commercials aimed at men work, and a Freudian analysis of beer, automotive, and business ads might be extremely revealing. The application of some of

<sup>3</sup>That is, "women who work outside the home 30 or more hours per week" (Nielsen, 1988, p. A). Evidently the sexism implied by this term is not a concern to the Nielsen company. To avoid confusion in this paper, the term "working women" (in quotation marks) will be used as Nielsen does, to mean women who work away from home. Of course, women who are homemakers and parents work at home whether or not they also work outside the home.

the newer concepts emerging from men's studies scholars could also be usefully applied. For example, Wenner & Gantz (1989) have analyzed the role sports television plays in the lives of men and Duroche (1990) has discussed the relationship between the social construction of masculinity and male perception. Works such as these may help explain how men read television commercials.

Gender images in television commercials provide an especially intriguing field of study. The ads are carefully crafted bundles of images, frequently designed to associate the product with feelings of pleasure stemming from deep-seated fantasies and anxieties. Advertisers seem quite willing to manipulate these fantasies and exploit our anxieties, especially those concerning our gender identities, to sell products. What's more, they seem to have no compunction about capitalizing on dehumanizing gender stereotypes to seek these ends. At the same time, many businesses rely on the consumer's adherence to these stereotypes to sell their products. The entire manufacturing and marketing strategy behind many products such as convenience foods, cosmetics, beer, and cars is tied to the exploitation of gender-specific behaviors. Thus, the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes has an important economic motivation for business and this is seen nowhere better than in the portrayals used in television commercials.

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