

Stereotyping in Advertisements Viewed by Children

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Advertising to children has evoked considerable controversy for a variety of reasons. This study used a sample of advertisements screened during children's television programmes to investigate the presence of stereotyping. While only low levels of stereotyping were detected in the gender dominance of advertisements and in aggression levels, clear imbalances were present in the sex of voice-overs and the ethnicity of characters. Although advertisers have a right to use themes and characters they believe will sell their products most effectively, they need also to appreciate the social implications of their activities. The Committee of Advertising Practice has issued an extensive series of codes which should promulgate advertisers' social responsibilities widely. However, careful monitoring of aggression may be necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of Code 11, Advertising to Children. Further evaluation of Code 7, People in Advertising, may also be necessary if the gender and ethnic stereotyping detected is to be addressed.

Keywords: television advertising, children, stereotyping, gender

Introduction

Since television advertising to children began, people have debated whether or not it is an ethical activity. Critics argue that advertising directed at children takes advantage of their vulnerability, and makes them want things they do not need. In particular, they express concern at the effect advertising may have on children's habits and preferences, the role it plays in influencing their sex role and occupational expectations, its power to inculcate materialistic attitudes, and the effect of these attitudes on family relationships. Indeed, some critics have argued that these problems justify banning advertising to children. Advertisers, however, suggest commercials provide information that enhances children's development and their acquisition of social skills such as decision making (see Schneider 1987). They claim self-regulation by the advertising industry will deal adequately with potential problems. While academic debate has revolved around several issues, this study has concentrated on the presence of stereotypes in a sample of advertisements screened during children's television programmes. Assessment criteria included scales published in academic literature and Codes prepared by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP).

Children's behaviour is influenced not only by the instructions they receive from others, but also by their observations of how people in their environment behave. Courtney and Whipple (1983) refer to this as observational learning and regard it as the first step in the acquisition of sex-typed behaviours. Using this premise, they suggested attractive television characters may represent influential models whose behaviour children emulate. While Courtney and Whipple found commercials did not create stereotypes, they suggested advertising could play a powerful role in reinforcing stereotypes. Their study revealed that products advertised to girls focused on themes of popularity and beauty, while boy-oriented commercials tended to concentrate on power and speed. They concluded that where children have undeveloped role expectations, and few experiences against which to assess what they see and hear, advertising has a greater influence. Boys, in particular, have a higher propensity to stereotype and could experience problems if as adults they have difficulty in accepting women in non-traditional roles.

Although researchers believe socialisation effects occur only after repeated exposure over a period of time, Courtney and Whipple found advertisements using reverse stereotypes affected children's attitudes, at least in the short term. This suggests advertising has the power to educate and bring about change, as well as reinforce the status quo.

Method

Advertisements scheduled during children's television programmes were observed and video-recorded during the first week of the May school holidays in 1989. Recording occurred between 3.45 and 5.15pm on TV2 from Monday May 8 to Friday May 12 and from 7.00 to 11.00 am on TV1 on Saturday May 13. This resulted in a total of 234 advertisements which yielded a final sample of 69 commercials after repetitions were eliminated. Forty eight percent of the sample featured food (cereals, restaurants, confectionery, beverages and snacks), 40% toys and 12% other products (acne cream, videos).

The sample was then analysed to investigate various aspects of stereotyping using two voluntary Codes issued by CAP: Code 7, People in Advertising and Code 11 Advertising to Children. (Code 11 did not come into effect until after the completion of this study). Previous studies (Moncrief & Landry 1982; Macklin & Kolbe 1984) also identified criteria that were used to assess sex role stereotyping. These criteria included gender dominance; activity levels; the level of aggression; and the sex of voice-overs, and are discussed in detail below.

Results

Gender Dominance

Male-oriented and female-oriented advertisements contained live or animated human characters who were predominantly of one sex. Gender neutral advertisements featured both sexes equally, or involved them both to a similar extent in a product-related activity. The sample was analysed to investigate whether one sex was more dominant than the other, or whether both sexes were equally represented. Advertisements featuring products traditionally aimed at one sex (i.e., dolls or cars), or which did not contain human characters, were not included in this analysis.

Table 1 summarises the results. While over half the advertisements were gender neutral, the remaining advertisements featured considerably more males than females.

Table 1. Gender representations in advertisements screened during children's television programmes

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	15	29
Female	7	14
Neutral	29	57
Total	51	100

Activity Levels

The level of activity displayed by characters in the 64 advertisements was analysed using a seven point scale developed by Macklin and Kolbe (1984); only those advertisements featuring moving humans or animated characters were assessed. Table 2 contains the results of this analysis.

Table 2. Character activity level

Amount of Movement	Advertisement Dominance		
	Male n	Female n	Neutral n
None	-	-	-
Little	2	6	2
Slow	7	5	5
Moderate	7	2	9
Active	1	-	8
Considerable	3	-	3
Very Active	-	2	2
Total	20	15	29

Although male-oriented advertisements featured slightly higher activity levels than those found in female-oriented advertisements, the gender neutral advertisements contained the highest levels of activity.

Aggressive Behaviour

Aggression encompasses hostile, injurious or destructive behaviour and so can refer to physical attacks upon people or animals, verbal abuse, and attacks on objects by people. Ten advertisements in this sample contained aggressive behaviour; seven of these were gender neutral while three were male-oriented. While this may suggest males are expected to be more aggressive than females, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from a sample this size.

Voice Overs

Advertisements were classified as having male, female or both male and female voice overs. While male voice-overs could be expected to appear predominantly in male-oriented advertisements, and female voice-overs in female-oriented commercials, the results contained in Table 3 show this was not the case.

Table 3. Sex of voice-over by gender dominance

Voice-Over	Advertisement Dominance			TOTAL n
	Male N	Female N	Neutral n	
Male	19	6	26	51
Female	1	9	2	12
Both	-	-	1	1
Total	20	15	29	64

Male voice-overs dominated; only one female voice-over appeared in male-oriented advertisements whereas several of the voice-overs in female-oriented advertisements were male. Gender neutral advertisements also contained an overwhelming proportion of male voice-overs.

Ethnicity of Characters

Commercials featuring human characters (live or animated) were classified into one of three categories. White-oriented or black-oriented advertisements contained characters of only or mainly one colour. Neutral advertisements featured approximately equal numbers of white and black characters.

Table 4. Ethnicity of models in advertisements

	Frequency	Percentage
White	61	95
Black	-	-
Neutral	3	5
TOTAL	64	100

Nearly all advertisements featured white models only and although a very small number could be classified as neutral, no advertisements featured Maori or other races.

Discussion

The four criteria used to analyse these advertisements revealed some interesting trends. While products aimed at one particular sex generally featured only that sex, products directed at both boys and girls often included both sexes in the advertisement. This suggests advertisers may be seeking to avoid stereotyping that could narrow their potential market from both sexes to only one.

However, many gender neutral advertisements aimed at adult viewers and some advertisements for children's products featured strongly stereotypical roles. CAP Code 7, referring to People in Advertising, suggests "advertisements should aim to reflect the diversity of the people of the community and the expanding range of roles for people of all ages, sexes, races and backgrounds" (General Principle 3). While interpreting and implementing this principle is subjective, this study suggests its presence is difficult to discern in at least some advertisements.

Activity levels did not vary markedly between male and female-oriented advertisements, although higher levels of aggression appeared in male-oriented advertisements. Interestingly, the highest levels of both activity and aggression appeared in the gender neutral commercials. This is not consistent with the hypothesis that advertising for "male" products uses more violent imagery, although "female" products exhibited low levels of aggression. The small cell sizes make it difficult to draw more than tentative conclusions about this aspect of stereotyping. However, that aggression was detected at all, regardless of its sex-orientation, is alarming. CAP Code 11 states: "Advertisements should not clearly portray violence or aggression" (2.i), although it does not suggest how to differentiate between rough and tumble play and aggression. Given the evidence that children may imitate actions depicted in advertisements, commercials may require closer appraisal to evaluate the effectiveness of this Code.

Voice-overs showed male dominance in both male-oriented and gender neutral advertisements, and male voices had a strong presence in female-oriented advertisements. Conversely, only a very small proportion of female voice-overs appeared in male-oriented and neutral advertisements. Given this imbalance, there is a possibility that children will believe men's voices have greater credibility and authority than women's voices.

Current advertising, with its dominant use of white characters, does little to encourage a view of New Zealand as a multi-cultural society. Although 1986 census figures classify 81% of the population as of European ethnicity, this does not explain the lack of Maori or other races in advertisements, and is inconsistent with aspects of CAP Code 7 cited earlier.

Conclusions

Although advertisements screened during children's viewing hours generally perform well in terms of gender representations, there are some areas for concern. In particular, the presence of aggressive behaviour, the predominant use of male voice-overs, and the lack of Maori and other races do not appear to accord with principles espoused in CAP Codes. Although advertisers have a right to screen whatever will promote their products most effectively, they need also to recognise overseas research suggesting children are easily influenced by stereotypes. Thus advertising using and endorsing stereotypical roles may be affecting children's social development as well as their purchase behaviour. Although it could be argued that children are more likely to learn behaviour patterns from the programmes they watch, their parents and their peers, this does not absolve advertisers from the responsibility of selecting their promotional material with regard for its potential social impact.

While the Codes issued by industry groups may promote a greater awareness of the issues discussed above, advertising to children requires on-going evaluation to ensure these Codes operate effectively. In particular, further work on measuring comprehension and stereotyping is needed to address issues raised by critics and to maintain the credibility of industry self-regulation.

References

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