

THE PORTRAYAL OF U.S. & U.K. WOMEN'S ROLES IN ADVERTISING: TESTING THE MIRROR THEORY

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ABSTRACT

A debate over the past forty years has centered on the role of television advertising. The two dominant positions in this debate have been the "mold" and "mirror" theories. The "mold" theory states that advertising leads societal attitudes, values, and beliefs while the "mirror" theory suggests the opposite. The majority of work supporting these positions comes from earlier studies conducted in the United States. However, this study sought to test the validity of the "mirror" by examining the portrayal of women in the UK television advertising, and comparing results with those of an earlier U.S. television advertising study.

Keywords: Television Advertising, Roles of Women, Mirror Theory

INTRODUCTION

Television advertising is a part of life in modern societies. In 2012, television advertising expenditures in the United States exceeded \$75 billion (Geskey, 2013). However, just what role television and indeed all advertising plays in these societies is a point of debate. Two major areas of thought stand in opposition to each other on this topic. One position holds that advertising influences the values and beliefs of the society in which it exists (Pollay, 1986). The counter position states that advertising is a reflection of society's values and beliefs (Holbrook, 1987).

Previous research (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Ferrante, Haynes, & Kingsley, 1988) on United States (U.S.) television advertising indicates that the portrayed roles of demographic groups in television advertising tend to lag behind the actual demographic changes in these groups. This lag effect, by virtue of its reactive nature, gives credence to the "advertising as a mirror" theory supported by Holbrook, rather than the "advertising as a mold" theory posited by Pollay.

HISTORIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Increased pressure from the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, led to greater interest in studies that focused on sexual stereotyping. The results from early 1970s' studies

provide evidence that television advertising did not portray women as autonomous, independent human beings, but primarily as sex-typed (Courtney & Whipple, 1974).

In the celebrated study of sex-role stereotyping in British television advertisements by Manstead and McCulloch (1981) autonomy, expertise, and authority characterize male roles. Conversely, females were shown as consumers of products and occupying roles defined primarily in relation to other people. An analysis of role portrayals in British magazine advertisements reveals women infrequently depicted in non-traditional activities and more commonly depicted as sex objects (Lysonski, 1984). A study by Hamilton, Haworth, and Sardin (1984) found that advertisements portraying less restricted, more contemporary female roles were consistently found to enhance the marketing effectiveness of brand advertising (Hamilton et al., 1984). Additionally, if the depiction of women is derogatory or demeaning, some women might take offense and react negatively to the company featuring these advertisements (Lysonski, 1984).

An extension and refinement of the Manstead and McCulloch study (1981), replicated by Harris and Stobart (1986), further reinforced the original findings of the Manstead and McCulloch study. Harris and Stobart (1986) also conclude that women in television advertisements appeared more frequently in the home and in dependent roles. Furthermore, the portrayal of women presents them as products users and associated with domestic goods (Harris & Stobart, 1986). Another study (Ferrante, Haynes, & Kingsley, 1988) revealed that although some advertising changes did occur with regard to the stereotyping of women, the role portrayal of women still centered on the home, while the role portrayal of men still focused on the business world.

METHODS

Using past research on U.S. television advertising as a starting point, this study attempted to test the validity of the "advertising as a mirror" theory by comparing television advertising aired in the U.S. to television advertising aired in another society. Due to long shared histories and numerous societal commonalities, television commercials aired in Great Britain were chosen for comparison. The study hypothesized these societies should exhibit similarities in the manner in which television advertising portrays demographic groups. In particular, the current work focused on the comparative portrayed roles of women in British and American television advertising.

The reasons for this decision were two fold. First, the recent increase in the study of sexual stereotyping provides strong background support and documentation. Second, this focus allowed for replication of a previous study to compare results Ferrante et al., 1988).

The method of research used in the current as well as the replicated study was content analysis. A simple explanation states that "Content analysis is a scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative, and generalizable description of communications content" (Kassarjian, 1977).

The total communication stimuli is broken down into analyzable elements and placed into specific categories. This study examined three elements: voice-over, on-camera representative, and background characters. Voice-overs are defined as off-camera, vocal messages. The element categorization is male, female, or a combination (chorus). The on-camera representative is

defined as a visual character who either comes into physical contact with, or verbally endorses the advertised product. Background characters are defined as on-camera figures, who while not directly involved in the endorsement of the advertised product, appear for more than three seconds, or have at least one line of dialogue. The categories for on-camera representatives and background figures appear in Tables 1 and 2.

Content analysis used in the current study was consistent with the method employed by Ferrante, Haynes, and Kingsley (1988). These studies were based on the 1972 work of Dominick and Rauch whose research was considered the foundation in the field. The original categories were followed as closely as possible to ensure a high rate of inter-judge reliability. A review of each commercial attempted to determine the following: (a) the gender of the off-camera announcer (voice-over); (b) the gender of the on-camera representative; (c) the location of the commercial (setting); (d) the occupation of the characters portrayed; and (e) the age of the characters portrayed. This study omitted the category of product type because of unacceptable inter-rater reliability.

The sample was drawn from commercials, which aired from July 31, 2011 to August 20, 2011 on the major British television networks (BBC1, BBC2, ITV/LTV, & Channel 4). In order to test a representative sample, commercials were taken from all time slots, morning (7:00-10:00 a.m.), daytime (1:00-4:00 p.m.), early evening (6:00-8:00 p.m.) and late prime-time (8:00-11:00 p.m.).

Again, following the method of previous studies (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Ferrante et al., 1988), the study included only those characters who appeared on-screen for three or more seconds or who had at least one line of dialogue. The study did not code children, network promotional advertising, or entertainment advertising. A total number of 159 male and 137 female characters were coded in the research. The sample encompassed 258 commercials.

At a pretest, two independent raters coded the characters appearing based on the previously established guidelines. To ensure an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability, each rater independently coded a sample of thirty commercials. The results of this pre-test showed inter-rater reliability average 93.1% with a range across categories from 86.4% to 100%. For the entire study, the inter-rater reliability average was slightly less than the pre-test (90.4%).

The research results of each category were compared to the U.S. study of Ferrante, Haynes, and Kingsley (1988) using a one-tailed t-test. Since differences between each study's categories are apparent through visual inspection, there was no utilization of a two-tailed t-test. Instead, a one-tailed t-test examined whether or not this study's results were significantly different (greater or less than) the results of Ferrante, Haynes, and Kingsley (1988). The null hypothesis was that a significant increase (or decrease) between each U.S. category and the current research category did not exist. The alternative hypothesis stated that a significant increase (or decrease) between the results of each study did exist.

Tables One and Two contain the results of the one-tailed t-test. A single asterisk denotes a significant difference (increase or decrease) between two categories at an alpha level of .05. A double asterisk and a triple asterisk represent significant differences at alpha levels of .01 and .001 respectively.

Table 1. Gender of Voice-Over Announcer, On-Camera Representative, and Occupation, U.S. and U.K.

	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>U.K.</u>
Population	N=763	N=258
Voice-Over	n=763	n=258
Male	83.1%	81.0%
Female	8.1%	16.1%*
Chorus	8.8%	2.9%**
On-Camera Product Representative	n=326	n=240
Male	57.4%	54.6%
Female	42.6%	45.4%
Occupation of Females	n=329	n=137
Wife/Mother	53.5%	37.4%***
Flight Attendant	0.3%	0.8%
Model	7.0%	4.9%
Celebrity	6.7%	2.9%
Cook/Maid/Servant	2.4%	0.8%
Secretary/Clerical	2.1%	1.6%
Businessperson	3.0%	7.3%*
Others	25.2%	44.0%
Occupation of Males	n=316	n=159
Husband/Father	23.4%	19.6%
Athlete	0.9%	4.7%
Celebrity	5.4%	5.4%
Construction Worker	3.5%	0.0%
Salesperson	4.1%	5.4%
Businessperson	15.8%	13.5%
Pilot	0.6%	0.7%
Others	46.2%	50.7%

Note *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 2. Setting and Age of Male and Female Characters, U.S. and U.K.

		<u>Females</u>	
		<u>U.S.</u>	<u>U.K.</u>
Setting		n=609	n=228
	Home	30.2%	32.5%
	Outdoors	21.2%	12.2%*
	Business	13.1%	11.4%**
	Limbo	15.6%	13.8%
	Restaurant	0.0%	8.9%
	Combination	4.4%	13.1%**
	Others	15.4%	8.1%
Age		n=609	n=228
	Young (20-35)	69.8%	66.7%**
	Middle (36-50)	25.0%	25.2%**
	Old (50+)	5.3%	8.1%**
		<u>Males</u>	
		<u>U.S.</u>	<u>U.K.</u>
Setting		n=489	n=270
	Home	14.7%	18.9%
	Outdoors	26.2%	31.7%
	Business	24.5%	13.5%**
	Limbo	10.2%	8.8%
	Restaurant	0.0%	6.8%
	Combination	3.1%	8.8%**
	Others	21.3%	11.5%
Age		n=609	n=270
	Young (20-35)	40.5%	52.7%**
	Middle (36-50)	46.0%	33.1%**
	Old (50+)	13.5%	14.2%

*p<.05 **p<.01

Note: The Setting category "restaurant" was merged into "other" in the U.S. Study, as the percentage of characters appearing there was negligible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A visible difference exists between the percentages of women used as off-camera representatives (the voice-over category) in Great Britain versus the United States. While the female voice-over is more prevalent in Great Britain than in the United States, the lower usage of chorus voice-over, rather than a drop in the use of male voice-overs, is responsible for the majority of the difference. These results are consistent with previous findings (Mamay & Simpson, 1981; Ferrante et al., 1988; Geis, Brown, Jennings, & Porter, 1994) that explain the predominance of male voice-overs due to the higher perceived authority value of the male voice.

The results of this study found commercials airing on British television to portray women's occupational roles in a stereotypical manner. Census figures from 1987 showed 62.6% of British women aged 16-65 as part of the labor force. This figure is almost a 100% increase from the 1977 figure of 31.6%. However, the largest category seen in commercials was that of wife/mother. The lag effect in advertising seemed noticeable when advertisers deal with women's occupations. These findings support earlier studies, which showed women appearing in predominantly traditional or submissive roles.

Past research on British magazine advertising (Lysonski, 1985) revealed a trend towards similar role portrayal. Over a seven-year period, the number of women in dependent or housewife/mother roles dropped significantly. However, no increase was seen in the number of women in career-oriented roles although there was a significant increase for women in the work force.

While the prevalent characterizations portrayed women in stereotypical roles, this study also found women portrayed in a broad spectrum of occupational roles. No one role stood out significantly; hence the large percentage of women in the "other" category. Furthermore, the female characters in this category were often young and perceived as single and non-dependent. This research echoes the results of similar studies (Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Harris & Stobart, 1986) in finding that while the portrayals of women constitute a wider variety of roles; overall, the stereotypical roles are still prevalent. While advertising appears to be changing, its role portrayals still lag far behind actual shifts in the make-up of society. In this respect, British and American television advertising share a common problem.

The "setting" category findings coincided with the occupation findings, showing women in stereotypical locations. As with the U.S., the largest category of setting for female characters was in the home. Existing research notes a shift of female characters away from traditional settings (i.e. the home). Findings by Merlo and Smith (1987) concluded that while advertisers are slowly shifting women's settings, they are hesitant to place women in traditional male settings (i.e. outdoors). Comparison of the percentages of women appearing in outdoor settings in American versus British television advertising reveals Great Britain trailing behind the United States in the movement away from traditionalism. This pronounced lag effect supports the hypothesis that British television advertising is reactive to demographic changes rather than a cause of change.

In age classifications, television advertising in the United States and in Great Britain persists in showing female characters predominantly in the 20-35 age group, although demographic trends

in both countries show this age group to be decreasing. Television advertisers in the United States and Great Britain place emphasis on youth and beauty in their portrayal of female characters. This follows the overall trends in both societies towards a fascination with youth (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Ferrante et al., 1988).

CONCLUSION

The similar lag effects present in both television commercials airing in Great Britain and the U.S. extend the validity of Holbrook's "advertising as a mirror" theory. While the lag detracts from Pollay's "advertising as a mold" position, it also shows Holbrook's mirror to be somewhat blurry. Whether or not advertising will ever catch up with society, as a whole is a matter for further debate, and perhaps an area that warrants future examination. Additional longitudinal research will be necessary to track changes in advertising's attempts and ability to mirror society truthfully. Finally, continued cross-cultural studies can further test the societal limits of Holbrook's mirror.

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