

# Anything they want to be? Sex-role Stereotypes in Commercials During Children's Viewing Time

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Recent studies using both selected children's television programs (Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974) and selected toy advertisements (Welch, Huston-Stein, Wright & Plehal, 1979) have demonstrated striking sex differences in both the number and types of roles portrayed by male and female characters. Models for sex-role "appropriate" behaviours have appeared in numerous guises. However, the real impact of this stereotyping on the child viewer is unclear because children are exposed during their viewing time to more than just children's programs and children's commercials.

Recent surveys of Australian preschoolers (Holman and Braithwaite, 1982) indicate that while the range in amount of television viewed by preschoolers is considerable (0-53 hours per week) the weekly average is quite high (11.26 hours in summer and 16.5 in winter months). Children's viewing hours are set between 3.30 and 7.30 p.m. The purpose then of the current study was to examine male, female and other role models portrayed during commercials which appeared during children's viewing time. The study analysed all television commercials appearing during children's viewing time for a one week period; that is, 200 different commercials, partly associated with children's programs and partly associated with adult programs, appearing during children's time. The nature of the product, type of setting, type of advertisement, and promise in the advertisement were coded, together with behaviour, role, sex, age, and expertise exhibited for each character appearing in the commercial.

The results indicated that many non-child products are advertised during children's viewing time and that sex role stereotypes are often more marked in adult commercials. In all commercials, however, the experts were

almost always male, regardless of the user for the product; women or girls were almost always in domestic/adjunct roles or in groups; and advertisements which promised sex, family or group support used women to portray these qualities. Men or boys were more often in commercials promising independence or money and more adult commercials were informative in nature while child oriented commercials relied on affective appeal.

Much pressure is being brought to bear on changing the content in children's programs and the types of products and time for commercials during children's viewing, yet little has been done to analyse the content (roles, promise, etc.) of the commercials appearing while children watch. The present study suggests that many of the adult commercials shown during children's TV viewing hours may be more sexist than the children's programs. If this is the case, children will continue to be exposed to very strong cues regarding the traditionally appropriate place of males and females in Australian society.

## References

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