Gender Stereotypes In MTV Commercials: The Beat Goes On
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Editors’ Note: Over time we have experienced an increasing level of technical sophistication in the media. In this article the authors discuss how this growing technical sophistication has not necessarily led to an increase in gender equality as portrayed in the media. This study illustrates the negative media depictions of males and females. Our questions for you are: What are the consequences of these depictions? How do they impact the people who watch MTV?

This study examines gender portrayals and stereotyping in a sample of commercials on MTV. The findings revealed that characters in MTV commercials, like those in music videos, are stereotyped. Female characters appeared less frequently, had more beautiful bodies, were more physically attractive, wore more sexy and skimpy clothing, and were more often the object of another’s gaze than their male counterparts.

Over the past 20 years, content analyses of television and its advertising have found that women are underrepresented and portrayed in stereotypical ways (Signorielli, 1985a). This study examines gender stereotyping in a genre not previously investigated: MTV commercials.

MTV commercials have been proclaimed as trendsetters in commercial advertising (Dalton, 1985; Gershon & Gantz, 1992). Despite their innovative contributions to advertising style, MTV commercials may have patterns of gender stereotyping found in other commercials. MTV has immense appeal for adolescents and young adults and has joined the other mass media as an influential agent of socialization. Advertisers have been drawn to MTV in order to associate their products with a medium on the cutting edge of the youth culture.

Gender Roles and Television Content

Studies have consistently found that commercials are stereotyped by gender (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Signorielli, 1985a). Research conducted over the past 25 years has revealed that commercials in prime-time and weekend daytime children’s programs rarely use a woman’s voice as a voice-over. Moreover, men are presented as authoritative, even for products used primarily by women (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Lovdal, 1989; O’Donnell & O’Donnell, 1978). While men and women are more equally represented (in terms of numbers) in prime-time commercials, women are very underrepresented in commercials aired during children’s programs (Doolittle & Pepper, 1975; Riffe, Goldson, Saxton, & Yu, 1989).

Some recent studies (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Ferrante, Haynes, & Kingsley, 1988; Lovdal, 1989) have examined voice-overs, occupation of major characters, product spokespersons, and general product categories, comparing findings from recent samples of commercials with those of studies conducted in the 1970s. In short, these analyses found little overall change in the presentation of men and women in commercials aired during the prime-time hours.

Standards for attractiveness, particularly in commercials, also appear to be sexually stereotyped. For example, a content analysis of 4,294 commercials found some form of attractiveness message once every 3.8 commercials and that “attractiveness is more associated with women than with men and that men (via authoritative voice-overs) are forging this attractiveness-women link” (Downs & Harrison, 1985, p.17).

MTV, It’s Audience, and Content

Almost 6 out of 10 television households receive MTV as part of their basic cable service (MTV Research, 1991). As MTV grew in popularity and its audience increased in size, companies who wanted to reach young people found that MTV was an important outlet for their commercial messages. In 1991, 80% of
MTV’s audience was between the ages of 12 and 34. Moreover, one quarter of the audience was between the ages of 12 and 17, an adolescent audience much larger than that reported for other television networks (MTV Research, 1991). In addition, adolescent viewers spend an average of over two hours a day watching MTV (Sun & Lull, 1986).

Whereas research has not yet examined gender stereotyping in MTV commercials, several studies have analyzed the characters in music videos. For example, Brown and Campbell (1986), using a sample of music videos from MTV and BET (Black Entertainment Television), found that women and blacks were in the minority on MTV. White men were seen most often and usually were the center of attention, while women and blacks remained in the background. Similarly, Sherman and Dominick (1986) found that women and minorities were underrepresented in samples of music videos on MTV and on network television.

Vincent, Davis, and Boruszkowski (1987), using the consciousness scale developed by Pingree, Hawkins, Butler, and Paisley (1976), found that 56.9% of the portrayals of women in concept music videos (videos that told a story) were condescending. Overall, the depiction of gender roles was traditional, and sexism was high. In a follow-up study using samples of concept videos taken 18 months apart (Vincent, 1989), most of the videos had all male performers and portrayed women condescendingly. There was, however, a significant rise in the number of videos that presented women as “fully equal” to men between the videos taped during the summer of 1985 and those taped during the winter of 1986-1987, from 15.5% to 38.5%. Conversely, there were also small but significant increases in the amount of sexy or alluring clothing (lingerie, bathing suits) and nudity in the later sample as compared to the earlier one. Similarly, Seidman (1992) found that females were more likely than males to wear sexually revealing clothing. Finally, both males and females were portrayed in sex-typed occupations.

These findings to date focus only on the content in music videos themselves, not in the ads inserted into the programs. The study will extend the literature by examining gender portrayals in the ads on MTV. The focus of this study is on the frequency and type of portrayals of females compared to males in the ads.

Two broad research questions guided the study. The first asks how men and women are portrayed in MTV commercials and hypothesizes that both men and women will be portrayed in stereotypical ways. Five specific hypotheses relating to gender images in MTV commercials were tested:

- Female characters will appear less frequently than male characters in MTV commercials.
- Female characters will be more likely than male characters to be portrayed as having very fit bodies.
- Female characters will be rated as more attractive than male characters.
- Female characters will be more likely than male characters to wear skimpy or sexy clothing.
- Female characters will be more likely than male characters to be the object of another’s gaze.

The second research question focuses on whether commercials for different types of products have a male or female gender orientation. In short, are there recognizable differences in terms of the types of products that are associated with men and women?

**Method**

A sample of MTV commercials was recorded on videotape during five weekdays in mid-November 1991. Six hours of MTV programming were recorded each day, half between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00 P.M. and half between the hours of 9:00 P.M. and midnight, the hours (after school and late evening) when adolescents are most likely to watch MTV.

In total, 550 commercials were recorded. Eliminating repeat commercials, the final sample consisted of 119 individual commercials. These commercials were equally likely to be found in the after-school and late
evening hours. The high rate of repetition, both within and across the time parameters, implies that there is a greater likelihood that the images in these commercials will be seen (and perhaps remembered) by viewers. In order to reflect the actual content of the time frame in which the commercials were sampled, the data for each commercial were weighted by the number of times it appeared in the entire sample of 550 commercials.\(^2\)

The recording instrument consisted of two separate units of analysis, the commercial and the major characters. A commercial was operationalized as an advertisement with the intent to sell or promote a product, service, event, etc. This operationalization excluded promotions relating to MTV itself, such as contests, surveys, and MTV programming. PSAs and other informational spots were also excluded.

The type of product (or service) advertised was coded using a 32-product coding scheme that was collapsed into six categories:

**Personal products:** appearance, hygiene, and health-related products \((n = 31\) unweighted; 136 weighted).

**Entertainment:** games, toys, musical equipment and accessories, and video game paraphernalia \((n = 26\) unweighted; 121 weighted).

**Clothing & Accessories:** clothes, shoes, handbags, jewelry, and like products \((n = 16\) unweighted; 97 weighted).

**Media Products:** books, magazines, movies, television shows, and like products \((n = 16\) unweighted; 84 weighted).

**Food & Drink:** both nutritious and non-nutritious foods, all restaurants, and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages \((n = 18\) unweighted; 68 weighted).

**Other:** cars, services, household products, and like products \((n = 12\) unweighted; 35 weighted).

Two separate measures of gender orientation were used. The first, visual gender makeup, was operationalized as the physical presence of males and/or females in the commercial. A commercial with a male gender makeup had only males present. A commercial with a female gender makeup had only females present. A neutral gender makeup commercial contained both males and females. Categorizing a commercial as "cannot code" meant that there were no characters. The second measure of gender orientation was the gender of the user of the product. A product user was operationalized as someone who held, demonstrated, touched, or was in any way physically associated with the product. These two measures isolated only male and only female orientations to focus on the most pure cases of gender orientation.\(^3\)

The second unit of analysis was the major character (or characters) within a commercial. Major characters were operationalized as humans who were central to the action of the commercial; in short, a commercial's basic nature and selling intent would be changed if this character did not appear. Announcers were not considered characters unless they appeared visually in the commercial. Basic demographic information about the major characters was coded, including gender, race or ethnicity, and social age (stages of the life cycle, ranging from infancy to old age).

Physical attractiveness was assessed by four codings. The first item measured the body type or level of fitness and masculinity of the character. It had three values: (1) out of shape (poor posture, flabby, soft, weak), (2) average fitness (little or no focus on masculinity or the body), or (3) very fit (muscular). Second, the character was rated on a 5-point attractiveness scale, ranging from (1) repulsive/ugly to (5) very attractive (stunning, above average appeal). Attractiveness was defined as the apparent physical attractiveness of the character (as opposed to the actor/actress) as s/he was portrayed within the commercial. Coders relied on the commercial context in making attractiveness judgments focusing on how the producers framed the character in order to eliminate their own subjective assessments of physical attractiveness. Third, coders also judged whether the character wore skimpy or sexy clothing, using a 4-point scale ranging from (1) neutral (non-sexy) clothing to (4) outright nudity. The final attractiveness item assessed whether the character was set up as
the object of other characters’ attention or
admirng gazes.

Fifty commercials (42% of the individual
commercials) were selected and independently
coded by two separate coders in order to
provide data for the reliability analysis.
Intercoder agreement was estimated using
Krippendorff’s (1980) alpha. The following
reliability coefficients were calculated:
product type (.98); visual gender orientation
(.94); gender orientation of the user (.89);
gender (.96); race (.88); body type (.75);
attractiveness (.91); sexy clothing (.86); and
object of gaze (.75). All of these variables
were nominal in nature except for two ordinal
measures—body type and attractiveness.

Findings

The demographic makeup of the characters in MTV commercials parallels the
distribution of characters in music videos (see,
for example, Sherman & Dominick, 1986).
Almost half of the characters (48.5%) were
young adults (about 18 to 25 years), and
a little more than a quarter (27.4%) were adults
(about 26 to 60 years). Relatively few
characters were portrayed as adolescents
(11.1%) or as elderly (12.1%). Children
(1.0%) were almost invisible in this sample.
More than 9 out of 10 characters (95%) were
white. The remaining 5% included all other
racial/ethnic groups (black, 2.3%; Asian, 2.1%;
Hispanic, 0.6%).

There was support for hypothesis 1.
Males appeared slightly more often (54.4%)
than females (45.6%) in the sampled MTV
commercials (‘‘goodness of fit’’ $\chi^2$ based on a
50/50 distribution was 4.1, df = 1, $p < .05$).
There was also support for hypothesis 2.
Women were more likely than men to be
portrayed as having very fit or beautiful
bodies, $\chi^2 (2, N = 489) = 96.3, p < .001$.
Almost three quarters of the men were rated as
having average bodies, while more than three
quarters of female characters (77.4%) were
rated as having very fit or beautiful bodies.

There was also support for hypothesis 3.
Females were rated as more attractive than
males, $\chi^2 (3, N = 517) = 206.6, p < .001$.
More than half of male characters were placed
in the middle category of the attractiveness
scale, with slightly more than one third rated
as attractive. Hardly any male characters
(2.2%) were rated as extremely attractive or
beautiful. Conversely, more than half of
female characters were rated as extremely
attractive or beautiful, and almost one quarter
were rated as attractive. Few female characters
were rated as neutral in attractiveness (15.1%)
or unattractive (8.0%).

Hypothesis 4 was also supported. Female
characters were more likely than male
characters to be portrayed wearing skimpy or
sexy clothing, $\chi^2 (2, N = 513) = 148.0, p <
.001$. The clothing worn by almost all (93.5%)
males characters was rated as neutral. A small
percentage of male characters (6.5%) were
coded as wearing clothing that was somewhat
sexy. While slightly less than half the women
in the sample (46.2%) were coded as wearing
neutral clothing, comparatively large
percentages of women were coded as wearing
somewhat sexy (24.4%) or very sexy (29.4%)
clothing.

Finally, there was support for hypothesis 5.
Female characters were more likely than
male characters to be the object of another
character’s gaze, $\chi^2 (1, N = 522) = 94.7, p <
.001$. One out of five male characters (19.1%)
was the object of another character’s admiring
gaze. In contrast 6 out of 10 female characters
were the object of another’s gaze. When one
character directed his or her gaze upon
another character the object of the gaze was a
female almost three quarters of the time.

The second focus of the study examined
the gender orientation of the commercials.
The analysis revealed that a majority of the
commercials were oriented toward both men
and women in regard to the visual presentation
of the sexes and the user of the product. When
focusing, however, on those commercials that
included only men or only women more
commercials were oriented towards men than
women. The measure of visual gender makeup
indicated that 23.7% of the commercials had
only males while 9.6% had only females. The
measure of the gender of the user of the
product revealed that in 4 out of 10
commercials only men touched, demonstrated,
or were physically associated with the product.
Women, on the other hand, were primary
product users in 2 out of 10 commercials. For
both measures purely male orientations were
found over twice as many times as purely
female orientations.
The relationship between gender roles and the type of product advertised in MTV commercials was examined by looking at the crosstabulations of the type of product advertised with two measures of gender orientation—(1) the visual gender orientation of the commercial and (2) the gender orientation of the user of the product.

For the relationship between the type of product advertised and the visual gender orientation of the commercial, most of the commercials had visual representations of both men and women (85.7% of media products; 62.5% of personal products; 57.4% of food products; 42.3% of clothing; and 31.4% of entertainment products).

When only one gender was represented, the gender was more likely to be a male than a female, except for commercials for personal products. For example, 38.1% of the commercials for clothing featured only men while only 15.5% of these commercials featured only women. Only males were seen in 32.3% of the commercials for entertainment products while 4.1% of these only featured women.

More than one tenth of the commercials showing only males were for food and drink, 7.0% were for media products, 28.9% for clothing, 30.5% for entertainment, and 17.2% for personal products. On the other hand, there was a somewhat different product distribution for commercials with only females. More than three quarters of these commercials were for personal products (55.8%) and clothing (28.8%) and one tenth were for entertainment products. Only 5% of the commercials showing only women advertised media or food-related products.

Commercials with only male product users were somewhat equally divided among the four categories, but with females almost three quarters of the commercials with only female product users were for personal products.

Personal products were the only type of commercials more likely to have female rather than male users (55.1% vs. 41.2%). More than half of entertainment commercials had male users and one third (33.1%) had no specific user. Clothing commercials usually had male (39.2%) or both male and female users (30.9%). Similarly almost half of the commercials for food or drinks were classified as having both male and female users. Finally, more than 6 out of 10 commercials for media products could not be classified by the specific gender of the user.

Discussion

Commercials on MTV are gender-stereotyped. Even though a large percentage of commercials were geared toward both men and women, the data consistently revealed that when one gender was the target of a commercial, the target was typically male. The visual gender makeup of the commercial and the gender of the user had more than twice as many only male commercials as only female commercials. It is particularly interesting to note that males were far more likely than females to handle or control the object being advertised. This may reveal a bias on the part of advertisers that males are more effectively associated with the strengths of a particular product than females.

The types of products classified as male and female also revealed a gender bias. The product type most often oriented toward males was entertainment-related. In contrast, the product type most often oriented toward females was personal products—products with the primary purpose of improving or enhancing the physical attractiveness of the buyer. While commercials with only male characters included products reflecting fun and action, commercials with only female characters focused on products related to looking good. These gender associations with particular product types reveal that in regard to the specific users of the products and the visual nature of the commercials there were stereotypical designations of women's and men's roles.

The analyses of character attributes also revealed that commercials on MTV were filled with stereotypical information about gender roles. Female characters in these commercials appeared less frequently, had more beautiful bodies, were more physically attractive, wore more sexy and skimpy clothing, and were more often the object of another's gaze than male characters. All of these findings supported the idea that visual attention was highly emphasized for female characters. The portrayals in these commercials reveal a disturbing message: The primary purpose of
women’s effort is to “look good” and to be the object of the visual attention of others.

This study revealed that despite MTV’s status as a “cutting edge” genre of television, MTV’s advertisers continue to utilize stereotyped images and appeals in their commercials. Consequently, the messages about gender roles that adolescents might learn from MTV commercials uphold traditional restrictive views of men and women. On the whole the findings of this study, while examining somewhat different variables, corroborate findings from recent content analyses of commercials in prime-time programs illustrating the persistence of sex-role stereotypes (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Ferrante et al., 1988; Lovdal, 1989).

This study indicated that MTV commercials preserve and perpetuate stereotypes about women. If adolescents, as is likely, utilize MTV as a source of social learning about gender roles, then they receive warped views of the roles and responsibilities of women in society. While we cannot say there is a causal relationship between commercial content and social problems like rape, eating disorders, and discrimination in the workplace, MTV commercials in no way contribute to a reduction of misconceptions about women and women’s roles in society. As a popular maxim states, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.”

References


Dominick & J. E. Fletcher (Eds.), Broadcasting research methods (pp. 235-251). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

