

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN TELEVISION ADVERTISING IN GREAT BRITAIN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

Jeff Bickel, Miami University  
Ronald K. Taylor, Shippensburg University

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## ABSTRACT

A great deal of debate 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 studies conducted in the United States. However, this study sought to test the validity of the "mirror" by examining the portrayal of women in British television advertising, and comparing results with those of an earlier U.S. television advertising study. Due to long shared histories and numerous societal commonalities, television commercials aired in Great Britain were chosen for comparison. This 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 portrayed roles of women in British advertising. The reasons for this decision were twofold. First, an increase in the study of sexual stereotyping provided strong background support and documentation. Second, this focus allowed replication of a previous study to compare results (Ferrante, Haynes, and Kingsley, 1988).

The method of research used in the current as well as the replicated study was content analysis. This investigation examined three elements: voice-over, on-camera representative, and background characters. 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 portrayed. The null hypothesis stated that a significant increase (or decrease) between each U.S. category and the current research category did not exist. The alternative hypothesis was that a significant increase (or decrease) between the results of each study did exist.

The sample was drawn from commercials (all time slots) which aired from July 31, 1992 to August 20, 1992 on the major British television networks (BBC1, BBC2, ITV/LTV, and Channel 4). The sample encompassed 258 commercials. 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. The results of the current study found commercials airing on British television portrayed women's occupational roles, settings, and age in a stereotypical manner.

Finally, the lag effects present in both television commercials airing in Great Britain and the U.S. study extended the validity of Holbrook's "advertising as a mirror" theory. While the lag detracts from Pollary'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. Additionally, future longitudinal research will be necessary to track changes in advertising's attempts and ability to truthfully mirror society. Continued cross-cultural inquiries can further test the societal limits of Holbrook's mirror.

References are available upon request.

Dr. Ronald Taylor  
330 Shippen Hall  
Shippensburg University of PA  
Shippensburg, PA 17257