

## *Subtle Sex-Role Cues in Children's Commercials*

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*Different production techniques for boys' and girls' ads create formal patterns that convey implicit meanings of masculinity and femininity.*

Sex stereotyping in the content of both television programs and commercials aimed at children and adults has been demonstrated repeatedly. Males outnumber females in programs and in commercials, particularly those directed at children (1, 2, 6, 7). There is an even greater imbalance when the experts or spokespersons for a product are examined. Whether on-camera or off-camera in the form of a voice-over, spokespersons are usually male. Television also provides stereotyped portrayals of the behavior and products used by males and females. In advertisements, women are usually shown using cosmetic or household products and girls play with dolls and miniature domestic implements. In children's programs, females are deferent and do little. Boys play with vehicles, competitive games, and war games, and men are associated with cars, sports, and the like. Males are more aggressive, dominant, and independent (6, 7). These content messages are blatant, obvious, and exaggerated versions of sex stereotypes.

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Our purpose in this study was to examine a more subtle level of messages that may be conveyed through the *forms* used in the medium. Form, as opposed to content, refers here to production techniques such as the level of action or movement, pacing, camera techniques such as cuts, zooms, and animation, and auditory features such as music, sound effects, and narration. All of these are relatively independent of content. In a cursory examination of toy commercials, it appeared that commercials directed at boys and those directed at girls differed in many of these formal features. If differences in pacing, camera techniques, etc., do exist, then they may convey messages about masculine and feminine stereotypes at a level that is not easily recognized and therefore may be more influential than the more obvious content messages. The purpose of this study was to determine whether differences in form do exist between commercials aimed at boys and at girls. Two aspects of content were also examined—aggressive behavior and the gender of the narration.

*In the literature on sex stereotyping in media, relatively little attention has been given to the forms of communication as means of conveying social stereotypes.*

One groundbreaking work is an analysis of magazine advertisements by Goffman (3). His thesis, supported by extensive examples, is that messages concerning authority, dominance, and other aspects of masculinity and femininity are conveyed through such formal features as the arrangement of characters (e.g., males are placed higher than women by being taller, by standing while women sit, and so on), visual and body orientation, and many other subtle cues that have little to do with the product being advertised or the manifest behavior of the characters.

The analysis of television form in the present study was part of a larger project devoted to the identification and study of formal features in children's television programs (4). The formal features defined and scored are:

1. the level of action or activity (both by characters and by inanimate objects).
2. pace (rate of change of scenes and characters).
3. visual or camera techniques (e.g., cuts, pans).
4. auditory techniques (e.g., dialog, sound effects, music).

While these features are conceptually independent of content, some of them are correlated with violence in television programs. For example, a high level of action occurs more often with violent content than does a low level (5). These associations of form with content suggest that, while form is independent of manifest content, it is not devoid of meaning.

Toy commercials directed to boys, to girls, and to both boys and girls were compared for differences in formal features as well as violent content and the gender of narration. The intended audience was inferred from the sex of the child characters in the commercial. Male commercials contained all male characters, female commercials all female characters, and neutral commercials approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. This criterion was used rather than the sex-typed nature of the toy being advertised because it was more objective and more separate from the content of the commercial.

We expected that male commercials would have more action, be more rapidly paced, contain more cuts, pans, and visual special effects, and include more nonverbal auditory features (loud music, sound effects, and non-speech vocalizations) than would female commercials. Neutral commercials were expected to fall in between the two. It was also predicted that female commercials would have more dialog, more narration, and less aggression than male commercials.

*Sixty toy advertisements were selected from videotaped records of Saturday morning and weekday morning children's programming broadcast during the fall of 1977.*

Twenty commercials were selected in each of the three categories (male, neutral, and female). Where more than 20 commercials fit one of these categories, selection was random, except that commercials whose audio or video recording was poor in any portion were excluded.

The 60 commercials were dubbed in randomized order onto a separate tape for coding. Inter-coder agreement was at least 80 percent for all categories; coders were unaware of the purpose of the study.

The formal features coded were divided into a number of sub-categories. Action by characters was called animate; action by objects (primarily toys) was called inanimate. Three five-second time samples were coded in each commercial—the first, third, and fifth five-second intervals. For each sample, the maximum level of activity for animate characters and inanimate objects was coded on the following scale: 1 = stationary with little movement; 2 = stationary, but some parts moving; 3 = moving through space slowly; 4 = moving through space rapidly.

The sub-categories of pace were variability of scenes (changes to a new scene not previously shown) and total pace. The latter consisted of variability of scenes, as well as familiar scene changes (change to a scene previously shown), and character changes (any change in the constellation of characters within or between scenes). The pace categories were coded for the entire commercial by counting the frequency of occurrence.

The five visual effects categories were cuts (instantaneous shifts of camera view), pans and trucks (camera moves across a scene), zooms (in and out), fades and dissolves (gradual fading of image to black or to another image), and visual special effects (camera and electronic tricks such as shifts to animation, fast and slow motion, distortion of images, etc.). The frequency of each category was counted for each commercial. For pans and zooms, durations were recorded as well.

Frequency and duration of each of the auditory categories were coded as follows: Dialog by characters in the commercial was coded separately for male and female characters and for children and adults. Narration was divided into talking narration and singing narration, each of which was coded separately for male and female narrators. Nonverbal auditory features included non-speech vocalization (coded separately for males and females), sound effects (all other noises including any sound made by an object), foreground music (prominent music that did not accompany dialog), and background music (soft music or music that occurred during prominent dialog).

Four types of aggression were defined: physical aggression (hitting or threatening another person), verbal aggression (insults, derogation, angry commands), object aggression (hitting or attacking an object), and fortuitous destruction (prominent injury or destruction of an object that is not directly "caused" by a character, e.g., an explosion).

*The three types of commercials were compared on all formal features and on aggressive content, using one-way analyses of variance.*

The means and F ratios are shown in Table 1. For those variables for which both frequency and duration were measured, results were almost identical, so only the duration measurements are reported.

*Action.* The male commercials had higher levels of inanimate action than did the other two commercial types, but there was no difference in action by characters. That is, the child actors in the three types of commercials were not differentially active, but the *toys* being used were involved in more activity in the male commercials than in the neutral or female commercials.

*Pace and variability.* Male commercials had more variability in the form of changes to new scenes than did neutral and female commercials, but the three groups did not differ on total pace.

*Visual effects.* Male and neutral commercials had higher rates of cuts than did female commercials, as predicted. Contrary to prediction, however, female

Table 1: Mean levels of formal and content features for male, neutral, and female commercials

Feature	Commercial type			F ratio (2, 57)
	Male	Neutral	Female	
<u>Action</u>				
	Mean rating			
Animate	1.97	1.65	1.73	1.03
Inanimate	2.10 <sup>a</sup>	1.10 <sup>b</sup>	1.02 <sup>b</sup>	3.59*
<u>Pace</u>				
	Frequency			
Variability of scenes	2.80 <sup>a</sup>	2.30 <sup>a</sup>	2.30 <sup>a</sup>	3.44*
Total	5.35	4.30	4.10	1.80
<u>Visual effects</u>				
Cuts	9.70 <sup>a</sup>	8.45 <sup>a</sup>	5.40 <sup>b</sup>	5.01**
Fades and dissolves	.90 <sup>a</sup>	2.15 <sup>ab</sup>	3.60 <sup>b</sup>	5.27**
<u>Visual special effects</u>				
	.00 <sup>a</sup>	.15 <sup>b</sup>	.00 <sup>a</sup>	3.35*
<u>Visual effects</u>				
	Duration (percent of time)			
Pans	8	8	6	.12
Zooms	8	8	12	2.83
<u>Dialogue and narration</u>				
Child dialogue, male	4 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>b</sup>	3.06*
Child dialogue, female	0 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>a</sup>	8 <sup>b</sup>	5.28**
Total dialogue	4	4	10	1.67
Talking narration, male	50 <sup>a</sup>	50 <sup>a</sup>	10 <sup>b</sup>	17.99**
Talking narration, female	0 <sup>a</sup>	4 <sup>a</sup>	30 <sup>b</sup>	13.19**
Total talking narration	50	54	40	1.90
Singing narration, male	24	10	14	1.05
Singing narration, female	4 <sup>a</sup>	14 <sup>ab</sup>	26 <sup>b</sup>	4.73*
Total singing narration	28	24	42	1.47
<u>Nonverbal auditory</u>				
Background music	64 <sup>a</sup>	74 <sup>ab</sup>	86 <sup>b</sup>	4.35*
Foreground music	20 <sup>a</sup>	6 <sup>ab</sup>	2 <sup>b</sup>	3.24*
<u>Noise</u>				
	26 <sup>a</sup>	8 <sup>b</sup>	4 <sup>b</sup>	6.67**
<u>Aggression</u>				
	Frequency			
Physical	.30	.05	.00	1.53
Object	.45 <sup>a</sup>	.00 <sup>b</sup>	.00 <sup>b</sup>	4.54**
Total	.75 <sup>a</sup>	.10 <sup>b</sup>	.05 <sup>b</sup>	5.35**

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

Note: Action means are the mean rating per interval. Frequencies represent the number of occurrences per 30-second commercial. Durations represent the mean percent of a 30-second commercial during which the feature occurred. Means in the same row with different superscripts are significantly different at p < .05 according to Fisher's L.S.D. tests.

commercials contained more fades and dissolves than did male commercials. Male commercials were characterized by more abrupt, instantaneous shifts in view, whereas female commercials contained more slow, smooth transitions or terminations. The neutral commercials rated highest on visual special effects. This last finding was not expected and is not readily interpreted.

*Auditory features.* Differences in male and female child dialog were built in by the selection process, since the commercials were chosen on the basis of the presence of one sex or the other. One interesting finding was that female characters did very little talking in the neutral commercials, where boys were also present, whereas they talked a great deal in female commercials. The total amount of dialog did not differ for the three types of commercials.

Male talking narration was more frequent in male and neutral commercials; female narration, both talking and singing, occurred primarily in female commercials. Thus, the sex of the adult narrator was usually the same as that of the children in the male and female commercials. The narrators in neutral commercials were predominantly male, a result consistent with earlier findings. There were no differences between commercial types, however, in the overall amount of narration.

Three nonverbal auditory categories—vocalization, sound effects, and foreground music—formed a cluster called *noise*. Male commercials had more noise than the other types. Background music, however, occurred more often in female commercials, which were characterized by soft music forming a background to dialog or narration. Male commercials contained more loud music and sound effects that were highly salient.

*Aggression.* Aggression was almost exclusively limited to male commercials, object aggression and physical aggression being the primary categories. These findings suggest that, under everyday conditions, the "masculine" toys shown in male commercials are likely to elicit more aggressive behavior in the child viewer than are the toys in neutral or female commercials.

*In summary, then, commercials directed at boys contained highly active toys, varied scenes, high rates of camera cuts, and high levels of sound effects and loud music.*

In the male commercials the characters were frequently aggressive to each other or to objects, and the narrators were male. Commercials directed at girls had frequent fades, dissolves, and background music; the narrators were usually female.

The formal features that were unique to female commercials—fades and background music—convey images of softness, gentleness, predictability, and slow gradual change. At the very subtle level of visual and auditory images, then, the stereotypes of females as quiet, soft, gentle, and inactive are supported.

The neutral commercials provide a basis from which to infer what is distinctive in both kinds of sex-typed commercials. Both neutral and male commercials had predominantly male narrators, and females engaged in relatively little dialog in the neutral commercials. Female narrators and female dialog were limited, for the most part, to female commercials. Females are deferent and do not speak when males are around, but they are talkative and authoritative in the absence of males. This pattern suggests that males are portrayed as the authorities in most content areas except that small domain reserved solely for females.

Male commercials differed from the neutral commercials more often than did the female commercials. On action by objects, variability of scenes, noise, and aggression the male commercials were distinctive; the neutral commercials were similar to the female commercials. Thus, messages about what is distinctively "masculine" are conveyed through a high rate of action, aggression, variation, quick shifts from one scene to another, and a jazzed-up sound track. Some of these features are probably production techniques designed to enhance the action, speed, and toughness of masculine toys, and may, in turn, reflect the conscious or unconscious sex role stereotypes of those advertising the toys. Thus, the formal features convey and reinforce some of the messages in the content, but at a subtle and pervasive level.

*The stereotyping of male behavior and activities in these commercials is possibly more distinct than the stereotyping of comparable female behavior.*

The problems of male role stereotypes are sometimes neglected because of our frequent focus on females. The pattern of high energy, quick changes, and aggression that might be summarized as "hype" shown here may be as maladaptive as the portrayal of femininity as quiet, retiring, and limited in scope.

The formal features associated with male and female commercials were not merely polar opposites of one another. For example, male commercials contained more inanimate action and noise than did neutral commercials, but female commercials did not rate lower on these variables than neutral commercials. Conversely, female commercials contained higher rates of fades and dissolves and lower rates of cuts than the other commercial types, but neutral and male commercials differed little on these variables.

The messages about masculine and feminine behavior conveyed by the features measured here may be more influential than the blatant stereotypes presented in the content. Because these messages are subtle, they may generally go unrecognized, making them more difficult for adults to counter via training or modeling. They are more likely to be passively and unconsciously accepted by the child viewer, and may be more generalizable to other situations than the more obvious and specific content stereotypes.

Finally, the cumulative effect of contiguous presentation of manifest content through distinctive forms may be to lend those forms a stereotypic meaning. Without ever really thinking about it, a child of either sex can come to decode production features that have been stereotypically associated with masculine content as conveying the aura and expectation of male-appropriateness to *any* content with which these features are subsequently associated. The converse would hold for forms associated with manifestly feminine content. Indeed, this process may be an illustrative prototype of how children come to be media literate, that is, to be able to understand the structurally and formally transmitted meanings, as well as the more obvious content, of televised messages.

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