

A content analysis of male roles in television advertising: Do traditional roles still hold?

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Analysis of male roles in television advertising is limited. In order to remedy this, our research serves as a catalyst by providing a review of the current literature, conducting a preliminary examination of male roles in television advertising, and discussing ways for this area of research to move forward in the future. Specifically, the study conducted in this paper examines television advertising to provide insight on the depiction of males, the portrayed relations between males and other individuals, and how these depictions may have changed from 2003 to 2008. Male depictions in lead roles are contrasted using 907 primetime commercials from 2003 and 961 commercials from 2008 from the four major US broadcasting networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX). Results suggest that some aspects of male depictions in advertising are counter to, while other aspects are reflective of, the changing gender roles occurring in society.

Keywords: male gender roles; stereotypes; commercials; content analysis

The issue of gender roles and traditional portrayals of both males and females in television advertisements is an active research area. Most research compares male and female roles (e.g. Bretl and Cantor 1988; Coltrane and Adams 1997; Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Craig 1992; Ganahl, Prinsen, and Baker Netzley 2003; Lin 1997; Scharrer et al. 2006; Stern and Mastro 2004) and has led to increased understanding of the differences in male and female depictions, and how these depictions have changed over time. Recent research, however, has moved away from comparisons between gender roles and has begun to focus on the representation of a single sex, most often women (e.g. Acevedo, Nohara, and De Arruda 2006; Peterson, Xu, and Limbu 2009). Through concentrated analysis of the female role, research has investigated the frequency with which female characters are represented, the variation in female portrayals based upon age, and the roles in which females tend to be portrayed (Stern and Mastro 2004).

Investigation into the masculine role is much less widespread (Wolin 2003; for exceptions see Gentry and Harrison 2010; Kaufman 1999). Few studies exclusively analyze male portrayals in television advertising, and researchers note that the study of male gender roles has lay dormant for many years while female gender roles received the majority of the focus (Good and Sherrod 2001). The lack of attention could, perhaps, be attributed to the prevalent belief that female portrayals are in greater need of change (Gentry and Harrison 2010). Although the study of gender roles has now expanded to incorporate men, males are rarely the sole focus of academic research, but rather often serve as a comparison point to females (Rudy, Popova, and Linz 2010). In the early 1990s,

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Jolliffe (1993) suggested that there was a need for additional content analysis of male roles. However, this recommendation seems to have gone unheard; within a 33-year period, the journal *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* has published 114 content analysis studies on mass media, of which only three focused completely on males (Rudy, Popova, and Linz 2010). These data underscore the neglect that the study of males has received in academic literature. Furthermore, Rudy, Popova, and Linz (2010, 711) go on to characterize the scant attention paid to men as ‘detrimental’ to enhancing our understanding of male role portrayals. Thus, there is an expressed need within the academic community to further investigate male roles in advertising.

In addition, changing societal roles make the investigation of male portrayals necessary. Masculine roles in society are being redefined in ways that are at odds with traditional masculine traits, and men are aware of these changes (Elliot and Elliot 2005). To navigate their changing roles, many men look to advertising to reinforce their desired self-concept (Holt and Thompson 2004). As Messner and Montez de Oca (2005, 1906) point out in their inquiry into masculine depictions in sports media advertisements ‘the cultural imagery in ads aimed at young men does not simply come from images “out there” ... this imagery is linked to the ways that real people live their lives’. Given the important role that advertising plays in the development of the male self-concept, focused study of male depictions in television advertising is warranted, both to clarify how men are currently being depicted and how these depictions have changed over time.

Given the limited perspective on male roles in television advertisements, this study serves as an initial investigation of male roles by providing insight on the depiction of male roles and the portrayed relationships between men and women in television advertising. Using content analysis, 907 primetime commercials from 2003 and 961 commercials from 2008 from the four major broadcasting networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX) in the USA are reviewed. Data were collected during 2003 and 2008 not only to allow for a comparison between these two years, but also to facilitate comparison to other studies. The five-year time span between data collection periods fills a time gap in previous research and illustrates how male depictions in television advertising may have changed over time. Before analyzing the data, brief overviews of historic and contemporary gender roles are presented, and the impact of advertising in perpetuating these roles is explicated.

Conceptual development

Traditional gender roles

Wiley (1995) defines gender as consisting of ‘the expression of those traits, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that support a claim on the descriptive dimensions of masculinity and femininity’ (362). Masculinity and femininity are not biological traits such as male or female, but rather are personality traits (Fugate and Phillips 2010). Gender is a product of social interaction that creates belief systems influencing the perception of women and men and establishing acceptable patterns of behavior (Deaux and LaFrance 1998; Goffman 1979; Wiley 1995). In essence, these belief systems create normative expectations and influence individuals’ perceptions of both themselves and others, known as gender roles. Gender roles are specifically defined as behaviors or occupations that a particular gender is more likely to engage in (Fischer and Anderson 2012).

Individuals become socialized into gender roles as children with culture creating variations in gender role expectations (Witt 1997). In a study of contemporary American society, Miller et al. (2009) found that

appearance stereotypes such as pretty, having long hair, wearing dresses, jewelry, and make-up, came to mind most readily when children described girls. In contrast, activity (e.g. liking sports) and trait (e.g. Fighting, playing rough) stereotypes were more prevalent in descriptions of boys (877).

These descriptions highlight that, even as children, we are influenced by societal perceptions of what type of behavior and appearance is expected of each gender.

The academic literature further highlights the characteristics that society has come to associate with the traditional male role. Good and Sherrod (2001) suggest that conventional notions of men include positive conceptions such as 'problem solving, logical thinking, risk taking, anger expression, and assertive behavior' (204), and negative attributes such as unemotional, tough, unattached, and sexual. Consistent with Good and Sherrod's observations, Ickes (1993) states that traditional gender roles in the USA suggest that men make status and power a priority. Traditional male gender roles not only influence society's perceptions of what personality characteristics a man should display, but also have been linked to expectations of men's physical appearance. Specifically, Guy, Rankin, and Norvell (1980) found that men with more muscular physiques are perceived as possessing more traditional male characteristics than men with slender or heavier physiques.

Traditional male roles also outline the types of behaviors that men should and should not engage in. Many of the expected male behaviors parallel the attributes that traditional males are expected to possess. For example, Good, Dell, and Mintz (1989) found that men that held more traditional attitudes toward male roles were more likely to believe that men should not engage in professional help-seeking in the form of psychological treatment. Men are also expected to avoid behaviors associated with homosexuality (Pleck 1976). Specifically, Pleck, Sonenstein, and Ku (1994) found that males who held more traditional attitudes toward male roles were more likely to have homophobic attitudes. Men should also provide for their family, leaving the child-rearing and frequent interactions with their children to their wife (Levinson and Huffman 1955).

Historically, it has also been thought that men are more motivated to gain achievement through work while women are more likely to gain achievement through domestic responsibilities (Morinaga, Frieze, and Ferligoj 1993). This has led to some occupations being stereotyped as more appropriate for men, while others are viewed as more appropriate for women. Men are often characterized as holding occupations as 'accountants, college teachers, physicians, lawyers, and financial officers' and being employed in labor intensive jobs such as 'carpenters, plumbers, electricians, mechanists, construction workers, fork lift operators, bus drivers, and truck drivers' (Mansfield et al. 1991, 64). Many of these traditional male occupations are consistent with the expectation that men possess greater problem-solving and logical thinking skills, along with the idea that men are better equipped to perform physical labor.

Contemporary gender roles

Evidence suggests that gender roles in the USA may be in a state of transition. Recent education and employment trends highlight the changes. For example, fewer men (27%) than women (35%) in the age range of 25–29 earn a bachelor's degree or higher (The Independent 2010). Furthermore, in the USA men earned fewer doctorates than women (Wingert 2010).

Not only are men being surpassed by women in higher education, but they may also be losing ground in the workforce. Women currently make up '51% of all workers in the high-paying management, professional, and related occupations' (US Department of

Labor 2008). This figure may be expected to rise as men took a hard hit in the recent recession, where 74% of lost jobs were occupied by males (Cauchon 2009). Consistent with the trend toward employment equality, a study by Bosak and Sczesny (2011) found that both male and female participants were equally likely to hire or shortlist an applicant based on their job qualifications and not on the applicant's gender. As a whole, this research suggests that occupations may no longer be as gender specific as they once were.

Change is also apparent in the number of men acquiring the role of stay-at-home dad. In 2008, there were about 140,000 stay-at-home fathers, which is a one-third increase since 2002 (Aasen 2009). The boost in stay-at-home fathers may not only be due to the fact that more men than women are currently unemployed (US Department of Labor 2008) but also may be influenced by society's more open-minded attitudes, whereby staying at home to raise children is becoming less taboo for men (Grasz 2005). Some additional evidence of transitioning gender roles was revealed by Fischer and Anderson (2012), who found that employed fathers perceive themselves as having the same feminine and masculine characteristics as stay-at-home fathers. Overall, it seems as though the paradigm that child-rearing is 'women's work' is shifting to incorporate men as prominent participants in the active raising of children.

The role of advertising in perpetuating gender roles

Although the society's influence cannot be underestimated, many factors influence individuals' perceptions of gender appropriate roles. For example, advertising, working as a socialization agent, contributes to the development and perpetuation of gender stereotypes (Eisend 2010; Moschis and Churchill 1978; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Consumer socialization is a lifelong process (Ward and Wackman 1974) in which individuals develop 'consumer-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes' (Moschis and Churchill 1978, 599) by learning norms of behaviors from socialization agents, which are people or organizations that the individual regularly interacts with such as parents, peers, workplace colleagues, or as is the focus of this study, the mass media.

Advertising influences consumer behavior (Moschis and Churchill 1978), serves as a mirror reflecting current societal trends (Eisend 2010), and is also used by individuals to learn about normative expectations and to derive a sense of self (Jagger 2001; Tomlinson 1990). Gentry and Harrison (2010) found in a content analysis of 225 commercials aired during children's programming that mothers were shown as nurturing, while fathers were not. Furthermore, boys in the commercials lived in an 'action-filled, violent, animated, video-game world where heroes emerged after vanquishing monsters and villains', whereas girls were likely to play indoors and participate in nurturing activities (Gentry and Harrison 2010, 89). With research demonstrating that gender roles are reinforced through marketing efforts, it would be expected that children learn about gender appropriate behavior from the media. This assertion is supported by Thompson and Zerbino (1997) who found that higher incidences of stereotypical behaviors in cartoons led to children being more likely to report a preference to obtain a stereotypical job.

The media's influence on gender-related issues also extends into adulthood. In adult populations, advertising has been shown to influence expectations of body size (Baird and Grieve 2006; Grabe, Hyde, and Ward 2008) and gender roles (Lafky et al. 1996; Gentry and Harrison 2010). When viewed as socio-semiotic 'tools', male depictions in advertising 'do not merely "express" masculinity, rather, they play a central role in forming conceptions of masculinity' (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 22) and thus provide men with implied instructions for gender appropriate roles (Laden 2003) and body expectations.

Recent studies confirm that advertising plays an important role in men's self-concept, and report that men experience increased dissatisfaction with their bodies after exposure to idealized images of men in both print (Baird and Grieve 2006; Hatoum and Belle 2004) and television (Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn 2004) advertising.

If individuals use advertising to aid in the construction of their self-concept and learn appropriate normative behavior, it would then be expected that advertising depictions of men should parallel trends in male behavior. In the past, men have largely been portrayed as in control and aggressive (Coltrane and Messineo 2000; Craig 1992; Kervin 1990). For example, Marlboro advertising campaigns have notoriously emphasized the connection between the brand and the rugged cowboy who is imagined to live unencumbered by societal authority and constraints (Holt and Thompson 2004). Some research suggests that men embrace the Marlboro ideal in an attempt to maintain a masculine persona (Elliot and Elliot 2005). New evidence suggests, however, that these depictions may not be universally effective (Martin and Gnoth 2009) and may be influenced by the current trend toward more open-minded gender roles (Deaux and LaFrance 1998). In current commercialized representations, gender roles may be changing to mirror the social changes outlined in the discussion of contemporary gender roles.

Study description

The purpose of this study is to provide an analysis of male portrayals in contemporary television commercials. Analysis of male roles in advertising has been largely neglected in favor of depictions of females. This discrepancy may have been warranted in the past, given the speed with which female roles were changing. However, gender roles for both men and women are becoming increasingly varied, which may lead to changes in how males are represented in advertisements. This study compares data collected from 2003 and 2008 and allows for comparisons with previously collected data to occur in relatively equal increments. Specifically considered are studies of male lead characters from 1985 (Bretl and Cantor 1988), 1990 (Craig 1992), 1992 and 1994 (Coltrane and Adams 1997), and 1998 (Ganahl, Prinsen, and Baker Netzley 2003).

Hypotheses

Gender roles are becoming more varied and should be reflected in advertising with a general trend toward less traditional gender portrayals (Wolin 2003). Previous research reported increases in the occurrence in the depiction of male leads in home settings and cast in paternal roles (Bretl and Cantor 1988; Schneider and Schneider 1979). We expect this trend to continue and, therefore, we hypothesize:

- H1: There will be in a significant increase in the use of male lead characters depicted in home-based settings from 2003 to 2008.
- H2: There will be in a significant increase in the use of male lead characters depicted in paternal roles from 2003 to 2008.

As women gain a more dominant role in society and a less stereotypical role in advertising, the representation of women as sexual objects should also decrease. Past studies show that women are often treated as sexual objects by men in television commercials (Coltrane and Adams 1997; Hall and Crum 1994). Other researchers (Bretl and Cantor 1988), however, have argued that as women become more equal members of society, their roles should increase and the portrayed relationships between women and

men should also change. There is even some evidence to suggest that advertisements may be beginning to use male depictions as visual objects (Schroeder and Zwick 2004), therefore, making them subject to the same sexualization process. Furthermore, support of a potential change in the portrayal of the power dynamic between men and women comes from a study by Conley and Ramsey (2011) who found that in magazine advertisements from 2006 and 2008, men were shown as submissive to women more frequently than women were shown to be submissive to men. In line with these contemporary studies, we expect that male characters in contemporary television commercials will be less likely to sexualize women.

H3: From 2003 to 2008, male lead characters will be significantly less likely to sexualize women.

As previously stated, traditional male gender roles have even been found to influence the perception of male body images (Guy, Rankin, and Norvell 1980); with more masculine traits ascribed to more muscular physiques. However, changes in male body type are running counter to this trend; men are becoming taller and much heavier (Ogden et al. 2004). One might, therefore, expect to find greater acceptance and increased depictions of men with more realistic body types, rather than the traditional athletic male. However, advertising and other forms of mediated messages ‘routinely promote masculinity and an “ideal” male body’ (Pompper, Soto, and Piel 2007, 529). In a study comparing population versus media body sizes in the 1980s and 1990s, Spitzer, Henderson, and Zivian (1999) found that body sizes of both male models and young adult men were both increasing, with changes in media depictions attributed to an increase in muscularity, and changes in men attributed to an increase in body fat. A separate study by Leit, Pope, and Gray (2001) confirmed that male Playgirl centerfold models became increasingly muscular over the same time period. Pope et al. (1999) had similar results when studying male action toys. Assuming that television advertising follows the same trend, male depictions in television commercials may continue to promote an idealized body type.

H4: From 2003 to 2008, the depiction of male lead characters having muscular idealized body types will increase in television advertising.

Method

Given the change in gender roles, we expect to find evidence of change in television advertising depictions of males. Using content analysis and employing a longitudinal design, a study was conducted to analyze the depiction of male roles in television commercials and to consider whether these portrayals have changed.

Sample of commercials

The sample for this study consisted of commercials aired on ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC during the week of June 9–13 of 2008 from 8:00 to 11:00 pm (primetime), and those aired during the week of February 3–7 of 2003 from 8:00 to 11:00 pm. These four stations are considered to be the major networks on the US television, which collectively attract the majority of viewership during this time period (Hetsroni 2007), and are the preferred outlet for advertisers (Finke 2010). In addition, the majority of content analysis studies investigating gender roles in television commercials include an analysis of these four

networks during primetime hours (e.g. Bretl and Cantor 1988; Coltrane and Adams 1997; Craig 1992; Ganahl, Prinsen, and Baker Netzley 2003; Mastro and Stern 2003; Paek, Nelson, and Vilela 2011); therefore, this sample will lend itself to comparison to multiple studies. Finally, primetime programming targets the mainstream suggesting that any changes that are detected are more likely to be indicative of widespread changes, rather than niche targeting that might be found in different time slots. Some of the more recent studies on gender roles provided evidence to suggest that gender role portrayals in advertising were indeed shifting, thus prompting us to launch a longitudinal analysis to investigate these changes. To do so, data were collected during 2003 and 2008, and the specific dates selected were due to data collection opportunities. The time frame also allows for a comparison not only between these two years, but also to maintain the approximate five-year intervals between data points of previous studies, starting with the 1985 sample used in Bretl and Cantor (1988), the 1990 sample used in Craig (1992), the 1992–1994 sample used in Coltrane and Adams (1997), and the 1998 sample used by Ganahl, Prinsen, and Baker Netzley (2003).

Initially, the commercials for each of the broadcast stations were examined separately. Finding no significant differences between the stations, commercials were later collapsed into a single sample. The sample consisted a total of 3541 commercials with 1773 commercials from 2008 and 1768 from 2003. Consistent with previous content analysis data cleaning procedures (Bretl and Cantor 1988), only those commercials that aired from the four major broadcasting networks excluding any public service announcements and commercials advertising network programming were included in the sample. Following established methodology from past content analysis studies (Bretl and Cantor 1988), after extracting all 3541 commercials, duplicate commercials were removed within each network but not across networks. Advertisements were not removed across networks because variations in advertising guidelines among the networks allow for minor differences between commercials (Rotfeld, Abernety, and Parsons 1990). Elimination of duplicate advertisements resulted in a final sample of 961 commercials from 2008 and 907 commercials from 2003.

Coding procedure

Based on common practices within academic literature, two trained coders, working independently, coded each advertisement. Coders were not involved in the research and were not familiar with the design of the study or its purposes. The coders were two adult males (non-students) and were trained and supplied with written instructions on how to perform the categorization procedures. Coders received a codebook that guided them through the coding sheet, supplied them with rules for analysis, and defined the variables used in the study.

Coding rules and variables

The coding process required examination of the general commercial elements and details regarding the male lead, and connections between the male lead and other characters. For every commercial, coders were required to code the characterization of the male depicted in each commercial. If the male was depicted as the lead character, additional elements were recorded describing the exchanges between the male lead and any females in the commercial. (A copy of the coding sheet and operational definitions are available from the first author.)

Male characterization

If the commercial did not contain a male, if the male was a minor character, or if the male shared the spotlight with another male, coders did not continue with the coding procedure. This conceptualization of the primary character is consistent with coding used in prior studies (Bretl and Cantor 1988). If the male depicted in the commercial fulfilled the requirement of being integral to the story line and not sharing the spotlight with another male, the commercial was designated as having a male lead. Coders then went on to categorize individual characteristics of the male, the setting in which the commercial took place, and any connections with other characters as described below. Only those male characters that fulfilled a lead role were chosen for analysis to remain consistent with previous studies allowing for further comparisons. Furthermore, this type of analysis allows for independent observations facilitating the employment of χ^2 analysis.

Setting

Coders categorized the commercials containing male leads using 32 specific settings as well as 2 general categories indicating ambiguous indoor or outdoor settings. Ambiguous indoor settings were those settings that took place inside, yet an exact location could not be identified (e.g. a plain white room). Similarly, an ambiguous outdoor setting took place outside, yet the exact location could not be identified (e.g. a small patch of grass and sky was shown, but nothing else that provided for a definitive location). This characterization of setting is consistent with the coding categories used by Bretl and Cantor (1988); however, it also includes additional categories that were not covered in their study. In conducting the analysis, settings based in the basement, bathroom, bedroom, entryway, garage, kitchen, living room, residential driveway, residential yard, or workroom/home office were combined to create a new category entitled 'home-based' settings.

Paternal role

The coders were asked to determine if the male lead was depicted as a father figure in the commercial.

Sexual objectification

Sexual objectification was deemed to have occurred if the male lead character treated a female character as an object intended for sexual gratification. Derived from Coltrane and Adams' (1997) research, male characters were coded as sexualizing women if they gazed sexually at a woman or participated in flirtatious behavior.

Body type

Consistent with the classification system employed by Kolbe and Albanese (1996), which was adapted from Sheldon (1954), body types were classified as endomorphic, mesomorphic, or ectomorphic. Coders could select from these three body type categories for the male lead as well as a fourth option if the character's body type could not be determined. Coders were instructed to select 'endomorph' for those characters that appeared to have a body that was soft and spherical or rounded in appearance with an underdevelopment of muscle. The mesomorphic category described characters with bodies that were hard, rectangular, strong, tough, resistant to injury, and generally

equipped for strenuous and exacting physical demands. Finally, the ectomorphic category described those characters with a body that was linear and fragile, characterized by flatness of the chest and delicacy of the body. The body described by this category is usually thin and lightly muscled with a physique that is poorly equipped for competitive and persistent physical action.

Coders received DVDs containing the commercials from both years, a log of all commercials, the coding sheet, and instructions as described above. After the coders had independently coded all 1868 commercials, inter-coder reliability coefficients were calculated using Perreault and Leigh's (1989) method. Perreault and Leigh's (1989) method was selected because in comparison with reliability coefficient measures, this method has been found to account for differences in reliabilities due to the number of categories while focusing on the issue of reliability of the whole coding process (Kolbe and Burnett 1991). Reliabilities ranged from 82% to 100%. For complete data on all of the reliability scores, please contact the authors. Next, the authors identified areas where the coders failed to agree. The coders then reviewed the commercials that lacked agreement in an effort to reconcile differences. Disagreements that remained were resolved by the authors.

Analysis and results

First, the use of male lead characters was analyzed. Significant differences were detected in the frequency with which males were cast as the lead character in the television commercials in the years under consideration ($\chi^2 = 20.29, p < .01$), with 30% (269/961) of the 2003 television commercials, and only 21% (198/907) of the 2008 commercials, depicting males as a lead character. In comparison, previous studies have reported that over half of all primetime television commercials cast males in the lead role (i.e. Bretl and Cantor 1988; Coltrane and Adams 1997; Craig 1992; Ganahl, Prinsen, and Baker Netzley 2003). The results of this study when compared with previous reports, therefore, may suggest that men are less likely today to be depicted as the lead character in primetime television commercials than was the case in previous decades. The reason for the decline may be due to the changing role of males in society. As women obtain more equal status, the role of males must shift to accommodate the change, the result being males taking on fewer roles of prominence, a shift played out in the advertisements considered in this study.

After looking at the prevalence of the male lead character, analyses were then conducted to further understand the settings in which male lead characters were depicted and consequently test the hypotheses put forth in this study. The incidence of home-based settings (those based in the garage, entryway, living room, bathroom, bedroom, kitchen, workroom/home office, basement, residential driveway, or residential yard) significantly decreased from 41% (109/267) in 2003 to 31% (60/196) in 2008 ($\chi^2 = 5.26, p < .05$). Although the 2008 results are in line with findings from Bretl and Cantor (1988) (who found that approximately 30% of male characters included in a 1985 sample of television commercials were depicted in a home setting), the results do not support H1 which suggested that from 2003 to 2008 there would be an increase in the depiction of male lead character in home-based settings.

H2 predicted an increase in the frequency of males cast in paternal roles. In 2003, only 17% (45/267) of the commercials with male leads depicted the central male character as a father. Previous research by Coltrane and Adams (1997) obtained similar results, finding that 16% of male characters were portrayed in family roles. Analysis of our 2008 data

shows the percentage of male leads cast in paternal roles was 26% (51/197), a significant increase from the 2003 data ($\chi^2 = 5.64$, $p < .05$), supporting H2.

To test H3, which predicted a decrease in the sexualization of women, contact between male and female characters was examined. Coders assessed whether male leads in the television commercials were portrayed as treating a female character as a sex object, using the guidelines described previously. Although the frequency of sexual objectification was low in both years, analysis revealed that male leads were less likely to treat women as a sexual object ($\chi^2 = 6.78$, $p < .01$) in the commercials from 2008 than in 2003. Specifically, women were treated as sexual objects by the male lead in 10% (22/228) of the commercials in 2003 as opposed to only 3% (5/168) in 2008.

Our final hypothesis (H4) predicted an increase in male leads with idealized body types. In support of our hypothesis, the percentage of males depicted as ectomorphic (slim and fragile) decreased; however, the difference failed to reach significance ($\chi^2 = 0.85$, $p = .36$). The percentage of male leads depicted as endomorphic (soft and spherical or rounded in appearance) decreased significantly from 16% (44/269) in 2003 to 9% (18/198) in 2008 ($\chi^2 = 5.23$, $p < .05$) and, as expected, the percentage of males depicted as mesomorphic (strong and well-muscled) increased significantly from 76% (203/269) in 2003 to 86% (170/198) in 2008 ($\chi^2 = 7.66$, $p < .05$). H4 is, therefore, supported.

Discussion

To lay the groundwork for a more detailed understanding of the male role in advertising, hypotheses were developed focusing on the frequency of male depictions, the roles that males portray, the interplay between male and female characters in television advertising, and the physical characteristics of the males depicted. The design of the study allowed for a longitudinal examination of male portrayals in television ads, comparing primetime television commercials from 2003 to 2008.

The results indicate that there were changes from 2003 to 2008 in male depictions in primetime television advertising. Men were significantly less likely to be depicted as the lead character in primetime television commercials aired in 2008 as compared with 2003. When considered in light of previous research, these results tend to suggest a gradual decline in male leads that may have been taking place over the last 20 years. We also found evidence that suggests that the roles of male characters in primetime advertising are becoming more congruent with society's changing gender roles. Although men were less likely in 2008 to be depicted in a home setting, the role of father did significantly increase from 2003 to 2008. The increased use of paternal roles may be reflective of the general acceptance of men in roles related to the home and childrearing. The decrease in the sexualization of women might also be indicative of changing gender roles whereby women are obtaining more equal status within society and are, therefore, less likely to be treated as sexual objects. Interestingly, Gentry and Harrison (2010) found that commercials aired during sports programming, and therefore more directly targeting the male audience, did not present these updated representations of the male role, but instead continued to foster traditional male stereotypes. Finally, we observed a difference in the physical depiction of male lead characters; however, the change is counter to general population trends in the USA. Although the male population in the USA is growing more obese (Ogden et al. 2004), the males depicted in lead roles in television advertisements continue to represent the traditional male with an idealized physique. So, despite the changing role of men in society, television commercials continue to present variations of the 'Marlboro Man.'

Limitations, future research, and implications

In recent years, content analysis has been used to explore the depiction of gender roles in television advertisements. However, substantial research focusing exclusively on male roles in advertising has yet to be fully accomplished. The need to conduct research that focuses solely on men is necessary because gender roles in society are in transition and traditional boundaries may no longer be applicable. The aim of this study was to provide an initial effort to fill the gap in the literature by analyzing how male portrayals in television advertising parallel societal trends and reports within academic literature. We found that although some changes (i.e. decreases in sexual objectification of women, increase in the portrayal of male leads as fathers, decrease in the overall use of male leads) suggest a change in the male portrayal in line with societal trends, others (i.e. decrease in the portrayal of men in home-based settings, the continued presentation of male leads with idealized physiques) run counter to what might be expected. It is important to note that, even though significant differences were observed between 2003 and 2008, the percentage of commercials portraying men in this light is still small. So while a trend is observed, the new roles that men are fulfilling within society have yet to be fully reflected in television advertising.

The study was limited to television commercials that aired during primetime on ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC; therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other time slots or broadcast outlets. In addition, differences may be observed for different programming formats. As found by Gentry and Harrison (2010), commercials that aired during sports and children's programming may be more likely to foster traditional male stereotypes. Although the usage of only major broadcast networks and those programs that aired during primetime is a limitation, this sample is consistent with the majority of content analysis studies in the academic literature. However, we suggest that future research is needed to compare how male portrayals differ based on the time of day, the network, and the programming, especially now that the percentage of the population watching cable television and viewing programs on the Internet has dramatically increased. Finally, data were collected at two different points of time during the selected years. Differences in the data may have been influenced by seasonal differences. For example, we find that male leads in commercials aired in 2008 were less likely to appear in home-based settings and are more likely to be portrayed as having idealized body types. These differences could be due to the difference in seasons with the 2008 data being collected in the summer months when individuals are more likely to be outdoors and more sparsely dressed. These seasonal differences, however, should not have played an influential role in our examination of such variables as the number of males depicted in lead roles, their portrayal as a paternal figure, or the sexualizing of women. Furthermore, our examination of male leads in home-based settings was not limited to only appearances indoors, but included outdoor home settings as well.

This study serves as a starting point for additional analysis of how men are depicted in television commercials. Future studies are needed, however, to explore this area in more detail. Specifically, future work could consider other characteristics of males cast in lead roles (such as age or attractiveness) and other roles that the male leads may be portraying (such as hero or class clown), and how these characteristics and roles might impact the relations of the male lead character. Future research may also investigate the overarching messages that are displayed in commercials depicting men. Harris (1994) created a typology of messages that underscore themes of masculinity within the USA. This typology may be useful in analyzing advertising messages to understand what themes still

resonate in today's society. In addition, there is a need to move beyond television advertising to determine how other advertising mediums may be influencing men's perceptions of themselves.

Although considerable research exists which examines male and female relationships, research analyzing male and child interactions is decidedly lacking. An additional extension of this work would be to analyze only those commercials that depict relationships between a male and a child. This would allow for an in-depth examination of how the media portrays male-child relationships. Finally, it would be interesting to follow this study up with an analysis of commercials that depict relationships between a male, female, and child to determine if men are portrayed interacting differently with a child when a female is present as opposed to when no female character is shown.

Despite these limitations and the need for additional work in this area, this study has important implications, both for academic theory building and for advertisers. This study provides a more thorough investigation into male depictions in television advertising, an area often overlooked in research, and provides direction for further theory building in the area of consumer socialization. Although consumer socialization was initially conceptualized as a lifelong process (Ward and Wackman 1974), research typically only investigates the socialization process of children (John 1999). Therefore, little research exists analyzing how adults' perceptions and behaviors are affected by media influences. Our research serves as a starting point in analyzing the consumer socialization process of adults and should be followed up with further quantitative studies.

Another area worthy of consideration is whether men using advertising in the socialization process may be influenced by persuasion knowledge, which is consumers' understanding of the persuasive tactics used by marketers (Friestad and Wright 1994). Consumers use their persuasion knowledge to adaptively respond to persuasion attempts (Friestad and Wright 1994). Researchers may need to consider that adults, who typically have higher persuasion knowledge than children, may be slower at adapting new roles because of their persuasion knowledge.

There is a need to explore how gender differences influence consumption behavior and how academic constructs and theories need to be adapted to incorporate these variations. As men take on more parental duties and play a stronger role in taking care of the household, they may be more likely to develop relationships with brands, which were once thought to only connect with women. Some academics have already started to realize the importance of trends in changing gender roles by distinguishing between differences in male and female consumption in regard to brand commitment, impulse buying, and hedonic consumption (Tifferet and Herstein 2012), as well as analyzing attributes of the 'manmaven' (Wiedmann, Walsh, and Mitchell 2001).

Our findings also have important implications for advertisers. First, our results suggest that in some ways the roles of male characters in primetime advertising are becoming more congruent with the society's changing gender roles. These findings may be of particular importance to advertisers of products with strong ties to the traditional masculine portrayal as these advertisers may need to reposition their products should conventional representations fall from favor. Furthermore, companies that typically use attractive women to showcase their product may need to strive to maintain a more balanced representation.

Finally, the results indicate that male lead characters are often physically portrayed in an idealistic manner. Perhaps this suggests that as a society, we have now also begun to objectify men, in addition to women. Evidence of men's growing preoccupation with body image is found in the increased number of males with eating disorders who suffer from the

disease largely out of a desire to have a perfect body (Zelman 2005). Phillips and de Man (2010) found that 78% of men reported dissatisfaction with their body. It now appears that women are not the only ones that deal with body image issues and that the media's continual barrage of unrealistic and unattainable images of attractive, athletic, chiseled bodies may be taking its toll on men's perceptions of self-worth. In an effort to counteract the effects that idealized images frequently portrayed in the media had on women's conceptions of what is beautiful, Dove launched the campaign for 'Real Beauty' which features real women that may not fit society's normative standards of attractiveness. This campaign has been received with great success by consumers and a comparable campaign celebrating real men rather than idealized men could also be implemented by marketers. Rather than continue to send the message that all men should strive to obtain perfection, marketers may want to embrace promoting more realistic body images in their advertising to not only prevent any negative effects that these images may have on men's self-worth, but also to gain success in the marketplace.

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Note

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