The Gender of Product Representatives and Voice-Overs in Television Commercials: An Update

By

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Abstract

This paper updates studies by O'Donnell and O'Donnell (1978), Lovdal (1989) and Bartsch et al. (2000) that laid out trends in women's representation in television commercials. In the spring and summer of 2020, we examined 541 commercials that we coded for type of product, gender of product representative and gender of voice-over. We found that women are more likely to be product representatives in 2020 than they were at any time during the 20th century and much more likely to be the voice-overs. Women were the voice-overs for 51% of the commercials that had voice-overs in our sample, a considerably higher percentage than reported in any 20th-century study. However, women remained under-represented as voice-overs for non-domestic products (e.g., cars, insurance, etc.) and slightly under-represented as product representatives for such products. We place our findings in the context of women's greater participation as consumers, especially of non-domestic goods and services, and as advertisers.

Keywords: product representatives, voice-overs, domestic products, non-domestic products.

Literature Review

Advertising in the media has tended to emphasize the need for sexual attractiveness since the early years of the 20th century, when for the first time many Americans had some discretionary income (Kenschaft & Clark 2016: 322 ff.). Before then advertising often just stated the price, availability and quality of the product. Since about 1910, advertisers have tried to create emotional associations with products to draw consumers in (Marchand 1985).

Our focus here is on contemporary television advertising. Television became a major source of gendered images reasonably soon after its introduction in the 1940s. By the end of the 20th century, somewhere between one fifth to one third of commercial TV shows' air time was spent showing advertisements (Allan & Coltrane 1996). The emphasis on gender-coded attractiveness seems to have required, at least for the men who were creating TV ads, that men be presented as knowledgeable and influential and women, as naive and dependent. Thus, for instance, the voice-over role, that of the disembodied authority telling what truths advertisers really want consumers to hear, was for years played by men: Courtney & Whipple (1974), O'Donnell & O'Donnell (1978), Bretl & Cantor (1989), Lovdal (1989) and Allan & Coltrane (1996) reported that anywhere between 88% and 93% of commercial narrators were men. Bartsch et al. (2000) reported that only 71% of these narrators were men in 1998, but this finding seemed a bit out of line with earlier ones, even while it suggested that commercials still relied on masculine credibility to a great extent. Bartsch et al. underscored, as others had not, that women were much more likely to be employed in the voice-over role in commercials for products primarily used in the home (in which they played that role 36% of the time) than in commercials for goods primarily used outside the home (in which they played the role only 11% of the time).

Also suggesting the greater credibility of men was a 20th-century tendency of TV commercials to make men their primary visible characters. But here findings

were somewhat more varied than they were regarding voice-overs. McArthur & Resko (1975) found only 30% of product "representatives" (as main characters were often called) were female; Bretl & Cantor (1998), 46%; Allan & Coltrane (1996), 38.6% in 1950s award-winning commercials and 32.8% in 1980s award winners. But O'Donnell & O'Donnell (1978) found that 50% of product representatives were female; Lovdal (1989), 51%; and Bartsch et al. (2000), 59%. Bartsch et al. again made the useful distinction between "domestic" products (in commercials for which women were product representatives 66% of the time) and "non-domestic" products (in commercials for which women were product representatives only 30% of the time). Such a distinction points to the tendency of advertisers to buy into and promote the idea that men and women have distinct realms within which their authority is relatively clear.

This article focuses on the gender of voice-overs and product representatives, two gendered dimensions of TV commercials that are relatively unambiguous and easily measured. But these are not the only kinds of gender presentation that have been examined by researchers. For example, beginning in 1979, Kilbourne made a series of famous films in which she documented the ways in which TV commercials have encouraged the objectification of women's bodies and are likely to have eroded women's self-esteem (Kilbourne 2010). Others have shown how ads have adopted increasingly stringent standards for female and male attractiveness—women being urged to be increasingly slender (Spitzer et al. 1999) and men being pushed in the direction of greater muscularity (Katz 1999). Relatively recent commercials often emphasize—and raise concerns about being sexually active for both men and women (Mager & Helgeson 2011).

There is some reason to believe, however, that gender presentations in TV commercials should have changed in the last 20 years or so. Most important, women have increasingly become the primary decision makers when it comes to all purchases made in the U.S. As early as 2009, Silverstein & Sayre reported that women made the ultimate purchasing decision for 94% of home furnishings, 92% of vacations, 91% of homes, 60% of automobiles and 51% of electronic equipment. One can perceive a domestic/nondomestic divide in these data, but no reason at all for ad agencies not to take into account women's attitudes towards the products they promote. And there is evidence that many of these percentages have actually increased in the decade after 2009 (Girlpower Marketing 2019).

There also seems to have been considerable change in the gender composition of those who make decisions at advertising agencies. There had been improvement in women's representation in the exclusive ad men's preserve even during the 20th century. However in 1997, a survey done by *Advertising Age's Creativity* magazine showed that women still only constituted an average of 26% of creative departments in smaller ad agencies and 24% in larger ones (AdAge 2003). Yet a survey commissioned by the Association of National Advertisers reported in 2018 that 46% of senior-level positions (e.g., Division Presidents and Chief Marketing Officers) in marketing departments were held by women, and considerably higher percentages of mid-level and entry-level positions were women's as well (Alliance for Inclusive and Multicultural Marketing, 2018). One reporter claimed in the title of a 2019 article that "Women are making advertising funnier, smarter, and way less sexist" (Werber 2019).

We wondered whether changes in gendered purchasing patterns and the gender composition of ad makers had implications for such measured changes in the content of TV commercials as the percentages of commercials in which females represented the product and in which females did voice-overs.

Methods

Commercial Selection

We used the same model of selecting commercials as that used by Bartsch et al. (2000). Commercials were selected from ABC, NBC, FOX, and CBS, Monday through Thursday from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. The first commercial coded aired on May 25th and the last aired on June 25th. We coded eight nights of commercials, giving us 16 hours of television and a total of 541 commercials to examine. Only one network was recorded per night. For the second round of coding we made sure to record each network on a different day of the week than we had in the first round. Ideally this coding process would have been completed in two weeks. But due to technical difficulties it took another two weeks to get each network recorded and coded.

Following Lovdal (1989) and Bartsch et al. (2000), we excluded commercials that advertised movies or television shows. We also excluded commercials that were political advertisements. Lastly, we did not code local commercials.

Coding of Commercials

Each commercial was coded for gender of the product representative, gender of the voice-over, and product type (domestic or non-domestic). We defined voice-over as a voice heard with no representative seen speaking. We coded the voice-overs as male, female, both, or none. Bartsch et al. (2000) coded voice-overs with multiple voices including male and female voices as "other." In this study, if a commercial had a male and female voice over, the voice over was coded as both. Only human adult voices (apparently age 18 and up) were coded.

We used Bartsch et al.'s (2000) definition of product representative: "the main character in the commercial." Once again Bartsch et al. used the categories "adult female, an adult male, other, or none." But we chose to include a "both" category for when we felt there was more than one product representative and these representatives were from more than one gender. Thus, in this study a product representative was coded as male, female, both or none. Only adult representatives (age 18 and up) were coded.

Product type was coded as domestic or non-domestic. Like Bartsch et al., we chose to use the definition of domestic and non-domestic product offered by Lovdal's (1989) study: products were labeled domestic if they were "foods, cleansing products, cosmetics, and home remedies." We considered all medications to be domestic products. Lovdal (1989) considered "cars, trucks, or any out-of-home items" to be nondomestic.

Commercials were coded independently by two of the authors. When a disagreement arose between the two coders, a discussion was used to achieve unanimity.

Findings

Our intention was to update what Bartsch et al. (2000) had done with 1998 data. They, in turn, had updated O'Donnell and O'Donnell's (1978) study using 1976 data and Lovdal's (1989) study using 1988 data. To the best of our knowledge, no researchers have done such a study since Bartsch et al.'s.

Table 1 updates a table Bartsch et al. (2000) produced, this time with 2020 data. It shows the frequency distribution and percentage distribution of men and women as product representatives and voice-overs. (See Table 1.) O'Donnell & O'Donnell (1978) and Lovdal (1989) did not report the breakdown of voice-overs for domestic and nondomestic products, but Bartsch et al. (2000) did, so we have the ability to study change in these areas as well.

Most striking about our findings, when viewed in relation to those of the three earlier comparable studies, is the steady increase of women's representation in virtually every category. Specifically, the percentage of product representatives that were female grew steadily from 50% in 1976 to 67% in 2020, with the greatest increase occurring in the 22 years between 1998 and 2020. The change in the gender makeup of product representatives was significant at the .05 level in the 1998-2020 period for all product categories: for all products together, for domestic products and, perhaps most notably, for non-domestic products. Men had been the typical product representatives in the vast majority of commercials for non-domestic products in previous periods. But in 2020, they were the main product representatives in only 53% of commercials for non-domestic products that had a single product representative. Women were the main characters in 47% of 2020 commercials for non-domestic products with a single product representative. For instance, women are product representatives, or at least main characters, for contemporary commercials for Nissan Sentra, A T & T and, perhaps most famously, Progressive Insurance (think Flo).

Unfortunately, what Table 1 fails to capture, and what we cannot compare to any previous analysis, is the degree to which looking at commercials in terms of only one product representative misrepresents the sample we examined. As no previous researchers seem to have done, we coded not just for whether a commercial had a single male or female product representative, but for whether its product representatives seemed to be a team that included at least one male and at least one female. And this latter category is the one into which 100 of our commercials about non-domestic products fell--as compared to the 39 that had a male representative alone and 34 that had a female representative alone. Virtually every contemporary Geico, T-Mobile, and Lowes ad, for example, has at least one female and one male who could be seen as main characters. It is as if today's advertisers want us to think that their non-domestic products can be attractive to all people, whatever their gender.

Our findings about voice-overs suggest not only that today's commercials are aiming to make products attractive to all people, but that they also are about the kinds of products about which people of either gender can be expert enough to talk authoritatively. Perhaps our most striking finding is that, in our sample of 541 commercials, 51% had a female voice-over and 49% had a male voice-over. The difference between this

gender distribution and the one in the 1998 sample (in which women were 29% of the voice-overs) had a significance level that was *way* less than .001 (according to our Chi-Square test). Moreover, when we divide the commercials into those which are about domestic and non-domestic products, we find that the percentage of domestic products with female voice-overs had almost doubled since 1998—from 36% to 63%--and that the percentage of non-domestic products with female voice-overs, while starting from a much lower level, had almost tripled—from 11% to 32%. Women are not only the product reps, but also the voice-overs, for Nissan Sentra, A T & T and Progressive Insurance, for instance. Both of these changes have a statistical significance that is *way* less than .001.

In short, women's presence as product representatives and voice-overs has grown notably since 1998. To the extent that gender typing in these key roles for TV commercials remains, it is in the domains that are dominated by females and males. Females, today, are much more likely than males to be the product representatives and voice-overs in commercials for domestic products. Males are still much more likely than females to be the voice-overs for non-domestic products and slightly more likely to be the product representatives for those products. Our research suggests, though, that contemporary commercials for non-domestic products are much more likely to have males and females teaming up as product representatives than they are to have either a male or female representative alone.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there remains a degree of gender stereotyping in the kinds of commercials for which men and women are product representatives and voice-overs, our findings suggest a marked increase in the percentage of commercials in which women play both these roles. One might be concerned that women are the vast majority of product representatives and voice-overs for domestic products, implying that men are not as interested in such products as women are. However, given the degree to which women *are* the actual purchasers of domestic products—probably considerably higher than the degree of their disproportionate representation in commercials for these products—we find it difficult to fault advertisers for this imbalance.

One might still fault commercial makers, however, for the continued prominence of men as product representatives and voice-overs for non-domestic products, even though women have made headway in both of these categories as well. Recent data suggest that women are the majority of purchasers for nondomestic products as well as domestic products (e.g., Girlpower Marketing 2019), something advertisers seem to have begun to recognize, but not, perhaps, to the degree that might make sense for them to do.

Bartsch et al. (2000) had done a little self-criticism when they noted that they had not coded commercials for the possibility of having people of both genders as product representatives, not one gender or the other. We did code this possibility and found that this was by far the most populated category when it came to product representatives for non-domestic products. Considerably more commercials for non-domestic products were represented by both men and women together than were represented by men alone or women alone. We actually see this as a sensible trend, as men and women often do make joint purchasing decisions, perhaps particularly about non-domestic products, in our view—although we actually have found no data, other than the personal, anecdotal sort, to support this contention. Recent studies tend to stress the percentage of purchases for given products for which either women or men are primarily responsible. The possibility that both might have input might usefully be investigated in future research.

We suspect part of the reason that commercials in 2020 are more likely to feature women than those even at the turn of century has to do with advertisers' increased recognition of women's role as consumers. But another part is surely that advertisers themselves are more likely to be women. We haven't tried to show that this change is a major cause of the change of women's representation in commercials. Obviously, correlation is only one of the three criteria essential to establishing causation. However, we can imagine ways in which future researchers might make the case for causation stronger. One way might be to study award-winning commercials (or any commercials, for that matter) and find who was primarily responsible for their creation.

Bartsch et al. (2000) concluded their update of gender representation in TV commercials by asking that future researchers confirm the trends they found towards greater female presence as product representatives and voice-overs. This article has done just that.

Table 1. Gender Representation in Commercials for the Years 1976, 1988, 1998, and 2020

	Years Commercials Were Coded			
	1976	1988	1998	2020
Product Representatives				
Overall				
Male	108 (50%)	113 (49%)	151 (41%)	90 (33%)
Female	106 (50%)	117 (51%)	216 (59%)	181 (67%)
Domestic products				
Male	39 (31%)	84 (45%)	102 (34%)	51 (26%)
Female	86 (69%)	102 (55%)	195 (66%)	147 (74%)
Non-Domestic products				
Male	69 (78%)	32 (73%)	49 (70%)	39 (53%)
Female	20 (22%)	12 (27%)	21 (30%)	34 (47%)
Voice-Overs				
Overall				
Male	234 (92%)	287 (90%)	432 (71%)	204 (49%)
Female	20 (8%)	31 (10%)	199 (29%)	209 (51%)
Domestic products				
Male			290 (64%)	89 (37%)
Female			160 (36%)	154 (63%)
Non-Domestic products				
Male			142 (89%)	115 (68%)
Female			17 (11%)	55 (32%)

Note: 1976 data are originally from O'Donnell and O'Donnell (1978); the 1988 data are originally from Lovdal 1989; and the 1998 data are from Bartsch et al. (2000).

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