5-13-2008

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TV Commercials Influence What You Want To Do In Life, New Research Shows

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May 13, 2008

DURHAM, N.H. – If women find their husbands reluctant to fold the laundry or wash the dishes, they may want to hide the television remote. New research from the University of New Hampshire shows that men, in particular, are influenced by television commercials that more often portray them in a career environment than doing domestic duties.

The results are reported in “Portrayals of Gender in Television Commercials and the Effects on Achievement Aspirations of Audiences” by Valerie Hooper, a graduating senior in sociology who studied how men and women are portrayed in television commercials and how they respond to them. She presented her research recently at UNH’s Undergraduate Research Conference.

The key research findings include:
• Men are portrayed as the main character of commercials more than women (55.5 percent men vs. 44.5 percent women).
• The majority of commercials featuring women focus on selling home products, such as food, cleaners, personal care items and furniture (51.5 percent).
• Men are most likely to be engaged in work behavior in commercials (34.2 percent).
• Women are least likely to be portrayed working outside the home in commercials (13.1 percent of women).
• Only 2.1 percent of commercials featuring men showed them performing domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, or caring for children.
• Men who viewed commercials with a male main character in a traditional, stereotypical male role were more likely to favor life goals related to a career.
• Men who viewed commercials with a male main character in a nontraditional, nonstereotypical male role were more likely to favor life goals related to the domestic sphere.

“Gender is one of the most studied social concepts as it is the main standard that people use in determining how to act and interact with others. Because television advertisements transmit cultural ideas about gender, they help to socially construct gender. Commercials may affect the way that people think about their own gender, and contribute to the ongoing social stratification of genders in our society,” Hooper said.

Hooper’s study was two-fold. First, she conducted an analysis of the content of a week’s worth of commercials broadcast on four channels during primetime viewing (8 to 10 p.m.) She then assessed the commercials – 1,538 in total – based on the characters portrayed in them, paying special attention to gender, behavior of the main characters, profession, setting, and the type of product being promoted.

Her content analysis showed that while men and women usually are equally cast in the
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commercials, men are more likely to represent non-domestic products, to be depicted working, and to be in a work or other “non-home” setting. Women are more likely to represent domestic products such as cleaners and foods, to be performing domestic tasks, and to be in a home setting.

“Television commercials still greatly mimic the common stereotypes in our society regarding life choices. Males are significantly more likely to be shown in settings outside of the home, particularly in the workforce. Alternatively, females are much more likely to be shown in a home setting, representing domestic products, and performing domestic tasks,” Hooper said.

“These stereotypes are considered outdated by many members of American society, yet still continue to pervade the media. These depictions not only defy the idea that diversity is becoming more accepted in society, but also completely ignore the fact that it is now a material need for both men and women to work and perform domestic duties as most American families cannot survive on one income alone,” she said.

Hooper then sought to determine whether how gender is portrayed in television commercials affects the actions and ambitions of men and women. In the second phase of the study, she showed commercials with traditional and nontraditional gender stereotypes to groups of UNH students. After viewing the commercials, the students were asked to discuss their life goals for the next five to 10 years.

Her research found that men who watched commercials portraying men in traditional roles (outside of the home, in a career environment) were more likely to emphasize occupational goals over domestic goals. Those who viewed commercials with men in nontraditional male roles were more likely to emphasize domestic goals.

Women who viewed commercials of women in traditional roles were more likely to have traditional life goals, and vice versa for those who viewed commercials with women in nontraditional roles. However, the results for women were not significant.

“The subtle implications of gender roles in commercials can influence self concept and future goals, particularly in the case of males. Although effects in the study were presumably temporary, one must keep in mind that individuals watch millions of commercials over the course of their lifetime,” Hooper said.

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