

GENDERED ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN: AN ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENCES IN MALE- AND  
FEMALE-TARGETED TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

MEREDITH FORD

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

**ABSTRACT**

Children are impressionable customers, and the media they consume influences their behaviors and perceptions. Gender stereotypes are highly prevalent in children's media, which can often lead children to create idealized images of what boys and girls should be. This paper explores advertising in children's television commercials given changes in our society promoting gender equality. Researchers studied commercials from 20 different television programs for children to find differences in male- and female-targeted advertisements. Commercials were coded for product characteristics, characters, and commercial logistics. Results show that children's television networks primarily air male-targeted commercials. Additionally, female-targeted commercials were more likely to involve spokescharacters, and gender stereotypes for both boys and girls were most prevalent in female-targeted commercials.

Keywords: children's media, advertising, gender-targeted commercials

## GENDERED ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN: AN ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENCES IN MALE- AND FEMALE-TARGETED TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

Children are prone to the effects of media on a variety of platforms. Whether on television, the Internet, or in video games, children are constantly bombarded with media messages. On average, almost half of the media consumed by children aged 8 to 18 years is from television, amounting to over 3 hours of television on average each day (Strasburger et al., 2014). This increase in consumption was spearheaded by the popularity of child-targeted TV programming and the near universal access that children have to televisions (Vandewater et al., 2007). Each of these children's programs are rife with persuasive messages hidden within shows and commercials. Product marketing and advertisements make up a large portion of these messages.

One inevitable aspect of television consumption is the prevalence of advertising through commercials. Many parents have concerned themselves with screening the shows their children watch to make the sure programs are age-appropriate, educational, or that they fit any other necessary criteria. However, the content and messages of commercials presented to children during breaks within programs is often scrutinized less than the programs themselves (Christakis et al., 2004). These commercials that market toys and other products for children can increase demands for products and goods they see on television. Children have very high purchasing power that is heavily influenced by advertisements. The effects of advertising have largely flown under the radar for parents, but the usage of characters and gender representation of characters in commercials has measurable impacts on children. By identifying how girls and boys are both targeted by commercials and represented within commercials, researchers, parents, and educators can

better understand how commercials are perpetuating antiquated gendered stereotypes in the context of social pressure to emphasize gender equality.

### **Changes in Society**

Second-wave feminism and modern views of equality have led to a revolution of gendered stereotypes in our society. In the last decade, more women have entered the workforce and the proportion of women in leadership positions has grown (Schuh et al., 2013). More men are taking on the responsibility of domestic chores and gay and transgender adults have successfully fought for greater rights and visibility (Cochrane, 2014). However, these advancements in equality have not made it to children yet, and particularly have not reached children's advertising. Some toy stores have made changes to how they market their toys in response to consumer pressure; WalMart and Toys R Us have toned down their explicit gender-specific children's marketing strategies and Target has completely removed gender-based labels from their toy aisles (Robb, 2015). Removing gender labels is a large step in reducing gender stereotypes. However, despite these moves towards neutrality, children's advertisements are infused with more gender stereotypes than they were 50 years ago (Sweet, 2014).

In addition to gendered products, characters in these advertisements also perpetuate stereotypical gendered behaviors. The rise of women in STEM-related fields has stressed the importance of representation of women scientists and mathematicians in contemporary media. Girls tend to shy away from STEM activities because of stereotypical cultural narratives that portray these women as undesirable (Colatrella, 2011). Instead, girls in commercials are shown playing with kitchen sets and dolls and are shown as objects of attraction, with diminutive waistlines and pink frilly dresses (McSweeney, 2012).

These stereotypical portrayals impact boys as well. Modern action figures in male-targeted commercials have a larger chests and more muscular limbs than previous counterparts. These dimensions contribute to the idealization of a muscular physique and negate the validity of other forms of masculinity (Baghurst et al., 2006). Recent changes in our society to promote gender equality have not yet spread to advertising in children's media despite the importance of media in forming children's behavioral expectations of themselves and others.

### **Children's Usage of Media**

Recent media trends have positioned children to begin consuming media at a very young age. Fifty-eight percent of children ages 0- to 8-years old watch TV at least once a day, and 96% of children ages 0- to 8-years-old live in a household with at least one television (Common Sense Media, 2013). There are multiple reports examining media usage among certain age groups. Children's TV-watching time varies by age: children under 2-years-old watch 44 minutes of TV per day, compared to 1 hour and 4 minutes among 2- to 4-year-olds and 58 minutes among 5- to 8-year-olds (Common Sense Media, 2013).

New methods of watching TV – such as recording shows on a DVR or streaming shows to a mobile device – have increased opportunities for consumption of media. Thirty percent of children have Internet connectivity on their TVs and 28% have a DVR so they can view shows at any time (Common Sense Media, 2013). Even with these advances, children still consume most of their television from TV sets. Some children eat breakfast and dinner in front of the television (Christakis et al., 2004), and 36% of children ages 0- to 8-years old have their own television in their bedroom (Common Sense Media, 2013). As children age and become more accustomed to the presence of media in their lives, their

television exposure increases, and the amount and effects of commercials and television advertising become more crucial.

### **Impact of Advertising on Children**

Advertising to children has become a popular tactic for many brands and television shows. Children have a lot of purchasing power, particularly in being able to pester their parents into buying products that they want (Simon & Sunu, 2014). A child can see more than 40,000 commercials per year (Kunkel et al., 2004), a number that has been exacerbated with the creation of new channels devoted specifically to children (i.e. Nickelodeon and Noggin). While advertising to children is well established and shows no signs of waning, there negative impacts on children who view such a large magnitude of commercials.

Children are a vulnerable audience because they take everything at face value. Children do not have the same cognitive skills as adults, so they are unable to discriminate between the commercial and the program, as well as acknowledge its persuasive intent (Simon & Sunu, 2014). Children do not understand persuasive intent until they reach 8-years-old (Kunkel et al., 2004). Through targeting children, advertising leaves a negative impact on the psychology of children. High exposure to commercials and advertising has been found to foster materialistic attitudes and consumerist behaviors in young children (Kunkel et al., 2004; Simon & Sunu, 2014).

Additionally, commercials easily contribute to children's bias towards advertised products. Borzekowski & Robinson (2001) found that children who watched programs with commercials were significantly more likely to choose to purchase advertised items than children who saw the same program without commercials. Advertising is positively

and directly related to children's purchase requests, and is also related to family conflict, disappointment, and life dissatisfaction (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). Advertisements can create family tension centered on purchase behavior. Advertisements also present children with a strong model of the types of behaviors they are expected to exhibit and the gender roles they are expected to conform to. The way that these role models impact children's perceptions of themselves and others is the most important factor affecting a child's maturation and how they see themselves in society (Smith, 1994).

### **Characters in Advertising**

Characters are highly prevalent in children's advertising. These characters can be presented in a variety of ways, but most characters that sell a product within a commercial are human, animal personifications, or product personifications (Callcott & Lee, 1994). Characters – especially familiar characters – often attract children's attention to the commercial and for the brand. Utilizing product characters can increase a child's recognition of the brand, liking of the product, early brand preferences, and encourage them to develop a relationship with the characters via parasocial interaction (de Droog et al., 2010). Product characters – characters associated with a particular brand, such as *Toucan Sam* with Froot Loops or *Tony the Tiger* with Frosted Flakes – are successful in giving a product a child-friendly appearance through their colorful picture and bubbly persona (Roberto et al., 2010). When characters are included in commercials, they are mostly male, non-celebrities (Callcott & Lee, 1994).

Researchers have found concrete evidence that advertised characters have an impact on children's taste preferences and purchase behavior. Roberto and colleagues (2010) found that children preferred the taste of foods that had popular cartoon characters

on the packaging compared to the same food without characters on the packaging. Children also demonstrated that they liked healthy snacks more when there was a character on the packaging, and both familiar and unfamiliar characters had a positive effect on liking (de Droog et al., 2010). More and more, advertisers are turning towards child-friendly animated product characters to appeal to the sensory stimulation of young children watching television.

### **Representation and Gender-Targeted Commercials**

Regarding the gender of characters in commercials, there are consistently more male characters than female characters. Advertising towards children features twice as many boys as girls, more male voiceovers, and more male-targeted products than female-targeted products (Browne, 1998). In television advertisements featuring only one sex of characters, boys outnumbered girls (Smith, 1994). Additionally, Bretl & Cantor (1988) found that the gender of the commercial voiceover was a male speaker 90% of the time, and female narrators only occurred when commercials had female main characters and were advertising female-associated products. The disparity in gender of characters is vast, but how each gender is portrayed through their appearance and behavior opens up an even larger gap.

Not only are men present in more commercials, we also see advertisers regularly relying on gender stereotypes within advertisements, especially those clearly targeted for either boys or girls. There are identifiable characteristics that distinguish male-targeted commercials from female-targeted commercials. Male-targeted advertisements contain more elements emphasizing action, competition, destruction, and control over others, whereas female-targeted ads contain limited activity, expression of feelings, and nurturing



behaviors (Johnson & Young, 2002). Men denote power, control, and dominance when women are left to be submissive, lacking intelligence, and helpless (Browne, 1998). For every one female character shown as an authority figure, there are 3.19 male authority figures (Hentges et al., 2007). This significant difference shows the extent to which gender stereotypes are perpetuated in children's media.

Even the body language of characters in commercials is indicative of perpetuated stereotypes. Girls are portrayed with traditionally feminine facial expressions and body positions across a multitude of media platforms, as well as traditional female occupations, such as a teacher or a mother rather than a doctor or a businesswoman (Collins, 2011). Even with the push to encourage young girls to pursue education in the STEM fields, women are still underrepresented in scientific careers in the media (Collins, 2011). Additionally, appearance is of much higher importance for women than men, forming societal expectations for physical attractiveness in females early on (Ogletree et al., 1990). Women are typically cast as younger, supportive counterparts to men and are underrepresented as primary characters in commercials (Ganahl et al., 2003).

Male and female characters are also associated with different types of products. Bold colored toys, action figures, and vehicles are typical "boys only" toys whereas pastel colored toys, dolls, jewelry, and domestic-oriented toys were typified as "girls only" (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). Fast food items are the most heavily advertised products to children, and these are also the commercials where boys and girls are presented most often together (Larson, 2001). In contrast, toys are the second most heavily advertised products to children, but boys and girls are rarely portrayed together in these commercials. This is likely because female characters are more likely to engage in cooperative interactions

when playing with a toy and male characters are more likely to be featured partaking in competitive interactions with playing with a toy (Larson, 2001). Despite their stark contrast, children will form behavioral expectations for each gender based on the play styles they see characters portray.

Through commercials and product placements within shows, it is difficult to escape advertising for food, toys, and other products. Traditionally, products such as food and toys are depicted in a gendered manner in television advertisements. Commercials depicting these gendered products have been proven to have a tangible effect on child's play. Smetana & Letourneau (1984) found that, when they were in mixed-gender groups, preschool age girls would play with male-oriented toys such as toy trucks, but boys were unwilling to play with female-oriented toys such as dolls. However, when left alone or when in a group of children who were all the same gender, both boys and girls favored their same-sex-oriented toy, providing evidence that gender concepts guide sex-appropriate behaviors. Additionally, the products themselves are often color-coded to explicitly indicate what gender they are intended for. Dolls, cosmetics, and jewelry are usually pastel colors, signifying that they are intended for girls, and action figures, building toys, and vehicles are bold or dark colors, such as black and red, signifying their intended use among boys (Auster & Mansbach, 2012).

Children reliably prefer to play with toys deemed appropriate for their gender (Cherney et al., 2003). By targeting dolls, clothes, and cosmetics towards girls and action figures, video games, and sporting equipment towards boys, the media constricts children into stereotyped roles and socializes us to accept these categorizations. However, these stereotypes can lead to a loss of empowerment, particularly among women. When

portrayed in advertisements, women and girls are less likely to be shown exercising authority, active behavior, or to be shown in a professional environment and more likely to be shown in a family context or as a sexual object (Adams & Coltrane, 1997). Children are likely to accept these sex stereotypes and identify with their typical role, and punish other children that exhibit cross-gender behaviors and traits. The promotion of these stereotypes has led to an unhealthily prescriptive situation where girls and boys stop playing together at a very young age. When children realize that the toys they see advertised are only meant for one gender, they latch on to that group of children and do not socialize with the other gender (Hains, 2015). This sets a detrimental precedent for child development and socialization skills.

### **The Present Study**

There have recently been changes in society's pressure to emphasize equality between genders. This social movement has infiltrated the political realm, but its presence in marketing has been less obvious, as the most reliable method to advertise children's toys is to show children playing with toys clearly meant for their gender (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). This resistance to change highlights the importance of television commercials featuring gendered toys that bridge the gap between genders. Previous studies have examined the quantity of commercials directed towards boys compared to girl-oriented toys (Johnson & Young, 2002) as well as characteristics of toys and commercials that lend themselves to targeting either boys or girls (Auster & Mansbach 2012; Smith, 1994). However, the roles that boys and girls play in gender specific product advertisements to children, as well as their interactions with the product and with each other, have yet to be

studied. It will be valuable to know how gender roles are being depicted to children within the context of children's television shows.

This paper will explore dominant methods of advertising products to children and the context in which these products are advertised. We chose to explore various types of gender representation among commercials targeting boys and commercials targeting girls. This research seeks to answer three questions pertaining to the depictions of boys and girls in children's television commercials.

RQ1: How do networks differ in commercials targeting boys and girls?

RQ2: How are spokescharacters used differently in commercials targeting boys compared to commercials targeting girls?

RQ3: How is each character's gender represented in commercials targeting their own gender and commercials targeting the opposite gender?

## **METHODS**

### *Sample*

This study examines the advertising included in a broad base of children's programming. This dataset was taken from a larger study examining food marketing to children on television. There were a total of 144 children's television shows, which included shows targeting children anywhere from 3-year-old to 9-years-old and older based on recommendations from Common Sense Media ([Commonsensemedia.org](http://Commonsensemedia.org)). Programming was recorded from broadcast networks and cable channels. A composite day sampling design was created to randomly select time slots and channels for recording each week over an extended sampling period, as was done by Stitt and Kunkel (2008). This process allowed for a broader range of advertising campaigns to be captured for analysis.

Each show originally aired between October 16, 2013 and November 18, 2013 and between 7:00 am and 10:00pm. Ninety-seven percent of the recordings were 30-minute television episodes, while the other 3% of the recordings were movies (n=4). Each recording had a 5-minute buffer at the beginning and the end of each episode, making the recording of a 30-minute episode a total of 40 minutes. Of the original set of videos, 79 shows aired on Saturdays (55%) and 65 shows airs on weekdays (45%). The shows aired on five different networks: NBC (n=6), CW (n=10), Cartoon Network (n=31), Nickelodeon (n=52) and Disney XD (n=50).

#### *Current Study Sample*

For this study, we randomly sampled 20 total episodes across the five networks. The shows chosen for this study were sampled such that the distribution of shows per network mimicked the full dataset – for example, shows from Disney XD made up 30% of Saturday shows in the original dataset (n=30) therefore shows from Disney XD make up 30% of Saturday shows in this sample (n=3) (see Figures 1 and 2). The sample for this study included 11 shows that aired on Saturdays (55%) and 9 shows that aired on weekdays (45%). For a complete list of programs included in this sample and where they aired (see Appendix A). Because our research questions focus on the implications surrounding gender-targeted commercials to children, commercials that targeted adults were not coded. There was a total of 467 commercial instances from these 20 episodes.

**Figure 1:** Distribution of shows aired on Saturdays

<b>Network</b>	<b># of Shows</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b># of Shows Included in Sample</b>
NBC	6	8%	1
CW	10	13%	1
Cartoon Network	13	16%	2
Nickelodeon	26	33%	4

Disney XD	24	30%	3
<b>Total:</b>	79	100%	11

**Figure 2:** Distribution of shows aired on Weekdays

<b>Network</b>	<b># of Shows</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b># of Shows Included in Sample</b>
NBC	0	0%	0
CW	0	0%	0
Cartoon Network	18	28%	3
Nickelodeon	21	32%	3
Disney XD	26	40%	3
<b>Total:</b>	65	100%	9

### *Coding Scheme*

A trained researcher watched each episode and coded the specific mechanisms companies used to advertise products featured in commercials. Given the 5-minute recording buffers at the beginning and end of each episode in the sample, all of the commercials that were in the entire recording were coded, not just those that fell within the context of the show. While there were often products that were advertised during the television show through product placement (i.e. an Apple laptop used by one of the characters or a character eating a bowl of Lucky Charms), only products, services, and locations that were featured in their own commercial outside of the show setting were coded.

To explore the techniques used and characteristics present in these commercials, a modified coding scheme modeled after Hurwitz and colleagues (2015) was used. The coding scheme in this study was divided into three parts: product characteristics, characters, and commercial logistics. After the pilot run with the preliminary coding scheme, changes were made to clarify a few codes and codes were added to account for more observed variables. The most prominent addition was a series of codes accounting

for the product being utilized as a character within the commercial (i.e. the only featured characters was an animated version of the product itself, such as a Lego figurine moving freely of its own accord).

**Product Qualities.** To assess qualities of the products, I coded for the color of the product and its packaging – options included dark/black, primary colors, pastel colors, and white/light neutral colors. I coded for the genre of the product (i.e. toy, food, doll, store, technology, etc.) and if the product was STEM related. Lastly, I coded for the target age group of the product using the following age divisions: baby, toddler, preschool, elementary, tween/teen, adults, or all kids.

**Characters.** Next, the presence and types of characters in the commercials were coded for. There were four possible categories for characters: product as character, licensed character (characters from a brand other than the advertised brand – i.e. Belle and Cinderella from a Disney Princess Lego set), spokescharacter (third-party characters not associated with the advertised brand – i.e. a boy and girl drinking Kool-Aid), and product character (character affiliated with the advertised brand – i.e. Toucan Sam and Froot Loops). We counted the number of each character (e.g. 0, 1, 2, or 3+), coded for their genders (male, female, mix, or unsure), their ages (baby, toddler, preschool, elementary, tween/teen, adults), whether they were animated or live, the type of character (i.e., human, animal, food), and their race/ethnicity (i.e. White, African-American, Hispanic). The code for the product being animated or live was eliminated when coding for product as character.

Further, because I wanted to examine the “gendered-ness” of advertisements, for any commercial that featured spokescharacters, I counted the number of boys and girls

present as well as if the boys were wearing dark colors (i.e., red, dark blue, dark green, gray, brown, or black) or sporting accessories (e.g., baseball caps, soccer balls, or roller skates) and if the girls were wearing jewelry or accessories (e.g., earrings or hair clips), dresses or skirts, and pink clothing. The physical characteristics spokescharacters included in commercials provide a clear picture into how advertisers see girls and boys as consumers (Pomerleau et al., 1990). Spokescharacters frequently embody the stereotyped behaviors, appearances, and activities expected of boys and girls. Because of their potential for insight, the codes for spokescharacters elaborated on more than codes for other types of characters (see Appendix B).

**Production technicalities** of the commercial were coded for, as previous research has shown that certain aspects of the commercial, such as quicker shot transitions and energetic voiceovers, tend to signify more masculine commercial attributes (Browne, 1998). The location of the commercial (inside, outside, or both) and the gender of the voiceover were coded. The length and pacing (slow, medium, or fast) of the commercial were also coded, in addition to the commercial's energy on a scale from 1 = sitting to 5 = physically crashing into each other. This scale was based on the rating system from Cherney and colleagues (2003). Notes were made if the commercial directed the child to an external site to purchase the product.

**Network.** Finally, the network the commercial aired on and the target gender of the commercial were coded. Each network was assigned a number and the coder reported that number depending on what show was being analyzed. Target gender was coded as male, female, or neutral. The code for target gender was made by summing all of the information from the commercial and determining if there were more overall characteristics indicating



a preference for one gender over the other (e.g., gender of the voiceover, number of male and female characters, color of the product, etc.).

## **RESULTS**

A series of chi-square analyses and z-tests were performed to identify significant differences in male- and female-targeted commercials in order to answer our three research questions.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

From the sample of 20 television shows, there were 467 commercials that targeted children. Each episode had between 21 and 34 commercials. Neutral commercials that did not target boys or girls specifically (n=144) were removed from the sample in order to analyze the differences that exist between male- and female-targeted commercials. The final sample of 323 commercials was used in the following analysis.

### *Networks & Gendered Commercials*

The majority of commercials that targeted a specific gender came from one of three networks: CN, Nickelodeon, and Disney XD (see Table 1). Overall, commercials were much more likely to specifically target boys (65%) than girls (35%).

Within networks, there were clear differences in rates of male- and female-targeted advertisements. Specifically CW, Cartoon Network, and Disney had the greatest differences. On CW, 94% of commercials targeted a male audience. On Cartoon Network, 84% of the commercials targeted a male audience, as did 67% of commercials on Disney XD. NBC had an even distribution (50%) of commercials targeting males and commercials targeted females, but had very few child-targeted gendered advertisements at all (n=10).

Only Nickelodeon had more female-targeted commercials (60%) than male-targeted. Female-targeted commercials were highly concentrated on Nickelodeon, whereas male-targeted commercials were more evenly spread out over multiple networks. Over half (52%) of all female targeted commercials aired on Nickelodeon, and another 28% on Disney XD, in comparison to other networks that showed less than 15%. In contrast, Cartoon Network aired 40% of male commercials, Disney aired 31%, and Nickelodeon aired 19%. These results demonstrate that male-targeted commercials appear to occur much more regularly than female-targeted commercials and much more regularly on certain channels, thus answering RQ1.

*Table 1. Number of commercials on each network targeting males and females*

	<b>Male-targeted</b>	<b>Female-targeted</b>	<b>Total Commercials</b>
<b>NBC</b>	5 <sub>a</sub>	5 <sub>a</sub>	10
<b>CW</b>	15 <sub>a</sub>	1 <sub>b</sub>	16
<b>Disney XD</b>	66 <sub>a</sub>	32 <sub>a</sub>	98
<b>Nickelodeon</b>	40 <sub>a</sub>	59 <sub>b</sub>	99
<b>Cartoon Network</b>	84 <sub>a</sub>	16 <sub>b</sub>	100
<b>Total</b>	210	113	323

Each subscript letter denotes a subset of Target Gender categories, where differing letters represent significance at the .05 level.

( $\chi = 49.24, p = <0.01$ )

### *Spokescharacters*

To test whether there were differences in the types of spokescharacters used in male- versus female-targeted commercials, we conducted a chi-square test. The chi-squared test was significant,  $\chi^2 (3, n=323) = 38.89, p = <0.01$ . Of the 323 commercials in our sample, 164 (51%) had one or more spokescharacters present. Female-targeted commercials included spokescharacters significantly more often (73%) than male-targeted commercials (39%).

Male-targeted commercials tended to have more diversity in the number of spokescharacters featured in each commercial than female-targeted commercials. Twenty-three percent of male-targeted commercials had one spokescharacter, 35% had two spokescharacters, and 41% had three or more spokescharacters (see Table 2). Female-targeted commercials were most likely to have two spokescharacters (49%) compared to either three or more spokescharacters (40%) or one spokescharacter (11%).

Table 2. *Number of male- and female-targeted commercials featuring spokescharacters*

	<b>Male-targeted</b>	<b>Female-targeted</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1 Spokescharacter</b>	19 <sub>a</sub>	9 <sub>a</sub>	28
<b>2 Spokescharacters</b>	29 <sub>a</sub>	40 <sub>b</sub>	69
<b>3+ Spokescharacters</b>	34 <sub>a</sub>	33 <sub>b</sub>	67
<b>Total</b>	82	82	164

Each subscript letter denotes a subset of Target Gender categories, where differing letters represent significance at the .05 level.

( $\chi = 38.89, p = <0.01$ )

#### *Gender representation within gender-targeted commercials*

Next we looked at how gender was represented in gender-targeted commercials. A chi-square test comparing male- and female-targeted commercials to the number of male spokescharacters indicated a significant difference [ $\chi^2 (6, n=323) = 186.03, p = <0.01$ ].

There was at least one male spokescharacter in all 82 male-targeted commercials with spokescharacters. Most commercials had either one or two male spokescharacters; 30% of male-targeted commercials had one male spokescharacter and 42% had two male spokescharacters (see Table 3). Furthermore, male spokescharacters wore sporting accessories in 55% of the commercials and were wearing dark colors in 55% of the male-targeted commercials.

Additionally, a chi-square test comparing the number of female spokescharacters in male- versus female-targeted commercials indicated a significant difference [ $\chi^2$  (6, n=323) = 152.40,  $p = <0.01$ ]. The majority (90%) of female-targeted commercials involved at least two female spokescharacters, whereas only 70% of male-targeted commercials involved two or more male spokescharacters (see Table 3), telling us that female characters are more likely to be portrayed in groups than male characters. We also coded if female spokescharacters were wearing a dress or a skirt, if they were wearing pink, and if they had any jewelry/accessories. In female-targeted commercials, female spokescharacters wore a dress or skirt only 40% of the time. However, female spokescharacters were wearing pink in 77% of female-targeted commercials and were wearing jewelry or other accessories in 60% of female-targeted commercials.

Table 3. *Number of male- and female-targeted commercials featuring boys or girls*

	Male-targeted commercials		Female-targeted commercials	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
<b>0</b>	0	62	75	0
<b>1</b>	25	8	4	8
<b>2</b>	33	10	3	45
<b>3</b>	9	0	0	8
<b>4</b>	8	0	0	11
<b>5+</b>	7	2	0	10
<b>Total</b>	82	82	82	82

( $\chi = 186.03, p = <0.01$ ); ( $\chi = 152.40, p = <0.01$ )

After examining how each gender was represented in commercials targeting their own gender, we turned to examine how boys were represented in female-targeted commercials and how girls were represented in male-targeted commercials.

The majority (91%) of female-targeted commercials did not have any male spokescharacters, however, 5% of female-targeted commercials had one male

spokescharacter and 4% had two male spokescharacters (See Table 3). Of the seven female-targeted commercials with any number of male spokescharacters, 86% featured boys wearing dark colors, and none of them featured boys wearing/using sporting accessories.

There were more females present in male-targeted commercials than males present in female-targeted commercials. The majority (76%) of male-targeted commercials did not have any female characters, however, 10% of male-targeted commercials had one female spokescharacter and 12% had two female spokescharacters. No male-targeted commercials had either three or four female spokescharacters (see Table 3). Of the twenty male-targeted commercials with any number of female spokescharacters, only 15% featured girls wearing dresses or skirts and only 35% featured girls wearing jewelry or other accessories. Additionally, 55% of female spokescharacters in male-targeted commercials were shown wearing pink.

## **DISCUSSION**

Commercials are still a prominent way through which companies try to sell their products to young children and their families. With children having more substantial purchasing power, and with increased concern about the negative impact of gender stereotypes on youth development (Simon & Sunu, 2014), it is exceedingly important to examine if and how companies are targeting their products to children through TV advertisements. We found that there are differences in commercials targeting boys and girls across networks, that spokescharacters are used differently in male- and female-targeted commercials, and that gender representation varies when targeting the same sex compared to the opposite sex. Each of these findings explain how advertisers market their

products to boys and girls and reveal important details about the effects and implications of gendered advertising.

### **Network**

Our first research question looked at how networks differ in female- and male-targeted commercials. We found that gender-targeted commercials differ drastically as a function of what network they are aired on. CW, Cartoon Network, and Disney XD all featured predominantly male-targeted commercials, whereas only Nickelodeon featured more female-targeted commercials than male-targeted commercials. The results from this study support previous research (Smith et al., 2012) that boys and girls are not evenly depicted in commercials, with boys often featured as the target of commercials and outnumbering girls in most appearances, but also provide new evidence that networks themselves may be more gender-focused than previously known.

Beyond different numbers of male- and female-targeted commercials per network, character representation varies in the same way. There are an equal number of boys and girls who live in the United States, yet there are more male-targeted than female-targeted programs. There is an unequal distribution of character representation in shows and commercials on each network. Smith & Cook (2008) found that animated programs are more likely to show male characters. This is consistent with our finding, because the programs offered on CW and Cartoon Network are predominantly animated, so it is fitting that their commercials have more male characters and are predominantly male-targeted. Because of this male homogeneity, girls might be deterred from watching shows on Cartoon Network, for example, and boys might not want to watch as many shows on Nickelodeon. By pandering strongly towards one gender, these networks are eschewing

half of their potential viewing base of children as well as dictating what kids should watch as a function of their gender rather than their interests. Further, the quantity of male-targeted commercials indicates a higher value placed on shows crafted to appeal to boys and on products intended for boys to play with. This can lead to young girls feeling less valued, not only as consumers, but also as people in our society (Eisend, 2010).

### **Spokescharacters**

Our second research question looked at how spokescharacters are used differently in female-targeted versus male-targeted commercials. We found key differences in how spokescharacters are used in gender-targeted commercials. Gender inequality was rampant in these commercials – female-targeted commercials featured only female spokescharacters 91% of the time and male-targeted commercials featured only male spokescharacters 76% of the time. Within male- and female-targeted commercials we found a host of differences how often boys and girls appear. First, we found that female-targeted commercials utilized spokescharacters significantly more than male-targeted commercials (73% compared to 39%). In contrast, male-targeted commercials featured characters more diverse in gender, age, and ethnicity than female-targeted commercials. Additionally, female-targeted commercials were only 9% likely to include any number of male spokescharacters, whereas male-targeted commercials were 24% likely to include any number of female spokescharacters which supports the tendency for male-targeted commercials to have more diverse characters. Boys are less likely to appear in female-targeted commercials than girls are to appear in male-targeted commercials, perpetuating the societal custom that it is more acceptable for girls to play with boy toys or participate in

more typically male activities than it is for boys to play with girl toys or participate in typically female activities (Auster & Mansbach, 2012).

Characters are instrumental in shaping children's views of advertised products (Kunkel et al., 2004), but female characters are not being portrayed in a manner that is representative of society. Our findings suggest that females are underrepresented in commercials. This is consistent with Smith and colleagues (2012) who found that only 31% of speaking characters in children's programming are females and Hentges and colleagues (2007) who found that for every one female character in school-aged television commercials, there were 2.82 male characters.

### **Gender Representation**

Our third research question looked at how each character's gender was represented in commercials targeting their own gender (i.e. how girls were portrayed in female-targeted commercials) and in commercials targeting the opposite gender (i.e. how girls were portrayed in male-targeted commercials). In these gender-targeted commercials, there are a few physical characteristics that set each gender apart. As far as clothing goes, boys were shown wearing a larger variety of colors in male-targeted commercials more than they were shown wearing in female-targeted commercials. Females were less likely to be wearing dresses or wearing pink in male-targeted commercials.

When boys appeared in female-targeted commercials, none of the commercials features boys using sporting accessories. This is compared to 55% of male-targeted commercials with male spokescharacters who were using sporting accessories. These percentages suggest that when male spokescharacters are utilized in female-targeted commercials, they are removed from the common hyper-masculine portrayals of men in



the media. They are more assimilated to the characteristics of female-targeted commercials and playing with female-targeted products.

When girls appeared in male-targeted commercials, 15% of those commercials featured girls wearing dresses or skirts, 35% featured girls wearing jewelry or other accessories, and 55% of them featured girls wearing pink. This is compared to 40% of female-targeted commercials with female spokescharacters who wore a dress or skirt, 60% with female spokescharacters wearing jewelry or other accessories, and 77% of female-targeted commercials with female spokescharacters wearing pink. These percentages suggest that when female spokescharacters are utilized in male-targeted commercials, they are still subject to generalizations of female stereotypes. Even when shown interacting with action figures, sports equipment, and video games (each traditionally masculine products), females are still in pink dresses. Gender stereotypes for girls were most prevalent in female-targeted commercials, which further stresses the importance of having female role models in equal representation for girls to look up to. This is consistent with research by Johnson & Young (2002) who found that female-oriented advertisements contained strong female elements, such as limited activity and nurturing behaviors, even when there were boys in the advertisement. Girls are pigeonholed into stereotypical depictions more than boys.

These findings are somewhat surprising given that there have been societal shifts urging parents and educators to make efforts to show that males and females can both engage in a variety of behaviors, and that they are not constrained to stereotypical expectations (Hentges et al., 2007). We found that most commercials (65%) were male-targeted. Give that a relatively equal number of boys and girls watch television, we would

have expected that female-targeted commercials with strong female character representation would share the airtime, but product commercials overwhelmingly favor boys. While the desire for gender neutrality is alive and well in our society, this movement hasn't yet manifested itself in the world of children's marketing.

Cultivation theory is heavily at play when it comes to gender representation in children's commercials. Children's perceptions of social reality and behaviors are heavily influenced by the images and portrayals they see in the media (Gerbner et al., 2002). Girls and boys are still being placed in stereotypical boxes when it comes to representation in commercials. Given that female- and male-targeted commercials are most likely to only feature girls and boys, respectively, our findings suggest that as boys and girls watch television, they are being exposed to commercials that further portray gendered toys as intended for use by only one gender. While there have been recent advancements urging more equal portrayals of boys and girls in the media (Peters, 2017; Schwab, 2016), our findings suggest that the current media landscape could have a negative impact on how girls see themselves versus how boys see girls, and vice versa.

### **Implications**

Gendered stereotypes are especially prevalent in toy commercials, where girls and boys are rarely portrayed together (Larson, 2001), suggesting that toys are highly gendered products and that boys are not recommended to play with female-oriented toys and vice versa. Boys are less likely to cross gender lines than girls (Todd et al., 2016), a statement that is supported by our finding that there are fewer female-oriented commercials/toys in male-targeted shows. Because of this, boys' exposure towards gender portrayals in commercials is biased and provides an imbalanced picture of how the toy

industry has made conscious shifts towards gender neutrality. Over time, it is unlikely that children will change their interest in gender-stereotyped toys if they are only privy to their own gender playing with gender-specific toys (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). With an increased concern about encouraging female involvement in STEM fields, the lack of exposure to girls playing with more traditional “boy” toys, which are more likely to be STEM related, can be problematic.

When presented with a variety of toys to choose from, children as young as 4-years-old choose gender-typed toys after seeing them modeled on television by children of their same sex (Browne, 1998). Girls are seen with dolls, and boys with action figures. Girls use Easy Bake Ovens, and boys play with Legos. Children accept these gender stereotypes, create an identity with that typical role, and punish other children, especially boys, who exhibit cross-gender behaviors and traits. It has only been within the past few years that toy companies have dedicated efforts to neutralizing their product offerings. Target eliminated its pink and blue aisles (Schwab, 2016). American Girl recently announced the launch of their first male doll (Peters, 2017). Independent toymakers are breaking with gendered trends and creating female action figures and dolls for boys meant to encourage empathy and kindness (Schwab, 2016).

Despite these prominent changes, there are strides that still need to be taken to show children interacting with non-traditional toys in mainstream media. Because children are susceptible to these portrayals, they begin to accept these assumed images as real and take cues about appropriate gender behavior from this advertising. This repeated exposure can lead to conflict among young children who believe that each gender should behave in the way that they have seen represented and could lead to negative behaviors towards

other children who do not live up to the gendered expectations set forth in commercials. These findings suggest our society's need to produce childhood television programs that promote equitability and empowerment for any gender across any boundaries. Parents and other adult role models must make efforts in the home to show that males and females can both engage in a variety of behaviors. Fathers can be involved with child-care and housework and mothers can go out and work as scientists or doctors. Educators have a platform to point out the bias of female characters in commercials and increase children's awareness of gender depictions in advertising. Toymakers can make efforts to reduce explicit gender targeting through the use of neutral colors and names of their products. These societal implications speak volumes to the larger effect that gendered advertising to children has on the outcomes and behaviors of young boys and girls and highlight the importance of moving away from these outdated gendered stereotypes. Contemporary representations of males and females only account for a portion of the gendered influence children observe in commercials, the product itself plays a substantial role as well. Until both the presentation of the product and the portrayals of characters no longer perpetuate gendered stereotypes, children will still be subjected to this traditional depiction of boys and girls and will continue to live with this bias.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample size for this study was 20 shows, with 210 male-targeted and 113 female-targeted commercials being used in our analysis. There are a handful of child-targeted networks that were not represented in this dataset. Selecting networks that target preschool-age children or networks that feature predominantly female-targeted programming may have a different impact on the results of

this study. Also, the television shows included in this study were collected a few years ago, in October and November of 2013. The characters in children's programming as well as the products advertised on commercials could have changed in these last two years. By recording these shows only over the span of two months, the products featured in commercials could be impacted by the timing of Halloween and Thanksgiving. Limited edition holiday-themed products are not representative of the typical products advertised in commercials, so this might have had a confounding effect on our analysis. Additionally, the shows used in the sample were collected primarily from cable television channels. The audiences for children's programming on cable channels may be vastly different from programming on broadcast television. A more diverse mix of programs may yield different results.

A suggestion for future research is to include neutral or non-gender-targeted commercials in the sample. While male- and female-targeted commercials provide a broad dataset to work with, they are also inherently biased in their representation of boys and girls. A male-targeted commercial is undoubtedly going to style and direct the spokescharacters in that commercial in ways that are appealing to boys, who are the target audience. This is an important point to study, however, stereotypical gender portrayals are almost expected. It would be interesting to examine male and female presentation in neutral commercials because advertisers are not trying to appeal to one particular gender. Studying this facet of gendered advertising may provide a more comprehensive picture of the motives behind gendered portrayals of characters in advertising to children and the specific casting and design choices advertisers make with their spokescharacters.

## **Conclusion**

The presence of advertising to children isn't the problem, and it won't go away. The problem is the absence of competing messages about gender behavior and values concerning sex roles. Stereotypes can lead to oversimplified conceptions and incorrect evaluations of gender behavior (Eisend, 2010). These perceptions can restrict life opportunities, particularly for women, as well as reduce dignity, create body dissatisfaction, and impede social interactions. It is important to note, however, that advertising does not reflect the significant advancement of the gender equality movement in our society. To counteract stereotyped representations of gender roles in advertising, the responsibility to promote equality between boys and girls falls on the shoulders of parents. They can make efforts in their homes to show that males and females can both engage in a variety of behaviors from domestic chores to outdoor activities. It is difficult to tell if a child's preference for a gendered toy is innate or socialized. Efforts must be made by toy companies, advertisers, and parents alike to continue the promotion of gender equality in boys and girls through character representation in mainstream media and through activities in children's daily lives.

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**Appendix A: Complete List of Programs and Networks**

<b>Saturday</b>		<b>Weekday</b>	
<b>Show</b>	<b>Network</b>	<b>Show</b>	<b>Network</b>
Make Way for Noddy	NBC	Spongebob Squarepants	Nickelodeon
Rescue Heroes	CW	Bubble Guppies	Nickelodeon
Beyblade	Cartoon Network	Dora the Explorer	Nickelodeon
Ben 10 Omniverse	Cartoon Network	Jessie	Disney XD
The Haunted Hathaways	Nickelodeon	Phineas and Ferb	Disney XD
The Thundermans	Nickelodeon	Crash & Bernstein	Disney XD
Spongebob Squarepants	Nickelodeon	Ben 10 Omniverse	Cartoon Network
Penguins of Madagascar	Nickelodeon	Looney Tunes	Cartoon Network
Mighty Med	Disney XD	Codename: Kids Next Door	Cartoon Network
Camp Lakebottom	Disney XD		
Max Steel	Disney XD		

## Appendix B: Coding Scheme

### Product

1. What is the product (i.e. Barbie car, Lego Star Wars set)? Please specify.
2. What color is the product? (i.e. doll clothes, the color of food/toy packaging – NOTE: if no product, code for the color of the overall commercial)
  - d = Dark/black = 1
  - r = Primary colors = 2
  - p = Pastel colors = 3
  - w = Light neutral/white = 4
  - o = Other color (please specify) = 5
3. What is the genre of the product?
  - f = Food = 1
  - a = Action figure = 2
  - d = Doll = 3
  - c = Clothing = 4
  - b = Beauty/Cosmetics = 5
  - t = Toy (i.e. Legos, toy truck) = 6
  - g = Board Game = 7
  - x = Technology = 8
  - z = Sports/Sporting Equipment = 9
  - s = Store/Location (i.e. Chuck E Cheese) = 10
  - m = TV Show/Movie/DVD/Video Game = 11
  - o = Other (please specify) = 12
4. Is this product a STEM-learning opportunity (clearly intended for STEM usage)?
  - 1 = Yes
  - 0 = No
5. What is the target age group of the product?
  - 1 = Baby
  - 2 = Toddler
  - 3 = Preschool
  - 4 = Elementary
  - 5 = Teen/Tween
  - 6 = Adults
  - 7 = All kids
  - 0 = other (please specify)

### Characters

1. Are there any human characters in the commercial?
  - 1 = Yes

- 0 = No
2. Is the product being used as the character? (i.e. the product is moving and speaking)
    - 1 = Yes
    - 0 = No
  3. If yes, how many products used as characters are there?
    - 1 = single character
    - 2 = pair of characters
    - 3 = group of characters (3 or more)
    - . = N/A
  4. What is/are the gender of the product(s)?
    - m = Male = 1
    - f = Female = 2
    - b = Both = 3
    - o = Other/unsure = 4
    - . = N/A
  5. What is/are the age group of the product(s)?
    - 1 = Baby
    - 2 = Toddler
    - 3 = Preschool
    - 4 = Elementary
    - 5 = Teen/Tween
    - 6 = Adults
    - m = Mix = 7
    - o = other/unsure = 8
    - . = N/A
  6. What type of product(s) is/are there?
    - h = Human or humanoid = 1
    - a = Animal = 2
    - f = Food = 3
    - t = Toy = 4
    - o = Other = 5
    - m = Mix = 6
    - . = N/A
  7. If you coded "h" or "m" above, what race-ethnicity are the products?
    - w = White = 1
    - b = African American/Black = 2
    - a = Asian = 3
    - h = Hispanic = 4

- m = Racially diverse mix/ambiguous = 5
  - o = Other = 6
  - i = Irrelevant because there are no humans = 7
  - . = N/A
8. How many licensed characters are there (i.e. the brand had to pay another company to use this character)?
- 0 = no characters
  - 1 = single character
  - 2 = pair of characters
  - 3 = group of characters (3 or more)
9. What is/are the gender of the licensed character(s)?
- m = Male = 1
  - f = Female = 2
  - b = Both = 3
  - o = Other/unsure = 4
  - . = N/A
10. What is/are the age group of the main licensed character(s)?
- 1 = Baby
  - 2 = Toddler
  - 3 = Preschool
  - 4 = Elementary
  - 5 = Teen/Tween
  - 6 = Adults
  - m = Mix = 7
  - . = N/A
11. Is/are the licensed characters animated?
- a. a = Animated = 1
  - b. l = Live = 2
  - c. m = Mix = 3
  - d. . = N/A
12. What type of licensed character(s) is/are there?
- h = Human or humanoid = 1
  - a = Animal = 2
  - f = Food = 3
  - o = Other = 4
  - m = Mix = 5
  - . = N/A
13. If you coded "h" or "m" above, what race-ethnicity are the licensed characters?

- w = White = 1
- b = African American/Black = 2
- a = Asian = 3
- h = Hispanic = 4
- m = Racially diverse mix/ambiguous = 5
- o = Other = 6
- i = Irrelevant because there are no humans = 7
- . = N/A

14. How many spokescharacters are there?

- 0 = no characters
- 1 = single character
- 2 = pair of characters
- 3 = group of characters (3 or more)

15. Are any of the spokescharacters celebrities?

- 1 = Yes
- 0 = No
- . = N/A

16. What is/are the gender of the spokescharacter(s)?

- m = Male = 1
- f = Female = 2
- b = Both = 3
- o = Other/unsure = 4
- . = N/A

17. How many boys are present?

- 0 = 0
- 1 = 1
- 2 = 2
- 3 = 3
- 4 = 4
- 5 = 5+
- . = N/A

18. If there are boys present, are they wearing any sporting accessories?

- 1 = Yes
- 0 = No
- . = N/A

19. Are they wearing dark colors?

- 1 = Yes
- 0 = No

- . = N/A

20. How many girls are present?

- 0 = 0
- 1 = 1
- 2 = 2
- 3 = 3
- 4 = 4
- 5 = 5+
- . = N/A

21. If there are girls present, are they wearing a dress/skirt?

- 1 = Yes
- 0 = No
- . = N/A

22. Are they wearing pink?

- 1 = Yes
- 0 = No
- . = N/A

23. Are they wearing any jewelry/accessories?

- 1 = Yes
- 0 = No
- . = N/A

24. What is/are the age group of the main spokescharacter(s)?

- 1 = Baby
- 2 = Toddler
- 3 = Preschool
- 4 = Elementary
- 5 = Teen/Tween
- 6 = Adult
- m = Mix = 7
- . = N/A

25. Is/are the spokescharacters animated?

- a = Animated = 1
- b. l = Live = 2
- c. m = Mix = 3
- d. . = N/A

26. What type of spokescharacter(s) are there?

- h = Human or humanoid = 1



- a = Animal = 2
- f = Food = 3
- o = Other = 4
- m = Mix = 5
- . = N/A

27. If you coded “h” or “m” above, what race-ethnicity are the spokescharacters?

- w = White = 1
- b = African American/Black = 2
- a = Asian = 3
- h = Hispanic = 4
- m = Racially diverse mix/ambiguous = 5
- o = Other = 6
- i = Irrelevant because there are no humans = 7
- . = N/A

28. How many product characters are there?

- 0 = no characters
- 1 = single character
- 2 = pair of characters
- 3 = group of characters (3 or more)

29. What is/are the gender of the product character(s)?

- m = Male = 1
- f = Female = 2
- b = Both = 3
- o = Other/unsure = 4
- . = N/A

30. What is/are the age group of the main product character(s)?

- 1 = Baby
- 2 = Toddler
- 3 = Preschool
- 4 = Elementary
- 5 = Teen/Tween
- 6 = Adult
- m = Mix = 7
- o = Other/unsure = 8
- . = N/A

31. Is/are the product characters animated?

- a. a = Animated = 1
- b. l = Live = 2
- c. m = Mix = 3

d. . = N/A

32. What type of product character(s) is/are there?

- h = Human or humanoid = 1
- a = Animal = 2
- f = Food = 3
- o = Other = 4
- m = Mix = 5
- . = N/A

33. If you coded “h” or “m” above, what race-ethnicity are the product characters?

- w = White = 1
- b = African American/Black = 2
- a = Asian = 3
- h = Hispanic = 4
- m = Racially diverse mix/ambiguous = 5
- o = Other = 6
- i = Irrelevant because there are no humans = 7
- . = N/A

#### Commercial Technicalities

1. Where does the commercial take place?

- i = Inside = 1
- o = Outside = 2
- b = Both = 3

2. Is there a voiceover?

- 1 = Yes
- 0 = No

3. Who does the voiceover (who is telling you to buy the product, not just dialogue)?

- m = Male = 1
- f = Female = 2
- c = Child = 3
- p = Product/Character = 4
- o = mix/other (please specify) = 5
- . = N/A

4. What is the pacing of the commercial? (i.e. speed of voiceover, speed of shot transitions)

- 1 = Slow
- 2 = Medium
- 3 = Fast

5. How long is the commercial?
  - 1 = 0-15 seconds
  - 2 = 16-30 seconds
  - 3 = 31-45 seconds
  - 4 = 46 seconds - 1 minute
  - 5 = 1+ minutes
  
6. How aggressive/energetic is the commercial?
  - 1 = sitting
  - 2 = some movement
  - 3 = participation in some activity
  - 4 = dancing, jumping, fighting
  - 5 = physically crashing into each other
  
7. Does the commercial direct the child to an external site for the brand/product?
  - 1 = Website
  - 2 = Store
  - 3 = Both
  - 0 = No direction
  
8. What gender does it seem like the commercial is targeting?
  - b = Boys = 1
  - f = Females = 2
  - n = Neutral = 3
  
9. What age does it seem like the commercial is targeting?
  - 1 = Baby
  - 2 = Toddler
  - 3 = Preschool
  - 4 = Elementary
  - 5 = Tween/Teen
  - 6 = Adult
  - 7 = All kids
  
10. Did the commercial air on a Saturday?
  - 1 = Yes
  - 0 = No
  
11. What network did the commercial air on?
  - 1 = NBC
  - 2 = CW
  - 3 = Cartoon Network
  - 4 = Nickelodeon
  - 5 = Disney XD