

## **Sex Role Stereotyping in Australian Television Advertisements**

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*Television has attracted considerable attention in recent years because of alleged bias in its sex-role content. Studies of television in Great Britain and the United States have generally fuelled concerns that the medium presents male and female characters in traditionally stereotyped ways. Comparatively little research has focused on the way men and women are depicted in other nations' television. Such analyses contribute towards a more comprehensive account of sex role stereotyping and to cross cultural investigation. The present study examined the portrayal of male and female characters in a sample of contemporary Australian television advertisements. A sample of evening commercials was analyzed using measures developed in North American and British work. Strong evidence of differences in the presentation of male and female characters was obtained, and the differences were consistent with those reported in studies of television content in the northern hemisphere. There is little reason to suppose that this area of Australian media is changing substantially in response to public debate. The implications of possible differences between nations in terms of sex role stereotyping in commercials are discussed.*

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Television has attracted considerable research scrutiny and public criticism in recent years because of alleged bias in its sex-role content. In general, research has confirmed critical viewers' suspicions that television presents males and females in highly stereotyped ways, with males shown as masterful and dynamic, females shown as subordinate and nurturant (Butler & Paisley, 1980; Durkin, 1985a; Livingstone & Green, 1986; Gilly, 1988). Investigators of these biases have expressed concern over the dis-

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crepancies with empirical reality and the possible effects upon members of the audience. For example, the ratio of males to females in television fiction is found typically to be around 7:3 (Durkin, 1985a) which is indisputably at odds with real world distributions, and the proportion of females shown in employment contexts as depicted in advertisements was found in one British study to be approximately 13%, while the actual proportion of females in the contemporaneous workforce was 41% (Manstead & McCulloch, 1981). Not surprisingly, there has been intense concern about the possible contributions of these distorted representations to children's sex role development (Durkin, 1985b,c) and to the perpetuation of societal attitudes concerning sex role divisions more generally (Reep & Dambrot, 1989).

While the effects of media content upon media users cannot be inferred directly from studies of content alone, television's prominence as a mass medium is such that it warrants careful attention as a pervasive variable in socialization and attitude formation. Analysis of television content serves both as an account of the values of a dominant sector of a given society and as a description of an important part of the context within which sex role learning takes place. Further, because sex roles are themselves the focus of public debate and media interest, the extent to which changes might be occurring in popular media representations, and the extent to which the media of different societies exhibit similarities or differences in their tendency to display traditional stereotypes, call for continuing investigation. The majority of content analyses have been conducted upon US television, and some recent studies have detected indications of modest shifts in US sex role portrayals away from traditional stereotypes (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Reep & Dambrot, 1987a, b; National Commission on Working Women, 1987). Studies of British television and radio in the early to mid 1980s revealed patterns of stereotyping very similar to those reported in the US, though occasionally even more markedly traditional (Furnham & Schofield, 1986; Harris & Stobart, 1986; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Livingstone & Green, 1986).

To maintain a comprehensive account of contemporary sex roles and to monitor possible changes in their portrayal, it would be valuable to have content analyses available from other nations. One recent investigation of Italian television advertisements (Furnham & Voli, 1989) indicated that the patterns found in North American and British studies hold for that country, too. The present study is intended as a further contribution to an international account by investigating the sex role content of current Australian television. Australia has much in common with other Western nations in terms of sex role divisions and contemporary sensitivity to gender politics. The purpose of the investigation was to determine how the country's

television channels represent male and female roles. Because a high proportion of Australian television entertainment is imported from the United Kingdom and the US, while commercials are made domestically, it was decided to focus the analysis on the latter. Commercials are of particular interest in the analysis of media content because they are a highly condensed form of information which tend to be selectively responsive to aspects of the surrounding culture (Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Millum, 1975), and because they are very frequent and usually repeated many times, so that most viewers are likely to encounter them, probably more than once.

For these reasons, commercials have been extensively analyzed in earlier US and UK research. This work has found marked differences in the way men and women are portrayed. Men are typically presented as independent and intelligent authority figures, whereas women usually appear in domestic settings and are depicted as dependent, unintelligent, and only concerned with the social consequences of buying a product (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Rak & McMullen, 1987). McArthur and Resko (1975) report that although the numbers of male and female characters were approximately equal, differences were apparent in the types of products each gender advertised. Only 14% of women were classified as authority figures, compared to 70% of men. Male product users were also more likely than women to be rewarded with social and career advancement. Schneider and Schneider (1979) found it was more likely that female characters were younger than men, married, and portrayed as unemployed, or employed in traditional female occupations. Women were also more likely to be involved in housework compared to occupational work (Scheibe, 1979).

In a British study Manstead & McCulloch (1981) found that 94% of voiceovers were male, which implies that advertisers believe the male voice to be more convincing and authoritative than the female voice (Gilly, 1988). Manstead & McCulloch (1981) also report that men were product users in only 24% of advertisements for domestic products, and 88% of users for body products were women. Only 13% of women occupied autonomous roles, despite the fact that they represented 41% of all employees in the United Kingdom. Men were also depicted more frequently in occupational settings, and were more likely to offer some kind of argument in comparison to women (Harris & Stobart, 1986). Livingstone & Green (1986) found that males advertise expensive products more frequently than females, and women are more likely to be silent and presented visually.

Less work has been conducted upon Australian commercials, although these have been subject to criticisms of sexist bias within the country (e.g. Edgar, 1976; Edgar & McPhee, 1974; Wyndham, 1989; The Women's Bureau of the Victorian Department of Employment and Youth Affairs, 1979). These concerns have been communicated to and discussed within

the media. For example, an influential set of papers by academics and broadcasters involved in the mass media in Australia (Major, 1976) objected that allusions to women working outside the home were rare (Summers, 1976, p. 141) and charged commercial television in particular with sexism and conservatism with respect to sex role change (Lovell, 1976, p. 33). One contributor pointed to evidence that in the US non-sexist advertisements had been successful and called for more of these on Australian TV (Shannon, 1976, p. 146).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Australia experienced substantial increases in the proportion of women in the workforce (Women's Bureau, 1985; Australian Bureau of Statistics, personal communication, 1989). The Labor government increased legislation to prohibit sex discrimination and appointed a Sex Equality Commissioner whose office has responsibility to monitor and advance gender equity in the society. Surveys of family roles indicate some shifts in the patterns of division of household labor (Brewer, Cunningham, Owen, 1982; Bryson, 1983). In sum, in recent decades Australia has experienced ideological, political and economic pressures concerning sex roles similar to those of other Western nations, and in this context it is of interest to assess the extent to which the mass media have responded to developments in the surrounding society.

Two previous studies provide slightly conflicting bases for expectations concerning the current state of sex role portrayals in Australian commercials. Dowling (1980) conducted an exploratory analysis of the portrayal of women in 105 Australian advertisements, and found that women were likely to be portrayed in decorative roles, accounting for 38% of the total number of advertisements portraying women. Only 9% of advertisements showed women as occupying a career role. Female pictures were also frequently used to advertise personal and grooming products.

However, only 5% of women were depicted as sex objects, which was seen to be "at odds with those who claim that advertising continually exploits the female body as a sales vehicle" (p. 3). Dowling concluded that these results provide support for the contention that a considerable gap exists between social change and its reflection in television advertising. Although this study was indicative of the patterns of sex role portrayals at the time it was conducted (1978), unfortunately it did not present any evidence on the presentation of *males* in the commercials. Another limitation of this study is that the scorers worked in a group rather than independently, leaving the reliability of the data vulnerable to criticism.

Gilly (1988) conducted a rare cross-cultural comparison of advertisements based on US, Mexican and Australian television. She found that, in each country, males were more likely to be used for voiceovers, and women were more likely to be portrayed as young (under 35). Men

were also more frequently depicted in independent roles, and women as being more dependent on other people. Apart from these variables, Australian commercials exhibited fewer sex role differences than commercials from the US and Mexico. Gilly (1988) suggests this is because Australian advertisers are more likely to adopt self-regulations because of recommendations made by women's organizations to limit the stereotypical portrayal of adults on television commercials. The discrepancy in the results may also be due to the smaller sample of Australian Advertisements (138), compared with the United States (275) and Mexico sample (204). Repeated advertisements were also included, which may have restricted the representativeness of each sample. It would be advantageous for further research in this area to use larger samples of advertisements and to exclude repeats.

The present study was designed to extend our knowledge of current Australian advertisements using a large sample and employing a coding scheme based closely upon those used in analyses of North American and British commercials, namely McArthur & Resko (1975), Manstead & McCulloch (1981), Livingstone & Green (1986), Harris & Stobart (1986) and Gilly (1988). The previous research in other Western nations and everyday observation led to the expectation that sex role stereotypes would be found in Australian media, too, but given the slightly different pictures emerging from Dowling's (1980) and Gilly's (1988) studies, the extent of any bias remains to be documented and a larger sample of advertisements is required.

## METHOD

### Sample of Commercials

The sample of television advertisements was selected by video-recording three hours of prime-time television every evening from 6.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. during a seven day period, between the 14 August to the 20 August 1989. The sample comprised commercials broadcast on three commercial stations (Channel 7, 9 and 10), and each channel was taped for one hour per night in a counterbalanced sequence. The sample consisted of 450 commercials. All repeat advertisements were omitted, as were advertisements containing solely children, animals or fantasy characters. The final sample comprised 281 independent advertisements for coding.

## Coding Procedure

The coding scheme employed for the content analysis was based on a compilation of categories taken from McArthur and Resko (1975), Manstead and McCulloch (1981), Livingstone and Green (1986), Harris and Stobart (1986) and Gilly (1988). The characteristics of each central figure depicted in the commercials were coded independently by three observers (one male and two females). These characteristics were Sex, Mode of Presentation, Age, Credibility Basis, Role, Location, Argument, Reward Type, Product Type, Product Price and Background.

### Central Figures

Adults playing a central role in a commercial were classed as central figures. No more than two central figures were coded for any one commercial. If more than two adults were depicted, those featuring most prominently were selected for further coding.

#### *Sex*

The central figures were classified as (1) male and (2) female.

#### *Mode of Presentation*

Central figures were classified as either (1) voice, where they appeared as disembodied voice-overs; (2) visual-speaking, when they were depicted visually and had a speaking part; and (3) visual-not speaking, when they were depicted visually and did not have speaking part.

#### *Age*

Central figures were categorized as being (1) under 30; (2) over 30; or (3) undecided.

#### *Credibility Basis*

Central figures were categorized as being either (1) user of the advertised product; (2) authority, when they were depicted as sources of information concerning the product; or (3) other.

### *Role*

Central figures were classified according to their apparent role in everyday life, that is (1) parent; (2) home-maker; (3) worker; (4) professional; (5) celebrity; (6) interviewer/narrator; (7) spouse; (8) partner; (9) sex object; (10) sportsperson; or (11) other.

### *Location*

Central figures were categorized according to whether they were depicted in a (1) home; (2) store; (3) occupational setting; (4) leisure; (5) sport; (6) fantasy; (7) driving car; (8) outdoor; (9) studio; or (10) other.

### *Argument*

Central figures were classified according to whether the argument they present in favor of the advertised product was (1) scientific; (2) non-scientific, or (3) none.

### *Reward Type*

The categories of rewards to be coded were (1) opposite sex approval; (2) family approval; (3) friends' approval; (4) self-enhancement; (5) practical; (6) social/career advancement; (7) other; or (8) none.

### *Product Type*

Products were classified according to the following categories: (1) body; (2) domestic; (3) food; (4) auto; (5) sports; (6) services (non-material products such as banking); (7) leisure; or (8) other.

### *Product Price*

The products associated with each central figure were coded as (1) cheap (under \$20); (2) expensive (over \$100); or (3) other (uncodable or unclear/intermediate price).

### *Background*

The background against which the central figures appear were coded as (1) mostly female; (2) mostly male; (3) mixed; (4) children; or (5) no background.

### **Coding Reliability**

Reliability of the coding procedure was enhanced by the use of video recorders to tape the commercials, as this enabled replays and placed less reliance on the coders' ability to process information rapidly. Three raters participated initially in a group training session where twenty commercials were coded. Each coder was then required to view independently a further set of twenty commercials. Interjudge reliability was determined as the percentage of agreement between each pair of judges (Kassarjian, 1977). Coding reliability for each variable, expressed as the average interjudge agreement, was as follows: sex 100%, mode of presentation 100%, age 100%, credibility basis 100%, role 81%, location 90%, argument 88%, reward type 85%, product type 100%, product price 88%, and background 81%. An index of reliability was also determined by recoding 20% of commercials randomly selected from the final sample. Agreement between each pair of judges was assessed, and the average reliability score on each variable was as follows: sex 100%, mode of presentation 100%, age 94%, credibility basis 96%, role 86%, location 78%, argument 75%, reward type 72%, product type 93%, product price 88%, and background 85%. Any discrepancies were resolved by reviewing jointly the problem commercial, and discussing its properties until agreement was achieved.

## **RESULTS**

### **Central Figures**

In the final sample of 281 commercials, 433 central figures were coded. 74% of these central characters were male, and 26% were female, a difference which was statistically significant ( $X^2 = 102.82$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.05$ ). The main findings concerning the relationship between sex of central figure and the categories of each of the dependent variables are shown in Table I.



**Table I.** Relationship Between Sex of Central Figure and Major Categories of Dependent Variables (Expressed as Percentages)

Sex of central figure			
Variable	Category	Male (%) (n = 319)	Female (%) (n = 111)
Mode of presentation	Voice	48	14
	Visual-speaking	31	43
	Visual-not speaking	21	43
Age	Under 30	20	62
	Over 30	29	23
	Undecided	51	15
Credibility basis	User	34	68
	Authority	60	22
	Other	6	10
Role	'Dependent' <sup>a</sup>	15	44
	'Independent' <sup>b</sup>	85	56
Location	Home	20	36
	Occupational <sup>c</sup>	23	19
	Leisure <sup>d</sup>	10	9
	Other <sup>e</sup>	47	36
Argument	Scientific	19	5
	Non-scientific	68	66
	None	13	29
Reward type	Social approval <sup>f</sup>	14	26
	Self-enhancement	14	18
	Practical	44	27
	Social/career advanc.	7	3
	Other	15	14
Product type	None	6	12
	Body	10	17
	Domestic	19	12
	Food	28	42
	Services	15	10
Product price	Other <sup>g</sup>	28	19
	Cheap	54	70
	Expensive	31	19
	Other	15	11
Background	Mostly female	11	9
	Mostly male	31	28
	Mixed	32	35
	Children	4	6
	No background	22	22

<sup>a</sup>Parent, home-maker, spouse, partner, and sex object.

<sup>b</sup>Worker, professional, celebrity, interviewer/narrator, and sportsperson.

<sup>c</sup>Includes store locations.

<sup>d</sup>Includes sport.

<sup>e</sup>Fantasy, driving car, outdoor, and studio.

<sup>f</sup>Opposite sex approval, family approval, and friends' approval.

<sup>g</sup>Auto, sports, and leisure.

### *Mode of Presentation*

Mode of presentation was significantly associated with sex of central figure ( $X^2 = 44.81$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Ninety-one percent of central figures who appeared as voice-overs were male. Females were also more likely than males to be presented visually, particularly when not speaking.

### *Age*

A  $2 \times 3$  (sex  $\times$  age) analysis indicated that male and female central figures were depicted in different age categories ( $X^2 = 71.94$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Women were more likely than men to be young (under 30), whereas men were more likely to be older (over 30). We considered that this effect may have been due to the typical classification of voice-overs into the indeterminate age category. A second analysis was therefore performed which excluded the voice-over component. This also revealed a significant association between sex and age of visually presented central figures ( $X^2 = 25.77$ ,  $d.f. = 3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### *Credibility Basis*

The basis of credibility for male and female central figures differed significantly ( $X^2 = 47.03$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Females were more likely than males to be shown as product users, while males were depicted more frequently as product authorities. This effect may be explicable in terms of the high proportion of voice-overs, who were invariably classified as authorities. In a further analysis which excluded voice-overs a significant association between the sex and credibility basis of visually presented characters was not found ( $X^2 = 5.07$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ , *n.s.*).

### *Role*

Initial analysis of a full  $2 \times 11$  contingency table relating sex to role category revealed a significant association between role and sex of central figure ( $X^2 = 100.33$ ,  $d.f. = 10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Of the female central figures, 16% were depicted as homemakers, 17% as partners, and 13% as sex objects. Of the male central figures, only 2% were shown as homemakers, 5% as partners, and 2% as sex objects. In a subsequent analysis, this table was collapsed into a  $2 \times 2$  contingency table by combining parent, homemaker, spouse, partner and sex object into one category, labelled dependent

roles; and worker, professional, celebrity, interviewer/narrator and sportsperson, into another category labelled independent roles. Males were more likely than females to be depicted in independent roles, whereas females were more frequently depicted in dependent roles ( $X^2 = 36.58$ ,  $d.f. = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Of the independent roles, males were most highly represented (51% of all male central figures) in the interviewer/narrator category. As interviewer/narrators were invariably classified as product authorities, it was possible that the significant role difference between males and females may not have been independent of the sex difference in credibility basis. To test this possibility, the role data were reanalyzed excluding the interviewer/narrator category. This reduced the percentage of independent roles filled by male central figures from 85% to 67%, but did not affect the reliability of the sex difference in role depiction ( $X^2 = 6.09$ ,  $d.f. = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). That is, men were more likely than women to be shown occupying independent roles rather than dependent roles, even when the biasing effect of male predominance in the interviewer/narrator category was removed. An additional analysis excluding voice-overs, also indicated that this effect was apparent for visually presented central figures ( $X^2 = 8.43$ ,  $d.f. = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### *Location*

The location data were reduced from ten categories to four categories because some of the categories concerned revealed low frequencies. Analysis of the resulting  $2 \times 4$  contingency table indicated that a significant association did exist between sex of central figure and location ( $X^2 = 11.15$ ,  $d.f. = 3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Female characters were more likely to be portrayed at home, and male characters were more likely to be depicted in occupational settings. Male central figures were also more frequently depicted in the *Other* category. It was possible that the significant association between sex and location was caused by the high proportion of central figures (44%) in the *Other* category. The location data were therefore reanalyzed by excluding this category, and a subsequent  $2 \times 3$  (sex  $\times$  location) analysis revealed that a significant association still existed ( $X^2 = 6.55$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). As the location variable was intended primarily for visually presented central figures, and was not particularly applicable to voice-overs, a further analysis was conducted which excluded voice-overs. This revealed that a significant relationship was still evident between sex and location of visually presented central figures ( $X^2 = 9.59$ ,  $d.f. = 3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### *Argument*

Male and female central figures gave different arguments in support of a product ( $X^2 = 20.34$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Men were more likely than women to offer scientific arguments, whereas women were more likely to present no argument at all. The same pattern obtained in a separate analysis with voice-overs removed ( $X^2 = 7.29$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### *Reward Type*

As some of the initial categories attracted low frequencies, the data were reduced by combining opposite sex approval, family approval and friends' approval into a new category of social approval. Analysis of the resulting  $2 \times 6$  contingency table relating sex to reward type indicated a significant association ( $X^2 = 19.64$ ,  $d.f. = 5$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Women were more likely than men to stress social approval, whereas men were more likely to emphasize practical rewards. Slightly more men than women were rewarded with social and career advancement, and more females than males emphasized self-enhancement as a type of reward. 14% of women compared to 4% of men intimated opposite sex approval as a reason for buying the advertised product.

### *Product Type*

As the auto, sports and leisure categories accounted for very few observations, they were combined with the category labelled *Other*. A subsequent  $2 \times 5$  contingency table showed a significant association between sex and type of product being advertised ( $X^2 = 14.31$ ,  $d.f. = 4$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Women were more frequently associated with body and food products than men. Males were more likely to advertise domestic products, services and other products. This effect may have been due partly to the high proportion of male central figures (48%) who were depicted as authoritative voice-overs, and consequently associated with the advertised product. A subsequent analysis which excluded voice-overs showed that a significant association did not exist between sex and product type for visually presented central figures ( $X^2 = 8.34$ ,  $d.f. = 4$ , n.s.). This suggests that although men were more frequently associated with service, domestic and other products than women, their credibility basis was that of an authority rather than a user of the products.

### *Product Price*

A significant association was found between sex of central figure and price of the advertised product ( $X^2 = 9.44$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Female central figures were more likely to be associated with cheap products, and males were more frequently associated with expensive products. An additional analysis excluding voice-overs revealed that this was not an effect of mode of presentation, as it was also apparent for visually presented figures ( $X^2 = 6.34$ ,  $d.f. = 2$ ,  $p < 0.04$ ).

### *Background*

There was no association between sex of central figure and type of background ( $X^2 = 1.87$ ,  $d.f. = 4$ , *n.s.*). That is, male and female characters were not more likely than each other to be portrayed against a particular type of background.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate clearly that men and women appearing in this sample of Australian television commercials were portrayed in decidedly different ways. The nature of these differences were systematic and in line with traditional sex-role stereotypes. These results are consistent with findings obtained in earlier studies in other countries. Men were over-represented in Australian commercials, and were portrayed as authoritative experts who provided objective and knowledgeable reasons for buying the advertised product. They were depicted in traditionally masculine settings, and occupied roles which were independent of other people. Male figures were also concerned with the practical consequences of buying a product, and were likely to emphasize social and career advancement as a reward for purchasing a product. Conversely, women were typically shown as consumers of inexpensive products, particularly those associated with food and the body. They were not likely to provide a reason for buying a product, but emphasized the social rewards for product purchase. Female central figures also occupied roles which were defined in relation to other people, and were more frequently depicted in domestic settings than were men.

These findings reveal that Australian television commercials manifest very similar traditional sex role stereotypes to those found in studies in North America and Great Britain. Many similarities exist between the presentation of central figures in the television commercials of these

countries. The finding that the portrayal of men in Australian commercials significantly outnumbers women is consistent with much previous research, as the proportion of male central figures in commercials ranges between 63% and 75% (McArthur & Resko, 1975; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Harris & Stobart, 1986; Livingstone & Green, 1986), and does not point to a narrowing of the difference in this respect comparable to that reported in a mid-1980s study by Bretl & Cantor (1988).

Other similarities were also apparent between the present study and previous research. The high proportion (91%) of males comprising the voiceover category is in accordance with previous reports, as figures range between 88% and 94% (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Harris & Stobart, 1986; Livingstone & Green, 1986; Lovdal, 1990; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981). The depiction of 62% of female figures as young is also a typical feature of advertisements from the United States, Mexico and Australia (Gilly, 1988). This implies that advertisers consider it important for women to be portrayed as youthful and consequently attractive, whereas this is not as important for men. Instead male figures are depicted as being older, which may enhance their commonly presented image as authoritative experts. The male figures' typical credibility basis as an authority of the advertised product complements previous findings (McArthur & Resko, 1975; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Livingstone & Green, 1986; Rak & McMullen, 1987). Men were commonly depicted as authorities on domestic products, and were more frequently associated with expensive products.

Other sex differences between central figures were also apparent. Women typically occupied roles which were defined in relation to other people, whereas men were more often portrayed as being autonomous. This has been a consistent feature of earlier analyses (McArthur & Resko, 1975; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; Harris & Stobart, 1986; Livingstone & Green, 1986; Rak & McMullen, 1987; Gilly, 1988). This is also reinforced by the finding that men were more likely to be depicted in occupational settings than women, a phenomenon which does not reflect reality as recent figures reveal that 41.3% of the Australian workforce is female (Australian Bureau of Statistics, personal communication, October 9, 1989). The stereotypical notion that women belong in the home is reflected in their frequent portrayal in domestic settings, a finding also apparent in British and American commercials (McArthur & Resko, 1975; Harriet & Stobart, 1986; Gilly, 1988). Women were also more likely to provide no argument in favor of the advertised product, and to be reliant on social approval.

Although we lack comparable studies from earlier decades, there is little reason to suppose that Australian advertisers have made pervasive changes in the wake of public criticism of this aspect of their products. Some evidence of a narrowing of the gap between male and female

portrayals in commercials is presented in a recent US study (Bretl & Cantor, 1988, based on 1985 broadcasts). These variabilities over time and between nations have important implications for future research. They lead to the possibility of valuable field and cross-cultural studies to uncover any attitudinal correlates among viewers of television materials with different levels of traditional sex role stereotypes. They point to a need for continuing and diversifying studies to determine whether other countries follow a shift detectable in US media, or whether the US media will revert to a greater proportion of traditional portrayals—a possibility indicated by a still more recent US study (Lovdal, 1990, based on 1988 broadcasts) which found no significant differences on several measures when comparing late 1980s data with those collected a decade earlier. Another recent US study, concerned with prime time TV content rather than commercials (Davis, 1990), also found little evidence of change in portrayals of women from the 1970s to the late 1980s.

Content analyses contribute to a *description* of the societal contexts within which people acquire and adjust to sex roles. They help to determine aspects of a society's social stereotypes which serve to justify and foster differential opportunities between the sexes (c.f. Durkin, 1987). It is striking that sex role stereotypes in Australian television commercials persist in traditional mode despite governmental, professional and popular pressures towards a more egalitarian society. This, as with content analyses of other countries' media, raises questions concerning who determines television commercial content and for what purposes (c.f. Butler & Paisley, 1980, for a wider discussion of the structure and politics of the media).

Notwithstanding answers to these questions, an equally important issue for social scientists concerns the place of media content in the *explanation* of the development and maintenance of sex role differences. This issue is not addressed directly by content analyses, and it is important not to confuse descriptions of the frequency of different types of content with the *effects* of the content (see Durkin, 1985b, c, 1986). Much recent research on this topic has pointed to the importance of the pre-existing developmental status, the social-cognitive sophistication and the sex role orientation and attitudes of the viewer (c.f. Durkin, 1984, 1985b, c, d, Jose, 1989; Katz, 1979; Livingstone, 1989; Rees & Dambrot, 1989), which interact with the social context to influence what the viewer perceives as salient in media content and how she or he responds to it. With respect to Australian viewers it is relevant that members of a multicultural society with a high rate of immigration are likely to display quite diverse attitudes and traditions concerning sex roles (c.f. Peterson, 1989). A full account of the effects and uses of the media stereotypes identified here will need to investigate

the ways in which they are interpreted and responded to by different sectors of the community.

Nevertheless content analyses do make a direct contribution to the sociohistorical study of the contexts of sex role divisions, and there is a need for regular monitoring of the world's media in this respect. The present analysis indicates that Australian television commercials conform to widely criticized patterns within Western television, and present a highly stereotyped picture of males and females.

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