

Are Spike's Commercials More Sexist than Lifetime's: A Comparison of Gender Role Portrayals in Advertising

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Abstract

In light of the proliferation of niche market networks and other trends towards market segmentation that have arisen in recent years, this study explored the prevalence of gender role stereotyping and product stereotyping in the commercials aired on gender-specific niche market networks. This study used content analysis to examine gender role portrayals in the advertisements played on Spike TV, Lifetime, and NBC. Results indicated that gender stereotyping was, in general, still prevalent in the commercials shown on all three networks. Female characters were more frequently associated with the home and family, while males had a stronger association with work and the business realm. When comparing across networks, the author found that stereotyping was not always shown in the same areas and that the same kind of stereotypes were not always emphasized.

Raj: The only thing I've learned in the last two hours is that American men love drinking beer, pee too often, and have trouble getting erections.

Leonard: Focus on the game, not the commercials, Raj.

- "The Cornhusker Vortex," *The Big Bang Theory* (2009)

I. Introduction

When television was first developed as a consumer medium in the late 1930s and 40s, American broadcast networks lived up to their name by deliberately making their appeal as wide and general as possible in order to attract the largest share of viewers. Since then, the rise of cable television and other new technology has solved the scarcity problem presented by the traditional method of broadcasting television signals via radio waves. This paradigm shift has allowed for the creation and distribution of a virtually unlimited number of cable networks and has resulted in the proliferation of media outlets we see today. Instead of all of these cable channels trying to attract the same general audience as broadcast networks, in recent decades the emphasis has shifted more to a niche market approach in which stations target a specific demographic (Messineo, 2008). In response to the narrowing in target audience, this study seeks to reconsider the use of gender role portrayals and stereotypes in television advertisements—a topic that has been widely researched in a broadcast setting—by investigating it within the framework of two opposing gender-specific niche market stations.

Since the 1970s, a significant amount of research has been done on the topic of gender roles in television commercials. While most previous studies have purposely collected data from broadcast stations

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to examine only commercials aimed at the general viewing public (Royo-Vela et al., 2008; Eisend, 2010), this study will explore the gender roles in advertisements played on two gender-specific niche channels: Spike TV (for men) and Lifetime (for women). For the sake of comparison, this study will also look at one broadcast station, NBC, as a control in order to compare the gender representations in the commercials aimed at niche audiences to those aimed at a more generalized audience. This study applied a content analysis methodology to the commercials played on each channel.

Spike TV and Lifetime are both aimed at attracting gender-specific demographics and so are the companies that advertise with them. When establishing its brand in the mid-2000s, Spike TV explicitly set out to cultivate a demographically pure male audience so that “you [advertisers] know what you’re buying” (Stanley & Fine, 2004). Studies have suggested that it is not just the products being advertised, but also the nature of gender representation in the commercials themselves, that varies based on the demographic of the target audience (Hentges et al., 2007). Meanwhile, another study found that non-traditional gender role portrayals in television commercials could have a positive influence on women’s self-confidence and independent judgment. This, in turn, suggests that commercials may have some effect on viewers, functioning as social cues to trigger and reinforce sex role stereotypes (Jennings et al., 1980). Therefore, it is worth exploring whether the shift in target audience for niche stations has coincided with a shift in the nature of the representation of gender roles in television advertising. This study compared the prevalence of gender stereotyping, looking at both gender role portrayals and product stereotyping (associating certain kind of products with gender), in the commercials shown on Spike TV, Lifetime, and NBC.

II. Literature Review

As previously mentioned, there has been a great deal of scholarly interest in the topic of gender roles in advertising since the late 1960s and 1970s. This time period coincides with the rise of second-wave feminism. While first wave feminism focused on the overturning of legal inequalities, second wave feminism focused more on *de facto*, or unofficial, inequalities. This included questioning and otherwise calling attention to traditional gender roles in the family, in the work place, and in media representations such as advertising (Zeisler, 2008).

Since then, studies exploring gender role portrayals and stereotyping in the commercials played on broadcast television have been conducted in a variety of markets all across America and the world. The results of meta-data analyses are a helpful way to look at the overall themes and trends that all of this research has uncovered over the past 40 or so years. Furnham and Mark (1999) carried out a meta-data study of 14 primary studies conducted over five continents in the past 25 years and found that, despite the cultural and chronological differences between many studies, when taken together they show a “clear pattern” that indicates “the universality of sex-role stereotyping in television commercials.”

In 2010, Eisend conducted an even more in depth meta-data analysis on the topic of gender role portrayals specifically in U.S. commercials by looking at 64 primary studies. He found that gender stereotyping is still prevalent in advertising today, particularly in regards to a character’s occupational status, but that stereotyping in general has declined somewhat over the years. Results also indicate that this decrease is dependent on “gender-related developments” and “value changes in society over time.” In other words, movements like second and third wave feminism, along with today’s era of political correctness, have led to differences in the way society perceives gender and, to some extent, have lessened our cultural reliance on traditional gender role stereotypes to define what it means to be “male” or “female.” In terms of advertising’s consequences for society, these results support the mirror argument—that changing social norms cause changes in advertising—rather than the mold argument—that value changes in advertising lead to similar changes in society. This conclusion is supported by Kim & Lowry (2007), who argue that advertisers seem to hold to “traditional images of gender roles,” therefore, reinforcing and often exaggerating gender stereotypes, despite the significant changes in “modern societal images.” Further, many others believe that “the media does far more to foster prejudice against women and minorities than to overcome it” (Messineo, 2008; Wilson et al., 2003). So, although we are currently living in what some have dubbed a “postfeminist” world, advertisers—and, some would argue, the mainstream media in general—are still struggling to catch up (Zeisler, 2008).

Similarly, in response to the recent proliferation of niche market networks, there has been some debate over whether such stations provide a new outlet for previously marginalized voices in our society or

simply hold onto and exaggerate existing stereotypes about their audience group. This debate relates to both the programming and the advertising shown on niche channels. As Messineo (2008) explained in her study of gender representations in commercials played on Black Entertainment Television (BET), "Market segmentation has the potential to create broader and more diverse representations of women and minorities, yet the process might equally be capable of producing narrower and more stereotypical images."

Another growing concern surrounding niche markets is that this recent trend towards market segmentation is enabling viewers to more easily filter out diverse or contrary opinions and points of view (Sunstein, 2001). According to the "echo-chamber" theory, as more narrow and specific niche networks arise, it becomes ever easier for individuals to pick and choose the messages they consume, viewing only those that "perfectly match their own beliefs and desires" and thereby inadvertently creating echo-chambers that "silence alternative voices" (Messineo, 2008). This trend is problematic, Sunstein (2001) argues, because the positive-feedback loop created when a consumer watches only programming that supports his or her point of view and this limits that consumer's ability to be aware of, open to, or familiar with diverse opinions and beliefs. Messineo (2008) argues that this echo-chamber effect could diminish empathy, or perhaps even increase prejudice, towards "out-groups," or those outside of a given individual's specific demographic or psychographic.

Adding to this trend is the understandable but significant fact that viewers find it "validating" to see others like themselves in the media they consume (Brand-Williams and Kiska, 1999). According to Joseph Turow's (1997) "image tribe" theory, marketers are highly aware of this and are therefore more likely to incorporate members of the target audience or aspects of that group's "assumed culture" into their advertisements. In other words, viewers are more likely to internalize advertisements in which they can relate to the characters or situations involved. So a woman who is a young, single lawyer is more likely to respond favorably to a commercial featuring an independent, professional female character than to one about a soccer mom.

Niche networks develop their identities based not just on what they are and whom they are targeting, but also on what they are not and whom they are not targeting, thereby creating easily identifiable in-groups and out-groups (Messineo, 2008). For example, Spike TV developed its station identity by branding itself as the "first network for men," deliberately avoiding women's programming and warding off potential female audience members. In fact, when Spike TV chief Albie Hecht, who helped launch the channel in 2003, resigned from his position in early 2005, some claimed that it was because the station's female audience had grown from 32% in 2003 to 42% in 2004 (New York Post, 2005).

When establishing the network, Spike TV designed and redesigned everything—from the shows to the on air graphics to the layout of the website—specifically in an attempt to attract the 18-to-34-year-old male demographic. As Stanley & Fine (2004) put it, "Spike's no network for the man who moisturizes. It's an unabashed network for the guy's guy who likes to watch people fall down and blow things up." That's the exact reputation Spike TV executives worked so hard to cultivate. Yet, from that description, it's easy to see why Messineo and others fear that niche networks can promote stereotypes just as easily as they can fight them. Then again, Spike TV is a bit of an anomaly in the world of market segmentation: It is a niche network aimed at white, middle to upper class, heterosexual males, the one demographic that does not fall under any minority statuses.

In March 2011, Viacom, which owns Spike TV, announced that the channel is being retooled in an attempt to reach a wider audience. After ratings losses at the end of 2010, the network is hoping to go beyond its current demographic by attracting both a somewhat older male audience and, surprisingly enough, expanding on its current female audience. However, the network will still be aimed primarily at men. The new goal is not to actively attract female viewers but rather to stop actively deterring them by stepping back from the "guy-centric, fratty tone and attitude" that the channel has worked so hard to build since it was introduced. As network executive Jeff Lucas explained, "We don't want the women leaving the room when the guy's watching the stuff" (Elliot, 2011).

On the opposite side of the niche network spectrum is Lifetime television network with its core demographic of 18-to-49-year-old females. Lifetime has been careful to label itself as "television for women" and avoid being called the "feminist network." Former network president and CEO Douglas McCormick said that Lifetime tries "to portray women in ways that move us all forward to a greater sense of enlightenment and understanding" (Hundley, 2000). The network claims to be of great value to the personal and social growth of women and has become an active and widely known advocate for the recognition and advancement of women (Humphries, 2009). In line with this, Lifetime's website states:

In addressing critical social issues affecting the lives of women and girls, Lifetime develops,

creates and launches multi-year advocacy campaigns that involve public service announcements, legislative advocacy and partnerships with hundreds of non-profit organizations, women leaders, public officials and key members of the media to reach women on-air, online and in communities across the country. As a result of its unified programming, digital and advocacy initiatives, Lifetime has remained the “most trusted” and “most empowering” network for women for nine consecutive years. (Lifetime, 2009)

Spike TV’s website makes no such claims and does not explicitly endorse, fund, advocate for or otherwise support any causes or organizations (Spike TV, 2011).

Although the network says nothing about how or if this dedication to women’s advocacy affects what commercials it shows, Lifetime does say that its advocacy extends to the content of the network’s original programming. This is particularly true when it comes to its woman-centered, made-for-television movies (Lifetime, 2009). A 2009 study that looked at gender and criminal victimization in such made-for-TV movies on three women’s networks—Lifetime, the Women’s Entertainment Network (WE), and Oxygen—argued that, of the three, Lifetime had the most realistic depiction because it “seemed to link each act of criminal victimization to subsequent victimizations,” be they social, psychological, or systematic (Humphries, 2009). However, both Humphries and Hundley (2000) are quick to point out that, despite the network’s advocacy, Lifetime’s films are not immune to stereotypes. Hundley found that:

Lifetime portrays white, upper/middle class, young/middle aged, heterosexual, physically beautiful, strong-willed, emotionally charged, sexual objects and procreators in its original movies. While Lifetime’s movies do address some women’s issues, they concurrently contain and undermine feminism by consistently reasserting that women cannot “have it all.”

Meanwhile, Humphries (2009) noted that the victimized female characters in the network’s films tended to “promote a rigid conceptualization of feminine behaviors and roles. They were sexually promiscuous or provocative. They were mediocre as parents or unfaithful as wives.” In other words, most victims fell into the “bad girl” archetype, a modality that allows many viewers to see the victims’ narratives as cautionary tales.

Do Lifetime’s dedication to women’s advocacy or Spike TV’s recent decision to broaden its viewership manifest themselves in the commercials played on each respective station? Ultimately, this study seeks to explore how advertisers use gendered niche stations and whether they use them as a medium for displaying broader and more diverse representations of gender, as an echo-chamber for repeating and exaggerating old stereotypes, or in the same way as they use broadcast networks.

Based on literature review, the following two research questions were formulated:

RQ1. When compared to a broadcast station, did TV commercials played on stations targeting gender-specific niche audiences show a higher incidence of gender stereotyping in gender role portrayals and/or product stereotyping?

RQ2. Do the commercials shown on a television channel aimed primarily at a male audience (Spike TV) show a higher incidence of gender stereotyping in gender role portrayals and/or product stereotyping than those shown on a television channel aimed primarily at a female audience (Lifetime)?

III. Method

This study applied content analysis. In mass communications research, content analysis is seen as a good research technique for finding data about the manifest content in media messages that is objective, systematic, and quantitative. In this case, the media messages being explored are gender role portrayals in television commercials. This data is collected by breaking the commercials’ contents into the smaller, more specific elements that the researcher wishes to examine in more detail and then evaluating and categorizing the manifest content of each commercial based on these categories. This method’s major benefit is its data-reduction capacity, in other words, its ability to take a vast amount of data and systematically break it down for a more manageable analysis. Its inability to adequately explore latent content is perhaps the biggest limitation of content analysis (Rosenberry & Vickers, 2009). However, for the purposes of this study, this will not be a drawback because it will suffice to explore just the manifest content of sex roles in the commercials for each channel being examined.

Sampling

The sample for this study was made up of all the different commercials broadcast on Spike TV, Lifetime, and NBC between the hours of 8 and 10 on three consecutive weeknights in March 2011.

As previously stated, these channels were selected based on their intended audience: Spike TV and Lifetime are both specialized cable networks targeting opposite genders, and NBC is a non-specialized broadcast network aimed at a general viewing public. All three are national channels. The networks were recorded during prime time hours, from 8 to 10, in order to capture the commercials at peak viewing times, as is standard in this type of research (Royo-Vela et al., 2008; Messineo, 2008).

Although some commercials were played more than once during the period of the study, duplicated advertisements were considered only once per channel. In other words, if a specific Nissan commercial plays twice on NBC, it was only counted once for the NBC sample but, if the same commercial plays once on NBC and once on Spike TV, it will be counted for both the NBC sample and the Spike TV sample. In accordance with the models set forth in the studies conducted by Gilly (1988) and Schneider and Schneider (1979), all noncommercial programming, public service announcements, film trailers, station identifications, and other spots reserved for the network to promote itself or its programming were not counted or analyzed.

Coding

The coding categories for this research are based on previous successful research models, particularly those used by Royo-Vela et al. (2008), Messineo (2008), Gilly (1988), and Ferguson et al. (1990), and altered or expanded as was appropriate to fit the needs of this investigation. For the sake of this study, a primary figure is any human or animated character in the commercial who has a speaking part, holds or uses the actual product, or appears on screen for at least five seconds.

The primary characters or figures in each commercial were analyzed by gender regarding the following variables as shown in Table 1: (1) class of product advertised; (2) role played; (3) social relationship with the other characters in the commercial; (4) the setting or location in which the advertisement takes place; (5) what a character's credibility is based on if he/she serves as an on camera spokesperson. For variables 2, 3, and 4, the classes within these categories are not mutually exclusive. In other words, a single male character in a commercial can be portrayed as both a husband and a parent or a single female character can be shown in both an office setting and outdoors during the same commercial. For variables 1 and 5, on the other hand, the categories are mutually exclusive. For commercials featuring a voice over, the gender of the off camera announcer was also coded.

IV. Findings

This study found that there are some notable differences in the representations of gender role portrayals in commercial advertisements by network. Further, network differences were found for every variable explored. While it is expected that different types of products would be advertised to different niche groups—after all, creating a medium for advertisers to easily reach narrower target audiences was the point of creating niche market networks in the first place—the differences coded for in this study are significant because they went beyond what was being advertised to explore how things were being advertised.

On the most basic level, differences began to appear in the number of women and men appearing in the commercials (see Table 2). While female representation was somewhat disproportionate in Lifetime's commercials at 56.3% compared to 43.7% for men, the Spike TV sample was far more skewed with male characters being vastly over-represented. At 67.9% of the representations, Spike TV advertisements showed more than twice as many male characters as they did female characters, which only accounted for 32.1% of the characters. NBC, the control network for this study, had the most evenly divided gender representations, with only a slightly larger percentage of men appearing at 53%.

Table 1 Variables and coding scheme

Character Variables	Classes
(1) Product	Alcohol Cars and car accessories Dating/singles Electronics and games Food or non-alcoholic drinks Household appliances and cleaning Personal and beauty care Pharmaceuticals Restaurants and retail outlets Travel and leisure Telecommunications (phone and TV) Other
(2) Character role	Husband/wife or boy/girlfriend Parent/child Homemaker or maid Professional or boss Office worker/white-collar worker Blue-collar worker Spokesperson/presenter Celebrity Romantic stranger/sex object Other
(3) Relationship with the other characters in the commercial	Family Social Business No relationship
(4) Setting	Private residence Store/restaurant Occupational setting Outdoors Other
(5) Spokesperson credibility	Character is product user Character is an authority Neither
Commercial Variables	Classes
(1) Voiceover (off-camera)	Male Female Both No voiceover

Table 2 Relation between product class and gender

Product Class	Spike TV		Lifetime Television		NBC	
	Male (%)	Female(%)	Male (%)	Female(%)	Male (%)	Female(%)
Alcohol	12 (4.4 %)	6 (4.7 %)	1 (0.6 %)	3 (1.4 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)
Cars and car accessories	57 (20.9 %)	13 (10.1%)	8 (4.9 %)	6 (2.9 %)	27 (15.4%)	8 (5.2 %)
Dating/singles	10 (3.7 %)	15 (11.6 %)	5 (3.2 %)	6 (2.9 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)
Electronics and games	30 (11 %)	15 (11.6%)	8 (4.9 %)	11 (5.2 %)	5 (2.9 %)	3 (1.9 %)
Food or non-alcoholic drinks	37 (13.5 %)	25 (19.4 %)	51 (31.3 %)	47 (22.4 %)	20 (11.4%)	16 (10.3 %)
Household appliances and cleaning	0 (0 %)	1 (0.8 %)	25 (15.3 %)	22 (10.5 %)	5 (2.9 %)	7 (4.5 %)
Personal and beauty care	9 (3.3 %)	8 (6.2 %)	10 (6.1 %)	43 (20.5 %)	5 (2.9 %)	34 (21.9 %)
Pharmaceuticals	1 (0.3 %)	1 (0.8 %)	9 (5.5 %)	26 (12.4 %)	24 (13.7 %)	22 (14.2 %)
Restaurants and retail outlets	81 (29.7 %)	26 (20.1 %)	6 (3.7 %)	14 (6.7 %)	39 (22.3%)	37 (23.9 %)
Travel and leisure	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	21 (12.9 %)	15 (7.1 %)	11 (6.3 %)	5 (3.2 %)
Telecommunications	15 (5.5 %)	10 (7.8%)	10 (6.1 %)	4 (1.9 %)	12 (6.9 %)	6 (3.9 %)
Other	21 (7.7 %)	9 (7 %)	9 (5.5 %)	13 (6.1 %)	27 (15.4%)	17 (11%)
Total number of characters (% of total)	273 (67.9%)	129 (32.1%)	163 (43.7%)	210 (56.3%)	175 (53%)	155 (47%)

When it came to the product class being advertised (see Table 2), women were more likely to be associated with personal and beauty care products while men were more likely to be associated with cars and car accessories on all three networks. Network results differed in some of the other categories. When compared with the other networks, men appeared more frequently on Lifetime in commercials for two categories: food or non-alcoholic beverages (31.3%) and household appliances or cleaning (15.3%). Meanwhile, Spike TV showed 81 (29.7%) male characters in advertisements for restaurants and retail outlets while Lifetime only showed 6 (3.7%). Another interesting difference appears in the travel and leisure category: although more male characters appear in commercials for this category on both Lifetime and NBC, there were no commercials in this category at all on the network that is actually aimed at men, Spike TV.

Several significant differences can be seen between the portrayals of men and women when looking at the data collected regarding character roles (see Table 3). While the frequency of association does vary, the advertisements on all three networks show more women than men in the roles of parent/child, homemaker, and romantic stranger/sex-object. Men, on the other hand, are shown more in all three categories of working roles: professional or boss, office/white-collar worker, and blue-collar worker.

Table 3 Relation between character roles and gender

Character Role	Spike TV		Lifetime Television		NBC	
	Male (%)	Female(%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female(%)
Husband/wife or boy/girlfriend	17 (5.9%)	20 (13.9 %)	26 (13.5 %)	25 (9.4 %)	25 (11.2 %)	30 (15.5 %)
Parent/child	8 (2.8 %)	9 (6.3 %)	27 (14 %)	54 (20.2 %)	22 (9.8 %)	36 (18.7 %)
Homemaker	2 (0.7 %)	5 (3.5 %)	3 (1.6 %)	38 (14.2 %)	7 (3.1 %)	10 (5.2 %)
Professional or boss	42 (14.8 %)	4 (2.8 %)	19 (9.8 %)	11 (4.1 %)	27 (12.1 %)	14 (7.3 %)
Office/white-collar worker	31 (10.8 %)	17 (11.8 %)	15 (7.8 %)	13 (4.9 %)	25 (11.2 %)	12 (6.2 %)
Blue-collar worker	45 (15.7 %)	10 (6.9 %)	16 (8.3 %)	5 (1.9 %)	31 (13.8 %)	5 (2.6 %)
Spokesperson/presenter	25 (8.7 %)	20 (13.9 %)	27 (14 %)	42 (15.7 %)	37 (16.5 %)	29 (15 %)
Celebrity	12 (4.2 %)	1 (0.7 %)	6 (3.1 %)	10 (3.7 %)	7 (3.1 %)	10 (5.2 %)
Romantic stranger/sex object	8 (2.8 %)	26 (18.1 %)	3 (1.6 %)	5 (1.9 %)	1 (0.4 %)	6 (3.1 %)
Other	96 (33.6 %)	32 (22.2 %)	51 (26.4 %)	64 (24 %)	42 (18.8 %)	41 (21.2 %)
Totals	286	144	193	267	224	193

The next variable this study looked at, the relationship between a character's gender and that character's relationship(s) with the other characters in the commercial (Table 4), follows the same trend. On all three networks explored, female characters appear more frequently in familial roles while male characters are more likely to be shown in business relationships. Here, it is again worth noting a few differences between the networks. Specifically, it is worth noting that, when looking at the percentages for each category, the most significant gender divides were shown on NBC's commercials. Spike showed more characters in general, both male and female, in business relationships while Lifetime showed more characters in general in family situations but NBC's commercials showed the greatest differences in characters' relationships based on gender.

Table 4 Relation between gender and character's relationships

(3) Relationship(s) with other characters	Spike TV		Lifetime Television		NBC	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Family	16 (6.7 %)	15 (12.9 %)	36 (23.8 %)	55 (29.4 %)	34 (20.5 %)	52 (36.6 %)
Social	71 (29.7 %)	39 (33.6 %)	42 (27.8 %)	45 (24.1 %)	36 (21.7 %)	30 (21.1 %)
Business	86 (36 %)	31 (26.7 %)	37 (24.5 %)	23 (12.3 %)	61 (36.7 %)	25 (17.6 %)
No relationship	66 (27.6 %)	31 (26.7 %)	36 (23.8 %)	64 (34.2 %)	35 (21.1 %)	35 (24.6 %)
Totals	239	116	151	187	166	142

When looking at the relationship between gender and the setting in which the character appears (Table 5), women were placed in residential settings more often than men. Lifetime is the most notable example of this, with 46% of all female characters appearing in the home compared to 24.6% of female characters on Spike TV and 32.5% on NBC. Men were shown more frequently than women in occupational settings and, to a lesser degree, outdoors on all three networks. Interestingly, of the networks examined, Spike TV has the highest percentage of female characters portrayed in occupational settings (26.9%) and the smallest differences between the percent of male characters and the percent of female characters who appear in both occupational settings and in residential settings.

Table 5 Relation between gender and the setting

(4) Setting	Spike TV		Lifetime Television		NBC	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Private residence	40 (14 %)	33 (24.6 %)	50 (29.2 %)	104 (46 %)	35 (17.9 %)	55 (32.5 %)
Store/restaurant	33 (11.6 %)	20 (14.9 %)	20 (11.7 %)	29 (12.8 %)	16 (8.2 %)	25 (14.8 %)
Occupational Setting	91 (31.9 %)	36 (26.9 %)	51 (29.8 %)	31 (13.7 %)	68 (34.9 %)	29 (17.2 %)
Outdoors	91 (31.9 %)	31 (23.1 %)	42 (24.6 %)	49 (21.7 %)	68 (34.9 %)	44 (26 %)
Other	30 (10.5 %)	14 (10.4 %)	8 (4.7 %)	13 (5.8 %)	8 (4.1 %)	16 (9.5 %)
Totals	285	134	171	226	195	169

Taken together, the variables examined in tables 6 and 7 show that, in general, the "voice of authority" in advertising is still associated with men (Messineo, 2008; Royo-Vela et al., 2008). Male spokespersons on all three networks were more likely to be an authority on the product being advertised, such as a doctor in a pharmaceutical commercial or a lawyer advertising legal services, than female spokespersons, whose credibility was more frequently the result of being a product user, particularly when it came to hair dyes, face creams, and other beauty products. When it came to voiceovers, Spike TV had the most significant difference between genders, with male voiceovers appearing in 72.7% of commercials compared to 12.3% featuring females. NBC also had more male voiceovers (43.9%) than female (37.4%). Lifetime is the only network whose commercials broke away from the paradigm of predominantly male voiceovers (Eisend, 2010; Messineo, 2008) by having a higher percentage of females (44.4%) than males (38.2%). The numbers of commercials with both male and female voiceovers or no voiceover at all were comparable for all three networks.

Table 6 Relation between spokesperson gender and credibility

(5) Spokesperson credibility	Spike TV		Lifetime Television		NBC	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Character is product user	25 (54.3 %)	26 (96.3 %)	10 (40 %)	37 (84.1 %)	12 (33.3 %)	25 (86.2 %)
Character is authority	12 (26.1 %)	1 (3.7 %)	8 (32 %)	4 (9.1 %)	17 (47.2 %)	4 (13.8 %)
Neither	9 (19.6 %)	0 (0 %)	7 (28 %)	3 (6.8 %)	7 (19.4 %)	0 (0 %)
Totals	46	27	25	44	36	29

Table 7 Frequency of voiceover gender by network

Gender of voiceover	Spike TV	Lifetime Television	NBC
Male	112 (72.7 %)	55 (38.2 %)	61 (43.9 %)
Female	19 (12.3 %)	64 (44.4 %)	52 (37.4 %)
Both	5 (3.2 %)	7 (4.9 %)	9 (6.5 %)
No voiceover	18 (11.7 %)	18 (12.5 %)	17 (12.2 %)
Total number of commercials	154	144	139

V. Discussion

This study sought to answer two primary research questions, each of which compared the relative frequency of gender stereotyping in the commercials of three television networks: Spike TV, which is a niche network aimed primarily at men, Lifetime, a niche network aimed primarily at women, and NBC, a more generalized broadcast station. The first question asked whether or not the advertisements aired on gendered niche networks showed a higher incidence of gender stereotyping than those played on a broadcast station. The second question looked at both niche channels independently and sought to compare and contrast the prevalence of gender stereotyping – through both gender role portrayals and through product stereotyping—in the commercials aired on a network aimed at women with those shown on a network aimed at men. However, the results indicate that neither question has a simple answer. The advertisements on all three networks show gender stereotyping in some areas, but it is not always in the same areas or the same stereotypes that are being emphasized.

On a more general note, the results show some overarching product stereotyping on all three networks, with female characters consistently being associated with personal and beauty care products while males are associated with cars and car accessories. This trend follows the traditional stereotypes of physical beauty being a woman's domain or responsibility while significant financial or purchasing decisions fall within the male's domain. As previously mentioned, one notable difference between networks is within the travel and leisure category. While Spike TV showed no commercials at all for this category, both Lifetime and NBC commercials associated this category more frequently with male characters. This suggests that, while men do go on vacations, advertisers believe that, as a demographic, women are more likely to make travel related decisions and they therefore advertise accordingly.

Some pervasive, cross network stereotyping in gender role portrayals can also be seen when looking at other categories. Female characters are more commonly associated with the traditional realms of home and family. This trend can be observed across several categories: Females are shown more frequently as parents and homemakers, with familial relationships, and in residential settings. Male characters, on the other hand, are shown more frequently within the traditionally male realm of the business world. Advertisements on all three networks show more men as professionals, office workers, and blue-collar workers. Male characters are more likely to have business relationships, with more male interactions on Spike TV and NBC have falling into the category of business relationships than any other type of relationship, and are more frequently shown in occupational or outdoor settings. These general findings support previous research, which suggests that, although society as a whole has made significant strides toward internalizing gender equality in recent decades, advertisers are still clinging to traditional gender role portrayals and product stereotyping (Eisend,

2010; Furnham and Mark, 1999; Kim & Lowry, 2007; Messineo, 2008; Royo-Vela et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2003).

Looking at channels individually, there are some notable differences in gender role portrayals by network. When comparing Spike TV to the Lifetime network, it could be argued that the commercials shown on both channels are reinforcing or exaggerating potentially negative gender stereotypes but, when it comes to female characters, they tend to emphasize two very different archetypes. Advertisements on Lifetime are more likely to show women as maternal, domestic characters that fit the mold of the suburban “soccer mom” while the female characters on Spike TV tend toward the “sex-object” model of femininity. Results from NBC generally fell between these two, with both stereotypes being present in its commercials but neither appearing quite as frequently as it did on the respective niche networks.

On the Spike TV commercials, women are shown more frequently as sex objects or romantic strangers (18.1%) but they are also more likely to be shown as independent or autonomous. Female characters on this network have a significantly weaker association with the home and family than they do on Lifetime or NBC. Further, they have a much greater level of representation in the workplace. As a network, Spike TV’s commercials show the highest percentage of women in white-collar and blue-collar jobs, in business relationships, and in occupational settings. It is the only network whose commercials show more females in an occupational setting than at home. However, while women are being shown as a part of the workforce, they are not being shown in the role of professional or boss (only 4 females fit into this category as compared to 42 males). In this way, female characters are being given some agency but are still being “kept in their place” by being relegated to the role of sex-object while having the role of professional withheld.

Male characters on Spike TV are frequently shown in traditionally masculine roles. They are significantly more likely than female characters to be associated with cars and with professional or blue-collar jobs. Characterizations often relied on the archetypes of the successful businessman or the rugged, outdoorsy blue-collar worker. For both genders, the commercials on Spike TV show a weaker association with the home and family and a stronger association with business and social relationships or settings.

Lifetime commercials are the complete opposite. When compared to those shown on NBC and Spike TV, both genders are shown more often on Lifetime at home and in familial roles and less often at work or in business situations. Female characters in particular are shown more frequently as mothers and homemakers (or both) but, interestingly, less frequently as wives or girlfriends. Additionally, nearly half of all the female characters appear in residential settings. Male characters are also shown more often in residential settings than they are on the other two networks. Even so, males are rarely shown doing domestic tasks such as cooking or cleaning (only 3 men fit into the homemaker category compared to 38 women) and are generally shown within the domestic realm in the traditional role of the patriarchal head of the family. Meanwhile, Lifetime is the network least likely to show female characters cast as romantic strangers or sex objects.

These results seem to support the image tribe theory (Turow, 1997). In the cases of both networks, the advertisements seem more likely to incorporate characters that fit the demographics or psychographics of the network’s target audience. In addition, they seem more likely to portray members of the opposite gender in similar roles. For example, Lifetime’s core demographic is women between the ages of 18 and 49. Beyond that, many of the women who watch the network are white, middle to upper class mothers and/or wives (Hundley, 2000). So it is no accident that many of the characters shown in commercials on Lifetime, both male and female, are portrayed as members of traditional, middle to upper class, suburban families. On the other side of the spectrum, the 18-to-34-year-old male target audience for Spike TV with its “laddie sensibility” (Crupi, 2006; Stanley & Fine, 2004) is less likely to relate to characters in familial roles. Despite the network’s recent announcement that it plans to broaden its viewership demographics (Elliot, 2011), it is the very nature of the “boy-man” psychographic that the network has been working to cultivate over the last several years to be less mature and less ready to settle down or, at the very least, less willing to embrace images of characters who have settled down and taken on the responsibilities that go along with the suburban family lifestyle (Cross, 2008, pp. 206-207). Therefore, both male and female characters in the commercials on Spike TV are portrayed less frequently in familial situations. Instead, both sexes are associated more with business or social relationships and are shown outdoors, at work, or in bars and restaurants. Most characters are single, active, independent adults and are, in many cases, defined by their sexuality or their careers.

It could be argued that the conflicting female archetypes represented by the commercials on both networks are potentially harmful and both portrayals are undoubtedly stereotypical. There is some current scholarly debate over which female archetype is more negative. Royo-Vela et al. (2008) argues that to make

a character of either gender into a sexual object or a "decorative object" is to actively "put him/her down" while to show a man or woman in a mostly traditional realm or role is less severe and serves to keep that character "in his/her place." Messineo (2008), on the other hand, believes that sexual desirability gives characters some power, especially when looked at through the lens of capitalism. She even goes as far as to say that, "in the lexicon of advertising, to be powerful or to be sexually desirable is a worthy, if not the most worthy, goal of consumers." Ultimately, it is difficult to judge which network's commercials show more stereotyping (research question 2) because the advertising on both channels seem to espouse one type of gender stereotyping while eschewing the other. It is therefore the argument of this study that both networks show equally stereotypical, if opposing, gender role portrayals of female characters while Spike TV has slightly more stereotypically masculine depictions of male characters.

In the commercials shown on NBC, the control channel for this study, the gender stereotypes shown on both Spike TV and Lifetime are present. Additionally, the divides between the two sexes are greater in many categories such as parent, office or blue-collar worker, family relationships, and business relationships. In all of these categories, males are more likely to be shown in the stereotypically masculine realm of work while females are more associated with maternal roles and the home. As far as product stereotyping is concerned, the advertisements on NBC also showed the most significant gender divide, percentagewise, of any network when it came to the categories of personal and beauty products and cars or car accessories. The advertisements on both niche markets are slanted towards a specific realm or group of stereotypes, but that means that both genders on each channel are adjusted to fit the channel's respective curve. The gender role portrayals on NBC commercials, on the other hand, are just all around more stereotypical, clinging to the whole array of gender stereotypes where Spike TV and Lifetime both stick primarily to one. These findings therefore suggest that, by keeping to the traditional middle ground, the commercials on NBC ultimately show a more widespread prevalence of gender stereotyping than those of either Spike TV or Lifetime.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was conducted on a relatively small scale. The advertisements are from three networks at prime time during three consecutive nights. Future studies could expand upon this research by collecting samples at different times during the day, during different parts of the year, or for a longer period of time. Researchers could also explore a greater variety of gender oriented niche networks in future studies, particularly the Oxygen and Women's Entertainment (WE) channels. Although it is not a gender-specific niche market network in the strictest sense, incorporating the Logo TV channel, which is geared towards the LGBTQ community, into future research may also yield interesting results.

Due to time and budget constraints, another limitation of this study is that there was only one coder, therefore making it impossible to test for intercoder reliability. Future studies could benefit from using multiple independent coders during the content analysis process.

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