

**Ogletree, S.M., Williams, S.W., Raffeld, P., Mason, B., & Ricke, K. (1990). Female Attractiveness and Eating Disorders: Do Children's Television Commercials Play a Role?, Sex Roles, 22(11/12), 791-797.**

## **OVERVIEW**

A dichotomy seems to exist in our cultural attitude toward food. Americans have always enjoyed and feel deserving of exquisite, rich, and probably expensive food. Compare this to societal demand—especially for women—to be fit and trim. This study seeks to determine whether these unbalanced attitudes toward food have manipulative effects on women.

### **AIM**

This "study was designed to examine the content of children's cartoon commercials." There was an expectation that many of the commercials would be advertisements for food products. The hypothesis was that these commercials would appeal to males and females. Conversely, there was an expectation that appearance-enhancement would be clearly directed toward females.

### **DESIGN**

Cartoons and commercials were recorded during nine Saturday mornings, three mornings from each of the three major networks' programming, during the months of September, October, and November in 1988. A total of 675 commercials were recorded, excluding public service announcements, commercials for television programming, and commercials that were clearly adult oriented. After eliminating repeats, 160 commercials remained for analysis.

The information was further categorized by supporting characters, main characters, narrators, and intended purchasers (male and female respectively). Statistical results were given for "all commercials," "food commercials," and "appearance-enhancement commercials."

## **FINDINGS**

The "all commercial" results indicate that more male characters were on the screen than females. Additionally, the majority of the narrators were males; however, over twice as many commercials targeted females.

More specific findings separate food commercials from the appearance-enhancement commercials. Upon study, "food commercials" reveal that the majority of on-screen characters and narrators are male; these food commercials equally target males and females. "Appearance-enhancement commercial" findings suggest that the overwhelming majority of on-screen characters and narrators are female; no males were found as intended purchasers. These commercials are squarely targeted to females.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Overall, food commercials target both males and females. Appearance-enhancement targets females. This research leads to the conclusion that these "commercials may be one factor contributing to less than ideal eating attitudes and habits in females." Due to the findings, there is concern that "this differential emphasis may start in the childhood years and may affect females', compared to males', higher incidence of eating disorders."

One interesting note is that several jeans commercials targeted males. These commercials were not rated as appearance-enhancement, but communicated a different message. These commercials encouraged male viewers "to do their own thing." There was a heavy emphasis on independence and individuality.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. Do you believe that Saturday morning commercials influence, in a direct way, young females toward eating disorders? Why or why not?
2. How can youth workers reconcile commercials influencing children to eat plenty of food products, most of which are unhealthy, with the appearance-enhancement commercials

- leading young women to desire fit, thin, and attractive bodies?  
Is there a double message?
3. Is it healthy that jeans commercials targeted primarily to males are based on values of individuality and independence? Does fashion lead to true individuality and independence?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. Dialogue concerning these commercials must start in the family, primarily because most viewing occurs in the home. Parents must be aware of the messages that commercials send their children. Parents must begin to look for these messages. Teachers and youth workers must also develop this insight because of their complementary role to parents.
2. When those who interact with youth are able to evaluate what specific messages TV commercials send, discussion with children may begin. When these issues are discussed, young people can start to view these commercials with judgment skills and come to conclusions on their own or with the family. Open communication with children and teenagers helps when other forces influence them toward unhealthy attitudes and habits.
3. The youth worker should be aware of his or her potentially influential relationships with youth. The youth worker should not only be able to notice the messages that commercials are giving, but in a pro-active style, the youth worker must also address these issues with groups and engage them in dialogue and critical thinking. At this point, corporate conclusions can be reached.

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