

The purpose of this research is to understand whether weight control methods are marketed based on gender¹. Put more simply, TV commercials were observed in order to establish if more woman than men appeared in advertisements relating to weight control. Furthermore commercials were divided into three distinct categories, based on the amount of effort demanded by the given weight control solutions. The preliminary hypothesis utilized was that marketers more frequently target women as consumers of weight control products, and that there would be a relationship between the amount of effort required by a product, and the gender of the actors used in the commercials. It was believed that less difficult solutions would be more likely to be marketed to women.

Introduction. Differential treatment based on gender is highly significant because it has manifested in many different aspects of society. Various studies have been conducted about the source of the different behavior patterns of the sexes, biological or environmental? While no opinion on this issue will be offered in this paper, the paper could be instrumental in documenting existing gender patterns. The results could offer evidence about the reality of a given environment (in this case the environment of the Wisconsin network television viewers). Knowledge of the situation would allow for the strengthening or undermining of environmental explanations.

During initial observations it was noted that contrary to previous conceptions commercials relating to weight loss are not abundant². This information was relevant to the amount of time which was allotted for observation under the sampling rule. For this reason the initial project outline which looked at gender affiliated networks as the independent variable³ was altered. Instead the gender of the actors was utilized as the independent variable. It was believed this would cut down on viewing times as it would allow for a single sample set. Instead of dividing time between to networks, one could dedicate full focus to one channel and produce a larger sample in less time.

The bivariate hypothesis which was decided on was women, who watch network television, are more likely to be targeted by advertisers of weight control products than men, which causes the products that are advertised to be solutions which require less effort. The independent variable (gender) in this thesis acts to influence or cause the dependent variable (amount of effort related to a weight loss solution).

Methods of Research. In order to comprehend the procedure used when approaching the project the research methods must be fully examined. A units of analysis is “the entity about whom or which the researcher gathers information.”⁴ In the case of this observation the units of analysis used were the television commercials I observed.

¹ Due to project constraints, it will be assumed, for the purpose of this research, that gender is dictated by one physical sex.

² Not abundant, in this case suggests only that at times less than one weight related advertisement occurred during each commercial break

³ The operational definition of a gender affiliated network being any network which uses mottos to specify their target audience. An example would be “Lifetime: Television for Women.”

⁴ Approaches to Social Research, pg. 574

The setting in which the observation took place was my apartment using my own television. I was generally alone when conducting observations if circumstances permitted. This allowed for a single focus. I used a tivo⁵ system to record my samples, and was therefore able to fast forward through the television shows and watch only the commercial breaks. If I was concerned about missing any details I was able to rewind and confirm my observations. The use of tivo also made it possible for me to observe my sample all in one day despite the fact that I recorded the various television shows on three separate days.

The sample was selected using the following rule: all commercials airing between five and seven pm, on three evenings Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday will be observed. The rule stipulated that the channel(s) observed must be basic networks⁶. It was believed that this would offer the most representative, unbiased sample. The three networks which were selected are the WB (which was recorded Tuesday), Fox (which was recorded Wednesday) and NBC (which was recorded Thursday). Three different networks were used in an attempt to remove any influences associated with a given network. Of the entire set of commercials which were observed, data was taken only from the commercials relating to weight control.

Further restrictions were necessitated as a result of the operational definition of commercials relating to weight loss. Commercials which specifically mentioned weight control, weight loss or synonyms of either term were deemed relevant. Commercials relating to general health with out the above stipulations were excluded. An example of this situation is provided by a specific Cheerios commercial. It advertised the cereal as “heart healthy” with the benefit of reducing cholesterol. An example of a commercial which was included is that of Total cereal. This commercial highlighted both the vitamin content and the reduced calories for weight loss purposes. The focus seemed to be on the other health benefits but since weight loss was explicitly mentioned the commercial was included.

It must be noted that the operational definitions created for this research are based on my own subjective experiences. Had the terms commercials relating to weight loss and gender affiliated commercials been operationalized in a different manner the observation of the same sample set could have yielded quite different results. It is for this reason that the operational definitions used have been offered. I attempted to make the definitions as objective as was humanly possible, but unforeseen bias is always possible.

I believe that the methods used were generally acceptable but I would have been more comfortable with a truly random sample to observe. Also the sample did make it difficult to obtain a large enough number of cases to study.

The operational definition of the gender affiliation of a commercial was determined as a majority rule. In commercials which featured only one actor, the gender of that actor

⁵ A digital recording system that works similar to a VCR.

⁶ Television channels which are available to the general public free of charge given that they have some sort of receiver, such as an antenna.

would dictate which category the commercial belonged to. In cases where multiple actors of both genders were featured, the commercial was documented as both genders with a note as to how many individuals of each gender appeared. In cases where there was equal representation of both genders the commercial was noted in both categorizations. In some cases a note was not used to show the gender break down, in these cases only one individual of the gender represented by the given category appeared in the commercial.

Dependent Variable. The dependent variable in this study was the type of weight control solution advocated in a given commercial. This is an example of an ordinal variable. The three distinct categories used, ranking from exercise⁷, this was considered to be the highest level of effort which could be advocated, to diet which was considered to require a moderate amount of effort, and finally there was a quick fix category. The quick fix was defined as any attempt to control weight and involved neither diet nor exercise, but was some form of substance either ingested or otherwise internalized. Examples of the quick fix category include diet pills, supplements etc. I found that this operationalization worked quite well I had provided for various overlaps which might occur, but these situations never came up. I had judged that juice diets would be categorized as quick fix, because juice could not be considered food and would more closely match the quick fix definition. The ads on TV fit quite well into each category.

Independent Variable. The independent variable used for this research was the sex of the actors portrayed in a given commercial. This is an example of a nominal variable. Only two mutually exclusive categories were utilized, male and female. Gender had to be operationalized in terms of physical sex because the research was done solely through observation. It also suited the parameters of this project to keep the research straightforward. It would be a good idea should some researcher be interested to investigate gender in less limited circumstance. The gender determination of each commercial did prove a little more complex than was first conceived of. I decided to count the number of male and female actors appearing in each commercial. To simplify I looked only at main characters and spokes people, however this still often left a lot to be recorded. At times classifications did seem to become a bit arbitrary, which is significant for the validity of the outcome.

Ethics. Given the nature of my research there are few ethical concerns. This is because I did not have to interact with any individuals personally. Viewing samples by television allows for a safe environment for those involved are removed literally thousands of miles away and could reasonably be assumed to be out of harms way. One concern I did have was that the results of this paper might be misinterpreted and used against women. I wanted make clear the distinction between how products are marketed and how individual women use them or not.

Results.

⁷ Exercise related commercials included both commercials for gym equipment and gym memberships.

Independent Variable

	Male	Female	Total
Quick Fix	1	111	4
Diet	1111	11111111	12
Exercise	111	11	5
Total	8	13	21

Dependent
Variable

Conditional Percentages

	Male	Female	Total
Quick Fix	$1/8 = .125$	$3/13 = .231$	4
Diet	$4/8 = .5$	$8/13 = .615$	12
Exercise	$3/8 = .375$	$2/13 = .154$	5
Total	8	13	21

Final Table

	MALE	FEMALE
Quick Fix	13%	23%
Diet	50%	62%
Exercise	38%	15%
Total	101%*	100%
(N)	(8)	(13)

Statistically the data is in agreement with the hypothesis. One could view it as supporting, but of course not proving, that weight control commercials targeting women are more likely to advocate solutions which require moderate to little effort. However the significance of this data is somewhat questionable when one looks at the raw data. Due to the small size of the sample only one male quick fix solution was recorded and only three female quick fix solutions. This disparity is not huge, especially given the total six hours of observation. Equally notable is that only a total of five cases of the exercise category were recorded, thus the bulk of the data came from diet related commercials. Perhaps a more significant conclusion is that for both sexes diet was the most widely advocated solution, with diet making up fifty percent of the commercials aimed at men and sixty-two percent of those aimed at women.

The purpose of this research has been to explore gender associations in our society. The results do confirm that quick fix weight control solutions target women more frequently than men. However I believe more trials need to be done to confirm the validity of the data. The sample size was not sufficient to be considered representative. Another important trait of the sample is that is not completely random. It was chosen at random but not using any kind of computerized system which would be regulated solely by chance. The sample was simply presumed to be appropriate under the research conditions. Several unmeasured variables could have skewed the outcome. An example

of such an extraneous variable is time of day. Samples were taken in the evening; this timing affects who is able to watch. Had samples been taken during the day, a different outcome may have resulted. Also the cost of a given treatment may have played some factor in marketing if it is believed women generally have less money.

Conclusions and interpretations. Based on the evidence it seems that in this case women were indeed targeted for simple solutions. This is significant because it offers some insight into the environmental forces that the different sexes are bombarded. Further studies should be conducted to see if this market strategy actually affects the women whom it targets. It also provides a guide for those interested in studying gender images, and the general weight control trends which are show cased by the media. This could relate significantly to the obesity crisis in the USA.