How Stupid Are We? A Study of the Depictions of Men in Modern Advertising

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Abstract

It is no secret that stereotypes exist in our society, and this can often be seen through our various types of media. One such avenue in which stereotyping is prevalent is advertising, and more specifically, television commercials. This paper aims to decipher whether or not the newest claim in advertising stereotyping is true: the notion that males, now more than ever, are being portrayed as idiots in television commercials. The first section presents a review of past literature written on the general topic of gender stereotyping in advertising, beginning with the portrayals of females and narrowing down to the depictions of males. A content analysis was then performed to further explore the claim that men are being depicted as stupid. The analysis consisted of coding 440 primetime television commercials over a one-week span, answering three main research questions in regards to stupidity in males opposed to females. It was found that males are portrayed as stupid, foolish and/or incompetent far more often than females, and the roles and settings in which this takes place tend to vary. The third section of the paper reviews these results and their significance, and investigates the effectiveness of humorous devices and persuasion in television commercials.
Stereotyping can be defined as the process of oversimplifying a conception, opinion, or image applied to an entire group of people. It is has been proven that stereotyping can be dangerous and oftentimes hurtful to the race, ethnicity, or gender that is being targeted. One such avenue that has constantly been under fire for stereotyping is the media. For many years, movies and television shows have often incorporated unfair stereotypes that have caught the attention of critics. Additionally, advertising has been a consistent outlet for stereotyping, both intentional and unintentional.

While radio commercials, print ads, billboards and other various media tools have all been channels through which stereotyping can occur, television commercials most often contain the portrayals of certain races or gender which society deems unfair. Hundreds of studies have been performed on the topic of stereotyping in advertising throughout the years, and have been very useful in attempting to enforce change from advertisers. The vast majority of these studies, however, look only at stereotyping involving women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other underrepresented groups. There is little to no scholarly research available regarding solely the portrayals of men in advertising, and the effects this may have on our society.

The notion that males, now more than ever before, are increasingly being depicted as “dumbed-down” or “idiots” in television commercials is the newest claim about stereotyping. This claim has been vocalized for only the past few years, and therefore very little, if any, scholarly research has focused on its legitimacy. Through analyzing past studies conducted on gender stereotypes in advertising, however, we can gain a sense of how males have been and currently are being portrayed. Before taking a closer look at males, it is important to review the stereotypes that women have been, and
oftentimes still are, subject to in advertising. This is so because a recognition of various patterns first triggered scholars to begin researching the phenomenon of media stereotyping and its impacts on our culture, and a broader scope is needed to fully understand the issue at large.

This paper is composed of three distinct sections. The first section presents a review of past literature written on the general topic of gender stereotyping in advertising, beginning with the portrayals of females and narrowing down to the depictions of males. The literature review is divided into various portions based on a specific method of stereotyping, ranging from generic sex roles to incessant sexuality. Impacts of such portrayals are discussed, helping to provide further insight as to how and why the stupid male phenomenon is relevant.

The second section outlines in detail the method, research questions, hypotheses and results of the content analysis that was conducted. The analysis consisted of coding 440 primetime television commercials over a one-week span, answering three main research questions in regards to stupidity in males opposed to females. The third section concludes the paper by reviewing the results of the content analysis and their significance, and investigates the effectiveness of humorous devices and persuasion in television commercials.

**Stereotyping of Women: Sex-Roles**

While there are numerous ways in which women have been stereotyped over the course of advertising history, one of the most common is through the oversimplified use
of sex-roles. Sex-roles refer to the ways in which women are portrayed in relation to how society traditionally perceives them: in the workplace, in the household, etc. Over the past 30 years, the levels of stereotyping in regards to the occupational roles given to women in advertising have remained at a steady level (Eisend, 2010). That is to say, women usually take on the occupations that we typically associate women to have. Such positions include nurses, schoolteachers, and even more prevalent, stay-at-home mothers (Eisend, 2010).

A 1997 study conducted by Carolyn Lin sought to identify and explore similar concepts. Using a sample of 505 commercials over a one-week span from CBS, ABC and NBC, four coders noted the various types of roles that both males and females performed. Additionally, the notion of “beefcake vs. cheesecake” was investigated (Lin, 1997). A male “beefcake” is essentially the All-American man; muscular body, great smile, and performing the roles we typically believe men should perform. A female “cheesecake” is the equivalent to a male “beefcake.” The “cheesecake” is pretty, charming, alluring, and makes up what an ideal woman should be (Lin, 1997).

The study showed that, similar to Eisend’s in 2010, women in commercials perform the roles which society assumes they should be doing: cleaning the house, picking the children up from school, and other fairly domestic duties. Likewise, men were shown stereotypically in their respective sex roles: fixing cars, mowing the lawn, and other more masculine tasks (Lin, 1997). Where the genders differed, however, was in this concept of “beefcake vs. cheesecake.” Women were twice as likely to be shown as “cheesecakes” than men were to be shown as “beefcakes.” This idea combines the concepts of sexualization and sex-roles, revealing that those commercials not only
showed women performing the roles that society deems typical, but they looked good while doing so (Lin, 1997).

This is actually an improvement compared to the limits women were confined to in commercials from the 1970s. In addition to being portrayed stereotypically when it came to occupation, women were primarily depicted in the household and not beyond it (McArthur, 1975). Men were shown in any number of settings outside the home, and commercials in which women were shown extensively outside the home were rare. The roles women played in commercials during this time period often relied upon the relationship they had with others: being a parent, housewife, spouse, or girlfriend (McArthur, 1975). Men, on the other hand, were usually shown in a role independent of relationships they had with others. They were depicted as celebrities or working professionals, and oftentimes used as voice-over narrators.

Women during this time period were often shown as “users” of the product being advertised, while men spoke authoritatively on the qualities of the product (McArthur, 1975). Not only did men speak of the benefits or attributes of the product, but oftentimes men were the only speakers in the commercial. They were often the only speakers who gave an argument on behalf of the product, regardless of the type of argument being given (McArthur, 1975). For example, a commercial might have shown a woman simply holding a bottle of bleach while a man spoke about its ability to remove stains. This inactivity that was attributed to women in commercials was reflective of the conservative nature of the time period, and as previously stated, this type of stereotyping is not nearly as prevalent in the more progressive world we live in today.
Stereotyping of Women: Incessant Sexuality

Women have still been objectified in other ways, however, and perhaps the most noticeable and negative form of stereotyping today has been through the use of excessive sexuality in advertising. In this day and age, there is more pressure now than ever before in regards to females being held to a strict bodily standard. Whether intentional or unintentional, the media has a powerful hand in the ways females perceive themselves, especially young women. Advertising has been a medium consistently under fire for its portrayals of women, both in print and on television.

Jean Kilbourne is internationally recognized for her influential, award-winning work in regards to the misogynistic portrayals of women in advertising. Her documentary film series *Killing Us Softly* has garnered worldwide acclaim, and has made both advertisers and consumers aware of the frightening messages that are sent to women of all ages through various advertisements. Her work focuses on both print and television ads, and observes the physical characteristics of the women in these ads. In addition to exposing the hypersexualization of women objectified in these ads, Kilbourne’s series addresses the passivity and subordination that these women are subjected to.

*Killing Us Softly* was first released in 1979, and has been revised and re-released numerous times since, most recently in 2010. In this newest edition, a central focus revolves around the physical positions women often take in modern ads. A woman might be shown beneath a man, beside him or seemingly “at his mercy.” She appears to be completely subjected to his will and what he wants to do. Closely correlated with this concept is that of “silencing.” “Sometimes this means actually covering a woman’s
mouth (forcibly, but also playfully), other times copy simply says that she need not (or shouldn’t) speak” (Wade, 2012). This is a serious issue in that it robs the woman not only of self dignity, but also the ability to speak freely, if at all. All the while, the women in these ads typically are shown in overtly sexual positions. This hypersexualization, combined with the subjectivity and apparent silencing, is extremely influential in shaping female ideals and perceptions.

Reflecting upon the power of the media to shape women’s self perceptions, Michael Jacobsen observes that “Women’s bodies have been used whole, or in parts, to market everything from brassieres to monkey wrenches. One effect of such ads is to give women unrealistic notions of what they should look like” (Jacobsen, 1995). It is no mystery that the images of women in print ads seem essentially unattainable. These women have perfect legs, breasts, hair, eyes, and teeth on a perfect frame. Many times these images are slightly or majorly enhanced through the use of computers, proving that these images of women are virtually impossible to replicate. “The ideal cannot be achieved; it is inhuman in its flawlessness” (Jacobsen, 1995).

Furthermore, the women used in these advertisements not only possess physical characteristics that are unattainable, but also dangerously unhealthy characteristics. Women in print ads are oftentimes professional models, and these models generally are unnaturally slim. The growing emphasis on thinness is exemplified in these ads. Citing feminist scholar Naomi Wolf, Jacobsen describes how “A generation ago, a typical model weighed 8 percent less than the average woman; more recently she weighs 23 percent less. Most models are now thinner than 95 percent of the female population” (Jacobsen, 1995). In an age where young females are consistently seeking the latest fashion trends,
styles, and other aspects of beauty, it is inevitable that they will be exposed to ads which contain these types of images. These portrayals represent a serious issue that has societal consequences.

**Impacts of Such Portrayals**

Women feel pressure to look a certain way, and this is largely a result of female portrayals in advertising. When a girl is consistently exposed to models her own age that weigh far less and have far more desirable physical characteristics, it is only natural for the girl to aspire to look that way. This will likely cause behavioral changes from the girl, which can impact her negatively.

Stick figure models leave ordinary women questioning their food choices regularly. On any given day, 25 percent of American women are dieting, and another 50 percent are finishing, breaking, or starting diets. Additionally, in a study of 494 middle-class San Francisco schoolgirls, more than half thought they were fat, yet only 15 percent were medically overweight (Jacobsen, 1995). These are just two of the innumerable staggering statistics in regards to women’s perceptions of their bodies. These statistics are quite sad, as they demonstrate the fact that women are not comfortable with their bodies, lack self-esteem and self-confidence, and feel the need to fulfill the unrealistic standard which is accepted and utilized in advertising.

The impacts that these stereotypes and objectifications have upon women are crucial to discuss in relation to the topic at large. They reveal how influential and powerful advertising can be, as well as proving that the words and images we see in ads
and commercials are more than just that; they are means by which we identify and evaluate ourselves. This is an important notion to understand and keep in mind while discussing the claim that men are now being portrayed as idiots in television commercials. This gives credibility to the process of investigating these claims, as such stereotyping can and does have harmful effects on our society.

**Stereotyping of Men: Sexual Objectifications**

Women are not the only ones who have experienced stereotyping throughout the history of advertising. While the majority of scholarly research devoted to studying stereotypes has focused on women and their portrayals, men have also been subject to numerous types of unfair stereotypes. The key difference is that much of the stereotyping aimed at men has proliferated over the past couple decades, whereas women have been targeted since as early as the 1960s and 1970s.

Men have been objectified in ways which people might not often consider. As Jean Kilbourne convincingly exposed the incessant and pervasive female sexualization through her film series, men have also been victims of similar objectifications, although to a much lesser extent. Richard H. Kolbe explores these types of objectifications in his 1996 study of sole-male images in print advertisements. In this study, male images in print ads from *Business Week, GQ, Esquire, Sports Illustrated, Playboy,* and *Rolling Stone* were analyzed in terms of clothing styles, body characteristics, hairstyles, facial hair, body and head positionings, dimensions of eye contact and types of adornment (Kolbe, 1996).
The study found that while types of clothing worn, facial hair, body and head positionings and dimensions of eye contact were generally standard and fair to men, the men that these print ads depicted were not “ordinary, average guys” (Kolbe, 1996). Rather, the vast majority of these men, specifically in regards to body characteristics, have the physique of the traditional male icon: strong and muscular. Few men have softer bodies (Kolbe, 1996). These findings are inconsistent with the reality of our society; not all men are chiseled studs. In fact, those who qualify as such are few and far between.

Just as young girls are affected negatively when consistently exposed to near perfect female body images, the same can be said for young boys. Boys struggle with weight problems, acne, and the trials and tribulations of puberty, as do girls. If young boys see these muscular, chiseled men in advertisements, their reality of what constitutes a healthy body may be skewed. It can create issues in regards to confidence and self-esteem, and altogether can cause a boy to feel badly about the way his body looks. This is just another example of the influence of advertising, more specifically stereotypes, and how they need to be taken seriously.

**Stereotyping of Men: Idiotic Depictions**

Despite the lack of scholarly research in regards to the matter, the large number of articles, blogs and other avenues for opinion and discussion validates the basic presence of the theory that males are increasingly being portrayed as idiotic in television commercials. As these commercials continue to portray males as foolish or
incompetent, they spark anger and concern. Chris Bucholz identifies a particular victim of stereotyping in today’s world of advertising: the “dumb dad.” “A very common stock character who's attracted a bit of attention lately is the ‘dumb dad’…These ads typically feature a dad or husband figure blundering around the house, seeming baffled by basic human activities” (Bucholz, 2012). These types of ads can be seen often, and are usually associated with products that are not complex in any manner. We see ads in which fathers cannot perform even the most basic tasks, and are often depicted as inept with children or laughable in comparison to the intelligence of their wives. “When taking all the ‘dumb dad’ ads that air every day into consideration, it becomes harder to ignore. Because make no mistake, this trope is incredibly common, and in its worst forms can get pretty insulting” (Bucholz, 2012).

Compared to research on stereotyping of women, far fewer studies have been conducted to investigate the idea of “man as idiot.” This is a new realization that has been conceptualized in only the past few years, which can explain the lack of scholarly research done on the claim. The studies that are helpful in exploring this idea of “man as idiot” often focus on the rates of males successfully performing domestic chores in advertising. Additionally, studies which focus on gender stereotyping as a whole make it possible to decipher valuable information regarding the levels of incompetence shown by men in commercials.
International Studies of Males in Advertising

While this project aims to investigate the frequency of men appearing idiotic in television commercials here in the United States, studies that have taken place in other countries lend support to this growing theory. A 1989 Italian study analyzed 333 daytime and evening television commercials by classifying the attributes of their central figures into eleven categories: gender, mode, credibility, role, location, reward, product price, argument, background, humor and comment (Furnham, 1989). Among numerous results irrelevant to this project’s focus, the study found that humor is largely preserved for the central male figure(s) (Furnham, 1989). Females are sometimes depicted humorously, but far less frequently than males. Consequently, this opens the door for males to be exploited humorously for the sake of the commercial; whether the males are being made fun of, making fun of each other, or simply shown in a non-serious manner.

An important study that took place in Taiwan in 2010 performed a content analysis of primetime television over a two-week span, resulting in a sample size of 1,049 characters from 222 unique commercials, (Wanhsiu, 2010). Aiming to analyze Taiwanese domesticity and fatherhood, the study found that men are much less likely than women to be shown doing housework of any kind or being involved with the care of children. When they are, they are most often shown as incompetent or unsuccessful in doing so (Wanhsiu, 2010). This study supports the theory that men are shown as idiotic, showing that advertisers are continually opting to utilize the “dumb dad” to sell their products.
A Romanian study from 2011 further propagates the theory of the dumb dad. A sample of 351 commercials was captured and coded from within 37 hours of programming on popular public and nonpublic cable networks in Romania, (Stoica, 2011). The study sought to examine gender role portrayals of men and women in Romanian television commercials: the power distance between genders, which genders performed which tasks, and which genders possessed which professional roles. Among the plethora of results that emerged, the most important for our purpose here is the finding that males are shown as foolish and frustrated far more often than women are, (Stoica, 2011). Furthermore, the study seemed to validate these findings and deem them acceptable. “The greater proportion of portrayals of men as frustrated and as foolish compared with women seems consistent with modern values,” (Stoica, 2011). This statement calls into question what our society values in this day and age; making the dumb dad a common occurrence seems to be the social and commercial norm.

**American Studies of Male Domesticity**

The idea that males in television commercials can in no way, shape or form perform basic domestic tasks first relies on the fact that their sex-roles reflect this notion. That is to say, they are rarely shown doing housework but when they are, they are shown incompetently attempting to do so. As previously exemplified, foreign studies support this concept and have discovered that males are generally clueless when it comes to simple domestic duties. The next step is to determine the pervasiveness of this concept in regards to American television commercials.
A 2000 study of the portrayals of men and women in U.S. Spanish-Language television commercials found that women are depicted in traditional female roles, while men are almost never depicted as parents or performers of domestic chores (Fullerton, 2000). The content analysis used 162 primetime commercials from a Spanish-language television affiliate in a major U.S. market, and coded for the types of roles the characters played in these commercials (Fullerton, 2000). The fact that men are almost never shown as parents or performers of domestic chores is intriguing in the sense that it makes one question why. Why are they not shown in such a light? Does this truly reflect societal values, or do advertisers simply want it this way?

An American study from 2004 is of the utmost importance in examining the theory of males appearing as incompetent, and takes Fullerton’s study one step further. Titled “Working Hard or Hardly Working? Gender, Humor, and the Performance of Domestic Chores in Television Commercials,” the study sheds light on the amount of domestic household chores performed by males and females in commercials, as well as the rate of success or failure of these chores. “Among all of the commercials appearing in a composite week of primetime television programming on ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, WB, and UPN, only those commercials featuring domestic chores taking place in a house, yard, grocery store or laundromat were coded, resulting in a sample size of 477 commercials” (Scharrer, 2004).

The study found that male characters in commercials often exhibit poor performance of even the most basic chores, and are portrayed as being humorously inept. There were 108 commercials (22.6%) in the sample in which a character’s performance of a chore was a source of humor, and males were more likely than females to be the butt
of these types of jokes. “Males’ performance in chores was more likely to be met with a disapproving response from others, less likely to be satisfactory in both process and outcome, and was generally less successful than females’ performance of chores,” (Scharrer, 2004).

A review of past literature was necessary in order to fully understand the greater scope of how stereotyping has changed and evolved over the course of advertising history. What started out as portraying both men and women in their traditional sex roles has evolved to encompass not only these sex roles, but also sexualization and physical silencing. The claim at hand relating to males being depicted foolishly goes where few other gender stereotypes have gone before: it deliberately makes a group of people appear less intelligent. With this in mind, we can begin to investigate whether or not this claim is true, why it might be true, and its significance if it is true.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Attempting to document the claim that men are increasingly being portrayed as stupid in TV commercials is a complex task, because “stupidity” can be implied in a variety of forms. For instance, the stereotypical male may be shown as a father, a boyfriend, a son, a lawyer, a police officer, or in any number of other possible roles. Also, he may be depicted in a wide range of settings. These two factors, along with the specific type of stupidity being portrayed, are integrated in to the strategy used to make the man look idiotic.
This study investigates the claim that men are increasingly being portrayed as stupid in television commercials through three research questions.

RQ1: Who appears stupid/foolish/incompetent in commercials more often: men or women?

This is perhaps the most important question being asked. This is so because claim does not simply assert that men are appearing idiotic, and that is all. The theory’s main argument is that men are appearing idiotic, and women are not. Therefore, it would be foolish to only measure the stupidity rates of men; to fully test the theory, it is imperative to measure the stupidity of both men and women, and then compare the numbers.

H1: While women will also be shown as foolish in some commercials, men will be portrayed as foolish far more frequently than women.

This hypothesis, which supports the claim that this study is investigating, is based upon several factors. First and foremost, the review of past literature suggests that this trend is steadily increasing. Both international and domestic studies, although not measuring specifically for male stupidity, have found that men are depicted as foolish and incompetent more often than are women. Second, it becomes apparent that this claim is legitimate while watching television. The public is starting to notice the dumb dad trend and is beginning to vocalize it as well.

RQ2: In instances where the man appears as stupid, what is his relationship to other characters in the commercial?

This is another question of the utmost importance. The majority of commercials that feature men as idiots do so at the expense of men compared to women; this is to say, the women in the commercial appear as smart, and the men are idiotic. This question
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seeks to explore how frequently this is the case in commercials that portray men as idiots, and whether or not men often appear as idiots together, with no female characters present.

H2: During commercials in which men are portrayed as idiotic, the majority of instances will involve women appearing as the intelligent, dominant figure.

As does Hypothesis 1, this hypothesis also supports the claim being investigated. Past studies involving male and female domesticity in commercials have found that men are typically shown as unable to perform such basic domestic tasks, whereas women typically can. Because this is often the case, it can be hypothesized that women will often be the intelligent figure that has to guide the man in performing domestic tasks.

RQ3: In instances where the man appears as stupid, what is the setting in which the commercial takes place?

This question is fairly straightforward, as it seeks to answer what types of settings are most often associated with men appearing idiotic in commercials. The answers to this question can be very wide-ranging, which is part of the nature of the study.

H3: The setting most often associated with men being portrayed as idiotic in commercials will be a domestic, household setting.

The review of past literature analyzed studies which oftentimes were concerned solely with sex-roles of men and women in regards to domestic settings, and it is reasonable to assert that the trend of male stupidity generally taking place within such settings will continue. While it is expected that both male and female stupidity will take place within numerous settings and locations, the setting most often associated with male stupidity will be domestic in nature.
Method

Because this study is original and its exact type has not been performed before, there is no single study to replicate. In order to address the three research questions and the corresponding hypotheses, a content analysis was conducted. There were two coders; both were males between the ages of 21 and 23, and both were undergraduate college students at Saint Xavier University. The study sought to have one male and one female coder to help combat any potential bias; however, due to specific restraints and requirements that the coders had to fulfill, this simply was not possible.

The content analysis examined commercials from one week of television, ultimately resulting in 440 total commercials that were analyzed. On the basis of previous studies, it was determined that one week of television was a sufficient sample size; most content analyses which investigate stereotypes in television commercials have anywhere from 150 to 600 commercials. Primetime television from Monday, February 10th, 2014 through Friday, February 14th, 2014 constituted the hours that were used. Television was recorded from 7 PM to 10 PM each weeknight, which comprises the standard primetime hours. These 15 hours of television were recorded by the coders on DVR devices, and were revisited the following week for analysis.

The five channels that were chosen to be recorded were ABC, NBC, ESPN, CBS and FX, and each received one of the five nights that were used. These five channels were chosen because they provide entertainment for different genders and age groups, and were deemed the fairest to be used in such a study. Additionally, these channels
offered the most diverse array of television programs during the primetime hours each night, which helps to achieve validity. The following channels were recorded on the following nights, and the following programs were aired during these time slots:

Monday, February 10: ABC, 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM, *The Bachelor*

Tuesday, February 11: NBC, 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM, The 2014 Winter Olympic Games

Wednesday, February 12: ESPN, 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM, Men’s College Basketball, Syracuse vs. Pittsburgh and Duke vs. North Carolina

Thursday, February 13: CBS, 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM, *The Big Bang Theory, The Millers, The Crazy Ones, Two and a Half Men*

Friday, February 14: FX, 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM, *Date Night* (movie)

The commercials during these time slots were analyzed in regards to the three research questions. The coders marked down how many times males appeared stupid, as well as how many times females did. Research questions two and three were only answered for commercials which featured at least one male character in a stupid manner; if only females were depicted this way, questions two and three were not addressed. If these questions were eligible to be answered, the coders marked down the relationship the male character(s) had with others in the commercial, as well as the setting.

Duplicate commercials were counted separately, and for a reason. When a commercial is shown repeatedly, it is because the advertiser has paid for this to happen. This means that the message being delivered is reaching the audience more often, and is more likely to stick than those commercials that are shown less often. Therefore, if a commercial which features a male as an idiot is shown frequently, the message hits harder. Infomercials, movie trailers, station promos, and other irrelevant items were not
taken into consideration for the analysis. These types of items generally do not contain any sort of stereotyping, and therefore were not deemed necessary to include in the study. All other commercials, as long as they were advertising for a product or service, were counted and analyzed.

The researcher understood that stupidity can mean various things to various people. What one person deems stupid might not be deemed stupid by another person, and vice versa. Therefore, it was made clear to the coders before the analysis started that stupidity can take on many different forms. Being talked down to, being laughed at, being the butt of a joke, tripping and falling, and being hit in the face are all examples of how someone can be made to look stupid. Saying something unintelligible and/or being unable to operate and perform basic tasks are other manifestations of stupidity. The coders were trained to take all of these things into account, and many more. Anytime an act of stupidity, foolishness, or incompetence was portrayed by a man or woman in a commercial, it was counted.

In addition to the coders being trained extensively on what constitutes stupid prior to the content analysis, intercoder reliability was established. This was done by having both coders separately analyze the same set of ten random commercials. Several of the commercials clearly featured males as stupid, several clearly did not, and the remaining few were commercials in which expressions of stupidity may have been debatable. The coders were very close in their agreement during this intercoder reliability exercise, which strengthened the analysis as a whole. After the analysis had been performed, the results were submitted. The coders varied slightly in their analysis of the 440 commercials, but to a certainly reasonable extent. Therefore, the two coders’ numbers
were averaged for each item. For example, if one coder found 14 examples of male stupidity and the other found 18 examples, the number shown in the results would be 16.

Results

If we revisit the first hypothesis, we see it was predicted that the number of instances in which men appeared stupid would outnumber the number of instances for women. After conducting the content analysis, it was determined that this hypothesis was correct, and by a significant margin. Of the 440 commercials, 52 portrayed male characters as stupid, foolish or incompetent, compared to only nine commercials portraying women in similar ways. Additionally, three commercials showed both men and women acting foolishly together, with no one character(s) being the butt of the joke. Table 1 illustrates these results.

Table 1: Number of Instances of Stupidity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Instances of Stupidity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>52 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>9 instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>3 instances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second research question focused on the relationships that the male characters had with others in the commercial in instances where they appeared stupid. It was
hypothesized that in the majority of these instances, the man would appear stupid at the hands of an intelligent, dominant female figure of some sort. The analysis found that of the 52 instances in which men appeared as idiots, 31 of them showed men in stupid roles opposite intelligent females, statistics provided in Table 2a. Fourteen instances depicted men in stupid roles opposite other men, commercials in which no female characters were present. The remaining seven instances were ones in which the stupid male characters had no real relationship to anyone or anything in the commercial; these men were stupid on their own. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was proved to be correct.

Although there was not a research question which investigated the exact familial or professional role of the stupid male characters (father, husband, etc.), it is interesting and important to note that of the 31 instances in which men are stupid opposite females, 17 featured the male character as a father and/or husband. The remaining 14 instances featured the male character(s) as a boyfriend, son, co-worker, athlete, or other role, as outlined in Table 2b.

Table 2a: Relationships within these Instances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Stupid Male Instances</th>
<th>Relationship to Other Characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Stupid roles opposite intelligent females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Stupid roles opposite other men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>No real relationship to anyone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The third and final research question aimed to determine what type of setting was most common in commercials which portrayed males as idiots. It was hypothesized that although the results would most likely vary significantly, the most common setting in which males would appear stupid would be a household, domestic setting. Table 3 shows that of the 52 instances in which males appeared stupid, 25 instances featured the male in a household setting. This was far and away the most prevalent setting, with the second most pervasive setting being a vehicle, with only nine instances. As was the case for both Hypothesis 1 and 2, Hypothesis 3 was proved to be correct.

Table 3: Settings in which Stupidity Occurred

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Stupid Male Instances</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Party/Social gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Office/Workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Store/Restaurant</td>
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Significance

As all three hypotheses were proved correct through the content analysis, an important statement can now be made. The claim that men are increasingly being depicted as idiotic in television commercials has proved to be a fact. The numbers do not lie: while men were depicted as stupid in one out of roughly every nine commercials, women were depicted as stupid in one out of roughly every 49 commercials. Why is this important, however? Why does this matter? It is a question that is often asked in regards to the fact that men are being depicted foolishly, and there are a number of answers.

First and foremost, it is becoming known that males are not satisfied with their portrayals in television commercials. A 2005 study by Leo Burnett Worldwide, one of the world’s leading advertising agencies, showed that men believe their depictions in advertisements are inaccurate and out of touch with reality. Titled “The Man Study,” over 2,000 men from 13 countries were interviewed, giving the study a global reach (PR Newswire, 2005). The study did not focus on specific aspects of dissatisfaction, such as levels of incompetence, but instead on the shifting ideals that define masculinity, and what it means to be a man in today’s society. According to the study, “Men may be more sensitive than we give them credit for: the greatest insult to a man, according to those surveyed, is that ‘he'll never amount to anything’ (29 percent), followed by ‘everyone laughs behind your back’ (24 percent) and ‘you're stupid’ (21 percent)” (PR Newswire, 2005).
The Man Study shows that not only can men be sensitive, but they are insulted by being called stupid. Simple logic suggests that men may also be insulted when they continually see television commercials which depict men as stupid. This is not to say that men’s feelings might be hurt while watching commercials; rather, commercials which feature a bumbling idiot of a man are more likely to offend men.

In the literature review, a stock character labeled by Chris Bucholz as the “dumb dad” was discussed. As The Man Study proved that men believe their portrayals in advertising are inaccurate, it also proved that men believe that advertising does not truly represent who the fathers of this country really are. The blundering, inept fathers we see on TV in no way reflect the abilities of actual fathers. The number of idiotic dads we see in commercials is beginning to far outnumber those caring, thoughtful, intelligent dads. What is so wrong with showing fathers succeed at something? It has gotten to the point where thousands of protestors have demonstrated their displeasure against certain ad campaigns which feature idiotic fathers. This was the case for Verizon’s 2004 “Homework” campaign, which involved commercials that showed a father who was incapable of helping his daughter with simple homework (Sacks, 2008).

Men are not the only ones upset with their portrayals. Sacks quotes Rose Cameron, senior VP-planning director and “man expert” at Leo Burnett, who argues that “One of the great markers [society] looks to about the intelligence of a woman is her choice of husband. So if advertisers position men as idiots in the husband scenario, then you’re commenting on her smarts. Women have told us, 'If you want to get on my good side, you do not show my husband as the idiot,’” (Sacks, 2008). Thus, anti-father
advertisements have been met with criticism from both men and women, further proving the importance of the issue.

In a country where fatherlessness is a horrible problem, what benefit can possibly come from depicting men as idiots in television commercials? Glenn Sacks believes that advertising plays a role in the fatherlessness issue, saying “While the advertising industry's negative depiction of fathers certainly isn't the cause of fatherlessness, it is part of the problem. In a TV culture like ours, the fact that the only fathers one can see on TV are buffoonish (at best) does influence young people's perceptions of fathers,” (Sacks, 2008). Advertising’s depiction of idiotic men is more than a source of humor during commercial breaks; it has a deep impact on those who view it.

**Commercials Matter**

When watching a TV show, it is thought that many people change the channel when the commercials are being shown. It is thought that not a lot of people care much for commercials, and will do everything in their power to avoid them if possible. While this may be true for some people, the fact of the matter remains that television advertising works; it is a proven science to sell products. Because television advertising works, it relies on the basic principle that people are actually viewing commercials. Therefore, commercials which feature men as idiots are being seen by millions of people on a daily basis. This lends support to the fact that commercials matter.

A 2012 Iranian study analyzed the persuasion techniques used in print advertisements compared to those used in television commercials. The tools used in the
study involved 40 tape-recorded TV commercials and 40 print ads taken from two Iranian newspapers, *Tehran Times* and *Iran Daily*, which are published in English, as well as the American magazine *Newsweek* (Dastjerdi, 2012). After all persuasion techniques for both mediums were accounted for separately and then compared with the techniques used by the other, the main finding was that the persuasion strategies used in TV commercials are much more effective than those used in print ads (Dastjerdi, 2012). While this does not necessarily prove that commercials that portray men as idiots are persuasive, it does prove that commercials have an impact. They can be very persuasive, and their importance should not be understated.

The point that commercials matter is further exemplified through a 2013 Australian study conducted on responses to TV commercials. A videography of viewer behavior in the family living room was performed in 13 households in Glenvale, Australia, noting how family members reacted to commercials and what they did during commercial breaks (Jayasinghe, 2013). Results found that commercials, regardless of type, do induce notable reactions from people in the living room, spanning across all ages and both genders (Jayasinghe, 2013). Reactions included laughter, excitement, commentary, and even disgust when viewing an ad that the person did not approve of. This study not only supports the fact that commercials have a notable impact, but it provides evidence that commercials cause genuine reactions from people. This lends us to believe that those in particular who are offended by commercials which depict men as idiots may very well physically show it in the living room.

One final piece of scholarly research which helps emphasize the point that commercials matter is a 2012 Belgian study that focuses on the impacts of advertisements
that are unfriendly to both men and women. Using an online web-based survey, the 903 respondents were shown a variety of advertisements and were asked to rate them based on their levels of unfriendliness, and which ones offended them more than others (Van Hellemont, 2012). The results showed that as opposed to beauty standards or nudity, respondents expressed more concerns and were more offended by the portrayal of men and women within traditional sex roles. Sex-roles were discussed earlier in the literature review, and have been involved in advertising stereotyping for years. Our content analysis showed that commercials which feature men as idiots most often do so in household settings, which correlates with the idea of sex-roles. Above all, this study further supports the concept that commercials have notable impacts on people. They are capable of causing laughter and smiles, but they are also capable of causing anger and frustration. The results from our content analysis are significant in that we see how commercials have the ability to affect those who view them.

**Humor: The Reason Behind it All**

Despite all the knowledge as to how and why commercials are influential, why both men and women are offended by commercials which feature men as bumbling idiots, and why we should care, one central question still remains: Why are advertisers choosing time and time again to pick on men? Why are men always seemingly the ones to be picked on? Some suggest that men deserve it. While no concrete scholarly research is available that pinpoints why men should be the ones who are consistently mocked and made fun of in commercials, there is an opinion among both men and
women that because the majority of advertisers are men, they can only make fun of themselves. Additionally, because of actual historic discrimination against women and minorities, some believe it is “men’s turn” to be the ones discriminated against, in the form of advertising. Whether or not this opinion is considered valid, it is simply that: an opinion.

What this opinion fails to acknowledge, however, is that while women have been stereotyped in the past in regards to sexuality and sex-roles, their intelligence was never undermined in ways which men are currently being subjected to in commercials. The tagline “So Easy, Even a Dad Can Do It” has actually been used over the past few years (Bucholz, 2012). Additionally, this opinion assumes that someone always has to be made fun of, as if there exists some sort of rule or guideline to advertising saying that somebody always has to look foolish. Not only is this not true, but it can be detrimental to the overall quality of commercials. Even if a situation arises in which it is unavoidable that a character in a commercial appears foolish, why does it almost always have to be a man?

Regardless of popular opinion as to whether or not it is man’s turn to be the butt of the joke, the real reason as to why he is portrayed as a buffoon can be summed up in a single word: humor. In commercials which feature the clueless male, the goal is to induce laughter from the audience. Not many commercials, if any, show a moronic father that is meant to be taken seriously. Advertisers ideally want to capture the attention of the viewer, subject the viewer to seeing an idiotic male, induce a few laughs at his expense, and if all goes well, create a need and/or want to purchase the product that
is being advertised. While some people may see this as a surefire method of successful advertising, the following studies will show why advertisers are doing it wrong.

There are two types of humor: low complexity and high complexity humor. Low complexity humor can be more popularly defined as “slapstick” humor: people tripping and falling, people hitting themselves on accident, etc. Essentially, this type of humor does not involve much thinking. It aims for a quick cheap laugh, and moves on. High complexity humor, meanwhile, is the exact opposite. It is humor which requires one to think. It is witty, clever, sometimes sarcastic, and more likely to be remembered. The overwhelming majority of commercials which feature a bumbling male idiot utilize low complexity humor; the man falls, the man cannot successfully change a diaper, etc.

A 2011 Dutch study examined the effects of these two types of humor as they relate to brand associations in commercials, or the likelihood of the viewer remembering the product being advertised. A content analysis of 255 humorous Dutch commercials took place in an effort to identify various types of humor complexity and brand associations, followed by a field study in which 150 participants responded to a survey which tested the effectiveness of brand recall for these commercials (Van Kuilenburg, 2011). Results showed that brand-related humor induced stronger brand associations, but that this was only the case for complex humor (Van Kuilenburg, 2011). Because the majority of commercials which feature the male idiot use low complexity humor, it can be asserted that these types of commercials are ineffective in garnering brand associations. Therefore, not only are viewers being offended, but the advertiser is not achieving the basic goal of attaining a future sale. It is a lose-lose situation for everyone involved.
To further explore this concept, we will take a look at a 2013 American study which focused on the effectiveness of humor and entertainment in commercials, and the extent to which these factors influenced the success of advertisements. The study used 275 consumers who were exposed to a sample of 82 ads from 35 brands in three categories: beverages, alcohol, and confectionary (Teixeira, 2013). Facial analysis technology was used to analyze the reactions of consumers when being shown the commercials, and then was related to measure purchase intent. It was found that too little entertainment and too much entertainment can both be detrimental to the commercial inducing a purchase (Teixeira, 2013). This can be directly related to commercials which portray the male as the moron. Oftentimes, the stupidity of the clueless male is well over-the-top; the commercial tries so hard to be funny, that it ends up falling flat on its face. When this happens, it exemplifies how using too much entertainment works against inducing a purchase, once again proving that these types of commercials simply do not work.

The use of humor in commercials is not entirely fruitless, however. When used correctly, (high complexity humor, just the right amount, etc.) it can do wonders in regard to grabbing the attention of the viewer. A 2011 Chinese study measured the effectiveness of humor in television commercials, focusing on attention getting and message processing (Chan, 2011). The study used a sample of 254 university students, who watched five commercials and completed a questionnaire after doing so. It was found that humor in commercials helps to secure attention getting, but has a negative impact on message processing (Chan, 2011). This essentially means that viewers are entertained by the commercial and will most likely watch it entirely, but will not always be able to
remember the product being advertised. More focus is spent on the humorous depiction itself, and while the commercial may be held in high regard, it does not achieve the all-important goal of attaining an eventual purchase.

While this is an interesting result of the study and certainly relevant to the discussion in regard to humor in commercials, a more important result that was found states that males regard humorous commercials as more persuasive, while the opposite can be said for females (Chan, 2011). This poses an obvious problem in light of commercials that portray men as idiots. The majority of these commercials takes place in a domestic setting, and oftentimes are advertising for domestic products. Women are typically the purchasers of these types of products, and therefore are the target audience for a lot of these commercials. We know several things about these commercials: they usually utilize low complexity humor, they oftentimes go overboard in the amount of humor used, and they tend to have a negative effect on message processing and brand association. When combined with these aspects, the fact that females regard humorous commercials as less persuasive adds up to one thing: commercials which depict men as idiots do not result in sales. Ultimately, they provide little laughter, offend large numbers of people, and get zero results. Advertisers might want to reevaluate their work.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this project was to investigate the claim that men are increasingly being depicted as idiots in today’s television commercials. At the beginning, it was simply a claim. After performing the content analysis and deciphering the results, it is a
fact. As is the case for any study, there are reasons for conducting it. The fact that men are being portrayed as bumbling fools can now be grouped with the various other stereotypes discussed in the literature review. It has become a stereotype, and stereotyping of any form is negative by nature. Although this may seem like a trivial issue to some people, the fact of the matter is that these commercials are offensive. They reflect inaccurate, out of touch characteristics of males, and provide laughable examples for our country’s children to watch on television.

The sad truth is that in addition to these commercials being offensive, they are typically lame and lacking real humor. The reality behind the use of humor in television commercials was discussed at length, providing a background as to why these commercials are ineffective. The problems with these types of commercials have clearly been pointed out. What is the point, however, of proving a problem exists without providing some sort of answer? Fortunately, the answer is fairly straightforward.

The discussion in regards to the use of humor in commercials is not meant to discourage any and all use of humor. Such a notion would be foolish and elementary. Eliminating humor altogether, or heavily restricting it, would not solve the problem at hand. Rather, the studies cited were meant to display what kind of humor is most successful in creating quality commercials and ensuring better sales, benefiting both the viewer and the advertiser. Instead of consistently making fun of males only in an attempt to draw laughter, commercials should make fun of everyone. There is no harm in spreading around the joke; TV shows such as South Park and The Simpsons have experienced decades of success largely as a result of following this method. Furthermore, if there is no need to make fun of someone to create humor and/or sell the
product, advertisers should avoid forcing the issue. A commercial can be extremely successful with nobody being the butt of the joke.

While the criticism of these commercials and those who create them may seem harsh, it is in no way a statement in regards to the advertising world as a whole. The majority of today’s advertising is very well done, and there are indeed humorous commercials which are successful without showcasing the stupid male. Ad writers are not lazy hacks with no sense of how to create an effective message. The issue of this new stereotype in which males are morons must be acknowledged, however, in order for both the viewer and the advertiser to be better off.

Luckily, there are reasons to be optimistic for change. While there are still stereotypes that exist for females in advertising, commercials have come a long way to eliminate many of the former ones. Advertising is constantly adapting and evolving, and there is hope that eventually the depictions of men will improve. Until then, however, men are left with a question: how stupid are we?
Referencias


Van Kuilenburg, P., de Jong, M. T., & van Rompay, T. L. (2011). 'That was funny, but what was the brand again?' *International Journal of Advertising, 30*(5), 795-814.
