

# Seen to Be Heard? Gender, Voice, and Body in Television Advertisements

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*A quantitative content analysis of 1,055 television ads reveals that male voiceovers outnumber female voiceovers 4:1. As has been the case for decades in television, a man is much more likely to serve as the disembodied and objective voice of authority, expertise, and reason. However, a woman's voice is twice as likely to be heard if her body is also represented on screen. Based on that finding, the authors argue that scopocentric sexism influences when and how gendered voices are presented. A woman's relative agency, her recourse to "voice" in both the literal and metaphoric sense, is conditioned by her visual presence. After completing the quantitative content analysis, a qualitative textual analysis was conducted on a subsample of ads in order to explore relationships between voice and body at a finer-grained level. The study provides an important update for critical ad research concerning voiceovers and is the first that systematically compares voice and body data. The authors conclude by presenting ideas for integrating critical sound research into media literacy curricula.*

*Keywords:* Gender; Voice; Body; Television; Advertisements

## Introduction

Sound is integrally linked to image in advertising. The smooth timbre of a baritone voiceover connotes confidence and class in a luxury car ad. In a beer commercial, female characters with infantilized voices create a hyper-masculine soundscape, articulating beer-to-bar-to-babes. Yet, despite the importance of sound, ad scholars tend to ignore it. The power of image is more readily apparent to the viewer and

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researcher. Sound often registers subconsciously, especially in a visually defined medium like television.

Sound's subordination to sight might have particularly important consequences for gender. Consider the voiceover. We found that men perform 80 percent of ad voiceovers. That finding is consistent with past research.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the omniscient narrator, the disembodied voice of reason and authority, is much more likely to be male. In fact, male voices dominate almost all vocal role categories, including those ignored in past research. However, male dominance is cut in half for role categories featuring the speaker's body. In other words, the chances of a woman's voice being heard are greatly increased if her body is also on display.

We believe that this is evidence of *scopocentric sexism*, the tendency for visual role presence to influence inordinately when and how a woman's voice will be heard. That finding has important implications for the study of gender in television advertising and audiovisual media in general. To better understand gender representation, it is important to study not only visual images and verbal texts, but also sound.

In addition to quantitative content analysis with 1,055 ads, qualitative textual analysis was conducted on a randomly selected subsample. In addition to nuancing our understanding of gender voice and body dynamics, the closer reading (and listening) of ad image, sound, and narrative revealed that a woman's chances of being heard are closely linked to her physical attractiveness. Whereas men are allowed to take on a range of visual representations, from fairly unattractive to extremely good-looking, physical attractiveness appears to be a prerequisite for women characters and spokespersons in the ad world. Once again, scopocentric sexism: The visual is overdetermining the vocal in the case of women's representations.

Extreme gender imbalance in the omnipresent world of advertising should be identified, documented, and explained. If we understand the contexts and causes of gender inequity in advertising and other media, we might be able to redress sexism more effectively and challenge pernicious gender biases that otherwise remain obfuscated and naturalized. Toward that end, after presenting both phases of the study, we will suggest practical applications for these findings and consider new ways to integrate sound research into media literacy programs and curricula.

## Past Research

In 1975, Doolittle and Pepper found that men were performing 91 *percent* of ad voice-overs.<sup>2</sup> Three years later, Marecek et al. determined that only "6.5 percent" of the ads in their analysis "used female voices exclusively," while another "4 percent used male and female voices together."<sup>3</sup> Ten years later, Bretl and Cantor produced similar results: "consistent with other content analyses conducted over the past 15 years ... approximately 90 percent of all narrators are male."<sup>4</sup> As a sign of slow progress, men were performing 80 percent of the voiceovers in TV ads by 1998.<sup>5</sup> These results are consistent with our findings.

While a 4:1 ratio of male to female voiceovers is inadequate from the vantage point of gender equity, the slow change over the past half century presents a challenge to essentialist arguments. In fact, vocal representations and preferences vary according to space as well as time. For example, men perform 81 percent of Saudi Arabian ad voiceovers, compared to 70 percent in Great Britain.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, cultural, ideological, and political-economic developments are influencing vocal performance and perception.

Why have marketers and advertisers remained so insistent on perpetuating male dominance in voiceovers? According to Lovdal, advertisers consider male voices “more authoritative and convincing than the female voice.”<sup>7</sup> Bretl and Cantor quoted ad professionals making similar claims.<sup>8</sup> More recently, marketing consultant Jim Gilmartin claimed that gender “tends to predispose responses to voice-overs in broadcast advertising.”<sup>9</sup> Without citing any research, Gilmartin asserted: “male voices are seen as more knowledgeable when describing technical attributes of a product, while female voices are seen as more knowledgeable when describing a product with references to love, relationships and caring.” Gilmartin advised clients to use male and female voices for the purposes to which audiences will respond most favorably, reproducing a time-honored tautology.

There is some evidence to support Gilmartin’s claims. For example, in an experimental study, Kolbe and Muehling found that children respond more favorably to ads with male voiceovers than those with female voiceovers.<sup>10</sup> However, children may simply be responding to the radically dimorphic nature of children’s advertising.<sup>11</sup> Consumers are being enculturated to favor the masculine voice from a very early age.

However, as opposed to Kolbe and Muehling, Leung and Kee found no significant difference in terms of gender reception among adult consumers.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, they found no evidence that male voice-overs appeal to one sex more than the other.<sup>13</sup> However, the study was greatly limited by its exclusive focus on male voiceovers. We do not know how their research subjects would have reacted to female voiceovers.

In some cases, vocal gender bias runs in the opposite direction. In one of the few studies to measure direct effects, Linek et al. discovered that people learned more when female voices narrated animated computer lessons than they did when those same lessons and characters were voiced by males.<sup>14</sup> In addition to time and culture, it appears that the vocal gender bias also varies by technology, medium, and genre.

A 2010 Adweek Media/ Harris Poll survey of 2,194 US consumers found that “Almost half of Americans (48%) believe a male voice is more forceful while 46% believe a female voice is more soothing.”<sup>15</sup> “Among those who believe it makes a difference,” explains David Ciccarelli, “over one-quarter (28%) believe a male voice is more likely to sell them a car and 23% say a male voice is more likely to sell them a computer. ... Only 7% say a female voice is more likely to sell them either.” In other words, the majority of consumers claim that the gender of a voiceover does not matter. Unfortunately, there is enough evidence of bias among audiences to make advertisers hedge their bets in the masculine direction. According to Ciccarelli, “gender stereotypes are alive and well in the way many people react to male and female voiceovers in commercials,” knowledge that leads to “easy choices” for marketers.

However, Anne Karpf advised us to be wary of such claims.<sup>16</sup> She noted that, “Taboos against women’s voices have a long history.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, “the history of women’s exclusion from broadcasting represents perhaps the most blatant example of prejudice against women’s voices.” Karpf described how male producers make excuses ranging from outright lies regarding women’s vocal fit for electronic recording technologies to the supply-and-demand tautology mentioned earlier.

Ads help naturalize the masculine vocal norm, making it difficult to determine whether consumer’s preferences, ad producer’s biases, or both lead to skewed vocal demographics. For example, twenty-six percent of the children in Kolbe and Muehling’s study incorrectly identified voiceover gender later when asked to recall basic ad elements. Most misremembered a female voiceover as having been male.<sup>18</sup> Consumers expect voiceovers to be performed by men, because most of the voiceovers they hear are, indeed, performed by men. Ad producers assume that audiences prefer male voiceovers, and therefore mostly hire men to perform them. Ad content helps carry those same expectations and circular logic on down to the next generation of consumers and advertisers.

Therefore, despite five decades of intermittent research, the question of why men’s voices dominate advertising remains largely unanswered. We argue that scopocentric sexism contributes to the problem. Scopocentric sexism is an audiovisual ideology linking women’s voices to their bodily display. After laying out the study that led us to that conclusion, we will discuss broader implications for advertising research, feminist theory, and media literacy.

### **Method: Content Analysis**

Past content analyses have focused on voiceovers, ignoring other speaking roles, such as characters and spokespersons. This study included those additional role definitions in order to answer a basic question: does the presence of a woman’s body increase the chances that her voice will be heard? The following hypotheses were tested:

H<sub>1</sub>: The ratio of male to female voices will be significantly greater in the voiceover category than in the character (speaking role) category.

H<sub>2</sub>: The ratio of male to female voices will be significantly greater in the voiceover category than in the spokesperson category.

H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> answer the same question: Are women more likely to be heard when seen?

We took the test one step further. Given that men are much more likely to be represented as disembodied voices (voiceovers) than women, then perhaps, by extension, women dominate the “voiceless body” category. If the lack of bodily presence helps empower masculine authority through a projection of omniscience, then perhaps the corollary case holds true: Women are more likely to serve as mute, visual objects in the “male gaze.”<sup>19</sup> To explore that proposition, a third hypothesis was tested:

H<sub>3</sub>: There will be more female voiceless bodies than male voiceless bodies.

In order to measure inter-rater reliability, two coders independently coded 100 ads, following an explicit coding guide. The first inter-reliability test resulted in over 90 percent agreement for all but one variable: voiceless body. The difficulties and vagaries of counting all characters in non-speaking roles made coding the voiceless body category almost impossible. Most mute bodies appear briefly and in mass numbers, rendering basic counting procedures impractical. Therefore, coding criteria and procedures were revised to include more specific rules and parameters, including narrowing the count for voiceless bodies to “individuals who are on screen, alone, for over 5 seconds.” Given the interest in visual objectification, it made sense to focus solely upon mute bodies that appear on camera for longer periods (i.e., 5 seconds or more). That helped the variable match our intent in determining if women’s mute bodies are more likely to be fixed in the gaze than are men’s mute bodies. A hundred additional ads were coded, using these revised criteria, resulting in inter-rater agreement exceeding 90 percent for all variables.

Having achieved the 90 percent threshold in pretests, coders were given separate content populations (i.e., ad search years) to code independently. Coders accessed TV ads posted to YouTube, using the following search terms: “TV Commercials [insert year].” Coders were instructed to code the first 220 ads for each year from 2008 to 2012 in order to produce a total content sample of 1100 ads. The procedure was designed to result in 1000 or more usable ads after duplicates were eliminated (e.g., the same ad could be posted in 2008 and again in 2009). It resulted in 1,055.

The search year reflects when the sampled ads were posted to YouTube, but not necessarily the year they were produced or originally distributed on TV. However, almost all were produced and aired between 2008 and 2012. Therefore, the sample can be said to represent “recent television advertising.”

Additional coding instructions were followed:

- Only code ads less than 70 seconds in duration.
- Ignore political ads.
- Only code ads produced in the English language made for the American market.
- Do not count animal characters, animations, or objects given human voice.

In the past, ad researchers videotaped ads broadcast during specific date ranges and programming slots (e.g., prime time) on a given television network or networks. Inevitably, that procedure skewed ad samples, and so does the use of YouTube. YouTube is not a neutral medium. However, the 1,055 ads captured using YouTube appear to be representative of typical commercial television ad fare, certainly as representative as those derived from prior sampling procedures. The fact that most advertisers want their ads to be posted and repeated on YouTube means that there is no simple rule determining what appears there. In order for readers to evaluate that claim and assess coding procedures, all 1,055 Ad URLs and the coding data for each ad can be accessed at the following website: <https://sites.google.com/a/umn.edu/gender-voice-in-tv-ads/>.

Although YouTube is a useful source for analyzing ad content, there are disadvantages as well. For example, YouTube is a dynamic database. Items are removed

fairly frequently. Our random sampling indicates that approximately ten percent of ads posted to YouTube are removed each four-month period. Because of the relatively high rate of turnover, we have provided the brand name for each ad on the project website so that the reader can access the ad using other means if desired.

### Results: Content Analysis

H<sub>1</sub> was supported. The ratio of male to female voiceovers is significantly greater than the ratio of male to female characters with speaking roles, roughly 4:1. Although men still outnumber women almost 2:1 in the speaking character role, gender imbalance is halved. Logistic regression resulted in a *p* value of 0.000, indicating that the difference and direction in these ratios are statistically significant.

H<sub>2</sub>, comparing voiceover and spokesperson roles, was also supported. Logistic regression resulted in a *p* value of 0.030.

However, H<sub>3</sub> was not supported. Men dominate women in the voiceless body category as well. Whereas we predicted that women would dominate that category, more often presented as mute objects than men, male bodies dominate that category as well. Therefore, it is not a simple matter of the male gaze determining which sex will speak versus which will be seen. The results are presented in [figure 1](#).

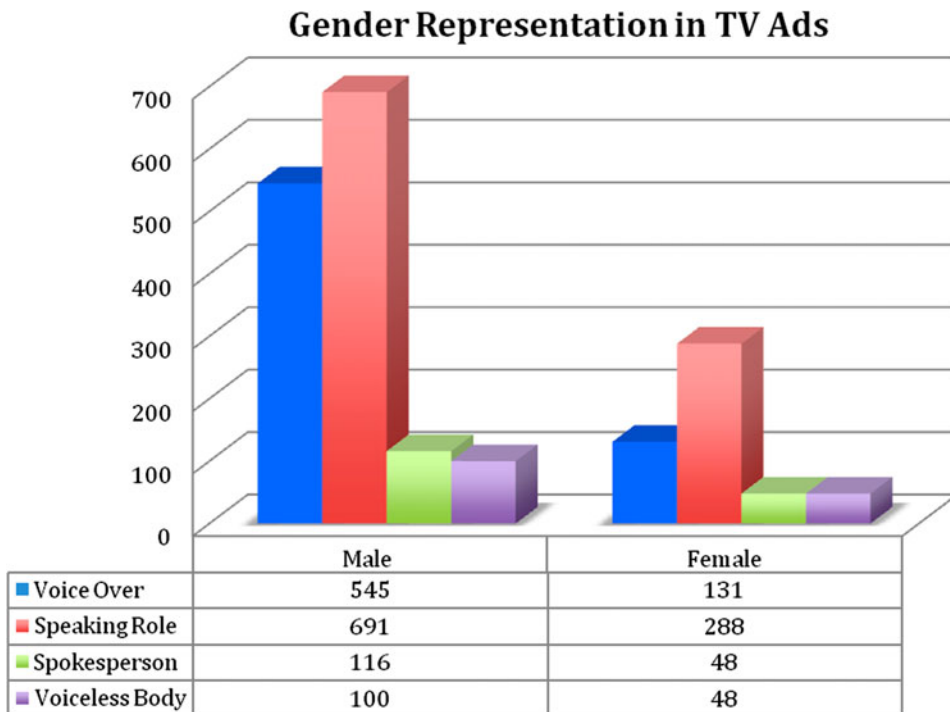


Figure 1. Gender, voice, and role in TV ads.

### Discussion: Content Analysis

The main contribution of this study is to explore relationships between body and voice. The above results indicate that women are underrepresented not only in the voiceover role but also as embodied characters and spokespersons. However, these results indicate that a woman's voice is 2.5 times more likely to be heard if her body is also on display. Therefore, we now need to answer the following question: Why are women more likely to be heard when seen?

The answer might lie in the predilections of ad producers. In 1976, *Advertising Age* journalist, Lorraine Baltera, heard ad exec Mike Huckabee "urge retailers to reinforce the stereotypical roles of both men and women in their advertising" at a retailing conference.<sup>20</sup> Huckabee quoted John Berger's famous line, "men act, and women appear."<sup>21</sup> Huckabee quoted Berger without attribution, turning the scholar's critical observation into an essentialized fact as well as a marketing dictum.

Huckabee suggested that marketers "put men in action situations." Conversely, a woman's "main drive is to be in control of her inner world," so she should be represented in more introspective and private settings.<sup>22</sup> As more recent statements by ad consultant Jim Gilmartin quoted earlier demonstrate, at least some ad professionals continue to operate under those untested beliefs about the ways men and women think, act, and are perceived. The results of this study demonstrate that scopocentric sexism remains an operating ideology and disciplinary regime in marketing.

To act is to be given voice, both figuratively and literally. Men are much more often allowed to make disembodied, authoritative pronouncements via voiceovers, while women are more likely to be heard if also viewed. When seen, their voices and perspectives are socially situated and embodied, thus representing personal, emotional, and subjective vantage points, rather than disembodied projections of objective and universal truth. In other words, scopocentric sexism is connected to a more encompassing folk theory of mind and body in the Western cultural tradition. In the West, emotion is associated with the body, whereas intellect is held to be part of the disembodied mind. Men are associated with mind and voice (i.e., rhetorical agency), while women are linked to emotion and body. Those basic binaries influence which gender will speak and in what visual contexts within advertising.

Morna and Ndlovu argued that women "are more likely to be seen than heard," based on "the fact that women are far more likely to feature as images than as voices in advertisements."<sup>23</sup> In their study, "women comprised 54% of subjects in billboards followed by 51% of the subjects in print advertisements," whereas, "in contrast, they comprised 42% of TV and 35% of radio advertisement subjects." According to Morna and Ndlovu, the more visual the medium, the more likely women are represented. Women are greatly underrepresented in media that allow for sound and voice, a finding that jibes with our findings here. While Morna and Ndlovu did not examine the relationship between voice and embodiment within individual media, their study provides additional evidence of scopocentric sexism across the advertising landscape.

There are significant implications of these findings for feminist media criticism. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* took gender theorization beyond an earlier emphasis on "the gaze" and toward performativity, providing a more dynamic and constructivist approach to understanding how gender and gender relations are produced, reproduced, and subverted.<sup>24</sup> Butler subsequently updated her performative framework in *Bodies that Matter*.<sup>25</sup> However, in both works, voice and silence remain little more than metaphors for empowerment.

As Keskinen notes, vocal metaphors are often employed in this "unreflexive" manner.<sup>26</sup> Actual voices and sounds have been ignored for sake of focusing on visual and textual rhetorics in isolation. As is true for the field of Media Studies, feminist critique tends to focus on visual and textual evidence, largely ignoring sound's productive role in gendering bodies and articulating identities. Feminist research and rhetoric share that bias with most other fields of scholarship and critique. As Keskinen also explained, "there is nothing wrong with the use of vocal metaphors in theoretical discourses."<sup>27</sup> Voice is a useful metaphoric stand-in for agency. However, we need to take actual voices and aural signs seriously as well, just as seriously as we take visual and textual rhetorics.

The point is not that sound is as important as sight, but rather that our senses are integrally connected. Take Judith Butler's claim that "the camera"—the technology featured in *Bodies that Matter*—"trades on the masculine privilege of the disembodied gaze, the gaze that has the power to produce bodies, but which is itself no body."<sup>28</sup> Butler's point would be enhanced by the serious consideration of sound. It is useful to think about how ambient sound and vocal recording operate as part of "the camera" as well as how sound features into the editing, engineering, and projection processes implicated in Butler's conceptual framework. In the case of the voiceover, the masculine gaze reveals "no body" but is empowered by voice, thus adding to "the camera's" visual capacity to "produce bodies." The male voice and camera's gaze work together to produce gendered bodies without overtly revealing the producers' masculine subjectivities. In other words, "masculine" remains an exnominated identity in the voiceover category (i.e., a qualifier that goes without saying), seemingly neutral yet exceedingly tendentious.

Despite their definition as *audiovisual* texts, audio is ignored throughout media studies. Scholars and critics visually decode and textually translate film and television, but tend to leave those same texts aurally unrendered. Liz Greene's research represented one of the few exceptions. Greene focused on the sexist manipulation of women's speaking and screaming voices in film.<sup>29</sup>

Music Education researchers have paid greater attention to voice. For example, in *Music, Gender, Education*, Lucy Green showed how Cartesian gender dualisms dominate vocal learning.<sup>30</sup> Green argued that in the West, "knowledge is commensurate with masculine prowess of the *mind*" in contradistinction to feminine "obedience to the *body*," a system of thought reified in vocal performance.<sup>31</sup> She explained that, "the woman singer is on display and is therefore engaged in an activity ... which is already coded as 'feminine.'"<sup>32</sup> Green provided an excellent illustration of scopocentric sexism. The woman singer's vocal expression and



reception is conditioned by her visual presence and “obedience to the *body*” to a much greater degree than is true for her male counterparts.

Green’s argument is reinforced by Martin Ashley’s discovery that boys in his study became increasingly uncomfortable as singers as they advanced through middle and preparatory school.<sup>33</sup> He demonstrated how boys and girls police the borders between two worlds: girls’ choir and boys’ football. Choirboys (an emasculating term) lose “the tribal support of the ‘football crowd.’”<sup>34</sup> In the younger grades, boys are often teased by girls for participating in what they view as their proprietary activity.

Ashley’s research supports Green’s arguments concerning voice and bodily display. Green argued that men are held to be intellectually endowed subjects, while women are compelled to perform as physically embodied objects, much as we have argued in the case of television advertising. “Whereas men produce culture,” explained Green, the passive woman “is bound to nature.”<sup>35</sup> Birds sing and listen; men watch and act. In a chapter entitled “Affirming femininity,” Green argued that women’s bodily displays affirm androcentric perceptions of “incompetence,” noting that “the more incompetent” the girl or woman singer “is taken to be, the more she must be forced to pay attention to displaying her body.”<sup>36</sup> While singing on stage is a very different thing than appearing or speaking in an advertisement, the same basic dynamic and gender discourse patterns who is allowed to speak and in what capacity. Basic binary oppositions and gender articulations continue to determine who is allowed to speak, or sing, and whether they are allowed to do so in visual or invisible contexts.

However, scopocentric sexism is clearly not the only ideology in play when it comes to gendered role divisions in advertising. The fact that men dominate the voiceless body category reminds us that men are overrepresented, albeit unevenly, across the entire ad-role spectrum. Despite Berger’s apt observation, women still manage to act and speak, and disciplined male bodies certainly appear in the camera’s gaze. Therefore, it is not just a matter of which sex is visually represented or obfuscated, but also how. As Schroeder and Zwick noted in their study of masculine imagery in advertising,<sup>37</sup> a “stereotyped iconography of masculinity and femininity” is consistently represented in the visual text of advertisements.<sup>38</sup> That point is reflected in, and reinforced by, sound.

As we are about to see in the following textual analysis, men’s and women’s voices and bodies tend to be represented in ways that reify dualistic understandings of gender: man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, public/private, business/domestic, active/passive, and so on. We are increasingly well trained to identify those ideological binaries as visually inscribed. However, their substantiation in sound remains largely unexplored. The goal of the second stage of this project is to examine the subtle interplay of gendered sight and sound as played out in individual ad narratives.

### Textual Analysis

After completing the quantitative content analysis, we conducted a textual analysis of ten ads randomly selected from the larger sample.<sup>39</sup> The goal was to better

understand how the broad patterns identified above are represented, complicated, and/or subverted within specific ad narratives.

Although the additional step of qualitative sampling is not always taken, we believe that deeper readings of specific ad narratives are very useful. Inevitably, coding is a superficial reading process, one that cannot, by definition, reach beyond manifest or denotative meanings. Information can be quantitatively coded, but symbolic meanings and cultural processes cannot.

Conversely, qualitative analysis is limited by the amount of text one can effectively analyze. Plus, it is difficult to generalize the resulting data. Textual analysis is an intersubjective, intertextual, and polysemic process.

Given their respective advantages and limitations, both methods, when used in tandem, provide valuable insight. In this case, we read each ad with the following question in mind: How are the coded variables—gender, body, voice, and role—represented within narrative context? In analyzing each ad, we focused on setting, character, role, and plot in order to understand how gender is performed.

After repeatedly viewing and listening to all ten ads, we grouped them into two categories: those in which scopocentric sexism is evident (eight of the ten ads) vs. those that complicate, and possibly even contest, traditional androcentric biases in advertising (two of the ten ads).

#### *Category One: Traditional Gender Roles and Representations*

The first ad in category one promotes Apple's Siri feature for the iPhone.<sup>40</sup> Several individuals ask Siri for help. Each of their queries represents traditional gender roles. One man seeks information regarding how to tie a bow tie, while another schedules a business meeting. A third man asks Siri to contact his spouse in order to tell him/her he will "make it" home, assumedly from a work context, possibly the airport. The fourth man asks Siri for a specific musical request. Meanwhile, women request the following information: directions to the nearest hospital, a plea for Siri to send someone to fix a flat tire (while flanked by a van load of children), information about weather in a travel destination to determine if it will be necessary for her to pack an umbrella, a reminder to call a friend, information about weasels, a wake-up alarm, and a grocery list reminder for "after work," the only work-related query by any of the women characters.

With few exceptions, the ad's visual settings reaffirm traditional gender norms. Most of the men are portrayed in work settings while most of the women are in domestic and recreational contexts. Female characters outnumber the male characters 2 to 1, but a male voiceover concludes the pitch. As in the majority of ads studied, women are only heard when seen.

The second ad promotes *Burnout Paradise*, a video game. Richly animated sports cars tear through an urban center while crashing into guardrails, buildings, and each other.<sup>41</sup> Guns and Roses provides an aggressively masculine soundtrack. Axl Rose's screaming voice injects testosterone-fueled competitiveness into the adscape. The

pitch ends, per usual, with a male voiceover. The ad and game speak to boys as autonomous agents with the power and efficacy to navigate danger and even wreak havoc. The public realm is a private playground wherein boys playing adult male roles have, or take, the right to make as much noise as is (digitally) possible. It is hard to imagine a similar ad aimed at girls.

The third ad, for Doritos tortilla chips, features a man explaining how viewers can make Doritos tortilla chips at home.<sup>42</sup> He uses a cooking show format and ingredients like an “autumn breeze and half a horse’s whinny” in a failed attempt to produce homemade Doritos. The soundtrack is dominated by sounds discordant with the traditionally feminine context of a cooking show, including power tools and the rough timbre of the would-be-chef’s baritone voice. He is the typical man’s man, one who is visually and sonically invading the feminized domain of the kitchen. He retains his masculine identity through satire and dismissive role reversal. The ad plays with, and ultimately reifies, gender expectations, using absurd symbolism and sound to help make the brand memorable.

One goal for advertisers is to place their brand’s logo in the mind of the consumer so that it might come to mind at point of purchase. Loud noises are an effective way to do so. Both in public life and ads like this, men are given greater leave to make such noises.

The fourth ad in category one touts HP’s Touchpad.<sup>43</sup> It features champion boxer Manny Pacquiao. The pugilist demonstrates how easy it is to use a Touchpad. Cinematic music provides a soundtrack for his humorous tech demonstration. After Pacquiao tells us that his dream is to become a pop singer we are treated to his painfully funny rendition of Dan Hill’s “Sometimes When We Touch.”<sup>44</sup> The ad ends with a male voiceover asserting that the Touchpad “works like nothing else.” In the commercial, one male voice represents authority (voiceover), another represents power (Pacquiao speaking), and the third (Pacquiao singing) softens the sell. The humor of the ad is driven by Pacquiao’s unexpected turn from boxing, a domain associated with masculine power, to pop music, a world associated with feminine vulnerability. Having demonstrated his power, underscored by an epic-style soundtrack, Pacquiao is given leave to sing a love song. He retains his credibility as an icon of masculinity, however, by failing miserably as a pop singer. It is similar to the narrative arc of the Doritos ad: invade and parody. Such identity border crossings reinforce rather than challenge basic gender dichotomies.

The fifth ad in category one promotes Nintendo’s 3DS XL portable video game player.<sup>45</sup> There are no on-screen characters nor spokespeople, just a male voiceover. The man speaks in a higher register and at a faster pace than is typical, in a tone that makes it apparent that he is talking to very young girls and boys who use such devices. As Lewin-Jones and Mitra discovered, products perceived to be gender neutral most often use male voiceovers,<sup>46</sup> which appears to be the case here.

A Target back-to-school commercial represents the sixth ad in category one.<sup>47</sup> It, too, fulfills gendered role expectations. The ad features a male music teacher whose doughy appearance cues humorous intent. He sings a list of all of the items parents should purchase for their children. An alto voiceover concludes the ad, illustrating

Lewin-Jones and Mitra's point that female narration is used mainly for ads that target female consumers.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Lovdal noted that "when a woman's voice is present, she is not speaking to the population at large but to dogs, cats, babies, children, and women dieters," adding that women "only talk to those of inferior status and to other women concerning feminine hygiene, headaches, and diets."<sup>49</sup>

The seventh ad, a commercial for TaxAct.com, is quite complex from a gender standpoint.<sup>50</sup> Yet, ultimately it fits category one, reinforcing rather than challenging the expectations of scopocentric sexism. The ad begins by showing a young boy swimming in a pool. After looking at various backyard water features, the boy realizes he desperately needs to urinate. While running to the bathroom, he is teased by every conceivable form of running water. His attempt to reach safety is thwarted by a sister who intentionally slams the bathroom door in his face and a censorious mother who scolds him for coming into the house wet. She sends the poor boy back out into the backyard where his public embarrassment is immanent. Finding no other option, the boy jumps back in the pool and finally relieves himself, smiling triumphantly as his mean older sister splashes into the pool. In sum, the clever boy successfully challenged feminine control of "his" domestic space, a clue that the ad is meant to appeal to adult male tax preparers. The only speaking role is a male voiceover at the very end of the ad.

The eighth ad in category one highlights Transition Glasses.<sup>51</sup> A baritone male voiceover explains the lens' technical merits as four models—three female and one male—pose while wearing the glasses.

### *Category Two: Polysemic and Potentially Subversive Adscapes*

We placed two of the ten ads in category two, which we define as polysemic and potentially subversive. We want to re-emphasize our earlier caveat: all texts are polysemic. Or, to be more accurate, multiple interpretations are possible for all texts. Instead, we apply the polysemic label more narrowly here to denote ads most likely to be read in ways that diverge from mainstream gender tendencies.

Ad one promotes the Mercedes CLS 2012.<sup>52</sup> An extremely attractive woman approaches a reasonably good-looking man as he leans against a Mercedes CLS 2012. We might assume that the man owns the car, given his presumptive pose. He spouts false information about the car's specs to impress the woman. The female protagonist corrects the overbearing man and, to his great embarrassment, opens the car door. It is her car. She smirks confidently as he shrinks away. The man's superficial pick-up scheme was foiled by a smarter, wealthier, more refined, and better-looking woman.

The ad could be interpreted as subverting a dominant gender paradigm, by laying bare its absurdity, or as an ideologically contained ritual of reversal, the exception that proves the rule. As was true in the TaxAct.com ad, a female character plays the role of censorious woman, in the Victorian tradition. Or, to follow another age-old trope, she gains power as the agent of sexual selection.<sup>53</sup> The overreaching man in the Mercedes ad simply does not measure up.

The protagonist's negative assessment and selective role were forced into being by the man's aggressive incompetence. The woman was seeking neither to censor nor to sanction, but was rather forced into action by the bumbling man's inappropriate overtures. Her role and identity were interpellated by text and context. As opposed to the women in the TaxAct.com, the Mercedes owner is a protagonist, the character with whom we are expected to identify.

The ad might represent strategic polysemy, a narrative that allows both female and male audiences to relate to the situation and product. One can imagine women identifying with the female protagonist, a smart and successful woman who puts a foolish man in his place. On the other hand, the woman would probably appeal to a large swath of the male audience in the same way that car models often do. As evidence of the latter reading, the "top comments" for the ad on YouTube—as determined by the number of thumbs up from fellow viewers—were "what's her name? She's gorgeous" and "Yeah, please, gimme her name. She's absolute drop-dead gorgeous." With supermodel good looks, the woman might appeal to male viewers quick to psychologically distance themselves from the foolish male antagonist.

The second and final ad in category two promotes Mozy's online backup system.<sup>54</sup> Much like the Mercedes commercial, the Mozy commercial could be viewed as either bucking or reinforcing dominant gender trends, depending on the viewer's vantage point. A callous businessman gets his come-uppance in the form of a stove falling from the sky, smashing his laptop. The voice of reason is an attractive female spokesperson. She explains what Mozy is, what it does, and why it is important to have an online backup system. This is a break with the traditional format wherein men explain technical information in voiceovers. However, the fact that she is a spokesperson, rather than voiceover, might make all the difference. Rather than a disembodied, authoritative male voiceover, as represented in the Transitions Glasses commercial, the female spokesperson, having passed the eye test, is allowed to speak with authority. It is not unlike the metrics applied to television reporters. Male newscasters take many forms, but female anchors and reporters tend to represent a narrower range of attractiveness.

The Mozy and Mercedes ads are similar. A very attractive woman gets the better of a stereotypically foolish man. In both, the humor is, assumedly, driven by the unexpected role reversal. A woman gains the upper hand on an unworthy man. She does so through technical knowledge. The balding businessman in the Mozy ad attempts to be perceived as an alpha, much like the Don Juan wannabee in the Mercedes commercial. However, both men's attempts at dominance are foiled. Foolish men are corrected by intelligent and attractive female protagonists. Both ads invert the dominant gender binary, with women representing cool intellect and men embodying emotional buffoonery.

The reversal found in both ads could be evidence that the predictions in Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" are coming to pass.<sup>55</sup> Haraway heralded the potential for technical integration to play a role in overcoming gender inequities, changing the very nature of gendered bodies. For Haraway, the "cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience."<sup>56</sup> More to the

point, Haraway's "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries."<sup>57</sup> Having mastered advanced technologies, car and computer, the female protagonists in both ads gain a modicum of power vis-à-vis their hapless male antagonists.

Conversely, both ad narratives provide evidence for Jean Bethke Elshtain's less optimistic claim that the "new woman" is simply the "old man," recruited to "join forces with the men, assuming masculine roles and identities and competing for power on established, institutionalized terms."<sup>58</sup>

Or, to return to another predictive piece, perhaps the rise of role-reversal ads like these provides evidence for Susan Willis's argument that Victorian role definitions remain alive and well.<sup>59</sup> Willis argued that essentialist feminisms continued to posit women as paragons of virtue in contradistinction to predatorial men. Such feminisms retain rather than challenge traditional gender ideologies by defining men and women in very narrow, stereotypical terms.

The correct answer is probably "all of the above." Given the polysemic nature of media reception, the Mercedes and Mozy ads are probably read in these and many other ways. For some viewers, these two ads might contest patriarchy, while for others, masculine power is reinforced. Brooke Duffy came to that conclusion in her study of Dove's user-generated ad campaigns.<sup>60</sup> The polysemic complexity of Dove's ad campaign rendered any simple reading impossible. Complex media texts are rarely simply sexist or subversive. Perhaps the advertiser's preferred reading is not singular either. Strategic polysemy allows ads to appeal to broad consumer bases.

Before ending the analysis and moving on to application, it is necessary to say more about the apparent role played by visual attractiveness. Men take all shapes and sizes in the ten ads, from Mozy's goofy businessman to Target's music instructor. Conversely, all of the women in the ads are thin, attractive, and nicely dressed, whether represented as smart protagonists (Mercedes and Mozy) or suburban damsels in distress (Apple). Once again, in line with the scopocentric sexism argument, image appears to overdetermine when and how women's voices will be heard. In these ads, only attractive women are granted the right to be present visually and, therefore, the right to speak (with the exception of one female voiceover, a woman who is assumedly speaking to other women). In other words, women are selected in relation to androcentric role definitions and expectations, with the first order of relevance given to visual attractiveness. If she passes the androcentric eye test, she might also be given voice. Once again, scopocentric sexism appears to pattern the relative representation of women's versus men's voices.

To be the man in control, you will want to purchase Mozy online backup or own a Mercedes, lest you come up short in the eyes of a beautiful woman. Granted, the ad implies that women should aspire to Mercedes as well. Once again, something for everybody, but far from a simple sell.

The above is our reading of these ads. Undoubtedly, others would read them differently. Therefore, this brief tour through a small subsample is intended not to exhaust all possibilities, but rather to qualify, explain, and nuance the macroscopic trends identified in the quantitative content analysis.

### Applications in Media Literacy

Jean Kilbourne's series of *Killing Us Softly* lectures (1979–2010) have helped generations of viewers decode sexist text and imagery in media. However, neither Kilbourne's films nor most other media literacy curricula feature sound. Visual and textual representations are emphasized to the exclusion of other evidence. This is not surprising. People tend to think of the eyes as portals for perception while paying less attention to sound. However, that is all the more reason why we should deal seriously with sound. We do not notice the profound effect it has on our perception.

One of the few media literacy programs to focus on sound is *Traject* (Pathway), a media production-based project based in Ghent, Belgium.<sup>61</sup> *Traject* teachers ask their students to listen before looking. Before sound succumbs to sight, *Traject* students are able to hear voices and sounds that might otherwise not rise to the level of consciousness.

Based on *Traject*'s work with children, Van Bauwel argues that focusing upon sound "as a medium" is "a useful way to learn and develop audiovisual knowledge."<sup>62</sup> That same method could be applied to audiovisual representations of gender. Instructors could begin by asking students to shut their eyes and listen closely to voices in order to understand how vocal volume, frequency (pitch), rhythm, and tone (timbre) are manipulated to produce gendered soundscapes. Having isolated sound, it would be possible to reintroduce visual images in a way that does not simply sublimate sound to the subconscious.

Students can also be encouraged to become critical listeners, taught to listen for stereotyping in pitch, timbre, and volume. For example, a videographer named Alittleboufant posted a critical side-by-side comparison of two 5 Hour Energy ads on YouTube. She draws the listeners' attention to the radically different and highly stereotypical tasks that a male and female character each accomplish with their "five hours of energy."<sup>63</sup> The young man writes novels, goes on adventures, and masters a sport. The young woman accomplishes a range of domestic tasks, becoming Super Mother as a result of the stimulant. As Alittleboufant notes, the woman uses the term "housekeeper" three times. Going beyond character, plot, setting, and dialogue, it would be useful for students to consider how the man's ad is underscored by an action-style movie soundtrack while a childlike musical score makes light of the young woman's many labors. Furthermore, the man's vocal tone indicates confidence, whereas the woman's tone is lilting and blissfully resigned. Many of her sentences swing upward in pitch as if she is seeking understanding and approval from the listener-viewer. He talks at the listener, projecting an almost threatening tone, the alpha male asserting his dominance over the viewer. Her tone is pleasant, resigned, and humble, requesting the listener's attention rather than demanding it. An instructor might ask students how these characters would be perceived if their speech patterns were reversed or, better yet, have students perform the same dialogue using different intonations. Such exploration can lead to profound discussion and, most importantly, critical listening.



Some ads give explicit attention to the matter of gender, voice, and sound. For example, an Andes Beer commercial provides men with an answer to two problems: screaming girlfriends and background bar noise.<sup>64</sup> The company offers a sound booth at bars that can generate ambient sound, giving wives and girlfriends who call them from home the impression that their male partner is somewhere other than a bar: outside on the street, in a library, at a hospital, at work, or other fictional location. The only female voice in the ad is that of a young woman whose high-pitched screams send her boyfriend running into the comforting arms of the local bar. Ads like this provide a window into the commercial manipulation of gendered sound. However, as demonstrated in the textual analysis, virtually any ad can be analyzed in order to understand how commercial soundscapes diverge from the real soundscapes we experience daily and, therefore, how the sonic simulacrum is ideologically patterned.

Media literacy is about helping us to become more consciously aware of cultural mediation. Whether a tribal dance, fascist rally, church service, or TV commercial, ritual narratives are about incorporation (literally: forming a collective body). To belong and gain identity in market-regulated consumer cultures, one gains instruction—and a profound sense of emotional gratification—through watching, reading, and listening to TV ads. Media literacy campaigns help viewers and listeners become more consciously aware of identity representation, formation, and mediation. That should include critical listening. Johnson and Young said it best: “Clearly, as we teach children to be media literate, that media literacy should include tuning their ears to the images of gender conveyed through language.”<sup>65</sup>

Drawing on this and past research, instructors can ask students to listen to TV ads at home and note the sex of each voiceover. At a very basic level, most will agree that there is something wrong when men perform 80 percent of voiceovers, and helping students identify those inequities for themselves is in itself a powerful teaching tool. In sum, there is much to be done with sound in critical media literacy curricula.

### **Professional Relevance and Industrial Applications**

Marketers must make difficult choices. As discussed earlier, there is some evidence that some audience members view men’s voices as more authoritative than women’s.<sup>66</sup> Yet, there is even stronger evidence that those stereotypes have weakened since the 1970s. Therefore, an advertiser can choose to go with the status quo or positive change, to reinforce or challenge sexism when choosing ad voices. Nass et al. identified the same dilemma for computer programmers:

The decision to imbue a given technology with voice can involve difficult choices. Designing technology that conforms to the user’s gender stereotypes may be the simplest way to meet his or her expectations about the technology. On the other hand, technology that challenges these stereotypes may serve to change, in the long run, the deeply ingrained biases that underlie the findings in the present study.<sup>67</sup>

Courtney and Whipple provided grounds for optimism:



If women's voices are used more often in the future, perhaps female announcers may become more widely accepted, and possibly even preferred, to male voices. Such a trend has taken place over the last decade with respect to female newscasters.<sup>68</sup>

For that to happen, it will be essential for communication scholars, media critics, and audiences to recognize the inequitable nature of vocal representation in ads, and to act upon that knowledge. Consumer pressure, in addition to conscience, may help advertisers make better decisions. Aliitleboufant's 5 Hour Energy post is an excellent example of a grass roots media campaign with the potential to directly pressure and challenge an advertiser.

## Conclusion

This study updates and adds to research concerning gender in advertising. Quantitative content analysis demonstrated that male voiceovers greatly outnumber women's voices, a finding in line with past studies. We also discovered that a woman's voice is much more likely to be heard if her body is on visual display as well. Based on that finding, we argue that scopocentric sexism patterns how women's voices are represented and heard in TV commercials.

Qualitative textual analysis was used to explore how voice and sound interact at a subtler and more profound level. We found that most of the sampled ad narratives, roles, and identities reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Only a few ads appear to challenge significantly ideological conventions in voice, image, and role norms.

Gender matters in advertising. As Lovdal pointed out in 1989, commercials "using male voice-overs reinforce the idea that men are more credible, convincing, and knowledgeable."<sup>69</sup> More research needs to be done to understand the full spectrum of gender, voice, and image in advertising, going well beyond voiceovers. Hopefully this study, having identified broader patterns in voice and image, provides useful context for more detailed textual and ethnographic investigations in the future.

A wider range of vocal qualities needs to be studied. As Johnson and Young explain: "advertisers, when constructing voice-overs, strive to accentuate gender, sometimes to the point of caricature."<sup>70</sup> To get at those quantitative evaluations measurements of relative vocal volume, frequency (pitch), timbre (tone), and rhythm could be combined with experimental design and/or consumer reception research.

There is nothing insidious about ads representing differences in voice based on sex. Men and women's voices clearly tend to differ, especially in terms of pitch. However, when vocal traits become accentuated "to the point of caricature"<sup>71</sup> and/or take the form of stereotypical body image, settings, dialogue, and plot, ad representations become highly problematic. We already know this to be the case for gendered imagery in advertising. For example, Debevec and Iyer have shown how "advertisers can alter the gender image of products and its impact on subsequent perceptions and attitudes."<sup>72</sup> They found that a spokesperson's gender influences

how consumers' perceive of various products, including which gender characteristics are attributed to those products. Similarly, Pike and Jennings demonstrated that "the gender of the model in commercials can have an impact on whom children perceive should play with particular toys."<sup>73</sup> Surely, voice and sound impact the gendered sell as well, a phenomenon whose broader social consequences we are just beginning to explore.

Karpf noted that the "human voice can tell us, with remarkable clarity and resonance, how far our gendered lives have changed."<sup>74</sup> She noted that change has been slow and not always positive. In the case of advertising, it appears that women are very slowly gaining ground as voiceover artists. However, that progress is minimal compared to the seismic shift that has taken place in other communication professions, such as television news reporting. Deeply engrained gender ideologies, including scopocentric sexism, continue to pattern how women and men are represented in advertising.

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