

*Brief Report*

## **Selling Stereotypes: Weight Loss Infomercials, Sexism, and Weightism<sup>1</sup>**

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Research suggests that television reflects the negative cultural stereotypes of women and heavyweight people. The purpose of this study was to analyze the extent to which paid programming reflects the gender role expectations that have been observed in other kinds of programming and, in particular, the gender representations and weight-stereotypic messages in weight loss infomercials. The results show that images of women outnumbered those of men 2:1, thin women appeared 3 times as frequently as heavyweight women, and the "scientific expert" was always a man. Weight loss infomercials contained more references to unrestricted than to restricted eating, promoted weight loss without exercise more than with exercise, and portrayed heavyweight people as unhappy and unattractive. The implications of the findings for weight-related prejudice and stigma are discussed.

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**KEY WORDS:** stereotype; prejudice; sexism; weight; media.

The results of abundant research document how television programming reflects and transmits the social values of the prevailing culture and has a socializing influence on viewers (Bryant & Zillman, 2002). Over the past two or three decades the social landscape of television reflected the more positive attitudes of the larger culture toward Black and Hispanic persons, single mothers, nontraditional families, and gay and lesbian individuals. However, results of previous research show that prejudice against heavyweight people flourishes within the American cultural values of personal responsibility, hard work, and self-discipline and that discrimination against heavyweight people remains largely legally and culturally approved (Crandall, 1994). Thus television should be expected to reflect the negative cultural stereotype of heavyweight people.

Stereotypes of heavyweight individuals include perceptions of them as lazy, unattractive, lacking self-esteem and willpower, socially inept, and intellectually slow (Allon, 1982; Harris, 1990). Beliefs about and reactions to heavyweight people have their roots in conservative social ideologies and thus are informed by the idea that people are responsible for their own life outcomes and can, through effort, change their life prospects. Stereotypes of heavyweight individuals include the belief that weight is controllable (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Beirnat, 1990; Crandall & Martinez, 1996). Results of previous research show that heavyweight people also evoke negative emotional reactions in others including pity, fear, disgust, and hostility (Allon, 1979; Hiller, 1981; Weiner, Perry, & Magnuson, 1988).

Research on the role of television in the stereotyping and prejudice of heavyweight people is scant, and researchers have focused primarily on the different representations of heavyweight male and female characters. In one study researchers rated the weight of adult television characters from the 33 most popular programs from March 1982 (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986). The weight-rating scale consisted of pairs of photographs of men and women that

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through pretest ratings created a pictorial, equal interval, weight scale. The study found that only a small number of the characters were given the heaviest rating (14%), and virtually all of these were male. Thin female characters were significantly more frequent than thin male characters.

Fouts and Burggraf (1999) coded the weight of female cast members in prime-time situation comedies from October 1996 by comparing the television character's body weight and shape to a series of visual images. Of the characters coded, 33% were rated as below-average weight and only 7% as above-average weight. The researchers also examined the comments made to, and about, female cast members. They found that the frequency of positive comments about and toward female characters decreased as their weights increased. In a similar study Fouts and Burggraf (2000) found that 76% of the female characters were below-average in weight and only 5% were above-average in weight. The researchers also measured the occurrence of negative comments about women's bodies and the associated audience response in prime-time situation comedies. The frequency of negative comments increased with the woman's weight, and 80% of these comments were followed by audience laughter.

In sum, the available literature suggests that television, at least in prime-time situation comedies, seriously underrepresents the prevalence of heavyweight individuals. Although heavier-than-average people make up 5–7% of the prime-time television population, statistics show that 61% of adults in the United States are either overweight or obese (BMIs > 25 and 30, respectively; National Center for Healthcare Statistics, 1999). In addition, heavyweight women are more invisible on television than are heavyweight men. Data also suggest that, when they do appear on television, heavyweight people are portrayed in more negative terms than are their thin counterparts. In these respects, television reflects the widespread prejudice and discrimination against heavyweight people in American society. Our concern in this paper is with paid programming, also known as infomercials, particularly weight loss/diet product infomercials. We are interested in the weight-related images and messages that are being delivered to viewers in this type of programming, and the implications of those messages for both prejudice against heavyweight people and the stigma associated with being heavyweight.

Product advertisements are not a trivial component of the television landscape. Advertisements

comprise about 15 min of each hour of noncommercial programming, and many cable and independent channels, on certain days or times, air only paid programming. There is a large research literature that documents the gender stereotypic images and messages in television advertising (Courtney & Whipple, 1980; Hall & Crum, 1994; Lovdal, 1989) and their effects on viewers' attitudes (Beckwith, 1994; Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999). For example, a survey of over 1,600 television advertisements from the 1990s showed that women were underrepresented relative to their prevalence in the population, were more likely than men to be shown in family rather than employment settings, and were more likely to be shown in a clerical than a professional job (Coltrane & Adams, 1997). Women in that study were also more likely than men to be shown as noninstrumental, sex objects. Comparable findings have been reported from surveys of Australian and Mexican television advertisements (Gilly, 1988).

Results of studies of advertising suggest that television portrayals of women emphasize three broad expectations of what women should be: domestic, sexually attractive and available, and thin. These role expectations are interdependent. For example, although sex appeal involves more than mere body-size requirements, being thin is a necessary condition for being sexy, at least on television. The cultural messages about thinness, however, go beyond its relation to beauty, sex appeal, and romance. According to the work of Allon (1979, 1982; see also Fraser, 1998), being thin also means being seen as self-controlled and morally strong. In the context of traditional stereotypes of women as emotional, weak-willed, and gullible, these cultural meanings help explain why thinness has been applied more to women than to men.

In this study we analyzed the content of infomercials at two levels. First, we were interested in whether paid programming reflects the gender role expectations that have been observed in other kinds of programming. In other words, what products are being marketed via paid programming appeals, and are they related to women's domesticity, sex appeal, and thinness? Second, we were particularly interested in the gender representations and portrayals in weight loss infomercials. That is, what is the cast of characters in these "programs," and what messages, both explicit and implicit, are viewers sent regarding the nature of weight and weight loss?

## METHOD

### Materials

Eighteen hours of paid programming were recorded from three different cable stations (Discovery Channel, TNN, and Court TV) on two different weekday mornings (6–9 a.m.) in August 2001. Infomercials were distinguished from regular programming by the label “paid programming” in the television listing, and, indeed, all such programs were preceded by a standard disclaimer from the station. Very little paid programming is aired in the afternoon and evening hours, but it is prominent again in the overnight hours. Thus this sample is reasonably representative of the content of daytime paid programming.

A coding sheet was prepared in two parts. The first part asked coders to count the spoken references to two topics: food/eating and exercise. Coders divided all references to food into “unrestricted” (e.g., “you can eat your favorite foods”) and “restricted” (e.g., “you need to reduce carbohydrates”) categories. Also, coders divided all references to exercise into two categories: “no exercise is necessary” or “exercise is needed” to lose weight.

The second part of the coding sheet directed coders to watch as well as listen and to record visual aspects of the program. Coders recorded the sex of the program’s host and scientific expert whenever applicable. Each image of a person was also recorded on a 2 × 2 table of the variables: sex (male or female) and weight (ideal weight or overweight/obese). These images were typically of the testimonial figures or clips of people who demonstrated the product. Coders also recorded the number of before/after images and coded the before/after images for whether the “after” image was happier, the same as, or sadder, than the “before” image.

### Procedure

The coders were 30 (9 male, 21 female) Hofstra University undergraduate students who volunteered in exchange for course credit. Students were used as coders to control experimenter effects. Coders reported to the lab individually and were seated at a table in front of a video monitor. The second author introduced the task and trained them by describing each coding item and giving some examples. Some exemplar references were also printed on the coding

sheet. Coders were randomly assigned to watch one of the six weight loss infomercials (see Table I for product names) and asked to code the audio and visual material separately and in that order. Coders were encouraged to rewind and review portions of the program that contained information bearing on the multiple coding categories or to check their coding. During the coding the second author remained otherwise occupied but nearby to answer questions and monitor the quality of the coders’ effort.

## RESULTS

### Coder Reliability

The reliability of the coders was assessed by their agreement on the coding of sex of the host and scientific expert. On both of those variables coders achieved 100% reliability on five of the six infomercials (the Atkins Weight Loss System infomercial featured male and female cohosts). On the coding of spoken references and visual images, some variability existed across coders of a given infomercial. For these variables the coders’ estimates were averaged.

### Infomercial Content

The infomercials were categorized according to their product type and their length (see Table I for list of all infomercials used in the analysis). Three categories of products were evident in a preview of all infomercials by the authors: health/well-being (e.g., NuZymes All Natural Digestive Formula), weight loss (e.g., Walk Away the Pounds), and beauty/body shaping (e.g., Body by Jake Bun & Thigh Rocker). An “other” category was added to accommodate the infomercials that did not fall into one of the three aforementioned groups. The occasional paid programs by religious organizations were excluded from the analysis.

These data were further analyzed by comparing the mean length of infomercial across product types (see Table II for means). The analysis showed that the mean lengths of the infomercial types differed,  $F(3, 31) = 4.72, p < .01$ . Post hoc comparisons revealed that the mean length of weight loss infomercials exceeded that of both the beauty/body shaping and “other” infomercials. The mean length of the weight loss and health/well-being infomercials did not differ.

**Table I.** Product Infomercials (by Category) Used in the Analysis

Category	Product
Health/well-being	CalAbsorb
	NuZymes All Natural Digestive Formula
	Sharper Image Ionic Breeze
	Snore Fix
	TempurPedic Mattress
	TriVita
	The Hot Mommies System Essential 3
Weight loss	Focus Factor
	Atkins Answer Weight Loss System
	Walk Away the Pounds
	BioSlim 2000
	Power 90
	Chitosol
	Michael Thurmond's 6-Week Body Makeover System
Beauty/body shaping	Epil Stop & Spray
	Body by Jake Bun & Thigh Rocker
	Victoria Jackson Cosmetics
	Bloussant Breast Enhancer
	Orbitrex
Other	Bowflex
	Professional Education Institute
	Ronco Rotisserie
	Hooked on Phonics
	Bose Stereo
	Find It Anne Murray CD Johnny Carson Collection Videos

These data partly reflect the gender role expectations observed in other types of television programming. More time is given to the marketing of weight loss and diet products than any other product type, and this occurs during the hours when female viewership is generally higher. Further, in each of the beauty/body shaping infomercials (see Table I) women are shown as the exclusive or dominant user of the product. These products reflect the cultural expectation that women's bodies appear youthful (i.e., Bun & Thigh Rocker, Orbitrex, Bowflex) and attractive (i.e., Victoria Jackson Cosmetics, Bloussant

**Table II.** Infomercial Categories, Length and Percentage of the Total Paid Programming Time, and Mean Infomercial Length

Product type	Total length (min)	Total time (%)	Mean length (min)
Health/well-being	174	25	24.8
Weight loss	258	36	28.7
Beauty/body shaping	123	17	13.2
Other	152	21	14.4
Station IDs	72	1	
Total	779		

Breast Enhancer, Epil Stop & Spray). The combined time given to weight loss and beauty/body shaping products, then, represents almost half of the paid programming in this sample. This is an indication of which issues marketers and television programmers assume are important to female viewers. These marketing and programming decisions reflect stereotypical role expectations for women. There was little evidence of the gender role expectation of domesticity in the infomercials observed.

### Weight Loss Infomercials

Six weight loss product infomercials were analyzed (see Table I for products), each of which was 28–29 min in length. The cast of characters in these programs was coded for the sex of the host and scientific expert. In four of the six infomercials the host was female; the remaining two were hosted by a man or man/woman cohosts. In all the infomercials the scientific expert was a man. The coders' tabulations of the visual images of people (not including the host and scientist) by their sex and weight were averaged (see Table III).

The means in Table III were analyzed by a 2 (sex of image: male vs. female)  $\times$  2 (weight of image: ideal vs. overweight) ANOVA. All the effects in the model were significant. The infomercials portrayed more women ( $M = 7.80$ ) than men ( $M = 4.09$ ),  $F(1, 23) = 44.93$ ,  $p < .05$ , and more thin ( $M = 8.96$ ) than heavy-weight ( $M = 2.92$ ) images,  $F(1, 23) = 40.28$ ,  $p < .05$ . These effects were qualified by a significant interaction between the sex and weight of the individual,  $F(1, 23) = 21.97$ ,  $p < .05$ , such that the tendency to portray thin more than heavyweight images was greater for women than for men.

These data are consistent with the gender representations observed in prime-time situation comedies (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999, 2000). That the cast of characters in weight loss infomercials is largely female, including the host and "satisfied customers," suggests to viewers that weight is a woman's concern. Moreover, the fact that thin women overpopulate

**Table III.** Mean Number of Visual Images of People Portrayed in Weight Loss Infomercials by Sex and Weight

Sex	Weight	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male	Ideal weight	5.79	3.05
	Heavyweight	2.38	1.69
Female	Ideal weight	12.13	5.99
	Heavyweight	3.46	2.55

weight loss infomercials is consistent with research that shows a large proportion of dieters are not actually overweight (Levy & Heaton, 1993). These kinds of body-size representations may contribute to eating disorders in weight-anxious television viewers. Finally, that men are the scientific experts in weight loss infomercials is an unsettling reminder of the patriarchal nature of appearance standards for women (see Fraser, 1998).

The messages about obesity conveyed in the weight loss infomercials were studied by analyzing references to two topics germane to the stereotype of obesity: eating and exercise. First, the references to unrestricted and restricted eating were compared; infomercials contained more references to unrestricted ( $M = 7.43, SD = 6.46$ ) than those to restricted ( $M = 1.82, SD = 2.51$ ) eating,  $t(27) = 4.37, p < .05$ . Then the references to the idea that exercise was necessary or desirable to lose weight were compared to references that weight loss could be achieved without exercise. There were no differences between "exercise not needed" ( $M = 4.19, SD = 4.23$ ) and "exercise needed" ( $M = 3.07, SD = 4.32$ ) references,  $t(26) = 0.92, p > .3$ . However, this effect was suppressed by the fact that one of the infomercials (Walk Away the Pounds) marketed an exercise-based approach to weight loss. When that particular infomercial was excluded from the analysis, the effect was significant; there were more references to "exercise not needed" ( $M = 4.87, SD = 4.22$ ) than "exercise needed" ( $M = 1.91, SD = 2.09$ ),  $t(22) = 3.75, p < .05$ , in the marketing of weight loss products.

Finally, the before/after images were summed across the six infomercials separately for the three coding categories. The analysis included 70 "after happier than before" images, 43 in which the two images were the same, and 5 "after sadder than before" images. This pattern of frequencies was significant according to a chi-square test of independence,  $\chi^2(2) = 54.3, p < .01$ . The explicit message in these repeated images is that "losing weight will make you happy." Other more subtle messages included "if you are heavy, you must be unhappy" and "weight gain risks further unhappiness." The before/after images also trade on the stereotypic belief that heavy people are emotionally maladjusted and unattractive. Finally, through their repetition these images may condition people to respond positively to thin people or those who have lost weight and negatively to heavy people, a response that has been observed in viewers of television situation comedies (Fouts & Burgraff, 1999, 2000).

## DISCUSSION

The social messages in weight loss infomercials reflect stereotypic beliefs that heavy people are gluttonous, lazy, and lacking in willpower, and they tell viewers that weight is a women's "problem." They promise weight loss without the discipline of exercise or the necessity of changing dietary or nutritional habits and perpetuate the notion that heavy people are unhappy and emotionally maladjusted. They also reinforce cultural norms that being heavy is unattractive and that weight is fully controllable. In sum, weight loss infomercials are a celebration of weight-related stereotyping and prejudice. What implications for weight-based prejudice, stigma, and health issues follow from these messages?

The marketing of weight loss products leaves viewers with the impression that weight is controllable and that anyone who is heavy, especially a woman, can lose weight if she makes an effort. Much research has established that belief in the controllability of weight is a significant component of prejudice against heavy people (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Martinez, 1996). Recently researchers have found that weight loss in both ideal-weight and heavy female targets increased perceptions of the controllability of weight (Blaine, DiBlasi, & Connor, in press). In that research weight loss in heavy targets actually increased negative attitudes toward heavy people. In this way, weight loss infomercials indirectly contribute to weightism by promoting the (largely erroneous) belief that weight is controllable.

Weight loss infomercials up the ante when they peddle the "controllability" of weight: they exaggerate both the ease associated with weight loss and the amount of weight that can be lost. In this study we found that weight loss infomercials promise significant weight loss without dieting or exercise; this promise has also been observed in the messages on women's magazine covers (Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999). These seductive mistruths further contribute to prejudice against heavy people. In addition, the use of scientific experts and vivid testimonial evidence contribute to infomercials' ability to persuade viewers of these mistruths, especially when the viewers are not motivated to think critically about the claims being made. This implication is amplified by the fact that infomercial shoppers watch more television and are less risk-averse than are nonshoppers (Donthu & Gilliland, 1996).

Weight loss infomercials also have implications for the stigma associated with being heavy. Heavy

people share with their average or ideal weight counterparts the belief that weight is controllable and a dislike of (other) overweight people (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Biernat, 1990). Thus, the strong but misleading message in the infomercials that weight can be easily lost has a corrosive effect on the ability of heavy people to externalize (e.g., blame on others' prejudice) negative weight- or appearance-related events. Researchers have established that the stigma associated with obesity is reduced when beliefs about the controllability of weight are challenged (Blaine & Williams, 2002). In addition, the moral context of obesity and weight loss in our culture—where fat is self-indulgence and dieting is a kind of atonement that produces the “thin” reward—has implications for psychological well-being, especially when weight loss fails to achieve its goal. Data indicate that the ineffectiveness of weight loss programs for heavy people may contribute to self-blame and negative self-concepts (Cameron, 1999).

The aggressive telemarketing of weight loss products contradicts, or perhaps is a response to, data that indicate that weight loss interventions are ineffective and have numerous drawbacks (see Cogan & Rothblum, 1993, for a review). Some weight loss drugs present health risks, as was the case with the now-banned “Fen-Phen” products. Researchers found that long-term use of diet drugs featuring the combination of fenfluramine and phentermine predicted heart valve damage (Food and Drug Administration, 1997). Even safe weight loss drugs, however, do not prevent dieters from regaining lost weight after the drug is discontinued; thus, they promote weight cycling—losing, gaining, and losing the same few pounds. Weight cycling is associated with serious health threats such as increased blood pressure and heart and kidney disease, and it promotes further weight gain (Ernsberger & Koletsky, 1999). Finally, the contradictory messages in some weight loss infomercials (“lose weight while eating all you want and/or not exercising”) may contribute to eating disorders or be especially persuasive to eating disordered people.

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