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Qualitative Research Methods
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Gender Depictions in Drug Advertisements

INTRODUCTION

The topic for my final research paper is gender depictions in television commercials for psychiatric medication. In particular, I will analyze how gender is depicted in psychiatric medication advertisements that aired on cable television. Media depictions of gender have been a significant focus for sociological research since the turn of the century; however an overwhelming amount of this research focuses on how the female body is objectified and commodified. As Americans now face higher odds of suffering from mental illness in their lifetime than at any other time in this century; the significant market for medication supports the widespread presence of pharmaceutical companies direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising. Since the culture industry continually exposes Americans to DTC advertisements, analyzing how gender is depicted is important to fully conceptualize how society perceives the experience of mental disorders. Each commercial in the sample was for a psychiatric medication that is prescribed widely in America. Because the pharmaceutical companies continue to increase spending for DTC advertisements, the topic of gender display in the advertisements requires additional sociological analysis.

TERMS

Direct-to-consumer advertisements (DTC)- DTC ads are drug advertisements marketed directly to consumers via television, news, or magazine ads. These marketing efforts have replaced direct-to-physician (DTP) advertisements and have become a huge market space for pharmaceutical companies.

Mental Disorders /Mental Illnesses- While the American Psychology Association classifies over 200 forms of mental disorders; this analysis will employ the use of five major categories of mental disorders: anxiety disorders, mood disorders, schizophrenia/psychotic disorders, dementias, and eating disorders. Although the experiences and severity of these disorders vary between individuals, the cultural stigma associated with mental disorder has created an unsafe environment in which people do not feel comfortable seeking treatment.

Psychiatric Medications- Medications used to treat symptoms of mental disorders. These mental health medications have been shown to positively improve the lives of individuals living with mental disorders, but still the results and side effects vary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an increasing body of research around the role of media and advertising in shaping social views on gender. Studies that critically analyze gender depictions add to the larger pool of feminist works. This research contributes to the current conversation on gender portrayals in advertising, while also discussing the implications within the health care system. As most Americans are over-exposed to this type of psychiatric drug advertisements, the concepts presented within increasingly shape how mental disorders are constructed as a social and gendered problem. Understanding the themes within psychiatric drug advertisements is vital, because of their influence on the public perceptions of the condition. The following section will describe key themes in the current research, discussing how media representations of mental disorders contain gendered messages.

Gender in the Media

Research on gender depictions in the media joins the larger conversation of gender inequality and the objectification of women in society. The use of media analysis to explore gender portrayals contributes to understanding the relationship between advertising and reality. Advertisers apply their vast knowledge of cultural contexts and meaning to portray a representation of 'reality' that suits the message the consumers are intended to receive. Slachmuis (2000) explains according to this view, individual's concept of themselves and society are intertwined with these systems of representation. The process of injecting imagery holds great power of persuasion and influence; so advertising should be understood as a deeply political process (Mander 2012). Lin and Yeh describe, "these depictions of context and imagery, with the sole purpose of selling something, create and reinforce the modern-day myths of what is "needed", of what it means to be feminine or masculine, and this causal reversal frequently distracts individuals from the direct commercial aspect of the advertising" (Lin & Yeh 2009). Because the media is a medium that has potential to strongly impact an individual's perception of reality and their own potential, people tend to align what they are capable of accomplishing with what they see others, similar to themselves, achieving. Similarly, it follows that gender representations in the media serve to reflect and refine an individual's gender role identity.

As Americans are continuously exposed to consumer advertising, it is reasonable to assume that the over-exposure has both intended and unintended consequences. Gulas and McKeage (2000) discuss how one unintended effect may be a social comparison with people portrayed in advertising. In the decades since Festinger's original work on the

theory of social comparison it has expanded, arguing social comparison may serve self-evaluation purposes as well as self-enhancement goals (Wood 1989). To be explained further, this theory holds that humans are motivated toward continual improvement and will compare themselves to others of similar status to supplement the strive for self-improvement (Festinger 1954). This process of social comparison is largely automatic, while the situational environment heavily influences the nature and context of the comparison. When studying the unintended consequences of advertising, Martin and Gentry (1997) found that adolescent girls compared themselves to the models in the ads, leading to negative effects on self-esteem and self-perception. Feminist researchers note that historically, advertising depictions and expressions of female roles are outright symbols of objectification, representing male desire (Dudley 1999). More recent studies on gender portrayals in the media by Martin and Gentry (1997) suggest males suffer self-esteem detriments related to idealized images of financial success, rather than images of physical attractiveness. The avalanche of images that are strategically conceived to sell goods, operate on a psychological level, changing attitudes, cognitions, and values (Gulas and Mckeage 2000). By reaching the ‘masses’ of people, advertising also bears sociological and cultural implications.

Growth of DTC Advertising

The rise of direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising was one of the most rapidly growing categories of advertising throughout the 1990s. The promotion of prescription drugs directly to consumers sparked a nation-wide debate on the ethicality of this practice. Park and Grow (2008) explain that supporters of DTC advertising assert that the contents of DTC advertisements provide fair and balanced benefit and risk information,

therefore educating consumers about diseases and treatment. They also note opponents of DTC advertisements argue the risk and benefits are not presented adequately, and they may also adversely affect the doctor-patient relationship (Park and Grow 2008). Despite the large body of research on DTC advertising, most literature focuses on how the ads impact the way consumers seek health information and interact with their doctors. While these are important questions that do deserve attention, DTC advertising also influences how the 'social reality' of mental disorders is constructed on the societal and individual level.

Overall, media analysis of psychiatric medication advertisements fit into a large body of interdisciplinary research exploring possible social cognitive effects of advertising (Park and Grow 2008). A newer topic is how DTC advertisements for mental disorder medications are associated to one's perceived reality of mental illness. Specifically drawing from cultivation theory and the theory of social comparison, advertisements represent a symbolic reality of modern life, which relates to the viewers' conception of social reality. Researchers who use cultivation theory frequently study how media exposure influences viewers' perceptions. When individuals are exposed to the media and advertising they are subconsciously using the constructs to make social estimates and judgments (Shrum 2003). Park and Grow (2003) explain that advertising in particular contains messages that function as a source of information to be stored in people's memory and retrieved for social judgments. Due to this, repeated exposure to DTC psychiatric medication advertisements may be a source of information that is stored in consumers' memory and influences their estimates of the prevalence of mental disorders. The following research will further explore the gender depictions and themes

within psychiatric medication commercials. Additionally, the representations will be discussed as they pertain to the condition of mental illness. The presence of overarching gender stereotypes and themes in these advertisements can provide insight on how social problems are constructed and disseminated through the media. The media analysis of gender representation and themes in psychiatric medication advertisements will contribute to prior research in Medical Sociology, as well as explaining how advertisements exert influence on societal perceptions.

DATA AND METHODS

This research project will analyze how gender is depicted in DTC television commercials for psychiatric medication, and how it frames the experience of living with a mental disorder. By conducting a content analysis of television commercials for mental illness medications, I will document the growth and progression of psychiatric DTC advertisements. By utilizing unobtrusive methods, this study incorporates pre-existing audiovisual material to analyze their representations of gender. For the purpose of this study, I only used American television commercials for psychiatric medications found online.

DTC Advertising was one of the most rapidly growing categories of advertising throughout the 1990s, and is currently the fourth largest consumer advertising category based off total advertising expenditure in the U.S. market (Park and Grow, 2008). As these commercials for psychiatric medications become more present in the mass media, consumers are continuously exposed and subjected to the messages within. The way these commercials bring awareness to and frame these disorders bears influence on how

consumers perceive the “social reality” of mental disorders. There are many DTC commercials on television, but the current study will focus strictly on those advertisements for psychiatric medications. Because these marketing campaigns often air for an extended period of time, the sample is comprised of forty commercials released from the mid 1990s to now.

Psychiatric medications, Paxil and Zoloft in particular, have been one of the most heavily advertised prescription drug categories in the DTC market (Park and Grow 2008). The sample for the current content analysis is comprised of 40 commercials. The commercials selected were DTC advertisements for antidepressants, bipolar and/or anti-anxiety medications, which are all used to treat mental disorders. The commercials all aired on cable television at some point, but I gained access to them through YouTube and a website called “iSpot.tv”. To fully understand the media representations of gender within my data, I first acquired a list of the top 25 psychiatric medications by number of U.S. prescriptions dispensed in 2012, provided through IMS Health. From this list, I found my sample of 40 television commercials for ten of the most commonly prescribed psychiatric medications, which are the following; Zoloft, Wellbutrin XL, Wellbutrin SR, Symetrin, Seroquel, Prozac, Pristiq, Paxil, Latuda, Cymbalta, and Abilify. Subsequently, the commercials were played back and content analyzed.

I examined the sample of commercials for psychiatric medications, named above, and identified how gender and emotional themes were represented in the advertisement. The use of audiovisual data required that I translate the interrelated components of the commercial, and then reduce the data to fit my coding categories leading to the final analysis and interpretation. After the initial analysis, in which I watched every ad one

time, I began the translation and reduction process of the data. The translation of the data started with a thick description on the visual component of each commercial, explaining shots used, prominent colors used, presence and interactions of people shown, setting, and visual metaphors. Next, the sound and text were translated from each ad; special attention was paid to the language used, gender of narrator, and the flow of audio compared to the visuals on screen. After analyzing the data initially, the code categories were developed using the spiral model of diving in and out of the data. The process of reduction allowed the multiple fields of the commercials to be easily grouped into descriptive codes I developed while analyzing the data. The purpose of utilizing an inductive approach to coding was the exploration of the key concepts allowed similar concepts to be combined into larger categories. The reduction of the descriptive codes and literal codes into three analytical themes was the final step in the interpretation of my data.

It is necessary to address the limitations associated with this study. Primarily, this study only explores psychiatric medication advertisements that aired on television, the exclusion of magazine and newspaper advertisements for psychiatric medications resulted in the loss of valuable data. Secondly, no other methodologies such as in-depth interviews or in-depth interviews were used to analyze consumer's perception of psychiatric medication advertisements. Notwithstanding these limitations, the use of content analysis sufficiently satisfied my research question.

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore how television commercials for psychiatric medications depict gender. To accomplish this I examined 40 television commercials for ten major mental illness medications, listed in the data and methods section above. Spanning the last 18 years, the commercial advertisements used in this study bring awareness to the construct of mental disorders perpetuated by pharmaceutical companies. The in-depth analysis of the commercial advertisements fosters a thorough understanding of the perceived social reality of mental disorders. The findings of the study answer my research question of how DTC advertising for psychiatric medications contain gendered messages. After collecting the data and reducing it for a final analysis, three major themes emerged. (1) The majority of individuals shown to be suffering from a mental disorder in the commercial were women; (2) the commercials depict individuals adhering to traditional gender roles once receiving medication; (3) The language and audio used perpetuations negative gender stereotypes. The following section will explore each theme and provide readers with a critical analysis of the negative gendered messages contained in psychiatric medication advertisements.

The gender gap: who is mentally ill?

Theme 1: The majority of individuals shown to be suffering from a mental disorder in the commercials were women.

The primary finding of this study is that DTC advertising commercials for psychiatric medications heavily portray women as mentally ill. Based on the audiovisual content analyzed, an overwhelming amount of women were shown as the individual suffering from a mental disorder. Throughout the analysis of data, several key features of

the commercials stuck out to me. Many commercials followed a script that followed one individual who was mentally ill, and then received the medication. All of the commercials that utilized this format, with the exception of two Zoloft commercials, portrayed a female suffering from a mental disorder. The two Zoloft commercials that did not adhere to that standard followed an animated, gender-neutral pebble through its struggle with depression. Every one of these commercials that followed a female suffering from a mental illness promoted hegemonic feminine ideals; typically white, slender body types, middle class, and in her mid to late twenties. In addition, these ads following a mentally ill female overwhelmingly showed her with a male romantic partner once receiving treatment. The remainder of data analyzed contained a multitude of people in each commercial discussing how they experienced their mental illness.

Every commercial that included multiple individuals suffering from a mental illness included portrayals from both genders. Despite the inclusion of both gender categories, these commercials portrayed females more frequently as the individual suffering from the mental illness. The disparity between gender portrayals in psychiatric medication advertisements places significant emphasis on the gender differences of experiencing a mental illness. More frequently in the commercials including multiple individuals suffering, males were shown as the counterpart, rarely shown to be suffering from a mental illness. Those males who were depicted experiencing a mental disorder ranged in diversity, showing a wider variation in age, body type, ethnicity than their female counterpart. The implication of this message in the commercial is women are the ones to suffer from a mental illness while males are shown as the supportive cast. The

homogeneity of female representation was apparent throughout the commercials, making this theme important.

The average person is mentally ill

Theme 2: The commercials depict individuals adhering to traditional gender roles once receiving medication.

While the commercials for psychiatric commercials are intended to bring awareness to consumers about the experience of being mentally ill, inspiring those who identify with the ad to seek medical help, the content observed emphasizes an overly-simplified construction of recovery. By featuring individuals suffering from a mental disorder, the commercials present both a portrait of mental illness and the recovery process that is so often overlooked or assumed to be irrelevant. The analysis of the advertisements in this study revealed that the current framework of recovery in mental health policy posits it as an individualized problem minimizes the more critical understanding of the gendered dimension of mental illness and recovery.

The commercials all began with individuals who were suffering from some type of mental illness, whether it is depression, bipolar disorder, or anxiety. Presenting the biomedical model of depression/mental illness, the ads all suggest that a brain chemical neurotransmitter imbalance, primarily involving serotonin and norepinephrine, is predominantly responsible for the development of mental disorders. This representation of mental illness is dominant in the United States, and emphasizes the effectiveness of psychiatric medication regimens in improving mood and treating other symptoms. Overwhelmingly, these pharmaceutical commercials begin with a mentally ill individual verbally sharing how they feel alienated from their peers, anxious, sad, lack of interest

and energy, and overall do not feel like themselves. The commercials also included visual metaphors that portrayed those who were suffering from a mental illness as in the dark, lying in bed, or aimlessly staring into space. In those advertisements portraying men as suffering from a mental illness, the experience was predominantly tied to their inability to connect with family or its negative effect on their career.

The distinct gender imbalance in the media's portrayal of mental illness in DTC psychiatric medication campaigns truly manifested in the representations of individuals who had recovered. As the majority of advertisements predominantly target female patients, the presentation of recovery always included a return to traditional gender roles. Women who were treated for their depression are shown exhibiting traditional gender-role modeling once they have recovered. Once cured of their mental illness, several women were shown staring into a mirror, or primping; embracing the superficial role assignment that women must care about their appearance. Women were also shown gossiping with friends upon receiving treatment, returning to work in a seemingly professional environment. All of the commercials that followed a single woman throughout her experience depicted that upon treatment she was able to resume her traditional role in a romantic relationship. These women who have been emotionally separated, or so the ad implies, are now able to resume their role as a significant other. These types of depictions all presented women with a male significant other and a child. The traditional family roles were very much embraced in these commercials, and several different ads specifically showed a woman picking apples in an orchard with her husband and children after being treated. The physical separation from her family presents a literal gender gap between the representations of female and male. Males who were portrayed

getting treatment for their mental illness were also shown returning to their traditional social position. Upon recovery men were seen, returning to work, playing football with friends, enjoying the company of peers at a bar or social gathering, doing manual work, playing with their children, and even graduating from college. The reflection of reality in the commercials emphasizes the distinctions between gender role assignments.

The emphases on recovery in the commercials contain messages that promote distinctions between the social interaction and behavioral dimensions of gender roles. The gender typical behaviors of men and women featured in the commercials are intended to depict the experience in such a way to reflect the real world, but the implications of superficial role assignments in mass media representations reinforces and perpetuates societal gender-role perceptions and attitudes.

Importance of narrator and voiceover

Theme 3: The language and audio used perpetuations negative gender stereotypes.

A very subtle component of many commercials analyzed, which was almost overlooked in this study, were the narration and audio components of the advertisement. In addition to visual representation of traditional gender roles, which emphasized the disparity in experiences of depression, the ever-present narration of the commercial also included a dimension of gender misrepresentation. Many of the commercials began with either a female narrator or actress verbalizing the symptoms and experience of mental illness. Once explaining the symptoms of mental illness, the medication was introduced and the remainder of the commercial was a narrator explaining the medication and the side effects. The gendered dimension of this narration is that once the medication was introduced the narrator was suddenly a male voice. The subtlety of this audio change

went unnoticed in my interpretation until the very end, in which I finally noticed it and re-analyzed all my data. The pervasiveness of this audio practice in the commercials was a significant finding in my data. Regardless of the marketing intent, the presence of this gender change has an effect that certainly influences the consumers' interpretation of the advertisement. There are several studies that have provided evidence that television imagery does have an impact on gender- role perceptions and attitudes. With this being known, the use of gender to verbalize different types of information in these commercials may also influence societal perceptions of gender positions. The use of a female voice to explain the symptoms and experience of mental illness adheres to the societal view of females generally engaging in social-emotional behavior. The switch to a male narrator for the purpose of informing ties into the societal view of men generally characterized as engaging in instrumental behavior. Thus, the persistence of gender-role stereotypes throughout the multiple dimensions in psychiatric medication commercials taps into the social interaction dimension of gender roles.

The continual portrayal of women as mentally ill and promotion of stereotypical gender roles were the major themes throughout DTC advertising commercials for psychiatric medications. From the over-representation of women, the emphasis on gender appropriate role and social behavior, to the gender of the narrator, traditional gender roles were pervasive and reinforced.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how gender was gender is depicted in DTC television commercials for psychiatric medication, and how it frames the experience of living with a

mental disorder. The analysis of forty commercials airing throughout the past 18 years exposed three significant themes. These themes were interpreted and supported through the visual imagery and audio in the commercials.

One theme is that the majority of individuals shown suffering from a mental disorder were women. This finding was repeatedly observed throughout all 40 commercials and portrayed women who adhered to the hegemonic standard of femininity. The continual portrayal of women as mentally ill suggests that women are more susceptible to be mentally ill.

The second theme was that both genders are shown returning to traditional gender role behaviors after being treated for their mental illness. While women were largely overrepresented in the commercials, upon receiving treatment they instantly began to care about their appearance and resumed their role in the familial unit. Despite their underrepresentation as suffering from a mental illness, those males who were shown seeking treatment returned to work, graduated from college, and also rejoined the family unit. The strict adherence to the gender role identities upon treatment was a significant finding in this study.

The final theme was that the use of different narrators subtly promoted societal perceived gender differences. By embracing the view that women are associated with socio-emotional behavior and males with instrumental behavior, the commercials applied the difference to what gender narrated what segment of the commercial. This was illustrated through the use of a female narrator when explaining the symptoms of mental illness, while a male narrator explained the medication and its side effects.

The distinct gender imbalances in these commercials is concerning, as the reality of mental disorders becomes a larger social problem. Although women are indeed statistically diagnosed with depression two times more often than men in the United States, millions of men still suffer from mental illness. Pharmaceutical companies perpetuate the notion of mental illness as a predominantly female disease. Thus, females may have an inflated view of their risk of mental illness while males may feel ashamed if they develop symptoms of mental illness. In terms of representation, the media distortion of those who suffer from a mental illness inevitably will perpetuate the over diagnosis among females and under diagnosis among males.

Although these psychiatric medication advertisements are intended to promote educational sources for consumers, increasing public familiarity with treatment and encouraging further discussion, they also negatively influence the social perception of mental illness. The commercial advertisements convey the pharmaceutical companies bias towards the biomedical theory of mental illness, portray women as more susceptible to mental illness, and dramatize treatment in accordance to traditional gender roles. While bringing awareness to mental illness is necessary given the prevalence of the disease, the messages held in the commercials should be directed towards a more educational purpose, contrary to the current promotional value.

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