Kid's TV Commercials Essay

Write an essay in which you examine Saturday morning television programming aimed at children. Use your findings from your study and the study data in the article "Females and Minorities in TV Ads in 1987 Saturday Children's Programs" **to agree with or disagree** with what John J. O'Connor says in his essay, "What Are TV Ads Selling to Children." Examine whether and/or how society has changed in the years between now and 1987 to account for the differences or similarities. Make sure you take a stance on what you think are the important factors with regards to your thesis.

Focus on ***one element only*** in your essay, either:

1) stereotyped sexual and gender representation or
2) minority representation and racism in children's TV ads

You can use the taped ads from the class Moodle site for your study

Attention: This assignment includes the use of study data, both from the report in the text, and from your own replicated study. Your essays need to include statistics backing up your points. Now it the time to develop a claim that is supported by the rest of your essay. We will talk about this in class as we get closer to the due date.
If you have any questions, come and see me!

The essay should be a **minimum** of 3 pages, typed, and double spaced, but more is better since this topic needs to be supported and developed. If the essay is under 3 pages, I will return it to you to add to up to the minimum. Then you will have to turn it in as your one late assignment (if you have not used it already). You should use quotations and must use statistics from the two studies, but you need to explain how the quotes and statistics relate **to your thesis.** Don't just stick statistics or a quotation in your paper to do your talking for you. All your paragraphs need to have your own topic sentences supporting your thesis and adequate support to develop the topic.

This paper will be graded on the following criteria:

- Is the paper the right length? Typed in MLA format?
- Do the ideas flow smoothly from one to the next, or does the paper read like a list?
- Does the paper give a thoughtful treatment of the issue?
- Is the paper a well thought out argument organized around a thesis?
- Does the paper have well developed paragraphs with topic sentences and adequate support in the form of detailed descriptions of commercials and analysis of the descriptions as they relate to your thesis, and statistics from your study and the readings?
- Does the writer stick to one of the three topics—minority, gender or health
- Has the paper been carefully proofread, including careful attention to any proofreading issues you are responsible for at this point?
- Has the writer introduced authors and articles using the patterns carefully including later references?
- Does the essay have an appropriate and well developed introduction and conclusion?

The enormous audience of children held spellbound by stories and sales pitches beamed into their homes has left parents, educators, child psychologists, and others worried about the effects of this programming. Studies have been done from time to time looking at the amount and kinds of advertising directed at children on Saturday mornings, at the nature of the programs designed for them and the values those programs seem to teach, and at whether all segments of our society are represented on children's TV—girls as well as boys, black, Hispanic, and Asian children as well as white.

In the first of the following essays, a writer in the *New York Times* argues that children's television is doing poorly in all of these important areas; the second article reports the results of a study of gender and ethnic bias in commercials aimed at children.

Reading Assignment

Pre-reading

Before reading the following essays, think about your own experience as a child with Saturday morning television. On a piece of paper, jot down what you remember in these three categories:

- Commercials: What were they for? As you recall, were they designed to exploit children or not? Why?
- Gender representation: Do you remember the characters of children's programs as being primarily male or female?
- Ethnic representation: Do you remember the characters of children's programs as being primarily white, or not?

WHAT ARE TV ADS SELLING TO CHILDREN?

John J. O'Connor

About 20 years ago, the new Action for Children's Television, started by mothers in the Boston area, prompted a national crusade when it attacked commercials in children's programming as being **exploitative** and a disservice to society. For the past couple of weeks, I have been dipping into the children's schedule and watching endlessly repeated sales pitches for sugary cereals, sweet drinks, fruit-flavored candies and blond, blue-eyed dolls with "fabulous hair" and "the hottest clothes." 1

Things haven't changed much in the television business of children's merchandising, and some aspects of the scene are even more appalling. 2

Considering the feminist gains of the past couple of decades, for instance, it is little less than astonishing to discover the **rampant** sexist stereotypes in the bulk of commercials. Boys still get to play sports and 3

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exploitative: *using selfishly or unethically;* ***rampant:*** *widespread*

be charmingly rowdy; girls play with dolls that look like "Charlie's Angels" rejects and that can be bought with such added-cost extras as nail polish, makeup, perfume and, of course, cool blond hair.

The message: little girls must be prepared for a life of buying clothes and cosmetics and all those other wonderful things that will make them irresistibly **alluring** objects. Life, it seems, is a look. 4

The role of television in the development of youngsters is, of course, crucial and inevitably subject to public hand-wringing every decade or so. The time has probably arrived for another national debate. Headlines once again are telling unsettling stories about troubled and seemingly **disaffected** teen-agers, the more notable of recent instances involving black and Hispanic youths in gritty urban New York, and whites in manicured suburban New Jersey. 5

Not surprisingly, a good many people waste no time in pouncing on television as the culprit. Being trotted out once again are the familiar statistics about the tens of thousands of hours of programming and the millions of commercials the average student has consumed by the end of high school. 6

Certainly, the commercials specifically aimed at young audiences are, at the very least, suspect. They don't only sell products—sugar-saturated and grease-clogged junk food—that arrogantly ignore today's nutritional campaigns. They sell language. ("Ain't life delicious," says the candy spot.) More to the point, they sell attitudes and values. Equally as disturbing as the sexism on so many commercials is the racism, even if unintentional, although Madison Avenue puts so much research into its products that nothing is likely to be unintentional. 7

Consider the parade of blue-eyed dolls—Beach Blast Barbie, Hula-Hoop Maxie, Cool Times Barbie and the rest of the somewhat tarty gang. Just about every commercial makes a point of mentioning the doll's hair, which is invariably blond and silky. "She's got the best hair," brags one commercial. Is there a message here for the black and Hispanic children with dark curled hair? It could hardly be plainer; they do not have the best hair. They are clearly inferior. They live in a society in which they can never be considered the best. And then public leaders scratch their heads over the very pronounced phenomenon of **alienation** among certain groups. 8

Considerably more subtle, there is the role given to "minority" children in well over 90% of the commercials. In fact, in the New York City area, black and Hispanic children are in the majority, but they nevertheless will have a hard time finding their reflections in the commercials surrounding the Saturday morning cartoons. 9

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alluring: *attractive;* ***disaffected:*** *antisocial;* ***alienation:*** *being an outsider*

Black children are just about always placed in supporting roles. If a basketball game is used to promote the virtues of a soft drink or cereal, the single black youth will barely get into the picture frame. The leader of the pack is invariably a white boy, preferably blond. The name of the game remains **tokenism.** One of the few commercials to give a starring role to a black youth is for a cereal and, in that case, all the players are black. Segregation lives, and in the oddest places. 10

It is distressing enough that Madison Avenue's constant message of "buy, buy, buy" is being delivered to homes that in many instances may not be able to afford the products in question. But it is downright infuriating when large sections of the audience being **tantalized** are left with the message that they are not important enough to merit equal visibility. The disservice to society noted back in 1968 is still very much with us. 11

FEMALES AND MINORITIES IN TV ADS IN 1987 SATURDAY CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS

Daniel Riffe, Helene Goldson, Kelly Saxton, and Yang-Chou Yu

This study updates research—some a decade old—on females and minorities in children's television advertisements, examining how often minorities and females are present, and in what proportions, settings and kinds of white-minority interaction they are presented. . . . 1

Method

Our goal was to generalize about how minorities and females are represented in the overall "world" of children's Saturday morning television commercials, regardless of which network's program a child might select. . . . 2

Two non-consecutive (Feb. 7 and Feb. 28, 1987) Saturdays were selected for this study, in order to increase representation of *different* spots *and* total numbers of spots. . . . 3

All national commercials on both Saturday mornings (7–11 A.M., CST) on ABC, CBS and NBC were recorded. We coded each commercial, including repeats, that appeared, assuming greater impact for repeated messages. . . . 4

Product and setting were recorded for each ad, while *individual character* **variables** included: race, age, gender, speaking role and interaction with minority characters. Three coders collected the data after revision of coding instructions, group training sessions and three reliability checks. . . . 5

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tokenism: *representing a minority group by using only one or two individuals;* ***tantalized:*** *teased or tormented;* ***variables:*** *things likely to change*

Findings and Discussion

ABC presented 147 commercials, CBS 139, and NBC 133. "Snack food" was the most frequently advertised (29%) product category, followed by "cereal" (25%), "toys" (tied at 15%), "miscellaneous other products" (tied at 15%), "fast food" (8%), "public service announcements" (5%) and "soft drinks" (3%). . . . 6

As predicted, the 419 commercials were populated primarily by males. Three times as many (29%) used only human male characters as used only females (9%). Nearly a fourth used only animated characters. 7

When animated-only spots are excluded, nearly 38% of the 323 human-only commercials used only males while just over 11% had only females. Overall, females were represented in 62% of ads. Previous comparable estimates of total female representation were 51% in 1971 and 60% in 1973, suggesting that female representation *may* have increased over the last 15 years. . . . 8

Our [next] prediction (no commercials with only minority characters present) was also confirmed. Two-thirds of humans-only ads were white-only. None were minority-only; white characters were present in 100% of commercials. However, nearly a third had at least one non-white character present. This may indicate increased non-white representation. In 1974, minorities were in a fifth of Saturday morning commercials. 9

But non-white "presence" is diminished even further when the focus changes from percentage of commercials with "at least one" minority, to proportion of characters who are minority. Whites . . . totaled nearly 60% of all animated and non-animated characters, non-whites totaled 8.2% (5.9% were black) and animated non-human characters made up 32% of all characters. 10

When analysis is limited to "real" human characters, 86.5% were white and 13.5% were non-white. Census data in 1985 placed the non-white percentage of the U.S. population at 15%. . . . 11

Gender and race were significantly related, . . . with a higher percentage of males among minority characters. Overall, white males were the most prevalent race/gender "combination," accounting for a majority (52%) of all 1,429 real human characters, with white females 34.5% of characters, minority males 9.2% of characters, and minority females 4.3% of characters. Census projections, however, show 1985's white *females* a plurality (43.5%) with white males 41.5%, non-white males 7.2%, and non-white females 7.9%. 12

Conclusions

In 1968 the Kerner Commission warned that, "If what the white American reads in newspapers or sees on television conditions his expectations of what is ordinary and normal in the larger society, he will neither understand 13

nor accept the black American." With slight ***emendation,*** that warning could still apply, and it could apply to the television depiction of females and minorities other than blacks.

In the 1970s, scholars spurred by minority and feminist concern demonstrated that racial minorities and females were underrepresented on television and, if present, were used as background in large groups, as token representatives, or to fill roles secondary to those of white males. Similar criticism was directed at television advertising aimed at children. 14

Minorities and females, in short, were shown less often than their numbers in society would lead one to anticipate, *and* less often in roles of authority or competence than logic would demand. 15

How have females and racial minorities fared since that 1970s flurry of research? Our 1987 data *suggest* that female and non-white *presence* (i.e., the presence of at least one) in children's commercials has increased. 16

But despite those increases, the world of children's television advertising remains predominantly male and white. In its whiteness, that television world mirrors the real world, according to census estimates (86.5% white characters on television and 85% white in the U.S. population). But by presenting a world with only 39% females, children's television commercials seriously distort the real world population, where a majority—51%—is female. 17

Further, a form of tokenism may remain: non-white presence (33% of commercials have *at least one* minority character) exceeds non-white proportion (15%) of characters in the population of television characters. And, for the most part, non-whites have non-speaking roles, and tend to be shown interacting among themselves and not with whites. 18

Minority characters were less likely than whites to be shown in home settings and adult minority males were seldom shown. Absence of adult male role models in many black children's lives has long concerned those who study urban families. Absence of such models in children's "prime time"—Saturday morning—commercials is chilling. . . . 19

Post-reading

John J. O'Connor has written his *impressions* of some of the effects of children's television, impressions obtained, as he says, by "dipping into the children's schedule." In other words, he did not carefully or systematically study the advertising on Saturday mornings or the presence of women and minorities in children's programming. Impressions may be interesting and worthwhile, but they are still impressions.

The article by Riffe, Goldson, Saxton, and Yu represents a very careful study, rather than impressions, but it is a study only of advertising, not of the

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emendation: *correction*

programs aimed at children on Saturday mornings. Nevertheless, it does seem to confirm many of O'Connor's impressions.

Compare the main points of O'Connor's essay and the article by Riffe et al. with your own pre-reading notes about your memories of Saturday morning TV. Were your impressions like or unlike those of O'Connor? Did they tend to confirm or not to confirm the conclusions of the study?

There are a few other matters to consider here too, before you go any further. One is whether minorities and women *should* be represented in television in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole. Because women represent 51 percent of the total U.S. population, it is pretty clear that they should receive half of the roles in television, but what about minorities? Should they get only about 15 percent of the roles just because they represent only about 15 percent of the population? What does a black, Hispanic, or Asian child learn by watching programs in which virtually all of the main characters are white?

The Kerner Commission's question is also an interesting one. What is the effect on white children's attitudes toward minority groups if they hardly ever see them on television?

O'Connor raises two related questions. He asks whether seeing one's own ethnic group or gender poorly represented on television would produce a sense of being inferior and of not really belonging to the larger society. And he also questions the values taught to young girls about what womanhood should be—whether they should come to feel that the most important thing about being a woman is to be an attractive sex object, desirable to men.

All of these issues are worth serious exploration.

Pre-writing

There are many different ways to apply classification techniques to children's television. For instance, if you wanted to examine the shows, rather than commercials, for treatment of minorities, you might decide, on the basis of watching a few programs, that characters tend to fall into four groups: leading characters, important characters, minor characters, and background figures. You could then count ethnic representation in each category.

Together with your teacher and your fellow students, you will need to decide what you are going to study and how you are going to proceed. Working together, your class will have to answer the following questions:

- What do we want to learn about television's treatment of gender and/or ethnicity on Saturday mornings? (Consider the questions raised

by O'Connor's article and the study by Riffe et al.; look again at the questions in the Post-reading section, page 85.)

- What system of classification will we use? (This will be determined largely by what you decide you want to find out.)
- Will each of us do our own individual study, or will we work together in pairs or small groups? Will the entire class cooperate in the same project, or will we do both, producing a series of individual papers that, when put together, offer a larger view of the issues we work on?
- Will all or some of us study the offerings of one or more of the three major networks, or will we study a local channel to see how it treats the issue we decide to study?
- Will all or some of us try to replicate—that is, redo in order to verify—the study of advertising, or will we examine the programs themselves?
- How many hours of broadcasting will we try to cover?
- Will we be able to videotape the programs or commercials we want to study? (If one person can make a videotape, two people or a small group can more easily work together on the analysis.)

When you have completed your study, you will be prepared to decide what your discoveries mean. Once again, the two articles and the questions listed in the Post-reading section above may help you with this, but you will also want to examine your own reaction to what you have learned. How *you* feel about your findings is an important consideration and should be part of your essay.

Writing

In your introduction, describe briefly what you have chosen to investigate.

In the body of your essay, you should first describe the method you used—that is, the aspects of children's television you chose to look at and how you proceeded. This is the part of your paper also where you report your findings. You may find that the article by Riffe et al. is a helpful model.

Conclude by discussing what your discoveries mean. You may also, although this is not necessary, make recommendations for changes in Saturday morning television.

Be sure to review the Writer's Checklist on pages 125–126.

Paragraph Organization and Development
THE P.I.E. PARAGRAPH

Read the following paragraph and answer the questions that follow.

Body Paragraph, Example 1

> Some sexist commercials include those for Giggle Wiggle, Shark Attack, and Frog Soccer. For instance, in the Giggle Wiggle commercial, four people play the game—two boys and two girls. During the game, only the boys move the game pieces, shouting enthusiastically when they've made the right moves, while the girls, basically motionless, smile vacantly and watch the boys. At the end of the game, one of the boys wins and gleefully shouts, "I win! I win!" while clapping his hands. Only then does a girl jump up and speak her one line, "Oh wow!"

What is the writer's argument (in the paragraph and in the essay to which this paragraph belongs)?
What is the writer trying to prove (in the paragraph and in the essay to which this paragraph belongs)?
Is there anything to contextualize this information? For example, is there a main point holding the information together?

What did the writer learn from this information?
What does the writer think about these findings?
What is the writer's reaction to this data?
How did the writer react to this experience?

The P.I.E. Paragraph:

P	**Point**	What is the point of this paragraph? What claim is being made? Often, the point is the TOPIC SENTENCE.
I	**Information**	How is the point supported with specific data, experiences, or other factual material? The information is the evidence used to support/develop the point.
E	**Explanation**	What does the provided information mean? The explanation is the writer's analysis, elaboration, evaluation of the point and information given, connecting the information with the point (topic sentence) and the thesis.

Body Paragraph, Example 1, Revised

POINT (topic sentence)

Many sexist children's television commercials lead me to believe that girls rarely see images of themselves in active or winning situations. Often, the boy wins the game being advertised while the girls, pretty little objects, serve as his mindless cheerleaders. In "What are TV Ads Selling to Children" John J. O'Connor claims that in these ads girls are portrayed as inferior to boys. According to O'Connor, "They live in a society in which they can never be considered the best." Some of these commercials include those for Giggle Wiggle, Shark Attack, and Frog Soccer. For instance, in the Giggle Wiggle commercial, four people play the game—two boys and two girls. During the game, only the boys move the game pieces, shouting enthusiastically when they've made the right moves, while the girls, basically motionless, smile vacantly and watch the boys. At the end of the game, one of the boys wins and gleefully shouts, "I win! I win!" while clapping his hands. Only then does a girl jump up and speak her one line, "Oh wow!" **My mouth fell open when I saw this commercial. The winning kid was not only rude, but annoying. In this commercial, as in others, the girls were not the central characters but part of the support network for the winners, the boys. In fact, I never saw a girl win a game in any of the children's commercials I viewed. These subtle statements in commercials can make a person think that it is okay to be sexist when in fact it is absolutely not.**

INFORMATION (paragraph body)

EXPLANATION (relevance portion)

P.I.E. Strategies:

Ideas for making a POINT:

Decide what you want to say to support your thesis based on your reaction to the text
Try categorizing your ideas and make a comment on a recurring theme you've found

Ideas for INFORMATION/support:

Information from the readings or class discussions (paraphrases or, occasionally, short quotes)
Personal experience (stories, anecdotes, examples from your life)
Representations in mass media (newspapers, magazines, television)
Elements from popular culture (song lyrics, movie lines, TV characters, celebrities)
Definitions (from the dictionary, the readings, or another source)
Statistics (polls, percentages, data from research studies)

Ideas for EXPLANATION:

Interpret, analyze, explain the information, opinion or quote you've included
Comment on the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of the quote, fact, data, information, etc.
Decipher the meaning or try to better your understanding of your observation, findings or experience
Suggest to your reader how the information you've included relates to your THESIS.

Writer _____ Evaluator(s) _____

Kid's TV Commercials PIE Paragraph Checklist

Does the paragraph start off with a topic sentence (or two) that breaks down their thesis on gender or minority representation into some smaller topic? ("P" portion of "PIE")

Does the writer use ample support in the paragraph in the form of data from her home study or the book study, quotes from O'Connor, description and analysis of ads from her study, and clear logic and reasoning to connect the support and provide smooth transitions? ("I" portion of the "PIE")

Does the writer have an "E" portion of the "PIE" that clearly explains how the support informs and supports the topic sentence and/or the thesis statement? The "E" portion should be at least two sentences.

Is the "PIE" paragraph from a minimum of two thirds of a page long to one page long?

Writer _____ Evaluator(s) _____

Kid's TV Commercials Introduction Checklist

Does the introduction start off with a "hook," a couple of sentences that draws the reader into the essay in an interesting thoughtful manner?

Does the introduction then move to a treatment of the specific topic that the writer chose to pursue, either gender issues, minority representation or health and obesity? This should either express the problem in some way or argue that the problem is exaggerated depending on your stance.

Does the writer introduce O'Connor using one of the patterns we worked on in class?

Does the introduction contain a clear, specific thesis statement at the end? The thesis should make a claim about the ads stating whether they are harmful or not with reference made to your topic selection (either gender, minorities or health).

Is there anything in the introduction that seems irrelevant or pointless as far as the assignment is concerned?

What do you feel are the strong and weak points of this introduction? What did you like or dislike about it?

Is the introduction at least two thirds of a page long?