

# The Implications of Gendering Childhood Obesity PSAs

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**Abstract.** The percentage of overweight and obese children is at or above 30% in 30 U.S. states. In light of this nationwide epidemic, examining messages concerning childhood obesity becomes increasingly important. One strategy employed to help combat childhood obesity is public service announcements (PSAs). In marketing, gender is one of the leading variables employed to tailor messages to audiences. The Constant Comparative Method was used to content analyze 20 childhood obesity PSAs found on YouTube and 10 PSAs found on the Let's Move Website. Analyses indicate that PSAs on YouTube, while still biasing the male population, represented females more often than those on the Let's Move Website. Implications for obesity prevention are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Effecting approximately one third of American children [1], childhood obesity has been recognized by the World Health Organization as an epidemic [2]. Medical complications include, but are not limited to: high blood pressure, type II diabetes, and sleep apnea [2]. Children also suffer mentally as they are often the subjects of ridicule by their peers [3]. Not only do children suffer both physically and mentally, but treating the symptoms associated with it costs the United States \$150 billion annually [4]. Many organizations, both public and private have spent millions of dollars in attempts to curtail the climbing rates [5]. Most recently, childhood obesity has caught the attention of many policy makers. First Lady, Michelle Obama has recently announced her "Let's Move" campaign targeting childhood obesity [4]. Prevention efforts often employ media campaigns, which utilize PSAs to warn both parents and children of the negative effects of a poor diet and lack of physical activity. In marketing, gender is one of the leading variables employed to tailor messages to audiences. Because we live in a media saturated environment and because we are often consumers of PSAs it becomes crucial to analyze their contents from a gender based perspective [6].

## **Experiment, Results, Discussion and Significance**

This study reports the results of a content analysis of childhood obesity PSAs that urges children and/or parents to become more physically active and/or eat a healthier diet. Two strategies were employed to search for PSAs involving the prevention of childhood obesity. The first involved utilizing YouTube. The following terms were used to find PSAs directed toward parents or children urging children to eat healthier and/or exercise regularly: "childhood obesity p.s.a.," "child nutrition p.s.a.," "child fitness p.s.a.," and "child exercise p.s.a." Upon searching YouTube 153 videos were obtained using the previous search terms. All videos were then viewed to determine if they met the following criteria.

- P.S.A.s must not be over one minute long.
- P.S.A.s must be produced by a professional organization.
- P.S.A.s must be produced in the English language.
- P.S.A.s must not be over ten years old.

After videos were determined to meet all criteria, 20 were retained for analysis.

The second search strategy involved accessing The "Let's Move" Website. The site included ten P.S.A.s which were determined to obtain all criteria.

Using the Constant Comparative Method, each video was first viewed in its entirety. Viewing videos determined PSAs directed at children often employ the use of cartoon characters or animation. PSAs that utilized animation and or cartoons and those cartoons that were given gender qualities were counted as representing either a female or male gender. After videos were viewed a code sheet was developed and the following categories emerged from initial viewing: "voiceovers," "gender representation," "gendered language" and "activities." Videos were then viewed again to determine if a voice over was employed and whether it was a female, male or an undeterminable gendered voice. The videos were then viewed a third time to determine how many times each gender was represented. It was

noted that at times it was impossible to determine the gender of characters in the PSAs. When this occurred, neither female nor male was marked on the code sheet. Videos were then viewed a fourth time to determine what types of activities characters participated in. The gender of background characters or members of crowds was not counted. Only when the camera focused on a female or male specifically, was gender representation noted. At the same time gender representation was noted, videos were analyzed to note any gendered language. Due to the nature of childhood obesity PSAs that promote physical activity, often represent characters participating in sporting activities. These activities often promote stereotypical activities where boys are seen participating in activities such as basketball and football and girls are seen participating in activities such as jumping rope and playing volleyball. Videos were analyzed to determine if male or female characters participated in stereotypical activities. This often necessitated pausing the video to determine what characters were participating in which activities. After all categories were coded, the result of each one was noted. The results of the PSAs viewed on YouTube were then compared to PSAs viewed on the “Let’s Move” Website.

	YouTube PSAs		Let’s Move PSAs	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
Gender Representation	31	53	11	32
Voiceovers	5	8	3	5
Activity Participation	7	7	1	10
Gender Biased Language	0	0	0	0

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn. The majority of PSAs represent males more often than females. When PSAs from the YouTube site were viewed, they contained more equal representation of females and males participating in activities, even though the overall number of males to females was still biased. However, when PSAs were viewed on the “Let’s Move” Website, only one female was featured playing soccer. When males were featured in “Let’s Move” PSAs they were often prominent sports figures participating in activities such as football and basketball. Females who were featured in the PSAs were Michelle Obama, Nelly Furtado and Mo’Nique who spoke about the dangers of childhood obesity and the importance of lowering rates, but were never seen participating in any activities. Childhood obesity rates for females and males are high for both genders [7]. Both females and males need to become more physically active. Therefore, both genders should be represented in PSAs promoting physical activity, especially PSAs featured on the “Let’s Move” Website. PSAs need to employ female and male role models engaging in physical activity. Just as PSAs already use males engaging in activities like football and basketball, females should be engaged in similar activities. Girls need active female role models, not just women, no matter how appealing or credible sitting passively talking about the need to be more active. Those children and parents who view First Lady Obama’s website could draw the conclusion that only male children need to increase physical activity as those PSAs that feature children being active are targeting male children. The “Let’s Move” Website needs to employ more PSAs directed at female children to encourage them to be more active.

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