

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN TELEVISION USE:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE INSTRUMENTAL-EXPRESSIVE DICHOTOMY

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Abstract

This study applied an interpersonal approach to understand gender differences in television use. According to several scholars, males are socialized to be instrumental in communication, goal-directed and task-oriented. Females, on the other hand, are socialized to be expressive, or focused on establishing and maintaining relationships. Based on this view, we expected that this instrumental-expressive dichotomy would also be expressed in uses of television. We conducted two studies to test four hypotheses about gender differences based on this approach. We found mixed support for our expectations. Males were somewhat more likely to use television for instrumental reasons. Women were somewhat likely to use television for ritualistic reasons. And, males were more likely to dominate the remote control than women. These findings are linked to prior research on the uses of television.

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Gender differences in communication have fascinated scholars from a variety of disciplines. For the most part, researchers in interpersonal communication have examined communication styles in a wide variety of contexts (e.g., same- and mixed-sex dyads, romantic relationships, friendships) and have accumulated some support for the belief that males and females can be classified as instrumental and expressive, respectively, in their orientations to and resulting tendencies in communication (Cole & Cole, 1989; Johnson, Stockard, Acker, & Naffziger, 1975; Matlin, 1987).

Although these studies have investigated gender differences occurring in face-to-face settings, these distinctions may be useful to explain differences in other communication contexts as well. Recent research has identified gender differences in media use (Heeter, 1988; Perse & Ferguson, 1993), however, few studies have advanced a theoretical position to explain why these distinct patterns occur.

This study integrated interpersonal theory with mass media research to examine gender differences in media use. Specifically, we proposed that gender differences in television use represent another manifestation of the instrumental-expressive dichotomy.

Instrumental versus Expressive Orientations

Research suggests that men and women differ in their interpersonal communication styles (Muluc, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Tannen, 1990). Although a wide range of terms have been used to categorize the distinctions between these styles, Parson's (1951) instrumental-expressive dichotomy has received a great deal of attention.¹

In general, researchers believe that differences in males' and females' communication patterns reflect their respective instrumental and expressive orientations. An instrumental orientation reflects an interest in attaining goals, accomplishing tasks, and manipulating the external environment. In contrast, an expressive orientation focuses on establishing intimacy with others by participating in relationships and dealing with emotions (Gill, Stockard, Johnson, & Williams, 1987; Johnson et al., 1975). Thus, the female expressive orientation emphasizes social integration whereas the male instrumental orientation is geared toward accomplishing goals (Gill et al., 1987).

Researchers working from a cultural perspective on gender differences (e.g., Maltz & Borker, 1982) suggest that men and women can be distinguished according to these orientations because they have been socialized differently. According to this perspective, men and women are raised in different "cultures" that endorse distinct values and uphold unique prescriptions for

behavior. Specifically, females are socialized into a world that emphasizes closeness and connection with others, and males are socialized to value competition, dominance, and status.

Given these distinct socialization histories, then, researchers suggest that females are expressive and males are instrumental in their orientations toward communication (Bem, 1975; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972). For females, talk is an important device for maintaining relationships; thus, communication is a reflection of intimacy and signifies a healthy relationship. For males, on the other hand, talk is a tool for solving problems, accomplishing tasks, and establishing dominance over others (Fitzpatrick, 1977).

Most likely, these orientations are not mutually exclusive of one another. However, they do signal important distinctions in males' and females' perspectives that influence individuals' attitudes toward and use of talk. According to Noller (1993), "because men and women have such different experiences and operate in different social milieus they then develop different genres of speech and different types of verbal skill" (p. 135).

Because of these different conceptions and uses of communication, males and females enact distinct communicative behaviors. For example, studies have shown that men tend to control conversations and interrupt more than women (West & Zimmerman, 1986; Zimmerman & West, 1975). Researchers suggest

that these tendencies (among others) are tactics used by men to establish their dominance over others and to accomplish specific goals. Alternatively, women tend to ask more questions (Fishman, 1978), nod more while their partner speaks (Henley & Kramarae, 1991), and use the pronouns "you" and "we" in their attempt to maintain closeness and connection with conversational partners (Muluc et al., 1988).

Thus, males' and females' socialization into distinct orientations may explain differences in their attitudes toward and use of communication. Males and females may approach interactions with different agendas, thereby leading them to regard and use communication in distinct ways.

Gender Differences in Television Use

It is clear that males and females use television differently. Gender differences in television viewing levels and program selection have been widely noted (e.g., Comstock, 1989). Researchers have observed television viewing behaviors that evoke Parson's (1951) instrumental-expressive dichotomy.

Males are more likely to be purposive and goal-directed in their television viewing. They plan what they will watch (Morley, 1986, 1988) and use remote control devices to "get more out of TV" and to access news (Walker & Bellamy, 1991). Females, on the other hand, are more likely to view television as a social context to spent time with family and friends (Morley, 1988).

Consistent with an instrumental approach to television,

males are more likely to control television viewing. Fathers usually have the most influence in program selection and are least likely to ask others' permission before changing channels (Lull, 1982). Males are more likely to select the programs during group viewing (Heeter, 1988) and use the remote control to try to annoy others (Walker & Bellamy, 1991).

Women appear to take more passive roles during group/family television viewing, perhaps to maintain relationship harmony. Women are more likely to report that someone else changes channels even though they wish they wouldn't (Heeter, 1988). Program loyalty, or watching programs regularly, decreases for female heads-of-household when they watch with male adults (Webster & Wakshlag, 1982), suggesting that women are not in control of program selection. When alone, women may not always use television purposively. Because of domestic responsibilities (Hochschild, 1989), distracted television viewing may be an accompaniment to other activities (Perse & Ferguson, 1993).

Television consumption, then, may also reflect general attitudes and orientations. Just as some interpersonal communication scholars claim that our habitual speech styles are indicative of our underlying psychological orientation (Bernstein, 1974; Sypher & Sypher, 1988), television use may reflect covert characteristics as well. So, gender differences may emerge in patterns of television use as well.

Instrumental and Ritualistic Orientations

Research conducted on the uses and gratifications of television suggests that social and psychological variables predict variations in patterns of media use (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985; Rosengren, 1974). From this perspective, individuals' attitudes toward the media determine how content is used to achieve certain goals.

Rubin (1983, 1984) has identified two distinct orientations toward television use that underlie viewing choices, activity, and gratifications. An instrumental use of television is highly purposive. Individuals with instrumental motives regard television as a tool that serves a distinct purpose (e.g., to entertain, inform, excite). As a result, these individuals select certain programs to satiate their desires, meanwhile remaining highly involved with the shows in order to fulfill their goals (Rubin, 1984; Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Persons with ritualistic television motives, however, do not engage in such purposive viewing. Instead, they watch television out of habit, when they are bored, or when they are lonely, and therefore engage in less selective and involved viewing. Thus, ritualistic motives are associated with using television for more emotional reasons, such as companionship and escape (see Dobos & Dimmick, 1988).

Rubin (1986) suggests that these motivations may reflect

individuals' more general psychological orientations to television. Instrumental and ritualistic television use has been linked to different levels of television use (Rubin, 1984), selection of different programs (Rubin, 1984), and different types and levels of activity before and during television viewing (Rubin & Perse, 1987).

These instrumental and ritualistic orientations to television are similar to instrumental and expressive psychological orientations to conversation (Parsons, 1951). For example, instrumental viewing motives represent the same purposive, goal-oriented approach that Parsons (1951) introduces. And, ritualistic motives characterize an emotional, relationship-centered approach to television viewing much like the focus of an expressive orientation toward the social world.

Different viewing outcomes associated with instrumental and ritualistic orientations reinforce the similarity between Rubin's and Parson's typologies. Ritualistic television use is linked to mental engagement with programs and knowledge gain (McLeod & Perse, 1994; Perse, 1990b; Rubin & Perse, 1987). Instrumental television use, on the other hand is associated with emotional reactions to television programs and feelings of friendship with television performers (Perse, 1990b).

Like interpersonal communication patterns, then, television viewing may be another arena for the manifestation of the instrumental-expressive belief systems. Instrumental viewing

motives may parallel a more general attitude of instrumentality while ritualistic viewing should evidence a more expressive orientation. Thus, we expected that males and females will differ in their television viewing motives due to their distinct orientations toward the world.

Just as males tend to regard conversation as an opportunity to achieve instrumental goals (Fitzpatrick, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1986; Zimmerman & West, 1975), we expected that they will have a similar orientation toward television viewing. We expected that males will use television more for instrumental, goal-directed purposes. Females, on the other hand, who tend to focus on relationships, should use television in a more emotional way, either as a substitute for social interaction, or as an escape from others. For females, television may be used ritualistically when opportunities for social interaction are not available or undesirable; hence, they should regard it as a way to fill the time in between meaningful interactions.

H1: Men will report more instrumental motives for watching television than women.

H2: Women will report more ritualistic motives for watching television than men.

Furthermore, because males view television as a means of accomplishing tasks and females regard television as an object upon which social satisfaction is built, we expected that

different attitudes toward the medium to arise as well. Females' television experience is more closely connected with feelings, emotions, and social satisfaction. So, we expected them to express higher levels of affinity for television, or feel that television was more important in their lives. On the other hand, because males may regard television primarily as a means to achieve certain goals, we expected them to report less affinity for it.

H3: Women will report a higher affinity for television than men.

Instrumental and expressive orientations may also be associated with distinct patterns of viewing behavior in social settings. Because an instrumental orientation reflects an interest in achieving personal goals and dominating or manipulating the environment, males may be more likely to maintain control over program selection via the remote control device. Because expressive orientations emphasize feelings, relationships, and intimacy among interactants, for females, the specific show selected for social viewing should not be as important as the experience of viewing with others. Thus, females may relinquish control over program selection to their male viewing partners as a way to establish connection and to display generosity.

H4: Women will report that male members of their family and social groups are the primary operators of the remote

control device more than men will report women to be the primary operators of the remote control device.

These hypotheses were tested with data collected in two studies: Study 1, a quota sample from the East Coast and Study 2, a random-digit survey from a town in the Midwest (Ferguson & Perse, 1993). The use of two samples from two sections of the country might strengthen the generalizability of our findings. Study 1 allowed us to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Study 2 allowed us to test all four hypotheses.

Study 1: East Coast

Method

Procedure and sample. In Spring 1994, research assistants enrolled in a research methods course were given course credit for collecting the data for this study. The 65 assistants, trained in questionnaire administration and ethics, were instructed to recruit adults in two age and gender quotas (males and females 18-49 and 50 and older) to complete questionnaires. Within a 2-week period, 243 self-administered questionnaires were completed.²

The sample was 47.7% male (coded 0) and ranged in age from 19 to 87 ($M=42.11$, $SD=16.88$). Respondents were drawn from a wide geographic area; 134 different zipcodes were represented. The sample was somewhat well educated. Overall, 14.4% were high-school graduates, 26.3% had attended college, 35.8% were college

graduates, and 22.2% had attended graduate school. Respondents watched an estimated 3.24 hours of television a day ($SD=2.61$). Of the sample, 82.3% subscribed to cable and 91.4% owned a remote control device.

Viewing motives. Respondents indicated their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with 16 statements about their own reasons for watching television. The 16 statements were drawn from larger sets of television viewing motivations (Rubin, 1983). These statements were selected because they were items that loaded on instrumental and ritualistic motive factors in previous research (Perse, 1990a).³ Eight items concerned watching television for ritualistic reasons, pass time, habit, companionship, and escape. Eight items focused on instrumental reasons, entertainment, excitement, learning, and social utility.

Item responses were averaged to create scale scores. Ritualistic reasons ranged from 1.00 - 4.88 ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 0.81$, $\alpha = .86$). Instrumental reasons scores ranged from 1.00 - 4.75 ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.84$, $\alpha = .72$).

Affinity. Respondents expressed their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with five statements drawn from past research (Perse, 1990a; Rubin, 1983) that concern perceptions of television's importance.⁴ Averaged affinity scores ranged from 1.00 - 5.00 ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.86$, Cronbach $\alpha = .83$).

Statistical analysis. After scale construction, hypotheses

1, 2 and 3 were tested with t-tests to locate gender differences in viewing motives and television affinity.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that males would report higher instrumental viewing motives than females. This hypothesis was supported. Males ($M=3.18$, $SD=0.73$) reported more instrumental motives for watching television than females ($M=2.98$, $SD=0.64$), $t(241)=2.30$, $p<.05$.

The second hypothesis predicted that females would report higher ritualistic viewing motives than males. This hypothesis was not supported. Females' ritualistic viewing motives ($M=2.16$, $SD=0.76$) were not significantly different from males' ($M=2.05$, $SD=0.85$), $t(240)=1.04$, $p=.30$.

The third hypothesis focused on gender differences in television affinity, or attachment to television. This hypothesis was not supported. Males ($M=2.33$, $SD=0.89$) and females ($M=2.14$, $SD=0.82$) did not differ in affinity: $t(241)=1.74$, $p=.08$.⁵

Study 2: Midwest

Method

Procedure and sample. A random-digit-dialing telephone survey was conducted in Spring 1991 among adults living off-campus in Bowling Green Ohio, a university community in the Midwest with 28,176 residents. Out of the 813 valid attempts

(excluding business numbers, no answers, and ineligible persons), there were 615 completions and 198 refusals, for a 75.6% completion rate. The sample was 45.1% male and ranged in age from 17 - 93 ($M = 36.27$, $SD = 17.01$). The average respondent had completed 14.45 years of education (ranging from 8 - 20 years, $SD = 2.45$). Respondents watched on average of 2.98 hours of television a day ($SD = 2.24$). Of the sample, 68.7% subscribed to cable, 73.5% reported owning a remote control device, and 76.9% had access to a VCR where they lived.

Viewing motives. Respondents indicated their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree) with the same 16 statements about their own reasons for watching television. As before, item responses were averaged to create scale scores. Ritualistic reasons ranged from 1.00 - 3.63 ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.48$, $\alpha = .83$). Instrumental reasons scores ranged from 1.00 - 3.63 ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .33$, $\alpha = .68$).

Affinity. Respondents expressed their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree) with the same five affinity statements. Averaged affinity scores ranged from 1.00 - 3.20 ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.46$, Cronbach $\alpha = .77$).

Remote control operation. If respondents owned a remote control device, they were asked "what one person in your household most often operates the remote control?" Most (50.9%) of the device owners reported to control the device's use. Other responses were coded as either male or female. Of the 376 remote

control device operators whose gender could be coded, 28.7% were male, 10.1% were female, and 61.2% were the respondent.

Statistical analysis. As with Study 1, t-tests were used to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Hypothesis 4 was tested using contingency table analysis.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that males would report higher instrumental viewing motives than females. This hypothesis was not supported. There were no significant differences between males ($M=2.59$, $SD=0.37$) and females ($M=2.59$, $SD=0.29$), $t(590)=0.14$, $p=.89$.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that females would report higher ritualistic viewing motives than males. This hypothesis was supported. Females ($M=2.47$, $SD=0.48$) reported higher scores than males ($M=2.40$, $SD=0.49$), $t(594)=1.97$, $p=.05$.

The third hypothesis predicted that females would report higher television affinity than males. There was no support for this expectation. Males ($M=1.82$, $SD=0.45$) and females ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.47$) did not differ on television affinity: $t(594)=1.60$, $p=.11$.⁶

The fourth hypothesis concerned control of the remote control device. Specifically, we expected that women would be more likely to report that males were primary operators of the devices in their households than men would report that women were

primary operators. This hypothesis was supported (see Table 1).

Although the majority of both men (70.9%) and women (52.9%) reported themselves to be the primary operators, men made this claim more than women. When men relinquished control of the device, they were slightly more likely to give it up to another male (16.3%) than a female (12.7%). Females, on the other hand, were far more likely to give control of the device to males (39.2%) than another female (7.8%). This distribution was a significant deviation from chance: $(N=376)=24.28, p<.001$.

Discussion

This study examined gender differences in television viewing under the assumption that distinct orientations toward interpersonal communication would carry over and guide behavior in the television setting as well. Specifically, we expected that males' instrumental approach to interaction would manifest itself in the form of instrumental television viewing motives, less affinity for the medium, and more control over program selection via remote control use. We expected females' expressive orientation toward communication to be shown in different patterns, marked by ritualistic television viewing motives, greater affinity for the medium, and less domination of the remote control device.

We found mixed support for our hypotheses. Males in the East Coast sample reported significantly higher instrumental television viewing motives than women. This finding, though, was

not replicated with the Midwest sample. There are some limited indications, then, that a male orientation toward the world that stresses dominance, control, and manipulation of the environment (Tannen, 1990) is reflected, to some degree, in an instrumental approach toward television viewing as well. Men who are socialized into believing that people and objects are "useful" to personal pursuits may approach a wide range of situations with predefined goals and enact behavior that will allow them to accomplish tasks. The results of this study suggest that males' underlying instrumental orientation may guide their behavior in the television context as well, leading them to consume messages (whether interpersonal or mediated) for instrumental purposes.

The second hypothesis predicted that women, because they have been socialized to be more expressive, would report to watch television for more ritualistic reasons than men. We found mixed support for this expectation. We found significant gender differences only in our Midwest sample. This tentative link between a ritualistic use of television and gender may be based in the meaning of ritualistic motives.

Ritualistic television motives focus more on the process and context of watching television, rather than on specific content (Rubin, 1984). One element of ritualistic viewing is companionship, or using television as a substitution for social interaction. Females have been socialized to value intimacy and

connections with others. While there have been few reports of gender differences in television viewing motives, Rubin and Rubin (1982) reported that older women were more likely to watch television for companionship reasons. Females, then, may be more likely to watch television for ritualistic, companionship reason.

Another aspect of an expressive orientation is to use communication to maintain and enhance relationships. Lull (1980) observed several social-relational uses of television. Television may be used to facilitate communication by giving viewers a common experience. But, television may also reduce conversational tension by filling in awkward gaps. Television may also may serve affiliation needs by bringing people together physically. Women may use television viewing as an excuse to spend time with family members, even if they are not particularly interested in the programs they are watching. Future research should explore the connections between social uses of television and expressive communication orientations.

The modest connection between female gender and ritualistic viewing motives may also reflect the woman's family role. As the caretaker, household tasks and family maintenance are often part of the rhythm of women's television viewing (Modleski, 1983). Because women engage in many more distracting behaviors than men during television viewing (Perse & Ferguson, 1993), it is not surprising that television viewing may be less content-oriented and more ritualistic. Radway (1984) noted that female romance

novel readers often used the novels as an excuse for "private time." Future research might explore if ritualistic television viewing motives may also be a way for women to create some "space" during a busy day.

The third hypothesis, which proposed that males and females would report different levels of affinity for television, was not supported. Although we expected that females would report a greater attachment to television because they use it to enhance social connections, we found that affinity levels, for both genders in both studies, were fairly low. Clearly, television affinity is not very high.

The findings of this study support views that attitudes about television are influenced more by motives, or reasons for using television, rather than characteristics of people (Rubin, 1983). Although affinity is an attitude that is linked to higher levels of exposure, it is clear that future research needs to explore why some people are more attached to television than others.

We found stronger support for our fourth hypothesis. Instrumental and expressive orientations were reflected in males' and females' reporting about who dominates their household's remote control device. As a signal of instrumental orientation toward television, males reported more than women to control the remote control device themselves. Reflecting a less instrumental orientation, women were more likely to relinquish the device to

males who are also viewing television.

Perhaps women's expressive orientation leads them at times to evaluate the television viewing experience in terms of feelings and relationships, thereby leading them to allow others with more specific viewing goals to control the device. Women may also sense conflicts over program selection as threatening to relationships and therefore, may relinquish control over the device in order to maintain relational harmony.

That men have the luxury of controlling program selection via the remote control device more so than women reinforces other findings about the male-dominated remote control device: Males change channels more and for different reasons (Heeter, 1988; Perse & Ferguson, 1993). Although we have advanced suggestions that these gender differences may be due to a search for greater variety and sensation (Perse & Ferguson, 1993), it is clear that the remote control device is also a tool that allows people to instrumentally accomplish goals and achieve a variety of gratifications (Wenner & Dennehy, 1993). The results of this study reinforce the utility of studying remote control devices as instruments to enhance program selectivity.

This study extends interpersonal communication approaches to help understand some gender differences in mass communication. Although interpersonal and mass-mediated contexts may not appear to be comparable environments, the results of this study suggest that behavioral patterns may remain fairly consistent across

situations.

Because gender differences emerge in many different contexts, the findings of this study offer some support for two conclusions. First, males and females may possess fundamentally different orientations toward the world that lead them to behave in different ways. Thus, it may be that gender is more than just a category for classifying biological differences; instead, it may also describe how groups of individuals differ in their psychological orientations and resulting behavior. Second, the results of this study point out the value of integrating mass and interpersonal communication approaches. As Berger and Chaffee (1988) suggested, providing a theoretical framework that unifies mass and interpersonal approaches advances knowledge in both disciplines.

Notes

¹It is important to note that because so many researchers have built on Parson's ideas, a variety of meanings for instrumentality and expressivity has evolved. However, a discussion of these inconsistencies is beyond the scope of this paper, and hence, explanations of these terms serve only as general abstractions taken from many different sources.

²We'd like to thank Charlie Q. Pavitt for help in arranging data collection.

³The eight ritualistic statements were: (I watch television) "Because it gives me something to occupy my time," "Just because it's on," "When I have nothing better to do," "When there's no one else to talk to be with," "Because it passes the time away, particularly when I'm bored," "So I can get away from the family or others," "Because it makes me feel less lonely," and "Because it's a habit, just something I do."

The eight instrumental reasons were: (I watch television) "Because it helps me learn things about myself and others," "Because it entertains me," "Because it's thrilling," "Because it's enjoyable," "So I can talk with others about what's on," "Because it's exciting," "Because it amuses me," and "So I can learn about what could happen to me."

⁴The five affinity statements were: "I would rather watch TV than do anything else," "I could easily do without television

for several days" (recoded), "I would feel lost without television to watch," "Whenever I'm unable to watch television, I really miss it," and "Watching television is one of the more important things I do each day."

⁵Because Perse and Ferguson (1993) suggest that traditional gender socialization effects are stronger in older rather than younger individuals, we conducted analyses of variance using age (29 and younger, 30 and older) and sex as factors. There was no significant interaction effect between age and sex on instrumental motives ($F[1, 240]=.73, p=.39$), ritualistic motives ($F[1, 240]=.08, p=.77$), or affinity ($F[1,240]=1.16, p=.34$).

⁶Based on Perse and Ferguson (1993), we once again conducted two-way analyses of variance using age and sex as factors. There was no significant age-sex interaction effect on instrumental motives ($F[1, 582]=.024, p=.88$), ritualistic motives ($F[1, 582]=1.33, p=.25$), or affinity ($F[1, 582]=2.18, p=.14$).

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Table 1

Gender Difference in Remote Control Operators

	Male	Female
Self	122 (70.9%)	108 (52.9%)
Other		
Male	28 (16.3%)	80 (39.2%)
Female	22 (12.7%)	16 (7.8%)

{N = 376} = 24.29, $p < .001$