Representations of Race in Television Commercials: A Content Analysis of Prime-Time Advertising

Dana E. Mastro and Susannah R. Stern

Given the paucity of contemporary examinations of racial/ethnic minority portrayals in television advertisements, this study analyzed the frequency, context, and quality of 2,315 speaking characters in a one-week sample of prime-time television commercials. Results reveal different patterns of portrayals when African American, Asian American, Latino, Native American, and White characters are featured in television advertisements. The implications of these images are examined from the perspective of social cognitive theory to provide insights into their possible impact on audience members' self-perceptions.

Research from the U.S. Department of Commerce demonstrates that, collectively, the annual purchasing power of racial/ethnic minorities constitutes over 20% of the nation's total consumer spending and is rising at a rate faster than that of the non-minority population (MBDA, 2000). Together with rapidly changing demographics, these figures have prompted advertisers to aggressively tap into the extensive minority market (Holland & Gentry, 1999). While such attempts represent tremendous financial opportunities for the ad industry, they are not without consequence for consumers. In fact, researchers argue that the sheer pervasiveness of advertising may enhance its potential to influence television viewers (Stern, 1999). In order to identify the possible implications of advertising exposure on minorities, this content analysis utilizes a social cognitive perspective in its evaluation of portrayals of Blacks (African Americans), Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in current prime-time television commercials. Because these depictions have traditionally been questionable in nature (Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002), these groups were isolated for examination. Although content analyses cannot offer causal evidence, the content features derived from these analyses are integral to the development of comprehensive media effects studies (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Social cognitive theory (SCT) suggests that under certain conditions, such as the
repeated, simple, and rewarded messages that typify television ads, viewers can and do learn from what they see in the media (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 2002). Although not every learned behavior is emulated, SCT submits (and empirical research supports) that the manner in which images are presented on television influences how viewers interpret and respond to the modeled acts (Bandura, 2002). One contextual feature in particular that may be considerably influential for audience members exposed to television commercials is the extent to which the models are believed to be similar to self. The character’s race/ethnicity has been found to be an especially salient indicator of this perceived similarity (Jose & Brewer, 1984) as evidenced in research indicating that Black viewers prefer ads (Williams, Qualls, & Grier, 1995) and programming featuring Blacks (Nielsen Media Research, 1998), and that Latinos favor Spanish-language programs. Additionally, studies reveal that children are more likely to report identifying with and wanting to be like media characters of their own racial/ethnic background (Greenberg & Atkin, 1982). Given that Blacks and Latinos also have been found to be among the heaviest television consumers (Nielsen Media Research, 1998), examining how often and in what context characters from different racial/ethnic groups are depicted in commercials becomes consequential.

**Commercial Images**

Typically, researchers interested in evaluating images in advertising have focused on three primary areas: (1) frequencies, (2) selective presentation, and (3) presentation quality.

**Frequencies.** Examining numeric representation is meaningful as presence in the media is seen as an indication of social relevance in larger society (Dorr, 1982). Despite their actual proportions in the population, racial/ethnic minorities have been chronically underrepresented in television commercials (Greenberg et al., 2002). This finding has been supported by longitudinal (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000) and cross-sectional studies of television advertising (Wilkes & Valencia, 1989). Two exceptions include Licata and Biswas’ (1993) and Taylor and Stern’s (1997) results revealing elevated occurrences of Black portrayals in television ads (finding Blacks in 35% and 31.8% of ads, respectively). Further, Taylor and Stern (1997) found Asian Americans to be depicted in 8.4% of commercials, Latinos in 8.5% of ads, and Whites in nearly every advertisement (98%).

**Selective presentation.** Examining the quality of these portrayals in terms of product association and setting is necessary as these provide implicit cues regarding the cultural worth of the individuals associated with them (Cohen, 1992). Typically, Blacks appeared in integrated ads for food (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Wilkes & Valencia, 1989), cars, alcohol (Wilkes & Valencia, 1989), or institutional/service advertisements, with the value of the product inversely related to interaction with Black models (Licata & Biswas, 1993). Comparatively, Whites appeared most often in advertisements for cosmetics and were most frequently found at home. Asians were
most often in ads for retailers while Latinos were primarily located in banking/finance ads (Taylor & Stern, 1997) or ads for food and entertainment (Wilkes & Valencia, 1989).

Presentation quality. Although arguably the most illuminating measure of the value of the characterization, relatively little is known about the qualities associated with these presentations. On average, studies suggest that racial/ethnic minorities appear most regularly in minor or background roles and group settings (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Wilkes & Valencia, 1989); are less likely to be pictured as parents or spouses (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000); and are less likely to give orders.

Research Questions

When the potential impact of exposure to television commercials is considered from the perspective of social cognitive theory, the quality of these ads assumes increasing social significance. As such, based on the assumptions of SCT and existing content analyses, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What is the comparative frequency of portrayals of race in television commercials?
RQ2: Do characters’ age and sex vary by race?
RQ3: What occupational and familial roles are associated with which groups?
RQ4: What physical attributes are associated with which groups?
RQ5: What personality characteristics are associated with which groups?

Method

A one-week sample of prime time television programming (8:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m. EST, Mondays - Saturdays and 7:00 p.m.-11:00 p.m. EST, Sundays) across the six broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, and WB) was recorded over a 3-week period in February 2001. Program time periods were assigned numbers from a random numbers table and these were then blindly drawn to construct a complete week. All national advertisements were coded, yielding 2,880 ads. Consistent with existing research, the use of a simple random sample was deemed appropriate to allow for generalization (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). While no uniform standard exists regarding sample size (Krippendorf, 1980; Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe et al., 1998), using standard error estimates to calculate confidence intervals around the current measures provided 95% confidence in the generalizability of findings (Neuendorf, 2002).

Reliabilities

Four undergraduate students, extensively trained on commercials outside the actual sample, served as coders. Scott's pi was used to assess intercoder reliability for
nominal level variables (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Ordinal/interval data were appraised with Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff, 1980). Reliabilities based on the actual sample are individually reported alongside each variable definition to follow.

Units of Analyses

The present study involved two units of analysis. First, consistent with current research on prime-time advertising, all national commercials were coded including repeated ads (Craig, 1992). Local commercials, political advertisements, trailers for television shows, movies, and sports events were excluded (Bartsch, Burnett, Diller, & Rankin-Williams, 2000; Wilkes & Valencia, 1989). Second, the first three speaking human characters in each ad were coded. A speaking part was defined as a singular, discernible voice emanating from an identifiable character. Pilot testing revealed that the majority of prime-time commercials contained fewer than three identifiable speaking characters. Thus, a maximum of three characters per commercial was coded thereby providing a systematic assessment while avoiding the uncertainties that arise when identifying “primary” or “background” characters (e.g., Bartsch, et al., 2000). In addition, because social cognitive theory posits that audience members are more likely to prefer (Williams et al., 1995) and identify with characters similar to self and are more inclined to attend to notable and distinctive characters (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 2002), only human speaking characters were included.

Variables

At the commercial level, product type ($P_i = 1.0$) was coded to identify the best description of the product using a 30-product coding scheme. At the character level, several variables assessing context, roles, behaviors, and attributes were coded. To address the context, setting ($P_i = 1.0$) was coded as the primary location where the character was found (including work, home, other indoors, and outdoors). Characters’ relationship to the product ($P_i = .92$) was also addressed and categories included using, endorsing, both, or neither.

Characters’ primary behavior ($P_i = .83$) (i.e., work, domestic, recreation, and other) was assessed to determine principal function within the ad. Another measure, job authority, ($P_i = .75$) was used to estimate characters’ primary professional relationship with other characters at work, including order giver, order receiver, both, and neither (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). Similarly, a social authority ($P_i = .86$) measure designating giving advice, receiving advice, both and neither was utilized to determine character’s social status. Family status ($P_i = 1.0$) was recorded in terms of whether or not the character was depicted as a family member. Alluring behavior ($P_i = 1.0$), measured as a dichotomy, indicated whether or not the character took part in behaviors such as flirting (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). To assess the extent to which a character engaged in sexual gazing ($P_i = 1.0$), the following four options
were provided: receiving a sexual gaze, giving a sexual gaze, both, or neither (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). Characters also were examined to establish the presence or absence of an accent (Pi = .91) (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), and their affective state (Pi = 1.0) was coded to determine if the characters laughed, cried, and/or shouted in anger.

Several other character attributes were assessed on a 5-point scale. Degree of dress (α = .88) measured the attire of the character ranging from conservative (1) to suggestive (5) (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Hierarchy position (α = .88) addressed the status of the characters from superior (1) to subordinate (5). The extent to which characters were respected (α = .94) was evaluated from highly (1) to not at all respected (5). Each character’s activity (α = .72) was rated ranging from active (1) to passive (5) (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Physical attractiveness (α = .88) gauged characters’ physical beauty by mainstream U.S. standards from attractive (1) to unattractive (5) (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). An affability item (α = .95) described the disposition of the character from friendly (1) to hostile (5) (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). In addition, body type (α = 1.0) was measured on Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger’s (1983) 9-point pictorial scale ranging from extremely thin (1) to extremely overweight (9). Finally, age (Pi = 1.0) was measured from child (1) to senior (5).

Results

To examine differences based on the race of the character, chi-squares were performed. The sizeable imbalance in appearances across racial/ethnic groups presented too great a violation of analysis of variance assumptions to employ such analyses with ordinal/interval variables. It was further necessary to collapse the following variables into three levels to avoid violations of the chi-square minimum frequency requirement: degree of dress, hierarchy position, respectability, activity level, physical attractiveness, affability, body type, and age.

Across the 2,880 commercials coded in this sample of prime time television, the race of 2,290 of the 2,315 speaking characters was identified. The majority of these characters was White (n = 1907, 83.3%) followed by Black (n = 285, 12.4%), Asian (n = 53, 2.3%), Latino (n = 24, 1.0%), Native American (n = 9, 0.4%), and “other” (n = 12, 0.5%). Males of all races appeared more often than females with the exception of Latinos, among whom the number of males and females was equivalent.

Commercial Level Characteristics

Black characters were most commonly depicted in commercials for financial services (n = 56, 19.7%) and food (n = 50, 17.6%). Asians appeared most commonly in ads for technology (n = 16, 30.2%). The commercials most frequently
featuring Latinos were for soap/deodorant (n = 10, 43.4%). White characters were seen most in commercials for technology (n = 285, 15%) and food (n = 277, 14.6%). Native Americans, rarely shown, were most often depicted in ads for macro-retailers (e.g., Wal-Mart) (n = 2, 22.2%) and automotives (n = 2, 22.2%). Due to the small number of appearances of Native Americans, they were excluded from further analyses.

The setting in which characters were located in commercials was found to vary significantly by race, \( \chi^2 (9, N = 2239) = 36.22, p < .01 \). While both Black (n = 83, 29.4%) and Latino (n = 10, 43.5%) characters were most often located outdoors, Asians (n = 22, 45.8%) were most often found at work and Whites (n = 574, 30.4%) were most often at home.

**Character Level Attributes**

Chi-squares revealed significant differences in characters’ relationship to the product based on race, \( \chi^2 (9, N = 2244) = 35.25, p < .01 \). Blacks (n = 103, 36.4%) and Whites (n = 667, 35.4%) were predominately seen using the product. Alternatively, Asians (n = 34, 65.4%) and Latinos (n = 12, 50.0%) most often had no relationship with the product being advertised. The primary behavior of characters did not differ significantly by race, \( \chi^2 (9, N = 2260) = 15.04, p = .08 \). However, while Black (n = 94, 33.0%), Latino (n = 12, 50.0%), and White characters (n = 746, 39.2%) were most often found engaging in activities other than work, domestic activities, or recreation, Asians were most often seen working (n = 22, 44.0%). If shown in occupational roles, the job authority of characters differed based on race, \( \chi^2 (6, N = 833) = 20.94, p < .01 \). Findings indicated that while Blacks (n = 51, 44.7%) and Asians (n = 10, 45.5%) typically did not give or receive orders, Whites were nearly as likely to give orders (n = 226, 32.4%) as they were to neither give nor receive orders (n = 279, 40.0%). An insufficient number of Latinos appearing in occupational roles barred them from inclusion. Measures of characters’ social authority demonstrated no distinctions based on race. Among Black (n = 241, 84.6%), Asian (n = 39, 78.0%), Latino (n = 15, 62.5%), and White (n = 1524, 80.1%) characters, the most common representation was neither giving nor receiving advice. Characters’ family status also did not vary by race. The majority of Black (n = 214, 76.2%), Asian (n = 35, 71.4%), Latino (n = 21, 95.5%), and White (n = 1365, 72.0%) characters were not identified as family members.

Statistically significant differences by race did emerge in chi-square tests of sexual gazing, \( \chi^2 (9, N = 2253) = 61.28, p < .01 \). The vast majority of Black (n = 264, 93.0%), Asian (n = 48, 96.0%), and White (n = 1762, 93.0%) characters did not give or receive sexual looks. Latinos, however, were more evenly divided between those who did not give or receive sexual gazes (n = 13, 54.2%) and those who did (approximately 45.9%). A similar pattern surfaced for use of alluring behavior, \( \chi^2 (3, N = 2253) = 52.01, p < .01 \). Although Blacks (n = 262, 92.3%), Asians (n = 50, 100.0%), and Whites (n = 1777, 93.8%) rarely engaged in alluring behaviors,
Latinos were more closely divided between behaving alluringly \((n = 10, 41.7\%)\) and not demonstrating such behavior \((n = 14, 58.3\%)\). Whether or not a character had an accent was significantly associated with race, \(\chi^2(3, N = 2237) = 304.81, p < .01\). Overall, Blacks \((n = 271, 95.8\%)\), Asians \((n = 43, 87.8\%)\), and Whites \((n = 1842, 97.7\%)\) spoke with no discernable accent. In contrast, Latinos \((n = 14, 73.7\%)\) were likely to speak with an accent. Although statistically significant, differences in laughter were not found to be associated with the race of the character, \(\chi^2(3, N = 2259) = 76.37, p < .01\). Race was not significantly associated with crying, \(\chi^2(3, N = 2256) = 1.70, p = .64\) or shouting, \(\chi^2(3, N = 2254) = 2.67, p = .45\).

The race of the characters was significantly related to their age, \(\chi^2(6, N = 2268) = 18.21, p < .01\). Black characters \((n = 138, 48.6\%)\) and White characters \((n = 1020, 53.5\%)\) were most commonly depicted as older adults, while Asians \((n = 22, 41.5\%)\) and Latinos \((n = 10, 41.7\%)\) were typically portrayed as young adults. Significant differences for degree of dress also were revealed, \(\chi^2(6, N = 2260) = 14.59, p < .025\). Whereas Blacks \((n = 167, 58.6\%)\), Asians \((n = 35, 70\%)\), and Whites \((n = 1219, 64.1\%)\) were shown to be conservatively clad, Latinos tended to be more suggestively clad \((n = 12, 50.0\%)\). Differences in hierarchy position, \(\chi^2(6, N = 2260) = 6.50, p = .37\) and respectability, \(\chi^2(6, N = 2260) = 14.72, p < .025\) did not vary meaningfully based on race. The characters were typically deemed to be average/neutral on both variables. However, the characters’ activity level, \(\chi^2(6, N = 2259) = 20.74, p < .01\) was significantly related to character race. Although Blacks \((n = 114, 40.0\%)\) and Whites \((n = 747, 39.3\%)\) were moderately active, Asians \((n = 29, 58\%)\) were most often found to be more passive. Latinos, were evenly divided between highly \((n = 10, 41.7\%)\) and moderately \((n = 10, 41.7\%)\) active. The attractiveness of characters also varied significantly by race, \(\chi^2(6, N = 2256) = 29.95, p < .01\). Both Black characters \((n = 127, 44.6\%)\) and White characters \((n = 904, 47.7\%)\) were average in attractiveness. Asians, however, were nearly evenly divided between very attractive \((n = 20, 40.0\%)\) and very unattractive \((n = 18, 36.0\%)\). Most often, Latinos \((n = 15, 62.5\%)\) were identified as very attractive.

Chi-squares for affability were conducted separately for men and women (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). Latinos were excluded due to an insufficient sample size. For men, no meaningful differences existed based on the race of the character, \(\chi^2(4, N = 1308) = 11.54, p < .025\), as each group was most often depicted as average in affability. Although not significantly different, \(\chi^2(4, N = 908) = 7.45, p = .11\), both Asian women \((n = 12, 66.7\%)\) and White women \((n = 370, 48.7\%)\) were identified as highly affable while Black women \((n = 74, 56.5\%)\) tended to be depicted as average in affability. Last, significant differences in body type emerged by race for both males, \(\chi^2(6, N = 1277) = 52.08, p < .01\) and females, \(\chi^2(6, N = 907) = 33.61, p < .01\). Among males, Black \((n = 78, 53.8\%)\) and White \((n = 770, 70.4\%)\) characters were typically average in weight, while Asians \((n = 17, 58.6\%)\) and Latinos \((n = 6, 60.0\%)\) were most commonly extremely thin. An examination of the women revealed that Black \((n = 72, 55.8\%)\), Asian \((n = 12, 70.6\%)\), and White \((n =
464, 61.9%) women were most frequently depicted as extremely thin. Latino women 
(n = 11, 100.0%) were identified exclusively as extremely thin.

Discussion

Overall, this analysis of contemporary television advertising indicates both 
progress and stagnation for racial/ethnic minority representations. While Blacks are 
generally portrayed in a more diverse, equitable manner, and at a rate commensurate 
to the population, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans remain under-
represented and, at times, negatively depicted. Because television commercials not 
only promote consumption, but also shape images and "sustain group boundaries 
that come to be taken for granted" (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000), it is important to 
consider how such representations might influence racial/ethnic minority viewers. 
However, linking exposure with consumer outcomes certainly will require micro-
and/or macro-level effects studies (Hertog & Fan, 1995) that incorporate audience 
and production level variables together with content characteristics (Shoemaker & 
Reese, 1996).

According to SCT, the process of learning from the media begins with the act of 
attending to the media event. Similarity and identification with the model facilitate 
this process (Bandura, 2002). Given this, Blacks and Whites have the greatest 
number of potential models in current television advertising among all racial/ethnic 
groups. When compared with U.S. Census (2000) figures, Blacks are represented in 
commercials proportionately (12.3%) while Whites are over-represented (75.1%). 
Black characters are typically found in ads for financial services or food, and are 
attractive, respected adults commonly located outdoors. This is largely comparable 
to the depictions of Whites, who tended to be fairly average in their roles and 
attributes. Based on SCT, then, it would be expected that Black and White viewers 
might be less likely than others to develop harmful self-perceptions as a result of 
exposure, especially when considering that characters' mere presence in ads sug-
gests social relevance and group legitimization (Dorr, 1982).

Latino and Asian consumers may acquire substantially different sets of messages. 
Although Latinos comprise 12.5% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2000), they 
make up only 1% of speaking characters in commercials. These models are highly 
attractive, younger adults with noticeable accents, who are more suggestively clad 
than their commercial counterparts and more frequently found engaging in alluring 
behaviors and sexual gazing. In applying SCT, Latinos exposed to these ads may 
learn to identify physical appearances and sexuality rather than intellect, for exam-
ple, as the most important components of self. Alternatively, Asians attending to 
images of self will typically find young, passive adults at work in technology ads. 
Potentially, this may serve to reinforce perceptions of Asian Americans as dedicated 
to work only, ultimately tying self-worth to submissiveness and superior achieve-
ment. Unfortunately, Native Americans are so infrequently represented in television
ads that it is impossible to speculate about the type of social learning that may result from exposure.

**Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

Given that these results reveal dissimilar patterns in the portrayal of different racial/ethnic groups, empirically testing their consequent implications for viewers will be essential in future research. Until such time, assumptions regarding the impact of media exposure on consumers remain largely theoretical. As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) point out, it is by integrating information about media production constraints, audience characteristics, and media content features into effects studies that we are able to more fully explain and predict the outcomes of exposure.

Although this study provides insight into representations of minorities in contemporary television commercials, the picture is far from complete. Future content analyses in this area should consider carefully the constraints presented by coding only the first three speaking characters in each ad. This practice limits confidence that all primary characters have been included and privileges primacy effects over recency effects. Further, this analysis, like much quantitative research on television content, utilized sampling and analytical techniques that, despite their ability to provide objective and generalizable information, preclude the inclusion of groups with minimal representation (i.e., Native Americans). As a result, continued research aimed at assessing the impact of the absence of representation on perceptions of self should consider, at minimum, the use of longitudinal data to detail and match changes over time (Poindexter & Strom, 1980).

**References**


