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**BLACK MALE ROLES IN NATIONALLY BROADCAST TELEVISION
COMMERCIALS**

Images and situations presented in television advertising play a significant role in how ethnic groups are perceived by viewers and how these groups perceive themselves. Thus television commercials have the potential to trigger issues of negative self-esteem among black and other minority populations, particularly among youth (Knoblock-Westerwood, 2006). The lack of black male portrayals in television commercials and the type of roles assigned to those black actors who are included may create the impression that minorities are not important in various social contexts.

Television's breakthrough year as a channel of mass communication and information was 1948. By 1955 television had surpassed radio and magazines in total advertising revenues and a year later passed newspapers as the number one national advertising medium (Agee, 1985). Television commercials do more than offer people images of selves defined through the consumption of products; they also shape images of others and sustain group boundaries that come to be taken for granted. Feelings of entitlement, subtle forms of prejudice and institutionalized

racism can be reproduced in and through commercial television imagery (Coltrane, 2000).

This research is intended to bring to light some ways in which television commercials may reinforce the notion that restriction and marginalization of black males in contemporary society are made to seem acceptable and normative for people of color. Nationally televised commercials continually present scenarios and circumstances which present negative and stereotyped racial portrayals by black actors. This is a step beyond simply examining how black males are portrayed compared to white males; this research also looks at ways that sponsors can perpetuate commonly held stereotypes about black males, how skin color can be an issue in casting for black actors, and the salience of roles assigned to black actors.

Samples of a variety of television commercials were examined to determine the presence of black male actors and their roles in the commercials from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The absence or marginalization of black males in non-sports oriented television commercials aimed at a nationwide mass market audience was noted. The study attempts to draw attention to the social and/or economic disparities between portrayals by black actors in nationally televised commercials as compared to portrayals by non-black actors, and explores the implications of these disparities upon future generations.

The current research also attempts to show that black males in nationally televised television commercials, even when included, may be assigned portrayals that

minimize their value as productive citizens and thus may leave an impression upon minority populations that their members are not entitled to, nor deserving of, inclusion in many societal activities which most commercials positively and joyously present as the norms of American culture. This is significant to a youthful minority population that seldom sees its likeness in these commercial presentations that consume an average of at least twelve minutes (20 percent) of each hour of programming. This marginalization of black male portrayals can also perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotypes held by non-minority populations about the relative worth of people of color generally. Thus I am looking not just at the distribution of characters but also considering the implications of those distributions for minority self-image.

Literature Review

Television tends to be a powerful arbiter of the social norms of contemporary culture (Entman, 2000). Studies involving the marginalization and absence of black males in televised advertisements for the most part have not acknowledged the harm that can be done to the marginalized populations and their progeny in terms of self-esteem and a sense of cultural inclusion, or “belonging”. Television commercials are all about human contact, and are directed at the consumer in a very personal way (Entman, 2000). This brings with it a capacity to elicit emotional responses from the target viewers, and affords the greatest potential for harm in marginalized populations who seldom see their images or representations

and thus may perceive themselves as outside of the dominant society's cultural norms.

There are no people more influential in presenting a society's contemporary cultural values and taboos than those who create television advertisements. In fact television advertising is one of the most popular ways of conveying a mass message. Advertisers in the U.S. spent \$59 billion on TV advertising in 2010 according to the marketing industry website Emarket, and advertisers are reshaping the media pie. According to Publicis Groupe's Zenith Optimedia (2012), television is the nation's largest advertising medium, with the internet closing the gap quickly. Over 98 percent of American households have at least one television set and about one fifth of every broadcast hour consists of commercials (Bretl, 1988, Kellner, 1990, Signorelli, 1991).

People of color now appear more regularly than in the past in commercials portraying a variety of roles (Entman, 2000). The quintessential manifestation of twentieth century consumer culture once affirmed the misguided notion of racial inferiority of black people either through exclusion or demeaning stereotypes. Entman (2000) also found that personal contact between members of white and black racial groups is a vital force in shaping attitudes and feelings. This is relevant because personal contact, although not specifically coded for in my research, was noticeably absent with respect to both cross racial and intra-racial scenarios within the television commercials examined.

In his study of media consumption trends among black men, Marc Kerschhagel (2011) identified which media sources are likely to have the greatest impact on the thinking and attitudes of how African-American men consume media and offered a series of recommendations about where interventions may be most fruitful. Among the most important mechanism for maintaining (or changing) perceptions that people of color are not important in various social contexts is the mass media with its significant power to shape popular ideas and attitudes. Kerschhagel notes that “mainstream media has a larger reach to African-American men...in general than media that target only an African-American population.”

His research indicates cable and broadcast television command 34 percent of consumption of media among black males. Magazines accounted for 67 percent and online consumption was 8 percent among black males. The average African-American household has four or more television sets and spends an average of just over seven hours each watching them (Kerschhagel 2011). It would be difficult to overstate the potential for harm to black males (including boys) if, despite a constant consumption of mass media, they find their images largely absent.

There are clear indications that the lack of a black male presence in television commercials deserves a contemporary examination. Until legally challenged in the late 1960's the mass media largely ignored people of color or treated them stereotypically or inconsequentially when they were included (Sloan, 2005).

In the mid-1960's, black civil rights groups targeted the advertising industry for special attention, protesting both the lack of integrated advertisements that

included blacks, and the stereotyped images that the advertisers continued to use (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). In 1968, the New York Times reported, “Black America is becoming visible in America’s biggest national advertising medium...and men in high places give assurances that there will be a lot more visibility” (Dougherty, 1982, p. D19). However, Coltrane and Messineo (2000) found that of almost 1,700 television commercials broadcast between 1992 and 1994 characters in the commercials enjoy more prominence and exercise more authority if they are white and male.

Media decision makers often portrayed minorities (particularly black males) in advertising images and situations that catered to the perceived attitudes and prejudices of the white majority (Wilson et al. 2003). Mastro and Stern (2003) examined the implications of images in televised commercials from the perspective of social cognitive theory, to provide insights into their possible impact on audience members’ self-perceptions. Social cognitive theory holds that human expectations, beliefs, emotional bents and cognitive competencies are developed and modified by social influences that convey information and activate emotional reactions through modeling, instruction and social persuasion (Bandura, 1986).

The authors found one contextual feature in particular that may be considerably influential to viewers of television commercials is the extent to which the models are believed to be similar to the viewer. The characters’ race/ethnicity has been found to be an especially salient indicator of any perceived similarity.

Children are more likely to report wanting to be like media characters of their own racial/ethnic background.

There has been ongoing research via content analysis to determine the level of inclusion of ethnic groups, genders and age diversity, and a shortage of such inclusion was found (Bristor, Gravois, & Hunt, 1995, Coltrane, 2000, Qualls & Moore, 1990). Bristor (1995) assessed images of interpersonal contact in televised commercials. Their sample, however, was limited to one week of prime-time programming on ABC Television and one week sampling the Fox Network, as well as two weeks on NBC. A sample of this small size would not likely be sufficient to approximate acceptable reliability.

Siarras (2008) addressed the topic of black men in five publications targeted at various consumers over a 25 year period, and examined five aspects of models. In terms of representation of black males no significant change could be determined over the observed period. The research concluded that the black male model was neither better portrayed nor in a less flattering manner for all years and all magazines analyzed. This research included only print media. Although print media consumes 67 percent of all media attention given by black males (Kirschhagel, 2011), the emotional impact of print versus broadcast on consumers, particularly youthful ones, can be vastly different. This research seeks to explore the impact of television on black males, including boys.

The examination of how masculinities and race are co-constructed in South African television advertising (Luyt, 2012) largely supported the hypotheses that

white men are represented as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity, while black men are marginalized. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is argued to afford a useful tool with which to explore how masculinity is constructed through media representation and practices. Findings suggest that, in general, white men were portrayed (in television advertising) as powerful; white women as sex objects,...black African men as aggressive and black African women as inconsequential. These representations are said to reinforce subtle prejudice against both African Americans and women. That study is relevant to this research with respect to the similarities of institutionalized and government sanctioned racism that has pervaded both South African societies through the apartheid construct and U.S. societies and cultures over many decades following slavery, and provides a foundation upon which further work may be undertaken.

The constructs of both apartheid and slavery provide ample material for a contemporary examination of the long term deleterious effects inhumane treatment has had on millions of people of color who have been its victims, and how those effects continue to manifest through the marginalization and exclusion of black male portrayals in contemporary television commercials.

This research was designed to measure prime time television commercials in terms of the inclusion and relative importance of black male portrayals. Prior analyses have typically included samples of sports programming, which my sampling does not because it would tend to skew the results toward a category which is acknowledged as generously and stereotypically populated by black males when

compared to commercials in non-sports oriented programming. Just over 28 percent of commercials in sports oriented programming featured black males(Children Now, 1999). This is a result of what has become known as “niche” marketing...the splintering of markets into increasingly smaller components (Sloan, 2005). This is an effort to reach specific ethnic groups and categories of individuals.

The most popular sports in the U.S. have over the past half century or so been well populated by black males, and thus the viewership of these sports tended to be more heavily inclusive of minority populations who sought the rare comfort of seeing their likeness in a competitive atmosphere in which their purported favorite participants often tended to dominate (Tygiel, 1993). Television advertisers quickly pounced upon this perception and began to tailor their messages and images to what they felt was a captive and potentially lucrative audience (Perryman, 2005). They particularly chose those black athletes who had established dominance in their sport as image icons for the sponsor’s product or service , such as Derek Jeter, Michael Jordan, George Foreman, Tiger Woods, Cam Newton, etc.(athletpromotions.com).

My data also include the perceived effects of the shade of the black actor’s skin, either ethnic or liminal, which has not been adequately addressed in prior studies (Kerr, 2006, Perryman, 2005). None of the prior studies has addressed the issue of the length of various commercials, and how that might affect the use of black male actors. There has been scant research with respect to whether the black actors’

roles are positive, negative or neutral and whether the roles are lead, co-equal or inconsequential. These are areas that deserve a contemporary examination.

Additionally, some critical scholars suggest that commercial television does more to foster prejudice than to overcome it, but researchers differ in their evaluation of recent trends and future prospects (Gray 1995; Hall, 1995; hooks, 1992; Lovdal, 1989; Wilson 1995).

Although studies show that images of nonwhite characters have changed considerably from older stereotypical depictions of Aunt Jemima or Amos and Andy, researchers do not agree that current television images and scenarios are more positive or realistic than their predecessors (Dennis & Pease, 1996; Frazer & Frazer, 1993; Kern-Foxworthy, 1994).

Some critics also contend that television portrayals of most nonwhites, but especially African Americans, have been infused with trivializations and exaggerations of negative stereotypical behaviors. However, systematic studies of the portrayal of both race and gender in advertising are exceptionally rare (Lazier & Kendrick, 1993; McClelland, 1993). The advertising industry's own research confirms the emptiness and falsity of mass media creations, which it played a major role in propagating (Macnamara, 2006), and which found that 74 percent of men surveyed believe that images of men in advertising were out of touch with reality. This tends to support the notion that television commercials can be equal opportunity disparagers of males of all ethnicities, as well as propagators of an

idealized and superfluous scale of living which belies the reality of what is available to the vast majority of American men (and women) of all colors, ethnicities and cultures.

Since lighter skin is empirically associated with higher-status occupations and levels of respect in terms of attainment of U.S. cultural and economic ideals(Hochschild, 2007), I expected black actors portraying characters of higher status or using high end or ideal/fantasy products to be lighter skinned than those playing lower status roles. Content analyses of skin color in mass media are few (Rios, 2003); however researchers have found that blacks in magazine advertisements are generally lighter skinned than in editorial photographs, black women are lighter than black men and media targeted to African Americans also feature blacks who are light-skinned (Keenan, 1996).

There are many forces – material, historical, cultural and political – that shape and constrict the life chances of black males in the U.S (Kerschhagel, 2011). Some of these are longstanding legacies that may take generations to shift. But in other ways the social, economic and symbolic place of African-American men and boys is recreated and reinforced every day via the proliferation of mass media, the most encompassing of which is television. Negative public perceptions and attitudes toward black males not only help create barriers to their advancement within this society, but also make those barriers seem natural or inevitable (Kerschhagel, 2011).

Research Questions

My research looks for answers to the following questions:

1. *What percentage of nationally televised commercials for non-sports oriented products or services include black male actors compared to white actors in the same commercials?*

2. *In what ways are characters portrayed by black actors in nationally televised commercials assigned roles of lesser status, authority or importance when compared to white actor portrayals in the same commercials?*

3. *How do portrayals by black actors in nationally televised commercials reflect the normative contemporary African-American culture and values as compared to the predominant values and culture of the dominant (white) society?*

Hypotheses

1. *Black Males are underrepresented in nationally televised non-sports oriented television commercials aimed at a general mass market*

2. *Black males portray roles in non-sports oriented nationally televised advertisements that are largely peripheral or inconsequential.*

3. Black male actors in non sports oriented nationally televised commercials are predominantly light skinned.

4. Black males portray roles that imply negative racial stereotypes in the majority of non-sports oriented nationally televised commercials.

Methodology

The data collected included a numerical accounting of the presence of black males in nationally televised commercials over various parts of weekday broadcasts, including early morning, mid day and prime time evening programming (see Fig 1).

Fig 1

PROGRAM	NETWORK	DAYPART AIRED	DATE AIRED
60 Minutes	CBS	7PM	10/7/2012
Are We There Yet?	TBS	9:30A	9/29/2012
My Name Is Earl	TBS	8:00A	9/29/2012
Walker, Texas Ranger	WGN	1:00P	9/29/2012
Today	NBC	8:30A	10/29/2012
Judge Alex	FOX	2:00P	10/26/2012
TMZ (CELEBRITIES)	FOX	1:30P	10/26/2012
American Dad	TBS	1:00P	10/26/2012
Inside Edition	FOX	1:00P	10/16/2012
Matlock	WGN	10:00A	10/26/2012
Access Hollywood	NBC	11:30A	10/25/2012
The View	ABC	11:30A	10/25/2012
Days Of Our Lives	NBC	1:00P	10/25/2012
The Chew	ABC	1:00P	10/25/2012
Who Wants A Million	ABC	12:30P	10/25/2012
New York Live	NBC	12:30P	10/25/2012
How I Met Your Mother	WGN	8:00P	10/25/2012
How I Met Your Mother	WGN	9:00P	10/25/2012
Last Resort	ABC	8:00P	10/25/2012
Wheel Of Fortune	ABC	7:30P	10/25/2012

Data Analysis

The data included the total number of black male actors, the number of black male actors in lead roles, whether they were assigned a speaking part, and whether they handled the product or used the service. In addition, the commercials were coded to include whether the role portrayed by the black male was positive, negative or neutral and whether the portrayal was co-equal or peripheral to white actors in the commercial.

A positive depiction would be where the black actor is the central figure or focal point of the sponsor's effort to induce viewers to purchase the product or service. A negative portrayal would be one in which the black actor acted or spoke in a fashion which could be viewed as strengthening negative stereotypical behaviors ordinarily ascribed to ethnic minorities by members of the dominant (white) culture; or where he was treated in a fashion which could be viewed as demeaning, humiliating, submissive or subservient. A neutral portrayal would be one in which the black actor was not a determining or consequential presence in terms of the sponsor's message, such as his appearance in a crowd or montage with white actors. Most disagreements arose over the racial identity of marginal characters, usually those whose appearance was fleeting.

The number of white actors and the total number of actors (of all races and ethnicities) in each commercial was also noted. In commercials where there were seven or more total actors, the category was coded as a crowd or montage (which shows a series of different or unrelated persons enjoying the product or service in rapid succession). The black actor's skin color (whether ethnic or liminal) was also coded. The definition of liminal is where the actor's skin color is light, and

ambiguous enough to raise doubts about his ethnicity. Ethnic implies that the actor's skin color is clearly dark enough to eliminate any doubts about his ethnicity as being African or African-American. The bench mark used in determining skin color is that an ethnic actor's skin is darker than a brown paper bag, while the liminal skin color is lighter than a brown paper bag. The reason for the paper bag test is because the paper bag is considered to be the "center" marker of blackness that distinguishes "light skin" from "dark skin" on a continuum stretching infinitely from black to white (Kerr, 2006). In commercials where a family was portrayed, the race also was noted.

Data Collection

The collection activities took place over a period from September 29 to October 26, 2012. The data were recorded on a digital video recorder using the Verizon Fios Fiber-optic television subscription service. Channels monitored included NBC/WNBC, CBS/WCBS, ABC/WABC, Fox Broadcasting, WGN/Chicago and TBS/Atlanta. Stations WGN and TBS were included because while both are local stations, they are seen on cable networks in virtually all 50 states (Appendix 1). Large national advertisers make frequent use of these outlets in their television ad buys and all are important in presenting the nationally televised commercials which this research attempted to capture. TBS is the only mass media cable network with black-oriented shows – Tyler Perry's *The Family That Prays*, and *Are We There yet* – both of which reach a large number of African-American viewers (Kershchagel, 2006).

The coding process involved three independent coders reviewing and analyzing 251 separate commercials. Two coders, in addition to the author, were trained in the coding scheme. The coders individually reviewed the sample commercials, and then collaborated on a consensus. Duplicates of commercials were not counted, but there were instances where the same product or service was advertised by a sponsor but in different configurations or with different scenarios and/or actor portrayals. In those cases, the variations were counted as separate commercials.. The product or service was categorized, and the corporate sponsor of the product or service was noted, as was the entertainment program within which the product or service was being advertised.

The 251 commercials reviewed were broadcast in time frames of either 15, 30 or 60 seconds...with 15 seconds being the most frequent at 105, or 41.8 percent. The second largest group was 30 seconds, at 105 or 41.4 percent. 60 second commercials numbered 37 or 14.1 percent. The preponderance of 15 second commercials tends to support the notion that contemporary marketing strategies are based on shortened consumer attention spans. That would seem to make the 15 second commercial more cost effective, rather than a longer message to drive home the sales pitch. That may also be a disincentive for commercial sponsors to be more racially inclusive in presenting their broadcast commercial messages if they feel that while being more inclusive may be politically correct, it may also not be cost effective.

Results

H1 . Black males are underrepresented in nationally televised non-sports television commercials aimed at a general mass market.

The total number of black male actors was 102 in the 251 commercials reviewed and coded, or 40.6 percent. 19 of the black actors were in lead roles, or .08 percent of the total commercials reviewed. Thus, my H1 is not supported, particularly if underrepresentation is judged in relation to the percentage of the black population in the U.S., which according to the U.S. Census Bureau statistics reported in July 2011 was 13.1 percent.

However, in lead roles where the black actor is portraying the most important or central figure in the sponsor's effort to sell the product or service, has a speaking part and/or handles the product or is shown using the service, my H1 is supported. This is when his singular behavior is calculated to induce the viewer to want to purchase the product or service. Although there were 17 commercials that included black males with speaking parts, they were not coded as having lead roles, even though their roles may have been positive or neutral.

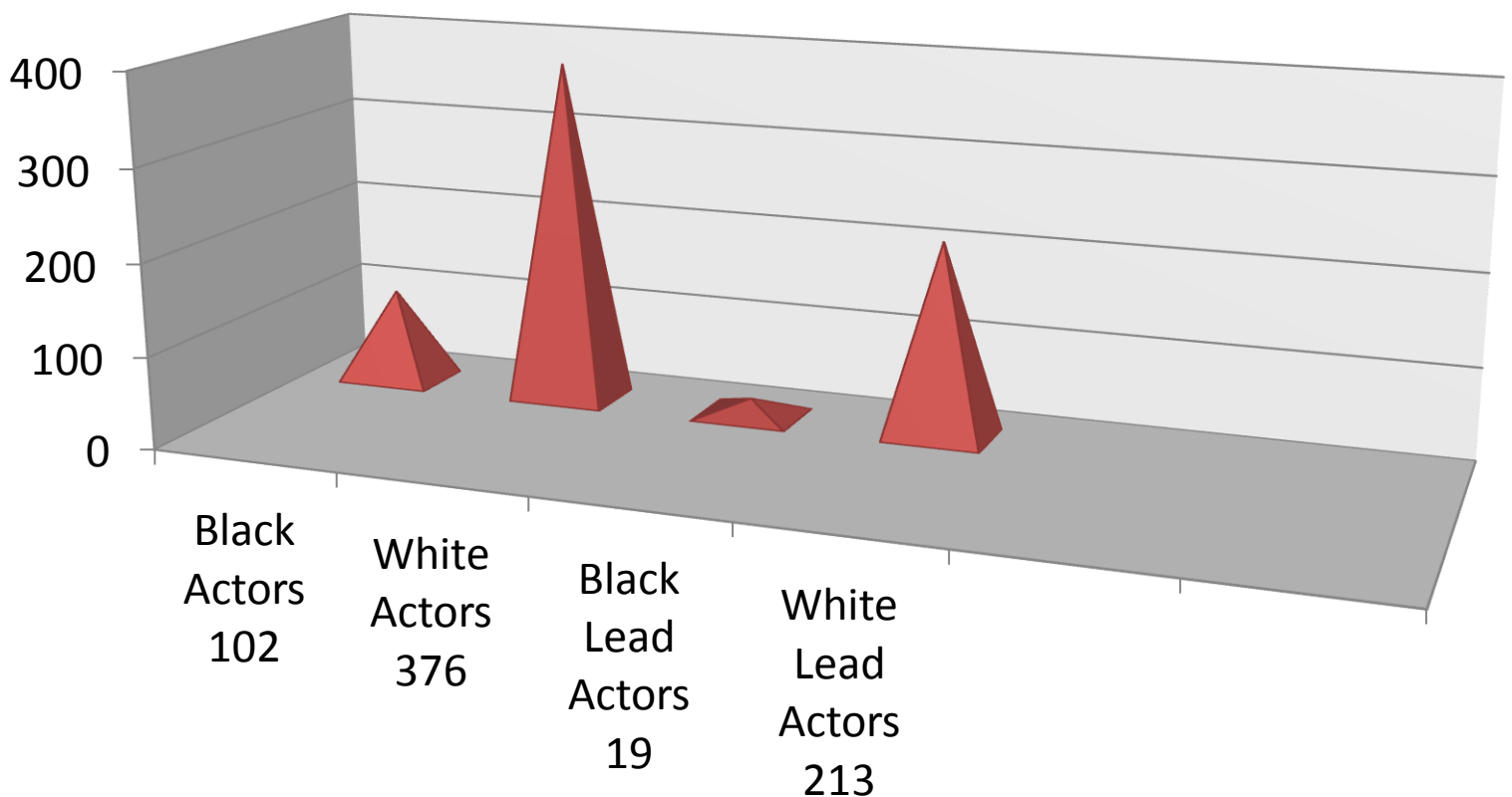


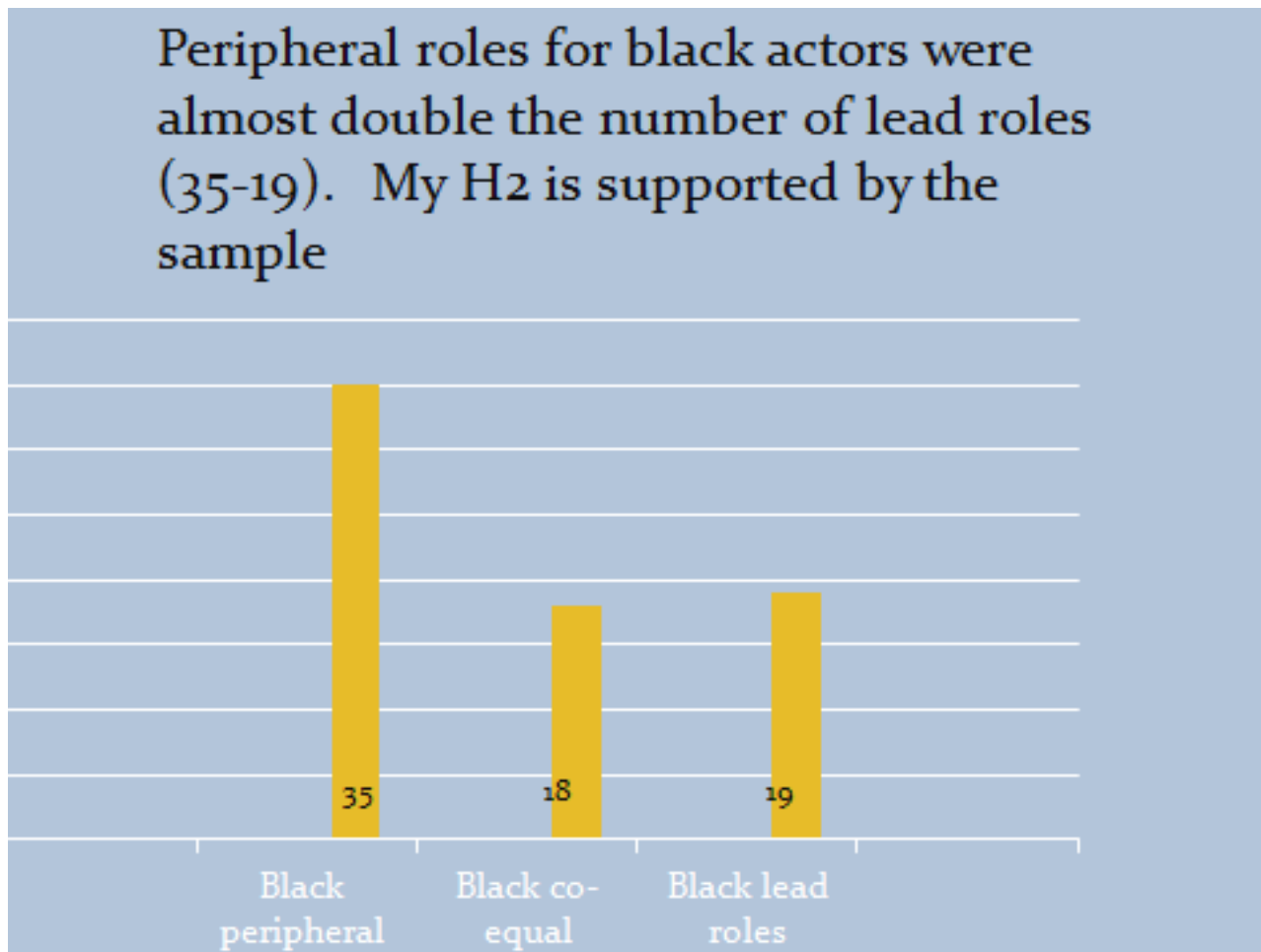
Fig. 2

H2. *Black males portray roles that are largely peripheral/inconsequential.*

There were 25 commercials in which the black male handled the product or was using the service, 24 commercials featured all white gatherings, and 2 featured all white families.

Peripheral roles by black actors in my sample totaled 35, compared to lead roles of 19 and co-equal roles of 18. Thus my H2 is supported. Peripheral is coded to imply that the black actor's role is simply part of a group or crowd as a backdrop to the central scenario about the product or service. His appearance may be fleeting or so obscure as to render him inconsequential in terms of the sponsor's overall . For example, a 30 second commercial for BP, the energy company, was aired during NBC's Today Show on October 26th at 8:30am. The length of the commercial was thirty seconds. In a montage of gulf coast shoreline scenes, an ethnic black man and his toddler son were shown for about one half second in the water. Their role was coded as peripheral and their depiction as neutral (dvd 2, 6:32 seconds). That was typical of a peripheral presence by a black male actor, where his presence was marginalized by the severely limited face time he was allotted.

Fig. 3



H3. Black males in nationally televised commercials are predominantly light skinned, rendering their ethnicity ambiguous.

The commercials were coded to reflect either an ethnic or liminal black male. In my coding scheme, ethnic implies that the male actor's skin color is darker than an

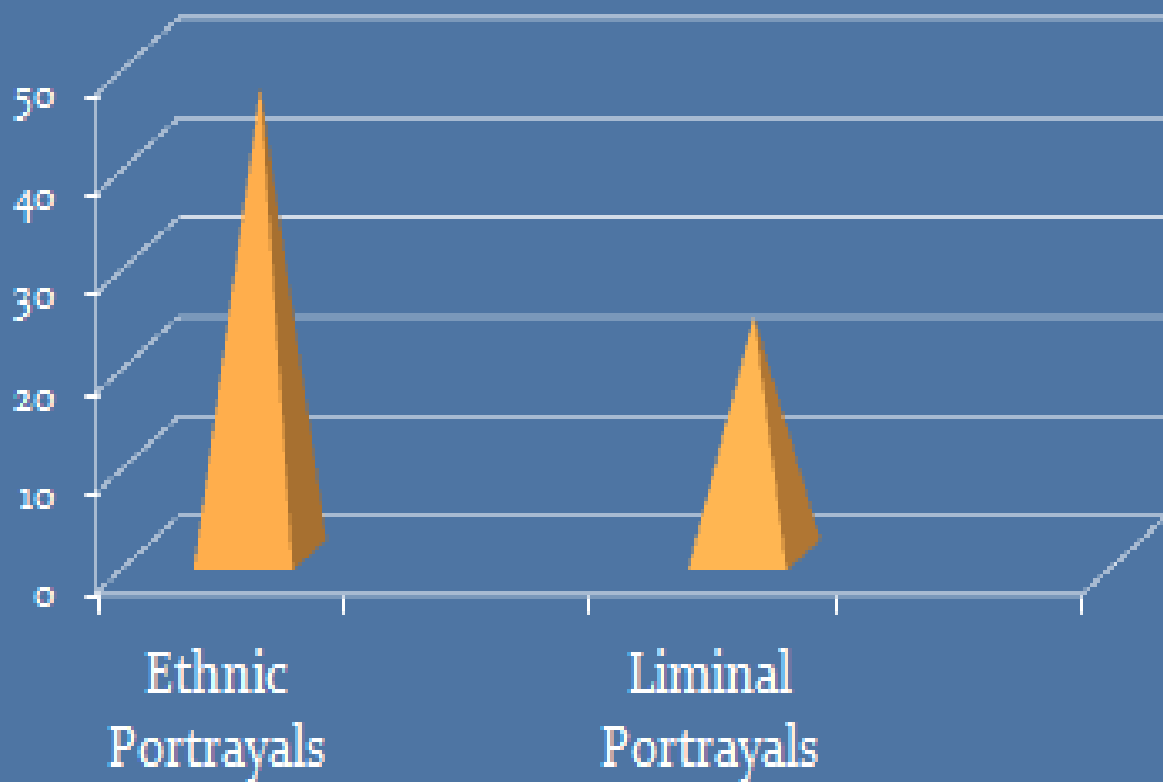
ordinary brown paper bag, making his ethnicity more clearly black or African-American. Liminal would be an actor whose skin color is lighter than a brown paper bag, potentially rendering his ethnicity ambiguous.

Prior researchers have used the paper bag standard as a benchmark (Graham, 1999, Kerr, 2006,). An ambiguous ethnicity could be Mulatto, Latino, North African or other darker skinned male but one who is not white nor is he clearly ethnic.

My research indicated there were 47 portrayals by ethnic males and 24 portrayals by liminal males. Of the ethnic males, 13 had lead roles in their commercials and of the liminal males 6 were coded as having lead roles. Thus my H3 is not supported.

Fig. 4

H3 - Black Males are predominantly light skinned when included in commercials (rendering their ethnicity ambiguous). H3 not supported in my sample.



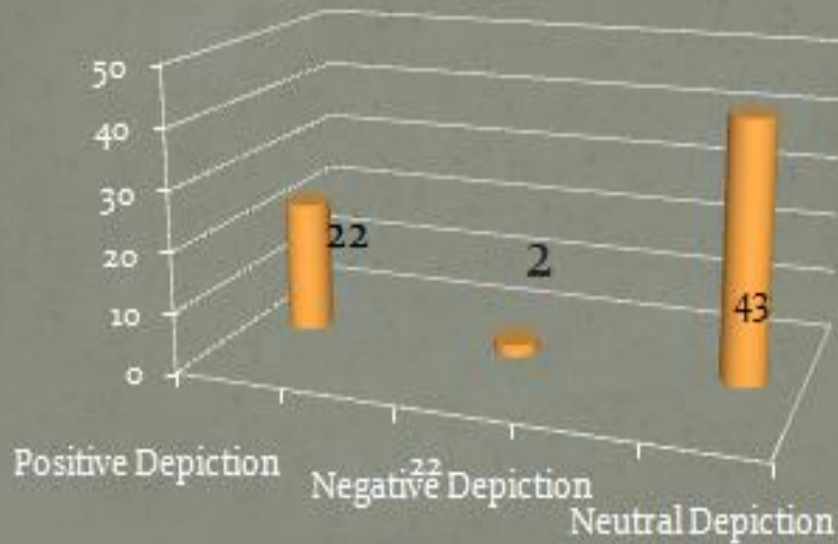
H4. *Black males portray roles that imply negative racial stereotypes*

Portrayals were deemed negative if the black actor functioned as the target of ridicule or abuse, or if he was shown to be ignorant of the benefits or use of the product or service in a way that was servile. Negative was also assigned to behavior or speech on the part of a black actor considered to be negatively stereotypical of his ethnic group, i.e., slang or accents; if he was otherwise degraded by being badgered, intimidated, humiliated or made to appear foolish by other actors in the scenes, that coded as negative.

Conversely, positive portrayals were those where the black actor was clearly the focal point of the sponsor's goal of influencing the viewer of the commercial to favorably consider and ultimately purchase the product or service. My research indicated there were 22 positive portrayals, 43 neutral portrayals and 2 negative portrayals. My H4 was not supported.

Fig. 5

DEPICTION OF BLACK MALES



Research Questions

Rq1. What percentage of nationally televised advertisements for non-sports oriented products or services include black male actors as compared to white actors in the commercials?

The research indicates the number of individual lead white male actors in my sample of 251 commercials was 213, or 84 percent, compared with 19 lead roles

for black male actors, or 9 percent. The other 38 commercials were either animated, without any actors (just depictions or graphics of the product or service, for example), or without a specific lead actor.

Rq2. *In what ways are characters portrayed by black male actors in nationally televised commercials assigned roles of lesser status, authority or importance when compared to white actor portrayals in the commercials?*

The data clearly show that black male actors in peripheral or co-equal roles far outnumbered the positive roles to which black male actors had been assigned. There were numerous instances where it required several slow motion replays of the commercial to determine whether the actor was in fact ethnic, liminal or otherwise ambiguous but not white, and then to assess his role, which in many cases involved face time of mere split seconds before the on-screen images proceeded to a next scenario as in the case of montages. Peripheral and co-equal roles are by definition of lesser status than positive roles, and of the 102 black actors in the commercials 35 were coded as having peripheral roles. In the two commercials coded as negative for example, one was for MetroPCS, a cellular telephone carrier, which opened with three ethnic males happily pounding away on the bottoms of buckets with drumsticks. Their presence in the commercial was totally inconsequential and the voiceover made no reference to them throughout the commercial narrative. The obvious takeaway was that MetroPCS was attempting to appeal to an African-American consumer, but in a totally gratuitous

fashion. Although that was not a category which was coded for, none of the other commercials sampled were considered as having pandered to an ethnic group quite as blatantly.

A second negative coding was assigned to DirecTV for a commercial which included three hoodlums whom it was implied attacked a white man, apparently to rob him. However, this particular commercial also included a liminal doctor who attended to the victim's wounds, in apparent attempt to balance out the perceived negative with a perceived positive. It's conceivable that this sort of casting earns the commercial sponsor credit for ethnic diversity without negatively affecting the overall marketing appeal. Another perspective is that this particular commercial reinforces the popular stereotypical view of people of color, i.e. by portraying the hoodlum as dark skinned. The converse of this is the positive portrayal by the light skinned actor as the doctor from whom the victim seeks treatment. As explained by Hochschild (2007), skin color is associated with individuals ... as well as their outcomes. A study conducted in 1972 examining white backlash to advertising featuring black models indicated that an advertisement featuring darker skinned blacks prominently was less acceptable to whites than those featuring lighter skinned blacks as background models (Block, 1972). With some exceptions, it still appears that most Americans continue to perceptually elevate lighter to darker skin aesthetically, normatively and culturally.

Rq3. *Should portrayals by black actors in nationally televised commercials reflect the predominant and specific contemporary differences of African-American culture and values as compared to the predominant (white) society?*

This is a difficult question. The point of television commercials is to sell products and services. This requires that the sponsor deliver a message that resonates with the intended audience. In most cases the intended audience is the general mass market (white) consumer. In order to most effectively sell a product or service, marketing experts have determined that if the intention is to sell a “lifestyle” product or service, then the lifestyle that would best be depicted would be one that is at the higher end of the possibilities, and one that appeals to the dominant society toward which the commercial message is directed. Many, if not most, consumers aspire to a higher standard of living, which is what sponsors are banking on in putting forth their messages. So not only may the product or service be beyond the economic reach of the general public (which is why credit purchases are normative in the current economy), but the context in which the product or service is presented may be even further out of reach for the average consumer.

For many African-American consumers who may be struggling to achieve even a mid-level economic circumstance, acquiring the high end goods along with upscale nuances around which they are pictured and presented, may be a significantly higher hurdle. As Entman(2000) notes those who craft commercials probably do not recognize the subtle but pervasive ways in which their products may inadvertently perpetuate the traditional racial pecking order.

That may lead to the conclusion that portrayals by black male actors do not generally reflect the predominant contemporary realities of African-American culture and values, nor do they essentially differ from the values and culture portrayed by white male actors.

The commercials tend largely to subsume any inferences or representations of cultural differences between and among various ethnicities, in favor of projecting an idealized version of the dominant American culture. For the most part the commercials are created to seduce consumers into aspiring to that idealized standard.

Television commercials by and large are reflective of what the sponsor wishes the consumer to desire and which is purported in the commercial to be attainable by the viewer. The commercials often attempt to create for the consumers the trappings of that next level of fulfillment which has been presented as desirable. Thus, any cultural differences between black and white actors and the scenarios in which they perform, if and where such differences exist, may be ignored by the sponsor as inconsequential in terms of the perceived desirability or usefulness of the product or service being offered.

Discussion

My research examines the absence or marginalization of black males in non-sports oriented television commercials aimed at a nationwide mass audience. The lack of black male actor portrayals in television commercials and the type of roles

assigned to those black actors can create the impression that minorities are not important within various social contexts. I argue that sponsors of television commercials should be more sensitive and responsible with respect to the enormous power they wield in terms of the potential impact (both negative and positive) on popular culture. This responsibility should be realized and attended to as a function of their strategies for corporate social responsibility as they strive to include all races and ethnicities in their messages and scenarios.

White people have long enjoyed rewarding forms of affirmative preferences across the range of social and economic life (Entman, 2000). This is a factor which must be considered in the presentation of television commercials. This “white privilege” is a construct that obviously has negative implications for minority groups generally and African-Americans particularly. In a sense, each member of the ethnic group bears the burden of representing his or her entire category. If a character conforms in any way to negative stereotypes, that is what the viewer likely will notice and remember; they will disregard any non-stereotypical qualities the same character demonstrates ((Entman, 2000).

While it is undeniable that African-Americans comprise a lucrative consumer market, advertisers for the most part turned a blind eye to that possibility until the civil rights movement made that segment of the potential market impossible to ignore. Critics accused the ad industry of reinforcing racist and stereotypical images, and a 1964 article in the publication *Variety* criticized advertisers for not keeping up with social changes (Sloan, 2005).

It is not likely that in contemporary marketing practices and culture any major advertiser would attempt to display a black man (or woman) via any media in a

prejudiced, stereotyped fashion. Complaints would most certainly be forthcoming from any number of black associations and perhaps the FCC (Wilson et al. 2003). But it must also be noted that there may be subtle and subliminal cues within commercial messages and images that tend to marginalize, delegitimize and even demonize people of color through the roles and representations assigned to black male actors. Thus even where the numbers of black males in televised commercials are not considered to be under-representative as a percentage of the black population in the U.S., the qualitative components of their roles may often be seen as sending mixed messages at best, and negative messages in many situations, about the relative worth of African-Americans as productive contributors to contemporary society.

As already noted, there is a significant population of African-Americans in the U.S. that seldom sees its likeness, aspirations or even its interests represented in a majority of television commercials. The implications of this exclusion may not have been thoroughly contemplated by the arbiters of popular culture (of which television is the primary exponent) in terms of its potential negative effect on America's cultural matrix going forward. This should be of particular concern with respect to the nation's youthful minority population.

This research suggests that the body of managers, producers and creative types responsible for suggesting and developing story lines for television commercials, and which cast for actors to bring those visions to fruition, should better understand the implicit power of those messages and scenarios to represent positive or negative messages. Corporations which commission advertising agencies to develop their commercials should do so with sensitivity that recognizes

this power as a function of their overall corporate social responsibility strategies. Doing so might prevent the sponsor from being appeased by the ad agency, for example, with a suggested commercial which inserts a youthful black hip-hop group as a user of the product as “ethnic diversity” and (which the agency might allege) satisfies the need for cultural inclusion.

Limitations

This research was conducted over a period of twenty eight days. The length of time allotted for this research was limited to one academic semester which forced compression of data collection and analysis. A more longitudinal study might be helpful in determining its generalizability.

This research lacked inclusion of qualitative data such as proximity between actors of different races, non-verbal cues which can be helpful in determining meanings with respect to interpersonal communication, and physical contact among actors in the commercials. It might also be useful to include the occupational status of the black actor’s character, if any, as a useful metric in determining whether his portrayal was considered positive, neutral or negative.

Future Research Directions

An examination of the nature of the product being sold and how that might relate to the makeup of the commercial cast might reveal some important differences in terms of the use of black actors. Previous research has indicated that sponsors of lesser value products or more utilitarian products, as opposed to so-called lifestyle products, have been more prone to use black actors, which more likely would

include black males. Bang and Reese (2003) found that “black models were likely to interact with low value products than high value products, although Caucasians did not seem to have an association with a particular product category” (p.2).

There might also be differences in the length of the commercials as this relates to the makeup of the cast, and whether there are more or fewer portrayals by black male actors in shorter or longer lengths.

Another metric that might be usefully studied could be the entertainment or news and information program within which the commercial appears. There are a number of entertainment programs that contain larger proportions of black actors, or which have plots which are specific to African-American cultural or family situations. These might tend to be more attractive to sponsors of a specific product or category of products or services. It might also affect the versions of commercials a sponsor might choose for presentation, i.e. an “ethnic” version might include a preponderance of black actors, and by implication be more inclusive of black males.

The issue of dominance and/or submission might be usefully examined in terms of the black male actor’s role within the commercial. Goffman (1979) has offered examples of the ritualization of subordination, where he discusses the classic stereotype of deference by lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration.

Conclusion

Corporations are usually formed and operate as profit making ventures. Their primary goal is to make money, although there has been fairly recent (over the past fifteen or twenty years) attention paid to their responsibility to protect the environment, treat their domestic and off-shore workers equitably, engage in philanthropic activity beyond what is allowed for tax write-offs, and recognize the fact that they can do well by doing good. But because this notion of corporate social responsibility is voluntary in most cases and therefore unenforceable, there is a fair amount of resistance and the majority of corporations are not fully invested in the CSR ideal. In many instances this resistance is also evident in how corporations manage their messages to consumers whom they are hoping to attract to their product or service.

Over the last several years, stereotyping based on race and gender has changed. The ad industry for many years had portrayed minorities and women in inferior roles: blacks, for example, as servants or likeable mammies, and women as housewives who couldn't solve simple household problems. However, since advertising frequently relies on recognizable images, stereotyping remained a common approach and new images appeared. The result was that a new stereotype took the place of the former gender and racial ones (Sloan, 2005). In other words, the metaphoric red bandanna and about fifty pounds were eliminated from Aunt Jemima's image (Wilson et al. 2003) and Uncle Ben was retrofitted with a streamlined new image, but the underlying representations of people of color, and black males in particular, remain largely peripheral, neutral and inconsequential.

My research indicates there is comparatively little by way of positive representations of black men in television advertisements for boys (i.e., men in the making) to use as role models. As J.R. Macnamara (2006) points out “mass media content (including television commercials) is ideology creation“(p. 196).

Television advertisers must advance beyond their traditional corporate defensiveness and implement policies and structures that can exert a positive influence with respect to social issues. Communicators need to continue to create fuller and more accurate portrayals of black males in the media through education and external pressure targeted at media producers and by working to embed more African-Americans in all links of the media production chain.

APPENDIX 1

CATEGORIES OF PRODUCTS/SERVICES

TELEVISION CHANNELS MONITORED

AUTO

NBC/WNBC

PHARMACEUTICALS

ABC/WABC

FINANCIAL

CBS/WCBS

INSURANCE

FOX NETWORK

FOOD PRODUCTS

WGN/CHICAGO

HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS

TBS/ATLANTA

TECHNOLOGY PRODUCTS

MEDICAL

CLOTHING

BEAUTY/COSMETICS

TOYS/GAMES

EYEWEAR

PET FOOD

VACATION/TRAVEL

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