

MINORITIES IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: AN EXAMINATION OF REPRESENTATION AND STATUS

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ABSTRACT

During the hours spent watching television, children are exposed to commercials in which minorities are usually underrepresented and portrayed negatively. When children see negative racial stereotypes, the stereotypes can affect children's perceptions of ethnicity and in turn affect their behaviors toward others of different races. This research examined the representation of ethnic groups in 340 children's commercials through a comparison to the national population. Although Caucasians and African Americans exceeded their percentages, Asians and Hispanics were still severely underrepresented. Also ethnic minorities were shown in low status roles while Caucasians were in high status roles. These findings suggest that minorities are not equally represented in children's commercials.

INTRODUCTION

Children view more than 40,000 commercials each year (Kunkel & Gantz, 1992). During the hours spent watching television, children are exposed to commercials in which minorities are usually underrepresented and portrayed negatively (Maher, Herbst, Childs, & Finn, 2008). For example, Maher et al. (2008) found Hispanics and African Americans were underrepresented when compared to the local population; Hispanics were found in only 1.5% of the commercials whereas their actual representation was 5.7% and African Americans were found in 14.1% of the commercials when their actual representation was 17.7%. On the other hand, Li-Vollmer (2002) reported that African Americans were overrepresented in commercials (19.9% in the study compared to 13% of the U.S. population) and Asians were underrepresented with only half of their real world population found in children's commercials. Nonetheless minorities are underrepresented in most cases and tend to be cast in lower status roles as background or minor characters as well as typically being portrayed with a negative stereotype. According to social cognitive theory, when children see negative racial stereotypes, the stereotypes can affect children's perceptions of ethnicity and in turn affect their behavior toward others of different races. Also cultivation theory can be applied to television viewing since people base their opinions of stereotypes on what they are exposed to in media (Bang & Reece, 2003). In short, children are at risk for developing negative stereotypes of minorities when they watch television and its advertisements.

Even children under the age of eight are able to understand and recall information from commercials (Macklin, 1987). Older children recall more information, yet younger children under the age of six can still recall information from a single exposure. Visual information is the most likely to be remembered (Maher, Hu, & Kolbe, 2006), which promotes the idea that children observe and *remember* the negative stereotypes portrayed on television advertisements and use these details when interacting with others.

Since children have limited experience in relationships they take what information they can gather from other sources such as commercials and use it in normal day-to-day life (Bramlett-Soloman & Roeder, 2008). Using information from commercials can affect how minority children are treated. Since most minorities are still underrepresented and are usually portrayed in minor or background roles (Taylor & Stern, 1997), minority child viewers will likely feel inferior since their race is rarely shown in major roles and they do not have someone with whom to identify (Maher et al., 2008). However, according to Furnham, Abramsky, & Gunter (1997) some children

are skeptical towards advertising, meaning they are not influenced by the commercials. So if a child sees a depiction of a negative, racial stereotype, the child may not automatically assume that stereotype is related to that one specific race. Beatty & Hawkins' (1989) research produced results similar to the Furnham study: stimuli from commercials may not be as effective as marketers plan. Nevertheless minorities still identify with their own race. In one study a group of African American students and a group of Caucasian students were shown two cereal commercials. One featured an American Indian and the other featured an animated tiger and three children – one Caucasian boy and girl and one African American boy. When asked what child they liked best in the commercial, 87% of the African Americans said they liked the African American boy best whereas the Caucasian children were evenly distributed across the three children categories. From this research we may conclude that children of color are more likely to view people of the same race as a model and focus their attention on people of the same race in advertisements (Barry & Hansen, 1973).

Consequently when children model themselves after commercials they are copying incorrect representations. For example Caucasian children are the leaders of most commercials, and African Americans rarely touch the product featured (Seiter, 1990). Additionally African Americans are shown with low value products and are usually not associated with skilled occupations when compared with Caucasians (Licata & Biswas, 1993). African Americans are more likely to be cast in lower status roles such as laborers and service workers whereas Caucasians are cast in high status roles such as doctors and dentists (Li-Vollmer, 2002). Racial minorities are cast in lower prestige roles while Caucasians are the promoters of the product and initiators of action. Also racial minorities tend to be cast in minor roles while Caucasians are cast in major roles. For example Maher et al. (2008) found that 23.8% of African Americans and Hispanics were cast in major roles and 73% were cast in minor roles compared to 34.3 % Caucasians and Asians in major roles and 53.1% in minor roles. By contrast, Caucasian boys exhibited more aggression than African American boys in commercials (Larson, 2003). Also Caucasians were mostly shown in domestic settings, but when they were together with other races the children were shown either outdoors or in public places (Larson, 2002). This depiction of race representation is important because it influences how children perceive other races. Furthermore, it assists them in learning social power and how it is represented through roles, status, and occupations (Li-Vollmer, 2002).

Similarly, social power is portrayed as a positive stereotype in Asian Americans. Two studies have shown that Asian Americans were underrepresented (Maher et al., 2008; Bang & Reece, 2003), while one study by Taylor & Stern (1997) found that Asian Americans were overrepresented, yet they were still depicted in positive stereotypes such as hardworking, serious, and technically competent. In another study, Asian women were not found in major roles and all Asian Americans were overrepresented in technology roles (Li-Vollmer, 2002). Coltrane & Messineo (2000) conducted an analysis that showed an increase in main characters for Hispanics and Asian Americans, but they were never shown as spouses and were rarely shown as parents. By contrast, Hispanics are negatively stereotyped. Hispanics are still underrepresented in total, with 97% of them represented, according to one study, in restaurant commercials (Li-Vollmer, 2002). Because it is often difficult to identify Hispanics in advertisements, there are not many studies involving them. More research is needed on representations of Hispanic and Asian Americans.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not minorities are represented in accordance to their national population, yet numbers are not the sole focus. Stereotypes, whether positive or negative, can impact the self-perceptions of viewers (Taylor & Stern, 1997), so it is important to discover if children's commercials today contain stereotypes and status differences. This study will extend previous research in two ways: First, it will provide current statistics for representation in children's commercials and second, it will provide current statistics for major, minor, and background roles in addition to assigned status. Moreover, below are three research questions that will be answered by the study.

RQ1: Are ethnic minorities underrepresented in children's commercials when compared to the proportion found in the national population?

RQ2: Are ethnic minorities shown in lower status roles while Caucasians are shown in higher status roles?

RQ3: Are Caucasians cast in major roles while the majority of minorities are cast in minor and background roles?

METHOD

Commercials

Based on past Nielsen ratings (Whitney, 2005), weekly ratings (Nielsen, 2009), and the most popular times that children watch television (Harrison & Marske, 2005; Folta, Goldberg, Economos, Bell, & Meltzer, 2006; Parents Television Council, 2006), certain television stations and programs were recorded for a larger research project.

Because children ages 2-11 most watch television during the after-school hours, Saturday mornings, and during primetime family hour, it was decided that television stations Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Toon Disney, and The CW would be taped (Harrison & Marske, 2005; Folta, et. al., 2006; PTC, 2006). Based on previous methodology, these stations were recorded from 3:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. during the week and from 7:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. on weekends (PTC, 2006; Folta et al., 2006). In addition, television stations ABC, FOX, and NBC were taped during family hour, from 8:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. on weekdays. The days of the week these channels were recorded were based on Nielsen ratings of what shows were most popular during the "family hour" (Nielsen, 2009).

Because of time restrictions, a subsample of 340 of the 1,351 commercials recorded was used for the current study. Commercials aired on Cartoon Network between 7:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. and The CW between 7:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. on Saturday January 31, 2009 and on Nickelodeon between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, January 27, 2009.

Procedure

Thirteen undergraduate students were trained in the procedures and coded a series of 340 commercials. Acceptable levels of inter-rater agreement were observed for most of the variables on a separate sample of five to ten commercials. An agreement of 100% on race was determined although Hispanic, Asian, and indeterminate race were not observed in the initial coding. There was 76% agreement on major, minor, and background roles. Over 87% agreement was found when coding for Caucasian status while 100% agreement was found for African American status.

Coding

Commercials were coded based on the presence of the first five human characters in children's commercials. Race was determined from physical appearance and facial features, and the highest status was coded for each group present in the commercial. The role of each person was determined by three categories: major, minor, and background. According to Maher et al. (2008), a major role was defined as when the character was very important to the advertising theme or layout, shown in the foreground, speaking, or shown holding the product. A minor role occurred when the character was seen as having average importance to the advertising theme or layout while a background role occurred when the character was difficult to find in the advertisement, and ultimately not important to the overall advertising layout or theme. The highest status was coded for each ethnic group present in the commercial; status could fit into one of four categories: high, middle, low, or no occupation/status. High status was an occupation that portrayed high prestige such as a scientist, doctor, dentist, or leader; middle status was a teacher or coach; low status occupations were associated with low prestige such as food service, laborer, or criminal; the fourth category was no occupation shown or doesn't fit previous categories (Li-Vollmer, 2002).

Results

Relative to RQ1, significant differences in the representation of ethnic groups when compared to the national population were found in the sample of commercials ($X^2(8, N = 513) = 121.95, p < .01$). Table 1 reports the frequency with which ethnic characters appeared in commercials versus the frequency with which they would be expected to appear based on the representation of ethnic groups in the local population. Ethnic percentages from the 2009 U.S. Census Sample Survey were used to determine national population percentages. African Americans were represented by 14.04% of the characters, which was more than their proportion in the population (12.09%). By contrast, Hispanics were represented in 0.78% of the sample, which is greatly below their representation of 15.75% found in the national population. Asian characters were also underrepresented; they were observed in 2.34% of the sample, whereas their local population was 4.44%. Caucasians were overrepresented in the sample (81.87%) when compared to their proportion of 64.93%.

In relation to RQ2, 50% of African Americans were cast in low status roles, whereas 100% of Hispanics were cast in low status roles. Asians were cast in middle status roles 100% of the time. Interestingly, Caucasians and African Americans were cast in high status roles one third of the time as seen in Table 2.

In accordance to RQ3, a statistically significant difference was found in the major, minor, and background roles. Table 3 provides the frequencies of role portrayed by each ethnic group, including major, minor, and background roles. Caucasians were more likely to be cast in major roles ($X^2(4, N = 273) = 61.41, p < .01$), whereas almost half of Hispanics were cast in background roles ($X^2(4, N = 126) = 25.45, p < .01$). Asians were cast in major roles about 40% of the time although they were also cast in background roles 40% of the time. Every ethnic group had the least number in the minor roles category ($X^2(4, N = 114) = 27.39, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study suggest that children's commercials do not fairly represent minorities when compared to their representation in the national population. In accordance with Maher et al. (2008) and Bang & Reece (2003), Asians and Hispanics are still underrepresented in commercials. Moreover, Caucasians are overrepresented, although African Americans are also overrepresented which supports Li-Vollmer's (2002) findings.

Additionally, the research showed that ethnic minorities were shown in lower status, while Caucasians were shown in higher status roles. This finding is consistent with Licata & Biswas (1993) and Li-Vollmer's (2002) studies that found African Americans were more likely to be cast in lower status roles such as laborers and service workers, whereas Caucasians were cast in high status roles such as doctors and dentists. These outcomes support the notion that although advertisers may say they have included minorities (for example, African Americans) in their commercials, it does not diminish the fact they are still cast in lower status roles.

Furthermore, a majority of minorities were cast in minor and background roles, while more than half of Caucasians were cast in major roles. These findings support Maher et al. (2008), who found that racial minorities tended to be cast in minor roles while Caucasians were found mostly in major roles. According to social cognitive theory, when children see negative racial stereotypes, the stereotypes can affect children's perceptions of ethnicity and in turn affect their behaviors toward others of different races (Bang & Reece, 2003). When minorities are shown in mostly inferior roles, children notice and save that information for later use, which, in turn, affects their behavior toward ethnic groups.

There are several limitations in this research. First, race is challenging to code on physical features alone; Hispanics were especially difficult to code. Secondly, if the sample size were larger, there would be more commercials that could provide more opportunities to capture human characters. Our sample contained many movie advertisements (over 30%) or other commercials that contained animated human or cartoon characters. Thirdly, the chi-square statistic was technically invalid for minor and background characters because of the absence of

characters in the “other” category. A larger sample size would ensure that every category is addressed.

Possible future research might include different types of commercials. It would be illuminating to include “adult” commercials to see if trends are similar to children’s commercials. Furthermore, commercials can be coded in different months to capture a different range of advertisements; for example, commercials during the fall months leading up to Christmas contain more toy advertisements compared to commercials airing during summer months that contain more outdoor products. Another possible line of research would be to include gender to see if females or males are more likely to be underrepresented or cast in stereotypical roles. It is important to understand the implications of showing minorities in lower status and background roles since children observe these instances in commercials and often make assumptions on how to treat others of a different race. Marketers should be aware of the consequences of these actions and how they can affect perceptions and beliefs.

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Table 1
Proportional Representation of Ethnic Groups in Comparison to National Population (n=513)

Ethnicity	Sample		National	
	Observed Frequencies	Expected Frequencies	Observed Proportions	Population Proportions
Caucasian	420	333.09	81.87%	64.93%
African American	72	62.01	14.04	12.09
Asian	12	22.77	2.34	4.44
Hispanic	5	80.81	0.78	15.75
Other	4	14.32	0.97	2.79
Total	513	513	100	100

Table 2
Level of Status for Ethnic Groups Present in Commercials (n = 35)

	Caucasian		African American		Hispanic		Asian	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
High	33.3	9	33.3	2	0	0	0	0
Middle	59.3	16	16.7	1	0	0	100.0	1
Low	7.4	2	50.0	3	100.0	1	0	0

Note. Characters of indeterminate race excluded.

Table 3
Number of Role Portrayed by Ethnic Group

	Caucasian	African American	Asian	Hispanic	Other
Major	231	31	5	2	4
Minor	92	19	2	1	0
Background	97	22	5	2	0