

Portrayals Of Cultural Diversity In Australian Television Commercials: A Benchmark Study

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Abstract

Although Australia is a multi-cultural nation, there has been little research on the portrayal of cultural diversity in television advertising. By contrast, other multi-cultural nations including Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom boast a rich stream of literature in this field. The research reported in this paper presents a simple content analysis of a sample of Australian television commercials. The ethnic profile of the advertising sample is compared with population data from the Australian census. The paper concludes people from culturally diverse backgrounds are not only under-represented, but they are also misrepresented in television advertising.

Introduction

Culture is a major demographic variable used in marketing segmentation. Consequently, marketing researchers have been very interested in ethnic-related research. Depictions of ethnicity in the media have also become one of the barometers in measuring social attitudes toward multi-culturalism.

According to government, Australia is one of the “most cosmopolitan nations in the world” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). Approximately 43% of the population were either born overseas or have one parent born overseas. In addition, more than 200 languages are currently spoken (A.B.S., 2003). In spite of the government’s multicultural policy, there have been few systematic studies of racial role portrayals in the advertising media.

Literature Review

In the international context, studies on the portrayal of cultural minorities have a long heritage dating back to the 1950s (Kassarjian, 1969; Mahtani, 2001). Although much of this centres on the USA and Canada, more recently, similar research has also been conducted in the United Kingdom.. In a critical review of extant research, Mahtani (2001) points to three distinct evolutionary phases. Initially, research focussed on documenting the under-representation of minority groups. This preoccupation with under-representation set the scene for the second stage, which examined the nature of misrepresentation. The third stage, which appears to be currently emerging, moves beyond discourse towards an ideological position. Indeed, the international literature dealing with advertising representations of minority groups is so extensive that an exhaustive review is well beyond the scope of a short paper. For the sake of brevity, Table 1, which summarises some of the principal studies, has been confined to publications in the last 15 years.

In Australia, research on gender has been more prevalent than research on race or age. As early as the 1970s, Dowling published the first empirical research on gender role portrayal in television advertising (Dowling, 1978; Dowling., 1980). Mary Gilly’s landmark paper which included Australia in a far reaching cross-national survey of gender roles found relatively egalitarian role portrayals (Gilly, 1988). More recently, Mazzella *et al.* found many more

differences in the portrayal of men and women (Mazella, et al., 1992) as did Milner and Higgs (2004). To some extent, the prevalence of research on gender reflects wider preoccupations with sex and female beauty.

In terms of cultural diversity, our literature review uncovered one major study examining cultural diversity in arts-industry participation (Bertone, Keating and Mullaly, 2000). In addition, there have been at least four major studies investigating role portrayals in local television drama (C.L.C, 1992; Jacka, 2002; May, 2000; Nugent, Loncar and Aisbett, 1993). Collectively these studies show that the representation of racial minorities in TV drama has increased consistently from 2% in the earliest study (C.L.C, 1992) to 28% in the most recent study (Jacka, 2002). A comprehensive review of the literature, however, has failed to identify any parallel Australian studies on cultural diversity in advertising.

Author/ Year	Region	Medium	Segment Focus	Main Study Focus
(Zinkhan, Quails and Biswas, 1990; Zinkhan, Cox and Hong, 1991)	USA	Magazines	Black Americans	Changes in role portrayals over four decades
(Cohen, 1992)	USA	Magazines	Asian-Americans	Consumer responses to Asian portrayals in advertising
(Taylor and Bang, 1997b; Taylor and Stern, 1997a)	USA	Magazines & TV	Asian-Americans	Representation and role portrayals
(Bristor, Renee-Gravois and Hunt, 1995)	USA	TV	African-American	Role portrayals
(Taylor and Bang, 1997)	USA	Magazines	Latino	Representation and role portrayals
(Grier, 1999)	USA	Print	African-American	Difference between advertisers' intended meaning and target groups' actualised meaning
(Davis, 1999)	USA	Radio	African-American	Relationship between media and racial identity
(Fujioka, 1999)	USA	TV	African-American	Japanese students' images of African-Americans derived from TV
(Coltrane and Messineo, 2000)	USA	TV	Non-White	Gender and Race representation and role portrayal
(Stevenson and Swayne, 1999)	USA	Direct-Mail	African-American	Role portrayals
(Stevenson, 2002)	USA	Catalog	African-Americans	Role portrayals
(Martin, 2004)	USA	Magazines	Non-white	Role portrayals in leisure contexts
(Rojas, 2004)	USA	TV	Latino	Role and class portrayals in Spanish language television
(Jacobs-Henderson and Baldasty, 2003)	USA	TV	African-American	Role portrayal and product type
(Jafri, 1998)	Canada	Cross-media	Muslim women	Gender and race role portrayals
(Turnstone, 2004)	UK	Cross-media	Ethnic Minorities	Role portrayals and incidence of representation
(Doonar, 2004)	UK	TV	Ethnic minorities	Role portrayal and effects on minorities

A detailed review of the international literature is well beyond the scope of a short paper. Nevertheless, two dominant themes emerge from a reading of this literature: one of under-representation and the other of misrepresentation. Firstly, under-representation takes several forms. Ethnic groups may be under-represented in primary character roles and (Mastro and Stern, 2003). A related issue is that the incidence of ethnic groups in advertising fails to reflect the reality of population composition (Taylor and Bang, 1997; Wilkes and Valencia, 1989). More problematic is the second issue of misrepresentation. Racial minorities tend to be portrayed, in a narrow range of roles and frequently in stereotypical ways. (Jacobs-Henderson and Baldasty, 2003; Taylor and Bang, 1997). Asian models, for instance, are more likely to be associated with science and technology product advertising (Taylor and Lee, 1994; Taylor and Stern, 1997a).

Methodology

The objectives of this study were twofold. The first major objective was to document the frequency of representation of culturally diverse backgrounds in advertising. A second related objective was to examine the nature of role portrayals. A sample of television advertisements was obtained using the protocol established by Gilly (1988). In brief, the method uses commercials broadcast on the highest rating television network during daytime (Tuesday between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:00 pm) plus a peak viewing time (Wednesday evening between 7:00 pm and 11:00 pm). Characters were included in the analysis providing that they had either one line of dialog or a screen appearance for at least three seconds. For this study only adult characters were considered. This resulted in 328 usable advertisements, with 241 primary adult characters.

One male and one female coder, naïve regarding the purpose of the study, assessed the commercials. Inter-rater reliability exceeded 90% on all dimensions. Consensus was used to settle coder discrepancies and coders were able to replay a commercial as many times as necessary in order to ensure an accurate judgment. Variables coded for each character, were also based on Gilly's protocol, formed the basis of the content analysis.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective of this study was to document the incidence of people from culturally diverse backgrounds in advertising. To provide benchmarks for comparative purposes, census data was obtained for the Australian population. For convenience, ancestry by birthplace of parents was used as the benchmark for cultural diversity (A.B.S, 2001). Table 2 compares our sample of TV commercials with the most recent results on Australian TV drama.

Racial Group	Australian Drama <i>(Jacka, 2002 study)</i>	TV Commercials <i>(This study)</i>		Population of Australia
	%	Characters	%	%
White/Caucasian	73.5	230	95.5	85.0
Indigenous/Aboriginal	1.1	1	0.4	2.00
Black African	-	3	1.2	7.00
Asian	4.4	6	2.5	5.0
Indian	-	1	0.4	1.0
Total Non Dominant Culture	26.5	11	4.5	15.0

Total	100	241	100.00	100.00
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Even the most cursory glance at this data shows that white characters are over-represented compared with broader population. Indigenous characters in the advertising sample accounted for less than one half of one percent yet they comprise 2 percent of the population. Characters from other culturally diverse backgrounds comprise less than 5 percent of the sample, yet they account for 15 percent of the population. It should also be noted that ancestry by parents' birthplace underestimates the ethnic composition of the Australian population. Therefore, the advertising sample provides a conservative estimate of the degree of under-representation.

It is also worth comparing the incidence of non-white portrayals in both advertising and TV drama. In the most recent major Australian study of TV drama, actors of culturally diverse backgrounds accounted for 27 percent of characters (Jacka, 2002) compared with less than 5 percent of the advertising sample suggesting that advertising lags well behind drama in its preparedness to portray

The second major objective of this study was to analyse the nature of portrayals. Although under-representation of minority groups was expected, the resultant low counts presented serious limitations for meaningful statistical analysis. Consequently, a simple test of independent proportions was the only analysis carried out and is presented in Table 3.

Variables		White/Caucasian		Non-white		Significance	
		<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>0.05</i>
Employment	Employed, at work	66	29	0	0	2.1	*
	Employed, not at work	34	15	1	9	6.3	*
	No visible signs of employment	130	57	10	91	2.1	*
Occupation	Top Executive	10	10	0	0	0.03	N/S
	Middle Level Manager	27	27	1	100	1.53	*
	Non Prof- White collar	13	13	0	0	0.38	N/S
	Non Prof- Blue Collar	4	4	0	0	0.45	N/S
Voice	Spokesperson	92	40	1	9	2.06	*
	Not Spokesperson	138	60	10	91	2.06	*
Other Factors	Product User vs Product Authority	52	56	0	0	1.12	*
	Recipient of Help vs Provider of Help	5	2	2	18	3.16	*
	Recipient of Advice vs Receiver of Advice	1	4	0	0	0.67	N/S
	Role dependent on others vs independent of others	89	39	4	37	1.0.	N/S
	Active role vs passive role	23	10	0	0	1.10	*
	Appears frustrated vs appears not frustrated	19	8	2	18	1.16	*

The results show a number of significant differences between white and non-white characters in the advertising sample. White/Caucasian characters are more likely to be portrayed in work related situations, more likely to be seen in middle or senior level managerial roles. On the other hand, characters from non-white backgrounds are less likely to be spokespersons, more likely to be seen as recipients of help and more likely to be seen in passive situations. These findings are broadly consistent with the international literature.

Limitations and Further Research

One of this study's limitations lies with the sampling strategy and resultant sample size. The sample of 328 commercials appears to be valid, yet it yielded only a small number of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds. Although the sampling strategy, focussing on mainstream networks and programs, followed a well-established protocol, it may have been sub-optimal for research on cultural diversity. Perhaps a sampling strategy favouring niche-market programming may have captured greater cultural diversity. Given that this is a benchmark study, it is necessarily exploratory in nature. Nevertheless, this study provides researchers with much-needed benchmarks for future comparisons.

Implications

This study's findings have both social and policy implications for the advertising and media industries. Lack of diversity in portrayals may signal, albeit unintentionally, that minority cultures are not integral to Australian culture. Yet, this position is directly at odds with government policy and the Broadcast Commissions' content standards. Indeed, broadcasters are required to reflect cultural diversity, however, no specific quotas have been established.

Although advertisers' and their agencies' preference for profiles of the dominant culture appear to be entrenched, its logic remains elusive. A key concern for advertisers is to provide credible and personally relevant messages. Several researchers have explored the dominant culture's reactions to racial portrayals in advertising (Cohen, 1992; Lee, Fernandez and Martin, 2002; Fujioka, 1999). These studies found that the dominant culture did not experience negative reactions to race in advertising, while minority groups often showed more positive attitudes towards the product and the advertisement (Cohen, 1992).

Conclusion

Based on the literature and research presented in this study, it is clear that Australian programming content is well ahead of advertising in providing realistic representations of Australia's cultural richness. Advertising's stereotypical misrepresentation of racial minorities paves the way for critics who point to a raft of problems, among them the lack of diversity.

In order to maintain the veneer of social responsibility, industry must mount plausible defences against this raft of criticism. One of the most common defences of advertising's artificial role portrayals is that it merely mirrors social values, rather than inducing social change (Courtney and Whipple, 1983; Pollay, 1987; Windshuttle, 1984). This line of defence is exceedingly difficult to maintain in the face of persistent criticism of the over-simplistic stereotyping used in advertising. Yet, advertising's apologists are able to maintain this defence by adding the qualification that it is not necessary for advertising to offer proportional representation of races, sexes or classes for the mirror argument to retain its validity (Holbrook, 1987; Windshuttle, 1984). As long as advertisements continue to under-represent

major demographic segments, without any logical justification, the door for this type of criticism remains open.

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