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| “What is Going on Here” |
| A Content Analysis of Racial and Gender Stereotyping in Advertising |
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| Abstract Gender and Racial stereotypes have been ingrained in American culture for the entire existence of America, however the culture has shifted in the last fifty years to move away from stereotypical portrayals in the media. This research paper is an analysis of what gender and racial stereotypes were present in Super Bowl commercials from 2003 to 2013. The research showed that although few overt instances of stereotyping existed, the exception being Asian Americans, many gender and racial stereotyping trends are being portrayed through advertisements. |

Introduction

American culture is a culture of hyper-consumerism, making product advertising a big business. Advertising is ingrained in the very framework of American society today, billboards telling you what restaurants have the best food, radio ads extolling the curative powers of fish oils, every web page on the internet plastered with sponsor banners, and television commercials showing how using their products will make you a stronger, more virile, and better person. Television of all the media outlets, is the largest purveyor of advertisements, companies spend exorbitant sums of money so that their product can be shown in every American home. For every half hour television show, only twenty-two minutes are actual programming, while the remaining eight minutes are advertisements. Therefore, since the average American watches thirty two hours of television each week as reported by the New York Times, that means Americans watch 512 minutes of commercials every week. The question then becomes what are people being presented with by these commercials other than the products? In this study a content analysis will be done on Super Bowl commercials that aired in the years 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013. The focus of this analysis is to see if racial and gender stereotyping is present in commercials and if so has there been a shift in the last decade.

Literature Review

This paper steps into two fields of research, gender and race. There has been much research done on how on these two topics are represented in the media. On gender for instance, studies have shown that over the last three decades woman are portrayed in a traditional stereotypical role (Craig, 1992). This representation of a patriarchal society is used as an argument by feminists that the male controlled media is attempting to subvert the gains of the Women’s Rights movement of the 1970’s (Craig, 1992). Beyond the portrayal of women in subservient roles, other studies have concluded that in television commercials men are more likely to be doing things outside the home than women (Bartsch et al, 2000). Even when a commercial does portray a woman working she is usually accompanied by a male superior (Allan & Coltrane, 1996). Another study claims that women are used in advertising only for aesthetic purposes (Uray & Burnaz, 2003). That same study claims that women are generally younger than men and are more often married. Also, when they do use the product being advertised, they generally needed help figuring out how to use it (Uray & Burnaz, 2003). Previous research has also found woman to be far less likely to be doing any physical activity as compared to men in advertising (Uray & Burnaz, 2003). What this previous research into gender representations in advertising shows us is that historically there is clear evidence of the stereotypical portrayal of women in commercials. There has also been since the 1970’s a movement in the direction of an increase in the number of women shown working, more women present in commercials, and women used in roles other than as sexual objects or mothers (Batsch et al, 200). The current study attempts to build off of these previous works and analyze representations of gender stereotypes from 2003 to 2013 as well as ascertain as to whether progress has continued in the portrayal of women in advertising.

Race is also being addressed in this study. The issue of racial stereotyping in commercials is very historically evident. Depictions of African Americans, Asians, and Latinos have been traditionally very questionable in nature (Mastro & Stern, 2003). The issue in question is whether advertisers have changed their portrayals of minorities and if so how far have they come? A key component in advertising that when the viewer looks at the actor’s portrayal the viewer should see themself in that actor’s portrayal (Mastro & Stern, 2003). If this is true then the choices made by advertising companies and the companies themself, involving what demographic they choose to place in the commercial, reflect the belief systems of these advertisers and companies. Since advertisers are attempting to represent the highest proportion of viewers as possible, the representations they choose are therefore, who they believe will be making the decision to purchase the product. In this way a commercial is a time capsule of what the advertisers and corporations viewed as to which members of society make the decisions of what to buy and who also have the purchasing power to buy their products for the time period in which that commercial is aired.

Methodology

Combining a basic quantitative analysis with a qualitative research approach, commercials were examined using gender and racial codes. This content analysis shows how gender and racial stereotyping evolved over a period of ten years. The commercials that were used in the study were selected because Super Bowl commercials are the most expensive advertisements for companies to purchase. These commercials are analyzed by advertising companies as well as by the companies themselves to best exemplify the embodiment of their product. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, these commercials are snapshots of the culture and of consumers for the year of that Super Bowl. The Super Bowls selected were 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013. These were selected to show the progression of a single decade and will provide a clear picture into the society advertisers were attempting to portray for that year as well as how this image of society has changed if at all. Commercials that used animation or used anthropomorphized animals were excluded due to the ambiguity of gender and racial portrayals. All commercials were viewed on the websites adland.tv, suberbowl-ads.com, and NFL.com.

Ethics

All commercials analyzed in this study were aired during the 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013 Super Bowl on the stations ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX. There are no confidentiality issues and no anonymity issues since these commercials were aired for public consumption.

Findings

The commercials were coded by year and then those numbers were added up to give an overall progression of gender and racial stereotyping. First the gender results,

**Table 1: Male representation and participation in commercials**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2003 n=31** | **2005**  **n=25** | **2007**  **n=26** | **2009**  **n=24** | **2011**  **n=26** | **2013**  **n=45** | **Total:**  **n=167** |
| Male Lead Actor | 31 | 15 | 21 | 18 | 22 | 35 | 142 |
| Male Uses Product | 8 | 9 | 14 | 7 | 10 | 15 | 63 |
| Males With Speaking Roles | 18 | 16 | 27 | 20 | 19 | 28 | 128 |
| Male in Role of Father | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 9 |
| Males Teenage and Under | 1 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 16 |
| Males 20s | 9 | 12 | 7 | 6 | 9 | 8 | 51 |
| Males 30s | 10 | 5 | 16 | 11 | 14 | 25 | 81 |
| Males 40s and up | 12 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 9 | 48 |
| Male Business | 4 | 1 | 13 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 40 |
| Male Blue Collar | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 16 |
| Male Police/Firefighter | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 6 |

n= number of commercials viewed

**Table 2: Female representation and participation in commercials**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2003 n=31** | **2005**  **n=25** | **2007**  **n=26** | **2009**  **n=24** | **2011**  **n=26** | **2013**  **n=45** | **Total:**  **n=167** |
| Female Lead Actor | 9 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 8 | 9 | 41 |
| Female Uses Product | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 18 |
| Females With Speaking Roles | 7 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 8 | 14 | 43 |
| Female In Role Of Mother | 6 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 17 |
| Female Teenage and Under | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Female 20s | 12 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 7 | 13 | 47 |
| female 30s | 3 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 17 | 31 |
| Female 40s and up | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 12 |
| Female Business | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 11 |
| Female Blue Collar | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Female Police/Firefighter | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Female as Sexual Object | 10 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 31 |

n= number of commercials viewed

of the 167 commercials viewed, 142 male lead actors were used in the commercial; that is not to say 142 commercials had lead actors, as some commercials used more than one lead actor. Of the same 167 commercials only 41 female lead actors were used. There were 18 instances of the female using the product being advertised and 63 instances of the man using the product; a lot of Super Bowl commercials do not show actual use of the product or an animal is shown using the product. These disparities remained consistent in all the years studied. Men were shown as businessmen 40 times, blue collar workers 16 times and as police officers or firefighters 6 times; whereas women were shown as businesswomen 11 times, blue collar workers 2 times and as police officers or firefighters 2 times. Men had 128 roles that involved speaking; women had only 43. The results for race were equally disproportional.

**Table 3: Representations of Race**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2003 n=31** | **2005**  **n=25** | **2007**  **n=26** | **2009**  **n=24** | **2011**  **n=26** | **2013**  **n=45** | **Total:**  **n=167** |
| Marital Homogeny | 10 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 14 | 42 |
| Interracial Couple | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Caucasian Speaker | 24 | 18 | 29 | 26 | 25 | 31 | 153 |
| African American Speaker | 8 | 7 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 11 | 43 |
| Asian Speaker | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 12 |
| Latino Speaker | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Diversity | 13 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 5 | 20 | 53 |
| No Diversity | 9 | 11 | 8 | 7 | 10 | 9 | 54 |
| Background Diversity | 6 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 30 |

n= number of commercials viewed

There were 153 Caucasian speakers, 43 African American speakers, 12 Asian speakers, and one Latino speaker in the 167 commercials. This ratio was consistent in all the years examined. This does not include voices heard from off camera as their race could not be accurately defined. The 167 commercials had 53 commercials with clear diversity, 54 with absolutely no diversity, and 30 with only background diversity; the other 30 commercials only featured one person so were excluded from this category, race of speaker was however still used in these commercials. The other racial aspect that was coded for was the presence of interracial couples, there were 43 couples that were prominently presented in the commercials and of these 43 commercials only one interracial couple was shown. The one instance is of an Asian and Caucasian couple shown buying a house in a FICO Realty commercial. The interracial couple was only on screen for roughly ten seconds, and they were crouched over a computer screen looking at various house listings. Even in commercials where different races were socializing, it was made clear that the African Americans were romantically paired with African Americans, Caucasians with Caucasians, Asians with Asians, and Latinos with Latinos. This presents an ideal apparently deeply held by companies and advertising companies that racial homogeny is the norm and that no interracial couples need to be presented in commercials.

Those are the overall results, now the year by year aberrations with specific examples will be examined. 2003 for instance, had the highest amount of commercials portraying women as sexual objects. This was specifically true of the beer commercials. Coors Light did an advertisement were a person was fast forwarding through the commercial and only stopping when two blonde twins in cheerleader outfits jumping up and down were on the screen. Miller Lite also had two attractive women argue over what was most appealing about Miller Lite, this ended with them fighting and tearing each other’s clothes off in a fountain. Smirnoff Ice portrayed a man who drank Smirnoff Ice and was then able to outsmart the man who had not been drinking Smirnoff Ice to win the attractive woman at the bar. This portrayal of alcohol as an elixir that imbues the consumer with creative and ingenious techniques to acquire a member of the opposite sex was a common narrative in 2003. Bud Light for instance shows men drinking Bud Light and using stuffed legs to appear to be involved in a yoga class filled with attractive women. Budweiser presented a man listening to his girlfriend talk when in actuality he is watching the game over her shoulder, the commercial ends with her being impressed by his willingness to listen. Budweiser also had a commercial wherein the man drinks a beer and successfully convinces his girlfriend to let him date her roommate as well.

The instances of commercials portraying women as sexual objects by beer companies were the most obvious transition across the study. 2005 had half of the incidents of women used as sexual objects as 2003 and three of these were done by a non-beer company. That company was GoDaddy.com and in all their Super Bowl commercials starting in 2005 they used women in skimpy outfits being sexual, talking about how GoDaddy.com is the best place to register domain names. 2005 had three iterations of Danica Patrick in situations where she would be about to reveal her nudity and then the commercial would end. These commercials make up the lion’s share of commercials portraying women as sexual objects from 2005 on. After the very sexually driven commercials of 2003 the Beer companies changed tactics. Budweiser for instance, used commercials with animals; specifically the Clydesdale horses or various animals attempting to be Budweiser Clydesdales. In 2011, they used an Old West theme of outlaws drinking Budweiser and then singing “Tiny Dancer” by Elton John. Bud Light also transitioned into celebrity endorsers, birds, and comedy: The celebrity endorser was Conan O’brien, and the comedy was anyone with Bud Light is okay even if they are hitchhiking with an axe or a chainsaw. Also 2003 had by far the most representation of beer commercials as Miller Lite and Coors Lite did not place a commercial any year after 2003, Miller High Life did have a commercial but no women were in it as it was an African American man loading Miller High Life into a truck and turning to the camera and yelling “High Life”.

The other category that varied most by year as pertains to gender is women in the role of mother and men in the role of father. Of the 43 speaking roles women received 17 of them were as the role of mother; Men had 128 speaking roles 9 of these being in the role of father. 2003 and 2013 had the most instances of women in the role of mother; the difference is that in 2003 the majority of these represented the woman as meek homemakers knowing how to please her family. Examples of this are a McDonald’s commercial that shows the mother knowing that her family craves fast food and provides it. It portrayed a stressed out man coming home from a hard day at the office as well as his young son who had a rough day at school. As the two males are comparing the difficulties of the day the mother pops around the corner in an apron, she is happy and smiling and suggests that her two men need McDonalds to turn around their day. Also in 2003, realty commercials, specifically FICO, show a female realtor that uses her knowledge as a mother to help a family get exactly what it needs in a new house. In 2013, the women are empowered in the role of mother, in a Tide commercial a woman cleans the lucky stain off of her husband’s 49er’s jersey because she is a Ravens fan: those were the two teams of the 2013 Super Bowl. An Audi commercial showed a mother and a father sharing in domestic duties as their son prepared for the prom. So even though both 2003 and 2013 had higher instances of mother and father portrayals the tone of these portrayals was very different. The portrayals of 2005 and 2007 had lower instances of the mother and father roles and in each case the parents were in the background and there was no insight into what their individual role as parent was.

The year by year breakdowns of race were not as illuminating, as the trend of significantly more Caucasian’s having speaking roles was consistent across all years. The amount of commercials that have diversity fluctuated wildly year to year; in 2003 more commercials had diversity than did not, in 2005 there was either no diversity or background diversity in the majority of commercials, 2007 mirrored 2005, whereas 2009 had an almost even representation of diversity, 2011 had a three to one ratio of commercials with no or only background diversity to commercials with diversity, and 2013 had a majority of commercials with diversity. Not included in the coding but an important aspect of the study are instances of racial stereotyping. Specifically, Asians were stereotyped with the vast majority of their appearances in commercials involved them doing martial arts, with no speaking role. In fact only one Asian had a speaking role in a commercial before 2013, this was Yao Ming who had to pretend not to understand English; coincidently this commercial also contained the only coded instance of a Latino given a speaking roll. She was the one trying to get Yao to understand he could not write a check. 2013 had several Asians with speaking roles and added a new instance of stereotyping, as the 20 year old Asian was working at Best Buy. The stereotype being Asian young men are all tech nerds. Referring back to 2003, in most of the instances of a minority having a speaking role, that minority was a celebrity; Nelly, Shaquille O’Neal, Jackie Chan, Michael Jordan and Yao Ming were all in commercials in 2003. Shaquille O’Neal and Michael Jordan were each in three commercials that year. So these celebrities make up almost all of the cases of minorities having speaking roles for 2003. This was an aberration though as the rest of the years studies had as many non-celebrity minority speakers as celebrity.

Discussion

As the findings have shown racial stereotyping in commercials is much less overt than gender stereotyping. The data does clearly show that Caucasian men are given the overwhelming majority of speaking roles or lead roles in commercials. This represents a belief in advertisers and companies that Caucasian men are still the demographic that needs to be targeted the most. The fact that men have 66% more speaking roles than women and are the lead role 72% more often than women and that this trend was consistent across the whole decade of Super Bowls shows that advertisers and companies do not see the woman as the member of the family with purchasing power. As Mastro and Stern concluded, a key component in advertising is when the viewer looks at the actor’s portrayal the viewer should see themself in that actor’s portrayal (2003). Therefore, since advertisers and companies are not targeting woman by giving them a representative of themselves in the commercial, it can be concluded that they still see a highly patriarchal society; wherein the family member that needs to be influenced is the man and not the woman. Building off of this idea of the underrepresentation of women that have purchasing power is the lack of portrayals of professional women. Men were shown as being either a businessman or a blue collar worker 56 times; a woman was shown in these two categories only 13 times. An example of a commercial that shows a woman in the workplace is the 2007 commercial for Sales Genie, the woman is used as a sexual object impressed by the success of the man who uses the Sales Genie. So even if a woman is shown in the workplace it can still be a stereotypical and not an empowered portrayal. Another aspect of the commercials was the different ways that the roles of mothers and fathers were portrayed in the commercials. As shown in the previously mentioned McDonald’s commercial the mother is portrayed as an attentive house wife or in the aforementioned Tide commercial the mother is shown undertaking malicious acts of stain removal. Fathers are portrayed as less attached and more distant. An example of this is a 2005 Cadillac commercial wherein the daughter steals her parents Cadillac to run off and get married to her boyfriend, the father seeing the car leave races to his wife’s car and drives to the outskirts of town to cut off his daughter. Once the father stops the daughter and her boyfriend the daughter pleads to her father that she is in love, the father tells her he know he just wants her to take her mother’s car. The moral of this is apparently the car is more important than stopping his daughter from marrying young. Another car commercial that portrays a father is a 2013 Audi commercial, in this commercial; a domestic scene is shown with a son preparing for the prom the mother is washing dishes and the father is standing next to her not assisting. This small incident reflects the findings of Allan and Coltrane that women are shown doing domestic work and men are not (1996). Again this highlights the underlying belief by advertisers and companies that their vision of the American culture is a man who works outside of the home and a woman that works inside of the home. A stereotype that was not included in the coding but was presented in a few different ways was the concept of men being tough; a 2009 Pepsi Max commercial took this to the extreme by showing a series of scenes in which men are struck with various calamities; bowling ball to the head and having someone turn the power on while a man is fixing a light fixture; shooting the man a good twenty yards, and after each calamity the man says “I’m good”. This ideal though not as overt in other commercials shows a belief in manliness; the idea that man are tough and can handle pain whereas women are not portrayed in this manner.

The ways in which racial stereotypes are presented in commercials, are not as obvious as the way gender is stereotypically portrayed. A cultural awareness to the dangers of racial stereotyping specifically towards African Americans is ingrained in current American culture. So much so that a Volkswagon commercial that aired in 2013 that had a white business man using the sayings and dialect of a Jamaican was attacked for being racist even though the commercial was very positive. The commercial was attacked for being verbal black face; black face refers to the use of black makeup to make Caucasian actors appear black, this was used in the 1950’s and 1960’s and is considered a particularly offensive racial stereotype. This sensitivity does not seem to include Asian’s who were, as stated above, the only instances of overt stereotyping in the decade of Super Bowl commercials studied.

Romantic pairings were also very clearly drawn along racial lines; as mentioned earlier only one commercial showed an interracial couple and even that couple was shown only for a couple of seconds in a montage of couples looking at the FICO website shopping for houses. The lack of representations of interracial couples makes apparent an underlying conservatism by companies and advertisers that hearkens back to the conservative 1950’s where there was a cultural taboo on interracial marriage. An example of this is a 2013 GoDaddy.com commercial; their only commercial not using sex as the main attraction, in the commercial six different men all of different races are shown with their wife, and all six couples are homogenous. So even GoDaddy, a company that has based its entire media campaign on shock value; will not show an interracial couple in its commercial.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are that although the coding is an attempt to break the commercial down only one researcher coded all the commercials. This lack of triangulation could have affected the data that is more subjective and may have allowed for an observational error. Also, in the course of this study the website that hosted the commercials stopped working and a second website was used that had only the most popular commercials instead of the complete list offered by the first website. The second website also did not have the 2013 commercials so the NFL website was used to view the 2013 commercials. This is the explanation for why 2003 and 2013 have more commercials used in the study than the other years. Another limitation of this study is that although Super Bowl commercials were deemed the most appropriate for this study as explained in the methodology section, it may have had more commercials aimed at men, due to them being aired during a football game.

Conclusion

Although American’s have moved away from accepting racism and gender discrimination, the overwhelming majority of advertisements that were used in this study were very clearly directed at Caucasian men. The presence of minorities and women in these commercials were generally as counterparts to these Caucasian men; minorities were the friend of the main character and women were the wife or girlfriend. The fact that women were underrepresented in the business setting and overrepresented in the home setting reinforces the conclusions of Bartsch et al, that men are more likely to be seen outside of the home whereas women will be mostly shown inside the home (2000). To add to this, even when woman are shown outside of the home and in the business world, it is their abilities as a wife and a mother that are lauded, specifically in the case of real estate agents; which is the most common profession of the women shown in business, or they are shown as a sexual object to be obtained. The racial stereotyping is most apparent in its absence, most commercials had a Caucasian speaker and few commercials were aimed at minorities. Asians, as explained above, were the exception; apparently they are not afforded the same racial sensitivity as shown to African Americans. Latinos were omitted altogether which underscores the earlier assertion that companies and advertisers do not believe in the purchasing power of minorities. There was however a clear progression in the way that women were portrayed in the commercials. The practice of beer companies to use woman as objects to be won in its commercials was only present in 2003; GoDaddy quickly took up the slack, but no other companies appear to rely on women as sexual objects as its primary advertising tactic. Also, the portrayals of mothers has transformed, 2003 showed mothers as obsequious, 2005 to 2011 did not used a limited portrayal of the mother and 2013 showed an empowered mother. Race also showed some progression as minorities, although still woefully underrepresented; after 2003 celebrities were not the only ones allowed speaking roles. Interracial couples still have very little presence in the realm of commercials which could be a remnant of the beliefs of 1950’s society that the races should marry amongst themselves. Therefore, although there is still conclusive evidence of gender and racial stereotyping in advertising today, progress is still being made.

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