

Study highlights racial groups in TV ads

August 12 2013

White people are more likely to be represented, and in a positive light, than Blacks or Asians in Canadian television advertisements, says a new study from the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM).

"Previous studies have looked at depictions of race in Canadian media, but this is the first to focus on advertising," says Professor Shyon Baumann, chair of UTM's Department of Sociology. "It's also the first to take a sample of commercials and use [quantitative data](#) to find the connections between products and different [racial groups](#)."

Baumann and PhD student Loretta Ho analyzed the appearance and context of over 1,000 White, Black and East and Southeast Asian characters in 244 [prime time television](#) food and dining ads. People from other cultural backgrounds, such as First Nations, Middle Eastern and Hispanic, were too under-represented to include in the study, something Baumann says is a recurring issue when examining comparisons of race in Canadian media.

The study examined human characters only, and did not include cartoons, graphics or voice-overs.

Baumann and Ho found that Whites were disproportionately over-represented when compared to the other groups. Although comprising 80 per cent of the Canadian population, Whites were in 87 per cent of the sampled ads.

Whites were also almost exclusively associated with healthier whole

unprocessed foods, such as eggs. Blacks and East and Southeast Asians, on the other hand, were over-represented in fast [food ads](#).

To identify trends in how the different races were represented, the study then examined the context in which the characters appeared.

Whites were associated with four overarching cultural trends: Nostalgia, which showed Whites as food craftspeople and bearers of tradition in quality foods; Natural, which associated Whites with nature, romanticized agriculture and wholesome foods; Highbrow, showing Whites as having high [socio-economic status](#); and Nuclear Family, which associated healthy families with Whites.

Blacks were more often associated with low socio-economic status and less often associated with family and tradition (a trend Baumann and Ho call Blue Collar), while East and Southeast Asians were negatively shown as "Asian technocrats" – achievement-oriented but unemotional and robotic.

Not only did Whites have more positive associations in the ads, but they were depicted in a wider variety of situations and experiences, says Baumann.

"Being viewed and seen reacting in different circumstances gives your identity flexibility and allows you to be seen as more of a whole person," says Baumann. "But if you're consistently portrayed as only one type of person, for instance, technologically savvy but socially awkward, your identity and society's expectations of you are constrained by that very flat portrayal."

Baumann calls advertising a good window for understanding society's idea of cultural identity and what it means to be a member of a particular ethno-cultural group.

"Advertising reproduces broad cultural understandings of race so it can connect quickly with the audience," says Baumann. "What this study shows is that ads are reproducing perceptions of race in ways that continue to be problematic for people who are not White."

"Interestingly, these are commercials broadcast in the Toronto market, which is 50 per cent non-White," he adds. "We were surprised at how different these commercials were, in terms of diversity, from our daily experience on the streets of the city."

The study, which was funded in part by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), is part of a larger study examining television advertising content in Canada. It was presented at the 2013 American Sociological Association annual conference (Aug 9 to 13).

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Study highlights racial groups in TV ads (2013, August 12) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-08-highlights-racial-groups-tv-ads.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.