

Racial bias in television ads

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The first systematic study of Canadian television commercials, conducted by sociologists Shyon Baumann and Loretta Ho from the University of Toronto Mississauga, shows that despite the country's multicultural make-up, visible minorities are underrepresented and misrepresented in TV advertising.

The study, which examined prime-time commercials on all three major Canadian networks – Global, CTV and CBC—during an 18-month period, appears in the *Canadian Review of Sociology*, published May 1. The authors, Shyon Baumann, chair of the UTM Department of Sociology, and Loretta Ho, a recent PhD graduate, focused on food and dining commercials.

"Ads are part of a much larger puzzle about why change is slow to happen," said Baumann. "Like the current case of racism in the NBA, this paper will force a conversation and an awareness of something many people aren't admitting is out there. This is still a problem and there is still work to do."

Baumann and Ho reviewed 244 commercials to see how frequently and in what way various visible minorities were portrayed. They found that blacks were not underrepresented, based on the percentage of the Canadian population that is black, but the same was not true for South Asians or East Asians. People of Middle Eastern ethnicity and Aboriginal peoples were basically invisible in prime-time advertising.

Meanwhile, whites were disproportionately represented in TV commercials, appearing in 87 per cent of commercials although they make up only 80 per cent of the population.

In terms of content, the researchers found that blacks, South Asians and East Asians were portrayed using narrow cultural schemas: the blacks as blue collar; the Asians as technocrats. By contrast, Caucasians were represented by four different schema—nostalgic, highbrow, nuclear family and natural (outdoorsy, health-conscious)—allowing for much more varied expectations of their behaviours and characteristics.

A schema is broader than a stereotype and can be defined as "a widely shared understanding at a descriptive level of the characteristics of a group and what their life is like relative to other groups," said Baumann. Schemas affect the status of individual groups within society.

By fitting visible minorities into narrow schemas, advertisers are reinforcing assumptions about the behaviours and characteristics of particular groups, which can be limiting and erroneous, said Baumann.

"These things are so entrenched in the advertising world that it goes beyond just being a stereotype," Ho told the Canadian Review of Sociology. "The way Asians are depicted gives me a script on how I should be acting: I should be the achiever, the unemotional robot, constantly striving for higher grades. Also, for the general public viewing this, it gives them a script on how to interact with me, before even knowing me, like 'Oh, she's an Asian. She must be smart.'"

"Schemas inform our ideas on how to behave as a member of a group or towards a group member," Baumann added. "When people act on schematic knowledge, it is kind of like being on auto-pilot. We assume certain things about what the people are like and how they interact."

Baumann said the study is important because, as the first research looking at Canadian television advertising, it gives us a sense of the content.

"Given the multicultural nature of Canadian society, we wanted to see if there was a discrepancy between the ads and what the culture is like," he said. "There was a good reason to expect positive results, because of our changing culture and demographics."

Given that blacks tended to be portrayed as blue-collar workers in a factory setting, Asians in the commercials fit the "smart and technologically focused" stereotype, and other visible minorities were absent in advertising, their expectations weren't met.

Provided by University of Toronto

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