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Still Not the Stars: African Americans As Social Minorities in Television Advertising

Abstract
Advertising can *either provoke or prevent cultural change. It articulates* ideas *about social class, cultural values.* and *societal power. African Americans* are *still being presented* in *television advertising* as *members of social minorities* who are *less likely to speak, to assume positions of authority,* or *to personify dominant middle class values* in *America.*

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Media content can either provoke or prevent cultural change. All forms *of* mass media construct patterns and prototypes in their content through both the overt inclusion *of* societal concepts and cultural associations and through the overt omission *of* other such concepts and associations. As a diagnostic measure, media content offers a revealing look at current *forms of* racial segmentation. In the 50 years since the *Brown* decision, minorities have assumed a much larger presence in many media content forms such as popular music, film, television, and advertising. African Americans were the first minority group *to* experience any measurable increase in inclusiveness across several mass media platforms, but particularly in the area *of* advertising. The civil rights movement and its accompanying social, governmental, and political effects that rippled throughout the 1970s and beyond pushed advertisers *to* confront their usage and representations *of* African Americans in advertising. African Americans also became established as an identifiable target market that was deemed fiscally desirable by advertisers. Thus, as the social and economic clout *of* African Americans has increased during the last 50 years, the market clout *of* this group has experienced an awakening as well.

Yet it is within advertising's realm that some *of* the starkest revelations are found with regard *to* African American media representations. Advertising, as an external and unaccountable influence, is a social force that deliberately seeks *to* give meaning *to* both people and products. It articulates all types *of* ideas about social class, cultural values, and societal power in the quest *to* sell goods and services in the capitalist marketplace. A closer look at today's African American television advertising representations reveals that, while numerical gains have been made in terms *of* the frequency *of* advertising depictions, African Americans are still playing a subordinate role as can be seen in data drawn from a study *of* primetime television advertising from the 2003-2004 television season. African Americans are still presented as members *of* social minorities who are less likely *to* speak in advertisements directed *to* the general public, *to* assume positions *of* authority, or *to* personify what are typically considered *to* be dominant middle class values in America. In this way, the advertising industry exerts a hegemonic influence upon the African American community. African Americans are included in increased numbers in advertising in

order *to* entice them into the overall commercial audience, 'while being simultaneously presented in imagery that limits and circumscribes their participation in the wider community.

Presenters

Karie L. Hollerbach is an assistant professor *of* communication at Southeast Missouri State University and teaches courses in advertising media, advertising creative strategy, and communication theory and research. She currently serves on Southeast's task force for minority recruitment and retention. She holds a B.S. and M.S. from Southeast and a Ph.D in Mass Communication and Media Arts from Southern lllinois University Carbondale. Hollerbach has several years of award-winning professional experience in corporate marketing and advertising from both the telecommunication and retail shopping center industries.

Walter B. Jaehnig is serving his second term as director of the School of Journalism at Southern lllinois University Carbondale. He was also director from 1987 to 1995. He is an associate professor at SIUC and teaches courses in reporting, editorial writing, news media ethics, international communication, and mass media and society issues. He has published many academic and general interest articles related to these subjects. Jaehnig received his B.S. and M.S .degrees from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, and has a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Essex. He is also a former newspaper reporter and editor. Jaehnig was a member of the journalism faculty at Indiana University, head of the Department of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Wyoming, and served two years as associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at UW before coming to SIUC.