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Race as a Dimension in Children's TV Advertising: The Need for More Research

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ABSTRACT

Most of the current research in the area of television advertising to children deal entirely with white populations. This exclusion of black subjects exists in spite of an abundance of research in education, sociology and psychology which suggests differences in the socialization of black and white children. The present article reviews major studies of television and children and black versus white child development. The authors conclude with several suggestions for further research.

Researchers in education and the social sciences have been concerned about the socialization processes of children for many years, even before the early works of Piaget. Several studies indicate that there are differences in the socialization of black and white children. These differences occur along a spectrum

of child development variables including imitative behavior,^{17,20} self-concept,^{9,12} language development,^{15,22} achievement motivation,^{14,19} attitude formation,²⁴ peer interaction¹⁶ and parent-child relationships.²³ It is surprising that the racial variable in television advertising has been relatively neglected by researchers. This paper presents the limited findings in the area of television advertising to black children and suggests important reasons why further study of the complex and highly emotional issues is necessary.

BLACK CHILDREN

In a recent study Sheikh, Moleski and Prasad²¹ surveyed 22 white boys, 24 white girls, 13 black boys and 12 black girls from the fifth grade. The children responded to several guided questions about an incomplete story. The story involved the main character, whose sex varied according to the sex of the subject, in the presence of his parents, watching one of his favorite television programs which was interrupted repeatedly by a particular commercial for a toy. The data were subjected to Goodman's⁸ analysis for a three dimensional contingency table.

In response to the question, "Do you think John/Mary felt like asking his/her parents to buy him/her that toy?", over 91 percent of the children answered in the affirmative. There were no significant race or sex differences. Both black and white boys and girls are probably influenced by TV commercials to the same extent. When asked, "Do you think that he/she actually asked them?", mean affirmative responses dropped to 65 percent. Here again there were no significant race or sex differences. Significant ($p < .05$) sex differences were found in response to the question, "Did he/she ask his/her father or his/her mother?". Boys lodged their requests significantly more often with their father and girls with their mother. These results can be explained in terms of the identification hypothesis. Livson¹⁸ discovered that sons were more involved with their father and daughters with their mother.

In response to "What did he/she say?", significant race differences were found ($p < .05$). White children perceived their parents as yielding to their purchase requests significantly more often than black children did. Although black as well as white children attended the same school, it is possible that the black children belonged to a lower socio-economic level. Consequently, it is conceivable that they did not perceive their parents to be economically capable of yielding to all their requests. It is also possible that the black children perceived their parents as generally less permissive than the white children did. A significant ($p < .05$) interaction between race, sex and mode of responding was found for the last question, "Suppose the parent said 'No,' what happened then?". The responses were coded into the following three categories: acceptance (he/she said OK and went to his/her room), outward-directed nonacceptance (he/she asked again: he/she got real mad), and inward-directed nonacceptance (he/she was sad: he/she felt bad). Inward-directed nonacceptance was the most common response (51%). The remaining responses were almost equally **divided into** outward-directed nonacceptance (23%) and acceptance (26%). Closer inspection of the data indicated that white boys expressed more outward-directed nonacceptance than the black boys, but black boys showed more inward-directed nonacceptance than white boys. Also, while in the white group more girls displayed inward-directed nonacceptance, in the black group more girls experienced inward-directed nonacceptance.

In another recent study, Donohue⁶ studied 162 black elementary school children in first, second and third grades in New Orleans. He used an open-ended interview technique to elicit responses from the children. Two scenarios about health were administered to the children. One suggested that the child was sick. He was asked, "What would you do to stay well, what would your mother tell you to do, what would a TV commercial tell you to do and what is the right thing to do?". Donohue's analysis of viewing habits did not show any significant differences due to sex or grades exclusively. One interesting note was that when the black children were asked who their favorite television characters were, they included only two black characters among their

top ten favorites. Donohue's overall finding is that television provides children with information that might encourage the development of somewhat questionable values as well as to provide innocuous consumer behavior models. His study showed that black children expressed a great liking for television commercials and indicated that TV is an important source of information for the products they buy or request. Additionally, he found that black children request more products which are presented by the television characters that they like.

A serious concern raised by Donohue's study deals with children's reaction to medicinal advertising. Children believe that when they are sick the answer to the problem is to take a pill. The continuous use of pills will ensure good health. But Donohue notes that black children seem to identify quite closely with their parents in respect to health matters.

Barry and Hansen³ investigated two hypotheses: 1) racial differences do not affect advertising recall of children and 2) racial differences do not affect advertising preferences of children. Thirty segregated white and 30 segregated black second graders from families of comparable income acted as the subjects. Each class of students was shown two out-of-cycle cereal commercials and administered a 12-item questionnaire. Nine of the questions measured recall ability, while three were preference measures. Through chi-square analysis, the study found that, while there is no significant difference between white and black second graders concerning their recall ability, there is a significant difference between them in terms of preference for the commercial, brand of cereal and actors in the commercial. While black children overwhelmingly preferred one specific ad, cereal brand and actor (who happened to be black) within that commercial the white children were divided almost equally among the three items. This preference difference could possibly be due to the race of the actor.

The authors suggested that a large majority of recall questions administered to black and white second graders produced similar results, and therefore, the hypothesis of recall ability was accepted. The hypothesis of preference was rejected, however. Specifically, the authors noted that black children had more difficulty in associating brands with a particular commercial. Their preferences were positively influenced by the presence of a black character in the commercial but white children's preferences were affected neither positively or negatively by the presence of a black character in the commercial. The authors suggest that these results could be due to the degree of integration in the schools, alternative media, alternative products, the degree of "blackness" in the commercials and the age of the children.

In another study. Hendon¹¹ compared recall and degree of insistence responses between normal IQ (NIQ) black and white children and educable mentally retarded (EMR) black and white children, ranging from ages six to twelve. Hendon's study used 49 NIQ's and 45 EMR's from the same two schools. He showed the subjects five of the cereal commercials most frequently seen on the three major television networks. The findings of his study indicated that there were no significant differences in either recall ability or degree of insistence between NIQ's and EMR's. Hendon did find that NIQ whites scored higher on recall ability than NIQ blacks but that EMR whites scored approximately the same as EMR blacks. Hendon also found that as age increased, recall ability increased and degree of insistence for the products advertised decreased.

Appleton and Barrett¹ studied 126 black and white second, fourth and sixth grade school children in segregated classrooms. Each class was shown two 30-second ice cream commercials. Eight recall and two preference questions were administered. The researchers found no significant difference in recall ability between black and white children. They did find a significant difference in recall for whites based on age. but that difference did not hold true for the black children in their study.

Although a content analysis of television commercials by Doolittle and Pepper⁷ did not deal specifically with the question of advertising to black children, the authors comment on the subject. They suggest that advertising has the potential as a socializing agent to advance the change of social mores, for example, the attitude to minorities. They further suggest that the proportion of advertising to children with minorities in it

has actually decreased in the last few years from 27 and 24 percent in two previous studies to 17 percent in their study. When minorities are presented, they generally appear in a setting which depicts numerous individuals rather than the family unit. The authors contend that minority children are used in advertising to "round out scenes" with groups of children rather than being presented in a family environment.

Finally, in an excellent summary by Banks² on television advertising's influences on children, the author suggests that data show that television is more heavily used by the poor and the black than print media and that most studies have not dealt with the problems of the "urban disadvantaged." Black children report more use of television as a learning device than do their white counterparts and black children perceive television as being more realistic than do white children. Banks cites a study by Greenberg and Dominick undertaken in East Cleveland which produced data illustrating that black children report having a higher average number of working television sets and two-thirds again as much personal viewing time as white children.

BLACK PARENTS

In recent years mothers of children have become more and more vocal regarding the programming and advertising seen by their children on television. Although the number of mothers active in this arena is small, it is a vocal group. Once again, virtually no known research dealing with the impressions of black mothers exists. An exception is a recent study by Barry.³ Because it deals with some of the more sensitive issues in the field, a more expansive presentation of his study is produced here. A questionnaire was administered by a black graduate student trained in field research to 65 black mothers in the Dallas, Texas area. The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit attitudinal data from these mothers regarding their perceptions of TV advertising to children. The respondents had an average of 2.8 children, whose average age was 6.1 years and average year in school was 2.1. Most of the respondents had secretarial/clerical jobs and their husbands were blue collar workers. The average number of school years completed by the respondents was 13.3 (first year college) and the approximate household income was \$10,800. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents had husbands living with them while 30 percent were widowed or divorced. Respondents indicated that their children watched television on an average of 4.2 hours per day. The results of the survey follow.

"Can your children tell the difference between TV programs and TV commercials (advertising)? How do you know?"

Ninety percent of the respondents felt that their children can tell the difference between television programs and commercials. There were three basic reasons: 1) the preference displayed for certain programs. 2) the length of time spent watching certain programs and 3) the attention paid to short quick commercials. As a child grows older, he develops a strong preference for programs over TV commercials. Seven percent of the respondents felt that their children cannot tell the difference between TV programs and commercials, due to their age (less than 2 years).

"Do you have any worries about television advertising which is aimed at children? Why or why not?"

About 70 percent of the respondents had no major concerns about TV commercials. The major reason was that they felt it had no harmful effects on children. Some of the respondents revealed that their major concerns about TV advertising to children centered around: 1) emphasis on toys, 2) fear that the products advertised on TV are out of the price range they are able to afford and 3) unrealistic nature of commercials, i.e., Kool-Aid commercial, cat singing, cookie man, etc.

"Should we control the kind of advertising that is presented to our children? If so, in what ways?"

Approximately 70 percent of the respondents replied that advertising should be controlled in some ways, but they were unsure how this should be accomplished. Thirty percent of the respondents suggested that it was the duty of the parent. Another 30 percent of the respondents said that advertising did not need any type of controls because they saw nothing wrong with its present form.

"Do you think that there are too many TV commercials aimed at our children?"

Twenty-one percent of the mothers believed that there are too many commercials aimed directly at children. These respondents, however, were at a loss to suggest what the correct number of advertisements should be. Almost 80 percent of the respondents felt that there were not too many TV commercials aimed at children, but too many commercials in general.

"Do you think that TV commercials make kids want things? Is this good or bad?"

All but one respondent thought that TV commercials led children to desire advertised products. The respondents were divided on how good or bad this effect is. Those parents who felt that it was bad did so because, in their opinion, children begin to want *everything* they see, without developing a sense of judgment on needs and priorities. Those respondents who felt that it was good, believed it gave their children more exposure to different situations.

"Do you think that TV commercials are understood by children? What are they trying to get the kids to do?"

Thirty percent of the respondents were of the opinion that TV commercials are understood by children. Seventy percent felt that they are not; children only see the product in advertisements and do not understand the intent of the ad. All respondents felt that the intent of most advertisements was to lead the children to ask their parents to buy the products advertised.

"Do most commercials tell the truth about the products they are selling? Can you give some examples of those which do not?"

Sixty percent of the respondents were convinced that commercials do tell the truth about the products they are selling, and 40 percent felt that ads are untruthful. The latter group based its belief on three basic observations: 1) products on TV exaggerate the performance capability of the products, i.e., toy products, nutritional cereals, etc., and 2) products on TV never fully explain that additional items or accessories are needed for certain products, for example batteries for toy products and 3) ads sell the hidden surprises (premiums) rather than the products themselves.

"Do your children ask you for things they see advertised on TV? For what do they ask you, for example?"

Eighty-six percent of the respondents revealed that their children ask for products seen on TV. In order of importance, these products include: 1) toys, 2) candy, 3) cereal, 4) clothes and 5) other food products. Thirteen percent of the respondents reported that their children do not ask for products seen on TV, basically because they are too young.

"When you take your children shopping, what do they ask you to buy them? Why do you think they ask you for these things?"

Respondents stated that items most commonly requested in this situation in the order of their importance are: 1) toys, 2) candy, 3) clothes, and 4) other food products. The two main reasons that children asked for these products were: 1) they saw the products on TV and 2) they saw the products in the store.

"Where do your kids learn about the things that they want most?"

Respondents answered that kids learn about the things they want most, in order of importance, from: 1) TV, 2) friends, 3) catalogs, 4) parents and 5) school.

"Do you think children get any wrong or bad ideas from the TV commercials that they watch? For example?"

One fourth of the respondents believed that children can be negatively influenced by TV commercials. The respondents felt that wrong ideas came from TV commercials in general rather than from those aimed at children. Bad ideas included sex appeal, drinking and smoking. The remaining three quarters of the respondents held that children derived no bad ideas from TV commercials.

A preliminary analysis of these data suggest that mothers are mothers and race is of little importance in a mother's attitudes toward advertising. This research, as well as other research studies done among parents concerning advertising, tends to validate the findings of Bauer and Greyser,⁵ which contend that the question of advertising is not very important to the American consumer when compared to topics like education, unions, bringing up the children, religion and shopping.

FUTURE RESEARCH

What should impress the reader most is the paucity of research in the field of television advertising and black children. This is especially confusing when one looks at the literature dealing with developmental differences between black and white children in psychology and sociology, marketing literature dealing with advertising to children and marketing literature dealing with advertising to blacks in general. With so many interested actors (government, business, child development specialists, mothers, etc.) there should be support for this kind of research.

Much research has been and is being undertaken in an attempt to assess the impact and influence of television advertising on children. Most of it, as previously mentioned, focuses on whites. If black children are different from white children in areas of parental relationships, language development, economic skills and so forth, might not the impact of advertising on these black children be highly different? If too, as Donohue suggests, black children have a more difficult time with nutritional needs satisfaction than whites, might not the cereal advertisements, and all food ads for that matter, have a differential impact on them?

What are the self-concepts that black children are being faced with? What do they think when they see all of these white children in family situations and few black families portrayed? Is the self-concept of the black child being negatively impacted? If, as it has been suggested, black children look at television as a more realistic portrayal of the world, what is the impact of commercials which might portray aggression in humorous terms (not to mention the aggression and violence portrayed in so many programs viewed by children)? Do black children model differently than their white counterparts? Urban education in this country is in trouble. This is a

well-known fact. This suggests that the basic skills of language development, reading, writing, etc., may not be being developed as effectively as they could be. Does television advertising, with its use of "psychedelic techniques" and quick and witty slogans aid in the retardation of these basic skills? If black children hold certain expectations as a result of commercials viewed on television, and these expectations cannot (for economic reasons) be fulfilled, what type of conflict does this establish and what is this conflict's impact during the life of the young black? Can it contribute to delinquency and crime?

These are loaded questions, heavily value laden. But they are questions which we must attempt to answer. It is the responsibility today of both advertising practitioners and academicians to support and engage in research which can begin to get at these value questions. To simply shrug it off and say that advertising is good or bad is insufficient. And we should mention, at this point, that the potential for advertising as a pro-social medium to children is vast. This has been suggested by Harding¹⁰ and Jerome.¹³ And we do not condemn television advertising; we in fact endorse its presence in our economic system. We do, however, suggest the need for much more research in this area. The added research must be approached much more scientifically and carefully than the early, exploratory works. We must have longitudinal studies. The real impact of advertising cannot be ascertained in a one-shot study, no matter how well designated and implemented it might be. Longitudinal studies demand effort and money. The effort must be backed by business, government and consumer groups as well as interested educators. We must strive for truly integrated research teams. Integrated not only in terms of the member social scientists but in terms of the race of the social scientists. We should include non-science members—consumer representatives and government spokespersons. Only in this way can we even begin to solve the value issues involved. The call in this paper is a Herculean one. But we suggest that this issue is important because its solution may help to shape the entire scope and future of advertising to children.

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