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## Race and Gender Representations in Advertising in Cable Cartoon Programming

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### Recommended Citation

Merskin, Debra L.. "Race and Gender Representations in Advertising in Cable Cartoon Programming." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.2 (2008): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1356>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**Volume 10 Issue 2 (June 2008) Article 10**

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**"Race and Gender Representations in Advertising in Cable Cartoon Programming"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/10>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.2 (2008)**

**Thematic Issue *Racialized Narratives for Children***

**Edited by C. Richard King and John Streamas**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/>>

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**Abstract:** In her paper "Race and Gender Representations in Advertising in Cable Cartoon Programming," Debra L. Merskin explores what children see and what they learn about racial, ethnic, and gender identity in television advertisements. Merskin examines race and ethnicity in commercials on cable television, specifically on the Turner Cartoon Network, an environment devoted entirely to cartoons and to children. Her content analysis of 381 advertisements reveals that while White and African American children are overrepresented in relationship to their percentage of the U.S. population, other minority group children are rarely portrayed. In only one instance were children of color shown alone, not accompanied by at least one White child. In addition, girls, particularly minority girls, were more often shown in the home, performing stereotypical domestic tasks while boys, particularly White boys, were found in the outside world doing active and exciting things. When minority children are shown, they are either accompanied by Whites (i.e., not left on their own) or marginalized with girls in ads that only girls are likely to pay attention to. Social learning theory predicts early learning about race contributes not only to children's present conception of self and others, but also provides the foundation for the construction of stereotypes that persist throughout a lifetime.

**Debra L. MERSKIN**

### **Race and Gender Representations in Advertising in Cable Cartoon Programming**

Imagine looking into the mirror and not seeing yourself reflected back. Adrienne Rich posits "When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you ... when someone with the authority of a teacher ... describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing" (166).

This is what the television viewing experience is like for millions of children who have few to no examples of kids who look like them, talk like them, or live like them. This "symbolic annihilation" has profound psychosocial effects on both minority and White children's developing sense of personal and social identity and perceptions of one another. Children's television exposure begins in infancy and persists throughout their lifetimes (on this, see Larson). Thus, what is learned during the early years is critical.

The most prevalent and controversial form of media content, advertising, is a particularly powerful force in children's television viewing environments (see McNeal; Rose, Bush, Kahle). This is the case for many reasons, but at the forefront is very young children's inability to distinguish between ads and program content (see Stutts, Vance, Hudleson; Ward, Wackman, Wartella) and limited vocabulary skills that inhibit understanding (see Van Evra). Children's vulnerability to cultivation by media effects is greater not only because of the amount of time spent with television but also because of less developed critical skills and cognitive abilities (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli). The cable television viewing environment differs substantially from that of broadcast. Not only is the amount of programming devoted to children greater on cable, resulting in more ads, but also federal restrictions on the content of television programs and the advertising that runs in them do not apply to cable, where more than half of all children's programs appear and program quality is generally low (Jordan). Since children spend a good portion of their TV time watching cable, and watch the advertisements within the programs, it is no surprise that commercials, instead of programming, are the focus of media creative industries (see Jhally). Given regulatory and substantive variations between broadcast and cable in the programming environment for children's television, it is important to examine the nature and quality of the advertising that occurs within and around these shows, particularly in terms of representations of race, ethnicity, and gender. This prompts the question "what do children see and what do they learn about racial, ethnic, and gender identity in the advertisements they see?"

Answering this question is the focus of this paper in which I examine race and ethnicity in 381 commercials on cable television, specifically on the Turner Cartoon Network (TCN), an environment devoted entirely to cartoons and to children. Although TCN is not the most-watched cable network that targets children (that honor goes to Nickelodeon), TCN has enjoyed phenomenal growth, rising to the #2 position, behind Nickelodeon and above the Disney Channel among children 2-11 years old on a full-day basis (Leith 1G). Despite the plethora of studies about children and television in the 1970s and 1980s, less attention has been paid to the content of advertising that targets kids since that time (see Smith; Riffe, Goldson, Saxton, Yu). While there is a corpus of research on gender representations in children's television advertising (e.g., Smith; Furnham, Abramsky, Gunter), particularly network TV, much less examines racial and ethnic representations, particularly portrayals in ads on cable (see Merskin). The study at hand adds to that scarce literature. Furthermore, there is little research on the content of child-targeted advertising on cable television (see Merskin). According to social learning theory (see Bandura; Tan), early learning about race contributes not only to children's present conception of self and others, but also provides the foundation for the construction of stereotypes that persist throughout their lifetimes (see Davis; Merskin). Considering the amount of time children 2-11 spend with television (150-200 hours per month), seeing 30-40,000 commercials per year (see Wechsler; Condry), they often spend more time with TV observing behavior there than they do with

other people. Research on children also reports a greater liking for television commercials than that of adults (see Robertson and Rossiter; Wartella). By watching members of their own and other races perform activities, children learn what is expected of them (or not) and what they can and cannot expect from others. Thus, this constructed worldview is reinforced in television programs and commercials that provide "some of the most compact, consistent packages of value-laden information that is congruent with the values pervading program content" (Haefner 86). Research shows television commercials that target children present race and gender as stable categories, and these messages are regularly repeated to this receptive audience (see Li-Vollmer). Therefore, the following research question framed this study: What are the racial, ethnic, and gender portrayals in advertising on the Turner Cartoon Network?

Much of what we know about children's relationships with television programs comes from the early research of Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker. During the course of their extensive interviews with more than 6000 children and 2000 parents, they found frequent viewing begins, for most children, around the age of three and remains high until the child is around 12-years-old. Although there were social class, race, and aptitude differences, they found that children spend more time with television than reading, listening to the radio, or going to the movies. This research was replicated in the early 1970s with the same findings by Jack Lyle and H.R. Hoffman. The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior provided the impetus for research on children and television violence, but also included children's relationships to advertising (see Comstock and Paik; Culley, Lazer, and Atkin; Signorielli; Ward; Ward, Levinson, Wackman; Ward and Robertson; Ward and Wackman). Importantly, what came out of this large body of work resulted in the recognition of children as a special and vulnerable audience.

Television is the most-used form of media throughout childhood. Thus, children are afforded a "special status when it comes to media regulation" (Snyder 68) owing to their limited cognitive abilities and lack of adult discretionary involvement in comprehending advertising. This consumption begins early, before age 2, when children begin watching, and trying to make sense of, television commercials (see Hollenbeck and Slaby). According to Dale Kunkel and Walter Gantz, until children reach 7-8 years of age, they "tend to be highly ego-centric and lack the ability to recognize the complex intentions and motivations of others" (149). Children below this age cannot differentiate between programs and commercial messages (see Adler; Minnow and Lamay; Signorielli; Unnikrishnan and Bajpai) and more specifically, do not recognize the selling intent of the commercial (see Minnow and Lamay). Research suggests the "dynamic and attention-grabbing nature of television" is greatest during commercials thereby justifying study independent from program content (Furnham and Farragher 61). As children grow, new information is incorporated into their repertoire of social understandings and assimilated as part of behavior (see Piaget). Through words and images, television advertising teaches children, by example, how to interact with one another and with adults (see Alexander and Morrison). The "performative aspects" of race, ethnicity, and gender (see Butler), promote the telling and repetition of particular cultural stories about how to be and become a part of mainstream society, mapping dominant ideologies of class, race, ethnicity, and gender (see Meijer). Sandra L. Bem states that ads, through specific codes, perform the cultural task of forming children into "gendered native[s]" (465). These codes, by featuring only one sex, one race, or by demonstrating identity submission on the part of race or gender, help inform the often limited range of experiences children can try out in the real world.

Social learning theory suggests children learn through observation (see Bandura, *Social Foundations*). Until a more mature understanding of commercials develops, "children are at a psychological disadvantage in an advertising world that presumes the rationality of its receivers" (Haefner 83). Social expectancy theory suggests the media contribute to expectations (or lack thereof) of other people in the world (see Jussim). Stable messages about race cultivate attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in children that mimic what goes on in the programs and ads (see Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan).

The pedagogical lessons of television advertising work to inform, affirm, and reinforce the status quo as the "first curriculum," school being second (Postman 50). Thus, through the codes of advertising, communicated by the presence and absence of minorities and characters playing stereotypical race and sex roles, children learn what is and what is not expected of themselves and others in society and how to interact in social life. Children of color typically watch more television than do White children, perceive television as more realistic, use the medium as an information source, and thereby are more likely to incorporate what they see into their role and self-schema (Li-Vollmer; McDermott and Greenberg; Van Evra). By virtue of not seeing themselves reflected, among other factors, these children often suffer lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression than do White children (see Choi and Lahey). This is particularly the case among Native American youth (Campbell and Eggerling-Boeck). For all children, the absence of or limited roles for children of color limits understanding and empathy between groups.

According to Robert M. Liebert, John M. Neal, and Emily S. Davidson, "commercials aimed particularly at children ... foster stereotypes, both sexual and racial" (119). More specifically, commercials are criticized for the selling strategies used to reach the child audience and for the production methods used that reinforce stereotypes. Voice overs, for example, are consistently male (see Johnson and Young; Chandler and Griffiths; Elliott and Wootoon) and verb elements emphasize competition, destruction, action, and agency (boys) or passivity and nurturing (girls) (see Johnson and Young). Other production techniques such as framing and timing involve more fades and dissolves in commercials that target girls, whereas boy targeted ads are more variable with sharper cuts (see Furnham and Farragher) function as subtle forms of sex role conferral. Gender research consistently reveals males outnumber females in children's television programs and ads (see Furnham, Abramsky, Gunter; Browne) and the roles played are stereotypical (see Furnham and Farragher). Race and gender identity are among the "image-based influence[s]" of advertising (Jhally 81). Advertisements are consumer-training grounds that acculturate and socialize children as they prepare for adult roles (see Alexander and Morrison). Production techniques encourage children to project themselves into the roles they see and incorporate the activities into their play dynamics.

Before the late 1960s, characters in children's commercials were almost exclusively White (see Rossiter). Since the 1970s, research has shown that people of color are underrepresented in mass media (see Graves) and when present, in order of frequency are Blacks, Latinos, and Asians. By the late 1980s, about 20 percent of commercials included both White and minority characters together (see Elkin and Handel). While there tends to be an overrepresentation of Asian Americans in technologically based commercials (an example of the model minority stereotype), African Americans are under-represented in these same ads, reinforcing a poorly educated stereotype (see Taylor, Lee, Stern). Charles Taylor, Ju Yung Lee, and Barbara Stern found, in 595 commercials featuring a real or animated child or children, that 42% were peopled only by White kids, 57% contained White children and children of color, and only 1% featured minority children unaccompanied by a White child or children. Race representations in children's commercials are well below real world demographics and when shown at all, tend to be in lower status roles and frequently silent (see Atkin and Heald; Barcus; Doolittle and Pepper). Children serve as resources for each other about one's own and other racial and ethnic groups (Graves). Commercials messages that reach them are loaded with ideological information about race, gender, ethnicity, and social class, i.e., power. Ellen Seiter's textual analyses of children's commercials reveals that while White characters are active, admirable, and assertive, minority characters are passive followers (*Sold*). White children are seen more often in commercials that focus on creative and intellectual skills. Stereotypical roles also confine representations of children of color (see Seiter, *Sold; Different*; Greenberg and Brand). African American children most often play musicians, athletes, and service workers and are the "token minority" (see Seiter, *Different*), whereas children, who belong to other groups, if seen at all, function as exotic helpers. Therefore, not only are White children seen more often in positions of higher regard than are minority children, but they are

also given more power and respect. Further, Mary Strom Larson examined portrayals of Latino, White, African American, and Asian children in television commercials using skin tone and facial features to identify race. While settings, activities, interactions, and products advertised featured more racial diversity than in the past, ads with only minority children were rare. Meredith Li-Vollmer examined visibility, status, and roles racial groups were assigned in American commercials and found the proportion of White and African American children over represented during programming, and while Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian children were dramatically underrepresented. When cast, racial and ethnic minorities were in lower status roles, and never spokespeople, imitators of action, or problem solvers. On the one hand, this study found numerically more representations of African Americans. On the other hand, particularly in terms of social power, this gain was offset by these depictions.

For this study, two constructed weeks of advertisements on the Turner Cartoon Network were examined in programs running from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. weekdays for a total of 28 hours of programming. This time period is appropriate as it contains programs and advertisements targeted toward at-home kids and those arriving home after school with viewing ending before parental choices (such as the news) might influence children's viewing. Saturdays were not included or regarded as distinct because cable cartoon programming is available seven days a week. A preliminary sample of data coded resulted in an average inter-coder reliability rate of 99 percent. Duplicate commercials were counted because repetition is an important part of commercial recall (see Surmanek). Advertisements that targeted adults and public service advertisements were not coded (such as ads for long distance services and adult shampoos). A total of 381 real person and animated commercials were coded on several dimensions: product category advertised (toys, cereal, snack foods, and clothes), gender address (target audience), sex of the narrator, setting (indoors or outdoors), gender of cast (all boys or all girls or either alone), and the race of the cast (individuals or in groups). For example, if the cast was male or female and the product was traditionally associated with a particular sex, then the commercial was coded according to that target. In 50% of the ads, the cast was entirely White children. A mixed-race group that included White characters occurred in slightly more than one third of the commercials. When race and gender were compared within White-only ads, one quarter targeted girls, nearly half targeted boys, and one-third targeted both groups. Interestingly, ads in which the target was a girl occasionally had a Black-only cast, but that was the only occurrence of a cast that did not include at least one White child. Ads that targeted boys were more likely to have an entirely White cast, as were ads that targeted both groups.

When Asian American children appeared by themselves in commercials (3%), the distribution was fairly equitable between girls (27%) and boys (36%), and both groups (36%). African American only casts occurred in only 2% of the ads. Mixed race groups were more likely to target both boys and girls (55%), followed by girls-only (27%) and boys-only (19%). No ads contained *identifiable* Latino/as or Native American children. To arrive at a sense of the kinds of products advertised, the commercials were coded according to product categories. Toys were advertised most (63%), followed by snack foods (30%) and cereal (5%). Clothing accounted for 2% of the commercials. When gender and product were cross tabulated, girls were the target for 35% of the toy ads and boys for 50% of the clothing ads. Both groups were targeted for 90% of the snack foods. Although a mixed-sex group was the most common (32%), boy-only cases were more common (16%) than girl-only casts (4%). And when the sex of the narrator was compared with the sex of the target for the product, nearly ninety percent of the ads in which the narrator was female targeted girls, while 3% of the ads with a female narrator targeted boys. In nearly half of the ads in which the narrator was male, the target was male and the other half ads containing both boys and girls. This finding is consistent with research on the persistence of male voice-overs in commercials and with the programming philosophy that says boys will watch ads that target boys, while girls will attend to ads that target them both.

The setting of the ad is also an important source of information about status. Ads that targeted girls typically occurred indoors, in their bedrooms (36%). A commercial for the Barbie doll, for exam-



ple, was softly lit, and emphasized pastel colors. The action took place in a girl's frilly bedroom, with a group of girls sitting on the floor next to the lace comforter covered bed, playing with their "Barbies." The voice over in this commercial was female. Ads occurring outdoors often included both boys and girls (girls 23%, boys 23%, both 29%). Boys, however, were the active agents in the commercial. An example was for an action-adventure game where the children were dressed in camouflage attire, maneuvering through a make-believe jungle. The boys lead and the girls followed. This was also the case in fantasy settings where boys were targeted 30% of the time and both girls and boys 32 percent. These space-based commercials had teams, sometimes mixed sex groups with boys initiating the action.

Television commercials that target children certainly are not the only part of US-American media where undesirable and limited portrayals of minority group children and girls are found. However, "like the entertainment programs which they support, they are an important source of children's expectations -- and prejudices" (Liebert, Neal, Davidson 119). The findings of this preliminary study offer good news and bad news for those interested in the production elements used in child-targeted ads. In response to the question, "what are the race and gender portrayals in advertising on the Turner Cartoon Network?" the findings suggest commercials that featured an all-male cast or mixed cast are more common than an all-female cast. This result is consistent with programming and advertising strategies that suggest the safest bet is to create a product boys will like, knowing girls will also be interested. These modes of presentation reinforce traditional sex-role stereotypes. The ads also privilege race, not only in terms of the number of White characters presented but also the power relationships between White and minority children. Not only do boys, in most cases White boys, dominate the ads, but when children of color are included they are never without White accompaniment, unless they are girls, and the product is Barbie.

Although the number of all-White commercials was actually lower than the percentage of Whites in the total U.S. population, mixed-race groups nearly always included White children as part of the cast. White male authority is also reinforced through the voice of the narrator. While not raced, the voice-overs perpetuate the belief that men are more powerful, more knowledgeable, more in control, hence more important in American society—the ones to be taken seriously. These findings are corroborated outside the United States in studies of New Zealand (see Furnham and Farragher), Japan (see Rose, Bush, Kahle), Australia (see Browne), and Great Britain (see Furnham and Farragher) child targeted television ads.

This study suggests several areas for future research. While the current study adds to the literature on advertising that targets children and begins the dialogue on the relationship of advertising, cable TV, and young people, there is need for more work in this area. Advertising in the unregulated cable environment could be compared with that appearing on the networks. Longitudinal research, for example, could explore whether there have been any changes in race and gender portrayals over time. In addition, a study of the action and interaction in the commercials and what girls do and what boys do in mixed group settings could provide more information about roles assumed within the ads and power dynamics affirmed. Qualitative work into children's attitudes toward these commercials would offer important insights on what children feel is going on in the ads and what they feel the commercials are telling them. Thus, the implications of this study are far-reaching. First, we find that, despite some progress that has taken place in terms of representations of race and gender in television commercials targeting kids, power dynamics remain largely unexamined. Girls, particularly minority girls, are more often shown in the home, performing stereotypical domestic tasks while boys, particularly White boys, are shown in the outside world doing active and exciting things. When minority children are shown they are either accompanied by Whites (i.e., not left on their own), or marginalized with girls in ads that only girls are likely to pay attention to. As Seiter points out, "gender and race seem to be both prominent and invisible in television commercials (*Sold* 134). The salience of gender and race will depend on who is watching the commercial."

Considering girls and boys are fairly equally targeted is only somewhat positive. On the one hand, advertisers are seeing girls as an audience for products, primarily toys, food and clothing. However, equal opportunity advertising does not really offer much in the way of understanding the content or power dynamics in the ads. Simply because girls are targeted nearly as often does not mean the representations are equitable. It is certain that, if an ad is to be taken seriously by children, the cast will not be all girls or all minorities and will not be narrated by a female voice. Rather it is a male voice and the White boy casts that are shown as the leaders in the world of children's advertising. These findings are consistent with the predictions of social learning theory that suggests what children see on television has the potential to teach them about socially constructed, expected sex roles and racial/ethnic stereotypes.

In conclusion, this study adds to the literature on gender and race roles in advertising that targets children. Co-viewing, early intervention, and dialogue with our children about the commercials they see offer important opportunities to discourage, at every turn, sexist and racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. However, is this realistic for most parents and caregivers? An early analysis of advertising by Erving Goffman prompted him to ask, "Why do ads not look strange to us?" (216). I assert they do not because television ads that target children are consistent with television ads that target adults, filled with White individuals doing important things, presenting limited roles to girls about being girls (and future women) and boys about being boys (and future men). The lessons we teach our children about living with themselves and others are important for everyone's future, as Neil Postman noted in his *The Disappearance of Childhood*: "children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see" (xi). Let us hope they have nice things to say.

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