

Rainbow Nation, Rainbow Advertising? Racial Diversity of Female Portrayals in South African Television Commercials

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Abstract

The paper examines female portrayals in South African television commercials, with a focus on roles and race. Advertising portrayals are generally considered reflective of the gender and racial diversity of a nation; and should therefore represent the target audience. In a country that features historical racial inequalities, the realignment of proportional racial representation is important. The study content analysed 245 unduplicated television commercials that featured women. Women were most frequently portrayed as product users; and they featured most often in personal care-product advertising. Contrary to the social diversity of the people of South Africa, the racial representation in the analysed commercials was over-representative in terms of the minority White racial group. Advertisers need to realign the representation of the different racial groups in television commercials, since a large and lucrative market segment could well be alienated by the current misrepresentation of racial diversity in these commercials.

Keywords: commercials, race, roles, television, women

Introduction

Advertising should ideally mirror the socio-cultural composition of a nation, including relevant portrayals of race and gender. As such, portrayals in advertisements are seen to reflect reigning socio-cultural norms, which allow consumers to identify with the message, and inherently, also the brand. It is said that television commercials point to the racial heartbeat of a nation which can positively influence relations between the different racial groups (Entman & Rojecki as cited in Jacobs, Henderson & Baldasty, 2003). This becomes especially important in a country like South Africa, considering its history of apartheid.

South Africa is often referred to as the “rainbow nation”, which encapsulates the multi-culturalism of the country. After 1994, in post-apartheid South Africa, both government and business have invested a lot of effort to address the inequalities of the past. One way is by means of the realignment of

racial representation in government and business – through the Employment Equity programme (Department of Labour, 2004). Another way (although not formally structured by means of a programme) is to ensure that gender and race portrayals in advertisements are consistent with the consumer culture of the country.

It is said that portrayals in advertisements can develop and exacerbate gender and racial prejudice if the advertising imagery is not aligned with social realities (Das, 2011). Furthermore, public reaction to specific imagery in media is related to the frequency of such imagery (Branston & Stafford as cited in Nguyen, 2015, p. 293); that is, prejudice will intensify under conditions of high frequency.

The media system dependency theory serves as a background to this study, where television and its audience are considered in the context

of larger social systems in this case, gender and race (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). The purpose of this study is to examine the representation of women from different racial groups in South African television commercials. Firstly, several studies relating to female role portrayals have been conducted across countries (Silverstein & Silverstein, 1974; Ferrante, Haynes & Kingsley, 1988; Siu & Au, 1997; Acevedo, Ramuski, Nohara & Trindade, 2010; Ishak, 2013). Secondly, a number of studies analysed the racial diversity in television commercials across several countries (Bristol, Lee & Hunt, 1995; Cassim & Monteiro, 2001; Jacobs *et al.*, 2003; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Sudbury & Wilberforce, 2006; Meyers & Okoro, 2012). Thirdly, a few studies examined the intersection between gender and race in television commercials (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Merskin, 2008; Luyt, 2011; Meyers & Okoro, 2012; Michelle, 2012).

However, to date, there has not been any known study combining female role portrayals with racial diversity within the South African television advertising context. The only study exploring the intersection between race and gender within South African television commercials was the study by Luyt (2011), but this study focused on male portrayals alone.

As such, this paper contributes to filling the gap in the existing literature by examining the role portrayals of women from different racial groups in television commercials within the context of the rainbow nation. For this purpose, the study utilised a quantitative content analysis methodology by studying a sample of television commercials from the most popular television broadcasters in South Africa. The research objectives set out to identify the roles in which women are portrayed, the product categories advertised by women, as well as the representation of the different racial groups in television commercials.

Background and Literature Review

The South African population was estimated to be 54.96 million people in 2015, of which 51%

were females (Statistics South Africa, 2015). The South African population consists of four main racial groups: Black Africans (80.4%) followed by Coloureds (8.8%), Whites (8.3%) and Indians/Asians (2.5%). Women make up a large part (45.2%) of the South African labour force (Statistics South Africa, 2015). In addition, female household heads in the Black population group comprise 43.8% of households - the largest female-headed group of all South African population groups (Statistics South Africa, 2015).

South Africans can access seven television broadcast options: the free-to-air broadcasters (*SABC1*, 2 and 3, as well as *e.tv*), and the subscription broadcasters (*DStv*, *M-Net* and *StarSat*). A total of 91.8% of South African adults have access to television (Optimum Media Direction (OMD), 2014, p. 72).

With regard to advertising, television is the mass medium of choice. This is evident in the high annual advertising expenditure of over R18 million on television commercials, which is almost half (48.9%) of all above-the-line advertising expenditure in South Africa (OMD, 2014, p. 73).

Bearing in mind the changes in the South African landscape since 1994, and the wide-scale access to media in recent years, it is expected that South African advertising should also have changed - especially in terms of its depictions of racial groups and gender roles. This is supported by the media system dependency theory, which postulates, amongst other, dependency relationships between the society and the media, as well as dependency relationships between the media and the audience (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). For this purpose, we focus on the dependency relationship between television as the medium and the audience in terms of gender (specifically female) and race. This dependency relationship varies across systems, including the cultural system and, as such, has a likelihood to affect audiences. In this regard, consumers do not only learn about brands through advertising, but also about other social

functions, such as race and gender roles as portrayed in advertisements.

With regard to the dependency relationship between society and television commercials, we assume that a dependency on television (through television commercials) will, over time, be likely to affect the nature of consumers' activities and decision-making, especially across cultures. This is because the media system dependency theory suggests that individuals rely on media information resources (in our case television commercials) to understand the world and themselves (Patwardhan & Yang, 2003). Visuals in advertisements effectively stimulate learning as they link the branded product to specific types of people and their lifestyles (O'Guinn, Allen & Semenik, 2012). For example, models featured in advertisements serve as individuals to whom the target audience can relate – both in terms of gender and race.

Female Gender-Role Portrayals in Television Commercials

Advertisements utilise pertinent portrayals, often stereotypes, to convey the message to the target audience (Jackson & Vares, 2013). Typical roles that women frequently portray include worker/career woman, homemaker/housewife, wife/mother, decorative, product user, sex object, social relationships, and mannequin/model (McArthur & Resko, 1975).

Most studies compare both male and female roles – and often across countries (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Livingstone & Green, 1986; Gilly, 1988; Wee, Choong & Tambyah, 1995; Ganahl, Prinsen & Netzley, 2003; Paek, Nelson & Vilela, 2011). However, a number of studies focus on female-role portrayals specifically and report that although some female portrayals in television commercials have improved over the years, there is still much stereotyping of women (Ferrante, Haynes & Kingsley, 1988; Siu & Au, 1997; Acevedo, Ramuski, Nohara & Trindade, 2010; Eisend, 2010; Ishak, 2013). A study by Milner and Higgs (2004) indicated that television

commercials in Australia actually became more stereotypical over time with regard to traditional roles for women. Typical stereotypes reported include women being dependent, inactive, young and fulfilling the role of mainly housewife or mother, and have been reported across countries, including the US, UK, Brazil, Egypt, Singapore, India, Australia and China (Siu & Au, 1997; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Furnham & Spencer-Bowdage, 2002; Acevedo, Ramuski, Nohara & Trindade, 2010; Das, 2011; Ishak, 2013; Kumari & Shivani, 2015).

Female-role portrayals in South African television commercials have not been widely studied. One of the first studies focusing on South African television commercials was by Furnham and Spencer-Bowdage (2002) who compared gender roles across British and South African advertisements. Their study reported that greater gender-role stereotyping was present in South Africa. A few years later, a study by Milner (2005) compared gender portrayals across South Africa, Ghana and Kenya. Their findings revealed that in South Africa, women are shown in more independent roles relative to relational roles compared to Ghana, and more working roles compared to Ghana and Kenya. However, the findings of Milner's study has to be interpreted with caution as the small sample sizes in the respective countries made many of the analyses unstable. The afore-mentioned studies focused on the comparison of gender-roles across countries, and not on the female roles *per se*. Finally Luyt (2011) compared the roles depicted of males and females in South African television commercials and reported that females were represented as subordinates. His study, however, focused on the positive and negative aspects of the portrayals – and not on the female roles *per se*.

Female Portrayals in association with Product or Service Categories

Several studies link female portrayals with product or service categories. Main product categories that feature women include personal care products, as well as food and household

items. One example is where women feature predominantly in television commercials for household-cleaning products and personal care products in Saudi, Kenya and Turkey respectively (Mwangi, 1996; Uray & Burnaz, 2003; Nassif & Gunter, 2008).

This is similar in Australian, Portuguese, Indian and Spanish television commercials where physical care and food-product categories most frequently feature women (Mazzella, Durkin, Cerini & Buralli, 1992; Neto & Pinto, 1998; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente, 2007; Das, 2011). Yet another example is Luyt's study (2011) that reported women to be most likely to feature in television commercials for clothes, domestic items, food and personal-care products. A recent example shows females mainly endorsing household products in Indian television commercials (Kumari & Shivani, 2015).

Racial Diversity in Television Commercials

Advertisements are expected to portray the racial diversity of the country in which they feature. Most countries consist of a dominant racial group and several racial minority groups. Several studies have analysed the racial portrayals in television commercials in various countries (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Jacobs *et al.*, 2003; Merskin, 2008; Squires, 2011). These studies report both over- and under-representation of racial groups with regard to the overall population composition.

The findings from one study indicated that although minority groups (non-whites) were represented in American television commercials, those other than African-Americans, were hardly ever included (Jacobs *et al.*, 2003). Interestingly, another study in the US indicated that the majority group (Whites) were also under-represented in American television commercials (Merskin, 2008).

Luyt (2011) reported that the White minority group in South Africa were over-represented in television commercials compared to the black majority group. Conversely, Meyers and

Okoro (2012) found that the racial representation on one South African television station (*SABC 1*), was indeed proportionate to the population diversity where the black majority group was dominant.

Female Race Group association with Role Types and Product Categories

Previous research on gender and race in advertising covered a range of contexts across various platforms, including magazines (Rudansky-Kloppers, 1991; Thomas & Treiber, 2000; Frith, Cheng & Shaw, 2004; Peterson, 2007; Sanger, 2009; Nam, Lee & Hwang, 2011; Jacobs & Tyree, 2013) and television (Bristor, Lee & Hunt, 1995; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Cassim & Monteiro, 2001; Jacobs *et al.*, 2003; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Sudbury & Wilberforce, 2006; Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008; Merskin, 2008; Luyt, 2012; Meyers & Okoro, 2012; Michelle, 2012).

Some of these studies examined the roles portrayed by people of different races in television commercials (or proxies for roles, such as setting or occupation). The findings from these studies varied. For example, Cassim and Monteiro (2001) reported that non-white women were mostly portrayed in 'unidentifiable' occupations, followed by skilled professionals. In another study, White women were reported to be depicted at home more frequently (rather than at work, or in a recreational setting), than were non-white women (Mastro & Stern, 2003). Similarly, Michelle (2012) found that White women were most frequently portrayed as homemakers, and non-white women as 'glamour models'. As there is no clear direction in terms of specific associations between role portrayals and race, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H₁: Female racial group representations in South African television commercials will differ significantly in terms of its association with specific role types.

Several studies report on differences in the association of racial groups with specific product categories. Two studies found that non-white people were less likely to be depicted in advertising of expensive products, such as cars and technology (Cassim & Monteiro, 2001; Jacobs *et al.*, 2003). Conversely, a study by Mastro and Stern (2003) reported that Whites were most likely to be associated with technological products, whereas non-white people were more likely to be associated with financial services. A more recent study by Michelle (2012) made a distinction between personal hygiene and personal grooming products. Her study found that White people were predominantly associated with household and personal hygiene products and non-white people with personal grooming products.

Considering that female racial differences in product associations do exist in advertising, the following hypothesis was set:

H₂: Female racial group representations will differ significantly in terms of its associations with specific product categories.

Method

A quantitative content analysis was conducted on a sample of television commercials that were aired on selected channels of South African television broadcasters. The content analysis aimed to answer the following research questions:

- i. In which *roles* are women portrayed in commercials?
- ii. In which *product categories* are women featured in commercials?
- iii. Are women from different racial groups portrayed *proportionally* to the South African racial population distribution?
- iv. Do commercials featuring women that represent different racial groups *differ* in terms of its associations with specific *role* types?
- v. Do commercials featuring women that represent different racial

groups *differ* in terms of its associations with specific *product categories*?

Television commercials that aired on the widely accessible free-to-air South African channels during prime time (18:00-22:00) on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays during a one-month period were included in the sample. The percentage of total audience of the channels was as follows (The South African Audience Research Foundation, 2009): *SABC 1* (98.4%); *SABC 2* (98.6%); *SABC 3* (96.8%) and *e.tv* (96.3%).

Non-probability purposive sampling was employed as only commercials that featured women were eligible for inclusion. The selected time frame contained 3 556 commercials, of which 1 404 contained women. Duplicate commercials featuring women were noted, but excluded from the final analysis, resulting in a total of 245 commercials that were analysed.

Clear and unambiguous categories are essential for reliable content analysis, therefore the study included detailed descriptions of categories, which were outlined in a code book. The coding categories included visual representations of female roles, racial representation and the product/service categories advertised. Inter-coder reliability between three independent coders was measured, using Krippendorff's alpha (for single-response categories such as product category) and percentage agreement (for multiple-response categories such as roles and race, where more than one option may be present in a commercial). The reliability scores were as follows: roles 84.1%, race 92.8%, and product category 100%. These reliability scores were acceptable as they exceeded the 80% cut-off as suggested by Neuendorf (2002).

The role categories were developed using roles commonly identified in the literature. Particular emphasis was placed on the roles that featured in Rudansky-Kloppers' (1991) study as there was no other study published

that focused on females, specifically within the South African context.

The roles were defined on the basis of four criteria: character, props, setting and product advertised (Dyer, 2008; Rudansky-Kloppers, 1991). Brief descriptions of the categories used in the study follow (with detailed descriptions available in the codebook):

- i. Career woman: A woman dressed in working clothes, such as a uniform or suit; and this would include professional women, labourers, and office workers.
- ii. Homemaker: A dependent woman – depicted performing household duties, and using household products.
- iii. Mannequin: Her main function is the demonstration of the product, which is any form of apparel.
- iv. Mother: The woman is portrayed with a child, displaying a nurturing disposition and parenting actions.
- v. Physically decorative: A woman depicted as the physical ideal – a picture of beauty and attractiveness.
- vi. Product user: The woman is using or preparing to make use of the advertised product.
- vii. The romantic: A woman depicted with, or focused on, a man in an affectionate manner (includes *inter alia* ‘wife’).
- viii. Sex object: This woman is portrayed in a sexually alluring manner, wearing provocative or revealing clothes.
- ix. Social being: The woman in contact with other persons in a social setting.
- x. Background element: A non-functional, non-definable portrayal that primarily serves to fill a space.
- xi. Other: Any definable functional portrayals that do not fit into any of the specific categories.

Options for ‘other’ and ‘background element’ were included based on the results of the pilot study.

Racial representations were measured according to the population descriptions used by Statistics South Africa: Black African, Coloured, Indian/Asian and White.

Results

Roles in which Women are portrayed in Commercials

The results indicated the following roles: product user (24.7%); social being (19.2%); other (13%); career woman (11.7%); background element (8.3%); mother (7%); physically decorative (6.2%); homemaker (5.5%); the romantic (2.3%); mannequin (1.3%) and sex object (0.8%).

In order to facilitate further statistical analyses, some categories (notably smaller ones) were collapsed into similar groupings in order not to violate the minimum requirements for chi-square analysis. The categories of homemaker, mother, romantic and social being were combined into a broader ‘relational’ category. The physically decorative, mannequin and sex object were combined into a broader ‘decorative’ category and the category labelled as ‘other’ encompassed background elements as well as the ‘other’ categories. Career woman and product user remained stand-alone categories.

From the adjusted categories, results showed that women were most frequently depicted in relational roles (34%), followed by the product user (24.7%). The incidence of women portrayed in the ‘other’ category was quite high (21.3%); and this category was later qualitatively analysed to determine any new roles, but falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Racial Representation

The racial representation in the commercials was as follows: Black (37.5%); Coloured (4.3%); Indian/Asian (2.3%); White (52.2%) and other/unknown (3.7%). Almost 20% of the commercials featured multiple-racial

portrayals - mostly Black and White women in one commercial.

Due to the comparatively low representations of Coloured and Indian/Asian female representations, these groups were combined with the Black race group. This decision was motivated by the fact that Black or so-called 'non-white' racial groups (Black, Coloured and Indian/Asian) in the current socio-political arena in South Africa are presented with favourable conditions of employment, as stated previously. The resultant distribution was 52.2% White women and 47.9% non-white women. Thus, depictions of White women were predominant in the sample – which is not proportional to the South African racial distribution.

With regard to Hypothesis 1 (H_1 : Female racial group representation in South African television commercials will differ significantly in terms of its association with specific role types), the results also showed that women of different races were associated with specific roles: non-white women were more often portrayed in relational roles than were White women (53.7% versus 46.3%). However, the chi-square analysis revealed that the difference was not statistically significant (p -value=0.6408; $df=4$), and consequently Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Product Categories Advertised featuring Women

Thirteen product categories were included in the research: apparel, beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), transport, electronics, entertainment, food, health, household, personal care, services, sport and 'other'. The initial results are presented in Figure 1.

Women were primarily depicted in commercials for personal care items (26.1%), followed by food (14.3%). Due to the low values in some categories, the data were collapsed into similar categories to enable further analyses. The resultant categories were: Appearance: Apparel, health and medication, personal care;

- i. Household and foodstuffs: Alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, food, household items;
- ii. Non-traditional products (those not traditionally associated with females): Transport, electronic, services;
- iii. Other: entertainment, sport and others.

With regard to Hypothesis 2 (H_2 : Female racial group representation in South African television commercials will differ significantly in terms of its associations with specific product categories), the chi-square analysis results revealed significant associations ($p=0.0346$; $df=3$). The results show support for Hypothesis 2 in that non-white women were significantly more likely to be portrayed in commercials for non-traditional products, than were White women. White women, on the other side, were more likely to feature in commercials for products related to appearance, as well as household and foodstuffs.

Discussion

The findings indicate that women are most often depicted in relational roles, which concurs with some of the findings from research in other countries (Ibroscheva, 2007; Das, 2011). Van Loggerenberg and Herbst (2010) assert that portraying the advertised brand, as something that brings people together, is a successful way of facilitating social interaction. Thus, featuring women as social beings in advertising seems to be an effective way to facilitate identification with the brand. The results indicating that non-white women are more often portrayed in relational roles, provides food for thought and warrants further investigation in future studies. With regard to racial representation, the majority of television commercials reflected White females (52.2%), which is not proportional to the South African population distribution as they constitute only 8.3% of the total population (Statistics South Africa, 2015). There is thus evidence from this study that Black females are under-represented in television commercials, and a minority racial

group (Whites) are over-represented. This finding is in line with some studies in other countries where racially disproportionate results were also reported (Furnham & Spencer-Bowdage, 2002; Hung, Li & Belk, 2007; Peterson, 2007; Maher, Herbst, Childs & Finn, 2008; Merskin, 2008; Luyt, 2011).

The under-representation of non-white women in television commercials in South Africa is important as it suggests that marketers are disregarding a substantial and potentially lucrative female segment. Particularly when one considers the high number of female household heads (43.8%) in the Black population group (Statistics South Africa, 2015). In this regard one can assert that local advertisers do not seem to exhibit an understanding of the rising Black consumer market.

The under-representation of the non-white women is also concerning as they do have ample access to television, with *SABC 1* (included in the study) being the preferred television channel. The target audience is, therefore, readily accessible, yet marketers are not representing non-white women sufficiently in commercials. This is disappointing, since the media system dependency theory indicates that a medium (in our case television commercials) is likely to affect the nature of consumer decision-making within cultural systems (in our case the decision-making of different female racial groups). Therefore, the Black, Coloured and Indian/Asian female consumers would be more likely to perceive a brand relevant to them if their cultural representations were evident in the commercials. South African advertisers are thus neglecting very important dependency relationships between television commercials and, especially the majority Black group.

With regard to product categories, women were frequently depicted as product users, which is in line with findings from other studies (Furnham, Pallangyo & Gunter, 2001; Ibroscheva, 2007). This portrayal makes sense, as television is particularly suited to product

demonstration. In terms of the intersection between gender and race with regard to product categories, non-white women featured significantly more often in commercials for non-traditional female products (such as transport and electronics) than did White women. In turn, White women were more likely to be featured in the commercials of products related to appearance, household and foodstuffs. This contrasts with the findings of Cassim and Monteiro (2001), who found that Black people in South African commercials were not featured in non-traditional product advertising. This suggests that stereotyping may have decreased and that women, at least for the non-white group, now represent a viable market for the non-traditional female products (such as cars and houses). This is consistent with a report by the Unilever Institute (2011), which stated that 69% of upper-class Black females are the key decision-makers on large household purchases. What is interesting is why advertisers treat the racial groups differently when it comes to non-traditional female product advertising – and warrants further investigation in the future.

Socio-psychological theory may shed some light on these findings. We know from this theory that society and the individual are interlinked (Iyengar & McGuire, 1993) as the individual attempts to meet the needs of society, and society assists the individual in attaining goals. It may be that marketers are creating associations between female consumers and specific products in an attempt to reflect the needs of society. Such depicted associations (for example, Black women depicted as consumers of traditionally masculine products) may be considered by the individual consumer as reflective of reigning social norms, and then have the effect of stimulating similar purchase behaviour as those depicted in the advertising. If one assumes that the role depictions in terms of product categories actually do reflect the social norms arising from family and other reference groups, this may be a very effective approach to advertising.

Concluding remarks

This paper focused on the role portrayals of women from different racial groups in television commercials, including representations across product categories advertised. The findings show that the racial representation in South African television commercials does not actually reflect the multi-culturalism of the rainbow nation. The findings suggest that South African advertisers are neglecting a prominent and lucrative consumer market by not representing the majority group of Black women proportionately in commercials. As a result, non-white female consumers may be less likely to relate to a brand that does not feature non-white women in its commercials.

The study contributes to the body of knowledge by expanding the research on the intersection between race and gender within the South African television commercials context. The findings emphasise the need for advertisers to realign the racial representation of females in a significant proportion of the population in television commercials. By neglecting to do so, advertisers may be alienating a large and valuable market segment.

A limitation of the study was that it did not include all television broadcasters in South Africa; neither did it include emerging media, such as electronic media. Future research should consider expanding the sample to include the subscription broadcasters, as the commercials featured in those channels could possibly sketch a different picture. Qualitative research is advisable to reveal the opinions and perceptions of women on the portrayals of females in commercials. Valuable insight may also be gained if the perceptions of women in terms of racial identification with advertising images are investigated.

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