A Content Analysis: African Americans Presence in Prime Time
Advertisements on BET and MTV Networks

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Introduction

Advertising has become one of the most visible and pervasive institutions in American culture (Taylor, Lee & Stern, 1995). Television is the most popular medium for advertising. The average household has the television on for at least 30 hours a week and about one-fifth of every broadcast consists of advertising (Coltrane, 2000). Billions of dollars are being spent every year by advertisers to sell products, images and lifestyles. Clearly, advertising has an enormous amount of power to shape one’s attitude, beliefs and values (Brown, 1999). This influence makes it important to explore how advertisers present race.

The economic and demographic trends of the late 1980’s and 1990’s, along with the increase in cultural awareness, encouraged advertisers to move into more culturally inclusive marketing strategies (Brown, 1999). The practice of African American targeted advertising has grown at a greater rate than ad spending overall (Elliot, 1995). African Americans appearances in television advertising have increased steadily since 1975, (Wilkes & Valencia, 1990). Although the numerical representation of African Americans in television has grown, the portrayal of them is still far from ideal. Dates and Barlow (1990), found that “black media stereotypes are not the natural, harmless products of an idealized popular culture; rather they are more commonly socially constructed images that are selective partial, one dimensional and distorted in their portrayal of African Americans” (p. 5).

Previous research addressing the portrayals of African Americans on television has focused mainly on network television. This past research frequently examines the issues of frequency of representation, positive or negative depictions and changes in portrayals over time (Taylor, Lee & Stern, 1995).

Minority media portrayals in the United States have been accused of reflecting and perpetuating racism that is dominant in our culture. The frequency of African Americans in television advertising does not accurately reflect the percentage of the population (Nelson 1990). Currently blacks represent 12.9% of the U.S. population (US Census, 2002). As a result, one would expect to routinely view African Americans in general media. Kasarjian, (1969) conducted a study on the portrayal of African Americans and found very few ads treating African Americans as equals that the advertising industry “cannot take pride in their supposedly new found societal responsibility” (p. 39).

Over the last 20 years African American media has become crucial to the advertising industry in reaching African Americans. African Americans hold $469 billion in purchasing power, more than any other minority group (Brown 1999). This fact makes it vital for advertisers to find the most effective ways to reach African American consumers.
With the emergence of culturally targeted media such as John H. Johnson’s JET and Ebony magazines targeted for African American women, Earl Craves Black Enterprise, an African American business magazine and Quincy Jones entertainment magazine, Vibe and with other culturally targeted media such as urban radio stations, advertisers are now more able than ever to reach African American consumers (Kern, 1994).

Until 1980 there was not a single television network dedicated to the concerns of the African American audience. Since its debut in 1980, Black Entertainment Television has created programming specifically for the African American audience. BET reaches over 65 million people ages 18-39 (Jones, 1990). BET provides public affairs, dramatic and comedy series, and musical programs that offer black characters and themes not shown on other channels. Beck’s (1989) research found that Black Entertainment Television was created to be “the primary source of entertainment and information for Black America” (p. 59). The impact of BET on the African American viewers has been substantial. Jones (1990) found that blacks that subscribe to BET spend 40% of their viewing time watching this network. Her research on the BET audience has also indicated that BET viewers tend to be younger and more culturally aware. These viewers are more confident in the way that black owned media portrays black subjects and tend to be more skeptical of black oriented programs. Jones’ (1990) research also suggests that African American audiences have “turned to media owned and operated by blacks because of the way they are portrayed in the mainstream white owned media” (p. 479).

With the recent $2.9 billion buy out by Viacom in November 2000, BET is no longer black owned. However, Viacom has kept BET as a separate entity under the Viacom umbrella rather than being merged into its existing basic-cable network that includes MTV and VH-1. A major concern is that the now Caucasian owned network will not continue to address the needs of the African American audience, consumer or portray African Americans realistically. Research by Elliot, (1995) argues that “BET’s ability to portray black role models in favorable social situations is determined to a large extent by the images embedded in its commercial spots” (p. 83). BET has an extended need for ad revenue, more so than large print vehicles like Vogue or New Yorker. This need has presented closer scrutiny of culturally embedded messages targeted to its audience. BET’s advertising should be 85 percent African American using the theory that advertisements should reflect the population (BET’s audience is 85 percent African American).

Viacom also owns Music Television (MTV), which was created in 1980, only months after BET. With a target audience of 18-24 year olds, MTV’s advertisements have been proclaimed as trendsetters in the world of commercial advertising. The once Caucasian dominated network is becoming increasingly diverse. During prime time, BET and MTV provide similar programming aimed at the younger viewing audience. Currently, MTV is running Hip-Hop: Making the Band and Snoop Dogg’s Doggy Fizzle Telefizzle during prime time. Clearly African Americans are a part of MTV line up. MTV is including African Americans in their programming, but it is questioned how they are integrating their advertising.

Despite the interest and calls for more research into the topic of race in television advertising, the studies are extremely rare (Coltrane, 2000). There has been more research on gender in television programming, research on race and ethnicity. Coltrane
(2000) suggests that this may be due to the media’s preoccupation with sex and female beauty. The media has the power to shape attitudes toward minority groups. Previous research studies by Whittler, (1991) found that “viewers do not necessarily mimic what they see on television, however, what they do see promotes specific forms of understanding, interpersonation and experience” (p. 59).

Through content analysis this study will address the presence of African Americans during prime time on MTV and BET cable networks. Past researchers (Kassarjian, 1969; Dominick & Greenberg, 1970; Wilkes & Valencia, 1989; Licata & Biswas, 1993; Reid & Bergh, 1980; Weigel, 1980) have used: level of integration, product type, product value, perceived importance, occupational role, and social situation depiction to provide an accurate analysis of advertisements. As a means of comparison, the same categories will be used for this study. The following questions will be answered:

1. Are the incidences of commercials containing blacks greater in the culturally specific medium than in mainstream media?
2. Is the pattern type advertised in culturally specific media different than the mainstream media and is the product value different?
3. Are black actors “role importance” different between a culturally specific media and a mainstream media.

Methodology

To obtain a set of commercials for this content analysis four hours of prime time (7:00-11:00 EST) broadcasting on MTV and BET were video taped. Five consecutive days of programming from the business week of June 23, 2003 to June 27, 2003 were taped for a total of 40 hours of programming and embedded commercials.

Using specific categories of analysis one coder analyzed all of the ads. A remote control was used so that the commercials could be paused or replayed as needed. Research by Wilkes and Valencia (1989) found that using the method of replay and pause may cause increased confidence and reflect more closely the actual incidence of blacks than a casual observer would be able to assess” (p.23).

In an attempt to remain consistent with previous research, only ads that included live models were included for this study. The sample also excluded paid programming (i.e., infomercials) and promotional ads (e.g., movies and television programs). In keeping with Wilkes and Valencia’s (1989) research, duplicate ads were retained to best represent the actual total incidence of African Americans in the sample. Wilkes and Valencia have argued, “commercials with a greater number insertions will tend to bias the results” (p. 21). Kassarjian (1969) found that there was no compelling reason to choose one approach over the other.

Categories of Analysis

The categories of analysis for this study have been used frequently in previous research (Elliot, 1995; Taylor, Lee, & Stern, 1995; Wilkes & Valencia, 1989; Kassarjian, 1969). Their use in this study will allow for comparison of results with the previous research. The categories used were; incidence of appearance of African Americans in a
commercial, *perceived importance* of the African American model to the commercial, *product type* advertised and *product value*. Much like the study done by Wilkes and Valencia (1989) occupational role was used at the start of the study. The number of situations where an occupation could not be determined was large and therefore this category was dropped from analysis.

Incidence of African Americans in commercials is useful for measuring the minority groups portrayal in one of the most influential institutions of American culture advertising (Wilkes & Valencia, 1989). A scale of 1-3 was used to determine the incidence of African Americans in the commercial

- *All African Americans in ad*
- *Group of 2-8*
- *Group of 9 or more*

*Perceived importance* deals with how African Americans are positioned in the commercials. Coltrane’s (2000) research suggests that African Americans “screen presence can be minimized by denying characters individuality and placing them in background roles” (p. 231). In this study, African Americans perceived importance was judged as either:

- *Major role*- very important to the commercial, shown holding the product and/or speaking.
- *Minor role*- average importance to the commercial, does not speak or handle the product.
- *Background*-hard to find, not important to the commercial.

The coding of product type presented another indication of stereotypical advertising that may not necessarily reflect the buying habits of African Americans. Eight categories were used for judging product type, household, electronic, car products, clothing, personal care, business/travel, recreation/entertainment, food, and alcoholic beverages. Product value was determined to be high if the product was over $20 and low if the product was under $20.

For the purpose of measuring reliability one 21-year-old Caucasian male was selected to code 20 percent of the total sample. He was given training on how to analyze the ads and after a 100 percent agreement with the research for ten commercials he then analyzed the sample independently. A 90 percent agreement was determined. The percent agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of advertisements watched multiplied by 100.

**Results**

**Incidence.** Of the 539 commercials with live models on *BET*, only 143 (26.5%) of these advertisements included African Americans. *MTV* aired 308 commercials with live models and 128 (33%) of these ads included African Americans. Thus *MTV* aired a higher percentage of African American depictions. The findings for the general media based commercials were consistent with the levels of incidence reported in other related studies. The incidence results for *BET* were inconsistent with previous research. Taylor et al. (1995) research reported that *BET* included African Americans in 57.5% of all advertisements.
Products Advertised. Of the 143 BET advertisements in which there were African American actors they were seen more often in commercials for clothing/personal care (29.4%), food (21.7%), and less for household (4.9%) and business/travel (2.9%). Conversely, the 128 MTV advertisements that contained African Americans featured more on food (46.1%) and clothing/personal care (25.8%) products.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Category</th>
<th>MTV</th>
<th>BET</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household</td>
<td>2 (1.6%)</td>
<td>7 (4.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics</td>
<td>24 (18.8%)</td>
<td>13 (9.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car Products</td>
<td>4 (3.1%)</td>
<td>20 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing/Personal Care</td>
<td>33 (25.8%)</td>
<td>42 (29.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Travel</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation/Entertainment</td>
<td>2 (1.6%)</td>
<td>12 (8.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Products</td>
<td>59 (46.1%)</td>
<td>31 (21.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholic Beverage</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (2.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (3.1%)</td>
<td>10 (7%)</td>
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Additional analysis was performed to determine if the product value of commercials shown on the culturally targeted network was different from that of the general media. Results suggest that both networks show a larger proportion of lower value products (priced below $20).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Product Value</th>
<th>MTV</th>
<th>BET</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over $20</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $20</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
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Level of Integration. MTV commercials containing African Americans were more integrated than those on BET. Eighty-seven percent of MTV’s ads containing African Americans were racially integrated, compared to 44.7% of BET commercials. BET showed more black-only commercials (54.4%) while only 13.3% of MTV’s advertisements used all African American actors.

Given the large amount of MTV advertisements where African Americans appeared in-groups (87%) it was not surprising that they were perceived to be less important on MTV ads compared to BET ads. African Americans were seen as major characters in over 70% of BET commercials compared to 42% in MTV commercials. The
The incidence of African Americans in “large groups” resulted insignificant for both \( BET \) (0.7%) and \( MTV \) (0%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level Of Integration</th>
<th>( MTV )</th>
<th>( BET )</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Americans Only</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group of 2-8 People</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group of 9+ people</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<th>Perceived Importance</th>
<th>( MTV )</th>
<th>( BET )</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
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**Conclusions**

The results from this study provide an interesting look into the difference on how culturally targeted media and a general media present African Americans. The culturally targeted media aired commercials at about the same rate as the general media. These results are not consistent with Jones (1995) research that found African Americans appearing on 58 percent of their advertisements. In this study, African Americans were included in only 26.5 percent of advertisements on \( BET \). This is percentage is down almost fifty percent over the last eight years. The lack of African American characters in these advertisements reinforces the need for proportionality criterion, where the representation of African Americans on \( BET \) would be judged by the audience characteristics. Using this theory, 85 percent of \( BET \)’s advertisements should include African American characters because their audience is 85 percent African American.

What has happened in the last eight years to cause \( BET \)’s advertisements to change so drastically? The one event that stands out is the November 2000 buyout by Viacom. The change in advertising may be validating the audiences concern that the network would not continue to address the needs of the African American audience. Although, Viacom has kept \( BET \) as a separate entity from its other networks, the advertising trends on \( BET \) and \( MTV \) are similar. \( MTV \) had a higher percentage of African Americans in their advertisements than \( BET \).

Another interesting finding of this study has to do with the level of integration. \( BET \) used all African American characters in 54.4 percent of their advertisements. While \( MTV \) advertisements only used all African Americans characters in 14.4 percent of the ads. \( MTV \) tends to use more integrated advertising while seems to rely heavily on integrated advertising. Coltrane (2000) research concluded that use of integrated advertising by mainstream media “may be a conscious act by advertisers to sure that a product or service is not solely associated with blacks by the sole use of black models” (p.237). \( MTV \) is definitely meeting and exceeding the population criterion for their advertising. The next major obstacle for the network may be to increase the number of “black only” advertisements.

The results of product type were also similar results, with food products being advertised more often on \( MTV \). A study by Reuters Health (2003), concluded that prime time advertisements with African Americans include more food advertisements.
than those without African Americans. BET’s advertisements have a tendency to include more clothing/personal care products and substantially less in the business product category. These patterns may be explained by consumption patterns of African American consumers.

Bristor et al. (1995) found that one of the most obvious ways to minimize African Americans’ in advertisements is by assigning them a token role. Tokenism was especially apparent in advertisements in which African Americans were in a crowd of people. In a Dell commercial that aired on both networks, an African American male often appears in the ad but only as a non-speaking constantly smiling part of a large Caucasian crowd.

African Americans’ presence was also minimized through objectification. For example, in a Nike commercial that also aired on both networks a Black runner informs the viewer that “scientist are constantly trying to figure out why I run so fast.” The camera then focuses on the runner’s muscular legs, with his head out of the picture. With his head above the screen or his back facing the camera as he runs away, suggests that it is not important who he is but what he can accomplish athletically.

Although contemporary advertisements may portray African Americans in more positive roles than has historically been done, many stereotypes are still prevalent. Though the stereotypes are subtle and at times may be confused as “positive stereotypes” it was still very evident in this study. In a Subway advertisement that aired frequently on MTV, a Caucasian woman asked an African American man “is there anything that you love more than chicken?”. This advertisement continues to perpetuate the stereotype that black people love chicken. Reebok, who advertises often on BET shows two detectives looking at a shoe print, the Caucasian detective then says, “we must find our usual suspects”. A line-up of all African American men then comes on the screen. While the entire commercial was in color, the line up of the men was in black and white. The utilization of black and white opposed to color suggests reality. The use of only black men in this advertisement preserves the stereotype that African American men are all criminals.

MTV is including far more African Americans in their advertisements than the average network. Why in MTV there is so much representation of African Americans in their advertising? One conclusion may be the acceptance and crossover appeal of African American culture. White Americans are increasingly willing to consume greater and greater amounts of certain kinds of black culture, which seems to be reflected in MTV’s advertisements. From music, dance, dress, slang, movies and advertising, the African American presence in popular culture is large. Some people call it the biggest crossover of African-American culture in this country. It seems like this is how it always has been. From minstrelsy to jazz to blues, R&B and now hip-hop, it seems that "blackness" will always be safe for white America's consumption. This "safeness" with black culture may be what is making MTV advertisers willing to include African Americans in their advertisements.

BET must include more African Americans in their advertisements, and present more positive minority portrayals. They should also work to expand their products that are advertised. BET has been accused of “selling-out” and in a sense this seems to be the case. If they do not address the situation, this extremely profitable network may start to lose their once loyal and trusting viewers. We hope that by calling attention to the lack of
African Americans in BET’s advertisements, we will provide a motive for the network to take a careful look at their advertising strategies and begin to make the much needed changes.

References


