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I, Julie Stewart, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology.

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Student’s name: Julie Stewart

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Jeffrey Timberlake, Ph.D.

Committee member: Erynn Casanova, Ph.D.

Committee member: Annula Linders, Ph.D.
Colorblind Commercials:
Depictions of Interracial Relationships in Television Advertising

by
Julie Stewart

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Dissertation Committee:
Jeffrey M. Timberlake (Chair)
Annulla Linders
Erynn Masi de Casanova
ABSTRACT

The mass media have long been a site for exploring social attitudes and trends related to race, gender, and class in America. In this dissertation I use media to build on previous research by examining depictions of interracial relationships (IRRs) in television commercials. Because of the ubiquitous nature of advertising and the fact that commercials are carefully orchestrated by organizations to sell products, their content gives valuable insight into what corporations and advertising agencies believe is marketable and acceptable in households across the country. Fully 98% of Americans have at least one television in their homes, which means that almost everyone is exposed to television advertising at some point or in some way throughout the week. Moreover, unlike other forms of visual media, which are to a large degree viewed intentionally, the content of television commercials is not pre-selected by viewers. As a result, television advertisers must strike a balance between creatively selling a product and maintaining a positive relationship with existing and potential consumers.

In examining the use of IRRs in television advertising, I ask three questions: first, what is the incidence of interracial relationships in television advertising, and how does this compare to the prevalence of such relationships in the contemporary United States? Second, what are the effects of the product, intended audiences, type of commercial, and the company advertising the product on the incidence of IRR depiction? Third, what is the relationship between the race of the people in romantic and platonic relationships and the depictions of those relationships in television advertisements? To answer these
questions I analyze a data base of over 1,700 televisions commercials collected during April 2012, which I analyze in conjunction with information on audience characteristics from the Nielsen Company.

I find a mix of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of interracial friendships and argue that this reflects positive changes for race relations overall in America. The data suggest that television shows and products aimed at younger audiences are more likely to feature interracial relationships and that these depictions are less likely for products and shows aimed at families and older audiences. Finally, I argue that advertisers rely on stereotypes to quickly get messages across to consumers and that the use of interracial relationships is often the result of employing what I refer to as “strategic ambiguity” by advertisers.

This dissertation is an important examination of the relationship between real life attitudes on interracial friendships and romances and depictions of these relationships in television advertising. It adds to the larger body of sociological research by using a unique data set from television commercials to examine when and where interracial relationships are (and are not) depicted in television advertisements and the relationship between these depictions, audiences, and social attitudes.
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DEDICATION

There are a number of people to thank who advised, guided, and encouraged me as I completed my PhD and dissertation. First and foremost thanks to God for being my strength in life and throughout this project.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For many years social scientists have used the media as a site for studying social trends and attitudes, specifically related to issues of race, gender, and class in America (Baudrillard 1975; Goffman 1979; Williamson 1995). This dissertation uses media to build on previous sociological research about interracial relationships, racial attitudes, and depictions of race and relationships in advertising by examining depictions of interracial relationships in television commercials. Because of the ubiquitous nature of advertising and the ways that commercials are carefully orchestrated by organizations to sell products, their content gives valuable insight into what corporations and advertising agencies view as marketable and acceptable in households across the country (Oakenfull, McCarthy, and Greenlee 2008). Fully 98% of Americans have at least one television in their home, which means that almost everyone is exposed to television advertising at some point or in some way throughout the week (Fisk 1986). Recent estimates show that adults are exposed to an average of an hour of television advertisements per day (Lafayette 2009). Moreover, unlike other forms of visual media, which are to a large degree viewed intentionally, the content of television commercials is not pre-selected by viewers. As a result, television advertisers must strike a balance between creatively selling a product and maintaining a positive relationship with existing and potential consumers.

Given the time, money, and research devoted by companies to creating commercials that will have a wide appeal while not offending potential consumers,
television ads likely reflect what these organizations see as mainstream social norms and ideologies (Goffman 1979; Mastro and Stern 2003). This further suggests that these commercials reflect what market research indicates that audiences find appealing. As a self-conscious reflection of cultural norms in service of a commercial product or service, the advertiser’s purpose is to make connections to target audiences in order to persuade audiences to purchase their product over other products. Television commercials, therefore, reflect millions of dollars’ worth of market research and demographic information collected by advertising agencies about who buys what products and the connection between a particular demographic or audience and that group’s ideas about society overall.

Several prior studies of advertising have shown that ads contain important messages about society. Goffman’s (1978) *Gender Advertisements*, for example, is an in-depth study of the different ways men and women are depicted in 1960’s print advertising and the way power relations are transmitted through the messages. Baudrillard’s (1975) famous studies of the semiotic codes within commercial signs and billboards and the growth of consumerism in America make the claim that every part of a sign or advertisement has an impact and meaning. He shows the importance of looking beyond text to understand the hidden goals and latent effects of advertisements. Williamson summarizes the importance of advertising as a medium. In her words, “pervading all the media, but limited to none, advertising forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and an immense influence” (1991:11). Jhally argues that advertising “structures mass media content” and that “advertising, as a discourse concerning objects, is dealing with one of the fundamental aspects of human behavior”
These studies demonstrate the importance of advertising as a reflector and creator of social norms regarding race, class, and gender.

As the media, and specifically advertising, play an important role in the lives of Americans, social issues with a prominent influence on the formation of the U.S. values can be studied through them. Research shows a relationship between what people see on television and the ideas they have about social issues. In fact, some argue that television has become the most important institution in the lives of Americans surpassing religion, education, and even family as the main influence over what people believe (Gerbner 1976). Importantly, advertising is a medium within television, with a specific goal of persuading audiences without offending them. Considering that companies spend billions of dollars conducting research into what will and will not offend and persuade large consumer audiences, advertisements become an important site for gauging what advertisers have found to be American ideas on a number of topics, including ideas on race (Jhally 1987; Goffman 1979).

In this dissertation I examine the prevalence and types of depictions of interracial relationships (IRRs) in television advertisements, including several types of platonic and romantic relationships such as friends, co-workers, and romantic partners. This project employs a unique set of data from over 1,700 television commercials and gives a description of the current state of depictions of interracial relationships in television commercials. Additionally, it examines the commodification of race in commercials to investigate the ways in which advertisers use race and interracial relationships to sell particular products. In other words, this project looks for patterns in where and how
interracial relationships are used or not used in television advertising, specifically in terms of depictions of interracial relationships.

Furthermore, I seek to expand previous media studies including Vera and Gordon’s (2003) concept of “sincere fictions of the White self,” Hughey’s (2009) “Magic Negro,” and Goffman’s (1979) *Gender Advertisements*, all of which argue that qualitative analysis of race/ethnicity in the media often leads to evidence of different forms of stereotyping, discrimination, or racism. I expand on this by creating an in-depth database that examines the use of IRRs in advertisements, where they are used, including what is being advertised, who the audience is, and what products use which types of characters. In brief, my research discovers when and where advertisers are willing to depict people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds interacting in both platonic and romantic relationships. The findings in this dissertation reflect the idea that there has been some progress in attitudes toward interracial platonic relationships but advertisers continue to avoid using interracial romances in commercials in order to avoid controversy.

This project is an important study of television advertising through the lens of the “commodity fetishism” as presented in commercials as they act as a capitalist tool to control consumers and create a hegemonic sense of which products are for or not for different target audiences. Jhally (1987) points out that advertisements are a mechanism for corporations to control the way audiences see themselves in relation to products. Advertisements are selling a lifestyle: to convince consumers their products and services are essential for achieving that lifestyle, corporations must invest in the commodity being sold. In other words advertisements promote the message that if you want to be like the people you see in commercials, you have to buy what it is they are selling. Thus the
content of ads reflects two influences: 1) the ideology of those who have the most power such as corporate leaders seeking to maximize profits and, 2) advertising executives who create advertising narratives that are designed to reflect their analysis of what appeal will persuade customer to purchase their products and services.

Despite the contributions of previous research, important gaps in our knowledge remain. First, large-scale studies of sociological variables in television advertising are needed to address the overall broad collection of advertisements that exist in the media and to go beyond existing studies of gender, class, and race in advertising that focus on small samples mostly from print advertisements (Goffman 1979; Thomas and Treiber, 2000; Baker 2005; and Martin 2004). Existing studies often employ convenience samples that fit the criteria the researchers are looking for, whereas a large scale study gives a summary of the overall state of advertising in the U.S. For example, while Goffman’s (1979) *Gender Advertisements* looks at depictions of gender in advertisements, he specifically chooses a handful of ads depicting gender, whereas my study looks at depictions of race within all of the advertisements within a set time, not just those that support the hypotheses, including calculating the percentage of ads which include depictions of relationships and those which do not, such as those which focus entirely on a single character or a product or service without showing any people in the ad.

Second, research is needed into interracial relationships (IRRs)—both platonic friendships and romantic relationships—focusing specifically on the friendship and romantic interactions of Whites and Blacks in television commercials (Larson 2002; Li-Vollmer 2002; Jacobs and Baldasty 2003). Researchers have studied the important role that IRRs (and attempts to prevent them from occurring) played in the formation of the
United States, especially in the South, following the Civil War (Moran, 2003; Dalmage, 2000). Additionally, studies suggest that advertising as a medium is particularly useful for studying changing societal ideas, especially pertaining to issues of race, gender, and class (Baudrillard 1975; Goffman 1979; Thomas and Trieber 2000; and Larson 2002). My study combines these two areas to understand the relationship between the reality of IRRs and depictions of them in television advertisements, which goes beyond existing research by comparing a large scale data set to data about real life networks and audiences, rather than relying on small samples and convenience samples and by studying interracial relationships specifically rather than just race.

In sum, while existing literature examines depictions of people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, depictions of gender, and depictions of race, the literature does not address IRRs specifically in television commercials. Given the success of previous studies at using commercials to study contemporary society, examining depictions of IRRs in television advertising provides a window into the current state of race relations in the U.S.

Research Questions

In order to understand where, when, and how interracial relationships are used in television advertising, this project addresses three sociological questions.

*Question 1: How prevalent are interracial relationships in television advertising, and how does this compare to the prevalence of such relationships in the contemporary United States?*
In other words how representative are depictions of IRRs in television commercials relative to real life demographic data on IRRs? This question addresses multiple sociological issues about the acceptance of IRRs by society and about the ideas that advertisers have about these types of relationships. To answer this question I collected demographic and product information from over 1,700 television commercials airing during Primetime hours for one week. After coding the relationships for race, gender, and type of relationship, I compare this data with real life data on friendship networks and the prevalence of interracial romantic and family relationships.

**Question 2: What is the relationship between audience characteristics and the depiction of IRRs in television commercials?**

This question examines where IRRs are more likely to show up in commercials and then analyzes which television programs feature commercials with or without IRRs and who the audience for each program is. This analysis uncovers the relationships between which shows we see commercials depicting IRRs and who advertisers see as receptive to IRRs.

This study expands upon previous research that focuses on depictions of race in print advertisements (Baker 2005; Thomas and Treiber 2000; Martin 2004) or small handpicked samples of television commercials aimed at one specific group (Larson 2002; Li-Vollmer 2002; Jacobs and Baldasty 2003), by using a large scale data set and by viewing a large sample of commercials to determine where IRRs are most likely to be shown. Therefore, I expand upon earlier studies to further understand the relationship between product, location, and depictions of IRRs. This adds to the larger body of research by testing claims that in recent years companies have expanded their markets
and attempted to reach as large and diverse an audience as possible with their messages and products and addresses sociological questions about whether younger and more diverse audiences are more likely to be accepting of interracial relationships than older and mostly White audiences.

*Question 3: What is the relationship between the race of individuals depicted in romantic and platonic relationships in television advertisements and the depictions of those relationships?*

This adds to the larger body of work, as it is an in-depth qualitative look at the content of television commercials in order to explore details about where, when, and how these depictions appear. Research shows that hidden messages about interracial relationships exist in commercials and semiotic analysis is necessary to understand these. This part of the study looks for stereotypes based on Hughey’s (2009) and Bogle’s (2001) summary of typical stereotypes of minorities when depicted in the media, as well as Goffman’s (1979) Ritualization of Subordination for power inequalities, and examines whether or not these depictions contain other differences such as setting, when characters of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are used, and where it is clear that a relationship is intimate and where it is ambiguous.

To answer this question I look at a series of twelve specific television commercials that feature same race friendships, interracial friendships, same race romantic relationships, and interracial romantic relationships to understand the ways in which different types of relationships and couples are depicted to determine if there are differences based on race/ethnicity, gender, and type of relationship such as the roles
each person plays, where people are shown, and which races are featured in different types of commercials. This also includes an in-depth look at the use of stereotypical characters and draws on Goffman’s (1969) concepts of power and subordination to determine whether people in interracial relationships and friendships are shown as being equally powerful or not. This qualitative portion of the study is an open ended examination of more intangible differences in the way IRRs are shown in commercials and the results fill in the gaps from the quantitative sections of the dissertation.

Importantly, this section explores the rhetorical use of IRRs as a tool for selling products, highlighting differences within products, and examines the differences in the way characters of different races are shown in different commercials, even when shown having a relationship with one another.

These three research questions organize the data collected for this project and guide the overall analysis of the findings. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, I address these questions, providing data analysis relevant to the issue of whether the interracial relationships in Prime Time television ads accurately reflect their frequently in the real world and also whether traditional gender and racial stereotypes are reflected or undermined in these ads.

I hypothesize that commercials will overrepresent platonic IRRs—based on Bonilla-Silva’s argument that the myth of a post-racial America leads many to claim to be color blind even if individuals do not actually have multicultural groups of friends, they like to picture themselves as being tolerant and open to diversity. Thus advertisements reflect these “sincere fictions of the White self” (Vera and Gordon 2003). In other words, people are comfortable with the ideas of interracial platonic friendships,
and they like to picture themselves as being tolerant and interested in such relationships. Therefore this would be a benefit to an advertiser in trying to sell a product—by creating an image of consumers that they would like to see—using race as a part of the ad’s appeal. By depicting harmonic relationships among groups of people of a variety of racial backgrounds, advertisers are able to appeal to a “sincere fiction” that many White people have of themselves. Furthermore, since most Americans believe themselves to be accepting of interracial platonic relationships, these depictions allow for advertisers to easily include token characters (Hughey 2009, Bonilla-Silva 2006) and reach a larger audience by allowing for people of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds to relate to the characters in the commercial.

Next I hypothesize that the historically taboo nature of romantic interracial relationships means they are underrepresented in television advertisements, since many White audiences are still uncomfortable with the idea of sex, romance, and intimacy between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, even as those numbers are rising in the real world (Moran 2003, Dalmage 2000, Larson 2002; Li-Vollmer 2002; Jacobs and Baldasty 2003). As Bonilla-Silva (2006) points out—the idea of a color blind society reflects a majority group of White people who claim to be tolerant and color blind, who often times truly believe themselves to be tolerant and color blind, but actually continue to support mythic narratives that lead to more subtle forms of racism. In fact, Bonilla-Silva (2006) suggests that in many situations the rhetoric that Whites use about racial relationships often does not allow for romantic relationships among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds—especially between Whites and Blacks.
I hypothesize that because status, social prestige, and intangible rewards are implicit in advertising, there will be differences in where IRRs are used in advertisements as companies attempt to create a specific feeling in customers in regard to a particular product that they are marketing. As Bobo (2001) points out, “We have high ideals, but cannot agree on the depth of the remaining problem—we are open to integration, but in very limited terms and only in specific areas” (294). While blatant racist desires for full segregation are not socially acceptable as a result of the civil rights movement, through studies such as this one we can learn about where more subtle ideas of segregation or difference exist in how audiences view different types of relationships.

**Sociological Contributions**

Advertisers, I suggest, typically only want to depict integration within these limited terms and specific areas that Bobo (2001) is referencing—the ones that are commonly accepted and are uncontroversial, such as friends hanging out to play sports, or people grabbing lunch with work friends at a public restaurant. When advertisers depict these types of relationships, they want to be confident that they are viewed by audiences who are open and interested in them, which leads to these commercials airing during shows that are popular with younger, hipper, more tolerant audiences (Rosenfeld 2007). I seek to determine where and when advertisers believe Americans are comfortable with imagining or seeing IRRs. This project adds to existing studies by determining in what areas people are and are not comfortable with IRRs by analyzing where, when, and with what products these depictions are likely to exist or not exist, and by determining which audiences are
most likely to be exposed to depictions of different types of relationships among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

As Petley explains, “The way in which companies have fought to maintain their market share has been to increase dramatically the number of brands they offer, and to try to cater to every imaginable ‘niche’ or particular markets. Importantly, advertising plays a key role here, not simply in differentiating each of these brands from others, but also in targeting the ‘right’ kind of consumer for each brand” (2002:13), including different brands for different people, even from the same organization. This means that advertisers are actively working to create commercials that appeal to a diverse audience, so the content of a commercial reflects what advertisers think an audience will tolerate and be persuaded to buy a product. This project will examine which products and companies believe that depicting IRRs aids in reaching the “right” kind of consumer, as well as determining who the “right” kind of consumer is through the eyes of these companies.

One reason I examined this data is to test Vera and Gordon’s (2003) theory that often times depictions of relationships between minorities and Whites are “sincere fictions of the White self.” In other words, those in power create narratives that may or may not exist in reality based on a “sincere fiction” of themselves. By studying where (and where not) interracial relationships are used in television advertising, I analyze the types of messages advertisers are sending about who uses what products, eats in which restaurants, and who viewers might imagine themselves to be. “The goal of selling products is met by harnessing visual cues that link the material object with a level of social prestige and implicitly promise intangible social rewards (e.g., friendship, beauty, romance), providing a slice of life to consumers” (Thomas and Trieber, 2000:358). Thus,
advertisements link products with status and rewards, targeted to both specific and mass audiences. The goal is to see where status and rewards are linked to IRRs and if there are differences in the ways that different types of relationships are used in television advertising.

For example, according to Eisenberg (1984), advertisers often use a strategy of relying on ambiguous messages in television commercials so as not to offend large audiences and to appeal to large groups of people. Each person who views a commercial can make a decision as to what the message of the commercial is, and therefore, members of large audiences are likely to find ways to relate to different products. For example, the Nike “Swoosh” is one of the most identifiable logos in the modern day. Yet there is no clear message associated with the Swoosh. When people see it, they know it means Nike, but each individual can make up his or her own opinion about it. My hypothesis is that this type of Strategic Ambiguity exists in depictions of IRRs in order to allow audiences to make their own assumptions about the relationships that exist within a commercial (Eisenberg 1984).

Also, when advertisers use a strategy of ambiguity, they have the option of denying the existence of concepts or ideas the public object to in order to save the reputation and profitability of the company they are promoting. Their goal is to find a balance between being edgy enough for the commercial to pique interest and conservative enough to not limit the audience or turn off a potential buyer. Furthermore, other less explicit messages within television advertisements, reflect the advertisers’ ideas on race, IRRs, and what audiences and potential customers will accept. These
include the placement of the characters in relation to one another, the use of symbols, and other ideas audiences may infer from viewing the ads (Goffman 1979; Baudrillard 1975).

This data set expands the focus of the study of advertisements to a large sample of television commercials. I address large sociological questions about the way interracial relationships are depicted by advertisers and whether this is comparable to real world friendship networks and instances of interracial relationships through using a large sample of commercials collected from Primetime television programs on four major broadcast networks. Hence, this project adds to the current body of literature by using television advertisements as a tool to investigate social ideas on interracial relationships.

As I include a comparison of findings of what relationships are being depicted in commercials with real life census data, friendship network data, and a summary of attitudes on interracial romantic relationships and friendships, this project expands upon theories that posit a relationship between media and social behavior/ideas. Specifically it examines the state of IRRs in the U.S and compares this data to the state of IRRs as depicted in advertisements.

In sum, this study examines depictions of interracial relationships (IRRs) in television advertising to better understand how and when these depictions are used (or not used) by companies and advertisers and how they compare to real life relationship networks. Interracial relationships are defined as any friendship or romantic relationship between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. This project is an important contribution because while many studies focus on the way race is depicted in advertising, several important gaps remain that this project seeks to fill by using a large sample of television commercials and by looking specifically at interracial relationships. I study
depictions of interracial relationships in television commercials in order to determine the ways in which advertisers use (or do not use) depictions of IRRs in advertising and whether these correspond with latent social norms based on real life relationship data. In other words, is the frequency of depictions of IRRs in television advertisements consistent with the real life existence of these relationships and what does this mean about the way advertisers view audiences, social attitudes, and the reality of interracial relationships in America? This project also fills gaps in the research by testing three hypotheses using a large data set of television commercials and a variety of research methods including descriptive and inferential statistical analysis and qualitative content analysis. This research is important because it yields insight into the connections between the real world of interracial relationships and depictions of these relationships in television advertising.

**Plan of the Dissertation**

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows: first, in Chapter 2 I summarize the important existing literature and theories the influence this analysis. I provide a thorough summary of the literature on the history of interracial relationships in the United States, an overview of the way advertising works and why it is important to study television advertising, a brief history of depictions of race in the mass media, with a focus on how interracial friendships and romantic relationships have been shown in both television and movies. Lastly, it gives an overview of the way race has been and is used and depicted in both print and television advertisements. The literature review includes research from sociology, communication, and advertising. It both summarizes relevant
literature while also proving the necessity of this particular project to fill the gaps in the literature. In Chapter 3, I describe the data set, which is a large set of television commercials collected during Primetime viewing over the course of one week, and explain which methods are used in this study and why.

Chapters 4 thorough 6 comprise the empirical core of the project. In Chapter 4 I compare real life data from the census and General Social Survey with data I collected from television commercials. I then analyze this data arguing that viewers are more comfortable with interracial platonic relationships than romantic and family relationships and thus these are overrepresented in television commercials. Chapter 5 assesses the influence of audience characteristics on the prevalence of IRRs in television. In Chapter 6 I use qualitative methods to study of interracial relationships in television advertising. In this chapter I examine in detail 12 commercials and analyze the way different types of relationships with characters of different backgrounds are depicted in television commercials. Finally, in Chapter 7 I summarize the key findings from my research and discuss implications for sociological theory and overall theories on race and the media.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Introduction

This project examines the way interracial relationships (IRRs) are depicted in television commercials. In order to clarify where this project lies in the larger body of sociological work, I present an in-depth review of the literature from both sociology and communication on advertising, the history of IRRs in America, the history of depictions of IRRs in television and film, and a summary of the literature on depictions of race and of interracial relationships in print and television advertisements.

This literature review accomplishes two goals. First it summarizes the existing literature on advertising, race and the media, IRRs and the evolution and depictions of race in print and television advertising. Second, I show where the gaps are in the existing communication, sociology, and advertising literature that this project fills, both concerning television advertising and interracial friendships and romantic relationships in the United States currently.

There are four main sections to this chapter. Section 1 explores the important role that advertising, especially television advertising, plays in modern American society. This section examines the way television commercials are purchased, developed, written, cast, and created in addition to explaining how television commercials get from the company to the agency to the general public. Section 2 gives an overview of the importance of studying IRRs by briefly explaining the history of these relationships in the United States and exploring the important role that laws, economics, and overall societal
views on interracial interactions over the course of the last 200 years has played in the formation of current racial attitudes among people in the United States.

Section 3 summarizes the existing literature on depictions of race and ethnicity in the media. This part of the study provides an overview of the history of depictions of IRRs in television and in movies and looks at the progress that has been made since the Civil Rights Movement. Finally, Section 4 examines the use of interracial relationships in print and television advertisements and explores the way people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have been depicted in ads and the evolution of these depictions. Furthermore, this section highlights the gaps in the advertising and race literature that this dissertation fills.

Section 1: The Importance of Advertising

Television advertising is an important medium to analyze because most Americans come into contact with some form of advertising on a daily basis, and because the primary goal of an advertisement is to sell a product to a demographically defined audience without offending any group enough to hurt the reputation of the product or organization. Advertising has become such a big part of life that Marshall McLuhan famously refers to advertisements as the “cave art of the twentieth century” (quoted in Shreve 2006). Like cave art, advertisements provide a snapshot of what life is like at a particular moment, in this case in the United States in the early 21st century. Because most Americans come into contact with television advertising on a daily basis, and because commercials are carefully orchestrated to sell products and services, analysis of their content gives valuable insight into what is seen by companies as being marketable and acceptable in
households across the country (Oakenfull, McCarthy, and Greenlee 2008). Estimates from an analysis reported in the *New York Times* indicate that the average American is exposed to over 5,000 advertising messages each day in various formats including billboards, television, and print ads (*New York Times* 2012). Clearly, viewers are receiving these persuasive messages at a rapid pace every day.

The unique nature of advertising is that messages are prepared by agents, publishers, companies, and advertising executives based on research and their own ideas about audiences and how to reach them (Laird 1998). In other words, advertisers have an agenda that is reflected in their commercials; hence, much is revealed by analyzing the content of ads. If content is chosen for a reason, researchers have the opportunity to determine what that reason is and to infer the choices that are being made by advertisers. The messages contained in advertisements reflect the perception that those creating the commercials have of their audience and the values and lifestyles that are appealing to audiences. By studying commercials and products, one has access to valuable information about the relationships between product, marketing, and the values a company perceives its audience to hold (Laird 1998). Advertisers rely on in-depth research about what sells to which audience and use this data to create the most persuasive commercial they can make, often times attempting to avoid major controversy that would lead to a decline in sales of the particular product. Danesi argues that “the advertiser raises products to the level of meaningful signs by linking them through representation to cultural traditions, values, rituals, and so on” (2004:192).

Advertisements are an important site for studying power inequities, because of the way a few influential executives are able to choose what products to advertise to which
audiences and where. In fact, researchers like Harms and Kellner (1991) call for a critical theory of advertising that examines the messages sent by the powerful advertising entities in the world in an effort to truly understand the power inequities reflected in modern advertising. They suggest that there is a link between the economics and politics of mass media and mass communication where the socioeconomic messages of commercials shape and reflect society.

Advertisements, and the products being advertised, fill multiple needs. As Jhally (1987) explains the goods featured in advertisements both communicate social ideas, values, and ideas about power and satisfy human needs. In addition to serving their intended purpose messages surrounding products communicate specific social ideas about power and about relationships among different groups within the United States. Therefore, the ways in which they are advertised to the public also reflect social ideas and ideas of structures of power. He also suggests that any study of media products must address specific questions about who produces the media and under what conditions they are created, including understanding what is valuable within the industry (time, money, audience) in order to determine the role advertisements play in individuals’ lives. Advertisers use their power in order to make money by targeting unsuspecting audiences (Jhally 1984).

Leiss, Kline, and Jhally explain how mediated communication, particularly television advertising, has changed the way Americans think, arguing that “they are part and parcel of the institutional structure in a capital-intensive industrial economy, putting power and authority at the service of particular groups for particular purposes” (1997:93).
In the case of television advertising, the media commodify social ideas in order to sell more products.

Creating Advertisements

Advertisers make deliberate choices about what to depict in ads, so it is useful to understand exactly how the process works. Advertising is the main way most companies promote goods and services to the public and the advertiser attempts to sell more by appealing to audiences and these audiences are massive since the average American will have seen well over 350,000 commercials by the time they turn 18 (Petley 2002). Typically, large corporations use advertising agencies to develop their product campaigns, either relying on the agency or having the agency work with their communication departments to combine knowledge of the product with knowledge of the market for maximum efficiency in reaching the desired audience. The agency typically conducts market and media research for the company in addition to designing the campaign and buying the advertising space (Petley 2002). Once an agency has been chosen, it presents a “pitch” to the company about who the target audience is for a product and their suggestions for best reaching this audience. Often specific measure such as the impact of the ad on volume, share, profit, trial, and reach are used to determine its success in meeting company expectations (Frith and Mueller 2010; Petley 2002).

Next, advertisers purchase ad space based on the audience, saturation, frequency, and type of advertisement the company is interested in. A unique feature of television advertisements is that they are constrained to a very short amount of time. Therefore, advertisers must quickly make their point in 15 to 30 second clips where there is little
time to develop plot or characters (Frith and Mueller 2010). Furthermore, with the
downturn in the economy, corporations have cut their advertising and marketing budgets.
This results in ad campaigns that are streamlined with a goal of reaching the largest
possible audience in the shortest amount of time, or, as advertisers put it, getting the
biggest bang for their buck (Frith and Mueller 2010; Petley 2002).

Casting Commercials

One extremely important element of advertising is correctly casting the characters
in a commercial. Advertisers use characters as a tool to reach multiple audiences and to
create situations that target markets can relate to. Therefore it is imperative that they
chose the right actors, including choosing people of a particular sex, race, and/or ethnicity
to play the roles in commercials. As Drewniany and Jeweler point out, “When you have
no more than 30 seconds to make an impression, strategy is where the TV commercial
begins” (2010:210). They explain that when creating a commercial, advertisers typically
brainstorm the easiest way to visually present an idea and determine what narrative
would go alone with that visual effect, then write a script about the narrative. Casting
agents choose models who most closely fit descriptions given to them by advertising
agencies, and thus the content of commercials is controlled by both casting agents and the
people writing commercials (Petley 2002; Drewniany and Jeweler 2010).

Because of the emphasis on the visual in television advertising, casting is an
important part of the final product. Each character and actor is chosen to meet a particular
visual image—the implication is then, that the race and ethnicity of characters and the
relationships depicted among characters of either the same or different races or ethnicities
are all intentional choices made to sell a product or ideas about products to consumers and to reach the targets possible audience and market (Drewniany and Jeweler 2010).

Brumbaugh (2009) finds that audiences frequently identify with same race/ethnicity characters and situations depicted in advertisements, simply because they share a race/ethnicity with the character in commercials. Therefore, when a company uses a character of a particular race in a commercial, it is safe to assume part of its goal is to make that character relatable to the audience, and thus sell their product to that particular racial or ethnic group. At the same time, Brumbaugh (2009) explains that people of different backgrounds relate to characters of different backgrounds if they have a life situation in common, even if race/ethnicity is different. For example, a Black man who is a father will relate to an Asian or White father depicted in a commercial, even though they are not the same race. A White man who is not a father will relate to the White father because they are both White, but a Black man who is a not a father would not relate to the depiction of a White father either by race or shared situation. These considerations result in advertisers’ making careful casting decisions based both on the race/ethnicity of the target audiences and based on the life situations of the audiences. In sum, characters reflect the advertiser’s ideas of the exact targeted audiences.

An important court case on this topic was decided in 1993 after the New York Times allegedly violated the Fair Housing Act by publishing racially discriminatory advertising for housing. In the case it was decided that the New York Times had to pay $450,000 in damages and donations and implement a policy requiring depictions of human models represent the racial makeup of the city (“New York Times Settles Ad Case Worth $450,000”). In other words, there was a penalty for a newspaper for not featuring
advertising with a diversity of characters. Therefore the potential for legal as well as social consequences for not using diverse models and characters in commercials and advertisements became an additional driver of diversity in casting models and actors.

**Target Audiences and Advertisements**

Organizations adapt marketing and advertising for particular audiences as much prior research indicates. Different audiences respond to different messages, formats, and ideas. For example, McDonald’s serves kosher food in Israel and follows halal rules for eating and closes five times a day for prayer in Saudi Arabia in an effort to sell more of their product in these markets. Also, in Japan McDonald’s has renamed Ronald McDonald “Donald McDonald” so that his name is easier to pronounce for people who speak Japanese (Frith and Mueller 2010:15).

Because of the relationship between television viewers and products, it is important that advertisers adapt their ads to target audiences. Advertisements tend to be socially and culturally relevant, giving power to the messages and ideas they represent. Advertising adds cultural meaning to products, which makes it important that advertisers truly understand the audiences they are marketing to (Danesi 2004). This implies that the content of commercials has been carefully crafted and constructed with a particular goal of selling the product to the audiences being reflected in the advertisement. Audiences relate to advertisements in two ways. One is disconnect from the subject or characters. The other is by becoming deeply personally involved, if they relate to the characters or situations presented in a commercial (Krugman 1965). Additionally, Nelson (2008) cites evidence updating Vance Packard’s concept of “hidden persuaders” supporting the notion that non-conscious factors sometimes play a relatively larger role in driving reactions to
ads than do rational ones—this could include the race, gender, or class of the characters in an advertisement. Thus it is important to advertisers to elicit the second response from audiences. Because of the emotional relationship between audiences and advertisements, researchers have the opportunity to study advertisements as cultural texts reflecting societal ideals and values (Frith and Mueller 2010).

In sum, when audiences view a commercial, they often are seeing a reflection of what the organization believes are overriding values of a society, making television advertisements an extremely important source of material for studying social attitudes on important topics like race, class, and gender. Because audiences are most likely to purchase a product they see in a commercial when they feel the commercial reflects their values, many companies attempt to present values in advertisements that reflect the values of their target market and any audience that might view the commercial (Sherif and Hovland 1961).

Section 2: Interracial relationships (IRRs)

As Section 1 establishes, advertisements are an important tool for studying social ideology in the United States. I examine depictions of interracial relationships (IRRs) in commercials in order to determine how true to life these depictions are. The history of IRRs in America is an important one, and this chapter benchmarks contemporary attitudes toward these relationships as reflected in television advertising. Thus, this section of the literature review gives an overview of the history of IRRs in the U.S. and media depictions of these relationships over time while establishing the need for more specific research into depictions of IRRs in advertising.
Overview of the History of IRRs

Interracial friendships and romantic relationships have historically been discouraged or taboo in America. While we know that there have always been relationships between people of different races and ethnicities in the United States, it is also evident that the acceptance of these relationships by society as a whole has grown over time. Mythical narratives about non-Whites were created before the Civil War to justify slavery and following the Civil War to maintain White power in the U.S., bolstering the mindset that individuals of differing racial backgrounds should not have relationships with one another outside of the economic world. When masters had children with their slaves, these children were not given the same privileges as the White children of that master, and the complicated nature of having a biracial child also lead to calls for making these relationships illegal.

The idea that people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds should not have interpersonal relationships was established as a mythical narrative in order for Whites to maintain economic power over Blacks and resulted in anti-miscegenation laws throughout the country. Even in places without laws on the books, major social stigma was attached to relationships between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds (Omi and Winant 1994; Wilson 1978). Thus, whether legal or not, society did not approve of most interracial romantic relationships until after the Civil Rights Movement in the middle of the 20th century and even today there is often stigma attached to these relationships (Moran, 2003).

Anti-miscegenation laws were important because they drew a clear line for Whites between those who were slaves and those who were free; a clear line between
those who were Black and those who were White, whereas sex between Blacks and Whites could result in biracial children that blurred the lines and roles between the races.

Moran contends that Blacks and Asians were victims of anti-miscegenation statutes created to establish norms about race (2003:19-20)\(^1\). From the beginning of its formation, then, in America, IRRs were discouraged by laws and the social customs of the dominant classes as a mechanism of social control.

Immediately following the Civil War, many laws were passed attempting to give Blacks equal rights. For example, The Civil Rights Act of 1875 gave Blacks full rights to equal employment, housing, and other public locations such as restaurants, inns, or medical facilities. This act was struck down in 1883 by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional. Thus, although Blacks were nominally free via the passage of the 13\(^{th}\) amendment, they were effectively without federal protection from southern plantation owners, who needed Blacks to work cheaply for them on plantations to continue profiting from cotton as they had during slavery (Wilson 1978; Dalmage 2000). This led to the growth of segregation, bolstered by the famous 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, allowing for “separate but equal” facilities for Blacks and Whites throughout the South, and thus again bolstering the ideology that races must not mix outside of the workplace where Whites ultimately dominated Blacks. These “Jim Crow” laws made it easier for Whites to

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\(^1\) It is important to note that these laws and taboos go beyond Black White relationships. As Chinese and Japanese citizens began to immigrate to the U.S. in the early 1900s, Whites continued to lobby for laws preventing marriage between races in general, not just between Blacks and Whites. Additionally, relationships between White Americans and many immigrant groups have also been discouraged historically throughout the United States.
control Blacks by limiting their access to resources and making them clearly “different” from Whites (Wilson, 1978; Dalmage 2000).

Anti-miscegenation laws helped maintain this color line and also functioned to prevent Black males from passing on any belongings to their children or from gaining privileges from having a relationship with a White woman (Moran 2003 and Dalmage 2000). While Blacks and Whites continued to be segregated throughout the South during World War II, the war made it impossible to maintain segregation in many parts of the United States. Additionally, Wilson points out that in the 1940’s “the concentrated Negro vote in large cities became significant enough in pivotal northern states to determine close national elections” (1978:86), resulting in more progressive Civil Rights legislation in an effort to gain and maintain the votes of this bloc. Additionally, during this time many Blacks migrated to the North (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1978) looking for work in factories or to follow family members to large cities in the North; thus changing the racial makeup of the country overall. This is the first time there was a substantial Black population in the Northern states.

By the end of the Civil Rights Movement, anti-miscegenation laws had been overturned by the Supreme Court in the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* decision, meaning people of all races are legally free to date, marry, and have relationships with people of any other race without the threat of arrest, prosecution, or lawsuit. Since this time, there has been significant growth in the number of IRRs in America. In fact, a recent article in *USA Today* highlights the fact that 15% of new marriages are between people of different races, fully 7 times higher than the 2% figure in 1960 (Marcus 2010). Importantly, one result of the Civil Rights Movement and Civil Rights legislation has
been a diversification of the workplace and educational systems including high schools and universities that has led to increased exposure to people of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds. This has resulted in many more interracial primary friendships and romantic relationships (Stears et al. 2009). Since people are more likely to come into contact with a diverse group of other people, the dating pool has become more diverse, and the number of interracial romantic relationships continues to increase. One way to better understand these historical changes in both attitudes toward IRRs and the presence of them in the United States is to study them through the lens of the mass media.

Section 3: IRRs in the Media

Consider the depictions of interracial romantic relationships in the following mainstream American films: first, D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation was released in 1915 to widespread critical acclaim and box office success; in fact, it was the highest grossing film of the silent era. This film depicts America during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras and portrays the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic force in the South, protecting helpless White women from the savage sexual predations of Black men. About a half-century later, in 1967, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner was released. This film is arguably the first positive depiction of an interracial romantic relationship in American cinema. Its release came directly on the heels of Loving v. Virginia, and during a period in which, as Courtney argues, “dominant American legacies of miscegenation were being confronted more directly than ever before” (2008:189). Importantly, although the depiction of an interracial relationship was clearly more positive than in Birth of a Nation, the tension in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner still rests on a “problem” of a romantic relationship
between a Black man and a White woman. Finally, the 2001 film *The Score* also features an interracial relationship (between actors Robert DeNiro and Angela Bassett).

Interestingly, in this film, the fact that the characters are not of the same race is not a plot theme, nor is there any suggestion that this type of a relationship is a problem for the characters, their family members, or broader society. Hence, in considerably less than a century of American history, cinematic depictions of IRRs shifted from predatory to problematic to unremarkable.

While there are many studies of the history of IRRs in America and of depictions of race in the media over time, there are surprisingly few sociological studies of depictions of IRRs in film and television. Most are from the fields of film studies or communication literature and focus on one particular film or television program or a small group of productions, rather than providing a comprehensive analysis across a broad spectrum of films and television shows. Additionally, many sociological books or journal articles mention IRRs in the media as part of larger studies but do not emphasize this as the complete subject of their work. As Moran and others have maintained anti-miscegenation laws and social proscriptions against interracial unions can be seen as the foundation of racial dominance, making its relative lack of focus in the academic literature an opportunity for productive sociological research.

Significantly, many of the ideas Americans hold about race, class, and gender are shaped by the media. In fact, Vera and Gordon (2003) cite Douglas Kellner who states, “Radio, television, film and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct
their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, or nationality, or sexuality, of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Movies manufacture the way we see, think of, feel, and act toward others” (1995:8). In other words, a society’s ideas on what is and is not acceptable often are influenced by what the population is presented in the media, in film, in television, and in advertisements. Gerbner’s (1967) cultivation theory also supports this showing that the media both reflects and shapes ideas on social issues.

Additionally, we have seen that as race relations have changed in American society over the last 100 years, so have depictions in the media, thus supporting the claim that media and society influence one another (Vera and Gordon 2003; Goffman 1979). With the success of the Civil Rights Movement, representations of diversity in the media have sharply increased since the 1960’s. Scholars maintain that this increase in the visibility of minorities in television and film, playing legitimate characters like doctors, lawyers, or judges, supports claims that traditional racism has decreased in the United States (Entman and Rojecki 2000). In fact, a commonly used historical framework is widely recognized in studies of the progression of depictions of minority groups in the media. The framework consists of four phases. First is non-recognition, where the group is not used or targeted; rather, it is excluded. Second is ridicule, where the images of the group arise, but are pejorative or negative, such as the Aunt Jemima or Uncle Ben ads of the late 19th century. Third is regulation where members of a group are shown in a very careful way, typically as above average members of society, such as depictions of minorities as doctors, lawyers, or police officers, as in The Cosby Show. The final phase is respect, where members of a group are shown through a broad range of images, reflecting the real life situations of a particular group such as a movie like Crash
Branchik suggests that this is the phase the media is currently in, one where diversity is a natural part of programming that reflects demographic and attitudinal changes of the American public but concedes that the first three stages occasionally appear within the modern media. On the other hand, Vera and Gordon (2003) view the same data as continuing to reflect “sincere fictions of the White self” and are created by those seeking to maintain powerful positions.

Much research shows that there is a relationship between audience attitudes about race and the way race is depicted in television and movies. Positive images of minority characters in television shows can result in more positive attitudes toward minorities by audiences (Bodenhausen et al. 1995). Thus, just as changes in attitude toward IRRs are reflected in the media, these depictions also change attitudes. In fact, following the Civil Rights Movement, television was often the only exposure that children and families had to minorities, and therefore positive images of Blacks and of interracial friendships and romantic relationships depicted in television shows became a useful tool to promoting acceptance of these practices that had long been seen as taboo within society (Greenberg 1972). Graves points out that “exposure to television messages and images can modify existing racial schemata, including the willingness to play with and be friends with cross-race peers” (1997:716-717). Thus those producing media, if interested in changing social attitudes on issues, are able to use their medium as a tool for exposing audiences to new ideas.

At the same time, negative images have a similar effect on audiences. For example Mastro and Stern (2003) studied portrayals of Latinos on television and the way White audiences react to the characters and situations being depicted. They found that
while blatant racist attitudes are not present, more subtle racist attitudes exist among Whites watching Latinos on television. They propose that this is in part the result of the negative way in which Latinos are often portrayed on television—frequently in low status jobs and as unintelligent, unmotivated, and submissive. Furthermore, they point out that although the U.S. Latino population is around 12% of the total U.S. population, only 3 to 4% of television characters are Latino, an indication of underrepresentation not reflecting the larger population of the U.S. While someone creating a television show might praise the diverse cast of characters, it is important to study how each of the characters is portrayed as well. A diverse cast alone does not necessarily denote progress in racial relations in America since some depictions leave audiences with a negative perception of a minority group rather than encouraging tolerance and acceptance of different racial and ethnic groups (Mastro and Stern 2003). Just because there are interracial friendships or romantic relationships in a film or television show, does not mean that the show is not relying on stereotypes or portraying Whites as having power over their minority partners, in essence, reinforcing the norms of the dominant ideology. Thus, images in the media can contribute to an audience’s perception of race in either a positive, neutral, or negative way, depending on how different groups and characters are depicted. In other words while demographics of the television landscape show an increase in depictions of minorities and in IRRs, these depictions often continue to be based on stereotypes and racist beliefs, thus they do not signify or encourage any type of real social change (Weigel et al. 1995).

As this section shows, there is a precedent for research examining the relationship that exists between societal ideas about race and the way race and ethnicity are depicted
in the media as each influence the other and my research answers sociological questions applying this theory to interracial relationships. The next section of this theoretical background examines the way race has been depicted in advertising over time and expands upon studies of race in television and film.

**Section 4: Race in Advertisements**

At the same time depictions of race in movies and television were evolving, changes occurred in advertising as well. As we have moved through the 20th to the 21st century we have transitioned from ads featuring only Whites, to ads ridiculing minorities (such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben ads), to a wide variety of advertisements depicting different racial groups in a wide variety of ways (Branchik 2007). For example, Licata and Biswas (1994) found that between 1960 and 1990 there was a significant increase in the use of Black actors in ads, from 4 to 44% between 1967 and 1974 alone. This trend appears to hold for multiple racial and ethnic groups, as calls for diversity and efforts to grow market share have involved incorporating a wide variety of characters into advertisements. An as yet unanswered question is when and where different groups are used and in whether or not the depictions are positive or negative.

Media scholars argue that when characters of different racial or ethnic groups are used in commercials it is intentional. Frith and Mueller give an example of the way race is used in advertising for different target audiences. In a commercial that won multiple awards for a car company, a car is shown being driven all over the world with the images in China showing Chinese people engaged in tai chi on the Great Wall and in Mexico Mexican farmers in sombreros. In this way, the viewer, who was sitting comfortably in
his or her living room was shown glimpses of how people live in other parts of the world. The viewer was given a quick glimpse of ‘the other’” (2010: 109). As they point out, these images rely heavily on stereotypes and a limited knowledge of people of various cultural backgrounds in order to get their message across.

Research shows that often racial groups are shown differently in commercials, with Whites being “foregrounded” and other racial groups being shown in the background. This is often attributed to “tokenism” and, interestingly, people marketing to Blacks frequently use the phrase “permission to buy” which Frith and Mueller suggests “is like saying, we know you’re Black, but it’s ok, you can buy our product too” (2010:111). It is important to study this phenomenon, as “whether done intentionally or unintentionally, advertisers continue to compartmentalize racial and ethnic groups in ways that reinforce separateness (Frith and Mueller 2010:119) thus reifying ideas about interracial relationships in the United States.

Importantly, the history of advertising in America reveals a clear evolution in the way minority groups have been represented (or not represented). As mentioned before, Branchik (2007) updated a commonly used historical framework that is widely recognized as the way groups have been used in the media that evolves from non-recognition to ridicule to regulation to respect. Other research focuses on depictions of race in print advertisements (Baker 2005; Thomas and Treiber 2000; Martin 2004) or small samples of television commercials aimed at one specific group (Larson 2002; Li-Vollmer 2002; Jacobs and Baldasty 2003) which are summarized in the following paragraphs. In recent years companies have maintained market share by increasing the number of brands they offer and catering to a wide variety of markets and audience.
Advertising becomes the key to making each brand stand out and finding the correct consumer for each brand within an organization (Petley, 2002). This means that advertisers are actively working to create commercials that appeal to a diverse audience which includes writing and casting commercials with characters and situations that are appealing to a particular audience in relation to the product being marketed.

Additionally, the research cited below suggests that there is a relationship between what people see on television and real life behavior and attitudes. Many argue that television has replaced all other institutions in being the greatest influencer of the ideas held by individuals in American society (Gerbner 1976; Gerbner et al. 1980; Fisk 1986) including ideas about race. For example, Gallagher argues that advertisements featuring diverse casts are a “carefully manufactured racial utopia, a narrative of colorblindness” (in Texeira 2005). In other words, these ads do not reflect reality; rather, they create a post-racial narrative that says race doesn’t matter, when many argue that it indeed does. Furthermore, while demographics show that there has been a major increase in interracial romantic relationships over the last 40 years, advertisements rarely feature interracial romantic couples, and when they do, they tend to rely on ambiguity as to what the actual relationships of the people in the commercial are rather than highlighting an interracial romance (Thomas and Treiber 2000; Baker 2005).

Companies spend a lot of time and money on advertising to sell their products. This means that virtually all the choices within an advertisement are intentional, and even when they are not rational, they do typically reflect an idea that a company has about an audience. Feedback measures on audience reactions to ads typically tell advertisers whether the choices they made were effective or ineffective in driving sales. Typically,
each actor or model, each product, each location, and each interaction is carefully crafted to appeal to a particular audience and create a specific feeling for the audience and the target market. The following is an overview of the important findings on race in advertising over the last several decades and is divided into print and television advertising.

*Print Advertising*

Print publications often have a specific target audience, which facilitates studies of the way products are marketed to particular groups. Additionally, a print advertisement usually involves a small number of people with the focus on one particular product, making them an excellent resource for understanding attitudes about race and gender. Goffman’s *Gender Advertisements* is an early study of the way women are depicted in print advertisements. His semiotic approach to analysis focuses heavily on the role of symbols in constructing systems of meaning.

This approach has been expanded to look at the intersection of race and gender in many studies. Thomas and Treiber (2000) studied over 1,700 magazine advertisements for the relationship between race, gender and portrayals of status. They also studied the promises made by product advertisements. They found there were differences in the way Black and White women were portrayed, but not between Black and White men. Black women were much more likely to be shown in “everyday” status, while White women were more likely to be shown in “trendy or “affluent” status. Furthermore, product promises were different in magazines with predominantly White audiences than those with predominantly Black audiences, with White magazines ads promising family success and Black magazines promising sex and romance.
Another important finding within print advertisements is that images of Blacks and Whites are different depending on whether the intended audience of the magazine is Blacks, Whites, or both. Research has found, for example, that Blacks are underrepresented in White magazines and Whites are overrepresented in Black magazines. Baker (2005) looked at women’s race and sexuality in advertisements by coding for function or role, relative function or authority, body position, relative size and height, character traits, body view, and physical characteristics, in magazine advertisements. She found that White women were much more likely to be shown in submissive and dependent roles, while Black women were more likely to be shown as dominant and independent, noting that it is not always minorities who are shown in a negative way in advertisements.

Over 85% of women in the advertisements in mainstream men’s and women’s magazines (targeting White readers) were White, so there is a clear bias toward White women for advertising products in mainstream magazines that is not reflected in the content of an advertisement itself. In other words, while the content is not race specific, the majority of the time a White woman is chosen as the character in Ads. In terms of magazine advertisements targeting Black readers, over 65% of the women were Black; thus, a more balanced distribution of depictions of race exists in the advertisements. So while Black women were shown as more dominant and independent than White women, the fact that they were almost completely absent from White magazines is an important finding (Baker 2005).

Another important finding about race in advertising is that different races are shown in different settings or locations (Martin 2004). In advertisements that take place
in nature or “Great Outdoors” settings, Martin found that the models were almost exclusively White, while Black models were most likely to be found in urban and suburban settings. His final conclusion is that leisure identities are racialized, and this is reflected in advertising. Thus, Martin (2004) is proposing that advertising can both reflect and reinforce racial ideologies, supporting the notion that advertising is an useful important source of information on racial perspectives which helps shape viewer’s attitudes.

*Television Advertising*

When companies advertise on television, they are able to reach a large audience and can often use Nielsen statistics to target an exact population. While diverse groups of actors are used in most commercials, the way people are portrayed varies based on race. Blacks, Whites, and Asians are used in different settings, for different products, and in different positions within commercials.

For example, Seiter (1995) finds that children are often stereotyped in commercials with the White child being shown as the “go-getter.” Additionally, Larson (2002) studies the way interracial relationships are portrayed in commercials for children’s products during children’s television programs, specifically their portrayals of White children compared to African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian children. One conclusion of this article is that interracial relationships are much more likely to be portrayed in public settings or outside of the home. For example, a commercial showing a child playing with a toy at home was twice as likely to feature only White children, while commercials for “other” or “outdoors” settings had a significantly higher rate of diversity.
Larson (2002) also found that instances of interracial advertising differed by product. Restaurants and food product commercials were highly integrated. He argues that one reason for this is the public nature of restaurants. This reflects the idea that overt racism has decreased in society, in that White people do not object to Blacks eating in the same restaurants as Whites or sharing a playground. The effects of historical and institutional racism, though, are evident in where Blacks are not shown in advertising. For example, educational products and clothing are almost exclusively advertised by Whites. Minorities are portrayed in the background and only for specific products, most frequently low status or low end products such as fast food or discount brands. Racial bias is also evident in the overuse of Whites as spokespersons for products (Larson, 2002; Li-Vollmer, 2002).

Also, Blacks and Whites are shown in different roles in commercials. First, Blacks are frequently represented in commercials, usually as secondary, rather than primary, actors of the scene (Jacobs and Baldasty 2003). This supports the idea that companies are not necessarily using minorities in commercials in an effort to market products toward them, rather, they are attempting to portray a diverse group of people using a particular product to appeal to a wide audience (Jacobs and Baldasty 2003). At the same time, Blacks are more likely to appear as primary actors (and more likely the targets of marketing campaigns) in advertisements for low-cost and low-nutrition products such as fast food or soda or in advertisements for sports related products. Whites, on the other hand, are more likely to be featured in advertisements for high-end products or for household or cleaning supplies or other items used within the home rather than in public. Research suggests that this reflects a continuing “one-dimensional”
perspective on race that sees Blacks as only being able to purchase low-end products and using minority characters only in the background of advertisements geared toward a White audience. This is consistent with Jacobs and Baldasty’s perspective that sometimes minorities in commercials are included to avoid claims that a commercial lacks diversity while still depicting the product being used mainly by White characters (Jacobs and Baldasty 2003).

Sometimes when television campaigns are purposefully created to fight racism, they rely on stereotypes in order to get their message across. Murji (2006) studied campaigns by Great Britain’s Commission for Racial Equality that were aimed at showing why stereotypes were wrong. Instead, the commercials, Murji (2006) proposes, actually perpetuate stereotypes by emphasizing the fact that stereotypes exist in the first place. One conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that even the most progressive of advertisements can inadvertently rely on stereotypes or be seen as perpetuating racism in an attempt to market to a minority audience. This highlights where use of minorities is little more than a marketing ploy, or worse a mechanism for replicating a dominant racist ideology. Even as the numbers of minorities in television commercials has increased, subtle suggestions of inferiority are being communicated through some ads (Bristor, Lee, and Hunt 1995).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I justified the need for a large scale study of depictions of interracial relationships by summarizing the existing literature in four key areas. First, advertising is important. Americans come into contact with advertisements every day, and the content
of these commercials both reflects and influences social attitudes. Second, IRRs have an important history in the United State as they functioned as a tool for those in economic power to maintain power over Blacks by controlling who they could marry/date. Third, depictions of race and ethnicity in the media have evolved over the last century, and this gives insight into societal ideas about race and relationships. Finally, existing studies have found a variety of insights about the way race is used in advertisements. This project expands upon these in order to specifically determine how IRRs are used in television advertisements and challenges existing research by looking not just at the race of the characters in commercials, but also looking at the relationships among people of different races in commercials. In the following chapter I describe the data and methods I employed to answer questions about the prevalence, determinants, and depictions of IRRs in commercials.
CHAPTER 3: DATA, MEASURES, AND METHODS

Introduction

In order to answer three questions about depictions of interracial relationships in television advertising, I examined 1,767 commercials collected from Primetime television. This is a unique project as the data set is unlike any collected in prior research and the analysis fills multiple gaps in the existing sociological body of work.

The content analyzed includes whether or not there is a relationship depicted at all, the race of the characters in the relationship if one is being depicted, the product being sold, the show the advertisement is airing during and all of the details of that show including air time, air date, and network, and the Nielsen ranking for the show and audience viewer numbers for each show for that week. I compared the data to information on real life demographics and friendship networks in order to determine whether the depictions of IRRs in television commercials are reflective of real life numbers of IRRs.

Additionally, for chapter 6 I completed a qualitative analysis of twelve specific commercials depicting same race platonic, same race romantic, interracial platonic, and interracial romantic relationships in order to clearly detail the subtle differences in when, where, and how different groups or dyads are shown in television commercials. Chapter 6 fills in the details and gaps that cannot be analyzed through the other data used for the project.
As summarized below, I analyzed data for three different chapters, each of which has a different focus in order to gain a deeper understanding of the way IRRs are depicted in television commercials.

**Question 1: How prevalent are interracial relationships in television advertising, and how does this compare to the prevalence of such relationships in the contemporary United States?**

This question is designed to generate baseline estimates of the relative frequency of depictions of IRRs in television advertising. Based on my literature review, my working hypothesis is that same-sex platonic friendships will be overrepresented in advertising (Bonilla-Silva 2006) and opposite-sex romantic relationships will be underrepresented (Moran, 2003, Dalmage 2000, Larson 2002; Li-Vollmer 2002; Jacobs and Baldasty 2003). I coded the presence or absence of IRRs in each ad and calculate a measure of the incidence of IRRs, comparing that incidence to the prevalence of IRRs drawn from data sources including the U.S. Census and the General Social Survey (GSS), as well as data from other research on friendship circles and race.

**Question 2: What is the relationship between audience characteristics and the depiction of IRRs in television commercials?**

In this chapter, I investigate the relationship between the demographics of the viewing audience of particular shows and when and where commercials featuring interracial relationships appear. My working hypotheses are that (1) television shows that are targeted to a younger and more racially diverse audience will feature more IRRs and commercials featuring IRRs will be more prevalent during shows that market products for younger diverse audiences. To answer this question, I merged data from the Nielsen
Company with my database of television commercials, and conducted multiple regression analyses to assess the independent effects of each of the predictor variables I specify.

Question 3: What is the relationship between the race of individuals depicted in romantic and platonic relationships in television advertisements and the depictions of those relationships?

Using a group of commercials from the larger set, I assessed the extent to which same-race and different-race relationships are depicted differently in television advertising. I hypothesized that same-race romantic relationships will involve a greater degree of intimacy than different-race relationships. To answer this question, I analyzed 12 commercials for stereotypes, power relations, and strategic ambiguity to better understand qualitatively the choices advertisers make in casting and using (or not using) interracial relationships.

Data

The data for this project comes from two main sources—a unique set of television commercials and audience data from Nielsen research. This project employs a detailed analysis of television commercials in order to better understand the depictions of interracial relationships in television advertising and focuses on 1,767 commercials collected from Primetime television on the four major broadcast networks over the period of one week during April of 2012. This sample is every commercial that aired between 8 and 10 pm (Primetime) for the week that the data was gathered from and features 815 commercials that depict different types of relationships among various groups of people.
The data for this project are the commercials from all of the television commercials aired on the four major networks NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox during a 7 day span of Primetime airing in April of 2012. Primetime television is defined as “the time period when the number of viewers [is] at its height and, therefore, when the potential for ad revenue [is] the greatest” (Moore, Bensman, and Van Dyke 2006:41) and is generally considered to be from 8-11pm. This time period and channels were chosen to develop a baseline for research using the largest viewing population during the most popular time period on the most popular and accessible channels. Since these shows are watched by a wide viewing audience, this data set can be compared to Nielsen, GSS, and census data.

Primetime is a unique programming block, as many network shows during Primetime are aimed at a wide audience; as opposed to cable television shows and shows that air during the morning and afternoon that tend to be directed at much more specific audiences, resulting in targeted niche marketing. Furthermore, since 98% of Americans have a television, this means that virtually every American has access to Primetime television, since network television is free for anyone who owns a television, as opposed to cable channels that are only available to those who subscribe to cable or satellite services. The goal of this project is to create a database of television commercials that attempt to sell to a large diverse audience, and Primetime television gives the widest variety of commercials, audiences, and programming.

In addition to the specific data collected to answer each of the three empirical questions, data were collected from each commercial for later use in the detailed qualitative analysis of the parts of the advertisements for the qualitative portion of this
dissertation. To these data I append demographic information on the programs’ audiences from the Nielsen Company.

The data were collected through digital recording of all of the television programs that aired during the time period using a digital video disc recorder and television shows that were collected from Dish Network on a digital video recorder. After the entire data set was collected, each commercial was viewed twice in order to double check for the coding for each one. While the commercials were viewed all of the necessary data were recorded and coded for analysis including the show during which the commercial aired, network, time, product, race and sex of all of the characters in the ad, the presence (or lack of presence) of a relationship, the type of relationship (friendship, romantic, coworker, client-employee, or family), and the type of product. Furthermore, to ensure interrater reliability, two independent researchers, after agreeing upon coding measures, each viewed 100 commercials and collected the same data, which was measured against the overall results of this study. In all 100 cases, the raters agreed on the races of the actors and in cases of IRRs whether the relationship was platonic or romantic.

Measures

Chapter 4

In chapter 4 I compare the data collected from television commercials on the types and prevalence of relationships depicted in the ads with data on real life social networks to determine whether what viewers see on television is an accurate reflection of the current state of interracial relationships and friendships in the United States. This includes data from prior research, data from the census, data on friendship networks, and data on
attitudes from the GSS. The relationships explored are friendships, romantic, coworkers, employee client, and family and the data includes the race, sex, and age of each person depicted in each relationship in the commercials.

Variables for this chapter. The dependent variables in this chapter are the types of relationships being depicted in each commercial. As each commercial was viewed the data was coded based on the types of relationships being shown and the people in each relationship. The first measure is “no relationship detected” for a commercial with no characters or just one narrator or character not interacting with anyone. Commercials where there are relationships were coded based on order of appearance as “relationship 1”, “relationship 2”, “relationship 3” etc….and identified as either a dyad or group being shown. Next the race and sex of each character was listed with each measure identifying each character as Male or Female and as White, Black, Asian, Latino, ambiguous (meaning clearly not White but not clear what the racial background is), or unidentifiable based on looking at the character—I worked with two student researchers who each independently coded 100 commercials that I had coded previously for race to confirm that my observations were correct. After coding 5 commercials under my instruction, the researchers each coded 100 commercials and our results were all the same, reflecting the fact that race/ethnicity were easy to identify within the data set. For purposes of this project I assumed that depictions of same sex relationships are platonic. Although it is conceivable that some same-sex pairs of men or women were supposed to be involved romantically, I saw no obvious signs that this was the case in any of the commercials coded for this project.
I further assumed that depictions of men with women were romantic relationships, unless it was clearly otherwise depicted in the commercial. For the most part, this depended on whether there was just one man and one woman or whether it was a mixed-sex group of people. So, mixed-sex couples were coded as romantic, again, unless it was clear from the commercial that the two members of the couple were “just friends.” Mixed-sex groups of people were typically coded as non-romantic, unless there were clear signs from the ad that there were romantic relationships in the group. These measures were used to create a database of the percentages of IRRs in commercials and were tested against the independent variables.

Chapter 5

In chapter 5 I examine the relationship between audience characteristics and the types of relationships depicted in commercials (same race or interracial platonic relationships and same race or interracial romantic relationships). This analysis shows where depictions of IRRs are likely and unlikely to occur in order to better understand when advertisers think these relationships will get a positive response from an audience. It uses Nielsen data to discern the relationship between the popularity of a program and the existence of IRRs in television commercials shown during a particular show.

Variables. The dependent variables to determine the likelihood that audiences are exposed to interracial relationships are all relationships romantic or platonic, all platonic relationships including friends, co-workers, and employee/client relationships,

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2 For example, a mixed sex group of co-workers in the office or at a bar would be coded as platonic, unless clear signals are given in the ad that one or more couples are involved romantically.
friendships, all romantic relationships including couples and families, and romantic couples. The independent variables include the audience characteristics for each show including race, sex, and age groups of viewers. The control variables are the networks, time, and day the show aired. These were the only additional variables included on the Nielsen data, so I was restricted in my capacity to include a large set of control variables.

I analyzed the data from the two sets to determine when and where interracial relationships were used (or were not used) and to see which audiences were most likely to see different types of relationship.

Chapter 6

In chapter 6 I perform a qualitative analysis of a set of 12 specific commercials chosen based on their frequency and meeting these four categories including: 3 depicting same race friendships, 3 depicting interracial friendships, 3 depicting same race romantic relationships, and 3 depicting interracial romantic relationships. I closely analyze the depictions in each of these commercials, including all of the independent variables listed above, as well as other data that will come from repeatedly viewing the commercials. This section also examines the types of stereotypes that are used in commercials about race/ethnicity and who would use a particular product and also uses Goffman’s (1979) concepts of power and subordination in advertising to determine the power distribution in different types of relationships. The goal of chapter three is to determine if there are subtle differences in the types of ways advertisers use each type of depiction or relationship in advertising and what these subtle differences are if they exist.
Methods

This dissertation answers three questions. First it looks that the relationship between real life interracial relationships and those depicted in television commercials, next, it looks that the relationships between the depictions of IRRs in commercials and audience characteristics, and third, it looks at the content of 12 commercials to see how stereotypes, power, and strategic ambiguity are used in depicting same race and interracial relationships. In order to explore depictions of interracial platonic and romantic relationships in television commercials, I employed three methods.

For Chapter 4 I created a database of all of the commercials airing on the four major networks during Primetime (8-10pm) from April 15-21, 2012. While watching the commercials, I coded for product, channel, time, race, sex, and relationships of all characters, number of people in the ad, and type of relationship including whether it is a friendship, romance, employee/client, coworkers, or a family. I compared the findings from this data set to data from the GSS about attitudes toward race, from friendship network studies, from the census, and from data on the makeup of relationships throughout the United States.

In Chapter 5 I used the data set from the commercials and used logistic regression to estimate the relationship between audience characteristics and depiction of interracial relationships. This data came from Nielsen and included the sex, race, age, and viewing habits of audiences during the Primetime week that the commercials were recorded.

Chapter 6 is a qualitative study of 12 commercials featuring same race and interracial platonic and romantic relationships. I completed field notes on the characters
and stereotypes, power relationships, and strategic ambiguity present in each commercial in order to describe in deeper detail the content and use of IRRs in commercials.

Methodological Advantages and Limitations

There are multiple advantages and limitations to this dissertation. This section explains the strengths of the project and areas for improvement for future research projects resulting from this research.

Advantages. As I discuss in chapter 3, this dissertation fills multiple gaps and adds valuable research to the overall body of sociological research. First, I created a large and unique large scale database that allows for examination of overall trends in television advertising and looks specifically at trends in depictions of interracial platonic and romantic relationships. Furthermore, this study goes beyond just looking at what is in commercials and compares the data from the unique data set to data on real life relationship networks and data on audience characteristics. Finally, this study looks at interracial relationships in television advertising, which is an important site for sociological study.

Limitations. Because of the size and scope of this dissertation, there are areas for improvement for use in future research projects. First, the data collected comes from Primetime and four major broadcasting networks, so it gives an excellent overview of mainstream viewing audiences, while it does not include information from cable channels or other times of day, so future research should determine if the results from this study would be the same for commercials airing at different times or places. Next, the qualitative set for this dissertation consists of 12 commercials. Future research should include a larger selection of commercials and a clearly defined rubric for collecting data
and analyzing content. Third, this project examines interracial heterosexual relationships and future research should include a study of depictions of other types of relationships.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I summarized the data and methods used to study the depictions of interracial relationships in television advertisements. The analysis relies on data from a unique set of television commercials airing during Primetime and Nielsen data of audience demographics from the same week in order to answer three research questions. First the data is used to compare real life data on social networks and interracial marriages and families with depictions in television advertising. Second, data is used to determine whether audience characteristics determine the types of relationships depicted in television commercials. Lastly, a set of commercials is analyzed qualitatively to determine when, where, and how interracial relationships are used (or not used) in specific commercials.
CHAPTER 4: A COMPARISON OF DEPICTIONS OF INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN TELEVISION ADVERTISING WITH THEIR “REAL WORLD” PREVALENCE

Introduction

Chapter 4 poses the question, “How prevalent are interracial relationships in television advertising, and how does this compare to the prevalence of such relationships in the contemporary United States?” Using a database of over 1,700 commercials from prime-time television, this chapter tests the hypothesis that interracial platonic relationships are overrepresented in television advertising and that interracial romantic relationships, especially those within families, are underrepresented.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis is that there will be an overrepresentation of interracial friendships and underrepresentation of interracial romances in commercials. The two perspectives are as follows: First is the idea that in our “color-blind” society, many individuals like the idea of having a multi-racial and diverse group of friends (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Vera and Gordon 2003) and advertisers see depictions of diverse groups of friends as selling more products by appealing to what Vera and Gordon call “sincere fictions of the White self”. That is, while most Whites believe themselves to be “color-blind” and tolerant (Bonilla-Silva 2006), in reality the idea of romantic or sexual relationships between people of
different racial backgrounds is still not widely accepted by large White audiences (Bobo 2001). Thus, advertisers attempt to avoid this controversy by depicting romantic relationships, especially those within families, featuring only people of the same racial backgrounds (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Bobo 2001; and Vera and Gordon 2003).

The other perspective is that calls for diversity from Civil Rights groups and changes in exposure to people of diverse backgrounds, especially through going to work and school with integrated groups, has led to positive changes in attitudes toward interracial relationships, and this is reflected in television commercials. Data from this research lends some support to both Rosenfeld and Wilson’s perspectives and Bonilla-Silva’s perspective in the United States,

**Methods**

The data for this chapter come from an examination of all of the commercials that aired on the four major networks during Primetime (8-10pm) during the week of April 15-21, 2012. Commercials are all coded for the product, when and where it aired, the characters, race, sex, gender and relationship among characters including whether it is a friendship, romance, employee/client, coworkers, or a family, and how many people are in the relationship. This information is used to better understand the relationship between what audiences see on television and the real life numbers of interracial relationships.

In this chapter, I compare data from the GSS, from friendship network research, and from the census with the percentages of relationships represented in the television commercials from my data set in order to determine whether real life networks are represented in advertising or not.
Findings

This chapter examines when and where IRRs appear and are excluded in television advertisements and compares this with real world data to determine whether the reality of interracial friendships and romances is reflected in television advertising.

General Depictions of Relationships

As Table 4.1 shows, almost half of the commercials featured in this project feature relationships. Advertisers use commercials with relationships to appeal to a viewer’s desire to belong and these commercials show products as being part of a positive interaction with others in a social context. Over half of the commercials depicted in a week feature no relationships. Some of these commercials rely on solely showing the product; others are testimonials that feature a spokesperson explaining the features of a product and do not rely on any type of relationship or storyline.

Furthermore, by not depicting any type of relationship, advertisers might believe they will avoid controversy over casting or legal battles like the one the New York Times faced in the early 1990’s. Of course, the other side of this argument is reflected in the 815 commercials that do feature relationships, as research shows that audiences often are more persuaded when they see characters in a commercial that they can relate to. Thus different advertisers clearly use different strategies for selling their products (Laird 1998; Danesi 2004).
Table 4.1. Relationships Depicted in Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Relationship Depicted</th>
<th>Relationship Depicted</th>
<th>Total Commercials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>952 (54%)</td>
<td>815 (46%)</td>
<td>1,767</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Types of Relationships and Depictions of IRRs

The data collected for this project can be interpreted to support both hypotheses, that of reflecting real racial progress in the U.S (Wilson 1978), and that of only the appearance of racial progress as a means of hiding continuing White privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2006). There are five clear types of relationships depicted in advertisements which are friendship, romantic relationships, families, co-workers, employee/client relationships, and. I look at the racial and ethnic composition of each of these to understand which types of relationships are most likely to feature characters of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Table 4.2 below shows the frequency with which each type of relationship was shown, and the relative frequency (out of a total of 815 relationships depicted) of each relationship. This table gives a first look at the most and least common types of relationships depicted in television commercials.
Table 4.2. Frequency and Relative Frequency of Relationship Types in Commercials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Same Race Dyad</th>
<th>Interracial Dyad</th>
<th>Same Race Group</th>
<th>Interracial Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>56 (7%)</td>
<td>73 (9%)</td>
<td>29 (4%)</td>
<td>119 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic couples</td>
<td>149 (18%)</td>
<td>56 (7%)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>98 (12%)</td>
<td>5 (&lt;1%)</td>
<td>97 (12%)</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Workers</td>
<td>20 (2%)</td>
<td>38 (5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee/Client</td>
<td>24 (3%)</td>
<td>38 (5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (&lt;1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4.2, the most frequent types of relationships shown in commercials are same race romantic couples and families (both of these are romantic relationships) and interracial group friendships (which are platonic). Table 4.3 presents the percentage of total relationships based on racial composition of the group for friendship dyads and groups and romantic couples and families.

Table 4.3. Percentage of Total Relationships Based on Racial Composition of Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Type</th>
<th>Same Race</th>
<th>Interracial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyad</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic couples</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Workers</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee/Client</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 yields multiple important findings about what types of relationships between what types of people audiences see when watching commercials during
Primetime. Friendships are overwhelmingly made up of diverse groups of people, especially when they feature a large group. Fifty-seven% of dyad friendships feature people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, while dyad romantic relationships feature only 27% interracial relationships. In every instance of a non-sexual or platonic relationship, the majority of depictions shown are interracial—this includes friendships, coworkers, and client employee relationships. Furthermore, when groups of platonic relationships are shown, they are almost always diverse, with 100% of the depictions of workplace relationships featuring interactions and relationships among people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.³

At the same time, 73% of romantic or sexual relationships feature couples who are of the same race. When families are included in this, 84% of romantic relationships are shown as same race. Furthermore, and perhaps most startling, 98% of families shown are all of the same race. If a person’s only exposure to the United States were television advertisements, that person might assume that interracial families do not even exist in the United States, since they are virtually non-existent in commercials. For perspective, when in June 2013 a Cheerios commercial aired that features a White woman, a Black man, and their mixed race daughter, huge numbers of negative comments appeared on the internet, and became a hot topic of discussion on news shows and in newspapers. This suggests both that commercials featuring interracial families are rare (otherwise there

³ Because these are Primetime ads, most of them are likely to be national ads due to the high cost of advertising. There could be different mixtures of groups in different locales and some of the precise variety of racial/ethnic groups might depend on the fact that this data was collected in Cincinnati and other markets might have different racial/ethnic populations featuring slightly different mixtures in commercials.
likely would not have been much of a controversy) and that the lack of such families depicted may be due to the fact that large corporations wish to avoid precisely the kind of public debate that the Cheerios ad instigated. On the other hand, now that Cheerios has “broken the interracial family barrier,” it is conceivable that more such ads will be produced in the future. Hence, my data suggest that as of April 2012 these family types were exceedingly rare, —and it is hard to say whether this commercial is unique or a sign of changes to come to commercials.

Summary of Relationships Depicted in the Data Set

*Platonic relationships.* This data set includes a number of platonic relationships including friendship dyads and groups, employee/client relationships, and co-workers in order to understand when and where interracial relationships are shown. First, in Tables 4.4 to 4.6 I summarize the data on friendships, co-worker relationship, and employee/client relationships in order to get a clear picture of where interracial friendships appear and where they do not appear. Many of the commercials in this data set feature platonic relationships. For dyads, none show a relationship between two people of any race besides White—so of the 56 friendship dyads that are same race, they are all White with White people. Furthermore, of the friendship dyads shown, 56 of them are a White character with another White character, while 80 of them are interracial with 49 of them being a Black person with a White person, 25 of them as an Asian with a White person, and 6 with a Latino with a White person.

Importantly, 64% of co-worker relationships depicted are interracial. The highest percentage is Black and Asian together making 32% of the interracial coworker relationships depicted. Next is White and Black at 11%, then White and Latino and
Latino and Black each at 8%. In these data, the only interracial relationships shown that do not involve a White person are within the co-worker portion of the study.

Within the employee client relationships depicted, 39% of them were same race, with 96% of these as White employees with White clients. For the interracial relationships, all involve one White person with 87% of interactions between Whites and Blacks and no relationships shown among minority groups without a White person involved.

The next three tables summarize the specific data on platonic relationships from the data set. Table 4.4 shows the friendships dyads and is broken down by the racial make ups of the relationships Table 4.5 summarizes co-worker relationships by racial composition, and Table 4.6 summarizes employee/client relationships by racial composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of same- or different-race group</th>
<th>Percentage of all dyads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total dyads</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same race (all White)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different race</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Asian</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Latino</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.5. Co-worker Summaries of Relationships Shown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of same- or different-race group</th>
<th>Percentage of all co-worker relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Co-workers</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Race</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Race</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Latino</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and Asian</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and Latino</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4.6. Employee/Client Summaries of Relationships Shown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of same- or different-race group</th>
<th>Percentage of all co-worker relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Employee Client</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Race</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Race</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Latino</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6 summarize the racial composition of platonic relationships in television commercials. There are a higher percentage of different race platonic relationships depicted than same race, with White Black being the most frequent.
**Romantic Relationships.** Two types of romantic relationships are studied in this data set. First is dyadic romances—this includes couples who clearly have a romantic relationship. Second are families where the presence of children implies a romantic relationship between the parents of the children. Table 4.7 summarizes the depictions of romantic couples by race.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of same- or different-race group</th>
<th>Percentage of all co-worker relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total romantic couples</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Race</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Race</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Asian</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Latino</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the romantic couples depicted, 73% are same race with 78% of these being White couples, 9% Black and 13% Asian. No other same race couples are depicted in this data set. For interracial relationships, 26% of romantic relationships depicted are interracial with 17% being between Whites and Asians, 13% between Whites and Blacks, and 6% between Whites and Latinos.

Table 4.8 is a summary of all of the families depicted by race and a summary of the interracial depictions as well.
Table 4.8. Summary of Families Depicted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of same- or different-race group</th>
<th>Percentage of all co-worker relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Families</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Race</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Race</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White and Latino</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 195 families featured in the data set, 183, or 93% of them are of the same race. 73% of these are White, 13% Black, 9% Asian, and 5% Latino. Only 6% of the families shown are interracial; 4% of these are White and Black and 2% are White and Latino.

The next section compares the findings on IRRs in ads with real life data on friendship networks and interracial romances.

**Real Life vs. Television**

This section compares a selection of data on friendship networks, racial attitudes, and data on interracial relationships in order to determine where television depictions are accurate and inaccurate and compare and summarize real life attitudes with depictions in television advertisements.
Table 4.9 summarizes the real life data on interracial platonic and romantic relationships. These data came from research on relationship networks by Smith (1999) and Quillian and Campbell (2003) as well as the U.S. Census.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marriage types</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blacks indicating interracial friendships</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites indicating interracial friendships</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All marriages that are interracial</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians born in the U.S. married to Whites</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinos born in the U.S. married to Whites</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black men married to Whites</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black women married to Whites</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the preceding table indicates, the hypothesis that platonic relationships would be overrepresented and romantic relationships be underrepresented is supported. Data on friendship networks show that interracial friendships, especially close friendships, are not as prevalent in the real world as they are on television, with only 6% of Whites claiming that they have interracial friendships, and 69% of television commercials depicting friendships among diverse groups of friends. While 15% of Blacks and 6% of Whites indicate interracial friendships, 36% of the friendships depicted in commercials are between Blacks and Whites. Furthermore, the data shows that interracial romantic partnerships are on the rise, even though 84% of commercials show romantic relationships and families as being all people of the same race and 98% of families are shown as being the same race. Since every year 15% of marriages are between people of
two different racial/ethnic backgrounds, there is a major gap between the number of real life interracial families and those depicted in commercials. These findings support both hypotheses—first that diversity in the media and advertisements reflects real changes in social attitudes over time and second that despite these changes, many ads reflect racial stereotypes as described by Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) concept of “color-blind racism”. Thus the support of the hypothesis about where interracial relationships appear and do not appear is a significant finding for many reasons. First, in the last fifty years, friendship networks have diversified, as increasing numbers of students go to college and live with diverse groups of people and thus expand their friendship networks beyond just those from their own race (Stearns, Buchman, and Bonneau 2009). In fact, one result of the Civil Rights Movement and Civil Rights legislation has been a diversification of the workplace and educational systems including high schools and universities that has led to increased exposure to people of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds and therefore resulted in many more interracial primary friendships and romantic relationships (Stearns, Buchman, and Bonneau 2009; Rosenfeld 2007).

At the same time, research shows that while people are likely to come into contact more frequently with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. When surveyed White and Black individuals both tend to indicate that they have interracial friendships, but only 15.2% of Blacks and 6% of Whites can specifically list friends of another race (Smith 1999). Quillian and Campbell (2003) had similar findings when studying the friendship networks of Hispanic and Asian teenagers. As Bobo (2001) and Bonilla-Silva (2006) point out, while White audiences report being very comfortable with the idea of interracial friendships, the majority of Whites do not have interracial friendships.
Therefore, when the majority of friendship groups in commercials are portrayed as interracial, it is not reflecting reality and instead supports Vera and Gordon’s (2003) concept of “sincere fictions of the White self,”

*Overrepresentation.* So why are interracial friendships overrepresented in television commercials? One is that as attitudes have changed over the last 50 years, it has become more socially acceptable to depict interracial platonic relationships in the media, including television advertisements. Another reason is because audiences are more tolerant toward these types of relationships: it is an easy way for companies to appeal to a wide audience while avoiding criticism from Civil Rights groups that might call for more diversity in advertising. Finally, the overrepresentation of interracial platonic relationships in television commercials reflects the idea that White audiences are able to see themselves in ways that hide subtle forms of racism that continue to exist in America by showing their “tolerance” through seeing harmonious interracial friendships on television and imagining themselves to have such relationships, even if their real life does not reflect this (Bonilla-Silva 2006, and Vera and Gordon 2003).

Table 4.4 features a summary of questions about changes in racial attitudes in the general United States population over the last 50 years and supports the idea that there have been real changes in attitudes about race over time and that these are reflected in an overrepresentation of interracial platonic relationships in television commercials and that they reflect real changes in daily interactions and relationships among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

As the data in the table shows, reported attitudes toward interracial relationships from Whites about Blacks have vastly improved over the last 40 years. The idea of
having interracial friendships and relationships based on equality has become more acceptable over time, and therefore, from this sociological perspective, it makes sense that this would be reflected in television and film. Wilson (1978) and Rosenfeld (2006) suggest that real life changes have occurred in race relations Post Civil Rights and therefore, advertisers depict interracial relationships in advertisements.

Table 4.10 features a summary of questions about changes in racial attitudes among whites over the last 50 years and supports the idea that there have been real changes in attitudes about race over time and that these are reflected in an overrepresentation of interracial platonic relationships in television commercials and that they reflect real changes in daily interactions and relationships among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. It is important to note that the GSS has not recorded attitudes toward integration among Blacks, but research suggests that Blacks tend to be far more supportive of residential integration, for example, than Whites (Krysan and Farley 2002).
Table 4.10 Questions from the GSS about Racial Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Whites reporting having a Black person to their house for dinner in the last year</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Whites who strongly disagree that they have the right to keep Blacks out of their neighborhood</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Whites reporting having Blacks living in the same neighborhood</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Whites who disagree with laws against interracial marriage</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Whites who favor bussing to integrate schools</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of people reporting that the employees at their job are half Black and half White</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of respondents who would try to change the rules if a social club they belonged to excluded minorities</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smith, Tuch and Martin suggest that “tolerance evolves, like culture or language. In a similar fashion, Americans’ regard for racial others appears to be an ever-unfolding drama that, at some times more than others, tightens its grasp on our nation’s conscience” (1997:13). Indeed, as political focus, laws, attitudes, and those in power change in
America, so does its racial landscape. These changes are reflected in both media depictions of interracial relationships and the attitudes Americans hold toward them.

Martin (2010) points out that there are now more than ever increasing interactions between Blacks and Whites and fewer social stigmas attached to relationships between people of different racial backgrounds. And while there are still racists in America, depictions of interracial relationships in the media are typically positive, reflective of real relationship networks. He posits that these depictions have a positive effect on audiences by changing stereotypes and ideas about relationships between Blacks and Whites. As America’s diversity grows, as more groups have access to college and a varied workforce, and as generations become more tolerant, the likelihood of developing relationships between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds expands, thus changing the societal views on the subject overall (Rosenfeld 2007; Wilson 1978).

Martin, Trego, and Nakayama (2010) explain that in the last 50 years the occurrence of interracial friendships among college students has grown rapidly, and this, they contend, results in changing attitudes about race overall in addition to changes in exposure and access to diverse groups of people. In other words, this analysis supports the perspective that race relations have actually improved. As the color line has faded, friendships have grown among Blacks and Whites, albeit slowly, and attitudes have changed.

Another reason so many depictions of interracial friendships occur in television commercials is the influence of civil rights groups which have called for more diversity in television, showing the many faces of America, rather than just White families. Furthermore, research has shown that media depictions of minorities are important in shaping the attitudes and opinions of others in society about minorities (Mastro and Stern
The use of diverse groups in media can positively impact racial attitudes in society. “In their most obvious dimensions, they promote tolerance, inclusiveness, and (limited) acceptance by Whites of Blacks” (Entman and Rojecki 2000:56-57). This conclusion is supported by the way interracial friendships are overrepresented in television commercials. In other words, those producing commercials add diversity for multiple reasons. One is simply to increase the overall market share and appeal to larger audiences. Another is the noble goal of gently nudging Americans into being more accepting and tolerant toward interracial relationships. Lastly, advertisers have responded to calls to increase diversity in media, leading to the addition of (many times token) diverse characters in seemingly harmless situations in order to not offend significant demographic segments in their potential marketing audience.

A second perspective on the overrepresentation of interracial friendships in the media and within television commercials supports a less positive interpretation of the data. Scholars like Bonilla-Silva (2006), Bobo (2001), Vera and Gordon (2003), and Omi and Winant (1986) suggest that these depictions are actually a tool for hiding the racism and segregation. Since there is a clear overrepresentation of interracial friendships, these scholars suggest that Whites are able to point to television and suggest that progress has been made racially. Given that real life data does not coincide with these representations and that 1) many friendships networks continue to be segregated and 2) the majority of closer relationships are same race supports the idea that many Whites still are not truly committed to pursuing interracial friendships outside of work or services. Thus, despite the evolution of the relationships between Blacks and Whites over the last 200 years, many sociologists, in contrast to the preceding view, suggest that racism is alive and well
in America, just in less obvious forms. People like the idea of interracial friendships, but in reality, close friendships tend to be among those of the same race, especially for White Americans.

The data on interracial romance, on the other hand, shows an underrepresentation in advertising versus what census data reveal about such relationships. Research indicates that over the last 30 years there has been a major increase in the number of interracial romantic relationships in the United States among people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition to the information from the Census table above, surveys reveal that 40% of Asians born in the United States marry Whites and 20% of foreign-born Asians in the United States are married to Whites. Furthermore, 38% of Latinos born in the United States are married to Whites. For foreign-born Latinos in the United States the number married to Whites are 12.5% for men and 17.1% for women. Lastly, 14.4% of Black men and 6.5% of Black women are married to Whites in the United States. (“Census: Interracial Marriage Rising”). Overall rates of interracial marriage are 7%, but each year 15% of new marriages are interracial, gradually raising the overall rate.

Sociological research supports this data showing changes in attitudes and demographics over the last 40-50 years in America. Instances of interracial romantic relationships have been increasing since the laws surrounding these changed in 1967. In fact, 7 of married couples are interracial now, vs. only 2% in 1970, and this number is rising (Rosenfeld 2007; “Number of Interracial Couples in U.S. Reaches All-Time High”). As an MSNBC report points out, “Many prominent Blacks — including Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, civil rights leader Julian Bond and former U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley Braun — have married Whites. Well-known Whites who have married
Blacks include former Defense Secretary William Cohen and actor Robert DeNiro” (“After 40 Years, Interracial Marriage Flourishing”). These very public interracial marriages among prominent public figures are a major shift from those of the past which were either hidden, such as Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, apologized for, such as Dean Rusk’s offer to President Johnson to resign from his position as Secretary of State when his White daughter married a Black man, or non-existent.

Further supporting the rise of interracial romances in the United States is data that shows that for married couples 20-29 years old, 64% of Asians, 37% of Hispanics, 9% of Whites, and 5.4% of Blacks are married to a partner of a different race (Joyner and Kao 2005). The authors also point out that it is difficult to get an accurate number of how many individuals are in interracial romantic relationships, as non-marriage relationships are not all recorded in the census.

For younger adults there are higher percentages of interracial romances as well with 14.2% of 18-19 year olds and 12.4% of 20-21 year olds in non-marriage based interracial romances (Joyner and Kao 2005). Since Americans are more comfortable with interracial romances outside of marriage, it makes sense that these depictions would be seen at a higher rate than depictions of families that are interracial, since the depiction of a family or parent with a child implies marriage and sex between people. In particular, the commercials in this data set do not reflect these changes in the family. Of the families shown, only 12 of 195 are interracial—barely 6%. Even though 67% of Asians and 37% of Latinos are married to people of different races, in the commercial set only 5 Latinos were shown as being in interracial families and no Asians were shown in interracial families. Of the total relationships depicted, 7% are interracial romantic couples, and less
than 1% are interracial families. At the same time, 18% of commercials feature same race romantic couples and 12% feature same race families. Additionally, 73% of romantic couples (dating or married) shown are interracial and less than 2% of families shown are interracial. Thus when commitment, children, and marriage are part of the relationship, there is a high likelihood that it will be a same race relationship depicted.

These data indicate that although some attitudes toward interracial dating have changed since the Civil Rights Movement, many in society experience substantial continued unease with such relationships, especially among some demographics. Those who are engaging in and have high acceptance ratings of IRRs tend to be younger White women and Black men, while older people, Black women, and White men, are less open to them (Schoepflin 2009). In fact, Childs (2005) found in her interviews with interracial couples that the real life reactions of family members when informed of their relationship were mostly negative or filled with skepticism, proving that real world experiences often vary from reported attitudes on race. While demographic information shows an increase in interracial friendships and interracial romantic relationships, data also shows that the experiences of people in these IRRs are not always positive (Schoepflin 2009). In short, while the increase in IRRs has increased significantly in recent years, many Americans are still uncomfortable with the idea of sex and marriage among people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds (“Number of Interracial Couples in U.S. Reaches All-Time High”).

While there has been a major increase in the number of interracial romantic relationships in recent years, of the commercials viewed for this project, only 7% showed interracial romantic relationships, and of the romantic relationships shown, 73% of these
featured partners of the same race. Finally, only 2% of family relationships depicted are interracial. So while many more Americans are marrying people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds creating mixed race/mixed ethnicity families across the country, in television advertisements, the landscape looks much different.

**Underrepresentation.** Since, television commercials have not always reflected the changes in the numbers of romantic IRRs, many scholars suggest that there continues to be incentives for Whites to maintain racial inequality in America (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Gray 1995). While blatant Jim Crow bigotry has become unacceptable, other, more subtle means of dominance flourish. Bonilla-Silva (2006) suggests that the concept of “colorblind racism” that has become so pervasive in American society is actually just a more savvy form of the racism than existed during Jim Crow in the South. So while it is clear that over the last fifty years there have been changes in the diversity of characters on television and in movies, this change may be seen as a form of rhetorical adaptation to maintain hegemonic control rather than a sign of true progress.

Gray (1995) points out that while it is easy to assume all diversity initiatives, such as increasing the number of Blacks cast in movies and television shows, as being progressive, little research supports this premise. When television and movie producers diversify their casts, they often include token minorities who embody stereotypical caricatures.

So how does this happen? Feagin explains his introduction to Vera and Gordon’s *Sincere Fictions of the White Self* that “Many of the White male moviemakers are relatively liberal in their personal politics; yet when it comes to racial matters—as Vera and Gordon show well—they still offer up a mostly sanitized and Whitewashed view of
the racial and other social history of the United States” (Vera and Gordon 2003:vii). In other words, even the best intentioned of filmmakers has a difficult time avoiding racial stereotypes. Feagin (Vera and Gordon) goes on to explain, “moviemaking and the other mass media are today controlled by a very small and quite undemocratic elite, one that is substantially concerned with maintaining current class, racial, and gender arrangements” (2003:vii). This elite manipulates societal acceptance of stereotypes and reinforces historical segregation that results in a still small number of interracial relationships, in relation to the large numbers of diverse populations within the United States today. In this view depictions of diversity exist solely to maintain a dominant perspective and satisfy complaints of a lack of minority presence in the media-- and that these changes in the numbers of Blacks and Whites being shown and changes in the types of relationships being shown, do not indicate real social change (Gitlin 1987).

From this sociological perspective, the racist attitudes and dominant ideology of White superiority have been maintained since Jim Crow and are merely packaged differently, creating a manipulated false consciousness of racial progress. The media has become an important tool in maintaining and replicating stereotypes and racist attitudes through mass producing and sharing messages that reinforce inequality through stressing individual achievement, capitalism, and reproducing the idea that Blacks and Whites are inherently different from one another. As television and film shape and reflect our ideas about interracial relationships, Bonilla-Silva (2006) and Vera and Gordon (2003) argue that by emphasizing and reifying dominant social constructions these media impede the acceptability of interracial relationships (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Vera and Gordon 2003).
Summary

This chapter supports alternative theories about changes in depictions of IRRs in television commercials and public attitudes toward these relationships. On the one hand, the overrepresentation of interracial friendships in commercials reflects some positive changes in attitudes toward IRRs. In fact, sociologists like Wilson (1996) and Rosenfeld (2007) argue that much progress has been made as far as race relations go in America, and for many the opportunity to meet and develop relationships with those outside of one’s own race or ethnicity is a real option that did not exist preceding the Civil Rights movement. Thus, when interracial relationships are depicted in commercials its evolution can be traced along with the evolution of overall race relations in America over the course of the 20th century. As Blacks and other minorities gained more rights such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or Brown vs. Board of Education, more opportunities opened up for Blacks and this changed friendship networks. Thus depictions of Blacks and Whites interacting in television commercials have reflected these real changes over history.

Other research, though, shows a more sinister cause for the overrepresentation of interracial friendships and underrepresentation of interracial romantic relationship and interracial families. This research suggests that Americans are as racist as ever, and they have found new ways to display and hide that racism. Rather than the blatant racism of Jim Crow and before the Civil Rights Movement, Americans display attitudes of tolerance, as reflected in the overrepresentation of interracial platonic relationships found in these commercials. Yet in real life they continue to avoid interracial friendships and create multiple narratives to defend this modern day segregation (Bobo 2001; Bonilla - Silva 2006). Furthermore, White audiences as a group continue to be uncomfortable with
the idea of interracial romance and sex, which is reflected in the lack of depictions of
interracial families and interracial romance from this data set. While in the real world
individuals are experiencing more and more interracial romances and multiracial families
are growing in number, these new types of families and couples continue to face racist
objections from the society within which they live, and this is reflected in the fact that
companies often choose to omit these types of relationships in advertisements (Bonilla-
Silva 2006).

The data reported in this chapter support the notion that, as predicted in the
hypothesis, interracial platonic relationships are overrepresented in television
commercials. Furthermore, it supports the hypothesis that interracial family and romantic
relationships are underrepresented in Prime Time television advertising in the United
States today.
CHAPTER 5: AUDIENCE CHARACTERISTICS AND INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

This chapter proposes that interracial relationships, both platonic and romantic, are more likely to appear in television advertisements airing during shows with high viewership among young and diverse audiences. To test this hypothesis, I analyze data from Nielsen and an independent data set of television commercials that aired during Primetime viewing hours.

As described in chapter 2, social ideas about race, class, and gender are often reflected in and shaped through the media. Over time, depictions of minorities have evolved from non-existence, to ridicule, to respect (Branchik 2003) and studies of depictions of race in the media provide a snapshot of society’s attitudes about race at a particular time in history. Advertising is a specific media that is a useful site for sociological study because of the careful way advertisers tailor their messages to target audiences. Since advertisements are a tool for selling both a product and a lifestyle, the careful casting choices made by companies reflect market research about what audiences will respond positively and negatively toward. Therefore, studies of television advertisements frequently give insight into advertiser perception of audience acceptance of different cultures, races, ethnicities, and relationships (Jhally 1987; Goffman 1972).

Three sociological perspectives inform this chapter. First, I rely on theory and prior research suggesting that because they are more likely to come into contact with
diverse groups of people, younger people are more likely to be open to the idea of
interracial relationships (Rosenfeld 2007). In examining which products feature IRRs in
their advertising, it predicts that products aimed toward younger, hipper, more open
minded audiences are more likely to feature interracial relationships, since research
suggests these groups are more open to the concept of integration (Rosenfeld 2007). As
scholars point out, younger audiences are more likely to interact with diverse groups of
people in their daily lives, more likely to have interracial friendships, work relationships,
and romantic relationships, and are more likely to be open to the idea of many different
types of relationships. This section suggests that when advertisers want to market to this
younger demographic, using IRRs can add to the persuasiveness of an ad (Rosenfeld
2007; Abernethy, Gray, and Butler 1997).

Second, I have argued in chapter 2 that advertisers invest significant resources on
market research to understand the preferences and aversions of the existing and potential
consumers of their products and services. They then craft messages and commercials that
will both appeal to and not offend target audiences. As Goffman and others indicate,
much information can be gained by looking at the audiences for particular television
programs and studying the advertisements that air during these programs (Goffman 1979;
Williamson 1984; Oakenfull, McCarthy, and Greenlee 2008). When advertisers attempt
to appeal to a minority group, they risk alienating the majority groups or creating
 commercials that do not make the product appealing to the majority audience (Oakenfull,
McCarthy, and Greenlee 2008). Advertisers also have to be careful when depicting
minorities as part of their commercials to appeal to the culture of that minority group
without relying on stereotypes or other offensive material. As the goal of the advertiser is
to appeal to target audiences, if ethnic or racial symbols or concepts are used inappropriately, the company’s brand image may be seriously damaged (Rotfeld 2003). For example, Intel received major negative press after releasing a print ad featuring six Black runners bowing down to a White man dressed in business clothes with the heading, “Maximize the Power of Your Employees” (Thomas 2007). This ad continues to be featured in websites and discussion boards as one of the ten most racist ads of all time. Thus, aligning the type of show with the product with the audience with the advertisement is a complex task. These findings provide insight into this process, especially the role that race and interracial friendships and romantic relationships play in these advertisements.

Third, prior research suggests that while Americans are comfortable with interracial friendships, co-workers, and employee/client relationships, since these have become commonplace and are non-threatening, they are less open to interracial romances, especially interracial families (Rosenfeld 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Importantly, while research supports the hypothesis that younger more diverse groups are more likely to approve of interracial relationships, and therefore should be more likely to see them in television advertisements, no studies specifically test this theory. Additionally, current research has not explored the relationship between the choices advertisers make when casting television commercials and the audiences who view each commercial. This chapter fills these gaps by examining the relationship between the demographics of audiences and the depiction of interracial relationships on television commercials aired during Primetime hours.
Hypotheses

In this chapter I test two hypotheses about advertisers’ use of interracial relationships in television advertising. I base my hypotheses on the reasoning that Americans are comfortable with interracial relationships among friends, co-workers, schoolmates, and between employees and clients, while remaining uncomfortable with interracial romances, marriage, and families. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement many public places have become more diverse and people are more likely to come in contact with those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Wilson (1978) further claims the Civil Rights movement has been successful in creating social change in attitudes about race and many Whites are more open to the idea of interracial platonic relationships. On the other hand, Whites still lag behind their minority counterparts in terms of comfort with interracial romantic relationships (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Therefore, I hypothesize that commercials aired during television shows that attract a largely White audience will depict a large number of commercials featuring platonic IRRs and a smaller number or commercials featuring romantic IRRs.

The second hypothesis is that minority audiences and younger audiences are more likely to see interracial relationships in advertisements because advertisers targeting them believe they are more comfortable with IRRs. Support for this hypothesis is research (Rosenfeld 2007) that shows over the last fifty years greater numbers of young people and minorities have been leaving home to go attend college. With less than fully formed ideas about racial relations and diversity, they are exposed at school to ideas about the value of respecting others and are exposed to positive examples of diverse groups of people. Without interacting with their families on a daily basis, their parents’ ideas on
race and interracial relationships have less influence over their ideology than their new
college experiences and the result is a more tolerant open-minded group of Americans.

Analytic Approach

My analysis uses two data sets to estimate the determinants of depictions of
interracial friendship and romantic relationships in television advertising. As detailed in
the Data and Procedures section below, I compared data from commercials airing during
Primetime with data from the Nielsen Company for the same week. This enables me to
test hypotheses about the relationship between audience characteristics and the types of
relationships portrayed in ads. I use logistic regression analysis to predict the likelihood
that each commercial will portray one of a number of types of interracial relationships
(Platonic, Romantic, and Family). My key explanatory variables are audience
characteristics, specifically the racial, gender, and age breakdown of viewership for each
show. In addition, I control for the channel on which the show aired and the day of the
week that the show aired.

Data and Procedures

In this section I briefly describe the data to be analyzed in this chapter. (For more details,
see Chapter 3). I then discuss the variables to be used in the analysis and provide details
of my methodological strategy

Data

Nielsen data. The Nielsen Company, a market research firm, provides detailed
analysis of consumer trends and habits to organizations seeking to use that data. I
obtained data from Nielsen on the race, sex, and age of audiences for all of the television
shows aired from April 15-April 22, 2013. This data set lists the name of each program, the time it aired, the share of the market the show had overall, and then breaks this information down per each demographic variable, thus giving a complete snapshot of who was watching what for the given time period. To understand which audiences viewed which commercials, I used the show’s name to create a database that specifies which viewers were seeing which shows and then examined which commercials aired during these shows.

Commercial data set. The second data set is a unique collection of information from all of the television commercials that aired from 8-10 pm between April 15 and April 20, 2012. For each commercial data was collected including the show it aired during, the time, day of the week, television channel, product being sold, and whether or not relationships were depicted. If relationships were depicted in the commercial, this was noted and then details of the type of relationship (Platonic including whether it is a friendship, employee/client, or coworkers, Romantic, and Family), the race of the characters, and the number of characters were recorded. This information was used along with the Nielsen data to determine which audiences were exposed to which types of relationships.

Variables

Dependent variables. Five dependent variables were used to determine the likelihood that audiences are exposed to interracial relationships. The unit of analysis in this relationship is the relationship, meaning that each commercial may contribute several (or no) relationships to the analysis. For each relationship, I created a dummy variable coded 1 if there was an interracial version of each relationship shown, 0 otherwise. The
dependent variables include (1) all relationships, including both romantic and platonic ones, (2) all platonic relationships, including friends, co-workers, and employee-client relationships; (3) friendships, which include any group of two or more individuals depicted spending time together in a non-romantic way by choice rather than through work or school; (4) all romantic relationships, including both romantic couples and families; and (5) romantic couples, which include any man and woman who are clearly in a romantic relationship including dating or married. Because many advertisers attempt to avoid controversy with audiences, I looked specifically at heterosexual relationships, since depictions of homosexual relationships in commercials are rare (although increasing in recent years) and create controversy, thus possibly leading to results that inaccurately measure an advertisers perception of what is or is not acceptable to audiences regarding interracial romance by conflating attitudes toward homosexuality with these. An interracial relationship is defined in the data set as any relationship between two people of different race/ethnicity and the categories are White, Black, East Asian, South Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern, or Other.

Focal independent variables. The focal independent variables for this chapter are several audience characteristics for each television show in the data set. These include the race, gender, and age distribution of the viewership and are coded as percentages. For example, a show scoring 30 on the Black variable would mean that 30% of the audience of that show were African American viewers. This chapter tests the relationship between particular audience profiles and the likelihood that an interracial relationship would be depicted in the commercials airing during each show.
Control variables. The control variables for this chapter are the networks where television shows aired which are NBC, CBS, and ABC, the time that the show aired, which is 8:00, 8:30, 9:00, or 9:30, and whether the show aired on a weekend, which is Saturday or Sunday. I control for these variables to assess the extent to which depictions of IRRs might vary systematically by network, time slot, or weekend, and because this proves some control over whether audience characteristics are correlated with these factors. For example, if a larger share of the weekend audience is younger or older and networks simultaneously vary the content of ads on weekends, then part of any observed relationships between audience age and depictions of IRRs could be due to the relationship between day of the week and audience age.

Methods
For the week being measured, 1,767 commercials aired during the television programs covered in the data. Logistic regression was applied to this data to estimate the relationship between audience characteristics and the depiction of interracial relationships. The logistic regression model is “linear in the coefficients,” meaning that each coefficient refers to the change in the log of the odds that each relationship depicted in the data set would be an interracial one, for a one-unit change in the independent variable of interest. For the audience characteristics, these would be one-percent changes in the share of each demographic group’s viewership. For the control variables, these would be interpreted as the difference in the log odds of an interracial relationship for each of the included variables (like NBC or a weekend show) relative to the omitted category. Because the log odds metric is not easily interpretable, I refer simply to whether
each variable had a positive or negative effect on the likelihood of the depiction of an interracial relationship, as well as the statistical significance of the relationship. Coefficients with p-values of .05 are flagged with a double asterisk, and coefficients significant at the .10 level are denoted with a single asterisk.

**Descriptive Statistics**

The following tables summarize the findings from the analysis of the Nielsen data with the commercial detail data set. Table 5.1 gives an overview of the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis, and Tables 5.2 through 5.6 summarize the logistic regression analysis of the likelihood of audiences seeing interracial platonic or romantic relationships.

First, Table 5.1 shows the means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values for all variables used in this analysis. Table 5.1 shows the descriptive statistics for the variables used in this analysis. For the viewing audiences 45% of the relationships depicted in commercials were interracial, 71% platonic, 73% of friendships, 18% of romances, and 28% of romantic couples.
### Table 5.1. Descriptive Statistics for the Variables Used in the Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All relationships</td>
<td>0.448</td>
<td>.498</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All platonic relationships</td>
<td>0.713</td>
<td>.453</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
<td>0.736</td>
<td>.441</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All romantic relationships</td>
<td>0.182</td>
<td>.386</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic couples</td>
<td>0.278</td>
<td>.449</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focal independent variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% other</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% male</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 2-17</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 18-24</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 25-34</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 35-49</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 50-64</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 65 and over</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>0.228</td>
<td>.419</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>0.292</td>
<td>.455</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>0.250</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>.421</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:30</td>
<td>0.504</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:00</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>.273</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:30</td>
<td>0.364</td>
<td>.481</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-10:00</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>.218</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend show</td>
<td>0.400</td>
<td>.490</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

This analysis of television commercials and audiences gives a snapshot of the relationship between audience characteristics and the likelihood that interracial relationships are depicted in commercials airing during Primetime television.
programming. The following tables examine this relationship for all relationships, all platonic relationships, all friendships, all romantic relationships, and all heterosexual romantic couples.

*All Relationships*

Table 5.2 below presents results from a logistic regression model for the probability that a relationship is interracial among all relationships depicted (n = 815). The dependent variable is scored 1 if the relationship is interracial, 0 if same-race.

This table summarizes all types of interracial relationships including friendships (both dyads and groups), co-workers, employee/clients, romantic, and family and examines how likely an audience member is to see any type of interracial relationship. The audience characteristics being examined are race and gender, expressed as percentages of each group, and the age of the audience overall. The control variables are the television networks including NBC, ABC, and CBS, as well as dummy variables for the time each show aired and whether or not it aired on a weekend.
Table 5.2. Coefficients and Standard Errors from Logistic Regression of the Probability of Viewing Any Type of Interracial Relationship by Audience Characteristics and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>.650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% other</td>
<td>-.103**</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>-2.02</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 2-17</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 18-24</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
<td>.284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 25-34</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 35-49</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 50-64</td>
<td>-.021</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>-.76</td>
<td>.449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>-.271</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>.301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>-.584**</td>
<td>.279</td>
<td>-2.09</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>-.511*</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td>-1.66</td>
<td>.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:30</td>
<td>-.360</td>
<td>.409</td>
<td>-.88</td>
<td>.378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:00</td>
<td>-.191</td>
<td>.426</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>.654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:30</td>
<td>-.389</td>
<td>.385</td>
<td>-1.01</td>
<td>.312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend show</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.192</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.664</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.324</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 814 relationships. Pseudo R² = 0.0154. ** p < .05; * p < .10.

The results from Table 5.2 suggest that non-Black audiences were significantly less likely to see an interracial relationship. These findings support the hypothesis that shows with a larger percentage of minority audiences and younger audiences are more likely to view interracial relationships. Additionally, ABC and CBS viewers were significantly less likely to see interracial relationships, which could be reflective of the shows airing on those networks and those specific audiences, relative to Fox or NBC. No other coefficient achieved statistical significance at conventional levels, suggesting that the depiction of all interracial relationships does not vary systematically across levels of
these variables. I test the hypothesis that specific types of relationships will be related to audience characteristics in the following sections.

Platonic Relationships

The next two tables summarize the data on the likelihood a particular audience would view interracial platonic relationships and the likelihood they would specifically view interracial friendships, as described below.

All platonic relationships. Table 5.3 below presents results from a logistic regression model for the probability that a relationship is interracial among all relationships depicted (n = 407). The dependent variable is scored 1 if the relationship is interracial, 0 if same-race.

This table summarizes all types of interracial platonic relationships including friendships (both dyads and groups), co-workers, employee/clients and examines how likely an audience member is to see any type of interracial relationship. The audience characteristics being examined are race and gender, expressed as percentages of each group, and the age of the audience overall. The control variables are the television networks including NBC, ABC, and CBS, as well as dummy variables for the time each show aired and whether or not it aired on a weekend.
Table 5.3. Coefficients and Standard Errors from Logistic Regression of the Probability of Viewing Any Type of Platonic Interracial Relationship by Audience Characteristics and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>-.044</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>-.89</td>
<td>.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% other</td>
<td>-.100</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>.230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 2-17</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 18-24</td>
<td>-.063</td>
<td>.101</td>
<td>-.63</td>
<td>.531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 25-34</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 35-49</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>.732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 50-64</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>.252</td>
<td>.424</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>-.666</td>
<td>.444</td>
<td>-1.50</td>
<td>.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>-.444</td>
<td>.506</td>
<td>-.88</td>
<td>.381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:30</td>
<td>-.422</td>
<td>.613</td>
<td>-.69</td>
<td>.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:00</td>
<td>.289</td>
<td>.691</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:30</td>
<td>-.555</td>
<td>.555</td>
<td>-1.00</td>
<td>.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend show</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>.305</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.623</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.399</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 407 relationships. Pseudo R² = 0.206x. ** p < .05; * p < .10.

The results from Table 5.3 show that there are no significant relationships so the likelihood of viewing an interracial platonic relationship is the same for all audiences. This does not support the hypothesis that younger and more diverse audiences will see more IRRs. This finding likely indicates that within platonic relationships, especially co-worker and employee/client relationships, of interracial pairs and groups are overrepresented, which means that audiences across the board are seeing a variety of interracial platonic relationships.
Platonic friendships. Table 5.4 below presents results from a logistic regression model for the probability that a relationship is interracial among all relationships depicted (n = 276). The dependent variable is scored 1 if the relationship is interracial, 0 if same-race.

This table summarizes all types of interracial friendships and examines how likely an audience member is to see any type of interracial relationship. The audience characteristics being examined are race and gender, expressed as percentages of each group, and the age of the audience overall. The control variables are the television networks including NBC, ABC, and CBS, as well as dummy variables for the time each show aired and whether or not it aired on a weekend. The control variables are the television networks including NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox.
Table 5.4. Coefficients and Standard Errors from Logistic Regression of the Probability ofViewing Any Type of Interracial Platonic Friendship by AudienceCharacteristics and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>-.052</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>-.82</td>
<td>.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% other</td>
<td>-1.54</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>.198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 2-17</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 18-24</td>
<td>-.039</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>.749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%25-34</td>
<td>-.052</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>-.86</td>
<td>.388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 35-49</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>-.58</td>
<td>.563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 50-64</td>
<td>-.026</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>.653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>.564</td>
<td>.528</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>-.550</td>
<td>.549</td>
<td>-1.00</td>
<td>.316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>-.388</td>
<td>.666</td>
<td>-.58</td>
<td>.560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:30</td>
<td>-.844</td>
<td>.747</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
<td>.258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:00</td>
<td>.727</td>
<td>.853</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:30</td>
<td>-.888</td>
<td>.649</td>
<td>-1.37</td>
<td>.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend show</td>
<td>.261</td>
<td>.393</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.562</td>
<td>3.285</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.435</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 276 relationships. Pseudo R² = 0.407. ** p < .05; * p < .10.

The results from Table 5.4: no statistically significant findings.

**Romantic Relationships**

The following two tables summarize the likelihood of an audience member to see an interracial romance. The first table examines all romantic relationships, including romantic dyads and families, and the second table examines romantic dyads specifically.

*All romantic relationships.* Table 5.5 below presents results from a logistic regression model for the probability that a relationship is interracial among all romantic
relationships depicted (n = 407). The dependent variable is scored 1 if the relationship is interracial, 0 if same-race.

This table summarizes all types of interracial romantic relationships including families and romantic couples and examines how likely an audience member is to see any type of interracial relationship. The audience characteristics being examined are race and gender, expressed as percentages of each group, and the age of the audience overall. The control variables are the television networks including NBC, ABC, and CBS, as well as dummy variables for the time each show aired and whether or not it aired on a weekend. The control variables are the television networks including NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox.
Table 5.5. Coefficients and Standard Errors from Logistic Regression of the Probability of Viewing Any Type of Interracial Romantic Relationship by Audience Characteristics and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>-.075</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>-1.10</td>
<td>.270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% other</td>
<td>-.175**</td>
<td>.094</td>
<td>-1.87</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>.969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 2-17</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 18-24</td>
<td>-.093</td>
<td>.130</td>
<td>-.71</td>
<td>.477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 25-34</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 35-49</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>-.63</td>
<td>.527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 50-64</td>
<td>-.063</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>-1.11</td>
<td>.268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>-.862*</td>
<td>.491</td>
<td>-1.75</td>
<td>.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>-.621</td>
<td>.499</td>
<td>-1.25</td>
<td>.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>-1.061*</td>
<td>.565</td>
<td>-1.88</td>
<td>.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:30</td>
<td>.315</td>
<td>.769</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:00</td>
<td>.314</td>
<td>.801</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:30</td>
<td>.223</td>
<td>.741</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend show</td>
<td>-.284</td>
<td>.359</td>
<td>-.79</td>
<td>.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.420</td>
<td>3.385</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 407 relationships. Pseudo R² = 0.039. ** p < .05; * p < .10.

The results from Table 5.5 again show that non-Black audiences were significantly less likely to see an interracial romantic relationship, supporting the hypothesis that advertisers are more likely to use interracial relationships to appeal to shows with a larger percentage of minority audiences and that White audiences are less comfortable with interracial romance than minority audiences. Furthermore, NBC and CBS viewers were also significantly less likely to see an interracial romance.

*Romantic couples.* Table 5.6 below presents results from a logistic regression model for the probability that a relationship is interracial among all relationships depicted
(n = 205). The dependent variable is scored 1 if the relationship is interracial, 0 if same-race.

This table summarizes all types of interracial romantic couples and examines how likely an audience member is to see any type of interracial relationship. The audience characteristics being examined are race and gender, expressed as percentages of each group, and the age of the audience overall. The control variables are the television networks including NBC, ABC, and CBS, as well as dummy variables for the time each show aired and whether or not it aired on a weekend.

Table 5.6. Coefficients and Standard Errors from Logistic Regression of the Probability of Viewing Any Type of Interracial Romantic Couple by Audience Characteristics and Control Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>-.122</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>-1.34</td>
<td>.180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% other</td>
<td>-.197*</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>-1.73</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 2-17</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 18-24</td>
<td>-.126</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>-.82</td>
<td>.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 25-34</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 35-49</td>
<td>-.039</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>-.82</td>
<td>.412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 50-64</td>
<td>-.102</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>-1.43</td>
<td>.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>-.568</td>
<td>.655</td>
<td>-.87</td>
<td>.386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>-.644</td>
<td>.649</td>
<td>-.99</td>
<td>.321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>-.975</td>
<td>.719</td>
<td>-1.36</td>
<td>.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:30</td>
<td>-.123</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:00</td>
<td>-.254</td>
<td>1.116</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>.820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-9:30</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>1.046</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend show</td>
<td>-.189</td>
<td>.449</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>.674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.153</td>
<td>4.322</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: n = 205 relationships. Pseudo $R^2 = 0.059$ ** p < .05; * p < .10.*
The results from Table 5.6 show that non-Black audiences were significantly less likely to see an interracial romantic couple. This does not support the hypothesis, that more IRRs would be included in shows that primarily appeal to a younger demographic. It is consistent with data that interracial romances are not frequently shown in television commercials.

Summary and Implications for Future Research

These findings do not lend support to the idea that companies that create Primetime ads specifically employ friendship and romantic interracial relationships differently in shows that appeal to a younger demographic than in shows that have a wider demographic appeal. Overall, a significant number of the commercials analyzed do not feature human characters in their commercials. Even in those commercials with IRR portrayals, few significant differences were found between IRR portrayals in ads on shows that were seen by viewers with widely different demographic characteristics. Multiple explanations illuminate this finding.

One explanation for why there is little variety in which audiences sees which ads is that viewers see the same set of ads for a limited set of products repeatedly. This result may occur because Primetime advertising is so expensive, so relatively few companies decide to purchase it. Therefore a limited set of commercials air during any program during this time.

A related explanation is that overall relatively few primetime television commercials show any interracial romantic relationships or only show interracial relationships in large group situations. Either way, audience does not impact content;
rather, in order to appeal to a diverse audience, commercials featuring groups of platonic relationships consistently feature diverse groups. At the same time they also feature same race families, same race couples, and same race friends, or no people at all. Because of the small number of interracial romantic relationships depicted in commercials, no viewer demographic is seeing a large number of them. And because they almost always rely on diversity in group platonic relationships, no one audience is seeing more IRRs than any other. This supports the idea that advertisers purposefully create commercials that appeal to a large audience and attempt to create ambiguous messages that persuade customers to buy their products while not offending them (Eisenberg 1986).

A third explanation is that the same primetime shows are popular with diverse audiences. For example, Dancing with the Stars and American Idol are popular with multiple ages, diverse racial and ethnic groups, and with males and females. This would suggest that advertisers may be crafting commercials to reach large audiences and not tailoring their commercials to particular demographic groups that are most or least likely to view interracial relationships positively and therefore just make commercials that will appeal to large audiences.

It is also important to note that this research supports the hypothesis that minority audiences will see more interracial romances than platonic relationships, while it does not show any difference in what younger audiences would see. Possible explanations for this are the fact that many young viewers do not watch live television, which this data set focuses on. Furthermore, it supports the idea that in general White audiences, whether young or old, are less likely to see interracial romances.
In examining the relationships between audience and the use of interracial relationships in television advertising, data indicate there are few significant differences in which types of relationships each audience sees. This fills the gap in the existing research by comparing content from commercials with Nielsen data on audiences viewing those commercials and makes a compelling case for further research into when and where interracial relationships are used in television advertising. Future research may determine if these results are different during different types of programming with a less broad viewing base such as sports programs, daytime television, or cable networks such as BET, Bravo, or Lifetime with more specific audiences. Additionally, future research can determine whether it is product or show that drives advertiser decisions in casting and use of interracial relationships for selling a product.
CHAPTER 6: RELATIONSHIPS IN TELEVISION
ADVERTISING AND STEREOTYPES, POWER RELATIONS,
AND STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

Introduction

This chapter is a qualitative study of commercials that feature interracial friendships and romantic relationships. Its purpose is to summarize and explore how and when different type of interracial relationships and friendships are depicted in contemporary television advertisements and to answer the question: *What is the relationship between the race of individuals depicted in romantic and platonic relationships in television advertisements and the depictions of those relationships?* To better understand the way different types of relationships are depicted, I analyze 12 representative commercials chosen from the larger data set based on their frequency and types of relationships depicted. By observing product, setting, characters and relationships, and the presence of IRRs, I provide a deeper understanding of how stereotypes operate in specific ads.

My analysis indicates there are three main ways in which advertisers use interracial relationships in advertising. First, many rely on common stereotypes of Blacks reflecting the difference between products aimed at White audiences and products aimed at minority audiences. Second, to show diversity in advertising while still maintaining White dominance, advertisements feature patterns of dominant and submissive power relations and ritualize subordination of minorities. Third, in order to appeal to certain audiences without offending other audiences advertisements often rely on strategic
ambiguity as they show diverse groups of people while not clearly identifying the relationships between those people.

**Hypothesis**

My hypothesis is that there is a relationship between the race of individual relationships depicted in romantic and platonic relationships and the way those relationships are depicted and that advertisers rely on stereotypes, power relations, and strategic ambiguity in order to quickly get messages across to audiences that will sell products and avoid controversy. The findings support this hypothesis and suggest that advertisers are strategic about how, when and where they use or do not use interracial relationships.

**Methods**

To understand the content of commercials, I chose 12 commercials from the data set. I determined which commercials to use based on multiple criteria. First, I chose 3 types of each commercial—same race platonic, same race friendship, interracial platonic, and interracial friendship. Then I looked for commercials that appeared frequently in the data set, that were nationally televised, and then viewed the collection and each time a commercial aired that met these criteria, I added it to the set. The commercials for this analysis are representative of the larger body of commercials and the way different types of relationships are depicted. The Philadelphia Cream Cheese ad is the exception to this, and I chose this own because it was the one exception to the rule for depictions of interracial romances and therefore is an important commercial to examine. For each commercial, I completed field notes on the roles the characters played in the commercial.
and detailed the relationships presented. Then I described the general plot of the commercial including the setting, product, and what the characters were doing. Next, I examined stereotypes, power relationships, and the use of strategic ambiguity in each commercial, as explained in the following tables:

Table 6.1 summarizes the definitions of stereotypes used to analyze the commercials in this chapter.
Table 6.1. Common Stereotypes in Media

| Stereotypes | **Sincere Fictions of the White Self:** Vera and Gordon (2003) use the term “sincere fictions of the White self” to describe depictions of Blacks or of interracial relationships that are created to appeal to White audiences, appease minority groups, and assuage White guilt and White complicity in accepting the systems of power that have historically oppressed Blacks.  

**Common media stereotypes:** This includes the “Magic Negro” or stock Black character who has magical powers of redemption and salvation for White characters, minorities as Minstrels/Entertainers, the Mammy and Tom which is the happy and faithful servant, and the Coon which is the stereotype of the Black man as lazy, unreliable, unintelligent, and oversexualized (Hughey 2009). |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How these stereotypes are depicted in commercials</td>
<td><strong>Black Characters</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | Sincere fictions of the White self—Black characters need help from White characters and lack socioeconomic mobility on their own. | Affluent, professional, long term goals  
Sophisticated upwardly mobile  
Focus on long-term gains and goals |
| | Magic Negro/Folk Wisdom:  
Romantic advice for White men.  
Moral lessons from life and the streets.  
Spirituality and material detachment | Fact-based and inferential reasoning—lessons from school and business experience.  
Material values of the upper class and attached to finer things. |
| | Minstrel like stereotype: Happy, subordinate, part of family. | Dominant member of the family. |
| | “Coons” are lazy, have a cultural deficiency, poor grammar, and respond to the short term—fast food, cars, women, clothes etc…. (Hughey 2009). | Ambitious, successful, married,  
faithful, honest, and enjoy delaying gratification in order to attain finer things like gourmet food or expensive reliable cars. |

Table 6.2 summarizes the qualifications for identifying unequal power relationships in advertisements.
Table 6.2. Power Relations in Advertisements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power Relations</th>
<th>\textit{Relative Size}: The size and placement of each character in an advertisement is important. As Goffman (1979) points out, “One way in which social weight—power, authority, rank, office, renown—is echoed expressively in social situations is through relative size, especially height”. (28)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{Function Ranking}: Characters are also depicted as having a ranking order over one another. Instruction or relationships typically involve a subordinate character. For example, in many advertisements, one person “is likely to perform the executive role, providing only that one can be fashioned…This arrangement seems widely represented in advertisements, in part, no doubt, to facilitate interpretability at a glance” (Goffman, 1979: 32).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{The Ritualization of Subordination}: There are specific physical positions that demonstrate one character in an advertisement having power over another. Goffman describes this: “A classic stereotype of deference is that of lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration…Correspondingly, holding the body erect and the head high is stereotypically a marker of unashamedness, superiority, and disdain” (1979:40).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Strategic Ambiguity}. The third area I used to guide this analysis is Strategic Ambiguity. Eisenberg (1984) suggests that advertisers can use purposeful ambiguity to intentionally allow for multiple interpretations of messages in advertisements to promote unified diversity and maintain deniability. I studied ads by determining where ambiguity about the product, characters, and relationships were in the commercial and how advertisers employ ambiguity to create a balance between being creative in advertising without offending potential customers.

\textit{Detailed Analysis of Commercials}

Below I present an analysis of 12 commercials. For ease of presentation I list the product, setting, characters, relationships, plot, summary of stereotypes, power relations, and use
of strategic ambiguity in tabular form. Following these tables is an analysis of the entire data set in table form and following each table I present my analysis of the commercial.

### Table 6.3. Kentucky Fried Chicken Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Kentucky Fried Chicken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>The dinner table in a private home—an average looking middle class home with a dining area separate from the kitchen and a modest size table and basic decorating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>A White family consisting of a mother and father in their 40s, a teenage boy around 14 or 15, and a daughter around 11 or 12.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>As the White family eats a dinner from KFC the teenage son stands up to express his gratitude to his mother for the delicious meal, in a sycophantic somewhat flippant manner. The rest of the family reacts with surprise and the daughter rolls her eyes. The reason the son is giving this speech is because they received a free chocolate cake with their family meal from KFC, and he feels that they should eat the cake in honor and recognition of all that their mother does for them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>There are no IRRs in this commercial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 6.4 reveals, several stereotypes are promoted. The family reflects an old-fashioned American ideal: married White couple with one son and one daughter. The White mother is portrayed in a traditional “homemaker”\(^4\) manner, quietly accepting praise for her ability to meet the needs of her male son through the selection of menu items. This ad also makes an appeal to the importance of Moms and their primary roles in

\(^4\) This sort of “traditional” family reflects Arlie Hochschild’s argument that women have a “second shift” where mothers may simultaneously be expected to work, serve their husbands and kids, and take care of the house, so they may not have time to make dinner from scratch but are still in charge of getting dinner on the table (Hochschild 2012).
the kitchen and dining room in the family. As to power relations the teenage boy stands while everyone else sits, commands their attention with his unexpected speech. The point of this commercial is to show a White teenage boy in an untypical way—loudly expressing gratitude to his family. In other words, rather than being portrayed as a typical teen playing video games, hanging out with his friends, or embarrassed by his parents, he is loudly proclaiming his affinity for his family and mother for providing such a great meal. His younger sister does not speak, communicating nonverbally by rolling her eyes. There are no IRRs in this commercial and no use of strategic ambiguity in communicating relationships among the characters.

Table 6.4. Hellman’s Mayonnaise Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Hellman’s Mayonnaise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>A nice upper middle class looking home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>A White mom in her 40’s and her young White son who is around 10 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>A mother is cooking dinner for her son using mayonnaise. He is excited about the chicken that she made and the mayonnaise she used on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>There is no IRR in this commercial. As only the mother and son are shown, there is no clear explanation of who this family or friend circles might include.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.5 summarizes an ad with a stereotype of a typical White mother son relationship, with the Mom making dinner for the picky eater plot. This White mother is shown as deferring to the desires of her son, a common stereotype of White women. In short, the mother is shown in the kitchen working to please her teenage son, suggesting he holds dominant power in this situation as the narrator explains that even the pickiest eater will finally be pleased if “Mom” makes this meal. Strategic ambiguity is not used in
this ad, as the relationship of White Mother to White son is clear, although it is not clear whether or not the mother is a single mother or not.

Future research might explore if the depiction would be the same if the mother were Black, or if the idea of a parent bending over backwards to please a child is a stereotype that applies only to White characters.

Table 6.5. Volkswagen Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Volkswagen Car</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>The inside of a car on a highway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>This ad features two White characters. First is a father in his mid-40’s who is slightly unshaven and portrayed as a hip dad. His son is portrayed as a new driver. A teenage boy, he is skinny, dressed in nice clothes, with slightly long hair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>The son wants to have a turn driving the car on what is clearly a long car ride. The father explains that he will let the son drive once they stop for gas. Since the car gets such fantastic gas mileage, they never end up stopping. As the ad continues and they keep driving, there are shots of the father grinning to himself and the son rolling his eyes in frustration as he realizes he is not going to get a chance to drive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>There are no IRRs in this commercial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.6 highlights stereotypes of White privilege in its use of a strong White male driving a well-engineered car with outstanding performance and gas mileage. When the son tries to gain agency, his father thwarts his efforts through rational thinking, by forecasting that the car would not need gas before they arrived at their destination. Through dialogue and images of the father as the only one shown driving or making a decision, the ad suggests the father has all of the power in the situation, a traditional “Father Knows Best” reflection of a proper father/son relationship. The White father is
literally in the driver’s seat, with physical, positional, and intellectual superiority. The father is portrayed as larger than his son and in command. While he appears to be agreeing to his son’s request, he sets conditions that he knows will mean his son will not take the wheel. Strategic ambiguity is not used in this ad as the subordinate relationship of the son to the father is clearly established, although it is unclear whether the child’s parents are together or not.

Table 6.6. Macy’s Department Store Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Macy’s Department Store</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>A set featuring Macy’s products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>There are multiple characters in this commercial including 2 White women, 2 White men, and 1 Black woman. The only relationship depicted among all of the characters is the implication of romance between the White women and White men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>This commercial features models using or wearing various Macy’s products including clothing and home goods. There are clearly two couples. One scene shows the first White couple chasing one another and sitting closely and looking at each other in a romantic way. The next couple is shown sitting on a bed together, again clearly in a romantic way. The Black woman featured in the commercial is only shown modeling clothing and showing household products. She is never shown in a relationship with the other characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>No presence of IRR. The only Black character featured in the commercial is used differently than the White characters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.7 depicts the Black woman in the ad differently than the White women as she is not shown in any type of relationship or interaction with the White characters in the commercial. In Bogle’s (2001) terms, the Black character in this commercial is merely an “Entertainer” with no other role in the ad. The White characters in relationships with one another are either both shown sitting in similar positions or shown standing at the same
time, and the actions are nearly symmetrical from character to character. Therefore, there are no clear power inequalities. A key difference is the Black woman, although portrayed as strong and independent, is never shown in a shot with the White characters, suggesting she is used more as a prop to display products, while the White characters are shown both using products and interacting with one another.

Strategic ambiguity is present in this commercial. The relationships among the White characters in this commercial are crystal clear. The relationship between the Black woman and the other White characters, on the other hand, is unclear as she is never shown interacting with the other characters in the same friendly and romantic ways that the White characters relate to one another.

Table 6.7. AT&T Mobile Phone Service Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>AT&amp;T Mobile Phone Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>A boring restaurant at a speed dating event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>The focus is on a White couple who have just sat down to talk at a speed dating event—it is one White man and one White woman, both in their late 20’s and dressed in professional clothing as if they had come from work and removed their jackets to appear more casual for the event. Several couples shown in the background, and it is hard to make out any of their features.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>The couple are seated at a speed dating event, so they are quickly trying to get to know one another. The man tells her that they are pressed for time, but he wants her to know he is looking for it all, house, kids, marriage, right away. As he tells her this, the woman is checking his online profile on her mobile phone and discovers that his online information does not match his words as it asserts he is a professional bachelor who is never getting married. She calls him out, and things get awkward. The ad ends with an explanation by the narrator that AT&amp;T gets information to users fast, and thus the woman is able to quickly determine that her potential date is dishonest, and she avoids a relationship with him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>There are no IRRs featured in this commercial.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this commercial the White woman uses her phone to become the person with the power over the White male. They are shown sitting equally in the commercial, but he quickly dominates the conversation. She then uses her phone to gather relevant facts and uses inferential reasoning to challenge his storyline. Once she shares her findings, she becomes the one with the power in the relationship. She clearly values honesty in the men she dates and is not interested in dating a handsome but dishonest man.

There is some strategic ambiguity about relationships in this commercial. While the characters in the background are diverse, it is difficult to determine which ones are speed dating each other. There is no clear romantic connection between any of the other characters.

**Table 6.8. Home Depot Commercial**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Home Depot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>This ad takes place in two places. First is a very expensive looking older home that has been restored with pristine hardwood, beautiful crown molding, and huge rooms that need to be painted. Next is a Home Depot store where the homeowners are shopping for paint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>There are three characters in this commercial: a White couple with a male and female both in their 30s and a Home Depot employee who is a Black male who interacts with the White woman as he sells her paint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>This ad starts off with the White couple deciding to paint their house. The woman goes to Home Depot to buy paint from the Black man who works there. When she arrives home, she and her husband paint the house together, followed by before and after shots of the house they painted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>The IRR in this commercial is of the White woman buying paint from the Black man.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.9 summarizes an ad showing a White woman as a customer, and a Black man as a Home Depot employee ready to help her get the paint she needs for her home. There is a suggestion of the “Tom” role, in this employee/client relationship as the White characters quickly walk into the store and are greeted by a smiling, older, Black man who is happy to help the White couple select their paint. There is no other interaction between the characters besides the interracial Employee/Client one. The Black man is characterized as friendly and polite and subordinate in station to the well-heeled White couple he is serving since they are shown in an expensive home with updated rooms and furniture, while he is in a working class job as a sales associate at Home Depot.

While the White couple are shown as equals, they are portrayed as of higher status than the Black employee whose only function is to provide paint to the White couple for their clearly expensive home. The relationships among the character are clear in this ad with no apparent use of strategic ambiguity.

Table 6.9. Philadelphia Cream Cheese Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Philadelphia Cream Cheese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Bedroom in a hip urban loft apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>Black man in his late 20’s and White woman in her late 20’s. They are snuggling in bed and clearly waking up from spending the night in that bed together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>The man is bringing the woman a bagel with cream cheese in bed. He gets in bed with her and they eat the bagels. It is clear that they are romantically, and importantly, sexually involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>Yes, there is an IRR. Based on the statistical information that shows a major increase in IRRs, including those between White women and Black men over the last 50 years, this commercial shows this relationship in an positive way and reflects Branchik’s concept of “Respect” within commercials.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.10 shows that Philadelphia Cream Cheese does not rely on racial stereotypes for this ad. While Goffman’s Ritualization of Subordination is present in this commercial, it is based on gender, rather than race. As Goffman points out, women are often shown lying down as a way to show that they are subordinate to men, and that is the case in this commercial. In a clear role reversal the man is serving the woman breakfast, rather than the woman serving the man and is consistent with the concept of Black males as servants.

**Table 6.10. Starbucks Blonde Coffee Commercial**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Starbucks Blond Coffee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Starbucks Coffee Shop and outdoors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and</td>
<td>While multiple people are shown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>drinking Starbucks coffee, the real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>focus is a White woman and Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>man who are snuggling on a windy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hill while they drink coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>People are learning to enjoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Starbucks’ new lighter blend of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coffee. The interracial couple serve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as a visual metaphor for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>difference between light and dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>roast coffee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR</td>
<td>The focus of this commercial is on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Type of</td>
<td>coffee and the interracial couple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depiction</td>
<td>enjoying it. Race is used as a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>metaphor for the new light roast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>being a welcome change for those</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>used to dark roast coffee.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the analysis in Table 6.11 shows that Starbucks does not rely on stereotypes or power discrepancies in depicting interracial relationships, or strategic ambiguity.
Table 6.11. Wendy’s Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Wendy’s Restaurant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>A Wendy’s Restaurant that is very busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>Wendy is the spokesperson. At the very end of the commercial a Black man is shown eating a chicken sandwich sitting close enough to a White woman that the audience may assume they are romantically involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>This commercial features Wendy Thomas, the restaurant’s namesake, describing what a great restaurant Wendy’s is while sitting in the front of a Wendy’s restaurant. The restaurant is clearly full of people, who are blurred while the focus is on Wendy’s testimonial. At the very end of the commercial there is a quick flash of a Black man eating a sandwich while his White girlfriend/wife watches him and they both smile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>The interracial romance shown is so brief that it is hard to draw conclusions about the relationships between the characters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.12 shows that the Wendy’s ad includes a diverse group of people, though so ambiguously and quickly that it is hard to analyze the role of race in it. Most characters are blurry in this commercial, and Wendy is its central focus of the ad. At the end of the commercial, a quick shot of a Black man eating a fast food meal with his White female partner does not reveal clearly what type of relationship they are in, a reflection of strategic ambiguity.
Table 6.12. Verizon Wireless Mobile Phone Service Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Verizon Mobile Phone Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Guys playing basketball at an outdoor basketball court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>This commercial features 6 male friends in their 30s and 40s playing basketball together. There are 4 White males, one Latino male, and one Black male in the commercial. The Latino male has a stroller with him, implying that he has brought a child to the game. The child is not shown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>This commercial focuses on 6 men who are not very good at basketball and the bad choices they have made recently. One White male speaks of how he used household bleach to whiten his teeth, the Latino male explains that he saves gas money by letting his kids hitchhike to school. When one falls he is instructed by another White male “don’t lift with your knees, lift with your back”, and lastly the Black character starts to say “do you know where surgery is dirt cheap” but is cut off by a White character explaining that Verizon is a good idea but he is sticking with AT&amp;T. The narrator cuts in and explains that there are bad ideas, like the ones the guys in the commercial promote, and there are good ideas, like Verizon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>This commercial shows a group of friends, and one of them happens to be Black and one happens to be Latino. The lines and situations are generic, and there does not seem to be any real difference in the way any of the characters are shown.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.13 shows that in the Verizon ad, the most startling observation from this commercial is the use of the stereotype of the dumb jock, a stereotype that crosses ethnic lines. These males are shown as being ignorant and making dumb decisions, regardless of race or ethnicity. While the depth of the relationships among these characters is unclear, all are consistently giving each other poor advice. There is some evidence of subtle racism, as Whites constitute two-thirds of the characters, a clear number imbalance.

Also, the only character who is interrupted is the Black man, perhaps a sign of his lower status. For perspective, no commercials in my data set featured a larger group of minority men hanging out with one or two White friends, reinforcing the concept of the sincere
fiction of the White self and reflecting the fact that the audience is overwhelmingly white.

Table 6.13. Snickers Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Snickers Candy Bar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>A hip fun party full of people in their 20s and early 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and Relationships</td>
<td>Two friends, a White man and Black man, and two White women with whom the men are flirting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>The White man in this ad is berating the women for not being interested in them, all while it appears he is the actor Joe Pesci, until his friend (the Black man) suggests he eat a Snicker’s bar, when he returns to his normal self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>While an interracial friendship is portrayed where the Black man plays the voice of reason, he is secondary to the central male character, who is White. There are two White girls who are friends, and the ad implies the men want to date the women.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.14 shows that Snickers uses stereotypes and unequal power relationships. The Black man in this commercial is very much the “Magic Negro” who swoops in to solve the problem for the White man and turn things around again (Hughey 2009). The power relations are interesting in this commercial, while the White man comes across as agitated and angry, he behaves as if he is the person with power. But the Black man, as the voice of reason in the commercial, actually is the one with the power, as once he gives his friend a candy bar, he turns into a rational guy once again. This ad reflects a Magic Negro stereotype with the Black male giving the White male the advice he needs to succeed in romantic encounters. Strategic ambiguity exists as it is not clear if the White women would be interested in the Black man if he approached them without his irrational White friend while it is clear that they are not interested in the White character.
Table 6.14. Aflac Commercial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Aflac Insurance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>A Black man and a White men who are friends fishing on a lake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters and</td>
<td>This ad features two friends fishing. The first is a White man and the second is a Black man who has injured his arm. As they discuss insurance, a duck is constantly stating “Aflac”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>Two men who are friends have gone fishing. The Black man is reminding the White Man of all the things his current insurance program does not cover. A duck continuously suggests that “Aflac” would fill those gaps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of IRR and Type of Depiction</td>
<td>There is a clear interracial friendship in this commercial as it features two guys, one White and one Black, out fishing together on a lake implying common interest and trust in one another.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Aflac ad depends upon the stereotype of a Black character who relates “folk wisdom, to his uninformed White friend, a “Magic Negro” who has an abundance of knowledge that his White friend has not considered. The interracial relationship shown relies on the idea that in this friendship the Black character is able to advise the White character on what choices he should make in his life, and in this ad, about his insurance. In this case, the Black man shares power with the Aflac Duck in helping his friend, with a patient and polite approach, understand the importance of purchasing supplemental insurance.

Summary

The qualitative analysis of twelve commercials indicates that advertisers often rely on racial and gender stereotypes, depictions of power inequalities between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and strategic ambiguity in identifying
relationships among characters and products. Because commercials are typically 30 seconds or shorter, there is not much time to establish characters, so advertisers rely on these three concepts so that audiences may quickly relate to the characters and situations being depicted. The remainder of this chapter will analyze the twelve commercials in terms of three factors: Stereotypes of people: White men vs. Black men; White women vs. Black women; same race vs. interracial romance; Power: White families and romantic relationships; and Strategic ambiguity.

**Stereotypes**

*White men vs. Black men.* Media stereotypes often depict White men as being responsible, determined, and interested in sophisticated products. This is reflected in many of the depictions of White men in this data set. In the Volkswagen commercial, the middle-aged father who is driving the car is depicted as being smart enough to buy a reliable car and to have the foresight to make a deal with his son that achieves his goal of being the sole driver while appearing to accede to his son’s request to drive the car. A different type of White man is shown in the AT&T commercial—he is deceptive and misleads a woman in an attempt to get a date with her.

The Home Depot commercial features an upper middle class woman being served by an older Black man. This relies on the stereotype of the successful, hard-working, young White male in contrast to an older Black male who is working at a low paying job with a goal of serving the needs of the White middle class customers in the store.

In the Verizon Wireless commercial, young men of a variety of backgrounds are stereotyped as being dumb jocks, regardless of race or ethnicity. In the Snickers commercial the Black character is the voice of reason, suggesting the “Joe Pesci” eat a
Snickers and calm down. This commercial is an example of Branchik’s (2007) regulation—the Black character is shown in a non-controversial role, with no real character definition or actions, rather than being the voice of reason. The Black character is shown in a folk wisdom role, being the voice of common sense to help improve a White man’s ability to attract woman by explaining that criticizing women is not a good way to attract them.

The Aflac commercial is a clear depiction of a “sincere fiction of the White self” (Vera and Gordon, 2003), as the White man is patiently listening to the Black man explaining all the parts of an insurance program that he seems to have overlooked. At first viewing this commercial seems to be a great example of a depiction of an interracial friendship, but when one examines the script, giving all of the knowledge to the Black man creates a “Magic Negro” depiction, as he functions to explain everything, patiently and politely, while the Aflac duck squawks loudly, about insurance to his White friend. This implication is that the White character needs a wise Black friend to inform him of all of the bills he would be have to pay beyond that which his current insurance covers.

*White women vs. Black women.* Commercials showing White families eating together support previous research that argues that White and Black women are treated differently in advertisements, with White women portrayed as needing the approval of men (such as the son and husband in the KFC ad and the White mom in the Hellman’s ad) whereas Black women are often portrayed as simply models or not in relationships with men.

Macy’s proudly showcases two White couples enjoying each other’s company, while the Black woman in the commercial seems like she is included as a token diverse
character. The fact that the Black character is at no time shown interacting with any of the other characters can be seen as racist, and supports the concept that while Americans are comfortable with diversity in a general way, when it comes to real relationships, what advertisers think we want to see is White people interacting with other White people (Bonilla-Silva, 2006 and Vera and Gordon, 2003), with a nod given to Black women with a limited, nonromantic role within their ads.

In the AT&T ad, the White woman is portrayed as an intelligent, good-humored, tech savvy professional, with sophisticated tastes in clothing, men, and cell phone providers, consistent with research on how privileged White characters are shown in the media.

_Same race vs. interracial romance._ Depictions of Same Race romantic relationships reflect advertiser’s ideas that there are differences in same race and interracial relationships, and overwhelmingly choose to show same race romantic relationships. Furthermore, White couples are shown as having fun romantic relationships, in contrast to Black characters that are not shown interacting with the White couples or are shown serving the carefree White romantic partners. Overall, this depiction suggests that racist ideas continue to be reflected in these commercials both in when and where Black characters are used and shown and in where they are absent. The idea of the helpful Black male employee is reminiscent of depictions of “Uncle Tom” or the “Magic Negro” in other places in the media (Bogle, 2002). It is important to remember that I am describing the content of 12 commercials, and the relationships identified may not be reflective of larger trends or patterns.
Interracial relationships as shown in Wendy’s, Philadelphia Cream Cheese, and Starbucks commercials rely on ambiguity and it is not clear whether the people are married or casually dating. This is important since Chapter 4 shows that advertisers are more likely to depict ambiguous or casual interracial romances than show interracial families or marriages. In the same race depictions, though, it is made clear that families of all people of the same race are married or deeply committed to one another.

**Power Relations**

As with stereotypes, the short nature of most commercials mean that advertisers rely on commonly held social ideology about power as a way of quickly getting across the plot and message of the commercial. This means that many of the commercials viewed for this project reflect clear differences in who holds power in relationships and in the United States overall.

**White families.** As explained earlier in this dissertation, 98% of the families depicted in this data set are all of one race, and of those families they are typically all White. By depicting White families, advertisers are able to give power to the purchasing power of Whites and present products that are meant for use by White families, by portraying them to be the only ones to use the products in different situations. For example, commercials for cars often depict a White parent and child enjoying an expensive, safe, reliable car, with the power differential being between parent and child, rather than race being a focus. The Volkswagen ad, for example, implies through the dress and nice car being driven in this commercial that these are people who are wealthy and enjoy sophisticated activities—thus anyone who were to buy this car could also be identified as being wealthy and a connoisseur of the finer things in life. It is not clear
whether a Black family could have taken on this role, but the fact that White characters were cast (not just in this, but in several commercials for high end reliable cars), suggests that a choice was made, and that choice was to sell reliable luxury cars to White audiences. A larger sample of ads would need to be collected and analyzed to confirm that these patterns exist more widely, and these conclusions are tentative.

Many of the commercials in this data set feature an all-White family eating dinner together. There is no suggestion of diversity, rather it is clear that the goal of this commercial is to sell the product, such as large family meals from Kentucky Fried Chicken, to middle class White families. According to Bobo (2001), there are many situations that Americans are not comfortable with regarding integration, and the use of an exclusively White families in many commercials shows advertisers agree.

*Romantic relationships and power.* The romantic relationships depicted in these commercials in this chapter often times rely on showing the woman in the relationship as the one in power. For example, in the AT&T commercial, the woman, well-dressed and articulate, is able to reveal the man’s duplicity by gathering facts on her mobile phone and determining that he is not trustworthy. In the Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercial there is a gender role reversal as the male character is making and serving food to the female character. While this gives power to the woman in the relationship, this is also consistent with the stereotype of Black male as servant to White people, although in this case, he is presented as the White woman’s equal. This commercial does not reflect many of the other findings from this study and suggests that changes in depictions of interracial relationships may be in the near future.
In the Starbucks commercial, the emphasis is on the fact that Starbucks has a new brew of coffee that is light, not dark like other coffees. Therefore, it makes visual sense that one of the couples shown enjoying cups of Starbucks coffee in the commercial is a Black/White interracial couple. In this instance, showing the distinction between light and dark aids in getting the main message of the commercial across. Considering that Starbucks markets its product to a younger more progressive audience, and younger people tend to be more accepting of interracial romantic partnerships (Rosenfeld, 2007), it makes sense that Starbucks would use a Black and White couple to represent the difference between their dark coffee roasts and their light coffee roasts without much risk of alienating their consumer base—young people who are tolerant and open to different types of relationships. Starbucks tends to market itself to a younger, hipper consumer base, and their use of an interracial couple is consistent with that.

**Strategic Ambiguity**

A frequent tool employed by advertisers is strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg 1984). By leaving it up to the audience to decide meanings and relationships, companies can avoid causing controversy while appealing to a wider audience, as audiences can decide for themselves what the ads means based on their own worldview.

In the Macy’s commercial, the relationships among the White characters are clear—there are two men and two women, each man is physically affectionate with one of the women, and they all hang out like friends. The Black woman in the commercial is not shown interacting with the other characters. She is on the same stage they are on, but they do not talk and laugh with her and there is no physical contact. It is up to the
audience to decide whether this woman is part of the group or just a random person in the scene.

In the AT&T commercial, the goal of the commercial is to have the woman one up the man through her use of a mobile phone to confirm her suspicion that he is being dishonest in order to persuade her to choose him as her date, it seems that AT&T chose a White couple so as to avoid any other implications of the plot. In fact, in this commercial, there are clearly other people speed dating, and there is a fuzzy image of a Black man on a date, but it is unclear who his partner is, and unclear who the other people in the room are. Instead the focus is entirely on the White couple and the woman beating the man at his own game.

While depictions of IRRs often rely on ambiguity as far as the nature of the relationships, the Philadelphia Cream Cheese ad may be a forerunner of greater numbers of romantic IRRs in the future. Of the commercials viewed for this project, this particular commercial stands out as unique, shows a White woman lying in bed with a spot open under the covers next to her. Next, a Black hands her a bagel and cream cheese, which they share while playfully hanging out in the bed. It is clear that this is a couple who are spending the day in bed together. They are unembarrassed by their differences in race. At the same time, where there is ambiguity is in the nature of the relationship—it is unclear whether this is a fling, a long term relationship, or a marriage. Research suggests that Americans would largely disapprove of this sort of blatant sexual interracial relationship (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Vera and Gordon 2003), yet Philadelphia Cream Cheese reinforces the normality of a White/Black romantic relationship. This particular ad supports Branchik’s (2007) suggestion that advertisements eventually reflect reality and that changes are on
the horizon for the types of couples shown in ads. The Wendy’s commercial is another example of racism by omission. While many television commercials feature same race romantic relationships and interracial friendships that are clear cut and the focus of the commercial, this commercial relies on ambiguity when depicting an interracial romance. The shot of the couple highlights an interracial romance, yet it is so brief that only upon multiple viewings does the audience realize that this is a romance between two people of different racial backgrounds. Furthermore, the main focus of the commercial is on the White main character, Wendy. Most other characters are obscured, so it is unclear what relationships exist among those shown eating at Wendy’s.

As mentioned above, interracial friendships are shown in the Verizon commercial, but no explanation as to how the characters know each other, how deep their relationships are. And since they are dressed to play sports, there are limited indications of class or lifestyle. In fact, this commercial and the characters in it are so generic, it seems that any person of any race or ethnicity could be cast in any role and not change the commercial.

**Conclusion**

This chapter reveals important qualitative insights into the differences in the ways relationships featuring different types of characters are depicted in commercials. Three important findings about the way commercials are made and how race is used within them are revealed. First, advertisers often rely on stereotypes in an effort to quickly get a message across. Second, there are clear power relations between characters in many commercials, and these are typically based on race, gender, or both. Last, advertisers rely
on strategic ambiguity when presenting potentially controversial relationships in advertisement.

Many of the minority characters in these relationships are flat, one-dimensional characters, and race does not play a role in their depictions. Third, interracial romantic relationships are not frequently shown, and when they are it is often to show the distinction between White and Black, light and dark. The exception to this rule is a Philadelphia Cream Cheese ad that shows a White woman in a sexual relationship with a Black man, enjoying eating bagels together in bed. Perhaps this is a sign that advertisers are moving toward realistic depictions of race in commercials (Branchik 2007). Lastly, when same race relationships are shown, often they are shown to the exclusion of any other type of relationship, making the focus on the plot of the commercial and not on race. Importantly, in multiple commercials viewed for this project, a clear distinction between happy carefree middle class White couples and token Black characters in the commercials is shown, reflecting a lack of progress in these depictions in commercials (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

This analysis shows that while progress has been made and some commercials are progressive in their depictions of IRRs, overall this reflects the overwhelming majority of research that suggests that depictions of race in television advertising continue to depict racist attitudes and do not accurately represent modern racial relations in the United States with overrepresentation of multiracial friendship groups and underrepresentation of multiracial families and interracial romances.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The main sociological goal of this dissertation was to collect a unique data set of commercials, code them, and compare results about when and where interracial friendships and romances are depicted in television advertisements with real life data about demographics, audiences, social attitudes, products, stereotypes, power relations, and ways advertisers use race when selling products in order to add to the wider body of sociological work to understand where and when interracial relationships are depicted in commercials and how this relates to real life attitudes and audiences. I also qualitatively examined twelve commercials to gain deeper insight into how stereotypes, power relations, and strategic ambiguity were used in specific commercials. The project answers three research questions, as explained in the following summaries of the empirical chapters.

Chapter 4

Chapter four answers the question, “What is the incidence of interracial relationships in television advertising, and how does this compare to the prevalence of such relationships in the contemporary United States?” Multiple conclusions can be drawn from this chapter. First, in comparing self-reports on friendships in real life with the findings from the commercials, interracial platonic relationships are overrepresented in commercials. There are two explanations for this. One is that audiences are increasingly comfortable with the idea of platonic interracial relationships and as attitudes change, companies are more willing to depict diverse groups and relationships
in commercials in order to sell more products. The second explanation is that companies want to present an image of themselves, based on their “sincere fictions of the White self” (Vera and Gordon, 2003) as being open minded and diverse, even if in real life people do not have many interracial friendships. This dissertation does not attempt to adjudicate between these claims, rather these theoretical concepts were used to inform my data analysis.

At the same time, interracial romances are underrepresented, especially in depictions families where people are more likely to be married. While these numbers have been on the rise, especially among younger adults, in television commercials most families shown are White, and when interracial relationships are shown they are often of couples who are not in necessarily long term committed relationships. An explanation for this difference in depictions of friendships and romances is that White audiences are comfortable with interracial friendships, but less comfortable with the idea of interracial romance. As a result there are fewer interracial romances depicted overall, and families that are mixed are nearly non-existent. This allows advertisers to avoid controversy and does not challenge White ideas of anti-miscegenation that date back hundreds of years (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 answers the question, “What is the relationship between audience characteristics and the depiction of IRRs in television commercials?” The main findings of this chapter are that there are few differences in who sees which types of relationships in commercials. This could be the result of an overall lack of diversity in commercials, overlapping viewership of Primetime television programs, or a saturation of a small number of commercials overall in Primetime.
Chapter 6 answers the question *What is the relationship between the race of individuals depicted in romantic and platonic relationships in television advertisements and the depictions of those relationships?* Using rhetorical analysis of 12 commercials, this section concludes that advertisers use three strategies to quickly get messages across to audiences. First, they rely on commonly held stereotypes, especially stereotypes of White versus Black consumers. Second, they present unequal power relations between people of different races in commercials. Third, advertisers rely on strategic ambiguity in the presentation of different relationships and diverse characters, in order to avoid controversy while appealing to a diverse large audience.

Conclusion

Important changes over the last 100 years have developed in the way Americans view interracial friendships and romances as well as changes in how these relationships are depicted in the media and advertising. In this project I examined the relationship between social attitudes and depictions of interracial relationship in television advertising. Overall this dissertation reflects the overwhelming majority of research that suggests that depictions of race in television advertising reflect progress in attitudes toward interracial platonic relationships, continue to reflect racist attitudes toward interracial romance, do not accurately represent the state of platonic and romantic relationships in the United State.
The findings from this project make important contributions to the larger body of sociological work by supporting existing arguments about interracial friendships and romances and giving new insight into the relationship between the media, advertising, and real world attitudes on race and relationships.

First, this project analyzes the relationship between depictions of interracial relationships in television advertising and real life data on relationship networks. It shows that platonic relationships are overrepresented and romantic and family relationships are underrepresented. Next, I examine the relationship between audiences and depictions of IRRs and suggest that non-White audiences are more likely to see interracial romances than White audiences while all audiences are likely to see interracial platonic relationships.

Lastly, I analyze twelve independent commercials to support the data from Chapters 4 and 5 by showing the ways in which same race and interracial relationships are depicted and show that commercials often rely on stereotypes, power relations, and strategic ambiguity when depicting interracial relationships or interactions in order to quickly get messages across to audiences that will sell a product, clearly explain the plot, and not offend large parts of the viewing population.

These are important sociological contributions, because they suggest that there interracial romances are still controversial and something market research suggests advertisers should avoid, thus supporting sociological theories on the fact that racism continues to be an issue in modern America.
Directions for Future Research

This project fills multiple gaps in the existing research and leaves room for a wide variety of future projects. The data set collected for this dissertation is unique, and it can be used to study race, sex, products, audiences and advertising. One proposed future project is to examine differences in the way women and men are depicted in commercials based on the age of the audience and the products being sold. Another future project could use the data to determine which products are sold during which shows and whether there is any relationship between show type and where the advertising is purchased.

There are also opportunities to expand this research to compare the data set to commercials airing at other times of day or during non-Primetime viewing. For example, one project could compare use of race in commercials during sporting events, daytime television, cable television, and the existing Primetime set. This data set could also be compared to historical data or to future data sets to see how depiction of race and gender have changed over time in television advertisements.

Lastly, there are multiple studies that could add to this current research. One would be to use the current analysis and look at gender as the primary variable rather than race to see if this impacts results. Furthermore, it would be useful to expand the qualitative section of this paper to look at a larger set of commercials to look at character traits individually and see exactly where and when certain stereotypes or ambiguity is used. That would give deeper insight into the content of the commercials in this data set that cannot be summarized through statistical analysis.
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