AUTHENTIC BLACKNESS AND THE PORTRAYALS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN PRIME TIME TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies
School of Professional Studies
Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. David Givens
Under the Mentorship of Kipp Preble

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

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May 2012
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ABSTRACT

Though each African American person holds unique experiences, beliefs and preferences that are molded by his or her background, education, gender, sexual orientation and religion, he or she is often defined by superficial characteristics, such as how a person behaves, speaks and dresses, that determine his or her degree of authentic blackness. This thesis explores authentic blackness within the African American community and how television commercials help define what is considered authentically black. Based on the Social Cognitive Theory, Hall’s Theory of Encoding and Decoding, the Cultivation Theory and the Social Construction of Reality Theory, this thesis explores how African Americans are used in television commercials and African Americans perceive authentic blackness. The first part of the study, content analysis of television commercials during primetime slots, found that stereotypical portrayals of African Americans still exists and that blackness is often used to validate the coolness of a brand or product. The second part of the study, a survey about what is considered authentically black and interviews with eleven African Americans, revealed that most respondents believe that acting black is comprised of superficial characteristics that change over time.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

African Americans are hardly a homogenous group. Each of the 38.9 million people who consider themselves African American each hold unique experiences, beliefs and preferences that are molded by his or her background, education, gender, sexual orientation and religion (United States Census, 2010). Like with any other group of people, African Americans have characteristics that are common to the group and are shaped by many internal and external factors. However, these characteristics do not define the individual.

As a minority group in the United States, African Americans share cultural and social norms that may not be found in other groups. However, the idea of authentic “blackness” is often defined by superficial characteristics, like how a person behaves, speaks, dresses, lives and spends his or her time and money, instead of being defined by true cultural characteristics. If these characteristics are possessed, they validate one’s perceived degree of authentic blackness. If a person lacks a characteristic, social acceptance may be withheld from African Americans who feel they are more authentic.

Statement of the Problem

Advertisers have recognized the benefits of using these cultural norms to help capture the attention of African Americans through targeted or multicultural advertising. African Americans are an important target for many industries. In 2008, African Americans spent $913 billion. They are projected to spend $1.24 trillion in 2013 (Miley, 2009). Television is an effective way for advertisers to reach African American consumers. African Americans watch television more
than any other race, with an average daily consumption of more than seven hours (Nielsen Media Group, 2012).

Advertisers sell attitudes, lifestyles, values and beliefs along with the brands they represent. In addition to selling products, companies want their audience to recognize their brand and embrace the company’s perceived lifestyle and values and to crave what the company has to offer. Companies attempt to create a positive shared experience with their target audience. Each image in an advertisement is strategically placed to capture the audience’s attention. The way a character behaves, speaks and dresses and his or her role in the commercial provides information about the character and the brand. As a result of the images shown in the media, the audience can be influenced to believe that the people around them have certain characteristics. Repeated images of African Americans behaving, speaking or dressing a particular way or portrayed in certain roles can lead to a generalization of all African Americans.

Television commercials often display a narrow depiction of the diversity within the African American community. Unfortunately, the diversity within the African American community is rarely shown in the media in the way the diversity in Caucasians is. Caucasian Americans can be portrayed in various roles that show the diversity within the group without having their “whiteness” questioned. However, according to a study by Burrell Communication, African American characters are often one-dimensional and portray stereotypes or inaccurate depictions (Burrell Communications, 2011).

Unfortunately, these images often become characteristics that people associate with real life African Americans. When a person sees repeated images and behaviors in the media, those images and behaviors become accepted as expectations of the type of people that are being
featured (Bandura, 2001). Unfortunately, “blackness suffers when it is witnessed through mass mediated presentations, particularly commercial efforts, which offer up a regular diet of banal, stereotypical fare” (Means-Coleman, 2006, 82). Therefore, the idea of what is perceived as authentically black is, in part, shaped by advertisements and other forms of media.

**Definition of used terms**

*African American* – According to the United States Census (2010), African American includes any person whose ancestry is traced to the people of Sub-Saharan Africa.

*Authentic Blackness* – Authentic blackness is a social construction that is used to measure the degree to which a person shares characteristics that are considered characteristics of African American identity and culture (Ndletyana, 2006). Authentic blackness can be highly subjective and based on a collection of ideas that a group of people agree on and can vary based on a person’s background and social environment (Gerbner, 1998).

*Television commercial* – For the sake of this paper, television commercials refer to advertisements placed during the breaks of television programming that are used to promote a brand’s product or service.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter two contains the theoretical basis for the framework for this study and a review the literature. Chapter three describes the scope of the study and explains the methodology used for data collection. Chapter four presents the results of the study and discusses the findings, the answers to the research questions and provides the
research questions. Chapter five discusses the limitations of the study, suggests further areas of research, and summarizes the study.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Albert Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) describes how messages in the media can influence a person’s or a group’s beliefs. The theory argues that being exposed to “repeated, simple, and rewarded messages that typify television ads, viewers can and do learn from what they see in the media” (Maestro & Stern, 2003, 645). Bandura did several variations on the study involving the behavior of children after repeatedly watching a person punch a bobo doll (a inflatable punching bag that usually has a clown face painted on it) and yell. In every variation of the study (including one where the bobo doll was replaced by an actual clown), the children repeated the actions they saw. We do the same when setting behavioral expectations for ourselves and others. A person may repeatedly see a favorable reaction to a character's behavior and determine that if he or she behaves the same way, a similar reaction would follow. In addition to changing a person’s behavior, SCT states that repeated images can alter one’s beliefs about others. People can learn what to expect from African Americans based on the images depicted in the media. Thus, repeated images of African Americans behaving a certain way may provoke the belief that blackness equals the behaviors they see in the media.

Stuart Hall’s Theory of Encoding and Decoding explores the process of the production and reception of media messages. Encoding involves the substance of the message and how it is delivered. The substance in the message is influenced by the preconceived beliefs of the creators of the message. Hall argues that the creators of the messages encode messages that will serve their interests (Chandler, 2001). For example, if the creator of the message believes that the use of Standard English is not a characteristic of authentic blackness, he or she will not show African
Americans speaking Standard English. The audience decodes the messages that have been encoded by the creator, thus taking meaning from what they see. Hall also notes that the text is polysemic, meaning that a person’s culture, identity, knowledge and opinions influence the understanding of the text. For this reason, two people can watch the same video clip and get different meanings from them based on their beliefs and experiences.

Social Construction of Reality refers to the idea that "social structures and meanings are created and maintained in social interaction" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, 44). These standards are not created by nature. They are standards society agrees to uphold. Social constructivism refers to how a group of people assigns meaning to certain actions or objects to create social standards. Social constructionism deals with how people learn about social standards though their interactions.

Social construction of reality is often used to study how the idea of race is accepted among people. According to Machery and Faucher (2005), “the concept of race—how race membership is thought of—is culturally transmitted: one acquires the concept of race from one’s social environment” (1210). How people learn about certain things also refers to the Social construction of reality as “beliefs, preferences, reasoning patterns are socially learned: like in traditional social learning theory, they are acquired from one’s social environment—from one’s cultural parents” (Machery and Faucher, 1215).

The Cultivation Theory states that television is a powerful and accessible medium that can influence a person’s perception of reality over time. The theory claims that, because of the medium’s ease of accessibility, people learn more from television over long periods of time than any other medium and that they lack a choice in whether they will participate. According to
George Gerbner (1998), television serves as a channel for “giant industries [to] discharge their messages into the mainstream of common consciousness” (176). Many stereotypes are learned this way. Symbolic annihilation also plays a part in how African Americans are viewed in reality. Symbolic annihilation refers to the omission of representation of a particular group in certain situations. Failing to portray African Americans with certain characteristics can make audiences believe that African Americans lack those characteristics in reality. For example, if African American men are rarely shown in an academic setting in the media, some may believe that African American men do not or cannot excel academically.

The African American Market

Advertisers began seeing the benefits of target marketing to African Americans in the 1940’s with the encouragement of African American advertising and public relations professional Moss Kendrix. Kendrix, through his public relations firm The Moss Kendrix Organization, secured a client in a soft drink company looking to increase its market share in southern states. Nehi was the drink of choice for southerners. Kendrix suggested that the company target African Americans by using positive images of African Americans in advertisements. He also suggested using baseball great Jackie Robinson as a spokesperson for the brand and for a contest targeting African American children. The company executed Kendrix’s suggestions and, eventually, The Coca-Cola Company became the king of soft drinks in the South (and beyond).

Since the national success of Cola-Cola, many other companies have recognized the benefit of targeting African Americans. According the United Stated Census, 39.3 million
African Americans live in the United States. According to the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia, African Americans have a buying power of $913 billion (Miley, 2009). African Americans also buy more per capita in several categories, including clothing, automobile purchases and convenience foods.

Though people can choose several media options, “the majority of viewers still watch television shows as they are broadcast, and television continues to be one of the most popular mediums for advertising” (Messineo, 2008, 753). According to The Nielsen Company, African Americans consume more television than any other ethnic group. Albarran and Umphrey studied the television viewing habits and the audience’s reasons for watching. They found that African Americans were "more likely to watch television for something to do" (Albert & Jacobs, 2008, 243) and more likely to "[watch] situation comedies, sports, and game shows more often than Caucasians or Latinos" (Albert & Jacobs, 243). Because African Americans make up such a larger share of television viewers than Caucasians and Latino Americans, television advertisements are an effective way to reach a large amount of African Americans.

Though African Americans watch more television (on average) than any other race, the portrayals of Africans Americans is often narrow and underrepresented. Each detail in a commercial parleys a message about the intent of the message being relayed. Repeated misrepresentations of a particular group of people can lead to generalizations in real life.

**African Americans in Advertising**

Though African Americans have been used in advertisements for several decades, most of the early portrayals were negative, stereotypical and offensive. Offensive images of popular
African American stereotypes such as Mammy (like Mrs. Butterworth), Uncle Tom (Uncle Ben), Sambo, Sapphire or Jezebel were pictured on posters and the products. They were often shown as threatening or subservient.

During the last several decades, the images of African Americans in advertisements have improved. Old images received makeovers. For example, Aunt Jemima lost her head scarf and gained a pearl necklace and a pair of pearl earrings. Other advertisements depicted more positive portrayals of African Americans. Still, negative stereotypes are often portrayed in advertisements. Messineo (2000) found that “television commercials tend to portray White men as powerful, White women as sex-objects, Black men as aggressive, and Black women as inconsequential” (753). Black men are represented as “hypermuscular or menacing” (Larson, 2002, 225) more often than white men. African American women are often depicted as unattractive or oversexed and sassy. Overweight women, in particular, are often depicted as aggressive and are overrepresented in comedic situations where they are bothered or upset by another person (Peters, 2006).

Though African American actors are used more frequently than in the past, the quality of roles for African American actors is less than those for Caucasian actors (Maestro & Stern, 2003). African Americans are more likely to be minor, subservient or background characters and “the quality of the portrayals is less positive that those of the majority group” (Messino, 753). The products and services that featured African Americans tend to be limited. According to Taylor & Stern (1997) and Wilkes & Valencia (1989), African Americans are most likely to be seen in automobile, alcohol and convenience-foods commercials and are less likely to be shown in the home and with families (Maestro & Stern, 2003).
When African Americans are used in advertisements, they are often depicted as stereotypical characters. African Americans are often used to reflect what is “cool” in society. African Americans often use the latest slang and provide brands a certain type of credibility for those who want to be cool. The popularity of Anhueser-Busch’s “Whassup?!” commercials is an example of how the use of African American actors helps a brand seem more cool (Watts & Orbe, 2002). The commercial shows four African American friends greeting each other with a comical and exaggerated “Whassup?!”. Though Anhueser-Busch maintains that compatibility among the group, not race, was the determining factor in the decision to choose four African American men for the advertisement, the actions were depicted as a common way that African American males greet each other and became the coolest way to greet friends (Watts & Orbe, 2002).

The current cultural climate of African Americans is depicted with the urban/hip hop culture. Hip hop music is among the top selling genres to all races but the majority of its artists are young African American males who only represent a fraction of the African American community. According to Mark Dolliver (2010), the overrepresentation of hip hop culture in the media has “created a one-dimensional vantage point [that overshadows the] market” (para. 5).

How African Americans and other minority races are represented in the media is important because the media helps determine how members of the race are viewed by peer members and others. According to Maestro & Stern, the portrayals of people in advertisements “provide implicit cues regarding the cultural worth of the individuals associated with them” (639). Coltrane & Messineo found that television commercials promote “group boundaries that come to be taken for granted” (Maestro & Stern, 645) as well as the brand. When analyzing minorities, the portrayal is more effective because the use of the minority is less prevalent.
According to Marilyn Kern Foxworth, an African American author who studies the portrayal of African Americans in advertising, consistent images of African Americans prescribe behavior expectations of African Americans in real life. She says, “not only are we given images of who we are supposed to be, but others are also formulating their images of us based on that… People have already determined who we are and how we’re going to react in certain situations” (Peters, para. 13).

Unfortunately, portrayals of African Americans in television advertisements are often narrow and do not fully represent the diversity of the members of the race. They do, however, present an image of blackness that has been accepted as authentic blackness. To understand how blackness is represented in the media, one must understand what blackness is and how it affects the way a person is perceive both within and outside of the African American community.

**The Concept of Blackness**

Each group of people has characteristics that identify people as members. Typically, it has little to do with what the person looks like and more to do with the person’s personality, characteristics and beliefs. Ethnic minorities often struggle with fitting within the expectations of their race because of their appearance.

Blackness is not necessarily defined by ethnicity. Biologically, an African American person is a person whose ancestors are of Sub-Saharan African descent. Blackness is cultural and measured by the perception of what it means to be African American. It involves self-perception and the identification of the member of the disadvantaged group. Lori Latrice Martin (2010) says “blackness is a contradiction, which involves treating the collectivity of individuals
who identify themselves as black as a generic group despite their social, economic, political, and cultural differences” (235).

Because of the long history of discrimination against African Americans, blackness is an important concept in the African American community. Whether battling slavery or civil rights issues, African Americans have worked as a collective group or a family. Thus, “if an individual feels as though he or she shares the same struggle with a particular group, they are more likely to see themselves as part of this group and adopt this social identity as part of their self-concept” (Harris & Khanna, 2010, 642). Historically, African Americans fought for basic rights, such as freedom from slavery, the right to vote, own property and gain equal education and employment. Because African Americans were the largest minority group targeted by these injustices, failing to identify with these causes meant that one was outside the “family” and failed to identify with blackness. Additionally, most African Americans came from similar socio-economic backgrounds and had similar educational experience. Even if an African American family had more money, they often could only own property in predominately black neighborhoods. This created strong similarities among African Americans.

Today, the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of African Americans are more diverse. Those with more money usually no longer stay in predominantly African American neighborhoods (and when they do, they typically live around other middle class families). The needs of African Americans are no longer widely similar within the group. Experiences, concerns and desires are now different based on an individual’s background rather than a collectivistic perspective. The diversity of the black experience has intensified the scrutiny of those not deemed “authentically black”. Individuals must prove his or her blackness based on how closely his or her behavior conforms to society’s standard of blackness,
particularly “among the younger generation [where] narrow definitions of blackness exist where those who fall outside the boundaries of this definition may face exclusion from the family” (Harris & Khanna, 644). Essentially, one must act black in order to prove his or her loyalty to the culture or be abolished as an “other”.

Despite the tireless effort of civil rights activist to improve the perception of African Americans, blackness is often equated with negative or lesser qualities. A study of the expected characteristics of African Americans was performed on African American high school students (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004) found that they viewed more negative qualities as authentically black. They reported the following:

(1) The academic-scholastic dimension, e.g., not going to class, not doing schoolwork, or acting “street-smart” rather than “school-smart,” (2) the aesthetic-stylistic dimension, for example, listening to rap music, dressing in hip-hop clothes, or wearing expensive, name-brand clothing, (3) the behavioral dimension, for example, using Ebonics or slang, and being violent, (4) the dispositional dimension, for example, being disrespectful, having a negative attitude, being loud in public, and having an “I don’t care” attitude, and finally (5) the impressionistic dimension, for example, giving the impression of being wild, ill-mannered, or rude.

Harris & Khanna, 644

Robert Means Coleman points out that many of the “descriptors such as grotesque, vacuous, honors nothing, profane, crude, nihilistic, hedonism, slap in the face, phony, pathetic, awful, and
gone wrong are wed to hip-hop” (Means Coleman, 2010, 87). In the media, hip hop culture depicts what is perceived as authentically black. Hip hop culture often glorifies ghetto culture, as a majority of the genre’s authentic artists grew up in the ghetto and claim to maintain ties with their old neighborhoods (Interestingly, this concept extends to other races as authentic Caucasian rappers Eminem, Paul Wall and Yelawolf all claim to hail from the trailer park). Harris & Khanna say that “authenticity has also been linked to social class, where being poor or from ghetto areas are perceived as measures of authentic blackness” (644). Media enforces this stereotype by mostly depicting poorer African Americans as authentically black:

…because of the conflation of race and class in America, middle-class culture is often understood as whiteness and blackness is understood as the behavior and experiences associated with the urban ghetto (Jhally and Lewis 1992, cited in Moore 2005). As such, members of the middle- and upper-classes may have trouble being perceived as authentically black by other blacks.

Harris & Khanna, 644

Many African Americans were raised in the ghetto or in poorer neighborhoods. African Americans have a long history of turning what can be perceived as a negative situation into a term of pride or endearment and pride in one’s lower socio-economical background is one example. “Ghetto can be deployed as a label for allegedly dysfunctional behavior (hypersexual, uncouth, criminal, violent, loud) and values (nontraditional family values, materialism) of Black
people from urban neighborhoods” (Dubrofsky & Hardy 2008, 375). However, defining blackness using socio-economical factors:

   Many place African Americans in the double bind of "damned if you do, damned if you don't." If you don't enter into hip-hop culture, then you are open to Huxtable-esque criticisms of facilitating modern racism. If you do become party to it, it is difficult to emerge unsullied by critics.

   Means Coleman, 86

   A person’s speech also is a major determining factor is blackness, particularly among educated and/or middle class African Americans. To advance academically and professionally, one must master Standard English. Using anything thing other than standard English is discouraged in many social and professional circles. However, educated (regardless of socio-economical status) and middle class African Americans are expected to display their blackness by not using Standard English. Harris & Khanna say, “the present construct of blackness includes an oppositional culture that has existed since desegregation, which suggests that speaking the Black English Vernacular (BEV, i.e., ‘‘Ebonics’’), listening to ‘‘black’’ music, and/or avoiding academic achievement (among other things) are all part of being ‘‘authentically black’’ (643). Educated and middle class African Americans must straddle between cultures to validate every expectation (blackness, professionalism, scholastic, etc.). To cope, some chose a type of “strategic assimilation” (Martin, 238), where they “gain access to predominantly white schools, occupations and neighborhoods while simultaneously retaining ties in the black world. They work in professional occupations with largely white coworkers; yet, maintain membership
in historically black churches and historically black civic and voluntary associations” (Martin, 238).

**Blackness is not a singular experience**

Blackness is a difficult topic to balance in real life among African Americans. African Americans must decide how to manage between how “black” to act and how “white” to act using what they learn from their peers and media portrayals of blackness. According to the Media Awareness Network, media oversimplifies topics and relies on stereotypes to provide familiar images to its audience. As previously mentioned, urban and hip hop culture are overly represented for African Americans and underrepresented in family and professional roles. Means Coleman says, “To let popular communication tell it, all we need to know about Blackness can be learned through *Roots* (slavery), *I'll Fly Away* (civil rights movement), *Good Times* (soul era), and *MTV Cribs* (hip-hop); what else is there to know?” (88-89). Judging by media portrayals, one might be led to believe that little diversity exists in the African American community. However, members of the African American race belong to a rich and diverse community that should be represented more fully both in the media and in reality. Robert Williams (2008) explains that “multiple African American experiences, defined by variables such as class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation [and] skin complexion” exists (55).

Some believe that media portrays a lack of diversity because it does not benefit stakeholders. Means Coleman explains that neither African Americans nor non-African Americans “have an appetite for images of diverse experiences within Blackness, such as the Black middle and upper classes, African Americans in non-comedic roles, or programming that attends smartly to the complexities of race relations” (82). According to Watts and Orbe (2002),
Michael Dyson believes that this version of "authentic" blackness is more valuable to spectacular consumption that representations of blackness as sameness precisely because it is not anxiety producing” (7).

African Americans are as diverse as any other cultural group of human beings, but this is not portrayed in the media, including television advertisements. This can cause African Americans to have a limited view of themselves and others. The African American community has a high spending power and watches more than television than any other race. Advertisers alienate an entire market by neglecting to market to African Americans in a diverse manner.

It can be assumed because of the Social Cognitive Theory that the portrayals of African Americans in advertisements influence what African Americans believe about themselves. For example, a young African American man can see the images of the street-savvy hip hop fan in baggy clothes aggressively speaking Ebonics and concludes that, because he and the character look similar, he should behave that way. He receives further validation from his peers who dress and act similarly. According to the social construction of reality theories, he and his peers have accepted this behavior and style of dress as their standard. According to the Cultivation Theory, repeated televised images of young African American males dressing and behaving this way solidify that standard. So when this young man encounters another young African American man who does not dress or speak similarly, he may conclude that other man is deviating from African American culture or attempting to act white and, therefore, not authentically black. Style of dress, speech and other superficial standards do not necessarily indicate the passion or connectivity that a person feels with his or her race. Therefore, failing to show diversity within the African Americans in the media limits the understanding of authentic blackness because,
according to the Cultivation Theory, television is among our main source of knowledge about the world around us.

The research for this project will analyze how African Americans perceive authentic blackness as related to the portrayal of African Americans in television commercials. This thesis will attempt to answer the following research question: Do the limited roles for African Americans in television advertisements create limited societal norms in the African American community? This study will also attempt to explore how social norms within the African American community are created.
Chapter 3

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

Advertisements are found nearly everywhere. Though the options for advertisements are nearly endless, television remains among the most effective ways to reach a mass audience. Television advertisements were chosen because television is a medium that reaches a large portion of Americans, particularly African Americans. According to Nielsen, 99 percent of American households own at least one television and the average person watches more than six hours of television each day. African Americans watch more television than any other ethnic group, averaging seven hours and twelve minutes (Nielsen Group, 2011). Additionally, people often watch television purposefully rather than being exposed to it because of their surroundings. Watching television is a voluntary action because people choose to turn on a television set to watch a program. A person would be involuntarily exposed to an outdoor advertisement when driving down the street.

According to the Social Cognitive Theory, people learn about themselves and others from repeated messages and images used in the media (Bandura, 2001). Additionally, the Cultivation Theory posits that television is a powerful and easily accessible tool that can influence a person’s beliefs over a long period of time (Gerbner, 1998). Therefore, it can be inferred that because African Americans watch more television than any other ethnic group, they gain some understanding of themselves and others based on what they see on television.

The purpose of this study is to observe and analyze the roles, portrayals and behaviors of African Americans in television advertisements. This study will focus on the accuracy of the portrayals of African Americans rather than the frequency. Television advertisements were
determined to be the best way to observe these portrayals. Being able to see and hear how African American actors are used in television advertisements gives a clearer understanding of how the actor is being portrayed. According to Stuart Hall’s Theory of Encoding and Decoding, the creators of a message encode meaning into them (Dicks, 2000). Therefore, in an advertisement, which is designed to influence its audience, the images in the commercial are strategically chosen to influence the brand’s perceived image. The choice of actors, the way the character behaves, colors in the advertisements, the choice of language and background music have meaning and can be analyzed to find patterns.

Print advertisements were eliminated because only the image of the models can be analyzed. Differences in personality and attitudes may not be easily identified in many print advertisements. The model's use of language cannot be determined as there is no sound associated with print advertisements. Radio advertisements were eliminated because the actors cannot be seen, which does not give the opportunity to analyze the actor's movements, style of dress and facial expressions. Though many online advertisements contain visuals and sound, an analysis on Internet advertisements is too broad and it would be too difficult to determine the effectiveness and reach of the advertisements.

A content analysis of the portrayals of African Americans in television advertisements was performed. Prime time time-slots were chosen because these time slots contain more diverse audiences than daytime or late night time slots. Programs from broadcast channels CBS and Fox were chosen because these stations are the most popular among African Americans, according to Nielsen (2012). Two broadcast television programs, Fox’s American Idol and CBS’s CIS, were chosen because they were consistently the most frequently watched broadcast programs among African Americans. (Nielsen Media Group, 2012). BET's Tuesday night time
slot was chosen because two popular television programs, *The Game* and *Let's Stay Together*, have a predominantly African American cast on a network that targets African Americans (Nielsen Media Group, 2012).

Concurrently, a study of the perceived blackness in the African American community was performed with surveys and interviews to gain a better understanding what is perceived as authentically black. According to the Social Construction of Reality theory, the concept of race is accepted by a group of people. People decide what is considered authentically black based on what they learn from their surroundings (television being one of the many ways African Americans learn about race) and from interactions among their peers (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Therefore, only African Americans will be used to determine intra-race relations between those considered authentically black and those not. A small sample will be surveyed to get an understanding of how blackness is perceived on television commercials and how that perception compares to how blackness is perceived in real life. Interviews will be conducted to get a more in depth understanding of attitudes about perceived blackness in the African American community. Interviewees were chosen from various economic backgrounds to gain a wide range of experiences and beliefs.

**Methodology**

The research performed for this project was designed to analyze the effect television advertisements have on the attitudes about blackness. To establish a relationship between the two, one must first analyze each topic separately. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used for this study. The quantitative study was essential to gauge the overview of attitudes of authentic blackness. A quantitative approach is necessary to gauge attitudes in
African Americans blackness for the interviews and to find patterns in both the portrayals of 
African Americans in the television advertisements.

To better understand how blackness is portrayed in advertisements, one must understand 
what is perceived as blackness. To gauge attitudes about perceived authentic blackness, a survey 
was given to 71 African American participants. Participants were gathered in person and over 
the Internet. The survey was used created and tabulated using SurveyMonkey.com. The survey 
was used in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What are the characteristics of authentic blackness?

Q2: Where does one learn about authentic blackness?

Q3: Are African Americans on television portrayed as authentically black?

Q4: Do class systems affect what is considered authentically black?

The answers to these questions influenced the codes for the content analysis. To further probe 
the findings of this study, some participants were selected for an interview based on their age, 
educational background and socio-economical status.

The content analysis of the portrayal of African Americans in television commercials was 
an attempt to find patterns in the way blackness is used in the medium. Codes were chosen to 
help measure the number of times authentically black characteristics were used in television 
commercials during the selected programs. The codes were determined by research from the 
literature review (Dubrofsky& Hardy, 2008 and Harris& Khanna, 2010). Codes included use of 
stereotypes, use of Black English Vernacular, references to ghetto lifestyle, references to hip hop 
culture (in dress, background music, speech, etc.), the portrayal of dysfunctional behavior (such
as criminal activity, excessive aggression or loudness or hypersexual behavior), and the use of African Americans to validate a brand’s coolness. The content analysis attempted to answer to following research questions:

Q1: How is blackness portrayed in television commercials?

Q2: Are African Americans portrayed diversely in television commercials?

Q3: Is blackness portrayed as different or deviant compared to other races in commercials?

As previously stated, the programs that were chosen were Fox’s American Idol (one episode, 2 hour long program), CBS’s CSI (one episode, 1 hour), BET’s The Game (two episodes, 30 minutes long each) and BET’s Let’s Stay Together (two episodes, 30 minutes each). Therefore, five hours of television commercials are being analyzed. Only commercials containing African American characters were used. Repeat commercials were only counted once to avoid miscounting the codes.
Chapter 4
THE STUDY

Content Analysis Results

The content analysis serves as a way to analyze portrayals of African American characters in commercials. Four hours of television programming was viewed for the commercials. Of the commercials aired, 32 different commercials featured African Americans as lead or minor roles in the commercial. As stated in the methodology, each individual commercial was only counted once. Any repeated occurrences of a commercial were not counted, including re-occurring on a different television program or on a different day. Seven categories for coding were used: placement, speech, hip hop culture, validating coolness, dysfunctional behavior, references to ghetto culture and stereotypes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Number of occurrences</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Placement</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Ebonics</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip Hop Clothes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip Hop Music</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validating Coolness</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional Behavior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to Ghetto Lifestyle</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: This chart indicates in number of occurrences of each code used in the content analysis.
Placement

One hundred fifty seven commercials aired during the four hours of television programming chosen for this study. Of this, 32 (20.3 percent) featured African American actors. Of the 32 commercials analyzed, 26 (81.2 percent) of them featured African Americans in the foreground of the commercial with equal or more time than characters of other races. Some included spokespersons for brands such as singer Jennifer Hudson for Weight Watchers, rapper Andre 3000 for Gillette razors and a woman bragging about Popeye’s chicken.

Speech

The use of Ebonics, or Black Vernacular English, is often considered as a characteristic of authentic blackness. In the 32 commercials analyzed, African Americans had no speaking roles in 26 of them (65.6 percent). Many of those commercials featured characters of all races to show diversity and featured a voiceover actor as the person giving information. In the commercials that featured speaking roles for African American characters, only eight (25 percent) featured African Americans using Ebonics. When they did, usually they were with a group of people or when casted as a “real person” providing a testimony about a product. A good example of the difference of speech between a spokesperson and “real people” is the commercial for Hair Infinity. In this commercial, the spokesperson speaks in Standard English, while the “real people” in the commercial used Ebonics.

Hip Hop Culture

Though it is a relativity new sub-culture, hip hop culture has become synonymous with the African American community, particularly the African American youth culture. Hip hop
music, slang, artists and dress are used to attract the attention of African Americans and other lovers of urban culture. For the sake of this project, codes for hip hop culture include the use of hip hop slang, hip hop dress, hip hop music (played in the background) and hip hop personalities.

Of the 32 commercials analyzed, eight commercials (25 percent) of the commercials referenced hip hop culture. Hip hop culture is most often referenced when the main actor or actors in the commercial were African American, presumably to attract African American audiences. For example, Kentucky Fried Chicken ran a commercial during BET’s Let’s Stay Together and The Game featuring an all-African American cast to promote its fast food restaurant. Hip hop music was played in the background and the guys in the commercial were dressed in hip hop clothing. During the same programming block, Gillette opted to run a spot featuring rapper Andre 3000 without the other endorsers Adrien Brody and Gael Garcia Bernal. This spot features hip hop music in the background. Andre 3000’s solo spot only appears on BET. The CBS and FOX time slots air the commercial featuring all three endorsers with background music that sounds more pop than hip hop.

Validating coolness

African Americans have long been the creators or early adopters of societal trends (Magazine Publishers of America, 2011). Commercials often feature African Americans encouraging use of a product because the product is cool (rather than bragging about quality). Of the 32 commercials shown, eleven (34.3 percent) featured African Americans validating the coolness of a product. Kentucky Fried Chicken’s commercial featured young black men using different euphemisms for “cool” to describe their product. Kentucky Fried Chicken strategically uses these young men and hip hop culture to validate coolness. While hip hop culture is not
referenced, TGIFriday’s used a suave young black man in black rimmed glasses and nice shoes for the role of the bartender to validate the coolness of the restaurant chain. The trendy and impeccably dressed young man is portrayed as the person who provides good times at the hottest hangout in town.

References to ghetto lifestyle

The occurrences of references to ghetto lifestyles were low. Only three (9.3 percent) commercials featured references to ghetto lifestyles and all were indirect.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes in commercials were prevalent. Sixteen commercials (50 percent) contained some sort of stereotype. Most prevalent was the volume that the actors were speaking on the commercial. African Americans were often seen speaking more loudly than actors of other races. For example, Jennifer Hudson, spokesperson for Weight Watchers, speaks more loudly and aggressively than other spokes models (which also enforces the stereotype that black women are bossy or overbearing). In a JC Penny’s commercial, a slightly overweight black woman is used as an enforcer. She steps up to assert that Ellen Degeneres cannot return an item without a receipt. Though Degeneres fights the white clerk, she backs down when the African American woman appears, connoting the stereotype that black women can be aggressive when they are crossed. The JC Penny advertisement, particularly, represents a stereotype of African American women, particularly overweight African American women, being aggressive. (Peters, 2006).

Old Spice’s commercials featuring Terry Crews is filled with stereotypes about black men. Crews bears his muscles by wearing only tiny shorts. This series of commercial was co-
branded with other Procter & Gamble products such as Charmin toilet paper and Bounce dryer sheets. The commercials start advertising one brand and are interrupted by Crews breaking through the walls or ceiling, yelling. His screaming and aggression is only targeted at the product. He fulfills a classic stereotype of the strong, aggressive, sex-crazed black male that inspired some people’s beliefs that African American men were dangerous and needed to be controlled.

The Social Cognitive Theory asserts that people learn from the media through repeated messages and images (Bandura, 2001). Based on this theory, one can infer that African Americans learn some expectations about members of their race from the portrayals they witness in television commercials. Stereotypical images of minorities hold more weight because minorities are shown in leading roles in commercials less than Caucasians. According to Marilyn Kern Foxworth, an expert in minority advertising, the images African Americans (and others) see in the commercials make them believe that the behavior they see is how African Americans are expected to act (Peters, 2006).

According to Stuart Hall’s Theory of Encoding and Decoding, the concepts of these commercials are created to send a message about the products. This means that each detail of a commercial, including the script, actors and images are carefully planned by advertisers. For example, the Old Spice commercials featuring Terry Crews were created Weiden & Kennedy, an agency with few African American employees (like many advertising agencies). This means that portrayal of an African American character was created by a mostly non-African American group of people. Though it is very possible that Crews was chosen for this commercial based on his popularity and visible physical strength, rather than his race, he is still an African American male portraying an overly used stereotype used in the media – an aggressive African American
male. Therefore, according to Hall’s theory, advertisers used Crews, his actions and other images in the commercials to convey the message that their product is powerful, aggressive and strong. Though they are encoding messages about their product directly, the use of Crews and his actions indirectly relay messages about race because as African American characters are analyzed more by audiences because they are seen less frequently. Viewers then decode the messages and that meaning from the content about the product and the images in the product, including Crews (Dicks, 2000). As Hall noted, the content can be polysemic, meaning that different people can find varied meanings in the content. Therefore, one viewer may only decode information about the product while a person more sensitive about race may decode racial information.

Discussion

Q1: How is blackness portrayed in television commercials?

The use of blackness does not necessarily equal the use of African Americans in commercials. African Americans were often not used in a way to emphasize their race. A person of any race could have been used to portray the characters in the commercial. African Americans were often used as filler to create diversity.

However, when race was emphasized, it was most often on programming targeting African Americans (BET’s The Game and Let’s Stay Together). In these instances, blackness is characterized by hip hop culture and speckled with stereotypes such as aggression, loudness and the use of Ebonics and slang. Blackness is also used to validate coolness. Many of the African American actors use euphemisms for “cool” to describe products. One reason for the difference
of portrayals on television targeted to African Americans is because audiences are often influenced more by commercials containing characters who they believe are similar to themselves (Messineo, 2008). Therefore, advertisers may be using stereotypical images to reach advertisers.

Q2: Are African Americans portrayed diversely in television commercials?

African Americans are portrayed more diversely than expected. African Americans were shown in a variety of settings, participating in various activities. In many cases, race does not play a major factor in the content of the commercial. However, when blackness is a factor in the commercial, stereotypes are more likely to be featured.

Q3: Is blackness portrayed as different or deviant compared to other races in commercials?

Blackness is portrayed as different in many cases but rarely as deviant. The use of hip hop culture and Ebonics is almost strictly reserved for African American characters. Two exceptions in the study are worth noting. In the commercial for JustFab.com, a fashion website and online store, two women, one Caucasian and one African American, are shown ogling a pair of shoes on the website. Though the African American woman only screams “Oh, God!” and drops her jaw, the Caucasian woman uses colorful phrases, like made Ebonics terms made popular in the 1990’s “Oh no they didn’t!” Another example of blackness being portrayed as different is in a commercial for the release of The Muppets on DVD. For a few seconds, Fozzie Bear is shown wearing a bandana and a chain, holding his hand as if he were about to make a
gang sign and speaking in what can best be described as a “gangsta” accent, which is often used by rappers.

**Survey and Interviews Results**

Sixty-seven participants completed a survey about how African Americans are portrayed in television and about authentic blackness in the African American community. The survey was given online and in person and was created through SurveyMonkey.com.

The first part of the survey asked about the participants’ beliefs about African Americans in television commercials. The majority of participants (64.1 percent) believe that African Americans are not represented accurately in television commercials. Many disagreed that African American characters were portrayed as ghetto (37.3 percent) or aggressive (43.9 percent). Participants also disagreed that African American characters act white in commercials (41.5 percent). When asked whether they believe most African American character speak in slang on commercials, 39.9 percent believe that they do. Seventy-six percent of participants agreed that hip hop culture is featured when African American characters were featured in the commercial. Seventy-four percent of participants believe that African Americans are often used to validate the coolness of a brand.
The second part of the survey asked participants about their beliefs on authentic blackness. Participants were asked where they believe African Americans learned about what is considered authentically black. Most people believe that authentic blackness is learned in social settings such as from family members (84.1 percent) or traditions (76.2 percent), peers (60.3 percent), church (54 percent) and social organizations (44.4 percent). Thirty-six percent of participants recognized the influence of television in learning about authentic blackness.

![Beliefs About Portrayals of African Americans in Television Commercials](image)

*Figure 2: This chart shows how survey participants answered about their beliefs about the portrayal of African Americans in television commercials (in percentages).*
Some participants were chosen to interview to give insight on their thoughts on authentic blackness via interviews. These participants were asked to give their opinions about the portrayals of African Americans on television authentic blackness and about their experiences dealing with their identity and the identity of others in relation to what is perceived as authentically black. Eleven people were interviewed for this study (names have been changed): Brittany, 30 (from Stellacom, Washington, but living in Mobile, Alabama), small business owner and yoga instructor; Latoya, 27 (Atlanta, Georgia), photographer; Hazel, 26 (Mobile, Alabama), pharmacist; Marcus, 26 (Dothan, Alabama but living in Mobile, Alabama), security specialist for the United States Coast Guard; Shameika, 23, (from Tacoma, Washington, living in Salt Lake City, Utah), customer service representative; Julie, 28 (Destin, Florida), executive
director of a tourism center; Alan, 30 (New Orleans, Louisiana), financial advisor; Dustin, 32 (Destin, Florida), swim instructor and tour guide, Anthony, 21 (Destin, Florida), assistant at a tourism center, Alana, 26 (Oakland, California, but living in Mobile, Alabama), finance director, Cara, 27 (Mobile, Alabama), customer service representative and Warren, 26 (Mobile, Alabama), poet.

Discussion

Q1: What are the characteristics of authentic blackness?

Participants were asked an open ended question about what activities or characteristics are considered authentically black. Many maintained that there is no way to act black. As Alana says, “If a person is born into a race, however they act is acting black. I am black. I don’t have to act… We have been programmed to think that certain individual traits are race specific, and they are not.” However, many of the participants who stated that they didn’t believe that a person could act black or white mentioned that others have expectations of what is considered black or white. A person’s speech was cited several times. Many survey participants indicated in the open ended question “What actions, characteristics or activities do you believe qualify as acting black?” that they believe speaking Standard English is considered acting white, while using Ebonics or slang is considered black. Fifteen (out of forty-two) comments specifically identify speech or dialect when asked to describe authentic blackness. Each interviewee indicated that they believe the way a person speaks is an indicator of authentic blackness. All middle class respondents interviewed mentioned that their blackness has been challenged because of the way they speak. This type of negative reaction could be as a result of middle class African
Americans feeling the need to assimilate as “they move back-and-forth between the [supposed] black and white world” (Martin, 2010, 238).

Other personality traits given during the survey included being funny, acting ignorant, being emotional, being strong, being loyal, being passionate, being pessimistic and being able to overcome adversity. External traits mentioned in the survey included being a lover of hip hop music, dress and culture, being good dancers, being religious or attending church frequently, loving soul food, attending or holding large family gatherings and rebelling against societal norms of style and attitudes.

The views of acting black did not vary much between those who identified themselves as middle class and those who did not, though middle class participants are more likely to admit that what is considered authentically black should be reconsidered. As Alana says, “In America, the phrase ‘acting black’ is accompanied by a negative or jester-esque connotation.” Almost all the interviewees listed the same answers that survey participants did, saying that acting black included loving hip hop culture, wearing baggy or sagging clothes, acting ignorant or ghetto, and using slang and Ebonics. When asked prominent African Americans such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Oprah Winfrey and President Barack Obama, are considered authentically black, even though they do not fit into their guidelines they mentioned, all said yes because of the contributions they made to African American community and history. As Shameika said, “Exceptional people get a pass.” Cara says, “Though the blackness of a figure like Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, Jr. would never be questioned, I wonder if it has something to do with the era they lived in. I wonder whether their blackness would be questioned if they lived in 2012.” It seems, however, that many participants believe that the definition of authentic blackness has changed over time.
When asked whether they believe a black person can act educated or professional while still holding on to authentic blackness, many indicated that they wanted to believe it was possible, but that they would still be perceived as acting white by others. Eight of eleven interview participants indicated that “acting black” was socially unacceptable, while, in most circles, “acting white” was socially acceptable. When asked about the difference between acting black and acting white, Alan answered, “It’s hard to define, but you know it when you see it. Mostly, [the difference] is the way a person speaks and whether the person acts professionally.” Latoya also mentioned that professionalism is more aligned with acting white, though she added, “We should probably say ‘This person acts professionally’, instead of saying ‘They act white’.”

**Q2: How does one determine whether a person is authentically black?**

As indicated in the survey and in Figure 3, most believe that authentic blackness is learned from family (83.6 percent), peers (58.2 percent), church (53.7 percent), social organizations (46.3 percent) and the media. Thirty-seven percent of participants believe that television plays a role in how blackness is determined. According to Machery and Faucher (2009), “human beings’ concepts of race do not occur in a social vacuum: social environments are important to explain the content of our concepts of race” (1209). According to Travis L. Dixon (2000):

The information that we gain from the mass media results in the production of stereotypes that help us simplify our environment. The media may act as a sociocultural agent or source of stereotypical information about African Americans (Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994). We might view the media as
a source of social learning that essentially teaches and reinforces certain ideas
about Blacks (3).

Therefore, both media influences and one’s social environment and interactions mold their
beliefs about race, as inferred from Social Construction of Reality and the Social Cognitive
Theory.

**Q3: Are African Americans on television portrayed as authentically black?**

Sixty-four percent of survey participants felt that African Americans were misrepresented
in television commercials and the media in general. Marcus is concerned with the way black
men are represented in the media. He says, “It is rare to find a clean cut black man on television
but when you do, he is often treated as an exception or abnormality”. Latoya believes that
African Americans are too often stereotyped in television commercial roles. “[African
Americans] are often shown in fast food or sports-related ads. I also feel that that are too often
shown dancing or singing or rapping. And nothing annoys me more than payday loan
commercials. They are usually almost all black. Black people can’t be the only people taking
out payday loans!” Warren believes that in some ways advertisers make an effort to include
African Americans but in many ways they fall short and can even be offensive. He says, “Any
time they put a black person in a commercial, they are just black they seem to be rocking a
natural hairstyle or he may be a guy with dreds, or a woman with a curly afro, [as if to say] we’re
not using a token black person, we are putting one of you in there. We want you to know that we
put Pookie off the street that you see all the time in this commercial. It’s all about relating to the
demographic you are targeting…But some of the ways advertisers target African Americans
offends me so much. There is an income tax business [in Mobile, Alabama] that targets African
Americans using hip hop music and slang. There is a law firm that has a black woman as a spokesperson asking the questions ‘Are you hiding your car behind Big Mama’s house to hide from the repo man?’ and ‘Do you have baby mama drama?’ These are serious subjects and they use buffoonery and ignorance to speak to the black community.”

**Q4: Does class systems affect what is considered authentically black?**

Three of the participants come from middle class backgrounds (Alana, Alan, and Brittany), while five say that they were from lower class backgrounds but had what some would consider middle class experiences or worked to reach a middle class status (Latoya, Hazel, Marcus, Warren and Julie). Latoya, Hazel, Warren and Julie all came from families that were not financially well-off but had parents who worked hard to give them distinguished or memorable experiences, such as private schooling, participation in pageants and international travel. Marcus grew up in a lower class neighborhood, but work his way to a lucrative position with the Coast Guard. The rest (Shameika, Anthony, Cara and Dustin) consider their status as lower class. Marcus divides African Americans into three categories. He says, “There’s a lower class that are complacent and don’t want to work to better themselves. There’s a working lower class [of people] who may not have always had money or status, but they are working to be middle class...Then there is a middle or upper class that has always had money”. Warren mentions that there is resentment between the classes in the African American community. He says, “Some black people with money will look down on those that do not have money. People without money resent the people with money because they show off or look down on people without money. Class divides us more than anything.” Latoya agrees that class divides the race. She said, “People assume once you get money and you start mixing and mingling with other race, you have forgotten where you come from. You don’t think you are black when you really are.”
Both class and race influence middle class African American identity (Martin, 2010). Middle class African Americans often got to school and or work with mostly white coworkers but still belong to mostly black churches and social organizations, making many feel that they are being watched and/or judged because they are perceived as an “other” by both groups. According to Prudence L. Carter (2000), “African Americans who feel the conflict between “making it,” or rather assimilation to dominant society, and group identification adopt [assimilation] strategies” (69) to help them fit into both groups.

Nine of the interview participants described having their blackness questioned based on their experiences or habits. Latoya says her blackness has been questioned when she has talked about some of the experiences she has had, such as participating in beauty pageants and travelling to France and Italy. She says, “When I tell people about certain things I’ve done or about places that I have travelled, they say, ‘Oh, you must be rich’ or ‘You’ve done white people stuff’. No, my parents wanted me to be cultured. But they feel that I have not struggled like they have.” Such reactions to Latoya’s experiences reflect Oscar Lewis’s (1969) Culture of Poverty thesis that asserts that people living in a lower class society has “a distinctive set of cultural patterns and values among the poor—antithetical in nature to ‘mainstream’ culture” (Carter, 66). Because international travel and participation in pageants is expensive and not something that many lower class people have to opportunity to do, some African Americans may perceive participation in these activities as “acting white”. They assume that only white people can afford such activities because they may not have met many African Americans with those experiences and, therefore, assume that such activities are for those not similar to them, i.e. Caucasians with disposable income. According to Eggerling-Boeck (2000), most people in
lower classes feel disconnected from mainstream norms and values. To compensate, they create their own subculture with its own values (19).

Brittany and Hazel, both health and wellness professionals, reported that they have received resistance from other African Americans because of their healthy habits. Hazel, a pharmacist who also holds Bachelors of Science in Nutrition Science, expressed frustration about some African Americans being “complacent” about wellness. She says that she is often criticized because of the way she eats. She says, “One person called me ‘the healthiest black person I know’, which is frustrating because I don’t understand why I cannot eat healthy and not being considered an ‘other’.” Brittany, a yoga instructor, is often questioned about how she started practicing yoga but she say that they really want to know “how a black girl started practicing yoga, an activity that is so often considered a white activity”. Lewis’s “Culture of Poverty” thesis applies here as well as some may assume that eating healthy foods or doing an activity like yoga, both of which many consider are expensive, are activities for Caucasians. The Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998), which states that prolonged exposure to images on television can influence a person’s believes about his or her environment, can be applied here as well. Because African Americans are over-represented in advertisements for convenience foods, like fast food restaurants and quick meals and cereals, underrepresented in advertisements about fitness (except when related to sports) and are more likely to be overweight in commercials (Maestro, & Stern, 2003; Messineo, 2008; Peters, 2006), eating healthy foods and some types of exercises unrelated to sports is sometimes considered a “white activity”.
Limitations of the Study

The first limitation is the age of the participants who were interviewed. Though the original intent was to interview African Americans of various age groups, most of the participants who were willing and able to be interviewed were in their twenties. Hip hop culture has been a dominant culture for the entire span of each the participant’s life. Much of the African American produced or centered entertainment during the participants’ lifetimes has been heavily influenced by hip hop culture. This including advertisements featuring hip hop music, clothes, slang and dance, usually used to target the African American market. This study would have been strengthened by having participants who lived before the time when hip hop dominated the African American culture, such as the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

The second limitation is the number of commercials that were used during this study. Though four hours of television programming was studied, the majority of commercials did not feature African American characters. The purpose of the study was to study portrayal of African Americans in television commercials. Setting a minimum number of commercials for the study, instead of choosing an amount of time for watching television would have increased the number of commercials studied, thus broadening the perspective.

The third limitation is the choice of television programming. Two sitcoms, one television drama and one competition-based show were chosen from three networks. Including other programming like reality television and broadcasted sports programming would have provided more variety in the sample of commercials.
Further Study Recommendations

Authentic blackness is a massive and complicated topic. This study serves as an overview and touches on many topics. Many African Americans have a strong racial identity, while others identify more strongly with other aspects of their lives, such as class and education. This topic can be explored in various ways.

One focus could be the difference in perception of authentic blackness factored by social or economic class. This study touches on the differences in perception among classes but largely focuses on the perspective of middle class African Americans. A more balanced study of the perspective of authentic blackness among classes is would provide more information about authentic blackness.

Though advertisements were used for this study, other mediums could be used such as music, television programming, movies, and news. Both the Social Cognitive Theory and the Cultivation Theory infer that television helps people learn about people in their social environments, including themselves (Bandura, 2001; Gerbner, 1998). Because hip hop culture is so dominant in the African American community (and in American culture, in general), studying how hip hop music and movies portray authentic blackness would be insightful in the study of the topic In the African American community.

Another option for further study would be to focus on Hall’s Theory of Encoding and Decoding (Chandler, 2001) to explore who creates the messages where African Americans were cast. Advertisers must maintain a balance between consumers who purchase the products and the media outlets that air the advertisements and must create content to appease both. Because most media outlets are controlled by six major companies, a very small number of people control
the content of most entertainment (Potter, 2006). Exploring how having the majority of content, including content targeting and containing African Americans, affects the perception of authentic blackness would extend this study to focus more on the messages being encoded and decoded.

Conclusions

This study attempted to ask the question: Do limited roles in television advertisements create limited societal norms in the African American community. The first part of the study explored the idea of “limited roles” of African Americans in commercials through a content analysis. Though the expectation was the African Americans were not portrayed diversely, African Americans were cast in diverse roles and were often portrayed as race-less in the commercials in the study. However, African Americans were often portrayed less diversely and more stereotypically in commercials for programs targeting African American viewers. Stereotypes are prevalent in commercials that contained African Americans, though they were more often more used in commercials that targeting African Americans. As expected, hip hop culture was very prominent. When African Americans were portrayed in commercials, hip hop music, clothing and speech were used in the commercial. African Americans were often used to validate coolness.

This study indicated that African Americans believe that television commercials (and other forms of media) have at least a minimal amount of influence on the perception of authentic blackness, with the other major influence being interaction with family and peers. These findings align with three theories used in this thesis: Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), which asserts that people learn behaviors and attitudes from simple, repeated messages in the media; the Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998), which states that television is a power medium
that can mold a person’s attitudes over extended periods of time; and the Social Construction of
reality (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008), that states that social structures like race are established by
social interactions.

Many of the participants believe that blackness is not portrayed accurately or diversely on
television commercials. Though many believed that there is no one way to act black, many cited
external characteristics (loving of hip hop culture, regular church attendance, loving soul food
and being good dancers) as ways to act authentically black. The most commonly characteristic
mentioned in the interviews and in the survey was speech and whether a person uses Ebonics or
Standard English. All participants interviewed stated that people judge a person’s degree of
authentic blackness based on how a person speaks. All also stated that the use of Standard
English is more aligned with whiteness than blackness.

Though television commercials are just one of the many ways people can learn and
create expectations about African Americans, advertisements play a role in molding how African
Americans are expected to behave. The media, when used correctly can help inject positive
images and attitudes that can modify the attitudes about what it means to be an African
American. Diversity in portraying blackness should be broader to display the rich, diversity that
actually exists within the African American community.
Works Cited


APPENDIX A

Thank you for participating in this survey. This survey is will be used to analyze authentic blackness in the African American community. Participation in this survey is voluntary and will not result in any type of compensation. You may skip questions or stop participating in this survey at any time. All information given in this survey will be kept confidential.

The first part of the survey will ask questions about how blackness is portrayed in commercials. The second part of the survey will ask questions about your beliefs about what is authentically black in the African American community.

This survey should take 10-15 minutes to complete. Thank you again for your participation.

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

1. African Americans are represented accurately in television commercials.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

2. African Americans characters are mostly represented as ghetto in commercials.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

3. When African Americans are in commercials they usually speak in slang.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

4. When African Americans are in commercials, they are often dictating what is cool.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

5. When African Americans are in commercials, they are often portrayed as aggressive.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

6. When African Americans are in commercials, they often act white.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

7. When African Americans are in commercials, hip hop culture is usually featured.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree
**Blackness questions**

8. Where do you believe people learn about what is authentically black? Check all that apply.

- Television
- Music
- Magazines
- The Internet
- Movies
- Family
- Friends
- Coworkers
- Classmates
- Church members
- Social Organizations
- Experiences with peers
- Cultural traditions
- Family traditions

9. What actions, characteristics or activities do you believe qualify as acting black?

10. Do you have any other comments you want to have in relation to this topic?
MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for [Dana Poyers], who is completing the requirements for her/his Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student’s work but rather meet with them as a "young colleague." If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for him/her, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for [Dana Poyers] as she/he completes her/his thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student’s thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature: [Signature]
Title: Adjunct Faculty
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Date: 1/25/12