Television (TV) program viewing is an activity that most people engage in and enjoy. In 1998, 98% of American households contained TV sets and the average time spent watching TV was 14 hours per week (Famighetti, 2000). In addition, Americans spend the majority of their leisure time watching TV rather than exploring other activities. In fact, Robinson and Skill (1993) looked at past research and found that people tend to watch more TV as they age. Specifically, elderly adults utilize TV more frequently than children, middle age and young adults because they have the most leisure time.

People watch TV for entertainment purposes and to acquire information (Huston et al., 1992a). People also use TV as a means of socializing and relieving tension. According to Huston et al., the elderly depend heavily on TV because it is a source of information, recreation, mental stimulation and companionship. TV also serves as a replacement for previous occupational status, child-rearing responsibilities and domestic tasks among the elderly (Huston et al.). The types of programs that the elderly watch are different from those of middle age and young populations. The elderly enjoy watching “news, documentaries and public affairs programs” (Huston et al., p. 15). Huston et al. propose that these programs provide a “social informational network” that one often loses after employment ends (p. 15).

Portrayals of people on TV are seldom representative of the individuals who actually watch the programming. Gerbner (1972) describes TV as promoting cultural values and norms and as presenting relationships among groups in society, whereas Clark (1972) proposed that groups gain recognition and respect by their portrayal on TV. Society recognizes social groups when they are visible on TV, while groups that lack representation experience non-recognition. The media gives respect to social groups when representations are positive and considerate. The disrespect of social groups results from stereotypical or negative depictions.

The elderly are frequently underrepresented and are often depicted according to negative stereotypes on TV and in other forms of media. Several research studies support these findings. For example, Vasil and...
Robinson and Skill (1995) conducted a study that focused on portrayals and depictions of the elderly on prime time TV. They examined the quality and quantity of images of the elderly by analyzing the elderly characters' appearance, the depiction of the elderly characters' living arrangements, and the roles of the elderly characters. The results indicated that the number of elderly characters 65 years and older on prime-time TV had not increased from 1975 to 1990. Neither female representation nor the number of elderly characters in leading roles had increased, thus portrayals of the elderly had no overall improvement from the mid 1970s.

A macro-level analysis of elderly depictions on TV stimulates a micro-level analysis of the central focus of this research: TV commercials. The overall stereotypical and demeaning portrayals in TV programs carry over into commercial advertisements. Although there is little research about TV commercials and depictions of the elderly, the available research indicates that the elderly are negatively portrayed in commercials.

Harris and Feinberg (1977) examined the images of the elderly in commercials and other media forms in order to determine the impact of these images. The researchers analyzed age, gender, romantic involvement, physical activity, authority as well as health and products advertised in commercials. The major findings of the study indicated that elderly characters were rarely shown as physically active and were shown having more physical ailments as age increased. Males were better represented than females and had more authority in old age. The investigation demonstrated that elderly images were both stereotypical and negative.

The findings of another study paralleled the findings of Harris and Feinberg (1977). Hiemstra, Goodman, Middlemiss, Vosco, and Ziegler (1983) examined TV commercials and their treatment of the elderly in order to ascertain whether the commercial advertisements stereotypically and/or negatively depicted the elderly. Several areas were examined such as the extent of elderly representation in TV commercials, the extent of female portrayals, the realism of elderly portrayals, the extent of familial relationships in connection with the elderly, the type of products the elderly advertise and the general tone of the commercials. The major findings were consistent with previous research: the elderly were significantly underrepresented and elderly females were unrealistically portrayed in commercials. The elderly were shown as disconnected from familial relationships and primarily advertised health, food, consumer and household products.

Following the Civil Rights movement and the strong integration efforts of Black leaders in the 1960s, depictions of African-Americans on TV increased (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1977 as cited in Huston et al., 1992b). African-Americans were seen in both leading and secondary roles more frequently, but they were only seen in certain types of programming, such as comedies. The characters played by African-Americans were also stereotypical; most were likely to be young and/or obese. Then in the 1980s the overall representation of African-Americans decreased. Kovaric (1993) cited the results of a study that showed that this decline in the representation of African-Americans still existed in the early 1990s.

When specifically looking at elderly representation and African-Americans on TV and in commercials, one significant finding from the research of Signorielli (1983) was that of the elderly characters present on prime-time TV programs, the majority were Caucasians. Greenberg, Simmons, Hogan, and Atkin (1980) found that the majority of elderly characters on TV in the 1970s were Caucasian and African-American elderly characters were systematically underrepresented in fictional TV series. Furthermore Hiemstra et al. (1983) reported that African-American elderly portrayals were both lacking and unrealistic in TV commercials. According to Huston et al. (1992b) the non-recognition and lack of respect for minority social groups can have two possible consequences: (a) the preservation of negative attitudes towards minority groups and (b) the internalization of negative self-perceptions of minority group members.

There is no current research literature on the representation of African-American elderly in TV commercials.
Commercial. The current study makes a contribution to this end. The goal of this study was to investigate the depiction of African-American elderly in TV commercials. This topic is an important issue because it addresses whether portrayals and depictions of African-American elderly adults are positive, negative, and/or stereotypical, which may compel more researchers to consider the impact of these images. Since the depictions and representations of African-American elderly adults in TV commercials have not been studied extensively, the collection of data in this area will assist researchers in examining the self-images and attitudes of African-American elderly adults. By revealing the portrayal of African-American elderly adults, researchers can use the data to further assess whether these depictions shape the attitudes of aging African-Americans.

Four hypotheses were generated. First, it was hypothesized that African-American elderly adults would be significantly underrepresented in TV commercials. This prediction was based on the research of Hiemstra et al. (1983), Harris and Feinberg (1977), Kovaric (1993), Signorielli (1983) and Greenberg et al. (1980) that found that elderly adults in general are underrepresented in TV programming.

Second, the researchers proposed that African-American elderly adults would not be cast as central figures in commercials, but as secondary characters. This expectation was based on the research of Harris and Feinberg (1977) that found elderly portrayals to be both stereotypical and negative.

Third, it was also hypothesized that African-American elderly adults would mostly appear in advertisements for health, food and household products. Hiemstra et al. (1983) found this to be true of their elderly sample.

The final hypothesis was that African-American elderly adults would be shown as physically inactive and having physical ailments. This prediction was based on the research by Harris and Feinberg (1977).

Method

Sample

In order to examine the depictions and portrayals of African-American elderly in the media, TV commercials were content analyzed during the fall of 2001 from September 26, 2001 to October 8, 2001. Three major networks were analyzed: Lifetime, Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The commercials were videotaped every-other-day from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST) and from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. (EST) for two weeks.

Coding Procedure

TV commercials were content analyzed by two reviewers (intrarater reliability was 97.8%) to provide information on a variety of characteristics. Data were collected on age, gender, ethnicity, role, portrayal of role, type of product advertised, health status and physical condition of characters.

Character age was coded using a two-category scheme: young adults and elderly adults. Young adults were characters identified or perceived as being between 20 and 49 years of age. Elderly adults were characters perceived to be 50 years old and above. Two elderly adult groups were formed: elderly characters were divided into the 50 to 79 year old cohort or the 80 years old and above cohort.

Characters’ ethnicity was coded as either Caucasian or African-American. A category labeled “Other” was used to classify non-Caucasian and non-African-American characters.

Role was coded in terms of whether characters were central or secondary figures. A central figure was defined as the character who was the main focus of the commercial or the character that spoke the most. A secondary figure was defined as a character who spoke little or not at all.

The portrayal of the roles of elderly characters was also coded. These portrayals included mother, wife, husband-father, student, grandparent, worker, lawyer, seller, consumer and other.

The type of advertised products was coded as well. The categories of products included health, food, household (defined as cleaning items for the home, furniture or appliances), recreation, automobile, cosmetics, clothing, consumer (defined as office supplies or electronics) and attorney services.

Lastly, health and physical condition were coded. Health status was coded in terms of the perceived number of health problems of elderly characters, and physical condition was coded in terms of the mobility (low, moderate or high) of the elderly characters.

Repeated commercials were omitted. Only those characters with completely visible faces were coded. Children and infants were not coded, but they were included in the calculation of the total characters appearing in the commercials.

Results

The sample consisted of 168 commercials from the three networks. In these commercials, there were a total of 494 identified characters (417 young adults, 66 elderly adults and 11 characters who were considered “other” because they were either children or infants). Of the 66 elderly adults, 65.2% were males and 34.8% were females, whereas of the 417 young adults,
40% were males and 60% were females. Overall, 63 elderly adults were thought to be between the ages of 50 and 79 years old, while only three elderly adults were considered to be 80 years old or above. Of the total characters shown in commercials, 15.8% were elderly adults.

First, the representation of African-American elderly in TV commercials was examined. Two Chi-square tests were conducted in order to determine whether there was a difference between African-American and Caucasian elderly adults, as well as African-American elderly adults and the total number of characters represented in commercials within the sample. The results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between African-American elderly adults and Caucasian elderly adults represented in TV commercials ($\chi^2(4) = 65.40, p < .001$). Of the total elderly adults presented in commercials, only 15.1% were African-American. Furthermore, the results from the second Chi-square test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between African-American elderly adults and the total number of characters in commercials ($\chi^2(9) = 22.84, p < .05$). Only two percent of the total characters in commercials were African-American elderly adults, whereas the proportion of African-Americans 65 years of age and older in the United States is 7.9% (Famighetti, 2000). These findings support our hypothesis that African-American elderly are significantly underrepresented in TV commercials.

Since the sample size of African-American elderly consisted of only ten adults (three females and seven males), no further statistical tests were conducted and only percentages were calculated. All ten of the characters were categorized as being between 50 and 79 years of age.

One of the predictions was that African-American elderly adults would not be cast as central figures, but as secondary figures. The majority of the African-American elderly adults (60%) were cast as secondary figures (five males and one female), whereas the remaining elderly adults (40%) were cast as central figures (two females and two males). This provided some support for our hypothesis that African-American elderly adults would be cast as secondary figures.

Further examination of the portrayal of roles revealed no significant pattern. Three characters were cast as consumers and another three as sellers. The remaining four characters were cast as a neighbor, swimmer, athlete and cancer survivor.

As for the types of products the characters advertised, four African-American elderly characters advertised health products, while the other six advertised the following: food, clothing, truck driving classes and volunteer work as well as consumer and automobile products. This also provided some support for our hypothesis that characters would advertise mainly health, food and household products because five of the ten (50%) African-American elderly characters were used to advertise health and food related products.

Regarding health and physical activity, nine of the ten characters were depicted in very good health and physically active. Only one character (a female) was portrayed as exhibiting poor health and low physical activity. This finding did not support our hypothesis that African-American elderly adults would be shown as physically inactive and having physical ailments.

**Discussion**

The results revealed that African-American elderly adults were underrepresented in TV commercials in comparison to their actual prevalence in the population, which is consistent with the television programming findings of Signiorielli (1983) and Greenberg et al. (1980) as well as the commercial findings of Hiemstra et al. (1983). The extremely small sample of African-American elderly adults obtained from the relatively large collection of commercials was particularly striking.

The sample size itself indicates the magnitude of the lack of representation and recognition of African-American elderly in the media. Only ten characters were available to assess whether African-American elderly adults were cast as secondary figures and to examine the types of products and roles that they presented. Although these conclusions are not useful for generalizing to the population, some interesting information can be extracted from this sample. The majority of the African-American elderly characters were cast as secondary figures, which indicates that the roles of African-American elderly adults are still minor in significance. The placement of African-American elderly adults in secondary positions also promotes the idea of inferiority and exemplifies the notion of non-recognition and the lack of respect for this particular population of elderly adults as indicated by Clark (1972).

In reference to the types of products that African-American elderly adults were used to advertise, African-American elderly adults marketed products consistent with those that Hiemstra et al. (1983) indicated elderly adults typically promoted: health, food, consumer and household products. Utilizing African-American elderly to endorse these products further simplifies their positions and reaffirms the stigma that older adulthood leads to a reduction in capabilities from professional responsibilities to domestic tasks. The role portrayal of African-American elderly adults did
not reflect a greater percentage of one role over the others; however, it was evident that the roles of consumer and sales persons were more readily used in commercials. In addition, the elderly did not portray roles involving any familial relationships, which parallels the findings of Hiemstra et al. that older adults are primarily depicted as disconnected from familial kinships.

Findings indicated that the majority of elderly adults represented in commercials were healthy and physically active, which contradicts the results of Harris and Feinberg (1977) that elderly adults are rarely shown as physically active. This favorable depiction of older adults as agile, vital and lively debunks the stereotypical images normally perpetuated by the media and replaces them with more accurate and positive portrayals, which according to Clark (1972) is a respectful representation. This finding also makes sense because it is in advertisers’ best interest to pair a positive image with the product they are selling or promoting.

The current research, however, leaves room for improvement. First, only 12 hours of commercials focused primarily on afternoon and evening commercials were coded. This amount of taping could be increased to 24 hours and extended to covering morning, afternoon and evening commercials. Another constructive change would be to examine commercials on more networks, such as United Paramount Network (UPN), Warner Brothers (WB) and the Central Broadcasting Station (CBS).

Although several aspects of this research could be enhanced, addressing these areas enables researchers to refine approaches to studying the depictions of the elderly. An aspect strengthening this study is that no current research exists that has simultaneously investigated the portrayal of the roles in which African-American elderly adults are cast in commercials and whether or not they are cast as central or secondary figures. The types of products advertised by African-American elderly have not been examined in research studies. Thus, this research serves as a foundation for the development of many areas, including the effects of these depictions on the self-image of African-American elderly adults.

Few studies have systematically examined the portrayals and depictions of elderly adults in the mass media, particularly TV commercials. Thus, the research implications for this study are numerous. One primary implication is that the results allow for the analysis of advertising methods utilized to influence an elderly audience as well as the general population as a whole (Dail, 1988). Awareness of these strategies will enable people to critically think about the images presented and whether representations are accurate. In addition, this study will enable advertisers to better holistically represent African-American elderly in commercials.

This research also serves as a basis for the formation of novel theoretical frameworks and research methodology (Dail, 1988). These frameworks and research designs will supply the needed tools for studying the effects of depictions on African-American elderly adults’ behaviors and attitudes (Dail). Lastly, this research raises the question of whether or not the presence of elderly adults in commercials advertisements positively or negatively influences the viewers’ willingness to buy merchandise (Hiemstra et al., 1983).

Although the present study was one of the first to systematically analyze African-American elderly representations in TV commercials, extensive research on this topic needs more emphasis and consideration. Future studies should expand this research to include more ethnic minority groups. One specific research project could be a longitudinal study examining whether middle-aged African-Americans’ attitudes toward aging changes in later life stages as a result of the media’s depictions of the elderly population.

Social stratification is another aspect that needs further investigation. Elderly adults with more economic advantages and security may significantly differ from those with financial difficulties. Accessibility to informational sources may limit or enhance how the media influences these elders. Thus, researchers should examine whether TV depictions of aging adults affect upper-class elderly differently than lower-class elderly.

References


