

# An Inquiry into Inferior and Superior Role Portrayals in Multi-racial Television Advertisements

De la Rey van der Waldt

This study is an analysis of black and white respondents' reactions to inferior and superior role portrayals in South African multi-racial television advertisements. The study was contracted with 116 white students from the UOFS and 116 black students from the UFH. General results of similar type of studies in the United States indicated a somewhat stereotyped and partly inferior role portrayal of blacks in advertising.

## Introduction

The South African advertising industry has burgeoned into a highly professional R800m-a-year industry (Financial Mail, 22 August 1986:6). From this figure the Financial Mail (p.57) anticipated that television advertising would be more than R284m (32.7%) of the total advertising expenditure for 1987. It seems, though, that it is an expensive medium (Die Volksblad, 5 July 1988:4 says that advertising expenditure in RSA (1987) for the first time exceeded R103 milliard) to work with and the advertising practitioner cannot afford to use this medium incorrectly.

Brits & Reekie (1985:44) explain the complexities of the South African consumer market and the importance of approaching this market correctly. With the above statements in mind it is likely that the advertiser should be aware of the problems and pitfalls of inferior and superior role portrayals in multi-racial television advertisements, especially with the present economic climate in the country.

## Theoretical Foundation

Many theories of consumer behaviour have used motivational and stimulus response approaches to try and explain the complexities of the South African consumer. Due to the problems sur-  
variance. Both factors deal with Sarbin & Allan's



De la Rey van der Waldt is a lecturer, dept. of Communication, Fort Hare, Ciskei.

rounding a sound theoretical basis for advertising (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985:48 and Van der Waldt, 1986:143) the present paper addresses three possible approaches in order to explain role portrayals in advertising. This study investigates the applicability of Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison, Grubb & Grathwohl's (1967) self-concept theory and Sarbin & Allen's (1956 & 1968) role theory to the advertising process. This has been done by analyzing the effects on cognitive behaviour of inferior and superior role portrayals of actors/models in multi-racial television advertisements.

## 1 Applying Festinger's (1954) theory

Festinger's theory (1954:117-140) holds that an in-

dividual is in a constant process of comparing himself with other individuals. While he bases his theory on nine hypotheses, the present paper highlights only the first three:

- (i) Every human being needs to compare himself.
- (ii) The human being constantly compares his opinions and abilities in relation to other human beings.
- (iii) A person tends to compare himself with other humans who are either the same as the individual or better than the individual.

It can be anticipated that consumers will compare themselves with the television actors/models. A further anticipation, as a result of Festinger's theory, is that they will rather compare themselves with models in superior role portrayals than with models depicted in inferior role portrayals. Kahle & Homer (1985:955) added that physical attractiveness is a very important variable in consumer and attitude research. They conclude by saying: "Most studies have shown that a physically attractive source facilitates attitude change." This implies that one is more likely to be persuaded by an attractive model than by an unattractive one.

Betten (1980) successfully applied this social comparison theory as a theoretical foundation to test the reactions of white consumers towards models of different races in South African advertisements.

## **2 Applying Grubb & Grathwohl's (1968) theory**

Grubb & Grathwohl (1967:26) claim that because self-concept is of value and of central importance to the individual, he will direct his behaviour to maintain and enhance his self-concept. By implication it would mean that broad groupings of consumers with similar self-concepts could be distinguished. As Overton (1981:49) stipulates, these broad groupings could lead to the basis of market segmentation. Corder (1976:3 20 & 1986: 14-17) holds the same view.

By carefully using goods as symbols, the individual communicates meaning about himself to his references, which according to Grubb & Grathwohl (p.27) causes a desired response and has an impact on the interaction process, thus reinforcing and enhancing his self-concept.

A possible theoretical approach to consumer behaviour could be to relate the individual's self-concept to the symbolic value attached to the

product. Grubb & Hupp (1968:63) explain: "Having the 'appropriate' people consume the product is a means of communicating the product's symbolic meaning with others."

The most important application of the role theory to the marketing practice is, according to Hawkins, Best & Coney (1983:208), in the concept of role-related product clusters.

A role related product cluster is a set of products generally considered necessary to properly fulfill a given role. Thus products may be functionally necessary to fulfill a role or they may be symboli-

Through the usage of stereotyped role portrayals by actors the advertisement could have a big impact on its destination. The question now arises, how would advertisers persuade the consumer to buy a product if the advertising actor portrays an inferior role in the eyes of the consumer?

## **The South African consumer market**

Corder (1986:14) suggests that the South African market needs a different sort of marketing mix. The growing black consumer market uses more than two thirds of the total consumption within certain product categories (Clarion, September 1983:2). Sinclair (1985:60) explains that black consumption is overtaking that of the whites.

Marketers have traditionally viewed South Africa from the point of view of a White market, which dominates consumer spending, and a black market (Sinclair, 1985:60). Basson (1986:53) put forward the question of a separate black consumer market, and explained the confusion over the concept, "the black market".

Views of the black market held by well-known black advertising practitioners in South Africa are contradicting. Khoza (1986:27) argues that it is perhaps naive to assume that black consumers are being Westernized. Tsabalala (1986:3) points out that the different black ethnic groups tend to move away from their strict traditional habits and are becoming more and more Westernized.

Koekemoer (1985:18) maintains that the changing role of the black market necessitates a definite change of strategy from the producer. As Khoza (In Koekemoer, 1987:98) states: "The black segment of the South African market will continue to grow in economic power and consumer sophistication and its demand to be treated with respect, understanding and finesse will increase."

Marketing Mix (February 1986:28) explains that a possible solution could be to approach the black

advertising market from both a first and a third world angle. One can anticipate that it will be the more westernized black in the more urban area (because of electricity supply) who will be more exposed to television advertisements. Therefore in this regard it seems appropriate to have a more westernized approach when communicating to this kind of audience.

From the above statements it is clear that the South African marketing communications are full of shortcomings and pitfalls. Despite these shortcomings it is possible to communicate effectively to specific markets, bearing in mind "... that blacks are somehow different to whites when it comes to communications effects and the use of communications" (Bester, 1987:335).

### **Aim of the study**

This study aims to develop factorial scales for the measurement of role portrayals in multi-racial television advertisements. Two different factor analyses with varimax axis rotation were conducted, each on a different race group. Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner & Bent (1975:485) explain that this type of axis rotation is the most widely used. Another purpose of this survey is to point out that there are differences in perception of inferior and superior role portrayals by television advertising models/factors.

### **Elucidation of concepts**

#### **Inferior role portrayal**

For the purpose of this study an inferior role portrayal is defined as a role which does not fall into a person's reference framework and a role with which the individual does not want to be compared.

#### **Superior role portrayal**

For the purpose of this study a superior role portrayal is defined as a role with which a person would like to identify, which falls into the individual's reference framework, portrays a high self-concept and enjoys the respect of other people.

### **Hypotheses**

1. White and black respondents (consumers) have different perceptions of inferior and superior role portrayals.
2. Items (statements) which were drawn from the different consumer theories will cluster together under one specific factor.

### **Sample**

The populations (N) were drawn from the departments of communication at the University of the Orange Free State and the University of Fort Hare, using the convenience sampling technique (Jefkins, 1982:88 and Groenewald, 1981:26) 116 students from each department were drawn, which brings N to 232.

### **Method**

The respondents had to complete the questionnaire in a normal class period. The definitions of inferior and superior role portrayals were explained and the respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire.

### **Measuring instrument**

A complete summary of the characteristics, definitions and dimensions of the afore-mentioned consumer behaviour theories were made. These dimensions were then rewritten as statements. Of these, forty items reflected role portrayals and consumer behaviour theories. These items were then incorporated into a four point Likert-type questionnaire, with a forced choice (i.e. either in favor or not in favor of the statement). All the questionnaires were used, because all had been correctly and completely filled in.

### **Working hypotheses**

- Two hypotheses were set up for research.
- (i) The item clusters for each factor will be the same for each race group.
  - (ii) There will be a difference in the explained variance of the same factors for each group.

### **Results**

The loadings were relatively high on the specific factors (i.e. > 0,40) and relatively low on all other factors. In some instances loadings of > 0,30 were also viewed as significant if they were meaningfully presented with other items on the same factor.

The results of the factor analysis on black respondents' attitudes (table 1) will be noted and then discussed, followed by similar treatment of the white respondents' attitudes (table 2).

The first factor accounts for 30,9% of the variance. All the significant item groups which it comprises were adopted from Festingers' (1954) theory of social comparison.

The second factor described as "the portrayal

**Table 1**

Factor analysis on the Black respondent's attitude (N 116)

Factor	Objective Description	Proportion of total variance %	Item type
1	Association with other	30,9	I compare myself with television models/actors.
2	Portrayal of South African Lifestyle	22,6	Advertisements should include actors from all races.
3	Inferior & superior role portrayals	19,4	Black actors can portray roles of important people.
4	Equivalent role portrayal	15,1	Black and white actors should portray the same status.
5	High self-concept	12,0	I buy a product because I would like to keep my own identity.

of the South African lifestyle in television advertisements", accounts for 22,6% of the total variance. The significant item groups here were adopted from events appearing on the SABC'S television advertisements.

Factors three and four declare 25,5% of the total variance. Both factors consist of items adopted from Sarbin & Allan's (1956 & 1968) role theory. Factor three, termed "inferior and superior role portrayals in television advertisements", accounts for 19,4% of the total variance. The fourth factor accounts for 15,1% of the total variance and is called "equivalent role portrayals".

The last factor, factor five, described as "high self-concept", declares 12,0% of the total variance. This factor consists of items adopted from Grubb & Grathwohl's (1967) theory.

According to the results the first factor accounts for 43,4% of the total variance and is termed "equivalent role portrayal". Factor two, "inferior and superior role portrayal", declares 18,5% of the total

(1956 & 1968) role theory and declare 61,9% of the total variance.

The third factor ("association with others") accounts for 15,1% of the total variance and deals with Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison. The respondents' results reflect that the fourth factor explains 12,9% of the total variance. This deals with the portrayal of the South African lifestyle in television advertisements. Factor five declares 10,1% of the total variance and deals with Grubb & Grathwohl's (1967) self-concept theory.

Cronbach's reliability coefficient alpha is relatively high (0,60 on the black response and 0,50 on the white response). This can be seen as a fair indication of the homogeneity of the measuring instrument.

Both hypotheses 1 and 2 were essentially confirmed. The results of the factor analyses do however have certain implications.

**Table 2**

Factor analysis on the White respondent's attitudes (N 116)

Factor	Objective description	Proportion of total variance %	Item type
1	Equivalent role portrayal	43,4	Black and white actors should portray the same status.
2	Inferior & superior role portrayal	18,5	Black actors can portray roles of important people.
3	Association with other	15,1	I compare myself with television models/actors.
4	Portrayal of South African Lifestyle	12,9	Advertisements should include actors from all races.
5	High self-concept	10,1	I buy a product because I would like to keep my own identity.

## Discussion

The two race groups' items loaded differently on the five separate factors. According to the black respondents, the following factors grouped together: (1) association with others (30,9%); (2) portrayal of the South African lifestyle (22,6%); (3) inferior and superior role portrayal (19,4%); (4) equivalent role portrayals (15,1%) and (5) a high self-concept (12,0%). The white respondents' factors were identified as follows: (1) equivalent role portrayals (43,4%); (2) inferior and superior role portrayals (18,5%); (3) association with others (15,1%); (4) portrayal of the South African lifestyle (12,9%) and lastly (5) a high self-concept (10,1%).

Though it seems as if the same factors (described in the aforementioned paragraph) were advanced by each race group, these factors declared the total variance differently. These results strengthen the presumption that the two race groups will interpret the items differently, and as a result the factorial loadings differ between the two race groups.

According to the results it seems as though it is very important to the black respondents to associate themselves with other individuals. Items which were borrowed from Festingers' (1954) theory of social comparison and Grubb & Grathwohl's (1967) self-concept theory explained 42,9% of the total variance (factors 1 & 5). A possible explanation of the black respondents' high item loadings on factor one could be that they are in Khoza's terms (1987:95) more related to the belonged consumer group. He contended: "Their buying behaviour is strongly influenced by an irresistible urge to become part of the group. Members of this group tend to be conforming and unexperimental." It also related to Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison. As a result of the role portrayals by blacks in television advertisements, it is possible that they may feel inferior and be more inclined to compare themselves to the role models depicted on television.

The social realities as portrayed by the advertisements on the SABC's channels contributed to the second factor high declaration of variance. This could be an indication that social realities are important to the black respondents' and that they are aware and critical towards the depicted realities.

Factors three and four, which correlate with the role theory of Sarbin & Allen (1968) declared 34,5% of the total variance. A possible explanation could be that the black respondents are not so attentive

to role portrayals in general. This does not mean that they ignore the roles models fulfill in television advertisements or that they do not value specific role portrayals as important.

The white respondents' first two factors, which dealt with Sarbin & Allen's (1968) role theory, declared 61,9% of the total variance. The first factor of the white respondent's response revealed that it is important that equivalent role portrayals exist in both race groups. A possible answer to this phenomenon could be that they feel it is important that blacks should also be portrayed in equivalent and even in superior roles.

The second factor deals with inferior and superior role portrayals, which is related to the first factor in the sense that both deal with role theory. A possible explanation for the high declaration of the variance by these two factors could be that the white respondents are more aware of role portrayals in general. Factors three and five [Festinger's (1954) social comparison and Grubb & Grathwohl's (1967) self-concept theories] declared 25,2% of the total variance. In relation to the black response this figure is quite small, which could indicate that these two variables are not so important to the white response.

The portrayal of a South African lifestyles in television advertisements (factor 4) gained less attention than with the black respondents. It could be that the white respondents are not so attentive to social realities protected on television.

The logic behind the two factor analyses was that the researcher would have been misled if only one factor analysis were conducted. If only one factor analysis (N 232) were conducted it could have been incorrectly concluded that the factor loadings were the same for both race groups.

## Summary

Colfax & Sternberg (1972:8) and Bush, Solomon & Hair (1977:21) explained that the American Negro was initially portrayed in inferior roles. These authors also explained that the situation has changed, partly because the mass media started to upgrade the advertising image of the Negro. Neutral role portrayals or roles that are not ascribed by society (eg. that of a musician or an athlete) were also being used to depict black Americans. Colfax & Sternberg (1972:12) note that musical talent cannot be "achieved" and the fact that musical talent is the predominant characteristic of depicted blacks only serves to reinforce the cultural stereo-

type and neutralizes whatever threat might have been implicit in the depiction of blacks in more conventional white collar roles.

Marketplace (18 July 1988:6) gives a possible explanation why South African television advertisements portray blacks according to American lifestyles: "The hypothesis is that these blacks (economically active blacks living in Soweto) view it as superior, more civilized, advanced, offering the most ideal lifestyle."

Allen & Hatchett (1986:97), Durand & Lambert (1985:10), Lysonski (1985:37), Manstead & McCulloch (1985:171), Atkin (1984:206), Repetti (1984:458), White (1983:279), Sutherland & Galloway (1981:25) and Burton & Ryan (1980:65) noted that

the mass media and more especially advertising is the mirror of society's values and norms. It seems therefore likely to ask whether television advertisements portray the present social values and norms in South Africa? Or could advertising be criticized for the utopia it creates? As Belk & Pollay (1985:889) affirmed: "The picture of material life presented in advertising images presumably creates a longing for "the good life" depicted — a longing which is pursued through consumption."

In the words of Cohen (1970:3) this is one area where advertising can make a meaningful effort to shoulder its social responsibilities, and at the same time it is a means of improving advertising's own somewhat tarnished social image.

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