Advertising images as social indicators: depictions of blacks in LIFE magazine, 1936–2000

JOHN GRADY

One of the most important prerequisites for building a more visual social science is demonstrating that visual data provide answers to research questions, which are not addressed satisfactorily by the use of more conventional, non-visual, methods. In this article the author argues that a systematic analysis of the images in print advertisements not only accounts for patterns in contemporary American race relations as reliably as findings derived from national surveys like the General Social Survey (GSS) and the US Census, but also illuminates questions that are often raised by, but seldom resolved with, quantitative data. These questions include, for example, consideration of what factors might encourage respondents to espouse some attitudes — or to make certain choices — but not others. More specifically, a close examination of trends in advertisements published in Life magazine between 1936 and 2000 reveals that, while the white commitment to racial integration appears to have taken longer to develop than survey data suggests, this commitment seems to be much firmer than findings based on census data imply. Nevertheless, the trend in advertising images also shows that, even with a steadily growing white commitment to racial integration, there are still areas of social life where whites are wary of blacks and find it hard to imagine scenarios that exemplify relations of moral equality.

At its simplest this is a story of two images. Figure 1 appeared in Life magazine in November 1945. It is an advertisement for the Pennsylvania Railroad and celebrates a return to normalcy after World War II. In a tableau depicting a joyous reunion of soldiers and their families, the one black figure, located in the centre of the image, is shown doing what was expected of blacks at this time, and that was serving the needs of whites. Over a half-century later an advertisement for Kool cigarettes from December 1999 in the same magazine also depicts a gathering marked by anticipation (Figure 2). In this image, however, two inter-racial couples are shown enthralled by the promise of sexual encounter. In the world depicted in this image blacks and whites pursue a common goal together as equals.

This article concerns a dramatic change in American race relations and what a study of advertisements like these reveals about that transformation. It is also a call for visual sociologists to make the analysis of visual images, like those found in print advertising, more robust and of greater value to the social sciences and other disciplines.

Social scientists and critics have studied print advertisements extensively, with behavioural and interpretive approaches exerting the strongest influence on research programmes. Generally speaking, behaviourists dominate much of the early literature, rely on the content analysis of large representative samples, and assume that images in mass culture directly reflect the values and world-views of those who consume these products. While behaviourists, therefore, tend to believe that the choice of images favoured by magazine publishers is most influenced by consumer preferences, they underrate the significance of any rift between consumers’ desires and advertisers’ values. As such, behaviourists study mass culture as a prism that reflects shared social values, which is especially useful for providing insight into what the general population values. Behavioural analysis, however, is limited to identifying patterns and trends in those variables that can be coded most reliably by a large research team. The difficulty of ensuring that different coders identify and classify variables in the same way, however, restricts content analysis to considering only a few of the most obviously discernible aspects of racial iconography, such as product type, occupational role, skin colour and well-established caricatures. Increasingly, few scholars think that this kind of content analysis repays the substantial investment of time and energy necessary to conduct careful studies that could be replicated.

Unlike behaviourists, interpretative sociologists believe that producers of images have more power than consumers in shaping mass culture. In addition, interpretative sociologists believe that the relationship between producer and consumer is inherently conflict

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Nothing in this world is as interesting as—people!
Nothing is as important as people... people who live and grow, love and get married... people with their habits and manners, their likes and dislikes. Nothing really matters but—people.

The city? We think of it as people. The countryside is people. And so is the railroad... just folks—all of them!

Locomotives, cars, equipment... all these have been thought out, designed, engineered, developed and built by people for people. They are of value only as they serve people.

We of the Pennsylvania Railroad try to keep in mind always: everything we do is measured by how we help people, how we get along with people, how we treat people. Our greatest reward is in having people think well of us... because we have served them well!

Pennsylvania Railroad
Serving the Nation

ridden and that producers use their superior power to persuade consumers to make choices they otherwise might not make. In addition, the choices toward which consumers are steered are most often not in their own best interests and usually serve narrow commercial – as well as more general ideological – interests of producers. Above all, interpretivists believe that products of mass culture, like advertisements, are best seen as messages, or signs, that one group of people creates in order to shape the behaviour, and control the consciousness, of another. Interpretative sociologists, therefore, use various techniques borrowed from the linguistic study of sign systems, or semiotics, to decode the meanings embedded in an advertisement. Close analysis of these meanings, thus, is seen as an important way of tracing the evolution, and influence, of the ruling ideas of a society.

Because interpretative sociologists assume that the codes they uncover reflect the central ideological interests and conflicts of a society, they believe that an adequate analysis can be conducted with a relatively small sample. From this perspective, it is only necessary to determine that a credible meaning can be attributed to an image. In other words, the mere existence of a meaning – and not how often it is produced – is what establishes it as representative of the underlying dynamics of a society.2

Most social scientists, however, have not been convinced by interpretative approaches to the study of advertising for two major reasons. First, they believe that interpretative methodologies utilize sampling protocols that are too impressionistic and idiosyncratic and do not produce conceptually well-integrated arguments.

Second, more traditionally trained social scientists are dismayed that interpretivists seldom test their theories and tend to engage in tautological arguments assuming that which they claim to prove. Rarely, if ever, for example, does an interpretivist author explain how to distinguish advertisements that are racist from those that are not, or the sexist from the non-sexist, or ideological manipulation from the exercise of simple consumer preference, and the like. Furthermore, many sociologists also dismiss interpretative sociologists’ reliance on small convenience samples as simply too inadequate to represent a universe of images in a contemporary media environment that is increasing geometrically in both number and variety.

The most important consequence of this rift between behaviourist and interpretivist approaches to the study of advertising, however, has been a lack of interest – and imagination – in devising research programmes, which would address the methodological concerns of behaviourists while developing protocols to encourage richer, yet more empirically grounded, modes of interpretation.

This article, therefore, will address the impasse that behaviourist and interpretivist approaches have created by proposing a different way to study advertisements as social documents. This approach is based on the work of Erving Goffman (1979), Michael Schudson (1984), Roland Marchand (1985) and Jib Fowles (1996), and is rooted theoretically in the American Sociological Pragmatism of Becker, Blumer, Mead, Dewey and Peirce, a tradition that Guba and Lincoln (2005) term ‘post-positivist’. From this vantage point, advertisements are best envisioned as behavioural records of patterned symbolic exchanges between the intersecting desires of producers and consumers. Consumers are actively interested in consuming various kinds of commodities, while producers seek to attract consumers’ attention so that they might consider and, in a best-case scenario, actually purchase the producers’ goods. Advertisements, therefore, are narratives whose primary function is to tell entertaining stories that appeal to what preoccupies consumers and offer some use of, or symbolic context for, the product being advertised. In other words, the advertising image, and hopefully the product itself, functions to resolve a consumer’s anxieties. These anxieties include not only those specific issues of living that the product might plausibly improve but also more diffuse preoccupations about the world in general and the consumer’s place in it. Thus, producers and consumers communicate readily not despite, but because of, their different interests. Over time producers have become adept at telling stories that appeal to consumers, but they have had to adapt their craft to the consumers’ situation. If the consumer is king – which in the aggregate they are – then the producer is a court jester who, in order to survive, has to know the mind of the king better than the king himself does. In this exchange, however, the king relies on the jester to articulate what the king might not otherwise be able to say (cf. Blumer 1969, 279).

For pragmatists, therefore, advertisements do not directly reflect what is actually happening in a social order – patterns of conduct – but instead mirror one of its most important processes: what people feel about their world’s happenings and what they imagine it would take to properly respond to those events. In short, the images in print advertisements document the prevailing preoccupations of a historical period that can be publicly aired while also identifying and extolling the
types of actions or sensibilities that should address those preoccupations successfully. Thus, for example, both the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Kool Cigarette advertisements address the uncertainty of reunion – ‘Where have you come from?’ ‘Where will we go together?’ – yet each celebrates a different approach to resolving this uncertainty. In 1945, exuberant confidence is the key to success, while 1999 advises a more dispassionate and wary engagement. Advertisements also identify the presuppositions of the world referenced in their narratives. For example, in 1945 people travelled long distances by train and were met in railway stations, where black porters would carry their luggage. By 1999, however, men and women were permitted to meet in bars and mingle socially in racially integrated groups. Advertisements, in other words, are social and cultural documents that reference actuality in varied and complex ways and can be used to complement information provided by other quite different sources of data. Thus, if attitude surveys tell us about a society’s beliefs and the census about its behaviours, then advertising mostly reflects its desires and fantasies.

Desires and fantasies are complex phenomena; they simultaneously elicit, and produce, varied emotional states. They express social values, while coming to terms with perplexing situations. They usually motivate individuals to communicate their feelings to others and provide many of the story elements that inform personal narratives. The forms taken by these imaginary messages – dreams, rumours, enthusiasms, fads and, of course, print advertisements – are acutely sensitive to contingent events and to relatively minute changes in the emotional temperature of a society. To be accepted as reliable data, therefore, advertisements – and the variables they contain – need to be carefully sampled and counted (as the behaviourists contend). Exploiting the semantic richness of their iconography, however, requires sensitive interpretive strategies that must be encouraged by a flexible methodological protocol (as the semioticians insist). Recent technological developments – and their reduced cost – go a long way to resolving this impasse between behavioural and interpretative sociologists, by making it possible to create data archives consisting of representative samples of print advertisements. These archives allow researchers to make the coding and interpretation of large data sets transparent and open to recoding and reinterpretation by other scholars. Digital cameras, scanners, and software such as Adobe Photoshop and FileMaker Pro, therefore, have made the forced choice between behaviourism and interpretative analysis, which had in great part been imposed by limits on data collection, now irrelevant and unnecessary.

Archiving databases of visual data such as print advertisements, and making them publicly accessible for review and restudy, much as art historians do with their museum’s collections and slide libraries, can also help address the analytic rigidity that is one of the more unfortunate consequences of the methodological divide between behaviourists and interpretivists. Because behaviourists only count the elements in an image and, thus, are unable to code the images’ rich narrative content reliably, their approach – and imagination – has never developed much beyond what a simple correlation of limited inventory of variables may dredge up. Interpretivists, however, have become quite content with analyses that border on free association and word play. Interpretivists tend to make plausible interpretations of one image, or a selected set, by imputing contexts derived from a virtually endless array of hastily formulated concepts, ill-conceived and barely tested theories, and idiosyncratic personal fixations. The arguments that issue from this approach often appear to be little more than a patchwork of unfounded pronouncements. Digitally archiving representative samples of print advertisements, however, enables scholars to give these very complex narratives the long overdue analytic attention they deserve and to see how an interpretation fares when weighed against a sizeable body of evidence.

This article is based on a sample taken from just such an archive. The sample includes every single advertisement in Life magazine containing a black figure in nine chronologically stratified periods from 1936 to 2000. Each period includes two immediately adjacent years and so the entire eighteen-year sample contains a total of 590 advertisements. The advertisements in this sample have been scanned and entered into a FileMaker Pro database. The coding was done on an Excel spreadsheet using a grounded theory approach where the analyst is able to code and recode the entire sample until the analysis is completed and can also share the coding sheet with the public.

The actual process of grounded theory coding used in this research proceeded as follows. The researcher sorted the archive chronologically and then coded the first file in the database, identifying variables, and assigning values to the file for each variable. The researcher then went on to the next image and coded it using the variables and values created for the previous image and proceeded in this fashion through the entire database.
Every time a new variable was identified and its values defined, the researcher returned to the beginning of the database and recoded all the previously coded images for the new variable. Generally speaking, most of the variables were identified in the early phases of the coding process. The result is a coding sheet that can be published with the analysis and evaluated by others who seek to replicate the study.4

Ideally, images should be taken from a representative sample of the most widely circulating national magazines. This approach could be supplemented by purposive sampling of popular magazines in niche markets. A historically based analysis, however, faces the challenge of collecting materials that are fragmentary, widely scattered and very expensive to acquire on loan from the libraries where they are housed, if they can be found at all. Most large libraries, however, have complete bound collections of Life magazine, which was one of the most popular magazines in the United States during much of the final two-thirds of the twentieth century. Generally speaking, Life magazine tended to have, on average, a slightly higher representation of blacks in its advertisements than many of the other national magazines studied by content analysts. In any given year, however, Life magazine was never in first place on this score and occasionally ranked below the median.5 Using Life magazine as a proxy for a more appropriately drawn representative sample of national magazines, therefore, not only makes this research feasible, but also probably reflects trends that would be evident in those other magazines anyway.6 Finally, the archive upon which this article is based includes every advertisement with a black person in it because, while Life magazine would often have between one and two hundred advertisements in each issue, there were so few with blacks in the early years that sampling selected issues would significantly increase the possibility of statistical error to unacceptable levels. All told, the complete archive of black advertisements in Life magazine from 1936 to 2000 includes 2602 images.7

Since 1942, national attitude surveys have asked whites many questions that assess:

(1) what rights they believe blacks are entitled to;
(2) self-reports on whether they engage in activities that include blacks in their lives or not; and
(3) various hypothetical scenarios involving the presence of blacks in their schools or neighbourhoods.

Chart 1 and Box 1 build on Howard Schuman et al.’s monumental Racial Attitudes in America (1997) and Maria Krysan’s (2002) update of the data. National attitude surveys record that white beliefs, on all 26
CHART 1. Selected national survey questions on white attitudes about blacks, by percentage of positive responses, and by various thresholds.

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Note: Below are the survey questions:
1. The average age of death in a neighborhood
2. The income level in a neighborhood
3. The education level in a neighborhood
4. The crime rate in a neighborhood
5. The unemployment rate in a neighborhood
6. The housing conditions in a neighborhood
7. The school quality in a neighborhood
8. The access to health care in a neighborhood
9. The access to public transportation in a neighborhood
10. The access to public services in a neighborhood

These indicators provide insights into changes in neighborhood quality over time.

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questions that measure one form of social distance or another, have moved steadily in a progressive, liberal and more integrationist direction. Beliefs that blacks are entitled to full participation in the public sphere are now espoused by an overwhelming majority of American whites. Responses to questions that measure whether whites believe that blacks have a right to participate in the private and personal spheres of whites have also trended in a positive direction, although in many cases these views have been espoused only by small majorities and, in some cases, not even that.

Box 2 shows that, of the 23 questions where more than half (or a simple majority) of whites espouse positive attitudes toward blacks, nine crossed that threshold between 1956 and 1963, during the height of the civil rights movement, while the same threshold was crossed on five questions between 1970 and 1985 and on another seven questions between 1988 and 1998. Considering only those questions where it is possible to measure the interval between reaching the 50% – and then passing the 75% – threshold, the average interval is 15.7 years, the median 17 years, with a range from 10 to 22 years.

National attitude surveys suggest, therefore, that a watershed was crossed by 1963. The second major period of attitude change (1988–1998) does not constitute a watershed like the earlier period’s affirmation of black civil rights as a legitimate entitlement. Nevertheless, it does suggest that integration is being viewed more up-close and personally. Whites now consider it acceptable for blacks to push into spheres where they may not be wanted, to

<table>
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<tr>
<th>White Racial Attitudes: Decades and Years When Thresholds Crossed</th>
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<td><strong>Majorities in the 1940s</strong></td>
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<td>2. Ability</td>
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<td>3. Jobs</td>
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<td><strong>Majorities in the 1950s</strong></td>
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<td>7. Same schools</td>
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<td>9. Schools 1/2 black</td>
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<td><strong>Majorities in the 1960s</strong></td>
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<td>5. Accommodation</td>
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<td>6. Same Block</td>
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<td><strong>Majorities in the 1970s</strong></td>
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<td>8. Next door</td>
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<td><strong>Majorities in the 1980s</strong></td>
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<td>18. Strong residential choice</td>
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<td><strong>Majorities in the 1990s</strong></td>
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<td>20. OK for blacks to push</td>
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<td>21. Black majority in school</td>
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<td>22. Positive/indifferent to intermarriage</td>
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<td>23. Motivation</td>
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<td><strong>Majorities in the 2000s</strong></td>
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<td>None</td>
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Box 2. White racial attitudes, positive views of blacks by decades and years when thresholds crossed. Sources: Selected national surveys.
Chart 2. Odds ratios of black–white and native–foreign intermarriage in the United States, 1900–2000. An odds ratio of 1 would indicate that intermarriage between the two groups was exactly as common as chance would predict, and that no social barriers exist between the groups. A smaller odds indicates a smaller number of intermarried couples compared to number that the size and distribution of the racial groups would predict. In simple terms, the smaller the odds ratio of intermarriage, the greater the social distance between the groups (Rosenfeld 2001, 3–4).

live wherever they desire and to intermarry with whites. As such, the attitude changes during this later period suggest that a new phase in white openness to blacks is building on earlier changes that were influenced by the civil rights movement. Changes in white attitudes about race appear to be part of a process that is taking place in stages.

An optimistic reading of national survey data, therefore, might not be faulted for concluding that white beliefs will become overwhelmingly committed to integration in all social spheres in the not too distant future. In fact, researchers who reported the findings of national surveys from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s – as liberal pro-integration majorities were first being established – tended to be very sanguine about their findings in terms very much like these (Hyman and Sheatsley 1956, 1964; Greeley and Sheatsley 1971; Taylor, Sheatsley and Greeley 1978).

Those who study social distance between the races and mostly rely on census data for their arguments focus on the actual choices that people make. For the purposes of this article, they have been interested in what whites and blacks report about whom they marry and where they live. Their conclusions about the prospects for racial integration, however, are not as optimistic as those of the attitude survey researchers.

Studies of interracial marriage, for example, show that during most of the twentieth century the odds of a black and a white marrying have been as low as 1/1000th of what it would be if race were not a factor (Chart 2). By 2000 the rate of intermarriage increased dramatically. Nevertheless, it is still only 1/68th of what chance would predict (Rosenfeld 2001).

Racial segregation in housing has been studied more thoroughly. Put simply, segregation increased since 1890 and peaked between 1960 and 1970. It has since steadily declined. There is general agreement, however, that blacks and whites still live in highly segregated neighbourhoods. One widely accepted measure of segregation is the ‘index of dissimilarity’, which ‘measures the extent to which blacks and non-blacks inhabit different areas of a city. It ranges between zero and one (100%), and can be interpreted as the fraction of blacks that would have to switch areas to achieve an even racial distribution citywide. Zero (0%) indicates perfect integration; one (100%) indicates perfect segregation – i.e. blacks and non-blacks inhabit completely different areas’ (Cutler, Glaeser and Vigdor 2001). In 1960 and 1970, the index of dissimilarity reached 79% (Chart 3). By 2000, it has declined to only 63%. Most experts consider anything above 60% to be ‘hypersegregated’.

Another commonly used measure of segregation is the ‘index of isolation’ (Chart 4). Because:

even if blacks are concentrated in certain parts of a city, they may have extensive contact with whites within those areas. The index of isolation . . . measures the extent of black contact with non-blacks. This index also varies between zero (0%) and one (100%), with higher values indicating greater black exposure to other blacks. (Cutler, Glaeser and Vigdor 2001)

It exhibits the same trend line as the dissimilarity index and peaks at 62% in 1970. The index of isolation then steadily declines to 40% by 2000. A measure above 30% is considered to be an indication of hypersegregation.9

What this review of social indicator trends reveals is that a researcher could arrive at quite different conclusions by primarily relying on only one source of information. Listening to what whites say they believe (attitude surveys) suggests that the United States is rapidly moving toward a society that will be integrated, for all intents and purposes, somewhere in the near future. Accounting for the social choices that whites have actually made (the census), however, makes it look like the journey to full integration has barely begun. It is true, of course, that survey researchers are well aware that their data is constrained by reliance on what people say they believe and do. Survey researchers are seldom surprised, therefore, when they encounter disconnects between pious assertion and reported behaviour. For example, almost two out of five whites surveyed by the General Social Survey in 2004 asserted that they felt ‘close’ to blacks, yet only one out 65 reported that there was a black in the circle of specific people they felt ‘especially close to’.10 In any event, even when researchers are aware of the limits of relying exclusively on survey or census data, neither source of data says much about the emotional response of whites to integration. In fact, the issue of whether whites are actually sincere in their commitment to inclusion animates much of the contemporary literature on race relations (cf. Hacker 1992, 52). While some scholars have commented on the need to develop ways of studying the emotional affect that accompanies public opinion (Krysan 2000), they have not been particularly imaginative in identifying sources of information that measure the quality of whites’ emotional attachment to – or distance from – blacks. Print advertising, however, is one of those sources.


CHART 6. Caricaturing of blacks in Life magazine advertisements.
Advertising images as social indicators


FIGURE 5. Aunt Jemima. Life magazine, 24 January 1944.


FIGURE 8. Life magazine, 10 March 1967.
Chart 5 shows that trends in the incidence of black advertisements as a proportion of total advertisements are consistent with attitude surveys and the census because they progress in a parallel direction and at a similar rate. The proportion of advertisements containing blacks is an important measure of social distance recognized by most students of race and advertising (e.g. Humphrey and Schuman 1984). During the period from 1936 to 2000, black advertisements increased from just over 1% of the total to 12%, with most of this change occurring since 1967.\textsuperscript{11} This increase follows trends in positive attitudes toward blacks found in attitude surveys, although apparently trailing them by about a decade.\textsuperscript{12}

Between 1936 and 2000 blacks are represented in two dramatically distinct ways in this sample. The first – the iconography of segregation – appears in a mature form in 1936, when Life magazine began publication, and disappears by 1960. The second – the iconography of integration – emerges in 1967 and continues to evolve through the present.

In the iconography of segregation the majority of the advertisements embody themes that celebrate the fulfillment of white needs (Figure 3). They evoke the values of physical comfort, relaxation, security and social support. Blacks have a specific function to play in these images as servants who anticipate and fulfill the needs of whites. Blacks are depicted as dark-skinned males, ranging in age from young adulthood to middle age. Whether as porters, waiters or personal servants, they are often caricatured broadly and commonly speak in an implausible black dialect. There are few advertisements with only blacks in them and they are never shown with family, partners or friends. Blacks are presented, however, engaging in warm and friendly interactions with whites, although they are rarely

![Buick's Opel is catching on.](image)


FIGURE 12. McDonald’s. Life magazine, 30 June 1972.

depicted in close proxemic distance and seldom do they touch. When they are shown touching, blacks usually assist whites in a deferential manner.

Between 1938 and 1961 the racial caricaturing of black people is gradually attenuated and finally extinguished (Chart 6). Racial dialect and broad caricature erodes and, for all intents and purposes, disappears by 1961. Trademark figures like Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima – hereafter referred to as ‘logos’\(^{13}\) – increase and then decline. Logos, both in their diminished size on the page and in their narrowed range of expression, appear to constitute a transitional phase in the elimination of caricature. The career of Aunt Jemima from 1938 through 1967 exemplifies this process (Figures 4–8).

The iconography of integration extends from 1967 through 2000 and celebrates a world of achievement, active enjoyment and the nurturing of social ties, especially among family and friends. If the iconography of segregation is about the fulfilment of white needs and assigns a crucial role to blacks as a component in the infrastructure of that dream, then the iconography of integration is about satisfying the wants and dreams of both blacks and whites (Figure 9). Blacks do not appear to have a social function in these advertisements that distinguish them from whites. Nevertheless, the dramatic roles they play in realizing the most common themes of the advertising narratives vary in suggestive ways.

First, the depictions that celebrate enjoyment and warm social bonds show blacks and whites equally engaged in sharing the rewards of a consumer society (Figure 10). Second, however, those advertisements that highlight achievement and success tend to showcase blacks in two specific, yet different, ways. Blacks appear either as well known cultural icons in a triumphal moment (Figure 11) or as anonymous everymen – or every-family in the case of Figure 12 – that has prevailed over adversity. However typified, blacks are seen as exemplifying well-deserved success. Finally, in many of the advertisements blacks witness to the need for social cohesion and moral purpose (Figure 13). All told, these three thematic clusters constitute over 90% of the advertisements since 1967 but less than 25% of those in the period before 1961.

If blacks have a function in these depictions, therefore, it is to exemplify that people can triumph over difficulty and adversity, share in the good life and still remind their fellows of the need for social responsibility. Thus, while blacks no longer have a clear social function in the advertising narratives, they do appear to have assumed an important moral function. In the iconography of integration, therefore, blacks lend legitimacy to the good life produced by late-twentieth-century American capitalism while simultaneously offering a moral caution about what, and whom, it neglects.

The iconography of integration depicts a more varied black community: more women and mixed groupings, a wider array of skin hues, and a more diverse representation of age groupings. In addition, there is virtually no evidence of any intentional stereotyping of blacks (Figure 14). Blacks and whites are shown enjoying each other’s company and are often depicted in closer proxemic distance than they were in the iconography of segregation. A small but growing proportion of the images shows blacks and whites intentionally touching each other (Figure 15).

Black people are most often placed in public settings whether with or without whites present. Their representation in private or personal spheres, however, shows an interesting pattern. Looking at the sample in its entirety, the percentage of black advertisements set in private or personal settings declines until it reaches a low point in the 1960s and then begins to increase again, apart from an anomalous decline in 1989–1990 (Chart 7). The social composition of these settings, however, changes dramatically during the course of this cycle. In the early years, private and personal spheres are overwhelmingly populated by both blacks and whites. After all, blacks are often depicted serving whites in the comfort of their homes and other private spaces. In later years, however, few images depict blacks and whites sharing personal or private space, even though a steadily growing proportion of all images set blacks alone in such spaces.

It is important to remember, however, that the iconography of integration develops gradually and in stages. Initially, blacks usually appear dispersed among large groups often engaged in whimsically implausible doings (Figures 9 and 16). Black people’s right to be there and participate is acknowledged, but the happenings are somehow not that believable. The Seagram’s advertisement in Figure 10 is particularly illuminating in this regard about the odd consequences of ‘idealizing’ integration. There are two black couples depicted in this rooftop cocktail party, who are clearly intended to be there. Their clothing is as stylish as the whites and they are equally attractive and fit. Yet, they are marginalized by the composition of the image. The black couple in the upper right hand corner of the image is the only couple talking to each other while the other
Advertising images as social indicators


Stealing cars is not safer a ‘college’ answer. It’s a huge hassle. You can use the American Life Theft Prevention Association’s ‘Dealership Thieves’ Guide’ to see if the business is likely to get углый. The guide will not only tell you where to buy a car, but also tell you how to guard it. One in five stolen cars is recovered by the thief. The rest may make it less attractive.

And before you buy the expensive options that’ll make your car more attractive to car thieves, buy the anti-theft device options that’ll make it less attractive.

Auto theft can be cut. Auto insurance costs can be controlled. Don’t underestimate your own influence. Use it, as we are trying to use ours.

Aetna wants insurance to be affordable.

black couple, located in the central conversational circle that swirls from right centre clockwise to the upper left quadrant, is not engaged in a face-to-face interaction with anybody else. The same is true of the white couple seated to their immediate right, of course, and it is undoubtedly a function of where people are seated in this dynamic tableau. The position of the black couple, however, is the one that is least likely to be drawn into the conversational swirl in almost any imaginable scenario. A close analysis of advertisements in the early stages of the iconography of integration would probably reveal similar dynamics. Blacks are included in integrated groups and are depicted positively, but relations between blacks and whites are socially awkward. Social psychological distance is apparent in spite of, and perhaps because of, the advertisers’ best intentions. Over time one can witness a growing comfort depicting blacks in close-up (Figure 17) – suggesting a growing white curiosity about blacks – while an increasing number of images show blacks and whites more involved with each other in the public sphere (Figure 18).

By 1998, therefore, blacks are increasingly depicted as attractive and appealing exemplars in a wide range of endeavours and situations. Long before the Kodak advertisement in 1999 (Figure 19), the comedian Bill Cosby had established himself as an icon of gentle concern and moral probity, who particularly distinguished himself by his respect for, and ability to connect with, children. In addition, advertisements during this period featured not only beautiful black women but also often seemed designed to celebrate the very fact of their beauty itself. The Virginia Slim advertisement in Figure 20, for example, is composed to accentuate the model’s attractiveness and the vibrant red background accentuates her dark skin colour. Another advertisement that is built compositionally around shades of black and highlights the musician’s skin colour to great advantage is an advertisement for Apple (Figure 21) that underscores the importance of personal commitment and dedication to achieving excellence.

A close scrutiny of advertisements containing blacks during the late 1990s and early 2000 shows that there are few positive human values or goals that are not exemplified in one way or another by a black person, either as a model or a real person. Eddie Robinson was the football coach of Grambling College, a historic black college in Louisiana. No other college coach has won as many games in this peculiarly American sport. Figure 22 is an advertisement for State Farm Insurance that identifies Robinson in small print and references his wins more centrally in the graphic design. It is not necessary to know who he is, however, to appreciate what he represents in this image – a model of adult responsibility teaching young children lessons that he has mastered. But the fact that some would know who he was (many American males) and many would not (most of the rest of the world) was sure to encourage the sharing of one small bit of contemporary black history during National Black History Month.

Many of the most striking advertisements feature older blacks making the most of the special pleasures that come with age, which, in the case of this Viagra advertisement (Figure 23), might also be seen as a continuation of earlier delights in the subjects’ lives. The reader would have to know about Viagra, of course, to clearly identify the sexual connotations in this advertisement. Even so informed, it is nevertheless true that this image is a beautiful evocation of a loving and long-term commitment. Knowing that this advertisement also represents an explicitly sexual relationship, however, only deepens its emotional effect.

Figure 24 is a study that evokes not only fond reminiscence but also how photographs can maintain family connections. All of the portraits of older people in Life magazine from this period are drawn with a quiet and compelling dignity acknowledging that life’s most lasting meanings are to be found in small moments and relationships. None does this so well, or perhaps so wistfully, as Figure 25, an advertisement for Solgar vitamins, which depicts an older woman quietly savouring time alone at home.

To be sure there are many younger blacks depicted in these advertisements and what they model is not always so sedate or, for that matter, even admirable. People do seem to have lots of fun enjoying life in the dream world of contemporary advertising and blacks are no exception, even if that only involves a slightly naughty display of flirtatious attitude, as in this exchange between two young women in a Virginia Slim advertisement (Figure 26).

In a way, the world of American advertising has always dreamed to be somewhat like the imaginary town of Lake Wobegon in Garrison Keiler’s National Public Radio show Prairie Home Companion. Lake Wobegon is a world of hyper-value where ‘the women are strong, the men are good looking, and all the children are above average’. After all, the great discovery of advertisers during this century has been that entertaining fantasies are what gets and holds an audience and provides those who have paid for the advertisement with an


He has 406 career wins, but a countless number of victories.

A legacy is really nothing more than a life well lived and plans well made. And, at State Farm, we want to help you make sure that your life and your legacy are all that you planned. State Farm understands life.


The Racial Gaze Within the Frame (LIFE: 1936-2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>36-38</th>
<th>44-45</th>
<th>52-53</th>
<th>60-61</th>
<th>67-68</th>
<th>1972</th>
<th>78-80</th>
<th>89-90</th>
<th>98-00</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eye Contact Between Races</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Race Looking at Another</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHART 8. Percentage of advertisements containing blacks where there is eye contact between blacks and whites.

opportunity to sell their product. The stories that advertisements tell are quite varied and their tone can encompass whimsy, irony and parody, as well as solemnity. Generally speaking, however, the characteristic mode of modern advertising may provisionally be defined as a type of fantasy realism, where magical events that often defy credibility are animated by the most mundane of motivations and desires. Whites are also displayed according to these conventions, but in recent years blacks have been especially so portrayed. It is as though advertisers have made a special point to ensure that they exhibit a diverse array of blacks in the best possible light within the range of acceptable moral conventions. As such, blacks become exemplars of one kind or another for the rest of America. They are depicted very much like whites except cooler and tougher, and often appear more grounded in themselves and more knowing.

Blacks are being put on a pedestal in these images, of course, and this courtly gesture suggests that there is much that is unresolved in how whites view blacks and that blacks today are being viewed through a kind of filter. It is interesting that so many of the most compelling images of blacks from the late 1990s depict them alone or in a couple. It is as though whites will look at blacks closely only so long as blacks are not in a position to look at them that closely.

What is most striking in this regard is that although a growing number of advertising images with blacks are set in personal and private spheres, rather than public ones, such is not the case with images that contain both blacks and whites, as Chart 7 makes abundantly clear.

Under the iconography of segregation, blacks and whites often came into close personal contact in the confines of whites’ homes, sleeping cars and hotel rooms. What was an intimate social sphere for whites, of course, was a worksite of one kind or another for black servants. Over the years advertisers steadily removed blacks as servants from white homes and similar social spaces, but the iconography of integration has yet to envision ways of bringing whites and blacks together again in these more intimate worlds, except now on a basis of moral equality. Nothing so clearly illustrates this last point as Chart 8.

In the iconography of segregation blacks tended to look at whites admiringly, while whites looked at blacks in a more patronizing and condescending fashion. Today, there is not much difference in how blacks and whites look at each other in these advertisements; it is just that they hardly do so.

There is in this database, however, one suggestive exception to this pattern of persisting social distance. Figure 27 plays with an old white fear. The young black male and the helpless white female in peril is a trope with a long and cruel history, most notably enshrined in D. W. Griffith’s silent film Birth of a Nation. Here, however, the viewer is told that, rather than being a predator, the black is a lifesaver if only he knew what to do in this situation. The woman, who appears to be white, is in her car, which, along with the bathroom and the bedroom, has become one of the most prized personal spaces in contemporary society. Her life depends on a black man’s compassion and competence in managing a situation that requires him to breach a boundary between public and private.
It would be a mistake to read too much into a single image; only time will tell if it signals a move toward inclusion in the imagery of integration. I suspect that it will because the image is not an isolated example. The Kool Advertisement in Figure 2, for instance, also breaches longstanding boundaries between blacks and whites, and it is not the only other example of such an event. Furthermore, this trend in the iconography of race relations is also a by-product of the moral function that blacks now play in these images as both paragons and judges of a new America. Whites once expected blacks to take care of them. Today, however, it appears that whites want blacks to care about them (Figure 28). But for this to happen whites are going to have to open themselves and their worlds up to blacks in a fashion that is unprecedented and which – as of May 2000 – had not emerged in the dream world of Life magazine advertisements.

All of the sources of data that I have considered – attitude surveys, the census and print advertisements – point toward the same conclusion: the major obstacle to racial inclusion on the part of whites is the exclusion of blacks from whites’ private and personal worlds. The census can only guess at what may be motivating whites in the choices they make to live in segregated neighbourhoods. Attitude surveys can be crunched and conclude that conversion to liberal attitudes takes place in spurts and especially at times of intense national concern about race, but that otherwise it is merely a question of increasing higher education and cohort replacement, which happens steadily, but very slowly. Of the three sources of data, only print advertisements provide a record of how whites envision the place of blacks in their world. What the images show, however, that the census and the attitude surveys do not, is that the erosion of social boundaries between blacks and whites has entailed a long and multifaceted process of imagining what a changed world should – and certainly might – look like. Nevertheless, the advertising images show that whites have had a difficult time imagining how to share a common world with blacks as equals, and they have barely begun to explore what equality would look like, and feel, in more personal and private realms.

Social scientists have long been interested in the cultural products of a mass society and its intersection with popular culture generally. Mike Ball (1992) reminds readers that Richardson and Kroeker’s (1940) study of changes in women’s skirts over the last several centuries has been replicated and extended in later studies, as has Robinson’s (1976) study of patterns in men’s facial hair over the same period. All of these studies have been based on systematic sampling of visual data. In a seminal essay, Herbert Blumer (1966) argues that modern society is ‘built around a chain of four basic
properties… (1) its massiveness; (2) the heterogeneous form of the society’s structural elements; (3) unimpeded access to areas of public life; and (4) immersion in a constantly changing society’ (339–40). In his discussion of public life in modern society, Blumer points out that for people in contemporary society:

The public sector represents a wholly new world of involvements and action in which they exist as a huge, anonymous and relatively undifferentiated throng – without organization, status structure, fixed leadership or a codex or body of established regulations. To grasp this point, one has only to think of the mass of movie-goers or the mass of newspaper readers or the mass of consumers buying shoes.

In referring to a mass of this kind, it is justifiable to speak of a fully developed kind of group, for the mass, surprising though this may seem, does in fact really act. And this action consists in making choices: choosing products as a consumer at the market, choosing among mass media programs, choosing from among the array of suggestions, party policies, doctrines and candidates on the political battlefield. Although arguably an indeterminate, anonymous and unorganized group, the mass is treated and addressed as a structured being. The best examples are to be found in advertising, in radio and television programs, in newspaper editorials and in the hit parade. (Blumer 1966, 342–43)

Similar processes where individuals’ choices create mass phenomena have long been studied by students of collective fashion, style and collective behaviour (Sorokin 1937–41) and have recently spurred a renewed fascination both among journalists (Gladwell 2000; Surowiecki 2005) and social scientists (Levitt 2005).

It may well be that media representations are documents that trace the links between how we idealize our lives and actually conduct them and that different media provide insight into some dimensions of social and cultural life and not others. Print advertisements, for example, toy with behavioral norms, while television advertising has more room for irony in celebrating or questioning those norms. Feature films reproduce the normative order in an even more complex and nuanced form, but also permit audiences, as well as social researchers, to explore modalities of style, or the possible ways that subjects orient themselves to – as well as manage – the normative order (Fowles 1996). If Goffman is correct that popular media reflects not so much a society as people’s engagement with that society then the various streams of popular culture might be read most profitably as different reflections of those emotional investments. (Grady 2007, 67)

Herbert Blumer has argued elsewhere that studying fashion and popular culture are indispensable for analyzing not only social change in modern society but also modernity itself (Blumer 1968, 1969). This article has shown that it is now technically possible to give print advertising the attention it deserves by constructing archives based on properly sampled materials, and that such attention repays Blumer’s faith that what he called the study of fashion not only produces insight into contemporary mores and sensibilities, but also provides indicators for the analysis of social change. Print advertisements can reveal a great deal about the affective dimensions of individuals’ choices and beliefs; and much more could be learned by applying the same approach to other streams of mass culture.

NOTES

[1] Examples of the behaviourist approach to studying cultural products, print advertising and the depictions of blacks in mass culture are found in journals such as Journalism Quarterly, Journal of Marketing Research, Public Opinion Quarterly and the like and include but are not limited to: Boyenton (1965); Riley and Stoll (1968); Kasserjian (1969); Cox (1970a,b); Stempel (1971); Bush, Resnick and Stern (1980); Sentman (1983); Humphrey and Schuman (1984); Zinkhan, Cox and Hong (1986); Ervin and Jackson (1990); Taylor, Sheatsley, and Gereely (1995); Keenan (1996); Marshall (1997); Thomas and Treiber (2000); Kalof and Fitzgerald (2003). While all behaviourists share the belief that advertising reflects values that are dominant in the society, some stress the impact that these images can have on shaping the self-image and role expectations of those so depicted, usually to the detriment of their potential development (see for example, Colfax and Sternberg 1972). Generally speaking most ‘behaviourists’ appear to subscribe to Guba and Lincoln’s (2005) ‘positivist’ paradigm and to be more closely aligned theoretically with a generic structural-functionalism.

[2] There is a highly elaborated body of theory that ‘interpretavists’ draw upon. The roots of their concerns can be traced to the Marxism of the Frankfurt School. More recent scholarship, however, is currently more influential. This includes Roland Barthes (1967); Judith Williamson (1991); and Stuart Hall (Morley and Kuan-Hsing 1996). Focusing on advertisements in general and
in particular the purported effects of advertising are a number of very popular slide lecture and tape shows, often distributed in video format. These include: Rigg (1987); Jhally (1992, 1998); Killbourne (1995, 2003); Dines, Jensen and Russo (1998). Contemporary studies of how blacks are depicted include: Mellingar (1992); Pieterse (1992); Kreinedemas (1993); Kern-Foxworth (1994, 1998); McClintock (1994); O’Barr (1994); Craig, Kreotedem et and Grynewski (1997); Meahy (1997); Cortese (1999). The vast majority of these writers would be classified as ‘constructivists’ or ‘critical theorists’ of various stripes by Guba and Lincoln (2005) and are generally conflict theorists.


4 The coding method outlined here is a customized variant of the approach outline in Becker (1998) and Strauss and Corbin (1998).

5 This comparative analysis was based on counts for various magazines that were collected by Kasserjian (1969); Cox (1970a); Stempel (1971); Humphrey and Schuman (1984); Zinkhan, Cox and Hong (1986); Lester and Smith (1990); Kern-Foxworth (1994); Snyder, Freeman and Condray (1995).

6 ‘In 1970 Life was America’s “favorite magazine” with over 8 million subscribers. With an estimated “pass-through” rate of four to five people per copy, each issue reached as many as 40 million people’ (Doss 2001, 8).

7 This database is being put in its final form and will be available for distribution as Advertising Images of Blacks: LIFE Magazine, 1936–2000. It will be available for the cost of production and shipping and handling from John Grady at jgrady@wheatonma.edu

8 The survey data are collected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), and especially those surveys that NORC conducts for the General Social Survey (GSS). In addition, the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan and the Gallup Poll are important sources of information.

9 Lois Quinn and John Pawasarat (Quinn and Pawasarat 2003; Quinn 2004) have recently suggested that these various indices for measuring segregation are flawed as a way of measuring integration. For example, standard techniques measure segregation at the census tract rather than the block level. Thus, a census tract could be considered not segregated if the black proportion of its population was 13% black, even though they were all clustered in one or two blocks, a not uncommon pattern in American cities. Nevertheless, according to their studies less than 10% of American live on integrated blocks, which they define as a block having no less than 20% whites and 20% blacks.

10 The complete General Social Survey (GSS) is available on-line at the University of California at Berkeley’s website for Survey Documentation and Analysis (SDA) http://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm; INTERNET. SDA is possibly one of the most user-friendly software programs that make it possible for anyone to carry out quite complex analyses of data from the GSS and other national surveys.

11 In Chart 5 ‘black figures’ refers to images of real people, whereas ‘black representations’ includes not only actual people, but statues, cartoons, graphic designs and the like that are intended to be seen as a black person.

12 The watershed in changing white attitudes about black rights, as measured in national attitude surveys, takes place between 1956 and 1963, while the images in this sample cover the years 1952–1953, 1960–1961, 1967–1968. A more fine-grained analysis of black advertisements, especially between 1956 and 1963, may narrow the lag between surveys and images, if not eliminate it entirely.

13 I use the term ‘logos’ to incorporate not only a trademark figure like Aunt Jemima and Rastus for Cream of Wheat but also the use of other figures like Amos and Andy and Bill Cosby who are often stylized and small on the page. Their function is usually to endorse the product.

14 Figure 10 has a real ethnographic feel to it. I suspect that actors may have been positioned by the creative staff of the agency in consultation with the photographer, but that they were instructed to improvise a cocktail party, and what they improvised – and what the photographer captured – may well reflect how cocktail parties were performed at that time.

15 It is possible, of course, that the woman is a very light-skinned black and that the man is a passenger in the car – thereby explaining the cuts on his face. In any event, the victim’s racially ambiguous status, his placement in front of a broken window, which traditional fears would have expected him to have broken, and then for him to be defined as a lifesaver in this scene has, for all intents and purposes, the same effect as the interpretation put forward in the text. In either case, a long-standing white fear is being exorcised.

REFERENCES


