

The Distorted Mirror: Images of Visible Minority Women in Canadian Print Advertising

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this research was to present a content analysis of advertisements, bringing into focus the portrayal of visible minority women. From this analysis, we evaluated the changes in the images representing this particular segment over a thirty year span. Finally, some implications of the role portrayals assigned to visible minority women were stressed.

RÉSUMÉ

Le principal objectif de cette recherche a été de présenter une analyse du contenu des annonces publicitaires, nous concentrant sur la représentation de la minorité féminine visible. L'évaluation des changements dans les images offertes de ce segment particulier de la population s'est faite sur une période de trente ans. Les diverses implications quant à l'attribution de rôles particuliers à la minorité féminine visible y sont discutées.

Since 1979, numerous publics have become increasingly interested in the representation, portrayal, and sexual stereotyping of women in Canadian media and advertising in Canada. Little if any research has been conducted, however, in the underrepresentation and stereotyping of visible minority women.

This paper will examine the data of a longitudinal study of visible minority women in Canadian print advertising. The research will answer the following questions:

- (1) What percentage of print advertisements depicted visible minority women?
- (2) Have changes occurred to the portrayal and ascribed roles representing visible minority women?
- (3) What are some of the implications of these role portrayals of visible minority women?

Introduction

In less than a decade, visible minority groups have seen their numbers increasing from 3 percent to 7.4 percent of

the Canadian population (Boxhill, 1984). With recent changes in world migration patterns, we can expect the percentage of visible minorities to continue to grow into major segments of the Canadian population. This new demographic structure will subsequently have important consequences on the needs and requirements of the Canadian community.

For the purpose of this study, visible minorities have been defined as non-whites who are not participating fully in the Canadian society. They include the aboriginal people, Canadians with origins in Africa, Arab countries, China, India, Pakistan, Japan, Korea, South East Asia, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, the West Indies, and the Philippines (Daudlin, 1984).

Canadian Research Studies on Visible Minorities in the Media

Since the seventies, a number of reports have been commissioned to study the representation and role portrayals of visible minorities in mass electronic media, mass

print media, and advertising in Canada. The 1971 Elkin study, as reported to the Ontario Human Rights Commission, stated that visible minorities were grossly under-represented in print advertisements and catalogues (ranging from .3 percent to 3 percent). Moreover, all of them were shown in traditionally accepted and stereotypic roles such as musical blacks, decorative native peoples, fat Persian rug dealers, and decorative and idle types in tourism and charity advertisements. Owaisi and Bangash, replicating the Elkin study in 1977, arrived essentially to the same conclusions, but they highlighted a preponderance of foreign tourism advertisements.

More recently, in 1982, the "PEAC Report" showed the analysis of television commercials in Canada. The most striking finding was the low number of visible minorities in major roles. Also in 1982, Granzberg found measurable misrepresentation in job roles and much stereotyping of visible minorities in Canadian prime time television programmes.

In a more recent national attitude survey (Thornicroft, 1983), the Canadian public and, especially, visible minorities were concerned about the narrowness and "inflexibility" of the roles shown in commercials on television. There was a belief that non-whites were depicted only in humorous or minor roles with characters of lower socio-economic status. In fact, by the mid 1980s, even as the Ontario government tried to include visible minorities in its advertising, several newspaper journalists reported that there continued to be measurable misrepresentation, discrimination, and stereotyping in print and television advertising (Littman, 1981; Scotland, 1984).

Racial discrimination does exist in Canada. Daudlin has shown that as many as 15 percent of the Canadian population exhibit blatantly racist attitudes, while another 20 to 25 percent had some racist tendencies. The increase in racism was attributed in part to Canada's immigration policy, which increased the number of Canadians with origins in the West Indies, India, Pakistan and other parts of Asia.

Methodology of the Present Study

This longitudinal study, completed in 1986, was meant to continue in the footsteps of the other five studies. The main objective of this research was to present a content analysis of advertisements, bringing into focus the portrayal of visible minority women. From this analysis, we evaluated the changes in the images representing this particular segment over a thirty year span. Finally, some

implications of the role portrayals assigned to visible minority women were stressed.

All advertisements for the years 1954, 1964, 1974 and 1984 published in one of Canada's major magazines, *Maclean's*, were analyzed. With a circulation of 2.4 million readers, *Maclean's* had the highest domestic household penetration of any national news magazine in the world (*Maclean's: Media Planning Profile*, 1984).

The longitudinal time frame allowed a large sampling of print advertisements to be collected and studied. A total of 4,385 advertisements and 7,716 visually identified persons were recorded. Over the thirty year span, the roles of women in society had been changing and it was decided to see if these changes in roles would be reflected in *Maclean's*.

The year 1984 was chosen as a terminal date for the study so to coincide with the Daudlin Report, *Equality Now: Report of the Special Committee on Visible Minorities in Canadian Society*. This was the first federal report of its kind.

Three research assistants were coached in identifying and analyzing the sought-after elements contained in the advertisements. The identifying indexing process as described by Tannenbaum (1955) was used. An index variable was considered to be a single stimulus element, or complex stimuli, that served to predispose a particular interpretation or meaning to the stimulus pattern. The indices, used in the content analysis, were any form of physiognomic labels, such as skin colour, facial and hair features, clothing styles, names and geographic cues. No line drawings of figures were considered, and each figure to be selected had to be clearly identifiable.

As a measure of reliability, we chose a coefficient of reliability method as discussed by Kassirjian (1977). The coefficient of reliability in this case had an interjudge reliability factor of 85.

Data Analysis

The data were broken into two discrete groups, white and non-white. The subgroups of visible minorities followed the 14 categories as stated previously by Daudlin. The categorization process led to some difficulty in terms of group boundary precision. It must be stated, however, that the focus of this study was on visible minority women. Discerning categories such as children, women, men, white and non-white enabled us to establish the required data.

Table 1

Total Number of Ads, Number of Ads with People (generally),
Number of Ads with Visible Minorities,
% of Ads with Visible Minorities

Year	Total No. of Ads	Ads with People (generally)	Ads With Visible Minorities	Ads With Visible Minorities as % of Ads with People (generally)
1954	1,050	656	8	1.2
1964	1,077	609	35	5.8
1974	694	363	23	6.3
1984	1,614	763	88	11.5

There was a major increase in the number of advertisements in 1984 due to *Maclean's* being issued on a weekly rather than a monthly basis. When we considered the whole of the thirty year span, the proportion of ads with visible minorities relative to ads with all types of people increased from 1.2 percent to 11.5 percent. The fact that this proportion grew from 6.3 to 11.5 percent in the last ten years was meaningful. However, this change must be viewed by comparing the proportion of visible minority persons to the total of persons represented in advertisements.

Over the thirty year period, we observed an increase in the representation of visible minorities in advertisements. However, in 1984, visible minorities still accounted for only 7.4 percent of all the persons shown. The statistics presented in Table 2 add much credibility to the statement by Daudlin: "Visible minorities are, in fact, the invisible minorities of our society" (p. 1). This phenomenon was even more pronounced for visible minority women, with their proportion found to be 1.5 percent in 1984 compared to 7.4 percent for visible minorities as a category. In 1984, women as a category were worse off than in 1954; their representation in advertisements had declined by 8.7 percent. Non-visible women, as a group, declined by 10 percent over the thirty year period while the representation of visible minority women had increased from 0.2 percent to 1.5 percent in advertisements.

The data showed that the category of tourism accounted for 46.9 percent of all advertisements for the thirty year period. In 1964, we witnessed examples of minority women in prestigious roles such as a spokesperson for a well-known financial broker or a leading television journalist. We then observed that in 1984, 33 percent of all

visible minority women were shown in charity-related advertisements and 48.5 percent in tourism. It was within this latter category that we found the largest percentages of roles displayed by visible minority women were in the decorative/idle and dancer categories (see Table 4).

Three roles displayed by visible minority women dominated the statistics with 83.7 percent of the total displayed roles. In the decorative/idle category, first in importance, women were shown as atmosphere/background "fill-ins." They were not interacting with the product and/or service in any meaningful way. We found that Asian/Indian accounted for 69.5 percent of women playing these roles. Latin/Mexican and Black women formed respectively 55 percent and 45 percent of the dancing category, second in importance. Latin/Mexican women represented all musicians' portrayal roles. Black women, however, represented 92.3 percent of the visible minority women shown in the poor/idle category. Canada's native women fell into a single category, thus forming 13 percent of the decorative/idle group.

The Invisible "Visible" Minority Women

Tables 1 through 4 statistically indicated the percentages of appearances of visible minority women and the images they have depicted over the thirty year period. As shown in the data, visible minority women remained close to being invisible in one of Canada's most important and widely circulated magazines. While certain roles, like decorative/idle, and poor/idle does have societal ramifications, that is, it sets stereotypical roles for identifiable groups, genders, and races. As Goffman (1979) has suggested, advertisers approve the use of stereotypical scenes and characters ensuring instantaneous recognizability.

If constituent groups now are concerned about the types of portrayals of minority women in print ads, then one could suggest, based on the evidence presented, that *Maclean's* magazine did reflect a distorted mirror. Over a thirty year period, visible minority women have been shown in extremely limited roles and associated with a very narrow range of goods and services. The roles that the magazine has shown have not kept pace with, or depicted in any way, some of the roles that visible minority women now play in the Canadian society.

Table 2
Total Number of Persons Shown in Ads, Categories of
Non-Visible Persons (White), Visible Minorities, Women
as % of Total Persons

Year	Total No. of Persons	Non-Visible Persons (White) as % of Total Persons				Visible Minorities as % of Total Persons				Women as % of Total Persons
		Men	Women	Children	Total	Men	Women	Children	Total	
1954	2045	54.2	35.2	9.7	99.1	0.7	0.2	0.1	0.9	35.4
1964	1991	51.8	31.4	12.1	95.3	3.0	0.9	0.8	4.7	32.3
1974	1473	60.9	25.3	10.4	96.6	2.1	0.8	0.5	3.4	26.1
1984	2207	55.4	25.2	12.0	92.6	1.7	1.5	4.2	7.4	26.7

Table 3
Visible Minority Women (V.M.W.)
Portrayed in Product/Service Categories

Year	1954		1964		1974		1984	
	No. of ads which include V.M.W.	No. of V.M.W.						
Alcohol	—	—	5	7	—	—	—	—
Charity	1	2	—	—	—	—	3	11
Communications	—	—	1	1	3	4	1	6
Femine Hygiene Products	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	—
Financial Services	—	—	2	3	—	—	—	—
Tourism	2	2	2	6	3	8	8	16
Total	3	4	11	18	6	12	12	33

Table 4
Role Category of Visible Minority Women:
Role Frequency by Race/Ethnic Categories

Role Category	Role Frequency	% of total Roles	Asian/Indian	% of total in Role Types	Black	% of total in Role Types	Latin	% of total in Role Types	Native	% of total in Role Types
Decorative/idle	23	34.3	16	69.5	4	17.5	—	—	3	13.0
Dancers	20	30.0	—	—	9	45.0	11	55.0	—	—
Poor/idle	13	19.4	1	7.7	12	92.3	—	—	—	—
Musicians	3	4.5	—	—	—	—	3	100.0	—	—
Labour	2	3.0	—	—	2	100.0	—	—	—	—
Craft/Artisan	2	3.0	—	—	—	—	2	100.0	—	—
Waitress	1	1.5	—	—	1	100.0	—	—	—	—
Receptionist	1	1.5	—	—	1	100.0	—	—	—	—
Spokesperson	1	1.5	1	100.0	—	—	—	—	—	—
Interactive/positive	1	1.5	—	—	1	100.0	—	—	—	—
Total	67	100.0	18	26.8	30	44.8	16	23.8	3	4.6

Discussion and Implications of the Findings, On a General Basis

It is increasingly recognized that advertising identifies and promotes the marketing of products, by promising specific social identities and by using structured social identities in the message. It is believed that advertising manufactures, defines and constantly redefines the range and repertoire of roles and identities available within the Canadian society (Belk and Pollay 1985; Pollay 1986; Singer 1986).

Massé and Rosenblum (1988) discuss the realities of national advertising. They believe that there is no female voice behind the ads since the ad world is a predominantly male world. The ads that we viewed in *Maclean's* were not statements for women by women; rather, they were constructs of women made "in the main" by men.

Perkins (1979) also argued that the media/advertising gatekeepers selectively chose the content of their stereotypes. The stereotypes are not arbitrarily chosen nor are they interchangeable. The choice of the stereotypes has particular ideological significance. Perkins went on to say that the choices of racial and women's stereotypes, in particular, are based on the ideological criterion of intelligence. Blacks and women, as oppressed groups, would be

characterized as less intelligent. It is particularly important to Perkins, in the context of a capitalistic ideology, that personal attributes should be conceived as being innate characteristics either of human nature in general (competitiveness), or of women/men/Blacks in particular, since this supports the belief that they are not the effect of the socioeconomic system (and, consequently, that the order of things is inevitable). The fact that stereotypes do so often present, and are shown with, attributes as if they are "natural" is not a feature *per se*, as much as it is an indication that they are ideological concepts.

Gender stereotyping — in this case the roles portrayed by visible minority women — was produced and accepted by large social institutions which then placed the advertisements into a mass medium, *Maclean's*. This reproducing and dissemination process, which Nancy Chodorow called "legitimizing ideologies," "create expectations in people about what is normal and appropriate and how they should act" (p. 35).

The "normal" visible woman was likely to be decorative/idle or poor. The range of roles in which she was shown remained almost the same over the thirty year period. The quantifiable data of this study reveal certain clear divisions in the representation of visible minority women for advertising purposes.

Recent Developments in Canada

In 1974, the Ontario Status of Women Council started a campaign to collect comments from interested persons across the country who would discuss women in advertising. This 1974 concern concluded with the report, *About Face: Towards a More Positive Image of Women in Advertising*. In 1977, the Canadian Advertising Advisory Board (C.A.A.B.), the Canadian industry's self-regulating body, released its report, *Women and Advertising: Today's Messages — Yesterday's Images*. However, throughout most of the following decade, little direct action was taken by this self-regulatory group.

In late 1979, early 1980, the Canadian government got involved in the question of sexual stereotyping of women. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) submitted a separate position paper called *Sex-Role Stereotyping in Advertising: A Summary of Concerns*. This document summarized the major concerns about women which were: images, language, roles, family and interpersonal relationships, personality, women as buyers, and women as sellers.

It should also be noted that the Québec government, in 1978, established a twelve-member committee to probe sexism. Québec's council on the status of women developed a series of four television commercials attacking all facets of sexual stereotyping, including advertisements (Heslop and Courtney, 1982).

Early in the 1980s, a ground swell, mainly by visible minority groups, demanded fairer treatment by the media. The Canadian Chinese community established the National Council for Equality, while Blacks and Chinese in Canada formed a coalition called Urban Alliance on Race Relations and the Council of National Ethnocultural Organizations of Canada. All of these organizations had, as their objectives, the elimination of ethnic and racial stereotypes and better representation of visible minority groups in Canadian media and advertisements (MacGregor, 1985).

However, it must be stated that, in all the early efforts, the plight and rights of visible minority women were really not considered to any great extent. They basically continued to be the noticeably invisible visible minority.

In their most comprehensive source book, *Sex Stereotyping in Advertising*, Courtney and Whipple (1983) make only two fleeting mentions — a total of 21 words — concerning visible minority women and minorities in

general. On page 56, they say that, "Absence of older and minority group women from advertising makes them an invisible part of society," and on page 173, they refer to "the insulting of minorities."

When looking at the present study, one will gather that advertising by most Canadian advertisers continues to ignore this country's visible minority groups. Advertisements in the popular media, such as *Maclean's*, do not reflect the cultural, racial and ethnic diversity of the Canadian mosaic. Also, when members of visible minorities were used in advertisements, as discussed, their occupational/ lifestyle roles were narrowly defined in stereotypical activities such as idle/dancers/poor/musicians and generally of lower status categories.

In 1986, there was so much governmental and group concern that the CRTC demanded that, in the area of radio and television, owners of the media make a definite commitment to improving the images of all women. The renewal of the stations' licences now depends on it. In December 1986, the CRTC announced that, effective the next licence renewal hearing of each station or network, adherence to its *Policy on Sex-Role Stereotyping* would become a condition for all broadcasting licences (*Pulse*, 1987).

Publishing and print advertising are less regulated as media. Since there is not a governing body to set policy, most concerned advertisers and publishers follow the Canadian Advertising Foundation's code. Nevertheless, numerous groups believe that there continues to be too much sexual stereotyping in advertisements (*The Financial Post*, March 1987).

Conclusion

This paper set out to present the findings of a thirty year longitudinal study. It answered three questions by showing the representation — or underrepresentation — of visible minority women. This was done in the larger structural context of placing those percentages in the context of all other people portrayed in advertisements, in the years 1954, 1964, 1974, and 1984. It was also shown that the roles played by visible minority women continued to be narrowly and stereotypically defined, with minimal change over the thirty year period.

The potential input of a steady diet of these print images has not yet been established. Relatively little is known about the ways in which the stereotypic images of visible minority women affect viewer's beliefs and atti-

tudes. Are beliefs and attitudes about visible minority people created or reinforced by the portrayal of these people in print advertisements? To what extent is sex role learning and the stereotyping of visible minorities influenced by these advertisements?

All forms of advertisements that show visible minorities and women in narrow stereotypical and pejorative roles are issues of importance to Canadian society. To the extent that viewers and readers of advertisements have their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours possibly affected by what they perceive in the media, relations between the races and sexes may be affected by advertising's limited and often stereotyped portrayals of visible minorities.

There should be ongoing research to serve as a barometer of change — or the lack of it. The agenda setters must be alerted to all potentialities of their societal labelling processes, both positive and negative.

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