RACIAL AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN SUPER BOWL ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, the United States completed its decennial census surveying changes in the living patterns and ethnic and racial trends of the population. This article explores how well these demographic changes are represented in the popular culture, particularly advertising. The authors studied a series of television commercials and analyzed to what degree the demographic changes in population are reflected in advertising. The results revealed several surprises, including a persistent racial basis in favour of those of European descent and a bias in favour of males as product spokespeople.

Keywords: Demographic change, Gender studies, Representation, Advertising

Introduction

In 2020, the United States completed its decennial census surveying changes in the living patterns and ethnic and racial trends of the population. The information gathered in the census has significant ramifications for the distribution of congressional seats and the allocation of government resources. The new census recorded significant changes in the demographic makeup of the country. The United States is rapidly becoming a majority minority country. In August of 2021, the New York times reported[1] that a third of the country's counties are now majority minority where people of color outnumber the white population.

The population of the country grew by 7.4% since the last census to reach a total of 331 million. This rate of growth represents the slowest rate of growth since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Furthermore, the White population actually declined for the first time in history and population growth is coming entirely from immigration and people of color. One factor in the declining White population may be the increase in people identifying as "mixed" or "multi-

ethnic" or "multiracial". This population more than doubled and it is thought that people who previously identified as White are now identifying multiracial.

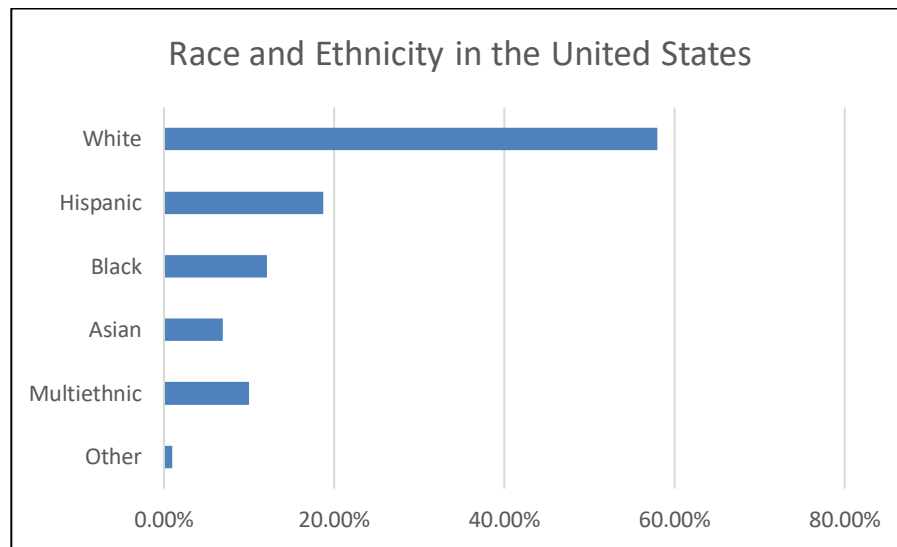A summary of the data is presented in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Current ethnic makeup of the US population according to the 2020 Census

As the graph above shows Whites are still the dominant ethnicity in the United States, comprising 58% of the population compared to 62% ten years ago   [2]. In a change from the past Hispanics are now the second largest ethnic group at almost 19%. The Black percentage of the population is roughly unchanged at close to 13%. The fastest growing ethnic minority is Asian. In the previous census, Asian constituted approximately 3% of the population and now makeup almost 7%, an increase of over 100%.

This paper will describe how these demographic changes are represented in media, specifically in advertising. Ads that aired during the 2020 Super Bowl were analyzed for the demographic and gender makeup. In total 47 national ads were viewed and analyzed. A summary of the corporations and products represented in the ads is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.Corporations and products presenting ads in the 2020 Super Bowl

Amazon	Mercari
Anheuser-Busch InBev	Michelob Ultra
Cabella Bass Shop	Mountain Dew

Chipotle	NFL
Coors	Oikos Yogurt
Cutwater Spirits	Paramount
Dawn Dish Soap	Pringles
Dexcom	Rate.com
Disney	Reddit
Dr Squatch	Robinhood
Fiverr	Rocket Mortgage
Frito Lay	Rockstar Energy
General Motors Cadillac	Samuel Adams
Guinness	Sketchers
Huggies	Square Space
Indeed	T-mobile
Inspiration4	Toyota
Jimmy Johns	Turbo Tax
Klarna	Vroom
Logitech	Weather Tech
M6N	

Several of the ads aired more than once during the game and the advertising dedicated to local companies was not included. For the purposes of this study only national advertisers were included.

Background and methodology

One of the main goals of the survey was to determine representation among the main actors of each commercial. For the purposes of this study, a main actor was considered to be any actor with a speaking role, regardless of the number of lines. Speaking even one line merited consideration as a main role. This method was decided upon because of the advertising industry practice to pay speaking and non-speaking actors with different scales, speaking roles receiving higher pay. The demographic data of the commercials is summarized in Figure 2.
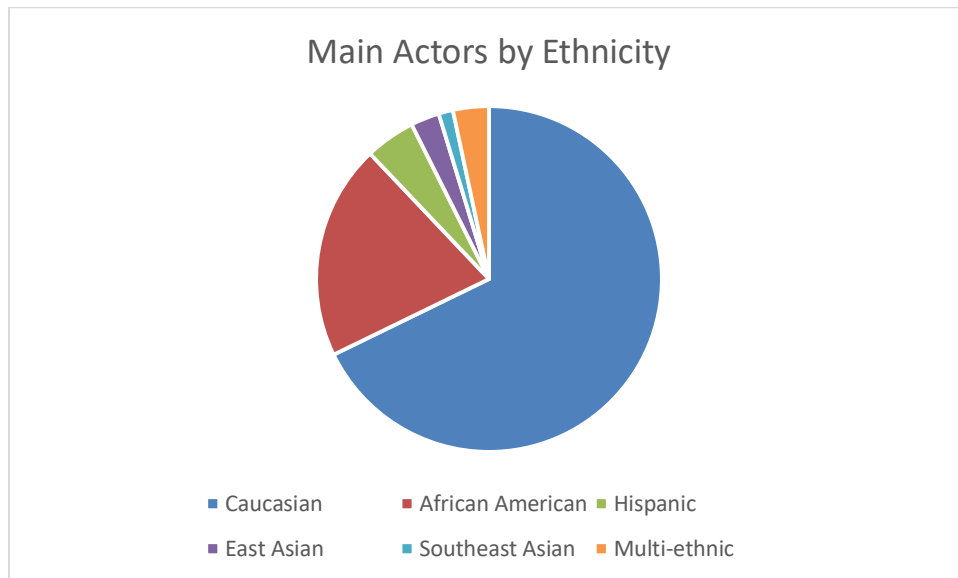
Fig. 2. Ethnic background of actors appearing in Super Bowl 2020 commercials

Racial Makeup Analysis

As can be clearly seen from Figure 2, White actors claim the majority of speaking roles in the Super Bowl commercials. White actors represent 68% of speaking roles in the commercials. This percentage is slightly higher than the White percentage of the population reflected in the previous census, 64% but larger than the 58% of the 2020 census. African Americans were the second largest percentage of speaking roles, 30%. This representation is much higher than the African American percentage of the population, slightly less than 13%. The group with the greatest disparity between population size and representation in advertising appears to be Hispanics. Hispanics represent almost 20% of the population, but only claimed 5% of the main actor roles. This disparity may be due to the relative newness of the population in the country or due to the perceived economic weakness of the population. Another underrepresented minority in advertising appears to be Asians. Asians represent one of the fastest growing populations within the United States reaching 7% in the 2020 census. Unlike the census which groups East Asians and Southeast as one category, the advertising analysis divided these groups, but their combined percentage of speaking roles, 4%, is still below the 7% of the population.

Gender Makeup Analysis

Another point of analysis of the data from advertisements involves the gender makeup of the actors. Of the main actor roles in the commercials 38% are filled by women. This shows a

considerable gap between female representation in the population. Similarly, 17% of the advertisements employed a voice over actor who does not appear on screen, but narrates the commercial. Of the advertisements that used voice overs, less than one-third of the actors are female, about 28%.

Conclusion

The analysis of the advertisements from the 2020 Super Bowl show several interesting disparities between the racial and gender makeup of the country and representation in advertising. This information should be of key interest to corporations and advertisers. The average age of the White population of the United States is now 58, almost double the age of the minorities in the country, especially the fastest growing Hispanic and Asian populations. In 2016, the Pew Research Center reported [3]that 60% of the Hispanic population was less than 34 years old. Asians also skewed younger, with 50% under 34 years old, compared to less than 40% of the White population being in this age group.

Advertisers especially value the 18 – 34 age group[4]. Consumers in this group will make purchasing decisions that they will follow for the rest of their lives. As non-White consumers make up an ever-larger percentage of this group, corporations and advertisers would do well to consider representing these populations in their commercials. Similarly, women than men now participate in post-secondary education [5]. As possessing a college degree is an indication of higher income and greater disposable income, advertisers looking to sell to this market would do well to represent members of this category in their advertisements.

Acknowledgements

References

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