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Stereotyped but Liked? A Content Analysis of the Presence and Stereotypical Portrayal of Minority Groups in Award-Winning Commercials

Serena Daalmans  & Mariette Odink

The present study examined stereotyping in the representation of gender, age and ethnicity in positive and negative award-winning commercials. Commercials were coded for the presence of males and female, different age groups and different ethnic groups, as well as for stereotyped portrayals of these groups. Overall results indicated that women and the elderly are underrepresented in both types of commercials, while ethnic minorities are represented in both types of commercials comparable to their proportions in society. Generally, negative award-winning commercials show less stereotyping in the representation of women, and there are no differences in the degree of stereotyping present regarding the elderly and ethnic minorities in both types of commercials.

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Keywords: Age; Ethnicity Award-Winning Commercials; Gender; Representation; Stereotyping

Over the past decades, studies have analyzed how stereotypes pervade mass mediated content. One of the specific research areas is the analysis of the representation of various minorities in television commercials, such as women, ethnic minorities and the elderly. Studies on commercials consistently reveal gender stereotypes, ethnic stereotypes as well as ageist stereotypes. Although there is some indication that different forms of stereotyping are declining, research generally shows that stereotyping of minorities in commercials is still prevalent (Bartsch, Burnett, Diller, & Rankin-Williams, 2000; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Roy & Harwood, 1997).

Previous research on stereotyping in television has generally focused on two levels of stereotyping. The first level of stereotyping includes the actual proportional presence of minority groups in television programs (compared to their presence in society), termed *recognition*. The second level focuses on the (stereotypical) nature of that representation or portrayal, termed *respect* (Clark, 1972; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Previous research has revealed that for women, racial minorities and the elderly their representations in commercials are lacking in terms of recognition and respect. With regard to gender this, for example, means that men are more often portrayed as main characters and voice-overs in the commercials, and are more often than women seen as product authorities and portrayed in a working role (Furnham & Paltzer, 2011; Matthes, Prieler, & Adam, 2016; Verhellen, Dens, & De Pelsmacker, 2016). For ethnic minorities, research has shown that they are consistently underrepresented (Koeman, Peeters, & D'Haenens, 2007), and that their portrayal is more often than not highly stereotyped through association with aggression and criminality (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). In contrast to the general graying of society, the representation of the elderly in television commercials is characterized by underrepresentation and stereotyping (portrayed as foolish and disproportionately associated with medical problems) (Chen, 2015; Peterson & Ross, 1997; Roy & Harwood, 1997).

Based on the large amount of time we spend with television, a demonstrable impact on how the public at large perceives the world and on the way individuals create an image of themselves and of others is often theorized (Cottle, 2000). From the theoretical vantage point of cultivation theory as well as social learning theory, television is confirmed as one of the main agents of socialization (Bandura, 1977; Signorielli, 2012). Research has shown that television viewing contributes to the maintenance as well as the learning (molding) of stereotyped perceptions of these minority groups among children, adolescents, and adults. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that television impacts socialization in people's self-image as well as their image of others (Signorielli, 2012). As such, if representations of minority groups on television (and its commercials), more specifically women, ethnic minorities and the elderly, are disproportionate and/or stereotyped, this could negatively

impact both viewers' attitudes and behaviors towards these groups (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). If we assume that television and its advertising has the potential to shape attitudes, self-perceptions and behavior, and then add the assumption that stereotyping plays a crucial role in the maintenance of power inequalities within wider social, cultural, political and economic structures (Cottle, 2000), the importance of analyzing and understanding the nature minority portrayals in commercials becomes clear.

The continued reliance of television commercials on stereotyped representations of minority groups is often explained by stating that advertisers only have a few seconds to capture an audience's attention. By using stereotypes advertisers fall back on pre-existing schemas that audiences have in their head which makes the processing of the message easier and the message thereby more likable for audiences (Morrison, 2014). However, recently the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of Unilever has argued that progressive, non-stereotypical ads are 25% more effective than stereotyped ads. He also reports that these progressive ads are more liked and more engaging than stereotypical ads (Ghosh, 2016). Weed therefor sees the economic and moral necessity for advertisers to limit the use of stereotypes in their commercials (Weed, 2017). This statement by the CMO of Unilever on the positive effects - *in terms of liking as well as effectivity* - of less stereotyping in ads is complicated by research on award-winning commercials (Chao, 2005; Davis & Carson, 1998; Marshall, 2006; Montano, 2004). Award-winning commercials, selected by and voted for by the audience, reveal for example more stereotypical representations of men and women than regular commercials. This seemingly contradicts the positive connotations Weed ascribes to audiences reception of more progressive advertisements. Additionally, the Netherlands knows annual awards for both positively valued commercials (*Gouden Loekie*) and negatively valued commercials (*Loden Leeuw*), which sparks the question if there are differences in the amount of stereotyping involved in commercials that are awarded a prize for being good and fun in the eyes of audiences and bad and obnoxious in the eyes of audiences.

The present study was designed to explore how stereotyped representations of gender, ethnicity, and age could vary as a based on the positive or negative evaluation of the commercial. Although previous research has consistently outlined underrepresentation (lack of *recognition*) as well as the prevalence of gender, ethnic and age-related stereotypes (lack of *respect*) in television commercials, no single study has investigated all these groups in positive and negative award-winning commercials. Taken together this leads to the following research question:

Are there differences in the representation of gender, age and ethnicity in (positive and negative) Award-Winning commercials in terms of stereotyping and proportional presence?

Methods

Sample

The sample consists of 123 commercials that were nominated for a *Gouden Loeki* (positive award, audience likes and enjoys these commercials, Welovereclame, 2018)

and 123 commercials that were nominated for a *Loden Leeuw* (negative award, audiences dislike and/or annoyed by these commercials, Radar Avrotros, 2018) ($N_{\text{total}} = 246$)^{1,2}.

For the *Gouden Loekie*, the selection of the nominated commercials each year which the public at large can vote for, goes through several steps. Each quarter of a year more than a hundred new commercials are presented, all of these are judged and ranked by a panel by GfK consumer research (Welovereclame, 2018) and they establish 10 “winners” for each quarter. On a yearly basis, this leads to 40 nominations, from which the Growth from Knowledge panel (GfK) then nominates the best 10 and then the public at large can vote for their favorite. For the *Loden Leeuw*, people can nominate a commercial that they found annoyingly bad via a website (<https://radar.avrotros.nl/uitzendingen/loden-leeuw/nomineren/>) by submitting the specific commercial and write down the reason why they have nominated it. These are curated in a list that host the most voted for awards, and then the public can vote for them.

Coding Criteria

For each commercial up to four main characters were coded, these were characters who had at least a minimal impact on the commercial. *Gender*, the coding categories for gender of the main character was male or female (Bartsch et al., 2000).³ The coding categories for *age of the main character* reflected life cycles: child: 0–12 years, teenager: 13–18 years, young adult: 19–29 years, adult: 30–64 years or elderly: 65 and older (Koeman et al., 2007). For the analysis and better comparability with census data, three categories were used: young (0–18), adult (19–64) and senior (65 and older). *Ethnicity of the main character* was coded as “Caucasian/white”, “Black”, “Asian”, “Mediterranean – Arabic”, “Mediterranean – Europe”, “South/Latin-American” or “Other” (Koeman et al., 2007). When coding a category as broad as ethnicity you have to resort to a definition of ethnicity on the basis of visible features. Therefore, physical or phenotypical characteristics, like skin color, type of hair, and shape of the eyes were of primary importance and were combined with cultural characteristics like clothing, name, and accent provided (Koeman, 2007). For the analysis, two categories were used Caucasian and Ethnic minority, this choice to lose the distinction between the groups in the analysis was made due to small cell sizes for the various ethnic groups as well as to accommodate comparisons with census data.

With regard to stereotyped gender representations, we assessed the *gender of the voice-over* (male/female), if the *character was portrayed as working* or *portrayed as parent* (yes/no; Bartsch et al., 2000; Furnham & Paltzer, 2011). With regard to age-related stereotyping we assessed if characters were *perceived as frail/in need of assistance* (yes/no; Roy & Harwood, 1997). And finally, with regard to ethnic stereotyping we assessed if the commercials main character’s behavior could be seen as an *exaggeration of stereotypes tied to the minority culture* (yes, no, it is counter-stereotypical, no; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000).

Reliability

Two coders, one of the authors and a student in a communication science master program, were involved in the coding process. The coders independently coded practice materials and then compared and discussed the results. The coding instrument was edited after these discussions to fix potential problems prior to coding and analysis. After the final revisions in the coding instrument, a little over 10% of the program sample ($n = 32$, 13%) was randomly selected to be double coded. Inter-rater reliabilities were calculated in SPSS using the macro by Hayes for Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The reliabilities for the various variables were: gender (1.00), age (.96), ethnicity (1.00), gender of voice-over (1.00), portrayed as working (1.00), portrayed as parent (1.00), perceived as frail (.96) and exaggeration of minority culture (1.00).

Results

Proportional Presence

Gender

In total, we coded 552 main characters of which 65.9% was male and 34.1% was female. According to the Dutch census bureau [Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS] in 2017, 49.6% of the Dutch population ($N = 17,081,507$) was male whereas 50.4% of the population was female (CBS, 2017). The gender distribution in positive (*Gouden Loekie*) and negative award-winning commercials (*Loden Leeuw*) were examined with a Chi-square goodness of fit test whereby the societal percentage was used as the expected value. The results showed that women were significantly underrepresented in both types of commercials (see Table A1). Nevertheless, an examination of Table A1 also shows that the distribution of gender on negatively valenced commercials differed significantly from the positively valenced commercials ($\chi^2(1, N = 552) = 5.324$, *Cramer's V* = .098, $p = .021$) and that compared to the census data the negatively valenced commercials are slightly less skewed.

Age

According to the Dutch census bureau [CBS] in 2017, 18.5% of the Dutch population ($N = 17,081,507$) was categorized as a senior (CBS, 2017). The age distribution in positive (*Gouden Loekie*) and negative award-winning commercials (*Loden Leeuw*) were examined with a Chi-square goodness of fit test whereby the societal percentage was used as the expected value. The results showed that the elderly were significantly underrepresented in both positive and negative award-winning commercials (see Table A1). An examination of Table A1 shows that the distribution of age on negatively valenced commercials differed significantly from the distribution in the positively valenced commercials ($\chi^2(6, N = 552) = 14.634$, *Cramer's V* = .163, $p = .023$) and that compared to the census data the positively valenced commercials are slightly less skewed.

Ethnicity

According to the Dutch census bureau [CBS] in 2017, 12,7% of the Dutch population ($N = 17,081,507$) was categorized as an ethnic minority (CBS, 2017). The ethnic age distribution in positive (*Gouden Loekie*) and negative award-winning commercials (*Loden Leeuw*) were examined with a Chi-square goodness of fit test whereby the societal percentage was used as the expected value. The results showed that ethnic minorities were not underrepresented compared to society in both positive and negative award-winning commercials (see Table A1), and there were no significant differences in the ethnic distribution between the two types of commercials ($\chi^2 (1, N = 552) = .498$, *Cramer's V* = .030, $p = .480$).

*Stereotyped Presentation**Gender*

As can be seen in Table A2, the results with regard to gender-stereotyped portrayals reveal that in general female voice-overs are underrepresented compared to male voice-overs in both types of commercials, and negative award winning-commercials (*Loden Leeuw*) incorporate significantly more female voice-overs than positive award-winning commercials (*Gouden Loekie*) ($\chi^2 (1, N = 194) = 7.004$, *Cramer's V* = .190, $p = .008$). Furthermore, results also reveal that women are under-represented in the working role in both types of commercials, but negative award winning-commercials (*Loden Leeuw*) incorporate significantly more working females than positive award-winning commercials (*Gouden Loekie*) ($\chi^2 (1, N = 223) = 4.071$, *Cramer's V* = .135, $p = .044$). Finally, in the portrayal of the stereotyped role of parent, there were no differences between the two types of commercials ($\chi^2 (1, N = 77) = .010$, *Cramer's V* = .011, $p = .920$).

Age

Previous research indicated a level of frailty or helplessness in the portrayal of the elderly. As can be seen in Table A2, helplessness was rarely an issue in the commercials, the elderly form the age groups that is the least in need of assistance or help, and in this regard there is no significant difference between the two types of commercials ($\chi^2 (2, N = 24) = 1.461$, *Cramer's V* = .247, $p = .834$).

Ethnicity

Finally, as can be seen in Table A2 the exaggeration of minority culture, in the representation of ethnic minorities was used in around a quarter of the positively awarded commercials, and around one-fifth of the negatively awarded commercials. There was no significant difference between the two types of commercials in the use of this exaggeration ($\chi^2 (2, N = 57) = 1.962$, *Cramer's V* = .184, $p = .365$).

Discussion

With this study, we aimed to assess if there were differences in the representation of minority groups in positive and negative award-winning commercials. The results revealed that in line with decades of previous research women were underrepresented in both types of commercials compared to their presence in society (Bartsch et al., 2000; Furnham & Paltzer, 2011). However, positive award-winning commercials show more a more skewed distribution of men and women than negative award-winning commercials. Positive award-winning commercials also reveal a higher degree of gender stereotyping in significantly less female voice-overs and less working women than negative award-winning commercials. This is in line with previous research on award-winning commercials, which concluded that men are overrepresented in positive award-winning commercials and women are stereotypically portrayed via the roles that they are given (Chao, 2005; Davis & Carson, 1998; Marshall, 2006; Montano, 2004).

Additionally, the elderly were also underrepresented in both types of commercials (although less so in positive award-winning commercials) compared to their presence in society, which was also in line with previous research (Chao, 2005; Peterson & Ross, 1997; Roy & Harwood, 1997). Finally, ethnic minorities were contrary to previous research not underrepresented compared to their presence in society in either of the types of commercials (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Davis & Carson, 1998). The stereotypical exaggeration of minority culture was present in around 20–25% of the commercials that featured a minority main character (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000), but did not differ between the two types of commercials.

Contrary to the general advancements in terms of equality for various minorities we have seen in many societies including the Netherlands, in terms of representation in politics, in education and in the workforce as well as the increase in more egalitarian views (EUAFR, 2018; UNDP, 2018), Dutch television advertising continues to underrepresent women, and the elderly compared to their presence in society and depict women in a stereotypical manner. This leads to the conclusion – in line with the cross-cultural work by Matthes et al. (2016) as well as specific representation studies in the Dutch context (Daalmans & Ter Horst, 2017; Koeman et al., 2007) – that progressive countries do not necessarily depict minority groups in more progressive ways in television advertising.

Finally, while advertising professionals who create the commercials are often considered “cultural intermediaries” (Cronin, 2004), their decision-making process about the representation of minorities in advertising, and their ideas about advertising effectiveness is rarely considered (Grau & Zotos, 2016). The scant research that is focused on these professionals reveal that they are more tolerant of stereotyped content than consumers are (Grau & Zotos, 2016), which might have consequences for their implementation of this content. Furthermore, previous research has (up until the recent study by Unilever) consistently revealed that advertisements with more traditional, stereotype conforming portrayal of particularly women, trigger more favorable affective and cognitive responses to the ads by consumers (Zawisza & Cinnirella, 2010). These consistent research findings coupled with advertising professionals more lenient attitude towards stereotyped content, might lead these advertisers to include more stereotypical portrayals because they perceive

their audiences as being more comfortable and positive with those portrayals. Nevertheless, more research is needed to disentangle this complicated relationship of the creators of this mediated content and its consequences.

With this study, the knowledge regarding the representation of minorities on Dutch award-winning television commercials has been updated and expanded. The fact that positive award-winning commercials showed a relatively more skewed distribution of men and women compared to census data than negative award-winning commercials, as well as a higher degree of stereotyping for gender warrants closer attention via both content-analysis and reception research. Future research should endeavor to analyze the relationship between stereotyped content and actual liking of these portrayals, since in this study the award-winning status was taken as a proxy measure for liking, and no claims regarding the mechanisms (such as processing fluency or reactance) that drive the liking of these representations can be made based on these data. Even though the Netherlands is generally moving towards a more egalitarian society each year – and even though marketing research has revealed that non-stereotypical ads are more liked and more effective (Weed, 2017), these results implicitly contradict these assessments and therefore warrant future research.

Notes

1. Raw data file, data file used for analyses and samples from the analyzed commercials can be found on OSF: <https://osf.io/9dm3u/>.
2. A post-hoc sensitivity analysis in Gpower revealed that based on the number of commercial and 80% power, we could detect at least an effect of Cohen's $w = 0.17$.
3. We also coded if the characters were human ($n = 552$) or non-human ($n = 20$) (in which the non-humans were sometimes difficult to code in terms of gender), and decided in light of the goal of this study that we would run the analyses with only the humans.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/dkrmw/>

Open Scholarship



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Appendices

Table A1 Presence of Minority Groups in Dutch Award-Winning Commercials Compared to Dutch Census.

<i>Gender</i>	Gouden Loeki*	Loden Leeuw**	Census	χ^2
Men	70.3	60.9	49.6	* $\chi^2(1) = 50.514, p = .000$
Women	29.7	39.1	50.4	** $\chi^2(1) = 13.127, p =$
Total	N = 296	N = 256	N = 17,081,507	.000
<i>Age</i>	Gouden Loeki*	Loden Leeuw**	Census	χ^2
Young	11.6	6.3	22.3	* $\chi^2(2) = 57.111, p =$
Adult	81.6	91.4	59.2	.000
Senior	6.8	2.3	18.5	** $\chi^2(2) = 105.064,$
Total	N = 296	N = 256	N = 17,081,507	$p = .000$
<i>Ethnicity</i>	Gouden Loeki*	Loden Leeuw**	Census	χ^2
Caucasian	90.5%	88.7%	87.3%	* $\chi^2(1) = 2.778, p = .096$
Ethnic minority	9.5%	11.3%	12.7%	** $\chi^2(1) = .450, p =$
Total	N = 296	N = 256	N = 17,081,507	.502

Table A2 Stereotyped Portrayal of Minority Groups (In Proportions) in Dutch Award-Winning Commercials.

	Gouden Loeki	Loden Leeuw
Voice-over	N = 87	N = 107
Male	81.6	64.5
Female	18.4**	35.5*
Professional role	N = 117	N = 106
Male	83.8	72.6
Female	16.2	27.4*
Parental	N = 40	N = 37
Male	52.5	51.4
Female	47.5	48.6
Need for assistance	N = 23	N = 1
Young	39.1	100
Adult	39.1	0
Senior	21.8	0
Exaggeration of minority culture	N = 28	N = 29
Yes	25.0	17.2
No, it is counter-stereotypical	10.7	3.4
No	64.3	79.3

* Exceeds expectations based on adjusted standardized residuals.

** Falls below expectations based on adjusted standardized residuals.