

**Images function on many different levels, both reflecting society and playing an active part in recreating that society. Do representations in advertising reflect the diversity in our multicultural society?**

An advertisement is more than a label attached to a given product or commodity to highlight its availability in the market place. Its importance is as paramount as the commodity in which it is deeply embedded. Consumers do not simply purchase the product or service out of necessity, but moreover because of the image that is constructed within the advertisement that accompanies the commodity. They are making an ideological transaction - they are buying the image or statement that the product says about its user, procuring not just objects but the ideas and meanings carefully orchestrated by the advertisers.

The world depicted by advertisers is more than “ideal”, it is portrayed as real and attainable, the only world in which we should live and flourish as a consequence. Individual advertisements actively infer certain meanings and reproduce particular social ideologies which can subsequently reinforce inequality and domination of a preferred culture in society. Judith Williamson argues that advertisements “do not impose their meaning upon us from above but we construct the meaning of an advertisement, at the same time reproducing dominant norms”. Williamson continues that readers will “fill in the gaps deliberately left by advertisers, which often have significant class, gender and racial overtones”.

Advertisements are sometimes designed to exclude particular viewers from seeing themselves in the advertisement via the use of models of a particular race. Pivotal to the effectiveness of an advertisement is identity - the consumer must be able to identify that the representation in the advertisement, and therefore the commodity, is targeted at them. It is at this point that the consumer embraces the image's meaning and is now unknowingly reinforcing particular aspects of a dominant ideology. Williamson comments that this subjective interpretation is "done almost instantly so that it is thought to be natural or common sense to view the advertisement in this manner".

A 1999 report for the Independent Television Commission studied the presence of multicultural minorities in advertising on television. The most common commodity category featuring ethnic minorities was "Food and Drink". This accounted for twenty per cent of all ethnic advertisements. When advertisers wish to place emphasis on foreign cuisine, they commonly use an actor that hails from the same origin as that food or drink. For example, an advertisement for Lilt uses a black-Caribbean as its central character. Not only is the drink and the actor in an indigenous setting, a Rastafarian voice-over is employed to further add to the authenticity of the tropical location and the drink. However, the intonation and pitch adopted in the voice-over is very deliberate- it is slow and exaggerated. This harbours overtones of the stereotypical perception of the Rastafarian -laid back, cool and relaxed, all qualities that the advertisers wish Lilt to be associated with. Furthermore, embedded within the cliched image of the Rastafarian is the notion that they are explicitly all marijuana smokers, lifted from the notably slow and drawn

voice-over. This further fuels the preconception of the ultra laid -back and cool Rastafarian, is more appealing to the youth market at which the drink is targeted, and encourages them to buy in to this perpetuated stereotype.

Continuing in their report the ITC noted significant findings in the tone of advertisements featuring ethnic characters. Fifty per cent of adverts depicting people of “Far Eastern” origin had a “Wacky/Humorous” or “Surreal” tone, at least thirty per cent more than other ethnic groups in the same category. An advertisement for Oriental Express ready meals again uses a cultural stereotype, this time with a “humorous” slant. A Japanese man is speaking at a high tempo and in a high pitch. He states that the meal is “ideal for big lazy like you”. Again the advertisers are nurturing a stereotype, depicting Japanese as manic and comical and highlighting in the text an apparent poor comprehension of English. This does not acknowledge that their whole alphabet and indeed linguistic structure is markedly different to that of western culture, hence their adoption of an entirely native tongue will inevitably result in verbal discrepancies. However, there are many people of oriental heritage who are born and raised in western culture whom may find this offensive, particularly when it would have been possible to read the text in a fluent and regular manner.

Similarly, ethnic advertisements with a “Sensuous/Sexy” tone account for twenty-two per cent of all advertisements featuring participants of black origin, whilst “Asian” “Far Eastern” and “Other Ethnic” pooled only three per cent collectively. The report found that black people featured heavily in

advertisements for music albums. The connotations entwined in music are many :movement, dancing, rhythm and beat have strong links with freedom, expression, sensuality, sexuality and virility. Advertisers are keen for the audience to infer this preferred meaning and employ black models, who are celebrated for their emotion in music and dancing, to foreground these connotations.

Advertisements for financial institutions illuminated difference again between white and ethnic minority participants. Seventeen per cent of all adverts featuring white participants were for financial institutions, compared to only ten per cent for ethnic minorities. It appears banking is a bastion for white representatives, as advertisers for financial institutions are keen to impress a notion of trust, honesty and sound business acumen. These are attributes not commonly associated with stereotypical images of blacks, often painted as untrustworthy, dishonest and linked to income of illegitimate means. It carries overtones of the purity and cleanliness of being white, instilled not only by advertising but throughout the history of art, literature and cinema.

The report also found that the immediate location of ethnic participants in advertisements adhered to several stereotypes. "Black Americans" accounted for eleven per cent of all their appearances in a "Menacing" or "Urban" setting, at least seven per cent greater than any other ethnic group. Seventeen per cent of "Asian" appearances were at "Work" , again greater than any other group. These classifications support the recognised stereotype of the

streetwise ghetto gangster and the innate work ethic stereotypically associated with black Americans and Asians respectively.

The examination of the role played by ethnic minorities and white participants in advertisements extracted comparable differences. The role of the “worker” for the white participant was evident in twenty -one per cent of adverts, against just ten per cent for ethnic participants. An inference can be drawn that, excluding Asians outline above, white people are portrayed as more hard working. The social implication of gainful employment is that workers pay taxes and so form the financial backbone of society. Conversely, ethnic minorities are seldom shown in a work environment and thus derive a benefit based income, draining the resources injected into the economy by the white worker.

Current advertisements appear reluctant to puncture the advertisers’ ideological equilibrium. A recent Halifax advertisement shows a black man singing the virtues of said bank to the lyrically amended tune of “Sex Bomb” by Tom Jones. The black participant wears a suit and an ever -present smile bouncing up and down in slow motion. The apparent imperative for the composers of the advert was to relinquish the stuffy and sterile image attached with banks and building societies. Here it is suggested that the black participant is the embodiment and personification of the bank - fun, happy, relaxed and friendly. He has a personable and approachable face - the face of Halifax. The agency has actively neglected to show the black representative in a more earnest role, instead trading on the stereotypical attributes of his ethnicity.

A recent advertisement for an insurance company featured a number of participants who supposedly work for the company, introducing themselves and their respective roles within that company. The final member of the team, a black participant, quips “ And I’m the token black man in the advert”. It is debatable whether this recognition of ethnic and cultural exclusion is an advancement, or is instead a new quirk to appease the ever-increasing need for novel and inventive slants in advertising.

One of the most vulnerable groups in society to the forces of advertising are children as they are incapable of deconstructing the loaded imagery before them. Exposed to dozens of images everyday, their young minds interpret representations literally, inferring meanings as true and without question. A current advertisement for Disneyland shows two excited children unable to sleep due to the wonderment surrounding their pending trip. The filming of the advert is covered in a glossy veneer, and supposedly captures the elation and anticipation exuded by what is clearly a white family set against the backdrop of a middle class home. The advert shows exactly what they are awaiting, panning across Disneyland's attractions and focusing on holiday-makers already there enjoying its pleasures. The entire advert omits the depiction of every cultural group except whites. The marketing of Disney has always traded on being the epitome of youth, fun, purity and representing the magical imagination and innocence of children. However, the advert strongly brings to the surface the issue of mass exclusion, showing Disneyland to be a phenomenon that can only be enjoyed by white, western cultured children. It

exclude wholly the many minority cultures that also queue to be enchanted by their films and then consume their merchandise.

It can be argued that advertisements portray only a fantasy world, an outlet for the consumer to experience a pocket of satisfaction from a world that is a marked departure from their own. However, we do not view and interpret them as isolated visions of perfection. Each advertisement, regardless of the commodity it wishes to foreground, conspires to fabricate a web of lifestyles ideals which seep into the consciousness where they mutate into beliefs.

Goffman says of advertisements "One can probably make a significant negative statement about them, namely, that *as pictures* they are not perceived as peculiar and unnatural". Images projected in advertisements are not innocuous. We are repeatedly invited to read the multi-level meanings of advertisements every day. Cultural representations or misrepresentations can further alienation and oppression via the exclusion of people constructed as different or even inferior. Iain Ramsay comments that "discrimination in consumption markets may be fuelled by cultural stereotypes which may in turn be fuelled by advertising stereotypes".

Advertisers skewed reflection of society to satisfy its own capitalist agenda is compounded by its notable neglect of the multi-cultural composition of society. It appears only certain facets of minority culture can penetrate the all-pervasive western, white culture. Ultimately, however, those facets must first be refined, distilled and presented virtuous so as to ever enhance the commercial appeal of the commodity. Advertisements highlight the cultural

position of society via subliminal meaning. The current array of advertisements would suggest society's position is firmly on white, western culture, with minority cultures fixed on the periphery.

The inherent problem surrounding advertising is that it is regulated under a criteria of "taste", "decency" and "the likelihood to cause offence". This reduces the overwhelming expanse of advertising to that of an abstract. Advertisements are reviewed singularly and thus the broader issues of exclusion, the political histories of some social groups and the conceptualisation of ideologies escapes regulatory criticism. It could be argued that it is the laws and regulation on advertising that first must be addressed before the mindsets of advertisers can ever be realigned.



## **Bibliography**

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