

## Racism In Advertising

In 2018 you would think that brands and advertising executives completely understand and believe in the power of positive representation of marginalized groups. As time moves forward and after years of supposed progression, one would assume that businesses and organizations would be able to spot racism in an advertisement during the initial conception, however that is not nearly the case. Recently, numerous well known brands have come under fire for publishing perceived racist advertisements rather it be via print, social media, tv or all of the above. More specifically, a great of example of this issue stems from the huge backlash H&M received after sharing advertisements of a young African American boy in a green hoodie that read “Coolest Monkey In The Jungle.” Now from first sight many can tell what is wrong this image and why it should have never been shared. With a long history of African Americans being mocked as animals and more specifically, monkeys, this ad was definitely not a winner. Surprisingly, H&M is not the only company to experience racial backlash. The cycle seems pretty standard, a racist ad is published, the public becomes enraged , the company apologizes , and then the same cycle repeats with a different brand. In my opinion this is an issue that runs deep within the systematic processes of companies who fail to hear the public voice and seldomly include diversity within their ranks. In addition to a systemic problem, racism in advertising also stems from a lack of poor communication. Companies fail to communicate with all constituents of their audiences, they fail to become informed on best communication practices and they also fail to simply pay attention to social cues and world around them.

So why exactly is this such a big issue? The immediate answer seems pretty obvious because as we all know ethically, racism just isn't right. However when you extend your critical lens and world view there's more to the problem than what meets the eye. Racism in advertising sheds a bright light on our society and tells the truth about how much we've progressed. In a Pew Research Center Survey they found that 43% of African Americans are skeptical that equality in society will ever occur<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, as time moves on our world is becoming more diverse and individuals are looking to see themselves represented accurately. As stated in an article by Oona King, published on the Google think database, "The demographic shift of the ad audience has far outpaced the demographic shift of the ad industry. Over 70% of diverse millennials would like to see better race related advertisements and representation<sup>2</sup>." From this we can see just how much the advertising field needs to make a change. As time moves forward we should not be rewinding the clock backwards. Instead we should be celebrating all ethnic backgrounds, cultures and religions and it should be positively highlighted in the ads we see everyday.

When I think about who has been impacted by racism in advertising there are many entities that come to mind. First I consider the marginalized groups who have to see themselves portrayed poorly as well those who are constantly reminded of the inequality that exists in America. Then my mind shifts back to the company who has to deal with the backlash which hopefully turned into a lesson learned. Finally, as an extension of marginalized groups I think about the children who may have come across the advertisement in some way. As we've learned in this course, there are specific regulations and restrictions that are set in place for what can be advertised towards children and this is for a good reason. The impressionable minds of youth are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://goo.gl/pdzc73>

<sup>2</sup> <https://goo.gl/BicNpG>

developing and shaping into what they will become in the future. When they catch a glimpse of ads that don't portray those in which they identify with in the best light, it impacts their sense of self. I can relate because as a young girl the media played a large role in what I deemed to be acceptable in society. I remember watching tv and being excited to see the very few ads that showed young children of color doing things like going to school or being productive. I also vividly remember the ads that showed children of color being from broken homes and other ads that promoted the theory that lighter is better. I say this to say that ads aren't merely short clips that go away. They stick with us and create narratives around groups that can either be positive or negative in nature.

So how do we fix this issue? Well I must say, there isn't a quick fix button to press or a simple book that will eradicate the problem however there are plenty ways to make steps toward change. I propose that companies begin by simply starting the conversation. Incorporate diversity trainings, encourage colorful conversation amongst employees and executives, communicate with respective teams and most importantly take responsibility for the message that is being shared. A part of the suggestions mentioned above is making sure that companies have teams that represent society. I believe that plenty of problematic advertisements would have been flagged if there were people from underrepresented groups involved in the process. Lastly but most importantly, establishing effective communication practices with the public is key. Brands should get out and hear the voices of consumers and learn their worldview so they can in turn know how to best speak to them via advertising. I also believe that if brands and advertising execs won't take on the challenge, platforms and networks should practice self regulation to

determine what is shared. If changes are made and voices are heard ads can improve and our society can continue working towards progression.

As previously stated, there is no easy fix to the issues at hand. Brands and companies cannot simply press a button to prevent racism in their ads however they can take steps to better communicate and sharpen their lens on the world. I am hopeful that businesses like H&M are learning from the world around them, increasing diversity in the boardrooms, and making a change for the better.

## Sources

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