

Embracing diversity, gender and race equality in Advertising.

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4. Your Word count, including all in-text references and quotation text, but excluding your bibliography;

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2500 words

Diversity, gender and equality in advertising; reflections or illusions?

In this essay, embracing diversity refers to the active inclusion, visibility and representation of people from varied racial, gender, and cultural identities within media and advertising; not just as tokens of identity but as authentic participants in the creative process. “To embrace diversity within media is to ensure that people of different identities are not merely visible but have agency in how they are represented.” (Ross, 2014, p. 5). In recent years, advertising has made great strides towards diversity in the modern day, but is it performative?

Advertising has always been a ‘mirror of society’, encouraging social ideas and norms; however, ads historically promote beauty standards that are narrow, representing straight, white, middle-class individuals. In the modern day, this does not represent the average person in society. Is diversity in advertising just being used as a marketing tool to simulate equality? Or do large companies actually care about representing the average person in modern society, Hall (1997) frames this shift as an effort to “speak from the margins” rather than reproduce dominant norms.

Inequality in advertising is rooted in history, early 20th century advertising was dominated by western ideals; white, slim, heterosexual and patriarchal. Laura Mulvey (1975) said “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly.”; which explains that in traditional cinema (and by extension advertising), the camera and narrative are controlled by men. The “male gaze” projects male desires onto women, showing how media is shaped by patriarchal desire to please men regardless of target audience. This theory can be applied to modern day advertising, however started in early advertising, women were often portrayed as dependent housewives, whereas men were considered dominant consumers. “Omo detergent ads” (1950s, UK): Showed smiling mothers doing laundry, this emphasised that women had strict roles and that consumerism was tied to domestic virtue. These ads were a subtle reinforcement of male dominance and patriarchal social order; in modern fashion ads the theory of male gaze continues with ‘over sexualised’ media to please the ‘male imagination’.

In history, racial minorities were either completely invisible or misrepresented as caricatures, this reflected colonial mindsets and the systemic fascism of the time. Frantz Fanon (1952) explained that the colonial gaze in historic advertising forced black people to view themselves through the lens of white supremacists, accepting the advertised stereotypes of inferiority. Advertising portrayed people of colour as inhuman, often persuading the public that they were inferior or “dirty”, “Between 1880 and 1915 ... advertisements regularly showed African-American children being washed

white; darkest bodies equated with dirt and impurity.” (Zimring, C. A. (2015)). This mass propaganda influenced centuries of hate and oppression towards minorities, iterating that people of colour were less-than or non-human.

As a result of such negative historical representation including, anti-gay aids propaganda, anti-black imagery and sexist ideologies; stigmas were developed against certain social groups, creating a vast divide between them and those the media considered marketable. The theory by Roland Barthes (1957) discusses how media and ads create “myths”, turning social constructs and theories into “natural truths”. The people who played on the marketable downfall of minorities are the ones who naturalised bias within media. It could be argued that the modern push for diversity only exists because the media has spent centuries normalising exclusion, this shows how uneducated opinions have ricocheted into today's negative reactions to diversity in advertising. The postcolonial & critical race media theory describes that representation is a site of power struggle, it explores how colonial media built hierarchies that modern diversity now tries to dismantle. Homi Bhabha’s ideas on “hybridity” (1994) suggest that colonised identities were forced to imitate whiteness whereas modern diversity celebrates hybridity instead; proving the idea of reparations for colonial mimicry. The current demand for diversity in advertising can't be separated from the history of propaganda and representation that precede it. For most of the 20th century, advertising and media served as ideological tools that reinforced racial and gender hierarchies rather than challenged them. Without acknowledging the historical role of propaganda in shaping who was seen as human, beautiful, or desirable, it is impossible to understand why contemporary diversity feels so urgent, or why its absence remains so visible.

Shifts in representation refers to the way advertising and media change over time in the way they depict specific social groups and identities. The shifts in diversity reflect wider cultural and political changes; as issues like race, gender and sexuality become more apparent, advertising adjusts the images that it uses. Stuart Hall (1997) states that Representation is not merely the reflection of reality, but the work through which meaning is actively constructed. This directly supports the idea that representation changes because culture changes, it gives theoretical grounding to argue that advertising is not passive; it constructs inclusive meanings in modern advertising.

As explained previously with historical context, advertising before the 1960s was predominantly white, patriarchal and heteronormative; whilst often showing women as objects and barely representing minorities. The shift away from stereotyped racial and gender imagery in advertising during the 1960s-1980s was largely driven by social movements rather than the industry itself. Douglas Kellner (1995) states that media culture helps shape the prevailing view of the world, reproducing existing discourses

and social struggles. The civil rights movement from 1954 to 1968, moved to end legalised racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans, the movement grew out of issues following the civil war. This movement affected advertising as there was a large demand to stop racist representation, civil rights activism exposed how harmful earlier advertising had been; specifically in its use of racist caricatures and complete exclusion of Black consumers. The period of second-wave feminism fought against systemic inequalities against women's rights, S. Laurel Weldon (et,al. 2023) states that understanding the long connection with the struggles of racialised and colonised women helps to illuminate its potential as a source for gender justice today. As a result of this movement, feminism challenged sexist portrayals in the media

*However, early representation was often superficial; minority models were included intermittently and within narrow beauty standards, reflecting tokenism rather than genuine inclusion.

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- S. Laurel Weldon, Amber Lusvardi, Kaitlin Kelly-Thompson, Summer Forester, Feminist waves, global activism, and gender violence regimes: Genealogy and impact of a global wave, *Women's Studies International Forum*, Volume 99, 2023,
- Weldon, S. L., et al. (2023) 'Feminism and Intersectionality', in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
(If your citation comes from another specific article or chapter, I can update this.)
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- 1) Historical Context
- 2) Shifts in Representation
- 3) Backlash and audience reactions
- 4) “Woke-washing” and capitalism
- 5) Can advertising reflect reality?
- 6) Conclusion