The changing relationship between brands and their audiences.

Expression or Exploitation?

Coexistent perspectives

Martin Bush

Changing relationships

Given the diversification of communication platforms and the exponential growth of emerging technologies, we will consider and analyse how the relationship between brands and their audiences has changed as a result of the contemporary zeitgeist.

Do you like me?

We will consider the changing ethical and emotional relationship between brands and their audiences with particular emphasis on race, gender and disability.

Contemporary debate

‘Social purpose has been a hot topic over the past few years. [Since] 2020, it’s become common for brands to embed a social purpose of some kind into their business model …’

‘Brands will recognise that it’s not just enough to sell to people. They will need to think really carefully about what they stand for. Increasingly, viewers and consumers are going to be wanting to spend their money and their time with brands that share their values.’

(*The Drum*, August 2020)

Over the last 30 to 40 years there has been a cultural and societal change in attitudes towards race, gender and disability and this has lead to a growing ethical and emotional relationship between brands and their audiences.

If we look at some advertising campaigns for mainstream brands such as *Argos*, *John Lewis* and *Sainsburys* we can clearly identify this cultural and ethical change in the content of these commercials.

What was once fetishized, now sits in the conventional mainstream domain.

Argos, *Life's Here. Be Ready by* The &Partnership 2021

John Lewis, *Let Life Happen* by adam&eveDDB 2021

Sainsburys, *Gravy Song* by Wieden+Kennedy 2020

Advertising’s once highly criticised persuasive messages, have seemingly been replaced by an alignment to ethical ideas.

There has been a shift from ‘pushing’ information on to audiences, to instigating brand conversations around carefully selected subjects.

As a result, the creation of ethically aware messaging has transferred from previous controversial margins to the mainstream.

Poor cultural representation in advertising

However, it is certainly evident from one poll that representation has not been resolved in advertising, and there is still much to be done.

A total of 51% of black and minority ethnic (BAME) people think television advertising does not represent different cultures well, according to a Channel 4 survey.

This is in comparison to 38% of white people saying different cultures were not represented well, and 41% saying black and brown cultures were badly portrayed. (Channel 4)

Introducing *Benetton*

For the purpose of our analysis of contemporary advertising it is worth considering the creative work for a brand created in the late 20th century that, in many ways, was tackling these inequalities well before brands of our present times.

That brand is *Benetton*.

Benetton

Before ethical awareness became a mainstream advertising practice, Italian fashion brand, Benetton, under the creative direction of photographer Oliviero Toscani, embraced the universal and immensely powerful productive agency of sensation. Toscani provoked our internal response to make the Benetton brand work effective.

Through traditional advertising platforms he would challenge mainstream opinion and promote greater knowledge and understanding of social and cultural issues through his *Shock of Reality* and *Unhate* campaigns of the 1990s.

The *'United Colors of Benetton'* strapline quickly began to manifest itself into the metaphorical vehicle that highlighted the complexities of society and culture.

Oliviero Toscani

Oliviero Toscani's creative work for Benetton was divisive. His campaigns polarised opinion, often being described as being exploitative.

His work used challenging visual statements that dealt with issues including racism, religion, homophobia and human rights.

"I tell a story with images relating to the moment of history I am in."

These issues remain central to the contemporary cultural zeitgeist, it is just that Toscani was addressing these 30 – 40 years ago.

The debate is whether Toscani was exploiting the subject matter to raise the *Benetton* brand profile (i.e. sell sweaters!), or trying to elicit an ethical response to the subject matter, by making us feel something about the subject.

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.

In November 1990 *LIFE Magazine* published journalism student Therese Frare's image of gay activist and AIDS victim David Kirby as he lay on his death bed. Two years later Benetton used the image, coloured by artist Ann Rhoney with oil paint, for its campaign.

Despite a backlash by many AIDS activists who believed it spread fear of sufferers and commoditised suffering, and a global campaign to boycott the company, Kirby's father Bill stated, "Benetton is not using us, we're using Benetton … If that photograph helps someone … then it's worth whatever pressure we have to go through."

It was, according to Benetton, the first public campaign to address AIDS other than those created by government institutions. That year the disease had become the number one cause of death for US men aged 25 to 44. Benetton claimed it wanted to "go beyond purely preventative measures and touch upon subjects such as solidarity with AIDS patients".'

La Pietà

The image appears to have a biblical reference to the death of Christ. It was chosen for its' emotional qualities and to highlight the prejudice towards the condition at that time. It was used with the permission of the family:

"We don't feel we've been used by Benetton, but rather the reverse: David is speaking much louder now that he's dead, than he did when he was alive."

The documentary photograph taken by journalism student Therese Frare, had actually been created to document the life of carers.

Toscanni commented:

“I called the picture of David Kirby and his family *“La Pietà ”* because it is a Pietà which is real. The Michelangelo Pietàs during the Renaissance might be fake, Jesus Christ may never have existed. But we know this death happened. This is the real thing.”

To provide context and explore the potential reasons why Benetton was producing this work we can look at the advertising environment at that time. It was mainstream political rhetoric and propaganda that Toscanni was challenging such as the following example form form the UK in the 1980’s.

AIDS

Toscani was addressing mainstream condemnation, misunderstanding and homophobia in the hope of addressing the injustice, ignorance, intolerance and bigotry of parts of contemporary society.

(Or … was he just selling sweaters?)

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.

This composition embedded duality in its messaging. On the one hand it was a positive message of racial integration and equality. It was hopeful, progressive, intellectually and aesthetically compelling.

On the other it sinisterly refers to the practice of the ‘Wet Nurse’, a role often forced on to enslaved females.

In the early 19th century, enslaved females were considered high value in western cultures and were used to breast feed plantation owners children.

Highlighting this exploitation allowed Toscani to tackle some of the issues that were not being addressed by politicians or the mainstream media, specifically racism. His chosen imagery provided challenge.

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.
dauphin

Giusy

Guisy clearly identified the cultural and societal backdrop within which advertising was operating at the time – the fear of the unfamiliar.

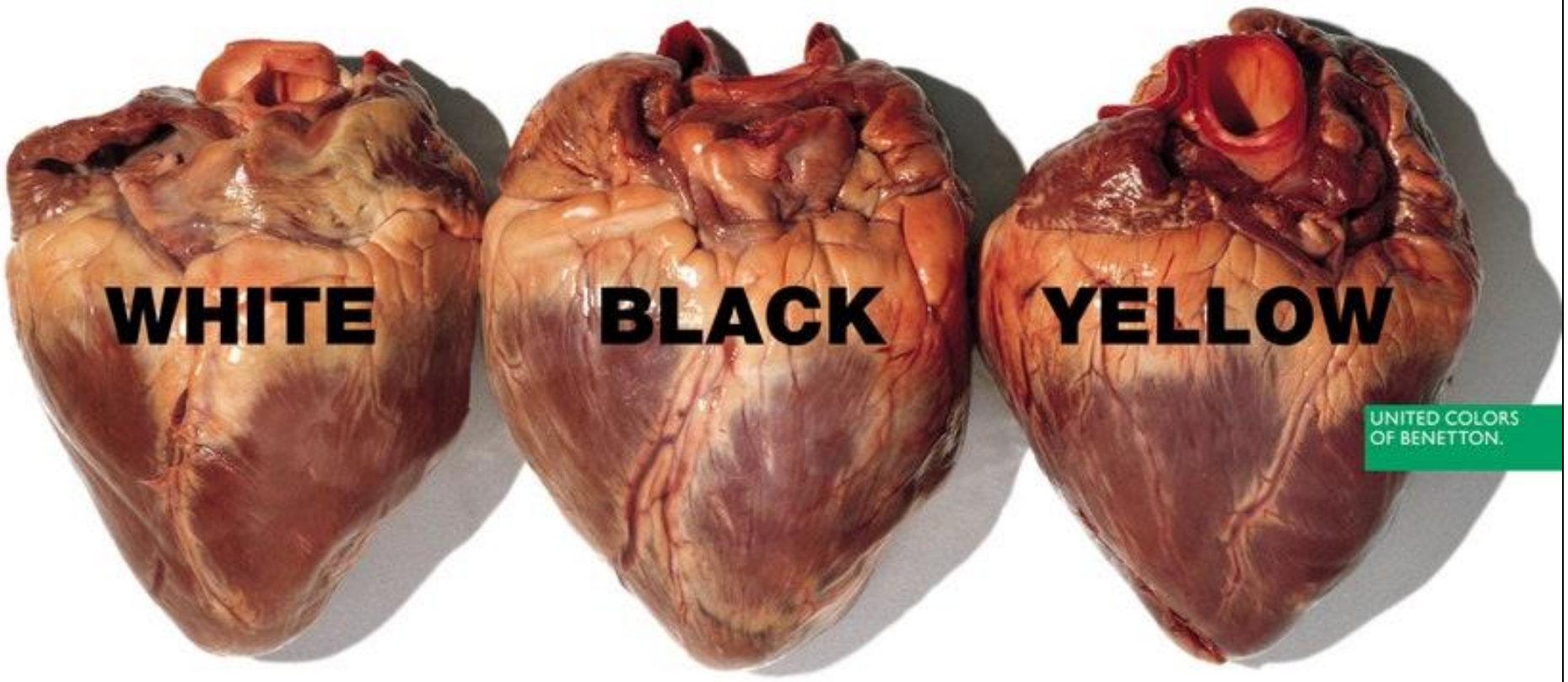
Published in 1991, this was described by Benetton as an ‘anthem for life’. Toscani once again taps in to the internal reactions and direct experience of the audience rather than structuralist semiotic interpretations of the work. This is what the audience at the time were not prepared to encounter.

The presentation of this ‘corporeal reality’ aligns with the post-structuralist idea of ‘abjection’. This has been written about extensively by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*) and is built around the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

Feelings of trauma and repulsion from the sight of the blood and umbilical cord embody the abject encounter:

‘Kristeva theorises abjection in distinctly phenomenological terms, associating the abject with all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle singular bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, ejaculation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Indeed, Kristeva primarily understands experiences of abjection in terms of bodily affect, moments of physical revulsion and disgust that result in `a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out‘ (1982: 1).

Kristeva, J.(1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon. S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.


WHITE
BLACK
YELLOW
UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.

Toscani also exposed these same feelings of abjection through the presentation of bodily organs, in this case pigs' hearts. This time it was used to address racism which Toscani had done on numerous occasions. These life-providing organic structures carry no specific identifying traits.

They are both vital and yet often considered repulsive.

The concept of the abject challenges our notions of identity, and it is exactly this that the artwork communicates. These internal organs are externalised and removed and therefore confuse our perceptions. Our relationship with identifiable race tropes is challenged. No matter our ethnic background, this display actually shows we are all the same.

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.

In 1991 Toscanni used this composition to highlight and question the lack of diverse representation in the media, which often promotes racial and gender stereotypes.

This image presented a same sex couple in an interracial family, at a time when advertising and popular media was mostly devoid of such depictions, the representation of which was still largely fetishishized in the media. (Remember the *Argos* ad?)

Today, mainstream campaigns for products such as *McCain's* oven chips now challenge the same prejudices. It seems that the work of Benetton has paved the way for much of the mainstream commercial work we see today.

McCain TV Commercial: *We Are Family,* 2017

UNHATE
campaign
FABRICA
UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.

Pope Benedict XVI kissing Ahmed el Tayeb

A digitally manipulated picture showed Pope Benedict XVI kissing Mohammed Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Islamic grand sheikh of al-Azhar mosque in Cairo.

The press asked if this was ‘an ideal notion of tolerance, or false morality religious persecution and intolerance’?

It was Toscani’s contribution to the fight against the "culture of hate in all forms.”

Ironically its’ united criticism by both parties/faiths involved, and actually went some way to repairing a relationship that was previously strained after Pope Benedict XVI’s criticism of Egypt’s behaviour towards Christians.

The campaign against religious intolerance and homophobia had a positive effect through its’ universal condemnation.

The critics

Writer, philosopher, photographer and activist Susan Sontag (1933 – 2004) wrote extensively about photography, culture and media, AIDS and illness, human rights, communism and leftist ideology. She condemned Benetton's advertising campaigns:

'Susan Sontag claimed this to be the appropriation … by the culture of capitalism. Award-winning photographs on burning social issues of the day were appropriated to the business of selling sweaters. Race, poverty, and pollution were among the images turned into billboard advertisements, and so too was AIDS.'

(Cooter, et al. 2007)

Backlash

‘An enormous furore was generated over it: in Germany it was taken to court; in France billstickers refused to post it; and, in Britain, The Guardian (the first newspaper to run it as a full-page ad) was inundated with letters of complaint. In addition to those disturbed by its apparent blasphemy, were those outraged by what was regarded as a particularly aggressive form of cultural and economic imperialism.’

Cooter, Roger & Stein, Claudia. (2007). *Coming into focus: Posters, power, and visual culture in the history of medicine*. Medizinhistorisches Journal. 42. 180-209. 10.2307/25805422.

Structuralism

In critical theory this widespread reaction highlights the distinct Structuralist approach within which the work is encountered.

Our readings are arrived at by our understanding of the cultural traditions contained within the imagery – this is what makes the work appear controversial and the relationship between the brand and the content to be exploitative. We ‘read’ the images with our associated bias, we neglect to individually react the images. We participate in mass hysteria which is the phenomenon that transmits collective illusions of threats.

However, a phenomenological approach to the work may offer a more subjective perceptual experience, one that expresses or conveys meaning through how it makes us feel, rather than just what it represents.

Semiotics

Advertising has historically (and conveniently) been deconstructed through semiotics as defined by thinkers such as Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure in the 19th century.

As an approach, semiotics has been central to Structuralist thought, as it relies heavily on reference and association through societal constructs. Therefore, it has served to form the foundation of our critical understanding and critical review of advertising in recent decades.

Representation has directed our shared understanding of what we see and how we ‘read’ any image, design or artwork. It provides us with meaning and context with the aim of heightening our intellectual encounter with art. It provides collective agreement and approval.

However, it does not inform us or help us understand what to feel about the work. This experiential encounter is broadly aligned to affect theory.

Affect Theory

Affect operates not metaphorically but phenomenologically. In line with Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of phenomenology this means the internally processed conscious (or unconscious) personal experience of the world, and not an external experience that shares a predetermined and agreed meaning.

(The Basics of Philosophy. 2017)

Unlike many cultural theories connected to Structuralism, it does not insist on a single ideology. It is a fluid construct that is not quantifiable and so sits outside the confines of any manifesto:

‘Indeed, you cannot read affects, you can only experience them.’

(O’Sullivan, Simon. 2001: 126)

Affect utilises the:

‘… visceral forces beneath, alongside or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, …’

(Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J. 2010: 1)

Affect is therefore how we are internally moved by what we see. This stands outside morality, meaning, intertextuality, expectation, deconstruction or construction. This is how Benetton set about raising social issues for debate.

The Benetton advertising campaigns embraced a phenomenological approach to create awareness. The brand became secondary to the message.

Interestingly, this once highly and broadly criticised approach, has now been adopted by many mainstream brands including *Iceland Supermarkets, Barnardos, Sainsbury's* and most famously *Nike.* It has *now* become mainstream advertising strategy for the contemporary zeitgeist.

An ‘affectual’ approach to communication

As time has passed the merits and content of the Benneton campaigns in particular have become more significant.

Advertising has always been a conduit for altering or influencing behavior, and in contemporary culture this is more prevalent than ever.

The Benetton campaigns suggest the most effective ads are those that prompt us to question something or feel something, not sell us something.

As data now begins to construct and direct rational approaches to advertising messaging, it is worth remembering that people are moved by feelings, not algorithms.

Nike

The Colin Kaepernick *Dream Crazy* commercial was aired in September 2018. It was created after Kaepernick was forced to leave his position as a *San Francisco 49ers* quarterback after he took to the knee during the national anthem before a game in 2016 to protest police brutality and racial injustice.

Nike then decided to use him as the spokesperson for a new advertising campaign.

With the advent of technology, advertising messages now have far greater reach, and this is true of Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign that raised the question of racial injustice and challenged our feelings towards it.

Believe in something

Kaepernick’s mantra was significant in the light of his own personal experience of being a black man living in the United States, and the things he was observing around him in his own country:

‘believe in something, even when it means you lose everything.’

Social media and mainstream media allowed reactions to the commercial to be shared. Advertising is no longer and disseminator of messages. Technology and social media have created platforms for its’ content and aims to be debated amongst the audience and with the brand itself.

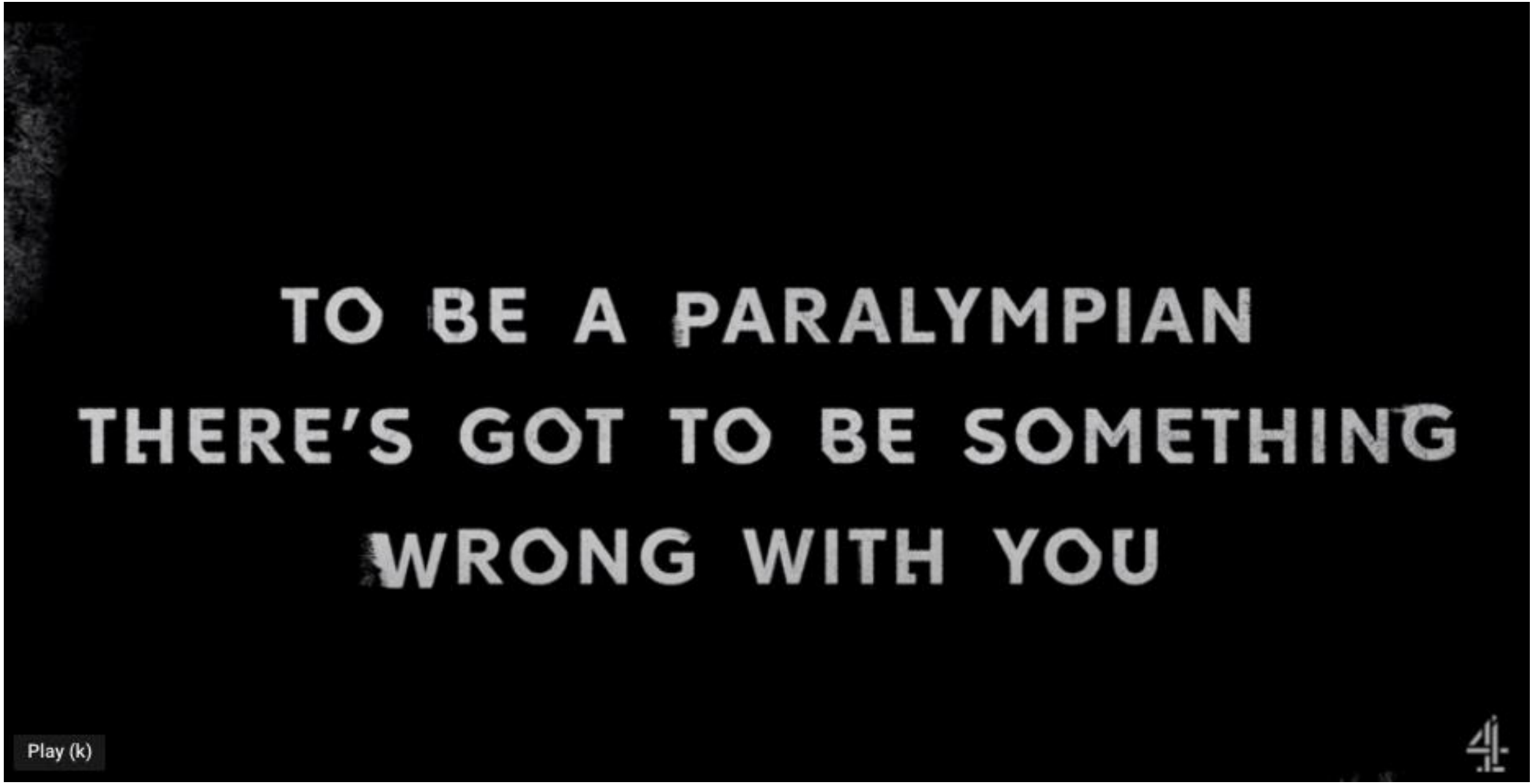
Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump
Follow
What was Nike thinking?
3:56 AM - 7 Sep 2018
29,849 Retweets 151,567 Likes
54K
30K
152K
You may also like

This commercial, much like Benetton's, met with large scale criticism. This included online indignation and the ritual burning of *Nike* products as Kaepernick was perceived to be disrespecting the American anthem.

That was until the death of George Floyd who died in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020.

The spirit and content of this commercial became globally apparent.

From this point on, taking to the knee, as a symbol for *Black Lives Matter,* became a universal display of multi-cultural solidarity. The commercial content became embedded in popular culture through aligning itself with how people felt. It was shared extensively on social media.


TO BE A PARALYMPIAN
THERE'S GOT TO BE SOMETHING
WRONG WITH YOU
Play (k)

Look …

‘We spotted an opportunity to present Paralympians in a way they hadn’t been shown before – by pointing a camera at the realities of their lives and, as with any elite athlete, the sacrifices they make in pursuit of greatness, …’

Lynsey Atkin, 4Creative’s executive creative director, on capturing the blood, sweat, sacrifices and dedication it takes to become an Olympian.

The following is the promotional film they aired.

(Channel 4: It's Rude Not to Stare by 4Creative. *The Drum.* August, 2021)

4Creative for the Tokyo Paralympics

To conclude ..

Advertising can no longer operate disingenuously or in isolation. Social media and news media platforms have made brands more transparent.

The values and beliefs of contemporary global culture and politics have also changed exponentially. As a result, so has advertising, sometimes leading, sometimes following.

There is now an appreciation that ‘consumers’ are no longer motivated by ‘things’, moreover, ‘customers’ are motivated by experiences and ethics. This has made advertising more informed and reflective. We have seen that original work will always attract controversy, but sometimes it can be the necessary conduit to effect positive change.

This leaves us with the question …

Does advertising influence popular culture, or does it hold up a mirror to our society?

Advertising has a flawed history. It is true that the advertising industry has not always provided a positive portrayal of diversity. Racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, stereotypes, discrimination can all be identified throughout the chequered history of advertising.

However, advertising is often analysed in isolation, without a broader consideration of context, that is, the times within which it was made, where was is made, and why it was made.

Its' content may actually be more indicative of the contemporary zeitgeist - a disjointed society, polarised political views, and a biased retelling of history.

Questions?