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Introduction

Within our modern world, we recognise that racial, sexual and disability abuse is not tolerated and has no place within our societies. However, we still see negative effects from certain individual events where actions towards certain groups have resulted an awareness being made and highlighting the issue. No-one, no matter how different we may see each other, should experience harassment or dis-allowed equality for their differences: we should treat others the way we would want to be treated. Advertising is a way to embrace equality for those groups of individuals who experience forms of harassment but how? People of colour, gender or disability should be given the same equality as anyone else. In this essay, I will explore this question and focus on areas such as tokenism, racism and representation to find out if advertising is embracing equality and diversity more than it currently is.

Tokenism

Brands who adapt their advertisement to embracing social movements such as BlackLivesMatter or LGBTQ+, often gain a competitive edge against other brands to show their brand supports this movement and widen their audience. But does the brand support the movement or is it just a marketing strategy? "The planet remains sharply divided between producers and consumers, and the enormous profits raked in by the super brands" (Klein, 2000, p347). Brands are often caught up in tokenism where the use of social movements are used as a marketing tactic for the brand whilst producers can distance themselves from the actual issues. Tokenism is a challenge within advertisement that allows brand's advertisements to adapt to the social movement on the surface, but not actually support it from the producer's side of the company image; as long as the consumers are consuming the product, the gap between them and the producers always remains distant. Movements such as LGBTQ+ are now starting to feel demoralised and mistreated within the advertising industry as "they feel there aren't enough LGBTQ people shown in marketing, and 55% consider the community to be "invisible" in advertising" (Rodrick, 2017). However, as an example, this tokenism can be seen whenever pride month occurs every year where, I feel, brands always make the effort to use the symbolic rainbow-coloured icons as well as mixed pronoun identifiers on their adverts. So, do brands face tokenism as a challenge in advertisement just to secure a wider audience and captivate this marketing opportunity or are the brands genuinely in support of this type of movement within advertising?

2012 Oreo celebrates Pride month ad that received lots of criticism

Examples of this are brands supporting the LGBTQ+ Pride month each year. Brands, like Oreo, will include the social movement into their advertisement to show their support, much like the example above, where the iconic rainbow has been adapted into the Oreo and "within 17 hours 157,000 people have liked the image, 40,000 have shared and 20,000 have commented" (Bingham, 2012). However, not everyone was so supportive as some commented ""I'll never buy Oreos again"" (News, 2020) and ""Disgusted with Oreos"" (News, 2020). This contradicts where I thought brands may try to take advantage from movements like Pride month as this example demonstrates consumers not engaging in the brand in a positive way and thereby the company faces possible losses and risk reducing the size of their audience with this advertising technique. So, when could tokenism not become a challenge in advertisement? Brands could start committing to adverts like this example above by Oreo and use authentic stories and experiences from the social group members and have meaningful ads that understand the movement and help move it in a positive way towards equality. This would build a positive relationship between the producers and consumers rather than the impression of producers using the month for profit and gain and not supporting the movement.

Racism

Racism has no right in this world whether you are white, black or any religious practise: you should be treated with the same equality as the next person much like how the bible states "love thy neighbour" (Enter the bible, 2021). Unfortunately, advertising has been an ongoing visual example of racism, and I do not think it is discussed as much as it should be. AdAge released an article in 2016 referring to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, showing shocking statistics of Black African Americans saying "In 1978, The 5% of Ad industry workforce was composed of black and Hispanic workers" (Wheaton, 2016) leading to a follow up statistic of "in 2014, some 36 years later, African Americans only made up 5.8% of the ad Industry" (Wheaton, 2016). Seeing this statistic was a real eye-opening realisation of what little progress has been made with equality and diversity in the advertising industry because it is a key part of our everyday world and it can have a significant impact of what we choose to buy, wear and do. But has it been unknowingly affecting how we see and treat other coloured groups because we are not being exposed to them through ads as much as white colour ads. However, I thought with the Movement of BLM being so prominent in 2024, African Americans must have a higher percentage in the workforce compared to the article from 2016. However, a 2023 Article from The Drum by Kendra Barrett proved me otherwise stating "the number of Black People in Marketing, media and AdTech grew to 15%" (Barrett, 2023). Not only does this show a strong racial difference between coloured groups being employed in advertising, but it also gives white groups in advertising more opportunities for promotions and benefits within the employment side and become heavily reliant on white actors. I discovered a term known as whitewashing which has been used to describe "white actors portraying non-white characters" (Gillespie, 2021) and an example of this was when the brand Dove portrayed a shocking racial advert involving a black lady taking off a piece of clothing over her head to reveal a white lady as the finishing scene in the ad.

Dove’s Racial soap advert from 2017

This ad caused major an outburst amongst the public viewers as it seemed to be visually demonetizing black actors and it gave a very mixed message about the aim of this advert: remove black actors and replace them with white actors! From this outburst, Dove did apologise and claimed to “miss the mark in representing women of colour thoughtfully” (BBC newsbeat, 2017) in this ad and has not made any further mistakes in further advertisements. This example is one of many that could be presented to us as an audience, exposing us blindly to whitewashing adverts that could psychologically affect our schemas if exposed to scenarios like these. Schemas are our brains mental frameworks, and it is how we interpret day to day opinions of other people or events such as racial and stereotypical outputs. If viewers’ schemas are influenced by whitewashing, then this will not help in making a change to equality in advertising as no one will be aware of the diversity issue in that roles are over played and relied on by white actors. I believe that having adverts like these being exposed to younger audiences is truly stopping the ability of advertisement being able to change the negative side of racism in this world and give equality to those who deserve it. However, these statistic and examples can be seen in how advertisement has started to give equality to those affected by racism. Although there are still only 15% of black people in marketing, media and AdTech within the industry during 2023, that still shows an increase from the 5% in 1978- it may be small and could be better, but it is a positive movement in the correct direction.

Gap Representation

Another challenge that the advertising industry faces in giving equality for certain minority groups is the representation of people such as disabled, older and ethnic groups. Many of the examples in advertising branded products uses a typical 'normal' person so that the wider target audience can associate with the actor(s) portraying the product. This leaves the minority groups, such as the ones stated above, not being given the equality they deserve in that they also may use those products but feel less obliged to continue using that brand if they cannot associate and connect with some of the advertisements being used. What is even more demoralizing, is that when disabled advertising was used, it was for charities to profit from their minority disability groups as Susan Scot Parker stated, "In 1988, disabled people were the largest minority group in Great Britain and the top 18 spending disabled charities got advertising worth more than 4.24 million pounds" (Scott- parker,1989).

Burger King's 2019 advertisement featuring blind protagonist- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0IApPRCajE

The example above is a brilliant example of how advertising can be made for all people with or without disabilities. Burger King launched this advert in Brazil in 2019 which featured a blind protagonist trying out a burger king meal with the iconic Burger king crown on his head. What makes this advert so inclusive for everyone is that the producers focused on how the protagonist used his

senses before giving his reaction to the food in a positive way. The ad also featured subtitles and audio as part of the advert for any impaired audience members viewing the advert. Because the producers for this advert thought about so many disabilities, the advert reached a larger, wider audience and therefore everyone, with or without a disability, felt like they are being treated no less or more than anyone else watching this advert. This proves that there has been a time where advertising has embraced a diversity group and has given them the same equal respect as someone who does not have any disabilities. Although this shows a time where minority groups have been seen as the majority by a brand such as Burger King, I do feel this equality is not being replicated in all brands and if they were too, equality would be given to all diverse groups. With "23% of the overall UK working age population being disabled" (MediaTrust, 2023) and from an All In 19,000 advertising and media participant survey, "11% of respondents in the industry have a disability" (MediaTrust, 2023). This is where all producers of brands should start to build relationships with the people within their teams who are part of the disabled community and give them the opportunity to share their stories and experiences through advertising outside of charity and campaign work. This links back to if producers would make relationships and connections to anyone in a minority group, such as having a disability, it would allow true authentic meaning behind advertising and avoid any mis representation gaps within the brand being avoided.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping has often been seen as a generational subject that was seen as a social norm predominantly during the 20th century where men would go to work and women would stay at home and keep house for the family. However, stereotyping can still be seen today within advertisements and is becoming an issue with giving certain groups the equality they deserve. The advertising industry portrays stereotyping as fixed ideas about what a certain type of person must do and can lead to psychological normalising through our schemas if exposed to at younger ages. Within advertising, there is a mirror vs mold argument between advertising industry and sociologists around stereotyping where the mirror side "reflects values that exist and are dominant in society" (C.Zotos, L.Grau, R.Taylor, 2018) and the mold side "views advertising as a reflection of society in its prevailing values" (C.Zotos, L.Grau, R.Taylor, 2018). This is saying advertising affects the state of society, but advertising has the power to change (mold) society's stereotypical viewpoints.

2011 Mr Clean Mother's Day advertisement

Above shows a very stereotypical example of advertising not giving equality to a minority group shown here as the female gender. The ad visually shows a woman and her younger daughter using a cleaning product to match the text, implying it is Mother's Day and this is a job more important than

celebrating. The clear example within the image is that the two characters are both female, implying the stereotypical mirror that women are meant to do the cleaning around the house no matter how old they are, and the men are nowhere in sight as they are not expected to clean. This leads on to the text saying even though it is a day for mothers (female gender) they should be cleaning, and she demonstrates this to her younger daughter to continue the stereotypical behaviour on throughout further generations to come. Mr Clean is a man depicted in the logo and the brand is run by men but the product they portray, in this image, is used by women. This says something visually about the brand itself and who is running it: a very stereotypical brand towards women which is a leading cause as to why advertising is struggling to appeal diversity to groups such as women not being equal to men. I'd also like to state another shocking fact which is the date that this ad was published in 2011. This seems too recent for a company to think this was an acceptable ad to use and it shocks me in that large companies, like Mr Clean, hold such power through the advertising industry and still put ads such as this example out there.

Conclusion

From my research and exploration into advertising in this essay, focusing on areas of diversity, I would say there has been change in the advertising industry embracing equality, but I do there could be more effort put into the minority groups. I think a good starting point would be having brand producers could start making relationships with anyone on their advertising teams and then letting them share their stories to then allow advertising help to make sure they feel part of the majority rather than the minority. If this occurs throughout big brands, issues like tokenism and any miss representations between groups will be resolved and producers will keep a strong company and will even expand their target audience therefore increasing profit and support certain social group movements. This could encourage others and share their stories amongst smaller businesses and then all over the advertising industry diversity will be embraced. Also, from the perspective of a viewer of advertisement, I personally think that minority groups are starting to get the equality and respect they deserve as I have started to notice much more diversity from big and small brands in the advertising roles through the industry.

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