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Is advertising embracing race inequality?

Advertisement means communication in which a product, brand or service is promoted to the public in order to attract interest and sales. According to Naomi Klein in “No logo”, “The role of advertising changed from delivering product news bulletins to building an image around a particular brand-name version of a product” (Klein, 2000, p.6, para 2). Is this true? Well in the 21st century a lot of things had changed, one of the most important things is, the evolution of society. The evolution of this one in particular has changed the way companies advertise their products. But all the advertising that we see everyday is controversial? Not at all, but some of them had been really criticised. In this essay I will talk about the race inequality of a few controversial campaigns that were used in the 90s, such as the Benetton campaigns. Later I will talk about Diesel, which is another cloth brand that is remarkable because of their questionable campaigns through the years. Following the topic, there are other big brands that advertise and promote race inequality, the ones I will talk about are Dove and Nivea, two of the biggest selfcare brands in the industry around the world. At the end I will be talking about one of the most provocative campaigns from Spain. This consists of a poster designed to represent the right wing during the elections of 2021, this poster is a really good example that emphasises racial inequality in Spain.

On the one hand, Benetton is a well-known cloth brand. They launched their own line of sweaters in 1956. Nine years later, their brand emerged and they opened their first factory.

Through the years they have been advertising every launch, until in the 90s, when they came up with pictures on a campaign using shocking and offensive images and messages to attract consumer attention. An example of this is the one where they introduced visual images of a black woman breastfeeding a white baby, all this under the slogan: "United Colors of Benetton".



Figure 1: Benetton, (1989), *Black Woman Breastfeeding White Baby*.

With this campaign they gained consumer attention and increased their sales.

However, is it clear that making these types of campaigns are delivered to gain the attention of customers, building an image of the brand, rather than selling the product itself.

Another controversial visual image is the one where an angelic-looking white child is hugging a black child, whose hair is shaped like the devil's horns. This image

created a lot of unprecedented outrage and controversy among black population in the US.



Figure 2: Benetton, (1991), *Angel and Devil*.

Benetton tried to provoke conversation on the stereotypes of good and evil with an advertisement featuring an angel and the devil. It is said that the campaign aimed to present real-world issues with some social relevance and in order to break the barrier of indifference that surrounds these issues.

But why did they represent the devil with the black child? As the objective of the campaign was to represent real-world issues, we understand that society categorises or judges black people as despicable and immoral people, which is completely unacceptable. Another similar but more current case is the ad of another famous brand, called H&M, where they advertise a black child in a hoodie. The slogan was “coolest monkey in the jungle”, but in the same campaign there was another boy wearing a hoodie that said “official survival expert” with a tiger.



Figure 3: H&M, (2018), A black boy models a hoodie with the slogan “coolest monkey in the jungle”.

These kinds of campaigns underestimate black people and imply that they are inferior to white people. That is called white supremacy, which is not an easy topic for black history.

On the other hand, another famous brand is Diesel. Renzo Rosso is the founder, and with his *avant-garde* style he was able to lead his company to be one of the most popular brands all around the world. Through the years Diesel has been known to introduce into the market a new concept of denim jeans that have represented quality and originality. Rosso has been criticised for every controversial campaign, he said:

Our ironic tone sometimes initially shocks consumers. We often present what appears to be outrageously inappropriate messages, confusing references to such things as racial, sexual stereotypes, materialism, drug abuse, religious intolerance and political extremism. The viewer needs to think a bit in order to understand what our intention really is. But once the viewer needs to think a

bit in order to understand what our intentions really are. But one they have taken the time, the viewer of a Diesel advertising usually picks up on a hidden order behind the work, a meaning that is less an insensitive, subjective statement and more a balanced observation of the realities of the world we share (Rigoni, 2017, p.59-60).

Which means the brand is actually focusing more on the message rather than on the product, that is why in some advertising we can not find the agency or the photographer's campaign, sometimes we can not even see the logo easily, because in these cases the logo is separate in a corner. "*Be stupid*" is one of the most criticised slogans of all the Diesel campaigns launched in 2010. It is said:

The campaign claims promises the target they'll be happier if they behave in ways that are considered stupid by more conformist others. They should do so in the most open ways, satisfying whatever sort of inner child they have, alone or in group. By acting stupid, they will assert their own singularity amongst their peers, a singularity that Diesel decides to turn into a social value community and will be likely identified by its members as one of them. (Rigoni, 2017, p.90)

Renzo once said:

We need to have the balls to break down barriers in a moment where fear is making the world divided with more walls. The future is about opening up and giving a positive output. Diesel always had and will always be a cultural commentator tackling relevant issues. (Rigoni, 2027, p.60).

All these advertisements were controversial by the way they could influence the children, convincing them to try dangerous things. In fact, the UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) decided to ban the campaign as it was considered offensive and promoting anti-social behaviour.



Figure 4: Diesel ad, (2010), *Be Stupid* "If you've never done anything stupid, you've never done anything at all".

One of the most controversial pictures of this campaign was the one where a "Native American" is shown next to a space ship.

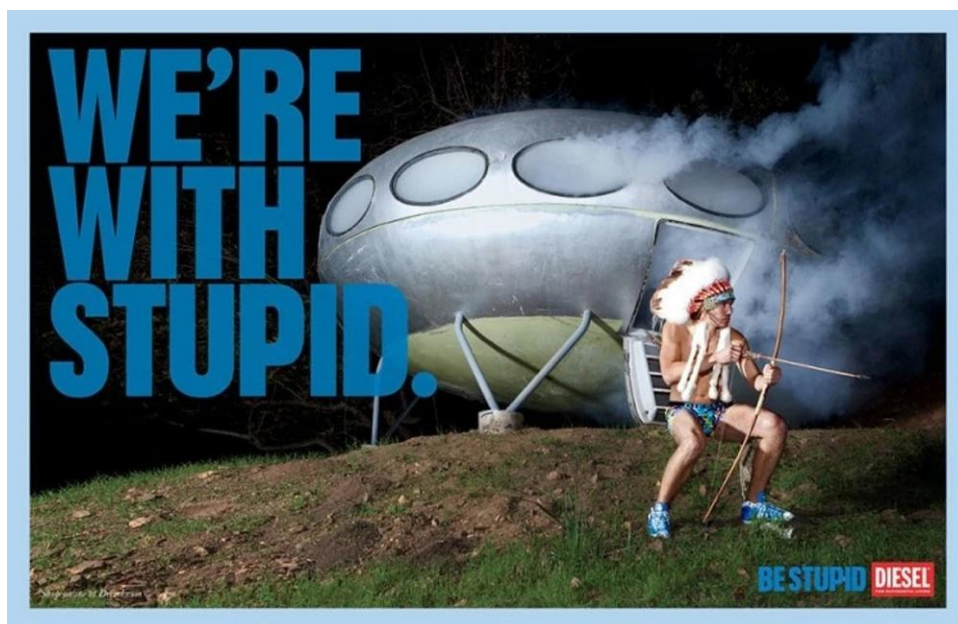


Figure 5: Diesel ad, (2010), *Be Stupid* "We're with stupid".

This ad was really popular because, in a way, the brand is making fun of Native American population, calling them “stupid”. As we well know, the history of the Native Americans boils down to the colonisation, discrimination and racism of this community. Even though, nowadays, Native communities experience higher rates of suicide compared to all other racial groups in the U.S. According to the U.S Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, in 2019 suicide was the second leading cause of death for American Natives between the ages of 10 and 34. Unfortunately, the health of indigenous population continues to be affected by social discrimination, economic conditions, including poverty, lack of health insurance and educational disparities.

Furthermore, in 2018, the famous brand of self-care, Dove, published a campaign with the slogan “Body Wash... Your Skin Color?”. In this commercial for one of their body wash products, an African woman appears removing her t-shirt and suddenly transforming into a white woman. The brand was accused of “whitewashing” and sparked a huge outrage on social media. People were offended because this ad reminded them of some historical references with soap adverts.

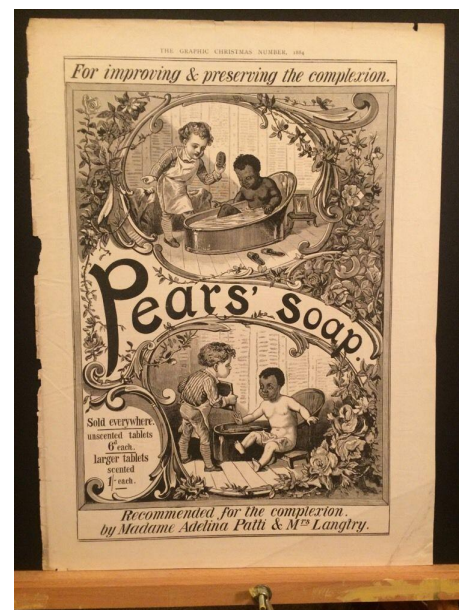


Figure 6: Pears' Soap ad, (1884).

One of the most famous racist Pear's Soap advertisements represents a black boy becoming white thanks to Pears Soap's "magic". The advertisement, which appeared in the *The Graphic* in 1884, consists of two images: in the first one, the white boy gives a bar of the soap to a black boy who is sitting in a bathtub. The second image reveals that, after washing, the body of the black boy turns into white.

As the poster was made for the British clients, this poster argued that turning the black boy white, functions as the representation of the British "civilising mission". Which influenced the kid's desire of being white, these two images are a clear example of the acceptance that black people are inferior.

As well as Dove, Nivea, is another well-known self-care brand. They launched an ad that received a lot of criticism when it appeared. In 2011, the ad was published showing a short-cropped African-American man ready to throw a version of himself with a beard and afro hair, under the slogan "Re-civilize yourself".

This type of ads emphasise the stereotypes that people have of black people, as they always represent them as uncivilised and savage. As I said in the beginning of the essay, with the H&M ad, this is called white supremacy.



Figure 7: Nivea ad, (2011),

Re-civilize yourself.

Finally, let's talk about advertising in governments. Through the years, governments have been forced, in a way, to change the perspective of their advertising, that is because of the evolution of society. The change is basically to be as inclusive as it is possible.

One of the biggest controversial advertising in Spain was in the 2021 elections. One of the most right wing, called VOX, publicised a provocative campaign. This one was located in Madrid, the capital of Spain.



Figure 8: Vox ad, (2021).

This ad consists of a picture where you can see, at the left, an old woman and at the right, an Arabic boy. The slogan is “Un mena 4.700€ al mes, tu abuela 426€ de pensión/mes”, which the translation would be: “An unaccompanied foreign minor receives 4.700€ monthly while your grandmother receives 426€ pension monthly”. This is a stereotype that most people do not know is false. What really happens when a foreign minor comes to Spain is that they are locked up in juvenile centers to process their papers. In the meantime the government tries to look for if they have family in Spain, if they have someone, the child will be transferred to them. If

they do not have family in the country they will live in the juvenile center until they reach the age of majority.

As a matter of fact, until they do not have their papers they can neither study or work, a situation that makes them feel useless because they can not do anything in the meantime. That's why a lot of people talk about them being a nuisance. Some of them decide to steal out because of necessity, while others do it for pleasure.

Thanks to this, people tend to generalise and discriminate against them, treating them badly without knowing the reality of their lives.

Most, if not all, of them receive the papers once they have reached the age of majority, in that case, Depending on the municipality in which they live, they receive a certain amount..

Once they have their papers, another issue is looking for a job. It is often said that if you are looking for it there is always a job. Unfortunately, in certain situations people do not trust them, therefore, it makes it difficult for them to find a stable job.

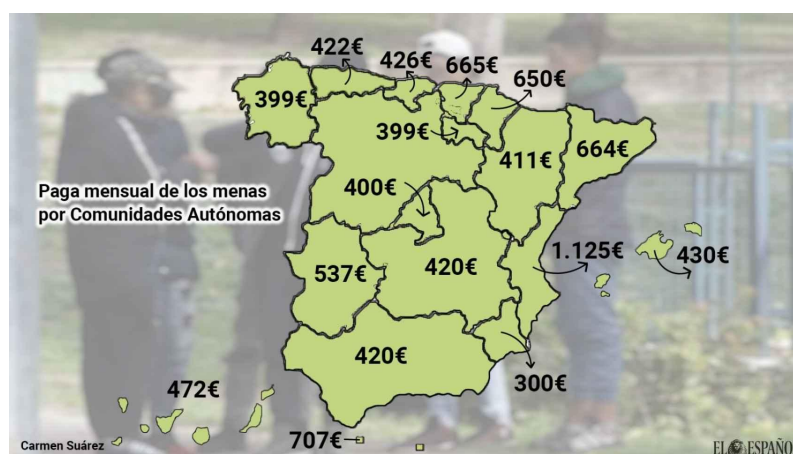


Figure 9: Monthly payment of the unaccompanied foreign minor by autonomous communities (2021).

To sum up, whether unintentionally honest or incredibly naive, these contemporary messages evoked deeply race inequality discourses around the inferiority, mostly of black people that remembers the era of slavery and have been reinforced through the explicit, frequent and shameless circulation of racist images in U.S popular culture and advertising.

Ads in particular, although seemingly harmless, have a great power in distributing societal messages concerning race to the population and in this way shape people's perceptions and understandings of people of particular genders and races. Although it is positive that advertisers are becoming more inclusive with black ideals of beauty, by hiring mostly black models in ads, or hiring Arabic people, Native American people and featuring them in non stereotypical occupations and portraying a variety of models from different race, there are always a way in which they are being negatively underestimated in ads. In this essay I mention only a few of them, but unfortunately, there are a few more.

The example of the Spanish campaign shows us that in the 21st century there are still people who do not accept that society is improving. There are still people who still believe in false stigmas about people who come to a new country looking for new opportunities that, unfortunately, they did not have in their countries.

Discrimination against people who were born in a different place than you or have different customs than yours does not make you a superior human being.

I would say that without this type of publicity, society would progress faster, since there would not be any stereotype of inequality just for the simple fact of being a person with a different nationality. Some people, like everything else in this life, are

more open than others, but deep down we all still have these kinds of internalised stereotypes. And sometimes, no matter how much we want to avoid it, we say certain comments that were once common and now they are offensive. Thanks to the fact that society is evolving, people are starting to be properly informed, allowing people to learn and identify certain ancient customs that we had been taught as childs.

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