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When will advertising embrace diversity, gender and race equality, and start reflecting the real world? Critically discuss and respond.

Introduction

In this essay I will discuss how advertising tries to approach diversity, gender, race and equality both in current times and historically. I will be discussing this through looking at specific advertising campaigns of two familiar brands, Benetton and McCain plus a state campaign by the UK Government.

Historically, when brand advertising campaigns try to show a diverse approach to their products, they often fail to realize the full effect that their campaign might have on the sensitivities of their target audience. Sometimes, certain interpretations or historical context may serve to change their intended message. In more extreme cases, even if a campaign had good intentions, misinterpreting the reactions of an audience might result in getting the advert banned or a negative view being perceived, which may affect their company therefore damaging the brand.

“However, graphic design is a part of fabric of the society in which we live – even what may seem like small design decisions affect other people and reveal something of a designer’s broader approach to life.” (Robert, 2019, p. 15).

Designers need to be aware of inclusivity and representing all parts of society while advertising a product. The world in which we live is constantly evolving. However, even now in the 21st century, the world still struggles to be inclusive towards some people, their beliefs

and the way in which they choose to live. There are still areas in the world where people are treated differently because of gender, sexuality or beliefs. “Design has enormous power to influence how we engage our world, and how we envision our future.” (Berman, 2009, p. 1). As designers it is critically important that our work reflects without bias, the respect we should have for all people.

Some brands have had successful campaigns that have embraced diversity. However, many have failed to do so and even had their campaigns banned.

“Advertisements have always been key to building a brand's image. A new global survey by YouGov, however, shows that advertisements are still failing to be fully effective – in the absence of diverse representation. Across 17 markets, more than two-fifths of global consumers (44%) feel that they are not fully represented by the people they see in adverts.” (Kar, 2021).

The YouGov data shows that 44% don't feel fully represented, however this figure is not the same for all the regions where people were surveyed for their opinions. In Europe, an even higher proportion of participants feel under-represented. In Britain for example the proportion was one half. Surprisingly, a smaller proportion of participants from UAE and urban India felt underrepresented.

Giving consumers representation which, they identify with, can only help to sell products. Designers who fully embrace inclusivity do themselves justice: can improve a brand's PR; improve company sales and have a positive impact on the global society in which we live.

Although we might think that social inclusion is a very modern dilemma, there is nothing new about having concerns regarding how for example gender, race and other political and social justice is represented. As early as the 1980s, one major brand was as the vanguard of highlighting these issues in their advertising campaigns, this company was Benetton; the Italian clothing brand.

Benetton's photographer Oliviero Toscani was an advocate of using visual images that challenged the onlooker to think about difficult issues such as racism, homophobia, religion and other human rights issues. As a company, Benetton embraced Toscani's use of powerful and subversive techniques to get the conversation started. As Toscani himself once said in an interview "you have to provoke interest!" (Culture Shifts, 2019). His method did produce controversial results, although the world may not have been ready for all his ideas. The campaign started people talking about the important issues back then and we still do to this day. His work shows how society has changed and how his work has influenced advertising in the following decades.

Toscani aimed to provoke an ethical response to the visual subject matter he presented on Benetton's behalf. He also wanted to raise Benetton's status to being an ethical brand. He sought to change the attitudes of the world by making people think and be more tolerant, therefore making the world a better place by accepting people's differences. Toscani's ambition was noble, but the best of intentions does not always guarantee success.



Fig. 1: *United Colors of Benetton*

In this image of a Black African woman with a white infant, the binary signs are black and white skin together. The posture is another signifier or known object and the brand name is also evident. The signified or interpretants may be that the Benetton brand represents unity and is anti-racist which is positive. However, it could also represent the historical widespread exploitation of black women as wet nurses by the wealthy white Western population. Having two wildly different narratives created a huge problem, and it was due to the second interpretation that this advert was removed from circulation.

The shock tactics used by Benetton to put a spotlight on diversity, although seemingly well intentioned, were subject to criticism on many occasions because of the possibility of people interpreting the narrative differently. On the other hand, the imaginative and memorable campaigns did mean that people remembered the brand. As Spivak, 1976, said “the experience and understanding of the observer are built into the observation.” (Huisman, Murphet and Dunn, 2006, p. 38). Even when campaigns are rejected, the main point of

advertising the brand is achieved. Both positive and negative views still highlight and promote knowledge of the brand.

Since the 1980's Benetton has gained a reputation for shock- advertising that has whipped-up controversy and stimulated debate – and helped to boost the brand recognition of the Italian fashion giant. (Mezzafiore, 2011).

Benetton became synonymous with these tactics; however, they reject this was their intention. Luciano Benetton stated, “We did not create our advertisements in order to provoke but to make people talk, to develop citizen consciousness”. (Floros, 2016)
In actuality, people were provoked and they felt that it was not an appropriate place to address this issue, but it did start a conversation.

In his interview with Gianluca Mezzafiore, Oliviero Toscani, the photographer for the United Colors of Benetton campaign explained his philosophy “La pub est une charogne que nous sourit” (Advertising is a smiling carrion). (Mezzafiore, 2011). In Toscani's view, the 'lifestyle advertising' of the time was dull and uncreative. Advertisers were churning out stereotypical portrayals of an ideal world, which simply did not exist.

In today's society it may be a risky strategy, because of cancel culture and consumers having the ultimate say on what is acceptable and therefore what they are prepared to consume.

The thinking was twofold. On the one hand all publicity is good publicity. On the other, no company involved in such controversy can be seen as boring – the label every fashion firm dreads. (Crowshaw, 1995).

The controversy that resulted from this campaign suggests that the interpretation of the signs within the images varied depending on the observer's knowledge and personal experience of the various issues being depicted.



Fig. 2: United Colors of Benetton - *Blanket*

Another Benetton campaign, by Toscani 1991 (Fig. 2) was used to question why there was so little diversity in the representation of families in the media and highlights their overuse of gender and ethnicity stereotypes. In the nineties, advertising rarely featured same sex couple families or mixed race couples. Toscani's pushing of the conventional boundaries then has made more things possible for the advertisers of today.



Fig. 3: *We are Family*

McCain launched a new campaign called “We are family” created by Adam&Eve/DDB, that moves away from the more traditional representation of the family which the brand might have been associated with in the past. A conscious decision was made to represent more diverse family set-ups such as lone parent families and extended families and so on. Modern day families would see their families represented, but whilst being depicted enjoying all that the ‘traditional family’ might do, like spending time having fun in each other’s company. McCain’s aim was to create an advertising campaign that not only celebrates ‘real families’ but also celebrates inclusivity by showing that whatever the shape or size of the family, all are acceptable. It also marks the end of the advertising’s traditional alliance with the nuclear family. (Britannica, 2021).

“The research, which was carried out for McCain by OnePoll, found that 49% of Brits thought popular culture did not reflect the reality of modern families, while a huge

84% of families said they hadn't seen anything in popular culture in the last six months that related to them." (Gwynn, 2017).

McCain are now making a concerted effort to tackle the stereotypes of the family depicted in past adverts. They show a variety of families to reflect the diverse reality of today's modern family. However, not all minority groups were represented, for example transgender or disabled groups.

Ultimately, the advert is designed to appeal to a wider range of customers by showing fresh views of family life, which are more representative of modern-day consumers' lives.

The voiceover starts by asking "What's normal? Normal isn't normal," and ends: 'it's mealtimes that make a family'. Some viewers were very critical of the advert campaign on YouTube (2017) and were not ready to have their notion of family challenged.

Although McCain does celebrate the differences in the make-up of the modern day family, it still manages to fall into the old gender stereotype trap by opting to depict the women mainly indoors e.g. cooking whilst the men took part in more fun outside activities such as playing football.

Mark Hodge, marketing director at McCain's, said:

"At McCain, we welcome the increased scrutiny the media has put on stereotypes in recent months. The campaign for increased gender diversity in advertising and the

rise of a new breed of 'honest' parenting influencers are important steps in helping to reflect the diverse reality of families today." (Powell, 2017).

The suggestion is that there is still more opinion to gather and marketing work to do in the field of representing the modern family in all its diverse forms for the McCain brand, but at least they were prepared to recognise this.

Sadly, the McCain campaign had some hateful comments by homophobic trolls on social media, about the gay couple (Lee and Mat Samuels-Camozzi) and their baby. This abuse online led to McCain deciding to trim the advert into two 30 second versions, one of which included the Samuels-Camozzi. The statement from McCain justifying this said;

"We have received overwhelming support for the campaign, but we are disappointed that there's a minority of individuals who have been verbally abusive to the real families that feature in our advertising." (Powell, 2017).

However, it is important that advertising campaigns continue to strive to show more diversity in adverts. "Rather than being a mirror on society, advertising has a powerful ability to shape it." (Poole, 2021). The bigotry displayed by a minority on social media should not be given into. Advertising has the power to influence and has a pivotal role to play in reflecting the reality of society today. When done correctly it can be used as a formidable tool to show progress and to effect change in people's mind-set.



Fig. 4: *Stay Home. Save Lives.*

The advert 'Stay Home. Save Lives.' was created by agency Topham Guerin in 2021 for the UK Government. It includes illustrative idealizations of family homes and the idea of people staying indoors to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The advert was originally posted on the Government's Facebook page but has since been deleted. The advert sparked many complaints because it shows all the domestic tasks like ironing, childcare, home schooling children and teaching a girl to clean a household being undertaken by women. While the role of the only man featured in the advert is relaxing on a sofa with his family.

It seems to be telling the viewer if you are a woman, you must do all these tasks, whilst submitting yourself entirely to outdated stereotypes that belong firmly in the 1950s. While on the other hand, the man portrayed is allowed to relax and do nothing in the house. It is troubling that these kinds of portrayals still exist in advertising today.

A spokesperson for the prime minister said: "We have provided information for the public throughout the pandemic. [The advert] does not reflect our view on women and we have removed it." (Kemp, 2021). Dr Pragya Agarwal an academic and activist subsequently complained that the statement "does not address the fact that the ad came out in the first place". (Farey-Jones, 2021). This is a true and valid point. The government may have removed advert but perhaps there are many more questions to answer. Who was responsible for creating it? Presumably the Government as the customer would have had the opportunity to view and sign off on the project they commissioned. Who authorised and signed off a campaign with such negative and stereotypical depictions of life in modern-day British homes to be posted on the government's social media page? Why did it take a public backlash to point out that these images are not acceptable in today's society?

The backlash to the government's latest advert campaign is a timely reminder of why tackling sexist, outdated stereotypes needs to be at the top of the advertising agenda. Advertising companies need to carefully consider how they represent the real world's diversity in adverts. They need to learn and evolve from their past mistakes to ensure all viewers and consumers feel represented and included.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to consider how advertising tries to approach diversity, gender and race equality in current times and historically, by looking at the works of Benetton, McCain and the UK Government. The purpose of adverts is to communicate with the audience. It is essential that companies consider and understand their target audience. If a design team is unable to get the fundamentals of understanding the make-up of its target audience and communicating its concept clearly, problems are caused. Getting it wrong means there is a real danger that an advert causes offence and a campaign is rendered ineffective or damaging.

Advertisers need to remain politically correct and keep up to date with language and cultural references of the time to ensure its ideas remain relevant.

Companies need to be bold and brave in choosing the directors for their advertising campaigns, if they want to change the mind-sets of the ill-informed. Oliviero Toscani (Benetton Campaigns) for example deliberately tried to force people to face up to the uncomfortable. What advertisers must also do, is have a strong diverse team, that can scrutinize campaign designs, test ideas through market research and can discuss various views to minimise the chances of unforeseen negative interpretations and the banning of campaigns.

McCain seem now to have a more positive approach to the diverse representation of the family, bringing the portrayals into something more recognisable in today's society.

Advertisers still need to come up with fair solutions to protect minority groups and educate the narrow minded.

In the case of government advertising campaigns, it is inexcusable that these are not rigorously scrutinised to ensure they are not offensive (as in the 'Stay at home. Save lives' campaign) to half its target audience.

It is evident that the advertising industry has endeavoured to address a lot of the non-inclusive representation of certain groups in society over the last few decades. However, the industry does still have a problem in the fact that its own workforce is not as diverse as it should be. The Advertising Association's own research suggests that the industry is white dominant, with almost 90% of workers being classed as white. (Fraser, 2021). According to the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, another inequality is that although men and women are equally represented in junior advertising roles, less than a third of women are in leadership roles. (Shearman, 2016).

Additionally, much more emphasis needs to be placed on research methods and scrutiny of campaigns before unveiling them publicly. There is still much to be done if advertisers are going to consistently get the narrative right and fully embrace our real world differences.

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Figure 1: Turner, C. (2019) *Black Woman Breastfeeding White Baby – United Colors of Benetton*. [Digital Image]. Available at: <https://29secrets.com/style/a-look-back-at-benettons-most-controversial-advertising-campaigns/> (Accessed: October 25th 2021).

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