

Representing?

A WHITEPAPER ON DIVERSITY IN ADVERTISING



Introduction

2018 is the year for Diversity to reign supreme. Tougher rules around representation in advertising are due to come to force this year and the Chief Executive for the Advertising Standards Association stated last year, “tougher standards can play an important role in tackling inequality and improving outcomes for individuals, the economy and society as a whole.”¹

How minority groups are visually represented in culture is a topic that has become increasingly prevalent, and the buzz around it isn’t likely to quieten down any time soon. This is a debate worth having though, as almost 40 million Brits currently feel underrepresented by modern advertising.² Society, however, has found itself caught between a rock and a hard place.

Whilst some brands have been praised for showcasing minorities in their campaigns, others face public backlash, and customer boycott for getting it wrong (recently H&M’s ‘monkey in the jungle’ model display³). Indeed, 42% of Brits feel brands can exploit events around diversity (e.g. Pride), meaning that we must handle the representation of minority cultures with care.⁴ What’s more, as brands are receiving pressure to be more inclusive in their visual messaging, consumer priorities remain also unclear. For instance, when faced with trading off the importance of gender equality vs racial equality, 1 in 2 would opt for tackling racial equality whilst a less staggering 3 in 10 would prioritise gender equality.⁵

With this in mind, the UK’s largest independent media agency the7stars, and leading semiotics and cultural insight agency Sign Salad have partnered up to investigate how brands can champion diversity with authenticity, so as to satisfy consumers’ expectations. In a quest to find dominant and emerging themes around representation of minority groups in visual culture, how can we ensure brands are protected and benefit from a positive, forward thinking approach to the ever-changing expectations of media? What are the key behaviours that brands can take on board to ensure that inclusivity and diversity are done well?

¹ 2017, ASA website <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/report-signals-tougher-standards-on-harmful-gender-stereotypes-in-ads.html>

² 2017, the7stars consumer study (The QT)

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/hm-hoodie-racist-boycott-advertising-people-h-m-a8149246.html>

⁴ 2017, the7stars consumer study (The QT)

⁵ 2018, the7stars consumer study (The QT)

THEME 1

Avoiding Tokenism

Although most brands understand the importance of engaging with diversity, many still struggle to do so in a way that feels authentic, rather than opportunistic or worse, exploitative. As demonstrated by the backlash to Pepsi's 'Black Lives Matter' creative⁶, consumers are now warier than ever of tokenism; where a brand appears to latch onto the diversity movement for the sake of profit-maximisation, rather than a genuine desire to represent and improve minority lives. Brands are at increasing risk of being accused of tokenism, given that over half of Brits don't believe that large companies genuinely care about social issues.⁷

In this hyper-sensitive consumer climate, four key behaviours can help brands to most positively act in this space. The first is consistency, ensuring that diversity is regularly featured, not treated as a one-off issue to be spotlighted briefly then put aside. Sign Salad's semiotic method can help reveal the difference in how two brands, Vogue and Nike, have historically represented ethnic minorities, thereby communicating different cultural messages about who these minority people are and what they represent. Overall, Vogue's magazines are dominated by white or light-skinned models, showcasing pops of diversity only in specific 'international' or race-themed issues.⁸ Racially diverse people are, thus, spuriously coded as an outlier rather

than the norm— a 'refreshing' exception in a world that is, by implication, assumed to be overwhelmingly 'white-washed'.

By contrast, ambassadors from minority backgrounds have appeared consistently across Nike's advertising⁹ – from their famous tie-ups with Michael Jordan to their spotlight on hip-hop culture in the 1990s. Semiotically, this repetitive visual signalling codes racial diversity as part of the status quo— something to be expected everywhere you turn, in a cosmopolitan world that is increasingly more connected. Compared to Vogue, Nike signals a vision of the world that is much more representative of socio-economic reality; and given that inequality is the third global biggest issue among millennials, is it a coincidence that Nike is the third most loved brand among this cohort?^{10 11}



For your next step

6 2015, <http://time.com/4726500/pepsi-ad-kendall-jenner/>

7 2017, the7stars consumer study (The QT)

8 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/aug/22/naomi-campbell-criticises-lack-diversity-vogue>

9 2013, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/25-nike-ads-that-shaped-the-brands-history-2013-8/#nnis-hopper-sees-barry-sanders-in-his-sleep-1994-6>

10 2017, The Drum (<http://www.thedrum.com/news/2017/04/20/victoria-s-secret-sephora-and-nike-rank-millennial-consumers-favourite-brands>)

11 2018, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/world-economic-forum-world-biggest-problems-concerning-millennials-2016-8/#8-lack-of-education-159-3>

Secondly, brands should remember that execution is as important as the creative concept. **A good idea should extend across all touchpoints.** Maltesers' braille bus-stop¹² was heralded as a shining example of extending their disability message across channels, as it acted to complement their main TV campaign. The reality is that it was a single 6 sheet in a central urban location – a token gesture performed just the once, rather than a red thread throughout all of their communications. Maltesers could have done more to approach diversity with a 360-degree view – rooting it in their business credentials, not just their marketing communications. For example, do their products carry braille descriptions? Also close to home, John Lewis was praised for embracing diverse backgrounds in last year's Christmas TV ad. However, just a few months later, they were faced negativity on social media when a same-sex male couple received a marriage gift list brochure with a female bride on the front page, meaning their intentions in their advertising were not put into practice.¹³ With this in mind, brands would do well to take a leaf out of Fenty Beauty's book. Besides merely preaching about diversity in their comms, Rihanna's young brand has gone even further by releasing 40 different foundation shades; taking a real financial risk that, semiotically, signalled the authenticity of their intentions, reflecting in overwhelmingly positive sentiment on social media¹⁴. Only by confirming its message across a diversity of touchpoints, can a brand comprehensively shield itself from consumer backlash - walking the walk is paramount.

Thirdly, successful brands should go beyond visually representing minorities, **to including diverse people within the creative ad-making process.** By building in diversity at the level of conceptualisation, brands ensure that the semiotic signifiers of genuine engagement are built into ads' DNA, safeguarding them against political blunders from the inside-out. This was the case with Lloyds Banking Group, who included their own Rainbow team in discussions on how to best represent bisexuality in their 2017 'By Your Side' executions. This created an authentic picture of a much-maligned subsection of the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Similarly, Nike's "On Air" campaign went beyond showcasing urban London, to harnessing the creative input of cultural influencers like Rezz radio, GUAP Magazine, and other London-based creatives to craft a new Nike Air Max design. For obvious reasons, this won them far more praise than Puma's equivalent campaign that aimed to showcase working-class London¹⁵, but failed to give working-class people a platform to develop and market their talents.

A similarly successful example was seen last year, when a Droga5 team led by two African-American creative directors revamped CoverGirl in the US. Since their creative process incorporated the life stories and opinions of diverse human beings, its output was naturally aligned with minority consumers' experiences of beauty. Resultant ads featured icons who were genuinely popular amongst minority consumer groups— like Issa Rae from HBO's *Insecure*, and the 69-year-old model Maye Musk – signalling the authenticity of CoverGirl's connection to minority politics, and its place as a genuine pop-culture insider (rather than a distant corporation, looking in from the outside). Needless to say, these ads fared much better than Dove's ad¹⁶ which depicted black women being "washed" white. This can be seen to echo longstanding colonial narratives about the need to "cleanse" racial "inferiority". Visually, it seemed to signal racial diversity as something to be rectified, rather than celebrated in all its glory. Consequently, the ad appeared to be an outsider to the cultural conversation, rather than to have been drawn from the creative input of real minorities, provoking the consumer backlash that one might expect.

Finally, brands should **give minority ambassadors an active role, not just use them to create an aesthetic.** The cultural dialogue has come a long way since Coca-Cola's 1971 Hilltop ad¹⁷, which deployed international faces without meaningfully exploring the lives and cultures behind them. Decoded semiotically, this ad seemed to be "utilising" one particular aspect of its minority ambassadors— coding their skin colours and faces as a functional tool that furthered commercial purposes. By contrast, today's best brands are careful to give minority ambassadors room for

self-expression, recognising that, as Lena Waithe put, "You don't want to be the face of something, you want to be the voice".

Nike's 2017 Pride campaign¹⁸, for instance, excelled because it not only spotlighted Leiony Maldonado as a 'queer' face, but also celebrated her voguing talents. Nike thus signalled that Maldonado was multifaceted; a fully fleshed-out and complex human being who therefore deserved the same rights to social justice, happiness, and media representation that others enjoyed. By contrast, L'Oreal's dealings with the model Munroe Bergdorf¹⁹ illustrated that they sought her cultural status as a transgender icon, but not her views on discrimination and race – signalling that they valued only what she could offer for commercial purposes, but not the complexity that made her human. No surprises that in the month of her dismissal, over 24,000 tweets related to this affair, with #boycottloreal making up a third of conversation, gaining almost 10M impressions. Brands must signal that their minority ambassadors are as complex and multifaceted as everyone else, in order to really join in the cultural conversation. Mencap's 'Here I Am' campaign was particularly skilled at this – showcasing the talents of Casey, a DJ with both skill and attitude. They focussed on him as an individual, with his learning disability taking a backseat. This was echoed by Channel 4's approach to the 2016 Paralympic games – taking their 'Meet the Superhumans' a step further and flying the flag for just how much those with disabilities CAN do, as opposed to can't²⁰. As difficult as it may be, the best brands must be brave and confident enough to relinquish a degree of control, and truly empower minority ambassadors to shine.

12 2017, <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/maltesers-unveils-braille-billboard-next-phase-disability-campaign/1419795>

13 2018, <https://twitter.com/elli1979/status/982551918101876736>

14 2018, Crimson Hexagon

15 2017, <http://www.gal-dem.com/puma-and-the-gross-fetishisation-of-working-class-struggle/>

16 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/41542818/dove-apologises-for-racist-facebook-advertising-campaign>

17 1971, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VM2eLhvsSM>

18 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwfqMUa1PFw>

19 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2017/sep/04/munroe-bergdorf-on-the-loreal-racism-row-it-puzzles-me-that-my-views-are-considered-extreme>

20 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=locLkk3aYlk>

THEME 2

Showcasing minorities often unseen or ignored

There is often a trade-off between portraying the aspirational and portraying the realities of modern life. 37% of Brits feel that advertising is more representative than it has ever been²¹. Despite this, not all minorities are equal. In Reflecting Modern Britain²², 79% of Brits felt that gay women were underrepresented in advertising. Compare this with 27% who believe the same of black people and it becomes clear that the scales are tipped in favour of the most 'visually obvious' option for many advertisers. Take the conversation over Christmas 2017²³ around the rise of "Princess Mixed Race". Many major retailers' Christmas adverts included families or couples in which there was a mixed-race partnership. This attempt to be more in tune with the nation (the 2011 census indicated 1 in 10, or 2.3 million inter-racial couples)²⁴ prompted some sceptics to suggest brands were dipping their toes in the pool of diversity without fully using exclusively minority actors. Brands seemed willing to portray minorities who would be immediate visual signifiers of diversity, but not those whose differences might be subtler, or require more nuanced creative efforts to portray. Some did critique this as the "Meghan Markle effect". With 45 million Brits claiming to have seen a Christmas TV ad last year, it's of utmost important that brands start thinking about all minorities, in the fairest manner.

A further problem lies in the fact that most advertising narratives are woven by London-based agencies. Stories are skewed away from regional peripheries, to a single centre of power. 62% of those in Yorkshire believe that advertising doesn't reflect life where they're from,²⁵ even though the 2011 census showed that 5.3 million Brits hailed from there, the UK's largest county. We find ourselves facing a situation where even some 'majorities' can feel like minorities in the world of advertising. How can advertisers address this? Three solutions come to mind.

The first is to **depict a plethora of difference**, rather than homing in on a single minority experience. In this respect, brands might take note of McCain's 'Here's To Love' creative²⁶, driven by the insight "What IS normal?" and has been widely praised²⁷. Rather than zooming in on one highly visible minority group – like racialised individuals or same-sex couples – the ad chose to intersperse these more overt "minorities" amongst other more traditionally represented demographics, like a young heterosexual couple, or a same-race older couple. Drawing on semiotics, we can see that the ad's use of a flash-cut technique (where couples were highlighted for no more than 5 seconds each, in a randomised sequence) ensured that no one couple took up more screen time than the others – thus signalling that all their relationships were equally

21 2017, the7stars consumer study (The QT)

22 2016, <http://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/reflectingmodernbritain>

23 2017, <http://metro.co.uk/2017/11/28/may-all-your-christmases-be-partially-white-now-princess-mixed-race-is-here-7116026/>

24 2018, ONS.Gov.UK

25 2017, the7stars consumer study (The QT)

26 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79LtGHFAVll>

27 2018, <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/mccain-challenges-normal-attitudes-love-ad-campaign-celebrating-diversity/1456744>

beautiful, significant, and worthy of representation, regardless of how “conventional” they might seem on the surface. By removing the focus on visually-explicit minorities, McCain ensured that even consumers from “hidden minority” backgrounds or regions could find someone in the ad that chimed with their own experiences. This spoke to the bigger jigsaw puzzle of modern Britain - a key source of praise behind this campaign.

Nevertheless, it is also important that brands develop a strategy for representing “invisible” minority groups in isolation, given that not all creative briefs allow the space to focus on multiple protagonists. In such scenarios, it is important that brands do not flag up “unseen” diversity for its own sake, but rather, are aligned with our second strategy of **highlighting to applaud**. Rather than focusing on how a person’s “invisible” minority status makes them merely different from others, the best campaigns always focus on how it has made them better or stronger. Think of how Pret a Manger’s homeless apprenticeship programme²⁸ draws on the semiotics of language by positioning its members as “Rising” or “Shooting Stars” — signalling them as sources of light, with potential to illuminate the way and act as beacons of hope for others in dire circumstances. A similar message came through in Marks and Spencer’s ‘Love, laughter, life and breast cancer: In our words’ campaign.²⁹ Although the campaign overall was lacking in a 360-degree approach, this creative resonated because it featured women of all shapes and sizes, united by one common feature, that they had cancer, in a positive and upbeat string of messages. These women were able to make light of their uncertain future and showcase strength

and grace during difficult times. Like Pret, albeit with a different tonality, it coded the protagonists’ status as an “unseen” minority as a source of personal strength, rather than highlighting it for its own sake.

Finally, a third strategy that brands can employ is to pair less visible minority communities with more visible faces. Historically, the makeup brand MAC provided a classic example of this strategy in the charity efforts around its Viva Glam range. Whilst popular superstars like Ru Paul, Lady Gaga, SIA have been positioned as the face of the campaign, its main beneficiaries are a less visible group of minorities in need, HIV and AIDS sufferers, whom the aforementioned stars are huge advocates of supporting. More broadly speaking, this technique of pairing visible and invisible faces is a common technique within the charity sector. The majority of the biggest charities in the world have some form of celebrity backing, tapping into the qualities of heroism and stardom that these celebrities are associated with (according to research done by the Institute of Fundraising).³⁰ Is it any surprise that when initiatives like Comic Relief and Children in Need place such ‘heroes’ in contexts where they can advocate for minority groups – ranging from the poor, to the homeless, to the mentally and physical disabled— such initiatives break fundraising records year on year? By linking up groups who benefit from different amounts of socio-economic privilege, brands enable this privilege to be shared out more equitably across society, so that everyone rises together.

28 2018, <https://www.pret.co.uk/en-gb/rising-stars-programme>

29 2018, <https://www.marketingweek.com/2018/03/21/ms-diversity-wrong-learn/>

30 2018, Institute of Fundraising <https://www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/home/>



THEME 3

Resolving vs reinforcing social division

In all this, one key question remains for the brands hoping to evolve their communications in a more inclusive direction. If they craft an ad designed to showcase the multitude of social, ethnic, geographical, sexual, and cultural ‘categories’ that make up British society, will this actually help to bring people together, or only emphasise existing divides, prompting consumer backlash? After all, there is a real danger that brands playing in this space could be seen as drawing attention to divisions between consumers. This was certainly the case when Dove launched its limited line of body-shaped bottles last summer – rather than being read as a genuine attempt at representation, the campaign was widely ridiculed for reinforcing crude categories.³¹

Historically, the way that some brands have worked around this problem is to downplay differences between people, thereby ensuring that by default, no sense of disunity could possibly arise. Consider, for instance, the cultural meaning communicated by Calvin Klein’s spot for the CK One fragrance³², released in 2011. The ad depicts a room full of young people who at first glance appear to exhibit some cursory signs of diversity: different skin tones, hair styles ranging from soft mohawks to undershaves. Subsequently, we see that all these diverse young actors’ actions start to converge in a shared pattern

– dancing in a similarly free-spirited way to Far East Movement’s G6, falling to the floor together, exiting the room as one choreographed collective. Ultimately, the ad signals that diversity can and should be subsumed under the umbrella of collective sameness and harmony – personal differences will fall away to make way for the shared spirit of the tribe.

Smirnoff operate in a category where the main product is widely perceived to be social lubricant – facilitating friendships, relationships and evenings out. Therefore their “We’re Open” series have been not only culturally relevant but directly related to the end benefit at hand. Particularly their “We’re all the same on the dancefloor” billboard execution seeks to highlight commonalities between its consumers, regardless of their background.³³ The sentiment that “Labels are for bottles not for people” further reinforces this.

31 2017, <http://www.signsalad.com/thought-store/2017/06/from-models-to-body-bottles/>

32 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG3h272ATn0>

33 2018, <https://www.72andsunny.com/work/smirnoff-we-re-open>

More culturally emergent brands employ a different tactic: rather than minimising social differences, they wholeheartedly embrace them whilst show how they can coexist in an inspiring, productive way. Consider Glossier's 2017 ad for its body hero range of skincare products.³⁴ Like Calvin Klein's aforementioned creative, Glossier's ad features overt visual signs of diversity – five bodies of varying colours, sizes and shapes are lined up next to each other. But unlike Smirnoff's 2011 TV spot & the Bacardi series, this ad doesn't homogenise its protagonists in any way, but showcases each person in a distinct pose that uniquely represents her own sense of individuality and personality. One woman raises a cheeky eyebrow as if throwing us a challenge, another is captured in full athletic glory mid-run, a third proudly shows off her pregnant belly. Each of the women in the ads is distinctly herself; yet all five of them coexist in the same space in a harmonious way, united by bold visual styling and attitude of self-love and confidence. This approach also plays out in work by Airbnb. They released their "We Accept" TV ad during the 2017 Superbowl³⁵, at a time the US government were looking to actively ban travellers from certain Middle Eastern countries. This was characteristic of the travel brand, whose ethos centres around 'belonging' so was largely perceived as authentic – although the real plaudits came from the speedy turnaround with which it was made.³⁶

These examples illustrate a wider cultural shift that is happening at present, where the end-goal has shifted from sameness to plurality. The task at hand is no longer for brands to homogenise diversity, but to harmonise it. By drawing on cultural insight and expertise, the best brands are able to communicate this spirit of harmony in an authentic way rather than an overly scripted one and truly move in step with the zeitgeist.

³⁴ 2017, <http://www.jenniferdemartini.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Screen-Shot-2017-10-29-at-12.40.17-1024x388.png>

³⁵ 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yetFk7QoSck>

³⁶ 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/02/06/super-bowl-2017-airbnb-ad/>



Conclusion

Whilst recognising we've come a long way, true diversity in advertising is an on-going battle, and not only one for the marketing industry to fight. Trade bodies, big and small businesses alike, and of course the UK government itself must keep this on the priority list. We hope that this whitepaper has illustrated some clear rules for brands wishing to diversify the faces who make and are represented within their advertising. The first, being to make it your red thread. One campaign doesn't create a culture change, but continued efforts to include all walks of life in your brand story will. Secondly, don't simply look for the easy, tick box exercises. Challenge yourself to represent the minorities who aren't easily shown, tell the stories which otherwise won't air, but will resonate with everyone, regardless of skin tone, sexuality or background. Finally, diversity isn't really about being different. It's about being equal. Advertising needs to represent the new normal for UK life, not showcase and make an exhibition of the outer edges. Inclusivity is really the end goal.



