The Routledge Companion to Media and Race

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Advertising

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Why study images of ethnic minorities in advertising? These images shape cultural attitudes about racial minorities and are very powerful agents of socialization. Advertising reflects social stratification—a barometer of the willingness of whites to share mainstream culture with people of color. Finally, studying these images fosters critical media literacy and empowers us to become more autonomous, capable of liberating ourselves from power arrangements and toward positive social change (Cortese 2016).

This chapter examines how ethnic images and race relations have historically been presented in advertising and how such portrayals correlate with patterns of intergroup relations and tensions. Advertising gives us a window to such social relations and ideological challenges to them. Over the years, stereotypes of African Americans and other ethnic minorities have not been eliminated but have changed in character, taking subtler and more symbolic or underhanded forms (Jackman 1994; Karins, Coffman, and Walters 1969; Pettigrew 1985). When social norms that characterize white–black relations are disputed and unresolved, portrayals of black people may not mirror this decreasing subordination but rather may employ more qualified or subtler stereotypes or retreat from challenges to norms completely by limiting images, creating greater social distance (Jackman 1994). Advertising images, as cultural commodities and social constructions, have long been sites of struggle along racial fault lines in the United States’ cultural landscape (Erikson 1976; Gamson et al. 1992).

In the early twentieth century, popular cultural objects caricatured blacks, echoing their second-class citizenship and assisting as an instrument of social control. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the mass media world was nearly all white. The “mammy” and other stereotypes of African Americans assured whites of a “natural” racial hierarchy. Predominantly white media industries produced overtly racist images during an era of customary and legal segregation in employment, residential housing, public transportation, and education.

The Civil Rights Movement successfully challenged the racist ideology that had resulted in discrimination, legal segregation, and the social, economic, and political oppression of blacks in the US. As educational and occupational attainment and voter registration increased for people of color, the symbolic trappings of domination were also challenged. Traditional stereotypes dwindled or died. Consciousness-raising on issues of racial imagery also resulted in the appearance of many more black characters in mainstream advertising than in the past.
There are also more blacks employed as cultural producers within mainstream media industries (see, for instance, Cassidy and Katula 1990). With increased numbers come efforts to produce more culturally authentic imagery of the black community. Nevertheless, minority-owned advertising agencies must walk a fine line between creating positive imagery out of a sense of community responsibility and securing the bottom line—making money. Unless there is profit, the agencies will not be creating any images, let alone positive ones.

**Symbolic Vestiges of Domination**

How much progress have we made in ethnic relations since the early part of the twentieth century? Are we a “color-blind” society or do we remain polarized by race? Social scientists generally posit steadily improving racial attitudes of white Americans, especially in terms of their attitudes toward African Americans. More tangible indicators corroborate such attitudinal changes, most notably the rise of a black middle class. Yet there continues to be negative stereotyping of ethnic minorities, evidence of widely divergent views of the extent and importance of racial discrimination to modern race relations, and evidence of deepening feelings of alienation among black Americans. White openness to integration at the personal level is also very limited. Blacks and Latinos continue to have low college attendance and graduation rates, high unemployment rates, and high rates of intraethnic violent crime. There are also new and subtle ethnic stereotypes.

As the twentieth century ended, stereotypes of African Americans were not removed from cultural products but altered in character, taking subtler and more indirect forms (Jackman 1994; Karins, Coffman, and Walters 1969; Pettigrew 1985). In a commercial produced for Ziploc bags, for instance, all actors had speaking parts except a sturdy black woman, whose reaction to the product was expressed with an excited “Ooh-wee!” Although ostensibly not blatantly racist, the commercial actually carried on the stereotype of the black mammy—subservient, dark, heavy, asexual, and inarticulate (Woods 1995). Hollywood films like *Imitation of Life* and *Gone with the Wind* have been famously criticized for mammy characters who used outbursts instead of grammatical sentences to communicate.

Perhaps the most well-known mammy image in advertising is Aunt Jemima, with her signature bandana. The original Aunt Jemima, Nancy Green (1831–98), displayed acute business acumen in an era when few blacks or women operated businesses. This former slave from Montgomery County, Kentucky, was the world’s first living trademark. She made her debut at age 59 at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where she served pancakes in a booth. The Aunt Jemima Mills Company distributed a souvenir lapel button that bore her photograph. The slogan later became the motto for the company’s promotional campaign. Green was the official trademark for three decades, and the mammy image—as in the Ziploc commercial—can still be seen in advertising.

These ethnic images are closely related to power relations through economic, classificatory, artistic, and judicial factors (Gans 1979; Griswold 1981; Peterson 1976). During turbulent times with intense resentment, as social movements skirmish to gain momentum, caretakers show cultural icons among the conflicts and crises of social norms (Dubin 1987; Swidler 1986; Wuthnow, and Witten 1988). When norms are challenged, images may not directly mirror this sudden shift. Rather, advertising uses subtler or more limited stereotypes. Symbolic annihilation may also be used—eliminating ethnic images altogether. Restricting images of interethnic contact may result in greater social distance...
between whites and people of color. In the 1950s and early 1960s, advertisers did not use ethnic minority models because of unsubstantiated fears of economic backlash from white consumers (Gould et al. 1970). For example, despite tremendous popularity as an entertainer with cross-over appeal, Nat King Cole could not contract a national sponsor for his 1956 television show (Woods 1995).

Though ethnic minority representation in advertising has clearly increased, how black people are depicted and what they contribute to the product’s image remains questionable. Some advertisers appear to lack awareness of or regard for sensitive cultural issues or ethnic stereotypes related to watermelons and the black child as a “pickaninny.” Academic research on ethnic stereotypes in advertising has slowed considerably in the 2000s. But as late as 1990, only 3 percent of people featured in national advertising were black (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs in Guy 1991). *GQ*, *Vogue*, and *Esquire* featured the fewest black models; *Sports Illustrated*, the most. When blacks did appear in ads, they tended to be athletes, entertainers, laborers, or children. The incidence of black women was even lower than that of black men. Less than 20 percent of all ads with blacks used black women (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs in Guy 1991). One study (Wilkes and Valencia 1989) found that blacks were featured in 17 percent of the 904 commercials seen but had major roles in only 31 percent of all ads with blacks. Blacks tended to be cast marketing beer or malt liquor, cigarettes, hair care, automobiles, and electronic products.

Connecting ethnic images to periods of social change highlights the social norms and cultural ideologies of a particular age (Williams 1981). A 1903 Pears Soap ad with a before-and-after visual sequence suggests the soap is strong enough to “clean” a black child, symbolizing a cultural ideology that blacks were unclean and being black carried a negative social identity. Inspecting cultural continuities and changes that are an integral part of critical periods in history furthers our understanding of the interconnections between symbolic and social relations (Pescosolido et al. 1997).

**Three Models of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Advertising**

There are three possible explanations for the way minorities are presented in ads: equal presentation, social reality, and cultural attitudes (Cortese 2015).

**Equal Presentation Model**

In the equal presentation model, whites and minorities are shown in exactly the same way, regardless of any cultural, economic, or physical differences. If whites are presented predominantly as middle-class persons in middle-class settings, African Americans are portrayed similarly, regardless of actual differences in the class distribution. Copycat and racial assimilation ads also support the equal presentation model.

*Copycat.* Minorities prefer to see images of people like themselves in advertising (Woods 1995). Consequently, advertising targeted at ethnic markets that uses ethnic models lends an aura of trustworthiness to the product or service. But this naive approach is risky if the marketer does not understand the nuances of ethnic culture.

In the early 1980s, advertisers began to replace white models with black or Latino models and translate English into Spanish to capture ethnic markets. The copycat, ethnocentric and uncreative, duplicates an ad but uses a model of different race/ethnicity.
The copycat mistakenly assumes blacks are simply dark-skinned white people. Some concepts and representations are not transferable across cultures (Lockhart 1992). Blacks and Latinos are diverse and large enough groups to necessitate distinctive and separate campaigns. The copycat denies the uniqueness of ethnic subcultures and reveals a failure to understand important socio-historical, racial, and cultural differences that affect the buying power of ethnic minorities. The behavior, attitudes, motivations, and mindsets of blacks, Latinos, and Asians are grounded in their particular socio-historical backgrounds.

Advertisers must understand black or Latino identity. Ethnicity has repercussions for consumption patterns, responses to particular advertising, and buying behavior. Effective advertising campaigns aptly demonstrate cultural differences. A mass marketing ad may emphasize scenery, wildlife, and mountainous landscapes. To target blacks, however, that same advertiser may refocus on style, fashion, and images central to an urban environment. Ostensibly, copycat ads tell us that minorities and whites are the same, there is racial equality, and acculturation is highly desirable. Beneath the surface, however, the message is that whites might not buy a product used by minorities. If it were not problematic, there would be no need to use both white and ethnic versions of the same ad. Why not use just one version, ethnic or white?

Copycat ads are a targeting afterthought. Mainstream marketing research tries to help advertisers reach the white, middle- to upper-class market. As ethnic minorities become socially mobile, they too are targeted, but often through copycat ads instead of those that play on unique subcultural images and symbols. The copycat technique often misreads Latino consumers, for example. A marketing campaign for fabric softener, for example, targeted at Latinas who are recent arrivals to the United States is ineffective if they do not grasp the notion of two-step (wash and soften) laundry.

Which ad is the original and which is the copycat? They appear in print at approximately the same time. The difference is the target audience for the magazine or newspaper. The issue is not which is the copycat, but the bending of ethnic images into a utopian assimilated social context instead of using actual, unique subcultural values, images, and symbols. Despite the widespread use of copycat ads, their absence from advertising textbooks is notable. This may be due to a fear of facing the controversial nature of ethnic advertising (O’Guinn et al. 1998).

**Racial Assimilation.** Through casting, print advertising exalts white standards of beauty: light skin, straight or wavy hair, and blue or green eyes. In other words, one must be as white as possible. When minority women appear in ads, they also conform to the provocateur: young, beautiful—as defined by white standards—perfect, and sexually seductive. They are sometimes shown with light skin, straight hair, hazel or green eyes, and Euro-American features. The racial assimilation model in advertising also applies to ethnic minority men.

**Social Reality Model**

The social reality model presents minority life as it is, not as a copy of white life. For instance, McDonald’s displays a single black mother whose young son is not especially fond of his mother’s date (Burrell 1992). Representations of ethnic minority subculture include extended families, urban settings, and parents with multiple jobs. Minorities are more likely to be poor or in lower-status occupations than whites. Ads reflect educational, socio-economic, and cultural differences between lower to lower-middle-class minorities and middle to upper-middle-class whites in American society. This model draws attention
to social inequality, much of which has its historical roots in racial segregation. The social reality model also explains ethnic marketing. Advertisers recognize the disproportionately large increase in the population and buying power of ethnic and racial minorities.

Cultural Attitudes Model

The cultural attitudes of whites toward blacks influence the way blacks are portrayed in advertising. These cultural attitudes reflect:

1. a history of slavery, lynching, threats, and other forms of racist intimidation;
2. state-legislated and court-ordered segregation and educational and occupational discrimination;
3. judicial and court biases in the application of the death penalty and jury selection; and
4. the denial of basic human rights.

The remnants of that history are visible in contemporary social stratification based on race, which is reflected in advertising. American society is highly stratified by race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Advertising becomes an indicator of the readiness of influential groups to accept or tolerate the mainstreaming of ethnic minorities in society. In short, advertisements are signs of ethnic secondary and primary assimilation.

Williams (1970) identifies 10 values that are central in U.S. culture. In addition to freedom, democracy, science, progress, and the like, they include racism and group superiority. These values, including the negative ones, are passed to the next generation through cultural transmission (Macionis 1996). Cultural beliefs favor whites over people of color, males over females, and the privileged over the disadvantaged. There are privileges that attach to white skin color that are often latent, invisible, or unnoticed. Although we would like to think of ourselves as a society where everyone is equal, like George Orwell’s successful revolutionaries in *Animal Farm*, there is no doubt that some of us are “more equal than others.”

The stereotypes and racist ideologies of dominant groups toward ethnic minorities in advertising are very revealing (Perkins 1979). These stereotypes depend on a connection of patterns that can be explained only in relation to each other (Carby 1987). Survey data indicate whites are most willing to accept integration and equal treatment in the area of employment, less so in the area of close social contact and residential integration, and least so in the area of interracial relationships and marriage.

Secondary Assimilation

Advertising displays employment integration, residential integration, and interracial relationships. Humphrey and Schuman (1984) compared the frequency and social characteristics of African Americans and whites in ads from *Time* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1950 and 1980. During that 30-year span, the occupational level of blacks portrayed had risen considerably. Accordingly, ads reflect the finding whites are willing to accept occupational integration.

Despite positive reactions to minority representations in advertising, marketers have not been willing to feature them on a regular basis. In 1985, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law assailed *The Washington Post* for a sharp underrepresentation of ethnic minorities featured in its real estate section ads. From January 1985 through April
1986, minorities were featured in less than 2 percent of the Post’s ads (Advertising Age 1986). At the time, the population of Washington, D.C. was 90 percent black. The Post replied by establishing a 25 percent target for blacks in real estate ads. The paper further said it would refuse advertising that did not comply with the policy. This acute underrepresentation of blacks mirrors survey data that indicate resistance to residential integration (Humphrey and Schuman 1984).

Primary Assimilation

Before 1970, the rates of interracial marriage in the US were less than 2 percent. By 1980, the rates slightly increased to 3.2 percent. By 2010, rates rose to 8.4 percent (Wang 2012), reflecting a noteworthy increase in social acceptance. (Nevertheless, whites are the least likely to marry outside of their race.) There has been an increase of ads with interracial intimate relationships, including a much-discussed Cheerios ad that ran in the 2014 Super Bowl. This reflects a reduction of social distance in the closest form of primary racial assimilation. There has also been a recent trend in advertising to show interracial friendships and interracial socializing.

Not all differences between representations of African Americans and whites in ads can be readily explained by either of the first two models. Research on consumer responses to integrated advertising is inconclusive (Reid and Vanden Bergh 1980), perhaps because cultural attitudes toward ethnic minorities are contextually conditioned. Moreover, these cultural attitudes are mirrored in print advertising.

Ethnic Stereotyping

White cultural attitudes about racial and ethnic minorities are often closely linked to cultural stereotypes. Another strategy in using minorities in advertising is to go completely in the other direction from equal presentation and play up or exaggerate the cultural and racial uniqueness of the role or the model.

African-American Stereotypes

One of the prevailing and enduring stereotypical images of ethnic minorities in the mass media has been that of the ruthlessly aggressive predator, someone who injures or exploits others for one’s own gain. A predator preys, plunders, destroys, or devours. Mass media have incessantly portrayed people of color as predators through their ethnicity or phenotypic features. The predator image has been around since at least the 1880s when American Indians were showed preying on stagecoaches in advertising for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows (Cortese 2016).

Black men have also been stereotyped as predators or thugs as a means of social control. This image can be seen in contemporary advertising, including political advertising. President H. W. Bush famously used an ominous image of Willie Horton, a furloughed African-American convict who was convicted of a brutal murder, to paint his opponent, Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, as soft on crime. Similarly stereotypical images—of African Americans and Latinos—were used during the 2015–16 Republican primary elections in ads run by candidates Donald Trump and Ted Cruz (Roller 2015).

Black women have been stereotyped as seductresses—a sexual predator of sorts. The Jezebel is promiscuous and sexually irresponsible. This stereotypical image has been
around since at least 1929 with Nina Mae McKinney’s portrayal of a seductress who marries a revivalist in the feature film *Hallelujah*. The image of the sexual predator continues in contemporary advertising. Black women are routinely portrayed as predatory, primitive, wild, or animal-like (Jhally and Kilbourne 2010).

**The Luscious Latina**

Latinos are even more underrepresented than African Americans in advertising. They were virtually nonexistent in ads prior to 1980 (Woods 1995). Even in the late 1980s, Latinos were featured in only 5.8 percent of all television commercials and as only 1.5 percent of the speaking characters on network television ads (Wilkes and Valencia 1989). When they do appear, Latinos are in background roles as part of a group. They are seen more often in commercials for food products, entertainment, alcohol, and furniture. Latinos typically are not represented in mainstream advertising hosting dinner parties, washing dishes, or drinking coffee (Woods 1995). An exception to the vast underrepresentation of Latinos in mass media is the Latina sex object or seductress. “The Luscious Latina” stereotype in film, television, and advertising has endured because of its marketability (Fregoso 1993; Woll 1980). The alcohol industry especially reinforces representations that exploit and demean women.

The amalgam of genetic features characteristic of Latino populations provides an exotic and attractive look. At the same time, cultural factors and social stratification based on race have helped prevent Latinas from being assertive and self-confident. The passive role of Latinas corresponds to the complementary and active role of Latino men. The logic seems to be that since Latino men are macho, Latinas must be passive. This has resulted in a stereotype that portrays Latinas as inarticulate, subservient, passive, and gullible. This negative stereotype tends to limit mass media portrayals of Latinas to roles as either maids or sex objects.

Actresses in the past, such as Rita Hayworth and Delores Del Rio, and today, such as Salma Hayek, sometimes present an image with both positive (e.g., powerful and sensuous) and negative (e.g., boisterous and oversexed) characteristics. Historically, Del Rio broke the color barrier for Latinas in Hollywood in the 1920s. The exotic woman had her niche in movies. Lupe Velez, another breakthrough Latina actress, fell into the role of the comedic spitfire by “speaking with a heavy accent and resorting to rapid-fire Spanish when annoyed” (Menard 1997). The spitfire, oversexed, and overly emotional woman is not a flattering image. These images are present in today’s media, including advertising.

Hayworth did not become popular in the 1930s and 1940s until she assimilated to Anglo standards. She dropped her image as a raven-haired, oversexed Latina and transformed herself into an auburn-haired love goddess. Carmen Miranda, a contemporary of Hayworth, on the other hand, was never able to shake her image as a spitfire and was always typecast accordingly. Other Latinas pursued the trail blazed by these pioneers—Rita Moreno in the 1950s, Raquel Welch in the 1960s and 1970s, Charo in the 1970s, Sonia Braga in the 1980s, Jennifer Lopez and Hayek in the 1990s and the new millennium—though never quite breaking out of the sexually charged roles still retained for Latinas.

Advertisers recognize and capitalize on the allure and popularity of Latinas. Typecasting and stereotypes are the core of the modeling and film industries. Advertising agencies and Hollywood producers have always looked for “types.” Unfortunately, Latinas are limited to roles as Luscious Latinas, maids, or illegal immigrants. Young Latina models and actors,
looking for visibility and a means to survive, are forced to accept jobs that cast them in these stereotypical roles.

Moreover, Latinas may also sometimes accept stereotypes because a role that requires physical attractiveness enhances notions of self-worth and self-esteem. The problem with this is that only a small proportion of Latinas are able to take advantage of this stereotype. Working-class Latinas are not afforded the opportunities to advance their careers or personal lives with this privilege. It is not always wise to stake one’s self-regard on an attribute as ephemeral as physical attractiveness. It is crucial that Latina models and actors have access to playing everyday people, ranging from hard-working mothers to professional women.

American Indian Stereotypes

American Indian imagery has historically been culturally insensitive (e.g., a rifle marketed as the “Savage Code”). Among the most visible and controversial popular culture stereotypes of Native Americans is the nickname of the NFL’s Washington Redskins. The Federal Communications Commission views the name as “offensive and derogatory.” Native American symbolism has been used often in advertising. One popular use is the Jeep Cherokee. A representation of an Indian woman remains on the logo for Land O’Lakes dairy products. In 1991, much to the consternation of the Lakota (Sioux) tribe, a brewer introduced a new type of malt liquor dubbed “Crazy Horse” (Woods 1995). The namesake for the product was obviously the legendary war chief. In fact, the Crazy Horse label features a Sioux war chief headdress. Nevertheless, his descendants argue Crazy Horse condemned alcohol because he understood how destructive it was to his people.

Highly stylized images were inspired by American Indian symbolism. Ads feature a backdrop of cabins built for tourists in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The shelters stand open for viewing the beauty of the red rock that inspired the Anasazi tribe to religious ceremony nearly 2,000 years ago. American Indian symbolism often markets cigarettes, making an odd link between Indian life and the natural qualities of tobacco. American Indian imagery in advertising is often exploited or misused, suggesting cultural insensitivity and ethnic ignorance on the part of advertisers.

Asian Stereotypes

Representations of Asian Americans in advertising, radio, film, and television are infrequent, notwithstanding a sharp 43 percent increase (from 2000 to 2010) in the number of Asian Americans who now comprise 5.6 percent of all people in the United States—either alone or in combination with one or more other races (Hoeffel et al. 2012). At the close of the twentieth century, only a small fraction of TV characters were Asian Americans; most of those roles were minor (Gerbner 1998). Asian characters comprised 3 percent of prime-time characters, but only 2 percent were recurring (Children Now 2001). Even though the presentation of Asian characters has increased in recent years, the underrepresentation and stereotyping of Asians continue (Sun 2002). Perhaps the main difficulty associated with these data is the lack of non-stereotypical role models for Asian-American children and teens. While some contemporary ads sometimes feature Asian women who are articulate, commanding, and acculturated, they break sharply with the lotus blossom, geisha, or China doll image of Asian women as submissive, frail, passive, and quiet.
Sadly, the typical Asian female in contemporary advertising is old wine in a new bottle. She conforms to the Dragon Lady—an Asian woman who is seductive and desirable but untrustworthy (Espiritu 1997a). Films in the early twentieth century (e.g., Daughter of Fu Manchu) portrayed this stereotypical scheming, treacherous, dangerous Dragon Lady—a female version of the Asian bad guy. She hypnotizes her male enemy, gains trust by seducing him, and when he least expects it, she disposes of him through sabotage or backstabbing (Espiritu 1997a).

The stereotype of the Dragon Lady can be traced back to the late 1800s when Chinese men immigrated to America typically for manual labor. Americans viewed them with animosity because of perceived competition for jobs. They feared mass immigration would result in sudden reproduction of Asians in the US. Americans suffered from “Yellow Peril,” a belief the Chinese would overpopulate and eventually take over and destroy American civilization. During this era, many states—including California—prohibited racial mixing through the passage of anti-miscegenation laws. Consequently, Chinese women were shipped to America to serve as prostitutes for Chinese men (Yung 1999). Chinese prostitutes were accused of being demoralizing, tainting the blood of white American youth, spreading sexually transmitted diseases, and being sexually corrupt (Uchida 1998). The perception of Chinese women as indecent and shameful helped to justify the enactment of anti-Chinese legislation. Anti-Chinese prejudice was reflected in Hollywood films that further perpetuated this depiction of the Dragon Lady.

Anna Mae Wong, a famous Chinese actress in the early twentieth century, is well known for playing villainous Asian women in films such as Thief of Bagdad, where she plays a Mongol slave girl who helps an evil ruler take over the world and Daughter of the Dragon, where she plays the daughter of malevolent villain, Fu Manchu. In both roles, she is untrustworthy, dangerous, and manipulative. If we consider this sexualization of Asian women over the past century, it is evident contemporary roles are simply an adaptation or contemporary version of the Dragon Lady—built on an ultra-sexualized appearance. Add tough, rude, candid, aggressive, sarcastic, and manipulative; remove submissive and selfless.

The Dragon Lady stands in stark contrast with a history in advertising that virtually never displays Asian men as sexually desirable. This image is controversial in Asian-American communities. The new Dragon Lady is popular among Asian-American female college students who enjoy how that image refutes the submissive and quiet Asian female stereotype. Future research should focus on how Asian-American representations influence Asian Americans and other racial groups. Ethnographic interviews and focus groups could be gainfully applied to address the tension between media hegemony and individual viewer autonomy. The media political economy affects Asian-American media representations and disrupts the status quo to produce regulatory and systematic changes. Ads stereotype the Asian woman as a passive sex object or a hyper-sexualized subject. Asian women continue to be reduced to one-dimensional caricatures in Western representations (Espiritu 1997b). In advertising, the Asian woman is eroticized as exotic, sensuous, and promiscuous, but untrustworthy.

Contemporary Images of Ethnic Minorities in Advertising

Social change in the US gradually reversed images of ethnic minorities in advertising. People of color have become more visible and portrayed more favorably. Four points about images of ethnic minorities in advertising are notable (Cortese 2016):
Until the 1980s, there were virtually no ethnic minority fashion models on the runways or in mainstream print media. This historical omission of positive ethnic minority images in advertising represents opposition to social change in which minority equality is viewed as threatening to whites (Humphrey and Schuman 1984).

Ads are becoming an ethnic rainbow. The saturation of ethnic minority images in mainstream broadcast and print media tracks racial advances; higher educational and occupational attainment; recent black economic, political, and social empowerment; and a retreat of traditional racial stereotypes.

Despite the large increase in ethnically diverse models, problems remain with how their images are marketed to the public. Ethnic minority models in ads often conform to standards of white beauty.

Models remain exploited through ethnicity or phenotypic features. This trend of playing up unique ethnic characteristics is a form of symbolic racism seen in books in which minorities are portrayed with distant images, commemorating particular cultural heritage, but without contact with whites.

Perhaps multicultural ads are now popular because they reflect social reality as a global village. Ads using only white models risk appearing stiff or dated. Similarly, using only one token person of color in a white crowd or group is a thinly veiled attempt to appear sensitive to ethnic minorities. Now minorities are used to sell products and services to all people. The use of black models in advertising grabs the attention of both black and white viewers (Burrell 1992).

The use of minorities in ads emerged in Europe. Couturiers, notably Givenchy, began using black women as runway fashion models (Scott 1989). Negative responses followed; some felt jobs should not be given to “immigrants.” Elle, a top French fashion magazine, championed the development of the multicultural look in its editorial pages. The global-village look entered the US in 1985 when the American version of Elle was introduced.

One of the original advertisers to adopt the global-village look was Benetton. The Italian knitwear producer initiated its United Colors of Benetton campaign in 1984 (Scott 1989). The ads show ethnically diverse, attractive teens and youngsters, often arm in arm. Benetton’s goal is to project a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood as well as appeal to ethnic consumers. Also in the 1980s, Esprit, a San Francisco-based sportswear enterprise, took a step further in this direction by using actual employees in ads. Today Wal-Mart does the same with its ethnically diverse workforce.

Advertising across the globe has become increasingly ethnically diverse. Japan, a country whose advertising has reflected an obsession with blond hair, blue or green eyes, long legs, and narrow noses is now using more Latinos, blacks, and Asians. Ethnically diverse advertising images provide a unique alternative to sterile white ones and are more representative of the real world. Modeling agencies now recruit internationally to meet the ever-increasing demand for fresh faces and an ethnic look. The shift toward more ethnically diverse fashion models is a big step and offers a cultural opening to a previously closed arena. Multiculturalism represents cultural strength instead of racial division. The multiracial look is in vogue in advertising. The process of changing racial definitions continues, and dramatic developments are on the horizon. These potential changes may be attributable to increasing rates of interracial marriage and a census that finally recognizes multiracial identities.

There has been a considerable increase in ethnic representations in advertising. However, sometimes advertisers merely “color” mainstream ads. Copycat ads are prevalent.
Ethnic stereotypes remain. In other marketing campaigns, ethnic themes are tastefully done. Sometimes explicit reference is made to phenotypical differences such as skin color. Ethnic representations in advertising have increased and improved. Some break racial stereotypes. Through visual imagery and text deconstruction, ethnic representations in advertising provide the tools to understand how mainstream culture views ethnic subcultures (Cortese 2016).

References


Further Reading


“20 Ads that Changed How We Think about Race In America,” *Business Insider*, 2013. Available at http://www.businessinsider.com/20-ads-that-changed-how-we-think-about-race-in-america-2013-2#ixzz3jF7pXtYB. (This slideshow contains the tale of race in the US, as told through its visual ads.)