

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT ADVERTISING

WHO IS MISREPRESENTED, MISSING, STEREOTYPED?

We are constantly bombarded by advertising—on our smart phones, tablets and computers, in our social media feeds. As we try to make sense of the sheer volume of advertising, we must also think critically about its content and consider what all of these ads are trying to tell us about our world and the people in it.

Ads may portray some people in a positive way, and other people—particularly minorities—in a more negative way, often using stereotypes. Or, they may leave some minority groups out altogether, rendering them “invisible.”

One reason for this is that members of the dominant group (white males, for instance) may have created the ads in the first place—choosing the images and the people in them, narrating and creating the text. That’s important, because the authors of content can vastly influence what eventually becomes accepted as societal norms. When one group is represented in the majority of advertising, that group’s ideals become the standard against which

all other groups are measured. As consumers, we need to reflect on the roles played by minorities in advertisements and consider who has been left out or misrepresented.

PEPSI COMMERCIAL **WATCH VIDEO**

In 2017, Pepsi released a commercial showing a peaceful protest by a diverse group of people. At the beginning of the ad, celebrity Kendall Jenner (of the Kardashian family) is shown doing a photoshoot near the protest. She runs to join the protest, while drinking a Pepsi. She walks up to a line of police officers, who are presumably there to provide “security,” and offers her can of Pepsi to one of them. The officer accepts the Pepsi, drinks it, smiles—and the crowd cheers loudly. The protest shown in the commercial is reminiscent of the real-life “Black Lives Matter” marches which were taking place around the same time, to protest the mistreatment of Blacks by police.



The commercial received massive criticism, with critics saying it trivialized the Black Lives Matter protests and portrayed Kendall Jenner as a “White savior” for the minorities in the protest, as she crosses the divide between the protesters and police to help the protesters receive a positive outcome using only her charm and a Pepsi!

When we look at past protests by Blacks, Indigenous people and other marginalized groups, the relationship between them and the police is not always a positive one.

Historically, when people from marginalized groups have made offerings or gestures of peace, they have not always been met with kindness, or even understanding. The Pepsi ad sends the message that marginalized people need a White saviour to help them. At an actual Black Lives Matter protest that took place in Baton Rouge on July 9, 2016, the end result was the arrest of a Black female protester. After the release of this commercial, Pepsi and Kendall apologized for any overt or implicit negative messages that the commercial sent out.



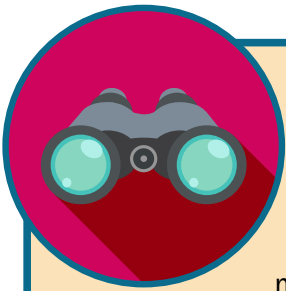
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H&M AD

In January 2018, Swedish retailer H&M released an advertisement featuring a young Black boy wearing a sweater that read “coolest monkey in the jungle.” The sweater, the phrase and the use of a Black person to sell this product was problematic in many ways. The combination of the phrase “coolest monkey in the jungle” and the use of a Black model worked together to send a message equating Blacks to monkeys and being less than human. The ad continues the marginalization of a targeted group of people, Blacks. Canadian singer The Weeknd had been working with H&M on a series of ads, but after this ad came out, he dropped his relationship with the company. He tweeted “woke up this morning shocked and embarrassed by this photo. I’m deeply offended and will not be working with @hm anymore...”. While costly to him, his swift and strong response sent a message that negative stereotypes must

not be tolerated. Social media swiftly condemned H&M’s advertisement and supported The Weeknd’s decision: his tweet got more than 100,000 retweets. The company pulled the advertisement and the product and apologized to those who were offended by it.

Companies can play a crucial role in preventing the negative portrayal of minorities in their advertisements. As consumers, we need to continue to hold companies accountable, calling them out through social media, hashtags, and boycotts. Everyone has a responsibility to think about the messages and the representation of people in ads and commercials. We should not allow our subconscious to internalize images from advertising to build our understanding of societal norms if the messages are ones that perpetuate stereotypes or represent marginalized groups in harmful ways.



JOURNALISM 101: REFLECTING DIVERSITY

Many newsrooms are becoming more aware of how important it is that the journalists and editors they hire reflect the community they serve. For most, that means hiring more people from marginalized groups. That change is happening, albeit slowly. Journalists need to ensure that every article they produce includes and embraces the viewpoint of marginalized people. Additionally, journalists need to help readers understand the historical significance of events and images, putting them in context to connect the past to the present.



DID YOU KNOW?

After the release and withdrawal of the H&M "coolest monkey in the jungle" advertisement, protesters near Johannesburg, South Africa stormed H&M stores, forcing them to close.



EDUCATION CONNECTION

Discuss!

Why is it important to think about the narrative/story that is being portrayed by the images in advertisements?
How can companies safeguard against the release of negative messages?

Check it Out!

Find some examples of how basketball star LeBron James, rapper Diddy and others rebranded the H&M advertisement.

Investigate!

There are many examples of ads that have portrayed marginalized groups in offensive and negative ways. Find two other examples and answer the following questions:

1. Why was the ad considered offensive?
2. What was the backlash
(ie, what did people say about the ad)?
3. How did the advertiser respond? Did they make changes so it wouldn't happen again?
4. How was the incident covered by the media?

DIG DEEPER LINKS TO LEARN MORE

Read CBC News', "*Pepsi pulls much-mocked Kendall Jenner ad, admits it 'missed the mark.'*" Watch the commercial and think about similarities between it and the images of Leshia Evans and Martin Luther King Junior mentioned in the article.

[CLICK HERE](#)

Explore more about H&M's controversial ad:
The Weeknd "deeply offended," cutting ties with H&M over advertising image of Black model.

[CLICK HERE](#)

The Guardian - International Edition:
Courting controversy: from H&M's "coolest monkey" to Gucci's blackface jumper.

[CLICK HERE](#)