Minority Images in Advertising: Market Power and Fashions of Practice

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Advertising is often singled out as an example of racism for excluding or poorly representing people of color, despite recent work that has documented a trend of steady improvement. Researchers typically suggest this improvement has occurred because minority groups have gained “market power” – that is because the group’s increasing size, affluence or youth make them an attractive target to marketers, who have an incentive to portray such groups more often and in a more positive manner. Here we revisit this common argument and propose an additional force shaping such depictions: “fashions of practice.” These fashions of practice are relatively short-lived stylistic practices that marketers incorporate into ads. Longitudinal analysis of more than 70 years of advertising reveals images are considerably shaped by both practices. Our unique sample helps us untangle these two very different social forces and leads us to argue for increased attention to fashions of practice.
American consumers have demonstrated considerable ambivalence to marketers and to the institution of marketing itself (Fox 1985). Now, in the age of social media and frequent calls for more “conscious capitalism” and transparent marketer behavior, marketers need better responses to recurring criticisms. One such criticism is that advertising, marketing’s most visible vehicle, propagates racial and ethnic stereotypes or simply ignores and systematically exclude people of color. It is, therefore, no coincidence that civil rights leaders, cultural critics and others have picked advertising as an example of the racial bias of marketers. The published research, however, tells a somewhat different story, one of admittedly slow and incomplete progress, but progress nonetheless. The dominant explanation for this change is that images of racial minorities improve as minorities gain market power - that is when they became large enough, wealthy enough, or young enough to command more respectful representation by marketers.

This intuitive economic explanation is compelling. We, however, propose that a second and less expected factor also has a considerable influence: fashions of practice. Fashions of practice are substantive stylistic changes that are primarily driven by a sense of what is in vogue, or preferred by empowered tastemakers. Just like all fashion, the antecedents of shifting stylistic preferences are many and overlapping. Sometimes, an identifiable agenda or edict from regulators or industry associations can be located, but other times times it is due to a perceived change in creative advertising style or technique. Others have been noted to emerge from the related worlds of art, journalism, and literature. And these fashions of practice may not always affect how individuals are pictured. However, we suggest fashions of practice as an explanation for some of the observed changes in marketer’s representations of people of color. Here we use a systematic sample of 70 years of American advertising to document the improving image of U.S. racial minorities and the role of fashions of practice. First, we review the empirical evidence for improving racial representations, and then we consider the two explanations of market power and fashions of practice.

1. THEORY

1.1 The Empirical Evidence

Research findings have repeatedly shown that minority racial and ethnic groups have been underrepresented in advertising. Early work focused on African Americans but in the 1980s and 1990s research
included Asian, Latino, and Native American representations as well (for a review see Cui 2001). This quantitative underrepresentation is sometimes known as the proportionality criterion and has frequently been used as the first step in understanding minority images in ads (Wilkes and Valencia 1989). Findings show that minority racial and ethnic groups have been underrepresented in television advertising relative to their numbers in the general public (Colfax and Sternberg 1972; Humphrey and Schuman 1984; Kassarjian 1969). More recent research on the proportionality criterion shows the inclusion of African Americans in advertising has improved over time (Bowen and Schmid 1997; Taylor, Landreth and Bang 2005). Several more recent studies find minorities appear in ads at a rate equal to their population proportion (Coltrane and Messino 2000; Mastro and Stern 2003), and some groups are actually overrepresented (Licata and Biswas 1993; Lee and Joo 2005: Taylor and Stern 1997). Licata and Biswas (1993) show a steady improvement in the inclusion of African American models in television advertising. While African American models were used in a scant 4% of television ads in 1967 (Dominick and Greenberg 1970), the number increases steadily to 13.0% in 1973 (Bush et al. 1977). While these results describe the number of ads with at least one African American actor, the upward trend is similar for studies focusing on the total number of minority actors as well, and in various media (Taylor and Stern 1997).

But quantity isn’t everything. The quality of representation has also been examined. Generally, these studies find images of minority groups have also improved over time, although less dramatically. Researchers have found that white models are still more often the central characters and the ones exercising authority. African Americans are more likely to be portrayed in stereotypical occupations as athletes or musicians, appear in public service ads, or are paired with food, cars, or alcohol (Bowen and Schmid 1997; Coltrane and Messino 2000; Mastro and Stern 2003). Asians are often paired with technology products, while Latinos more often appear in food, entertainment, and banking ads (Taylor and Stern 1997; Wilkes and Valencia 1989). Even when included in advertising, racial minorities are more often depicted as children (Seiter 1995), or as token members of their race (Bristor, Lee and Hunt 1995; Kanter 1977/2009). While some these representations remain unflattering, Cui (2001) reviews more than a half century marketing research on ethnic minorities and finds that in addition to greater numbers, minority groups are also portrayed in more diverse roles, more positive, more major roles and skilled jobs, and traditional stereotypes have been abandoned or updated.

1.2 Market Power
What is the explanation for these improved representations? Researchers have typically speculated that improvement is driven by some form of market power. For example, Westerman (1989) describes how advertisers interested in the increasing size and buying power of the African American market helped change negative stereotypical images. Quaker foods transformed “Aunt Jemima from a servant mammy into a black Betty Crocker.” The growing size and youth of the market, with its high birth and immigration rates, made African Americans a desirable target market, one that would hesitate to buy from companies using negative or stereotypical representations. The changing market power of African American consumers created a context in which marketers “must serve up appealing images that are politically correct and racially sensitive, images that motivate [consumers] to buy” (Bowen and Schmid 1997: 135). Licata and Biswas (1993) note that black civil rights organizations continue to appeal to marketer’s desire for profit when pressuring for the use of black models in advertising, relying on the market power argument. Minority groups without significant market power remain invisible or stereotyped in advertising. Merskin (2001) notes the small size and poverty of Native American consumers results in continued use of stereotypical images that would be unacceptable for any other group with more market power.

Given this popular market power explanation, we would expect the improvement in images of minority consumers to be slow and steady, reflecting the steadily increasing size and buying power of minority markets. A corollary to this may be that during moments of high visibility the market power of groups may be further emphasized, and racial representation may be under increased scrutiny. This explanation is less about the size or buying power of the minority market than its visibility. But this visibility operates in a similar way, encouraging marketers to portray minority groups with sensitivity. One likely moment would be the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s. At this time of national attention to race, it would seem likely to see advertisers improve portrayals of African Americans (Fox 1985). The election of the first black president in 2008 may be another such moment. While the economic or demographic aspects of African Americans did not dramatically change, these historical moments are related to the increased public visibility of African Americans which may operate similarly to market power.

Market power is a sensible explanation for steady improvement over time, and its corollary high visibility argues for similar improvements. However, these are not likely not to be the sole dynamics. We propose fashions of practice as another mechanism that adds to our understanding of observed changing representations of minorities in
advertising. We also note that fashions of practice and market power are not mutually exclusive but may overlap and combine in a variety of ways.

1.3 Fashions of Practice

Alongside market power we introduce fashions of practice. British sociologist Liz McFall (2004) has been particularly recognized for bringing this thought to the academic discourse on advertising. As of yet, it has not seen significant application in U.S. marketing research. To McFall (2004), advertisers are cultural producers interested in using style to enhance the effectiveness of their marketing. McFall (2002) argues that much change occurs in advertising due to what is deemed as fashionable practice. A certain style of rhetoric or representation becomes popular within the advertising creative community, flourishes, declines, and is replaced. Fashions occur in advertising practice, like elsewhere, for all kinds of competing and overlapping reasons.

Other researchers have noted what appear to be fashions of practice as well. Advertising historian Roland Marchand (1985) describes how advertisers in the 1920s incorporated the sharp angles, geometric forms, and streamlined silhouettes of the Art Deco or Zig Zag Moderne art style to emphasize atmosphere and social class in their marketing efforts (p.140-148). Another fashion of practice in advertising is the vogue in the 1980s and early 1990s for photojournalist “reality-style” ads that feature black and white photography, little copy, unstaged poses, with the product absent or subordinate (Warlaumont 1998). While McFall (2002) describes a number of close ties between advertisers and artists and the particular taste cultures that emerge among advertisers as a result (p.130-140), we believe fashions of practice may be drawn from diverse sources including fads in business as well. Furthermore, fashions of practice do not necessarily deal with images of minority groups. Instead, they bear on the design of the ad such as the atmosphere and use of figures, which in turn may affect images of minorities.

Thus, we have two possible explanations of the improved representation of minority groups observed in advertising from the 1950 to 2010. The traditional explanation is that the increasing market power of minority groups results in increasing inclusion and increasingly tasteful representations. The corollary to this is that moments of increase visibility also provide an incentive for more, and more positive, portrayals. We propose fashions of practice as another explanation, and examine our data for noticeable fashions of practice related to images of minorities. It is very important to note that these two explanations are not mutually exclusive but may be combined or intertwined in any number of ways. The use of a longitudinal sample will help us disentangle the slow and steady
improvement and respectful images suggested by the market power explanation from less enduring and more stylistic fashions of practice.

2. METHOD

We conduct a content analysis of nearly 1300 ads that cover 70 years of the most widely circulated print advertising. We begin by evaluating advertising against the proportionality criterion and plotting changes over time. Then we examine ads qualitatively to look for evidence of increasing market power and fashions of practice.

2.1 Data Collection

Because our objective was to examine advertising in general, we choose ads printed in the most widely circulated magazines in a multi-stage sampling frame. Not all media or segments are the same, but this sample of ads gives us a sense of what the modal American consumer is likely to see. First, we selected ads from decennial years from 1950 to 2010 to allow comparison to U.S. census data, then added midpoints every five years. We then took ten ads from each of the ten highest circulation magazines for that year. Circulations were obtained from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (now the Alliance for Audited Media). One issue per magazine per year was randomly selected. Individual ads of one-quarter page or larger were then taken from randomly selected pages. This yielded a total of 1,299 advertisements (one publication had only 9 ads).

2.2 Content Analysis

The race of each individual that appeared in an ad was coded as white or non-white to allow for comparison with national census data. Anthropomorphized products, spokescharacters, and indistinct crowds were excluded. Product and ad characteristics such as brand, category, headline, and the number of people shown were also recorded to help contextualize our findings. Three coders and one back-up were extensively trained. Reliability was calculated using Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff 2004) using syntax provided by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007). Our reliability coefficient, Krippendorff’s alpha, is 0.8583, providing confidence in the reliability of our coders. Analysis was conducted by assigning the value agreed on by at least two coders. Results for non-white images were also reviewed and confirmed by the authors. We then used this data set to evaluate the proportionality criterion, a
frequent measure of equal representation in advertising (Wilkes and Valencia 1989). That is, we asked whether the number of minorities shown in advertising was less than, equal to, or more than their proportion of the population. We also calculated whether the number of minorities pictured in advertising were statistically different from year to year. In the quantitative analysis we group all minorities together as non-white. While we recognize that this is an oversimplification, we use this division to be able to compare our data to census data. We further disaggregate this in the qualitative analysis.

2.3 Qualitative Analysis

The quality of representation was also determined by examining visual themes and manners of depiction that appeared in the advertisements. We used techniques drawn from the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to guide the analysis and interpretation of this qualitative data (Goulding 2005). First, we limited the qualitative analysis to ads that contained at least one non-white individual. We then used provisional coding to indicate each actor’s position, apparel, degree of power and status, occupation, consumption, interaction, whether the ad was single-race or integrated, the setting, and product category. We also looked for the presence or absence of stereotypical presentations noted in previous research. Some coding categories also emerged during the analysis such as whether an ad pictured one or multiple people, whether the people pictured were portraying everyday people or were celebrities, and whether people pictured were foreign or American. The constant comparison method was used to compare each ad to other similar ads, other similar brands, other ads with minorities, ads from other years, and those without minorities.

3. RESULTS

The social landscape in postwar American advertising differs from demographic reality. Less than 10% of the overall sample is non-white. However, the number of minorities present in our sample generally increases throughout the period under investigation. The number also rises in 1970 (the increase is significant at the 90% level) and jumps dramatically in 2010 (significant at the 99% level, see figure 1). We next explore the general trend toward inclusion next, as well as these two peaks.
3.1 Market Power

Racial and ethnic minorities remain underrepresented compared to the population in all quinquennial years except for 2010. However, the trend is toward greater inclusion and is consistent with a large body of previous work (Cui 2001). Not only do the numbers improve, but minorities are seen in higher status occupations and a greater range of consumption situations. While stereotypes certainly persist, for example the picturing of African Americans as musicians or Asian Americans as technically competent professionals, many depictions are positive. The 21st century presents us with images of a Hispanic Chief Quality Officer, an Asian family at leisure, and an African American father coaching his son’s baseball team.

This steady improvement is marked by the use of minorities as sole product endorsers beginning in the year 2000. This style of ad features a single person using or endorsing a product, in contrast to previous images in which minority figures were presented alongside a number of Caucasian figures. In 2000 alone, we see an African American promoting Nyquil, chewing Trident, and extolling the benefits of People PC. Hank Aaron endorses Aflexa. This style is typified by the coffee ad presented in figure 3, in which an Algebra teacher overlooks the city from a rooftop as she considers how to motivate her students. She is African American. In this style of ad, minorities, many of which are African American, are pictured as end consumers of the advertised brand. We believe this overall trend in both numbers and quality of representation reflects African American’s growing market power.

3.2 Native American Images

In contrast to African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanic consumers, Native Americans remain rarely pictured. This is consistent with a market power argument; Native American consumers are a small group and poor (Merskin 2001), and this lack of market power is reflected in a continued use of stereotypical images. In all the advertisements in this data set, Native Americans appear in a historical context and are identifiable by their traditional costume. A 1975 advertisement for Pensupreme Frozen Iced Tea pictures a native carrying a crate of tea. The grinning native is clothed in a headband with a feather, lace-up buckskin shirt, loincloth with tomahawk, and wears war-paint on his face. The headline reads “Have a tasty tea party / Another revolutionary treat from Pensupreme.” The reference to the Boston Tea Party may suggest that this isn’t a Native American at all but a revolutionary in Native disguise. This gives credence to the market power argument. While some minority groups
are being courted by marketers and featured in more positive ways in advertising. Groups with small numbers or low affluence such as Native Americans remain virtually invisible in advertising. When they do appear, the images remain stereotypical and downright offensive.

3.1 Fashion of Practice: Integrated Casts from 1970 to 1980

The number of non-white depictions peaks twice and both involve fashions of practice. The first peak is characterized by distinctly integrated casts. In a 1970 ad for Westinghouse set at a construction site, shows a number of African American and Caucasians working alongside one another. A 1975 Colgate ad shows an African American and a Caucasian Olympic athlete, who are surrounded by several children of various racial and ethnic backgrounds: Caucasian, African American, and Asian. A 1980 ad for Amtrak typifies the integrated cast that appear throughout this period (see figure 2). In the ad we see pictured an older Caucasian baggage handler, African American porter, Caucasian waitress, African American ticket agent, and Caucasian chef. These five employees seem chosen to intentionally present a cross-section of genders and races. Furthermore, these ads tend to have quite a few people present, and this helps explain the notable increase of minorities from 1970 to 1980 in our sample.

Colfax and Sternberg (1972) also describe this type of presentation as “All-Races-Together” (13) or the “brotherhood of all races” (14) in which the American melting-pot ideal is upheld. This is a common style in their data set, which ranges from 1965 to 1970 (slightly earlier than we see it). In our longitudinal data, this style is popular for only a short while, though it does persists at low rates for a while. While these ads may be linked to the earlier success of the civil rights movement, and may be in part attributed to the growing power of minorities, we believe these ads also strongly demonstrate a fashion of practice. These ads are striking, and strikingly different, when seen as part of the 1299 ads.

3.3 Fashion of Practice: Corporate Social Responsibility Advertising in 2010

The year 2010 represents an important inflection point in our data. For the first time, the number of non-whites pictured in our sample of ads surpasses their frequency in the U.S. population (see figure 1). In fact, non-whites in ads increase dramatically and significantly (at the 99% level) between 2005 and 2010. It is indeed tempting to point to the 2008 election of President Barack Obama as the precipitating event. However, our analysis reveals that the reason for this shift is less about the changing demography of the United States or improving
attitudes toward racial and ethnic groups, or the election of President Obama, than it is about a fashion of practice among marketers, one closely associated with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) advertising.

This type of advertising promotes the charitable and philanthropic actions of brands or companies. In an attempt to show the scale, scope and diversity of their responsibility efforts benefiting the less fortunate, this style of ad tends to picture the poor people being helped by the company. These poor people are usually people of color. It is this type of CSR advertising that is responsible for the 2010 rise in representations of minorities, not a sudden increase in minority inclusion in non-CSR brand advertising.

Furthermore, the non-white spike in 2010 ads is made up exclusively of non-Americans, particularly the foreign poor that reside in China, India and Africa. While foreign, these depictions are counted in the sample because the brands are headquartered in the U.S., offer products in the U.S, but more importantly because the images are seen by American readers and likely help shape American perceptions of poverty and its interaction with race both internationally and domestically. They also add to the count of non-white minorities in the brand’s advertising, but they are distinctly portrayed as “other” (O’Barr 1994).

For example, a 2010 ad for household cleaner by SC Johnson describes “ingredients from Africa” that help build a school for the African farmer’s children. The illustration is in a scrapbook style complete with a pressed flower, a scrap of burlap sacking, a sketch of a thatch hut, and photos of Fiske Johnson amid thankful African villagers (figure 4). PepsiCo’s water reclamation CSR ad pictures a Chinese farmer, an African farmer, and two African women carrying jugs of water on their heads. Three more Ethiopian children, described in headline size text as “the world’s poorest people,” are pictured washing their hands with the help of the philanthropic organization WaterAid. The fashionable nature of corporate social responsibility (CSR) ads offers more non-white people who are portrayed as beneficiaries of the good marketer. This particular fashion of practice, in the form of CSR, drives the observed increase in the number of minority people represented in advertising in 2010. That isn’t to say there are not positive, respectful, market-power driven images of minorities in 2010. However, a simple count overlooks this unusual fashion of practice that considerably increases the numbers.

4. DISCUSSION
In our examination of 70 years of American print advertising, we have seen the increasing market power of minorities correspond to more images, and somewhat more respectful and positive images, but not universally. Lack of improvement is jarring and shameful in the case Native Americans. We have also shown that some of the observed increase is more attributable to fashions of practice in advertising, particularly the use of integrated casts in the 1970s and 1980s, and the practice of CSR advertising in 2010. We have made a modest return to an important topic with considerable currency and asked new questions about what causes change in marketing communications. We find fashions of practice to play an important role.

Of course, our data are historical artifacts and come with the attendant shortcomings, as well as advantages. In striving for a mass sample, we did not examine the impact of lower circulation magazines or those more specifically targeting certain audiences. Coding historical ads can be difficult as time passes, although our coders demonstrated exemplary reliability. We also did not attend to the social consequences of advertising. We did not show that advertising influences individual consumers. Instead, this work strives to better understand a collective, institutional, and sociological practices that produce ads that likely influences consumer behavior, and in ways that may be unintended but socially significant.

Given the current discourse on inequality, race and justice, it would seem that at least we, as scholars and teachers, make ourselves, our colleagues, our students and practitioners aware of a different explanation of advertising’s changing faces. To better understand how and why change occurs in fits and starts, as well as more steadily over time, we have provided this analysis. While we cannot make any causal arguments, we believe the data are strongly suggestive of the role of fashions of practice. This effort may start us on a path to better understanding how and why advertising looks the way it does and how and why it changes with respect to import issues of our day.
References


Figure 1: Testing the Proportionality Criterion by Comparing Minority Representation in Advertising and the American Population

In the advertising sample, the solid line indicates significant change at the 99% level. None of the other dotted lines in the advertising sample are significant at the 95% level. Only the increase from 1965 to 1975 in the advertising sample is significant at the provisional 90% level.

In 2000, the percent distribution is based on reporting of race alone for whites and blacks. The population data come from Hobbs and Stoops (2002), CENSR-4, "Demographic Trends in the 20th Century: Census 2000 Special Reports", Figure 3-3: Distribution of total population by race: 1900 to 2000.

Figure 2: Fashion of Practice: A 1980 Advertisement for Amtrak features an “Integrated Cast” (One page of a seven-page advertisement)
Figure 3: Market Power: A 2000 Advertisement for Maxwell House

I will take more naps.

I will spend more time in my pajamas.

I will find a boyfriend who likes to cook.

I will make all of my students love Algebra.

I will be happy.
Figure 4: Fashion of Practice: A 2010 Johnson and Johnson CSR-style Advertisement