

Brand Blunders and Race in Advertising: Issues, Implications, and Potential Actions from a Macromarketing Perspective

Introduction

This pedagogic commentary explores the problematic representation of race in three recent high-profile advertising campaigns in what we refer to as “brand blunders”, and the issues, implications, and potential actions this raises from a macromarketing perspective. We seek to address the call of [Francis \(2021\)](#) to explore the topic of race within the marketing academy and move this to the core of the macromarketing curriculum. We also respond to the recent invitation by [Stanton \(2022\)](#) for contributions which examine macromarketing topics from a pedagogical viewpoint that have utility for educators in this discipline and can facilitate classroom discussion as well as future research on macromarketing topics of interest. Macromarketing has historically been concerned with the interaction and reciprocity of marketing systems and society ([Hunt 2011](#); [Shultz II 2009](#)); [Layton \(2007, p. 227\)](#) posited that “...the concept of the marketing system lies at the core of this thinking about macromarketing.” Our focus is to examine the representation of race by certain brands in their advertising imagery and publicity and the audience reaction to these campaigns. We also consider the subsequent response of the company to this furor and what these examples imply about the relationship between marketing systems (such as advertising) and society ([Wooliscroft 2021](#)). According to [Francis \(2021, p. 137\)](#), “out of all institutions for marketing, advertising provides the most visible evidence of how their practices and norms produce or support systemic racism.” It seems therefore apposite to explore how this may potentially manifest itself within advertising imagery for prominent international brands and what this implies about the relationship between advertising, race, and society from a macromarketing perspective.

The commentary seeks to contribute to the discussion on race in advertising ([Davis 2007](#); [Francis 2021](#)), and the societal role and impact of advertising imagery ([Livas 2021](#); [Loxam 2016](#); [Paulson and O’Guinn 2018](#)) from a macromarketing standpoint. We examine imagery from three relatively recent advertising campaigns by H&M, Jo Malone, and Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) which created public controversy in terms of their representation of race, and led to some accusations of overt racism by public commentators and consumer communities. We argue that these examples constitute significant “brand blunders”, which in the context of this commentary we define as *unintentional transgressions committed by a brand against its stakeholders that result in significant negative publicity for the organization and require some form of corrective marketing communications action*. The advertising examples we have chosen are taken from international (H&M) and Chinese market contexts (Jo Malone and D&G). We examine each campaign including the fallout in some detail and consider what macromarketing implications and future empirical research questions arise from this analysis; we also provide some suggestions for how this commentary can be utilized for classroom teaching.

This commentary is structured as follows: we first explore literature relevant to cultural stereotyping of gender and race in advertising and the critical role of consumers in the reading and interpretation of advertising texts. We then examine the three specific advertising campaigns by H&M, Jo Malone, and D&G as examples of “brand blunders”, evaluating the content of these campaigns, how they were received by their relevant audiences, and the subsequent organizational responses to consumer interpretations of the advertising imagery. Finally, we explore the key issues, implications, and potential actions that are raised by these

examples, and how we should consider the interaction between advertising, race, and society based on the analysis of these campaigns from a macromarketing perspective ([Francis 2021](#); [Livas 2021](#)). We also pose relevant questions for macromarketing scholarship that may be considered in future empirical studies of advertising and marketing. We conclude that embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is crucial for marketing and that macromarketing is ideally placed to advance this agenda for the entire discipline. It is our intention to open potential new research vistas for macromarketing doctoral candidates in this area and stimulate critical thinking on these matters for students undertaking courses in advertising, brand management, consumer research, innovation management, marketing communications, and marketing strategy, specifically with a macromarketing focus.

Advertising, Society, and Cultural Stereotyping: Representing Gender and Race

Advertising occupies a significant place within social and cultural life, with [Leiss et al. \(2005, p. 19\)](#) famously describing advertising as a “...cultural discourse in and through goods,” and the role of advertising as a harbinger of social and cultural change has been well documented historically ([Fox 2009](#); [Frank 1997](#); [Loxam 2016](#)). Brands are socially and culturally embedded and [Holt \(2004, p. 9\)](#) argues that “iconic brands function like cultural activists...their myths prod people to reconsider accepted ideas about themselves.” Advertising has an inherent relationship with social norms and values ([Livas 2021](#)) and advertisements are regarded as a social tableau that constitute “reflections of society” ([Marchand 1985, p. 165](#)). As [Clampin \(2009, p. 71\)](#) has previously argued: Advertising is designed to reflect everyday life. It depends on connecting with a constituency of customers, speaking in their language and identifying the problems they encounter every day, while proposing empathetic solutions. Where it succeeds in doing this it serves a function above and beyond merely selling products by helping to reflect society, validating behavior, and establishing norms of conduct.

[Belk and Pollay \(1985, p. 889\)](#) document how advertising had a key role in promoting the “good life” and a “...life abounding in material comforts and luxuries – through the settings in which it promotes its offering and through the values to which it attaches its appeals.” [McDonald, Laverie, and Manis \(2021, p. 485\)](#) have recently articulated the mutual shaping of advertising and society, arguing how “...advertisers influence society and changes in society influence advertisers.” The extent to which advertising accurately reflects society has been questioned, most famously by [Pollay \(1986, p. 27\)](#) who notes how “few would argue that advertising faithfully mirrors reality,” and whether advertising can or should reflect social reality has itself been called into question ([Holbrook 1987](#); [Scott 2005](#)).

Advertising discourse has a prominent role in cultural stereotyping in two specific areas of the advertising literature on gender and race. [Goffman's \(1979, p. 25\)](#) analysis demonstrates how advertisements frame certain gender relationships and depictions of social reality which are presented as natural. Since at least the 1970s, there has been an abundance of research which has highlighted how advertising portrays gender, and particularly female roles, in stereotypical ways ([Verhellen, Dens, and de Pelsmacker 2016](#)). Advertising is seen to promote sexism and the sexual objectification of women ([Grau and Zotos 2016](#); [Huhmann and Limbu 2016](#); [Tshichla and Zotos 2016](#)); however, it may be that the advertising industry itself is undergoing a process of evolution and social change in terms of the representation of gender and sexuality. [Branchik \(2007\)](#) has documented how advertising images of the gay community in the United States have developed to a more progressive and respectable image

over time. A study by [Ford et al. \(1998\)](#) found that women in Japanese magazine advertising were presented in “counter-stereotypical” ways and found no significant differences in gender portrayals for the central characters in the advertisements. In the United Kingdom in 2018, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) introduced new rules (Code Rules 4.9 and 4.14) on gender stereotyping in advertising which state that ads “must not include gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence” ([Advertising Standards Authority 2018](#)), and there is currently a preponderance to “Femvertising” (advertising emboldened with feminist principles) as an industry response to gender stereotyping ([Sobande 2020](#)). Advertising texts constitute bodily norms ([Patterson and Elliott 2002](#)) and create an ideal image for females ([Yazdanparast et al. 2018](#)); however, there are certainly signals from the contemporary industry and advertising discourse that gender stereotyping is something that is being challenged at both a practice and regulatory level.

The cultural stereotyping of race and ethnicity has been regarded as particularly evident in advertising discourse ([Humphrey and Schuman 1984](#); [Rubie-Davies, Liu, and Lee 2013](#)), and historically, African Americans have struggled for inclusion in the advertising industry ([Chambers 2008](#)). In their analysis of American advertising imagery, [Bristor, Lee, and Hunt \(1995, p. 56\)](#) concluded that “...an ideology of white superiority is deeply encoded in mass media advertising;” various studies have highlighted that racial stereotyping remains prominent in advertising media ([Johnson and Grier 2012](#); [Taylor, Landreth, and Bang 2005](#); [Taylor and Stern 1997](#)), and the representation of African Americans in advertising characters has certainly been historically problematic ([Davis 2007](#)). As societies’ views on issues of race and racial equality have evolved, so too has advertising’s representation of race. [Goldman and Papson \(1998\)](#) demonstrate how advertisers such as Nike incorporate the allure of African American culture for corporate brand advertising, and [Crockett \(2008, p. 256\)](#) has argued that “blackness is a source of fresh, constantly reproducing symbolic material for appropriation.” [Branchik and Davis \(2018, p. 470\)](#) have noted the growing representation of black models in advertising which “...reflects American society’s growing embrace of diversity in general and the important role of blacks in popular culture.” Much like the issue of gender representation, as society changes and evolves over time, the social tableau of advertising representation has also corrected and adjusted to reflect these important social and cultural developments in terms of race ([Marchand 1985](#)). As key “citizen artists” in culture ([Holt 2002, p. 70](#)), some corporations have tapped into social justice causes as a reservoir of cultural meaning and champion issues on DEI, although their sincerity and authenticity in doing so is certainly open to scrutiny ([Sobande 2020](#)). That the overt racism of some historical advertising representations ([Chambers 2008](#)) is being challenged and eradicated is something that must be considered a positive development for the advertising industry and society.

The advertising industry itself has traditionally been less than socially diverse ([Chambers 2008](#); [Fox 1997](#)), and television programs such as “Mad Men” have highlighted a largely gender (male) and ethnicity (white) hegemony within American advertising agencies in the 1950s and 1960s. The extent to which the industry has changed is documented in some recent studies; [Middleton, Turnbull, and de Oliveira \(2020\)](#) have explored how traditional gender stereotyped models are still referred to by agency practitioners in how contemporary advertising campaigns are developed in Brazil, while [Windels \(2016\)](#) found that some advertising practitioners used stereotypes but in subversive or truthful ways rather than ways that were harmful to those represented. In a recent contribution, [Middleton and Turnbull \(2021, p. 566\)](#) highlighted the “...market system dynamics operating upon meso-level professional advertising actors that result in transformed logics and practices;” their findings

outline an industry in which being socially progressive is regarded as a specific intellectual asset to advertising agencies. The preceding analysis has highlighted research that has documented specific areas of stereotyping in relation to gender and race in advertising, the evidence from previously mentioned contemporary studies has indicated how this is slowly changing, and advertising as a discourse and profession is potentially becoming more diverse and inclusive. That some cultural stereotyping exists and is part of the current advertising landscape remains undeniable; however, advertising representations and viewpoints within the industry do point to some potential evolutionary change and cause for cautious optimism.

Consumer Response to Cultural Stereotyping in Advertisements

The role of the consumer in the interpretation of advertising meaning is something that has been a focus for research in the discipline for well over three decades ([Buttle 1991](#)). Consumers have a role as an active audience in the reading of advertisements ([Hirschman and Thompson 1997](#)), and often have a high degree of advertising literacy. Advertisers may encode “dominant or preferred meanings” in their messages ([Hall 1980](#), p. 134), while consumers have their own individual reading and develop “interpretive strategies” that are idiosyncratic and framed based on their own social and cultural knowledge ([Mick and Buhl 1992](#)). Consumers form “interpretive communities” around particular messages and meanings of advertising ([Fish 1980](#); [Yannopoulou and Elliott 2008](#)), and advertisements are important social resources which are used by these communities in the context of everyday life ([Ritson and Elliott 1999](#)).

Research has demonstrated that consumers not only actively negotiate the meaning of texts ([Grier and Brumbaugh 1999](#)), but also personalize them in terms of their own goals and life projects ([Thompson and Haytko 1997](#)). Consumers are highly engaged in their advertising reading and have demonstrated criticality and sophistication in how they interpret advertising texts ([O’Donohoe and Tynan 1998](#)). Linear communication models have tended to simplify the ways in which advertisements are decoded by consumers ([Hackley and Hackley 2022](#)), and studies have illustrated that, as embedded within a socio-cultural milieu, consumers are individualized readers of advertising meaning and their engagement with advertising is multi-layered and complex ([Scott 1994](#)).

The reading of advertisements and how they are interpreted is gender-specific ([Stern 1993](#)), and gender differences in how consumers interpret advertising meaning have been previously noted ([Elliott et al. 1995](#)). Consumers tend to react negatively to gender stereotyping and sexual objectification in advertising ([Elliott, Eccles, and Hodgson 1993](#)), and advertising images that are idealized are found to have a negative impact upon the self-esteem and self-perceptions of physical attractiveness of both sexes ([Gulas and McKeage 2000](#); [Hirschman and Thompson 1997](#)). Studies which explore how consumers read advertisements note the “discursive constitution of the socially, historically situated interpreting subject” ([Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999](#), p. 42), particularly in terms of how consumers negotiate the meaning of advertising texts. [Rome, O’Donohoe, and Dunnett \(2020\)](#), p. 557) document the ways in which young women “...engage with gender discourses and gendered power relations in their reading of advertisements,” and are critical readers who negotiate conceptions of gender and sexuality through their evaluation of advertising texts. [Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen \(2017\)](#) demonstrate how “Femvertising” leads to higher ad attitudes and less ad reactance than traditional advertising, and [Sternadori and Abitol \(2022\)](#) highlight how “Manvertising” (socially progressive representations of masculinity) was positively received by men who

identify with masculine traits and support women's rights. Previous studies have highlighted how gender ideologies are negotiated by active advertising audiences, but also how these ideologies are being subverted at the level of society and practice (such as the recent Gillette advertisement “The Best Men Can Be” which challenged societal conceptions of “Toxic Masculinity” in 2019) ([Rhodes 2023](#)).

The representation of nationality and race in contemporary advertising can frame how consumers experience advertising texts ([Holland and Gentry 1999](#)). Advertisements that contain themes of patriotism and nationalism are often appreciated by consumers who are positive in their advertising responses ([Yoo and Lee 2016](#)). Although evidence of racial and ethnic stereotyping and archetypes do persist ([Taylor, Landreth, and Bang 2005](#)), culturally situated consumers interpret advertising texts and ascribe meaning to them on their own terms. In her study of advertising, with regard to young Scottish consumers, [O’Donohoe \(1999, p. 684\)](#) notes how nationalism plays a role in advertising interpretation and that “...these meanings seem to be intertwined with their sense of national identity.” [Zhou and Belk \(2004\)](#) corroborate these findings in their analysis of Chinese advertising reading and note how Chinese consumers interpret advertising in terms of a cosmopolitan as well as a highly nationalistic lens. The social, cultural, and historical positioning of the reader certainly impacts how such advertisements are interpreted, which highlights the value of considering the reader response of consumers to advertising texts ([Scott 1994](#)). Some advertising texts can give the impression of a unidirectional process of advertising communication ([Buttle 1995](#)), it is clear the audience has an active and engaged role as a co-creator of advertising meaning.

Brand Blunders and Race in Advertising: Considering H&M, Jo Malone, and D&G

The preceding analysis has evaluated the relationship between advertising, race, and society, as well as considering the role of consumers in advertising interpretation processes. The interaction between marketing systems and society is a key macromarketing concern ([Layton 2007](#)), and the issue of the representation of race in advertising is a prescient topic, particularly since the prominent rise of racial social justice movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) ([Francis 2021](#)). In the light of this, we sought to examine some high-profile brand blunders in terms of the representation of race in advertising, and considered how macromarketing and advertising theory provides a useful basis for evaluating this nexus. As marketing scholars have argued that failure has as much to teach our educators, students, and practitioners as success ([Brown 2008](#)), it seems helpful from a macromarketing perspective to investigate the problematic representation of race in advertising in some recent high-profile advertising campaigns, and what theoretical as well as practical implications can be drawn from these.

We focus upon three examples of brand blunders from multinational corporations in terms of the representation of race in advertising campaigns, which created significant public reaction and controversy for the brands concerned. We explore the specific nature of the racial representation in the advertisement, the consumer response to the advertising imagery, and the subsequent company actions to address public criticism of the organization. Each example highlights a different form of racial representation (the first involving black model representation for the international market, the second the erasure of a black actor from an advertisement for the domestic Chinese market, and the third a Chinese model representation for the domestic Chinese market). We consider the specific brand blunders created by these

organizations, the resulting publicity fallout, and what these examples collectively imply for macromarketing theory and advertising practice. We also offer some research questions for future macromarketing scholarship, and finally provide some suggestions as to how these examples could be discussed in the classroom from a macromarketing perspective.

H&M's Brand Blunder

In January 2018, an advertising image for the online store of the Swedish fashion company H&M featured a three-year-old black model called Liam Mango. The words “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle” were the featured text on the green hoodie he was wearing. The image elicited a furious online and social media response from commentators and customers, with some accusing the brand of blatant racism, and high-profile brand ambassadors like Canadian singer Weeknd and American rapper G-Eazy cutting ties completely with the brand ([Barr 2018](#)). A large campaign on social media calling for the brand to be boycotted by its customers also followed ([BBC 2018](#)), and riots broke out at H&M stores across South Africa, causing the company to temporarily close all stores in the impacted areas.

There is ambiguity about the intention of H&M and whether this transgression amounted to a genuine brand blunder or a form of deliberate overt racism, although the evidence suggests that the latter is probably unlikely ([Blanchard 2019](#)). Interestingly, the mother of the young model, Terry Mango, had commented online that she herself did not regard the image to be of racist intent and incurred the wrath of some members of the African community in Europe, even requiring additional personal security owing to the media attention the advertisement had generated ([Wang 2019](#)). The public controversy surrounding the image led to an apology from H&M for any offence caused, the appointment of Annie Wu as H&M's first Global Leader for Diversity and Inclusiveness, and the company providing training for staff on DEI-related issues at H&M (*ibid*) ([Figure 1](#)).

It was not as simple as H&M lacking ethnic diversity in their workforce however, as [West \(2018\)](#) has documented in her analysis of the controversy; H&M did have quite a diverse workforce at the time, with significant numbers of ethnic minority employees working throughout the company, and how this brand blunder precisely occurred remains somewhat opaque. The company has put various safeguards in place regarding the generation of designs and the use of artificial intelligence for digital imagery to try to ensure that something like this could not happen again; it was bad publicity for a brand that was already troubled in terms of its market position ([Blanchard 2019](#)). What does seem apparent is that the event led to significant changes in the DEI policies of H&M, and the incorporation of training and practices to improve the corporate culture and organizational policies on DEI.

Jo Malone's Brand Blunder

The second example concerns the perfume brand Jo Malone, which is owned by the global cosmetics company Estee Lauder. In 2020, Jo Malone employed Star Wars English actor John Boyega as an official brand ambassador for the company. He originally shot a commercial entitled “London Gent,” which featured the actor walking around his native Peckham in South London hanging out with friends and family. Boyega had much creative input into the development of the original commercial that was personal to him and based upon his life story ([Elan 2020](#)). When Jo Malone reshot the commercial for the Chinese market, they decided to retain the original idea of “London Gent” but replaced Boyega with Chinese actor Liu Haoran; no other black actors featured in the remaking of the commercial. This led to accusations not only of racism from the company, but also the cultural

appropriation of Boyega's creative input into the original film ([Onibada 2020](#)). To further compound matters, Boyega only discovered his recasting in the advertisement via social media and not from the company ([Elan 2020](#)); he promptly resigned from Jo Malone as an ambassador for the brand ([Malvern 2020](#)).

Although the actor stated he understood why the firm would wish to use local actors in different international regions, he also highlighted that the decision to replace him with a Chinese star was made “without his knowledge or consent,” and he commented how “dismissively trading out one's culture this way is not something I can condone” ([Ad Age 2021](#)). Boyega had previously been removed from a Chinese poster for the movie *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) in which he played a leading role, and this had also happened to other non-white characters in the movie ([ITV 2020](#)). Jo Malone removed the advertisement from its campaign in China, stating, “we deeply apologize for what, on our end, was a mistake” ([BBC 2020](#)), with the owners of the Jo Malone brand Estee Lauder apologizing for the hurt caused to the actor ([Elan 2020](#)) ([Figure 2](#)).

The fallout from the recasting was significant, and the original founder of the company (who had left the business in 2006) defended her reputation and distanced herself from its actions ([Smith 2020](#)). Whether the actions of Jo Malone were an act of deliberate racism or purely a “tactical” marketing decision ([Elan 2020](#)), it amounted to the erasure of a black actor from an advertisement for the Chinese market, an action that backfired badly for the Jo Malone brand. It generated an enormous consumer backlash on social media ([Onibada 2020](#)), one which the company struggled to provide an acceptable explanation for; the public reaction only precipitated a fulsome apology rather than a wholesale reappraisal of DEI policies or practices at Jo Malone.

D&G's Brand Blunder

The final example relates to three online promotional videos for D&G as part of the brand's “D&G Loves China” campaign in mid-November 2018. With gaudy Chinese decorations in the background and erhu music playing loudly throughout ([Zhang 2018](#)), one video featured a Chinese model haplessly attempting to eat pizza, cannoli, and pasta with chopsticks, and the voiceover (in Mandarin) adopted a patronizing tone toward the model. The videos were posted on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter ahead of an upcoming fashion show in Shanghai – “The Great Show” – named as a “Tribute to China” according to the company ([Chung, Holland, and Wang 2018](#)). This video led to a fierce consumer backlash against the brand in China ([Pan 2018](#)), with consumers filming themselves destroying D&G products, and mentions of the brand surging by 2,512% on the Chinese social media network Weibo ([Hills 2021](#)). The brand was accused of “trivializing” the country's centuries-old culture and incorporating a racist stereotype of Chinese women ([Lim 2018](#)). Similarly, [Zhang \(2018\)](#) argued that the video was not an homage to China, but a racist depiction of the white West's orientalist perception of Chinese culture. The actress who featured in the video, Zuo Ye, was widely attacked on social media in the wake of its release, outlining that the controversy almost destroyed her modeling career, and she publicly undertook to “improve my behavior” in future ([BBC 2019](#)).

The problems for the brand were further exacerbated when screenshots of private messages allegedly made by one of the brand's co-founders about the controversy surfaced on Instagram, which included highly derogatory remarks about China and Chinese people ([Jennings 2018](#)). The incident led to the cancellation of the brand's Shanghai fashion show and its products being pulled from Chinese e-commerce sites, with the hashtag “Boycott Dolce” trending on Weibo ([Ritschel 2018](#)). Our own analysis of the posts on Weibo

documented a significant upsurge in consumer anger in the wake of the comments attributed to the co-founder via the Instagram private messages, as Chinese consumers interpreted the videos in terms of their own nationalistic identity positions ([Zhou and Belk 2004](#)).

The founders of the company did release a contrite apology video outlining their respect for the Chinese nation, its history, traditions, and people; however, this was not well received by Chinese consumers, particularly considering the alleged comments attributed to the company co-founder. As a result, the brand has suffered significant damage in the crucial Chinese market for luxury goods ([McEleny 2018](#)). The advertisement attempted to employ humor as a device for the Chinese market, and the use of cultural stereotypes can lead to negative reactions if not sensitive to the socio-cultural context of the consumer ([Rößner, Kammerer, and Eisend 2017](#)). In the domestic Italian context, this incident has been said to be “a clash between the Italian attitude and the critical ability of the new, global, and connected audience” ([Modica 2018](#)). [Modica \(2018\)](#) argued that the D&G advertising campaign in question demonstrated a sense of cultural superiority by Italians and a problematic portrayal of women as submissive beings. According to [Hills’s \(2021\)](#) report, the brand was struggling to regain Chinese consumers’ trust until very recently. The controversy surrounding the racial and sexist stereotyping in the advertisement and the alleged direct messages from the company found on social media have, thus, negatively impacted upon the D&G brand reputation and equity in the Chinese market. It appears that the original video was based on poor execution of cultural and humor cues in an advertisement rather than intentional racism; however, the alleged comments attributed to one of the brand co-founders did not aid the cause of the brand in the context of its Chinese market and customers.

Issues, Implications, and Potential Actions for Macromarketing

The brand blunders we have featured collectively highlight significant issues in terms of the problematic representation of race by certain international brands, and this has created countervailing consumer criticism of the companies concerned. We can also observe how marketing systems and society interact and impact upon each other as a result ([Hunt 2011](#); [Shultz II 2009](#)). Whether these examples constitute evidence of structural racism in Western capitalism, or are genuine brand blunders is debatable and contested, as they could be either or both depending upon one's analytical or theoretical perspective. They do raise some interesting issues, implications, and potential actions that we argue are relevant to the macromarketing discipline. In this section, we attempt to use relevant marketing and advertising theory to analyze these examples, their significance to macromarketing, and the key practical lessons we can extract from a pedagogical perspective. We also crucially identify key avenues and questions for further academic inquiry in each of the themes we highlight that could stimulate future macromarketing research in the various areas discussed.

Brands in an Era of Accountability

[Fournier and Avery \(2011, p. 198\)](#) have outlined how marketing practitioners increasingly work within an “age of transparency” owing to the digital world and the interconnected nature of consumers. The rise of digital communications and social media culture means that company actions, and particularly brand blunders or corporate scandals, are open to far more public scrutiny and interrogation than they may have been previously. Consumers are digitally networked and form online communities and e-tribes around topics of interest that

can hold companies accountable for their actions and behavior ([Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008](#)). What these examples all expose is the power and amplification of consumer voices via social media to highlight company errors and change corporate policies and practices as a result. Consumer groups in this context are key stakeholders in the co-creation of value for organizations, a role very much conceived for them from a macromarketing perspective by [Lusch and Webster \(2011\)](#). Some future research questions that may be of interest for macromarketing scholarship are:

a.

To what extent do online consumer communities via activism create lasting social change in marketing organizations?

b.

How do organizations facilitate co-creation with consumer communities and what outcomes and consequences does this potentially have for each party? ([Goulding, Shankar, and Canniford 2013](#))

In the example of H&M, a review of diversity policy and staff training was instigated by the backlash from online consumer communities, caused by the offensive advertisement featuring the three-year-old child. While controversy can itself be utilized as an effective marketing tool to generate publicity and consumer interest in a brand ([Brown 2003](#)), it is unlikely that accusations of ostensive or implicit racism are good for any organization, and in all three examples the companies have been quick to engage in public relations exercises to acknowledge their mistake and apologize to their customers. Whether this is merely a traditional PR crisis management tactic or a genuine commitment to DEI policies, only time will tell. The critical scrutiny provided by online communities on social media would at least appear to be an important development in creating a positive change within the organizations in question and perhaps, by extension, for the marketing discipline.

Advertising Polysemy and the Attributional Power of the Reader

Advertising texts are complex and polysemic, which [Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson \(2010, p. 51\)](#) describe as the "...factors that lead consumers to generate multiple meanings for the same message." Indeed, a key focus within research in advertising has been to explore how consumers engage with and derive meaning from advertising texts ([Belk 2017](#)). The tradition of reader response theory has been well established within the advertising literature ([Scott 1994](#))- a vital contribution which views "...the consumer as active co-creator of text" ([Stern 1989, p. 332](#)) and ascribes vital agency to the reader of advertising in processes of advertising interpretation. As [Mick and Buhl \(1992, p. 318\)](#) have presciently noted, "...consumers interpret ads as a principal way to understanding their world and themselves and, in the end, they become the final arbitrators of advertising meaning." Sometimes, for low involvement advertising, a singular meaning is more likely to be dominant ([Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson 2010](#)). Research has demonstrated that consumer reading and interpretation of advertising meaning is idiosyncratic ([Mick and Politi 1989](#)), and consumers engage with advertising in terms of their specific life experiences and trajectories ([Mick and Buhl 1992](#)). Thus, advertising texts have the potential for multiple meanings and discourses ([Cook 1992](#)), and are engaged with and evaluated by consumers in a fashion that is highly socially and culturally contextual ([Scott 1994; Stern 1989](#)).

The three examples highlight the power of advertising audiences in ascribing meaning to texts and the expansive literary license of interpretive communities within a digital context. Marketing communications textbooks can be seductive in their simplification of consumer

interpretive processes in relation to advertising meaning ([Hackley and Hackley 2022](#)), and it is important for firms to conceive the consumer as an active, engaged, and critical audience for marketing communications campaigns and messages. The example of D&G especially highlights how consumers can wield such textual power if advertisements offend their culture, race, or sensibilities, and can adopt a highly nationalistic stance in their advertising response ([Zhou and Belk 2004](#)). This underscores the need for organizations to view the development of marketing communications as a co-created partnership rather than a simplistic message delivery process ([Badot and Cova 2008](#)), and the use of marketing research as part of the advertising development process to incorporate a multiplicity of consumer voices and perspectives from various social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. A critical appreciation of interpretive advertising theory and the use of consumer research can potentially aid organizations to avoid such brand blunders and create more inclusive and appropriate marketing communications messages that will potentially resonate with their audiences. Some future research inquiries from a macromarketing perspective could explore:

a.

How are consumer perspectives incorporated into the creative advertising development process?

b.

To what extent is ethnic diversity represented in commercial marketing research, as others have called for in academic consumer research? ([Arsel, Crockett, and Scott 2021](#))

Consumers as readers of advertising have a crucial role in marketing communication processes, and these examples highlight how potentially diverse consumer voices and perspectives (and particularly those of ethnic minority consumers) may be absent from the current marketing research landscape. The research questions we pose could not only be relevant to macromarketing scholars in terms of the diversity of research participants, but also critical to how those working in marketing and advertising roles can reflect upon their practices and consider the extent to which they are sufficiently diverse and inclusive for the contemporary age.

Advertising as an Adapting Social Tableau

The world has undoubtedly seen a radical shift in the past decade with mass social movements like “Me Too” and BLM putting critical issues like gender and race equality on the agenda for both business and society, with vital and searching questions to address ([Sobande 2020](#)). As society has evolved and transformed, the social tableau of advertising also adapts in order to reflect these important changes ([Marchand 1985](#)), something which advertisers have adjusted to quite well in their history ([Fox 1997](#)); [Branchik and Chowdhury \(2012, p. 160\)](#) have observed how advertising has a powerful role in both “...reflecting and facilitating social change.” Advertising texts will evolve to reflect these social changes and so too should DEI policies within the marketing and advertising industries to address critical issues on gender and race equality.

It is important for marketing scholars to critique racism within the marketing academy ([Tadajewski 2012](#)), and this should also extend to calling for more diversity in commercial advertising and marketing organizations. [Middleton, Turnbull, and de Oliveira \(2020\)](#) have highlighted the need for advertising employees to engage with unconscious bias training to create a more diverse and inclusive work environment, which is something we would support and echo. People of color have gained more prominence in the creative advertising industries ([Chambers 2008](#)), and consumers have always been ethnically diverse and never more so in

an era of globalization and networked online communities. The greater promotion of the DEI agenda is, therefore, vital to achieve more inclusivity and to eliminate advertising campaigns that are either implicitly or explicitly sexist or racist in tone or content (being unintentionally sexist or racist is always a possibility and we hope our analysis and suggestions can potentially help to guard against this), and create more employee diversity in an industry which requires it. This also raises some useful questions for future scholarship in macromarketing on DEI in particular:

a.

To what extent is DEI making an impact upon the marketing and advertising industries in terms of hiring policies, including appointments to senior management roles?

b.

What are the lived experiences of ethnic minorities working in the marketing and advertising industries in Western societies?

The preceding examples highlight that much work still needs to be done in this area to create more inclusive campaigns which do not cause offence or provoke negative consumer reactions, and broaden the pool of diverse talent working in advertising and marketing organizations. The evidence from the H&M example in particular highlights how reflexive and agile organizations can learn from brand blunders and foster a DEI agenda in a positive way for the development of inclusive and potentially better marketing practice. While DEI continues to make important strides in various industries including marketing, a key future macromarketing challenge is to both monitor this progress and document the experiences of different genders and ethnic minorities working in the sector during this transitional period toward equality.

Discussion and Conclusion

We contend as a discipline examining the role of marketing systems, their impact on society, and society's impact upon them ([Hunt 2011](#)), that macromarketing is pivotally placed to both examine marketing systems from a social justice perspective as well as championing a DEI research agenda, which macromarketing scholars have identified as a key current concern of the discipline ([Francis 2021](#)). The evolution of mass social movements has highlighted the diversity imperative we have within global societies for equality, fairness, and justice, and we argue that macromarketing can have a key role in developing this important research agenda, as well as promoting DEI concerns for the marketing discipline. The development of the macromarketing scholarship of this nature has critical potential not only for the marketing academy, but also to "...transform the world into a better place" ([Dholakia 2012](#), p.224), which remains a vital potentiality of the field.

Our analysis has highlighted what [Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau \(2008, p. 339\)](#) have previously referred to as the "wisdom of collective crowds" in holding corporate interests to account and confronting potential instances of sexist or racist stereotypical representation. Consumer communities are connected via digital technology and social networks to influence the behavior and practices of corporations, and these examples have highlighted the important ways in which their power can be exercised to instigate social change. Consumers themselves have vital input into value co-creation processes for marketing ([Lusch and Webster 2011](#); [Vargo and Lusch 2004](#)), and we have demonstrated that they can also nudge companies in positive directions to embrace DEI initiatives. The online environment has the capacity for social harm as well as good, and online communities can inculcate important

moments of social and cultural disruption that can lead to better outcomes for society generally, and for marketing specifically.

The relationship between advertising, social values, and culture is also an important macromarketing consideration (Livas 2021). It has been suggested that while advertising does have a role in shaping culture, Holt (2006, p.374) counters that “cultural products other than brands, including films, television programs, politicians, sports teams and novels – do the ideological heavy lifting in modern culture.” In a similar vein, Livas (2021, p.461) notes that “...though advertising can contribute to social change, it is unlikely to be successful on its own.” Marketing scholars have been skeptical as to the authenticity of brands taking a lead on social justice issues (Sobande 2020), or whether this is a desirable goal for society (Livas 2021). Advertising campaigns such as Nike's Colin Kaepernick “Dream Crazy” do highlight how advertisements can have a useful part to play in fostering national debates and conversations on social justice issues, such as racism in sport and society, and how brands can act as agents of ideological change in this regard (Holt 2004). If advertising imagery has historically been part of the problem in perpetuating racially problematic stereotypes (Chambers 2008; Davis 2007), it is reasonable to indicate that it could also potentially become part of the solution to redress this balance. However, the social and cultural legitimacy of the brand in tackling such issues would be important to ensure organizations were not engaged in cynical practices of “woke washing” (Kates 2004; Rhodes 2023; Sobande 2020). It is critical that marketing not only reflects important social changes that are taking place, but also fully embraces them for the development of more diversity and inclusivity for the industry.

We also wish to highlight the classroom and course potential of our pedagogic commentary, and the ways in which it may be effectively utilized for these purposes. We have identified six specific areas where this commentary might be usefully employed for macromarketing pedagogy and offer some discussion questions for various courses:

1.

We have made the argument in the commentary that the three examples constitute “brand blunders” rather than prima facie evidence of overt or structural racism; however, we have also acknowledged they are racially problematic advertising images and instances which have the potential to be considered racist in either content or intent. Perhaps critical questions to pose to students regarding these advertisements, either as individual or collective examples:

a.

Are these examples unintentional “brand blunders”, as the authors suggest?

b.

Do these examples constitute structural racism?

c.

Do these examples contain elements of both brand blunders and structural racism?

d.

What recommendations would they make to the companies based upon their analysis? Francis (2021) has highlighted how addressing the issue of structural racism is of vital importance to the macromarketing discipline, and we contend a discussion of this type would be relevant for courses examining macromarketing concepts or exploring the relationship between marketing and society.

2.

The commentary examines the role of cultural stereotyping in the areas of gender and race as prominent categories where this takes place. It may be insightful to investigate with a student

class the extent to which cultural stereotyping remains a part of the contemporary advertising landscape:

a.

Is the social tableau of advertising reflections genuinely shifting in a more progressive direction? ([Marchand 1985](#))

b.

What are the key forces which can potentially drive social change in advertising texts and work practices?

This would be relevant to courses in advertising and marketing communications to evaluate whether “progressive market logics and practices” ([Middleton and Turnbull 2021](#), p.461) are authentically reflected in the advertising imagery and work practices of today.

3.

We have considered the role of online consumer communities in highlighting brand blunders and creating change within some organizations. It might be fruitful for classes to consider the level of sway that online or brand communities have over company policies and practices, and whether organizations are required to align to the values of the consumer community, as [Skålén, Pace, and Cova \(2015\)](#) have suggested that firms align with the practices of their consumers. Brand communities can create value for organizations and consumers ([Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009](#)), yet they can also be sites of conflict and contestation between the organization and the community ([Cova and Pace 2006](#); [Fournier and Lee 2009](#)). It would be interesting to explore:

a.

How empowered are online or brand communities in a digital era?

b.

In what ways do online or brand communities’ impact upon organizational processes and practices?

c.

What are the broader implications of this for the co-creation of value? ([Lusch and Webster 2011](#))

This would be particularly relevant for courses in brand management, consumer research, innovation management, and marketing strategy, which consider the consumer-organization interface.

4.

Somewhat related to this point, it may be helpful to examine if organizations should view their consumers as co-creators of value in terms of advertising and marketing communications development. [Hackley and Hackley \(2022\)](#), p.28) have argued that consumers are intricately involved in “meaning making processes” in how they read advertisements, while [Holt \(2004\)](#), p.184) adopts a more producer-orientated perspective, and notes how brands provide “...a myth that is compelling enough to draw people together, on their own, so that they [brand communities] can amplify the myth through their interactions.” Some important discussion questions to consider:

a.

Should brands engage in the sort of author-based cultural mythmaking processes advocated by [Holt \(2004\)](#)?

b.

Should consumers be intricately involved in the advertising development processes of organizations as part of consumer co-creation of meaning? ([Vargo and Lusch 2004](#))

c.

How can advertising campaigns represent a heteroglossia of consumer voices? ([Cook 1992](#))

These questions would be especially pertinent for courses in advertising and marketing communications.

5.

As DEI has risen as a key concern within areas such as macromarketing and consumer research ([Arsl, Crockett, and Scott 2021](#); [Francis 2021](#)), it would be useful to explore with a student group whether the rhetoric of DEI matches the reality for different genders and ethnic minorities in terms of hiring policies in the marketing and advertising industries:

a.

Is the promised “DEI dividend” being realized by these various groups in terms of employment opportunities and career advancement in marketing and advertising?

b.

What actions can companies take to improve their DEI record and how can these make a meaningful difference?

This could be analyzed by considering the achieved progress of DEI in these industries, and would be relevant to courses in advertising, marketing communications, or any courses which address macromarketing themes.

6.

We argue our pedagogic commentary and extended bibliography could also be used for course development and design for subjects such as advertising and society, advertising and gender, advertising and race, or any course which considers advertising from a macromarketing perspective. While not a fully comprehensive reading list, we anticipate it can provide some seminal texts and examples of impactful recent papers for instructors delivering courses in these areas and cognate disciplines to macromarketing.

Finally, our pedagogic commentary has highlighted some future research agendas for macromarketing in terms of the role of online communities in marketing processes, the incorporation of diverse consumer voices into the advertising development process, and the lived experiences of different genders and ethnic minorities working in the marketing and advertising industries, to measure the progress of equality and diversity. We conclude these are all important avenues to explore and to develop scholarship in order to advance DEI research in the macromarketing discipline. We hope our paper has made a modest contribution in highlighting the relevance of this to the macromarketing field, macromarketing's pivotal role in promoting this research agenda in the mainstream marketing literature, and encouraging a discussion on the evolving relationship between advertising, race, and society for future macromarketing teaching and scholarship.

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