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Perspectives

Race and Advertising: Conceptualizing a Way Forward through Aesthetics

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Abstract

As brands and advertisers worldwide are claiming to be reviewing the ways they represent race, this conceptual piece provides a call to action for international advertising researchers to also reassess how they engage and analyze race. Our goal is threefold: 1) provide an abbreviated assessment of the current body of advertising literature involving race and advertising and summarize its insights and lacunae; 2) expand the conceptualization of race currently held in advertising research by proffering a racial aesthetics framework that examines what race is and how it is reified through advertising (i.e. white supremacy; racial respectability; racial pride; race as biology; colorblind/post-racial; hyper-racial) and 3) illustrate how our conceptualization can support a more robust and informative body of research. Our intention in these three endeavors is not to provide an exhaustive accounting, rather we purposely paint with broad strokes to invite fellow researchers to deepen, broaden, and reimagine future research on race and advertising.

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Introduction

The “racial reckoning” of 2020 ignited in the United States (U.S.) by the killings of African Americans at the hands of police officers is having global implications for the advertising industry. A recent report which explored the perspectives of over 2,700 global marketers found that nearly two-thirds of the marketers (63%) said that movements such as “Black Lives Matter” and “Stop Asian Hate” significantly impacted recent content decisions (Shuttershock 2021). The report also notes there is more of a desire for brands to effectively represent the world we live in. Accordingly, many major brands worldwide have made some significant changes over the course of fewer than two years. Pepsi Co, the parent company of the Quaker Oats Company, rebranded the company’s 130-year-old Aunt Jemima brand – whose origin story centers on a minstrel show – as the Pearl Milling Company. Australia’s Warrnambool Cheese and Butter company released news that Coon cheese, originally branded as Red Coon cheese in 1931 (a derogatory reference to the nation’s aboriginal population), would be rebranded as Cheer cheese. The Hong Kong-headquartered chemical company Hawley & Hazel announced that the Chinese name of its top-selling toothpaste brand in much of Asia, Darlie brand (originally known as Darkie) will be changed from 黑人牙膏 (“Black person toothpaste”) to 好來 (“Haolai”) which echoes Hawley & Hazel’s Chinese name (yet the brand logo which features minstrel imagery will remain). While multinational corporation Nestlé announced that it would be rebranding several of its confectionary products sold in South America and elsewhere, including Red Skins, Chicos, and Beso de Negra (kiss from a Black woman) to eliminate marketing that contains racist elements from its vast line of products.

This is just a small sampling of the branding changes related to race that are afoot internationally. Even though the real depth of such surface-level changes still needs to be fully appreciated, these adjustments already provide rich illustrations of how race is explicitly and implicitly bound up with the visual and material culture of advertising. Yet the political and cultural implications of how race and advertising come together remain under-examined, particularly among advertising scholars (Chambers et al. 2020). We argue that understanding such dynamics is acutely important to fully grasp the role of advertising within contemporary societies worldwide, particularly as communication technologies advance and advertising campaigns become increasingly enmeshed with the values, lifestyles, and (political) identities of consumers. While the study of race in advertising literature dates back several decades, it has and continues to be often examined in ways consistent with the prevailing times (Grier et al. 2019). For instance, the 2004 edited volume “Diversity in Advertising” by Williams, Lee, and Haugtvedt (2004) marked a major turning point in the literature on race and advertising, as the volume chapters emphasized the then-current “diversity reckoning” in which advertisers recognized (at least discursively) “minorities” as a “new and “growing” target market. This period contrasts with the more recent so-called “racial reckoning” in which brands recognized (at least discursively) racism as a systemic advertising/branding feature. However, as noted by industry observers, many of the organizations which have released statements since 2020 denouncing racism and affirming that “Black Lives Matter” made similar declarations in the past around “diversity”, “equality, and “inclusion” with little action to address the issues (Crear-Perry et al. 2020).

In this conceptual piece, we offer a means to broaden how race and advertising are investigated by delving into the conceptual framing of race and its relationship with advertising.

Specifically, we ask: what is race and how does it function within the logic and creative output of the advertising industry? How has race been studied within the field? What insights have resulted? What knowledge gaps remain and how can those gaps be addressed? Our purpose in undertaking this conceptual project is threefold: 1) provide an abbreviated assessment of the current body of advertising literature involving race and advertising and summarize its insights and lacunae; 2) proffer a racial aesthetics framework that examines what race is and how race is reified through the visual and material culture of advertising, and 3) illustrate how our framework can support a more robust body of research in the area of race and advertising. Our intent in these three endeavors is not to provide a definitive or exhaustive accounting, rather we purposely paint with broad strokes to tender insights that can be expounded upon and refined by future research studies.

A Brief Overview of Research on Race in the Advertising Literature

Starting with the 1950s, began a tradition of advertising research examining dynamics at the intersection of race and advertising. This surge in race-related advertising scholarship coincided with the rise of the U.S. civil rights movement and the realization of non-white consumer buying power (AEF 2020; Chambers 2008). The majority of this literature can be schematically divided into two broad streams: one which focuses on race-related portrayals in advertising (through content analyses) and another that investigates the impact of the ad models' race on consumers' responses (through experimental designs).¹

First, content analysis studies have served as a historical “barometer” for the evolution of racial advertising representations (Zinkhan et al. 1990). For example, the portrayal of African

¹ Additional literature examines diverse phenomena related to race such as the types and frequency of products advertised to specific racially categorized groups (e.g., Petty et al. 2003).

American models went from unskilled laborers in the 1950s (Shuey et al. 1953) to broader representations with subtle depictions of inferiority in the 1990s (Bristor et al. 1995) to encompass a wide range of professional and familial contexts after the turn of the century (Branchik and Davis 2018). However, recent research shows how the use of certain stereotypes has remained consistent over time in the U.S. (Wu et al. 2022). Advertising studies focused outside the U.S. demonstrate that the use of racial stereotypes also persists in South American (e.g., Shinoda et al. 2021), European (Mogaji 2015), and African (Luyt 2012) advertising contexts. However, despite the wealth of insights brought by content analyses, most employed a quantitative approach which tends to privilege quantification over deeper meaning-making (i.e., power and intersectional analyses) made possible by qualitative and critical approaches (see Devi Prasad 2019; Gopaldas and DeRoy 2015; Thomas 2013; Wu et al. 2022). An understanding of these meaning-making processes is necessary to expand conceptualizations of race.

Using experimental designs, the second line of research starting from the 1960s in the U.S. examined the impact of “race” on consumers’ ad responses. Earlier studies, often weak in theory, focused for the most part on the notion of “white backlash” and attempted to comfort and convince advertisers that the integration of black actors in advertisements held limited social and economic risks (e.g., Guest 1970). Later, although the “white backlash” debate did not entirely disappear (see Taylor 2011; 2019), research enlarged the soundness of their questioning and drew on a vast array of psychological theories such as Identification, Distinctiveness, Homophily, Social Identity and Schema theories (to name a few) to predict ad effectiveness (e.g., Aaker et al. 2000; Forehand et al. 2002; Whittler and Spira 2002). Nevertheless, throughout the six past decades, this literature indicates three fairly consistent results: (1) consumers prefer ads featuring actors of their racial group, (2) this preference is greater for consumers who are part of

a “minority group” and (3) for those who identify strongly with their minoritized racial groups (for reviews and meta-analyses, see Kareklas 2010; Sierra et al. 2012).

Although there is less research examining the impact of race in advertising on consumer responses outside of the U.S. context, existing work has significantly nuanced our understanding of the effect of race on people’s responses to advertising. Namely, by highlighting the key role of cultural dynamics in the construction and perception of race in advertising. For instance, studies in East Asia have challenged the notion that consumers prefer actors of their racial group (see #1 above) as they showed that the use of white models resulted in a higher rate of positive consumer attitudes and beliefs towards the ad and brand than when Asian models were featured (e.g., Baek et al. 2022; Chang 2008; 2014; Gan 2022; Strebinger et al. 2018). Furthermore, studies in South Africa revealed that it was not so much the numeric status of the racial group which predicted consumers’ responses (see #2 above) but rather its social status (e.g., Grier and Deshpandé 2001; Johnson 2013). More specifically, social hierarchy creates norms that affect predictions of advertising persuasion (Grier and Brumbaugh 2007). Finally, studies in France point toward the importance of sociopolitical dynamics to effectively predict the impact of the strength of racial identification (see #3 above) on consumer responses (e.g., Johnson and Grier 2011).

By and large, these multifaceted results highlight the need among advertising researchers for a finer conceptualization of what “race” is. More specifically, existing results, such as the aforementioned studies in East Asia and South Africa, demonstrate that the representation and impact of “race” in advertising depend upon the meaning that emerged from specific social-political and social-cultural contexts. Be it the hegemonic influence of white/western beauty standards in Asia or the consequence of apartheid’s minority rule in South Africa, how consumers respond to the use of race by advertisers is contingent on global and local histories. In

this article, we offer a conceptualization of race and its consequences with the hope that it will enable advertising researchers to better examine such complexities.

What is Race?

Race is commonly viewed as a way of categorizing individuals into distinct groups according to perceived phenotypic features (e.g., skin color, physical characteristics, religion, origin). However, modern science has largely debunked this view, which fundamentally conceptualized race as an outgrowth of human biology, by demonstrating that there is more genetic variation found within, rather than between, racial groups (Witherspoon et al. 2007). These findings have shifted the dominant framing of race from a question of biology to a more nebulous socially constructed concept which contends that “race” and associated racial categories are the product of social (vs. biological) processes. Nevertheless, positioning race as a social construct often leads to a questioning of its “realness”. As a social construct, it is presumed to be a mere abstraction that does not tangibly exist within social reality. On the contrary, while race is unnatural, even as a socially constructed concept it has real implications for our collective social, cultural, political, and material realities.

To recognize and comprehend these multifaceted implications, advertising scholars must expand how advertising research is conceptualized, particularly as it relates to race. Advertising researchers largely utilize positivist paradigms and psychological constructs in their scholarship (Yoo et al. 2015). While such an orientation has resulted in a wealth of knowledge on how the functions of advertising impact the cognition, affect, and behavior of human beings, it is proven less effective at interrogating the complex influence and impact that race and associated social structures have on peoples’ thoughts, feelings, and actions. Moreover, the Psychology field has recently acknowledged its institutionalized racist underpinnings, further reinforcing the need for

an expanded conceptualization of race (American Psychological Association 2021). The less utilized fields of philosophy, cultural studies, and anthropology, with their coordinated focus on existential questions concerning social interactions and how those interactions are impacting and impacted by racialization processes, may advance more useful conceptual frameworks in this regard. As such, we draw from these disciplines in our conceptualization of race as a social construct. What follows is our triumvirate characterization of race as a social construct and its impact on advertising. Our theoretical framework is a synthesis of racial logic first introduced in anthropology (Smedley 1998), cultural studies (Hall 1997; 1980; hooks 1992), and philosophy (Mills 2014). As opposed to situating each disciplinary frame as mutually exclusive from the other two, we conceptualize them as complementary and synergistic (Figure 1). Embedded within our conceptualization of race are the six modes of racial representation that dominate present-day advertising. A more detailed discussion of the components of Figure 1 follows.

[Figure 1 near here].

Historicizing Race

There is an ongoing debate regarding the genesis of race. While some scholars tie race and racism to imperial capitalism, some locate the emergence of race in the Middle Ages, and others find race-thinking, as far back as classical antiquity (see Mills 2020). Most scholars have commonly adopted the short periodization which posits that the development of modern-day race served to rationalize the expansion of European colonial projects by categorizing colonial/imperial subjects as inherently inferior and in need of (white) stewardship. Thus, this modern conceptualization ties race to a very specific ideological stance, white supremacy, a value system guided by the belief that the economic, sociocultural, and/or sociopolitical advantages enjoyed by whites are naturally/normally ordained. Although scholars contend that

advertising has played a key role in such a naturalization/normalization of whiteness and white supremacy (see Davis 2018; Rosa-Salas 2019), advertising research generally overlooks such historical dimensions while investigating representations or testing “race” in advertising. Indeed, advertising researchers tend to use “race” as an operationalizing variable interchangeable with “culture” and “ethnicity”. However, providing a historical account of how race has emerged within a context is key to shedding light on the ideological and hierarchical power dynamics that underline advertising strategies and their impact.

Race as Discourse

According to Stuart Hall (1997; 1980) race is a floating signifier and much like a language, its meaning is fluid and shifts with context. However, we position race as discourse (rather than language) to emphasize the underlying power relations at work (Foucault 2013). The body, with its apparent phenotypic differences (e.g., skin tone, hair texture, the structure of the eyes, nose, lips, etc.), serves as the foundation (or text) for the discourse of race (Hall 1997; 1980). Differences can be found in the world. For instance, in the context of the U.S, distinctions between racial categories are rather rigid due to the historical significance of the “one-drop rule,” which categorized anyone with any amount of African ancestry as Black, while in much of Latin America a more nuanced system that recognized mixed-race ancestry was utilized (Khanna 2010). However, while distinctions across geographic contexts exist, each shares an underlying “meaning-making system” that reifies racial hierarchies.

“Meaning-making systems” are neither fixed nor natural but fluid and intersectional. Since including mixed race as a legally accepted identifier on the U.S. Census from the 2000 edition, the rigidity associated with the “one-drop rule” has begun to dissipate. As such, race is neither immutable nor mutually exclusive, but rather context specific and affixed to the

discursive practices that give other identity coordinates (e.g., gender, sexuality, class, etc.) meaning. Religion, anthropology (social sciences), and biology (natural sciences) are all well-recognized “meaning-making systems”. Advertising has also been identified as a powerful “meaning-making system” by a long tradition of research (e.g., McCracken 1986). Yet its particular role within the context of race has been too often overlooked. Existing research shows how asymmetries in group knowledge, stigmatization, distinctiveness, and power influence the way meanings are created by viewers of racially targeted advertisements (Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). As such, there is a need to further explore how advertising is a powerful “meaning-making system” that is used to normalize, (re)produce and possibly challenge racial inequities.

Materializing Race

Lastly, we incorporate Charles Mills’ works (2014; 2003), which elucidate the materiality of modern-day racial logic. Describing race as a social construct or discursive tool may encourage some to overlook or even deny its materiality. However, the structuring of life outcomes that occurs as a result of racialization processes becomes starkly visible when the functioning of social institutions is examined through the lens of race. For instance, the consistency of racial disparities in employment, housing, and incarceration rates even when controlling for factors like social class and gender, demonstrates that race as a social construct possesses far-reaching material consequences. In the advertising context, research shows how racially targeted strategies have exacerbated material disparities such as substance abuse and other physical wellness challenges (Kwate and Meyer, 2009; Gardiner 2004; Grier and Kumanyika 2010). In other words, the intersection between race and advertising has real material implications that advertising researchers need to further consider and investigate. Next, we turn our attention to the six types of racial aesthetics in advertising embedded in Figure 1.

Racial Aesthetics in Advertising

Collectively, these modalities represent how the visual and material culture of advertising reifies and normalizes race by deploying, ignoring, and/or reimagining the historical context, modes of discourse, and material outcomes associated with race in their visualizations of racial dynamics in the marketplace. Given that race is contextual, fluid, and intersectional, our intent is not to present these six frameworks as exhaustive or conclusive, but rather as a snapshot of the present moment. As Schroeder (2008) notes, advertising heavily relies on visual rhetoric in its pursuit to persuade and create commercial value. The racial aesthetics in advertising typology that follows answers Schroeder's call for advertising researchers to develop novel modes of inquiry that enable us to better investigate how images communicate and the value they create. In this article, we define advertising racial aesthetics as the different visual regimes and creative techniques utilized by advertisers to (re)present racial dynamics (Thompson-Summers 2017). We position aesthetics as the amalgamation of all the sensory aspects incorporated into a given advertisement, including but not limited to language, layout, atmospherics, visual cues, and symbolism.

In addition to being conceptually grounded in our framework that positions race as a socially constructed concept, our overview of racial aesthetics in advertising is analytically informed by the scholarship of Bonilla-Silva (2003), Crockett (2008; 2021), and hooks (2012). Bonilla-Silva's work highlights the myriad ways that racism can be propagated in the absence of intentional racist behavior, while the work of Crockett and hooks offer critical modes of understanding how the logic of race is leveraged by advertisers and other agents within the creative industry. Additionally, our typology is constructed with the understanding that advertising is a capitalistic tool wielded by brands in their pursuit to maximize monetary profits,

and as such the practice of advertising tends to normalize a certain affluent and environmentally destructive lifestyle typically affixed to whiteness, particularly in Western contexts (Thomas and Jones 2019). When advertisers depict the “average” American, Brit, German, or French person, white models are generally chosen and while euphemisms like “general” or “mass” market are often bantered about as ways of speaking about diverse cross-sections of a population, in practice, such market segments are usually overwhelmingly white (Rosa-Salas 2019). As such, we built our racial aesthetics typology with the assumption that an (unintended) function of advertising is to normalize whiteness – to designate white people and the cultural practices associated with them, which are the product of racialization processes, into taken-for-granted standards of normalcy (Chambers et al. 2020). In addition to the characteristics noted below, it’s also important to recognize that in varying degrees, the categories we highlight here each advance the normalization of whiteness endemic to the field. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we visualize our typology as nascent in nature and not only encourage but invite fellow researchers to deepen, broaden, and even reimagine its content and contours, particularly as it relates to Global South social contexts, given the author teams’ Global North embeddedness.

White Supremacy – Visualizing Domination and Subjugation

In this mode of racial aesthetics, advertisers incorporate blatant portrayals of white superiority and/or non-white subjugation. While this form of aesthetics is a rarity in contemporary advertisements, it has a long and infamous history in the Global North and remains a consistent feature in advertisements directed at Global South populations. The host of brands noted in the introduction that have or are in the process of rebranding is representative of this mode. Each uses aesthetics that explicitly denigrate communities of color. In essence, brands

that propagate this mode of aesthetics attempt to leverage the historical significance of race as a social construct to build a brand that is recognizable and easy to remember. For instance, Aunt Jemima (now Pearl Milling Co.) and Uncle Ben's (now Ben's Original) forefront language and imagery associated with a timeframe in the U.S. South when white people largely refused to call African Americans Mr./Mrs. or sir/ma'am because of the superior cultural and political status whites possessed. Choosing instead to refer to African Americans as uncle/aunt. A 2016 ad for Qiaobi laundry detergent released in China relied heavily on antiblack racial tropes to convey its branding message (Tsoi et al., 2016), and in advertisements found in India and Nigeria, the brand Fair & Lovely (now Glow & Lovely) often couples lighter skin tones with social mobility and darker skin tones with undesirable social outcomes (Chia et al, 2012; Vijaya 2019). While the use of this aesthetic is less frequent in advertisements for consumer products, it remains prominent in political advertisements the world over, particularly in propagating the ideologies of conservative political parties (see for instance Michel's [2015] work on the political ad landscape in Switzerland).

Racial Respectability – Visualizing Assimilation

This mode of racial aesthetics centers on portraying the cultural practices of non-white populations as aligning with hegemonic norms and standards. In essence, advertisers attempt to attend to the social stigma associated with being racialized as a non-white person by presenting the ideological predilections, social behaviors, and aspirations of non-white populations as identical, or at least akin to, those lived out by white middle-class consumers. In the U.S., this mode came to prominence with the rise of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Beginning in the early 1900s, civil rights activists utilized respectability politics as a tactic to garner mainstream (read: white) support for civil rights legislation (Crockett 2017). By the

midpoint of the century, advertisers had coopted the practice in marketing strategies which resulted in a largely new form of marketing, multicultural advertising. This novel form of persuasive communication, which for the first-time positioned populations of color as viable consumer groups, heavily relied on assimilationist imagery, language, and cues (Chambers 2008). For instance, research on the portrayals of Asian Americans in magazine ads has shown how they are commonly portrayed as “model minorities” – “hardworking, technologically savvy, business oriented, successful, and well assimilated” (Taylor et al. 2005, 163). While more subtle in its execution, this mode of racial aesthetics still tends to position whiteness as the norm to which non-white consumers must conform. However, Ralph Lauren pushed the boundaries of this approach with their 2014 holiday ad campaign wherein the company utilized historical photos of Native Americans dressed in Western attire typically worn by white European settlers. The photos harken back to a time in U.S. history known as the Assimilation Era. A period when Native Americans were forcibly cut off from their cultural practices and “Americanized”. This mode remains a key feature of general audience and targeted (multicultural) advertisements. In addition to being a prevailing aesthetic of U.S. advertisements, this assimilation-centered approach is widely utilized in both post-colonial South Africa (see Johnson et al. 2010; Vorster, et al. 2020) and France (Johnson et al. 2015).

Racial Pride – Visualizing Racial Empowerment

In this mode, advertisers use language, visual cues, and symbolism associated with reclaiming a marginalized racial identity. On the surface, this mode of racial aesthetics in advertising appears to function antithetically to the racial respectability mode. Rather than negating racial and cultural differences experienced by non-white populations, the racial pride mode centralizes and celebrates said distinctions. However, as opposed to acknowledging the

nuanced complexities of racialized identities, this mode typically trivializes sacred symbols of racial pride or deploys easily recognizable tropes and stereotypes as stand-ins for racial acceptance. For instance, a 2020 ad for Kentucky Fried Chicken released in Trinidad and Tobago to recognize Emancipation Day (a holiday commemorating the end of slavery in former British colonies in the Caribbean) featured a chicken drumette projecting a shadow in the form of a Black Power fist (Linly 2020). Even when more authentic aesthetics are utilized, these visuals often are at odds with broader business practices associated with the brand. For instance, after the killing of George Floyd by members of law enforcement in May 2020, Amazon incorporated direct language and visuals into its marketing communication that conveyed support for the “Black Lives Matter” movement while simultaneously suppressing the labor organizing efforts of its warehouse workers, who are disproportionately people of color. This practice has been categorized as “woke washing” (Sobande 2020) and while it can provide short-term brand benefits, it is less effective in the long term given how social media empowers consumers to call out such practices on a broad scale. This mode has been utilized across product categories, especially “vice products” such as fast food, alcohol, and tobacco (Barnhill et al. 2022; Wailoo et al. 2022). By deploying such aesthetics, vice products not only minimize and/or commodify aspects of racialized identities but also exacerbate negative material outcomes such as substance abuse and other physical wellness challenges (e.g., Kwate and Meyer, 2009; Grier and Johnson 2011). For instance, Gardiner (2004) argues that the “African Americanization” of menthol cigarettes through the tobacco industry’s use of Black culture visual cues and symbolism in their 1960s advertisements may be partly responsible for disproportionately high tobacco-related disease and mortality among African Americans.

Race as Biology – Visualizing the Materiality of Race

The defining characteristic of this mode of racial aesthetics is its incorporation of language, visual cues, and symbolism that essentialize race as biological. While the dominant understanding of race is that of a socially constructed reality, when advertisers deploy this mode of racial aesthetics they revert to aesthetics that position race as a genetic fact. This mode is most often used in health-related marketing communication which decontextualizes the material outcomes of race. For instance, in the U.S., conditions like diabetes and hypertension, which are far more prevalent among African Americans, are expressly communicated as issues that disproportionately impact African Americans in a decontextualized manner. Typically, such linkages are made without any discussion of structural impediments African Americans must contend with, such as redlining, environmental racism, and less access to adequate nutrient-rich foods and healthcare. The absence of such context renders the discourse associated with this mode primarily focused on the body and individual behaviors as the locus of interventions. Rather than situating the material outcomes associated with race as an amalgamation of complex personal and structural relationships, they are essentialized as directly correlating to the body's bioscience and behavioral outputs. In 2014, the American Diabetes Association released a series of public service advertisements illustrating the disproportionate impact diabetes has on communities of color. However, rather than depicting how diabetes results from both individual and structural conditions faced by these communities, each advertisement overemphasizes genetics and lifestyle factors. Additionally, the burgeoning genetic ancestry testing market has wholeheartedly adopted this mode. When consumers submit a sampling of their genetic material (typically via a cheek swab or saliva sample), they receive a detailed report of their ancestral background, including a percentage breakdown of their racial makeup in return. As previously mentioned, modern science indicates that there is more genetic variation within racial groups

than between them (Witherspoon et al. 2007), yet this industry has chosen to biologize race by leading consumers to believe, notably through their advertising practices, that it resides in their DNA.

Colorblind/Post-racial – Visualizing Diversity

This mode uses language, visual cues, and symbolism that propagates what some prominent scholars and civic organizations have classified as cultural myths affiliated with neoliberal capitalism – namely, equal opportunity, meritocracy, and personal responsibility (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2003; Aspen Institute 2004). These cultural myths are undergirded by two conceptualizations of race. The first, colorblindness, espousing the socially constructed approach to race, situates race as an idea as opposed to a fact. However, rather than acknowledging and addressing the interplay between the discursive, historical, and material aspects of race, this mode views race as solely a discursive concept. As such, the proposed way to address race is to ignore it. The second, post-racial, acknowledges that race has discursive, historical, and material outcomes but positions them as no longer valid/relevant – typically referencing racial minorities in positions of power and/or equal protection provisions and statutes. For instance, the increasing use of so-called “mixed-race” actors (notably children) and families in advertising serves the construction of a marketplace mythology wherein mixed-race representations personify the new irrelevance of “race” (see Harrison et al. 2017). The basic logic is that race once held influence over day-to-day experiences, but society and its regulatory structures have progressed to a point where such influence is no longer a reality. By striving to “normalize diversity”, this mode deploys aesthetics that projects a racially egalitarian marketplace – where everyone has the same opportunity to excel, and achievement is a direct result of merit and individual effort. Since the logic associated with this mode is that race is not real or ceases to be relevant, the mere mention

of race is deemed racist behavior (e.g., playing the “race card”). In Australia, the annual Meat and Livestock Association’s “We love our lamb” campaign on “Australia Day” (a national holiday commemorating the anniversary of the “first fleet” from Europe landing at Sydney Cove –that some also refer to as “Invasion Day”) often stirs controversy as it attempts to humorously broadcast Australia’s uniqueness. After being long criticized for favoring a “white settler narrative” (Carlson and Frazer 2021: 201), its 2017 commercial strived to emphasize Australia’s diversity. It began with an Indigenous group hosting a barbecue on a beach and then welcoming “newcomers” by boat in their supposed historical order – Netherlands, Britain, France, German China, etc. With the arrival of the final boat carrying refugees, someone asks: “Aren’t we all boat people?” to which an indigenous host jovially responds: “And you’re welcome!” While some praised the ad for celebrating Australia’s multiculturalism, many criticized it for reframing and trivializing colonial violence. By featuring a cheerful, multiracial, egalitarian, and conflict-free crowd united through consumption, this ad features all the key characteristics of colorblind/post-racial aesthetics.

Hyper-racial – Visualizing Decontextualized Racial Cues

In this racial aesthetics mode, racialized language, visual cues, and symbolism are used as a means of “shocking” the audience and “breaking through the clutter”. The key to this mode is its decontextualization of the historical significance of race. Often the language and imagery associated with racial dynamics are deployed without acknowledging the construction of race as a project to support and normalize white supremacy. For instance, the Benetton Group’s iconic 1989 “Black and White” advertising campaign largely drew upon racialized imagery associated with chattel slavery (e.g., power differentials between slaveholders and the enslaved) without situating the ads in their accompanying historical context. More recently, the Swiss division of

Amnesty International released a campaign that “blackfaced” right-wing politicians and renamed them with a Muslim name to ridicule their political stand on migration and asylum (see Michel 2020). In the same vein, the high-end brand Dolce & Gabbana utilized an assortment of stereotypical elements associated with Chinese culture in an ad released in China intended to promote an upcoming runway show (Wilkinson 2018). Presenting racialized visualizations without the benefit of race’s distinct historical context enables racism to take on new meanings that are not supported by its constituted structure. As an example, policies and procedures adopted to address the power inequities related to race can be repositioned as discriminatory and unjust to white constituents and therefore classified as reverse racism.

Discussion

We began this perspective piece by illustrating the significance that race continues to hold within the advertising industry. This was followed by a synopsis of advertising literature related to racial dynamics and the knowledge gaps that remain. As a means of addressing these gaps, we introduced a conceptualization of racial aesthetics in advertising, determined by the social construction of race. At the core of our conceptualization is a focused attunement to the discursive, historical, and material relevance of racial dynamics and their visual portrayals in advertisements. Previous research concerning race in advertising has largely neglected to attend to the discursive, historical, and material aspects of racial dynamics as an interrelated triumvirate, opting rather to implement theoretical and methodological frameworks that position race as a “variable” analogous to other aspects of self (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, etc.). However, we posit that for scholars and practitioners to understand the meaning and impact of race, it must be approached as a distinct “construct” that has emerged from a unique and ever-shifting sociopolitical context. Nonetheless, the hierarchical

arrangements of the local context filter into the way aesthetics are racialized in advertising and are an integral consideration.

Keeping with this social construction approach to race, we propose six modes of racial aesthetics in advertising. The discussion of each of them highlights how contemporary advertising uses language, visual cues, and symbolism that contribute to the reification of race. More specifically, we present how this reification occurs through cues of domination, assimilation, empowerment, genomics, diversity, and/or exploitation. Extending Windels' (2016) work on advertisers' perceived benefits of ad stereotyping, we conclude that, in parallel to goods or services explicitly promoted, the reification of race allows advertisers to subtly position race as a commodity, readily available for sale to their viewers. Table 1 summarizes the typology and describes a few ways forward.

[Table 1 near here].

We posit that each mode of our typology offers guidance for areas in need of further research. For instance, the white supremacy mode and its explicit depictions of domination and subjugation underscore the need for more advertising research to examine why and how white supremacist ideology has sustained itself as a viable and often effective mode of consumer persuasion, particularly in Global South markets (especially regarding skin lighting ads). Relatedly, from a managerial perspective, the field could greatly benefit from ascertaining a deeper understanding of how ads featuring white supremacist ideology impacts brand engagement within and between non-white populations. As previously noted, ads explicitly depicting white supremacist logic have declined in the Global North, and such ads continue to be a fixture in the Global South. However, due to the presence of social media and other digital technologies with a global reach, advertisements often transcend the geographic location of their

target audience. Therefore, we suggest future studies take a global perspective when analyzing consumer responses to ads. For instance, by examining the impact white supremacist ads intended for Global South consumers have on those in the Global North (and vice versa).

In the case of the racial respectability mode, in response to a racially diversifying consumer population, the advertising industry is shifting away from a pure assimilationist approach and deploying respectability advertisements that leverage depictions of acculturation – showing how those within the cultural minority can adopt hegemonic cultural practices while retaining practices distinct to their cultural background (Kim 2007). For instance, a growing number of brands worldwide design targeted ads in addition to a “mainstream” ad (e.g., Maheshwari 2017). Often each of the targeted ads blends elements of hegemonic culture with cultural particularities associated with the targeted racial group. Such a shift suggests a need for future research to not just investigate how consumers respond to the racial makeup of actors featured in ads, but also how the mode of cultural engagement (i.e., assimilation versus acculturation) employed affects consumer responses.

The racial pride mode and its emphasis on forefronting aesthetics associated with the reclamation of marginalized racial identities hint at how advertising can be used to advance racial acceptance and empowerment. As noted earlier, advertisers typically execute this mode of racial aesthetics by haphazardly applying widely known cultural symbols affiliated with a specific racial group. As such, future research that details how advertisers can thoughtfully and effectively center their commercial messaging around symbols of racial pride would be of great benefit to the field. One area that appears ripe for future study is ads that focus their messaging on moments of enculturation – illustrating how minoritized communities become familiar with cultural practices endemic to their community. Proctor & Gamble’s 2017 commercial in the U.S.

entitled “[The Talk](#),” wherein Black parents discuss the everyday ramifications of racism with their offspring not only allows non-Black viewers an opportunity to witness a long-held tradition within Black culture but also serves to acknowledge and validate the collective pain and pride that is interwoven into the Black experience.

The race as biology mode highlights the need for research that will address advertising’s overdependence on individual characteristics and behaviors, especially in the domain of social marketing (Grier and Poole 2020). For instance, many national public health agencies worldwide (e.g., France, UK, US), have readily acknowledged that the disproportionate number of hospitalizations and deaths experienced by communities of color as a result of COVID-19 was in large part a function of environmental and structural inequities, including in some cases mention of systemic racism. Yet, while a preponderance of consumer-facing public health messaging noted disproportionate negative health outcomes across racial categories, the link between these outcomes and structural issues remains largely neglected. Instead, advertisers largely concentrate on individual behaviors, such as handwashing and mask-wearing. Future research is needed to better articulate and communicate how life outcomes emerge from the interplay of agentic and structural elements of social existence.

The colorblind/post-racial and hyper-racial modes of racial aesthetics essentially function as two sides of the same coin. The former dramatically undervalues the importance of race by ignoring it, while the latter does so by deploying it solely for its shock value. In both instances, future research could examine the myriad way that ads featuring decontextualized images of race impacts consumer engagement. For instance, in the case of post-racial imagery, it would be managerially useful to understand if consumers respond more favorably when such imagery is positioned as aspirational as opposed to achieved. Relatedly, recent research suggests that

prioritizing visualizations of diversity over racialization as it is experienced may exacerbate racism (Scarritt 2019). As such, it would be beneficial for future advertising research to investigate if consumers, particularly marginalized consumers deem racially decontextualized advertising as harmful, and if so, better understand how that sense of harm impacts their affinity for brands that engage in it.

From a managerial perspective, the emphasis on increasing racial diversity in agencies and suppliers suggests the importance of considering the role of advertising creators. Specifically, we recommend future research delve deeper into the complexities of deploying racial aesthetics by investigating the implications of partnering or outsourcing advertising content to content creators that are racialized in the same manner as the models featured in an ad and/or the ad's target audience. In other words, are modes of racial aesthetics more likely to produce positive outcomes, such as being perceived as authentic or receiving higher favorability ratings when the racial makeup of the creative team aligns with that of the target audience and/or the models featured in the ad?

Scholars should investigate whether consumers can identify the different types of racial aesthetics, and also whether their perceptions and responses depend on their personal characteristics (e.g., racial group, religion, level of racial identification, nationality). In line with recent calls for more and finer intersectional approaches to advertising and marketing research (Eisend et al. 2022; Johnson al. 2019; Rosa-Salas and Sobande 2022), we invite advertising researchers to utilize an intersectional lens when analyzing racial identities. Doing so would require moving away from characterizing race as a discreet variable and positioning it as a life-structuring construct whose meaning and salience are derived from its interaction with other identity coordinates, such as gender, sexual orientation, and social class. In the same vein, simply

manipulating a model's perceived race is not sufficient to measure the role that race may have on ad effectiveness. Other aesthetic qualities of a given advertisement must also be taken into consideration to understand consumer responses. Such a recommendation echoes the existing work investigating the effect of cues (e.g., Appiah 2001) and specific portrayals on ad effectiveness (e.g., Gan 2022; Johnson and Grier 2012; Rößner et al. 2017, Terlutter et al. 2022). However, it goes further by specifically guiding scholars to carefully examine the sociopolitical aesthetics embedded implicitly or explicitly in their stimuli. As discussed earlier, even what may be seen as a “simple” multiracial advertisement holds both interpretive and sociopolitical implications that should not be ignored.

Furthermore, considering the aforementioned key role that research conducted outside the confines of the U.S. has played in complicating our understanding of the impact of race in advertising – namely, that the meaning of race is contingent on global and local histories, increased attention to the Global South and other non-US localities is gravely needed. More specifically, further broadening the cultural and geographic scope of where this area of research takes place will undoubtedly provide unique and vital insight. Yet, for those insights to become transformational, practitioners will need to be able to assess, understand, and integrate them into their practices - so that representations reflect an expanded conceptualization of racial dynamics. As such, we also encourage advertising researchers to leverage distribution channels beyond academic journals when communicating their findings – particularly in the classroom where there is still an important need to engage rigorously with race, racism, and racial aesthetics so that future generations of advertisers are more aware of how ad representations of race impact consumers and beyond (Grier 2020, Thomas and Jones 2019, Thomas 2017).

Nevertheless, as noted previously, our intent is not to present these six modes as exhaustive or conclusive. We, therefore, invite advertising scholars to identify further racial aesthetics, in particular those that may challenge the reproduction of historical racist norms. Thus, advertising scholars could investigate local and/or global modes of interventions (i.e., new aesthetics?) that will allow advertisers to move away from the reification of race. In other words, are there “anti-racist” aesthetics that could be socially transformative and offer ways for more equitable marketplace experiences to emerge, or are advertising aesthetics doomed to reify race? To answer such a question, advertising scholars could investigate “new” aesthetics that emerge from transitioning from white-supremacy aesthetics (e.g., from Aunt Jemima to Pearl Milling Company; from 黑人牙膏 to 好來) or other visual cues and language that try to counter respectability aesthetics. The typology we have presented here may also hold utility for the study of celebrity endorsements (see Bergkvist et al. 2016) and social media influencers. In both instances, how might racial aesthetics differ when fame is present as a social identifier? Such analysis will nevertheless require deeper engagement with race’s discursive, historical, and material attributes but also consider the profit- and capitalistic-driven nature of advertising and what this implies in terms of brands’ commitment to anti-racism (see our discussion above on Amazon and “woke-washing”).

As brands and advertisers grapple with how to repair their misuse of racial aesthetics, researchers have an ethical and political responsibility to hold them (and ourselves) accountable in the process. Our hope is that the framework we have outlined here can help illuminate the path forward.

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Figure 1: Racial Construction of Advertising Aesthetics

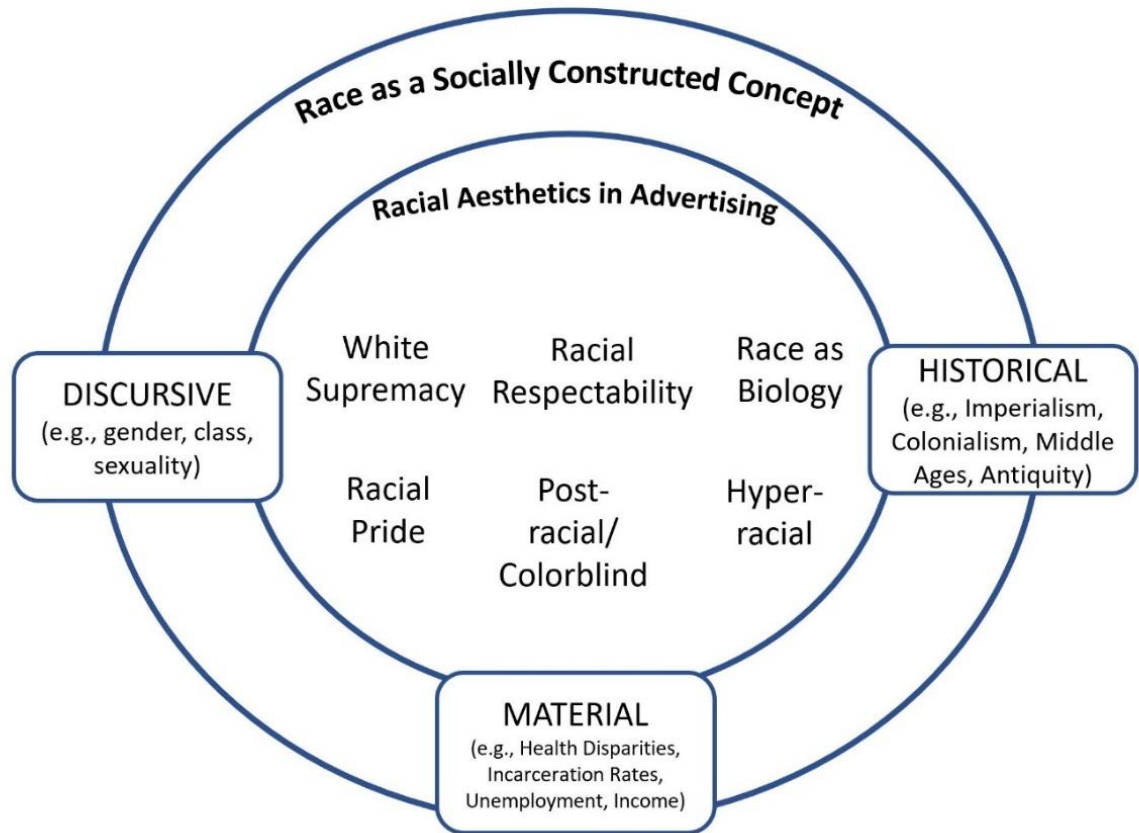


Table 1: Summary of Racial Aesthetics in Advertising

Mode	White Supremacy	Racial Respectability	Racial Pride	Race as Biology	Colorblind / Post-racial	Hyper-racial
Defining Attribute	Incorporates blatant portrayals of white superiority and/or non-white subjugation	Portrays the cultural practices of non-white populations as aligning with hegemonic norms	Uses language and visuals associated with reclaiming a marginalized racial identity	Utilizes language and visuals that essentializes race as biological	Uses language and visuals that propagate neoliberal ideology	Utilizes racialized language and visuals to “shock” and “break through the clutter”
Real-world Example	(China) 2016 Qiaobi ad’s heavy dependence on antiblack racial tropes	(US) 2014 Ralph Lauren ad’s depiction of Native American forced assimilation	(Trinidad and Tobago) 2020 KFC ad misappropriating the Black Power fist to celebrate Emancipation Day	(US) 2014 American Diabetes Association PSA - race and diabetes	(Australia) 2017 Meat and Livestock Association “We love our lamb” ad.	(Worldwide) 1989 United Color of Benetton’s “Black and White” ad campaign
Research Opportunity	Advertising and the functioning of white supremacist ideology	Consumer response to modes of cultural engagement	“Woke-washing” and culturally aware/ authentic use of racial pride symbolism	Articulating interplay of agentic and structural life elements	Consumer responses to decontextualized images of race/racism.	

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