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EXPLORING THE PRESENCE AND EFFECTS OF RACE INCLUSIVITY ON BRANDED CONTENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Studying inclusion in advertising is of special interest, as it functions as a powerful tool for shaping individuals' attitudes towards cultural groups and their roles. Race inclusion, in particular, expressed by the diversity of skin tone, is important given the white-skinned dominant presence. This study analyses the actual representation of diverse skin tones in cosmetic brand publications on their Instagram pages. Moreover, it examines the impact of inclusive communication regarding skin tones on user engagement. A content analysis of 50 Instagram posts from 15 beauty brands was conducted, with a total of 750 posts inspected. Results indicate a lack of representation of skin tone diversity. Likewise, it was possible to conclude that diversity in skin tone negatively affects engagement, with darker skin tones performing worst among mass market cosmetic brands. Otherwise, diversity seems to be well accepted among audiences of premium brands. Implications for practice and theory are discussed.

Keywords: Advertising, Social Inclusion, Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Inclusivity has been claimed as a relevant topic in marketing and advertising, being associated with various areas, including gender, sexual orientation, and race (Ferdman, 2013). As the decision to *include* fosters perceptions of social justice and consumer-brand identification, brands manifest their interest in addressing *inclusion* in their communications (Eisend et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2001). Despite that, few studies have explored whether brands *walk the talk*, putting inclusivity in practice in their social media, and whether these efforts generate positive outputs for brands. Brand efforts in social media capture the largest scope of branded content, while marketers try to put together a robust content calendar (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Thus, analysing their social media offers the right context to evaluate the real practices of inclusivity and their effects.

The current study focuses on race, and using skin tone, it evaluates whether diversity is present in cosmetics brands' publications on Instagram brand pages. Due to the dominance of privileged white individuals in the economic, political, and cultural spheres of society throughout history, cosmetics advertising was originally crafted to appeal to this group and cater to their interests (Hernandez, 2011). It heavily promoted a restricted ideal of beauty, with a focus on Eurocentric features such as fair skin, slim bodies, and straight hair. Thus, cosmetics offer a relevant context for research. Moreover, else than

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evaluating the presence of race inclusivity among cosmetic brands in social media, the current study examines the impact of inclusive communication on user engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diversity is defined by the presence of individuals with varied identities, backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs (Bernstein et al., 2020). Some examples of diversity include ethnicity, race, age, nationality, gender, colour, sexual orientation, physical ability, body type, and religious beliefs. Inclusiveness portrays the effectiveness of an organization and its members in linking, involving, and utilizing people from various backgrounds and characteristics (Ferdman, 2013). It involves cultivating a setting where all individuals, regardless of their differences, feel esteemed, dignified, and welcomed. The aim is to promote diversity, equality, and equal opportunity whilst actively challenging discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion. This includes creating a sense of belonging for all individuals and fostering a community where everyone feels supported and valued (Ferdman, 2013).

Research in diversity and inclusion in advertising commenced in the 1970s, with studies focused on age and gender (Belkaoui & Belkaoui, 1976; Silverstein & Silverstein, 1974; Smith, 1976). Studies in this area have been motivated by a general perception that advertising is not inclusive and does not accurately reflect the diversity of society (Haller & Ralph, 2001), with consumers demanding more representation. Previous studies indicate that marketing campaigns that promote inclusivity and diversity positively influence consumer's perception of a brand, leading to an increase in purchase intent (Eisend et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2001), especially among Generation Z, who are more sensitive to social appeals (Djafarova & Foots, 2022).

Studying inclusion in advertising is of special interest, as it functions as a powerful tool for shaping individuals' attitudes towards cultural groups and their roles. It is capable of both mirroring and reinforcing social norms and has a crucial impact on the development of individuals (Davis, 2017). Race inclusion, expressed by the diversity of skin tone is of interest as the white-skinned demographic had a dominant presence in the advertising (Mehaffy, 1997). Until the late 1990s, there were racial disparities evident in primetime commercials. Luxury, beauty, and household advertisements predominantly featured white individuals while people of colour were more often represented in advertisements for cheaper, less nutritious products and sports equipment (Henderson & Baldasty, 2003).

Consistently over time, cosmetics brands have upheld traditional white-minded beauty standards in their advertising (Peiss, 1998). However, more recently, the industry started adopting a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, motivated by consumer demand for representation and authenticity in advertising (Baek et al., 2023). These new consumer demands were largely influenced by social media influencers who are progressively utilizing their platforms to promote messages of inclusivity and diversity. This is often achieved by sharing personal experiences and endorsing products that cater to diverse skin tones and body types. These influencers have become a formidable presence in shaping consumer attitudes towards beauty and advocating for greater representation in the industry (Hajli, 2014).

Previous studies have identified that inclusive brand campaigns create a stronger connection with *diverse* users, who feel recognised and valued (Wiklund, 2022; Salsabila & Apriliyanty, 2022). This acknowledgment, in turn, is more likely to lead to user enthusiasm for following and engaging with the content, which in turn leads to more likes, comments, and shares (DePalma, 2020; Salsabila & Apriliyanty, 2016). Thus, it is proposed that while building an emotional connection with the *specific diverse* targets,

the presence of diversity also affects audience engagement with the content in general, as captured in the following hypothesis:

H1: The representation of skin tone diversity affects user engagement in social media.

As the research question investigates the effects of skin tone diversity on the general target audiences, it is relevant to understand whether the type of brand influences the effects, as their audiences differ. It is expected that among premium brand audiences, the effects on user engagement differ from mass market brand audiences, due to a larger representation of skin tone among mass market audiences.

H2: The effect of skin tone portrayed in the post on engagement rate is moderated by the type of brand, so audiences from premium brands will engage differently from audiences from mass market brands.

METHODOLOGY

A content analysis of posts was performed. The beauty industry offers a relevant setting for the current research because else than representing one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide (Euromonitor, 2022), it has also been notable for its efforts towards inclusivity. Instagram was chosen as the platform to run the study due to its large penetration and engagement, with almost one billion users accessing their accounts on a daily basis (Insider Intelligence, 2023).

Various criteria were used to select the brands for the study, namely: *i*) their position in the ranking of Euromonitor Top Cosmetic Brands (Euromonitor, 2022); *ii*) holding a global official Instagram account; *iii*) to ensure dataset consistency, only feed posts (static publications that remain on the home pages of Instagram accounts) were considered for analysis; *iv*) to accurately capture the spectrum of visual diversity, the dataset was limited to posts displaying colour images (not black and white); *v*) the analysis exclusively focused on posts featuring an image with individuals alone; *vi*) in the search for a nuanced investigation into diversity and inclusion, all publications focusing on representations of products, landscapes, or subjects tangential to an individual representation were removed from the dataset; *vi*) only posts portraying full face were considered.

In total, 15 brands were analysed (7 mass market and 8 premium), with 50 posts of each being collected by the researchers. Number of likes, shares, and comments were extracted. The number of Instagram page followers was considered for calculating the level of engagement per post. Monk Skin Scale (MSS) (Monk, 2023), as in Figure 1, was used to assess skin tone. Using this scale, a value of 1 (light) to 10 (dark) was assigned to each of the posts analysed. The assignment was reviewed by 5 other people external to the study, in order to ensure validity.



Figure 1. Monk Skin Tone Scale

RESULTS

In total, 750 Instagram posts were collected. Only 2.8% of the sample represented dark skin tones (8-10 in MSS), and 25.6% were medium skin tones (5-7 in MSS). The majority (71.5%) were light skin tones (1-4 in MSS) (Table 1). Thus, darker skin tones are clearly under represented.

For testing H1, skin tone was considered as the independent variable, and engagement rate, as the dependent. A simple regression analysis was run. Results validate H1 for its significant effects (std.coef.=-0.153; $p<0.01$). Thus, skin tone diversity impacts

engagement in social media. However, the impact is rather negative, with darker skin tones capturing less engagement. For testing H2, PROCESS 4.2 (Hayes, 2012) was used to evaluate the presence of moderation. Results validate H2, thus the effects of skin tone on engagement rate are moderated by the type of brand (interaction coef.=1.511; $p<0.01$; LLCI=0.3787, ULCI=2.6432). When brands are mass market, the effect is negative and significant. When brands are premium, on the other hand, the effects of skin tone on engagement are not significant.

Skin tone Classification	Frequency	Percent
Light Skin Tones	536	71.5
Medium Skin Tones	193	25.7
Dark Skin Tones	21	2.8

Table 1: Distribution of Skin Tone

CONCLUSION

The current study intended to evaluate whether brands practice inclusive communication content in their social media pages and the effects on engagement. Focus was placed on exploring the effects of race, captured by means of skin tone. Cosmetics brands were selected and their content on Instagram brand pages was collected. Results indicate lack of representation of darker skin tones and confirm that skin tone diversity impacts engagement rate. However, different from expected, the effects are negative, thus, the darker the skin tones, the less engagement is associated with posts. This effect takes place among mass market brands, but not among premium brands. While exploring these results, we may conclude that diversity is mostly appreciated among audiences of premium brands, whose reaction to skin tone differences does not impact their engagement with the content. Among the implications for practice is that if brands intend to extend diversity, a larger representation of darker audiences is much needed. While driving diversity, premium brands enjoy an advantage over mass market ones, as engagement rates of darker skin tones are comparable with lighter ones. Regarding implications for theory, the current study positions audiences' level of engagement with diverse content as a function of the type of brand. Limitations include the category and brands selected. Future studies could extend the analysis beyond cosmetics and further explore the content of comments, to understand whether the effects of skin tone are consistent.

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