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 <https://doi.org/10.38140/com.v30i.8740>
ISSN 2415-0525 (Online)
Communitas 2025 30: 56-73

Date submitted:
5 November 2024

Date accepted:
22 May 2025

Date published:
31 December 2025

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CONSUMERS' PERSPECTIVES ON MULTIRACIAL ADVERTISING IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

ABSTRACT

In March 2022, the South African Human Rights Commission opened an inquiry following official complaints sparked by the publication of racially insensitive advertisements. Despite this, advertising agencies appear to publish material that does not represent an all-inclusive approach, which considers consumers' perspectives and perceptions of multiracial advertisements. This study suggests guidelines for formulating multiracial advertisements to enable advertising agencies to elicit the desired responses from consumers. A qualitative methodology with a cross-sectional descriptive design was adopted. Data was collected through a social media search for related posts. The study purposively sampled cases of brand advertisements (n=3) that South African consumers perceived as racially offensive, namely Dove, Clicks/TRESemmé, and BMW. A convenience sample was also employed to collect comments per advertisement (n=20). An inductive approach to thematic content analysis was utilised to code consumers' responses on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, and YouTube). The findings indicate that race remains a sensitive topic among South African consumers. Thus, marketing communication practitioners need to be mindful of the racial connotations that the content in their advertising material might carry.

Keywords: multiracial advertising, consumer perceptions, reputation management, social media, brand management, marketing communication, SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 12

INTRODUCTION

Organisations operate in complex business environments where they must constantly be aware that their consumers keep a close eye on them through the social media lens. Although social media presents organisations with multiple advantages, such as ease of access to target audiences on a global scale, cost-effective marketing communication strategies, real-time communication and relationship building, it also holds disadvantages (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013).

Firstly, it demands constant monitoring, interaction, and feedback from consumers. Secondly, it contributes to image distortion and organisations have limited control over the perceptions consumers and other stakeholders form about them. For example, social media users are quick to share negative opinions and experiences of a brand, and negative feedback on social media can spread quickly. Several studies (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Young, 2020) emphasise the damaging effects of unfavourable consumer perceptions on an organisation's image and reputation. In support, Melewar (2008) and Jere and van Niekerk (2017) state that consumers use social media platforms to pressure organisations to give in to their demands because they are aware of social media's impact on organisations. Therefore, advertisers must be mindful of this and carefully monitor their social media advertising campaigns to address negative feedback.

The advertising industry constantly evolves and adapts to current trends, technologies, and consumer behaviour. Post-apartheid, the evolution of advertising reflects the ongoing struggle for greater diversity, inclusivity and representation in media and advertising, and highlights the role of advertising in shaping societal attitudes and values. The rise of social media has enabled consumers to demand more authenticity and representation in advertising, as advertising agencies appear to publish materials that do not consider consumers' perspectives on and perceptions of multiracial advertisements (Langlois, 2019; Wasserman, 2020).

There is evidence of social inequalities in South African advertising, and it has been highlighted that there are still significant disparities in the media despite the nation's transformation (Wasserman, 2020: 451). Consequently, in March 2022, the South African Human Rights Commission opened an inquiry following official complaints sparked by the publication of racially insensitive advertisements (Masweneng, 2022). According to Langlois (2019: 65), racist advertisements have been published historically and are likely to be published in the future. The latter assertion is evident in the case of Nivea, H&M, Dove, Clicks/TRESemmé, and BMW (SAHRC, 2022a). These brands faced a backlash from South African consumers on social media for the publication of advertisements that were perceived to be racially insensitive (Brophy, 2017; Young, 2020; Masweneng, 2022). The publication of these advertisements changed how South African consumers perceived these brands (Masweneng, 2022). According to Kapoor *et al.* (2018), the public sharing of consumer perceptions on social media can harm a brand's image. Advertising agencies need to understand how consumers perceive multiracial advertisements to minimize the possibility of offending certain racial groups (Johnson, 2009: 45; Maree & Jordaan, 2016; Swanepoel, 2018).

This study aimed to develop guidelines that could be used as a point of reference when formulating multiracial advertisements to enable advertising agencies to elicit the desired response from South African consumers. The study's main objective was to analyse consumers' perceptions of three instances of brand advertisements that South African consumers perceived as racially offensive. The first instance is a 2017 Facebook advertisement for Dove, a personal care brand owned by British multinational consumer goods company Unilever. The advertisement depicted a black woman seemingly transitioning into a white woman, presumably after using Dove

body lotion. The second instance is a 2020 online advertisement for TRESemmé, an American hair care brand, also owned by Unilever. The advertisement came under fire for dictating white beauty standards as the norm in the brand's hair care advertisement. The advertisement appeared on the website of Clicks, a South African retailer, while the subsequent backlash focused predominantly on Clicks. Lastly, a 2023 billboard advertisement for the car manufacturer BMW's 2023 5 series model was perceived as undermining black people's power and superiority with the tagline, "we are our ancestors' wildest dreams".

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY IN ADVERTISING

According to Stanton (1994: 9), advertising can be defined as follows:

...all activities involved in presenting to a group a non-personal, oral, or visual, openly sponsored identified message regarding a product, service, or idea, while an advertisement can be understood as a message disseminated through one or more media and it is paid for by an identified sponsor.

For the purpose of this article, diversity is defined as "the practice or quality of involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, abilities, etc" (Grindstaff, 2022: 133).

Diversity in advertising is essential for various reasons. Firstly, the media presents a lens through which society shapes its reality; therefore, advertisements reflect the population of their target audiences as accurately as possible (Harter & Rutter, 2021). Secondly, not only are diversity and inclusivity morally and socially right, these concepts also enhance brand equity and are necessary for brand relationship building and engagement (Flowers, Buckman & DiPrete Regan, 2020; Harter & Rutter, 2021). Furthermore, diversity allows people to see reflections of themselves in an advertising campaign. This enables them to form deeper connections with the advertisement and the brand (Flowers *et al.*, 2020).

Advertisements are pervasive in modern culture, and they have the capacity to shape people's perceptions of themselves, others, and the world around them. The concern is that advertisements impact social and cultural values; thus, this infringement influences our cultural and social standards (Malik & Shehzadi, 2017).

THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING IN SHAPING SOCIETAL NORMS AND VALUES

Advertising influences society's norms and values by creating and reinforcing cultural stereotypes, gender roles, and standards. It also promotes certain lifestyles, consumer behaviours, and cultural practices. Additionally, advertisements can raise awareness about critical social issues such as environmental protection, human rights, and social justice. In support of this argument, Rajendrah, Rashid and Mohamed (2017) report on how advertisements often feature models with an idealised body type and appearance, which could create unrealistic expectations for individuals and could contribute to issues with body image. Discrimination is also apparent in certain advertisements.

Kniazian (2014) refers to how men and women are represented differently regarding credibility, occupation, and gender roles in certain advertisements. For example, women are most likely to be portrayed in positions where they need to obtain the approval of their family and males, whereas men are portrayed holding powerful social standing and careers.

Several studies (Hobbs, 2017; Mastro & Stamps, 2018) have identified constant misrepresentation and underrepresentation of ethnic and racial diversity in advertisements. According to Friberg and Jacobsson (2021), black people are often stereotyped as being uneducated, criminal, athletic, aggressive, and sexual. This leads to advertisements that breach social and cultural standards (Malik & Shehzadi, 2017).

The concept of multiracial advertising

This study refers to Johnson's (2009: 46) definition of multi-racial advertising as "a type of advertising, casting actors from different racial backgrounds simultaneously". Multiracial advertising may take various forms – from portraying interracial families to using models from different racial and cultural origins (Harrison, Thomas & Cross, 2017). The goal of multiracial advertising should be to convey a more inclusive and diverse depiction of society, challenging established standards and prejudices promoted through advertising (Johnson, Elliot & Grier, 2010).

Mastro and Stamps (2018) opine that multicultural representation has been an attribute of advertising since the 1970s; however, insufficient representation and stereotypes persist in today's advertising. Furthermore, there remains a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in advertisements across media platforms (*ibid.*). Johnson (2009) and Friberg and Jacobsson (2021) disagree, stating that since the end of apartheid in South Africa, the number of advertisements using people of different races has increased significantly. This view has, however, elicited a wide range of emotions, with some regarding this approach as the ideal social mirror for a democratic South Africa. In contrast, others view it as a pervasive advertising tactic. Although advertisements have used visual representations to mainstream and legitimise mixed-race identities, these pictures typically neglect everyday consumer habits, conceal the connections and processes that give rise to multiracial groups, and lack sociopolitical context (Harrison *et al.*, 2017).

Multiracial advertising can be a force for positive change. Findings from Johnson *et al.* (2010) indicate that developing a relationship with a consumer extends beyond specific multicultural advertising and is a function of the consumer's cultural group and cultural views. In South Africa, for example, organisations that employ multicultural appeals could expect stronger loyalty, not only from black, Coloured and Asian consumers, but also from whites, particularly those with a low degree of prejudice. Hence, the construction of brand attitudes depends on consumers' initial exposure to the multicultural advertisement and their previous interactions with the company or brand.

Moreover, advertisements advocating for social justice and equality can help to challenge existing social norms and promote more inclusive and diverse communities.

By presenting individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds positively and non-stereotypically, multiracial advertising can challenge existing biases and encourage greater understanding and acceptance among different communities (Johnson, 2009: 45; Maree & Jordaan, 2016; Swanepoel, 2018).

Consumers' perceptions of advertisements and their effect on brand image

Social media has changed the way information is accessed and transmitted. Platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram, among others, have become essential tools for the survival of organisations in today's complex environment (Hays & Daker-White, 2015). In response, many organisations have intensified their marketing communication efforts through social media and have become aware that these applications can facilitate two-way communication between organisations and stakeholders (Chi, 2011; Mulder & Struweg, 2015). Marketing communication practitioners employ and implement social media marketing tactics to assist them in achieving their marketing objectives (Johansson & Hiltula, 2021). Additionally, social media is used to enhance brand awareness and perceptions at a fraction of the cost (Watson & Hagen, 2015).

Asur and Huberman (2010) state that social media's ability to transmit information rapidly can be a significant advantage or disadvantage for organisations. For example, traditionally, consumers used word-of-mouth to share their positive or negative experiences and perceptions of a brand. Today, the same principle applies; however, these experiences and perceptions are shared on social media and are sometimes accompanied by images, videos, and supporting evidence. These can go viral, and organisations can find themselves amid a crisis if the experiences and perceptions are negative (*ibid.*). Therefore, it is important for marketing communication practitioners to be aware that consumers with a high social media following who spread marketing information may have considerable influence (attitude and behavioural responses) on their social connections and followers (Duffet, 2017). In agreement, Johansson and Hiltula (2021) state that social media advertising tactics can influence an organisation's image and brand perceptions. Hence, organisations need to be aware that the experiences and perceptions shared by consumers on social media can affect their brand image and reputation.

The literature reviewed above is relevant to this study considering that individuals share diverse experiences and perceptions on social media in response to multiracial advertising, and their viewpoints can vary greatly (Johansson & Hiltula, 2021). Multiracial advertising on social media needs to promote inclusion, relatability, and social conscience. Many organisations and brands have embraced social media marketing communications. However, they have yet to fully comprehend the impact of these digital platforms on consumers' attitudinal and behavioural responses, and purchasing intentions (Duffet, 2017). Consequently, organisations must approach these activities with integrity and authenticity, ensuring that their commitment to diversity extends beyond marketing activities and is reflected in their reputation (*ibid.*).

RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

This study was interpretative in nature and aimed to answer the following research question: How can marketing communication practitioners avoid offending certain racial groups amongst South African consumers when using multiracial advertisements? Informed by the research question, the study's aim was to develop guidelines that could be used as a reference point when designing multiracial advertisements to enable marketing communication practitioners to elicit the desired responses from South African consumers. The following objective guided the study: To advance adopting more inclusive multiracial advertising strategies and avoid offending certain racial groups in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology with a cross-sectional descriptive research design. The qualitative approach enabled the researchers to collect data that provides a holistic understanding of consumer perceptions of multiracial advertisements. The study purposively sampled three instances of brand advertisements that South African consumers perceived as racially offensive, namely Dove, Clicks/TRESemmé, and BMW. These advertisements were identified due to widespread criticism on social media (SAHRC, 2022b; Gumede, 2023). Furthermore, convenience sampling was employed to collect 20 comments per advertisement (a total of 60 comments) included in the study for analysis. From the 60 comments, a total of 177 coding comments (words and phrases) were identified based on the frequency of these words and phrases. The data was collected by conducting a social media search, specifically on Facebook, Twitter (renamed X in 2023), and YouTube, in search of posts and comments directly related to the advertisements in the sample for one year post-publication. Keywords and hashtags such as #Clicksadvert, #Tresemmeadvert, #Dove, and #ancestorsBMW were used to generate comments related to the sampled advertisements.

The comments were analysed using an inductive approach to thematic content analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). An inductive approach was appropriate as the researchers aimed to analyse consumer responses on social media platforms to develop themes and groupings from the data. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify and arrange commonalities in the data so that themes and sub-themes could be developed. The trustworthiness and reliability of the data were taken into consideration. The researchers remained objective and unbiased throughout the data collection and analysis process. For triangulation, inter-coding reliability was ensured through cross checking the data set. The researchers used a peer review system to independently review the codes and themes developed to verify consistency and rigour. The profiles of the sampled comments remained anonymous, and confidentiality was ensured by removing any personal information attached to the comments. Ethical clearance was obtained, and the ethical clearance number is available on request.

FINDINGS

In the following section, each theme and its subthemes are discussed in more detail and supported with relevant quotations from the data. The data was transcribed manually using an inductive approach to thematic content analysis. An Excel spreadsheet was used to categorise, analyse, and present data in themes and subthemes. Table 1 below presents the five main themes that were developed from the data. To ensure a clear understanding, the themes are described in terms of conceptual and operational meanings.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTION OF THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

Theme	Description	Subtheme
Ethnocentrism	<p>Conceptual meaning: Ethnocentrism is referred to as cultural ignorance and a predisposition to view the world mostly from the standpoint of one's own culture. It is the view that one's own racial, ethnic, or cultural group is the most noteworthy or that some or all characteristics of that culture are preferable to those of others (Worthy, Lavigne & Romero, 2020).</p> <p>Operational meaning: In this study, ethnocentrism refers to comments that found the advertisements offensive, ethnocentric, and discriminatory towards black South Africans.</p>	Discrimination, disrespect, inequalities, comparisons, offensive, racism
Defenders/ bystanders	<p>Conceptual meaning: A defender or bystander is someone who advocates for or attempts to protect something from being destroyed or taken away (Cambridge Dictionary 2025).</p> <p>Operational meaning: In this study, defenders/bystanders refer to comments demonstrating that the public supported/backed the organisation.</p>	Supporters, neutral stance, misinterpretation
Negligence	<p>Conceptual meaning: Negligence is defined as behaviour or a failure to act that violates a duty of care (Hopcraft, 2015).</p> <p>Operational meaning: In this study, negligence refers to comments that questioned the marketing teams responsible for the advertisements and comments that sought accountability from the marketing communication practitioners.</p>	Accountability from marketing team, apology, repercussions

<p>Boycotting</p>	<p>Conceptual meaning: Forno (2013) defines boycott as an act joined by one or more parties for a specific purpose, urging others not to buy certain goods/use certain services.</p> <p>Operational meaning: In this study, boycotting refers to comments suggesting disassociation with the brand.</p>	<p>Dissociation with the brand</p>
<p>Recommendations</p>	<p>Conceptual meaning: Cambridge University Press (n.d.) defines recommendations as suggestions about how to deal with something in a helpful way.</p> <p>Operational meaning: In this study, recommendations refer to comments that proposed suggestions about how the organisations could go about dealing with multiracial advertisements.</p>	<p>Call to action, commendation, proposal, constructive criticism</p>

Figure 1 serves as an illustration of the consumer perceptions analysis per theme.

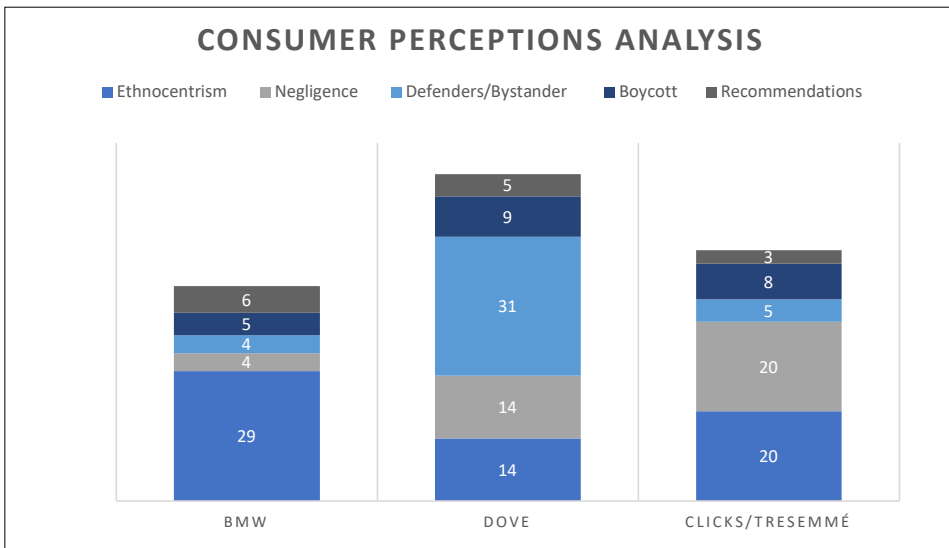


FIGURE 1: ILLUSTRATION OF CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS ANALYSIS

Theme 1: Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism was the dominant theme (n=63). The development of this theme was guided by the following sub-themes: discrimination/disrespect/inequalities/comparisons/offensive/racism. The subthemes contain words and/or phrases consumers used to describe their perceptions of the advertisements. Of the three advertisements, ethnocentrism was the most prominent in the BMW advertisement

(n=29), followed by Clicks/TRESemmé (n=20), and Dove (n=14). The comments coded under this theme for the BMW advertisement (n=29) contained phrases such as:

BMW would not dare do or say if they please - powers did not allow them.

Never imagined that BMW will use this as a marketing gimmick.

BMW was attacking black people, look at the ad carefully.

Term is very negative and demeans the contributions of our ancestors.

Words and phrases used in the comments indicate that consumers were offended by the BMW advertisement and were displeased about how the organisation loosely used the term “ancestors”. In black South African culture, the term “ancestors” carries significance, and this is evident in some of the comments:

They didn't see the need to respect the ancestors of the rainbow abomination.

It's more profound than racism.

It's actually anti-human.

For the Clicks/TRESemmé advertisement (n=20), comments coded under the ethnocentrism theme included words and/or phrases that refer to consumers taking offence at the contents of the advertisement:

But to suggest that white people's hair is better than ours is absurd.

Black people are sick and tired of being looked down on ... we have to endure disrespect in our faces ... enough of meaningless apologies.

For the Dove advertisement (n=14), comments indicated how South African consumers perceived the Dove advertisement as offensive and lacking inclusivity:

As a black who dealt with racism before, I see how this could offend people.

I agree with anything people say it's racist... commercial looks racist as hell, LOL.

These ads are offensive.

Just proves the point that many companies and people are subconsciously #racist and don't even know it.

Based on the ethnocentricity theme it appears that organisations continue to misrepresent and underrepresent ethnic and racial diversity in their advertising (cf. Johnson *et al.*, 2010). This is in line with previous studies that indicate that there remains a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in marketing across various media channels (Hobbs, 2017; Mastro & Stamps, 2018). Considering the findings, it appears that advertising agencies and brand communication managers continue to produce

materials that fail to consider how multiracial advertisements are perceived by consumers (Langlois, 2019; Wasserman, 2020).

Theme 2: Defenders/bystanders

The defenders/bystanders theme (n=40) was developed based on the following sub-themes: supporters/neutral stance/misinterpretation. The defenders/bystanders theme is most prominent in the Dove advertisement (n=31). The researchers observed that in the case of the Dove advertisement, most comments reflected that consumers were of the opinion that the advertisement was misunderstood and misinterpreted. These perceptions are evident in comments such as:

Wow show the whole thing it is not racist; so I take no one watched the entire video. The white lady turns into an Asian woman at the end. Should white people be mad too?

Really silly to call this racist.

Everything is racist now. No matter what you do is racist. I don't care what the commercial is, I love dove soap and will continue to use it.

For the Dove advertisement comments coded under this theme indicated that the brand has a large base of loyal consumers and advocates willing to defend the brand in times of crisis. On the other hand, the BMW and Clicks/TRESemmé advertisements only had four (BMW) and five (Clicks/TRESemmé) comments coded under this theme. The researchers observed that only a few consumers seemed to defend or take a neutral stance towards the Dove and BMW advertisements:

If given the chance they would categorically state that it was truly never their intention but merely and honest albeit dumb mistake on their part.

Those who are offended have an internalized inferiority complex.

I am a black woman and find the ad enlightening...it was diverse, elegantly portrayed.

Apparently we the black community are offended by this ad.

Aren't we a bit overly insensitive?

Let's not twist this one. I won't say y'all are too sensitive, you're just misinformed.

Why people up in their feels about the BMW ad beats me.

The defenders/bystanders theme indicates that individuals share diverse experiences and perceptions on social media in response to multiracial advertising and their viewpoints may vary greatly (Johansson & Hiltula, 2021). Johnson *et al.*'s (2010) findings indicate how organisations in South Africa that employed multicultural appeals could expect stronger loyalty, not only from black, Coloured and Asian consumers, but also from white consumers, particularly those with a low degree of prejudice.

Theme 3: Negligence

The negligence theme (n=38) was developed based on the following sub-themes: demand for accountability from the marketing team/apology/repercussions. The researchers observed that this theme occurred most in the Clicks/TRESemmé advertisement (n=20), followed by Dove (n=14), and BMW (n=4). Comments related to the Clicks/TRESemmé advertisement indicated that consumers were of the opinion that advertisements of this nature should not be used, especially in a society that aims to embrace diversity, and that beauty should not be measured against Western standards. Many of the comments questioned the intentions of the marketing agency that was responsible for designing the advertisement:

Which agency is doing your marketing?

They need to suffer the consequences, this apology doesn't do for me.

Shine the spotlight on the people responsible for the racist imaging of black hair, ask them the hard question, hold them accountable.

Seemingly, consumer perceptions included that the marketing agency and the brand needed to be held accountable for their actions. Moreover, consumers did not accept the organisation's apology.

Comments related to the Dove advertisement (n=14) reflected similar sentiments:

Dove executives should have seen this criticism issue coming.

A very stupid mistake and they probably paid some advertising genius a great deal of money for this work.

Who in their right mind thought this would be an acceptable commercial?

Only a few comments (n=4) relating to the BMW advertisement referred to the advertising agency and/or brand communication team. Nevertheless, the few comments observed and coded under this theme echoed the sentiments expressed by consumers about the Clicks/TRESemmé and Dove advertisements:

BMW owes us & our ancestors an apology.

You have to blame the people that work for these companies.

The advertising team obviously needed some Black SA employees to help them understand the culture.

The negligence theme supports Johansson and Hiltula's (2021) assertion that social media advertising tactics can influence an organisation's image and brand perceptions. Organisations need to be aware that the experiences and perceptions consumers share on social media can affect their brand image and reputation.

Theme four: Boycott

The boycott theme (n=22) was developed based on the following subtheme: dissociation with the brand. The boycott theme represents consumer perceptions that suggested mobilising fellow consumers online to stop purchasing products from these brands because of the controversial advertisements. Comments related to the BMW advertisement (n=5) reflecting these sentiments included:

Boycott all them.

Stop buying from that company and bankrupt them.

Boycott them.

The findings further indicated that this theme was slightly more pervasive in consumer comments posted in response to the Dove advertisement (n=9):

Boycott the hell out of them.

Boycotting your product might be incentive to not fall into the Trump mindset.

I and my friends actually stopped buying it after this ad.

Consumer perceptions deduced from the comments made about the Clicks/TRESemmé advertisement indicated that these consumers agreed that brands that continued producing advertisements containing offensive material should be punished and boycotted:

All TRESemmé products to be delisted and removed from the shelves ... Clicks has accepted the resignation for their senior executive ... it's a win!!

I never have to step foot into a Clicks again.

With reference to the above comments, it is clear that social media users are quick to share negative opinions and experiences of a brand, and negative feedback on social media can spread quickly. Studies by Melewar (2008) and Jere and Van Niekerk (2017) found that consumers use social media platforms to pressure organisations to give in to their demands because they are aware of social media's impact on organisations.

Theme five: Recommendation

The theme recommendation (n=14) was developed based on the following subthemes: call to action/commendation/proposal/constructive criticism. This theme was most prominent in comments on the BMW advertisement (n=6). The recommendation theme represents consumers' suggestions that advertising agencies should consider different races and religions when creating advertisements. Three particular user comments stood out in relation to the BMW advertisement:

The bottom line is BMW should respect African spirituality and culture. We are not our ancestors' wildest dreams. We are Ancestors!

If they had just said our wildest dreams, with the same sister in the picture, it would have been a celebration/acknowledgment.

When people mischievously attack you, don't sulk, reposition yourself.

Comments reflecting similar sentiments were observed in relation to the Dove advertisement (n=5):

I have an idea why don't we give Dove ideas instead of bashing them.

Racism is still a touchy subject and people don't forget, we know that things are not equal if you know the truth.

Common sense marketing tells you if you present a demographic, always do it at the same time.

Comments coded in this theme from the Clicks/TRESemmé advertisement (n=3) reiterated consumer perceptions that were found in the other two advertisements for this theme:

Should attend a workshop or a course designed to educate them on racism, tolerance and cultural sensitivity.

This off course should be installed as a law in these cases, regardless of where there are criminal charges brought against the perpetrators.

Duffet (2017) states that organisations must have integrity and authenticity, ensuring that their commitment to diversity extends beyond marketing activities and is reflected in their whole reputation. Furthermore, Johnson *et al.* (2010) emphasise that the goal of multiracial advertising should be to convey a more inclusive and diversified depiction of society, challenging established standards and prejudices promoted through advertising.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question, "How can marketers avoid offending certain racial groups amongst South African consumers when using multiracial advertisements?" in order to develop a set of guidelines that marketing communication practitioners could use as a point of reference when designing multiracial advertisements to elicit the desired responses from South Africans.

The findings highlight that race remains a sensitive topic among South African consumers and that marketing communication practitioners need to be mindful of the racial connotations that their advertising material might carry. Although it is evident in the sampled advertisements that marketing communication practitioners attempted to represent diverse cultures, the results demonstrate that in these instances their attempts fell short. From the five themes it can be deduced that South African

consumers perceived these advertisements as having an ethnocentric undertone, which they found offensive, and that when consumers believe that a brand is credible, they will defend it in times of crisis based on their past experiences with the brand and its reputation. Such consumers will discourage movements that aim to harm the brand's image and reputation, such as boycotting and trolling.

This study recommends that marketing communication practitioners appreciate the racial dynamics faced by South African consumers and adopt a more holistic and inclusive appeal to multiracial advertising. It is further proposed that marketing communication practitioners looking to target South African consumers through multiracial advertising should consider the following guidelines during the development of their advertisements:

- ◆ Diversity representation: A multicultural advertisement should have a variety of people from different racial, ethnic, age, gender, and racial backgrounds. It should reflect the multiracial culture of the country and refrain from using prejudice or stereotyping in the advertisement. It should also exhibit cultural sensitivity by showing that it respects and understands different societies. Moreover, it should not include objectionable material, misrepresentation, or appropriation.
- ◆ Considerations for inclusive messaging and language: A multicultural advertisement's message should be inclusive of and approachable for people from different cultural backgrounds. It should acknowledge and celebrate cultural variety while speaking to universal ideals and experiences. To achieve diversity, advertisements that target specific linguistic communities should be developed in different languages or with subtitles or translations. Their relevancy could also be increased by using language and idioms acceptable to the specific cultures involved.
- ◆ Cross-cultural visuals and symbols: Visual components, including colours, attire, scenery, and music could trigger cultural connotations. A multicultural advertisement could include various identifiable and relevant visual elements for different cultural groups, ensuring inclusion in its appeal. There should be an understanding that customs and sensitivities vary amongst societies. A multicultural advertisement should indicate knowledge of these differences and refrain from generalising or including stereotypical references that might alienate or offend certain ethnic groups.
- ◆ Authentic storytelling: Multicultural advertising frequently includes real stories that appeal to a variety of people. Advertising could engage people personally by including narratives and experiences representing the variety within a community, the local context, and relevance. A successful multicultural commercial should also be adapted to the target audience's geographic location. It ought to consider the cultural, social, and historical elements that have shaped the experiences and viewpoints of the intended audience.

In essence, a multicultural advertisement appeals to various audiences from diverse backgrounds while also effectively communicating with them. A multicultural advertisement should value variety, recognise cultural variances, and promote tolerance. It should successfully engage and resonate with consumers from different cultural origins by accurately depicting and speaking to the target audience's context while catering to a broader audience.

Limitations and future research

The limitations include that the data was collected through a desktop study; thus, only readily available textual data were sampled. Furthermore, the study only focused on advertisements critiqued on specific social media platforms during a specific period. Future research could explore the topic by conducting interviews with consumers to understand their perspectives toward multiracial advertisements. Moreover, future studies could investigate interviewing advertising agencies to determine what guidelines they follow when developing inclusive multiracial advertisements.

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