Chapter 2
Deconstructing Representations of African Americans in the Media: An Analysis of Misconstrued Tactics to Refute African Americans From Suburbia

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ABSTRACT
A 2014 survey distributed by Runnymede Trust indicates that 74% of respondents believe that media portrayals of minorities promote racism. The media plays a significant role in the ways that African Americans are perceived resulting in implicit bias. Data reveal that biased representations of minorities has existed since the early 1870s. The cinematic representation of African Americans in the media negates reality with portrayals of ignorance and subservience. The chapter uses technical discourse to analyze 20 historical and present advertisements with negative portrayals of African Americans in an attempt to identify strategies used by marketers to dehumanize the Black consumers and shape suburban communities.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7835-2.ch002

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INTRODUCTION

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Marketing and advertising greatly influence society. Advertising Age has published much of what we know about the roots of African Americans portrayed in early advertising. “From the end of slavery to the period of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, ads in the U.S. continued to show blacks as Aunt Jemimas, Uncle Bens and Rastuses—individuals subservient to whites. Trade cards, ad stamps, blotters, tins and bottles commonly portrayed blacks with thick lips, bulging eyes and distorted grimaces” (Advertising Age, 2003, para. 6). According to Wilson and Taub (2006), there are links between racist advertisements and the ethnic makeup represented in suburban neighborhoods. They help to aid the demographic divide. Racial domination is promoted by the negative images represented in print and televised media. Viewing such images have the ability to shape our perception and constant exposure to such depictions can result in a sense of superiority (Brooks & Herbert, 2006). These images are polar opposites of the richly defined associations aligned with suburbia. Suburbanism, “is commonly referred to social conformity and with privatized forms of family living at the expense of higher cultural aspirations” (Harris, 2015, p. 664). The social experience within suburbia is monolithic thus, the images of African Americans in the media do not align with its paradigm. This paper looks at the role that media portrayals of African Americans have on the increased ethnic and racial boundaries within suburban neighborhoods.

African Americans are the largest consumer group of color (Nielsen, 2018). However, the tactics used to gain their support and represent them within the marketplace have been plagued with corruption and distaste. African Americans make up 14% of the United States population, yet they are responsible for roughly $1.2 trillion in purchases annually (Nielsen, 2018). Clearly, this consumer group has taken great strides to invest in the American economy. However, the inexplicable caricatures and false representations of minorities in the media have permeated the airwaves, internet platforms and billboards for decades. These depictions negate the political identities and social norms found within suburban communities while making it difficult for minorities to gain acceptance and receive fair treatment in such environments.
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