



ARTICLE

## Marketing blackness

How advertisers use race to sell products

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### *Abstract*

Marketing blackness, or black cultural identity, involves promotional strategies reliant on persons and other symbolic and material representations socially and historically constructed as black (e.g. speech and phonetic conventions, folklore, style, fashion, music, usage of the body, and the black physical form). This research presents a framework that assesses the strategic role blackness representations play in US advertising. The framework addresses the fundamental question of how advertisers use blackness representations to deliver promises about their products' benefits, a necessary first step in ultimately understanding their effectiveness and their impact on blackness itself. The framework orders blackness representations along two dimensions of meaning based on the central claims made in advertisements: (1) claims about the product/brand as a cultural resource, and (2) claims about the viewer that emphasize themes of similarity or difference. The framework also specifies a range of advertising strategies reliant on blackness representations located along the two dimensions. I suggest that the time has come to change the focus of research on blackness representations from numeric representation and role status to understanding their role in promotional strategy more broadly, particularly in branding.

### *Key words*

advertising • black • black culture • culture

MARKETING BLACKNESS INVOLVES advertising and other promotional strategies that incorporate blackness representations in the form of signs, which may include black people or other symbolic and material artifacts

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Vol 8(2): 245-268 1469-5405 [DOI: 10.1177/1469540508090088]

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of black cultural life (e.g. speech and phonetic conventions, folklore, style, fashion, music, usage of the body, and the physical form itself). Blackness representations that appear on products, in advertisements, or other media have been the focus of research in a variety of academic disciplines, namely marketing and advertising (e.g. Carter-Whitney et al, 1992; Motley et al., 2003; Bailey, 2006; Grier et al., 2006), communications (e.g. Goldman and Papon, 1998), sociology and cultural studies (e.g. Pieterse, 1992; O'Barr, 1994; Armstrong, 1999), cinema studies (e.g. Marchetti, 2001; Kraszewski, 2002), and history (e.g. Kern-Foxworth, 1994). Unfortunately, missing from this literature has been a framework that captures the implicit meanings underlying the role of blackness representations in advertising strategy. The literature has at times proceeded from the limiting assumption that blackness representations only aid in targeting black customers, ignoring their role in hailing the mass market. Thus, my goals in this study are (1) to provide a framework that orders blackness representations along dimensions of meaning, and (2) to document the resultant advertising strategies that rely on blackness to sell product or promote the brand to the mass market. This research is a necessary first step to enable further research that can ultimately specify the effectiveness of these efforts and their impact on black culture.

## BLACKNESS AND ADVERTISING

What is 'blackness' and how do marketers use it to sell product? In this study blackness refers to the myriad ways of making a claim on black cultural identity. Stuart Hall notes that blackness has come to signify the various communities that keep black traditions, historical experiences, aesthetics, and counternarratives (Hall, 1993: 4). These communities are of course plentiful in number, socially-constructed, and scattered across the globe. Thus, as a limit on the scope of this research, I focus primarily on African-American traditions, experiences, aesthetics, and counternarratives in the USA rather than those developed elsewhere.

The practice of using representations of blackness to deliver messages to mass audiences in the USA traces its origins to minstrel shows (Witke, 1968[1930]; Boskin, 1988). Archetypal minstrel characters were easily incorporated into early advertising strategy through humor (Beard, 2007). Eventually, the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement precipitated a fundamental transformation in racial politics that de-legitimized discourse that disparages the racial other (Omi and Winant, 1986). Thus in the contemporary marketplace product or promotional strategies reliant on classic racist appeals expose themselves to costly retribution (e.g. CNN, 2000).

Blackness representations increased in prevalence as appeals reliant on racist stigma lost their legitimacy. Between the 1950s and late 1980s black actors went from virtually absent in advertisements to virtual parity with whites (Bush et al., 1977; Humphrey and Schuman, 1984; Wilkes and Valencia, 1989; Zinkhan et al., 1990). Some attribute this change to political pressure on advertisers (and other media) from the federal government (cf. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; Kassarjan, 1969). Furthermore, after the Second World War a new black middle class emerged with the financial resources to attract national brands (Walker, 1998; Weems, 1998; Ownby, 1999). These two rationales appear to comprise the conventional wisdom about why blackness representations had increased so dramatically by the 1990s. However, conventional wisdom almost certainly, overstates the actual impact of government pressure on advertisers and the efforts of national brands to target blacks with television advertisements. Seldom do national brands design commercials to appeal specifically to blacks, particularly when compared to far more extensive efforts to target Hispanics (e.g. Strachan, 2002; Yin 2003; Beirne, 2005; Curry, 2006). The business press often frames this as a case of advertisers ignoring the black market segment. However, as Arlene D'Avila's (2001) pioneering work on the Hispanic market segment makes clear, advertisers do not recognize blacks as comprising a market segment at all. Advertisers construct a version of blackness (i.e. black cultural identity), particularly as expressed by youth, that functions to set trends in the mass market—not to be served as a segment apart from the mass market. (Conversely, advertisers construct Hispanics as a distinct market segment that is nonetheless compatible with existing segmentation approaches. They emphasize a 'native' language but blur distinctions between various nationalities.) Consequently, blackness representations appear overwhelmingly in mass market as opposed to targeted campaigns (D'Avila 2001: 217—26). This raises the question: What do advertisers use blackness representations to signify to the (putatively white) mass market? Further, what message strategies are reliant on blackness representations? Addressing these questions requires the broad, panoramic view that comes from an approach grounded in material culture.

#### A CULTURAL APPROACH TO ADVERTISING

Cultural approaches that define culture as the dynamic process of meaning making are well suited to investigate meaning in advertising (Williamson, 1978; Ewen, 1988; Hall, 1997a, 1997b). Similar to prior research employing a cultural approach I treat advertisements as artifacts of material culture and read them as socially constructed texts using a procedure adopted from cultural and literary studies (cf., Lentricchia and DuBois, 2003).

To uncover meanings signified by blackness representations I read a set of advertisements directed at the mass market, searching for signifiers and signifying practices that reveal underlying dimensions of meaning. I organize those dimensions into a framework that specifies the meanings around which blackness representations cohere and a range of advertising strategies reliant on making claims about black cultural identity. Below I detail data collection and analysis, but since close reading is less reliant on set protocol than, for instance, experimental approaches adapted from psychology, I leave some details for discussion in context with the findings.

## METHODOLOGY

I analyze a large and diverse sample of television advertisements that utilize blackness representations. I use commercials because television is primarily a mass-market medium, despite the expansion of interest-based and demographically segmented programming. TV also allows for the greatest range in signifiers (i.e. image, text, and sound) and thus meaning.

### Data collection

In the spring of 2001, I recorded 1701 commercials from network and basic cable TV during morning, afternoon, late afternoon, prime-time, and late-night time slots over a three-week period. (The complete list of 26 network and basic cable stations is included in the appendix.) This procedure yielded a representative sample of advertisements aired during the span of the study. I delimit the sample to include only unique spots created solely to promote national brands available at retail. Consequently I remove spots for local or regional brands, public service announcements, station identifiers, and spots featuring recorded performances originally created for some other purpose (e.g. motion picture, music, or network promotions), and duplicates. The remaining 839 unique spots constitute the total sample. Of these, 205 (24%) contain some symbolic, visual, or rhetorical representation of blackness (as specified elsewhere). They constitute the adjusted sample for analysis. This is similar to Bristor et al. (1995), who find a relatively large number of spots that feature black actors (45%), most of whom appear in multicultural casts. Finally, despite the proliferation of tailored programming and targeted cable channels I saw nothing to suggest that the spots in the adjusted sample varied at all by network.

### Data analysis: Close reading blackness representations

When read closely, advertisements reveal shared assumptions about the culture through a blending of primary and secondary discourse (O'Barr,

1994). Primary discourse refers to ideas advertisers articulate explicitly while secondary discourse refers to implicit ideas about society and culture that flow across advertisements. For a viewer to make sense of an advertisement he or she must interpret its claims in both primary and secondary discourse. To paraphrase O'Barr (1994: 3), showing the viewer how to use laundry detergent or motor oil reveals something about who does laundry and who changes motor oil.

A close reading involves a careful search through primary and secondary discourse for signifiers and signifying practices that reveal patterns, themes, or a central design. Signifiers include rhetorical devices such as structure (e.g. argument, discussion, and action), style (e.g. poetry, song, rhyme, etc.), tone (e.g. humor, irony, or sentiment), and diction, as well as images and other symbolic content, along with thesis (a declarative statement of meaning) and theme (the work's major pervasive concern). Signifying practices also deliver meaning through the arrangement, presentation, and order of signifiers. Stuart Hall identifies three practices advertisers use to establish a position of identification with the viewer, where the viewer internalizes the advertiser's preferred interpretation (Hall, 1997a, 1997b). Advertisements create meaning by comparing that which is expected (but not present) to that which is represented. They create meaning by making identity claims; that is, assigning an object to some category of objects in order to highlight themes of similarity or difference. Advertisements also create meaning through the viewer's interpretation, which is always contingent on history, context, etc.

I conduct a close reading on this adjusted sample of 205 advertisements and report findings using specific advertisements as exemplars. I read each spot searching for how signifiers are used as part of specific signifying practices. As per Hall (1997a, 1997b), signifying practices deliver meaning in advertisements through claims made about the product, the hailed viewer, or both. These broad claims constitute the underlying dimensions of meaning that order blackness representations in advertising. After identifying the dimensions, I group the advertisements into strategic categories along them.

To identify the dimensions of meaning that order blackness representations I read each spot to first identify the specific claims made about the product or the viewer through primary discourse. For each spot I identify the roles played by blackness representations, execution format (e.g. slice of life, montage), and the value proposition (i.e. product/brand benefit) in making claims. Tacking back and forth between the spots iteratively, I assess secondary discourse, or broader categories of claims advertisers make about

mass-market culture through the product and/or brand. I detail the dimensions that emerge from this procedure in Figure 1. Note that the dimensions are depicted as ideal types whose boundaries do not comprise hermetically sealed categories, but rather distinct conceptual categories with some degree of overlap,

## FINDINGS

To establish a position of identification, where the viewer internalizes an advertiser's preferred interpretation, advertisers make a series of claims using blackness representations to aid them. Advertisers make claims about the product (or brand) highlighting ways it serves the viewer as a cultural resource. Advertisers also make claims about the viewer, emphasizing themes of similarity or difference. The claims constitute the fundamental dimensions of meaning along which blackness representations are ordered, which I detail next.

### **Claims about the product or brand as a cultural resource**

In contemporary consumer culture, consumers choose from a palette of products and brands that act as cultural resources that aid them in their cultural (or lifestyle) projects (Holt, 2002, 2004). Advertisers use blackness representations — along with other cultural representations — to make claims about how the product or brand is useful as a cultural resource; claims that may be more (or less) reliant on black cultural identity for legitimacy. Simply put, when positioning the product or brand as an authentic cultural resource the advertiser must rely on blackness representations to make the claims believable. Authenticity claims are, of course, only one kind of claim advertisers make. Advertisers also use blackness representations to make other kinds of claims but black cultural identity is not indispensable to such claims. To illustrate, consider two lifestyle-focused spots. In the first, a fast food chain positions the brand as authentically black by virtually overwhelming the viewer with blackness representations. The montage includes a hip-hop DJ, dancers, a young black male getting a tattoo, and a voice-over making frequent use of black vernacular and slang phrases, etc. The brand is always proximate to these signifiers, inviting viewers to connect meanings associated with the signifiers to the brand. Alternatively, in the second spot the advertiser uses blackness representations to make the more mundane claim about the product: it is an object of sexual desire. A black woman stares longingly and whispers at a black male clad in the product (slacks). The spot stands as one of very few that depicts romance or sexuality between black men and women (cf., Bristor et al., 1995), but does so

without making any claims whatsoever on blackness. The spot is virtually identical to the others in the campaign except for the race of the lead actors.

### **Claims about the viewer: Themes of similarity and difference**

Advertisers also commonly make claims about the viewer's identity, marking him or her as fundamentally similar to or different from what is depicted. Advertisers commonly use blackness representations to emphasize these themes. To emphasize the viewer's high status, advertisers include black actors in multiracial casts in high-status roles (e.g. spokespersons or customers) with whom the viewer should identify. For instance, a spot for a depression medication features vignettes of typical users\* from a diverse array of racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds. The spot clearly emphasizes the users' similarity to each other, and by extension the viewer. Advertisers at times, however, wish to mark the viewer as different. Themes of difference often highlight what he or she should aspire (or not aspire) to be. To highlight aspirational differences advertisers might, for instance, utilize a celebrity endorser. In a spot for a pain reliever, actor Ben Vereen gives testimonial about the product's efficacy in his post-stroke recovery. His celebrity status marks him as fundamentally dissimilar to the viewer, but invites the viewer to aspire to be more like him by using the same product. Advertisements also highlight differences meant to be dissociative, or perhaps even disparaged. For example, a spot for a collection agency that specializes in locating fathers delinquent in child support payments makes frequent reference to (but never depicts) a 'deadbeat dad.'

The framework of claims depicted in Figure 1 organizes the advertisements in the adjusted sample into an array of message strategies reliant (to varying degrees) on blackness representations. I turn now to a more detailed analysis of these strategies, focusing on the various ways advertisers utilize blackness representations in each strategic category.

### **Advertising Strategies with Limited Reliance on Blackness Representations**

In the vast majority of spots in this sample blackness representations play a rather limited role, one best assessed by looking across spots at secondary discourse for common meaning. In these spots blackness representations are almost entirely incidental to any product or brand claims and are almost certainly not part of any explicit appeal to black consumers.

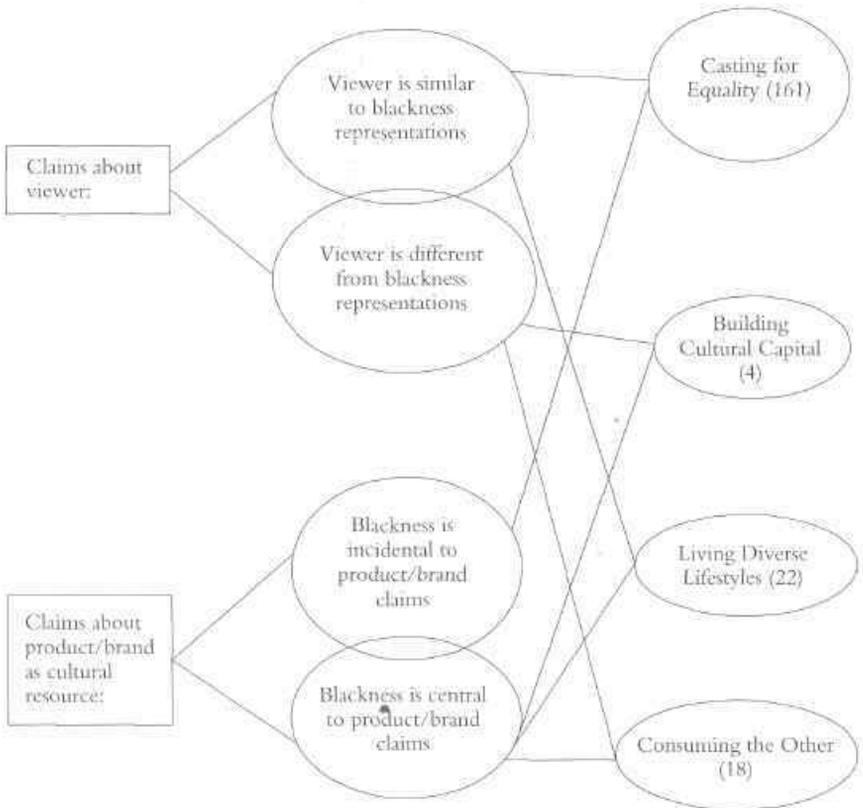


Figure 1: Advertising strategies reliant on blackness

### Casting for Equality

The 161 spots in the *Casting for Equality* strategic category are by far the largest number in any category, a full 78.5 percent of all spots that utilize blackness representations. *Casting* emphasizes the viewer's similarity to blackness representations, but without making any claims about the product or viewer that are reliant on black cultural identity. Instead, what blackness signifies is evident only when looking across the spots, which are strikingly similar in execution. In almost every instance, blacks appear in a multi-racial ensemble of actors. Their blackness universally symbolizes the firm's adherence to broad social goals, like racial equality, which are attainable in the mass market.

Consider a corporate brand advertisement for an insurance firm titled 'Driving School'. The spot's persuasion-by-benefit appeal emphasizes good

corporate citizenship through community involvement and accident prevention. It features Howard Simpson, a black, 40-something, accident prevention expert, a dutiful father, and community volunteer. The spot hypes the company's core expertise in accident prevention while downplaying its profit-making interests through Simpson's roles as highly trained expert, neighbor, and family man. His cultural identity is in no way relevant to these specific product claims but becomes relevant as part of a broader implicit promise that emerges when looking across these spots. The spots offer the marketplace as a site of racial equality, signified by black actors in high status roles as part of multiracial ensembles. This implicit promise is one aspect of an ongoing search for compelling brand meaning that can break through the clutter of competing signs in contemporary consumer culture (Goldman, 1992; Goldman and Papson, 1996).

Although none of the *Casting* spots associate the product's appeal with black cultural identity the remaining 44 spots link it directly to the product's appeal, offering some aspect of blackness as a product or brand benefit.

## **Advertising strategies highly reliant on blackness representations**

### **Building Cultural Capital**

This advertising strategy emphasizes the viewer's difference from blackness while also making claims about the product that are reliant on blackness. In this strategy, unlike the *Consuming the Other* strategy that I detail later, blackness is central to such claims because it is dissociative rather than aspirational. Though few in number (4) the spots warrant focused attention because they incorporate an implicit but clear critique of blackness directly into the product's appeal, representing blackness as deviant from a white, middle-class, suburban mainstream or 'phantom center' (see Ferguson, 1990) and consequently low in cultural capital. The *Building Cultural Capital* spots use blackness as a foil against which they provide an object lesson in building status through product consumption. Bourdieu (1984) identifies cultural capital as a status-generating asset that takes three primary forms: embodied (status-marking tastes, skills, and practices), objectified (status-marking objects such as homes or autos), and institutionalized (formal status-markers such as education or occupation). Embodied cultural capital is of particular interest because it is thought to be the most fluid, or easiest to convert into status (Holt, 1998).

To illustrate, consider a McDonald's advertisement that features a middle-class black woman and her young son ordering his first Happy Meal. The advertisement places McDonald's at the center of an emotionally and socially significant moment in family life, a common trope

Goldman (1992) labels 'the paleosymbolic moment'. Although married, only the woman's role as mother is foregrounded. No husband or father is present or ever mentioned. She transmits embodied cultural capital to the child, instructing him in appropriate public decorum as he waits to order. ('Remember to say "please" and "thank you".') After he successfully places the order, with Ronald McDonald looking on approvingly, the mother says, 'Ronald thinks you did good'. The boy calmly corrects his mother's grammar. I think I did *well*' (emphasis in original). This second paleosymbolic moment reaffirms white middle-class behavioral norms through the brand, offering the viewer an object lesson in building embodied cultural capital. The child corrects his mother's use of black vernacular English, and by extension black culture's presumed disavowal of white middle-class norms. Although the spot uses black vernacular English to signify low cultural capital, the propensity to substitute 'good' for 'well' is common in many vernaculars and is also a common error in standard English (Edwards and Winford, 1991; Rickford, 1999), a fact that broadens the spot's appeal beyond black viewers.

### Living Diverse Lifestyles

By contrast to *Building Cultural Capital*, in this strategy advertisers emphasize the viewer's fundamental similarity to blackness representations and make product claims that are reliant on blackness. The salient characteristic of these 22 spots is the high symbolic value advertisers place on cross-cultural encounters, which are highly prized in contemporary consumer culture.

A spot for iTunes titled 'Concert' illustrates this strategy using a multiracial cast of performers to highlight the embodied and objectified cultural capital necessary to appeal to the young, tech-savvy target segment. The spot opens with a white teenager who walks into an empty concert hall where standing on stage, shoulder-to-shoulder and three rows deep, is an ensemble of his favorite music artists. In one scene he engages black reggae artist Ziggy Marley in a back and forth using a faux West Indian dialect.

Teen: Hey Ziggy, how about 'We Are One'? [No accent]

Ziggy: Evrah-ting cool!

Teen: Ay! Oui! [Mimicking Ziggy's accent]

Ziggy: Yeah mon. [Everyone laughs]

Immediately following he engages in a playful back and forth with Sinashmouth, a white rock artist, switching out of the accent.

Teen: Hey Smashmouth.

Smashmouth: What do you wanna hear?

Teen: How 'bout 'All Star' for the fourth track?

Smashmouth: Umm. I don't think so. [Slightly shakes his head as teen grins nervously]

Smashmouth: I'm just kidding. [Everyone laughs.]

In this spot consumption is embedded in a rich cultural tapestry, visualized by the multiracial cast. Blackness, represented by the teen's West Indian dialect and a host of other African American speech conventions coming from the artists, is integral to the spot's claims about the product's benefit. A desire for and appreciation of intimate cross-cultural encounters through consumption are indicative of high cultural capital (see Holt, 1998). The consumption markers associated with such encounters (e.g. music collections) constitute objectified cultural capital available in the mass market for those with the right kinds of tastes and money. Importantly, the teen's embodied cultural capital (i.e. his wide-ranging musical tastes and ability to code-switch between very different cultural styles) creates the cultural encounter — not the product. It also establishes the viewer's fundamental similarity to the blackness representations. As noted previously, consumers use brands as resources to aid ongoing cultural projects. Smart advertisers place the product into the spot so it appears as a tool that aids in such projects.

### Consuming the Other

Finally, in the *Consuming the Other* strategy advertisers once again emphasize the viewer's differences from blackness and make products claims that are heavily reliant on blackness. This strategy marks difference by idealizing and essentializing blackness to a degree the other spots in this sample do not. Additionally, *Consuming the Other* positions blackness as aspirational rather than dissociative, unlike *Building Cultural Capital*. These 18 spots make the most systematic attempts to leverage the cultural value of blackness by depicting it as an exotic (and mostly male) other, transferring that value to the brand, and delivering it to the mass market. *Consuming the Other* is part of a broader branding strategy Holt (2002) identifies as 'coattailing on cultural epicenters' where firms appropriate powerful cultural signifiers and attach their meanings and significance onto the brand. Similar to bell hooks's 'eating the other' (see hooks,

1992), these spots implicitly promise a viewer that he or she can symbolically appropriate desirable cultural traits through product consumption. This is a compelling promise only to the extent that advertisers can persuade viewers to decode blackness representations on their behalf and to grant legitimacy to the process. *Consuming the Other* warrants focused analysis in this research because a thorough reading of both primary and secondary discourse is necessary to understand it more than the other three advertising strategies.

Blackness is a source of fresh, constantly reproducing symbolic material for appropriation (O'Barr, 1994; hooks, 1994; Goldman and Papsen, 1996; Boyd, 1997), easily incorporated into a message strategy that highlights difference through essentializing. Essentializing involves defining a subject in terms of a relatively fixed set of traits that claim to mark authenticity in the category (Spivak, 1999). Essentializing inevitably involves privileging some traits while marginalizing others. So it is in the *Consuming the Other* strategy, and in all of the strategies reliant on blackness representations, that product claims rely almost exclusively on masculine notions of blackness. Black women go largely unrepresented in these strategies but are frequently depicted in the *Casting for Equality* strategy. In some respects this is unsurprising, as black feminist scholars and cultural critics have long noted that essentialized notions of blackness explicitly or implicitly privilege black masculinity while problematizing black femininity (e.g. Wallace, 1970; Shange, 1975; hooks, 1992; Willis and Williams, 2002).

The 18 spots in this category essentialize blackness to varying degrees, dividing it into discrete traits, creating fertile symbolic ground from which authentic meanings can be harvested then offered to consumers for use in their cultural projects. I detail three substrategies that further subdivide these spots in Figure 2, listing the accompanying products. I note that all 18 spots share the core elements of the *Consuming the Other* strategy in common, making distinctions between them rather fine. Nevertheless, each subcategory has important points of distinction that merit attention in this analysis.

The eight spots I label *Black Style*, *Vernacular*, and *the Cool Pose* tie the product to black popular culture's reflexive coolness and unique vernacular and stylistic conventions (e.g. the cool pose) to mark it as an authentic cultural resource. In a richly-textured advertisement that serves as an exemplar, Brand Jordan athletic apparel drapes the product in blackness representations such as slang and other visual symbols like the cool pose stylistic convention. These signifiers require substantial semiotic labor from the viewer to decode when compared to other spots in this sample, which

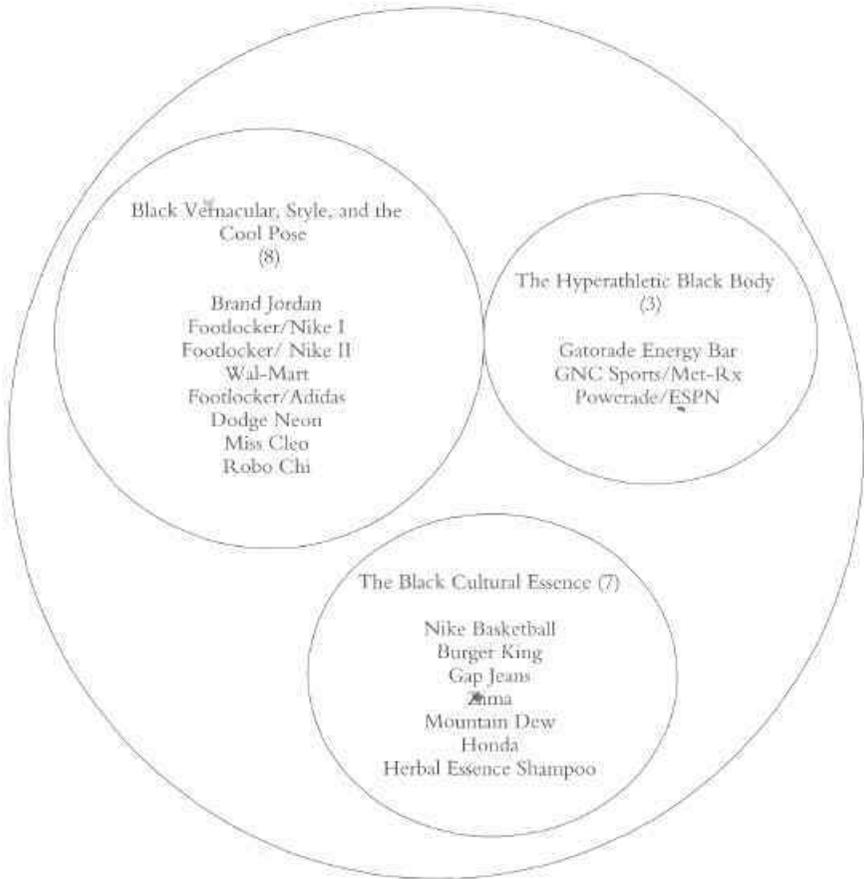


Figure 2: Consuming the Other

Goldman and Papsen (1998) suggest invites the viewer to grant legitimacy to the process.

The spot features three professional athlete endorsers: Roy Jones, Jr (boxing), Derek Jeter (baseball), and basketball icon Michael Jordan, each appearing in distinct vignettes without speaking. (I will focus on the vignette that features Jordan.) The primary discourse in the spot is fairly straightforward corporate branding, but the spot takes on a categorically different richness when considering secondary discourse. The spot is notably different from other athletic brand spots, particularly those featuring Jordan. This spot forgoes the typical focus on images of (mostly male) athletic triumph to prominently feature images of pre-teen African

American and Latino boys at play. It presents them in somber visual tones (a common visual signifier of poverty) inviting the viewer to consider the social malady that pervades the lives of many such boys and the settings from which some of their athletic heroes have emerged.

In the closing frames, Jordan stands in cool pose, head cocked slightly, just off center-screen flanked on both sides (and two rows deep) by young black and Latino men also in cool pose. The cool pose has been identified as the ritual embodiment of black male style, combining a physically and symbolically defiant stance with a steely gaze (see Majors and Billson, 1992). Jordan is the tallest figure in the scene by at least a head. The black youth slang phrase that appears on-screen, 'Much Respect to You', grants status to the viewer and serves as a direct invitation to consume the product. By copying the pose Jordan extends the olive branch to the at-risk minority youth flanking him as well as those who emulate his style and purchase his apparel, occasionally at their own peril (see Crockett and Wallendorf, 1998 on competitive dressing and violence among school-age children). Jordan has been widely critiqued for his apolitical public persona, non-engagement on critical racial issues, and limited connection to minority youth (cf, Dyson, 1993; Rhoden, 2006). Surprisingly, Brand Jordan ties itself semiotically to ongoing social problems associated with black and Latino youth and does so without admonishing them the way a similar Nike basketball spot does by having an off-screen narrator urge the viewer to 'Shoot over the brothers - not at them' (Goldman and Papson, 1998). Brand Jordan incorporates these youth — in cool pose no less — to offer the viewer 'much respect,' an invitation to peaceful relations. In the spot's final frame Jordan, the young men, the hip-hop/soul ballad that serves as background music, and the 'much respect' slogan tie together the meaning system for the viewer before visually funneling it into the brand logo.

The three advertisements that offer the *Hyperathletic Black Male Body* to the mass market explicitly weave the product to idealized images of black male bodies that dramatize an essentialized blackness trait: hypermasculine bodies built for endurance and unwavering labor. The exemplar of this strategy is a commercial for Gatorade's energy bar. The spot relies on the exaggerated camera distancing and centering techniques typical of photo hyperrealism, along with the mortise and frame technique (see Goldman, 1992).

The advertisement opens with an athlete, center screen, running up stadium stairs. Stationary cameras are close enough for the viewer to recognize coffee-colored skin, intense facial expression, and beads of sweat pouring off the shaven head and sculpted shoulders on this well-defined

athletic form as it bolts by them. This advertisement presents objectified images of the black male physique and visually connects meanings associated with them directly into the brand logo in the next-to-last frame. Visual techniques that represent abstract qualities such as athleticism and connect those symbols to the brand logo invite the viewer to associate those qualities with the product and grant it cultural authenticity.

These three advertisements are a distinct strategic subcategory because of their unique focus on the black male physical form, particularly when engaged in athletic performance. Black bodies in the USA, male and female, come with a large reservoir of long-standing associations with physicality and labor immediately recognizable to any culturally literate viewer (Jordan, 1968; Pieterse, 1992; Soar, 2001). Essentializing infuses real or imagined biological distinctions with cultural meaning, granting black bodies a unique and naturalized aptitude for athleticism (Boyd, 1997; Dyson, 1993). The 'black body as organic machine' is a centuries-old trope that predates the North Atlantic Slave Trade (Jordan, 1968) and persists in the popular imagination, resistant to scientific debunking (cf. Gould, 1977, 1981; Hutchinson, 1997). However, its authenticity in this context also stems from the unique regard male athletic achievement is thought to have in black popular culture, originating in the postbellum period where blacks were largely barred from participation in other arenas (Hoberman, 1997; Rhoden, 2006). Thus the strategy is a standard among sports, health, and exercise products. Those that offer hyperathleticism as a product benefit depict black male bodies without much cover and large expanses of sweat-laden skin shown at extreme close-up. Bodies in these advertisements are hard at labor or only momentarily at rest.

The seven commercials in the category I label the *Black Cultural Essence* offer the mass market what is presumed to be the essence of black cultural identity, especially its uninhibited use of the body. Each of these spots could conceivably be included in the *Black Style, Vernacular, and the Cool Pose* category. They are analyzed separately here because they are less overtly concerned with time- and context-dependent popular stylistic conventions. The spots in the *Black Cultural Essence* strategic category also make a stronger claim on authenticity. They imply that blackness is reducible to a set of relatively invariant traits (i.e. musicality, dance, play, and uninhibited movement of the body) that are commodifiable and thus portable to an eager mass market.

Consider Nike's 'Freestyle Rhythm,' which features a host of professional athletes in the National Basketball Association (NBA) at the time the spot aired. No brand has had more success compellingly portraying

itself as an authentic cultural resource (Goldman and Papson, 1998). Since the mid-1980s Nike has positioned itself as a leading producer in the black (or 'urban') cultural epicenter, along with advertising giant Wieden+Kennedy, by successfully leveraging the symbolism of playground basketball (Goldman and Papson, 1998; Armstrong, 1999). The cultural value of this imagery is so high that Nike typically strips professional athletes of team-identifying markers, even at the risk that these endorsers may not be immediately recognizable to the casual observer.

In 'Freestyle Rhythm', each frame is filmed against a completely black backdrop, primarily devoid of light except at the floor level. In each frame, players enter from off-stage opposite each other, pass the basketball back and forth, and bounce it from side to side. The sounds of bouncing balls and squeaking basketball shoes are sampled and mixed to create the hip-hop background rhythm to which these players essentially dance throughout the spot, passing the ball back and forth between frames, connecting the vignettes into a theme. Resembling an updated version of the Harlem Globetrotters of previous generations, the focus on dance and play distinguishes the spot from the hyperathletic black male body category. Hyperathleticism requires arduous labor in addition to product consumption. 'Freestyle Rhythm's' bodies, though in constant motion, are engaged in dance and play, not labor.

The final few frames illustrate how these essentialized black cultural traits are made portable to an eager mass market. As the music builds to a crescendo, Jason Williams, one of only a handful of US-born white players in the NBA, dribbles the ball between his legs and throws a no-look pass stage left out of the top of the frame. Though it is unnecessary to have background knowledge about Williams to understand the spot, it adds richness. Williams serves as the very embodiment of black popular cultures portability to an eager mass market. Early in his career he was nicknamed 'white chocolate,' a none-too-subtle racializing of his style of play and lifestyle (e.g. O'Sullivan, 2002). Thus, placing Williams and other anonymous white actors in the spot assures the mass market that the desirable traits the viewer sees are attainable through product consumption.

The advertiser leverages powerful cultural signifiers to convince the viewer to grant the product cultural authenticity. Thus it is worth noting the basic visual flow the viewer is invited to follow to arrive at the advertiser's preferred interpretation. The background music, players, their movement, and their style all signify black culture's presumably essential traits of musicality, dance, and play. These signifiers are connected to each

other in the spot by quite literally following the bouncing ball through each frame leading the viewer to the spot's two central identity claims. Namely, musicality, dance, and play are the essence of blackness and that these traits are attainable by the viewer as a brand benefit. The spot combines the blackness representations in the final few frames then visually connects them to the brand logo in the final frame. This visual flow invites the viewer to internalize Nike's preferred interpretation that the product serves as an authentic cultural resource.

In a much simpler execution, a spot for Gap Jeans uses a black woman's body to represent uninhibited movement. The woman, clad in jeans, a sweater, and wearing dreads initially appears too distanced to be recognizable. She dances smoothly and sensuously toward the viewer emerging slowly from the all-white backdrop until her racial identity is clear. When she reaches full body proportion she leans back, away from the viewer, index finger extended, defiantly rolling her neck and wagging her finger, as if to deny the viewer her essence. She turns away and saunters off screen left. Immediately filling the momentarily empty space where all her movement occurred is the campaign slogan and brand logo. Like the 'Freestyle Rhythm' spot, blackness is essentialized as free flowing, uninhibited movement of the body, symbolized, then offered to the mass-market viewer. As noted previously, black women appear far less frequently in strategic categories where blackness is central to claims made about the product. It is noteworthy in this instance because her uninhibited movement is sexualized in a way that black men's is not. Black women's bodies, like black men's, are subject to the 'black bodies as organic machine' trope but are also marked as special, as (obtainable) objects of desire. They are a canvas onto which fantasies about an erotic other are easily painted (hooks, 1992; Pieterse, 1992; Willis and Williams 2002).

## DISCUSSION

This research proceeds from the premise that a broad, panoramic view of blackness representations in advertising is needed to understand how they are used to sell product. This analysis reveals that blackness representations are organized along two dimensions of meaning. Advertisers use blackness representations to help them make claims about the product's role as a cultural resource that aids in their lifestyle projects. Advertisers also use blackness representations to make claims about the presumed viewer that emphasize themes of similarity or difference. The spots in this sample cohere into sets of broad-based message strategies that appear at particular locations along the dimensions.

Analyzing the secondary discourse in these advertisements reveals implicit social rules governing the role these products play in the culture beyond lifestyle-oriented cultural projects. That is, if advertisements about laundry detergent tell us something about the implicit social rules governing laundry, what do these advertisements tell us about blackness?

### **A corporate aesthetic of blackness?**

According to Goldman and Papsion (2006), corporate advertisements present an interpretive framework that offers the viewer aesthetic consistency and coherence. To the extent that the blackness representations in this sample comprise a corporate aesthetic of blackness (i.e., a grand narrative about blackness in abbreviated form) they do so through their consistency and coherence.

In almost 90 percent of the spots in the adjusted sample (89.3%), blackness functions as a metaphor for the widely shared social goals of racial equality and cultural diversity.<sup>2</sup> These spots represent blackness with near perfect uniformity. They highlight themes of similarity with such astounding repetition that they appear to serve a broad ideological function rather than merely a corporate one. Advertisers rather easily reinterpret themes of equality and diversity back into corporate values, affirming them for viewers by depicting black faces in high places, as product spokespersons, users, or non-speaking extras. Viewers are quite cognizant that blackness has been historically marginalized; thus casting alone represents a symbolic break with the past and an affirmation of contemporary mass-market ideology that welcomes all, meeting the needs of each in accordance with his or her ability to pay.

Blackness hails the presumptively white, suburban, middle-class viewer both with what is represented and what is not. Advertisers depict blacks in primarily the same ways they depict whites. What they do not depict is racial inequality, which is assumed away entirely along with any role for the mass market in its persistence.

The corporate aesthetic that emerges from this sample of advertisements overwhelmingly emphasizes similarity between blackness and the hailed viewer, but not exclusively so. *Blackness is an obstacle to mobility or antidote to self-repression.* The remaining 22 spots in this adjusted sample (10.7%) perform an altogether different ideological function from the others. Although they are far less consistent in execution, they nonetheless cohere around a basic difference theme. Blackness is marked as special, and further as *essentially* different from the hailed viewer. Blackness has historically been marked as 'other' in western culture, set off against its

self-repressive norms in ways that are at times desirable and at others repulsive to the presumptive mainstream (see hooks, 1992, 1994). Advertisers using the *Building Cultural Capital* and *Consuming the Other* message strategies incorporate blackness representations as metonyms, parts that stand in for complex relationships between western culture's phantom center and its margins. Worth noting is that these spots signify primarily by making a series of claims, then inviting the viewer to legitimate them.

Reading both primary and secondary discourse in these spots reveals that blackness representations emphasize essentialized differences from the presumed viewer that signify on one hand an inability (or unwillingness) to abide by western culture's discursive and behavioral norms, affirming the presumably behavioral origins of low cultural capital. If the consumer adopts the proper behavioral and dispositional norms, the product serves as objectified cultural capital — a means to escape a low cultural capital lifestyle. Alternatively, advertisers also represent blackness's essentialized differences from western culture's discursive and behavioral norms as the antidote to its self-repression and anhedonia. Black culture's free and uninhibited movement of the body, along with its figurative language, and emphasis on dance, musicality, and play, signify the quintessential antidotes to self-repression. Advertisers essentialize blackness but are careful not to de-contextualize it lest their authenticity claims become suspect. Thus blackness in these spots is not a set of free-floating signifiers stripped of context and history and presented rapid fire as Goldman and Papsion (2006) suggest. In fact, the spots help the viewer contextualize blackness representations. But, they do so in a manner consistent with contemporary mass-market ideology. So, although they highlight social problems such as youth violence, they downplay any role the mass market might play in creating or exacerbating such problems.

## CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One purpose of this research is to document the dimensions of meaning that order the use of blackness representations in advertising, along with the range of strategies reliant on those representations. Another purpose is to suggest that there is a need for more research on blackness representations to understand their effectiveness and impact beyond advertising.

Understanding how effective blackness representations are in advertising and their impact on the communities from which they are appropriated are important goals. Unfortunately, I cannot assess the impact of the four strategies highlighted in this study. I purposely use cross-sectional data collected from a single medium in order to generate inferences from a representative sample of advertisements likely to be seen by any consumer.

However, these data do not permit the kind of **multimedia** historical analysis of promotional strategy suggested by Holt (2006) as necessary to assess effectiveness. Nevertheless, these limitations suggest directions for future research. Ideally, future research would employ richer case-level data that would encompass all promotional activities for selected products or brands, including entire advertising campaigns across multiple mediums, sponsorships, company-sponsored and consumer websites, blogs, and other efforts to directly engage the brand. Such research would naturally lend itself to cultural and discourse-focused approaches such as extended case analysis. Ultimately, future research in this area should assess the impact of branding strategies reliant on cultural representations, both in terms of commercial success for marketers as well as the social and cultural impact of these efforts,

### Acknowledgements

The author thanks the editor and three anonymous reviewers for their guidance, Harvard Business School for its technical assistance in data collection. He also thanks Douglas Holt, Roland Leak, Randall Rose, Hope Schau, Terrance Shimp and Melame Wallendorf for their valuable input on earlier versions of this manuscript.

### Notes

1. Even contemporary blackness representations are contested for perpetuating a racist legacy (e.g. Peters, 2006)
2. The percentage figure is the sum of the spots in the *Castings for Equality* and *Living Diverse Lifestyles* message strategies divided by the number of spots in the adjusted sample.

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## Appendix

### Networks

Arts & Entertainment (A&E)	Home & Garden Television (HGTV)
ABC	The Learning Channel (TLC)
Black Entertainment Television (BET)	Lifetime
CBS	Music Television (MTV)
Cable News Network (CNN)	NBC
The Comedy Channel (now Comedy Central)	Nickelodeon
Court TV	Turner Network Television (TNT)
Discovery Channel	The Travel Channel
Entertainment and Sports Network (ESPN)	UPN
Family Channel	USA Network
Food Network	Video Hits 1 (VH1)
FOX	WB
	The Weather Channel (TWC)
	WTBS