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Imported advertising : imported culture

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STRATEGYNOTES

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The shadow of globalisation is spreading through an unlikely medium: ads. **Bronwyn Higgs** looks at the threat imported advertising poses to local culture.

Imported advertising: imported culture.

Australia is a multicultural country. Prime Minister John Howard has been frequently quoted as saying that, "Australia is one of the most cosmopolitan nations in the world."

Even the most cursory glance at our nation's demographic composition reveals the extent of multiculturalism: more than 40 percent of the population were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. Among our culturally diverse population, dominant groups are Aboriginal, Asian, African, Indian and Pacific Islanders.

Depictions of ethnicity in the media have also become one of the barometers for measuring social attitudes toward multiculturalism. Accordingly, the government's multicultural policy makes provision for media to reflect cultural diversity in its imagery. This policy is enshrined in the Broadcasting Services (Australian Content) Standard.

Unlike many other countries, Australia's content standards do not establish any quotas for multicultural role portrayals. Issues concerning how to reflect multiculturalism in program content and advertising are matters for the industry itself to manage.

A comprehensive review of Australian research on multicultural role portrayals soon reveals that there is all too little scholarly interest in the field. Of the available research, there have been four studies investigating role portrayals in local television drama, one study on arts industry participation rates and just one very recent study on multicultural images in advertising.

RESEARCH STUDIES

The four major studies investigating role portrayals in local television drama show that the representation of racial minorities in TV drama has improved consistently from two



TV ads lag behind programming in representing Australia's cultural diversity. This imported campaign for Calvin Klein features 13 characters, just two of whom are not white Caucasians.

percent in the earliest study carried out in 1992 up to 28 percent in the most recent study published in 2002. In TV drama, at least, racially diverse actors are represented in numbers approximating the population.

TV programming content is well ahead of advertising in providing realistic representations of Australia's cultural richness. The only known published study of multicultural role portrayals in television advertising was presented to the Hawaii International Business Conference in 2006. This study examined more than 320 Australian television advertisements and recorded both the incidence and nature of multicultural role portrayals.

Key findings included the fact that 95 percent of all characters in advertising are from the dominant white Caucasian group.

In other words, white characters are over-represented in advertising when compared with the population.

Racial minorities, on the other hand, are under-represented. The study also found that when people from diverse racial backgrounds are used in advertising, they are more likely to be seen as secondary characters – appearing in the background. Alternatively, they are used in stereotypical ways. For instance, peoples from non-dominant racial groups are more likely to be seen as service providers, recipients of help or in passive roles.

In addition, race role portrayals appear to be confined to a narrow range of product associations. For instance, Asian characters are often associated with communications technologies or high technology brands.

In short, advertising imagery reflects the dominant white culture and almost entirely overlooks Australia's racial diversity.

The advertising study also found that the racial groups portrayed in advertising appear to be influenced by US culture. Racial groups represented in advertising are more likely to be Hispanic, Asian or African American.

These images are not reflective of Australia's population composition. Totally absent from advertising images studied are the mix of Indigenous and Islander peoples that contribute to Australia's unique form of multiculturalism. These groups, which are both historically and culturally significant, have been overlooked by advertisers.

This study, and other similar studies conducted internationally suggest that advertisers and their agencies' preference for profiles of the dominant culture appear to be entrenched. Images of non-dominant racial groups, if they are seen at all, appear to be coming to us through the 'back-door' when advertisers choose to import their campaigns.



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IMPORTED CAMPAIGNS

When advertisers use imported campaigns, they not only import TV commercials, but other media including magazines, cinema and out of home. Thus imported imagery has a spill-over effect. Imported images find their way into media for which there are no content standards. Imported advertising leads to an imported culture.

For the past 15 years, the number of imported television commercials has increased gradually – from eight percent in 1992 to just over 12 percent in 2005 according to data supplied by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). Prior to 1992, foreign advertising was not permitted.

Annual compliance reports published by ACMA show that foreign advertising is concentrated in categories such as automotive, cosmetics and toiletries, fashion, leisure and outdoor products – including toys. Curiously, these are the same categories that are more likely to include people from culturally diverse backgrounds in advertising.

Although the regulations expressly govern broadcast content, the impact can be far reaching. Relaxing the rules governing TV appears to have inadvertent consequences for print and alternative media platforms.

A casual glance through any women's magazine will quickly reveal the images of Hispanic and African American women used to sell cosmetics, skincare and fashion.

ADVERTISING AND POPULAR CULTURE

Advertising forms part of our cultural content along with all manner of audiovisual material. Advertising's place in popular culture makes it an especially powerful means for communicating images relevant to specific groups as well as to the mass market. A key concern for advertisers is to provide credible and personally relevant messages. Advertising imagery, including the 'look' of actors, is a vital component of messages designed to convey personal relevance for specific target audiences. Imagery in advertising is aspirational. Agencies do not select advertising imagery for its capacity to mirror social and cultural realities.

By their very nature, advertising messages are designed with a tightly defined target market in mind. Imagery carefully selected for its resonance within one target audience is unlikely to capture the imagination of people who fall outside that market definition.



This double page spread for L'Oréal shows women from a range of cultural backgrounds, including both Asian appearance and African. The presence of women from culturally diverse backgrounds is essential to the main advertising message.

“As media becomes more global, we can expect changes to established representations of cultural diversity.”

An unintended consequence is that advertising imagery tends to mirror the aspirations of dominant (or profitable) groups, while minority groups are all too often overlooked.

EXPLANATIONS FOR UNDER-REPRESENTATION

To explain the over-representation of dominant cultures in advertising, some agencies have pointed to a fear of negative reactions from the dominant culture. Yet, consumer researchers exploring this issue have not been able to document any negative responses.

A number of studies in the international context have demonstrated that the dominant culture did not experience negative reactions to multicultural portrayals in advertising. In contrast, racial minorities showed more positive attitudes towards both the product and the advertisement when actors from culturally diverse backgrounds were included as characters in advertising messages.

In theoretical terms, there does not appear to be any justification for overlooking culturally diverse groups in advertising.

DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

Lack of diversity in role portrayals may signal, albeit unintentionally, that non-white cultures are not an important part of Australian popular culture.

Advertising's stereotypical misrepresentation of racial minorities paves the way for critics who point to a raft of problems, among them the lack of diversity.

This lack of diversity contributes to a stable of homogenised advertisements with relatively undifferentiated advertising executions.

In the event that serious under-representation of racial minorities in advertising cannot be redressed voluntarily, the industry runs the risk of having quotas imposed on it – along the lines of the system used in the US and Canada.

As media becomes more global, we can expect changes to established representations of cultural diversity. Imported advertising and global campaigns are more likely to be dominated by US imagery. While such changes are likely to bring an overall increase in cultural diversity, it may come at the expense of local relevance. **M**



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