Whiteness Constructed in a Multicultural World

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Abstract. Many garment producers act on a global market, where people from different cultures often move from countries to others, as well as surf in a world-wide virtual space. In this context, garment producers design their marketing communication efforts considering identity and personality related to the target group aimed at. Often they choose models for their ads, which mirror ideals that the generally defined target group is attracted by. Garment producers often succeed in picking models or icons, which fit well into the social class standards, which the target group identifies with. Nevertheless, they often do this without reflecting on the icons' identity-and personality-value across cultural differences as colour of the skin, gender and sexuality. Consequently, global standardised advertisements contain stereotypes or standardised personalities. It is common these stereotypes are dominated by whiteness. A possible understanding of "whiteness" is as follows: "lifestyles of white human beings, non-coloured persons". One question is how whiteness is being constructed in the contemporary visual culture of marketing fashion design. By examining four advertisements of brands providing life-style values, this paper aims at better understanding the lifestyle concept of whiteness. This understanding is of actual interest to a garment producer when designing advertisements. A lack of understanding diminishes the producer's chance of digging all the market-potential. Three brands closely connected to adored white ideal lifestyles are examined. Furthermore, the brands are in a middle-prize segment and act world-wide on a global market. The study shows, whiteness is represented by wealth, financial independence, power, old traditions, cultural interest and education, sport, leisure, power for life and happiness in life. Further, it appears from the study, whiteness is connected to the American dream. In summary, whiteness is plenty of stereotyping. A conclusion is, the concept of whiteness is far to narrow to fit a global garment producer.

Key words: global advertising, global branding, global marketing.
JEL classification: M31, M37.

1 Introduction

There is no doubt global marketers often strive for a standardisation in marketing efforts (Agarwal, 1995; Backhaus and van Doorn, 2007; Belk *et al*, 2005; Chung, 2007; Nanda, and Dickson, 2007; Herrmann and Heitmann, 2006; Levitt, 1983; de Mooij, 2003, 2005; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1999; Yavas *et al*, 1992; Zou and Tamer, 2002) As marketing communications use identity and personality-effects as components when constructing a visual message in order to gain the target group's attention, interest, desire and action (Aaker *et al*, 2001; Aaker, 1996; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), global standardised advertisements contain stereotypes or standardised personalities. It is common these stereotypes are dominated by whiteness (Whitelock and Rey, 1998). A possible understanding of "whiteness" is as follows: "lifestyles of white human beings, non-coloured persons". One question is how whiteness is being constructed in the contemporary visual culture of marketing fashion design.

1.2 The purpose with this paper and why it is a matter of interest

By examining four advertisements of brands providing life-style values, this paper aims at better understanding the lifestyle concept of whiteness and its value in global, standardised advertisements. Garment producers design their marketing communication efforts considering identity and personality related to the target group aimed at (Vrontis and Vronti, 2004). Often they choose models for their ads, which mirror ideals that the generally defined target group is attracted by. Garment producers often succeed in picking models or icons, which fit well into the social class standards, which the

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target group identifies with. Nevertheless, they often do this without reflecting on the icons' identity-and personality-value across cultural differences as colour of the skin, gender and sexuality. Better understanding the lifestyle concept of whiteness is of actual interest to a garment producer when designing his/her advertisements. A lack of understanding diminishes the producer's chance of digging all the market-potential. Understanding how whiteness is being constructed indicates if it makes sense and pays off from a global marketer's point of view, to use stereotypes dominated by whiteness.

Three brands closely connected to adored white ideal lifestyles are examined in this study, which -as mentioned earlier- aims at better understanding the lifestyle concept of whiteness. The brands examined are in a middle-prize segment and act world-wide on a global market.

2 Theoretical

There is an empirical problem, but there is also a theoretical problem: which theoretical frameworks are crucial to understanding why global standardised advertisements contain stereotypes or standardised personalities?

The question of standardisation or adaptation has long been a key issue in international marketing (Demetris *et al*, 2009; Herrmann and Heitmann, 2006; Okazaki and Mueller, 2007). Studies show that the same issues have been drawing interest from both academics and practitioners since at least the early 1900s, and in parallel with increasing internationalisation and globalisation (Agarwal, 1995; Demetris *et al*, 2009; Ryans *et al*, 2003). At the same time, we lack a deeper and comprehensive theoretical holistic approach to marketing strategies that specifically problematise and focus on standardisation versus adaptation (Herrmann and Heitmann, 2006; Okazaki and Mueller 2007; Ryans *et al*, 2003; Schultz and Kitchen, 2000). We also lack a universal applied marketing strategy that takes the individual idiosyncrasies of markets into account.

Some research (Levitt, 1983; Szymanski *et al*, 1993) indicates that markets are homogenous and that similar strategies are applicable regardless of the country. In Europe, this same view is often based on the notion that the EU is facilitating a harmonisation of conditions and assumptions in EU countries, which leads in turn to the increasing homogenisation of consumer attitudes. Increasing homogenisation favours economies of scale. From a business owner's perspective, economies of scale favour standardisation (Ryans *et al*, 2003).

The EU (European Union) has roots going back to 1952. However, as recently as 1998 in an EU history, a comparative study of the English and French markets showed that marketers have continued to see a need to adapt their initiatives to local conditions because of deeply rooted cultural factors (Whitelock and Rey, 1998). These findings are notable, given that Great Britain and France are among the countries that have long been part of the EU. Other studies, such as Belk et al. (2003), point in the same direction. Ryans et al. (2003) believe that there is a great deal of empirical evidence that markets are not homogenous, which in turn casts doubt on whether the standardisation of marketing is meaningful in an international context.

A mixture of different strategies has also been placed on the agenda. Comparative studies have been conducted to determine the effects and efficiency of such mixtures. Multi-domestic strategies have been compared to adaptive strategies based on the overarching marketing mix, as have entirely local and individually constructed marketing mixes (Solberg, 2000; Szymanski *et al*, 1993; Zou and Tamer, 2002). Many studies have focused in particular on advertising (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1999; Sirisagul, 2000; Soufani *et al*, 2006; Vrontis, and Kitchen, 2005; Vrontis and Thrassou, 2007), but researchers appear to perceive that taking cultural differences into account is also important with regard to branding strategies.

Aaker et al. (2001) assert that different cultures perceive brands in different ways. Kanwar (1993) and Yavas et al. (1992) discuss different

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perceptions of risk and brand loyalty in varying cultures. A mapping study by De Mooij (2005) revealed patterns among companies that point to six different market communication strategies in the context of globalisation. They range from full standardisation to local action, in other words production for economies of scale but local adaptation in terms of marketing. A review of the literature indicates that the majority of researchers concur that cultural differences lead to differences in how things are received. This means that, in an era of mass consumption, mega-markets, mega-trends and hyper-Taylorism (Klein, 2002), it is not entirely clear how international marketing should be designed so as to be effective. This creates problems for manufacturers and marketers. The absence of a universal marketing strategy represents a deficiency in the theoretical discourse. An overview of the research front also indicates that the problem persists regardless of whether we are talking about tangible or intangible values (Aaker *et al*, 2001; Kanwar, 1993; Yavas *et al*, 1992). "Tangible values" refers to solid, physical hard values, while "intangible" refers to soft, imaginary or aesthetic values, as in Grönroos (2004).

There is a pressing need for a theoretical generalising marketing strategy that also takes individual market tendencies into account. The issue is whether it is possible to categorise the cultures of different countries with a view to laying the groundwork for a theoretical generalising marketing strategy. Herrmann and Heitmann (2006) believe that the question of standardisation versus adaptation is closely related to whether a society can be viewed collectivistically rather than individualistically. The individualism-collectivism dimension (Green and Deschamps, 2005) has often be used to describe, explain and predict differences in attitudes, values, learning, communication, individual creativity, socialisation, and the concept of self. The same dimension has been used assiduously in the field of organisational research ever since Geert Hofstede's intercultural studies in the 1970s, which were conducted at IBM in 50 different countries, and

in an organisational context. According to Herrmann and Heitmann (2006), the issue of whether the local culture is characterised by consumers who follow in the patterns of others or by the individual is an important factor when a marketer is choosing between standardisation and adaptation. These authors further argue that research indicates that people in individualistic societies value choice among different products within the same product category more than do those in collective or mutually interdependent cultures. In other words, as opposed to fully individualised marketing in a tailor-made world (Gilmore and Pine, 1997). Herrmann and Heitmann (2006) talk about adaptation to socio-individual, socio-cultural tendencies in a market that is at the same time geographically delimited. Other researchers discuss cultural differences based on risk acceptance in those cultures. The perceived risk is then viewed not as a personal factor associated with an individual consumer, but rather as a feature of the national culture (Kanwar, 1993). Belk et al. (2003) speak in terms of basic moral values as being decisive for a local consumption pattern, and for the attitude toward advertising campaigns and brands. Risk and morals also constitute dimensions that have, since Hofstede, often been cited within organisational research.

One precondition for a categorisation of different national cultures with a view to laying the groundwork for a theoretical generalising marketing strategy appears to have to do with the extent to which research succeeds in convincingly identifying dimensions for description, and how well it succeeds in bringing to the fore explanations and predictions of cultural differences in attitudes, values, learning, communication, independent creativity, socialisation, and the concept of self. The absence of a basis for understanding and explaining the cultural tendencies of a specific country in terms of marketing-related factors such as identification and personality often results in vague, superficial and unclear cultural descriptions. As a result, there is currently no good theoretical basis for practitioners to use in order to both standardise and, at the same time,

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appeal to local cultures. They often choose models for their ads that mirror ideals to which the generally defined target group is attracted. Garment producers often succeed in picking models or icons that fit well into the social class standards with which the target group identifies. Consequently, global standardised advertisements contain stereotypes or standardised personalities. It is common for these stereotypes to be dominated by whiteness, which aims to appeal globally and to local cultures simultaneously. This is why we analyse whiteness as an example of standardised personality in advertisement.

3 Method

A method inspired by Arnold (1999a,b) is chosen for this study. In step one, the images are described in detail. In step two, the complete image's message is interpreted. The analysis will be followed by a discussion on how the images relate to gender and sexuality. The impact of pre-understanding is discussed by researchers (Gummesson, 1994). We rely on well-established research traditions in qualitative empirical research (Denzin and Berg, 2001; Flick *et al*, 2004, Gummesson, 2003; Lincoln, 1998). The methodology applied belongs to the interpretive paradigm, which assumes that the world of reality can be described and interpreted from a subjective, epistemological approach. It means that truth is relative within a context, in which facts and data relate to subjective values in a close and intimate way and in which meaning-making by semiotics as in Barthes (1967) is part of a socio-cultural dimension. Subjective constructions as described by Berger (2009) contribute to the interpretation of empirical evidence. In order to capture the consumer's point of view, we select image analysis as an approach as it uncovers underlying psychological principles. Such research has the potential to increase fundamental knowledge in international marketing (Herrmann and Heitmann, 2006).

4 Empirical examples

Below five empirical examples are described and interpreted. The images subject to the interpretation in this paper are not enclosed. Similar to empirical raw data from interviews or surveys, the analysed images are available on the reader's request (contact details to the author as above).

The first example is from the Swedish global brand Gant, their 2006 spring collection. The ad was published well-timed as the company was introduced at the stock exchange. The second picture is from Gant's 2006 fall collection. The third photo is a Breitling ad from the weekly Time magazine. The ad has in contemporary been presented in various fora besides the Time magazine. The forth image is from the Swedish global brand Peak Performance and was launched in 2003. The fifth image described and interpreted is from Ralph Lauren's "Issue V" in spring 2014. The latter has been chosen as a follow-up empirical evidence.

4.1 Gant spring collection, 2006
4.1.1 Step 1: Description

The picture shows a middle-aged, wealthy celebrity with wife and children. He is wearing a chequered white and blue shirt. She is wearing a light-blue dress without sleeves. She has a wedding ring on her finger and sunglasses on top of her head. Her hair is made in a natural manner, eyebrows well-taken care of, natural or no make-up and transparent or no nail-polish. She has a slight and natural smile on her mouth. The son is wearing a light-blue sweater. His hair is cut in a proper manner. The picture communicates family harmony and happy interaction between the members of this family. They are outdoors (on Martha's Wineyard – compare with text on bottom of the picture), in nice weather. Both he and she are sun-burned. One gets the feeling that the family on the picture consists of happy and healthy individuals. The man looks typically male, whilst the woman looks very female. One of the children is hugging his father from behind.

Another one appears as if he was cradled by his father. At the same time the father is hugging his wife. A third child is partly visible in the right corner and visually closes the family unit.

4.1.2 Step 2: Interpretation

The marketer wants to communicate the harmony of the ideal family. A family-ideal, that everyone is supposed to be dreaming of. A mother is still a wife and mother, a father is still head of the family, protector, supporter with still plenty of time to spend with his family in nice surroundings. One has enough leisure time for spending and enjoying it with one's family out in the countryside (Martha's Wineyard). This specific family also communicates class, as it belongs to one of the most well-known American clans. The target consumer admires the old, successful family, which connects to plenty of traditions. The consumer even may identify with the positive symbols the brand "Kennedy" stands for. It's white, it's powerful, it's successful, it's independent, it has tradition and style. A Kennedy has the possibility of choosing lifestyle, collecting the supreme, the exclusive. Who wouldn't love to be in their shoes? If Gant is good enough for a Kennedy, it is good enough for me. Whiteness is connected to freedom, a sportive, leisure-loaded lifestyle, success and financial independence. Last but not least it is even connected to a Christian, patriarch perspective on family order.

4.2 Gant fall collection, 2006
4.2.1 Step 1: Description

This picture shows a middle-aged woman. She looks like a celebrity. She has curly, long hair. She is a brunette and has a natural make-up. She doesn't wear any jewellery but has a watch on her right hand. She looks thoughtful and mild and has a smooth smile on her lips. She is wearing a white blouse with long sleeves, a white-blue striped sweater with a v-collar. On top of that, she is wearing a grey cardigan. Around her neck, she has a chequered woollen scarf. She wears a red-black-green and blue chequered skirt. Apparently, she is relaxing at a café, drinking a café latte. Probably she is having a conversation with someone.

4.2.2 Step 2: Interpretation

The text below the picture tells us the woman in the photo is working with artists – as a curator. Her distinct country-look gives an impression of tradition and style. By this, one gets the impression she isn't a slave of the present common lifestyle, plenty of stress and obligations, rushing for one's survival, competing with others to win the game named career and social respect. She already has it all, either by family tradition or by her own further success. She is in the adorable, envied position that everybody is dreaming of: She may live her life making what pleases her, whatever she is interested in. Now, she is interested in cultural production, which means she is engaged in something valuable. She is contributing, has an interest in life. Many women would adore living her life. Thus she is interesting.

4.3 Breitling ad from the weekly Time magazine
4.3.1 Step 1: Description

The photo shows a sportive young till middle-aged man in black leather jacket, wearing sportive sunglasses (Ray Ban type), wedding rings and a Breitling watch. His hair is cut in a sportive and classical manner. He is standing in front of a small aeroplane. He is outdoors, standing as if he was waiting for someone or something. On his jacket, one can see at least three insignias, showing his status as an aviator. He makes a self-confident and smug impression. It is obvious to the observer that the man on the picture the well-known actor John Travolta. The mountains in the background imply that he is capable of flying over them. Fresh and nice weather in an open landscape gives the impression of a nice and independent lifestyle.

4.3.2 Step 2: Interpretation

Sportive lifestyle, wealth, freedom and independence. These are things that many people would love to have in their lives. The brand "Travolta" stands for physical power and life power. The observer sees an adored icon, which wears a Breitling. This white man symobolises dreams connected to success and social position. Choosing the star Travolta, who himself -as told in the ad- "nurtures a passion for everything that embodies the authentic spirit of aviation" confirms pilots who have the financial possibility of choosing, they choose a Breitling watch for there is no better as to the technical standards.

4.4 Peak Performance summer collection, 2003
4.4.1 Step 1: Description

The observer notes an open landscape with sporty youngsters on the beach. In the background there is a couple of handles visible that underlines the surroundings of a bathing place. Some of the youngsters wear swimsuits. The girl at the centre of the picture is wearing white shorts as a contrast to the boy's naked chests. The youngsters are having fun and obviously are enjoying themselves playing a little bit violently with each other. The boy in the background behind the girl is wearing dark shorts with white two white, vertical stripes on the on the hips. One can see that the shorts have pockets, which underlines their sporty and casual character. He is lifting the anonymous girl up on his shoulder to show off his male strength. Her being seated on his shoulders gives the impression of lifting lightness. This communicates strength and freedom.

4.4.2 Step 2: Interpretation

The white shorts are implying innocence, which in turn symobolises youth and the power of having a secured life and a future. The youngsters on the picture experience the width and breadth of life, the scope of life as a challenge. The youngsters play around, no worries, their future secured, they own the

complete world and they go for it. Success, independence, pleasure and wealth in their narrow future. Who wouldn't love having their situation? Sportive, outdoor garments that suit their lifestyle of future success, who in the same age wouldn't like to join them?

4.5 Ralph Lauren, spring, 2014
4.5.1 Step 1: Description

The landscape is a welcoming, bright and light oasis by the beach with a lookout over the sea. A glamorous airy sea side villa by the coast with minimalist furnishing, surrounded by purity and bright colours of nature. A young woman barefoot by the beach, bold and sharply dressed, stylish and in harmony with the modern and enchanting scenery. There is a young male counterpart resting relaxed in front on the engine-hood of a sporty, luxurious and elegant convertible vintage sports car. He is dressed in orange casual pants and a dark sports jacket of elegant completion. He is wearing a conspicuously watch and dark loafers. He wears no socks sporting a T-shirt under his jacket, which has rolled-up sleeves. He uses a handkerchief as decorative ornamentation of the breast pocket of his sports suit. It's summer season.

4.5.2 Step 2: Interpretation

There are plenty of status symbols in the settings. They tell the story of a certain lifestyle. More, the nautical surroundings at the French Riviera underline taste, traditions and an artistic charisma at a time. The vintage sports car also stands for traditions. The man and women seem to belong to those adorable and adored people enjoying an impeccable lifestyle. They both have material means and the "savoir –vivre" to make the right and individual choices in life. You only live once and should carefully pick all details, having an influence on your daily-life. Every detail is a piece of art and all are muses, which serve as an endless inspiration for wellness in your single life. The ad is a beautiful invitation to capture each moment of

your life – if you are wealthy enough. If you are not, you'll continue to strive for the adorned lifestyle.

5 Analysis

One question is how whiteness is being constructed in the contemporary visual culture of marketing fashion design. Whiteness is represented by wealth, financial independence, power, old traditions, cultural interest and education, sport, leisure, power for life and happiness in life. Whiteness is thus apparently connected to the American dream. In contrast to what Dwyer (2004) discusses on models, these models stand for physical freedom and independence rather than ambitious, anorectical beauty. In all five pictures, there is no elegance as described in Moeran (2006) or König (2006). Instead, the pictures mirror lifestyle elegance in the sense of freedom, success and financial independence.

5.1 Discussion on how the constructions analysed relate to class, gender and sexuality

The white ideals on the pictures all belong to an adored class. Like in Bourdieu (1979) the choice and combinations of the garments make the difference between good and bad taste. Class is though not expressed by showing off richness and wealth as in Moeran (2006) and König (2006). It is rather expressed by showing off a decent but discrete lifestyle. As having a family to care about is part of the same lifestyle, children are incorporated and included in their parents fashionable ambitions as illustrated in Linn (2004). As to the gender roles traditions are reproduced: the male models are hemen, the female models are very feminine or posing in a very feminine way. A perspective close to: «Ihr Schein, sein Sein » (Vinken, 1999) i.e. the woman as a status symbol, owned by him, is obvious regarding picture one and picture four, whereas the fourth picture even has a sexual dimension linked to the models gender roles.

6 Conclusions

Whiteness is plenty of stereotyping. A global market in a world where people from different cultures often move from countries to others implies we are living in a multi-cultural world. The same goes for the virtual space, which is multi-cultural although there are strong local communities with their own cultures at a time. The concept of whiteness is far too narrow to fit a global garment producer. Conclusively, it may be assumed it makes poor sense and pays off badly from a global, marketer's point of view, to use stereotypes dominated by whiteness.

7 Closing comments

As long as there is no good theoretical basis for practitioners to use in order to both standardise and, at the same time, appeal to local cultures, the problem will continue to exist.

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