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## On the Turning Away: A Critical Look into Brands' Engagement towards Ethics

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper takes a bird's-eye view of the prevalent and urgent misuse of the ethics of representation, with a special focus on fashion imagery in the contemporary world. Utilising a detailed literature review, the Paper looks at three specific themes: gender, race, and exoticism. It includes a critical analysis of marketing rhetoric, and questions are raised to bring into focus the cost of 'bad faith'. The Paper also explores and interprets case studies and real-life examples of how brands can market themselves, even expand their customer base, without compromising trust or ethics.*

**Keywords:** Ethics, race, gender, marketing, colonialism, imagery, responsibility

### INTRODUCTION

Researchers tend to have broad definitions of 'ethics'.

This paper takes into account the fundamental reasons around which marketers in the fashion industry use and misuse ethics whilst marketing their brands and brand imagery. On the one hand, ethics have become almost a marketing strategy that brands use for virtue signalling. For example, greenwashing is the "practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organisation's otherwise environmentally unfriendly or less savoury activities" (Netto et al). Similarly, in terms of how persons of different ethnicities are represented in different contexts, this paper aims to investigate how the concept, construct, and claim of diversity has been highlighted by brands in their marketing campaigns. This research paper empirically aims to bring to the reader's attention the many ways in which ethics in the fashion industry are underlying, and contorting. It takes the examples of various brands and case studies to do so, and is formatted in an interpretive, literature-based context.

An instance that highlights this aspect of marketing is seen in the history of Hawaii's representation. Borgerson and Schroeder evaluate multiple studies across decades (Bartky, 1990; Borgerson, 2001; Butler, 1987/1999; Gordon, 1995; Walker, 1998; Young, 1980) to demonstrate a larger point about ethical action being given the limelight it deserves to protect and promote truer imagery. "These studies theorise the sort of beings that are capable of ethical action and responsibility. They are linked by a concern with how visual markers such as skin colour and gendered gestures, which are mapped in and onto the body, represent or determine the status of beings, particularly in the context of racism and sexism." (Borgerson and Schroeder 576) By studying the link between visual representation and opinions that the media forms in the minds of the public, it can be said that ethical action and representational responsibility, when ignored, play a key role in regressive brand images that are not inclusive or true.

"The Hawaii represented is the Hawaii that exists for most people, and therefore seemingly innocuous and 'fun' representations create and maintain a discourse that reveals effects and precursors of colonialism." (Borgerson and Schroeder 579) In essence, how Hawaii was internationally marketed as a 'paradisical' and 'serene' state did not correspond with the reality of its native populace. The marketing, therefore, was inaccurate and not in keeping with the historical cultural values that Hawaiians traditionally share. This disparity between the country's phoney branding and its truth gives rise to stereotypes and, possibly discrimination, as it forms a set image in the minds of the audience, who have no experience of its reality. Thus, without proof of cultural truth, tourists flying to Hawaii develop set expectations of the behaviours of Hawaiians and the idea of 'Hawaii', neither of which will be accurate, as they were marketed by said colonialists, and not by residents of the State themselves.

"It is important to remember that marketing does not merely use a pre-existing discourse but works to create, and then sell, its visual rhetoric through the use of carefully designed marketing communication and promotions" (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2002b).

Racial images, or visual branding, try to design aesthetics around which people of certain ethnicities may be depicted with particular traits. Notions created by the ads and campaigns that these images feature in can be misleading and often untrue; this does a grave injustice to those truly belonging to that ethnicity.

For example, Schroeder and Borderson spoke about how Hawaiian women were portrayed as promiscuous and easy-going; however, in reality, these traits had become associated with them due to how the state was being marketed, and were not supported by any evidence of their lived reality. One must be careful and thus question the media that promote a specific image of a place/ethnicity/race/religion or people, as these images are actively tailored by brands to simply promote and sell their goods and services, almost always at the cost of those they are depicting and resulting in more discrimination and subliminal stereotyping.

Borgerson and Schroeders' report highlighted how 'ethnic' music, and 'albums' evoke the white colonialist potential of a medium that begins as a blank slate and treats the observed exotic native, often dark-skinned, as an object to be reported on and recorded by the outside observer." The words 'as an object to be reported on' make clear the objectification and lack of humanity that the media can contort images to be. Dark-skinned persons can then start being viewed as 'exotic' or 'special' due to widely viewed ads, marketing their image as one worthy of being 'othered' or treated specially. This may cause a drift in gaining the same opportunities and respect in their social and professional spheres, as those they are having to interact with are likely to already have preset notions about their communities.

By using artistic mediums such as music or visual cues that are seen globally by audiences of all different nationalities, brands tend to circulate their versions of what they believe particular communities stand, e.g. African Americans (or other darker-skinned people living in nations majorly populated with Caucasian people).

Furthermore, it is not only visual media that are invoked or created to market ideas and concepts, but also media such as music. Costa argues that the history and function of Paradise in the West have exerted profound influences on the way Hawaii has been marketed. Paradise has been a topic of fascination and ambition for communities across the world, whether religious or simply mystical. When a particular hemisphere, or region, is depicted to resemble the idyllic and serene visions that are associated with 'paradise', along with the idea of flexibility in rules, as quoted above (innocuous and fun), making a trip to it suddenly becomes all the more attractive and interesting. Faiths and movements of many kinds have often been marketed to the public as the 'only route to paradise'. However, introducing a place on Earth as 'Paradise' gives audiences a reason to flock to such a location based on their presumptions and visions of their 'perfect place'.

Religion has always played a pivotal role in structuring society and the notions that surround it. Marketing a particular faith, belief, or religion can be done in many ways, and has been done time and time again throughout history. Race, gender, and cultural stereotypes that seem to exist independently can also be traced back to religion. For example, "Exposure to paradisaal discourse comes about through marketed representations of gender (male/female), race (black/white/somewhere in-between), the histories of religion (saved/damned), and other cultural institutions that make use of hierarchically-ordered dichotomies, including 'us versus them' gleaned from hundreds of records." (Costa, 1998). As explained above, to market 'paradise' is not a new idea. The histories of religion (to be saved or to remain damned) have had one key commonality which is the linearity with which actions that are right and wrong are seen, and how redemption or purgatory notions envelope those who are not as set on the belief of a Heaven and a Hell, as may their religious counterparts.

The discourse mentioned here is said to be linked to pre-set stereotypes of gender, race, religion, and other cultural institutions. By this measure, paradise as a concept means different things to different people, and thus can be marketed variously. The discourse of these notions of 'paradise' is heavily dependent on the cultural and racial contexts it borrows. For example, a marketing campaign invoking the colours of India will not work to market America.

## **RACISM**

Racism is a prominent issue that can be quoted and referenced in the domain of marketing ethics. Lewis Gordon's work on anti-black racism is one of the leading pieces that describes the concept of 'bad faith' which creates fictitious, misleading, and ignorant visions around a particular race. Gordon mobilises Jean-Paul Sartre's mechanism of bad faith, which can then be reinterpreted in the modern context. The quote "Bad faith describes the attempt to avoid responsibility for the open nature of human beings and human projects, resulting in the diminution of human beings. In bad faith, the inability to face the openness of human existence fosters a lie of predetermined being and limited possibility," materialises racial cues. (Gordon 572)

The phrase that may come across as striking here is 'the inability to face the openness of human existence'. The truth of several brand campaigns that may highlight models or brand ambassadors of a particular race to match fictitious values, or a marketed lifestyle, is to deny views of reality. For example people of African origin, living in first-world countries are shown competing on par with their white counterparts, grossly misleading consumers. Here though opportunities may be plenty, so are rigid social stereotypes. The brand in this hypothetical commercial may be marketing the idea that wearing their products makes anyone, regardless of their class, background, gender, or in particular, race, attractive candidates for 'seizing the day'. Yet the reality of African American life is that it may have enormous challenges in climbing up the opportunity ladder.

In this sense, brands dismiss the full stories, and historical as well as active modern beliefs regarding the race of those featured in their ads, and deflect from their own branding to highlight race. One way in which brands and media can combat such dismissal, and in turn, have a higher chance of having a broader, more diverse customer pool if they were to choose relatability over bad faith. If products are marketed with inverse stereotypes, brands market themselves as advocates for inclusivity and initiative instead of being seen as bystanders to issues that are already being perpetuated by society. If a brand creates a new make-up line for darker skin tones, without highlighting them as 'special' or 'unique', and instead as natural, they subliminally signal their acknowledgement of the openness of human existence, and give an equal chance to all their customers; therefore growing their status as 'understanding' and 'empathetic'.

Bad faith is prevalent in ads all over the world, from international companies to local businesses, it plays a role in all industries, and may be found to be a weaker 'tool' than 'relatability'. If customers can relate to the struggles they see on their screens, even if for thirty seconds, brands may leave a lasting memory that can spark controversy, but more than that, justice. Bad faith discourages members of particular identities and races from accepting communities unlike theirs as their 'normal'.

This leads to frustration in those parts of society that are not sufficiently or appropriately represented. This can shrink their customer base, and can perpetuate the already existing and demeaning racial stereotypes. To face the openness of human existence is to encourage and attract all its aspects wholesomely and be able to foster greater goals for both company and customer, and society. Yet another point of view that can be considered is that of ethical action and racial responsibility is “visual markers such as skin colour and gendered gestures, which are mapped in and onto the body, represent or determine the status of beings, particularly in the context of racism and sexism.” (Borgerson and Schroeder 576). The key term ‘mapped’ used here gives a structured texture to racial markers which are contorted to represent certain statuses of those being marketed. By this theory, an Indian family in an international ad has a high chance of being depicted as what the public, or target Western audience, already thinks is a ‘typical’ Indian family. This however, does not mirror what can very well be the reality of real families in India, and depending on the majority of their view base, the brand making the ad, may prefer to side with media fallacies instead of the reality, simply because of the actor’s visual markers i.e. race, skin color. This marketing tactic uses bad faith as a tool to differ from the actuality of a particular race or even gender, and is done strategically. Hence the word ‘mapped’ may be used.

When brands ‘map’ out the way they are going to market a product or service, they take into account the countries their ads and campaigns will be consumed in, limiting and rigid beliefs that the people there already have, and whether they aim to use those beliefs as a boost, or to encourage those communities to break away from them. So a brand can either take the path of initiative or ignorance. Though clairvoyance would be useful in their strategising, ads tend to have the social demographics of their viewers mapped out in an organised manner, so much so that they may even use humour, a borderline dangerous tool (due to chances of offending audiences), as a tool to get their message across.

Another quote that concludingly highlights the goldfish bowl that brand representation concerning race is “Representations construct reality and are part of the lived experience.” (Borgerson and Schroeder 589). This can be linked to the first quote by Gordon on how representations of certain races are taken from reality yet tend not to mirror the lived experience, but are marketed to those living it. Sometimes ads and commercials operate on bad faith, but even if we operate on the assumption that they are simply misguided, the consequences of the racialised images created are still severe. This impacts the dignity of the “targeted” racial community and undermines culture- appropriate representation.

## **GENDER STEREOTYPES**

“Sexist representations compare women with nature, such as woman as island, as the lure of the islands posed on waterfalls, always decorated with flowers, sexually available and unburdened by Western guilt” (Borgerson and Schroeder 583).

The idea of tailoring an almost dystopian-like image about the modesty and grace a woman from a specific region ‘must’ have, does not only diminish the reality of who she is, and those like her, but also of her community as a whole. This, again, is a practice of bad faith. Her people’s image, morals, and culture are twisted to suit what the stereotypical Westerner’s typical dream is often described as: no strings attached. When planted into the minds of the brand’s audience, these images can be further talked about, socially marketed, and then, over time, have a chance of evolving into a stereotype or a ‘norm of thought’ whenever that community (in this case, the Hawaiian community) is concerned.

As highlighted in the previous subheading, bad faith can be practised in the name of colour, race, gender, and class. It spins on the delicate spindle of what marketing sharks use to catch their prey -- vulnerable, easily convinced audiences that are in need of entertainment and direction. Audiences that forget to draw back the curtain and look at the whole picture, the truth, not simply assumptions and strategically woven tales. This can also be linked to what ‘trends’ are. Audiences use television, film, posters, campaigns, ads, logos, articles, and several other forms of media to glorify their feeling of belonging to their communities, or they use the same tools to give meaning to someone else’s.

Another quote that builds on how the ‘typical Hawaiian woman’ may perfectly encapsulate her regional state with just her aura, is explained again by Schroeder and Borgerson while studying airline ads. “She becomes “Hawaiian” easily, for this transformation translates into exotic native guilt-free sexuality and a sensual playfulness for her and her new husband.” This part of the marketing campaign could very possibly be what made Hawaii into what we know today as a ‘honeymooning paradise’. For the audience viewing the ‘Hawaiian woman’s’ description, they subliminally accept an image that does not have any truthful backing or evidence regarding. The ad this quote is based on would have claimed the Hawaiian woman to be ‘sexual’, erotic, and sensually playful. She does not have any regard for ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, for her duty to her own goals around intimacy. She simply exists in a window of perfection and, as marketed, is a temptation for those viewing her. However, nowhere would the ad have quoted real interviews or trustworthy sources of real Hawaiian women on whether their reality is in keeping with the ad’s depiction.

To conclude, how such representations encourage bad faith in the media, especially around gender, is again well explained in the quote: “These representations are instrumental in constructing the image of Hawaii as an exotic, primitive paradise within colonial, patriarchal, and racist discourses that ultimately lead to bad faith marketing.” (Borgerson and Schroeder 585).

The purpose of this Paper is to highlight the issues regarding the application of representative ethics within the fashion and marketing industry. The methodology used was a thorough literature review of the available material.

Ethics in the fashion industry plays a pivotal role in the relationships and reputations certain brands form with their consumers, as well as gives a broad spectrum view to widespread stereotypes, social norms, and traditions prevalent in modern-day society. This paper covers issues such as ‘bad faith’ and misrepresentation in the context of gender and race via visual markers such as skin colour, gestures, paralanguage, and status.

The examples and case studies cited in this paper can encourage the reader be more thoughtful and cautious about how certain social norms, stereotypes, and practices can be cleverly marketed to audiences both subliminally as well as in a direct manner, depending on how well the brand knows their target audience, and the release purpose for their ad/campaign.

The white male whose school of thought may be adamantly heteronormative will be marketed a location or brand in a very different manner than his female counterpart, who may be seated in the opposite hemisphere. The product or service being marketed may be the same in both cases. However, when tools such as ‘bad faith’ are used, both persons are sold the idea in different ways so as to make it equally appealing.

In this sense, bad faith can degrade communities, genders, and people of certain races, which can lead to social offence, and make brands lose the very things they are looking for from a larger customer base. If brands were to market more ads or run more campaigns depicting individuals of different genders and of different ethnicities, the increase in their diversity quotient would boost their consumer base. To add, the fashion industry caters to individuals across nearly all economic strata. By consciously diversifying their 'ideal visions' or marketed 'dystopias', brands would be able to gain more trust from their consumers, while not having to sacrifice loyalty, 'modern thinking', and ethics. Fashion should elevate people's ways of carrying themselves, not contort these into a tailored, discriminatory, and ostracising notions and stereotypes.

One can suggest that this deliberation to tailor images can be mitigated if every ad released by a brand of a certain stature were to pass their ads through nationally acclaimed ethics boards that approve them for marketing. Censorship may pose an issue for such boards, as countries would be allowed to nationally disallow certain thoughts or ideas being marketed. However, as far as ethics go, brands should have the right to propagate whatever ideas they want to, provided that they are within the ethical criteria.

Another suggestion to minimize the use of 'bad faith' and the misuse of ethics is that of employment. Employment can be linked to both present-day society as well as to the future, both of which are of key importance to brands. If more companies were to bring onboard a more diverse employee base and have persons of all ethnicities, ages, races, genders, and backgrounds, then their idea production will naturally become more far-reaching and suggestion-based. This will mean their campaigns and ads will run for a larger audience, one that has as much of a diverse reach as that of their employee base. To build on this idea, employment is not the only way brands increase their campaign reliability. Sociological research (in the form of case studies and interviews of consumers) will be able to give brands a fairly accurate idea of what their product's unique selling points can be.

One of the most-watched Dove campaigns, #StopTheBeautyTest, shows schoolgirls in India being made to follow traditional 'home remedies' such as applying turmeric on their skins to 'wash the dark colour of their skins off', amongst others. The campaign does not focus on selling their products. It focuses on selling what the brand stands for such as social justice, equality, and progressive attitudes. When target consumers in India, in particular schoolgirls like the ones shown in their ad, relate to the practices and stereotypes regarding size, accessories, hair types, race, marriage, and gender being shown. When the impressionable teenager sees her characteristics reflected positively on a national level, the next time she gets teased—she has a positive role model to recall and the negative stereotype does not become her only point of reference. Dove covered several social issues, all of which personally affected women and girls throughout India in a relatable and radical manner.

There is a culture of tokenisation prevalent in the fashion and marketing industry. The fashion industry being one of the most worn (quite literally) on the sleeves of their consumers' hearts, is a great place to start creating change in ethical misuse.

Fashion is for everyone because all of us deserve to embody who we really are, from the feathers in our hats to the laces we wear. Starting now will lead to a brighter future, happier marketing, and a stronger consumer market.

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