Permission to Be Prejudiced: Legitimacy Credits in the Evaluation of Advertisements With Black and White Models

Beomjoon (Peter) Choi, California State University, Sacramento
Christian S. Crandall, University of Kansas

We investigated the impact of race on the evaluation of print advertisements. Participants rated a high quality ad with a Black or White model and then rated a mediocre ad with a Black or White model. Participants who first rated a White model could not discriminate without appearing prejudiced, but participants who positively evaluated a Black model would possess legitimacy credits, allowing them to discriminate subsequently without appearing prejudiced. The findings show that nondiscriminatory behavior in one setting can legitimize subsequent racial discrimination that is otherwise suppressed.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13145/volumes/v35/NA-35

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Blacks are nearly 13% of the population in the U.S. and they have substantial buying power. Consequently, advertisers have a real interest in attracting this market segment, and cannot fail to include Black models in their advertising messages. But given the relatively low frequency of Black models featured in commercials (Wilkes & Valencia, 1989; Williams, Quals, & Grier, 1989), it appears that advertisers may be hesitant to use Black models. It is likely that advertisers may have real concerns about how White consumers may react to non-White models in their ads. This is especially a concern for high-value goods other than cars, in whose ads Blacks are highly unlikely to appear (Bailey, 2006). Why are there so few Black models in commercials, given that the research literature suggests that race has not been found to have an impact on viewers’ responses (e.g., Whittler, 1989)? Although the research seems to indicate that Whites do not evaluate ads featuring Blacks differently from those featuring Whites, it may be that practitioners have found that ads featuring Black models are less effective in attracting consumers to buy their products—a result they have refrained from publishing, if not acting upon. In this article, we use a more subtle technique for demonstrating racial bias than has been typically used by marketing researchers for the assessment of models in advertising.

Most of the early research shows that White consumers do not respond negatively to advertisements or promotional materials featuring Blacks (Bush, Gwinner, & Solomon, 1974; Schilinger & Plummer, 1972; Solomon, Bush, & Hair, 1976; Bush, Hair, & Solomon, 1979; Tolley & Goett, 1972). In a long series of studies in marketing and social psychology, many studies have found little bias against Black by White participants, and often a bias in favor of Black targets (e.g., Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones & Vance, 2002; Whittler & DiMeo, 1991). But one must ask where the source of this apparent indifference lies. Is it because there is little or no prejudice affecting these decisions, or is it because White responses to ads with a Black model are carefully controlled, with prejudice and discrimination suppressed?

We suggest that evaluations of Black models in ads are determined by a complex mix of positive and negative feelings characterized by ambivalence, Crandall and Eshleman (2003) have proposed the Justification-Suppression Model (JSM) of the expression of prejudice. They argue that racial prejudice is usually suppressed, resulting in lower overt expressions of prejudice than is genuinely felt. However, because affect has motivational properties, people will seek a way to express prejudice, and justifications will allow overt discrimination. A justification is any process that can allow the expression of prejudice, without suffering sanctions, whether external or internal. There are many different kinds of justification, and they appear in many guises. One particular justification of prejudice expression is “legitimacy credits.” Legitimacy credits are the memory of previous non-prejudiced behavior, which can be called upon to offset a subsequent release of prejudice. Legitimacy credits can be acquired by engaging in any overtly non-prejudiced behavior—by behaving positively toward a group, by having friends from the group, by smiling at group members on the bus, by buying a piece of art from a group member, or even by evaluating the group positively on a rating scale.

In the present study, we investigate how the acquisition of legitimacy credits affects the evaluation of the ads featuring Black and White models, by providing people a chance to gain legitimacy with a positive evaluation of a high quality ad featuring a Black model. Then, we measured people’s evaluation of the subsequent mediocre ad with another Black model. In the pilot study, we use a between-subjects design, and seek evaluations of high or low qualities ads featuring Black or White models. Because the single-ad between-subjects method offers no acquisition of legitimacy credits, we expect no bias against Black model ads. Results show, when evaluating the ads, participants were highly responsive to the overall quality of the ad, but they were unresponsive to the race of the model. When employing this straightforward method, it might appear that this population of students lack prejudice, and do not discriminate on the basis of race. In Experiment 1, we introduce an opportunity to gain legitimacy. White participants first evaluate a high quality ad with a Black (legitimacy credits) or White (no credits) model. In Experiment 1, participants then evaluate a mediocre ad featuring either a Black or White model, anticipating that in the no credits conditions, participants will not show an anti-Black bias in evaluation, whereas the participants who first evaluated an ad with a Black model will, on a subsequent evaluation, show an anti-Black bias in evaluation. As expected, when people were provided an opportunity to positively rate a high quality advertisement featuring a Black model, they evaluated the target advertisement with a Black model more negatively than that with a White counterpart. Participants in the Suppression condition did not downgrade an ad with a Black model compared to an ad with a White model, but participants in the Legitimacy condition did—leading to a fairly strong preference for the White ad by White participants.

The present study investigated the impact of model’s race on evaluation of advertisements and the underlying psychological mechanism. A favorable rating for one advertisement featuring a Black model may be sufficient justification to allow subjects to express their prejudice toward the target advertisement with a Black model. This study suggests that consumers’ underlying psychological mechanisms to exposures of advertisements featuring Blacks, are subtle, complex, and multiply-determined. Whites will only release their attitudes into expression with there is some kind of justification for doing that. Any person looking for signs of racial prejudice must not simply go forward and ask—one cannot possibly trust a simple answer to a simple question in this context. As long as people are not permitted by the situation to release their attitudes without guilt or shame, they are not likely to express their genuine prejudice.

References
Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 35) / 725


Chura, Hillary (2005), “Offerings Hope to Extend the Oprah Effect,” Advertising Age (March 7), S12.


