"There's nothing wrong with the picture": Representations of diversity through cultural

branding

Susie Khamis

University of Technology Sydney

Abstract

To attract consumers ever more distracted and dispersed, and achieve cultural resonance, brand advertisers increasingly speak to discourses of diversity. These representations are often contentious, particularly when they refer to certain aspects of contemporary identity politics. As these controversies play out on social media such as Facebook, they reveal key insights into branding today: the discursive volatility that shadows representations of diversity; asymmetries of communicative power between brands and consumers in online discussions; and the extent to which representations of diversity are rendered more or less divisive depending on their proximity to already existing anxieties and/or resistance. This article contextualises this interplay through three Australian brand campaigns from late 2015 to early 2016 and shows how social media further problematise what was an already dynamic, tense and dialectical relationship between consumers and brands.

Introduction

From Hollywood to high streets, the football field to the classroom, few areas remain untouched by the identity politics that now dominate public conversations. Questions of race, religion, sexuality and gender permeate not just sites of political officialdom, but also everyday areas of social activity. These discussions often pivot on a concept of diversity, and the extent to which groups once marginalised, oppressed or ignored are both seen and heard. In this milieu, several brands have become salient markers of an acute commercial sensibility. Within a crowded and cacophonous mediasphere, and to 'cut through the clutter' – industry shorthand for getting consumers' attention – brands engage with and through discourses of diversity. These become conversational reference points, and signpost divisive and contentious debates. This article considers the risks that such a strategy entails, as well as the possible rewards it delivers; and it charts this phenomenon through the dominant mode of contemporary public discourse: social media.

The focus is on three brand campaigns which appeared across Australian media, between late 2015 and early 2016: high-end department store David Jones, telecommunication company Optus, and private health insurer Medibank. What follows is an analysis of how diversity is represented through branding, and embedded in politically charged contexts. This discussion thus reflects one of the most profound aspects of contemporary civilian life: the personalisation of politics – how it is conceived, articulated and enacted. According to Bennett (2012), traditional sites for the organisation of civic life have weakened and waned, through the combined effects of economic globalisation, the splintering of social institutions, and the decline of group-based centres of solidarity and loyalty. As a result, writes Bennett, "individuals increasingly code their personal politics through personal

lifestyle values" (p. 22). Insofar as consumer decisions both carry and endorse these 'personal lifestyle values', analysis turns then to how contemporary brands negotiate this. Specifically, the pronounced trend towards what Banet-Weiser (2012a) calls 'commodity activism': the merging of political and social goals with consumer behaviour, which weaves activism through branded capitalist frameworks (2012a: 40). For Banet-Weiser (2012b), the rise of commodity activism, so reliant on the consumer-citizen of neoliberal economics, renders political practice "as easy as a swipe of your credit card" (2012b: 18). When consumers 'vote' via brand choice (e.g. for fair trade, organic, sweatshop-free and so on), political action becomes a necessarily personal and individual exercise. Indeed, Banet-Weiser shows how this shift has imbued and altered spaces once considered 'authentic' – or above and/or impervious to market forces: politics, self-identity, creativity and religion. As such, Banet-Weiser sees attempts to dichotomise the market and the 'authentic' as inevitably strained; brand culture now *is* culture, and culture is "continually reimagined and reshaped, a process inherently ambivalent and contradictory" (2012b: 9).

Ambivalence, 'crowdcultures' and 'a new species of hip consumerism'

This ambivalence is a useful way to approach and unpack contemporary branding. In an obvious break with more sceptical accounts of comparable phenomena (Serazio, 2013: 2-8), this article does not see branding as ideologically antithetical to the public good, or unable to speak to civic concerns (Heejo Keum et al. 2004: 370). Rather, as brands venture into politicised spaces, they can infuse consumer culture with what Meijer (1998) calls an "as yet unmined source of civic capital" (p. 247), through vignettes that that are instructive in their positive portrayal of multicultural life. Brands are multilayered amalgams; they convey not just unique selling points or idealised reflections of the target consumer (Kuksov et al. 2013:

294); but also, and necessarily, a position in relation to diversity. Moreover, this politics cannot be explained nor dismissed by a knee-jerk, neo-Marxist charge of recuperation, since this disavows the cultural exchange that occurs between brands and consumers. To explain this exchange, Holt's (2002) dialectical model of consumer culture and branding is especially pertinent.

For Holt, and since the mid twentieth-century, branding has been propelled by a constant tension best seen in dialectical terms. This dialectic manifests thus: profit-driven firms seek to innovative and inspire through experiments in advertising, marketing and branding: new strategies, novel approaches and so forth. Media-literature consumers, however, become ever more savvy, cynical and skilled, which presents a challenge for marketers. When consumers become adept at decoding and eventually resisting the latest brand fad, firms must revise brand strategy – and so the process goes. Effectively, though, branding actually benefits from these demand-driven jolts. As Holt writes, a system that survives on the constant production of difference welcomes "unruly bricoleurs", whose "creative, unorthodox, singularizing consumer sovereignty practices" become "grist for the branding mill that is ever in search for new cultural materials" (p: 88). Meanwhile, advertising itself has evolved from its mid-century position of arch authority (the *Mad Men* world of cultural engineering and Freudian assumptions); to the postmodern period from the tail end of the 20th century (with widespread use of irony, self-awareness and stealth); and most recently, to the post-postmodern point of today. Now, and in ways directly relevant to the personalisation of politics, consumers demand more (not less) from brands: "Consumers will look for brands to contribute directly to their identity projects by providing original and relevant cultural materials with which to work" (p: 87). So, rather than dismiss branding as

capitalist chimera, as one might expect from consumers so versed in its logic and language, they actually demand from brands 'authentic' cultural value.

Most significant here is where Holt (2016) locates the dominant site for this dialectical exchange. Holt sees in social media a new locus of (digital) power: 'crowdcultures', online formations that that can quickly generate critical mass around myriad issues, causes and concerns. According to Holt, firms now try to anticipate, address and exploit the power of crowdcultures through 'cultural branding', or messaging that both resonates with key crowdcultures (their moods, motivations and interests), and serves the brand's identity and positioning. This requires brands to invest, literally and symbolically, in emergent movements so that their connotative breaks with market conventions (or brand competitors) will impress on-trend crowdcultures. Put simply then, cultural branding is not just about 'standing out', but also appearing culturally relevant and in sync with specific crowdcultures. Key here are the questions of timing and opportunity – brands must read the zeitgeist constantly and seize the most compelling flashpoints, "playing off particularly intriguing or contentious issues that dominate the media discourse related to [their] ideology" (p: 48).

It may be tempting to read this exchange between brands and consumers in broadly cynical terms. Viewed thus, brands innovate only to the extent that their imagery is judged fashionably novel, and not so much that they challenge the status quo or instigate seminal social change. The history of 'controversial advertising' has been amply critiqued on these grounds. One of the most notorious examples here is Italian clothing brand Benetton, which for most of the 1980s and '90s traded on what Lury (2000) called "an aesthetics of pseudo-

shock" (p: 160). Under the creative direction of photographer Oliviero Toscani, the brand forged a graphic mosaic of political, social and cultural transgressions, with motley references to AIDS, religion, racism and so on. Suffice to say, this imagery was crafted primarily for provocation (Skorupa, 2014: 70; Dahl et al. 2003: 268-269), even though Toscani professed otherwise, that is: that Benetton was philosophically committed to the 'united colors' of difference, diversity and social inclusion.

Bereft of a blueprint for change, or call to any action besides shopping, Benetton drew wide criticism and, in its wake, contoured reception of similarly inspired campaigns. It also hardened a view that, as capitalist constructs motivated by profit and market share, brands irredeemably sit outside 'real' political formations and struggles. For this reason, when symbols and slogans migrate from the worlds of advocacy, politics and rebellion towards advertising and branding – airbrushed, beautified and seemingly emptied of any subversive spirit – intellectual scepticism quickly kicks in. However, and to return to the ideas of ambivalence and the 'authentic', this position does not survive one glaring reality. As Frank (1997) makes clear in his history of advertising and countercultures, the intermingling of politics, branding and culture that both Banet-Weiser and Holt write of is in fact *the* history of advertising and countercultures. Frank explains this thus: first, there is the extent to which most 'authentic' countercultures are themselves informed and furnished by the mediated ephemera of the 'sponsored society', the stuff of advertising (p. 8). Second, and since the seismic cultural ferment of the 1960s, the advertising world – itself weary of hierarchy and excited by creativity – increasingly saw countercultures not as recalcitrant adversaries but rather as iconoclastic allies (p. 9). Ironically or otherwise then, neither the

'establishment' nor 'the people' were completely independent, autonomous or self-sufficient from the other.

For Frank, the fact that brands continue to draw so frequently and so liberally from countercultures (in terms of imagery, ideals and causes) speaks to shared symbolic resources, perceived affinities, and the rise of a "new species of hip consumerism, a cultural perpetual motion machine" (p. 31). That capitalism emerges here so dynamic, agile and flexible does not cancel out all questions of power and exploitation (some of which will be addressed shortly); but it does demand analysis that is nuanced enough to accommodate ironic tensions and ambiguities. The alternative – a fixed spectrum that pits capitalist institutions and 'the people' as diametric opposites (or 'square' versus 'hip') – would be, following Frank, "a strategic blunder of enormous proportions" (p. 19).

In the opening decades of the 21st century, this spectrum seems fuzzier and more fluid than ever. The point here is not to suggest any parity between consumers and brands on any front, but to consider how the dynamics of contemporary cultural branding produce ironic tensions. To be sure, branding is premised on capitalist conventions. That said, the intersection of crowdcultures, the personalisation of politics, and the rise of 'hip consumerism' bespeak a dialectical relationship – and this is one way to understand representations of diversity in branding. Turning the focal beam towards social media is particularly helpful. Social media have created lucrative opportunities for brands to draw from and monetise what seems a limitless bank of consumer information – the prized 'insights' that steer brand strategy. At the same time, though, the speed and intensity with which social media users speak back to brands shows the multiplicity of crowdcultures

around any given issue. Even for a fashionable politics of diversity, there is a diversity of opinion – which underscores: (a) the polysemic nature of brands and (b) the volatility of brand-consumer relationships – both of which are not easily mapped onto inflexible power grids.

To illustrate, attention turns to Australia and three brands that, between late 2015 and early 2016, show how engagement with diversity may have appeared, superficially at least, the *de rigueur* response to 'hip' crowdcultures. However, these brands committed to stances that were still politically divisive. As the subsequent consumer-brand conversations played out across Facebook, this much was clear: whatever wafer-thin lines still separated 'the commercial' from the 'authentic', the 'personal' from 'the political', or the 'consumer' from the 'citizen', appeared illusory at best.

Australia: "Do not adjust your sets"

Despite being one of the most multicultural nations in the world, Australian media has long been dominated by largely homogenous tableaus (Higgs and Milner, 2005: 61). When academic, journalist and television host Waleed Aly accepted his *TV Week* Gold Logie in May 2016, Australian television's highest accolade, he opened his acceptance speech with this: "Do not adjust your sets. There's nothing wrong with the picture" (Aly, 2016). Born in Melbourne to Egyptian parents, Aly was the least White recipient of the award in its history, as well as its most Muslim – at a time when Muslim Australians were (and are) foci of fear, misunderstanding and misrepresentation. After widely publicised Islamist terror attacks around the world, Aly's comment was neither glib nor factitious. In Australian media, representations of Muslims are rarely celebratory. Moreover, it is not just people that look

like Aly (or with names like 'Mustafa', as he says in this speech) that are often overlooked or maligned. It is the gamut of what comedienne Hannah Gadsby calls the "not normals" (Netflix, 2018). Gadsby connects this term to her (in)visibility as an androgynous and introverted lesbian, but it can arguably encompass any group that suffers for its divergence from historically dominant and institutionally resilient ideals and practices. Although speaking from different vantage points, both Aly and Gadsby highlight Australian media's treatment of people like them.

Within this context, three brand campaigns stand out for their emphatic embrace of the 'not normals'. Here that term is stripped of any stigma, derision or deficiency and instead marks imagery that breaks with the conventional and clichéd. Within a matter of months from late 2015, David Jones, Optus, and Medibank launched brand campaigns that, by virtue of atypical nods to diversity, became national talking points. Whilst being noticed is the goal of all advertising, the fallout here was of a different order. Unlike past studies of controversial advertising in Australia, the reaction had nothing to do with the sensitivity or delicacy of the commodities advertised (Waller, 1999: 289) but by the types of people used in each brand's marketing.

Brands, Facebook & consumers' 'front row seat'

Much of the controversy associated with these campaigns surfaced on Facebook. As the world's dominant social-networking site, most brands now have a Facebook presence for both promotion and as forum for interaction with fans and followers (Lipsman et al. 2012: 41). This interaction also produces for brands commercially valuable data. As Carah (2017) argues, the technological, economic and cultural infrastructure of social media has

produced four core features of contemporary branding: brands' reliance on consumer participation to create and share content; consumers' use of mobile devices to participate in these structured algorithmic networks; the generation of data from this participation; and brands' use of this data to refine their marketing (p. 387).

Consumers' participation in these networks produces a unique value-add for brands. First, as Arvidsson (2005) argues, and to the extent that consumers partake in sites freely (both unpaid and un-coerced), the communication delivers for brands a form of 'immaterial labour'. This labour, which produces commodities' informational and cultural content, is made more lucrative precisely because it comes from what appears creative autonomy (p: 239-242). It also sits within what Mumby (2016) calls 'communicative capitalism'. Through brand communities on social media, corporations cultivate "an almost limitless, ongoing circuit of sociality that can be converted into economic value" (p. 892). For Mumby, the fact that this everyday communication appears mutual, authentic and reciprocal effectively obscures its contribution to the brand's value-chain (p. 897).

Mumby's point is not challenged here. Ostensibly, brands interact with consumers on Facebook on the assumption that dynamic, real-time exchanges foster loyalty, likeability and trust (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018: 32). For their part, consumers tend to 'Like' brand pages on Facebook to ensure a 'front row seat' to news, developments and upcoming events (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011: 569). Ultimately though, brands aim to turn online engagement into market advantage, and parlay feedback towards brand equity – the brand's perceived quality to either existing or prospective consumers (Kamboj & Rahman,

2016: 680-683); in short, to convert consumers' immaterial labour into productive commercial content.

At the same time, it bears noting how this interaction between brands and consumers effects a unique distribution of discursive power. Advertisers cannot treat sites like Facebook as unproblematic extensions of their TV commercials or billboards. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue, social media compel brands to contrive charismatic content that draws both attention and engagement: "Social Media is less about explaining why your baking mix, detergent, or shampoo is better than anyone else's than it is about engaging others in open and active conversation" (p. 66). As such, brands plant talking points into their marketing to stimulate lively and animated debate – but social media dynamics will inevitably create the unpredictable element in any promotion. For Mangold and Faulds (2009), social media therefore introduce a 'hybrid' element to Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) – or how brands sustain a strong, cohesive, consumer-focused message across diverse channels. Social media complicates IMC strategy, "because it combines characteristics of traditional IMC tools (companies talking to customers) with a highly magnified form of word-of-mouth (customers talking to one another) whereby marketing managers cannot control the content and frequency of such information" (p. 359). Therefore, and in the case of controversial and/or politicised branding, it does not necessarily follow that, as Bartholomew (2018) argues, brands can orchestrate 'algorithmic outrage': highly targeted messages "titrated into perfect proportions", stimulating just the right amount of intrigue (Bartholomew 2018). Brand managers can no doubt anticipate certain responses, but it is still the case that: campaigns exist in a wider world of unforeseen social activity; and consumers' responses cannot be predicted or contained.

The participatory and conversational nature of social media like Facebook exposes brands to consumer responses that can veer from or even undermine a brand's message. Social media accommodate and potentially amplify the public airing of these divergences. When that brand message rests on a polarising political stance, such as diversity, consumer complaints focus on these forays into contested spaces. Of course, most businesses now factor diversity into their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) charters (Lozano & Escrich, 2017: 685). Such commitments rarely invite wider deliberation or debate, as they are matters for upper management. On social media, though, feedback is not just accepted; it is integral to the commercial dividends that social media pay. As Duguay (2018) argues, "Design features programmed to steer users' activity, platforms' selection of topics according to popularity, the encouragement of profitable connections and channelling users' data for economic gain constitute clear interventions into the processes of sociability and information exchange that occur through social media" (p. 22).

Clearly, there are economic imperatives at work. Playing to the conversational appeal of 'hip consumerism', 'commodity activism' and 'cultural branding' reaps commercial reward inasmuch as this will drive social media buzz. Arguably, brands that champion an ethos of diversity appeal to growing 'crowdcultures' of 'woke' politics, a newly acquired and fashionable sensitivity to matters of identity and social inclusion (Urban Dictionary, 2018). Brands can therefore take some comfort in certain general (and generational) trends (*The Economist*, 2017; Rosen, 2018) – but there are still pockets of resistance. Lest they appear arrogant or obtuse, brands must respond to these as well (Xia 2013: 76). Put simply, the

politics of diversity is not sealed with consensus; there are matters still up for debate, and anxieties yet to be allayed.

Adam Goodes & 'the new David Jones'

In October 2015, Australian retailer David Jones launched a new brand campaign called 'It's in you'. It was fronted by five brand ambassadors: media presenters Jason Dundas and Emma Freedman; models Jessica Gomes and Montana Cox; and the recently retired footballer and activist for the rights of Indigenous Australians, Adam Goodes. The aesthetic was edgy, youth-oriented and urban, an obvious bid for a demographic that had hitherto eluded David Jones: 18-34-year-old shoppers (Sullivan, 2015). Founded in 1838, David Jones was a formidable presence in Australian retail (Miller and Merrilees, 2016: 397), but was associated with clientele that was mostly older, staider and slowly disappearing – literally dying out. According to the brand's chief marketing officer, the campaign hoped to "push the boundaries" and represent "the new David Jones" (quoted in Macleod, 2015).

To appreciate why Goodes was such a controversial appointment for David Jones, some backstory is required. Goodes had just ended a stellar Australian Football League (AFL) career with the Sydney Swans club (from 1999-2015), been a two-time Brownlow Medal winner (AFL's top prize) and become one of the nation's most prominent advocates for Indigenous Australians (Webster, 2016), for which he was named 2014 Australian of the Year. For Goodes though, this drive to highlight the ugly and uncensored racism across society (especially sport) was not universally welcomed. He had become a polarising player, which climaxed in May 2013 during a Sydney Swans-Collingwood match. Goodes singled out to the umpires a 13-year old female Collingwood fan that had called him 'ape' during play,

and who was then removed by security. While Goodes was backed by his peers, senior AFL officials and the Collingwood Football Club, his stand against the young spectator drew far less support from Australia's "conservative commentariat", which reframed the incident as Goodes having picked on a naïve, defenceless girl (D'Cruz, 2018: 132). The event intensified an unprecedented level of booing directed squarely at Goodes during his games, far beyond the standard amount of jeering that spectators would send players' ways. It became so unrelenting that Goodes called an early retirement. Many observers in the public domain saw the booing as abject and unmistakable racism, a point confirmed since racist slurs usually accompanied it. Still, there were attempts (albeit incredulous) to explain it otherwise: as free speech that was part of the sport, directed to the player and not their race.

It was widely assumed that, post football, Goodes would continue his fight against racism in Australia, but few expected him to take his cause to David Jones – or for David Jones to invite such a contentious personality into its marketing. According to the brand, the appointment was tied to its Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), part of its CSR. As Goodes explained, when heritage organisations such as David Jones adopt an RAP, they play an important role in 'closing the gap' (between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians), creating a more inclusive society, and promoting change (David Jones, 2016). The fact that the campaign launch came so soon after Goodes' retirement ensured that his politics would inflect public reaction. On the brand's Facebook page, the topic monopolised feedback, secured for David Jones some semblance of cultural relevance, and gave the tired brand a much-needed shot of media frisson (Tse, 2015). By aligning the brand with a figure already campaigning against the historical and institutionalised mistreatment of Indigenous

Australians, David Jones borrowed from Goodes' political capital to flag its own newfound edge. It co-opted the identity of empowerment embodied in Goodes (Ritson, 2015), which forced the brand's iconography into the 21st century and created an instant talking point. The appointment proved a marketing coup. On the day of its release, the video featuring Goodes had been viewed online over 200, 000 times and the brand's Facebook page saw a massive upsurge in new page 'Likes', up 235% from the previous week (Hatch, 2015).

In terms of 'cutting through', the appointment of Goodes was an unqualified success. At the same time, David Jones set in motion something that now follows every brand that makes provocative statements. Namely, social media censure from those offended and outraged. In this case, the booing that had usurped the tail end of Goodes' football career followed him online. As if to prove his point – of endemic and entrenched discrimination – the retailer's Facebook page was soon flooded with racist, hateful comments, many simply repeating the slurs Goodes had encountered in play (McKenny, 2015). Subsequent news coverage centred on this aspect of his new role, which garnered media attention (as David Jones most likely expected) and drew the brand into a larger cultural conversation, as befits marketing that speaks to topical and debatable issues.

Many of the Facebook comments simply stated 'boo' (Carter, 2015), while many others constituted hate speech that would have legal consequences offline. These comments found footing and support on social media and sustained a long-term campaign to vilify Goodes. He had been taunted, mocked and sledged across Twitter, Wikipedia, YouTube and memes. As Matamoros-Fernández (2017) argues, such practices are enabled by 'platformed racism', whereby social media furnishes racists with tools that, by virtue of the libertarian

ideology that steered how the Internet developed, green-lights bigoted, derogatory speech. Through their affordances, policies, algorithms and corporate governance these tools were "important in magnifying the racist discourse around Adam Goodes", as the content was shared and Liked thousands of times and hence rewarded with metrics of popularity (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017: 938). Once the booing of Goodes followed him onto the David Jones Facebook page, it was clear that, as Coram and Hallinan (2017) note, and contrary to those that claimed otherwise, it could all be "traced back to his stand as a proud Indigenous man who stood up to his racial vilification" (p. 109).

Brands cannot assume perfect symmetry between their interests and ideals and those of their followers. Where there is stark misalignment, brand equity suffers. Many of the racist comments that were directed at Goodes and David Jones via Facebook were so abhorrent that some of Australia's leading news organisations refused to repeat them in their coverage. On the brand's Facebook page, though, the speed and intensity with which the 'booers' dominated discussion became *the* story. The episode vividly illustrated what Susan Fournier and Jill Avery (2011) call 'open source branding', whereby "a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation such that consumers gain an equal, if not greater, say than marketers in what the brand looks like and how it behaves" (p. 194). This produces a paradoxical quirk: "in gaining resonance, the brand relinquishes control" (p. 194). Given that negative content is often interesting, shareable and highly newsworthy, the risk to brand image is high: "Without warning, brands can find themselves at the center of a vortex, to which they must bend or otherwise respond" (p. 200). In short, the brand's response must adhere to and ideally strengthen the overall brand image without sacrificing that aspect of the brand message that drew criticism.

For David Jones, the barrage of online abuse gave the brand cause to reaffirm its commitment to both Goodes and their RAP. As a result, media coverage of the retailer's statements, lamenting the hate speech and reaffirming its stand by Goodes, had another (and predictable) outcome: an outpouring of support for the appointment, on the brand's Facebook page. This has become a fairly standard trajectory: controversial representations prompt highly-publicised outrage, the brand issues statements, which in turn prompt others to counter the critics with messages of support and praise. For David Jones, and as befits the brand's upmarket image, the response to racists was measured and succinct; the brand did not engage directly with the social media 'haters' but through official media statements.

Optus: 'We speak your language'

Goodes had become synonymous with Indigenous pride, anger, resilience and resolve, so he guaranteed for David Jones an automatic headline. However, representations of diversity do not require a well-known personality to activate social media conversations. In November 2015, telecommunication brand Optus was also the subject of heated online debate, for reasons similarly indebted to a discourse of diversity. In this case though, the outcry was triggered by the brand's use of Arabic text in its promotions. In shopping centres around Australia, frequented by shoppers that shared a language other than English, Optus mounted posters that stated, 'We speak your language' (in Arabic, Vietnamese, Mandarin and so on, depending on which other language was mostly spoken). These informed local shoppers that some staff in the nearby Optus store was fluent in a language that they were comfortable in (besides English). This strategy, of modified marketing in multicultural settings, is not uncommon in Australia, (Wilkinson and Cheng, 1999: 108). It has been widely

used by the private sector since the mid 1990s, especially by companies like Optus. Given

the extent to which new immigrants relied on affordable long-distance communication, they

benefitted from such language-specific campaigns (Chan, 2006: 241).

While the posters had been rolled out across various shopping centres in different

languages, only one proved controversial. In Casula Mall, in Sydney's outer southwest, the

poster's message was in Arabic, with an Arab-looking model smiling in her Optus uniform.

Statistically, this made sense. By 2016, at 1.4%, Arabic had eclipsed Italian to become the

third top language spoken in Australian households, after English and Mandarin (ABS, 2017).

Casula sits within Liverpool City, where Arabic is spoken by 11.4% of the population, up from

9.5% in 2011 (Multicultural NSW, 2017) and second only to English. Language was thus used

as a highly congruent ethnic cue (Khan et al, 2015: 224). Indeed, such commercial logic has

become so common in Australia that there are now annual multicultural marketing awards,

agencies that specialise in multicultural marketing, and the emergence of casting agencies

dedicated to finding and promoting work for actors and models that benefit from this

growing need in Australian media.

In anything other than a monolingual consumer market, language selection is a sensitive

issue for the general public (Caminal, 2010: 774) since it privileges fluency in something that

many would not recognise (Richardson, 2012: 68). As Johnson and Grier (2011) note, "While

targeting minority groups is becoming a commercial necessity, [advertisers] cannot afford to

alienate the rest of the market, especially if this 'rest' is still the majority of the population

and of the marketplace" (p. 236). This risk is exacerbated when the target (Arabic speakers)

is associated with something that many may in fact fear or harbour negative feelings

towards – Islam (Markus, 2014: 13). This sits within a larger story of Australians' growing

unease around multiculturalism in general, based on resurgent nativism and fears of

religious extremism (Walsh, 2014: 281). It marks a convergence of ignorance, anxiety and

fear that makes 'minority marketing' fraught with danger. According to Sinclair (2009), "fear

of the brand becoming associated with a racial outgroup" (p. 179) sees general reluctance

by advertisers to commission language and culture specific campaigns.

In this instance, the use of Arabic was provocative for reasons far from rational. The Optus

Facebook page was initially inundated with comments that fell into two main camps. First

were those that found the use of Arabic objectively abhorrent, as though signage in

anything other than English implied weak capitulation to those that refuse to assimilate.

Reflecting on the matter in the *Daily Telegraph*, a populist tabloid, Susie O'Brien wrote: "The

fact that many of the people who live near me don't learn English reminds me that they

don't want to become part of our community; they just want to make money from our real

estate" (O'Brien 2015). Second, there were those that found the timing of the posters

insensitive since they came so soon after the ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks in Paris on 13

November (Davey, 2015). Clearly, this rests on the misconception that Islam, Arabic and

terrorism could be so casually conflated.

The scale of the Paris attacks (Ginesta et al. 2017: 625) meant that, even in Australia, the

topic dominated news and current affairs for several days. This had direct consequences for

Optus. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, around the world, the volume and

intensity of online hate speech directed at ethnic and religious minorities spiked. For

Kaakinen et al. (2018), this phenomenon is attributable to social media's unique

accommodation of 'fringe' speech that would not be tolerated elsewhere (a point made earlier). They write that, while the direct victims of the attacks were in Paris, "the media-based contact extended its psychological impact throughout Europe and the rest of the world" and created a social climate "determined by continuous insecurity and fear of future attacks based on possibilities instead of probabilities" (p. 92). Telescoped to Casula, this anxiety saw Arabic, official language of over 20 countries and the first language of over 200 million people worldwide, linked to terrorism. Not only was the Optus Facebook page overtaken by angry and ill-informed comments, but also threats of physical violence were made against store staff. This forced Optus to act and on 18 November a brand spokesperson announced: "following a threat to our store staff, we made a decision to remove some materials that were published in Arabic. The safety and security of staff is paramount" (quoted in Howden, 2015).

Like David Jones, the Optus Facebook page drew a barrage of racist, hateful speech. However, there were differences in how Optus responded – first to the racist posts, and then when the removal of the posters (to protect Opus staff from physical harm) was wrongly read as a *mea culpa* (Bagshaw, 2015). Besides media statements to address the outrage collectively, the brand's Facebook moderators also addressed commentators individually. This enabled Optus to both reinforce its commitment to diversity (Canning, 2016) and also, in the process, school critics on matters of history, demography and basic general knowledge – particularly those that equated language with religion or assumed that posters had only been printed in Arabic.

Medibank: for 'every kind of family'

In both the David Jones and Optus examples, the outrage spoke to grievances and anxieties that had simmered in Australia for centuries (relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians) and decades (Australians' mistrust of Arab Muslims). Brands' inclusion of divisive people and groups are therefore deliberate and knowing. The endorsement of cultural diversity implies a progressive, future-focused sensibility. As such, its use in branding is likely to: upset traditionalists; offend those that are insular or parochial; and unsettle anybody that sees the extension of cultural recognition as a zero-sum game. For these reasons, brands that project a cosmopolitan outlook bank on a growing share of goodwill and support. They are cognisant that support for diversity drives a debate that has already been won – albeit to one side's chagrin. However, and as seen with David Jones and Optus, even representations that carry official backing from legislation, policies and charters do not necessarily enjoy a universal mandate from the populace, and that corps of resistance finds release on social media. This played out again in February 2016 when Medibank, Australia's biggest private health insurance brand, launched its 'I am better' campaign.

Through this campaign, Medibank presented one of the most eclectic arrays of family life in Australian advertising history. This point was stressed by the TVC's montage and voiceover, covering the various ways that Australians (or at least Medibank's 3.9 million members) express and experience 'family': families with foster children, no children, children with Down syndrome, and 'kids with fur' (pets); single-parent families, single grandparent families and families with same-sex parents. It also promised health cover for 'every kind of individual' – including those new to the country or new to the language. It was a

kaleidoscopic feast, but the inclusion of same-sex parents proved the most controversial. On the cusp of Australia's historic plebiscite on marriage equality (which returned a 'yes' vote in November 2017), the minute-long advert was timely, topical and – as it turned out – divisive. In its wide embrace of every kind of domestic arrangement under the feel-good rubric 'family', including same-sex parents, Medibank courted pushback from those Australians still unconvinced by the 'Yes' case for equity, equality and empathy.

As official sponsor of the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras, the campaign capped an already strong association between Medibank and Australia's LGBTI communities. For some though, the inclusion of same-sex parenting in the Medibank campaign was considered proof that the brand had insulted (if not abandoned) the traditional family unit – a sentiment they shared on Medibank's Facebook page (Higginson, 2016; Killalean, 2016). Accused of overstating the incidence of same-sex parenting in Australia, Medibank's response was succinct. Citing research that 1 in 29 Australians identify as gay and only 6.8% of Australian families fall into the traditional nuclear structure, the brand's Facebook representatives maintained that their messaging was accurate, inclusive (Bobbins, 2016) and in line with Medibank's Diversity & Inclusion Policy.

In their inclusion of Goods, Arabic and same-sex parents, these brands pointed to a 'woke' sensibility. Whatever controversy they anticipated or caused presumably upset only those in vain denial of contemporary cultural realities. Still, the fact that these brands made such bold and unapologetic commitments to diversity, and refused to bend to consumers that took umbrage, shows how practices of branding have evolved beyond the discrete demarcations of old. On social media, brands will be lassoed into dominant cultural debates.

Put another way, had Medibank omitted same-sex parents from its definition of the modern

Australian family, there would almost certainly still have been social media censure – from

LGBTI advocates calling for recognition, visibility and presence. Viewed thus, and from a

commercial perspective, it makes sense to champion a view of diversity that is generous,

realistic and celebratory – especially when there is a generational preference for such

messaging. Still, until all representations of diversity are met with relaxed nonchalance, it is

likely that brands will tread across political fault lines. For this reason, brand imagery of

Adam Goodes, Arabs and same-sex parents asked Australians to interrogate their own

biases and assumptions in ways that could have political, philosophical and/or material

consequences.

Conclusion

For many brands, forays into the political realm are both shrewd appraisals of popular

causes as well as inevitable outcomes of contemporary media practices. There are at least

two key forces pushing brands in this direction: the growing ease and speed with which

citizen-consumers mobilise support or punishment for brands that fail to endorse or encode

a particular politics (Kelm and Dohle, 2018: 1524) – the ascent and normalisation of

'commodity activism'; and a dialectical relationship between brands and consumers that has

privileged 'cultural branding' as the dominant brand paradigm. As they percolate media that

are ever more interactive, participatory, convergent and dispersed, brands design

campaigns that most closely reflect the interests and ideals of (increasingly 'woke')

'crowdcultures'. As such, this article shows how brands adapt to the mercurial conditions of

contemporary media. Given the swift and often uncensored backlash that brands can

attract on social media, they effectively tempt commercial retribution when they diverge

from popularly safe scripts. Brands must now factor in the likelihood that, on social media, users will unpack contentious representations; they cannot be silenced or ignored and must be negotiated lest they derail the brand narrative (Gensler et al. 2013: 242-244). As such, social media management becomes a necessary part of the brand's identity, as online moderators tread a fine line between respectfully acknowledging detractors and defending the brand's values and ideals.

As commercially motivated constructs, profit, reputation and shareholders inevitably drive brands. There is an obvious and inescapable limit on just how bold or controversial their political statements will be: these will almost always be tempered by a capitalist instinct. That said, the brands considered here show that this overarching impulse does not cancel out or diminish a culturally significant shift in how brands address consumers. Indeed, at a time of growing frustration with how much of mainstream media ignores, maligns or misrepresents particular groups and issues, this analysis serves as a timely examination of some ironic tensions. Social media responses to David Jones, Optus and Medibank illustrate how consumer practices and political discourses both collide and coalesce. Online debates via Facebook canvass the cultural fissures that underpin contentious debates, in dynamic and real-time exchanges. For this reason, and as these representations of diversity intersect with myriad and nuanced audiences, technologies, climates and conditions, they produce fresh and valuable cultural insights.

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