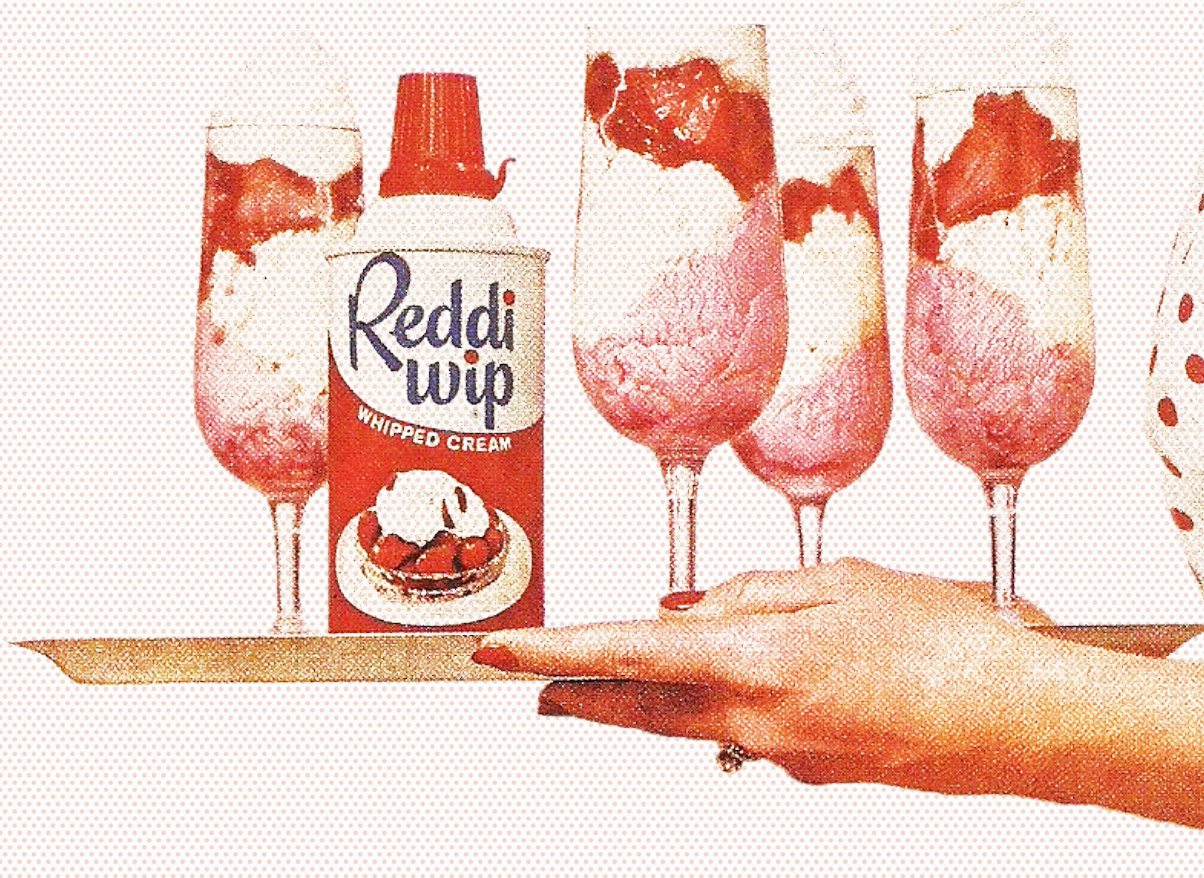


*trapped  
in the  
kitchen*



How marketing fails minorities and women  
Lauren Frankforter, May 12, 2022

Brands have the power to shape culture. The average American constantly sends and receives messages, and about 4,000-10,000 of those messages come from brands and advertising. Companies spend millions to make their messages the one of the few that consumers actually listen to, and their messages generally urge people to take some sort of action. While we may not always be cognizant of it, marketing makes a significant impact on what we do, what we buy, and what we think.

However, we all know advertising is notorious for sending subliminally harmful messages. Marketing has a dark history regarding its treatment of minority consumers and staff. According to authors and former advertising professionals Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts, “between 1980 and 2010, women in commercials were shown in workplace settings only 4 percent of the time,” and they were very often shown in kitchens. Additionally, women were generally portrayed in a negative light, needing something new to help them stay fit, look attractive, look after their homes, and look after their children.

Things haven’t gotten much better - “in 2019, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found that ads up for awards at the prestigious Cannes Lions advertising festival depicted male characters working almost twice as often as female characters. Male characters also outnumbered female characters 2:1 and had twice as much screen time and speaking time. Another study conducted by Ebiquity, a media consultancy, found that, of the ads aired in 2016, only 4 percent showed women in leadership positions”.

While marketing messages may not be explicitly harmful, they still convey oppressive ideas - dieting has turned into ‘wellness’ and the word

‘ageless’ has replaced age-defying products. And while the general world of advertising may appear to be more progressive and less overtly detrimental, many of our most powerful corporations and brands haven’t changed. Just this week, here were some reinforced stereotypes I found in advertising:

*While a Hello Fresh ad on YouTube didn’t explicitly depict a woman cooking, it showed the hands of a woman preparing food with a female voiceover.*

*A Febreze commercial on Hulu featured a woman tidying up her home for her man to arrive.*

*A Lowes commercial for lawn mowers on Hulu featured exclusively male characters and a male voiceover.*



## ***Who’s in charge of sending these messages?***

*Who are the oppressors, and how do we know it’s them?*

Companies can either produce their marketing in-house or partner with advertising agencies. Because companies invest so much into their branding and advertising, they must be strategic and intentional in all decisions. Many people are involved in those creative decisions – teams may consist of strategists, writers, directors, designers, photographers, videographers, and so many others, depending on production needs. Regardless, all forms of marketing – advertising, social media, PR moves – are overseen by many people. And after ads are created, they’re to be reviewed by company higher-ups. Essentially, there is a large group of people respon-

sible for every single advertisement produced – so when a brand sends a harmful message, several people are at fault. It’s important to look even deeper into who exactly fills those marketing roles. While the male-to-female ratio of people working in advertising is pretty equal, men are the ones in leadership positions – “While there are about equal numbers of women and men in advertising overall, 71 percent of creative directors – the role with the most creative control – are men” (Altman). In addition, a majority of the people in charge of crafting brand messages are white – roughly 73 percent.

## ***Who are these messages for, and are they being heard?***

*Who is being oppressed and why is this oppressive?*

Marketing and advertising seem to fail most when it comes to representing women and minorities. In efforts to make their products appear more desirable, advertisers leave out many audiences, and the way they understand these audiences comes from social stereotypes. Three-quarters of women worry that the way models look in advertising makes women feel bad about themselves and can be harmful, and 63% believe that advertising holds some blame for eating disorders.

A study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media reported that “while 74% of ads [in 2020] features at least one woman, 61% were white. Once cast, women of color face an institutional lack of access to makeup artists, stylists, and photographers. Euro-centric norms also affect women outside the industry: Black women are 80% more likely to change their hair due to biased expectations at work”. Here are some other statistics the study found:

*Latinos make up about 18% of the population, yet only 6% of characters in ads were Latino.*

*Sexist stereotypes were reinforced as 88% of Latino people wearing revealing clothing in ads were women.*

*One in ten women in ads were over fifty years old.*

*One in five Middle Eastern characters in ads were women.*

*Asian characters were half as likely to be shown driving in an ad.*

*Black characters were twice as likely to be shown in comedic roles.*

*White characters were twice as likely to be portrayed as “especially intelligent”.*

*Almost of characters with disabilities that were depicted were white.*

*Only 2% of ads depicted at least one character from the LGBTQ+ community.*

*Less than 1% of characters were indigenous, and only 4% of those had speaking roles.*

Even though some may argue that 'it's just advertising,' it can be oppressive. Oppression is considered the "network of forces that together restrict the freedom of individuals" (Gillis 76), and mar-

keting consists of large networks of people working together. The ultimate goal of marketing and advertising is to make some sort of impact on people and society; because the industry seeks to make

an impact in order to influence or even control what people buy or do, it can have the potential to be oppressive.



## *How are these messages harmful?*

*What does it feel like to experience this sort of oppression and what are the possible consequences of it?*

The images around us have the ability to shape how we see the world. If people are constantly surrounded by messages and ads that either underrepresent or misrepresent them, it may eventually have a collective impact, especially when these messages are coming from brands with widespread influence and economic power. Studies have shown that a long-term effect of living life surrounded by biased brand messages is that "they quietly shape our entire construction of reality" (Roberts and Cunningham). If

a young woman comes across 10,000 messages from brands in a single day, then it's likely that hundreds, if not thousands, of these messages are telling her to be thinner, prettier, hairless, more feminine, blonder, and younger – every single day.

## *Why are these messages being shared?*

*What keeps this particular oppression in place and how may it be justified?*

According to the 3 percent movement, which is dedicated to increasing female representation in creative director positions, "55% of agencies offer diversity/unconscious bias training". If just over half of the industry is aware of their implicit biases, that means about half of ads being produced may still be stereotypical or misrepresentational – and I think the industry can do much better. The people who are still creating sexist or racist marketing messages may argue that stereotypes exist for a reason. Additionally, we've all heard that 'sex sells'

in advertising, yet does this mean that sexism is supposed to sell? Ultimately, these excuses are not enough, and several people are keeping them in place. All people that contribute to an ad are responsible for making sure it's socially responsible, and because creative directors ultimately have the most authority when it comes to the creative control of an ad, they should be held to the highest standard. However, the vast majority of creative directors in the US are white and male.

# How can we change the narrative?

*In what ways do the oppressed resist, and what are systemic changes that would help to undermine this instance of oppression?*

*What are the possible consequences of liberating the oppressed in this scenario?*

The main way women and minorities can influence real change in advertising is to spend money on the brands that get it right – many unconventional direct-to-customer brands place diversity as a top priority, such as Glossier, Third-Love, and Warby Parker. By refusing to buy into harmful marketing, brands will have no choice but to rethink their strategies in order to keep up with a highly saturated and competitive market.

Many internal changes are to be made if the industry really wants to do better. By balancing gender representation in marketing, especially in leadership positions, brands have a better chance of reaching and representing their audiences, therefore impacting them. Doing the same for ethnic minorities and other oppressed groups can produce even greater grange. The more diverse a creative team is, the less likely their messages will only reflect the mythical norm. And ultimately, it's essential to ensure that creative teams are informed and unbiased, which can be achieved through diversity, equity, and inclusion training.

However, it's important to be mindful to ensure brand messaging aligns with the brand's values and actions. A consequence of liberating the oppressed, in this case increasing diversity in marketing, is performative activism, something many major brands currently do. Performative activism happens when people and brands support an issue or cause because they want to seem like they care rather than actually contributing to or helping the cause. For example, a large number of brand logos are decorated with a pride rainbow every June, but do all of these companies actually con-

tribute to LGBTQ+ causes? Instead of shining light on real issues, performative activism gives the attention back to the brand. By hiring diverse teams, brands and agencies can better empathize with their audiences. It takes a wide range of knowledge to tell truly inclusive stories that represent real people and the world as it is today.

*“As storytellers and business leaders, we have to be vigilant to really reflect our ever-changing culture. By 2045, the US will become ‘minority white,’ so it’s very important that we use an intersectional lens, and that we stay relevant with how our culture is shifting.”*

- Madeline Di Nonno, President and CEO of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media



Trapped in the Kitchen

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