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HOW DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AFFECT SHOPPER ATTITUDES

by

Melissa Oliver

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Fashion Business & Entrepreneurship
at
Lindenwood University

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HOW DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AFFECT SHOPPER ATTITUDES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science
at
Lindenwood University

By

Melissa Michelle Oliver

Saint Charles, Missouri

March 2021

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: How Diversity and Inclusion Affect Shopper Attitudes

Melissa Oliver, Master of Science/Fashion Business & Entrepreneurship, 2021

Thesis Directed by: Dr. Chajuana Trawick, Endowed Chair and Associate Professor of Fashion & Design

This paper analyzes the effects of consumer behavior in relation to diversity and inclusion in retail advertisements. The primary objective of diversity and inclusion initiatives is to have a workforce that closely resembles an organization's target audience and the growing group of loyal customers the company wants to retain. Differences in age, race, gender, national origin and sexual orientation should be encouraged in advertisements to ensure optimal organizational performance. People who are different from one another in race, gender and other dimensions bring unique information and experiences to bear on the task at hand. By analyzing consumer behavior based off diversity and inclusion in advertising, you can better understand how authenticity plays a part in perceptions.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This paper and the research behind it would not have been possible without the exceptional support of my committee chair, Dr. Trawick, and committee members, Professor Perry and Professor Skoglund. Their enthusiasm, knowledge and exacting attention to detail have been an inspiration and kept my work on track all the way to the final draft of this paper. I am also grateful for the insightful comments offered by the anonymous peer reviewers. The generosity and expertise of one and all have improved this study in innumerable ways and saved me from many errors.

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Introduction

It is no secret that today's shoppers do not always feel valued or represented for who they are. However, in recent years, and especially with everything that has happened in 2020, the retail industry is making strides in diversity and inclusion, and customers are noticing, which in turn creates a tremendous opportunity for retailers. Although improvements have been made over the past decade, inclusion is too often treated as a box to tick. Recently, I switched careers from Information Technology to Fashion Business. Once I began working in the retail industry, I started noticing a lack of diversity in advertisements posted throughout retail stores. This prompted me to explore how a lack of diversity and inclusion in retail advertisements can affect a business' profits, as well as consumer behavior. To develop more meaningful relationships with consumers, retailers must insert themselves around a strong, authentic purpose linked to diversity and inclusion values. Advocating for diversity and inclusion is an opportunity to cultivate a culture that matches customer values. By offering products that address consumers diverse needs, retailers are becoming more inclusive and are attracting new customers at the same time. Let us revisit the iconic scene in the 90's movie, *Pretty Woman*. Julia Roberts' character walks into a high-end Beverly Hills boutique, and a rude sales associate turns her away based on how she looks, remarking, "I don't think we have anything for you. You're obviously in the wrong place". This movie was filmed 30 years ago. So, imagine if someone had experienced that today. Julia's character would have made the incident viral on her social media before even leaving the store.

Diversity and inclusion are gradually becoming more important for businesses globally due to a shift in consumers' expectations. It does not matter that this is a response to a higher moral duty or commercial pressure. What matters is that attitudes change, society becomes truly inclusive, and that the barriers surrounding diversity are broken down. This shift by businesses is both necessary and encouraging. Society has been fed the belief that

retail experiences play a role in defining broader social interactions, therefore questioning how corporate diversity and inclusion policies transform into the physical retail environment and customer experience. How are businesses with a retail presence able to deliver inclusive experiences to their consumers? Unfortunately, there is not a candid answer to such a complicated question. Brands are exclusive and different by nature. Each brand has its own distinctive offer and individual target market, which requires an unambiguous solution. It is totally reasonable that a business focus on their own target market for much of the business' marketing activities. However, when it comes to branded physical environments, companies will profit by making these as inclusive as reasonably possible. Although a brand can choose their target market, they can't choose their consumers. To encourage further discussions, this paper discusses various insights that will make clear how retail experiences can become more inclusive. As a starting point, diversity and inclusion will be defined. Diversity is defined as the mixture of individuals in society; the range of human differences, and 'Inclusion' as the practice of providing equal access and opportunities to people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized (Johnston, 2020). Accessible doesn't equate inclusive and diverse. Looking more in-depth into what is required to comply with the disability regulations, the attention and focus on 'access' is understood, however, further conversations to define 'inclusive' interactions are necessary.

State of the Field

Retailers' diversity and inclusion practices have been making a positive impact on shoppers' behaviors. People are already shopping based on their values. Recently, I interviewed two coworkers from a previous job at Hollister Company. When asked to give their opinion on various retailers, both participants agreed that they have slightly shifted their business away from a retailer that does not reflect how important diversity and inclusion is to

them. Both participants, who are minorities and younger shoppers, have noticed a higher frequency of diversity and inclusion-driven switching in the last year. In this year alone, many retailers began championing the Black Lives Matter movement, specifically after George Floyd's murder. A long list of retailers would include words of encouragement on the brick-and-click sites. Although this was encouraging, I could not help but wonder if some businesses were only using the hashtag "Black Lives Matter" as an opportunity to gain business. There was a long list of retailers that posted words of encouragement for my community but did nothing else to make real change. It felt as though #BLM was a trend for some businesses rather than a movement to end police brutality and racial discrimination. I dare not name any specific retailers that have experienced this kind of customer backlash. No organization is immune to mistakes. Even companies that have gotten positive press for embracing diversity and inclusion have made missteps that got just as much, if not more attention.

There are many factors that would induce consumers to select one retailer over another when price, access and products are identical. As a Black woman, I know that my community takes trust seriously, along with feeling that the retailer is socially responsible when deciding who to spend their money with. African American consumers represent a tremendous and growing buying power. According to the latest African American spending statistics from Nielsen, African Americans spend \$1.2 trillion annually, and their spending is expected to grow to \$1.54 trillion by 2022 (Gudat, 2018). This further emphasizes the importance for retailers to use a multi-cultural and inclusive marketing strategy. There is a high degree of loyalty amongst the Black community to those retailers who deliver on the factors important to them. Shoppers are not just turning away from retailers that do not share their values, they are turning toward those that do. Based on the responses from the anonymous participants, it seems shoppers are likely to switch to a retailer that reflects the importance they place on diversity

and inclusion. Such purpose-driven switching can improve retailers' top line. Take Nike, for example. The company launched a "Just Do It" ad campaign with football player Colin Kaepernick. The quarterback was rejected by the National Football League for kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality against African Americans. Some consumers boycotted the brand. But many embraced it. In the days after the ad was released, Nike's online sales nearly doubled compared to the same period the previous year, and its stock price reached an all-time high (Berr, 2018). Retailers can expect better performance when they offer products, services and experiences that reflect what shoppers want and value. Even so, championing diversity and inclusion is a tremendous opportunity for retailers. Embedding it across every function of the business while cultivating an inclusive culture is good for business, and it matters to customers.

My recent survey reveals that not only do shoppers expect retailers to engage in conversations around social issues, but also, diversity and inclusion influences their purchasing and switching behaviors. While it depends on the category and segment, the interviewees both noted that they would pay a premium of five percent or more to shop with a retailer committed to diversity and inclusion. In other words, retailers can expect better performance when they offer products, services and experiences that reflect what shoppers want and value. By orienting around a strong, authentic purpose, who they are and why they are here, linked to diversity and inclusion values, retailers can develop more meaningful relationships with customers. As shopper demographics continue to shift from static segmentation profiles, embracing people's differences and creating positive experiences for everyone is more than brand building or risk management. It is essential for growing wallet share and winning over customers.

Action is complex when transforming an inclusive brand into retail. Therefore, all touchpoints should be considered. There are a good number of retail brands that are making

great efforts to be diverse and inclusive, however, those same brands are still struggling to translate these policies onto the shop floor. Businesses need to ensure that their brand's promise is represented throughout the store experience and with each moment of the consumer's journey when creating brands with inclusive positioning. No longer is it good enough for businesses to claim they are inclusive, rather, it's their actions that matters. A deeper customer connection is achieved when a brand's marketing claims are reinforced by its in-store actions and their values become more authentic. Consider MAC Cosmetics, a global leader in brand inclusiveness. Diversity and inclusion are explicitly integrated into their brand promise, which is, "all ages, all races, all genders" (Johnston, 2020). The high bar they set for themselves is admirable, however there are some opportunities to render such a promise to be better and create a more inclusive experience across all the physical touchpoints in-store. MAC Cosmetics is just one example, but this can be said for many companies. According to a study conducted in 2019 from Deloitte agency Heat, representation in ads correlated with an increase in both stock price and public perception (Beer, 2019). A company will benefit if consumers see advertisements that portray people who look and act like them because if a consumer feels more connected to the brand, they will be more likely to make a purchase. Data from Marketing Drive shows that brands with the highest level of diverse representation in their ads saw an average stock gain of 44% across seven quarters. Further, the most diverse brands were preferred by 83% of consumers. The likelihood of purchase is nearly equal for both white (70%) and non-white (71%) consumers, exemplifying the value of diversifying campaigns (McKinney, 2020). Subtle changes to a company's environment can easily help convey an inclusive brand message to the center of the customer experience. Referring back to the example of MAC Cosmetics, their promotional images displayed in-store exclusively featured young women and their product names, some of which include, 'Prissy Princess', 'Mischievous Minx', and 'Basic Bitch' are deeply marketed to females. This is contradictory of the brand's

positioning of “all genders”. And although it is typical for the store staff to exemplify the brand’s inclusive positioning, and although the company itself reflects well the ethnic diversity of their consumers, in the store I visited, there were no older women or men working. However, this is only one example of how a brand is lacking in diversity and inclusion in more ways than one. My point is that if there is no representation in-store of the brand message in either the promotional staff or the imagery, does this make the brand position unauthentic? The minority consumers will be empowered, without affecting the majority by increasing the diversity in-store through at least one touchpoint.

More can be said on how companies will profit by featuring inclusive and diverse advertisements. Let’s look at a well-known athleisure wear company, Nike. Launched just in time to mark the start of the 2018-2019 National Football League season, and also celebrating the 30th anniversary of the popular tagline, “Just Do It”, the full Nike commercial featuring social activist, and past NFL Quarter Back, Colin Kaepernick, lit up the cultural discourse like no ad had ever done. There were many mixed reviews. Some people loved it, while others hated it. Some people bought Nikes, while others burned Nikes. However, the commercial was talked about it at home, at work, on the news; everywhere. It was disruptive because it addressed America’s biggest fault lines, race, patriotism, sports, and business. However, according to Nike founder Phil Knight, that was kind of the point. Nike’s results seemed to have backed that up. Despite Fox News and parts of the social media sphere predicting the Swoosh’s downfall, the company claimed \$163 million in earned media, a \$6 billion brand value increase, and a 31% boost in sales (Beer, 2019). What can be learned is that for one, brands risk getting significantly burned if they don’t back up their purpose-filled advertising with actual action. Before and since the Nike ad, too many brands have mistaken taking a stand on something in an ad as a solution or alternative for actually taking a stand on something. Based off of my research, it can be said there is undeniable evidence

which shows that both businesses and society benefit when solutions go beyond a business' target market to embrace the wider diversities within the community. Inclusive design is more than just about elevating the experience of those more vulnerable. It has more to do with actualizing the full potential of those who have been excluded to impact society as others can. Thus, creating often unforeseen innovation and shared experiences that all of society can benefit from.

Methodology

Precisely measuring and analyzing the effects of diversity and inclusion as it relates to consumer behavior was questionable because I wasn't completely sure how it could be done. However, I used what I learned in previous graduate courses and narrowed the decision down to use either qualitative or quantitative data. The choice to use qualitative data was an easy one once I decided to conduct my own survey in order to get a better understanding of how diversity and inclusion in advertising affects consumer behavior. Using SurveyMonkey, I conducted an anonymous survey, which consisted of 10 various questions in order to gauge how important representation is in advertisements. I received 22 total responses from individuals of different races/ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. Throughout my study, I also asked people about their perceptions of authenticity in marketing. Of the various groups that I surveyed, African American and LGBTQ+ respondents expressed the strongest preference for diverse and inclusive advertisements. For example, 70% of Black consumers said they are more likely to purchase from a brand whose advertising positively reflects their race/ethnicity. The world is more mixed race than it has ever been and there are now generations of consumers who are increasingly multicultural through the intersectionality of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. For instance, I found out that 69% of LGBTQ consumers expressed that they are more likely to interact with an online ad that authentically

represents their sexual orientation. Brands should want to take the initiative to reflect the world we live in by showcasing the wide range of diverse identities within the LGBTQ+ community. This would include non-binary and transgender people, as well as lesbian and gay parents with children. For example, when a transgender person of color is represented in a commercial or advertisement, it builds a sense of trust and understanding, while sending a validating message to trans people everywhere. The results of my study clearly point out that people are more likely to consider, or even purchase a product after seeing an ad they think is diverse or inclusive and brands are expected to be inclusive in advertising.

Production

While it has been a positive change for many corporations to begin voicing support for Black Lives Matter in the weeks after the murders of individuals such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, it is going to take more than a few social media posts and vague PR statements if they truly want to embrace diversity. It is clear that the trend for inclusiveness is not going to slow down for businesses. So how should a company take this idea of positivity and incorporate a more inclusive message into their brand? Store layouts and in- hold the power. A business doesn't have to completely revamp their inventory to become inclusive. For some cases the simple solution is to update displays and store layout. A company can take what they already have and move inventory across gender lines, which would offer traditionally male clothing and products in the "women's" section, and maybe vice versa. Inclusivity embraces racial, ethnic, size, age and gender diversity and showcasing inclusivity should be a comprehensive and concerted effort. A step further would be to create dedicated gender-neutral sections that go across gender lines to appeal to a larger target audience. When I presented my oral defense, I mentioned to my committee how there are some stores that don't carry my clothing size, petite, and that can deter me from wanting to shop with that brand.

However, some would make the argument that distinct petite and plus size sections are in fact perpetuating the idea that if one does not fit into clothes in the “normal” section, they are different. For a more inclusive shopping experience, instead, the alternative solution would be to group all sizes together by style rather than by size. Conducting my survey has led me to conclude that there is a call for the improvement of diverse representation in store images. This goes beyond including different ethnicities, race, and socio-economic backgrounds. Examples of diversity and inclusion in retail would include plus size mannequins, Halloween costumes for children using wheelchairs on display, gender neutral clothing, images of dark-skinned models with dreadlocks, foundation for all skin tones and products for multicultural hair on shelves, visible and accessible to all. Each of these touchpoints in the consumer journey matters, whether it is displays, posters, flyers, social media posts and websites. To create an inclusive shopping experience, in-store representation and intention matter. If a company’s inclusive nature is completely ingrained in their business model, their authenticity should not come into question.

Conclusions

Due to a shift in consumers’ expectations, diversity and inclusion are becoming increasingly more important for businesses globally. However, one has to wonder if this shift is a response to commercial pressure or a higher moral duty. Yet, what is most important is that the barriers surrounding diversity are broken down and that attitudes are changed to truly become a inclusive society. As a Black woman growing up in the inner city of St. Louis, Missouri, I have too many memories of not feeling included and welcomed in stores from a very young age. Sadly, this is true for many people of color. Often, some of the common experiences include being ignored at stores, while white families coming in after were greeted with big wide smiles. To this day, many Black and Brown people are continuously treated differently due to racism or unconscious bias. To all the retailers

struggling to address racism, here is my advice. From my experience as a minority, but more importantly, as a valued customer, it is your responsibility to begin to dismantle structural racism that exists in your stores and is experienced by people of color. Diversity of thought doesn't happen without diversity of representation. Not only should advertisements being representative of all people, but the staff should be as well and can serve this multicultural base. Nevertheless, this shift by businesses is a positive one, and both encouraging and necessary. Although this paper has mentioned alternative solutions, there is not a straightforward answer for how businesses with a retail presence can deliver inclusive experiences to all their consumers. Each brand has its own distinct offer and specific target market, which requires a specific solution. Yet, while some may argue that every business is different and brands are exclusive by nature, the bottom line is that diversity and inclusion are essential for many types of businesses, from the board room, to the products and services offered. Businesses should start considering whether or not to join the movement or take the risk of leaving some consumers behind as they seek out more accepting alternatives.

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