

Havin' Fun With Supersize Stereotypes: McDonald's Online Marketing Campaign
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America is the well-known cultural melting pot of the world. Here, all sorts of races and ethnicities coexist, assimilating and mixing, to create a jambalaya of culture. If one were to reach a ladle into this metaphorical pot and scoop out a sample of the stew, it would probably taste like McDonald's. McDonald's is one of the most successful corporations of our time. Its prowess seems to transcend normal demographic divides; it is the entire world's local restaurant. One of McDonald's newest campaigns is digital and tries to appeal to consumers via the internet. The company has purchased several domain names; i-am-asian.com, 365black.com, and meencanta.com to separately lure customers in from various racial backgrounds. These sites appear to foster a community, congratulating each group's achievements, celebrating their uniqueness, and commemorating their culture. However, beneath all this multicultural pageantry there is a pronounced and barely masked advertising ploy. McDonald's "Havin' Fun" campaign blatantly targets various races individually so that it can personalize specific messages and advertising techniques for each group. The attempts to identify with minorities only extend to the most superficial, clichéd cultural components. This sort of target marketing portrays a shallow understanding of racial and ethnic identity and reinforces preexisting stereotypes.

Target marketing is nothing new. For decades, advertising companies have been sectoring off the public, directing different campaigns or advertisements towards specific groups. This is an accepted and expected practice. The advertisers need to recognize their audience in order to get the message right. Positioning a product for the elderly in an AARP magazine or advertising to children during Saturday morning cartoons makes

sense. McDonald's has been employing this technique for ages. As a large, prosperous company, McDonald's has had the resources to really expand on the standard target marketing techniques. Their minority marketing efforts began in 1972 when they hired an African-American owned advertising agency, Burrell Communications Group, to target the black community. McDonald's was actually one of the first companies to employ an agency to market exclusively for a minority group (Green 1). The representatives at Burrell had their roots in the African-American community, and understood the culture not just because they studied it, but because they lived it. The firm was paid big bucks to tell McDonald's exactly how to appeal to the African-American market. McDonald's Senior Vice-President of Marketing, David Green, brags that "this relationship has helped McDonald's...have the highest share of the African-American market. Talk to anyone in the 'hood,' and they talk about Mickey D's. We've become part of the vernacular" (1). Ignoring the racist implications for a moment, Green's statement is probably true. McDonald's has done a great job of making sure no one feels left out.

Although it is clear that some efforts are targeted towards a specific group, (billboards written in Spanish, a television commercial featuring a black family reunion, etc.) McDonald's generally seems to exercise a certain level of discretion in their advertisements. Their minority featured ads fit right into an age of political correctness. While perhaps designed for a particular demographic, they do not tend to shout this intention out loud. They try to achieve a seamless inclusion that will appeal to their target audience, but not come across as calculated or overtly contrived. This generally sensitive portrayal of minorities makes the "Havin' Fun" campaign all the more brazen and bizarre.

“Havin’ Fun” is a section on the McDonald’s website. “Havin’ Fun” features links to three micro-sites, which are “small Websites within the client’s site geared toward a particular promotion or campaign” (Anthony 2). They can be accessed from both the McDonalds’ “Havin’ Fun” homepage and by typing the domain name directly into a web browser. It wouldn’t be unusual for there to be special interest sections aimed towards certain consumers *within* the site, but to register entire websites for the express purpose of targeting a specific race is rather extreme, even in today’s ‘anything goes’ marketing world. Owning domain names, albeit ones as ridiculous as i-am-asian, presents a lot of possibility. Strangely, McDonald’s doesn’t seem to take much care in capitalizing on this opportunity: the websites are generally poorly executed. They have amateur designs and lack a friendly interface or worthwhile content. They make no attempt to hide their obtrusive efforts to appeal to those “on the fringe,” a sentiment McDonald’s implies by blatantly differentiating the minorities from the mainstream market. Each site is created specifically for Asians, Hispanics, or blacks, and announces this fact loud and clear. “We *know* you. We *understand* you. Please eat a Big Mac!” they seem to say. Making an attempt to relate to different communities is understandable, even when the sole purpose is to encourage consumerism and brand loyalty. However, if a company plans to display a contrived interest in a group, one would think they’d try to go about it in a sincere and subtle way.

“Me encanta” translates to “I love it,” a takeoff of McDonald’s most current slogan “I’m lovin’ it.” This site is made for the company’s Latino sector. The site’s default language is Spanish, but for the purposes of this paper I changed it to English. The main graphic of the page is a large graffiti-esque heart, decked out with fuzzy dice,

parrots, sombreros, and soccer balls. The Golden Arches tower above this conglomeration of “authentic Latin icons.” The words “Me Lado Latino” (My Latin Side) sprawl across the crowded heart as a reminder that *this* is what being Latin is all about: tacky car ornaments and a love of McDonald’s.

From there, the site churns out a repertoire of further stereotypes and simplified imagery. “We enjoy soccer, music, and special dates like no one else does!” brags a section called This Is My Passion. This section has a brief article glorifying Columbus Day, an article about McDonald’s Youth Soccer Clinic (which brings big name soccer stars to underprivileged Hispanic kids), and a link that seems to be about Spanish music but actually just boasts about McDonald’s relationship with the Latin Grammy’s. Under a section called “I Enjoy Playing” are several mini-games for the enjoyment of the Latino consumer. The games, which perhaps would have been considered thrillingly high-tech in the late 80’s, are fairly pathetic. They stretch to find ways to combine McDonald’s menu items and Latin culture in a medley of unparalleled fun. In doing so, the games come off as racist jokes rather than a form of challenging recreation.

One particularly offensive game is called “Party Tonight.” In it, you run down derelict streets of an urban neighborhood collecting as many Dollar Menu items as you can “so that everybody can have a good time with music, girls, and McDonald’s Dollar Menu!” This fits into the stereotype of Latinos as poor, patriarchal party animals. In another game called “Taximetro,” you are a taxi driver. Your mission: “Drive your taxi around the city and when you see someone thinking about chicken...you know where to take them!” This nearly seems to say that as a Latin American the best you can be is a

telepathic taxi-driver (not to mention that your clients in “el barrio” are a rather idle population, with no place to go except for the local Mickey D’s). In a section called “Latin Pride,” McDonald’s urges you to “Promote the Latin Spirit!” To do this you must display the tacky “Me Lado Latino” heart as conspicuously as possible. You can download the image as a screensaver, print it out as a poster, or transfer it onto a t-shirt or sticker. There is also a cut out stencil of the image and you are encouraged “take some spray paint in your favorite color and enjoy your Latino heart in authorized places!” Exactly what sort of places do they think would *authorize* this capitalist graffiti? Latino neighborhoods? Or is it just a perfunctory disclaimer? It would probably be McDonald’s dream to have free advertising on every building exterior and subway car. The only spirit that is promoted from all these interactive art projects is McDonald’s!

365black.com shies away from the lowest common denominator of African-American culture, and instead tries to appeal to the more serious “black-and-proud” philosophy. It is at least somewhat comforting to see that the VP of Marketing’s racist comment, equating the African-American market to “the hood,” doesn’t spill over to the online realm. In fact, McDonald’s seems vigilant to avoid more typically portrayed stereotypes of black male characters such as “buffoons, menacing and unruly youths, or as hypermasculine thugs” and black female characters as “exotic and sexually available” (Coltrane 3). The site accomplishes this quite well, and should actually be commended for doing so. However, it still maintains a strange sense of overstatement and exudes a patronizing quality. For example, the intro page displays a silhouette of a large African tree, the Baobab. “Whatever blooms from the Baobab is given back to the earth, because the mighty tree never forgets its roots. Like the mighty Baobab, McDonald’s and I will

not be moved!” the site proclaims. I’m not exactly sure what this phrase is trying to inspire. Have blacks been wrong in looking to Africa for their roots? Is their culture actually hidden beneath the Golden Arches? The site is padded with stock images of black men and women in power-suits, standing tall, with serious expressions on their faces. There are no mini-games to be found here. Instead there is a section devoted to prominent African-Americans in the McDonald’s corporation, with testimonials of how McDonald’s helped them realize and pursue their dreams. The site even directs focus to previous advertisements aimed towards blacks, and allows you to view several television commercials featuring black lead characters. It almost seems proud to show off the contrived attempts at appealing to the black community by featuring young men rapping about McDonald’s on the basketball court.

During my research of 365black.com, the site suddenly went through a complete and inexplicable transformation. It went from what I just described, an unconcealed invocation to the black community, to a sleek, ambiguous domain over night. The site currently has very little content attached to it. The tagline on the top of the page reads “Deeply rooted in our community!” As if to provide proof of this concept, their homepage shows an African-American woman smiling broadly, surrounded by a gaggle of red and yellow balloons. This woman is Charlotte M., and McDonald’s wants you to know how they helped change her life. You learn that Charlotte is the one million dollar winner of McDonald’s Monopoly Sweepstakes 2006. There is a short article chronicling the fateful day Charlotte scratched off the game piece on her McChicken sandwich wrapper and discovered she was a grand prize winner. “McDonald's gave me an opportunity to touch the lives of others and fulfill dreams I never thought possible!” she

gushes. Under a tab called “Events,” you are encouraged to enter for a chance to win tickets to the NBA All-Star Game in New Orleans. The only other page this new site has is called “What is 365 Black?” I desperately wanted to know the answer to this question myself. Unfortunately all that appears is a short paragraph which pompously states, “We believe that African-American culture and achievement should be celebrated 365 days a year — not just during Black History Month.” The site is supposed to be a means of achieving this goal. This is a worthy proposal, but the site makes no effort to execute the idea. Charlotte M. is a lucky woman, but is she also meant to be a representation of African-American achievement? Winning tickets to a basketball game is nice, but is that all the culture the African-American community has to offer? By omission of relevant content, McDonald’s seems to say it is.

The Asian-American community can seek refuge from the unsympathetic, Anglo-centric advertising world at i-am-asian.com. The domain name, simple and obtuse, makes no effort to conceal the target audience. The site takes the form of a living room, peppered with objects and memorabilia that apparently no Asian-American home should be without. Paper cranes hang from the ceiling, a Godzilla action figure, Buddha, and a waving cat statue sit idly on the shelves, loaded with technological gadgets. The content of the site is accessed by clicking on the various objects in the room. What is supposed to be some sort of “original interactive experience” is poorly executed and difficult to navigate. There is no feng shui in this room! For one thing, the site lacks any sort of introduction or welcome page. This might be a blessing though, given the sorry state of [i-am-asian](http://i-am-asian.com)’s previous mission statement which read in part, “We’re Asian and Pacific Islander Americans...we honor our heritage- but we love being Americans...Whether

we're sipping green tea or enjoying a Big Mac sandwich, we're helping make the magic mix called America even richer. And McDonald's is right there with us, everyday!" (Tan 1). A cheesier, more patronizing sentiment may never have been voiced.

By clicking on a pig that stands outside a glass door, you are brought to a section on Asian culture. All that's available there is a brief introduction to the Chinese lunar calendar, which reads like a Britannica for the Kid's entry. By clicking on the flat screen television, we can watch an actual McDonald's television advertisement in a number of different Asian languages. The commercial focuses on several young Asian women, who tell us about the stresses of juggling their many responsibilities. We see them studying at a library, performing experiments in a science laboratory, and answering phones at a fast paced office. "Time? There's never enough time to finish everything. That's why when I get a free moment I enjoy it," they confide as they clutch a hamburger in one hand, and karaoke microphone in the other. It seems as if the advertisers drafted a list of Asian stereotypes and then planned the commercial around it. Asians are smart, work hard, and excel at everything they do. It's a stressful life. The words, "Thank god McDonald's is there to give them their much needed fix of relaxation and good times" might very well be their concept statement. The site also contains many allusions to the motifs of challenge and competition. A McDonald's apron tossed across a couch reads "I aim to be the best!" The women in the previously mentioned commercial say they have a passion for activities "that challenge me to the fullest." The only mini-game on the site, "The Arch-Card Challenge," wonders whether "you are clever enough" to complete a spiritual pilgrimage from a McDonald's in Hawaii to a McDonald's in Los Angeles by building a makeshift wooden bridge across the Pacific Ocean. You are "challeng[ed] to get from

here to there in 3 not-so-easy steps!” All this adds up to a motif of competition and excellence that permeates stereotypes of Asian-Americans.

These micro-sites are certainly under the radar when compared to McDonald's other advertising efforts. They almost seem out of place in the corporation's slick marketing machine. The ostentatious messages and sloppy design make the micro-sites seem like the work of a fresh intern not yet wise to the marketing world's affinity to corporate sleekness. I do not know how much traffic these micro-sites get. I'm quite sure, however, that if they were a major online destination for the general public, or perhaps a television commercial seen by millions, the crass, oversimplified depiction of ethnicity would not go unnoticed. This makes me wonder who exactly decided to create these absurd websites, and what the motivation behind it was. It seems that 365black.com was the brain child of Burrell Communications Group, the same company McDonalds first used to do their minority marketing in 1972 (Anthony 1). Burrell, a successful and innovative company, says that “clients who come to [them] with narrow visions of traditional print or broadcast advertising may be cheating themselves out of a cost effective medium” (Anthony 1). As a way to provide fresh, cheap advertising they have been exploring new ways to utilize the internet. This has led them to launch micro-sites for their clients as a way to tap into this growing desire. Kelly Williams, Vice President of Burrell's Engagement Marketing, admits that these micro-sites are “particularly relevant for target marketing.” She continues by explaining that “Advertisers are now saying, 'Gee, I can't just have one campaign.' They know that they have to do something different. They find out from us how they can experientially touch the people they're trying to reach” (Anthony 3). This is precisely what is happening with all three of the

McDonald's micro-sites. The same principles behind the creation of 365black.com also apply to i-am-asian and meencanta. McDonald's can't allow Asians, Latinos, and blacks to be lumped together as a general minority population, nor do they feel comfortable allowing them to simply coexist within the mainstream, or in this case, the *white* market. They feel compelled to create as many avenues for advertisement as possible, so that every sort of person imaginable will feel a deep connection to the company.

While this sort of niche marketing may open opportunities for McDonald's to relate to specific groups, it closes off a wider sense of community. Scott Coltrane, a professor who studied the effects of racial target marketing in television commercials, notes that "such differentiation can promote suspicion of others," and that by "emphasizing 'image tribes,' advertisers heighten consumers' sense of social separation and encourage them to label others as different" (8). Surprisingly, even though minority groups are common victims of prejudice and stereotypes, this doesn't mean that the commercials targeted towards them are void of such transgressions. Coltrane found that "commercials targeted to African Americans contain about as many racial stereotypes as those directed toward Whites. Similarly, commercials targeted to women have about as many gender stereotypes as those directed to other audiences" (8). This makes me think that finding such trite and clichéd images on the McDonald's micro-sites isn't that unusual. Even though each site professes a sort of insular and understanding "for us, by us" sentiment, they are still full of mass-held stereotypes. Coltrane's conclusion to his study echoes this pattern perfectly by stating, "While different audiences receive slightly different images, most commercial advertising continues to perpetuate narrow stereotypes" (9).

The stereotyped messages extend beyond the targeted demographic, and end up reaching the general public. In our commercialized society, marketing and media often become a culture in itself. Marketing, some of it direct and some subtle, creates a minefield of manipulation. Since advertisements can blend so seamlessly into our everyday lives, it is often difficult to recognize them as such. As a result, we let our guard down. We are unprepared for the persuasive messages the marketing world tries to spoon-feed us, and we begin to confuse their contrived efforts with some sort of natural and free-form culture. This means that advertisements hold a lot more weight than a simple product promotion. Coltrane says they end up “shap[ing] images of others and sustain[ing] group boundaries that come to be taken for granted” (7). This results in “feelings of entitlement, subtle forms of prejudice, and institutional racism which are reproduced in and through commercial television imagery” (7). The reference to television commercials now extends to include corporations’ micro-sites. The same theories behind television commercials exist in McDonald’s micro-sites as well. Although they go about it in different ways, both mediums ultimately want to influence consumers to eat their food and form a fierce brand loyalty with their image. However, the micro-sites might be even *more* dangerous in their power to shape perceptions, because they try to hide their ultimate advertising goal behind a guise of multicultural appreciation. Unlike McDonald’s micro-site for children, which has a banner at the top of the page announcing, “Hey kids, this is advertising!” (Happy Meal) the cultural micro-sites have no such disclaimer. This means that visitors to the site aren’t on the immediate lookout for manipulation, and are more likely to be subconsciously influenced by what they see. The cognitive acumen to recognize the sites’ shallow cultural portrayal is

blunted. The visitor is more likely to subconsciously accept these crass representations, which does nothing but conform to preexisting stereotypes the visitor might have.

The internet is still a relatively new medium, one whose potential advertisers are only just beginning to understand. These micro-sites might seem strange and out of place now, but perhaps in a few years every company will have something similar.

Corporations will race to buy domain names like i-am-homosexual.com or paraplegicXrepublicans.com in hopes of covering all their bases and appealing to every possible audience. If this does end up happening, my one hope is that these future companies will not stoop down to McDonald's level by portraying their targeted audiences in a stereotypical, shallow, and uninformed way. When it comes to McDonald's three micro-sites, I'm definitely NOT lovin' it!

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