

Exploring the History of Subliminal Racism in Ivory Soap Commercials

David Gil, a social scientist, explains that humans need a strong social-psychological base to achieve their full potential (26). Gil defines a strong social-psychological base as having stable, meaningful social relations and a sense of belonging to a community, involving mutual respect and the emergence of a positive self-identity (26). In order to achieve this basic human need, one must have the ability to work toward positive self-identity, something that was not possible for black people during the Jim Crow era. Part of the reason that this was impossible was due to the explicit and covert racism black people experienced. After the illegality of slavery, racism assumed more subtle forms, including intense subliminal messaging (Lebduska 390). Subliminal messaging is defined as using discrete stimuli to impact the viewer subconsciously (Dictionary.com). This allows the advertiser to send whatever message they want without necessarily experiencing social consequences.

Subliminal messaging was most commonly used in advertising to send white supremacist messages. Angelica Morris and Lee Ann Kahlor explore the influence of racism in advertising in their 2014 paper “Whiteness Theory in Advertising: Racial Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Ads.” They write, “the most important component of this [white] privilege is the ability of the White-identified culture to remove itself from discussions of race, such as ignoring the absence of non-whites in advertising or stereotypical portrayals of them” (416). This theory is demonstrated in the Ivory soap advertisements after the Jim Crow era. These commercials contain racist undertones linking whiteness, specifically white womanhood, to purity and goodness. The impact of these ads reinforced subliminal racism that continues to this day.

The American concept of purity can be traced through the history of the Eugenics movement, which defined white people as the superior race due to its alleged genetic purity. This

theory of racial cleanliness reveals itself in Ivory commercials, which explicitly link whiteness and purity. After the Civil War, there was a simultaneous boom in industrialization and immigration, as well as a development of sanitation system concerns. The boom in industrialization provided the newly arrived immigrants, as well as rural Americans, with jobs. However, this explosion of city population caused old sanitation practices to fail (Zimring 56). As diseases and death skyrocketed due to the lack of accessible sanitary programs, the Eugenics movement swept in and latched on to the pollution panic. By defining “purity” as what one is not, as well as maintaining that white is the norm, one had defined whiteness as the pure norm and any other race as the other-ed filth (Berthold 14). The American obsession with alleged racial purity did not go unnoticed by corporations, who latched on to the fixation that to be healthy was to be clean and pure. Procter & Gamble, a wealthy corporation, was no exception. In fact, the first Ivory ad debuted in 1882 in a religious weekly, *The Independent*, that claimed Ivory was “99 and 44% pure” (Editors of Advertising Age 10). Ivory’s tagline of being “99 and 44% pure” has been the same for over 120 years, portraying the company as honest while promising the consumer that their soap is the purest and thus, the whitest out there. These ads never explain their definition of purity, so the Procter & Gamble chemist who made the discovery was never questioned (Lebduska 389). Procter & Gamble focused their Ivory advertisements on white women, purveying them as “the keepers of domestic cleanliness as well as purity” (Lebduska 387). The company was not explicitly saying that whiteness is better; however, the subliminal messaging becomes clear after examining the history of the word “purity.” Procter & Gamble’s commercials for Ivory soap contain racially driven messaging which linked whiteness, specifically white womanhood, to purity and goodness, a linkage that continues to this day.

A 1959 Ivory soap commercial features a white upper-class attractive young woman displaying Ivory soap as an economical and luxurious choice, while sending overt racist messages about whiteness. The commercial begins with a young white woman in a fancy parlor turning to the camera and telling the audience that she has a split personality between her pleasure-loving side and her practical side. However, she explains that both sides get along just fine when it comes to Ivory soap. She then exclaims, “It’s so white, looks pure, smells pure” (Procter & Gamble “Ivory Soap Commercial-1959-Vintage Advertising”). Here she alludes back to the belief that whiteness is a state of purity because she openly states that because the bar of soap is so white that it looks pure. The woman is dressed in a flowing white gown for her pleasure-loving side, and a lightly colored suit for her practical side. The woman is surrounded by the color white throughout the commercial. For example, when she shows us how luxurious the soap is in the bath, it cuts to her in an elegant all white bathroom, gleefully washing herself with Ivory using a white wash cloth in her bathtub (Procter & Gamble “Ivory Soap Commercial-1959-Vintage Advertising”). Everything from the flowers on the table behind her to the bow in her hair is white. Lisa Lebduska, an English Professor at Wheaton College, explains, “Ivory’s white purity, sanctified by a biblical act of naming and a purity made real by science, contrasted with the threat of blackness, absence, and a growing black empowerment that muddied white American dreams” (390). Lebduska explains here that Ivory was named after a Bible verse, holding Ivory whiteness up as biblical goodness fighting against blackness (Editors of Advertising Age 9). The commercial wraps up with her practical side explaining to the viewers how economical Ivory soap is compared to other leading brands. The Ivory woman is a good girl; she shows little skin even when there’s implied nudity with her in the bath, maintaining her place as a pure, sexual object (Lebduska 392). She holds Ivory up as the product that links

whiteness to beauty and purity, which becomes the symbol of white womanhood; however, in doing so, she denies woman of color access to beauty and purity.

A later Ivory commercial from the 1970's features an everyday girl speaking naturally to the camera, inviting the viewer to join her in her Ivory inspired purity. During this time period, this commercial took place during the Black Empowerment movement. The commercial begins with a young white woman named Marcia Van Dyck from Kenmore, NY telling the viewers that she seems nervous because it is her first time ever being on television (Procter & Gamble "Ivory Soap Commercial-1970's"). She is in the commercial because her boyfriend wrote to the Ivory company, stating that he believed Marcia was the perfect "Ivory girl". This is one of the first examples of the "Ivory girl" being shown as an achievable symbol. "The Ivory girl" can be bought and created, as long as she is white. Marcia tells the viewers that she just loves learning about Ivory purity, because when she sees the commercials she just thinks, "that girl believes what I believe"(Procter & Gamble "Ivory Soap Commercial-1970's"). Every "Ivory girl" from this era was a young white woman. This presentation sends the subliminal message that to be an Ivory girl is to be a white girl, which continued to perpetuate racism within Procter & Gamble. Gil's theory of structural violence is on display here because its making sure that white people are still seen as superior. White and black people were being taught the dichotomy of whiteness as good and blackness as bad, which prevented white people from ever having meaningful relationships with black people and black people from ever having a positive self-image. The significance of this subliminal messaging taking place during this time period is that as people were protesting for equal rights, corporations were still benefitting off of the structurally violent system of white supremacy.

Although black people were never the center of focus in Ivory ads, they were constantly tokenized, which prevented the company from being labeled as racist. One ad from 1998 for Ivory moisture care features a group of white or white passing women with one black woman. The women in the ad, which is shot in black and white, are shown in various stages of undress as they touch their skin seductively (Procter & Gamble “Ivory Moisture Care”). Every white and white passing woman is seen in a simple white top before they are shown naked coquettishly covering their breasts; however, the black woman is never shown wearing clothing. The first time she appears on screen her back is to the camera, and she is only wearing a white necklace. There is a brief image with her smiling afterwards. In the next image, the woman is shown with a shirtless black man who has his arm around her; they both stand with their backs facing the camera. In the final image, she’s in the arms of the black man who is wearing a white shirt, but again, the woman is still naked (Procter & Gamble “Ivory Moisture Care”). Although the black woman is only in the commercial for about seven seconds, she seems like a hypersexualized afterthought. This contrasts from the 1959 commercial, where the white woman is dressed in a flowing white gown before we see her in a nude allusion. The subliminal message says that even though she is sexualized the viewers must respect her. However, the black woman is never given that chance, as she is never shown in any clothing while the white women surrounding her are. This is structurally violent as it is negatively shaping the way the general public views black women. Even in other commercials from the 1980’s and 1990’s, people of color were never the center of focus. They only appear for a few moments before the camera turns back to white people. They are thrown in the commercial as an after-thought if the company was checking off a box saying they weren’t racist. The “Ivory girl” message of white purity is clear in this ad, with a sexualized black woman thrown in for spice.

The Ivory soap commercials after the Jim Crow era send the subliminal message that to be white is to be pure and good, which shapes the way the general public views whiteness, and conditions white people to uphold the structurally violent system of white supremacy. If black people are told since birth that they are inferior and bad from advertising and/or other racist institutions, then it is near impossible for them to create a positive sense of self-worth (Morris and Kahlor). In fact, individuals who have weak feelings of identification with their race or culture have more positive attitudes towards ads featuring White models, no matter what their ethnic identification is (Morris and Kahlor). White people benefit from this finding on both ends, since individuals who have a stronger identification with their race have been found to have more positive attitudes towards ads featuring models from their ethnic group (418). White people are taught to prefer whiteness no matter what, and this ensures that subliminal racism continues to exist in the advertising world today. Procter & Gamble has yet to come forward to acknowledge the prevalent history of racism in the company. Instead of doing so, they just removed people from their ads altogether. In a 2011 commercial, for example, four soap bars zoom across a yellow stage and stack on top of each other saying, “When dirt changes its formula, so will we” (Procter & Gamble “American Icon Ivory Soap Gets Modern Day Makeover”). The racist history of Procter & Gamble is impossible to wash away. The only hope they have for a future of equity is to come forward, admit their history and legacy, and actively work towards re-shaping their advertising scheme.

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