

## We Missed the Mark: The Impacts of Well-Intentioned, but Racist, Design

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Abstract | The design industry is no stranger to perpetuating racism by upholding the normality of whiteness. The beauty industry is no different—upholding a long-standing history of Euro-centric beauty standards and the erasure of darker skin complexions. Although there have been efforts made to center more people of color in the beauty industry, like Rhianna’s Fenty Beauty cosmetic line, there still exists major problems in the ways that companies intend to include diversity within their media advertisements and product offerings. Throughout this paper, we will be looking in-depth at the Dove advertisement in which a Black woman removed her shirt and turned into a White woman. We will dissect the intentions of the advertisements as well as uncover the problematic elements of racism within the artifact (the advertisement), the system (the Unilever company), and the experience (the aftermath and harm) that well intentions caused. As design educators, it is important for us that we emphasize what design is and how it can be used to impact the world around us. In order for us to do this, we have developed a physical toolkit, Racism Untaught, that analyzes racialized design and allows opportunities for students and organizations to use design research to create anti-racist design approaches. The toolkit further reveals and analyzes the areas of design, which we have defined as; 1) An Artifact: an easily identifiable and tangible designed object or thing, 2) A System: an institutional or cultural set of procedures or principles in which people are organized, or 3) An Experience: an occurrence within a system or interpersonal encounters. Using this breakdown of design categories, we will analyze Dove’s advertisement and how its well intentions were harmful in all areas of design.

Keywords: Design Education, Anti-Racism, Intentionality in Design

The beauty industry— specifically the soap industry— has a long history of equating beauty and cleanliness to whiteness. This societal construct is another way to categorize Blackness as “other” and create a white social normality in which those with darker skin complexions would never be able to achieve. Examples of this prejudice range back to the early 1900’s with advertisements like the one below created by N.K. Fairbank Co. which “shows a little white girl asking a Black child why her mother won’t wash her with Fairy Soap...” (Figure 1) and the Pears soap advertisement which shows a Black child’s body turning white after taking a bath with their product (Figure 2)(Montford, 2014). These advertisements echo through the broader culture in the United States, perpetuating an unrealistic and exclusive model of beauty making it impossible for Black people and other people of color to be accepted as a beauty standard.



Figure 1. N.K. Fairbank Co. Fairy Soap Ad c. 1940 (Source: Montford, 2014)



Figure 2. Pears' Soap Advertisement (Source: Astor, 2017)

This may seem like an issue of the past, however, racialized elements permeate in today's advertisements whether intentional or not. In 2017 Nivea created a set of advertisements to promote the brand's "Invisible for Black and White" deodorant. The advertisement pictured below (Figure 3) depicts the back of a woman's head with long, curly, dark hair cascading down an all-white garment. On the ad, in all caps, a slogan reads "WHITE IS PURITY." The ad first appeared on Nivea's Facebook page as a post with the caption "Keep it clean, keep bright. Don't let anything ruin it, #Invisible." (Wang, 2017) The advertisement was met with an uproar from consumers who shamed the company for its racist rhetoric and consumers who began to use the ad to push a white supremacist agenda. What is hard to understand with large institutions that continue to approve racialized design is, "how did it get this far in the process?" What systems do institutions like Nivea have in place to not only safeguard from racist rhetoric, but perpetuate systemic racism in this way?



Figure 3. 'WHITE IS PURITY' Advertisement (Source: Wang, 2017)

Throughout this paper, we will use the Racism Untaught (Mercer et al. 2018) framework to investigate the negative impact of advertisements like the one above. Our framework breaks down design into three categories/identifiers- artifacts, systems, and experiences. We will examine the Dove advertisement (as an artifact) which perpetuates racial biases due to a lack of understanding around issues of racism and Euro/white-centric beauty standards. We will then analyze the system (the Dove brand- under the Unilever company) which uphold white-centric beauty standards, and then investigate the experience this ad created and how those instances affected the broader community. The question that guides our work is "How can design assist in identifying racialized designs and critically assess anti-racist concepts?" We use this question in the analysis of the Dove artifact as it affects the broader system(s) of oppression and the experiences of people of color.

The first of the three identifiers of design we have defined- artifact- is a designed object showing human craft or machine modification, which, in this case, perpetuates elements of racism. David Pilgrim, the founder and curator of a 12,000-piece collection of racialized artifacts at the Jim Crow Museum, says, "If you show me the things a society produces ... then I can tell you a lot about the attitudes, taste, and values of the people that made the stuff." In other words, an artifact does not sit on its own, rather it is supported and upheld by a system (discussed in the next section) and influences people's experiences (discussed in section 4). It is not the artifact itself that is racist, problematic, and/or political "...but the social or economic system in which it is embedded." (Winner, 1980) When examining the Dove advertisement, there are implications of its intentions versus its impact due to the culture of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. We uncover the elements of racism along with a brief historical look at how advertisements such as these perpetuate a culture of prejudice.

### 2.1. The Dove Advertisement

In an attempt to be inclusive and to denormalize whiteness as the standard in beauty advertisements, Dove posted a 3-second GIF promotion to their Facebook page, showing three women who each removed a t-shirt of matching skin tone to reveal the next. These actions were done with a bottle of Dove body wash in the right foreground of the screen. The first woman, a Black woman, removed her shirt to reveal a White woman. The White woman then removed her shirt to reveal another woman of color. Then, as GIFs do, the ad repeats, over and over again. (Figure 4)



*Figure 4. Captions (Source: Wootson, 2017)*

[Image Description. Screenshot of a frame of the 3-seconds long GIF which shows the sequence of a Black woman removing her shirt to reveal a white woman.]

The first step in the Racism Untaught toolkit (Figure 5) is "context." In this step, we have identified and defined elements of racism that are perpetuated in the racialized design we are analyzing. These elements of racism help to identify and broaden our understanding about what exactly is at play (racially) within this artifact. More analysis of these terms help us and participants of the toolkit understand that these elements work together, supporting each other and the system of white supremacy.



Figure 5. Captions (Source: Mercer et al, 2018)

Out of the 36 elements of racism in this deck of cards we have designed, we have identified at least ten terms that are shown in this advertisement.

1. Anti-Black Racism: Our toolkit defines this term as “elements of racism directed towards and experienced by Black people.” Because of the historic and insidious nature of
2. Cognitive Dissonance: the state of having inconsistent or contradictory thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions
3. Color Blindness: disregarding the experiences of People of Color by devaluing and ignoring their racial identity
4. Colorism: prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group
5. Explicit Bias: attitudes and beliefs about a person or group of people on a conscious level, usually expressed as a direct result of a perceived and/or socialized threat
6. Implicit Bias: the unconscious attribution of particular qualities to a member of a certain social or cultural group
7. Institutional Racism: racial discrimination that derives from individuals carrying out the dictates of a prejudiced institution or society
8. Intent Over Impact: prioritizing well intended actions over the negative impact they might have had on People of Color
9. Microaggression: a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group
10. Passive Racism: attitudes and actions that contribute to the maintenance of racism, without openly advocating violence or oppression

What we found most interesting is that ‘cognitive dissonance’ and ‘impact over intent’ support each other in the perpetuation of anti-Blackness. Although anti-Blackness may not have been intended, one cannot ignore the long history of racism in soap advertisements, as mentioned in the introduction. As designers, it is imperative that we inform ourselves about the history of our particular industries. If we want to claim that we are human-centered and focused on community, we should take care to advocate for those historically marginalized and misrepresented. The artifact that Dove created lacked the cultural awareness of its implications. It was color blind in that it was speaking to a future where an advertisement like this might make sense without first coming to terms with its own role in explicit racism of the past. Not too long ago in 2017, Dove had a similar issue with its Dove VisibleCare Body Wash advertisement, featuring a before and after closeup of skin with a Black woman underneath ‘before’ and a white woman underneath ‘after.’ (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Dove VisibleCare Body Wash Advertisement (Source: Dove.com, 2011)

### 3. The System

The second of the three identifiers of design we have defined— system— is an organized set of doctrines, ideas, or principles usually intended to explain the arrangement or working of a systematic whole. Systems are designed to create a way of working that affects everyone, either negatively or positively. A racialized design system perpetuates oppression, which has limited opportunities and access for historically marginalized people and communities. The system of design is determined by both the internal agents, being designers themselves, and external agents, the people who respond or interact with a design.

The internal agents who developed Dove are part of a larger system and are a subsidiary company to Unilever. Unilever is a large for-profit organization that owns over 400 brands globally and is used by over 2.5 billion people, external agents, per day. It is one of the largest consumer goods-producing companies in the world. The problems within a system of this size are not always purposely developed but are perpetuated nonetheless. The issues and concerns of developing racialized designs by the Unilever system are rooted in the internal structure of complex systems (Meadow, pg.4) and are perpetuated by an institutional or cultural set of procedures or principles in which people are organized. In the same way, a sports team works together to make a goal or score a touchdown, the system of Unilever is a system that works together to develop beauty and personal care, foods and refreshments, home care, and water purifiers. There is a wholeness to the system in which their products are developed. There are the visible elements to their system, i.e. the corporate executives, geographic divisions, and the product type divisions that develop innovative products, but we also need to focus on the invisible elements of the system. The functionality or purposes in the different areas. The purpose for Unilever might be different than the purpose of the brand Dove. In the

Racism Untaught framework we break this down by level of oppression (Figure 5), outlined in our framework as 1) personal beliefs, 2) agentic action, 3) institutionally, and 4) culturally. In this section, the Dove commercial (Figure 4) that was posted to Facebook will be used to exemplify how these levels of oppression can break down the systems that allowed this ad to reach the public domain.

### 3.1. Levels of Oppression

The levels of oppression are represented as concentric circles, the most inner circle being personal beliefs. The personal beliefs, ideas, and feelings that perpetuate oppression. Dove saw this ad as “missing the mark” and then their non-apology was called out on social media by a Dove consumer on their Facebook page, “What exactly were y’all going for? What was the mark . . . I mean anyone with eyes can see how offensive this is. Not one person on your staff objected to this? Wow. Will not be buying your products anymore” (Wootson, 2017). This consumer is correct in questioning the personal belief a person would need to have to explain the point they were trying to make, and wondering exactly what the point it was meant to be. The next circle, agentic action, is when oppressive beliefs translate into oppressive behavior. The posting of this ad to Facebook was an oppressive action by a company valued at approximately 5.1 billion U.S. dollars. This results in institutional and structural oppression that results from agentic oppressive behavior. What systems are in place at Dove that allow for ads such as this one to put into the public domain? At the time this ad was put into the public domain what was their mission of diversity, equity and inclusion, if they had one, what systems were in place that question the status quo at Dove. The outer circle is cultural, the systems of norms, values, beliefs, and trusted systems of acquiring truth that preserve, protect, and/or maintain oppression. The cultural implications of a company as large as Dove, with the potential to reinforce and perpetuate personal beliefs. Culturally the belief that lighter skin is prettier is perpetuated by overlooking subtle and overtly outrageous implications of an ad like the ad we are analyzing, and other similar ads Dove has also published in the public domain.

## 4. The Experience

The third of the three identifiers of design we have defined— experience— is something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through. Sharing personal experiences have proven to be a key element in creating anti-racist design approaches through the design research process and an integral part of understanding the audience for whom the designer is creating. Understanding how the artifact (Dove advertisement) and system (Unilever) work together, we can grasp how an experience of othering, dismissal, and racial gaslighting can be created.

Once the advertisement was released, the perpetuation of anti-Blackness and harm toward Black women was amplified. Rightfully so, Twitter users reposted the ad commenting on the misrepresentation and perpetuation of racism. A hashtag began, #boycottDove, which seems to be one of the only way consumers can gain collective power to change an industry's values in a capitalistic system. Celebrities even began speaking out, like actress Danielle Brooks who said “Wait. Dove, you want me to believe that using your soap will turn my skin into that of a white woman? No – that can't be it. You want me to believe being black isn't clean? You want me to believe that black = dirt and white = purity and using your soap will make me clean? Got it. You're telling me my skin, the deep, rich melanin that I was born with and cannot change, is filthy. Got it.

That's painful.

That stings.”

In a reactive response to the backlash, Dove expressed their regrets in posting the advertisement in a Twitter post stating “Dove is committed to representing the beauty of diversity. In an image we posted this week, we missed the mark in thoughtfully representing women of color and we deeply regret the offense that it has caused” (Astor, 2017).

The complexity of this system is exactly why the effects of boycotting campaigns can seem weak in effecting the stakeholders of the company. It is not until companies begin trending for the wrong reasons that there is regret and a statement

much like the title of this paper will be said "...we missed the mark." It is coded language for the mediocrity and creativity of any industry to seek inclusivity and question the impact of their work before it is released.

## 5. Conclusion

A long list of sincere, heartfelt, and misguided apologies are the result of ads that perpetuate systems of oppression. The Dove advertisements shared in this paper are only a few examples of the long list of racialized artifacts that are produced and placed in the public domain. The questions we most often hear from students are, how do the systems in a company as large as Dove not catch a blatantly racist advertisement? As design educators, it is imperative that we emphasize how design can be applied to impact the world around us. That we help students learn the language necessary to uncover problematic elements of racialized design within artifacts, how these artifacts are the result of outdated norms that are integrated in systems of approval, and the impact they can each have on the experience of all community members.

Racism Untaught is a framework and methodological intervention that analyzes racialized design and allows opportunities for students and organizations to use design research to create anti-racist design approaches. The framework is meant to be used in a collaborative and participatory setting, with the community it is meant to enact change within.

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