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BLACK ADS MATTER: AN ANALYSIS OF BLACK REPRESENTATION IN  
ADVERTISING

By

Elyssa Quinn Smith

B.A., University of Kentucky, 2016

M.A., University of Louisville, 2022

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

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Department of Communication

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Louisville, Kentucky

May 2022



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A Thesis Approved on

April 26, 2022

By the following Thesis Committee

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Siobhan Smith-Jones, Thesis Director

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DEDICATION

*To my parents for their unending support.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge the Black lives that have been lost due to systemic racism in this country. Your deaths have brought international attention to the injustices embedded in our country, but they should not have had to. Your lives matter. I would also like to acknowledge the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement, and similar movements, who have garnered international attention to issues of race in the United States. Without their work to bring attention to issues of representation, this thesis would still be necessary, but may not hold as much relevance.

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This thesis would not be possible without the support of my family and friends. Thank you to my parents, who have inspired me through their own incredible accomplishments. Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my boyfriend, Tyler, who encourages me to go after whatever I want in life. Thanks for reminding me to rest and pushing me when I rest for too long.

## ABSTRACT

### BLACK ADS MATTER: AN ANALYSIS OF BLACK REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISING

Elyssa Quinn Smith

April 26, 2022

During the summer of 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) became a rallying cry throughout the United States and the world. At that time, many individuals and organizations reflected on how they could better support the movement for equality, equity, and inclusion, but some of the results were ingenuine, perceived as virtue signaling or woke washing. In this thesis I explore the Black representation in advertising from three prominent car brands from both pre- and post-summer 2020. I analyze ads from Acura, Buick, and Lincoln to determine if they are synergistic and include multi-dimensional Black representation, criteria Burgess et al.'s (2020) set for audience connectedness. To measure synergy, I assess the ad elements and offer a new perspective that considers how ad elements that include Black representation work together to create a message about diversity. I discuss the implications of Black representation, or the lack thereof, using congruity theory and social cognitive theory to determine the impacts on both sales and society.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black Americans at the hands of police officers, protesters took to the streets around the country and world to speak out against injustice. Black Lives Matter (BLM) became a rallying cry on yard signs, apparel, and social media. During this racial reckoning, many organizations felt the need to evaluate their own racial bias and dedicate themselves to being more diverse. As a part of this shift, some organizations focused on representation in their public image through advertising.

Advertising is one of the most visible ways that organizations interact with consumers and form an image for the public. Although brands took a variety of approaches to their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives during and after the summer of 2020, I am specifically interested in how advertising changed during this time. This shift in advertising is important because of the impact advertising can have on consumer buying behaviors and beyond. Historically, studies conducted on advertising have focused on its effectiveness in the marketing process (Schouten et al., 2020; Woodside, 1990). Effective marketing is an incredibly important area of consideration, as it typically is what drives brands. Audience connectedness is key in creating relationships between consumers and the purchases they make, both short and long term (Burgess et al., 2020).

From a marketing perspective, brands engaging in the BLM movement, or failing to do so, are likely making that decision with the goal of audience connectedness in mind. Advertisers are deciding to increase minority representation in campaigns because they

see a target market that can be tapped into to increase sales (Burgess et al., 2020; Eechambadi, 1994). According to congruity theory, if brands can align themselves to the values of customers, customers will be more likely to purchase from them (Sirgy et al., 1991). In this thesis, I attempt to capture the effects of audience connectedness using the framework proposed by Burgess et al. (2020), which indicates efforts at diversity in advertising must be multi-dimensional and include synergistic visual and non-visual cues to be successful.

In addition to the impact on sales, advertising can also be evaluated as media, similarly to TV or movies. Although less consideration has been given to advertising in these terms historically, a growing number of brands and scholars are considering the impact advertising has beyond a sales tactic. For the past 10 years, issues of representation have become more prevalent in entertainment media. Trends like #OscarsSoWhite have pushed Hollywood for better inclusion of people of color. However, the issue of media representation often stops with movies and TV. Using social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), which has historically been used to analyze media (Krcmar, 2019), I attempt to analyze advertising as a text that impacts consumers beyond goals of persuasion. My analysis concludes with a comparison of advertising pre- and post-summer 2020, which might indicate a change in Black representation in advertising.

The two prongs of evaluation are relevant now because consumers have become increasingly skeptical. During the summer of 2020 and in the years since, consumers have accused advertisers of taking advantage of the social justice movement, making an ingenuine attempt to increase sales by creating inclusive advertising. My evaluation aims to determine how Black representation in advertising can be good for marketing and how

the summer of 2020 may have impacted advertising of specific brands. Although it is difficult to determine the true motivation of these ads, I also attempt to understand the ethical implications of advertising designed as a marketing tool, if it ends up having a positive impact on individuals and society when linked with audience formation of social perceptions and norms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **History of Black Representation in Advertising**

The first notable shift in Black representation in American advertising was in the transition from advertising used to sell and recapture enslaved people to including the Black image to sell products. Product and service advertising created by early White advertising agencies often depicted the stereotyped and caricatured representations of Blacks that reinforced the ideals of the racial hierarchy at the time. Though the transition marked a notable difference in the “product”, the images used continued to reflect horrific treatment and negative portrayals of Blacks, often unrelated to the products sold. In other cases, stereotypes were used to express the idealized racial order, with Black men and women in subservient positions (McQuirter, n.d.).

The mammy stereotype was often used to sell household products to White customers, such as Aunt Jemima as the face and name of pancake syrup and mix (McQuirter, n.d.). As the civil rights movement pushed for change, opportunities arose for Black participation in the advertising process and representation improved. The number of degrading representations dwindled, though some, like Aunt Jemima, persisted until quite recently. During the 1950s and 1960s, advertisers also began to consider the Black consumer and visual representations that would appeal to them, creating another notable shift in Black representation in advertising. The emergence of multicultural advertising necessitated White advertising agencies to tap into talent of Black-owned agencies to help understand and grow their audiences (Davis, 2020).

Some scholars believe the increase in focused media catalyzed segmented advertising; others posit that focused media arose because of advertisers' need for segmented audiences to target (Eechambadi, 1994; Petty, 2003; Speicher et al., 2018). Either way, general interest magazines and broad-based television programming became less popular as more focused media emerged. Magazines such as *Ebony* and cable television networks such as Black Entertainment Television (BET) allowed advertisers to segment their audiences and tailor messages to specific groups based on race (Petty, 2003). While targeted marketing is generally an efficient and recommended practice for marketers, it becomes problematic if it is used to perpetuate racist stereotypes or relegate targeted groups to the margins. Petty (2003) notes that as targeted advertising became popular, so did the assumption that advertising to the masses equated to advertising to White audiences and targeted advertising was reserved for non-White audiences. So long as racial and ethnic minorities were included in targeted advertising, advertisers erroneously assumed racial and ethnic minorities could be left out of mass advertising, or ignorantly neglected to include them in the core messaging.

Although there has been substantial progress in representation in advertising, there are still strides to be made in representation (Davis, 2020; Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Aside from the quantity of representation, advertisers must also consider the quality of representation including the roles Black people play in advertising and the product categories in which Black people are represented. Recently, research has shown Black casts advertise necessity items, while all White casts are more common in ads for luxury goods. Scholars agree the observed differences in racial representation stem from

targeting based on demographic data on television viewing habits, which typically show a racial divide in habits (Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Petty 2003).

Aside from traditional media, online advertising can also include potentially harmful targeting tactics. On Facebook, for example, creating custom audiences and look-alike audiences can lead to targeting in a discriminatory manner. These issues are especially pressing when targeted advertising for housing, employment, or financial services could exclude audiences based on what Facebook calls “sensitive features” such as gender and race (Speicher et al., 2018). Petty (2003) also details the sensitivity of targeted advertising for products that could have detrimental health benefits, such as cigarettes and alcohol.

The critiques of targeted advertising are not intended to discredit its use entirely. Rather, I include these critiques to suggest that targeted advertising based on race should be approached carefully and should not be equated to inclusive advertising. Burgess et al. (2020) argue that successful diversity initiatives create messages that resonate with a broad audience, rather than segmenting racially diverse audiences and serving each segment a different message based solely on their race.

The critiques of targeted advertising also suggest that it has an impact, perhaps unintended, on representation in mainstream advertising. For this analysis, I selected ads that ran on national television channels and were not likely part of a targeted marketing campaign. Instead, I selected ads of interest with the intent of analyzing the core campaign of each brand. My analysis was not intended to specifically address how targeted advertising may have impacted the representation in these core messages, but I do note instances when that may have been the case. Targeted advertising, even on the

basis of race, is still common practice in advertising agencies and may provide context for further analysis on the topic of representation in advertising (Speicher et al., 2018).

### **Self-Brand Congruity and Brand Personality**

The advocacy of targeted marketing is well supported by studies on congruity theory, specifically on self-brand congruity. As the name implies, self-brand congruity is reflective of the comparison between a consumer's self-image and their perception of a brand (Sirgy et al., 1991). If consumers feel that brands align with their own self-concept, they are more likely to purchase products from that brand over competitors (Kumar & Nayak, 2014; Sirgy et al., 1991). Purchasing from brands that reflect consumers' self-image minimizes cognitive dissonance and reinforces the customers' current beliefs (Islam et al., 2018).

Consumers' perceptions of brands reflect the personality those brands present through communication, advertising, and interactions with customers. Brand personalities are formed to appeal to the target audience and, in order to be effective, should be reflected in all brand communication (Ries & Trout, 1972; Fill & Turnbull, 2019). Brands create positioning statements to express their personality and ensure consistent communication reflects the personality at all consumer touchpoints (Fill & Turnbull, 2019). In advertising, specific tactics such as anthropomorphization and personification are used to attribute human behaviors and traits to products and brands (Aaker, 1997). Aside from these tactics, language use, physical representations, and music choice in advertisements create distinct and lasting brand personalities that reflect the personalities of consumers (Barthes, 1977; Klipfel et al., 2014; Lee & Kim, 2017; Oakes, 2007).

Language use in advertising can contribute to brand personality both connotatively and denotatively through word choice and delivery. Language-based stereotypes and social evaluations create associations between brands and personality traits (Barthes, 1977; Kinzler & DeJesus, 2013). Physically, advertisers can represent brand personality by portraying and reinforcing imagery of typical users that reflect the self-concept of the target market or the ideal self-concept to which the target market aspires. The personalities of those physically represented then become linked in the consumer's mind to the brand personality (Lee & Kim, 2017; Schenk & Holman, 1980). Music can also create associations for consumers between a brand and commonly held assumptions or feelings that music conjures in individuals (Oakes, 2007).

Along with the associations advertisers create between brand personality and language use, physical representation, and music, advertising can also express direct brand personality traits by associating a brand with a human personality. For example, spokespeople can represent a brand through the use of their voice, physical representation, or music in advertising. Using a spokesperson can create a direct link between the spokesperson's personality traits and the personality of the brand (Aaker, 1997).

Self-brand congruity is the extent to which the personality of the brand and the self-concept of the consumer are compatible (Klipfel et al., 2014). Studies have concluded that self-brand congruity leads to higher brand loyalty and consumer engagement (Islam et al., 2018; Phua & Kim, 2018). Thus, congruity theory can be used to develop relationships with audiences by appealing to aspects of their self-image or their ideal self-image (Parker, 2009). Historically, race has been a primary aspect of self-



image that advertisers appeal to when engaging with Black and other non-White audiences.

While race is an aspect of self-image, it is not the only aspect, and when race is singled out as the primary factor for congruity, ads fail to appeal to an increasingly racially diverse audience. In order to successfully execute diversity initiatives, Burgess et al. (2020) insist marketers must consider their approach to diversity, the audiences' perception of diversity, and the level of belief congruence. They argue that these factors are key in creating messages that resonate with a broad audience.

Burgess et al. (2020) assert that successful diversity initiatives lead to audience's connectedness, which they define in terms of the degree of relatedness to others that people feel, such that they feel a part of something. Based on this definition, self-brand congruity is a major factor in audience connectedness. As audiences feel more self-brand congruity, they will also feel more connected to the brand. Connectedness leads to positive outcomes for the audience overall, including positive affect toward the brand advertised. Conversely, failed diversity initiatives can lead audience members to feel excluded, tokenized, or singularly represented (Podoshen et al., 2021).

Podoshen et al. (2021) explore such a case of a diversity initiative that backfired. Because of decline in sales beginning in 2013, Marvel Comics sought to include more diverse characters in 2018. However, instead of creating new characters, Marvel switched out White characters with non-White characters. In analyzing consumers responses to Marvel Comics, Podoshen et al. (2021) found consumers favored more organic evolution of characters instead of swapping in new characters in place of White characters, like Marvel did. Fans also noted that swapping the characters but maintaining the same

backstories trivialized experiences of the minority characters and did not lead to meaningful inclusion. Meaningful inclusion requires “transformational effort that more fully embraces removing the barriers contributing to inequity” (Podoshen et al., 2021, p. 132). Instead, readers found Marvel’s efforts opportunistic and artificial, perceiving little authenticity in the effort or dedication to inclusion.

Through analyzing Marvel’s failed attempt to introduce diverse characters, Podoshen et al. (2021) sought to understand the audience’s perception of tokenism and content creation without appropriate depth in the new characters. During the summer of 2020, several brands made similar missteps in using Black characters as tokens in ads and creating content to meet diversity initiatives without appropriate depth (Bonaparte, 2020; Podoshen et al., 2021). With increasing skepticism from consumers, these attempts failed to create self-brand congruity and audience connectedness. Instead, consumers accused advertisers of attempting to profit from the social justice movement (Bonaparte, 2020; Davis, 2020).

Enhanced audience connectedness is more likely to occur when marketers consider the way the audience perceives diversity in the advertising and when the audiences’ beliefs align to the diversity initiatives that messages communicate. Burgess et al. (2020) propose that the marketer’s approach to diversity must be:

1. multi-dimensional and
2. include synergistic visual and non-visual cues

In order to be multi-dimensional, the advertising must portray more than a singular aspect of diversity. Advertising can include dimensions of diversity in the language used, physical representation of ad characters, and music chosen for advertisements. To be

considered synergistic, the visual and non-visual dimensions of language use, physical representation, and music should work together to form a cohesive advertisement that is aligned with the brand image.

### **Automotive Advertising**

Early on, automotive advertising in the US reflected the importance of developing a personality related to the target audience. In the introductory stage of the product lifecycle, in this case when cars were first mass produced in the early 1900s, primary marketing objectives are to create awareness of the product and develop a market of consumers (Gitman et al., 2018). Many early car companies sought to develop a market of consumers who were striving for status. Because cars were not yet widely owned, many automotive advertisements of the 1920s highlighted the prestige of purchasing a car.

In the 1930s, as cars gained more widespread awareness and entered the growth stage of the product lifecycle, brands began to differentiate themselves. Luxury automakers continued to associate their cars with elevated social status while companies like Ford began to emphasize selling to the everyday consumer (Lienhard, 2016). At this time, it is unlikely that any car ads included Black models, regardless of targeting, because advertisements that included Black models depicted them as cooks, porters, or agricultural laborers (Chambers, 2011). Scholars have observed that non-luxury brands across product types have since been more inclusive of Black and other non-White models, although luxury brands are more likely to continue the use of White models (Henderson & Baldasty, 2010; Strebinger et al., 2018). This trend is important as it could

have an impact on the audiences that have high awareness of, consider, and ultimately purchase luxury products, including cars.

The purchase of a car is a high-involvement decision, which means that consumers do research, compare features and benefits, and take their time in making a final decision. Consumers also put a lot of stock into the reputation of the brand from which they are purchasing, which is established in part through advertising. For high-involvement, specialty goods, like cars, brand-building is key to establishing positioning and being included in the consumer's consideration set when they do eventually need the product (Fill & Turnbull, 2019).

Because of the focus on brand-building and the prominence of car brands, many US consumers hold common associations of car brands and their traits; Toyotas last forever, Volvos are safe, Tesla is visionary. Cars are also thought of as a reflection of the individual driving them, in both personality and status. Customers comparing their personalities to those of car brands will either feel strong self-brand congruence or will not feel they align with the brand. Strong self-brand congruence could be a precursor to audience connectedness, especially if the advertising approaches diversity in a way that is multi-dimensional and includes synergistic visual and non-visual cues, fitting the criteria that Burgess et al. (2020) have laid out.

My first research question aims to understand the audience connectedness of a sample of luxury car brands based on ad elements and based on the relationship between the ad and the brand personalities. If the ads do meet the criteria for audience connectedness, I can conclude they have a higher chance of being successful in creating congruence with the target market, which leads to positive outcomes for the brand

including higher likelihood of purchase, brand loyalty, and consumer engagement (Islam et al., 2018; Kumar & Nayak, 2014; Phua & Kim, 2018; Sirgy et al., 1991).

**Research Question 1:** How might Acura, Buick, and Lincoln's ads from both pre- and post-summer 2020 meet Burgess et al.'s (2020) criteria for audience connectedness that proposes that the marketer's approach to diversity must be:

1. multi-dimensional and
2. include synergistic visual and non-visual cues?

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory determines that learning can occur through imitation because of the human capacity for symbolization, self-regulation, self-reflection, and vicarious capability (Bandura, 2002; Krcmar, 2019). Imitation does not always occur through direct contact, meaning that learning can occur by imitating media. By viewing advertising as a form of media, I apply social cognitive theory to understand how personal, environmental, and behavioral determinants have interrelated impacts on human behavior.

Social cognitive theory can be used intentionally to generate positive outcomes for viewers. Children's media that demonstrates prosocial behavior can be used to predict and explain positive behaviors like sharing (Krcmar, 2019). Similarly, narrative persuasion can be used as an educational effort for adult viewers. Well-liked characters can model behavior to help enact social change in society. Modeling behaviors is also successful in health campaigns to benefit viewers physically and mentally (Krcmar, 2019).

Concurrently, social cognitive theory posits that media can impact audiences in unintended ways as well. Unintended impacts are of concern when audiences consume content that shows violence or aggression, risky behavior, or stereotypes. Children are especially at risk because they are developing their social world and the portrayal of the characters informs them of how to expect similar real-life people to be, especially when portrayals are consistently repeated. Repeated portrayals can lead to formations of stereotypes that are hard to break (Bowman, 1998; Nabi & Prestin, 2017; Swan, 1998). Similarly, repeated portrayals of settings in specific ways can contribute to formation of expectations about that setting. Most notably, cities in children's programs are crime-ridden and in need of saving by superheroes, whereas rural nature settings are depicted as peaceful and magical. With limited real-world experiences, children are especially susceptible to accepting these portrayals as reality (Swan, 1998). In reference to new media, Krcmar (2019) explains how the impacts of social cognitive theory may be even more pronounced, as the models of behavior are more individually curated for users based on audience targeting.

Beyond the individual, communication is significant in producing and sharing meaning, representation, and thought with others (Carey, 1989). The creation of community relies on everyday communication in which we engage with those around us (Dewey, 1916). The use of visuals in advertising conveys meaning and that meaning can become key in helping to shape societal attitudes (Davis, 2020). Advertising images can reflect and reinforce societal norms and therefore also become agents of socialization. Understanding advertising as a way of conveying important beliefs, reveals those who create advertising images as incredibly powerful. Davis (2020) notes that advertising is

one of the least diverse in terms of employing racial and ethnic minorities, indicating that those who have had the power of controlling advertising images have historically been, and continue to be, White.

Evolving ideologies impact advertising and updated portrayals in advertising, in turn, impact society (Davis, 2020; Jones, 2020). Beyond consumeristic goals, brands with progressive stances can have a lasting impact on consumers in a positive way. In our post-COVID and post-racial reckoning world advertising needs to be rethought.

Advertising can be used to motivate progressive behaviors such as conservationism and social justice. However, the most ‘in your face’ advertising promoting progressive behaviors can be perceived as ingenuine and labeled as green-washing or woke-washing (Jones, 2020). Advertisers must be dedicated to continued efforts when promoting progressive behaviors to be perceived as genuine by consumers.

### **Summer of 2020**

During the summer of 2020, scholarship focused on brand responses to the BLM movement, with many researchers suggesting that diversity, equity, and inclusion became a platitude instead of a genuine initiative (Bonaparte, 2020; Davis, 2020). By assessing advertising, researchers gained insight to how brands engaged with relevant diversity and social issues. Bonaparte’s (2020) exploration of the impact of the BLM movement on advertising and corporate images provides an analysis of the initial responses from brands during the summer of 2020.

By comparing advertising about racial equality from two prominent brands, Nike and Starbucks, Bonaparte (2020) analyzes the importance of ads with direct calls to action, rather than reactive responses with little follow through. Starbucks’ racial equality

advertisements and corporate initiatives to address racism were poorly received in part because they followed major tragic events, the murder of Michael Brown and an incident in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in which a Starbucks manager accused two African American men of trespassing while they were meeting in the store and had them arrested. Starbucks received some credit for these ads, but its lack of a strong stance in public-facing policies and advertising caused them to face some backlash for the ads and for future policies that appear to contradict the social justice messaging. Bonaparte's (2020) analysis shows Starbucks' failure to establish audience connectedness and to be authentic or sustainable. In contrast, Nike's 2020 ad in response to the social justice movement was well received because it was a part of an ongoing campaign in which Nike partnered with social justice activist and former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Nike is well known to use bold marketing to support ongoing racial justice and had been working with Colin Kaepernick since 2018 (Bonaparte, 2020).

Khamis (2020) evaluates advertising imagery and promotional cues of four valuable, global brands, Budweiser, Gillette, *Vogue*, and Patagonia, in order to understand how they engage with relevant diversity and social issues. By assessing how brands address contemporary consumers, she attempts to understand the risks and rewards brands face by breaking the mold of inherent conservativeness and representing progressive ideology. Khamis also acknowledges the serendipitous timing of her writing, noting that brands now, more than ever, are taking political and social stances that they may never have taken before.

The Budweiser ad that Khamis (2020) considers, along with arguably all of its advertising, does not take such a political or social stance. Instead, Budweiser recalls an



1800s scene designed to resonate with viewers today because of its depiction of the American Dream. Budweiser's decision not to engage with relevant social issues is a stance in and of itself. By maintaining its neutrality, Budweiser cements its place as a conservative, risk averse company and attempts to establish connections with audiences who also choose not to engage progressively in political or social issues. Similarly, Khamis posits that *Vogue*'s apathy regarding issues of feminism positions *Vogue* in the same category with Budweiser. *Vogue*'s lack of dialogue around evolving, inclusive standards of beauty show its inability to be accountable for problems it has perpetuated. *Vogue* had the opportunity to right historic wrongs with dedicated discussions of how standards of beauty have historically been centered around thin White women but chose to avoid the topic.

As counter-instances, Khamis (2020) discusses the gambits of Gillette and Patagonia that paid off for their brand identities as progressive companies. Gillette, unlike *Vogue*, took a step toward correcting an environment of toxic masculinity that it may have contributed to historically. With its ad "The Best a Man Can Be," Gillette challenged sexism and misogyny. While it did receive backlash, Gillette took a risk with its identity that proved successful in connecting with progressive audiences.

Patagonia is a brand that has always taken such risks. Khamis (2020) argues that Patagonia is first motivated by politics and activism, where other brands often see politics and activism as a second thought. Patagonia is a quintessential example of a progressive brand that actively engages with political and social issues and stays involved long-term. Patagonia's brand promises are focused on sustainability and social change. The brand acknowledges the role of clothing companies in environmental and social issues and

outlines for customers how it is rectifying these issues. Customers are also encouraged to get involved by making small changes to their lifestyles and demanding that brands they purchase from take similar steps to Patagonia. By highlighting its own activism online and through advertising, Patagonia proves that social and environmental causes are central to the brand.

In summer of 2020 many questioned the long-term strategy and real action behind the diversity messages many brands were developing. Even now, in 2022, it is difficult to reflect on the continued success of advertising and rebranding efforts sparked by the summer of 2020. In just two years, the impacts of long-term strategy decisions are not yet evident and lasting dedication to diversity initiatives cannot yet be measured. The examples Bonaparte and Khamis provide show successful long-term brand engagement with relevant diversity and social issues, unsuccessful brand engagement that was perceived as ingenuine because it was not sustained, and nonexistent brand engagement through brands that have not addressed such issues.

However, it is important to continuously assess audience connectedness, authenticity, and sustainability of these messages for positive outcomes for brands and audiences. For brands, these outcomes translate to sales, brand preference, and customer loyalty. Increasingly, brands are emphasizing the importance of positive outcomes beyond these marketing objectives as they relate to consumers and society (Bonaparte, 2020; Davis, 2020). Viewing diverse advertising can help prevent formation of negative stereotypes and increase positive portrayals of historically underrepresented groups (Mastro, 2017). Representation can impact how audiences see themselves in the social world, what they aspire to be, and the pride they feel in their own identities (Besana et al.,

2020; McInroy & Craig, 2015). Because advertising can reflect and reinforce societal norms, consumers and brands must continuously assess advertising messages to ensure they reflect the ideals and values of the society in which we live, or hope to live.

**Research Question 2:** How has Black representation changed between the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads from Acura, Buick, and Lincoln?

## METHODS

### **Research Design**

In order to evaluate audience connectedness and the impact that summer 2020 had on advertising, I conducted a qualitative content analysis on six advertisements. The nature of a qualitative content analysis includes my own subjective interpretations as the researcher. Many aspects of my identity are important to address as they provide important context for my interpretations.

### **Identity**

First, being mixed-race gives me a unique outlook on race and representation. Researchers have found that individuals more easily recognize and remember faces of their own race compared to those of other races (Meissner & Brigham, 2001; Sporer, 2001). This finding implies that I more easily identify those who are also mixed race. Because I am both Black and White, I may also more easily identify both Black and White actors in the ads I analyze.

Although my racial identity can help to analyze the advertisements, the identities I am interpreting are inherently essentialized through my analysis. Black experience cannot be singularly represented. However, through strategically essentializing Black identity, I provide a critique of advertising that has a history of both essentializing and ignoring Black identity. The critiques in this thesis are not meant to represent a monolith of Black representation, but instead to point out the problems with those who are *not* Black essentializing Black representation.

Because I identify as half Black and White, I gravitated towards those classifications for identifying others. I did consider looking at African American representation because of my specific interest in American advertising. However, not all Black people are African American, and my interest is not specific to those with African origin nor those who are American citizens. I am interested in those who are Black and appear in American advertising, regardless of their origin or citizenship. This distinction was especially important because actors in advertisements can conceal markers of their origin or nationality for roles, specifically their accents. Black is a more inclusive term and more appropriate for use in my analysis.

In addition to my race, I have a background in advertising which also provides a distinct perspective for advertising analysis. When working in an advertising agency, I had personal experiences with the development of ads designed to show diversity and the challenges associated with that process. Specifically, I worked in advertising during the summer of 2020, when discussions of race in advertising became much more prevalent. My experiences in the field have changed my perspective on advertising and given me insights that impact my analysis.

### **The Ads**

My content analysis is focused on TV advertisements that ran on national broadcast networks because of their broad reach and target audience. TV advertisements are typically indicative of a larger, integrated campaign with supporting advertisements (Berger, 2011; Steel, 1998). Though I will not assess each individual piece of these campaigns, the TV advertising provides the most in-depth texts for analysis. TV advertisements generally have the longest content with visual and audio for analysis.

My selection of the category of advertisements was a critical factor in the development of this thesis. I chose luxury cars for the category of interest because of their prominence in the United States market and their role in the development of brand personality, which Neilson (2021) estimates will be increasingly important due to the auto industry supply shortage in 2020. Car companies are leaders within the advertising industry and can shape advertising trends, set benchmarks for success, and inform audiences of what to expect from advertisements. Advertising from such an omnipresent industry changes the way consumers interact with advertising and perhaps even media more broadly (Reeves, 1961).

Although the idea of luxury is subjective, luxury cars are associated with comfort, amenities, quality, performance, and status (Anurit et al., 2002). Even with automotive advertising budgets trending down over the past four years, it is estimated that car companies spent \$3.84 billion on TV advertising alone in 2020 (Gazdik, 2020). Because consumers are exposed to a large number of ads for luxury vehicles, portrayals in these ads can contribute to the development of consumers' social worlds (Swan, 1998). Research Question 2 aims to discover if there has been change in Black representation in advertising after summer of 2020. If I note a change, hypotheses about the impact of those changes in the social worlds of Black Americans could be put forth in future research on advertising effects, specifically on Black Americans.

The timing of interest also impacts my analysis, as many product categories stopped or significantly changed advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to avoid advertising messages that were a direct result of the COVID pandemic, I selected pre-summer of 2020 advertising that aired prior to March of 2020, when the majority of

the United States shutdown due to the pandemic. The post-summer 2020 advertising will be less impacted by the pandemic, however I selected advertising from after November of 2020. While the pandemic was still impacting daily life in the United States at that time, the impact on advertising was dwindling. November marked the beginning of holiday ads that shifted focus from the hardships of 2020 and looked toward the holiday season, albeit differently from a normal year. With vaccines moving closer to gaining Food and Drug Administration approval, many Americans were hopeful for the new year, a sentiment expressed in advertising as well.

### **Sampling**

There are many different brands within the luxury car market, so I included further specifications for establishing the brands of interest. Using *Kelley Blue Book's* Brand Watch Report (Cox Automotive Inc., 2021), I assessed the consideration levels of luxury car brands. I excluded brands with less than 10% consideration to prevent selecting campaigns aimed to significantly grow or change the brand market share. I avoided brands at the top of the consideration level as their status as leaders in the category could impact marketing tactics. When a brand leads a category, advertising may be reduced if stakeholders do not feel it is necessary. Conversely, brands leading the category may also feel comfortable to take risks in advertising that they would not feel comfortable taking otherwise (Steel, 1998). In order to avoid both cases, I excluded the brands with the top three levels of consideration. I also excluded brands that do not buy TV advertising, such as Tesla.

When evaluating the remaining options, three brands were consistently close to one other in their levels of brand consideration quarter over quarter: Acura, Buick, and

Lincoln. These brands fell at the bottom of my threshold for brand consideration, with Buick and Lincoln holding 10% consideration and Acura holding 11% in the second quarter of 2021. Since the final quarter of 2019, all three of these brands have remained stable in their positions in the consideration set of luxury vehicle shoppers, never falling below 7% consideration, or reaching above 14% (Cox Automotive Inc., 2021).

Consistency in consideration level was an important factor when I determined brands because a major change in consideration level could be indicative or predictive of a change in the typical advertising for the brand.

In order to capture ads that had similar prominence, the selected ads needed to have no fewer than 1,000 national airings and no more than 4,500 national airings. Impressions were also an important consideration, because I wanted the ads to have been viewed a similar number of times by the audience. Ads with between 750 million and three billion TV impressions were considered.

I selected one ad from each brand from before March of 2020 and one ad from each brand from after November of 2020. Due to the focus on Black representation in advertising, I purposefully selected ads that included Black representation, when available within the aforementioned criteria. In many cases, the limits I placed on national airings and impressions precluded ads with Black representation from being selected. I provide more detail on ads that did not meet the inclusion requirements in the discussion section.

### **Data Collection**

I collected the data using iSpot.tv to view the TV advertisements. iSpot is a website used by advertisers to measure brand business impact of TV advertising. iSpot



provides information on the advertiser, products, actors, and airings of TV commercials, as well as videos of the commercials. I assessed each advertisement for four potential items of analysis: language use, physical representation, music, and synergy. I initially analyzed all six ads to answer Research Question 1. After initial analysis, I compared the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads for each of the brands to answer Research Question 2.

## **Measurement/Instrumentation**

### ***Language Use***

I divided language use into three categories: voice-over, dialogue, and on-screen text (Butler, 2009). For the purposes of this analysis, voice-over is defined as the voice of a narrator who is not present physically in the advertisement. This can include narration during the action of the commercial and/or summation of the product at the end. Dialogue on the other hand, is categorized as conversation happening on screen, with characters who are seen on screen. Although dialogue typically requires two or more people, for this analysis of language, dialogue can occur if the character is talking to themselves, the audience, or the car. Finally, I analyzed on-screen text. On-screen text is typically used at the end of the commercial to display the brand and product name but could also be present throughout the commercial. For the purposes of this analysis, I did not consider closed captions as on-screen text. Because music is categorized separately, I did not consider lyrics in language analysis.

When assessing language, I analyzed the six commercials for themes and categorized accordingly. When comparing the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads, I used elements of a semiotic analysis to understand the contextual importance of language use in the ads. I used a semiotic analysis to explore both denotative and connotative

meanings. Denotation is the foundation of meaning, devoid of cultural connotations (Barthes, 1977). Connotative interpretations, on the other hand, are based on cultural context, in this case the time surrounding summer of 2020, and are incredibly important in ad reception, and in turn, effectiveness (Herman, 2018).

### ***Physical Representation***

Physical representations of characters in the advertisements include the number of characters, relationships between the characters, roles as primary or secondary characters, and determination of race. Although the number of characters in the ad was a quantifiable variable, the other aspects were difficult to determine with strictly objective measures. The roles of the characters as primary or secondary were based in part on the number and length of time they are on screen and talking. However, other factors including camera framing and importance of the character were also used (Butler, 2009). Establishing the relationships between characters was based on explicit statements at times, but often required contextual clues to establish.

Similarly, the race of actors or spokespeople were found using resources such as IMDb, an online source for movie, TV, and celebrity content that includes information on actors (IMDb, n.d.). In addition to online information or when it was not available, I used other measures of race. Scholars across fields agree that race is a socially and culturally constructed concept with little biological foundation (Gannon, 2016; Ifekwunigwe et al. 2017; Thompson, 2006). Because there are no established rules for inclusion or exclusion of racial groups, I used factors commonly associated with race (Brawley, 2021). I used physical factors including skin color, hair texture, and facial features to determine the race of characters (Hazell & Clarke, 2008; Thilaka et al., 2020). I also considered other

factors that were evaluated for the analysis in my determination of race, such as dialogue, relationships between characters, and music.

### ***Music***

Analysis of music included notes on the prominence of the music, including the timing and volume, genre of music, details of the artist, and lyrics, if applicable.

### ***Synergy***

In marketing, synergy is typically assessed in terms of the way communications in different mediums work together toward a singular message. For this analysis, synergy is similarly defined as how aspects work together toward a single message. In this analysis, however, I assessed the aforementioned aspects for how they worked together toward the message.

I assessed two aspects of synergy in the analysis. First, I considered the combination of language, physical representation, and music in the ads and how they work together toward the advertising message. I also noted and explored elements of dissonance. Secondly, in order to address Burgess et al.'s (2020) criteria, I evaluated how the elements that included Black representation worked together toward a message that emphasized diversity.

### **Analysis Procedure**

I conducted the analysis by watching and listening to each of the six ads. Initially, my examination was focused on Research Question 1. When assessing audience connectedness, I considered the advertisements independently of one another and did not yet compare the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads. First, I analyzed language use in the advertisement. I watched the ads at least three times for language use to evaluate the three

aspects: voice-over, dialogue, and on-screen text. Next, I watched the ads to determine aspects of physical representation. Some aspects of physical representation, such as relationships between the characters, roles as primary or secondary characters, and characters' race were contingent on the dialogue breakdown. I then evaluated the ads for music use. I used the application Shazam to identify the music used in the advertisement when possible. Shazam identifies music by creating a digital fingerprint of a song played and matching it to the Shazam database, which includes millions of songs (Demarest, 2021). From there, I found information about the artist and lyrics using digital music service Spotify, if needed.

I reviewed the information on language use, physical representation, and music before establishing final determinations on synergy. I evaluated congruence among the three factors to determine the advertising message synergy. The levels of synergy were determined as a range based on congruence between all elements, only some elements, or no elements at all.

After the analysis regarding Research Question 1, I shifted my attention to the comparison between the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads to answer Research Question 2. I watched the pre- and post- ads back-to-back to note initial differences. Then, the previous analyses on the pre- and post- ads from each brand were compared for notable differences in the representation of Black spokespeople, Black characters, or music by Black artists. As part of Research Question 2, I also determined and explored synergy between the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads.

## RESULTS

Research Question 1: How might Acura, Buick, and Lincoln's ads from both pre- and post-summer 2020 meet Burgess et al.'s (2020) criteria for audience connectedness that proposes that the marketer's approach to diversity must be:

1. multi-dimensional and
2. include synergistic visual and non-visual cues?

### **Pre-March 2020**

#### ***Acura***

The first Acura ad I chose for analysis aired for the first time in June 2018 and last aired in April 2019. On iSpot, the ad is called *2019 Acura RDX TV Spot, 'Rainbow' Song by the Rolling Stones [T1]*. The spot had 4,100 national airings which resulted in 1.5 billion impressions. It is 30 seconds long (Acura, 2019).

#### **Language use.**

**Voice-over.** Michael B. Jordan, a prominent Black actor, provides the voice-over. At the end of the ad, Jordan informs the audience of the sound system in the 2019 RDX before wrapping the ad up with the campaign tagline, "it's everything we ever imagined and then some." The use of "we" indicates that Jordan is a part of the group who is presenting the ad. That group could be others in the ad or Acura itself.

**Dialogue.** The spot opens with a non-traditional, yet increasingly familiar form of dialogue, a tone indicating that a voice assistant system is listening for a command. Aside from this tone, there is nothing denotatively indicating that the woman is speaking to a

voice assistant. However, connotatively we are aware that her request to “play ‘She’s a Rainbow’” is intended to be heard and responded to by the voice assistant in the car. By beginning the song, the car engages in dialogue with the woman.

***On-screen text.*** The on-screen text in the ad is used to reinforce the voice-over. As Jordan says, “everything we ever imagined”, those words animate over a black screen. As he adds “and then some” those words also animate into the screen. As those words fade, the Acura logo, name, and slogan, “precision crafted performance” appear, unaccompanied by voice-over.

**Physical representation.** The primary person physically represented on screen in this advertisement is a White woman sitting in the driver’s seat of the car. She is identified as the primary character as she spends the most time on screen and has a speaking role, as mentioned previously. She is sitting in the car in a testing facility and is wearing a lab coat, indicating that she works in the testing lab.

In the first second of the ad, a Black man can be seen sitting in the lab as well, facing the car. Aside from Jordan’s voice-over, this is the only Black representation in the ad. Eight seconds into the ad, we see him again, along with other workers walking around the testing facility. The other workers are too far from the camera to determine their race. These characters are all very minor in the advertisement and may not even be noticed to the average viewer. They provide more context to the setting of the advertisement rather than as characters. At the time, we only see these characters in passing. However, after viewing the entire ad, a viewer may consider that Jordan’s use of “we” indicates that he was one of the workers walking around the test facility.

**Music.** After the voice command system is told to play “She’s a Rainbow,” the song plays in the advertisement. “She’s a Rainbow” is a 1967 song by The Rolling Stones. In the advertisement, the song does not begin at the very beginning, but instead just a few seconds before the lyrics begin. The song plays for the first three lines of lyrics, “she comes in colours everywhere, she combs her hair, she’s like a rainbow,” before the main character turns down the radio. After a brief pause, the voice-over begins and the music restarts along with it at a much lower volume.

The Rolling Stones are known for rock music, but “She’s a Rainbow” is a notably lighter song, characterized as psychedelic pop.

**Synergy.** The beginning of the ad has strong synergy. When the music in the ad plays, rain begins to fall on the windshield of the car and throughout the area of the lab where the car is parked. The area surrounding the car lights up with different colors as the song plays. The correspondence between these actions and the song are complementary. The actions of the main character also align well with the music as she reaches out to feel the rain and seems amazed by the lights. She appears to be pleased by the song playing and perhaps by the additional effects as well. Although Jordan and the woman do not engage in dialogue with each other, she turns down the music in time to hear Michael B. Jordan’s voice-over begin, which does give an impression of dialogue. Jordan’s voice-over makes immediate reference to the car and sound system on which the music was playing, creating a logical transition into the voice-over and corresponding on-screen text. Although overall the ad has many synergistic elements, the Black representation is not necessarily synergistic because it is not incorporated through all elements of the ad.

## **Buick**

The pre-March 2020 Buick ad I chose is called *2019 Buick Envision TV Spot, 'Groceries' Song by Matt and Kim [T1]* on iSpot. The 30 second ad aired in March 2019 and ran through July of the same year. It had 1,700 national airings and 870.2 million impressions (Buick, 2019).

### **Language use.**

**Voice-over.** The voice-over talent for the Buick ad is not identified. The voice sounds like an older, White man. He comes on at the end of the commercial announcing “the new Buick Envision, it’s full of surprises.”

**Dialogue.** The dialogue in the spot is primarily between two main characters, a son and his mother. The son, who looks to be 8–10 years old, begins by asking his mother if this is their new car. Without saying yes, she confirms it is a “new Buick Envision” and shares a few features of the car with her son. He responds with “cool” to which she says, “wait till you check out the back.” In the back, the son discovers “...a lot of groceries” which he tries to put off unloading by offering to walk the dog first. His mother responds, “we don’t have a dog,” and hands the boy the groceries. The mother calls after him “look at my strong man,” to which he responds, “don’t patronize me.”

**On-screen text.** The on-screen text appears as the dialogue ends and reads “New Buick Envision” with the logo between the words “new” and “Buick”.

**Physical representation.** The ad has two characters, a son and his mother. The relationship between the two is inferred by the setting, in front of their home, and the action, unloading the groceries from the trunk. The boy also asks, “is this our new car?”



implying that it is a car for the family. The actor that plays the son is not identified, but based on his skin color and hair, the boy is Black.

The mother in the ad is played by Presilah Nuñez, an American actress best known for her role as Erica on *The Haves and the Have Nots*. The mother in the ad is lighter skinned than her son, but also Black based on her skin color and hair. Presilah Nuñez is Dominican, which adds complexity to her race that does not necessarily translate to her role in the commercial.

**Music.** The music in the ad begins after the dialogue and is set under the voice-over. The song used in the ad is a song called “It’s Alright,” which was released in 2012 by Matt and Kim. The song only plays for five seconds and does not include any lyrics. Matt and Kim are an indie, electronic duo from Brooklyn, New York, who have played at many big music festivals including Coachella and Bonnaroo. Both Matt and Kim, who are in a relationship, are White.

**Synergy.** In the beginning of the commercial, there is a gap between the language and physical representation of the characters. Since the characters are Black, neither the ad elements nor the Black representation in the ad are synergistic. The dialogue between the mother and son does not align with the norms of Black culture. Before taking the groceries into the house, the son talks back to her, asking, “can I do it after I walk the dog.” Perhaps worse, he tells her in a quite forceful tone, “don’t patronize me,” as he carries the groceries into the house. This is not in alignment with the way many Black mothers raise their children. Respect towards elders and parents is very important in the Black community and the son’s backtalk is not aligned with those values. The mother’s

flippant attitude towards her son's disrespect is also contrary to the cultural norms (Dixon et al., 2008).

The voice-over begins after the dialogue and is not integrated into the action of the ad. The narrator takes on the perspective of an outsider and speaks directly to the audience. By commenting on the action of characters, indicating the car is “full of surprises,” he takes on the role of narrator and separates himself from the mother and her son. Because his voice-over begins with the music, those elements feel synergistically connected, yet separate from the action of the ad.

### ***Lincoln***

The first Lincoln ad for analysis aired in January 2018 and ran through August of 2018. On iSpot, the ad is called *2018 Lincoln Navigator TV Spot, 'Uncharted Waters' Ft. Matthew McConaughey [T1]*. The spot had 1,100 national airings, that resulted in 1.2 billion impressions. It is 30 seconds long (Lincoln, 2018).

#### **Language use.**

***Voice-over.*** There is no voice-over used in the '*Uncharted Waters*' ad.

***Dialogue.*** The only words spoken in the ad are from the main character, Matthew McConaughey. He says, “next chapter” as the cargo ship that his car is on approaches land, and he prepares to drive off the boat. He appears to be talking to himself, since there are no other people in the ad, and he does not face the camera to address the audience.

***On-screen text.*** After McConaughey drives off the ship, he drives down a winding road through the woods. The camera pans up to show an overhead view of the road and the trees and the Lincoln logo appears alongside the words, “The 2018 Lincoln Navigator”. The words “Lincoln Navigator” are in bold font. As the name and logo fade

away, the text “Named ‘MOST APPEALING VEHICLE’ in the J.D. Power 2018 APEAL Study” appear as the car continues down the winding road. Lastly, the words fade out for new text to fade in reading, “With the highest score of any vehicle in the last six years.”

**Physical representation.** Matthew McConaughey is the primary character in the ad. McConaughey is a well-known actor, producer, and director who began his acting career in the early 90s. McConaughey is a 52-year-old white man.

**Music.** The music in the ad is not listed in iSpot and could not be identified by Shazam. It is possible that it is a custom composition made for the commercial. The ad starts out with suspenseful music behind prominent sound effects of wind, the ocean, birds, and McConaughey turning the pages of a book in his lap. As the boat approaches land, the creaking of the ramp provides a transition to McConaughey turning the knobs on the car dash. The music then takes over as the primary sound effect with a stronger beat.

**Synergy.** Many of the elements of the *Uncharted Waters* ad are synergistic. McConaughey is represented as a singular, mysterious explorer, whose mystery is amplified by the lack of voice-over, limited dialogue, delayed on screen text, and the music. The combination of the single line of dialogue “next chapter” along with the on-screen text “The 2018 Lincoln Navigator” imply that the 2018 Navigator will be different than the past Navigators. That point is supported by the claim that the Navigator was named most appealing by J.D. Power. However, the ad itself does not seem to be different than past Lincoln ads. McConaughey has been the Lincoln spokesman since 2014 and appeared in many similar commercials. In the context of the brand history, the

ad is not entirely synergistic. There is no Black representation in this ad, so there not opportunity for synergy that works towards a message of diversity.

### **Post-August 2020**

Research Question 1: How might Acura, Buick, and Lincoln’s ads from both pre- and post-summer 2020 meet Burgess et al.’s (2020) criteria for audience connectedness that proposes that the marketer’s approach to diversity must be:

1. multi-dimensional and
2. include synergistic visual and non-visual cues?

### ***Acura***

The second Acura ad chosen aired in January 2021 and ran through February 2022. On iSpot, the ad is called *2022 Acura TLX TV Spot, ‘Pushing the Limits of Premium Performance’ [T1]*. The spot had 1,600 national airings resulting in 776.4 million impressions. It is 30 seconds long (Acura, 2022).

#### **Language use.**

***Voice-over.*** At the end of the advertisement, the Acura spokesman says, “visit your local Acura dealer for attractive offers on the TLX.” The voice-over talent for the ad is not identified. It is a man’s voice, but his race cannot be determined.

***Dialogue.*** There is no dialogue in the Acura commercial.

***On-screen text.*** The on-screen text is one of the most important elements in the commercial because there is limited voice-over and no dialogue. All of the text in the commercial is capitalized. As the commercial opens with the car speeding across the screen, the text animates using a swipe-in style across the screen. The text reads, “the

performance in these” followed by various features including “available super handling all-wheel drive™” and “double-wishbone front suspension”.

In a still shot of the car, the words “comes from these” are visible above the car before the shots change to feature racecars. “ISMA Champions” animates into the screen followed by “2019 and 2020” as the cars zoom down a track. The camera cuts to different angles of the cars and “2021 winners Rolex 24 at Daytona” slides onto the screen before the camera cuts back to the Acura. The car slides across the screen revealing “the 2021 TLX”. The screen then goes black and flashes the slogan “Less talk. More drive.” The Acura logo with the brand name and tagline, “precision crafted performance,” wrap up the ad. In the last frame, the APR percentage of the car appears on the screen.

**Physical Representation.** In a few quick cuts of the ad, the hands of the driver can be seen turning knobs and steering the car into slides. Based on the watch and fingernails of the person driving, they are likely a man. Based on his skin tone, he is likely white.

In a parallel style, the hands of the racecar driver can be seen on the wheel. The racecar driver is in full uniform, including gloves, so their gender or race cannot be determined.

**Music.** The music in *Pushing the Limits of Premium Performance* is not identified by iSpot and could not be identified by Shazam. The music begins with an upbeat tempo that can barely be distinguished from the zooming sounds of the car. As the ad goes on, the beat becomes more prominent, but is still intertwined with the sounds of the cars accelerating, zooming past the camera, and screeching around turns.

**Synergy.** The synergy in the Acura ad is strong, emphasizing the performance of the car and deemphasizing other factors in alignment with the slogan “Less talk. More drive.” The quick succession of the on-screen text along with the use of all caps makes it more difficult to understand what the ad is communicating, especially in the beginning. However, the speed and prominence of the text aligns with the quick cuts of the camera and beat of the music. Similarly to the Lincoln ad, there is no synergistic Black representation in this ad.

### ***Buick***

The post-summer 2020 Buick ad chosen aired in May 2021 and ran through November of that same year. The 30 second ad is called *2021 Buick Envision TV Spot, ‘Quadruple Take’ Song by Matt and Kim [T1]* on iSpot. The spot had 4,000 national airings, that resulted in 1.8 billion impressions (Buick, 2021).

### **Language use.**

***Voice-over.*** The voice-over talent for the post Summer 2020 Buick ad is the same as that of the previous ad. He is not identified but sounds like a White man. He comes on at the end of the commercial announcing “the all-new Buick Envision” that is “an SUV built around you, all of you.” The connotation of “all of you” is multifaceted, because “you” can be both singular or plural. Singularly, “all of you” indicates the SUV is built around every aspect of you. However, “all of you” can also indicate all of the individuals watching the ad.

***Dialogue.*** Interestingly, this spot is mostly based on dialogue between four women who are all the same person. The first woman gets in the car and says that her spin class was brutal to which the woman in the passenger seat tells her, “you can try

using the Buick's massaging seat." The other women ask about the car's Wi-Fi before they all agree on how much they used to hate parallel parking, presumably before they got a Buick that would park itself. Using many versions of the woman talking to one another emphasizes the many needs of a one person and the many features the Buick has that satisfies those needs and bolsters the first reading of "all of you" as all versions of you as a person.

After the woman parks her Buick, she gets out, greeting a man with a "hey". He tells her, "you really outdid yourself" to which she responds, "yes, we did." This interaction provides additional context to the reading of "you" as the individual, as the "we" can be read as the woman and the many facets of herself. In this case "we" can also be read as those at Buick, who have really outdone themselves in creating the all-new Buick Envision. Contrary to the "you" in the dialogue, this reference to "we" does not seem to be inclusive of the audience due to the framing of the camera. As the woman says, "yes we did", the camera pans away from the conversation and the screen is occupied primarily by the car, with the woman and the man in the background. If the woman would have addressed the camera when saying "we" then she could have included the audience.

***On-screen text.*** The on-screen text appears at the end of the ad, in sync with the voice-over. The Buick logo appears along with the text "SUV." As the voice-over says, "built around you," the capital letter "u" animates to the word "you" in all capital letters, with parenthesis around the "u".

**Physical representation.** The advertisement opens with one woman, played by Vanessa Curry, leaving a spin class. Other gym members can be seen through the front

window of the gym, but provide only context to the setting and are not main characters in the spot. The woman gets into her car where other versions of her are gradually revealed. The gym version of the woman is the main character in the advertisement; she has the most lines and exists outside of the car. Those waiting for her in the car are supporting roles, emphasizing different features of the Buick. The version of the woman in the passenger seat is perhaps the 'modern woman' version. She is in a leather jacket and suggests the car massager. Another version of the woman is in the back seat. She is dressed in a sleeveless purple top and asks about playing music. She may be the 'fun' version of our main character. Lastly, the 'nerdy' version of the main character is introduced in glasses and a collared shirt with a vest. She chastises the main character for not having a strong enough Wi-Fi password. The many versions of the main character signify the many roles we have in life and attempt to show how the Buick accounts for all those roles.

Vanessa Curry is an American actress, model, and dancer who has done many commercials. She has Hispanic heritage but appears racially ambiguous. Racial ambiguity can be used in advertising to relate to a wider variety of audience members because people from different races may perceive the character to be like them (Meissner & Brigham, 2001; Sporer, 2001). There are not any additional contextual clues that would indicate the woman's race in the commercial.

In the end of the spot, the woman exits the car and meets a White man. He is only featured up close for a second before the camera angle changes to feature the car. He is a minor character in the advertisement.



**Music.** In the first half of the commercial, there is no music used. The music begins as the main character presses the button for the Buick to self-park and plays through the end of spot, including through the voice-over. The song is the same one used in the pre-summer 2020 ad, “It’s Alright” by Matt and Kim. The first ten seconds of the song play, which do not include any lyrics.

**Synergy.** The Buick ad transitions well between its three phases. The first is the conversation between the main character and the versions of herself. This section ends with the collective “me too” in reference to hating parallel parking. The second phase of the ad overlaps the first and is signified by the music playing as the main character parks. This music leads to the main character getting out of the car and meeting the man. Lastly, the voice-over and on-screen text come on. This phase feels distinct from others but is connected by the music playing in the background. In this phase, the car is the focal point of the ad rather than the characters. Without the music, this ad may lack synergy, but the music helps with the transitions between the scenes. The timing of the music does not seem to indicate that it is the music the ‘fun’ version of the main character is playing in the car. The characters do not react to the music which indicates to the audience that it is an external jingle played in the commercial. The use of the same music throughout Buick commercials also supports the belief that it is not played in the car and instead indicative of the brand. The diversity in this ad is also synergistic, represented throughout ad elements, though it is notable that there is not explicit Black representation.

### ***Lincoln***

The post-summer 2020 Lincoln ad is called *2022 Lincoln Aviator TV Spot, ‘Where Does the Stress Go’ [T1]*. The spot aired in September 2021 and ran through

February 2022. The 30 second spot has had 3,500 national airings that resulted in 2.7 billion impressions (Lincoln, 2022).

**Language use.**

***Voice-over.*** The voice-over talent in the ad is Matthew McConaughey, a well-known White actor. He narrates the ad, proposing that “when you’re driving a Lincoln, stress seems to evaporate into thin air,” before pondering all the various places the stress might go. He speaks directly to the audience, suggesting “perhaps you’ll come up with your own theory of where the stress goes,” before letting the audience know that “behind the wheel of a Lincoln is a mighty fine place to start.”

***Dialogue.*** The only dialogue in the ad is between a father and his young daughter. After losing her balloon, she yells “daddy” at him, before whining and stomping on the ground. He turns to face her, but the clip of them ends before he responds.

***On-screen text.*** At the end of the ad, as McConaughey repeats the brand name, it appears on the screen along with the Lincoln logo. Below, the Lincoln name and logo, “The Power *of* Sanctuary” appears before the commercial ends. The word “of” is italicized in the on-screen text.

**Physical representation.** The first scene of the ad is the hand of a Black woman unplugging an electric Lincoln Aviator. The actress in the advertisement is not listed by iSpot, however she can be identified as Black because of her skin tone in the very first shot, as well as throughout the ad. The second scene is of her driving the car down a winding road and, based on McConaughey’s narration, contemplating what happens when her stress evaporates. She is established as the main character in the ad because she is driving the car and the audience presumes that they are looking inside her thoughts as

the following scenes progress. This woman is also revisited at the end of the ad, still driving her car, stress-free.

The second character is a man sitting at a table in a snack bar, opening a soda that, in alignment with McConaughey's narration, "shoots off like a rocket." There are other characters behind him, but they are not the focus of the scene. The man at the center of the scene is played by Sedrick Cabrera, a Chicano actor. Cabrera could be considered racially ambiguous by audiences, as he has light brown skin and dark hair.

The next scene includes a Black father and his daughter. Neither of these actors are listed by iSpot. Based on their skin tone and the girl's hair, they can both be identified as Black. Their relationship is inferred based on their interaction and that the little girl also calls the man "daddy" in the only dialogue in the spot.

Lastly, a White woman is seen walking down the sidewalk of a city, fighting wind and rain. This actress is also not listed by iSpot but can be identified as White based on her skin tone and hair.

**Music.** The song used in the *Where Does the Stress Go* ad is not listed in iSpot and could not be identified by Shazam. It is possible that it is a custom composition made for this commercial. The song does not have any lyrics and builds from a simple, slow piano melody into a quicker, more complex song.

**Synergy.** Matthew McConaughey narrating the main character's thoughts in the *Where Does the Stress Go* does not make for a synergistic ad based on either assessment. Because the gender and race of the voice providing the inner monologue do not match up with the visual representation of the woman in the ad, viewers may experience dissonance when viewing the ad.

## **Comparisons**

Research Question 2: How has Black representation changed between the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads from Acura, Buick, and Lincoln?

### ***Acura***

The style of the two Acura ads is notably different. Although both display features of the cars, the second places much more emphasis on the features and focuses much more on the driving features. The pre-summer 2020 ad features dialogue between characters and prominent music but the post-summer 2020 ad relies heavily on on-screen text and sound effects.

The pre-summer 2020 ad featured Michael B. Jordan as the spokesman and the post-summer 2020 ad did not. Because Jordan was the primary source of Black representation in the ad, his removal left no Black representation in the later ad. Because there is almost no representation of any kind in the post-summer 2020 ad, the lack of Black representation specifically does not stand out. However, it is notable that Jordan was not used as the post-summer 2020 voice-over talent.

### ***Buick***

Unlike Acura, the Buick ads appear to be within the same campaign, using the same music and the same balance between the story line and the features of the car. Similarly to the Acura ads, the pre-summer 2020 Buick ad included Black representation, while the post-summer 2020 Buick ad did not. The post-summer 2020 included a racially ambiguous character who created better ad synergy because of her numerous representations. Although the synergy did improve in the Buick ads, the racially

ambiguous actress is not as effective at representing Black identity as the Black actress in the pre-summer 2020 ad.

### *Lincoln*

The two Lincoln ads also appear to be in the same campaign, with McConaughey narrating both. However, the second ad features a Black woman as the primary character, instead of McConaughey being the only character represented. In this set of ads, the Black representation increased from pre-summer 2020 to post-summer 2020, but the synergy of the representation decreased. The Black representation in the post-summer 2020 ad is limited to the physical representation of the main character and does not extend into the voice-over that provides her monologue. If the voice-over provided different narration, the ad may have been more synergistic.

## DISCUSSION

### **Acura**

Acura's pre-summer 2020 ad includes limited diversity that is multi-dimensional but not synergistic. With the visual inclusion of a few Black characters and the use of Michael B. Jordan as the voice-over talent, there is Black representation in two aspects of the ad. However, Acura's approach to diversity is not synergistic because of the lack of interaction between the visual cues, primarily a White woman, and the non-visual cues, Michael B. Jordan's voice, and "She's a Rainbow" by the Rolling Stones.

The lack of interaction between the visual and the non-visual cues and synergy in the ad creates a disconnect for the audience. Without consistency, the brand lacks a strong persona, and the consumer may be confused about which aspects of the ad are most representative of the brand personality. Because the audience does not have a clear sense of the brand personality, they will likely not feel self-brand congruity based on the ad and may be less likely to engage with the brand (Islam et al., 2018; Phua & Kim, 2018).

By including Michael B. Jordan as the primary source of Black representation, Acura may lead its Black audience to feel excluded, tokenized, or singularly represented (Burgess et al., 2020). The limited Black representation also conveys meaning to the audience, Black and otherwise, that can shape societal attitudes about who drives Acura cars and who does not (Davis, 2020). Specifically in this ad, the White woman is driving the car while Black men are seen in the background working, if they are noticed at all.

Although the woman is also dressed as a lab worker, she is more prominently featured as the driver of the car.

With no diversity in the post-summer 2020 advertising, there is no opportunity for multi-dimensional or synergistic representations. The Acura ads in my analysis show a decrease in Black representation between the ad airing in June 2018 and the ad airing in January 2021. This suggests that Acura does not have a strong dedication to Black representation in its advertising.

I did come across some post-summer 2020 Acura ads that included diverse actors; however, they did not meet my criteria for inclusion based on the limited number of national airings and impressions. I was particularly interested in the *2021 Acura RDX TV Spot, 'I Like It' Song by Carlos Moyra [T2]*. The ad includes on-screen text in Spanish, voice-over in Spanish, music by a Hispanic artist, and Hispanic and Black characters. However, the ad had fewer than 100 national airings (Acura, 2021). The emphasis on Spanish and Hispanic representation paired with the low number of national airings are likely indications that the ad is an example of an ad targeted for Spanish-speaking audiences.

Alongside the post-summer 2020 ad with no racial diversity, this Hispanic targeted ad provides evidence that Acura may reserve representation for targeted advertising. It appears that Acura assumed the core advertising should appeal to White audiences and relegated targeted groups to the margins.

## **Buick**

Buick's pre-summer 2020 ad includes multi-dimensional Black representation that is not synergistic. The portrayal of the mother and her son can be considered multi-

dimensional because they are physically represented and engaged in dialogue in the ad. However, the relationship between the mother and son also fails to show genuine Black representation and is not synergistic because the physical representation does not align to the dialogue between the mother and son. The lack of synergistic Black representation may lead to the Black audience feeling tokenized.

Although the physical representation of a Black family is obvious in the ad, the relationship between the mother and son is not one with which many Black audiences will feel congruent. Because there is no singular representation of a Black mother-son relationship, some Black mothers may feel the Buick portrayal represents them. However, based on the importance of respect for parents, especially mothers, in the Black community (Dixon et al., 2008), the representation in the Buick ad feels incongruent. I suspect that the goal in this ad was to increase Black representation to form a relationship with Black audiences, specifically mothers. Without an understanding of Black experiences, the result is a tokenized representation that falls short of building a relationship and may even push Black audiences away from Buick.

Portraying the family as only a mother and her son also reinforces stereotypes about Black fatherhood. Stereotypes that Black fathers are not present in their children's lives run rampant in the United States (Coles & Green, 2010). Perpetuating this stereotype, intentionally or otherwise, in portrayals of Black families can lead to negative outcomes. Historically, stereotyped representations reinforced ideals of the racial hierarchy, which may still be the case through demonstrating Black fathers as inferior by exclusion (McQuirter, n.d.). Repeated portrayals of stereotypes can also become



internalized for Black families, potentially leading to stress and negative self-image (Besana et al., 2020; Schwing et al., 2013).

Buick's post-summer 2020 ad includes the physical representation of a racially ambiguous woman. This representation is multi-dimensional because she is physically represented and engages in dialogue with the various versions of herself. The post-summer 2020 Buick ad is synergistic in its representation of diversity, even though it is not necessarily Black representation.

Buick's use of a racially ambiguous woman is a likely attempt to appeal to a broad audience. Advertisers portray and reinforce imagery of typical users that match the self-concept of the target market physically (Lee & Kim, 2017; Schenk & Holman, 1980). Audiences of different races may perceive the woman as being the same race as them, which could lead to self-brand congruity. However, without a clear racial identity established, audiences may also perceive the racially ambiguous woman as unlike them.

By presenting the many facets of the single woman's personality, Buick creates a woman whose personality could also resonate with a variety of individuals. However, like her race, audiences may reject her entirely if they do not feel some aspects of her do not represent them. The post-summer 2020 Buick ad attempts to represent everyone but could fall into a trap of truly representing no one.

The Buick ads included in the analysis show a decrease in explicit Black representation between March 2019 and the ad airing in May 2021. This finding suggests that Buick is dedicated to diversity but does not have a strong dedication to explicit Black representation in its advertising.

## **Lincoln**

Lincoln's pre-summer 2020 ad does not include any Black representation. The ad itself is synergistic, however it claims to be representing a new "chapter" which is not established in the ad. With Matthew McConaughey as the lone person represented physically and through his dialogue, the possible audiences for brand congruity with Lincoln are limited. The long-term nature of McConaughey's partnership with Lincoln creates a direct link between the McConaughey's personality traits and Lincoln's brand personality (Aaker, 1997).

Due to the history of luxury vehicles being advertised to White men, repeated portrayals of McConaughey could reinforce expectations about the type of person for whom Lincolns are made. These expectations can have negative consequences for those who are not represented. Without Black representation in the ad, behavior of owning a Lincoln is not modeled by a character congruent to the Black audience. This lack of representation may lead to Black audiences not considering ownership of Lincolns a possibility. Perhaps worse, if Black audiences do not feel congruity with characters repeatedly used in Lincoln commercials, they may feel that the cars are not for them. This feeling could create a barrier for Black audiences aspiring to own Lincolns by leading them to feel less worthy of ownership.

Beyond Black audiences, communication is significant in producing shared meaning across all of society. The message that Lincoln, and other brands, communicate through advertising can lead to a shared understanding about who should own the products they advertise. If White men are the only group shown owning and driving

Lincolns in commercials, what might society implicitly think about other groups they may encounter owning or driving the cars?

Similar to the additional Acura ad I discovered, I found a pre-summer 2020 Lincoln ad featuring Serena Williams, a prominent Black tennis star. However, the ad had fewer than 1,000 impressions and 100 national airings, so it did not meet the criteria for inclusion (Lincoln, 2019). In the ad, called *2019 Lincoln Navigator TV Spot, 'Sanctuary' Featuring Serena Williams, Song by Sarah Vaughn [T1]*, Serena Williams is the main character of the ad and driver of the car. While sitting in the car, she plays the 1956 song "Make Yourself Comfortable" by Sarah Vaughan, a Black jazz singer. This ad, with prominent Black representation and a limited number of national airings, was also likely designed for a targeted campaign.

Lincoln may have tried to compensate for the exclusion of Black representation in its main campaign ads by prominently featuring a Black woman in the post-summer 2020 ad *'Where Does the Stress Go'*. The Black representation in the post-summer 2020 ad is multi-dimensional because Black characters are both physically represented and engage in minimal dialogue. However, the post-summer 2020 Lincoln ad is not synergistic in its representation of diversity since McConaughey, a White man, narrates the thoughts of the primary character, a Black woman.

The *'Where Does the Stress Go'* ad was likely Lincoln's attempt to navigate the challenge of having a White man as the longtime spokesperson for the brand. Perhaps Lincoln's advertising has not phased McConaughey out because of his relationship to wife Camila Alves McConaughey, a Brazilian-American model and designer, which may communicate support for interracial couples and families. However, Alves McConaughey

is not featured in any of the Lincoln commercials, so the brand is not effectively communicating the message of support if that is the goal.

Moving away from a longtime spokesperson can be tricky territory, as State Farm Insurance recently discovered when it swapped the actor playing its spokesperson, Jake from State Farm. The original Jake was Jake Stone, a White employee of State Farm cast for the role as spokesperson. The new Jake, actor Kevin Miles (also known as Kevin Mimms), made his debut in February 2020 and sparked controversy because he is Black. State Farm faced backlash in part because they did not show a meaningful dedication to the new inclusion of Black representation. Swapping White Jake for Black Jake without a new backstory or even a new name trivialized the new minority character and led audiences to feel the Black representation was opportunistic and artificial (Podoshen et al., 2021).

State Farm competitor, Progressive, has had more success in incorporating multiple spokespeople into their advertising. After success with spokesperson, Flo, Progressive introduced additional characters into ads that also featured Flo. The interaction between Flo and other characters decentralized her role in advertising, which may have set audiences up for an easier transition to the 2021 ads featuring Dr. Rick. The 2021 Progressive ads feature Dr. Rick, a character coaching new homeowners who are turning into their parents, without Flo. However, in both the State Farm and Progressive examples, the spokespeople became famous because of their roles as spokespeople, which notably differs from Lincoln's use of a celebrity spokesperson.

Old Spice has had success with decentralizing its celebrity spokespeople, successfully transferring the role from Isiah Mustafa to Terry Cruz and now from Cruz to

Deon Cole through transitional ads that featured both the old and the new spokesperson. However, it should be noted that these spokespeople are all Black men, which may contribute to the ease with which Old Spice transitioned them. To decentralize the spokesmen's roles, Old Spice also included other notable celebrities in advertisements including, Fabio, Derrick Henry, and currently Gabrielle Dennis and Nia Long.

Using a similar tactic, Lincoln could decentralize McConaughey by incorporating other celebrities who are both physically represented and have speaking roles. Using celebrities instead of unknown commercial actors could create a more equal power dynamic than that which is established in the '*Where Does the Stress Go*' ad. A gradual incorporation of Black celebrities with roles equivalent to McConaughey's could lead to synergistic and multi-dimensional Black representation in Lincoln's advertising that audiences perceive as genuine.

Although the Lincoln ads I analyzed did show an increase in Black representation and diversity between January 2018 and September 2021, the lack of synergistic representation results in the ad falling short of Burgess et al.'s (2020) criteria for audience connectedness. Because the main character in the ad is not given any dialogue or the opportunity to narrate her own thoughts, she likely lacks the depth necessary to connect with Black audiences. The exclusion of her voice and insertion of a White man to speak on her behalf recalls the painful history of marginalized groups, both Black people and women in this case, fighting to be heard in a country historically dominated by White men. Her narrow representation was likely an attempt to increase diversity in Lincoln advertising that may result in Black audiences feeling tokenized.

## CONSIDERATIONS

Inherent limitations exist based on my selection of a qualitative content analysis method. The analysis is subjective to me as the researcher and does not contain quantitative findings. Although the conclusions were drawn from relevant research and theory in scholarship, they include bias based on my identity as a mixed-race graduate student who comes from a background of advertising. Specifically, the topic of interest recalls enduring injustices that Black Americans face and the potentiality of brands exploiting the BLM movement that aims to highlight those injustices. With a background in advertising, I have personal experiences with the development of ads designed to show diversity and the challenges associated with their development.

The research is also limited in that it is not reflective of consumer sentiment. The theories I used, self-brand congruity and social cognitive theory, posit the impact audience connectedness may have on consumers and the way consumers use advertising to form their social reality. However, I have not presented a study that aims to validate those theories. This content analysis cannot be used to draw conclusions about the impact of the advertising on consumers. This research can, however, lead to hypotheses for further research. For example, focus groups, questionnaires, or experiments gathering information on audience's feelings and responses to ads could provide evidence of the impacts of Black representation in advertising.

Future research can also attempt to yield generalizable results, something that was not possible with my sample of interest. Quantitative analyses of Black representation in

advertising could yield data pointing to a clear increase or decrease in Black representation over time. Coding the types of representation in a large sample may also produce findings about the types of representation in advertising pre- and post-summer 2020.

The purposive sample in my study cannot be used to draw conclusions about all advertising from the selected brands, and certainly not all advertising pre- and post-summer 2020. In order to conduct an in-depth analysis, I narrowed the product category and the selected a small sample. The results of the analysis are not intended to be generalizable. Despite this criterion, I was able to analyze the difference between a small selection of ads from pre-summer 2020 and post-summer 2020.

Although the three brands I selected – Acura, Buick, and Lincoln – are all luxury car brands, their status as neither leaders nor laggards in their product category may also be limiting. I selected these brands to avoid advertising from brand leaders that may feel content with their leadership status or that may feel comfortable taking risks. I also wanted to avoid brands that may be making major changes to their advertising to gain brand consideration (Steel, 1998). However, the consistency in the consideration levels of the brands I selected, as well as their status as middle-of-the-road luxury car brands may be a factor in the lack of multi-dimensional, synergistic Black representation. Perhaps they do not have strong marketing overall, which has resulted in their consistent position in the middle of the consideration set. On the other hand, perhaps they are comfortable where they are, not feeling the need or having the confidence to take risks to be leaders in Black representation. Additional research comparing these brands to those at the top and bottom of the consideration set could rule out product category position as a factor in

Black representation, or provide a deeper understanding of how product category position impacts Black representation in advertising.

In my analysis, I was able to determine that only one of the six ads from Acura, Buick, and Lincoln met Burgess et al.'s (2020) criteria for audience connectedness regarding their approach to diversity. The ad that did meet this criteria, Buick's post-summer 2020 ad *Quadruple Take*, did not have explicit Black representation and instead featured a racially ambiguous actress. By comparing the ads, I determined that Acura, Buick, and Lincoln all changed the inclusion of Black representation between the pre- and post-summer 2020 ads I selected. Each of the car companies changed the Black representation in different ways. Acura and Buick decreased their Black representation, while Lincoln increased its Black representation from pre-summer 2020 to post-summer 2020.

### **Implications**

A great deal of current scholarship focuses on the negative impacts of poor representation in media and advertising. Although I did find evidence that representation is limited to targeted campaigns and that stereotypical Black representation are still issues in advertising, it is not enough so simply call for advertisers to remove stereotypical representations. Advertising, as a discipline, must also make a concerted effort to represent those who have been historically underrepresented in positive ways to a broad audience in the way many TV shows and movies have. Doing so will have positive impacts on both marketing goals and societal views of historically underrepresented groups.



Congruity theory helps explain how, from a marketing perspective, brands that are dedicated to audience connectedness will have more success in brand loyalty and consumer engagement (Islam et al., 2018; Phua & Kim, 2018). Brands that are committed to audience connectedness through representations of diversity as described by Burgess et al. (2020) will enjoy those benefits from diverse audiences, connecting with groups that have been historically excluded from core advertising campaigns. Those groups are increasingly growing in numbers and in buying power, so it will be important for luxury car brands to establish congruity with them in order to stay relevant (Melancon, 2021).

Luxury car advertising is aspirational in nature (Strebinger et al., 2018). Luxury car brands seek to establish congruity with who the audience strives to be, the ideal, which is part of what makes luxury brands desirable (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012). The product quality of luxury brands may reflect their aspirational nature, but the advertising of the brands I have analyzed do not. Luxury brands see themselves as proactive leaders in their respective industries (Kapferer, 2010) but the selected advertising from Acura, Buick, and Lincoln have shown them to be reactive in their inclusion of Black representation. If these luxury brands considered more than just product quality and led the industry in proactive representations of Black people, their advertising could contribute to their aspirational image. As a result, luxury brands could be cultural leaders, modeling synergistic and multi-dimensional Black representation to which other brands, and society, can aspire.

Social cognitive theory demonstrates the impact of advertising beyond a sales tactic, with both positive and negative impacts on individuals and society. In advertising, characters can model prosocial behavior or represent harmful stereotypes (Krcmar, 2019).

In the context of luxury car advertising, I use social cognitive theory to understand both individual and societal expectations about who can drive luxury cars, who can aspire to have a luxury car, and who we should expect to see driving a luxury car. Because advertising images can reflect and reinforce societal norms, those who create luxury car advertising need to be cognizant of the images they produce.

Aside from how the theories apply independently, their interdependence cannot be ignored. Brands may feel more motivated to increase Black representation if Black representation increases sales. The increase in representation, regardless of the goal, can still result in positive outcomes. Consequentially, the increase in Black representation is beneficial for individuals and society. Perhaps more important are representations that are genuine, multi-dimensional, and do not essentialize Black experiences, which can only be a result of greater awareness and inclusion of Black professionals in advertising.

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