

Does the Outdoor Industry Perpetuate Whiteness? An Examination of Colorism with Athleisure and Outdoor Brands Instagram Posts

Nigel AR Joseph, Jihyeong Son, Vicki McCracken, Washington State University, USA

Keywords: Colorism, Instagram, intergroup social dominance, marketing

Background. Due to the omnipresence of social media, the general public has unlimited access to the good, the bad, and the neutral marketing practices of corporate organizations across varying industries. As such, consumer awareness, confidence and trust are sensitivities to corporate practices and communications (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Companies respond by making purposeful decision on which individuals to feature on their Instagram feed based upon who best reflects their brand identity (Ngia, Tao & Moon, 2015; Liang et al., 2011). By using Instagram in this manner, companies are contributing to societal interpretation of who is in the in-group or out-group. They also may be contributing to the perpetuation of social hierarchies, stereotypes, and asymmetrical behaviors on social media, which are central to social dominance theory. Social dominance theory poses that the effect of social preferences asymmetrically favors dominant groups over subordinate groups perpetuating a shared hierarchical value ideology at an intergroup level (Sidanius & Pratto, 2011). One way in which social dominance is manifested is through a preference for white skin tone, also known as, colorism (Maddox, 2004), a preference that mainstream marketers have been guilty of perpetuating for decades. Taylor and Costello, however, believe that a firm's communication should incorporate an array of people of color to increase society's understanding of the cross-cultural consumers in its marketing practices (2017). Most recently, Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) CEO David Labistour openly shared that MEC has perpetuated the stereotype and "incorrect notion that people of color (PoC) in Canada don't ski, hike, climb or camp" (Labistour, 2018). Labistour's letter recognized MEC's role and committing to actively change the narrative about PoC in the outdoors. In response, this paper pursued an empirical investigation of diversity on Instagram by exploring the theoretical underpinnings on Instagram.

Research perspective and hypotheses. This study is from a progressive Black masculinity perspective that centers around the critical race theory, Black feminist thought and the theory of intersectionality (Mutua, 2006). Due to the limited instructional dedication to ethnicity in the educational curriculum of Western societies, many people have limited encounters with various cultures. The our objective is to challenge the reader's views on consumers expand the ideal consumer towards a portrait of a diverse diaspora by analyzing the following: (H1) Outdoor brands display social dominance of colorism through hierarchical stereotyping by not representation to the cultural diaspora of the community and society within who they feature in their posts. (H2) Intergroup social dominance occurs on Instagram by means of asymmetric following behaviors between race/ethnicities of consumers with brands.

Results. We collected data through an intercept survey conducted at a predominately white United States university. The survey was administered to 109 individuals (the mean age was 22.4 +/- 3.9 years, 39.4% were PoC, 53.2% were female and 44.0% were male, including a person who identified as a transgender male; 2 people did not disclose their gender). The survey questionnaire a primary question asking participants to identify the brands they follow on Instagram from a pre-established list (Engagement Lab's, 2016).

To answer H1, we employed content analysis to calculate the percentage of post that has at least 1 person of color (PwPoC) accepting posts with people who have racial and color ambiguity from ten brands Instagram profiles between January 1, 2018 to April 1, 2018. Finally, we compared the percentage of posts with people of color to determine if it reflects western countries that record visible minorities and ethnicity demographics data. The results show that outdoor brands represent the lowest percentages of PwPoC: Columbia Sportswear (9.43%), Patagonia (2.74%), and The North Face (2.56%) a combined average of 5.00%. Conversely, average the ten brands percentage of PwPoC is 39.32% that is nearly identical to the percentage of American PoC (39.30%) and better than the percentage of Canadian PoC (22.27%). Furthermore, in 2017, 27% of all outdoor participants are racially or ethnically diverse (The Outdoor Foundation, 2017) confirming Labistour (2018) statement supporting H1.

To answer H2, we applied a binary logistic regression, to understand the effects the number of post with a person of color (PwPoC), gender, and people of color (PoC) was on the following behavior for an athleisure brand on Instagram. The reference group consisted of White individuals, males, and the brand Nike. The Hosmer-Lemeshow test showed that the model fitted the data well, $p = .533$ that explained 19.3% of the variability. Having an Instagram feed that showcases diversity was significant, ($p < .001$) in following behavior on Instagram. Finding showed that PoC have following behavioral asymmetry when following brands on Instagram compared to white people, however the relationship was not statistically significant ($p = .302$). Examining the interaction between PwPoC and PoC controlling for all other variables, the coefficients indicate that PoC follow athleisure brands at a higher rate compared to white people when the brand showcases diversity ($p = .003$), thus partially supporting H2.

Implications. Collectively the research finding suggests that social dominance and colorism may be prevalent in on Instagram, especially within categories that uphold stereotypes, perceptions, and biases about ethnicities and races of their consumers, such as the outdoor industry. This research is pertinent on multiple aspects. From a social media marketing perspective, the research verifies that diversity on social media builds more bridges with their consumer communities. From an academic perspective, the exploratory research reaffirms the need to include underrepresented population when regarding research. Although the finding illustrated aspects of social dominance, future research focused on individual evaluations of social media posts may shed light on the residuals of stereotyping and western-idealism especially how representation of PoC and LGBTQ are more visible in brand marketing activities.

References

- Engagement Lab. (2016, January 6). Patagonia, Lululemon and Weight Watchers work up an online social sweat, while Under Armour and New Balance work out word of mouth conversations. Retrieved from <https://www.engagementlabs.com/press/patagonia-lululemon-and-weight-watchers-work-up-an-online-social-sweat-while-under-armour-and-new-balance-work-out-word-of-mouth-conversations/>
- Labistour, D. (2018). An open letter from our CEO MEC.com. Retrieved November, 6, 2018 from <https://www.mec.ca/en/article/outside-is-for-everyone>
- Leak, R. L. (2014). Situational effects of ethnic phenotype in marketing: investigating inter-and intra-ethnic preferences for minorities in advertisements. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 18(2), 135-148. DOI: https://www.abacademies.org/articles/amsjvol18n_o22014.pdf#page=142
- Liang, T. P., Ho, Y. T., Li, Y. W., & Turban, E. (2011). What drives social commerce: The role of social support and relationship quality. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 16(2), 69-90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2753/JEC1086-4415160204>
- Maddox, K. B. (2004). Perspectives on racial phenotypicality bias. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8(4), 383-401. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0804_4
- Mutua A. D. (Ed.). (2006). *Progressive Black Masculinities?* Taylor & Francis, New York, NY.
- Ngai, E., Tao, S., & Moon, K. (2015). Social media research: Theories, constructs, and conceptual frameworks. *Int J Information Management* 35, 1, 33-44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2014.09.004>
- Sen, S., & Bhattacharya, C. B. (2001). Does doing good always lead to doing better? Consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility. *Journal of marketing Research*, 38(2), 225-243. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.38.2.225.18838>
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (2011). Social dominance theory. *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, 2, 418-438.
- Taylor, C. R., & Costello, J. P. (2017). Corporate Social Responsibility and the Portrayal of Minority Groups in Advertising. In *Handbook of Integrated CSR Communication*. Springer, New York, NY, 361-375. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44700-1_20
- The Outdoor Foundation. (2017). Outdoor participation report 2017. Retrieved November, 8, 2018 from: http://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-Outdoor-Recreation-Participation-Report_FINAL.pdf