

Feminists, Feminism, and Advertising

Some Restrictions Apply

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Chapter 5

Black Women and Advertising Ethics

A Womanist Perspective

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Elsewhere I have described triadic convergence in the contemporary era as a dynamic synergy among media, technology, and culture, enabling radical innovation and the potential for radical redistribution of social, economic, and political power (J. Jenkins 2014, 2015). I also have warned that this synergy has permitted the proliferation of indistinguishable advertising that blurs the boundaries of traditional advertising forms such that there is hardly a distinction between consumer advertising, news, and popular culture. Indistinguishable advertising includes such things as branded and sponsored programming and content, native advertising and product placement, social media and microblogs, celebrity endorsements, and marketing tie-ins. The obvious ethical problem is that consumers, however savvy, might not discern whether they are engaging advertising, as opposed to entertainment, editorial, or documentary content. Indeed, increasingly it is difficult to tell the difference. At the same time, as the advertising industry directs indistinguishable advertising techniques toward, among other objectives, increasing its reach and influence among so-called “desirable” populations, such as black women and millennials, the industry continues to deflect criticism that diversification among executive practitioners and power brokers is not commensurate with the audience it seeks. Critiques of these ethical issues generally are not well received among advertising industry opinion leaders. Nor are these ethical problems well considered or researched in the academy.

I begin this chapter by introducing Womanist ethics and discussing indistinguishable advertising before laying out some of the ethical dilemmas inherent in indistinguishable advertising tactics that target black women. I then describe two television series as exemplars illustrating the ethical complexities: ABC’s *Scandal*, which debuted in 2012, and Fox’s *Empire*, which debuted in 2015. The ethics of indistinguishable advertising and the ethics of

advertising inclusion and diversity are discrete and not by any means always related sets of problems. However, here I mine the intersection between black women and indistinguishable advertising as an exercise few have been willing to take on. Where black women meet indistinguishable advertising warrants a particular ethical framework first for witnessing and second for parsing the problems, dilemmas, and injustices peculiar to black women. Womanism is uniquely suited to this task given its emphasis on celebrating the specificity of US black women's raced, gendered, classed experiences as historically specific but individually diverse; its origins in critiquing and supporting the US women's movement, despite white feminisms' racism, homophobia, and class elitism; and its commitment to the African-American community and civil rights, despite black men's sexism and the community's homophobia (Collins 1996).

In most instances, I demonstrate my arguments by way of black women, specifically, and race, gender, class, and sexuality more generally. My concerns with indistinguishable advertising, however, extend beyond women of color. Black women in the United States (which is a more inclusive term because not all black women in the United States are African American) are not a homogenous group, despite advertising segmentation practices that might suggest otherwise. Womanist ethics are inherently intersectional, meaning they account for the experience of race as predicated on the experience of gender and socioeconomic status among other factors, and vice versa. Womanism illuminates the ways raced, classed, sexed, and gendered advertisers and advertising professionals target raced, classed, sexed, and gendered audiences as consumers with raced, classed, sexed, and gendered advertising content suggesting seemingly commonsense social scripts and prescriptions for attitudes and behaviors. Indistinguishable advertising, by definition and design, is not meant to be recognized as advertising, even as it sustains what hooks (2015) might label "imperialist white supremacist capitalist heterosexist patriarchy."

WOMANIST ETHICS

To begin this conversation, I offer Womanist ethics as a lens through which to view contemporary advertising practices with new eyes from a rarely accounted-for standpoint—that of multifaceted US black women. Womanism recognizes complicated intersections of racial, economic, sexual, and gender oppressions. Alice Walker (1983) coined the term *Womanist* as an affirmative expression of love in response to the elitism and racism of white heterosexist US second-wave feminism. Interpretations of feminism by women of color involve recognition of the specific historical legacy

of US black women who were active in antiracist and antisexist struggles through the first- and second-wave US women's movements. Originally associated with the values, traditions, and activism of the African-American community, Womanism by some accounts represents the pivot from white second-wave liberal equality feminisms to the US third wave founded on recognizing differences among women based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, nationality, and economic status, among others. Womanism today continues to advocate for and celebrate inclusion, global links, and interdisciplinarity. However, Womanists tend to engage in the examination and integration of black women's experience into dominant understandings of the social world to debunk myths that perpetuate privilege and oppression, to construct ethics and virtues, and to envision human liberation (Harris 2010). Womanists are distinctly aware of the need for simultaneous liberation from all oppressions. Although Collins (1996) makes some important distinctions between Womanism, generally aligned with the African-American community including men, and black feminism, generally aligned with white feminisms' interests in global gender oppressions, the two terms are often used interchangeably. Given the often overlooked but foundational contributions by women of color to feminist thought, "[f]or feminist theory it becomes a moral imperative to examine interlocking systems of oppressions" (Golombisky 2015, 391).

Theologian and ethicist Katie G. Cannon (1988) is credited with developing Womanism's foundations in love into Womanist ethics through her liberation studies. Cannon (1988) affirms that white supremacy and male superiority shape and pervade society. For masses of people, particularly black women, suffering and social marginalization are the normal state of affairs. As long as white male experiences dictate ethical norms, marginalized communities suffer unequivocal oppression. As moral agents, black women create coping mechanisms, make moral judgments, and exercise ethical choices that not only inform Womanist ethics, but also extend to all marginalized communities across changing US demographics and social landscapes (Cannon 1988). In this discussion of advertising, I focus on three principles of Womanist ethics: inclusion, historical context, and pragmatic solutions.

First, regarding Womanist inclusion, even as the advertising industry searches for lucrative and sometimes-elusive niche audiences, diversification among its workforce continues to lag as racist and misogynist representations are employed in efforts to engage the very populations they seek. Meanwhile, as Kreshel (2017) notes, the "desirability" of an audience is usually defined in terms of consumption potential; thus the media landscape is designed to attract the "haves," and "entire segments of the population might be ignored if advertisers don't deem them 'desirable' as a target market, if advertisers aren't interested in talking to them" (203). Thus any interest in diversity on

the part of the advertising industry is predicated on “desirable” audiences in terms of affluence or at least market potential.

Second, if diversity is absent in the advertising workforce, misrepresented in advertising content, yet valuable as a commodity that the media sell to advertisers, then Womanist ethics ask: What gave rise to this situation? Certainly the history of US racism and systemic forces within the advertising industry not only produce a male-dominated, homogenized industry relative to the general population but also justify the status quo. This speaks to power relations that can deflect criticism of its practices in the name of creative license, commercial free speech, client preference, neoliberal individualism, and heteropatriarchal capitalism.

Last, Womanism urges practical solutions for social justice. Womanism accounts for different ways of thinking and knowing based on diverse experiences. These varied perspectives can provide valuable insights into influential product categories in advertising. Take, for example, the beauty industry. According to the Nielsen Report (2015), “94% of all US households buy beauty products,” but total sales have been flat. Diverse US communities demonstrate different standards of beauty, media preferences, and purchasing habits. Yet the advertising industry routinely continues to suggest that to be beautiful is a woman’s most important calling and defines beauty in racist, ageist, heterosexist, and ableist parameters. Understanding culture and experience through applications of Womanism, advertisers might increase relevance to and connections with consumer audiences. However, embracing inclusion and diversity because it is profitable to do so, while a rhetorically expedient advocacy, is not necessarily an ethical one. Womanist ethics in advertising position inclusion as the starting point, not the payoff or a postscript.

INDISTINGUISHABLE ADVERTISING

A key feature of the media landscape in the converged era, which I argue emerged in the 1980s, is that advertising messages increasingly are intermingled with and often indiscernible from other mediated forms (J. Jenkins 2014, 2015). *Advertising Age* columnist Jack Neff (2015) writes, “In fact, you could make the case that all advertising is content, and vice versa.” What is more, consumers’ general dislike of, indifference toward, and technological capability to avoid advertising have led advertisers to develop strategies to overcome consumer resistance, including among others, covert-masking and media linking. Pointing out that covert communication tactics predate the 1980s by decades if not by a century, Petty and Andrews (2008, 7) define *masked marketing* “as marketing communications that appear not to be

marketing communications”; such messages may be “masked as to their commercial source, their commercial message, or both.” Covert masking includes “posers” disguised as researchers, buzz and viral marketing, advertorials, “ad-sults” from search-engine queries, urgent “ad-formation” disguised as trusted sources of private or personal account information, and “advertainment” as product and advertising placement in entertainment venues (Petty and Andrews 2008, 8). The Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) list is more succinct: Deceptive advertising formats include “Advertisements Appearing in a News Format or That Otherwise Misrepresent Their Source or Nature” (22396), “Misleading Door Openers” (22598), and “Deceptive Endorsements That Do Not Disclose a Sponsoring Advertiser” (22599) (“Notices: Federal Trade Commission” 2016). Consumers may be deceived when they let down their guard against such deceptive pitches. Petty and Andrews (2008) argue that if these kinds of practices are not “deceptive advertising” in the strictest historical sense, they do nevertheless fall under the authority of the FTC. This is an opinion shared more recently by the FTC (“Notices: Federal Trade Commission” 2016).

Indistinguishable advertising practices are often accompanied by media-linking strategies that connect multiple media channels to create sequenced touch-points for consumers and positive outcomes for advertisers. Some advertisers encourage “desirable” consumers to join discussion forums in varied formats, notably branded contests, testimonials, chats, parties, and so on, regarding their favorite brands. Henry Jenkins (2010, 944) describes “transmedia storytelling” in which elements of a story are “dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.” In this case, each medium adds something to the story. Consumer audiences are not passive in this process because influencers are key for providing relevant media content, identifying trends in subculture, and gathering loyal followers of the brand across platforms, including blogs and social media (J. Jenkins 2015). Advertisers, in turn, enjoy essentially free benefits, “earned media,” if you will. Such practices become especially onerous if the consumer “communicator” is being remunerated to communicate or is self-marketing but has not disclosed that information (Petty and Andrews 2008). Advertisers leverage information gathered on these platforms for a number of purposeful endeavors, including developing consumer and media insights, building campaigns, compiling user demographics, creating audience profiles, and, of course, increasing profit. Advertisers also broker the information to third parties who then merge those data with other “big data” to create information useful for their own purposes. All these tactics also remain ethically questionable.

Uncertainty about the legalities of indistinguishable advertising persists, too. False advertising, that is, advertising that outright lies, is illegal on its

face. Deceptive advertising, a representation or omission of information likely to mislead a reasonable consumer in a material way, is also illegal, according to the FTC. But indistinguishable advertising hardly resembles what consumers and government would recognize as traditional advertising, which is precisely the legal question. Are viewers being deceived if they are unaware that they are watching a promotional message? The truthfulness of persuasive claims is particularly important in messaging environments where audiences let down their guard as consumers to be entertained, to connect with social networks, to gather information, or to express themselves creatively and politically. Government agencies have sought to develop guidelines with regard to indistinguishable advertising. For example, in December 2015, the FTC issued the “Enforcement Policy Statement on Deceptively Formatted Advertising” and indicated the agency’s intention to take action against advertising it determined to be deceptive (Fair 2015). But in 2016, the FTC settled with Warner Bros. Home Entertainment about a video game scandal in an industry notorious for its racism, homophobia, and misogyny. Warner Bros. was accused of covert masking, surreptitiously paying off well-known online gamers who were using YouTube to promote Warner Bros. games without the gamers disclosing the paid nature of their endorsements (Federal Trade Commission 2016). Meanwhile, the Federal Communications Commission has updated its guidelines and imposed fines to communicate the need for ethical and transparent practices among advertisers and businesses (Heine 2015). Part of the success of indistinguishable advertising is that it has flown under regulatory radar. However, indistinguishable advertising does warrant ethical attention, regardless of movement toward legal and regulatory scrutiny.

ETHICAL CONCERNS WITH INDISTINGUISHABLE ADVERTISING

Here I focus on two ethical concerns associated with indistinguishable advertising: diminished consumer choice and gender disparity. As diminished consumer choice, simply put, advertising that does not announce itself as such misleads consumers. Research affirms that indistinguishable advertising impedes consumers’ abilities to determine if they are receiving advertising messages (Bermajo 2013). If consumers don’t know they are consuming advertising, they cannot reject the advertising message or create counterarguments (Dahlen and Edenius 2007). When information is not readily perceived as advertising messaging or delivered in a recognizable advertising format, information processing is different (Dahlen and Edenius 2007). Consumers who interact with indistinguishable advertising

might fail to create counterarguments for or to reject ad messaging that they normally would.

Diminished choices reduce the ability of consumers to boycott companies or to abstain from purchasing. Diminished choices also decrease citizens' ability to create and mobilize independent economies and media that are more representative of gender and culturally specific needs and wants (Gandy 2012). For marginalized communities, this ability can be crucial for survival. Civil rights movements, thriving economies, critiques of the media, and alternative media representations have resulted from independent mobilization in opposition to the discriminatory practices and marginalizing efforts of advertisers, who in some cases knowingly promote products that harm and produce campaigns with stereotypical and injurious images. Precedents set by African Americans in the 1930s affirm the legacy of successful outcomes from boycotting. African Americans urged consumers not to purchase from retailers that refused to employ people of color. Results from consumer mobilization contributed to reform in racist business practices as well as political and economic gain (Gandy 2008). More recently, consumer mobilization was critical to the removal of online advertising content deemed offensive and stereotypical to female, black, and Hispanic audiences. The Richards Group in Dallas created *Hail to the "V"* for feminine hygiene brand Summer's Eve in which talking hand puppets representing women's vaginas spoke in inflated ethnic accents and dialects. Although the client and agency supported the campaign and affirmed their creative license, the offensive advertising content was eventually removed largely because of pressure created by consumer mobilization and criticism (Nudd 2011).

Segmentation strategies that often accompany indistinguishable advertising also contribute to diminished choices among audiences. Segmentation strategies help to reproduce inequality by privileging particular groups because of preferred consumption patterns, distribution channels, and geographic location (Gandy 2012). Segmenting strategies create polarizing effects for those who exist outside constructed norms because they reproduce systems of inequity and limit alternative opportunities (Gandy 2008).

In addition to diminished choice, indistinguishable advertising can exacerbate women's social and economic inequities. Gender concerns are intersectional by definition, meaning gender issues always intersect with and so are inseparable from issues of race, socioeconomic status, age, sexuality, ability, and so on, across traditionally *constructed* demographic categories as well as invisible and unmarked positionalities. Thus issues concerning gender in advertising ethics in a converged era are always already complex and multidimensional. Additionally, historically speaking, advertising has long been heavily criticized for producing and exploiting gender concerns. One of the most-cited contemporary examples is the critique that advertising creates

desire for unattainable and unsustainable lifestyles. Another example, more specifically regarding gender, is that advertising naturalizes gender traits and binary gender roles that damage human lives and stifle human expression (Borgerson 2007). Furthermore, advertising-induced effects on body self-image can result in women's body-dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, eating disorders, and unnecessary plastic surgery (Sobol and Darke 2014).

Coping mechanisms are of particular concern for women of color, as most can never achieve the dominant gender norms, beginning with beauty ideals in terms of skin color, physique, and hair texture. Beyond the difficulties of living with the knowledge that one can never match the cultural ideal of white beauty while every advertisement hawks products that require one to buy and try, Harris-Perry (2011) offers the contemporary trope of the "Strong Black Woman," which can be used to demonstrate aspects of gender oppression in advertising. According to this construct, black women are expected to be strong, selfless, resilient, and excel, regardless of resource disparity, social norms, or debilitating realities. This can be extremely damaging because infallible strength is humanly impossible to maintain. Attempts toward such impossible goals can cause grave physiological and psychological harm, including those associated with feelings of shame, inadequacy, and rejection. For example, black women are structurally positioned to experience prolonged shame and rejection at greater rates than others, which is associated with hyperactive release of the steroid hormone cortisol (Harris-Perry 2011). As Harris-Perry (2011) notes, elevated cortisol contributes to weight gain, heart disease, hardening of the arteries, and decreased immune function. Hence, the connection between black women's marginal social status and poor health is not hyperbole. Black women are overrepresented for a number of stigmatized identities that are perpetuated by stereotypes and lifestyles spurred by advertising. Despite significant progress, as a group, black women are more likely to be impoverished, in poor health, unmarried, overweight, undereducated, and underemployed (Harris-Perry 2011). Black women who do not fall into underprivileged circumstances such as these are still subject to the damaging racial and gender stereotypes not only associated with such circumstances but also perpetuated by advertising (Harris-Perry 2011).

Furthermore expectations of infallible strength are not ascribed to all women. Although seemingly celebratory, Womanist ethics implores further contemplation of the Strong Black Woman trope present in modern advertising. Returning to appeals to consider historical context in Womanist ethics, it's important to reiterate the relationship between Strong Black Woman stereotypes and black women's history of slavery, servitude, exploitation, and labor, not to mention the most horrendous and extreme forms of physical, psychological, and sexual victimization in the United States. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) invented intersectional analysis in her exegesis of the symbolic

violence that the US legal system does to black women who have already experienced assault, rape, and domestic and workplace violence in greater numbers than other women.

The stereotype of the Strong Black Woman, among numbers of destructive and devastating stereotypes and tropes about black women, creates unrealistic, unhealthy expectations of achievement and endurance for black women. It obscures the realities surrounding the truth of their actual lived experiences. Without an accurate depiction of reality, many of the ills that affect black women are easily ignored or disregarded, thus remaining socially invisible. Even more compelling, advertising depictions of the Strong Black Woman are apparent in character narratives that *are developed to resonate with black women*. Some “segments” of well-educated white-collar black women have become a targeted demographic thanks to their ability to generate profit and influence. Adaptations of the Strong Black Woman stereotype in advertising are also integrated within leading and supporting roles, which feature black women in branded television programming, movies, and entertainment. The emphasis here is *branded*.

Additionally, Womanist ethics are needed to respond to the needs of millennial audiences. Generational shifts in consumer markets are necessitating wider social rethinking about taken-for-granted binaries in terms of strict female–male gender, gender expression, and identity; heteronormative sexuality; and more. At the same time, in many cases, cultural shifts are embracing new racial forms, such as mixed, bi-, and inter-identifications (as well as sometimes reverting back to learned racisms). In advertising, some segments of millennials, like affluent black women, represent “desirable” groups to target with advertising. Yet millennials as a group remain one of the most skeptical ever toward advertising, fueling the search for ever more clever and sometimes ethically questionable indistinguishable advertising tactics. Today millennials are largely considered advertising’s primary and most lucrative audience. As this generation matures, sectors of life, leisure, industry, and commerce are expected to transform in accordance with their distinct characteristics and preferences (Howe and Strauss 2000). Millennials have gained a reputation in advertising of withholding support and openly criticizing brands and advertisers that demonstrate racial, gender, and sexual intolerance and misrepresentation. Although it is white millennials whose data are often highlighted to represent all millennials, Harris (2014, 252) notes, black millennials exhibit distinct but generally ignored characteristics, including a belief “that racism continues to be a major social ill in American society” (252).

Distinct preferences among black millennials contribute to trendsetting use of social media and mobile devices (Nielsen Report 2016). Increasingly, black women and black millennials have used these technologies as platforms

to raise awareness about issues in their community and to promote solidarity (Nielsen Report 2016). Millennial black women, notably Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, Umaara Elliott, and Synead Nichols, are founders, activists, and leaders of grassroots movements such as #BlackLivesMatter (Jobin-Leeds et al. 2016). Contemporary black millennial movements use social media tactically to elevate national consciousness regarding police brutality, racism, and other social injustices facing the black community. #BlackLivesMatter began as a hashtag in 2012 after the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American teenager. Since then #BlackLivesMatter has blossomed into a movement with more than 4.5 million mentions since August 2015 (Nielsen Report 2016). #BlackLivesMatter is a powerful example of millennial black women's leadership, influence, and social media usage.

The influence of black women as well as the distinct preferences and social media behaviors of black millennials are evident in the media as well. According to Nielsen data, 62 percent of black millennials support media depictions of celebrities who share their ethnic background (Nielsen Report 2016). Consequently, the repeated failure to recognize the contributions of people of color and the lack of diversity among 2015 Oscar nominations spurred the boycott and social media hashtag #OscarsSoWhite (Nielsen Report 2016). African-American actress Jada Pinkett-Smith championed the boycott. On Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Pinkett-Smith, in a video post to her Facebook page, announced she would not support the Oscars because of the award event and organization's lack of diversity (Griggs 2016). The influence of black women, black millennials, and distinct social media usage spurred the Oscars' governing body to take steps toward improving diversity. After nearly a century of exclusion, the 2016 Oscars reflected better diversity among its invited guests with 46 percent women and 41 percent people of color, compared with 25 percent and 8 percent, respectively, in previous years (Nielsen Report 2016).

TELEVISION, INDISTINGUISHABLE ADVERTISING, AND AUDIENCES

Although a number of indistinguishable advertising formats and practices are accompanied by covert media strategies, in this discussion I highlight examples that employ television. I cannot overemphasize that repeated exposure via advertising to stereotypical depictions and imagery of women, communities of color, and other dispossessed people is problematic. Research indicates that repeated exposure to television portrayals of particular groups can lead to the adoption of distorted beliefs (Rubie-Davies, Liu, and Lee 2013). Beyond

creating and perpetuating harmful myths about the subordinate group among the dominant group, this means adopting and internalizing lies about 'oneself as a member of the subordinate group. Thus, like advertising, television is a ubiquitous source of information about culture and society through which "appropriate" roles in society are conveyed. Viewers are bombarded with images and content on television that is generally fictional. However, for many viewers, television portrayals represent an unspoken reality that consistently affects some viewers' future behaviors and beliefs (Rubie-Davies, Liu, and Lee 2013).

Among advertisers, network and cable television have traditionally been the prestige advertising media. Historically, television has enabled brands to send messages, gain notoriety, and develop emotive relationships with mass audiences. Television also has facilitated simple methods for audience segmentation. Through television, advertisers can target audiences that are heterogeneous in their demographics, spending power, interests, and lifestyle, which makes it easy to craft messaging and strategies to resonate directly with target audiences (Schiffman and Wisenblit 2015). But television today is struggling to compete with newer web and mobile digital media platforms for consumer attention, which means television is struggling to compete for advertising allocations. Moreover, sophisticated recording, streaming, and time shifting devices allow viewers to avoid commercials, television's traditional advertising tactic.

To counteract consumer avoidance, target "desirable" audiences, and resuscitate television, branded programming has increased. Many popular television shows are extended commercials. Whereas some viewers believe they are simply watching television programs, they are actually enthralled with lengthy branded content laden with embedded advertising messages, product placements, and sponsorships. Advertising has long since developed content and programming with the primary purpose of luring "desirable" audiences to spaces to connect with advertisers (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). Television programming not only provides an effective vehicle to communicate indistinguishable advertising messages, but it also allows advertisers to engage and build relationships with "desirable" audiences.

Women remain a particularly "desirable" consumer advertising television audience. This audience is also demonstrative of shifts spurred by convergence. To contemporary advertisers, women are influential and affluent, and control discretionary income. Market research estimates that their total purchasing power ranges from \$5 trillion to \$15 trillion annually and is expected to soar in the years to come (Nielsen Report 2013b). In the United States alone, women account for over 50 percent of online purchasing and influence over 80 percent of car, new home, and vacation purchases (Barletta 2014). Women are loyal and enormously valuable consumers whose unique

complexities warrant distinct attention (Schiffman and Wisenblit 2015). Additionally, powerful audiences of women represent a myriad of diversity, including black women.

Today, black women are more educated and economically successful and hold more executive positions than ever before, which is typically a reliable predictor of future wealth and influence (Nielsen Report 2016). More than any other ethnic culture, black women tend to head their households (Miller and Kemp 2005). Research affirms that 40 percent of black women consider themselves to be trendsetters (Nielsen Report 2014). Known as early adopters of new technologies and communication tools, black women provide a strong base for brands (Nielsen Report 2014). Key demographic segments, including 73 percent of whites and 67 percent of Hispanics, believe African Americans heavily influence mainstream American culture (Nielsen Report 2013a). Yet another factor in connecting with black female audiences stems from generational shifts. According to US Census data between 2004 and 2014, the number of African Americans ages 18 to 34 and 55 and older grew in number by 33 percent and 55 percent, respectively (Nielsen Report 2016). The complexities of black women as an audience or market group are further characterized by differences based on age and opportunities to nurture loyal relationships with millennials. Nielsen research (2014) states that black women offer an unparalleled opportunity for brands and urges advertisers to “get to know” “African-American” women: “(U)nderstand the key drivers of her purchasing habits, likes, and dislikes, her preferences, behaviors and her value of culture and community.”

Undoubtedly, black women are a powerful audience and important to advertisers now, and in the future (J. Jenkins 2014, 2015). Trite, disingenuous advertising risks not only missed opportunities to connect brands and causes with this group, but also exploits a historically marginalized community. Black women represent increasingly diverse, educated, conscious, and affluent consumers who research companies and financially support brands that reflect their ethnicity, cultural identity, and values. Compared with the total market, African Americans are 38 percent more likely to make a purchase when advertisements reflect their heritage (Nielsen Report 2014).

Evidence of contemporary attempts to connect with these economically “desirable” audiences of women can be found in some television programming. Communities of color often demonstrate distinct preferences and media selections that debunk general market norms. In comparison with total markets, African Americans watch fourteen more hours of television each week (Nielsen Report 2014). In addition to a preference for television, African-American consumer reports reveal a preference for television programming that provides diversity in casts and strong characters that reflect black lifestyles and cultures (Nielsen Report 2014). The appeal of connecting

with such desirable audiences has contributed to growth in television advertising. In 2013, \$2.6 billion was spent on media linking strategies focused on African-American audiences, which included cable, syndicated, and network television (Nielsen Report 2014). This represents a 7 percent growth over 2012, compared with a 2 percent increase in overall advertising spending. However, this amount is merely 2.6 percent of the total \$69.3 billion companies have typically spent advertising using similar media strategies in 2013 (Nielsen Report 2014). In 2015, television captured the largest share of black advertising budgets. In the four-year period between 2011 and 2015, broadcast television advertising buys that focused on black audiences increased 255 percent (Nielsen Report 2016). Television programming that delivers these preferences receives both the highest ratings and most advertiser attention. This is where our discussion of the ethics of indistinguishable advertising intersects with Womanist ethics' interest in marginalized groups, in this case black women. Programs that attract black women as audiences are a magnet for indistinguishable advertising practices.

SCANDAL: POSTRACISM AND MEDIA-LINKING STRATEGIES

One program where black women and indistinguishable practices meet is the popular ABC network television program *Scandal*, which debuted in 2012. Part of *Scandal*'s popularity is the appeal of the program's lead character, Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, the first African-American woman in a leading role in a network dramatic series in four decades (Wright 2014). Pope is inspired by Judy Smith, the DC-based black public relations crisis communication manager and powerbroker whose resume includes working with Monica Lewinsky, Wesley Snipes, and the George H. W. Bush administration regarding Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings. In 2015, *Scandal* averaged "a 2.94 rating in the 18–49 demographic with 9.33 million viewers" (Kimball 2015). In advertising, that is formidable. In 2013, Nielsen consumer research (2013a) ranked *Scandal* as the highest rated scripted drama among African Americans, although *Empire* smashed that achievement in 2015. Nevertheless, with an audience of 37 percent black viewers, *Scandal* did break records (Pallotta and Steiter 2015). In 2016, *Scandal* remained the second highest-ranking network television program among black millennials, behind *Empire* (Nielsen, 2016).

However, *Scandal* is popular among mainstream audiences as well, according to advertising industry insiders (Stilson 2015). Contributing to *Scandal*'s mainstream success, 68 percent of its audience in 2016 was not African American (Nielsen Report 2016). This fact speaks to Franklin's (2014, 260) argument that advertising efforts and budgets once used to target

US black consumers specifically are increasingly “folded into total-market efficiencies.” African-American advertising mogul Tom Burrell affirms many of these claims. Burrell challenges total market initiatives not to treat culturally diverse black audiences as if they are dark-skinned white people (Burrell 2010). This is assimilation aligned with what Warner (2015, 633) describes as “a colorblind agenda,” which is advanced “by rarely addressing the cultural differences that marked social stratification lines that forced people of color into subordinate positions.” If people are treated as individuals, rather than as members of a racial group, for example, then these individuals are also separated from their “historical trajectory of disenfranchisement” (Warner 2015, 637). Hence, colorblindness today under this guise of a postrace society poses no threat to white privilege (Peller 1990; Warner 2015).

Shonda Rhimes, *Scandal*'s creator, is credited for the series' racial sensibility, which is to cast people of color across the board for their talent, a practice called “blindcasting,” in contrast to an entrenched practice of casting actors of color into tokenized roles scripted on the basis of the character's race. Despite progress, *Scandal* has been charged with the “erasure of race” and promulgating “US imperialist politics” so that “the supposed ‘feminism’ of the program is at first very upper class and career-oriented, and in the end very conservative and very traditional” (“*Scandal: A Color-Blind Fairy Tale*” 2015).

Allowing racism to persist under the guise of white colorblindness, postrace logic suggests that if a television series includes powerful, successful black stars, both as executives behind the program's production and as onscreen talent playing lead roles, then the narratives need not deal with race per se *because we are past all that and can turn our attention to issues pertaining to “everyone.”* Racism, thus race, prior to postracial times, is assumed to be an issue only to those who are not white, as if whites don't have race and so need not concern themselves with white privilege. Rather, in a postracial series, the arc of the drama can focus on “mainstream” rather than racial or ethnic storylines and perspectives.

Joseph (2011) describes the rhetorical sleight of hand that postidentity discourses such as postrace and postfeminism achieve by operating as if the civil rights and women's movements have already achieved the goals of ending racism and sexism. In this delusion, mentioning racism or sexism is tantamount to unpatriotic. However, Joseph (2011, 67) also demonstrates the way “postidentity tactics” can be appropriated to be used against the racism and misogyny of postidentity. This can be accomplished by recoding claims about race and gender into less contentious, more palatable symbols, such as disguising race as class-based meritocracy and giving feminist goals a “stylistic mask” (Joseph 2011, 67) of postfeminist femininity. Rhimes understands that her ability to treat black audiences with TV they relate to in large part

depends on her ability to simultaneously attract mainstream audiences that also ensure advertisers' interest. TV ratings for black women cost more than TV ratings for adults 18–49.

In addition to its cultural appeal, *Scandal* is influential because of its media-linking strategies, which effectively herd viewers back to network television, mitigate time shifting, and help collect valuable data for advertisers. Social media have been a vital component of *Scandal*'s strategic success since its launch. "During broadcasts cast members live-tweet about each episode," wrote Vega, who noted in 2013 that *Scandal* had "generated 2,838 tweets per minute and a total of 157,601 tweets" in an episode.

Social media platforms, notably Twitter, help advertisers maximize exposure among users already exposed to brand integrations, sponsorships, and tie-ins to achieve brand lift and message expansion. Twitter offers TV-conversation targeting, which allows advertisers to display their advertisements to users who are tweeting about a television program before, during, and after it airs. Twitter also offers keyword targeting tools, which advertisers can use to display promoted tweets to users who have tweeted specific and related phrases purchased by advertisers (Fleischman 2013). Additionally, *Scandal* watch parties—face-to-face and virtually through Facebook—encourage audiences to interact as interpretive communities to also advertise content (Elliot 2014). Hence, viewed through Womanist ethics, we find an exemplar where targeted branded advertising content intersects with high concentrations of "desirable" black women, who are eager to participate in media that seems to address them with empowering, aspirational messages, even commercial ones.

SCANDAL AND EMPIRE: BRANDED PROGRAMMING AND INDISTINGUISHABLE ADVERTISING

Branded programming not only facilitates methods to create and count viewers, but also provides covert pathways for advertisers to integrate products, lifestyles, and behaviors. Many audience-generated conversations about *Scandal* focus on clothing and fashion. Kerry Washington and the cast's stylized looks have been described as *gladiators in suits*, a riff-turned-catchphrase on the show's now-famous scripted lines describing Olivia Pope's staff as "gladiators in suits" and "warriors in suits." Clothing retailer The Limited leveraged *Scandal*'s popularity in a licensing deal with ABC to implement indistinguishable advertising practices. According to Elliot (2014), The Limited, hoping to reinvigorate its brand, launched a multimedia campaign featuring the tagline "Fearless fashion for ladies who lead." A coopted white upper-class feminist play on the trivializing cliché "ladies who lunch," The

Limited tagline also then invites critiques of race and class. Advertising executions featured spreadable video content, print advertisements, and product endorsements from *Scandal*'s creator and cast members, as well as the logos of the television series and ABC network. "The *Scandal* collection at The Limited contained more than 70 clothing items, with prices that range from \$49 to \$250" (Elliot 2014). The collection, advertised as designed by Kerry Washington, was meant to be "aspirational" yet "accessible" for "confident women everywhere," according to a story in *Target Market News: The Black Consumer Market Authority* ("Scandal Inspires Fashion Line" 2014). The \$12 million campaign included social media brands Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter using the hashtag #scandalstylethelimited (Elliot 2014). Later The Limited incorporated its original *Scandal* campaign into a new iteration asking, "What does Leading Look Like?" Promoting The Limited's 2015 fashion collection as the "New Look of Leadership," the new campaign featured "over 60 diverse women who are leaders in their fields—business, education, government, tech and beyond" (Ciambriello 2015).

In addition to strategic alliances created through television programming, opportunities for advertisers to fuse messages directly into program scripts occur as well. As technology continues to provide ways to avoid commercials, networks are compelled to develop methods to deliver value to advertisers, not to mention shore up the future of the medium. Fox executive Gary Newman affirms existing partnerships with advertisers and encourages advertisers and networks to be open to finding new ways for brands to see the value in embedding brands and products within network programming (Flint 2015). Let us recall that native advertising is the chameleon that disguises itself to blend into its nonadvertising environment for the purpose of advertising. An example of such opportunities with branded programming is demonstrated through the relationship between Pepsi and the television program *Empire*, Fox's popular US dramatic series. In January 2015, after just three weeks on the air, 61 percent of *Empire*'s audience was black, an all-time US record high for that demographic (Pallotta and Steiter 2015). In 2016, *Empire* was the top-rated network television program among black millennials and ranked among the top ten network television programs among both black millennials and older black generations (Nielsen Report 2016). With 37 percent nonblack viewers, *Empire* is well on its way to mainstream success (Nielsen Report 2016).

Like *Scandal*, *Empire* represents what media pundits have referred to as a *postracial network television series* in the same way that the United States became a so-called postracial nation after Barack Obama became the forty-fourth US president (Wright 2014). Like *Scandal*, *Empire* features an ethnically diverse cast in complex leading roles aired during primetime slots. Much of *Empire*'s success is attributed to its leading woman character played by the black actress Taraji P. Henson. *Empire* also features fresh storylines

that are of interest to those “elusive” audiences, notably communities of color, which include significant numbers of women and millennials. Whereas *Scandal*’s drama is set amid Washington DC’s federal politics, *Empire*’s drama is set amid the corporate culture of hip-hop music and the entertainment industry. Lee Daniels—of *Monster Ball*, *Precious*, and *The Butler* Hollywood fame—cocreated, produces, and directs *Empire* with executive producer Danny Strong. *Empire* has averaged a 6.4 rating among total markets. Moreover, *Empire* has demonstrated consistent growth among its core audience, women ages 18 to 34, with ratings reaching 7.6. Overall, *Empire* has averaged 13.5 million viewers during live broadcasts and 9.2 million on digital and Internet platforms (Stilson 2015). Among black millennials, *Empire* received an average rating of 25.6 percent in 2016 (Nielsen Report 2016). *Empire* is also a social media dynamo, garnering up to 2.4 million tweets during live broadcasts and 15.8 million likes, comments, and shares on Facebook (Stilson 2015).

Empire’s success provided unprecedented opportunity for advertisers to connect with what a Pepsi marketing vice president described as the “hottest show on TV, attractive to all demographics,” but particularly “the all-important 18-to-49 demo” (Schultz and Poggi 2015). In a \$2 million deal that exemplifies an unprecedented level of advertising integration, Pepsi in 2015 became a player within a three-episode subplot in *Empire* (Flint 2015). Described as a “meta-integration” (Schultz and Poggi 2015), the deal might have been more accurately described as a *mega*-integration. The details are as complex as the ethical concerns it represents: In an *Empire* storyline, a fictional pop star is contracted by Pepsi to write and perform a song for and star in a Pepsi TV commercial. The Pepsi commercial, part of *Empire*’s narrative drama, not only debuted during *Empire* in a commercial break that could have been part of the *Empire* episode, but also subsequently ran as regular commercial advertising on the Fox network. Lee Daniels not only appeared playing himself in a cameo role as the director of the Pepsi commercial in an *Empire* episode, he also directed the Pepsi commercial as it aired as bona fide advertising. Finally, the fictional *Empire* star performing “his song” in the commercial did *not* actually write the song, but the *Empire* character, Jamal Lyon, and the actor who plays the character, Jussie Smollet, now join the pantheon of real pop stars like Michael Jackson and Britney Spears who did star in Pepsi commercials (Schultz and Poggi 2015). Meanwhile, the artist who did write the song, Tyrone Reginald Johnson, remains mostly obscure. Moreover, although it would not be relevant except for the present discussion of millennial attitudes toward diversity, Smollet is an out gay black man.

The 2014 television program season featured nearly five thousand in-program placements leveraging well over one hundred brands (Flint 2015). The success of branded content, such as Fox’s *Empire* deal with Pepsi, is

irresistible to advertisers ready to mimic successful practices. Strategies that link so-called multicultural demographics through multicultural casting and facilitate conversations through social media were projected to dominate the 2015–2016 television seasons (Stilson 2015). Also, television spinoff programs and increased so-called multicultural and female-driven programming are expected to become prevalent as television networks attempt to rebrand themselves. Considering the historical void and caricatured representations of communities of color on network television, increased multicultural representation might be refreshing. However, let us remember that contemporary multicultural representation also corresponds with the preferences of “desirable” audiences with buying power and influence.

CONCLUSION

Womanism requires contemplating ethical concerns regarding race, gender, sexuality, and class spurred by indistinguishable advertising. Increased awareness, knowledge, and media literacy education concerning indistinguishable advertising might mitigate potential harms to consumers and citizens, but traditional advertising ethical frameworks do not adequately account for contemporary intersectional diversity or indistinguishable practices, let alone in instances where the two converge. Advertising ethics tend to align with what is least likely to draw legal trouble.

Benefits of indistinguishable advertising—namely opportunities to connect with “elusive” and “desirable” consumer audiences, to lower costs, and to limit regulation—appeal to advertisers and contribute to its proliferation. Although appealing, indistinguishable advertising popularizes strategies and tactics that can promote, and set precedents for, economic oppression and prejudice (Gandy 2012). These ethical concerns are easy to ignore without an ethical framework that makes apparent what is generally invisible and ignored. Furthermore, citizens who buy more, and are perceived to have the potential to buy more, are privileged over those who do not. Although some may argue that such practices are inherently logical in the marketplace, Womanism urges advertising ethics to set a different standard that elevates the role of social justice in capitalist enterprise, thereby making “social responsibility” less a euphemism and more a reality. Excellent advertising practices accurately reflect “the society it emerges from and represents” (Golombisky 2003, 21).

Inclusive advertising ethics are needed as advertising transitions from producing work that primarily reflects the tastes and preferences of older white heterosexual men to work that targets and includes the preferences of women and communities of color, who represent a variety of lifestyles and a spectrum of diversity. Centrally locating Womanism within advertising

ethics discourse might contribute to mutual respect and stronger relationships between consumers and advertisers. Moreover, the inclusion of Womanist ethics might improve self-regulation and cultural sensitivity, which could reduce litigation, advertising blunders, and private lawsuits.

In addition to complex racial issues, Womanist ethics are beneficial to understanding gender concerns spurred by indistinguishable advertising. Womanism is committed to the survival, liberation, and well-being of people before profit. Womanism compels intersectional critiques of antiquated and covert gender norms perpetuated through indistinguishable advertising. For example, as *Scandal* engages its seven million viewers (Nielsen Report 2015), Womanism asks why dominant cultural conversations structured around women remain focused on the consumption of fashion and why women continue to be valued primarily for their appearance rather than their character or achievement. Womanism questions why depictions of women of color in the twenty-first century remain tied to stereotypes and tropes that date back to early American justifications for slavery and servitude. Womanist ethics remind us to ask why we have to work so hard to have these discussions about racism and (hetero)sexism in the first place. Womanist ethics implores advertisers to commit to influencing relevant and resonant issues among audiences, rather than perpetuating dominant narratives that reinforce male hierarchy and white supremacy. Cannon (1988) identifies wisdom, dignity, grace, and courage as virtues intrinsically connected to black women in the United States because of their shared history. Moreover, Womanist ethics offers a body of human experience, literature, artistry, and historical narratives to inspire new and different ideals and values. Cannon's (1988) work also offers advertisers a method to reveal ethics and virtues unique to contemporary consumer audiences. These ethics and virtues can be applied to create empowering advertising that satisfies marketplace logic but remains culturally sensitive and successful (Harris 2010).

As an institution, advertising represents far more than the executions it produces. Its conditioning and practices promote ideal behavior and social organization. Advertising shapes the economy and labor practices, along with what we widely accept as ordinary social life. Through Womanist ethics it is hoped that what is produced in advertising, taught within its curriculum, experienced in its workplace, and consumed by citizens pushes us all toward a more complete pluralist democratic reality.

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