

**The Impact of a Hoodie: How Multinational Corporations Like H&M Improperly Continue the
Legacy of Racism that Killed Trayvon Martin**

By Christian Pierce

Introduction

Multinational corporations have an extreme amount of power to influence global ideologies and shape culture. Corporations exert much of this power through media. This media, as Adorno and Horkheimer decried, is a culture industry with the purpose of convincing the masses to be subservient to capitalist aims (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2010). To connect with consumers, media producers must use a common language that allows for an understanding of the message. Much of this language is racialized capitalism. Rather than overcome injustices, the language serves to create more inequities between those in power and consumers. However, multinational corporations should shift the meaning of the language used to be champions for human rights.

From a human rights perspective, multinational corporations have an important role. This role comes from the normative theory that companies ultimately exist to make a positive contribution to society (Wettstein, 2009). One of the greatest positive contributions that can be made is the safeguarding and protection of human rights. Though governments are seen as the entities that should be held accountable for human rights, multinational corporations may often be able to operate in areas where there is a gap in state governance. Because multinational corporations can operate in this area, there is “a direct obligation to engage in the proactive realization of human rights” (Wettstein, 2009, p. 164). A keyword is *proactive*. Multinational corporations should not only ensure they are not complicit in the violation of human rights, or reactive when leadership knows of human rights violations. These organizations should take the initiative to actively search for violations of human rights and combat those.

However, the current United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights only states, “Businesses should respect human rights. This means that they should avoid infringing on the human rights of others and should address the adverse human rights impacts with which they are involved” (United Nations, 2011, p. 18). Though the Guiding Principles later mention that businesses *should* identify, prevent and mitigate human rights violations, there is not an obligation to do so (United Nations, 2011). The accountability often comes from outside pressure or public scrutiny due to mistakes that multinational corporations make. This is often the case with an instance of discrimination, especially racism.

Racism, to define it, is a type of discrimination against a person or group of people because of their external physical features. This discrimination often occurs, whether knowingly or unknowingly, at different levels. The largest overarching level is systemic. Systemic racism exists within the overarching structure of a society. This type of racism can be seen overtly and covertly. It creates oppression for certain racial groups while providing privilege for others. The second level of racism is institutional. Institutional racism is a type of discrimination that appears within the laws, policies, or regulations of an institution or organization. Institutional racism is often able to exist because of the conditions that exist in a systemically racist culture. The third level of racism is the individual level. Individual racism most often occurs in environments that are systemically and institutionally racist. Because individual racism occurs in this environment, people may be conscious or unconscious of the discriminatory views they hold. Regarding multinational corporations and the obligation to be antiracist, it is important to understand the different levels of discrimination to recognize the root causes of these human rights violations.

Upon understanding racism, it is then possible to know how to be antiracist and fight the myths that are perpetuated through certain inequities. According to Erika George, “antiracism challenges the racist ideas that lead to the racist actions that create and perpetuate racial inequality” (George, 2021, p. 6). Antiracism recognizes all races as equal and attributes the discrimination that occurs at all levels as originating from discriminatory policies and practices. For the scope of this paper, the focus on racism that occurs and antiracism will be for people of African descent. This is not to diminish the inequities that other groups of people have faced. Rather, this is to show how multinational corporations still discriminate against people from a specific racial group, which has been subjected to hundreds of years of chattel slavery and marginalization.

Similar to the way Edward Said defined Orientalism, in a post-colonial world there is still an otherness that is attributed to members of the African diaspora (Said, 2003). Because people of African descent are viewed as the others, there are judged through European (“Western”) standards. These standards are propagated by multinational corporations and contribute to the dehumanization of Black people. Though the development of culture may seem to warrant an “alter-ego,” it is unnecessary. Like people from the Orient, many of the beliefs and stereotypes about Black people were constructs imagined by the dominant (colonial) powers of the West (Said, 2003). As nations that were once colonial powers remain, so do these ideas. According to Marx the ruling class and the ideas of that class are the ruling intellectual force (Marx et. al, 1972). When looking at the leadership of many multinational corporations headquartered in Europe, like H&M, for example, it is apparent that the ruling class is still White.

Board of Directors



Figure 1: H&M Board of Directors (H&M Group, 2022)

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, many companies made commitments to be more racially diverse and equitable. Yet many of those companies were complicit in creating the conditions that allowed a Black man to be killed in such a merciless way. The imagery often used in mass media and advertisements created a narrative and contributed to the myth that Black men are criminals, predators, demons. The language in much of this media may appear harmless, yet the myth is revealed when analyzing the metalanguage.

“To put it simply, culture is about shared meanings” (Hall, 1997, p. I). In looking at how representation leads to a shared meaning among people, it is important to first understand what representation within culture is. When looking at du Gay et al. (1997) circuit of culture, there is a common language that can be used to show how language within a culture helps to construct representation. This does not mean that a language is necessarily spoken like English, German, or French, etc. Rather, the language in this sense is they people have a common understanding of certain audio or visual references. Ultimately, meaning is what gives people a sense of belonging, perhaps to one group instead of another. It is produced in everyday interactions between both those of the same and those of different cultures.

This paper, through the case at H&M, shows how multinational corporations are still complicit in reproducing a toxic culture through racist representations of Black people. The analysis shows how the language behind three aspects of a sweatshirt advertisement display signs that represent a discriminatory view of Black people. The paper will conclude with a recommendation on how a multinational corporation like H&M can implement an antiracist program that shifts organizational culture towards more inclusion.

H&M

Though, when looking from a business and human rights perspective, it can be argued that multinational corporations have an obligation to proactively prevent racism, that may not occur in reality. Multiple multinational corporations do not implement actions to prevent this type of discrimination. Even when there is a policy or claim that is made to highlight the diversity and inclusion initiatives of these organizations, actions may reveal these multinational corporations are complicit in the very racism they claim to be against. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, multinational organizations that are complicit in racism seem to only correct their actions when pressured by an external source (usually public backlash). Within the context of the representation of color in media, multinational corporations perpetuate racist stereotypes through products and advertisements.

In this section, one of these multinational corporations will be discussed- H&M. Because the company culture and values often allow such racism to exist, it is important to understand the background context. Therefore, the case will first articulate the creation of the company, followed by a recent incident of racism towards Black people.

The Company

Swedish fashion retailer H&M was created after entrepreneur Erling Persson returned from a trip to the U.S. in 1946 (H&M Group, 2021). Discovering new ideas from American

chain stores, such as *Lerner Shops*, Persson decided to focus specifically on womenswear and opened the first “Hennes” (Hers) store in Västerås, Sweden (Giertz-Mårtenson, 2012). In 1968, leadership changed the name of the company to Hennes & Mauritz, when hunting store Mauritz Widforss was acquired (Latham, 2015). Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, H&M continued to expand in Europe. In 2000, the company expanded across the Atlantic with a flagship store opening on Fifth Avenue in New York (H&M Group, 2021). The company continues to grow, with over 4,856 stores in 75 markets, as of 2021 (H&M Group, 2021). However, other than a few specific collaborations, the H&M merchandise collections are all centrally created in the company’s headquarters in Stockholm (Giertz-Mårtenson, 2012).

On the group website, H&M lists both “Inclusion & Diversity” and “Human Rights” sections. Their definition of D&I is, “Diversity is the mix of people while inclusion is about actively advocating for that mix and making it work” (H&M Group, 2022). Regarding human rights, this multinational corporation states,

“We recognize that we have a responsibility to uphold human rights. This means doing everything we can to avoid harming the human rights of people and communities, as well as creating a positive impact in our operations, throughout our supply chains and in the communities we are part of” (H&M Group, 2022).

Given those bold statements, one may assume H&M is treating its stakeholders and customers with the utmost dignity and respect. However, that did not seem to be accurate with the release of a children’s sweatshirt in 2018.

The Advertisement

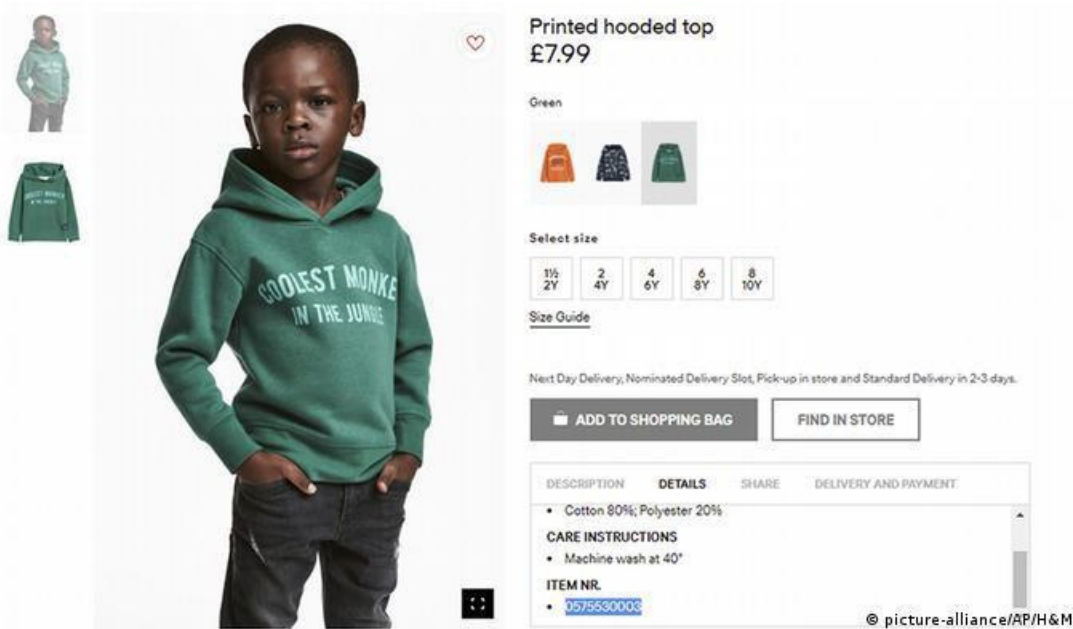


Figure 2: H&M Hooded Sweatshirt (Cords, 2018)

What do you notice when looking at this image?

There are many different layers to discuss, but for the scope of this paper, three will be highlighted. The first will be the sweatshirt phrase, the child, and the significance of the sweatshirt (hoodie). Within the phrase, “COOLEST MONKEY IN THE JUNGLE,” there are two objects to note: monkey and jungle. From the level of denotation, it may be widely accepted that the meaning of the phrase is what it states, a cool monkey is in the jungle. Going to the level of connotation, it is possible to decode the racist signifiers of the phrase. Though there are many types of simians, of various shapes and sizes, “monkeys” are often depicted as bestial, black creatures. During Medieval times, apes took on a devilish appearance and represented sinful behavior, especially lust (Hund & Mills, 2016). White women who were seen as promiscuous or unfaithful were accused of consorting these dark, demonic apes. This depiction continued during the era of colonization. Colonial stories often featured European women who were banished to or lost in Africa (Dodds, 2006). Upon arriving to the continent, they would encounter male apes, be raped, and foster children (Dodds, 2006). The stories created helped catalyze the demonization of African people that allowed Europeans to view them as sub-human. This representation created a common language among people across Europe and the Americas that Black people were lower in status. Specifically, Black men were viewed in various images as criminals and sexual predators. Two major film’s in the early 20th century that reinforced this were *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 and *King Kong* in 1933. During *King Kong*’s production, the trial of the Scottsboro Boys occurred (Hund & Mills, 2016). These teenagers were accused of raping two white women. In media publications during the time, the boys were likened to an ape like King Kong, looking to kidnap and rape helpless white women. Though Hall discusses that the word “black” was changed as a signifier in the 1960s due to the slogan “Black is Beautiful,” negative associations with the word continue to persist (Hall, 1997). Even in the present day, there are situations where Black boys and men are locked away for rapes and sexual assaults they did not commit. It often occurs, like in the case of the Central Park Five in 1989, because of the narratives those in privilege would like to believe (i.e., bestial black men) rather than the evidence of the case (Stratton, 2015). Therefore, before analyzing other factors about the image, through a common language among people it is possible to surmise the meaning is racist.

Yet, what if H&M was given the benefit of a doubt, and the organization did not mean to pair this sweatshirt with a young Black boy as a model? Would it make any difference in the interpretation and representation of this advertisement? Through their product offering, H&M provided a blatant answer to these questions.



Figure 3: H&M's boy's sweatshirt comparison (Today's Parent, 2018)

There is a stark contrast between the two boys. First, the statements of the sweatshirts reinforce racist stereotypes. The phrase on the right has been discussed, yet not in contrast to the sweatshirt of the White boy: “MANGROVE JUNGLE OFFICIAL SURVIVAL EXPERT JUNIOR TOUR GUIDE.” The phrase is steeped in White Saviorism (Cole, 2012). It implies that the White boy can survive in the “dangerous” jungle (the danger emphasized by the tiger), but he has tamed the environment in a way that he can show others around as a “tour guide”.

The White boy's hair, gaze, and slightly open mouth display an innocence while simultaneously displaying a meekness about what he may see. However, his body posture and hands in pockets (though offscreen) display confidence in line with the phrase on his shirt. The phrasing and contrast show an otherness between the boys. It is reminiscent of the way Said describes Orientalism, a Western means of dominating and having authority over another culture (Said, 2003). The phrasing implies that though the Black boy may belong in the environment (the jungle), he is still primitive and bestial. Therefore, though the White boy is the foreigner to the jungle, the implication is that he knows it best and can help others survive.

Do you find the gaze of the Black boy striking? Scary? Is his posture intimidating? Though it may be perceived that this boy is more aggressive than his peer, at the time of the photo he was five years old. His name is Liam Mango, and he is from Stockholm (Ahmed, 2018). Though Liam is just a child, research shows that most of those who will view his image already see him as something less than human. Goff et. al (2014) found that, especially among White women, Black boys are seen as less childlike than their White peers of the same age. This loss of

innocence implies that Black boys will be treated more like adults and will not be given the same empathy and grace exhibited towards their White peers. In conjunction with the representation of Black men as apes, this dehumanization of Black boys leads to a higher rate of police violence towards them (Goff et al., 2014). In the United States, Black children are 58% more likely than White children to be tried as adults (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2007). These children who are tried as adults and sent to adult correctional facilities face horrifying consequences. They are twice as likely to be assaulted by prison staff, five times as likely to be sexually assaulted, and eight times more likely to commit suicide (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2007). Even in the school environment, at the kindergarten level (around Liam's age), teachers take racialized approaches to discipline Black boys (Zimmermann, 2018). As discussed, the phrase alone is quite racist. When looking at the way a young Black boy is portrayed in combination with the phrase, the image and product become even worse. Tragically, this continues a long history of advertisements that marginalize and dehumanize Black children, as seen below.



Figure 4: Fairy Soap Ad (Edwards, 2013)

“Clothes, for example, may have a simple function-to cover up the body and protect it from the weather. But clothes also double up as signs. They construct a meaning and carry a message” (Hall, 1997, p. 37). What is the meaning and sign of the hooded sweatshirt, or hoodie? It is a piece of clothing originally developed for athletes to wear on the sidelines of sporting events (Champion, 2021). It became a staple at universities in the United States and was seen as a practical piece of clothing to keep people warm. Laborers began adopting the hoodie as well, as the sweatshirts were convenient to use in warehouses. The popularity of hoodies spread when athletes (who were predominantly heterosexual males) gave their track gear to their girlfriends to wear (Wilson, 2012). Over time, the hoodie came to be adopted by groups of people who had negative stereotypes: skaters, graffiti artists, and rappers (Wilson, 2012). The negative

stereotypes associated with those groups of people were then attributed to the clothing article. The hoodie became an intimidating piece of clothing, a signifier representing some type of criminal or outlaw uniform. Though there are people who wear a hoodie while engaging in criminal activity, the overwhelming majority of those who wear it do so for comfort or fashion. As hoodies were embraced by hip-hop culture in the 1990s, many Black boys and men adopted the wear. In the U.S., this led to a backlash from the White majority, who identified the hoodie with signified concepts such as “thuggish” or “unprofessional”. The National Basketball Association (NBA) went so far as to ban them to make sure athletes dressed in a way that “accurately” reflected their reputation (Eligon, 2005). Ironically, the piece of clothing meant for athletes was not permitted for athletes, solely because of the language it conveyed when worn by Black men.

In looking at Liam in the H&M advertisement, the representation of the hoodie is in line with the dehumanization of the phrase on the hoodie. The language and signaling that it conveys, especially in contrast with the White boy, is here is another *Black criminal*. Regardless that this is another human or child, this beast will one day leave the “jungle” to terrorize others or rape those who enter his domain. This message further supports the myth that Western countries are justified in their neo-colonial and imperial treatment of Africa and African people.

Though other tragic events occurred due to the dehumanization of Black men through words and images, there is a specific killing that highlights how the representation of a hoodie can be deadly to Black boys. That killing is of Trayvon Martin in 2012. The man who shot Trayvon, George Zimmerman, was found not guilty of murder, yet there is no dispute that he killed Trayvon. However, during the trial, the defense demonized Trayvon and, because of the way he looked, associated him with a number of break-ins that had occurred in Zimmerman’s neighborhood. It didn’t matter that Martin was in the neighborhood visiting, with some candy in his pocket and an ice tea. He was Black and wearing a hoodie, thus to Zimmerman he did not belong there. Media outlets emphasized this villainization. Geraldo Rivera, from Fox News, stated, “So it’s a dark night, a 6-foot, 2-inch hoodie-wearing stranger is in the immediate housing complex. How would the ladies of that jury have reacted? I submit that if they were armed, they would have shot and killed Trayvon Martin a lot sooner than George Zimmerman did. This is self-defense” (Williams, 2012, para. 17). To further drive the narrative that Trayvon Martin was a criminal or an intimidating person who deserved his fate, most platforms published a black and white photo of him in a hoodie.



Figure 5: Image of Trayvon Martin (CNN, 2012)

While there is a difference due to the hoodie being down in the H&M photo, the piercing gaze and solemn face of Liam is similar to that of Trayvon. The photographer for the ad campaign could have picked a photo with Liam smiling, yet chose that expression because of what it represents when reiterating the language that Black boys, especially those who wear hoodies, are criminals. Even the specific image of Trayvon has been used to demonstrate a “no hoods” rule at an American university (Lemoncelli, 2022).

Based on the three factors of the image, it may be quite apparent the system of “truth” H&M looked to perpetuate through this ad. Based on that “truth”, the subjectification of Black boys as criminals continued. There is a specific agenda followed, which is due to structural racism and systemic biases. Through recognition from external views, H&M recognized the way this advertisement continued a toxic discourse and attempted to mitigate fallout.

The Response

In response to the advertisement, six H&M stores in South Africa were targeted by protesters (Sky News, 2018). Additionally, there was swift condemnation online, with many decrying the brand for pushing a neocolonial narrative (Bever, 2018). The Weeknd, a musical artist, also cut ties with the company (Smith, 2018). To counter the response, H&M issued an apology. However, the apology did not address the racism within the advertisement, only the fact that some people were offended by it (Bever, 2018). Two months after this controversy, the company hired Annie Wu to be the global leader for diversity and inclusion. Processes were supposedly implemented to make sure photos were checked for any sensitivities. However, with

most products produced in Sweden, the company still encounters difficulties when overcoming ethnocentric views for advertisements.

After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, H&M was one of the many multinational corporations that gave a commitment to help increase racial equity. The leadership of the company released a statement and made a \$500,000 donation to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and two other non-profit organizations (H&M Group, 2020). This commitment seemed inauthentic, however, when another incident was revealed later that summer. In August 2020, an internal photo from the H&M owned & Other Stories revealed a purple hat labeled as the “N**** Lab Beanie” (Wright, 2020). The use of such a blatant racial slur demonstrates a lack to learn from mistakes such as the sweatshirt incident. It also shows that the narrative portrayed by media from H&M still follows a White European truth about Black people. H&M had focused most of its D&I efforts in the U.S., where there is much external pressure to do so. However, the leadership of the organization had little incentive to authentically implement more equitable practices in Europe.

Conclusion and Recommendation

As Hall discusses, there is a constant sliding of meaning (1997). Because of that, the viewer is as important as the producer in interpreting the meaning of something in a common language. Though it may not be possible to completely remove negative connotations from the word “black,” internal viewers in multinational corporations can educate themselves to recognize when the meaning is meant to be racist. In grasping this understanding, and because the images do not have a fixed meaning, viewers can help producers completely shift signs and signifiers to portray Black people more positively. Looking at representation within the circuit of culture, this change in representation will help change the cultural perception of Black people.

In 2021, the UN Global Compact listed three actions multinational corporations could take to be antiracist, yet the actions were fairly broad: 1. Speak up and take action 2. Educate and show leadership from the top 3. Invest in Black people and other marginalized people of color (Connors, 2021). While these are seemingly appropriate suggestions, there are elements missing. What are the specific actions that companies need to take? How can they educate leaders at the top? Will investing in Black people eliminate the narrative that allows racist images?

The argument could be made that H&M has already invested in Black people through the donation made after the death of George Floyd. If the concept to invest, or the meaning, is interpreted differently, investing in Black people could be hiring them (and other people of color). To quickly impact and change the narrative for those in power, a Black leader could be added to the Board of Directors (George, 2021). Black talent could also be hired from external sources. However, with the addition of Black representation would have to be organizational transformation. Representation without cultural transformation may continue the problems created by racism. Even though Annie Wu was promoted to the global leader for diversity and inclusion, it was done so internally, so there was no large cultural shift for the organization.

If the culture of a group is derived from a micro level, based on everyday interactions that occur with people, there may be a program H&M may implement to encourage a change in the meaning leadership has of Black people. Because H&M is a multinational corporation, it can be assumed there are Black people (and other people of color) working at offices around the world.

Therefore, the organization can implement a reverse mentorship program. Through the reverse mentorship program, Black junior leaders would act as mentors for White senior leaders. This will give the White senior leadership, acting as mentees, the ability to overcome the perception of otherness they may have towards Black people. Breaking the negative stereotypes of the senior leadership will have an impact on organizational culture, as those in power will be able to alter the meaning of the language used about Black people.

As part of the obligation to protect human rights, multinational corporations need to change the way they use media. This change in media will allow them to create more equitable and inclusive messaging that positively represents people from all racial groups. The new meaning and messaging will create the conditions that allow people to live with dignity and respect. For Black people, this will facilitate a narrative that does not criminalize or demonize them. Doing this will have a profound impact, and most likely result in mitigating the needless violence and abuse people face.

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