

# The Representation of Race in Advertising

A Case Study of the Representation of Race in Procter & Gamble's Campaigns' *The Look* and *The Talk*. Besides, an Examination of Consumers' Perception Thereof.

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Kirsten Michaela Bencker

Master Thesis in Culture, Communication & Globalization  
9<sup>th</sup> Semester, Aalborg University



Supervisor: Olga Gurova

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## Abstract

"I'm no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. Not all white people, just the vast majority who refuse to accept the legitimacy of structural racism and its symptoms" (Eddo-Lodge, 2018, ix). This quote by Reni Eddo-Lodge is part of the book *Why I'm no Longer Talking to White People About Race*, whose sale numbers surged worldwide in response to the police killing of George Floyd. It reveals the necessity to understand the nature of White supremacy deeply embedded in society in order to overcome the latter. Coming from the field of market and consumption, this thesis examines the hidden power relations of race in investigating its representation in advertising. The aim hereby is to move the debate around race forward and disclose the social constructs that lie beneath its notion.

In order to achieve the above, two campaigns by the brand Procter & Gamble (P&G) which critically broach the issue of race are analyzed using a combination of Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of representation and semiotic- as well as critical discourse analysis. The qualitative analysis of multiple semiotic modes employed in both commercials unveils that P&G's campaigns are aiming to dismantle the notion surrounding White supremacy by representing Whiteness from the perspective of Black people. While an intersectional approach to this thesis shows that some features advocate a stereotypical depiction of social actors, the results maintain that P&G shares features of cultural branding in showing culturally sensitive topics and thereby calling consumers to challenge their taken for granted norms and start a conversation around racial bias.

Apart from examining the *producing* side, this thesis takes into account the campaigns' *receiving* part in order to disclose not only how racial identities are represented but also how consumers react to these representations. This is analyzed by conducting a netnographic study of consumers on YouTube within the frame of Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model. This unobtrusive method reveals in-depth insights into consumers' attitudes and shows that P&G's commercials generate controversy among viewers. While many viewers positively receive the commercials' representation of race, confirming the authenticity of these representations, others criticize the latter as being inaccurate or anti-White. This might be linked to the hidden notion of White supremacy that is still embedded in some consumers' ideologies. The overall findings lead to conclude that, in order to eradicate systemic racism, much still remains to be done.

However, P&G is taking first steps in disrupting the latter by engaging consumers to start a difficult, yet necessary conversation around racial bias.

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# 1 Introduction

The current uproar surrounding the killing of George Floyd has led to global protests against police violence and the systemic racism that is still deeply rooted in institutional organizations. The fact that George Floyd's death reverberated across the world confirms the global struggle with racial inequality and demonstrates that the widespread and entrenched prejudices and marginalization faced by Black people are materialized beyond police brutality. In popular culture particularly, the portrayal and reproduction of racist and mostly stereotypical images of Black people have evolved within Western society dating back centuries. Until today, these images are perpetuated in media forms such as magazines, newspapers, or television (Hall, 1997; Crockett, 2008). Even though many companies repeatedly emphasize their support in regard to racial equality and deny any form of racist attitudes, numerous brands, among them global companies such as Dolce and Gabbana, H&M or Dove, have been called out for tone-deaf marketing and racist undertones in selected campaigns proving that, although we often claim to live in a "post-racial era", racism is built right into every level of our society (Pfeiffer & Meyers, 2018).

The recent events have also shed light on a debate around racism that puts Whiteness and White privilege at its center. Following the incident of George Floyd's death, social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram were flooded by messages that advocated the need to dismantle White supremacy and counter a narrative that has - both consciously and unconsciously - supported a social system in which White people enjoy a structural advantage over other racial groups. Simultaneously, brands were urged to tackle racism and be more engaging in combating White supremacy (Romano, 2020; Mull, 2020).

The multinational consumer goods company Procter and Gamble (P&G) is one of the brands that picks up on the issue of racism, for they have published a series of thought-provoking campaign videos inviting consumers to look at systemic racism from a different angle. While their campaigns have gone viral and earned applause for portraying the "raw truth" about racism, they have likewise been met with negative reception. Critical voices accused P&G's campaigns as "identity-politics pandering" (Coolidge, n.d.); others perceived the videos to be racist against Whites (Coolidge, n.d.; Tan, 2018).

In consideration of these observations, this thesis is yearning to examine P&G's depiction of racial identities in two of their controversial campaigns that broach the issue of race, namely *The Look* and *The Talk*. The aim is hereby to explore the ubiquitous presence and use of symbols regarding race that transforms advertising into a form of socio-cultural communication that is shaping, reinforcing, and/or challenging prevalent norms in society. I set out to explore both the linguistic and visual representations of race by employing a combination of Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory, multimodal discourse- as well as semiotic analysis. As Gopaldas and DeRoy (2015) lament, the majority of studies surrounding race in the media follow a unidimensional approach, which neglects the "intersections of multiple historically oppressed identities" (p. 334). Accordingly, this thesis will be conducted from an intersectional perspective, therefore providing an in-depth understanding of privilege and marginalization in said campaigns.

What is more, the majority of consumer research has - to a great extent - been focusing on stigma and how stigmatized consumer groups experience their representation in marketing. Yet, scrutinizing advertising from the perspective of Whiteness is often discarded (Johnson et al., 2017). This neglect has consequences for the perception of race: Burton (2009a) argues that White people specifically find it difficult to acknowledge their own role of Whiteness in society as it is assumed to be the norm (p. 174). Since P&G's campaigns overtly challenge Whiteness ideology and unveil prevalent prejudices against Black people, consumers' perception towards the videos will be taken into account by using a netnographic approach and employing Hall's (1973) reception theory. Thereupon, this thesis is meant to fill the aforementioned gap in research in investigating how consumers respond to marketing strategies perceived as disrupting privilege.

In aiming first to understand the nature of P&G's depictions of race and then use the set of selected videos to drive a netnographic study of consumers' reaction, I hope to shed light on the negotiated representation of race in the marketplace and how privilege manifests itself in contemporary advertising. These issues will be approached by the following research questions along with two subquestions:

*How do Blackness and Whiteness shape Procter & Gamble's advertising campaigns and how do these concepts reflect consumers' attitudes towards race?*

*RQ 1: How are racial identities represented in the discourse of P&G's campaigns?*

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter is meant to provide a contextual background that is considered important for the reader to be fully familiarized with the topic. To understand the representation of race in the chosen campaigns, it is paramount to first elaborate on the social construct that is race and its relation to power. Subsequently, I will elucidate the significance of the media as a cultural symbol before providing a brief description of the historical evolution of race representation in the media. As outlined above, this thesis aims to investigate selected campaigns of P&G. It specifically focuses on the ways the brand takes on topics such as race and White privilege. I argue that both campaigns share features of *cultural branding*. Hence, the latter concept, as defined by Holt (2004), will be discussed.

### **2.1 Race in the Marketplace**

#### **2.1.1 Defining Race**

While most people certainly share a general understanding when talking about *race*, I have found that race frequently circulates in popular discourse without providing a clear explanation of the said term. Conflicting conceptions of race might arise from its historical usage: up until the 20th century, the notion of race had partly been constructed around biological features. The *biological* understanding of race implies that humans with the same genetic and/or phenotypic traits can be categorized into distinct racial groups. Consequently, shared and visible features such as hair texture or skin tone are used to declare a person's race and differentiate one racial group from another. From a neutral viewpoint, this distinction does not suggest a hierarchical system between different races. Historically, however, it has been used to support a "racialized social hierarchy" that would put White people on top and Black people at the bottom of the order (Thomas et al., 2018, pp. 207-208).

Scholars have nonetheless discredited the theory of race as a biological construct, and numerous studies have validated that the genetic variation between humans is so little that "there is as much, if not more, genetic difference within racial categories as between them" (Thomas et al., 2018, p. 207). Nowadays, race - along with other concepts such as gender

identity, sexuality, or class - is widely acknowledged as a *social construct* (p. 208). Races, as Cornell and Hartmann (2007) propound, "are products of human perception and classification" (p. 24). Physical characteristics function as definitive features of one race or another. To be more precise, these characteristics render it possible to come up with categories for humans. While these categories carry no *natural* connotation with them, it is the social actor that attributes meaning to these categories.

### **2.1.2 Race and Power**

It is essential now to distinguish between *ethnicity* and race. Although people belonging to the same race can likewise belong to the same ethnicity, ethnic groups "share a set of traditions and customs that distinguish their ethnic groups from other ethnic groups within their racial group" (Thomas et al., 2018, p. 209). Cornell and Hartmann (2007) further elaborate on this distinction in naming several unique qualities that separate the notion of race from ethnicity. Of central importance here is the role of *power*: questions of power, politics, and culture play a detrimental role in constructing ideas around race. Besides, time and space are crucial components in this construction, meaning that the experience of race is inherently context-bound and fluid (Thomas et al., 2018, p. 208).

Race as a sociological theme has emerged during the era of European colonialism. European settlers categorized "foreigners" with different phenotypic traits into racial categories. The effect of these designations was that it allowed colonizers to not only assert power "to define one culture against 'the other'" (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 29) but to take advantage of this power and legitimate claims to occupy places and exploit resources. These processes were signs of a political power game that would essentially arrange for a tiered system of races in which certain races were seen as less worthy than others. Given the fact that *White* European settlers gained the upper hand in this struggle for power, being White is, until today, represented as the "taken-for-granted norm" whereas the Other - meaning all those allocated within the "non-White" category - were "racially marked and defined" (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 30).

To return to the difference between ethnicity and race, Thomas et al. (2018) propound that race functions differently in the sense that its notion has a distinct "socio-historical purpose, creating hierarchy in society and the marketplace" (p. 207) while ethnicity is "predominantly a matter of choice and convenience" (p. 209).

Bearing in mind the above, it has been decided to use Black and White as terminology for race in this thesis. Although African-American is often used similarly with the racial identifier Black, the former term "does not capture the lived experience of black individuals living in, or with ancestry from, places beyond the borders of the United States" (Thomas et al., 2018, p. 2011). Black depictions in the media do, however, speak to - and affect - more people than the aforementioned group. Given this thesis's international scope, the latter terminology was deemed more appropriate.

Linked to this terminology is the intentional choice to capitalize Black and White: by using **Black**, I aim to acknowledge the shared sense of identity and history of Black people that will be undermined by using lowercase black, a word that signifies merely a color. Furthermore, this thesis is yearning to denaturalize the idea of Whiteness as both neutral and the norm. In using **White** in capital letters, I critically call attention to White as a racial category that continues to be the dominant force in society.

### **2.1.3 Media as a Cultural Symbol**

This thesis's analytic method will follow a cultural approach that studies advertising as "artifacts of material culture" (Crockett, 2008, p. 247), which should be read and interpreted as socially constructed texts. Following this approach, it is argued that the media plays an essential role in constructing, representing, and transforming prevalent ideas about the social world. Marketing communication, such as advertising, creates cultural meanings and conceptions that influence how consumers perceive and construct certain assumptions about concepts such as race, sexuality, gender, or class (Harrison et al., 2017; Crockett, 2008; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). As such, the representation of race in marketing should not be studied in a vacuum, for advertising is an active contributor to both creating and reflecting culture and social norms. This also implies that these representations are positioned in the light of "changing social and cultural practices" (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004, p. 24), meaning that they are fluid and context-dependent. In the case of race and marketing, this means that, for instance, discourses on race can vary depending on the socio-cultural and historical context they are situated in.

#### **2.1.4 The Representation of Race in the Marketplace - Historical Overview**

The practice of using race to market products is not a new phenomenon. Hall (1997) notes that the representations of Black people in advertisements can be traced back to the end of the 19th century. The European colonization of Africa arranged for an image of Black people that symbolized primitiveness. With the increasing rise of the popular press, the imagery surrounding Blackness reached a wider audience and the idea of the "civilized", i.e., Whites, which was set in binary opposition with the "dirty" and the "savage", i.e., Blacks, was applied to ordinary mass advertising. In British soap advertising, for example, Black people's darker skin was utilized to signify dirtiness while white skin connoted purity and cleanliness. Soap as a product symbolized the racializing of the domestic world and vice versa (Hall, 1997, pp. 239-242).

In the USA, Blackness as a symbolic asset in the media is said to have its origins with the beginning of the 20th century. Similarly, Black people were mainly depicted as archetypal minstrel characters in advertising strategies with the intention of disparaging their race (Crockett, 2008, p. 246). Up until the Civil Rights Movement, Black people continued to either be portrayed in a somewhat stereotypical manner or not be apparent at all. It was not until the pressing demand for racial equality in both politics and society that researchers have noted a delegitimization of racist discourses along with a transformation in the media's representation of Blackness. The Civil Rights Movement and concomitant developments towards Black empowerment gave rise to a new form of cultural identity, the effects of which became increasingly notable in the media industry: Not only did the representation of Blackness increase significantly, but it also changed in a way that countered the narratives about Black people which had been previously constructed by the media (Crockett, 2008; Hall, 1997).

Yet, while race has surfaced as a central issue in the media, it continues to be loaded with stereotypical and sometimes racist images. Although Bailey (1990) predicates that the agenda surrounding Black representation has changed both from a theoretical and visual standpoint (p. 43), there appears to be a latent consensus amongst various scholars that the legacies of the historical oppression of Black people continue to be discernible in the media, albeit in a less significant manner. Bristor et al. (1995), for instance, investigated the representation of Black people in TV advertising and concluded that, whereas the number of Black people in contemporary advertising had been increasing, subtle racist elements indicating White

superiority were still prevalent. This argument was supported by researchers in later studies who acknowledged the underlying persistence of symbolic images in the mass media that connotes White supremacy and Black inferiority (Crockett, 2008; Thomas et al., 2018; Dawn, 2009; Downing & Husband, 2005).

## 2.2 Cultural Branding

In his work *How Brands Become Icons: the Principles of Cultural Branding*, Holt (2004) provides a systematic overview of cultural branding through a series of case studies. The author initiates the conversation on cultural branding by outlining three conventional branding models predominantly used in marketing campaigns: mind-share, emotional, and virtual branding. *Cultural branding*, however, does not fit in either of those models: In order to become an iconic brand through cultural branding, a brand must fulfill specific requirements that will be introduced in the subsequent paragraphs.

According to Holt (2004), cultural branding, which is "the set of axioms and strategic principles that guide the building of brands into cultural icons" (p. 11), is a strategy that provides identity value in creating myths that address "the collective anxieties and desires of a nation" (p. 6). While conventional brands aim to maintain consistency and work with established principles and concepts, an iconic brand feeds on important cultural shifts in a nation. Based on the premise that an iconic brand's success depends on how well its myth responds to the audience, it needs to be sensitive to cultural disruptions in society. Holt (2004) further argues that people are constructing their identities in the light of shared historical incidents affecting the entire nation. Thus, if brands correctly address both desires and fears triggered by these historical events, their branding can function as a reflection of those aspired identities.

Often, identity myths are set in populist worlds<sup>1</sup> in order to create reliability. However, reliability is not sufficient in itself: as Holt (2004) elucidates, in order to be truly authentic, a brand needs to establish both literacy and fidelity in their branding strategy. This is achieved if a brand illustrates a nuanced understanding of cultural codes and idioms derived from the

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<sup>1</sup> autonomous places where people's actions are perceived to be guided by intrinsic values, not by money or power (Holt, 2004, p.11).

populist world on the one hand and if they sacrifice their "broad-based popularity to stand up for this ethos" (p. 65) on the other.

One last thing to mention is that iconic brands perform as political and cultural actors in the marketplace. Since their myths are based on significant social changes within a culture or nation, these myths often touch "a political nerve" (Holt, 2004, p. 127). Holt (2004) equates iconic brands with cultural activists since it is their branding that motivates people to think out of the box and reconsider their taken-for-granted ideas about themselves and their surroundings. To achieve the status of a cultural activist, brands have to acquire cultural knowledge and be sensitive to their consumers' identity aspirations.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter will outline the concrete methodological considerations deemed the most appropriate to answer this thesis's research questions. To begin with, I will expound on my philosophical stance. Secondly, I will elaborate on the qualitative nature of the thesis and how I aim to answer my problem formulation within the frame of a case study research design. Subsequently, my choice of material, including data collection, data set, and theories, will be presented. To conclude this chapter, I will discuss the limitations of this study.

#### **3.1 Research Paradigm**

The literature review of this thesis has already elaborated on race as an inherently social construct. This perspective is deeply rooted in the idea of social constructivism, a philosophy that is concerned with the social world and the actors involved in it. Social constructivists argue that reality is fundamentally subjective, for each person has their unique perception of the world. Accordingly, this position counters the argument that social reality exists outside of individuals - one definitive social world cannot exist - and maintains that knowledge and meaning are constructed through the actions of social actors. Therefore, phenomena are continuously created and reconstructed by these actors' interests, which implies that the social world is never constant and always evolving (Hall, 1997, p. 62; Bryman, 2012, p. 33). This position is relevant for this project since I aim to understand the discursive construction of race in the media. Within this framework, I argue that race is a product of social context. The media

reinforces this construction by representing certain views on what constitutes Blackness and Whiteness (Crockett, 2008; Shome, 2000). Thus, a social constructivist approach enables me to look beyond the representation of phenomena on the surface and critically reflect on the meaning-making of these representations.

From this perspective, acquiring "real" knowledge is unattainable since "the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality" (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). Thus, the researcher aims to understand rather than scientifically explain social phenomena (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p.102). At the same time, the researcher itself is fundamentally shaped by their "own interests, biases and preferences" (p. 102). To a certain extent, the findings and interpretation of data will, therefore, always be shaped by one's subjective version of social reality.

Besides, it has been decided to adopt an iterative research approach, which is a combination of deductive and inductive methodologies. This means that, upon commencing the analysis, I started out with a set of theories that were conceived to be useful for analyzing my primary data. This type of procedure is typically following a deductive approach. At the same time, as the research and analysis progressed, I developed my own categories and themes from the primary data, which is more typical for an inductive process (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 303).

## **3.2 Research Design**

In this section, I will set forth the structures deemed the most relevant for answering the thesis's interdisciplinary problem. The specific considerations that were taken in regard to this thesis will be propounded in the following sections.

### **3.2.1 Qualitative Research Design**

The nature of this project is fundamentally qualitative. As previously noted, my focus as a researcher lies in understanding a phenomenon rather than attempting to explain it within one definite, scientific model. This perspective calls for approaching the project within the framework of a qualitative research design (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). Besides, as Daymon and Holloway (2011) clarify, a qualitative research perspective allows for examining complex, power-related issues and the co-construction of meaning from a critical standpoint (p. 5). The

latter argument fits in particularly well with this thesis's nature, for its aim is to fathom the pivotal role that factors such as culture, history, and power play in the discursive construction of race in the media. As opposed to quantitative approaches, this method implies that the researcher is "an active sense maker" (p. 7) who generates knowledge and interprets data along the process of conducting the study.

### **3.2.2 Case Study Research**

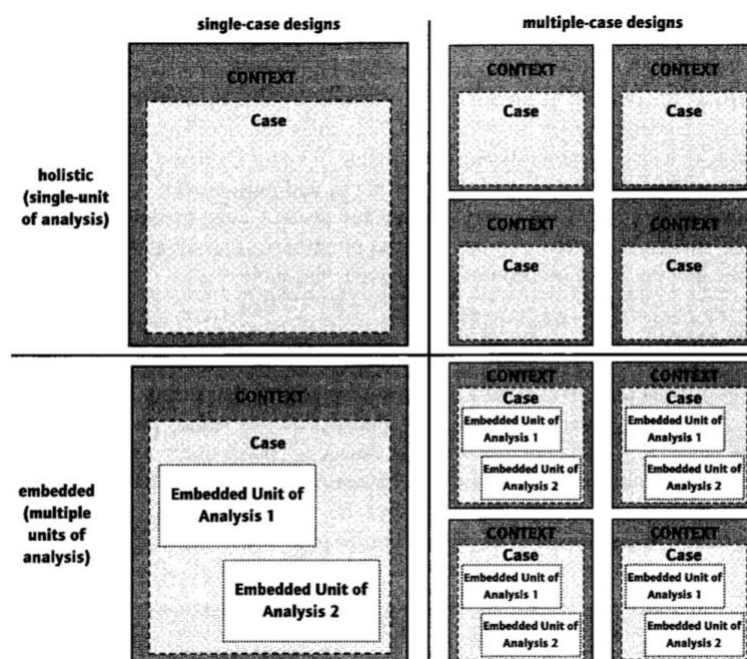
It has been decided to examine this thesis's problem formulation within the scope of a case study design. This choice is based on the aim to explore a social phenomenon, i.e., the representation of race in advertising, in a particular context. Case study research provides a useful tool to study the aforementioned phenomenon since it is a method that investigates "the complexity of a phenomenon, including its intricacies and its context" (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 108). Besides, this thesis's particular problem formulation aims to explore *how* race is represented and *how* a specific audience may react to this representation. This reinforces the choice to employ an explanatory case study design as Yin (2009) argues that *how* or *why* questions often favor the use of this research enquiry (p. 9). He further contends that, within a case study, these questions focus on the investigation of a "contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 13). The aim of this study is then to understand these contemporary communication events - in the case of this thesis, *advertising* - in its ordinary context (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 115). What differentiates a case study from other methods is its "specific, in-depth focus on a phenomenon in its naturalistic setting as an object of interest in its own right" (p. 114), which allows for an intensive and detailed analysis of the case (Bryman, 2012, p. 66). In another aspect, a case study enables the adaption of multiple data collection methods (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 115). This is particularly appealing since the thesis intends to collect data both on the producing end and the receiving end of the selected campaigns.

#### ***3.2.2.1 Single-case Study***

As will be further explained in chapter 3.3.1, I selected the brand P&G as an appropriate case because of its pursuit to broach issues surrounding race from a rather unusual viewpoint. Different from conventional advertising, P&G prompt conversation about racial bias by presenting racial identities through the perspective of Black people, showcasing racial bias

from a "Black" point of view. This allows for exploring key social processes, i.e., the impact of diverging race representations in the media on consumers' responses. Thus, this case can be categorized as an *exemplifying* case (Bryman, 2012, p.70).

To Yin (2009), case studies can be divided into single and multiple-case studies. The difference lies within the chosen case, context, and unit of analysis (p. 46). It has already been said that the problem formulation is examined within the *context* of advertising. The specific *case* relates to P&G's representation of race in two chosen commercials. Since two individual commercials are being examined and compared with each other, there are two *units of analysis*. Thus, the thesis was conducted within the scope of an embedded, single-case study design (pp. 46-50). The types of designs for case studies, as expounded by Yin (2009), are set out in the figure below.



**Figure 2.4** Basic Types of Designs for Case Studies  
SOURCE: COSMOS Corporation.

Figure 1: Basic Types of Designs for Case Studies (Yin, 2009, p. 46).

### 3.2.2.2 *Quality of Case Study Research*

Despite the strength of a case-based approach, it may lead to issues concerning the phenomenon's generalizability. As Flick (2011) explains, "qualitative research often is not very strongly linked to generalization issues" (p. 42). This is even more problematic with the design of case studies. Bryman (2012) claims that it is impossible for a single case to be representative of other, more general cases (pp. 69-70). This begs the question of whether the study's findings have a broader value beyond the specific phenomenon that is being treated within the case. This issue has also been discussed by Yin (2009). However, he propounds that case studies "are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p. 15). By that, he means that such a study aims not to reach a statistical generalization but to "expand and generalize theories" (p. 15). For a case study to be generalized to a theory, Yin (2009) emphasizes that it is crucial to ensure the research's quality using specific criteria. These criteria have been reflected in this thesis and have helped establish a highly qualitative thesis. They will thus be presented in the following.

The first criterion is *construct validity*, which means that the researcher should identify "correct operational measures for the concepts being studied" (Yin, 2009, p. 40). This validity was guaranteed by using multiple sources of evidence, i.e., relevant secondary documentation, relevant pre-existing theories, and netnography. Using several data sources helped to have multiple viewpoints - and get a profound overview - on the primary data being analyzed and thus choose appropriate methodological measures (pp. 40-42). The second criteria, *internal validity*, concerns the researcher's attempt to "establish a causal relationship, whereby certain conditions are believed to lead to other conditions, as distinguished from spurious relationships" (p. 40). This was done by adopting a theoretical framework that has been widely used by other researchers and is logically coherent. The open and detailed explanation of this framework ensures plausibility. Besides, I was open to potential limitations of my chosen theory and rival theories, which are both addressed in chapter 4.5. Thirdly, *external validity* refers to whether the thesis's findings can be generalized beyond the case. As discussed, case studies focus on analytic generalization, meaning that the "investigator is striving to generalize a particular set of results to some broader theory" (Yin, 2009, p. 43). By providing a thorough description of my methodological and theoretical approach and using the same logic and

approach while analyzing both units of analysis, I made sure that other readers can resonate with my findings and apply them to a different context (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p.125). Additionally, I regularly compared my findings to my theory and literature review in order to put them into a broader, more general context. Lastly, the research project should demonstrate *reliability*, i.e., "demonstrating that the operations of a study . . . can be repeated, with the same results" (Yin, 2009, p. 40). This criterion was fulfilled by thoroughly documenting my whole procedure, providing a step by step explanation of my methodology, and reading through the whole thesis numerous times. Besides, by continuously checking in with my thesis advisor, I ensured that potential inconsistencies in my approach were disclosed and consequently dismissed.

### **3.3 Choice of Material**

This chapter contains a detailed statement on the data collection process of this thesis. The chosen data rests on two different perspectives: the producing and receiving end of the media. Thus, the following sections will elaborate on the data that has been deemed appropriate for representing these perspectives. Besides, I will propound the theoretical framework that will be applied in order to analyze and interpret the data.

#### **3.3.1 Empirical Data Collection**

Upon commencing the research for this thesis, I was interested in examining the contemporary representation of race in the media and how consumers perceive said representation. This was considered to be particularly intriguing in the light of new social movements advocating to critically rethink our idea of race: over the past few years, brands' marketing strategies have increasingly been laden with political content. Due to the increase of online communication, this kind of advertisement is "less top-down and controlled by political consultants and has greater engagement of ordinary citizens" (Johnson, 2012, p. 205). To Holt (2016), brands are put in greater spotlight concerning socio-cultural and political issues. They are either criticized for being politically incorrect or praised for their sophisticated take on an issue. This is also why the concept of cultural branding increasingly takes on power in the media.

Taking these aspects into account and in consideration of the choice to employ a single case-study design, two campaigns from the multinational consumer goods company Procter &

Gamble (P&G) were chosen: *The Look* (Canned Bommercials, 2017) and *The Talk* (Ads of Brands, 2019). P&G was selected as a suitable unit of research since the brand has been releasing advertisements that are highly politically charged and cover multiple societal themes, e.g., gender equality or race. (Meyersohn, 2020; Aziz, 2019). What is more, P&G is not only the world's largest consumer goods company operating across the globe, but also featured as the "world's largest advertiser" in 2019 (Brunsman, 2019). This implies that their ads, which are widely accessible on the internet, e.g., YouTube, have a global reach and impact consumers across national boundaries.

The campaigns *The Look* and *The Talk* have been selected as appropriate units of analysis because of their critical thematization of race. *The Look*, which was first posted by the YouTube channel Ads of Brands, centers its story around a Black man and follows the daily struggles he encounters due to his skin color. By the time of enquiry, this video has generated over 600.000 views (Ads of Brands, 2019). *The Talk* was initially published by the YouTube channel Canned Bommercials in 2017. It has generated over 2.5 million views and shines light on the difficult conversations Black mothers have with their children about racism (Canned Bommercials, 2017). The high number of views on both videos suggests that they have reached a broad audience making them appropriate units of analysis specifically for examining consumers' perception of these videos. Moreover, the commercials have been produced within the last few years and within a similar historical timeframe (2017-2019); thus, it can be argued that they are, to some extent, reflecting on *contemporary* societal issues. Lastly, P&G's campaigns are somewhat different from other campaigns since they are not aiming to be more inclusive by merely including a wider variety of underrepresented groups in their ads. Instead, the ads change the perspective by showcasing the stories from a Black peoples' point of view, confronting the audience with the racial discrimination that the Black society is facing day-to-day. Consequently, both videos provide a meaningful ground to analyze race representations in the media.

### 3.3.1.1 Netnography

This thesis also aims to take into account the receiving end of the media, i.e., the consumer watching the video. In this regard, P&G's campaigns are particularly interesting to look at since their campaigns, especially *The Talk*, have generated controversy among consumers. While the

support in respect thereof has been undeniable, criticism has been expressed by consumers who felt like *The Talk* would be racist towards White people (Tan, 2018).

Nevertheless, some difficulties come with aiming to study consumers' awareness of their own racial identity. As Wildman (1996) argues, "the invisibility of privilege renders its empirical exploration challenging" (as cited in Johnson et al., 2017, p. 504). Extant research has examined White privilege through data collecting methods such as in-depth interviewing or ethnography. A majority of scholars dealing with the said topic have, however, reported "difficulties when requesting white respondents to critically reflect on their whiteness" (Burton, 2009a, p. 177).

Due to the latter argument and also, because of the Covid-19 crisis, making it hard to conduct interviews in person, I decided to turn my attention to the Internet. Many consumers have expressed their opinions about the campaigns via social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook. Both campaigns have generated massive online responses, so the Internet provides a meaningful way to study consumers' perception of the media. Generally speaking, online communities and platforms have increasingly gained importance in marketing communications because they provide new means to study consumers' needs (Kozinets, 2002).

Hence, I decided to sample data about consumers' reactions with the method of *netnography*. Deriving from ethnographic research, netnography investigates Internet behavior. As a method, it is "faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61). Added to this is the fact that many social media platforms include comment-sections. Thus, when a video is uploaded on one of these platforms, viewers can both comment on the video's content and initiate a discussion with other viewers (Rashid & Zeeshan, 2018). This form of interactive advertising provides a rich and easily accessible source of data, making it possible to study consumers' initial responses to the ad and examine whole conversations that may unveil deeper ideological motivations embedded in their reactions. I therefore concur with Hughey's (2012) conceptualization of online comments, who argues that they are "crucial mechanisms in the reproduction of discourses of power" (as cited in Johnson et al., 2017, pp. 504-505).

The unobtrusive aspect of netnography allows for a sense of relative anonymity that may unveil discourses around privilege and power relations that would otherwise remain hidden (Steinfeldt et al., 2010, p. 362). The latter is of particular relevance for the study of Whiteness as it has

been reported that, in traditional data collecting methods, (White) consumers have encountered problems in identifying their own race. While netnography does not allow for obtaining informant identifiers, making it hard to identify the "race" of consumers and generalize from these results, some users might disclose their identifiers in the comments. It might then be possible to see possible patterns among these consumers.

#### *3.3.1.1.1 Sampling Method*

It has further been decided to collect data from one media outlet, i.e., YouTube. This platform has been selected due to its communicative functions, i.e., the possibility to comment and discuss on posts as well as its availability of a larger number of comments, ensuring a variety of different opinions. Besides, YouTube is a platform that has a global reach and provides the chance to examine reactions from international viewers. This allows for investigating consumers' reactions from a global perspective. Unfortunately, the comment section on *The Look* and *The Talk* posted by P&G has been turned off. For this reason, comments from *The Look* are derived from the YouTube channel *Ads of Brands*, who have also posted said campaign and generated a response of more than 900 comments. Comments on *The Talk* were collected from the channel *Canned Bommercials*. This video has more than 4000 comments (Ads of Brands, 2019; Canned Bommercials, 2017).

It is also necessary to address the type of sampling method that has been chosen to collect comments on both videos. As for this analysis, I decided to use a type of sampling known as *purposive sampling*. The latter is a common method in qualitative research as it provides the possibility to select units of analysis "in terms of criteria that will allow the research question to be answered" (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). In other words, this method samples participants in a strategic, selective way (p. 418). The samples are thus selected following the particular research question. In terms of netnography, Kozinets (2002) concurs with Bryman's (2012) argument in stating that "the netnographer's choices of which data to save and which to pursue are important and should be guided by the research question" (p. 64). Seeing that this thesis aims to investigate consumers' reactions using Hall's (1973) theoretical framework on data, the choice to employ purposive sampling was reinforced.

The rationale for my sampling method is as follows: regarding Hall's (1973) proposed readings of a message, i.e., dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading, I decided to focus upon users

who clearly communicated how they perceived the specific commercial so that they could be categorized within these different categories. Users expressing informational and comprehensible opinions were preferred to users who only commented with off-topic or unintelligible statements. This approach is also suggested by Kozinets (2002), who emphasizes the need to classify messages based on their informational content (p. 64). However, within these categorized readings, I decided to analyze the chosen data in a less controlled way, being open to the further generation of theoretical categories. By that, I mean that users practicing an oppositional reading, for instance, would set out different reasons for why they have chosen to oppose the message by the encoder. Thus, if there were recurring themes among these reactions, they were further divided into these specific themes. Similar to Kozinets's (2002) proposal, data collection was continued until theoretical saturation has been achieved. This is accomplished when "new data no longer stimulate new theoretical understandings or new dimensions of the principal theoretical categories" (Bryman, 2012, p. 420). The proposed sampling method is also typical for this thesis's iterative approach as it allows the researcher to find new patterns without being too regulated by prior theoretical knowledge while simultaneously drawing on theoretical ideas to have data put into context.

### **3.3.2 Data Analysis**

According to the theoretical framework that I developed (see chapter 4), the analysis is structured in the following way:

The analysis will be divided into the interpretation of the campaigns where I intend to comprehend the portrayal of race as represented by the producer P&G (*encoding*) and how it is perceived by the audience (*decoding*). The first stage further comprises three steps that were based on CDA and semiotics. First, I will try to elaborate on the social structures, i.e., racial identities, that are being represented in both campaigns. This is done by employing semiotics. Following the semiotic description, the results will be interpreted. This involves identifying the discourses that are *naturalized* by examining the power relations that determine racial identity. Lastly, these discourses will be situated within a broader context. In light of my literature review, the findings will thus be compared to previous and recent trends in the field of advertising and race. This involves discussing how these discourses on race might be different/similar to other advertising and whether they may disrupt contemporary representations, intimating a latent shift regarding race representation in advertising.

The second stage will be based on Hall's (1973) reception theory and is concerned with how consumers respond to the discourses as unveiled in stage one. By employing netnography and Hall's (1973) model, I aim to categorize consumers' reactions into three positions that they might take upon decoding the advertising: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. The visualization of the framework of analysis can be examined below:

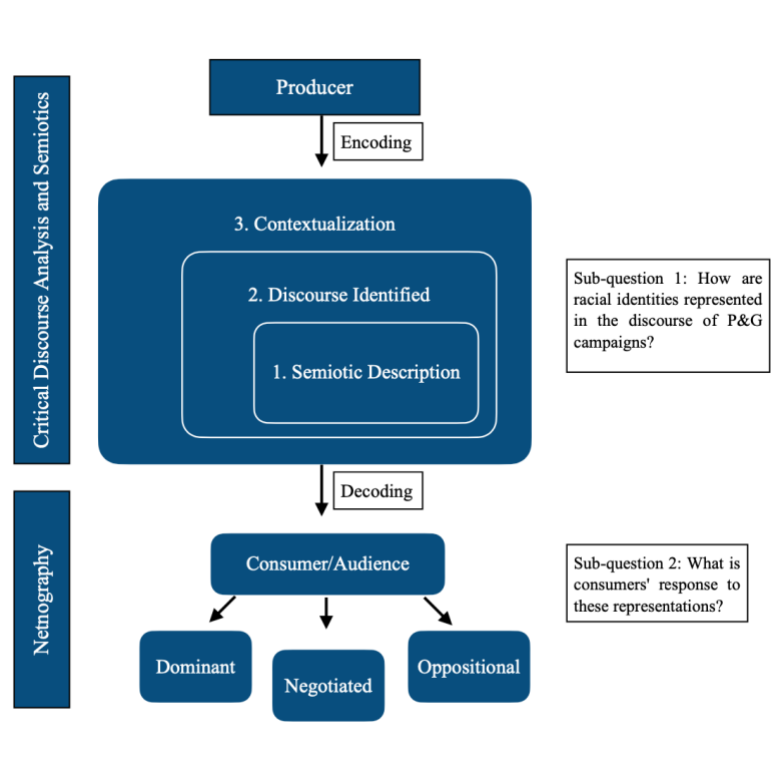


Figure 2: Representation of this Thesis's Theoretical Framework

Furthermore, the steps of analysis *1. Semiotic Description* and *2. Discourse Identified* were split into smaller elements. This was done through an iterative process, which means that before commencing with the analysis, I have drawn on theoretical ideas and relevant literature in order to establish the theoretical base in Figure 2 and put my analytical findings into context. While the latter is more typical for a deductive approach, I remained open to finding patterns, themes, and categories from the data while simultaneously discarding, adding, or refining elements of the literature review and theory in consideration of my interpretation of the primary data (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, 303; 326). The chosen approach is also supported in conducting a case study as set forth by Yin (2009, p. 1).

The multimodal approach of this thesis suggests dividing the semiotic description into smaller sections. Accordingly, upon conducting the initial analysis, categories deemed essential in answering the research question were identified and named. These categories were included in the analysis and are presented in Figure 3.

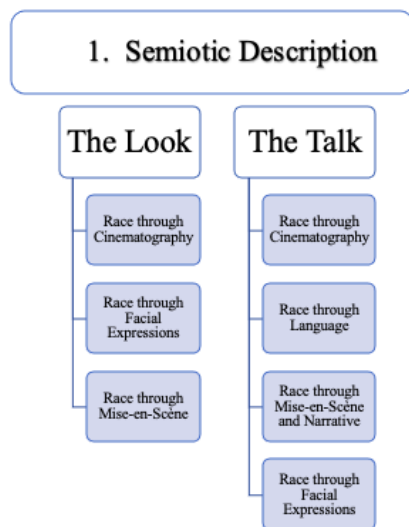


Figure 3: Categories in Semiotic Description

Guided by the findings of the first stage of analysis and this thesis's theoretical basis, the second stage of analysis - *Discourse Identified* - was split into three sections. These sections are showcased in Figure 4.

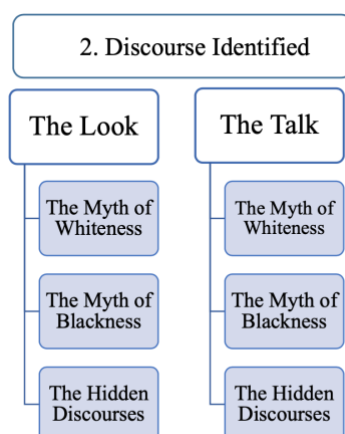


Figure 4: Categories in Discourse Identified

On the decoding end, consumers' reactions, categorized within the oppositional, dominant and negotiated readings, have been divided into additional themes when deemed useful. The categories and sub-themes are included in the analysis and showcased in Figure 5.

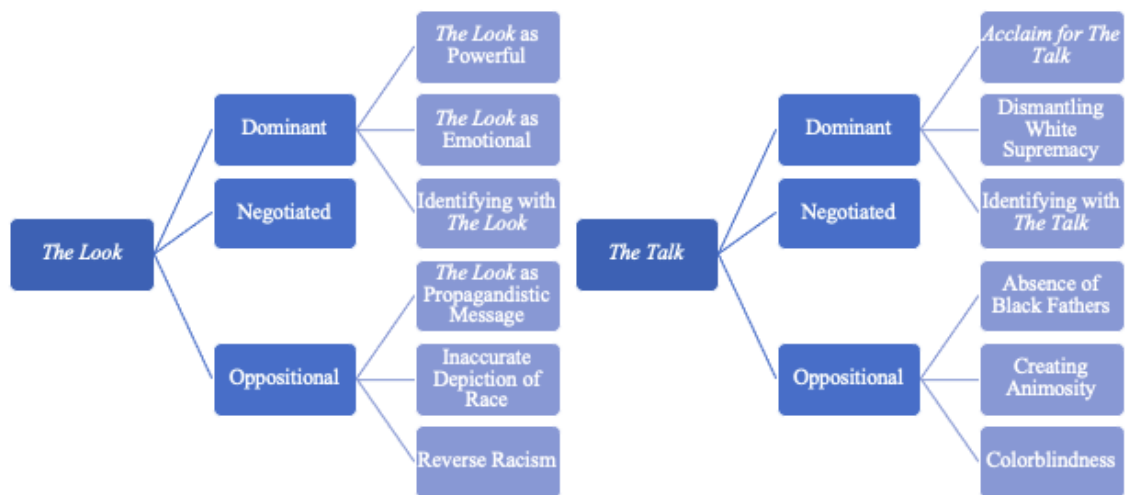


Figure 5, Categories and Sub-themes Found in Decoding Consumers' Perception

### 3.4 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Despite my attempt to remain unbiased, the constructionist vantage point of this thesis implies that my analysis results will be shaped by my own understanding of the social world. In other words, my subjectivity essentially influences the design of this thesis and the way knowledge is being produced (Daymon & Holloway, 2012, p. 9). Moreover, it needs to be acknowledged that I am a White woman, which entails that I come from a privileged position and have not gone through Black individuals' lived experience. This might make it more difficult for me to understand particular aspects of being Black. Nonetheless, through the inclusion of different perspectives, e.g., Whiteness theory and intersectionality, I aim to be critically aware of my orientation and my identity. Also, as Burton (2009a) argues, being White gives me the possibility "to uncover the different dimensions of whiteness from a position of dominance" (p. 176).

Although this thesis provides an insightful understanding of race portrayal in the marketplace, it does not attempt to be generalizable in the sense that the discourses on race as represented by these two campaigns may be representative of the conceptualization of race in a broader field. To ensure a broader picture regarding race in the media, I suggest including more campaigns from different brands. However, regarding the high expenditure of time needed in analyzing my data and due to this thesis's limited scope, the latter suggestion has been put down. Besides, a case study aims to be generalizable to theoretical propositions, "not to

enumerate frequencies" (Yin, 2009, p. 15). To ensure the latter, four criteria for judging the quality of the research process as set forth by Yin (2009) have been applied (see section 3.2.2.2). Furthermore, the particular case study will be put into context by comparing it to the literature review in chapter 2. By doing so, I can determine potential trends in contemporary advertising corresponding to - or disaccording with - the studied case.

Additionally, there are a few drawbacks of netnography that need to be addressed. Although netnography is a valuable tool to access data from consumers easily, it lacks the availability of consumers' information, e.g. age, gender, skin color, and profession. It is thus difficult to make assumptions about possible correlations between their demographic background and their reactions in regard to the videos. There are also ethical issues related to this thesis: while the consumers' point of view is an essential part of my analysis, the research has been carried out without any personal involvement with - or consent by - the audience. According to Kozinets (2002), there is no clear consensus on this issue of what constitutes informed consent or whether online forums appear to be private or public sites (p. 65). However, these ethical issues are minimized for YouTube is an openly accessible platform, and individuals commenting on these videos expect everyone to see their content. There is no login needed for a stranger to review the comments generated by P&G's videos. The case would be different if individuals were commenting in closed forums or groups.

Also, the narrow focus on online communities renders it difficult to make claims about the videos' general reception since it excludes groups outside of the selected online samples (Kozinets, 2002, p.62). Results might have been more meaningful if I had included other data sampling methods such as personal interviews, focus groups, or other forms of ethnographic observations. Nonetheless, since the publication of Kozinets's work (2002), the Internet has grown in importance. Especially social media platforms have become an essential element for consumers, changing "consumer behavior and the ways in which companies conduct their business" (Dwivedi et al., 2020, p. 1). For these reasons, I maintain to argue that netnography is a very useful approach to studying contemporary consumer behavior.

## 4 Theoretical Framework

While endeavoring to analyze the selected primary data, a coherent theoretical framework needs to be established. As regards this thesis, the aim of this framework is twofold. First, it should define and explore key concepts about race representation in the media as they will both delimit and guide my analysis. Secondly, as the foundation for the analysis, it should assist in explaining and interpreting my data. I will firstly discuss Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of *representation*. The reason being that he approached the media from a cultural standpoint, arguing that ideology plays a vital part in how race is represented in the media. Referring to race, Hall (1997) introduces the concepts of *Othering* and *stereotyping*, which will be presented in the subsequent chapter. In conducting an approach that recognizes race as a social construct, it was also deemed necessary to take into account *Whiteness* as a theoretical category. Since Relating thereto, I draw on Burton's (2009a; 2009b) and Frankenberg's (1993) approaches to Whiteness theory as complementing assets to Hall's (1997) framework. The theoretical framework will also swiftly elaborate on the intersectional approach adopted for the thesis.

The aforementioned cultural approach acknowledges the media as a symbolic process of meaning-making and calls for analytical tools that render it possible to study the impact of power and culture on representation. *Critical discourse analysis* focuses on exposing social, cultural, and political themes embedded in the construction of race in the media by aiming to deconstruct the power dynamics hiding beneath these notions. This is why Foucault's view on discourse (as presented in Hall, 1997) and Fairclough's (1995) conception of critical discourse analysis will be taken into account as analytical tools. Besides, analyzing the discursive construction of race in advertising requires understanding the symbols conveyed in both textual and visual images. Hence the study of signs, also known as *semiotics*, provides a complementary analytical method for the present thesis.

Lastly, Hall's (1973) reception theory will be used to explain consumers' reactions and attitudes towards P&G's advertising campaigns. The choice of this model is based on my intent to remain a coherent approach to the analysis. While Hall's (1997) representation model can be applied

to examining the producing side of the campaigns, i.e., *How are racial identities represented in the discourse of P&G's campaigns?*, his reception theory completes the analysis by exploring the receiving end of the advertisement, i.e., *What is consumers' response to these representations?*

## **4.1 Representation Theory**

### **4.1.1 Stuart Hall's Concept of Representation**

In his work *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), Hall expands on the interplay between representation, meaning, and language and argues that they operate within a system of representation. Within this system, the aforementioned concepts relate to one another in the sense that "representation connects meaning and language to culture" (p. 15).

Hall (1997) defines representation as "the production of meaning through language" (p. 16). This production is, however, a more complex one that Hall (1997) breaks down into two systems: the first scheme is a system "by which all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or *mental representations* which we carry around in our heads" (p. 17). This set of concepts is what he calls a *conceptual map*. Conceptual maps help to comprehend the world in a meaningful way. However, correlating these concepts does not happen coincidentally; it occurs according to our interpretations and conceptions of the world. This is where *culture* comes into play: as Hall (1997) asserts, those belonging to the same culture "share broadly the same conceptual map and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways" (p. 18).

However, sharing a conceptual map is meaningless if we do not have some medium that helps us exchange or represent these concepts. Thus, they need to be translated "into a common language, so that we can correlate our concepts and ideas with certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images" (Hall, 1997, p. 18). Accordingly, *language* is what constitutes the second system of representation. Now, Hall (1997) defines language in a much broader sense: not only does language attribute to the written or spoken system of a particular language, but it also refers to things that are not inherently linguistic, e.g., visual images, facial expressions, or fashion. The words, sounds, or images we use in language are what Hall (1997) denotes as

*signs*. Signs are the vehicles that "stand for or represent the concepts and the conceptual relations between them which we carry around in our heads and together they make up the meaning-system of our culture" (p.18). Hence, a language that comprises a similar system of signs enables us to translate our conceptual maps into actual words or other communication forms. These communicative modes can be shared and exchanged with people that speak the same language (Hall, 1997, pp. 18-19).

The essential key for understanding Hall's (1997) system of representation is the interplay of both systems: the first system enables us to make a meaningful sense of the world while the second system functions to translate these concepts into a linguistic system by using a particular set of signs (p. 19). The process that links things, concepts, and language to one another is what Hall (1997) defines as *representation*.

One last thing to note is that Hall (1997) follows a constructionist approach to language, which essentially implies that meaning is not transferred by the material world, but constructed by social actors. This is done by using a representational system that consists of concepts and signs. Social actors then fix the initial arbitrary relationship between a concept and a sign through codes. More on the relationship between signs and concepts will be presented in section 4.2.

#### **4.1.2 The Construction of Otherness and Whiteness**

Employing a constructionist approach to language and meaning also implies that the representation of actors in the social world is fundamentally constructed. As explored in section 2.1., race is a social construct made up to categorize individuals into different groups and set up a system of racial stratification. Building on Hall's (1997) concept of representation, the following two subchapters will discuss *Whiteness* and *Otherness* as a theoretical construct.

#### 4.1.2.1 Otherness and the Concept of Stereotyping

Studying the concept of *Otherness* in social sciences is not a novel undertaking. Within numerous disciplines, the notion of *the Other* has come to play a significant role in describing the relationships between Western cultures and the East. Cultural theorist Said (1979) discusses the dominant understanding that Europeans have of the East and coins the term *orientalism*. To Said (1979), orientalism is a discourse "by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (p. 3). Essentially, he argues that the discourse on orientalism is one of power and knowledge: "knowledge of the Orient . . . in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and this world" adding that "the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks" (p. 40). This dominating framework explains the notion of "European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (p. 7).

Based on Said's (1979) ideas, Hall (1997) discusses the significance of Othering and the representation of difference in visual studies. Difference, to the author, is crucial in representational practices as he asserts that "without it, meaning could not exist" (p. 234). For instance, in the context of race, Blackness only carries meaning if it is set in opposition to Whiteness. Similar to what Said (1979) has stated, Hall (1997) draws on a quote by Douglas (1966) who contends that "social groups impose meaning on their world by ordering and organizing things into classificatory systems" (as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 236). The anthropological implications to marking difference are that these groups tend to shore up their own culture while classifying and stigmatizing others (p. 237).

Chapter 2 of this thesis has already expounded both on the historical processes that generated the notion around race and on the evolution of the representation of race in the marketplace. Bearing in mind what has been said in this chapter and applying the concept of Othering, it should come as no surprise that Blackness and Whiteness have historically been polarized to their extremes in a media dominated by the White society. Added to Hall's (1997) concept of

representation comes the determining factor that is power. Now, power should not be understood in merely political terms, but within a broader context "including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way" (p. 259). To Hall (1997), the circularity of power is essential in the context of representation. As previously stated by Said (1979), Western culture has traditionally come to be in charge of this power. Concerning race, the result is a regime of representation that has come to construct an image of the Black race that represents them as inferior (Hall, 1997).

Closely intertwined with power and representation is the concept of *stereotyping*. A stereotype "reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (Hall, 1997, p. 257). Power comes into play since stereotyping epitomizes a form of power that classifies other people according to their characteristics in a somewhat patronizing way. Instead of seeing people as individuals, stereotypes assign individuals to groups (e.g., gender, class, nationality, or race). Visual images in the media continuously reinforce racial stereotypes and thus contribute to a reductionist image of Blackness. Hall (1997) recalls Bogle's (1973) study that identifies five central stereotypes about Black people. While they are widely contested, Hall (1997) argues that there remain traces of these stereotypes in the media. There is, for example, the continuing representation of the Black, young male as a "rioter", a depiction that derives from the histories of colonialism. The stereotypical Black female is either found to be objectified as a sexual, exoticized object or depicted as a housewife and/or unwed mother (Hall, 1997; Bailey, 1990; Bristor et al., 1995; Harrison et al., 2017).

The essential point is that, while meanings can never be entirely fixed and anti-racist movements have contested the stereotypical depiction of Black people in the media, stereotypes can prevail through the binaries that continue to frame the representation of social actors. While the inversion of negative Black stereotypes or the depiction of Black people in a positive way increases diversity and seemingly furthers an anti-racial political statement, it still homogenizes them as the other and "does not necessarily displace the negative" (Hall, 1997, p.274).

#### *4.1.2.2 Whiteness as a Theoretical Category*

The concept of race and the representation of Blackness has undoubtedly been widely discussed in numerous academic disciplines. However, research on Whiteness as an ideological construct

has been relatively scarce. Burton (2009b) argues that the preponderance of White scholars in the academic environment accounts for an epistemological stance in the literature centered around a Euro-American point of view and thus neglects a critical approach towards Whiteness as dominant ideology (p. 349). The enduring social and political movements against racism, most prominently the Black Lives Matter movement, prove the need to denaturalize this ideology to dismantle White supremacy and make apparent the continuing system of racial privilege. While I am not contesting or questioning the relevance and importance of the research on race focusing on Black representation, I concur with Burton's (2009a; 2009b) appeal to include Whiteness as a theoretical category.

Just like Blackness, Whiteness as a construct stems from a "system of socio-economic power, exploitation and exclusion" (Burton, 2009b, p.350). Sociologist Ruth Frankenberg (1993) provides a succinct definition of Whiteness as a social construct:

First, Whiteness is a social location of structural advantage. Second, it is a "standpoint," a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others and at society. Third, "whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices that are unusually unmarked and unnamed. (p. 1)

Frankenberg's (1993) first point addresses one of the central issues surrounding the construction of race. It alludes to the racial hierarchy ingrained in the social system; the privileges and systematic advantages that White people hold in Western society and are denied to a Black person. In the context of analyzing representation, Dyer (1997) adds that "it is this privilege and dominance that is at stake in analysing white racial imagery" (p.9). Frankenberg's (1993) second point emphasizes the epistemological, Euro-American viewpoint embedded in White people's system of values and beliefs. This perspective concurs with Edward Said's (1979) take on orientalism and his argument that European people often identify themselves against other cultures and consider their culture to be the norm (p. 40). This leads us to Frankenberg's (1993) third point on Whiteness. The aforementioned standpoint entails that White people often find it difficult to identify themselves as White and having a White identity since it is represented as the norm. Concurrently, White people do not seem to be aware of their White privilege and believe that "they think, feel and act like and for all people" (Dyer, 1997, p. 9). This is also where *colorblind* racism comes into play: when individuals believe that equal opportunities exist for people of all races they, at the same time, deny the existence of White privilege and institutional racism and see Whiteness as the "one" true representation of cultural

norms. The "belief in this concept promotes the unconscious execution of racism by ignoring the societal issues that maintain cultural inequalities" (Morris & Kahlor, 2014, pp. 416-417).

As I have explored earlier, the notion of racial hierarchy is also deeply embedded in visual images, particularly in popular media. For example, in advertising, numerous studies have proven that White people still represent the majority of represented actors and are mostly depicted as superior in contrast to Black people. This depiction's ramifications are far-reaching since section 2.1.3 has highlighted that the media plays an essential part in (re)producing notions of race. According to Shome (2009), "popular culture constitutes one site through which whites learn that sense of material and cultural entitlement that is enabled, and the sense of social agency that is produced . . ." (p. 368). The literature on Whiteness theory hopes to localize Whiteness and uncover "dimensions of Whiteness from a position of dominance by analysing power, privilege and rewards of whiteness" (Burton, 2009a, p. 176). Regarding the medial representation, Whiteness theory can contribute to denaturalizing racist depictions and thus disrupt the normative, institutionalized discourse on race.

#### *4.1.2.3 A Note on Intersectionality*

The focus of this thesis lies on examining advertising from the perspective of race. However, race as a social construct is just one of various identity constructs that produce a hierarchical system of privilege and marginalization. The interplay of these dimensions is known as *intersectionality*.

The term intersectionality first came up when Kimberlé Crenshaw noticed the lack of Black women represented in movements such as the anti-racist and women's movement, which had either been male or White-dominated. Crenshaw and other Black feminists understood that, for a Black woman, the axes of oppression, i.e., racism and sexism, were too intertwined for it to be addressed only through anti-discrimination or feminist policies (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Crenshaw, 1998). In contemporary research, the term has been broadened to comprise other social categories (e.g., ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status). These categories "intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural level . . ." (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267).

Accordingly, taking an intersectional approach considers "diversity across multiple dimensions at once" (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015, p. 333). In the light of this project, this involves being aware of the different nuances that are connected to the representation of race and how these reflect, reinforce and/or challenge hegemonic power imbalances.

## **4.2 The Study of Signs**

Hall (1997) draws on the work of several critical theorists that were considered essential in analyzing representation and the making of meaning. Among those is semiotics, or, the study of signs. To Hall (1997), a semiotic approach to representation "is concerned with the how of representation, with how language produces meaning - what has been called its 'poetics'" (p. 6). Semiotics is a relevant tool for this thesis since it is deemed necessary first to describe how something is represented, i.e., how advertising creates meaning by representing the social world through a particular system of signs. Therefore, this approach is applied for the first step of the analysis (*1. Semiotic Description*). The following section will expand on said approach in introducing theorists that fundamentally shaped the discourse on semiotics.

### **4.2.1 The Model of the Linguistic Sign**

Ferdinand de Saussure has laid the basic groundwork of the linguistic theory and is considered to be one of the catalysts for the emergence of semiotics as it is known today (Hall, 1997, pp. 30-31). Although mostly known for his work as a linguist, he perceived "language" to be part of a much broader framework of communication, a discipline that would study "the life of signs within society" (Saussure, 1916/1969 as cited in Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p.4). He further designated said discipline as *semiology*.

On the heels of identifying the meaning of language, Saussure introduced a model of the linguistic sign that consists of two systems: the *signifier* and the *signified*. Both elements constitute a fundamentally psychological entity "united in the brain by an associative bond" (Saussure et al., 2011, p. 65). The first element, the *signifier*, evokes an idea or concept in our head "with which the form was associated" (Hall, 1997, p. 31). The second element, the idea or concept, is what Saussure denotes as the *signified*. Hall (1997) exemplifies this concept: "every time you hear or read or see the signifier (e.g. the word or image of a Walkman, for example), it correlates with the signified (the concept of a portable cassette-player in your

head)" (p. 31). Saussure (2011) emphasizes that it is crucial to acknowledge the sign's arbitrary nature. This means that the signifier has "no natural connection with the signified" (Saussure et al., 2011, p. 69). Thus, the sign's associated connection is a result of an accepted convention. However, this does not imply that the meanings of signs are fixed. On the contrary, they are "always subject to change, both from one cultural context and from one period to another" (Hall, 1997, p. 32).

#### **4.2.2 Introducing Semiotics**

Based on Saussure's framework, theorists have since developed the study of the sign in a broader sense that "has been applied to a wide range of cultural objects and practices" (Hall, 1997, p. 36). As touched on previously, this discipline is today referred to as semiotics.

In general terms, semiotics is the theoretical study of signs that examines how a sign conveys meaning in a given context (Hackley, 2003, p. 110). Semiotics places its emphasis on the understanding of two concepts: *communication* and *culture*. Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) defines communication as a *human symbolic activity*. According to the author, both linguistics and nonverbal communication are integral parts of said communication, an approach that is similar to Hall's (1997) definition of language as presented in section 4.1.1. From the viewpoint of semiotics, *culture* is a "*set of systems or codes of symbols and meaning, of communication as human symbolic activity*" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p. 17). To put it precisely, if we want to understand signs, we need to uncover the codes and symbols used in communication within their broader cultural contexts since culture eventually determines how we interpret signs.

#### **4.2.3 Roland Barthes's Mythologies**

Semiotician Roland Barthes was one of the first theorists of his time to critically reflect on consumer culture in the sense that he considered objects displayed in advertising to be "saturated with latent meaning" (Huppertz, 2011, p.88). Huppertz (2011) argues that for Barthes, popular culture was replete with signs that conveyed narratives expressing "collective cultural values" (p. 88). Since I also argue that advertising should be understood as a symbolic form of communication and aim to unveil the hidden constructs of advertising, Barthes's approach is particularly useful and will be introduced below.

In his essay *Myth today*, Barthes adapts Saussure's model of the linguistic sign in adding a second system to the former and develops an advanced semiotic concept that he coins as *myth*. The first semiological system of this concept refers to Saussure's notion of the sign: within this system, the signifier and signified "unite to form a sign with a simple denoted message" (Hall, 1997, p. 39). The second stage empties the first stage of its denoted message and takes the sign to a more abstract, elusive meaning. This stage is what Barthes defines as the *level of the myth*. Within this level, the sign "yields a second, more elaborate and ideologically framed message or meaning" (Hall, 1997, p. 39). As an example, Barthes recalls an advertisement for spaghetti. Within the first-ordered meaning, the viewer of the ad receives a visual stimulus that the viewer denotes as French spaghetti and sauce. The second level transforms the new signifier, here French spaghetti and sauce, into a new, second-order meaning. In regard to spaghetti and sauce, that meaning could, based on cultural conventions, possibly connote "Italianess" since spaghetti is often connected with Italian cuisine (Kettemann, 2013).

Two important concepts that are needed to understand Barthes's level of myth are *denotation* and *connotation*. According to Barthes, the sign entails both a denotative and connotative function. The sign's first-ordered meaning is denotative, that is, the descriptive, explicit, obvious meaning that most people would agree on (Hall, 1997, p. 38; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p. 26). The second-ordered meaning of the sign is considered to be connotative, which means that its decoding depends on the context, "is fundamentally ideological . . . and results from association of ideas" (Rivière, 2008, p. 25). Hence, signs can have different connotations depending on the interpreter and the cultural context in which the sign is situated. Concurrently, Rivière (2008) argues that different signs can have the same connotations (p. 25). With respect to the aforementioned example about spaghetti, it may be argued that Italianess could be connoted through both an image of pasta or the picture of the Colosseum in Rome.

### **4.3 Discourse Analysis**

Aside from semiotics that focuses predominantly on the details of language and how language produces meaning, Hall (1997) discerns that language and representation should also be located within a broader, cultural context. This is where the *discursive* approach to representation comes into the picture. Discourse is, as Hall (1997) argues, "more concerned with the effects

and consequences of representation - its 'politics'" (p. 6). Since the previously presented problem formulation is related to the discursive construction of racial identities through advertising, it is likewise essential to pay attention to the various discourses that shape the representation of race in the selected videos. This will be thematized in stages two and three of the analysis (2. *Discourse Identified* and 3. *Contextualization*). For this reason, Hall's (1997) idea on discourse and the specific approach to discourse analysis that is utilized for this thesis will be elucidated.

#### **4.3.1 Defining Discourse**

As touched upon briefly, discourse situates meaning within a cultural context and is thus closely connected with "the historical specificity of a particular form or regime of representation" (Hall, 1997, p. 6). Hence, language is not scrutinized as a general construct but as a specific one that generates meaning contingent on *who* deploys language and *when* and *where* it is deployed.

In Hall's (1997) concept of representation, he relies on an idea of discourse that is defined by Michael Foucault. Foucault follows a *historically* grounded approach to the meaning of language, albeit still embedded within Saussure's and Barthes's ideas on representation. To Foucault, discourse is less a linguistic concept but rather a system of representation that constructs meaning and meaningful practices within a particular historical period. Foucault further contends that "since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do - or conduct - all practices have a discursive aspect" (Hall, 1992, as cited in Hall, 1997, pp. 201-202). Once again, the constructionist view of language is deeply entrenched in Foucault's approach to discourse who maintains that subjects only become meaningful within discourse (Hall, 1997). With this in mind, Foucault argues that analyzing discourse entails understanding the rules and practices used to produce meaning and thus regulate discourse. In order to understand these rules and practices, they need to be located within their historical frame (Hall, 1997, p. 44). Thus, it is a method that examines *how* language is used, *why* it is used in a specific way, *when* it is deployed, and by *whom* (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 167-168).

There are various approaches in conducting discourse analysis, and the right method essentially depends on the perspective the researcher intends to take. While some aim attention at the

speaker as an active agent in producing meaning through language, others - including Foucault - center their study on the impact of power and ideology on discourse (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p.166). Since this thesis aims to uncover ideological constructs embedded in representation, the focus will remain on the latter approach to discourse.

#### 4.3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

To Foucault, discourse is inherently determined by the cultural and historical context it is situated in (Hall, 1997, pp. 46-47). Guided by these notions on discourse, several scholars have developed a type of analytical research known as critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA has evolved as an established academic discipline to study the interplay of discourse and power. Concerning this thesis, Fairclough's approach to CDA has been deemed the most relevant. Generally speaking, Fairclough views discourse as a form of social practice that "implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it" (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 358). By that, he means that discourse is both shaped by the social world in which it is situated and also actively shapes it: "It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it" (p. 359). Applying this viewpoint to the media, one may argue that different forms of media, e.g., movies, newspaper, or advertising, are not only reflective of ideological structures embedded in society but can also contribute to changing cultural norms. Thus, concerning this thesis's topic, CDA is a valuable tool in unraveling how particular notions on race have been naturalized through discursive reproductions in the media.

The concept that is *naturalization* is one that should be further explained: Fairclough (1995) argues that social actions cluster around social institutions, i.e., family, school, the workplace, church, etc.<sup>2</sup> Each of these institutions contains ideological-discursive formations (IDFs), among which one of these IDFs is usually the dominant one. According to Fairclough (1995), each IDF is embedded within "its own ideological norms" (p. 27). A dominant IDF can naturalize discourse, meaning that its entrenched ideological norms are accepted as 'common-

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<sup>2</sup> Fairclough (1995) defines a social institution to be an "apparatus of verbal interaction, or an 'order of discourse' [...] Each institution has its own set of speech events, its own differentiated settings and scenes, its cast of participants, and its own norms for their combination" (p.38)

sense' by the public, which renders their ideologies invisible. The aim of critical discourse analysts is then to denaturalize these discourses, which "involves showing how social structures determine properties of discourse, and how discourse in turn determines social structures" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 27). Fairclough's idea of IDFs is quite similar to Foucault's notion on the regime of truth as presented by Hall (1997). To Foucault, there is no absolute truth of knowledge, but only discursive formations raising claims about truth. The type of discourse that is accepted and considered to be 'true' in society, or, in Fairclough's terms, 'the norm', is what Foucault denotes the *regime of truth* (Hall, 1997, p. 49)

Power plays a crucial part in forming and reproducing these discourses. In social sciences, Foucault introduced a relatively new conception of power that moved away from the idea that power is oppressive, operating from one single direction, i.e., top to bottom, and one specific source, i.e., the sovereign or the state. Instead, he conceives of power as a net-like construct that circulates within different levels of social existence and can be deployed and exercised in both private and public spheres (Hall, 1997, pp. 49-50). Critical discourse analysts further argue that within these spheres, discourses are negotiated, and texts are thus often "sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance" (Wodak, 2004, p. 187). Fairclough (1995) corroborated this statement, emphasizing that social institutions are not monolithic in the sense that they provide one dominant set of ideological and discursal norms. Rather, "they are pluralistic to an extent which varies in place and time, and from one institution to another" (p. 40). From the perspective of power, it can be argued that a social institution executes power (in discourse) if they are able to maintain an IDF in dominance, meaning that their norms remain unchallenged and uncontested. With the rise of competing discourses within a social institution, its power may be undermined (Fairclough, 1995).

In regards to methodological approaches, Fairclough (1995) proposes a framework consisting of three interrelated elements "social practice, discursal practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and texts" (p. 74). A specific discourse then requires an analysis "in each of these three dimensions" (p. 74). His method calls for the "linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and texts, and *explanation* of the relationship between the discursive practices and the social processes" (p. 97). The image below visualizes Fairclough's three-part analytic model:

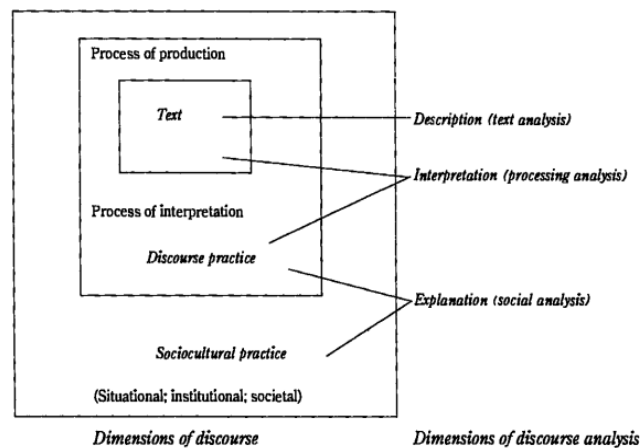


Figure 6: Dimensions of Discourse and Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995, p. 98)

Fairclough's framework provides a useful discursive approach to analyzing representation. It is therefore also incorporated in the analytical framework of this thesis.

#### 4.4 Reception Theory

The last section of the theory concerns the reception of the messages conveyed via representations in the media. This implies considering the *receiving* point of view of a message. In the case of advertising, that is the consumer or the viewer of the advertising. Following Hall's (1997) representation theory, his encoding/decoding model will be presented in the following.

To Hall (1973), the communication process in the media takes on a discursive form that comprises the production of the message as well as its perception and use. The actors involved in this process are the institutional structures of broadcasting at the producing end and their audiences at the receiving end. Within this communicative chain, the *encoding* and *decoding* of the messages conveyed in the media are determinate moments. The 'circuit' of communication starts with the producer of the program who encodes a message that is "framed throughout by meanings and ideas" (p. 3). These notions are drawn from a "wider socio-cultural and political system of which they are only a differentiated part" (p. 3). It has already been discussed that representation in the media is fundamentally shaped by social, cultural, and political processes. This is reinforced by the use of visual signs in television that, at the connotative level, intersect "with the deep semantic structures of a culture" and take "on an ideological dimension" (p. 12). Thus, the production - or encoding - of a message is inherently

ideologically motivated. To Hall (1973), the meaning the producer intends to convey through their medium is the *dominant/preferred* meaning. However, connotative codes are polysemic and can be interpreted in different ways. Thereupon, the audience might receive and understand - or decode - "the message in a way different from that intended" (p. 15). The discrepancies between the encoding and decoding of a message are what Hall (1973) denotes as *systematically distorted communication*.

Reasons for a distorted chain of communication are varied; however, they essentially relate to differing societal perspectives. Misreadings at a connotative level might "signify, at the 'message' level the structural conflicts, contradictions and negotiations of economic, political and cultural life" (Hall, 1979, p. 16). As a result, Hall's (1973) theory states that viewers take up one of three different positions when decoding a message: *dominant*, *negotiated* and *oppositional*.

If the producer's message is encoded in a *dominant* way, the audience takes up on the message as intended by the producer. This is what Hall (1973) calls the "ideal-typical case" (p. 16). Viewers encoding the message in a *negotiated* way might acknowledge and partly agree with what has been dominantly signified by the encoder; at the same time, their opinions may differ to a certain extent. The last way to interpret a message is through the *oppositional* code. Here, the audience decodes the message in a globally contrary way, albeit perfectly understanding the encoder's dominant inflection. Decoding a message in an oppositional way implies that the viewer disagrees and collides with the encoder's dominant interest (Hall, 1973).

Hall (1973) conceives of this process of communication as a circuit. He thus rejects the idea of communication as a linear process in arguing that the audience not only consumes a message but plays an active role through decoding messages according to their own personal and cultural frameworks. Once decoded (by the audience), "the translation of that message into societal structures must be made again for the circuit to be completed" (p. 2). Since the producing side of the circuit derives its themes and topics from a broader socio-cultural context, the audience is, in this sense, both a source and receiver of the message (Hall, 1973, p. 3).

## 4.5 Critical Comments on Theory

The preceding chapters have presented the theoretical framework that is deemed useful in analyzing the representation of race. Nevertheless, this framework has some methodological limitations that will be addressed in the following.

Concerning the field of semiotics, Barthes maintains that visual images are so polysemous that - if they are analyzed by itself - there is a "'floating chain' of 'signifieds' from which viewers may choose" (White, 2012, p. 29). To Barthes, linguistic messages are one of the means that stabilize and clarify the signs which are conveyed in an image. The verbal text functions as an "anchor" that helps to "'to choose the correct level of perception'" (White, 2012, p. 29). A linguistic text can thus either extend the meaning of the image or elaborate on it (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 18). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) reject this view in arguing that "the visual component of a text is an independently organized and structured message, connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it" (p. 18). This implies that a multimodal text may carry different sets of meanings, depending on the mode that is used. An example given by the authors is how an advertisement's *verbal* text might be perceived as 'non-sexist', while the ad's *visual* image may connote sexist stereotypes (p. 20).

As to CDA, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) notice that the focus of this practice has mainly been limited to "language, realized as verbal texts, or to verbal parts of texts which also use other semiotic modes to realize meaning" (p. 14). This approach undermines the meaning potentials of other semiotic modes. In light of the importance that the visual media plays in representing and/or challenging dominant discourses, it is paramount to recognize all communicative aspects (both verbal and non-verbal) that contribute to a visual text's meaning. For example, an advertisement can be seen as a multimodal semiotic product since it not only involves a verbal mode, i.e., what is said, but it combines "modes such as facial expression, gesture, posture, and other forms of self-presentation" (p. 41).

Bearing in mind the two arguments mentioned above, this thesis acknowledges the importance of interpreting *multiple* modes and doing so *independently* to disclose possible discrepancies

between different modalities. Thus, to enhance my interpretive analysis, multimodality, that is, "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 20), is a factor that will also be taken into account when analyzing this thesis.

Although Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding theory provides a useful asset in analyzing how consumers perceive the representation of race in the chosen campaigns, his framework is somewhat outdated as it does not account for the rise of new media forms, e.g., social media, online broadcasting, etc. Bødker (2016) points out how social media platforms such as Facebook alter how media content is circulated since the "recipients" of the media messages, aka *users*, play a more active role in disseminating said content. By engaging in online commentary or likes, the circulation of media bears "traces of social interaction" (p. 415). For example, a simple like or comment by a user on a Facebook post can make this post more visible to this user's Facebook friends. This new moment of news distribution requires a subsequent, second reading. Besides, due to the increased availability and popularity of alternative channels producing news and the rise of other, less "professional" forms of journalism, i.e., the tabloid press, social media, or user-generated content, the institutionalized hegemonic discursive domain has become more open to contestation (Bødker, 2016; Stevenson, 2002). Stevenson (2002) purports that media forms such as the tabloid press run in an "oppositional stance to official regimes of truth" which blur "the distinction between facts and fiction, thereby disrupting the dominant language game disseminated by the power bloc" (p. 14).

Taking the points mentioned above into account, the question remains whether Hall's (1973) framework, which focuses on traditional forms of media, is relevant in today's society and the context of social media. I maintain to argue that Hall's (1973) theory is relevant and applicable in the contemporary context; Yet, the current media landscape demands an approach to this theory that needs to be adapted. Touching on the first point of criticism, I contend that his approach must acknowledge that content and meaning circulates differently in the current media landscape. Thus, the audience's increased involvement in the media circuit needs to be considered when analyzing their reception regarding the media.

Concerning the second point of criticism, it needs to be remarked that it is important to clarify what is meant by the preferred meaning. As for this thesis, I argue that the audience's reading can be perceived as *dominant* if the viewer agrees with the messages that are encoded by the

producer, i.e., the company P&G. While the first part of the analysis aims to unveil this encoding process, its results will serve as the basis for the decoding part. This section will examine how viewers perceive this representation and whether they agree/disagree with this portrayal.

## **5 Analysis**

### **5.1 Encoding**

The first part of the analysis concerns the *encoding* of the advertisements and aims to answer the thesis's first subquestion, i.e. *how are racial identities represented in the discourse of P&G's campaigns?* This will be done by applying the analytical framework as presented in Figure 2.

#### **5.1.1 The Look**

*The Look* is the first campaign composed by P&G, which will be used as an analytical ground to study the representation of race. The analytical steps will be the same for each unit of analysis, which is why this chapter is divided into *Semiotic Description* and *Discourse Identified*.

##### *5.1.1.1 Semiotic Description*

In *The Look*, racial divide and bias play a pivotal role in how race is represented. Both Whiteness and Blackness are visually constructed through various features that emphasize the separation between what it means to be Black and White. The following paragraphs will delve into different systems that generate these specific meanings surrounding race.

##### *Race through Cinematography*

Cinematography is a central feature that showcases how race is framed and shown through. As Turner (1995) argues, techniques such as camera angles, movements, or framing contribute to generating meaning about particular characters or objects in a scene, hence why they can be important signifiers of race (pp. 73-78). Besides, they may tell us something about the "symbolic relation" between the viewer and the objects/people depicted in the video (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 262).

The latter can already be manifested in the first scene of the commercial, which - in terms of cinematography - sets the overall tone for the video's further course (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:00-0:05). In this scene, a Black, middle-aged man is introduced by employing a close-up shot at eye angle. As he lays in bed, he opens his eyes and directly gazes into the camera and, thus, the viewer. These few techniques have significant ramifications on the viewer's relationship with the represented person: firstly, in terms of the vertical angle, a perspective at eye angle may connote a feeling of symbolic equality. To be more precise, this angle represents the subject from a more neutral camera angle as it is set at the same height as the spectator. From a horizontal viewpoint, the man is portrayed frontally, which creates a feeling of maximum involvement with the man in the picture (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). This is reinforced by the close-up shot of the scene, which renders it possible to create even more intimacy between the audience and the portrayed person as the viewer can pay attention to his facial expressions, which may convey his emotions. A last thing to remark is the fact that the man is directly facing the camera. Addressing the viewer directly "conveys a sense of interaction between the depicted person and the viewer" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 43). Overall, the specific choice of cinematography in this scene could - based on Barthes's mythological meaning of the sign - connote a rather intimate relationship between the audience and the depicted person, which may enhance the viewer's identification with the character. By employing these technological features at the video's opening, the viewer is invited to delve into the story that will take place in the further course of the video.

The consecutive scenes are predominantly shot from an eye angle perspective and represent different excerpts from the aforementioned Black man's daily experiences. He is thus centralized throughout the commercial's storyline and generates a strong alignment. While the ad's narrative centers around this man, the camera uses varying points of view. On some occasions, the camera takes the main character's position, that is, the Black man. As a viewer, one can subjectively see from this person's perspective, which renders it possible to make sense of what it is like to see what the Black man sees. These kinds of shots are, as Turner (1995) explains, "important for motivation and also for controlling aspects of the audience's identification with the characters" (p. 75). Having said this, some scenes are also filmed either from the first-person viewpoint of the White people whom the Black protagonist encounters or from a third-person perspective (e.g., Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:16; 0:17; 0:40; 0:49). In either case, these shots are focusing on the visual representation of the Black man. In doing so, the

viewer can discern the man's reactions to the encounter between him and White people. These cinematographic choices have a twofold effect on the audience: on the one hand, through the Black man's first-person shot, the viewer feels connected to the Black man, almost like they are taking part in his experience. On the other hand, the audience can reinforce an emotional connection with the Black man by showing them his facial expressions through third-person shots.

There is one cinematographic discrepancy that should be addressed: in the last sequence (Ads of Brands, 2019 1:00-1:33), the camera takes a first-person shot and showcases a policeman guiding the viewer into a courtroom. Initially, the Black protagonist is nowhere to be found, which makes the audience presume that the camera moving through the courtroom is, once again, taking the point of view of the Black protagonist. It is not until the end that the receiver realizes that the camera takes a different position: This time, the camera's perspective is that of the accused, while the Black protagonist can be seen as the judge. This is also the only time that the judge, or any character, is presented from a slightly lower angle perspective, which conveys power and dominance (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004, p.135). The ramification of this discrepancy will be commented on in greater detail in section 5.1.1.2.

A last and important thing to note is that, aside from the video's opening, the only time that the viewer is addressed directly by the Black man is at the very end of the film. The direct interaction between viewer and character is what Jewitt and Oyama (2004) denote as a *demand*. They explain that "the people in the picture symbolically demand something from the viewer" (p. 145). According to the authors, the precise meaning of this demand conveyed in a scene hinges on other features, i.e., facial expressions or gestures. Considering the chronological order of these demands - the commercial begins and ends with a demand by the Black man - it may be argued that the protagonist is inviting the viewer to partake in his daily routine as a Black man. The end of the video signifies the end of his story and leaves the viewer alone with their reflection. During the film, another form of demand is connoted by establishing direct eye contact with White people when the camera impersonates the Black protagonists (e.g., Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:20-0:24; 0:34-0:37; 0:38). Since these demands are expressed when the camera is taking the position of the Black man, they inform about the critical attitude vis-à-vis the protagonist. The consecutive sections will elaborate on this attitude more thoroughly.

### *Race through Facial Expressions*

The first-person shot from the Black man renders it possible to pay attention to White people's behavior and facial expressions in reaction to seeing the Black man. According to Berger (2005), facial expressions can act as meaningful signs for they "provide information about affective state, including both emotions . . . and more enduring moods" (p. 15). Most White characters appear in a medium or close shot where they gaze into the camera. Thus, the receiver can identify their expressions. In all of the scenes, their faces sport more serious expressions. This is particularly evident in a scene where the Black protagonist approaches an elevator and signalizes his wish to join (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:20). On the other end, White people are showcased standing in the elevator. As the camera zooms into their faces, the audience distinguishes rather expressionless countenances. The characters' lips are closed, and their eyes are open. These "blank faces" are often used as expressive signs to keep others at a distance. Especially the White man situated in the left frontal side of the elevator seems to connote a rather cold attitude towards the Black man since his lips are downturned, which makes him appear rather angry (Givens, 2002). Through zooming into a closer shot and by directly gazing upon the receiver, the expressions of the White group are intensified.

The elevator's closing door further symbolically reinforces the connoted notion of keeping distance. In another shot, we can see this scene from the White peoples' point of view (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:25): through a closing door, the receiver discerns how the protagonist's access to the elevator is denied. While White people's expressions connote hostility towards the Black man, the closing door may further this hostility in signifying rejection: the Black man, contrary to the White people, is not allowed to join the elevator. The specific expressions and actions by White people create a myth regarding the Black man that revolves around exclusion. The theme of exclusion is also represented in other scenes, e.g., when a White woman rolls up her car windows after realizing that her daughter in the car waves at the Black child (0:10) or when the White couple entering a restaurant chooses to sit further away from the protagonist after being offered a seat close to him (0:33).

The created hostile atmosphere is reinforced by a system of signs connoting threat, as highlighted in a scene where the protagonist enters a retail store (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:43). After being recognized by the salesperson, the Black man becomes the center of attention to a White man which, as his black, formal uniform suggests, appears to be a security guard. He

immediately gazes upon the camera with narrowed eyes and downturned lips. As the security man slowly walks towards the camera, i.e., the Black man, he conveys a menacing atmosphere, manifested by his facial expression and status as a security guard (Givens, 2002). Other parts of the movie, e.g., the dining scene or the swimming pool scene, insinuate further expressions of discomfort by White people that arise when they see the Black man (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:27; 0:38). The climax of this threatening atmosphere is reached at the video's ending sequence (1:00). As has been stated before, the audience presumes that they are taking the perspective of the Black protagonist. This time, a door is opened by a White man. Albeit he is only visible through a close-shot, his uniform indicates his position as a policeman. This presumption is confirmed in the following shots as the man turns to make way for the character employing the camera's position. The policeman's grimly and serious face, signified by his slightly frowned brows and narrowed eyes, connotes an unambiguous threat (Givens, 2002). This feeling amplifies once the viewer realizes that they are walking into a courtroom. As has been stated before, this scene conveys a distorted image as the camera shot leaves the audience to falsely assume that it is taking the first-person perspective of the Black man. Consequently, the protagonist's final portrayal as a judge is somewhat ambiguous since the previous scenes have portrayed him as an excluded and inferior part of society. This ambiguity will also be discussed in a later part of the analysis.

Altogether, while the camerawork places the Black man in an *equal* relationship with the viewer, his relationship with White people, as represented by facial expressions in the video, appears to be *different*. The expressions given to the Black man by White people connote a certain feeling of coldness, rejection and even threat. Thus, Barthes's myth established regarding Black people enacts that being Black signifies difference, inferiority and exclusion.

### *Race through Mise-en-scène*

The preceding sections have revealed how various semiotic modes represent the Black man as someone who appears to be socially excluded from his social environment. This constructed myth is reinforced by the *mise-en-scène* of the commercial. According to Turner (1995), the *mise-en-scène* encompasses important recognizable attributes of a film as it involves features such as "set design, costumes, the arrangement and movement of figures, the spatial relations . . . and the placement of objects which have become important within the narrative" (p. 85). As Turner's (1995) explanation suggests, the term includes numerous film elements that come

together and can be analyzed. However, due to this thesis's limited scope, it has been decided to focus on semiotic resources deemed the most relevant for analyzing the representation of race.

The first thing to note is the scarce representation of Black people in the video. The Black protagonist's social surroundings are - except for the young, Black child pictured in two scenes (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:08; 0:57) - almost entirely White. The absence of Black people in public places projects an image of a social world that appears to center around Whiteness. Exclusion is, therefore, not only connoted by how White people act when recognizing the presence of the Black person but also by the absence of other Black people in the commercial.

The use of colors in *The Look* is another critical semiotic resource of the film. Color becomes particularly relevant in consideration of the symbolic weight of color combined with the idea of race as a social construct. As illustrated by Dyer (1997), the colors white and black have specific connotations that are embedded in our society. More than just being a hue, color is the visible physical attribute that socially categorizes people into racial groups. Historically, the symbolic meaning of White as pure and good has been juxtaposed to Black being the signifier of evil, dirty and bad (pp. 41-81).

In *The Look*, the separation of Black and White as constructed through narrative and cinematographic elements is consolidated by the commercial's use of colors. In fact, they are deployed as organizing signs used in the representation of social actors. This impression is induced by the first scene, which introduces the protagonist (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:00). As he lays in bed, the whites of the bed linen immediately draw attention to his skin color. Contrasting his darker skin with a lighter background emphasizes the socially constructed dichotomy that divides him as a Black person from Whiteness. The contrast introduced by the first shot pervades in consecutive scenes. For instance, the next shot shows the protagonist behind white curtains as he sits up (0:07). The clothing he wears in the whole video is mostly dark, as can be seen in the first scene with the Black boy or the scene in the retail store (0:10; 0:42). Another contrast is established during the elevator scene (0:18): opposed to the first scene, his layers of beige and brown clothing form a palette that seems to blend with the wooden background. This makes him disappear into the background, which, in a sense, signifies his invisibility. His appearance and surroundings are juxtaposed to the light grey walls situated left from the wooden wall. As the camera turns around and showcases the White people

in the elevator, we can see that the elevator is located within a white-grey, marble patterned wall. This juxtaposition presents another meaningful separation between Whiteness and Blackness.

This chapter has already mentioned clothing as an important visual signifier of a character's position in relation to their environment. Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) describes that the use of clothing should be understood as a way of communication, "conveying socially relevant information" (p. 105). Hence why a person's choice of clothing may connote important notions about their societal role, status, or mood. As touched on previously, the protagonist's outlook remains rather casual and discreet. Nevertheless, his attire appears to be fashionable. While the protagonist tries to catch the elevator, he is wearing a chic beige coat and brown suit trousers supported by a black briefcase that he carries with him. In the restaurant sequence, he wears a burgundy blazer over a plain white shirt (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:18; 0:27). Fashionable clothing and accessories indicate that the Black man cares about his appearance. Besides, his clothes mark the wearer as someone who has a somewhat higher social class status since he can afford these kinds of fashionable clothing (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). These particular clothes might then signify a particular image of wealth and status enjoyed by the Black man. This notion is corroborated by the last sequence of the advertisement in which the Black man's uniform points to his position as a judge (Ads of Brands, 2019, 1:00).

Since White people are represented in higher numbers, it is difficult to assign a single role to them as indicated by their clothes. Instead, the different scenes that take place in public places showcase a diverse set of people. Similar notions of affluence are conveyed by the formal and/or chic clothing worn by individuals in the elevator or by the salesman and his customer in the retail store (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:18; 0:42). As touched on above, uniforms point to the status of two men in the courtroom as policemen and the man in the retail store as a security guard (0:44; 1:00). At the same time, there is also a more casual, laid-back style worn by White customers of the restaurant. The setting is less formal since the scene occurs in a typical American diner as indicated by the booth-like chairs and tables that are juxtaposed in close proximity and the bottles of mustard and ketchup on the table (0:27). Consequently, the different kinds of settings and clothes as represented in the film connote diverse notions about the social status of White people.

#### 5.1.1.2. *Discourse Identified*

The latter section has touched on the representation of race by identifying and interpreting several semiotic modes that were deemed especially interesting in analyzing how race is constructed in *The Look*. These interpretations establish particular myths surrounding race and unveil multiple discursive categories that are employed in the film. The reproduction of these specific discourses fundamentally shapes how race is represented and showcases how these representations are linked to power-related issues. It is thus important to make sense of these discourses before situating them within a broader cultural context.

#### *The Myth of Whiteness*

Although the ad's protagonist is a Black person and the narrative revolves around this person's story, Whiteness essentially *dominates* the social world constructed in the film. This is, among other things, visible by the numerical preponderance of White social actors in comparison to Black people. This White dominance is accompanied by a notion of White supremacy. Visually, the audience will recognize this superiority as manifested in White people's behavior and expressions when encountering someone that is Black. This involves implicit behavioral patterns such as disallowing the Black protagonist access to the elevator or White people's decision to be seated far away from the Black man at a diner. Barthes's myth established regarding Whiteness also revolves around discriminatory attitudes: White people embody the latter by publicly showing hostile behavior when seeing a Black person in public spaces such as a shopping street, a retail store, or a swimming pool. The first-person point of view of the camera renders it possible to put ourselves in the position of the Black man and thus perceive sensations of hostility and threat at first hand. Essentially, it is argued that the definition of Whiteness here is built around the idea of superiority. By constructing a world that privileges Whites and disadvantages those that are Black, the commercial reproduces a hierarchical social system. This idea is then inherently connected to the concept of power in the sense that White people hold power to discriminate against Black people and categorize them as the Other.

### *The Myth of the Other*

The former section has argued how several semiotic representations of Whiteness draw attention to a power-related system that racializes the Other. These power structures laid between Whiteness and Blackness is one of the guiding discourses of this advertisement. Through the juxtaposition of cinematography, facial expressions, and mise-en-scène, the receiver can perceive the differences that revolve around the discourses of race. This is demonstrated by representing a White-dominated social world, the specific colors employed in the film, and the implicit racist behavior expressed by White people. The cinematography of the movie helps in transferring these notions to the audience. While being White is represented as the norm, being Black is portrayed as the exception. Furthermore, the treatment by White people gives reason to suppose that they have a relatively narrow view on Black people, which is fundamentally negative: as elucidated in the semiotic description, they were perceived as a threat, invisible, and inferior to Whites. The myth embodied in Blackness is therefore founded upon the concept of Othering (Hall, 1997): the construction of Blackness is fundamentally opposed to the construction of Whiteness and leads the viewer to think of a social world that is inherently unequal. This creates the antonym "us" (the White people) vs. "them" (the Black people) and, consequently, reinforces prejudices and stereotypes about Black people.

The aforementioned discourses surrounding racial identities lead the viewer to suppose that the camera moving through the courtroom, which is impersonating the accused person, is the Black man. However, the end of the video contests this power imbalance by assigning the Black person the judge's role, a position that is considered highly respected in society. This switch is also connoted by representing the judge from a slightly lower angle, making him look powerful (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 140). The discursive reproduction of Blackness and Whiteness and the relationship between these two social constructs thus takes a shift and challenges the concept of White supremacy. There seems to be an ambiguous construction of society: while showcasing that Black people can also be presented in higher, appreciated positions, they are still perceived as different through discourses that construct asymmetrical dichotomies dividing White and Black.

### *The Hidden Discourses*

From an intersectional standpoint, it is also important to acknowledge dimensions apart from race that contribute and relate to the particular representation of race in the ad. This will lead to a more complex understanding of how racial identities and power relations may be constructed (see section 4.1.2.3).

Gender is one of these dimensions that work together with other categories such as race to oppress or privilege social groups. Within *The Look*, Blackness is predominantly represented by the Black male protagonist; Black females are solely depicted in two scenes, i.e., the elevator scene and the scene in the courtroom (Ads of Brands, 2019, 0:18; 1:12). However, they remain in the very background of these scenes and are not deemed essential for the course of the story. While it is challenging to make interpretations on how Black females are represented, their absence should not be ignored, for it has consequences on how Blackness is constructed. In the video's social construction of race, female Blackness is left out and poses a question about whether the experience of Blackness would change under the context of being female. The choice to have a Black man take the role of a judge might reduce prejudices about Black people to dismantle hierarchical power relations between Black and White people. Yet, the particular "higher" status that is connoted by representing him as a judge might be perceived as limited to the male gender. The question remains whether a Black woman would be able to take on the same position or go through the same types of discrimination as experienced by the Black protagonist. Nevertheless, the video also combats the stereotypical breadwinner role of men by depicting the protagonist with a Black boy (Holt & Thompson, 2004). His specific relation to the man is not stated, yet, their way of interaction is indicative of a close relationship and suggests that the protagonist may be the father of this boy. This portrayal sheds light on his role as a caring father and could point the viewer to think of other aspects than professionalism that define a Black man, countering the stereotypical narrative of the absentee Black father (Bristor et al., 1995, p. 52).

White women are represented at a significantly higher rate than Black women. The hostile attitude towards the protagonist is, however, not gender-specific. Both White males and females display implicit racial bias manifested in their interactions and behavior. The woman's stereotypical role as a stay-at-home mother is refuted by presenting these women in diverse

roles (Kacen, 2000). The formal clothes worn by the red-haired women in the elevator or the grey-haired women as seen on the side of the courtroom scene, point towards the women's profession within a higher-positioned job (Ads of Brands, 2019 0:22; 1:15). At the same time, other women are also portrayed in jobs which are usually lower-paid, such as waitressing. One might argue that masculine dominance is preserved by choosing to have men represent the policemen and the security guard. These professions are traditionally male-dominated (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Yet, altogether, there is no overarching indicator of a social world that necessarily speaks for a stereotypical portrayal of women in the sense they are subordinated to White males. Instead, the power to dominate is exercised by Whites irrelevant of gender. The same can be argued from the position of class. While White males and females are depicted in different settings occupying different social roles, there is no specific discrimination between Whites because of certain class barriers. Conversely, the Black protagonist's well-respected position as a judge, along with his choice of clothing, connoting financial well-being, does not protect him from being the subject of social exclusion by Whites. This is a tangible example of the racist attitude towards Black people regardless of their position in society.

Within the discourse of race, the power to perpetuate racial stereotypes and oppress those classified as Others is given to White people, epitomizing the dominant culture. This means that the receiver will recognize privilege and power as manifested in White people regardless of gender or social status.

### **5.1.2 The Talk**

P&G's ad *The Talk* is the second unit of analysis that will be examined as part of this thesis's encoding process. Accordingly, the video, which illustrates Black mothers speaking to their children about racism through decades, will be analyzed in two stages before concluding with an overall contextualization of both campaigns.

#### *5.1.2.1 Semiotic Description*

Similar to *The Look*, *The Talk* sheds light on racial bias and sparks a discussion about the historical perception of Blackness in society. While the former ad is primarily relying on visual elements to narrate its story, *The Talk* combines visual and linguistic components to arrange

for a meaningful ground to study discourses around race. These components will be discussed below.

### *Race through Cinematography*

The analysis on *The Look* has already pointed at the significant contribution of a film's cinematography in the construction of meaning. The camera's positioning may tell us more about the relationships between characters and the kind of engagement that is established between viewer and character (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 261).

*The Talk* is primarily narrated through an eye-angle perspective (Canned Bommercials, 2017). This particular choice of vertical level places the characters at the same height as the viewer and creates a relation of symbolic equality (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011). The familiar, neutral viewpoint established by its vertical axis is complemented by horizontal angles that predominantly showcase the characters from a slightly oblique perspective. These angles contribute to establishing the depth of involvement between the represented characters and the viewer. Contrary to the frontal angle, as applied in *The Look*, an oblique angle somewhat detaches the audience from the characters. In *The Talk*, it seems as if the viewer is not part of the world represented to them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 133-136). Notwithstanding, the close and medium shots employed throughout the video to depict the Black characters let the viewer "see small nuances of behavior and emotion while eliciting a higher degree of identification and empathy" (Mercado, 2010, p. 41). This connoted emotional connection is, however, only established with Black people. Generally, White people are scarcely represented and, if so, they are blurred in the background. This is, for instance, apparent in a scene that depicts a Black boy being chased down by White boys (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:12). Other scenes show White characters from a far distance as perceived through a long shot (0:29; 0:44). The use of long shots in a movie can convey various meanings. What is important regarding the depiction of characters is that a long shot suggests an impersonal relationship between the viewer and the represented object and thus categorizes White people as strangers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 148). Therefore, it can be asserted that the camera angles employed in the video initiate a more intimate relationship with the Black characters while at the same time detaching the viewer from White people.

There are also a few shots that showcase characters from a lower angle. More particularly, these angles are employed in scenes where mothers talk to their children (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:22; 1:32). The audience then takes an over-the-shoulder shot behind the children that look up to their mothers. It has already been argued that these kinds of shots make the represented subject look imposing and more prominent, which signifies that the subject has power over the addressee (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 140). Putting this into context, one may argue that this choice of angle could indicate the mother-child relationship that situates the mother in the position of power and knowledge. This observation would be coherent with the video's linguistic elements since the mothers are having a serious conversation about the dangers and criticism their children will face due to their race (see *Race through Language*). While these conversations indicate that the mothers are familiar with this racial bias, the children are put in a position of innocence, not being aware of their skin color's ramifications. A more thorough analysis of this will be taken in the next sections.

### *Race through Language*

Language plays a crucial part in this advertisement in constructing discourses around race. The majority of this dialogue is conducted by the Black mothers in the video. While there are several different sequences and protagonists, the scheme of dialogue remains the same for each scene: A woman is talking to a young child about the racial bias they will experience. The content of their conversation and their way of interaction insinuates a mother-child relationship between these characters (Canned Bommercials, 2017).

One central point that needs to be discussed is the use of pronouns. Black women frequently use second-person pronouns ("you") when addressing their child. It seems like they are appealing to their children, wanting them to listen closely, which is underlined by questions such as "you hear me?" (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:26) or "you are beautiful period, okay?" (1:38). This form of communication also leads the audience to think of a certain closeness between the mother and the child.

The use of the second-person pronouns contrasts with the linguistic construction of another group of people that are either addressed through third-person pronouns - "you can do anything *they* can" (0:40); "*they'll* stop you" (0:54) -, passive voice - "you are going to hear it" (0:17); "when you get pulled over" (1:05) -, or through the use of subjectives, i.e., "the *Lady* at the

store" (0:06), "there are *some people* who think" (0:29). By using these linguistic devices, a sense of distance is taken from this group. Since none of these "people" are visually depicted in the film, they remain passive actors only mentioned through language. Contrary to the Black protagonists, the audience cannot identify or build a relationship with them.

It is unclear who exactly is meant by these references since the viewer can only listen to short fragments of these conversations. Although unspecific, the film has subtle cues indicating that this group might refer to White people: in the second sequence, for instance, the mother decides to have a conversation about racism right after her Black son has been depicted running away from White boys (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:13). In another scene, the audience can see White people queue for a school bus - it turns out that this scene is depicted from a Black girl's perspective who watches those people through a car window. The voice-over of a woman states, "remember you can do anything they can" (0:40). Subsequently, the viewer sees the Black woman and her daughter stand on the side of a parking lot, looking at these White people (0:43). While "you" seems to refer to the Black girl, the pronoun "they" appears to allude to the White people as vaguely depicted in the background. The contextualization of this analysis will touch on this topic more thoroughly. For now, the critical aspect is the linguistic juxtaposition between one group (Black children, addressed through the use of "you") and the other group (addressed through pronouns, passive voice, and subjects, e.g., "they", the *lady*, *some people*). In such a way, this juxtaposition creates a myth of a social setting that appears to be divided into these groups.

But not only pronouns connote a latent boundary between these two parties; The usage of specific phrases construct a social world that perpetuates this discrepancy: visually, the other group, mentioned in the preceding section, is scarcely represented in the video; linguistically, however, they are constructed as a group that holds the power to discriminate against - and/or be dismissive of - Black people. One mother, for example, explains to her son that "there are *some people* who think you don't deserve the same privileges just because of what you look like"(Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:29). In another scene, a Black woman talks about an "ugly, nasty word" that her son is inevitably "going to hear" (0:15). Her reaction alludes to the fact that her son has heard this "nasty" word before. In a third example, a Black mother warns her son about getting pulled over, stating that "*they*'ll stop you" (0:54).

Conversely, both mothers and their children are seemingly lacking the tools to take action against these mentioned forms of discrimination. Referring to the nasty word that the boy has been called, the mother states that "[there's] *nothing* I can do about that" (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:18) while another mother explains that denying equal privileges to everyone is "*not* fair" (0:34). Linguistic resources such as the adverbs "nothing" and "not" emphasize the powerlessness of Black people to overcome discriminatory practices and reinforce the notion that it is the other people who are in charge of these practices and who, in return, would be in charge to change these.

### *Race through Mise-en-Scène and Narrative*

The previously analyzed linguistic mode must also be put into context by examining both the video's narrative chronology and aspects of the film's mise-en-scène. Altogether, there are six different sequences, each showcasing a dialogue between a mother and - what appears to be - their child. Within a sequence, contiguous scenes are linked on "the basis of a thematic or logical continuity" (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, p.189). These sequences differ inasmuch as they portray distinct narrative units comprising different characters and settings. Nevertheless, a few visual aspects are similar in every sequence. For instance, it can be noted that all Black protagonists appear neat and well-dressed. Combined with accessories such as cars and jewelry, notions of a certain degree of financial stability are triggered. Some scenes are set either in front of houses or inside a house or apartment. While it is not possible to make unambiguous statements about their "social status," it may be argued that the Black characters do not seem to suffer financial hardship (Canned Bommercials, 2019).

The settings of each sequence, as well as other elements such as costumes and characters' appearance, insinuate that the sequences are shot in different decades. The first sequence, for instance, illustrates a young, Black girl wearing a pink dress with a white lace collar, puffed sleeves, and matching hair ties (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:00). The costume worn by this girl is reminiscent of an older decade such as the 1950s (Reddy, 2019). In another sequence, two Black parents with an Afro hairstyle are represented (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:29). The Afro, according to McIlwain (2007), was a popular hairstyle in the late 1960s and 1970s and represented one of the more dominant signifiers of Blackness (p. 177). Besides, the hoop earrings worn by the Black woman were a popular accessory by Black feminists in the 1960s and 70s ("Hoop Earrings"). Thus, the parents' appearance might allude to this period. The last

sequence showcases a modern-day car parked in front of a suburban house (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 1:00). The setting suggests that this scene takes place in the current time frame. The style of the two characters corroborates this argument: the girl can be seen wearing a choker and a green bomber jacket, while her mother is wearing a yellow blazer and large sunglasses. All of these items are commonly worn in the 2010s (Boone, 2016). Identifying these sequences's exact time frames is undoubtedly up for interpretation. Yet, the decisive point is that the dialogues between mother and child appear to be held within different time frames. Nevertheless, these dialogues revolve around the same issues, i.e., racial discrimination. Hence, the Black characters ostensibly struggle with similar matters regardless of time, space, or social status.

White people are, at least visually, sparsely represented. It is clear that the narrative revolves around a Black point of view since the viewer gets to delve into private conversations between Black people without the presence of someone that is White. Still, in most scenes, Whiteness is somehow apparent. In the first sequence representing a Black girl and her mother in front of a mirror, the girl is depicted with a White, blonde doll that she combs while talking to her mother (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:10). The next sequence showcases a Black boy seemingly being chased by three White boys, though they are blurred out in the scene's background (0:14). The same applies to the following sequence where the audience can see a White family and White baseball players in the backdrop of the Black family (0:29). Lastly, there is a sequence showing a group of White children and some of their parents standing next to a bus (0:44). Likewise, they are only vaguely visible through a long shot.

The scarce visual representation of White people does not allow for analyzing their behavior or facial expressions. However, it can be said that they are depicted as separate from those that are Black since Black and White people do not interact with one another. This boundary is not only connoted through the absence of said interaction but also other visual devices: in one scene, the viewer can observe how a Black boy is portrayed behind a grid. He watches an event that appears to be out of his reach as signified by the grid that holds him back from joining whatever is happening on its other side (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:31). While it is unclear whether White people are represented on this other side, the latter may be assumed given that the previous scene of this sequence had showcased only White people in the background. This separation is connoted more unambiguously in the next sequence, which portrays a scene of White people looking at the camera (0:39). They are depicted through a blurry, blue-ish filter.

In the subsequent scene, the audience can see a Black girl looking through her car window. It seems as if the camera took the girl's perspective while the White people were showcased staring at the camera. The car window keeps her away from being a part of this group and thus accentuates a detachment from the White group.

### *Race through Facial Expressions*

As the cinematography enables the viewer to identify and emotionally connect with the Black characters, the audience can pay attention to facial features, which may point to the characters' current emotional states (Berger, 2005, p. 15). In most of the medium and close shots it can be asserted that both, mothers and children, have quite serious facial expressions indicating the severity of their conversation. The children in particular appear to be rather upset about the things they are being told. As Givens (2002) propounds, their distress is connoted by facial features such as a hanging head that gazes down to the floor. The latter is exposed through close shots of a Black girl watching White people on the other end of the street, or the Black boy going to a baseball match with his parents (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:48; 0:29). According to Givens (2002), signs of sadness are mostly shown in the eye area, but also through motionless, passive facial expressions. This is particularly evident in a scene that depicts a Black boy on a porch with his mother (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:09). While he appears to slowly understand the ramifications of the "ugly word" he has been confronted with, his face remains rather motionless. Along with his glassy eyes and downward-drawn mouth corners, his expressions connote a certain feeling of sadness (Givens, 2002). The mothers' faces, in contrast, spot serious but determined and emotionally laden expressions, which are signified through the brow-raise and wide eyes as seen by the mother sitting with her son on the porch and the mother in the car talking to a girl (Givens 2002; Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:22; 1:11). Generally, it can be concluded that the viewer is confronted with an abundance of emotions as signified by the protagonist's countenances. Connoted sensations such as sadness and anger create, based on Barthes's mythological meaning of the sign, a rather dark atmosphere, underscoring the severity of the addressed issue.

### *5.1.2.2 Discourse Identified*

*The Talk* constructs specific discourses that situate race in a particular context. These meanings about race also affect and shape the social world represented in the advertisement. Following the first stage of analysis, the present stage will address the aforementioned findings and make sense of them by situating them into discursive categories.

#### *The Myth of Whiteness*

Contrary to *The Look*, White people are visually represented as passive actors: they are scarcely illustrated, remain in the backdrop of scenes, and are showcased only through long shots. As a result, the audience does not have the opportunity to build an emotional connection and identify with White characters. Visually, they seem to be irrelevant backdrops of these scenes, yet, Whiteness appears to be an omnipresent subject among the Black community. This is primarily substantiated by the language that is used to refer to them. It has been noted that, linguistically, another group is constructed and juxtaposed to Black people. As previously examined, visual images help to assign this group to White people. This notion is reinforced if these discourses are embedded in a historical context. As explained in section 2.1, Black people have been discriminated against by White people for centuries. Suppose we associate the other group with White people, their role changes from being represented as visually passive and irrelevant for the story to playing an active part in discriminatory practices against Black individuals. What is more, they are the initial reason for the conversations held between Black parents and children in the film in the first place. The feeling of powerlessness as linguistically signified by the Black community amplifies the notion of White superiority and constructs a prevailing Black/White dichotomy in the social world. The various periods as represented in different sequences further emphasize that these racial power relations have perpetuated through time and prevail today.

#### *The Myth of Blackness*

It has already been argued that cinematographic and narrative elements put Blackness at the film's center of attention. Particular sequences draw the audience back to different historical

moments in time, a point which becomes especially significant by the mise-en-scènes of these sequences. While the Black protagonists are presented in different settings at different times, their commonality lies in the burden of their race: as can be derived from the conversations held in *The Talk*, other people openly disclose their disregard for Black people by demonstrating racist attitudes. Cinematographic devices are used to provide an insight into how the aforesaid racist practices affect the parties concerned: emotions such as sadness, anxiety and anger are evoked by their facial features and connote feelings of unrest and discontent. Linguistic aspects signify that this unrest is induced by the apparent powerlessness and injustice which grips them in the face of discriminatory practices. Being Black is represented as a natural, inherent disadvantage that Black people have limited power to overcome. Accordingly, one of the fundamental aspects of this campaign is its focus on power and empowering one group while simultaneously denying this power to the other, i.e., the Black community. Both visual and linguistic aids help the audience understand that others ("they") and not the Black community have access to privilege and the power to deny this access to others. The medium to close shots of Black characters increase the viewer's emotional involvement with the protagonists and transfer this Black perspective to the viewer.

### *The Hidden Discourses*

As has been stated before, the representation of race should take into account multiple dimensions. This vantage point makes sure to outline a more complete picture of race representation and might reveal neglected categories that would remain hidden in the light of an unidimensional approach.

At first glance, the campaign appears to critically reflect on race relations and the White/Black power imbalances that persist into the 21st century. Yet, it is remarkable that the campaign has specifically chosen to portray Black women having "the Talk" about racial bias with their child. Black fathers are not only missing in the active participation of this conversation, but even more, they are almost entirely left out of the narrative. In merely two of six sequences, Black fathers are represented (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:29; 0:43). Their presence, however, is barely noticeable and does not impact the further course of the story. In one of these two sequences, the viewer cannot even identify the father's face since he is only present from the back of his car (0:43). In the other sequence, the camera lens remains focused on the mother's

face and foregrounds her presence while the father's attendance is removed to the background (1:29).

The choice to only have Black women lead the difficult conversation surrounding racial bias raises the question as to how fathers might contribute to this Talk. It opens a space of discussion on men's and women's roles in the family: is it the mother's role to elucidate on these issues? If so, what does that mean for the representation of Black fathers in this campaign? Certainly, it can be argued that this representation perpetuates an image of Black men as fairly absent, passive father-figures. Considering the severity of the topic discussed, the absence of fathers might imply that the father does not care to be involved, does not have a good relationship with his kid, or is not an active part of the family. The latter only applies to the scenes without a Black man present and would imply that the mother takes over a single-parent role. While these are all just speculations, it can be suggested that the specific choice to have only women talk to their children creates a myth around Blackness that supports a close mother-child relationship, yet, it leaves out the father's role and perspective. This myth may also further a gender-stereotypical portrayal, for it signifies that it should be the woman's role to "take care" of the family and address central issues that need to be explained.

Social status is another category that must be discussed: as has been previously noted, financial scarcity and poverty are issues that are neither linguistically nor visually addressed. Although the depiction of Black protagonists in this film suggests that they suffer emotional hardship due to their racial disadvantage, none of the sequences essentially allude to the fact that they might find themselves in difficult financial situations. The lack of representation of less privileged groups renders it difficult to make assumptions about how systemic racism affects the aforesaid groups. Hence, the question remains whether Black individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds would be confronted with the same extent of racial discrimination or whether this would change in a different context.

There is little to say about gender portrayal of Whiteness since White people are only depicted vaguely in the background. At the beginning of the ad, a girl talks about a "Lady" whom she has encountered at a store (Canned Bommercials, 2017, 0:00). Other linguistic references to White people seem to appeal to a collective rather than to gender-specific groups. The same can be said about other identity categories such as social status or age. The effect is that, from a Whiteness point of view, race is dealt with in simple Black-White dichotomies, substituting

subgroups and individuals for a homogeneous group. The presentation of this White homogeneity has the implication that group-heterogeneity is overlooked and rendered irrelevant when it comes to defining "White people" as instigators of discriminatory practices against Black people.

### 5.1.3 Contextualization

The last part of the *encoding* process of the analysis is contextualizing the chosen advertisements. This step is based on Foucault's and Fairclough's idea that discourses are fundamentally ideologically grounded, meaning that specific discourses are situated within a broader cultural and historical context. This context both shapes and is shaped by discourse (see section 4.3). To open up the possibility to draw comparisons and provide a clearer overview, it has been decided to merge the contextualization of *The Look* and *The Talk* into one part.

A vital point that comes into place when addressing the representation of race in *The Look* and *The Talk* is *power*. Hall (1997) expounds that power is often thought of as a central source originating within macro entities, e.g., larger institutions such as the media, the government etc. (pp. 49-51). Having said this, in *The Look* and *The Talk*, power fundamentally operates from multiple sources at the very micro-level of society. Now, within this system of power, Whiteness and Blackness are both linguistically and visually represented as two separate forces. Different scenes illustrating Black characters' experiences unveil the existing power imbalances between these forces and expose White people's racial attitudes and behaviors. *The Look* focuses on the visual representation of these beliefs, while *The Talk* predominantly centers around the linguistic construction of racism. Nonetheless, these effects have the same results and emphasize that White supremacy lies at the ideological core of White people's belief system. This analysis's intersectional approach further unveils that the power to discriminate lies in the hands of White people regardless of other social identity categories such as gender, age, or class. Being White is thus represented as the ultimate signifier of privilege, showcasing that racist attitudes are embedded in the fabric of the Black protagonists' social environments.

P&G's representation of White people aligns with Frankenberg's (1993) idea on Whiteness as it broaches the issue surrounding Whiteness as an ideological construct that normalizes White

racial identity and simultaneously marginalizes those belonging to the other race. Thus, the discursive construction of power in the chosen campaigns is similar to the historical notion of race as a social construct that legitimizes claims to exploit and misrepresent Black people as classified by their skin color (see section 2.1). While the portrayal of Black characters does not allude to a low socio-economic status of said characters, they are withheld the power to achieve a society of social justice. The latter is particularly significant in *The Talk*, in which linguistic devices help construct the impression that Black characters lack the power to react and take action against this injustice. *The Look* takes a different approach in assigning the Black protagonist the role of a judge at the end of the campaign. While this role might trigger the notion that institutional racism does not exist, the preceding sequences undermine this assumption in showcasing the day-to-day microaggressions towards Black people that remain instilled in society. Albeit different approaches, both campaigns aim at deconstructing the idea of a post-racial society free from racial prejudice, discrimination or privilege. The company thus taps into the discourse around colorblind racism, a concept embedded in the ideological construct of Whiteness (see section 4.1.2.2): In confronting the audience with the perspectives of Black characters, the ideas that revolve around colorblind racism are dismantled.

The discourse around power ties in with the next thematic area, which is the construction of *the Other* as represented in the commercials. It has already been argued that both campaigns construct a dualistic notion of White/Black, which is emphasized by various semiotic resources such as cinematographic elements, language, facial expressions, or mise-en-scènes. Much like Hall's (1997) ideas about representational practices, *Othering* in these campaigns is built as a tool to mark difference and stigmatize others. At first, classifying Blackness into the category of the Other might appear inaccurate as both campaigns are portraying Black characters as the central protagonists of the films. Especially in *The Talk*, White people have no visual significance and are linguistically delineated as the other group juxtaposed to the self, i.e., the Black characters. Still, as demonstrated in the literature review of this thesis (section 2.1), Otherness is historically connected to the race that is stigmatized, marked, and defined - i.e., Black people - by those that represent themselves as the norm, i.e., White people. As the aforementioned section on power has argued, White people still impose this norm in both campaigns.

The question of who takes the role of the Other is thus ambiguous: the taken perspective by Black people in the campaigns construct White people as the Other, albeit it is the latter group

that is perceived as superior. This might have the effect that the audience can empathize with - and put oneself in the position of - Black people and what it means to be categorized and stigmatized as one homogeneous group. In this way, the notion of Black people as the Other is deconstructed and makes aware of the categorization and marginalization they have to encounter as a group on a daily basis. P&G thus taps into the historical discourse of Othering and uses it as a tool to unveil the standardization of Whiteness as the norm, the latter of which is another ideological component of Whiteness (see section 4.1.2.2).

Although these campaigns aim to deconstruct and challenge predominant notions about race, it must also be reiterated that there remain facets advocating a stereotypical portrayal of social groups, predominantly gender. The scarce mentioning of men in *The Talk* and the lack of Black females in *The Look* emphasize traditional notions surrounding masculinity and femininity, suggesting that P&G distances itself from an intersectional approach. As a result, certain traditional assumptions about gender and race are reinforced: the absence of father figures in *The Talk* alludes to the media's stereotypical depiction of the absentee Black father (Bristor et al., 1995). At the same time, this portrayal perpetuates the idea that women are in charge of most parental duties. *The Look* challenges some of these traditional ideas about gender as the Black protagonist is portrayed as a caring father to his son. However, the missing portrayal of Black females constructs a hidden discourse around the representation of the said group and leaves the audience to wonder why they were left out of the picture.

Besides, the lack of representation of poverty puts to question how these Black experiences would be valid in a different context. What impact does, for instance, the intersection of a lower social class and Blackness have on the representation of the latter? At the same time, P&G might also intend to combat the stereotype of the less fortunate Black community by showcasing them within a wealthier setting. By doing so, they may even emphasize that Black people will not escape racial prejudice despite - or regardless of - their class position in society.

The last point to remark regarding the intersectional approach is that the constructed Black/White dichotomy foregrounds the issues around race and puts other social categories in the background. The effect is that White and Black people are thought of as two divided, self-contained, homogeneous groups. Considering the complex interplay of intersections, this depiction is certainly not entirely reflective of everybody's ideological view in society.

However, it demonstrates the systemic disadvantages of being Black in a White space and thus reflects on the contemporary, dominant notions of Whiteness.

Finally, P&G's campaigns need to be juxtaposed to contemporary depictions of race in the media in order to see how they may or may not differ from the latter. It has been elucidated that advertising has been increasingly sensitive towards the depiction of race in aiming to increase the representation of Black people and reverse stereotypical depictions by showcasing Blackness from a different perspective (see section 2.1.4). According to Hall (1997), these representations can be useful counter-strategies in subverting the stereotypical depiction of Blackness. While this approach may help deconstruct these traditional notions, it does not necessarily broach the underlying issue of systemic racism (pp. 270-272). These representations could take the focus away from racial inequality and assume the idea that revolves around colorblindness, namely that there is no such thing as racism, given that campaigns display more diversity. The decision to incorporate Black people in the media could also, as Hall (1997) remarks, be less of a political statement and more an act of symbolic appropriation in order to meet economic purposes (p. 273).

This is where *The Look* and *The Talk* gain significance: instead of avoiding the controversy around race and denying the existence of White supremacy, they situate their narratives right within this discussion. This means that, by using both visual and linguistic devices as meaningful semiotic tools, they actively work with the issues of race and re-emphasize the daily struggles of Black people. They are thus aiming at disrupting prevalent thought-processes and denaturalize what Fairclough (1995) denoted as IDF.

## 5.2 Decoding

Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model calls for taking into account the receiving end of the campaigns, i.e., the *audience*. While chapter 5.1. has provided a thorough analysis of the portrayal of race in *The Look* and *The Talk*, this part will complete the latter in delving deeper into the consumer's perspective. For this purpose, it has been decided to first divide the decoding process into two parts by separately examining consumers' perceptions on *The Look* and *The Talk* before concluding the analysis with a discussion that compares both findings.

### 5.2.1 *The Look*

As stated in section 3.3.1, comments from the campaign *The Look* have been selected from the YouTube channel Ads of Brands (2019). Although Procter & Gamble's posting of the commercial on YouTube has generated more than 1.2 million views, their comment section was turned off at the time of this analysis. Thus, Ads of Brands was deemed a useful alternative to collect comments as their posting has generated more than 600.000 views with more than 900 comments to select from.

#### 5.2.1.1 *Dominant Reading*

To Hall (1973), a message is decoded in a dominant way if the consumer concurs with the message that has been encoded by the producer. The analysis of *The Look* has manifested that the campaign aims at raising awareness of issues such as racial bias and White privilege. In consideration of these findings and by examining the comment section, it can be said that a majority of comments appear to be understanding of the messages conveyed by P&G. Leaning on the definition of a dominant reading, the responses given by users on YouTube were divided into different themes of which these comments come under.

#### ***The Look as Powerful***

One of the widespread reactions of users is related to *The Look's* ability to impact the audience. In line with this understanding, some comments frame P&G's commercials as *powerful*, which is illustrated in the statements below:



Figure 7, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

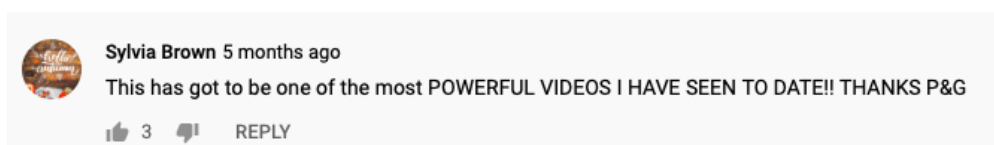


Figure 8, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

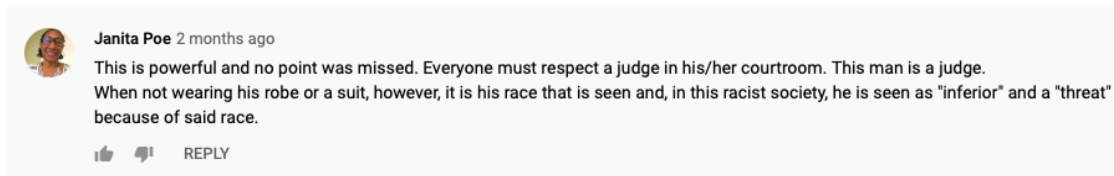


Figure 9, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

To Holt (2004), a powerful ad "prods people to reconsider accepted ideas about themselves" (p. 9). In other words, the commercial should leave an impact on the audience in the sense that it leaves them to think about what has just been presented to them. Although the users in Figure 7 and 8 don't elaborate further on why they perceived the campaign as "powerful", there are other consumers whose comments demonstrate that they have recognized *The Look* as an ad that may have the power to impact people's attitude towards race.

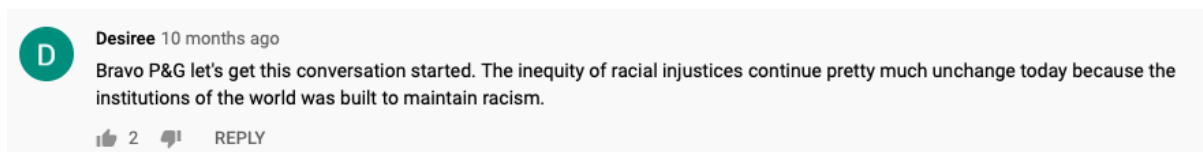


Figure 10, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

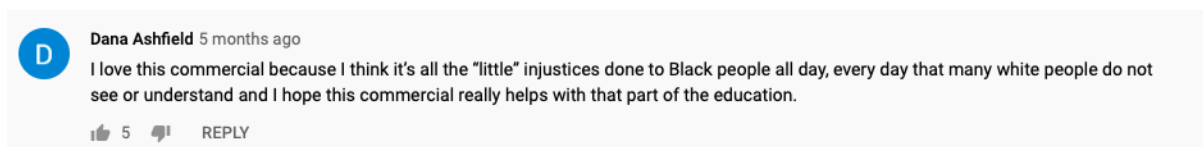


Figure 11, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

The quotes "let's get this conversation started" in Figure 10 and "I hope this commercial really helps with that part of the education" (referring to the need to dismantle White supremacy) in Figure 11, showcase that these users have perceived *The Look* as an ad that intends to start a dialogue about racial injustice. Though it is unclear whether the commercial motivated these users themselves to think differently about race, their reactions indicate that the ad both encouraged them to *think* about the issue at hand and gave them hope that other people may reconsider their conventional notions of race.

Certainly, it can be argued that all of the comments above are genuinely appreciative of P&G's message. In particular the comments ranging from Figure 9 to 11 demonstrate how viewers grounded the commercial's meaning in a present context as they acknowledge how racist attitudes are still ingrained in society. Hence, it can be said that *The Look* had a powerful impact

on these consumers in a way that motivated them to think "out of the box" and consider the message in light of a broader, cultural context.

### ***The Look as Emotional***

Other comments highlight the emotional effects of P&G's video on consumers. From the following comments, it can be deduced that users are deeply touched by the campaign and recognize feelings of empathy for Black people:

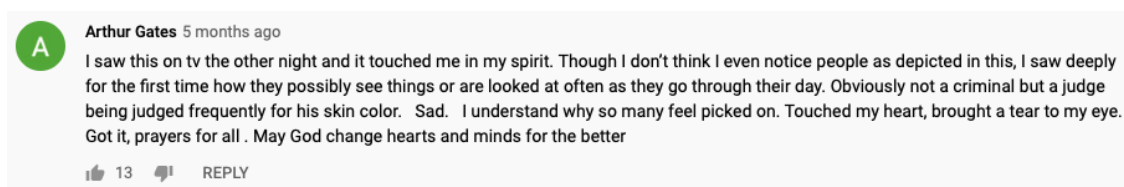


Figure 12, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

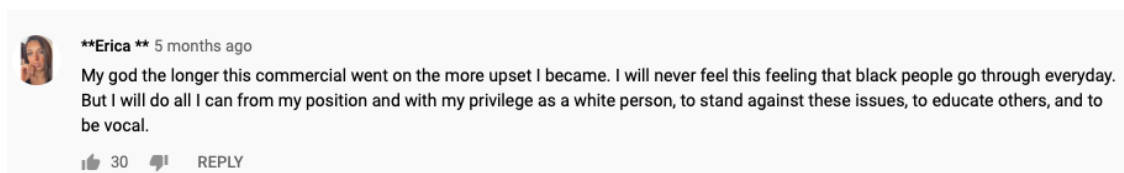


Figure 13, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

Apart from feeling empathy, "Arthur Gates" in Figure 12 uses the adjective "sad" to describe the ad and claims how it "brought a tear to my eye", while "\*\*\*Erica\*\*" in Figure 13 denotes *The Look* as upsetting. These reactions indicate that emotional reactions of sadness are elicited as well.

Besides, the two comments above also suggest that they originate from non-Black and/or White people. The latter is hinted at by the user in Figure 13 as they claim to be "a white person", describing that they "will never feel this feeling that black people go through everyday". "Arthur Gates" in Figure 12 notes that it was the first time they understood the lived experience of many Blacks, alluding to their position of a privileged, non-Black individual. These comments insinuate that the users acknowledge the issue of White privilege as addressed in *The Look*. "\*\*\*Erica\*\*" even contends that, from a privileged viewpoint, they will aim to deconstruct Whiteness and dismantle White supremacy by taking action against these issues.

Other comments falling under the *emotional* category appear to emanate from Black people since they claim to be able to relate to the situation depicted in *The Look*:

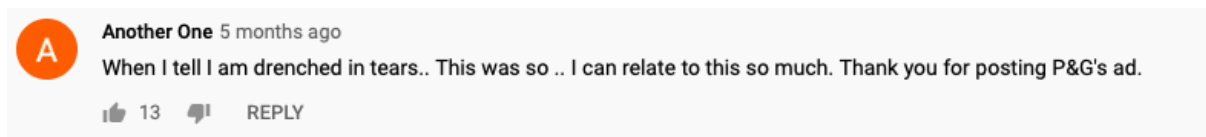


Figure 14, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

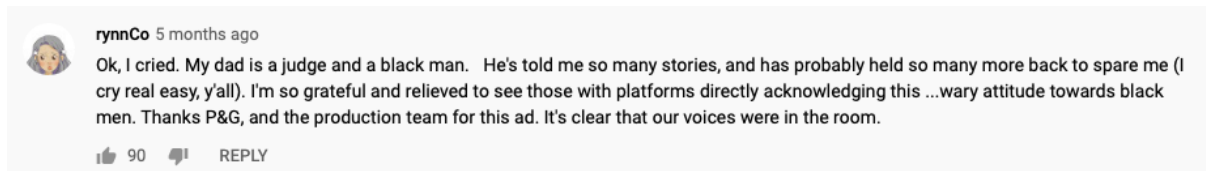


Figure 15, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

Once again, statements such as "I am drenched in tears" (Figure 14) and "I cried" (Figure 15) corroborate the above-mentioned feeling of sadness that is evoked by the advertisement.

### Identifying with *The Look*

The comments in Figure 14 and 15 already demonstrate that people relate to the Black protagonist's situation in the video. Apart from this, numerous other consumers use the comment section to note that they, as well, have been experiencing situations of *The Look* as depicted in the campaign:

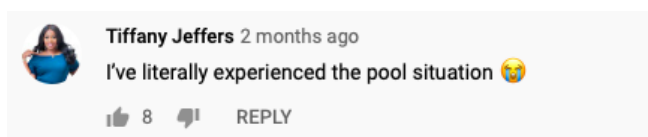


Figure 16, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)



Figure 17, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

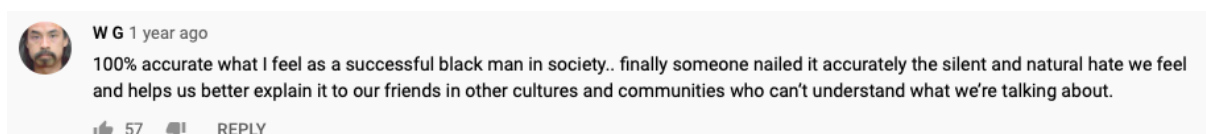


Figure 18, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

In addition to users identifying with the ad, the use of a crying and a sad face emoji in Figure 16 and 17 evoke notions of sadness, once more verifying *The Look's* emotional power.

However, not only Black people come forward to speak about their experiences. Some comments emanate from people having other ethnic backgrounds as showcased in the Figures below.

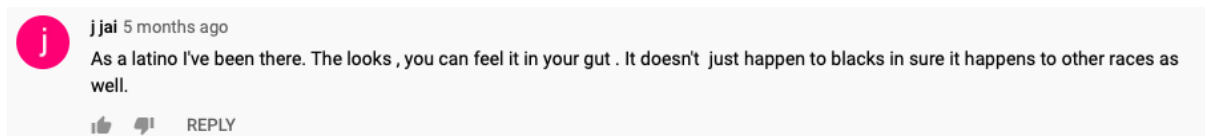


Figure 19, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

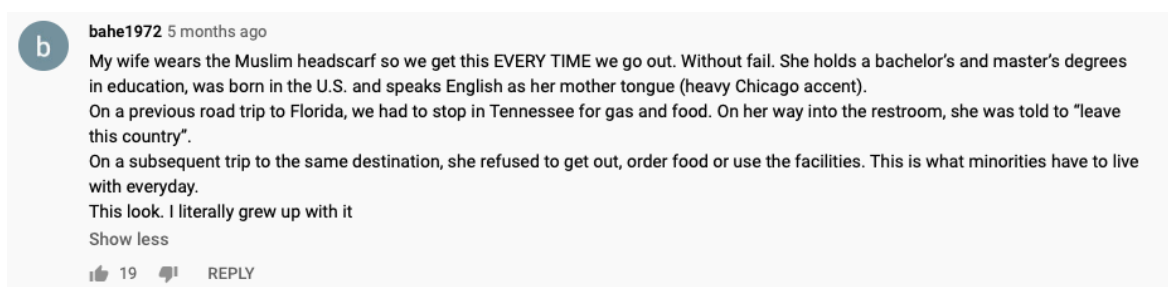


Figure 20, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

While user "j jai" in Figure 18 describes himself as Latino, "bahe1972" in Figure 20 speaks on behalf of their wife who appears to be a Muslim. Although the commercial portrays the Look given to Black people, these users see themselves represented as well, claiming to have also been confronted with this particular Look in society. These comments leave to assume that the ad not only affects the Black society, but minorities from all kinds of backgrounds, once more reinforcing the powerful impact *The Look* has on its audience.

#### 5.2.1.2 Negotiated Reading

The majority of comments either fall under the dominant or oppositional category. Yet, few users seem to understand the ideas of the message while simultaneously criticizing some parts on the other. Thus, it can be said that they have practiced a negotiated reading of the message. Most of these readings criticize P&G's choice to have the Black protagonist take the position of a judge since they claim that this conveys the message of having to be extraordinary as a

Black person to get respected by White people. The following discussion provides an illustration of how consumers take a stand on this issue:

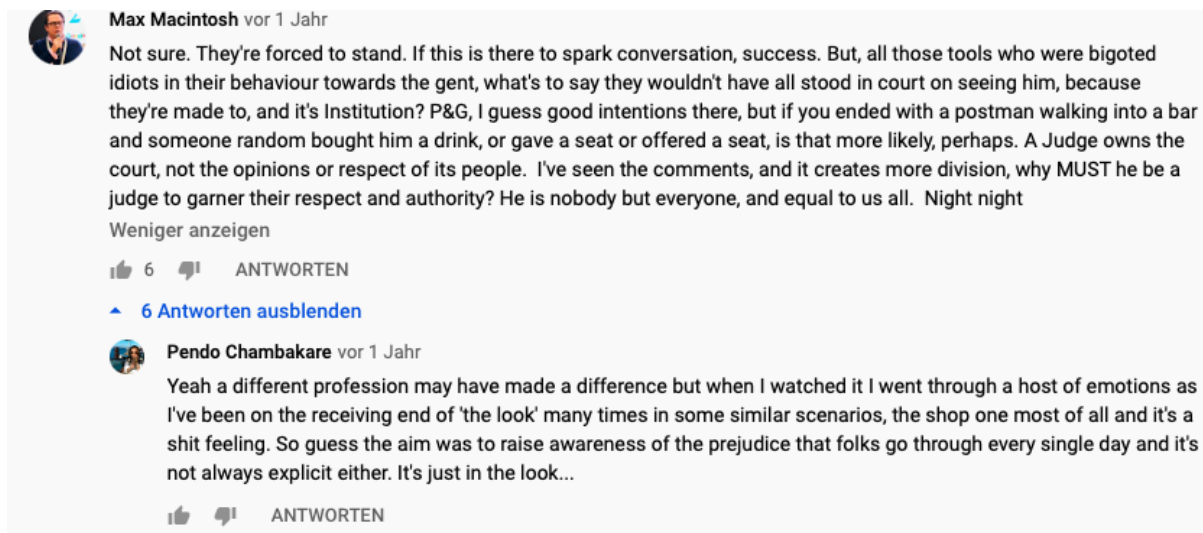


Figure 21, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

Commencing their comment with the phrase "Not sure" suggests that the user "Max Macintosh" is torn between differing opinions. The user elaborates on his opinion in opening up a debate on the protagonist's role as a judge. While understanding the objective of P&G's message, the viewer disputes whether this message came across as intended. According to them, the respect for the Black protagonist shown by people in the last part of the video does not imply that they would respect him in a different position. To "Max Macintosh", individuals are more or less forced to show respect due to the man's position as a judge. As shown in Figure 21, another user partly complies with this argument and suggests that a different profession "may have made a difference". Simultaneously, this user seems to acknowledge the commercial as they emphasize how it depicts familiar situations, for they were on the "receiving end of 'the look' many times in some similar scenarios".

A similar interchange is highlighted below in Figure 22. In their initial comment, the user "Loreto Bustos" touches upon the same point of critique mentioned above. Their perspective changes, though, after another commenter replied that the protagonist's position as a judge might have been necessary to have other people understand the experience of Black individuals.

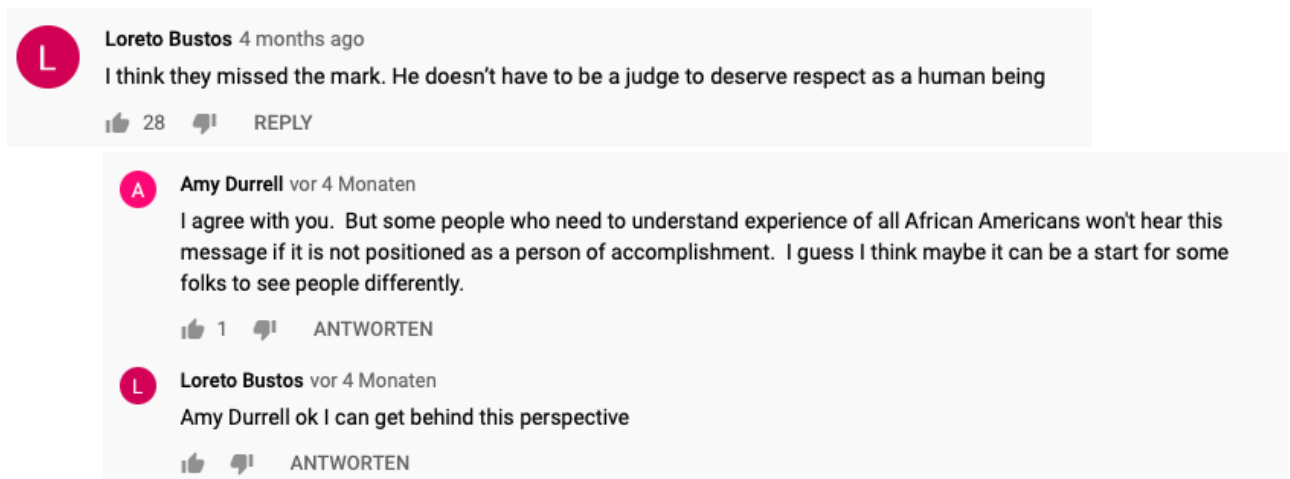


Figure 22, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

The discussions in Figure 21 and 22 reflect the negotiated debate on the protagonist's profession and insinuate some discrepancies between the encoding and decoding of the commercial.

### 5.2.1.3 Oppositional Reading

Despite the abundance of positive comments, numerous users voice their critical stance towards *The Look's* message. Once again, it has been deemed useful to divide these reactions into recurrent themes that emerged from the oppositional comment section.

### ***The Look* as Propagandistic Message**

Some users object to the truthfulness behind *The Look's* depiction and hold a debate about the authenticity of P&G's advertisement. This attitude is exemplified in a direct reply to another user's comment in Figure 13. Contrary to the dominant reading practiced by the user "\*\*\*Erica\*\*", the user in Figure 23 contends that P&G's campaign is merely promoting propaganda, affecting consumers' public opinion about issues that are not as severe as P&G claims them to be.

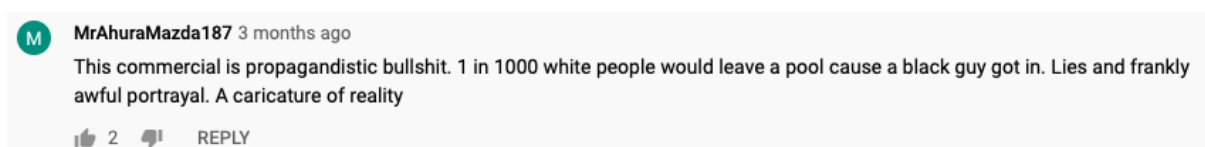


Figure 23, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019)

Other viewers take issue with P&G as a company itself, criticizing the hypocrisy of broaching issues around race as a large corporation. The comment by user "Aubrey Salazar" in Figure 24 suggests that the user thinks that behind P&G's courage to take on political issues, hides a leadership team that may not be representative of the change that is advocated by their marketing efforts.

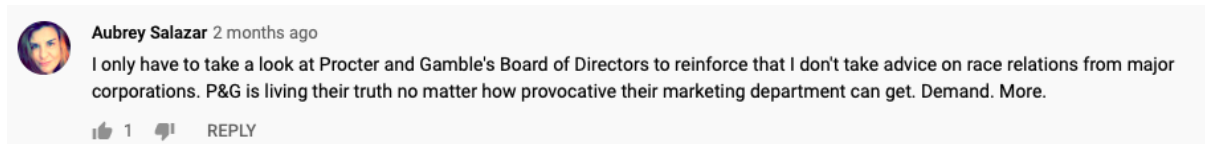


Figure 24, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

The users in Figure 25 and Figure 26 emphasize that *The Look's* message should not be taken wholeheartedly, for it is ultimately used by P&G to push for their own purposes rather than truly standing behind their political message.



Figure 25, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

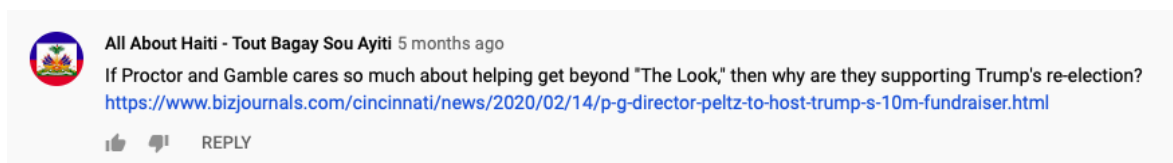


Figure 26, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

## Inaccurate Depiction of Race

It has already been noted that there is a debate about whether the depiction of White supremacy and racial injustice is authentic and whether they are still prevalent in contemporary society. Many commentators draw on the concept of colorblindness as they seek to delegitimize the idea of White supremacy that is portrayed in *The Look* (Morris & Kahlor, 2014):

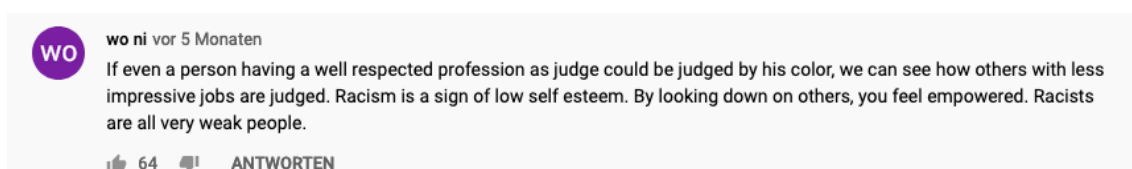




Figure 27, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

The above comment is a response to a comment by the user "wo ni". While "wo ni" frames their discourse around discrimination based on skin color, intending to challenge White privilege, "Andrew Trinh" in Figure 27 tries to aim attention at other factors of appearance that are contributors to the judging behavior of people. By doing so, "Andrew Trinh" appears to construct a narrative that maintains to overlook skin color, and consequently race, as an issue. The reply by this user is thus a perfect example of the adversarial debate on colorblindness. This narrative is also constructed in the succeeding comments:

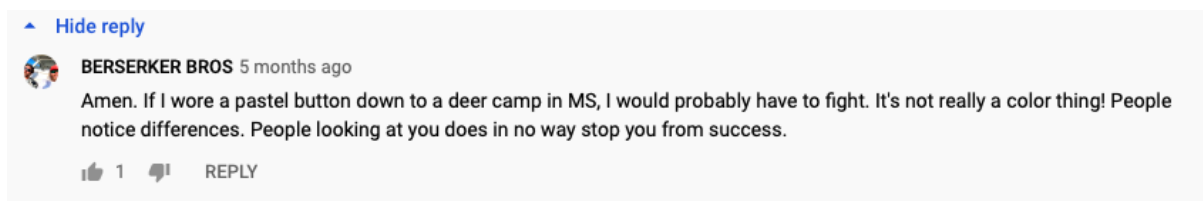


Figure 28, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

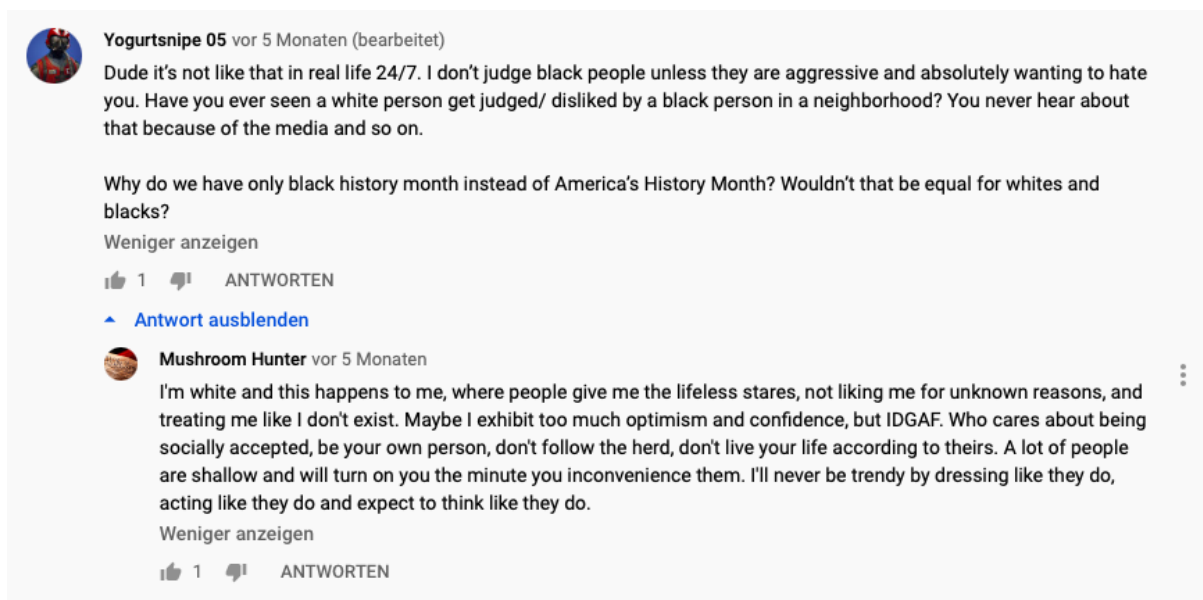


Figure 29, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

Especially phrases such as "It's not really a color thing" as seen in Figure 28, or the call to have an "America's History Month" instead of a Black history month in Figure 29 offer an insight into an ideological view underlying that implicit racial bias does not exist. This ideology is

further corroborated in a reply by the user "Mushroom Hunter" to the comment in Figure 29. Through the equalization of the White experience with the Black experience, the user, who claims to be White, trivializes skin color as decisive factor of racial discrimination.

## Reverse Racism

Apart from the issue of colorblindness, comments highlight that the campaign furthers an anti-White narrative that delineates Whites from Blacks. Some of these comments are depicted below:

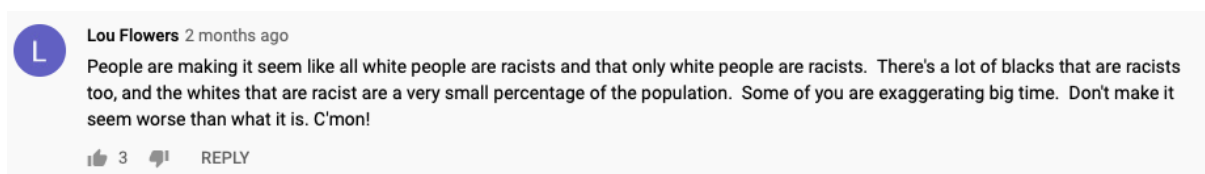


Figure 30, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

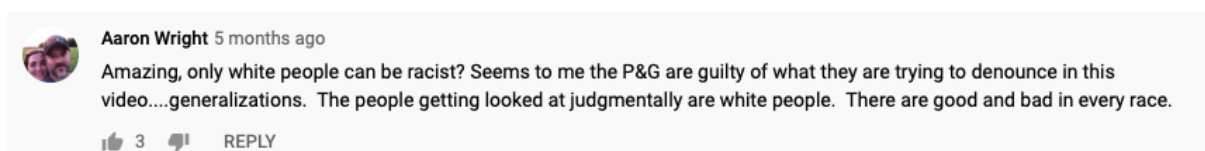


Figure 31, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

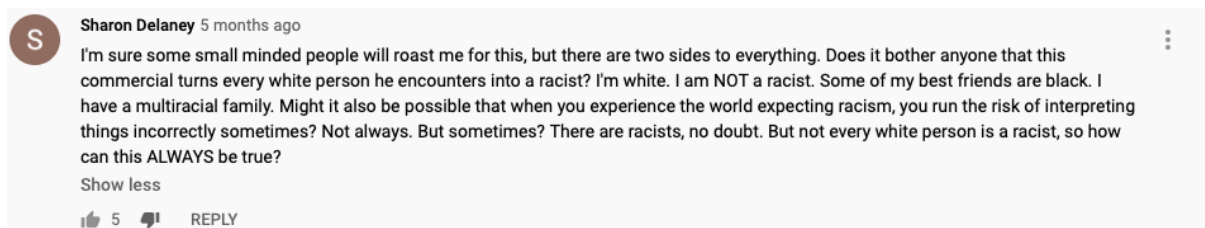


Figure 32, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

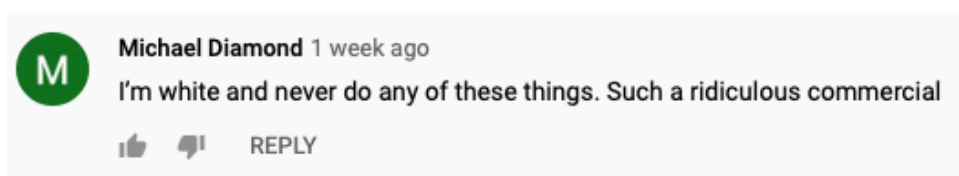


Figure 33, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

The comment "there's a lot of Blacks that are racist too" in Figure 30 constructs a narrative that downplays racism against Blacks and highlights the racial prejudices seemingly directed at White people. The same argument is outlined in Figure 31 as the user claims that the ad is generalizing the depiction of race, further purporting that it is White people who will get looked

at judgmentally. The users in Figure 32 and Figure 33 clarify their position as White individuals, asserting that *they* are not racist and that the ad distorts reality in positioning all White people as evil.

Apart from users' discontent with how Whites are represented, some viewers further criticize the "us vs. them" rhetoric deployed by creating homogeneous groups and categorizing White people as racist and Black as the receiver of this racism. This topic is addressed more thoroughly in the following comments.

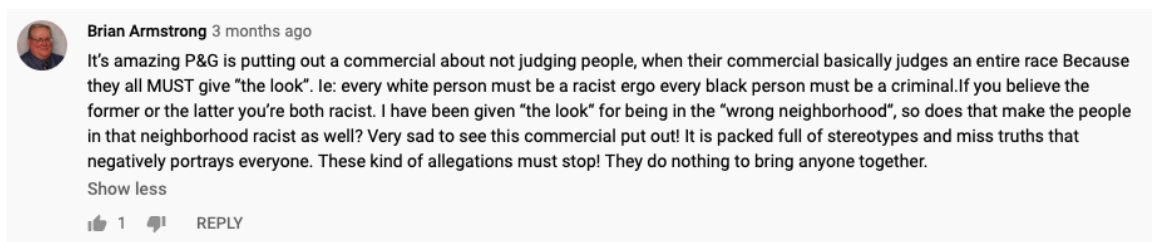


Figure 34, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

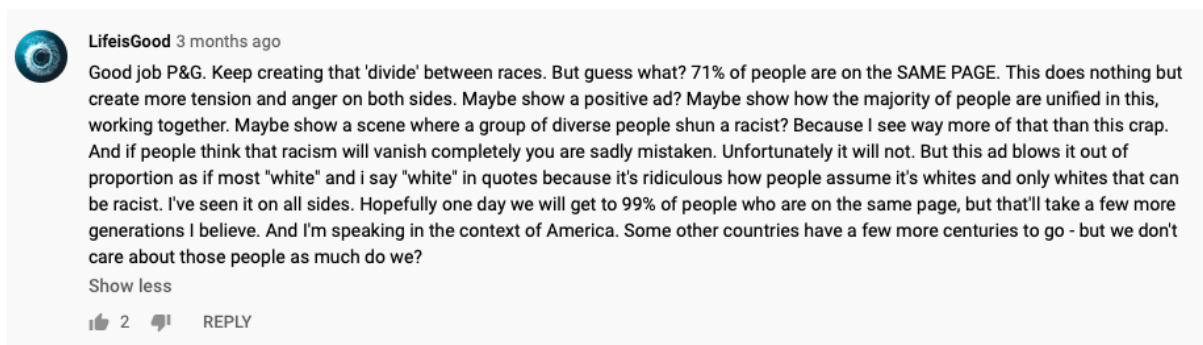


Figure 35, Source: YouTube (Ads of Brands, 2019).

Both viewers call attention to the apparent division and hatred encouraged by this video, arguing that P&G should have portrayed a narrative revolving around unification rather than the opposite.

This particular discourse constructs a myth of reverse racism and reinforces the argument that anti-White racism is as much of an issue as racism against Blacks. Through the denunciation of an entire group, i.e., White people, consumers argue that P&G constructs a narrative that falsifies reality.

### 5.2.2 The Talk

Similar to the analytical procedure in *The Look*, comments from *The Talk* could not be selected from P&G's official YouTube channel for their comment section had been turned off at the time of the investigation. Besides, *The Talk* was posted on the channel Canned Bommercials (2017). Due to the posting's high viewer numbers and the significant amount of comments to select from, it was deemed an appropriate alternative.

#### 5.2.2.1 Dominant Reading

*The Talk's* overall response has been widely positive, suggesting that many consumers have decoded its message from a dominant position. The analysis of comments has, once again, shown that different themes frame users' affirmation of the message. These themes will be taken into account and discussed below.

#### Acclaim for *The Talk*

A considerable amount of comments commend P&G's courage to depict a topic that is usually less talked about in the media. The following user praises *The Talk* and emphasizes P&G's approach, noting how other corporations should take similar risks:

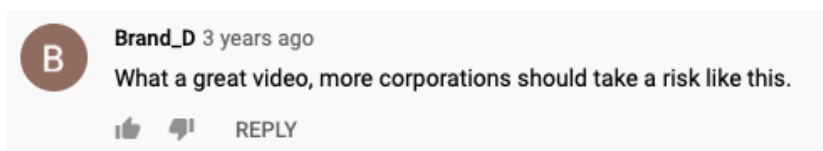


Figure 36, Source: YouTube (*Banned Commercials*, 2017).

Other comments focus on users' appreciation of *The Talk's* depiction of true experiences. This illustration, according to users in the Figures below, may encourage and facilitate difficult conversations about race.

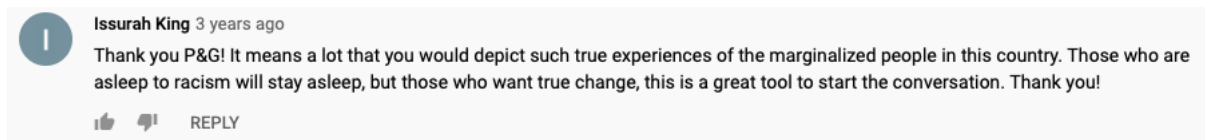


Figure 37, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

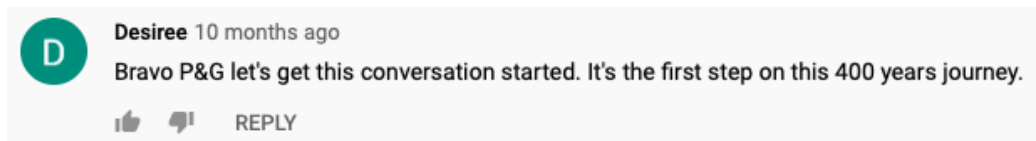


Figure 38, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

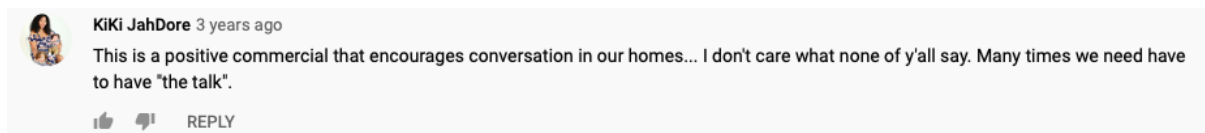


Figure 39, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

Not only do users applaud P&G for their political message, but their appreciation goes so far that some even note to become new customers in the light of this ad. While "pozablo" in Figure 40 claims to be "saddened" by the apparent racist comments to *The Talk*, "Dawn R. Wolfe" describes the ad as "heartbreaking" which eventually motivates them to become a new customer. Examples of these viewpoints can be found in the succeeding Figures.

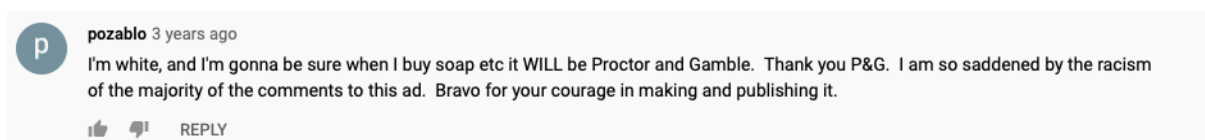


Figure 40, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

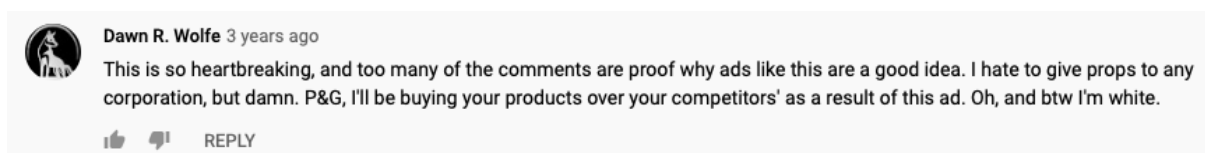


Figure 41, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

Overall, the response from the comments within this thematic dimension all center around acclaiming P&G for their critical thematization of race. Subjectives such as "bravo" or "thank you" are used to express the admiration and gratefulness for P&G's approach. Added to this domain is an emotional dimension insinuated by some users as can be seen in Figure 40 and 41.

## Dismantling White Supremacy

The two latter comments disclose the users' position as White persons, which leads to infer that it is not only Black people being touched by the campaign as they feel that their situation has been accurately represented. Numerous users claim to be White, acknowledging that racism and White privilege are prevalent issues that need to be condemned and dismantled. For the "older white woman" in Figure 42, the video has made a profound impact: describing the commercial as "an eye opener" suggests that the lady has developed a new perspective on the issues reflected in *The Talk*.

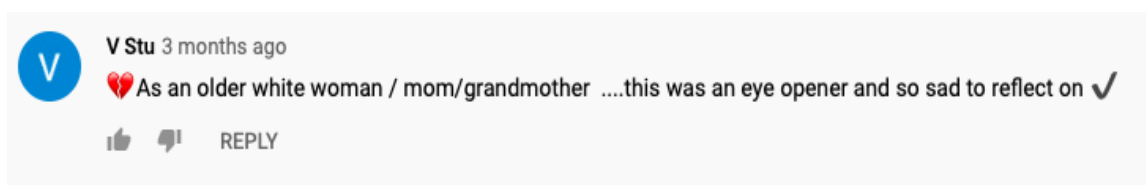


Figure 42, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

Another White user connects to the ad by sharing his Black friend's encounter with racial prejudice. He maintains that listening and understanding is important and emphasizes his attempt to acknowledge systemic racism in "keeping the conversation going" (see Figure 43).

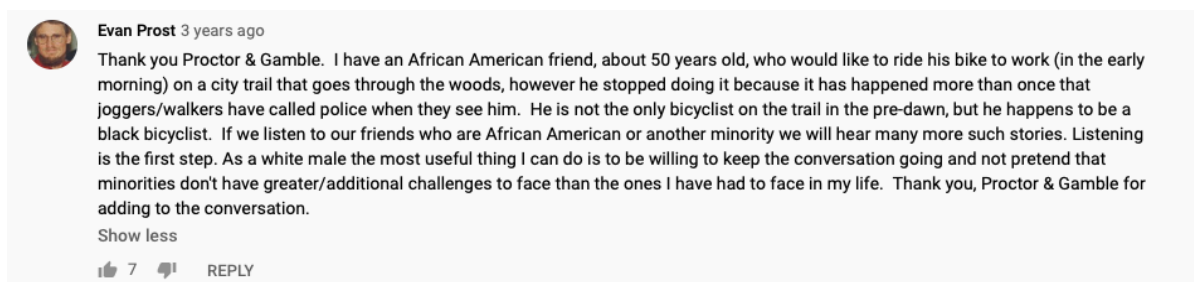


Figure 43, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

A similar message is conveyed by the comment of a user in Figure 44. While the consumer does not specifically claim to be White, they relate to the Talk only by referring to their "African-American friends" suggesting that they might not belong to the latter group.

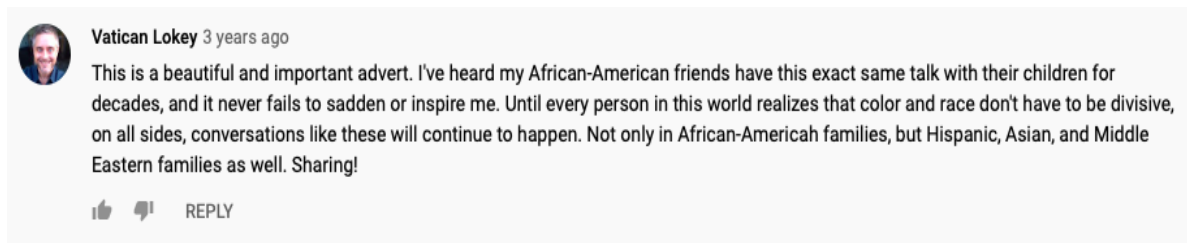


Figure 44, Source: YouTube (Canned Bommercials, 2017).

The need to have White privileged people acknowledge and actively take action against racist behavior is further emphasized by a White user in the following comment:



Figure 45, Source: YouTube (Canned Bommercials, 2017).

According to "Rick Nance", racism originates from privileged individuals who "can't see it, or don't care (enough)". The latter quote is reminiscent of the aforementioned concept of colorblindness. As has been described before, this subtle form of racism contributes to disseminating an ideology that fundamentally denies the existence of White privilege (Morris & Kahlor, 2014).

## Identifying with *The Talk*

Many Black consumers are appreciative of P&G's message and share their own experience with the issue that has been addressed in the video.

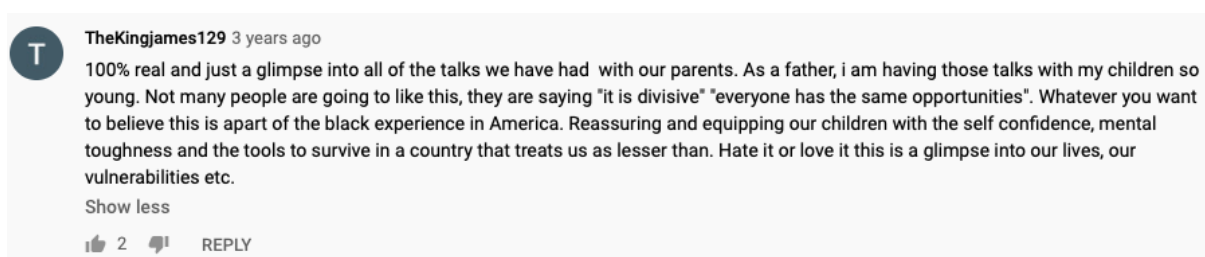


Figure 46, Source: YouTube (Canned Bommercials, 2017).

The father in Figure 46 validates the truthfulness of *The Talk* in describing how he has to have these talks with his kids, declaring that "this is a part of the black experience in America." The

Black users in the comments below coincide with this statement in asserting that they can relate to the ad for they had been confronted with these conversations by their parents:

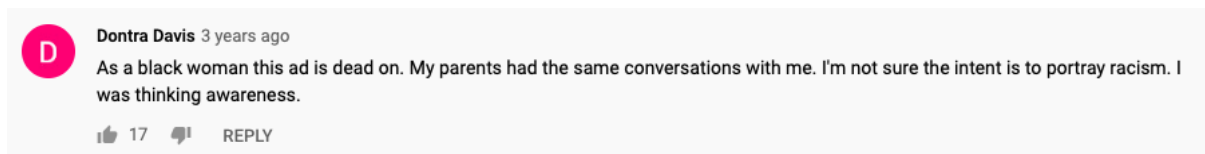


Figure 47, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

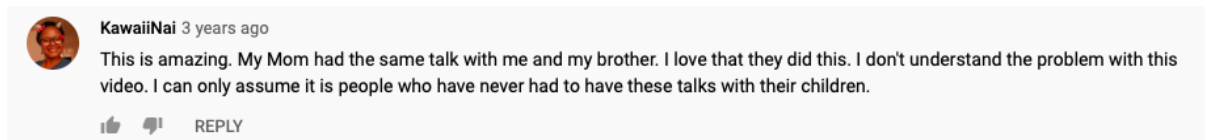


Figure 48, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

While some consumers account for their personal experience with the Talk, others specifically identify with the protagonists in the depicted scenes. The user in the comment below shares that she had a similar encounter as the Black girl at the very beginning of the advertisement since she had also been told that she was pretty "for a Black girl" and that her skin color belonged to the "good shade."

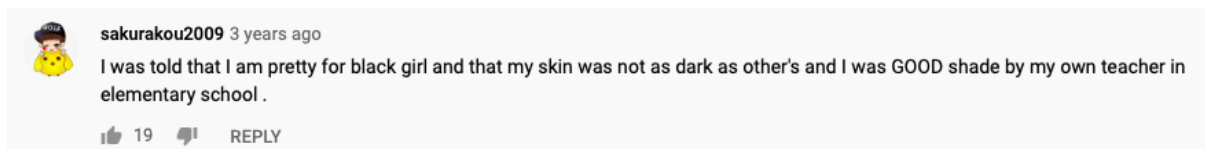


Figure 49, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

The comments above illustrate that, albeit coming from different backgrounds, many users can relate to the Talk depicted in the commercial, once more reassuring the accuracy of the stories that have been portrayed.

#### 5.2.2.2 Negotiated Reading

Some of the viewers on YouTube seem to understand *The Talk's* overall message and partly agree with it. However, they express certain doubts about its accuracy or voice critical opinions about specific details. This process of encoding falls under Hall's (1997) category of a negotiated reading. Since these criticisms vary considerably in their subject and the quantity of these readings appears to be relatively scarce, they were not categorized into themes.

As showcased in Figure 50, one consumer partly acknowledges P&G's commercial by stating that "most of it was decent". Concurrently, they deprecate certain aspects of the ad and claim that they distort the realities, reflecting "a world view of victimhood".

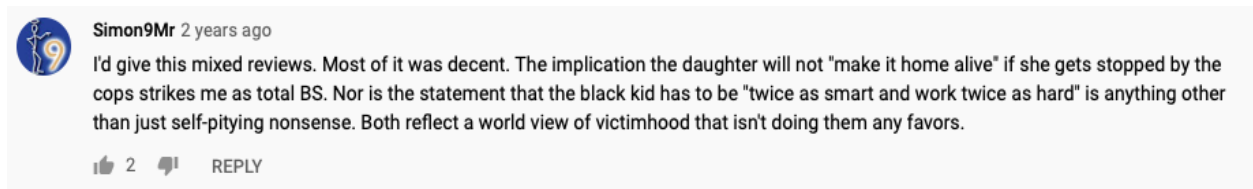


Figure 50, Source: YouTube (Canned Bommercials, 2017).

A similar approach is taken by user "Cliff Totten" in Figure 51, who highlights the advertisement's importance and agrees with its goal on the one hand while subtly contesting the meaning of the film on the other. To the consumer, a negative mindset around skin color may result in a "self fulfilling prophecy." Meaning that an outlook on race that exclusively rests on the disadvantages of said discriminated social category may further a narrative steeped in those negative notions. The criticism thus relates to the specific representation of Blackness as depicted in *The Talk* and advocates for a different mindset that should be taken into account when approaching race.

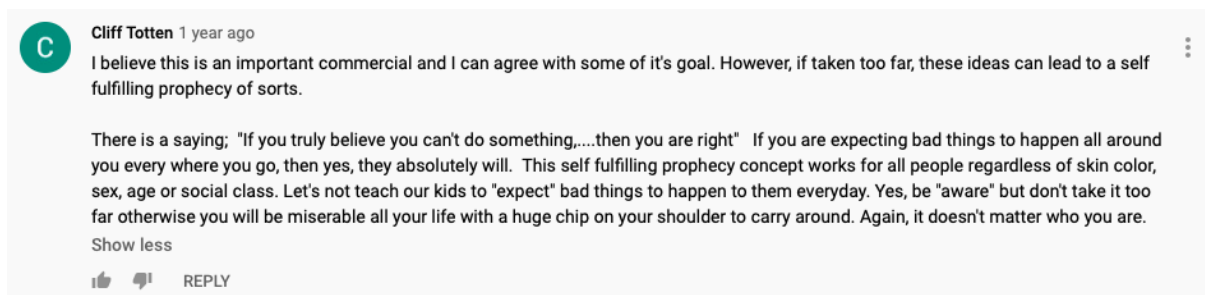


Figure 51, Source: YouTube (Canned Bommercials, 2017).

While endorsing the ad's subject matter, the subsequent readings can be categorized as negotiated since they take issue with the absence of Black fathers as has been discussed in section 5.1.2.2. The viewer in Figure 52 further states that they are "leery of Proctor and Gamble", though the specific details of the consumer's wariness about P&G are unclear.

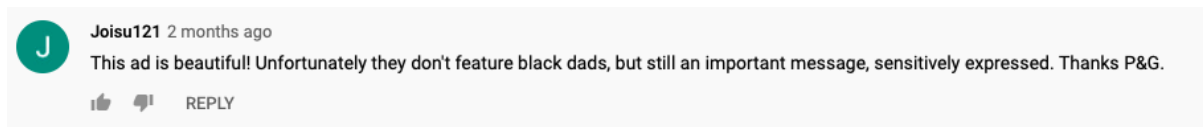


Figure 52, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommericals*, 2017).

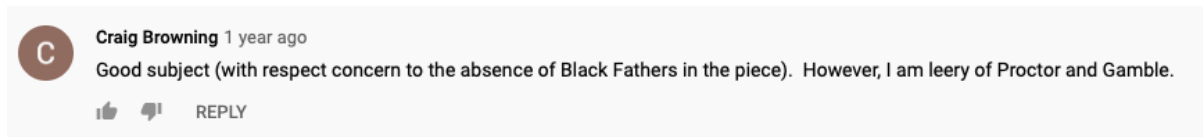


Figure 53, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommericals*, 2017).

The criticism broached in the two latter Figures is also being taken up in users' comments categorized within the oppositional reading. Yet, the users in Figure 52 and 53 maintain to describe the commercial as "beautiful" or having broached a "good subject", indicating that they approve of some of the commercial's elements.

### 5.2.2.3 Oppositional Reading

During the process of decoding, some consumers created interpretations of *The Talk*, which were developed in opposition to the message that P&G encoded. These oppositional readings offer various interpretations, which are once more thematically categorized in this chapter.

### Absence of Black Fathers

The underrepresentation of Black father figures in *The Talk* has already been touched upon in section 5.1.2.2. The user comments from *The Talk* make apparent that this aspect is also a heavily discussed topic by viewers. In this narrative, the legitimacy of the ad is thus contested by the lack of Black male representatives. For instance, the subsequent comment condemns *The Talk's* portrayal of Black men: to the consumer, the role of Black men in families is undermined by their absence, which advocates a wrongful depiction of Black fathers.

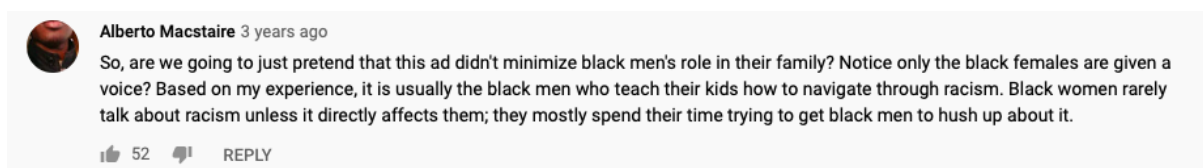


Figure 54, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommericals*, 2017).

Another individual touches upon the same issue and expresses their discontent with the ad based on the fact that no Black fathers seem to be contributing to the commercial. The extreme aversion with the ad is signaled by using the noun "hate" to describe *The Talk*.

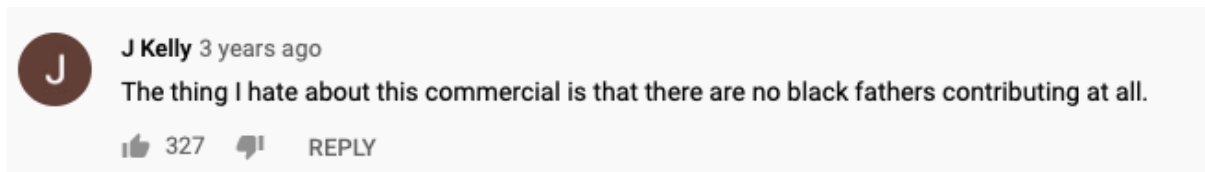


Figure 55, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

The user in the following comment further corroborates the apparent disapproval of the ad's specific portrayal of Black men.



Figure 56, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

The two sad face emojis in Figure by "David Cooper" in Figure 56 allude to the user's disapproval of having no dads portrayed. Considering the significant amount of likes most of the comments above have received, it can be argued that this opinion is shared by many other viewers.

## Creating Animosity

Besides, some consumers interpreted *The Talk* as a commercial that creates animosity between different ethnic groups. Such an understanding is underpinned by the user in Figure 57 who argues that *The Talk* is supporting the racial divide rather than resolving the latter.

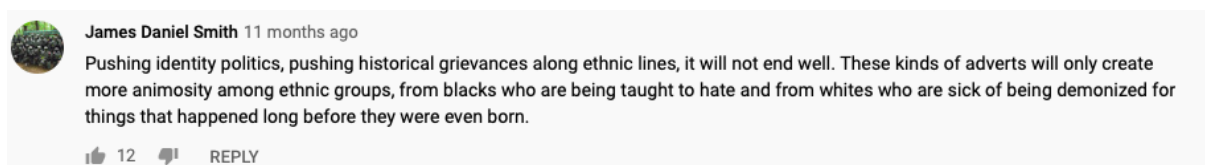


Figure 57, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

Another user argued along these lines, thanking P&G "to keep racism burning wildly in the United States" (Figure 58). The sarcasm in this statement is clearly discernible as the user

further describes this dissemination of racism as "responsible" and "exactly what a big company should do." The high number of likes (62) signals that several other users coincide with this opinion.

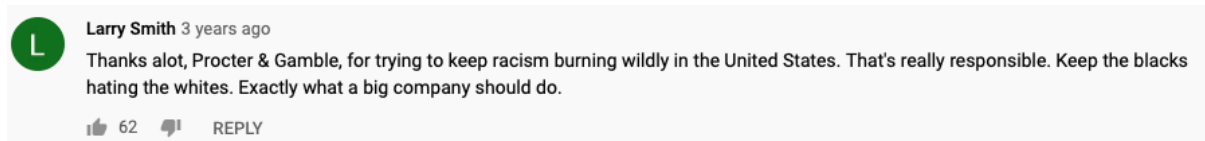


Figure 58, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

The articulation of a similar attitude is voiced in the comment below, resonating with the above-mentioned oppositional decoding of the advertisement.

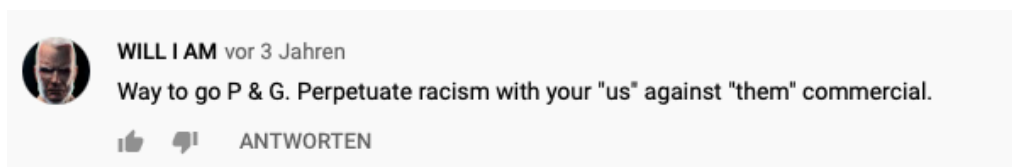


Figure 59, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

"WILL I AM" uses sarcastic elements in his comment as well as he claims that *The Talk's* perpetuation of disseminating a "us vs. them" narrative is the "way to go", inferring that P&G fails at their intent to address racism and deconstruct the latter.

## Colorblindness

Lastly, consumers touched upon an issue that has likewise been discussed in *The Look's* encoding process, i.e., colorblindness (Morris & Kahlor, 2014). The comments within this theme reflect on users' disapproval of the racial attitudes portrayed in *The Talk*. One user argues that this representation would be "harmful to the conversation about equality", as showcased in Figure 60.

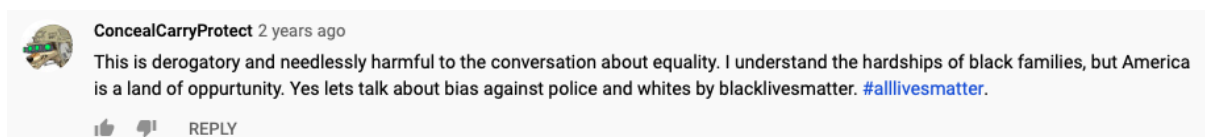


Figure 60, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

Instead of recognizing White supremacy, the hashtag #alllivesmatter by the user above implies that they hold a somewhat colorblind attitude, negating the existence of racial prejudice.

Similarly, the user belows accuses P&G of perpetuating a victimized portrayal of Blackness, contending that one should not blame skin color on bad behavior. Once again, the user renounces the persistent racial discrimination and purports that Black people need to "respect authority" in order to be treated with respect by the latter.

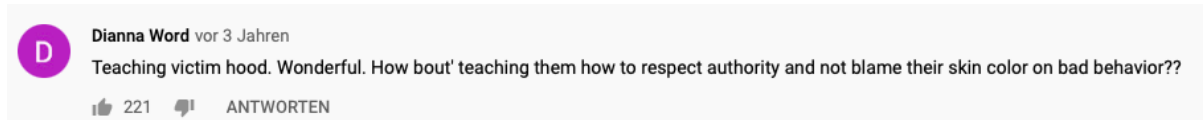


Figure 61, Source: YouTube (*Canned Bommercials*, 2017).

The comment in Figure 61 gains in importance if one considers the high number of likes that said comment obtained by users (221). This may indicate that many other consumers concur with this user's oppositional reading of the advertisement.

### 5.2.3 Discussion

The decoding section demonstrates that a significant number of users on both videos have practiced a dominant reading implying that the messages P&G aimed to convey were, at least partly, decoded successfully. To Hall (1973), "this is the ideal-typical case of 'perfectly transparent communication'" (p. 16). Thus, the data suggests that P&G's choice to portray difficult yet powerful stories about racial bias was greeted with considerable support. Consumers appreciated and applauded P&G's courage to take on these issues, claiming that their campaigns might contribute to the conversation around racial bias. Few of these viewers even declared that they would become new consumers of P&G. Besides, some of those users explicitly stated that they were White, demonstrating that the message came across both Black and White consumers. While White consumers showed empathy for what Black people go through daily, many Black users expressed the accuracy of the campaigns' representation of Blackness and how they may relate to different situations as depicted in the videos. What can be deduced from this is that, even though the commercials juxtapose Blackness in opposition to Whiteness, both Black and White consumers share a common sympathy and understanding of the campaigns. Such self-reflective and empathetic reactions signify that those decoding the

message from a dominant position acknowledge the stigmatized status of Black people in society and aim to deconstruct and make apparent the prevalent notion of White supremacy.

Yet, this analysis's findings also illuminate that not everyone decoded the commercials' messages in such a straightforward way. Albeit to a lesser extent, some consumers practiced negotiated readings of both campaigns: comments within this category acknowledged the topic that had been broached but criticized some aspects of the videos. In *The Look*, consumers were dissatisfied with the protagonist's depiction as a judge as they maintained that this would convey a wrongful image of Black people to the audience. Negotiated readings in *The Talk* were more diverse and concerned the absence of Black father figures and the representation of Blackness. As regards the latter aspect, some users criticized that the video had been reflecting a distorted view of race, contributing to the victimization of Black people in society. To Hall (1973), these misunderstandings often arise at a societal level representing "structural conflicts, contradictions and negotiations of economic, political and cultural life" (p. 16). They are, therefore, ideologically motivated. In consideration of the latter and having regard to section 4.1.2.2 on Whiteness theory, it is not surprising that P&G's commercials incited controversy among consumers. As has been illustrated in section 2.1, racial hierarchy and White supremacy are notions that have woven throughout the history of the construction of race. As a result, many consumers may not be aware of the privileged position White people enjoy over a non-White person.

This perspective is best reflected in the last section of the analysis, which revolves around users who have practiced an oppositional reading. Despite the preponderance of dominant readings, a significant number of consumers still disapproved of the encoder's messages and reproduced their own meaning of these messages. The majority of oppositional readings in both ads centered around two main topics.

The first issue consumers saw with the commercials was the apparent racial divide encouraged by P&G's constructed narratives. To some users, this depiction did only further hatred between groups. One consumer argued that "these kinds of adverts will only create more animosity between ethnic groups" (see Figure 57), while another one proposed to "show how the majority of people are unified in this, working together" rather than "keep creating that 'divide' between races" (see Figure 35). It can then be argued that the representation of Black and White people

had not resonated with the aforementioned viewers as they did not believe that this depiction would be the right approach to tackle the problem of racism.

The second issue was that some consumers simply denounced the overall representation of race, arguing that the campaigns were racist against Whites and overlooked that Whites are likewise affected by racism. The latter finding uncovers the manifestation of Whiteness that seems to be embedded in some viewers' thought structures. This demonstrates that consumers appeared to be unwilling to reflect on White privilege. Rooted within this contention is an adherence to colorblindness, which, according to Hall (2003), "can have a substantial influence on perceptions of society, racial groups and, self" (as cited in Morris & Kahlor, 2014). Among the audience arguing in such a way, some specifically noted that they were White. However, this does not imply that everyone with this standpoint may be White: According to Morris and Kahlor (2014), the belief in colorblindness can be purported by "individuals of all races" (p. 417) as a result of the dominant ideology that maintains to be socially constructed in society (Morris & Kahlor, 2014; Burton 2009a, 2009b). Although some consumers dissociated themselves from being racist (see Figures 29, 32, 33), colorblindness promotes "the unconscious execution of racism by ignoring the societal issues that maintain cultural inequalities" (Morris & Kahlor, 2014, p. 417).

Additional points of criticism concerned the scarce representation of Black males in *The Talk*, which indicates that consumers would have liked to see the representation of Blackness from an intersectional standpoint. Hence, potentially, these users would have been more appreciative of the encoder's message if they had followed an intersectional approach rather than focusing on the portrayal of Black mothers and their children. A small number also deprecated P&G's message mainly because they maintained that the company would only address these issues for economic purposes.

Although Hall's (1973) framework provides an insightful understanding of consumers' perceptions of the media, messages in social networks like YouTube circulate differently and may challenge the circuit of communication addressed by Hall (1973). In view of this thesis, it must be said that YouTube's algorithm implies that, ideally, YouTube presents viewers with videos that they are most likely to enjoy. In the case of *The Look* and *The Talk*, this could mean that users who have previously searched or watched videos about issues surrounding racial bias and cultural advertising are more likely to see P&G's campaigns proposed in their feed than

other users. The repercussion is that these users may be more likely to be fond of the topics addressed in these campaigns and thus read the messages from a dominant standpoint rather than the oppositional (Cooper, 2020).

Furthermore, the "like and comment" function on YouTube comments changes how content is circulated: comments from other users can influence how users perceive the videos they are watching. For instance, a comment elucidating on topics broached in the video can raise awareness on an issue that the individual consumer has not thought about before. This means that, at the first reading, a user might have been appreciative of P&G's ads. However, after reading critical comments on, for instance, the racial divide portrayed in both videos, the consumer might change their attitude towards these campaigns.

Clearly, the above-mentioned statements are all just eventualities. It remains unclear whether and if, to what extent, consumers have been influenced by other users' opinions and the individual algorithm on YouTube. The possibility to like and comment certainly impedes a simple, straight-forward reading of consumers' perception of P&G's messages, hence why the findings of the high amount of dominant readings should be noted in the context that these attitudes are impacted by YouTube's algorithm and the social interaction on this platform.

## **6 Conclusion**

Overall, this thesis has aimed to disclose how two commercials, i.e., *The Look* and *The Talk*, by the brand P&G represent racial identities and how consumers respond to these specific representations. The qualitative research approach implemented within the scope of a single-case study design allowed for an in-depth analysis of both commercials and led to the following conclusion:

All things considered, the first part of the analysis - the *encoding* stage - revealed that P&G addresses the pressing issues on race that remain prevalent in Western society. By employing various semiotic resources, topics such as Othering and systemic racism are broached to make apparent an ideology that constructs Whiteness as the ultimate power that determines how Blackness is often represented and perceived in the media.

Bearing in mind Fairclough's (1995) idea of discourse, the campaigns illustrate stories that showcase how a society incorporates IDFs that naturalize Whiteness as a norm. Yet, by narrating the stories from the perspective of Black people, the brand itself *denaturalizes* these IDFs by displaying how its structures appear to be embedded in society and determine the discourse around race. In openly broaching the issue of White privilege, P&G ultimately challenges the practices of power in society and thus *denormalizes* the viewer's taken-for-granted norms. This is particularly apparent in the last scene of *The Look*: previous scenes coupled with the particular choice of cinematography makes the audience assume that the Black man would take over the role of the convicted rather than being represented as a judge. This assumption may call attention to the racial bias that remains ingrained in many individuals' attitudes.

The argument outlined in the last paragraph implies that P&G's commercials partly align with the current demands emanating from the Black Lives Matter movement in the sense that their campaigns respond to the prevalent social issues related to this movement (Williams, 2020). In aiming to unveil hidden constructs around Whiteness and devoting attention to the experiences of Black people, P&G is taking on a significant role to address and consequently dismantle White supremacy.

Concurrently, there are aspects that indicate certain discrepancies from the aforementioned approach. These aspects concern the unaddressed, hidden discourses regarding the intersectional representation of race. This is not only reflected in *The Talk's* underrepresentation of Black male characters but also through other subtle cues, e.g., the lack of Black females portrayed in *The Look* and the limited significance of other social identity categories, i.e., social class, in the representation of race. Especially the representations on gender further a narrative that, still, partly rely on stereotypical depictions of social actors.

Whether these factors were perceived as hindering the effectiveness of P&G's commercials was examined in the second part of the analysis - the *decoding* stage. The framework derived from Hall's (1973) reception theory has proven to be a useful tool in analyzing how consumers have received and interpreted the messages transmitted by P&G's campaigns. It allowed for an insight into how the campaigns' representation of race is reflecting consumers' attitudes towards race. Although a majority of consumers appear to accept racial bias as urgent matters that need to be addressed to challenge prevailing notions of race, comments from the negotiated and

oppositional side made apparent that some may still (un)consciously perpetuate Whiteness as the dominant ideological construct. Other comments demonstrated that P&G's neglect to represent race in an intersectional manner was perceived as detrimental for an accurate depiction of race. What can be derived from the latter statements is that the analysis of users' attitudes towards the commercials unveils that traditional socio-cultural norms are both challenged and persisted by consumers. The YouTube comments on *The Look* and *The Talk* are thus indicative of an online community divided by different social values.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned discrepancies between consumers' understanding of the commercials, the analysis has shown that many comments still practiced a dominant reading, demonstrating that P&G's effort to align its advertising with contemporary, societal changes was met with considerable support. This leads to the final conclusion that P&G is, at least partly, implementing the concept of cultural branding, as proposed by Holt (2004). To Holt (2004), a brand performs cultural branding if they are able to construct identity myths that address socio-cultural changes, motivating individuals to "reconsider accepted ideas about themselves" (p. 9). The campaigns' focus on racial bias indicates that P&G provides identity value by addressing contemporary and significant cultural shifts in society. P&G's status as a cultural activist (and thus iconic brand) is further substantiated by the fact that their advertisements encouraged some consumers to question and re-evaluate their taken-for-granted norms. Furthermore, many viewers acknowledged the commercials' authenticity, which was emphasized by Black consumers in particular, corroborating the accuracy of P&G's depiction of racial issues.

The heated discussions surrounding both commercials illustrate that the represented topics have caused controversy among consumers. However, this does not undermine the cultural branding implemented by the company. In fact, by addressing culturally sensitive topics, the brand demonstrates fidelity in its marketing strategy, a crucial step towards becoming an iconic brand. To Holt (2004), this step implies "sacrificing broad-based popularity to stand up for this ethos" (p. 65). It can then be argued that P&G's bold approach in *The Talk* and *The Look* contributes to shifting the conversation around race in encouraging consumers to challenge their long-established norms. Although it is suggested that an intersectional approach would have possibly amplified the commercials' impact, the analysis has demonstrated that advertising can have a profound effect on consumers' attitudes, validating, once again, the significance of media as a cultural symbol.

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