

Sebastian Chapman

COMD3504

April 18, 2023

Research Paper 2: Racism in US Advertising

During the late 1800s and early 1900s soap companies started a trend of including African Americans in their advertising posters. These depictions were not positive or encouraging but rather quite racist. In the following words I will decode this advertisement for the Lautz Bro's and Co's Soap company of Buffalo, NY. The goal is to examine the components individually and how stereotypes may disrupt the meaning of this advertisement in both the time of its release and currently as well.

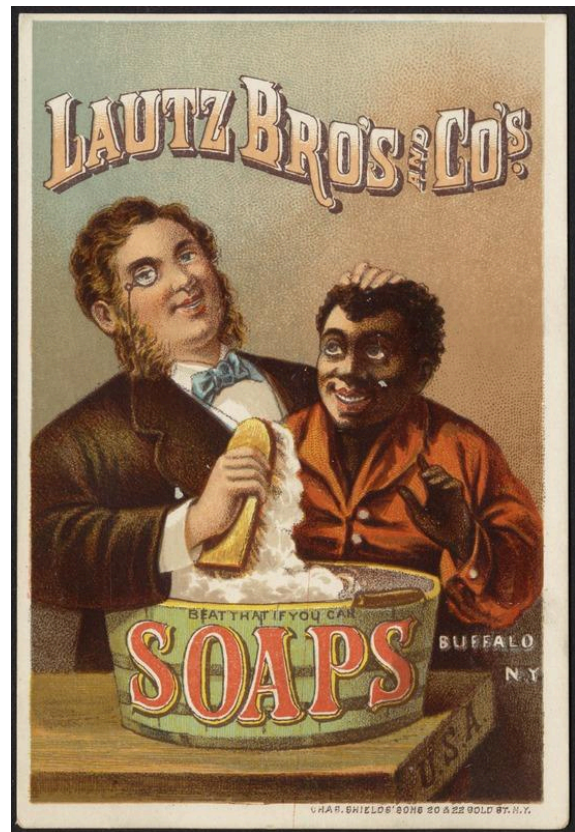


Figure 1. Lautz Bro's and Co's Soap Poster (1870-1900)

To better understand the message of this poster we must break it down first. The linguistic message is quite clear and straightforward at first glance. "The linguistic message is a denoted description that literally answers the question — what is it? Language in this case is used to purely and simply identify the essential elements of the scene and the scene itself,

guiding the readers to the intended interpretation." (Lanir). The name of the company, its place of origin, and the main product that they are advertising are all in very big and clear letters. The next linguistic element is hidden on top of the word "soaps", and it appears to be a challenge for the reader to go out and not only buy the soap but to try and achieve the same result that is depicted in the ad. This message can stand alone and be acceptable in today's ad environment because without the imagery of the poster the words can mean only a challenge. At the time of its release, it was more heavily weighed down by the racist connotation of slavery and oppression that these words would suggest that someone go and try to wash a person of color in hopes of finding white skin underneath to attest to the soap's efficacy.

The next element is the symbolic and literal messages within the image. According to Barthes, any advert contains three types of messages: a linguistic message, and two messages encoded in the image – the denoted one (the object) and the connoted, symbolic one. ("The Third Meaning by Roland Barthes"). In this instance the literal messages take a back seat because these refer to things such as the table, the bucket, and the brush; these are factual elements that represent pretty much only what they are supposed to without further thought. The symbolic messages are more compelling, and these include the white man dressed in the fancy suit and bowtie. The color of his skin and his clothes are connected to a certain perceived high social status; the monocle and groomed beard suggest that he is also educated. On the other hand, the African American subject is dressed in a very simple shirt that does not really symbolize any high social status in comparison to the suit and bowtie. The white man's hand on top of the African American's head represents dominance and oppression. Although this disparity caused no great ordeal at the time of this poster's release, it may cause more of an uprising today. The audience back then was just Caucasian people and not everyone as is most likely the case today.

Although this is not always obvious, if caught today this situation would result in very negative feedback from the public with possible boycotts as well.

The Lautz Soap poster is a clear reminder of the huge blunders that have been committed in the advertising world against people of color. It was common practice to use people of color as the antagonists in the ads of the early 1900s. The concept of white being seen as a symbol of purity is still being used for evil today, albeit not so much so in the world of commercial advertising. "The theme of purity is noticeably everywhere, but it is especially prominent in our contemporary fixation on hygiene. This may seem totally unrelated to issues of racism and classism, but in fact, the purveyors of purity draw upon the same themes of physical and moral purity that have helped produce white identity and dominance in the US." (Berthold). The symbol of the African American character as something that is dirty and an object to be washed is also highly offensive for today's standards.

In conclusion, the Lautz poster is full of racist innuendos, and negative imagery. The choices that were made were deliberate and they reflected the majority attitude on these issues at the time. An ad like this being released today would cause a great commotion and would land the Lautz company in very hot water with the POC community which are now part of their consumer market and not a caricature to place on their ads. I believe that many years from now there will be many current ads that may be perceived differently as audiences change with the times and circumstances by which they are surrounded.

Works Cited

“Lautz Bro’s and Co.’s Soaps, Buffalo, N. Y.” *Digital Commonwealth*,
www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:7m01bq19d.

“Lautz Bro’s and Co.’s Soaps, Buffalo, N. Y. ‘Established 1853.’” *Digital Commonwealth*, www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:7m01bx882.

Berthold, Dana. “Tidy Whiteness: A Genealogy of Race, Purity, and Hygiene.” *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 15, no. 1, Indiana UP, Mar. 2010, p. 1,
[doi:10.2979/ete.2010.15.1.1](https://doi.org/10.2979/ete.2010.15.1.1).

Lanir, Lesley. “Barthes’ Linguistic Messages — Anchoring and Relaying.” *Medium*, 10 Dec. 2021,
medium.com/@llanirfreelance/barthes-linguistic-messages-anchoring-and-relaying-9dc99d4c8c60#:~:text=The%20linguistic%20message%20is%20a,readers%20to%20the%20intended%20interpretation.

“The Third Meaning by Roland Barthes.” *Garage*,
garagemca.org/en/programs/publishing/the-third-meaning-by-roland-barthes.