

Introducing Colourwashing- Towards a Definition

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Abstract

Introducing Colourwashing – Towards a Definition

The Contemporary Cultural Industries (CCI) are instrumental proponents in an exponential rise in the representations of minority groups over the recent past. In many respects and vantage points, from publishing, to television, online, print and radio, this apparent paradigm shift can be characterised as an ascendancy in diversity discourse. This conference paper seeks to demonstrate the ambivalence of this cultural shift in representations and introduces into the academy the analytical concept of colourwashing. The research paper is derived from a section of a much larger body of scholarly work. Itself seeking to locate the current politics of representations in formative terms of power and agency. We engage with the current cultural/media landscape and assume that society is making virtuous headway in the march towards equality, for all. However, based upon a working hypothesis, this paper seeks to interrogate and problematise the current CCI paradigm – to expose how plurality in this configuration acts as a form of racialised governance.

Despite recognition in the literature that new modes of racialised capital flows are increasingly mapped to CCI internalised policy imperatives. Inquiry and critical discussion remain understudied aspects of this new paradigm. Further, scholarly literature is scant in providing adequate interrogation to describe discursive formations and their impact on the embodied that power seeks to over-represent. Methodologically, this paper begins with discussion regarding the hypothesis that the concept of colourwashing and the wider thesis seeks to test. While the CCI – judging from its mass communications output – suggests that the moral and economic case for diversity is aligned, this paper argues an opposite reading. Rather, that this current iteration of the CCI is complicit in reductive outcomes for those who it embodies. Furthermore, CCI output acts through hyper-racialised symbolic practices to provide cover and deflect from structural inequalities inherent in its political economy and the wider society that it mediates.

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Preamble**Slide 1**

Hello everyone, thank you Caroline and our UEL colleagues for hosting this event. Today I would like to briefly introduce the topic of colourwashing.

General Introduction-**Slide 2**

This conference paper draws from a section of my current research into representation, discourses, symbolic power and questions of agency. On screen is a list of my work, the section we will discuss is boxed in red.

On screen is a brief agenda of what we will discuss.

Slide 3**Slide 4**

We are witnessing historic changes across the UK Contemporary Cultural Industries (CCI), in terms of representation and increased diversity. Here is a stacked chart. According to the Lloyds Banking Groups "Ethnicity in Advertising" report, minority representation in advertising alone more than doubled in the three years up to 2018.

These changes are new cultural phenomena that are pertinent and novel with implications that demand critical investigation. My thesis aims to understand and situate contemporary discourses and mass communications cultural representations of minority groups. And to interrogate the politics underpinning their increased visibility across media cultures. This will be achieved via a critical reading of representative recent artefact output of the CCI paired to a set of comparative case studies that will engage with and comprehend the politics underpinning this shift. However, today I will present to you some of my current work in relation to the development of the analytical concept of colourwashing and describe to you the prior state of representations regarding minorities.

Prior debates-**Slide 5**

In terms of prior debates, it is important to provide some context here. Absence, invisibility, non-recognition and marginalisation were atypical features of the prior cultural landscape and the repetition of chosen racialised myths (Hammersley, 2003). Further, this was an arena characterised as a crisis of representation and argued as a key site for the struggle, a plural and complex fight for the fair distribution of representative symbolic capital. This is important. For representative symbolic capital is itself the substance for the goals of justice and democracy across the political, educational and material employment spheres of social life (Jay, 1994).

Where we are now-**Slide 6**

Empirically, a new epistemology of race relations has been created before our eyes and for our public consumption, one devoid of complexity, in which we all have 'equal' agency – a panacea to the politics of representation within culturally signifying spaces. Culturally, this contemporary era is understood to be a radically distinctive departure period. One that encompasses a quite different aesthetic in the ordering of representations of minorities (Hall, 1993). The shift is so recent, accelerated, and ongoing, that the new paradigm has insufficiently been documented and its facets challenged critically (González-Lesser, Hall, & Hughey, 2020). Furthermore, we can frame this politically and in terms of events. As a society, specific focus was brought to the question of minority

representation within the public sphere post a series of racialised often horrifically violent, broadcast incidents with wider societal implications.

Problems with current configuration-

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However, this contemporaneous increase in representation is deeply problematic and advances several serious regressive issues that undermine this superficially optimistic indicator of progress and by extension ignores and confirms wider systemic discriminatory structures. As in the past, the problem of either a lack of representation or the current model is dependent upon the identical logics of the system. My thesis argues, this leads to the same dead-end racialised discourses with the outcomes for those racialised remaining unchanging.

Racialisation is a complex process, posited by Stuart Hall (1993) and is used to reproduce racialised discourses and processes in a dialogical self-affirming relationship. It is the hypothesised contention of this research and the basis of my critique, that the changes to hyper-representation are quantitative only and do not carry through to the aesthetics as textually implied, or to the institutions at key positions that produce the media artefacts – they are indicative of colourwashing. A type of sophistry.

Indeed, there is documented evidence to suggest that increased representation is disconnected from comparative levels of prosperity and employment. Data from the Office for National Statistics, 2019, and more recent data from the Department for Work and Pensions, 2022, confirm this.¹ In fact, the assessment seems to run counter to the logic of the representations – rendering this an area of wider societal concern. This is relevant, for if society is to successfully progress to a greater participation model, meaning inclusion and equality of opportunity for all, then interrogation of what appears to be visible progress is essential.

Furthermore, and critically, those media artefacts (hailed as progress) are blindly, subtly, and in some examples deliberately, reinforcing and reproducing contentious and limiting ways-of-being, that draw upon racialised discourses that cause harms within the communities that they seek to [over]-represent. Thus, of urgent need are sophisticated critiques required to answer these axiomatic, perpetuated and incorrect narratives, in terms of inquiry and for reasons of social democracy, inclusion, accuracy, and justice.

Towards a definition of colourwashing-

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This section of the paper works towards a critical, cultural analytical definition of the concept of ‘colourwashing’. Colourwashing as a distinct term does not feature within the literature around questions of representation both within earlier works (c.f. Alexander, 1994) or within later papers (Smith, 2013; Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014). It is also absent in current research debates (Hubbard, 2022), it remains undefined as a term, a critical descriptive term, a launched concept that is novel in its application. Dumas (2016) observes that much research within the area of representation is skewed towards the field of education and the impact of racial signifying practices

¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/ethnicitypaygapsingreatbritain/2019>. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment/latest#by-ethnicity>.

and the presumed consequences on educational discourse. Which to my mind, negates the wider picture and locates a large proportion of critical investigation to a single sphere of interest (see, Gulson, Leonardo & Gillborn, 2016). This highlights the need for an accurate encompassing descriptive that will permit a more interconnected approach to understanding the contemporary field (Lim, 2016). The critical application, conceptualisation and the understanding underpinning my creation of the term began to crystallise over a somewhat lengthy period and was brought to focus within the politically polemical work of Sarah Schulman (2012). Schulman is noted for studies and literature within the arena of queer politics, it is through this work that she coined and deployed the notion of 'pinkwashing' and the conceptual framework that underpins this critique. Engaging with this work was very much a eureka moment, finding a word that encapsulated the new axioms of representation in which we find ourselves. In comprehension, it was then a short leap to acknowledge that this notion of the word captured by Schulman could be redeployed to work with race, racial contemporary politics and representation. Through a process of substantiation, substituting 'pink' for 'colour' and thus realising with this simple word change, that this now new word, this term, would encompass entirely the conversations, thoughts and ideas; indeed, the landscape that this thesis is seeking to understand and engage with. This new term colourwashing affords contemplation; space is provided to make sense of the multifarious images, discourses, narratives and representations under critical investigation as mass communications within our shared contemporary environment – our habitus.

Linguistically, no official and critical redeployment of the term is in place currently (OED, 2023).

We can assume our learned audiences' familiarity with the term whitewash, which is to say an act of glossing over, covering up and its applicable political connotations (OED, 2010; 2023). Following this line of thought in a linear direction and closely associated sense, the word 'pinkwashing' is strongly related to the word 'greenwashing', that is itself interrelated to and modelled upon the term 'whitewash', a compound word. The only differential for these terms is within the sectors, areas, modes and aspects of contemporary culture that they are deployed as a framework to engage with. Namely, environmentalism, queer politics, and representational racialised politics, respectively. All the described words feature an embedded critique composed of a political facet and a tacit acknowledgement of a process infused with discursive and signifying hierarchical power - the antithesis of what they purport to be.

Why do we need this term? -

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We need this conceptual term. For it is through this novel re-articulated term and its reworking, we can begin to comprehend, discern and examine the concepts, cultural practices, historical politics, material political economy processes, methodologies and policies associated with accounting for the over-representation of racialised bodies within contemporary signifying media. Furthermore, the term acts as a facilitator to allow us to explore the co-adoption of minority identities and minority embodiments by media outlets and cultural artefact creators. The term itself affords us a neat and tidy captioned word to discern complex discourses informing representation for the discreet purposes of storytelling, market capture, sales; and of critical importance, to advance for those engaging in colourwashing both subcultural and cultural capital (Thornton, 1995), a soft power and legitimacy (Thorsby, 1999).

By deploying colourwashing in practice, this research will investigate to what extent those depicted are objectified in a manner not quite seen before, and how bodies are selected, racialised and represented to fulfil a capital imperative. Simply put, the organisation, company, corporation or media outlet is engaging in the practice to promote within its output, minorities to signify to society (and itself), that it is decent, equitable, inclusive of difference. If only it were that simple or indeed true. The employment numbers and representations tell us a different story.

Further, we could postulate that in the overwhelming instance, employing these colourwashing methods absolves the creator of the much more complex and difficult work of building equality of opportunity and outcome within their own organisations and entities. Racialised bodies are selected and depicted in a performative mockery of inclusion. Colourwashing therefore represents a type of 'digital happy pill' that we are encouraged to take on face value without rigorous and critical investigation or indeed complaint.

End thoughts-

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To conclude. Colourwashing allows us to postulate a further objective of this research which is to rigorously examine, investigate and answer a set of questions. To briefly summarise those as a hypothesis here, against this new cultural and mass communications landscape of extremely high levels of representation what current form does contemporary representation of minority communities take in this moment? What codes, rhetorical devices and signifiers are recreated, adopted, modified, and reinterpreted for the audience? Are there questions of agency and counter-hegemony and opportunity to consider?

Thank you for your attention.

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