Selling Diversity: The Politics of Representation in Global Advertising

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ABSTRACT

This study meticulously examines the racial and cultural ramifications associated with Thailand's 2013 Dunkin' Donuts "Charcoal Donut" advertisement, which incited international indignation due to its visual resemblance to blackface. This study utilizes Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the visual representation of race and identity, and the ways in which these representations either uphold or challenge dominant social constructs. Data were obtained from the advertisements and augmented by secondary sources, including international news reports, scholarly analyses, and audience reactions on social media. The analysis shows that the advertising uses language that is both inclusive and nationalistic, but its visual design focuses on light-skinned images and follows traditional Thai beauty standards for colourists. Audience views show a difference between how people in different cultures saw the picture: some thought it was stylish or original, while others thought it was racist because it used blackface. At the macro social practice level, the advertisement reinforces the concept of "Thainess," which promotes unity and a shared identity while obscuring the systemic disadvantages experienced by ethnic minorities. The study contributes to the existing academic discourse on global advertising by illustrating how multicultural narratives are selectively adapted to align with local contexts, thereby negotiating and normalizing prevailing power dynamics. It emphasizes the importance of culturally informed and ethically sound representation methods in international marketing.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis; Representation of race; Colorism; Global advertising; Thainess ideology; Media ideology and identity.

INTRODUCTION

People have always thought of advertising as a powerful cultural force that can change how people think about their identity, social values, and ties to the rest of the world. As brands go global, it becomes harder to come up with messages that will appeal to a wide range of people. Modern international advertising requires not only linguistic translation but also cultural negotiation, as campaigns must align with both global branding strategies and local societal norms. Researchers such as Camphouse (2025) and Team (2025) assert that the global marketplace has intensified the necessity for corporations to deliver promotional content that is culturally sensitive, visually appealing, and strategically adaptable to diverse markets. But these efforts often run into problems when local stories about race, identity, and inclusion don't match up with bigger global stories.

A good example of this problem happened in 2013 when Dunkin' Donuts Thailand ran an ad campaign for its new "Charcoal Donut." The ad showed a woman with a beehive hairstyle from the 1950s putting on dark skin makeup and bright pink lipstick while showing off the main product. The picture had the phrase "Break every rule of deliciousness" next to it. Responses from around the world came right away and were mostly negative. Many people in the Western media called the campaign "bizarre and racist" because the images were so close to blackface (Gabbatt, 2018; CBS News, 2013). Blackface is fundamentally linked to racial stereotyping and dehumanization in American history and culture, originating from 19th-century minstrel performances exemplified by the "Jim Crow" caricature (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History &

Culture, n.d.). These historical connections shape contemporary perspectives, particularly in Western societies where blackface is unequivocally linked to bias and racial violence.

Still, the symbolic meaning of "blackness" in Thai culture is very different. In Thailand, black is not usually associated with race like it is in Western countries. Instead, it may be seen as a neutral colour that stands for aggressiveness, uniqueness, or business traits like charcoal flavouring. Thai audiences and local media often reacted to the Dunkin' Donuts ads with interest instead of anger, praising their creative use of visuals and unique style. CBS News (2013) and Lopez (2013) said that Thailand has a history of using similar images in commercial branding, like the "Black Man" home goods mascot. Nadim Salhani, the CEO of Dunkin' Donuts Thailand, called Western criticism "paranoid American thinking" and said that using the colour black in marketing is not racist (Lopez, 2013).

These different answers show the main problem with international advertising: the clash between universal standards for how to show race and local cultural contexts that interpret pictures in different ways. Western audiences viewed the advertisement through the prism of historical trauma linked to blackface and racial caricature, while numerous Thai viewers perceived it as visually striking, unconventional, and detached from racial politics. This difference shows how important cultural context is for making meaning and interpreting things. This is a main focus of representation researchers like Hall (2020), who says that media texts don't just reflect reality; they also shape meaning through certain ideological frameworks.

The Dunkin' Donuts ads go beyond cultural interpretation and deal with deep social issues in Thailand, especially when it comes to beauty standards and racialized aesthetics. Research shows that Thai ads often show people with lighter skin tones, which are seen as modern, beautiful, and wealthy (Rojratanakiat & Chantagul, 2022). The emphasis on fair skin in Thai media exemplifies persistent colourism rather than race as conceptualized in a Western framework. These aesthetic hierarchies, while not always tied to race, still keep power imbalances and social divisions going. So, even though the ads may not have meant to use blackface, the way they chose to show things still fits into a culture that values whiteness and pushes darker skin tones to the side.

Scholarly discussions regarding international advertising underscore the increasing imperative for brands to promote diversity and ethical representation. Consumers, especially younger ones, are demanding more marketing content that accurately reflects different identities and respects cultural context (Campbell, 2023; Eisend, 2023). Research also shows that multinational campaigns still have problems with tokenism, performative diversity, and stereotypical representations (Rößner & Eisend, 2023). These trends show that even though surface-level diversity has increased, the basic power structures that control representation have mostly stayed the same. Additionally, the uniformity within advertising production teams—often consisting of majority groups—results in blind spots and unintentional biases in campaign design (Association of National Advertisers [ANA], 2024).

Audience responses to advertising reveal substantial variations in interpretation and meaning construction. Kucher (2025) notes that people are more likely to respond positively to ads that accurately reflect their cultural identity. On the other hand, ads that are wrong or offensive could hurt trust and brand credibility. This dynamic is heightened in digital public spheres, where audiences actively negotiate, challenge, and reinterpret media messages. The Dunkin' Donuts case shows that Thai and foreign audiences had very different ideas about what it meant, which shows how cultural background, media literacy, and social awareness affect how people interpret things.

This research utilizes Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the representational, discursive, and ideological dimensions of the Dunkin' Donuts "Charcoal Donut" advertisement. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is particularly suitable for this study as it investigates the interaction between linguistic and visual elements and their connection to social structures and power relations. Fairclough emphasizes the connection between text, discursive practice, and social practice, allowing scholars to articulate how micro-level representations influence macro-level ideologies. CDA provides a framework for understanding how seemingly neutral promotional content can reinforce cultural hierarchies, engage in identity

politics, and perpetuate dominant ideologies such as nationalism or colourism in the context of global advertising.

This research investigates the visual construction of race and identity in advertising (Research Question 1) and the implications of these representational decisions on broader social and ideological meanings in both Thai and global contexts (Research Question 2). The research elucidates the interaction between local cultural logics and global racial discourses by situating the advertising within the frameworks of multiculturalism, national identity, and global branding.

This study asserts that the Dunkin' Donuts advertisement represents more than a mere commercial misstep; it exemplifies the cultural politics of representation that arise at the convergence of global and local interpretive frameworks. The research illustrates, through Critical Discourse Analysis, the ways in which visual and verbal methodologies sustain entrenched power structures while simultaneously enabling audience-driven reinterpretation and resistance. This study contributes to wider discussions about how to portray people ethically, be sensitive to different cultures, and negotiate different ideas in global advertising.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic discourse on international advertising has increasingly emphasised issues of race, identity, and representation, especially as globalisation amplifies the dissemination of images across cultural and political borders. Advertising has changed from being just a way for businesses to make money to a major cultural conversation that affects how people see themselves, how they build their identities, and what they believe. When international companies enter different markets, they have to balance the needs of their global branding strategy with the needs of the local culture. This literature review brings together research on how global advertising changes, how race and colour are portrayed, how audiences interpret things, and how ideologies are discussed. It puts the current study in the context of established theoretical frameworks that look at how meaning is created, challenged, and normalised in cross-cultural advertising contexts.

Globalisation has significantly altered the dynamics of advertising production and consumption. People today don't just passively take in media; they actively think about, negotiate, and challenge ads based on what they know about their culture, history, and social status. Campbell (2023) asserts that global consumers are increasingly insisting that advertising demonstrate social responsibility, cultural sensitivity, and ethical awareness, particularly regarding race and diversity. This expectation is part of larger social and political movements that have made people more aware of how media companies represent different groups. At the same time, brands have to deal with the problem of keeping a consistent global character while making ads that fit in with local cultures. Eisend (2023) calls this conflict the "glocal paradox," which means that advertising has to find a balance between being relevant to local audiences and being the same everywhere. While adaptation facilitates corporate engagement with specific cultural contexts, it simultaneously presents risks of misinterpretation, cultural appropriation, or symbolic offence when images circulate beyond their intended audiences.

The complexity of cross-cultural interpretation is particularly pronounced in racialised imagery. Race has been historically conceptualised as a socially constructed category linked to observable phenotypic characteristics, including skin colour, hair texture, and facial features. In Western societies, racial iconography is deeply rooted in the history of colonisation, slavery, and systemic discrimination. Blackface, which started in minstrel shows in the 1800s, was used to make fun of and dehumanise African Americans, which helped keep racial hierarchies in place and made exclusion seem normal (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.). Historical legacies continue to shape contemporary Western interpretations of visual representations of individuals with darker skin tones, rendering such imagery highly sensitive and politically contentious.

Nonetheless, racial symbolism is not universally constructed or interpreted. In many Asian cultures, like Thailand, the colour black does not automatically mean a person's race like it does in Western countries. Instead, it might serve as a symbol for product features, modernity, boldness, or new ideas. According to CBS News (2013) and Lopez (2013), Thai commercial culture has long used dark imagery without causing any

problems at home. This shows a unique semiotic history. This difference supports Hall's (2020) idea that representation is not just a mirror of reality, but a cultural practice that creates meaning. Images derive meaning from the sociocultural contexts in which they are interpreted, making global advertising particularly susceptible to varied interpretations when visual symbols transcend cultural boundaries.

While race is a central theme in Western discourse, the concept of colourism provides a more precise analytical framework for understanding visual hierarchy in various Asian nations. Colourism is the practice of giving lighter skin tones more attention than darker ones within the same racial or ethnic group. It is often linked to ideas of beauty, social status, and modern ideals. Research on Thai media consistently demonstrates a preference for lighter-skinned representations, reinforcing aesthetic hierarchies that associate fairness with beauty and success (Rojratanakiat & Chantagul, 2022). These hierarchies operate independently of Western racial classifications while perpetuating structural inequalities by marginalising individuals with darker complexions and indigenous populations. When looking at ads from non-Western cultures, it's important to tell the difference between racism and colourism. Mixing the two can make it hard to see how power works in the local culture.

Despite the growing awareness of diversity and inclusion in advertising, empirical research indicates that advancements in representation remain limited. Rößner and Eisend (2023), in their longitudinal study of advertising content, found that while the representation of minorities has increased in number, it often remains superficial, stereotypical, or subordinate. This phenomenon, referred to as "performative diversity," signifies the strategic employment of varied imagery lacking substantive engagement with systemic injustice. Eisend (2023) also says that businesses might use inclusive aesthetics to make their image better while avoiding bigger problems with social norms. These strategies allow advertising to communicate progressiveness while maintaining existing hierarchies, transforming diversity into a marketable visual asset rather than a genuine commitment to equity.

The lasting nature of representational constraints is further shaped by the organisational structures within the advertising industry. The Association of National Advertisers (ANA, 2024) says that creative teams, especially those that make decisions, often lack diversity, which makes it hard to come up with new ideas for campaigns. Uniformity among producers can lead to cultural blind spots, increasing the likelihood of stereotyping or insensitivity in visual and narrative choices. These organisational dynamics influence not only the individuals depicted in advertising but also the construction and assessment of identities. In global campaigns, these differences can make it harder to get the message across to the right people, especially if the cultural assumptions that go into making the ads are not looked into.

To figure out how advertising affects society, it's important to know how the audience reacts. Kucher (2025) contends that consumers respond more positively to advertisements that align with their cultural identities and personal experiences, while representations considered inappropriate or offensive may undermine brand trust and credibility. The identical visual features may provoke varied reactions among audiences owing to disparities in historical memory, cultural standards, and media literacy. This diversity is especially pronounced in global advertising, where local and international audiences perceive visuals through distinct ideological lenses. The varied reactions to the Dunkin' Doughnuts "Charcoal Doughnut" campaign, ranging from local approval to global disapproval, illustrate the significant impact of cultural context on meaning-making processes.

Digital media contexts intensify these dynamics by providing platforms for audiences to publicly negotiate and contest advertising messages. Social media discourse enables users to articulate divergent interpretations, challenge dominant narratives, and expose ideological conflicts embedded in commercial texts. Fairclough's (1995) concept of discourse as a battleground is especially relevant, as meaning emerges from the interaction of producers, texts, and audiences. Online reactions to controversial ads show both personal views and larger social stories that include different value systems. In the case of Dunkin' Doughnuts, the global outrage was mostly because of its ties to blackface in the past. Thai reactions were more complicated, showing that different cultures have different ways of understanding visual symbols.

In Thailand, advertising representations are intricately connected to the concept of "Thainess," a cultural construct that emphasises national unity, harmony, and collective identity. Media portrayals of diversity often operate within this framework, acknowledging differences only insofar as they reinforce a cohesive national narrative. Hall (2020) asserts that these representational strategies function ideologically by determining what is displayed and what is obscured. Thai advertising may use multicultural images to show that there is some variety on the surface, but it often ignores the deeper structural inequalities that ethnic minorities face. Inclusion, therefore, takes on a symbolic role instead of a revolutionary one, putting branding interests ahead of social equality.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers an extensive analytical framework for scrutinising these representational processes. Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Model posits that discourse operates simultaneously at textual, discursive, and social levels, enabling the examination of the interplay between linguistic and visual elements and overarching ideological frameworks. CDA is particularly suitable for cross-cultural advertising research as it examines both micro-level representational choices and macro-level power structures. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) elucidates the production, dissemination, and interpretation of advertisements, illustrating how commercial texts enable the normalisation of dominant ideologies, including nationalism, colourism, and performative diversity.

The existing body of literature suggests that advertising does not merely reflect social reality; rather, it actively shapes cultural knowledge and identity politics. Global advertising campaigns operate at the intersection of local cultural norms and transnational narratives, making them sites of ideological discourse and potential conflict. The Dunkin' Doughnuts "Charcoal Doughnut" advertisement exemplifies these complexities, as its visual strategies are interpreted differently across cultural contexts, revealing tensions among race, colourism, and national identity. This study underscores the imperative of critically examining the adaptation, circulation, and challenges of global advertisements across diverse sociocultural contexts.

This literature review integrates research on globalisation, representation, audience reception, and discourse theory to provide a conceptual framework for analysing the ideological ramifications of the Dunkin' Doughnuts advertisement. It stresses how important it is to tell the difference between racial and colourist frameworks, recognise the audience's role in making meaning, and put advertising texts in the context of bigger power dynamics. This underscores the importance of Critical Discourse Analysis as a means of clarifying the cultural politics of representation in an increasingly interconnected media landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative methodology grounded in Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the portrayal of race, colourism, and national identity in the 2013 Dunkin' Doughnuts Thailand "Charcoal Donut" advertisement. CDA is particularly appropriate for this methodology as it frames discourse as a social phenomenon that both reflects and sustains power relations embedded in cultural and institutional frameworks (Fairclough, 1995). Advertising, as a multifaceted and ideologically laden form of communication, functions not only to promote products but also to propagate values, normalise social hierarchies, and shape public perceptions of identity. This methodological approach enables a critical examination of how visual and verbal choices in advertising participate in overarching ideological conflicts at the intersection of global branding and local cultural contexts.

The analytical framework is founded on Fairclough's tripartite paradigm, which examines discourse through the dimensions of text, discursive practice, and social practice. These dimensions are viewed as logically interconnected rather than sequential, enabling a thorough elucidation of meaning-making processes. The paradigm facilitates the transition from micro-level semiotic elements to macro-level ideological constructs, making it especially suitable for cross-cultural advertising studies where meanings are contested across sociocultural boundaries. This research utilises a versatile framework to examine the multimodal aspects of advertising, recognising that meaning is co-constructed through the interaction of visual imagery, linguistic components, and audience interpretation.

The primary data for the study consists of the Dunkin' Doughnuts Thailand "Charcoal Doughnut" advertisement released in 2013. This advertisement was selected via purposive sampling due to its considerable public visibility and the international controversy it incited regarding racial representation. The campaign offers a conceptually significant opportunity to analyse the unique operation of visual symbolism in various cultural contexts and the recontextualization of global advertising texts upon their distribution beyond their original locale. The research situates the advertisement within a comprehensive discursive framework shaped by media commentary and audience engagement, rather than perceiving it as an isolated artefact.

The study incorporates secondary data, including global and local news articles, opinion pieces, and publicly available audience feedback from digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), to enhance contextual understanding and enrich analytical insight. The sources were selected based on their relevance to the advertising and their impact on public discourse regarding the campaign. International media coverage clarified Western interpretive frameworks influenced by historical discourses of race and blackface, whereas Thai media responses reflected local aesthetic norms and narratives of national identity. Audience comments were included to show how different people interpret things and how those interpretations were negotiated, challenged, or made normal by different social actors.

The analytical process involved a thorough scrutiny of the advertisement's visual and verbal characteristics, informed by the principles of multimodal discourse analysis. We looked at visual elements like skin tone, colour contrast, lighting, facial expression, posture, styling, spatial arrangement, and compositional hierarchy to see how aesthetic choices affected the creation of identity and difference. The arrangement of lighter and darker skin tones in the visual composition and how these choices fit with Thai media culture's beauty standards were given special attention. We looked at linguistic elements like slogans and written signs that promote unity and national identity to see how they fit into the bigger picture, especially since inclusive language can hide social differences.

The study focused on the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of advertising across diverse cultural contexts at the level of discursive practice. Media narratives were scrutinised to identify dominant discursive frameworks, such as the celebration of innovation, the defence of cultural identity, and the condemnation of racial insensitivity. Thematic analysis of audience responses was employed to discern recurring interpretative patterns, including support, critique, humour, indifference, and moral outrage. This part of the analysis showed how cultural context, historical memory, and social consciousness affect how we interpret things. It showed that meaning is not fixed in the text, but comes from the interaction between the creators and the listeners. The simultaneous existence of diverse interpretations illustrates what Fairclough refers to as discursive struggle, wherein various meanings concurrently circulate and contest one another.

The analysis placed the advertisement within the broader ideological frameworks existing in Thai society and the global advertising culture. The study centred on the notion of "Thainess," an ideological framework that emphasises harmony, unity, and a shared national identity. The study examined the congruence of the advertisement's visual and linguistic strategies with this ideology by representing diversity in symbolic and depoliticised ways that enhanced national unity while sidelining structural inequities. The study looked at how the campaign reflected global corporate stories that say diversity is good for business, showing that inclusivity can be a marketable quality instead of a true commitment to fairness. The analysis identified a correlation between representational choices and overarching societal norms and institutional practices, linking micro-level semiotic elements to macro-level power dynamics.

To ensure analytical rigour, triangulation was utilised across various data sources, including the advertisement, media discourse, and audience feedback. The analysis's reliability was strengthened by the fact that different sources all had the same themes of unity, beauty standards, colour symbolism, and racial sensitivity. The research utilises a reflexive methodology, acknowledging the interpretative nature of Critical Discourse Analysis and the researcher's role in influencing analytical interpretations. The analysis prioritises transparency and theoretical consistency over the pursuit of objectivity in a positivist framework.

Ethical concerns were addressed through careful handling of publicly available data. The comments from the audience were made anonymous, and only the parts that were relevant to the study questions were included.

The study avoided reinforcing harmful stereotypes or sensationalising racialised material, tackling challenging topics with critical insight and cultural awareness. The study relied exclusively on secondary data and did not involve direct interaction with human subjects, thereby mitigating concerns regarding informed consent, while still conforming to ethical standards for qualitative research.

The study's limitations stem from its focus on a single advertising example and its reliance on secondary data. Consequently, the results are not intended to be statistically generalisable. The case is considered analytically enlightening, offering insights into the overarching dynamics of representation in global advertising. The method focused on visual and linguistic elements, neglecting other multimodal factors such as music, sound, and gesture. The articulated limitations present prospective pathways for future research, which may employ comparative methodologies, incorporate additional multimodal elements, or directly engage advertising professionals and marginalised communities to further examine production processes and lived experiences.

This analytical framework enables a comprehensive and contextually nuanced examination of advertising as a site of ideological negotiation. By integrating textual, discursive, and social analyses within Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the study establishes a robust foundation for investigating the cultural politics of representation in global advertising and for understanding how meanings are constructed, contested, and normalised across cultural boundaries.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the Critical Discourse Analysis of the 2013 Dunkin' Doughnuts Thailand "Charcoal Donut" advertisement, concentrating on the visual and linguistic representations of race, colourism, and national identity, and their resultant ideological ramifications. Employing Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, the results demonstrate that the advertising simultaneously promotes narratives of unity and inclusivity while reinforcing hierarchical visual standards rooted in colourism and national ideology. Audience interpretations demonstrate that the meanings attributed to the campaign differ significantly across cultural contexts, highlighting the instability of representation in global advertising.

The ads mostly use colour symbolism and visual composition to get their message across. The pictures are artistically refined, using warm lighting, stylised poses, and pleasing compositions to create a feeling of community and celebration. These graphic choices help the brand show that it is aware of and includes different cultures. However, a thorough examination of compositional hierarchy reveals a subtle but enduring bias towards lighter skin tones. People with lighter skin tones are more prominently featured in the frame, often in the centre or foreground, while people with darker skin tones are either pushed to the side or stylised in ways that make them less connected to their physical identity. This graphic hierarchy shows how Thai media culture tends to favour lighter skin, which is often associated with beauty, modernity, and higher social status.

The difference between inclusive language and a hierarchical visual structure shows how colourism works in commercial photography. Darker skin is shown not as a group of people, but as an aesthetic effect that goes along with originality, taste, or visual contrast. In this context, colour functions symbolically rather than representationally, emphasising the concept that lighter skin remains the unmarked standard against which differences are evaluated. These results support current research on Thai advertising practices, showing that colourist hierarchies still exist even in campaigns that seem to celebrate diversity. The visual design gives the impression of being inclusive, but it actually keeps differences that favour certain looks over others.

Linguistic parts make this stress even worse. Slogans that promote unity and a shared national identity say that all citizens are part of one national community and that diversity is peaceful and without problems. The language paints a perfect picture of national unity, suggesting that differences in ethnicity and culture disappear when people share a common identity. Even though these statements seem general, they still serve an ideological purpose by hiding socioeconomic inequalities. The ad shows unity as a current reality instead of a goal, which normalises social peace and downplays the experiences of communities that are left out. This finding supports Hall's claim that representation actively shapes meaning by deciding which facts are highlighted and which ones are hidden.

The results show how meaning is made through production, circulation, and interpretation at the level of discursive practice. The campaign was widely spread through many channels, such as TV, print, and digital media, so that people from both the US and other countries could get involved. Most Thai media coverage of the ad focused on how new and visually appealing it was, emphasising its modern look and festive tone. These opinions are in line with the dominant national stories that stress unity, creativity, and pride in one's culture. Most people saw the ads as a good way to build a brand, not as a place for intellectual debate.

In Thailand, people had a wide range of reactions to the audience, from strong support to quiet criticism. Many people praised the ad for its creativity and visual appeal, seeing the images as art rather than as a racial issue. Some Thai people saw that the characters looked different, but they didn't think these representations had any political meaning. Some offered nuanced critiques, noting that while diversity was visually suggested, it remained superficial and failed to authentically represent marginalised ethnic groups, including indigenous or minority cultures. These responses indicate that although the advertisement largely adhered to dominant cultural standards, it was not entirely immune to scrutiny.

On the other hand, people from other countries, especially Western ones, were very angry about it. People who saw the darker skin and stylised image thought of blackface in a historical context, connecting the image to racial caricature and dehumanisation. Western media coverage called the campaign racially inappropriate and pointed out how it was similar to tactics used in the past to oppress people. The interpretations spread quickly through international news outlets and social media, turning the ad into a symbol of racial conflict. The significant divergence between Thai and Western interpretations underscores the culturally contingent nature of meaning construction and illustrates how global dissemination exposes advertisements to contradictory discursive frameworks.

These different interpretations show what Fairclough calls "discursive struggle," which means that meanings are always being fought over by different social actors. Thai audiences primarily engaged with the campaign through local aesthetics and national contexts, while Western audiences perceived the same imagery as objectionable, invoking a racialised history. The commercial became a site of ideological conflict, illustrating how global advertising texts are recontextualised as they cross cultural boundaries. This discovery highlights the limitations of advertiser influence on meaning and demonstrates how globalisation intensifies the potential for representational conflict.

The results show that the ad reinforces the dominant ideological frameworks in Thai culture, especially the idea of "Thainess." This worldview emphasises unity, harmony, and collective identity, often depicting difference as symbolic rather than significant. The ad brings people of different looks together in an appealing way and uses words that are welcoming to everyone, which fits with national stories that praise diversity but don't address inequality. Difference is acknowledged only to the extent that it reinforces a unified national identity, thereby concealing systemic inequalities.

When looking at identities that are missing or not very important, the ideological role is most clear. The poster hints at diversity, but it doesn't clearly show ethnic minorities who face systemic discrimination in Thai society. Their absence indicates a selective representation strategy that prioritises aesthetic harmony over social realism. Hall calls this the "politics of representation," and it happens when inclusion works through controlled visibility that supports existing stories instead of challenging them.

The results also show how the campaign fits in with global advertising trends that see diversity as a marketable asset. Multinational brands are increasingly employing inclusive imagery to exhibit ethical awareness and social responsibility. However, as this example shows, these kinds of strategies often stay shallow, showing off visual diversity while keeping existing inequalities. The Dunkin' Doughnuts ad is a good example of this trend because it uses diversity as a symbol while still promoting colourist standards and national ideology. Inclusivity functions as a branding strategy rather than a transformative movement.

The results clearly show the difference between racial rhetoric and colourist discourse, which helps us understand how different situations can lead to different interpretations. From a Western perspective, the controversy surrounding the advertisement is rooted in racial discourse, where darker skin tones evoke

connotations of blackface and racial violence. In Thailand, images mostly work within a colourist aesthetic framework, where skin tone is more about beauty, originality, or style than race. This difference is important for understanding why people reacted to the ad in different ways. The findings demonstrate that, despite the advertising not being designed with racist intent, its global distribution provoked racial connotations that extended beyond the local context.

The study indicates that the advertisement's representational approach ultimately preserves rather than disrupts existing power dynamics. The marketing portrays diversity as visually appealing and socially acceptable, thereby circumventing the scrutiny of disparities linked to ethnicity, class, and skin tone. The combination of inclusive discourse and hierarchical aesthetics shows how advertising can promote progressive values while also supporting reactionary norms. This difference is important to the results and shows how complicated the ideas behind global advertising strategies are.

The results show that the Dunkin' Doughnuts "Charcoal Doughnut" ad tells a complicated story in which unity and hierarchy coexist and inclusion and exclusion work together. Visual and verbal elements work together to create meanings that fit with national ideology and corporate branding goals. However, how people interpret these meanings shows how they can change depending on the culture. The analysis, employing Fairclough's framework, demonstrates how advertising functions as a site of ideological negotiation, where global and local discourses intersect, conflict, and evolve. The results serve as a foundation for the subsequent discourse, which examines these patterns in relation to broader theoretical discussions regarding representation, power, and ethics in global advertising.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the Dunkin' Doughnuts Thailand "Charcoal Donut" advertisement operates as a complex discursive space where global branding strategies, local cultural aesthetics, and historically situated racial connotations intersect. The campaign, despite its assertions of inclusivity and celebration, is perceived to reinforce entrenched hierarchies linked to colourism and national ideology through its representational strategies. This analysis situates the findings within comprehensive theoretical frameworks concerning representation, discourse, and power, while also investigating the tensions that emerge when advertising texts cross cultural boundaries.

A major conclusion of this study is that the advertisement suggests a superficial alteration in representational discourse rather than a profound transformation. The campaign superficially adheres to contemporary global advertising trends that advocate for diversity, unity, and inclusivity. Using language that is inclusive and images that are visually different shows that the company is aware of the growing public need for ethical representation. Still, this openness mostly stays symbolic. The preferential representation of lighter skin tones and the aesthetic enhancement of darker complexions indicate that existing colourist standards endure. This pattern supports research that says diversity in advertising has become more obvious but not more meaningful. This is what is known as "performative diversity" instead of "structural change."

From a Critical Discourse Analysis point of view, this conflict shows how ideology is built into representational behaviours. Fairclough's idea explains how advertising can seem progressive while also making inequality seem normal. The Dunkin' Doughnuts campaign portrays unity as an achieved condition, thereby obscuring the persistent social and ethnic inequalities within Thai society. The ad shows variety as peaceful and non-controversial, which takes difference out of political discourse and puts it in the realm of aesthetics. This ideological strategy allows the advertiser to promote national unity without getting into problems with power, marginalisation, or being left out of history.

It is important to know the difference between race and colourism in order to understand the different ways people interpreted the ad. In Western contexts, the imagery was primarily examined through a racial discourse shaped by the historical legacy of blackface. When viewed through this lens, a darkened complexion means a history of racial caricature, dehumanisation, and institutional oppression. The worldwide condemnation of the campaign exemplifies this interpretive legacy, in which visual representation is inherently connected to historical calamity. In Thailand, on the other hand, the ad mostly works within a colourist aesthetic framework.

In this situation, skin tone is more of a sign of beauty, innovation, or style than of ethnic identity. The criticism arises not from the image itself, but from the conflict of divergent cultural histories of meaning-making as the advertisement disseminates globally.

This disagreement shows that Hall is right when he says that representation is culturally specific and that the meaning of a text is never fixed. The Dunkin' Doughnuts campaign is an example of how global advertising texts lose their ability to be understood as they move between different cultures. What is seen as creative or popular in one place may be seen as rude or harmful in another. This instability shows the limits of global branding strategies that assume visual symbols can easily cross borders. The results show how hard it is to advertise globally, especially when campaigns rely on aesthetic abstraction that separates visual cues from their social and historical meaning.

Reactions from the audience support the idea that customers are active participants in creating meaning rather than just passive receivers of commercial messages. Thai audiences mostly understood the ad through local cultural ideas that stress national unity and visual beauty. While some viewers offered nuanced critiques, the campaign was largely perceived as aesthetically innovative. International audiences, on the other hand, started counter-discourses that questioned the validity of the images and looked closely at the brand's moral obligations. These differing responses exemplify what Fairclough describes as discursive struggle, in which competing interpretations coexist and compete for dominance within public discourse. The ad turns into a place for ideological negotiation instead of a clear way to communicate.

The ad talks about the idea of "Thainess," which is about unity, harmony, and a shared identity at the level of society. This ideology promotes social unity while also hiding differences by making it hard to look closely at them. The campaign's depiction of diversity operates within this ideological framework, acknowledging differences only insofar as they reinforce a unified national identity. Ethnic minorities and marginalised populations frequently remain unrecognised, suggesting that inclusion is conditional and selective. This finding aligns with Hall's concept of the politics of representation, wherein visibility is regulated to sustain dominant narratives while excluding marginalised voices.

This study also contributes to the dialogue regarding corporate ethics in global advertising. Even though more and more international brands are trying to show that they care about social issues, the story of Dunkin' Doughnuts shows how a lack of cultural reflexivity can make ethical intentions less important. The ads show a bigger trend where diversity is seen as something that can be sold instead of something that needs to be understood in context as a complex social issue. This highlights concerns expressed in the literature that global advertising often prioritises market appeal over representational accountability.

Despite these important findings, the study has flaws that need to be recognised. The analysis focusses on one advertising campaign and mostly uses secondary data, like media reports and audience feedback that is available to the public. This approach aligns with CDA's focus on discourse as socially contextualised, although it restricts access to production-side viewpoints and the lived experiences of marginalised populations. The approach emphasises visual and linguistic elements, neglecting other multimodal aspects like music, sound, gesture, and narrative sequencing that could enhance audience comprehension. Incorporating these elements in future research could enhance the understanding of how meaning is constructed in audiovisual advertising.

The issue of generalisability also necessitates consideration. The findings of this single-case study are not intended to be broadly applicable. The Dunkin' Doughnuts campaign is viewed as philosophically enlightening, offering insights into the broader dynamics of representation, ideology, and global circulation. Comparative analyses across diverse cultural contexts or advertising campaigns would clarify whether similar representational patterns occur elsewhere and how they are perceived by different audiences.

In conclusion, the discussion shows that the Dunkin' Doughnuts "Charcoal Doughnut" campaign is a perfect example of the contradictions that come with global advertising methods. The campaign aims to align with contemporary standards of inclusivity while simultaneously reinforcing aesthetic hierarchies and ideological norms rooted in local cultural contexts. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to illustrate how

advertising operates as a significant cultural text that both shapes and is shaped by competing discourses of race, colourism, national identity, and global ethics. The results underscore the necessity for advertisers to engage critically with the cultural histories embedded in visual symbols and to recognise that representation carries ideological ramifications that extend beyond mere economic objectives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the 2013 Dunkin' Doughnuts Thailand "Charcoal Doughnut" campaign to explore the formulation and challenge of race, colourism, and national identity in global advertising. The research utilised Critical Discourse Analysis to demonstrate that commercial imagery regarded as benign or cheerful within a local context can acquire profoundly transformed meanings when transmitted across cultural and historical boundaries. The analysis reveals that advertising serves not only as a marketing instrument but also as a crucial cultural text that navigates the complexities of identity, ideology, and ethical responsibility within an increasingly interconnected media landscape.

The study's main contribution is that it makes clear the difference between race and colourism in an analytical way. The findings suggest that the international controversy regarding the advertisement stemmed not from a singular, immutable interpretation within the text, but from the conflict of culturally distinct interpretive frameworks. In Western cultures, the portrayal was scrutinised through a racial discourse shaped by the historical legacy of blackface and racial oppression, rendering the visual representation ethically indefensible. In contrast, the advertising in Thailand operated primarily within a colourist aesthetic framework, where skin tone signifies attractiveness, originality, or stylistic uniqueness rather than ethnic identity. This study empirically demonstrates the intersections and divergences of various frameworks, thereby augmenting the comprehension of representation while averting the conflation of culturally specific activities into universal categories.

The analysis shows that the campaign is an example of a larger trend in global advertising: the rise of symbolic inclusivity without any real change in the structure. The campaign uses physical references to variety and inclusive language to promote national unity, but it also reinforces aesthetic standards that favour lighter skin and push differences to the side. This contradiction shows that diversity can be used as a branding tool while the underlying power dynamics are still not being dealt with. The study highlights critical concerns in media and advertising scholarship regarding performative diversity, demonstrating how inclusion can ideologically sustain inequality rather than contesting it.

This study theoretically enhances Critical Discourse Analysis by demonstrating that ideological meanings extend beyond textual purpose, being activated through circulation, reception, and recontextualization. The Dunkin' Doughnuts campaign exemplifies how global advertising texts function as platforms for discursive conflict, where meanings are challenged by producers, media organisations, and audiences across cultural boundaries. The research underscores the importance of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in examining multimodal texts and monitoring the propagation of ideology at both local and global scales through the amalgamation of visual, linguistic, and interpretive components.

The outcomes have substantial practical implications for advertising and media professionals. This study emphasises the necessity for brands to move beyond superficial representations of diversity as they increasingly claim their social responsibility and cultural inclusivity. Global marketing must recognise that visual cues are historically contextual and culturally specific, and that images deemed acceptable in one context may result in harm or exclusion in another. Ethical advertising requires the ability to adapt to local cultures and an understanding of historical sensitivities across national boundaries. Doing cultural audits before circulation, putting together diverse creative teams, and keeping in touch with cultural experts on a regular basis may help reduce the risks that come with global media circulation.

The research possesses multiple deficiencies that necessitate scrutiny. The study focused on a single advertising campaign and employed secondary data, thereby constraining the scope of generalisation. The results are not intended to represent all global advertising techniques but to offer conceptually illustrative insights into the dynamics of representation and interpretation. Moreover, while the study focused on visual

and verbal components, it excluded other multimodal dimensions, including auditory elements, music, gestures, and narrative progression. Future research may utilise comparative designs across various cultural contexts, incorporate additional multimodal elements, or directly involve advertising professionals and marginalised populations to deepen the understanding of production processes and lived experiences.

This study demonstrates that global advertising constitutes a contentious cultural sphere where commercial objectives, national ideologies, and historical narratives intersect. The Dunkin' Doughnuts "Charcoal Doughnut" ad shows how openness and exclusion can exist at the same time, how unity can hide differences, and how pictures can change meaning as they cross borders. This study rigorously examines these matters, enhancing ongoing dialogues concerning representation, ethics, and power in global media. The research underscores the responsibility of advertisers, scholars, and media entities to critically evaluate the cultural and ideological implications of representation in a global landscape where images surpass borders, while history remains restricted.

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