

Exploring Racial Diversity in Fashion Brand Advertising: An Instagram-Based Study of Three Prominent Brands



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Abstract Cultural and racial diversity in fashion brand communication has been a growing discussion topic, often associated with either spontaneous or organized by citizens movements advocating for issues of discrimination, exclusion, and even human rights. This article's goal was to investigate the ethnic representation in the communication and promotion content published by three reference clothing brands on the Instagram social media platform: H&M, Lefties, and Zara. The study focused on the analysis of the Instagram pages of these three brands, between January 2020 and January 2022. In this article, we begin with a literature review on the topics of diversity and representation. We then present the methodologies and results of the carried out analysis on H&M's, Lefties' and Zara's Instagram posts. Finally, we discuss the results and their respective conclusions.

Keywords Design and branding · Ethnic diversity · Public interaction · Instagram social media · Clothing brands

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1 Introduction

Culture is an essential component of human identity and plays a significant role in shaping individuals' beliefs, values, and perceptions [6]. In today's globalized world, where people from different cultures come together, advertisers are keen to tap into cultural influences to create campaigns that resonate with specific target audiences. One approach that has gained significant popularity in recent years is the use of models from different cultural backgrounds in advertising campaigns. By showcasing diverse models, companies can appeal to a wider audience and demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and diversity.

The *Colors of Benetton* campaign is a well-known example of how using models from different cultures can be highly effective in promoting diversity and inclusion. The campaign was highly successful in its efforts to break down cultural barriers and promote unity, with its iconic ads featuring models from various cultural backgrounds, races, and ethnicities. This campaign demonstrated the power of using diverse models to create a connection with audiences and increase brand loyalty.

Therefore, in this article we will explore the use of models from different cultures in advertising, with a specific focus on three well-known fashion brands: H&M, Zara, and Lefties. Each of these brands has used diverse models in their campaigns to appeal to a wider audience and showcase their commitment to diversity and inclusivity. By analyzing the strategies and tactics used by these brands, we hope to gain insight into the effectiveness of using models from different cultures in advertising and its impact on brand image and audience perception.

1.1 *The Power of the Consumer*

Consumer influence is a widely recognized phenomenon that has gained considerable attention in recent years. Consumers have been found to exert influence on businesses, not only through their purchases but also through their expression of opinions and concerns. This influence has been greatly amplified by the emergence of social media and other digital platforms, which have facilitated the sharing of experiences and opinions, potentially affecting a business's reputation and profitability. As a result, businesses have started to pay closer attention to consumer preferences and needs, taking steps to address concerns and adapt to consumer demands. By virtue of their purchasing power and their ability to shape the market through their actions, consumers hold a significant degree of influence over businesses and industries, making their voices essential in shaping the market's future.

The lack of diversity in advertisements has become a growing concern for the public in recent years, particularly in the wake of events such as the BLM¹ protests in 2020, which highlighted the importance of reaching diverse ethnic groups on a

¹ **Black Lives Matter (BLM)** is a decentralized political and social movement that seeks to highlight the racism, discrimination, and racial inequality experienced by Black people.

large scale. However, addressing this issue is challenging due to the persistence of color-blind racism² (Morris & Kahlor, 2014), which slows down progress by denying that racism is still a problem. For instance, a survey conducted by ICS/ISCTE,³ in Portugal in 2020, showed that 52% of the Portuguese population believes that there is less ethnic-racial discrimination in Portugal than in the rest of Europe. This perception contrasts with the fact that the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination received more than 408 complaints in 2021.

2 Whiteness Theory

The Whiteness Theory suggests that race and ethnicity are significant factors in shaping our perceptions and experiences, including how we view and respond to advertising. While the term “color-blind racism” refers to a denial of racial discrimination and an attempt to ignore race altogether, the Whiteness Theory postulates that this approach perpetuates racial inequality by failing to recognize the impact of race and ethnicity on individuals and society as a whole.

Despite its relevance to advertising and consumer perception, the Whiteness Theory is not commonly applied in these contexts. This may be due to a lack of awareness or understanding of the theory among advertisers and marketers, or a reluctance to acknowledge the role of race and ethnicity in advertising campaigns.

However, according to [5], there are many missed opportunities for advertisers who fail to consider the implications of the Whiteness Theory in their campaigns. By understanding the impact of ethnic identity on consumer behavior, advertisers can create more effective and inclusive campaigns that resonate with diverse audiences.

For instance, individuals with high ethnic identities are more likely to respond positively to advertisements featuring models of the same ethnicity, as they feel a stronger sense of cultural connection and representation [16]. On the other hand, those with low ethnic identities may have a more positive response to advertisements featuring white models, as they may perceive them as more universal or mainstream (Morris & Kahlor, 2014). By taking these factors into account, advertisers can tailor their campaigns to better reflect the diverse identities and experiences of their target audience.

² **Color-blind racism** is the belief that racial inequality is no longer an issue that warrants attention because there are now equal opportunities for people of all races.

³ **ICS/ISCTE surveys** are a collaboration between the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS-ULisboa), the Lisbon University Institute (ISCTE-IUL), and Impresa Publishing Group S.A., namely through SIC and Expresso. This collaboration aims to collect, process, and disseminate data on the attitudes and political behaviors of the Portuguese population by conducting opinion polls (surveys) on representative samples of the population.

2.1 Color of Benetton and Dove “Real Beauty” Campaign

Advertising campaigns play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes toward diversity and inclusivity. Benetton’s “United Colors of Benetton” campaign stands out for its bold use of colors to showcase a diverse range of individuals. The use of bright and contrasting colors creates a visual impact that unifies individuals from different races, ethnicities, and cultures, conveying the message that diversity is beautiful and should be celebrated. Similarly, Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign challenges traditional beauty standards by featuring women of different ages, races, and body types in their natural states. This approach promotes body positivity and encourages women to accept themselves as they are, without relying on heavy makeup or retouching.

The impact of both campaigns has been significant in initiating discussions and debates about the need to embrace differences and celebrate individuality. The campaigns have contributed to the efforts toward creating a more inclusive and accepting world. This effort is seen in the reaction to the negative response towards Colors of Benetton made by other retailers, which spurred the audience to create pro-Benetton groups in Germany to fight the backlash and discredit that Benetton received [12]. However, further research is needed to determine the long-term effectiveness of such campaigns in promoting diversity and inclusivity. Future studies can investigate the impact of advertising campaigns on societal attitudes towards diversity and inclusivity, as well as the potential for such campaigns to influence behavior and promote positive social change. Overall, advertising campaigns have the potential to play a significant role in promoting diversity and inclusivity, and their unique approaches can contribute to creating a more accepting and inclusive society.

2.2 Diversity in Social Media

The clothing industry is recognized as one of the most fiercely competitive markets, where clothing brands need to remain adaptive and flexible to the ever-changing trends to remain successful. The increasing accessibility of the internet and the widespread usage of social media have intensified the need for brands to be more responsive to their target audience’s needs and preferences.

Diversity and inclusivity are becoming increasingly important values to consumers, and brands need to ensure that they reflect these values. Consumers expect to see more representation of people of color in the fashion industry, and clothing brands are under pressure to feature models from different ethnicities and skin colors in their advertising campaigns and on their runways.

Moreover, the purchasing power of minority groups is rising, particularly in the case of Asian Americans. According to a study by Humphreys [7], the purchasing

power of Asian Americans increased by 180% between 2000 and 2014. This demographic represents a growing segment of the market, and brands need to be aware of their preferences and purchasing habits.

However, [4] study found that Asian Americans may not necessarily prefer models of their ethnicity. Social status may play a more significant role in their decision-making process than ethnic identity. Nevertheless, clothing brands should aim to be inclusive and representative of all ethnicities and cultures to appeal to the diverse range of consumers in the market.

3 Case of Study and Methodology

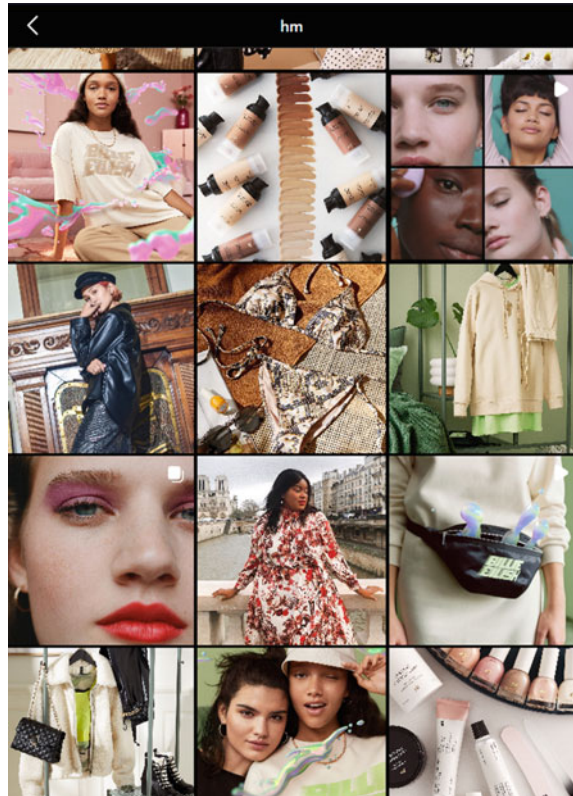
The present study aimed to investigate the stance of international brands on the issue of diversity and inclusivity. To this end, the Instagram accounts of three major brands, namely H&M, Lefties and Zara, were examined as exemplified in Figs. 1, 2 and 3. Specifically, data on the likes, comments, and ethnicity of the models were collected for January, May, June, and December of 2020, as well as January 2022. Given the BLM protests in June 2020, which highlighted the need for ethnic-racial diversity among professionals, we examined whether these brands had already supported non-Caucasian models in January and May 2020, before this public appeal.

The data collected in June 2020 reflected the brands' response to this request, as well as the consumer behavior in response to this fact. Additionally, the data from December 2020 and January 2022 revealed whether the brands continued to present cultural diversity in their posts and whether the public's interaction with the advertising was a result of genuine interest or a perception of social status, provoked by CSR⁴ advertising. Notably, previous research suggests that consumers may support CSR propaganda initiatives not because they support the cause, but for selfish reasons such as maintaining a certain social image that is more favorable to them [13].

To analyze the models featured in the posts, we divided them into four categories, with an additional category to indicate posts that solely contained products. The categories were "Black" for models of African or similar descent with black or mulatto skin tones; "White" for Caucasian models; "Asian" for models of Asian origin; and "Mix" for posts that contained multiple models of multiple cultures. Overall, this study sheds light on the approach of major international brands towards diversity and inclusivity and underscores the importance of genuine commitment to promoting diversity in advertising campaigns.

⁴ **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** it is the idea that a company should play a positive role in the community and consider the environmental and social impact of business decisions.

Fig. 1 Screenshot of H&M's Instagram feed for January 2020

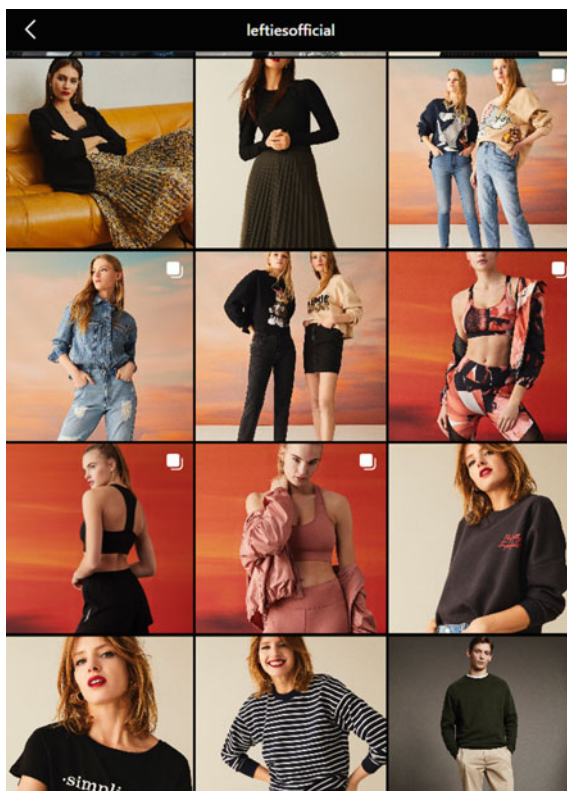


3.1 H&M—Results

Data collected from H&M's posts, shown in Fig. 4, demonstrates that both in January and May 2020, there was a balanced diversity among models of different ethnicities. However, in June, contrary to what would be expected, there was a significant increase in posts featuring white models and a simultaneous decrease in posts featuring models of African descent. In December of that year, there was a restoration of ethnic balance in the posts, with an even greater number of black models than Caucasian models, which remained the case in January 2022. It is worth noting that posts featuring exclusively "Asian" models were scarce, with these professionals being included in the "Mix" category, along with models from other ethnicities.

Figure 5 depicts the average number of likes per publication in each category, with the "White", "Black", and "Mix" categories maintaining a similar level of engagement in January and May 2020. However, in June 2020, the "Mix" category displays a notable increase in likes, surpassing even the "Product" category, which had been the strongest in 3 out of the 5 months analyzed. This suggests a positive audience response to diversity and inclusivity, possibly driven by the BLM movement.

Fig. 2 Screenshot of Lefties' Instagram feed for January 2020



Conversely, a sharp decline in the number of likes is observed in December 2020 and January 2022, particularly in posts featuring non-Caucasian models. This decrease could be attributed to a reduction in H&M's page views among its target audience or some other change on the platform between December 2020 and January 2022.

The findings from Fig. 6, which represents the quantification of publication comments, suggest that there was a notable and consistent increase in user engagement with posts showcasing non-Caucasian cultures during specific months in 2020, specifically January, May, and June. This increase in interaction may imply a positive response from the audience towards diversity and inclusivity. Additionally, this trend occurred before the BLM's event, which further supports the possibility of a genuine interest in diverse content.

However, the sudden decrease in overall numbers observed in December 2020 and January 2022, as seen in Fig. 3, raises questions about the potential reasons for this shift. It could be due to a change in the audience's preferences, a shift in the way the Instagram application promotes content or a combination of both. Further investigation would be necessary to determine the cause of this trend. Nonetheless,

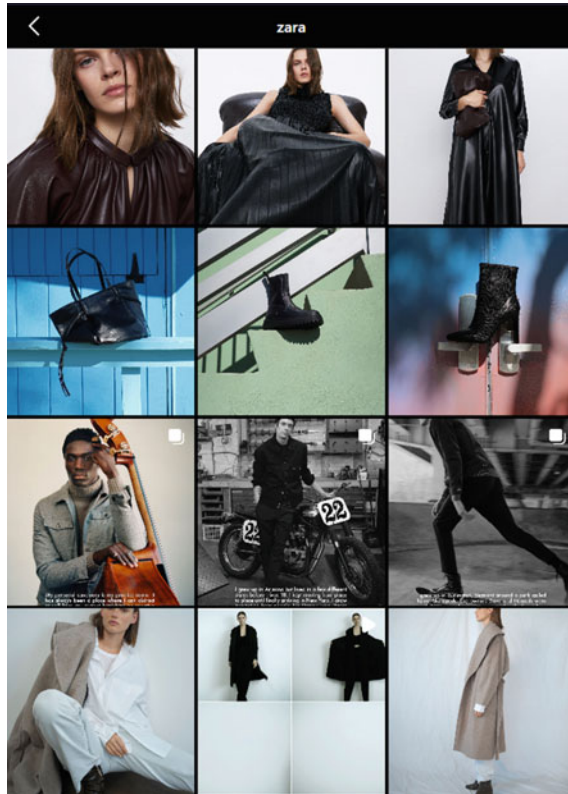


Fig. 3 Screenshot of Zara’s Instagram feed for January 2020

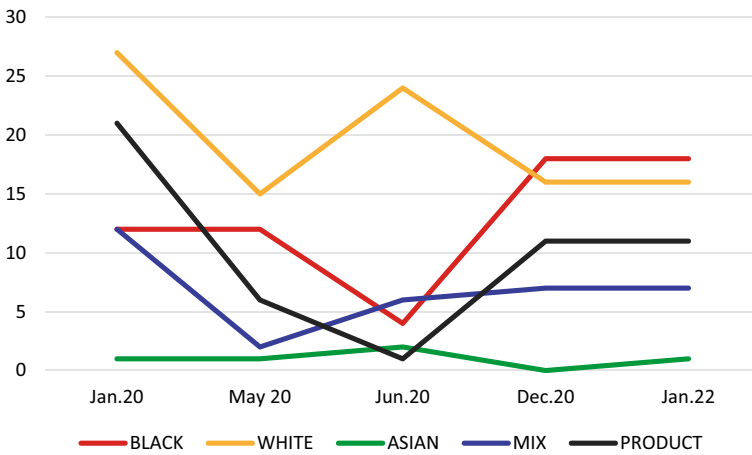


Fig. 4 Number of posts made by H&M on Instagram

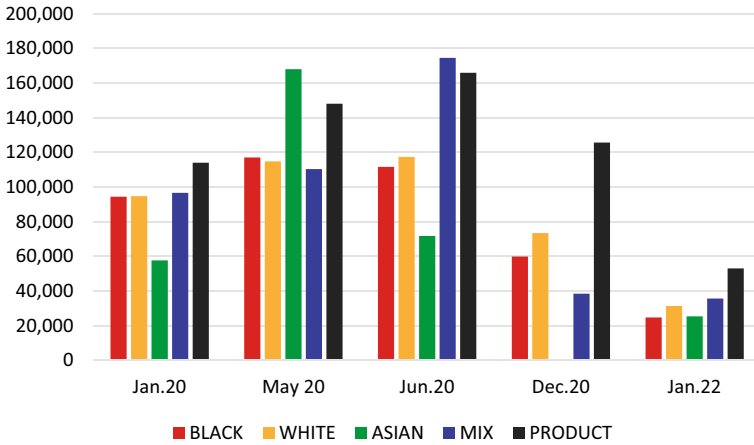


Fig. 5 The average number of likes for each publication category, categorized by the ethnicity of the model, at H&M

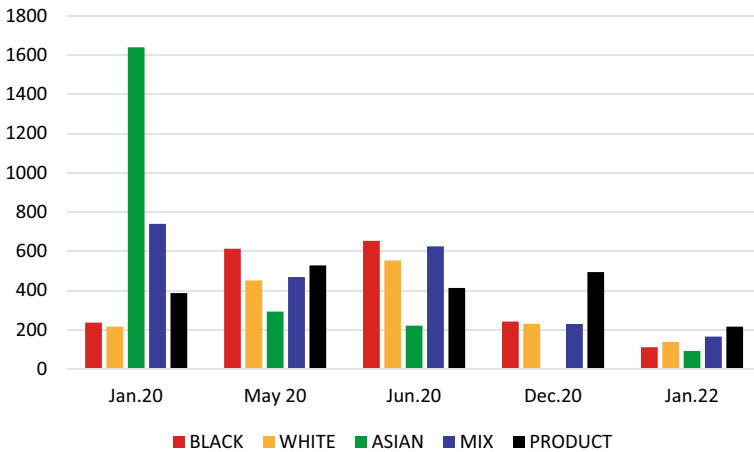


Fig. 6 The average number of comments for each publication category, categorized by the ethnicity of the model, at H&M

these results highlight the importance of ongoing monitoring and analysis of user engagement with diverse content on social media platforms.

Due to the low number of posts in the “Asian” category, it is difficult to conclude from the results presented in Figs. 5 and 6. The low sample size can affect the statistical significance of the data, and as a result, it may be challenging to generalize the findings to the overall population. It is important to keep this limitation in mind when interpreting the results of this analysis.

3.2 Lefties—Results

The findings in Fig. 7, featuring the number of posts by category, suggest that Lefties has struggled with diversity in their representation of ethnic and racial minorities. Specifically, the data shows that in December 2020, only 6 posts featured non-Caucasian models compared to 18 posts with Caucasian models across a combination of 5 categories. While Lefties posted a single image in June 2020 in support of the BLM movement, there was no noticeable effort to improve diversity on its Instagram page. While there was some improvement in January 2022, with more non-Caucasian models appearing in Lefties’ posts, they continued to present a lack of cultural diversity in their model selection.

Figure 8 reveals a significant surge in likes from January, May, and June to December 2020 in the “White” category. In December, the average of this category was more than twice that of June, indicating a rise in audience engagement, possibly driven by the increase in diversity in posts. Although the “White” category remained dominant in December 2020, the other categories, except for “Asian”, were closely competitive. However, this situation changed drastically in January 2022, which suggests that the interest of many who liked the posts was not genuine but rather resulted from CSR propaganda.

The data presented in Fig. 9, relative to the number of comments, is consistent with the findings in Fig. 7, as both graphs show similar indicators. This reinforces the conclusion that the audience’s engagement with the content is related to the diversity of the models represented in the posts.

The lack of data or limited representation of the “Asian” category in the graphs makes it challenging to draw accurate conclusions or make informed assessments about the performance or engagement level of this category in comparison to the other

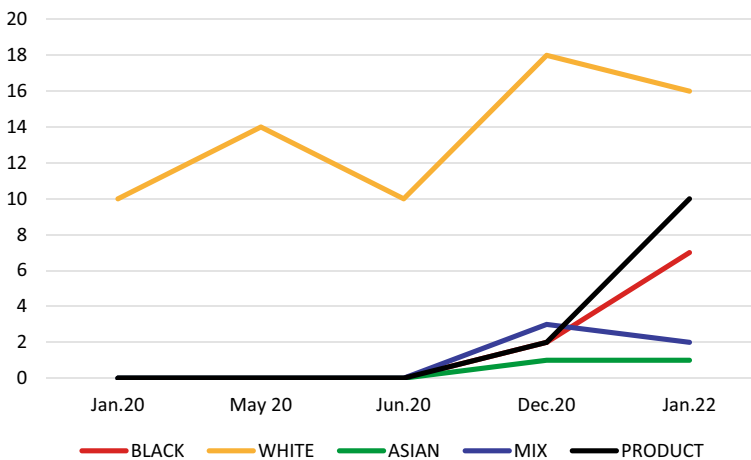


Fig. 7 Number of posts made by Lefties on Instagram

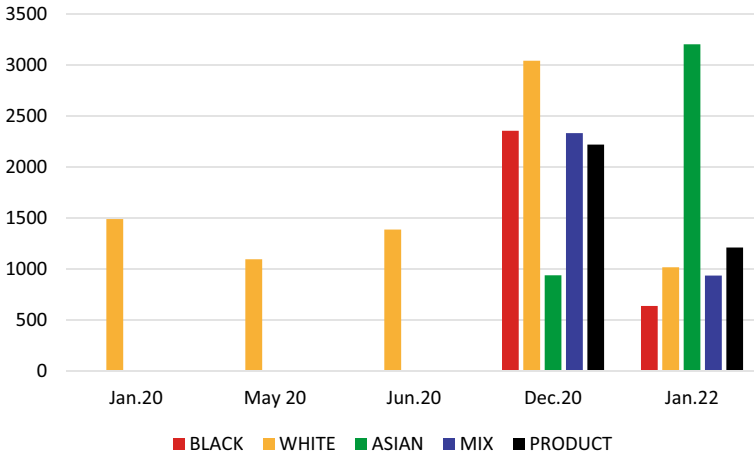


Fig. 8 The average number of likes for each publication category, categorized by the ethnicity of the model, at Lefties

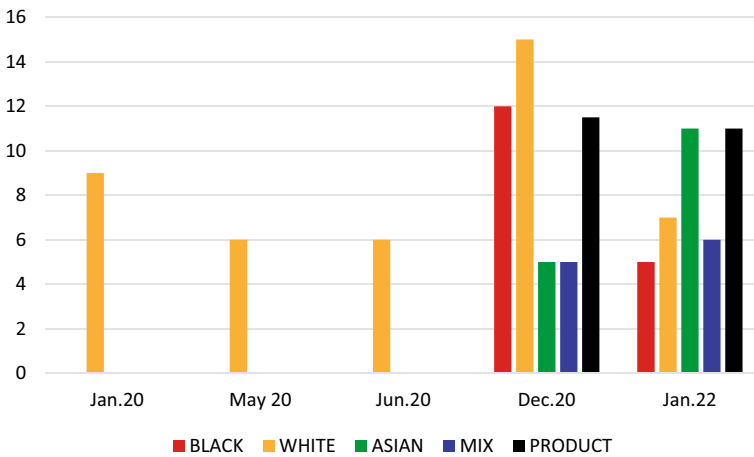


Fig. 9 The average number of comments for each publication category, categorized by the ethnicity of the model, at Lefties

categories. This underscores the importance of including adequate representation of all categories in data analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the trends and patterns observed.

3.3 Zara—Results

Figure 10 illustrates that Zara has the largest number of posts in the “Asian” category, although the overall number remains low. In January, May, and June 2020, the difference between the “White” and “Black” categories remained noticeable. However, diversity increased in December of the same year and January 2022, with greater balance among the different categories. This could be seen as an indicator of Zara’s commitment to addressing the need for greater representation of diverse cultures.

Figure 11, representing publication likes, reveals that there was already a strong interest from the audience in seeing posts with diverse ethnicities present in January and May of 2020, even before the BLM protests gained momentum. In June, the “Black” category reached its peak in terms of the number of likes, surpassing posts featuring only Caucasian models. This suggests that there was a growing awareness and appreciation for diversity in fashion. However, in December of that year, there was a significant drop in the number of likes in the “Black” category, which may imply that the audience’s choices were influenced by social image rather than a genuine interest in diversity.

By January 2022, the audience’s preferences had shifted once again, and there was now a greater interest in the presence of different cultures within the same publication rather than in posts featuring only one category. This indicates a more inclusive and open-minded approach to fashion, in which diversity is celebrated and represented.

Figure 12 shows that in January 2020, the number of comments was considerably lower than in the other months, indicating a lack of audience interaction with the posts. The month with the highest growth in interaction was December 2020. However, once again, in January 2022, there was a sharp decrease in engagement, with all categories, except “Mix”, experiencing a decline. This may suggest that there was a change in the Instagram platform or algorithm that affected audience engagement.

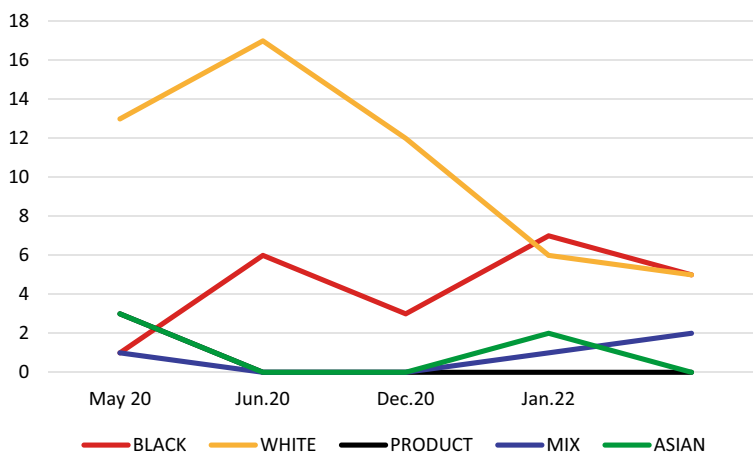


Fig. 10 Number of posts made by Zara on Instagram

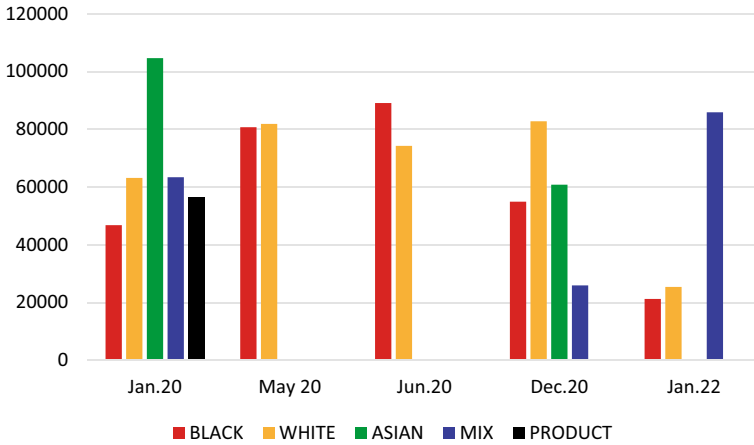


Fig. 11 The average number of likes for each publication category, categorized by the ethnicity of the model, at Zara

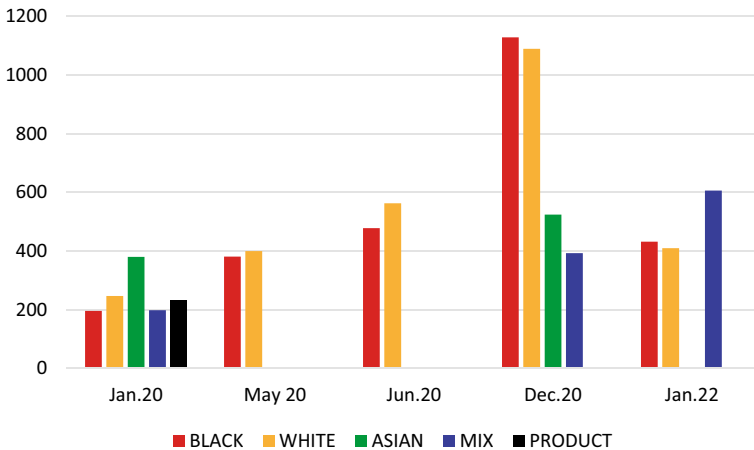


Fig. 12 The average number of comments for each publication category, categorized by the ethnicity of the model, at Zara

4 Conclusion

The data presented across the different graphs shows that the “Asian” category is volatile and unpredictable, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions. This is likely due to the relatively smaller number of posts compared to other categories. To draw more accurate conclusions, additional data such as sales figures, audience reactions, and other factors would need to be considered [15].

Based on the data analyzed, H&M appears to be the brand with the most posts and the highest level of cultural diversity in the models featured. Zara is also notable for its increasing emphasis on diversity in posts from 2022 onwards. Lefties, on the other hand, has the least diversity among the analyzed brands but has shown gradual progress in including more diverse cultures in its posts over time.

Overall, it does not seem that the analyzed brands have based their choices solely on a fashion perspective resulting from the BLM protests. This conclusion is based on the observation that these brands have continuously used professionals from different cultures over time. As for the audience, initial support for the cause at certain times appears to have been motivated more by matters of status and social image, rather than the importance of the cause itself.

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