Colouring Inclusivity: Exploring the Role of Skin-Tone Diversity in Consumer Perceptions and Brand Practices

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Abstract:

Skin-tone representation has gained growing attention in practice but remains underexplored in academia. Across three studies, we examine how consumers perceive skin-tone "diversity" through various metrics—brightness, richness (inclusion), and evenness (equity)—to understand the dynamics of representation better. We further analyse how brands depict skin tones over time and how mismatches between brand portrayals and audience demographics influence engagement. Results show that brightness perceptions are subjective and influenced by individuals' backgrounds, whereas richness and evenness are objectively perceived. Analyses of Instagram and Twitter posts reveal that brands respond to social movements with more diverse portrayals, though strategies vary. TikTok data further uncovers inverted U-shaped relationships between skin-tone discrepancies and engagement metrics. These findings provide managerial insights into advancing authentic and effective diversity in brand communications.

Keywords: Skin-tone diversity, colourism, inclusive marketing

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics