

# The role of brands in shaping narratives

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## The most enlightened brands are the ones that want to impact culture, explains MediaCom's Jox Petiza

When I first started my career in marketing, I took a job as an intern in the Philippines' biggest skin whitening company. At the time I viewed my role as one that served a market need, but I've come to learn about the way and extent companies have shaped our daily narratives, including in how they promote inclusivity and diversity (or don't).

The skin whitening industry as an example is a multi-billion-dollar industry (projected to be worth \$24B by 2027), is widely used in Asia – i.e. half of Filipinos, Koreans, and Malaysians and can be higher in other countries like India at 60%. Products such as topical creams, and even injectables, are widespread (Vogue/Marketwatch).

The use of whitening products exists also across classes. In this narrative, fair skin = beautiful, no matter what your background and with the money seen in this sector it's no wonder little change has been made since I first started my career.

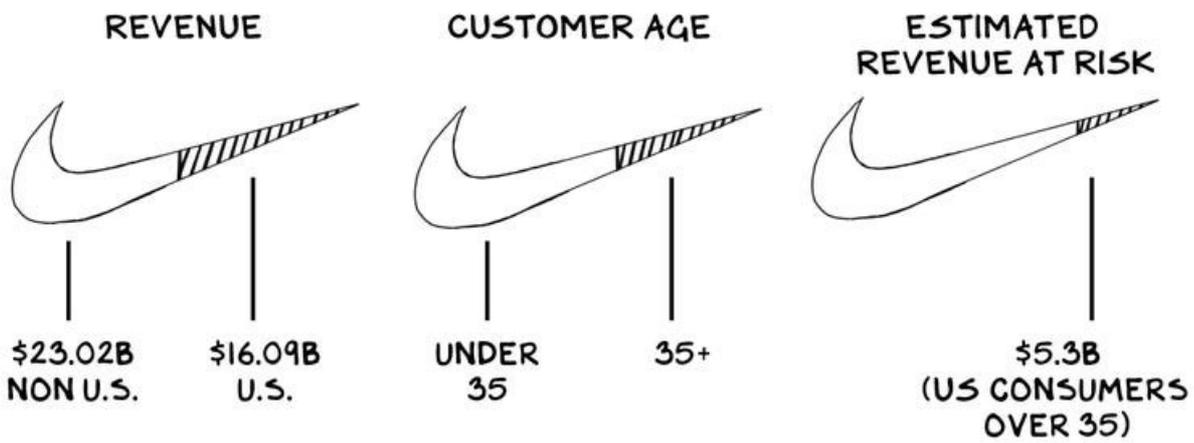
Cultural narratives are powerful and at times dangerous. Almost a decade later, in London, I found myself being pulled into a project working on the dangers of tanning and skin cancer. I candidly told my team of how I've come full circle having started with skin whitening and now working on tanning.

### Brands have always been part of culture, but consumers now demand an active role

These past few months have been pivotal for diversity, equality and inclusion. Not only has there been a reckoning among consumers, but there has also been closer examination of brands' role in society. Consumers are pushing back against some of the more harmful narratives perpetuated by the media.

Being culturally relevant is now more important than ever for brands. 57% of Americans think that it's easier for people to get brands to address social problems than the government (Edelman).

But taking a stand is easier said than done. Brands need to achieve a balance between standing for something versus the potential impact on the business. This is what Nike did when they released a (back then) polarising ad featuring Colin Kaepernick. They took a calculated risk by focusing on the right audience – younger, diverse, who believe in racial equality.

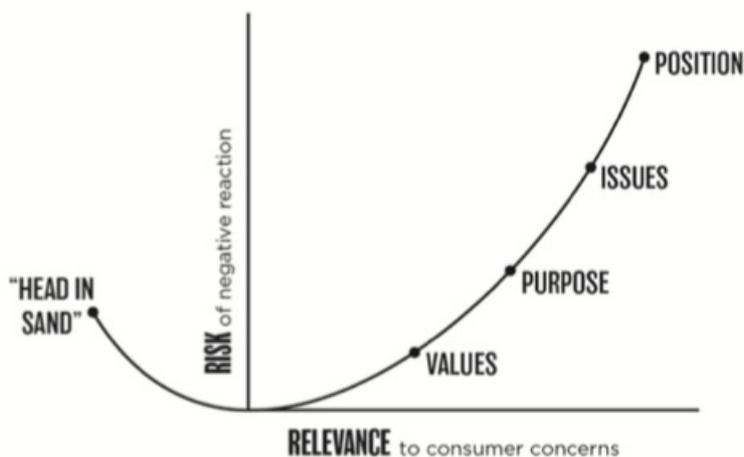


SOURCE: PROF G ANALYSIS OF NIKE AND CNN DATA.

Moreover, it also boils down to authenticity and how brands align their values with consumer beliefs. It is not performative allyship but being consistent in taking a stand, no matter what. Ben & Jerry's or Patagonia, for example, have aligned their communications, operations, and overall ethos when it comes to their position on societal issues.

But there are also brands that have started taking strides starting with their values and working their way up to fulfilling their purpose.

## The Brand Risk-Relevance Curve



Source: [Forbes](#)

## It's harder to create collective cultural moments in a fragmented world

It has become even harder to dissect culture in a hyperconnected yet hyper-segmented world. In the past, airing an inspirational 60-second ad during the Superbowl (think, I'd like to buy the world a Coke back in '72) would collectively heighten everyone's spirits.

But not today.

The world has become more diverse and arguably, polarised. Society has become more fragmented with subsets of cultures emerging through technology e.g. Reddit has thousands of subgroups, each member sharing different truths.

This hyper-fragmented experience makes it more challenging for brands to create a collective culture hinged on mass cultural moments. Brilliantly summed up, "Highly individualised, personalised advertising makes advertising a private, rather than public, experience. It keeps us from knowing what advertising our friends are seeing. Which in some way keeps us from knowing what brands may be culturally acceptable." – The Ad Contrarian

## But ultimately, brands have the power to shape culture through narratives

Stories are means for brands to connect with consumers. Brand stories are human stories. And whilst brands respond to market demand, brands, especially ones with power and resources to reach people at scale, influence consumer mindsets. "Life imitates art far more art imitates than art imitates life", Oscar Wilde would argue.

In this decade alone, we've seen brands challenge norms through powerful narratives. [SK-II in China](#) opened the debate about Left Over Women and their worth not being tied to marriage.

Or, for example, Pampers installed diaper changing stations in men's restrooms so dads could change their baby's nappy, traditionally only available in female restrooms. Most

recently, Uber challenged users to delete the app if they tolerate racism through billboards across 13 cities in the US.

And almost a decade after I first began my career, big CPGs have finally decided to rethink their whitening products.

The most enlightened brands are the ones that want to impact culture, or what Kevin Simler coined as Cultural Imprinting. “Cultural imprinting is the mechanism whereby an ad, rather than trying to change our minds individually, instead changes the landscape of cultural meanings — which in turn changes how we are perceived by others when we use a product.”

## OPINION