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ADVERTISING MINORITY REPORT: THE (IN)VISIBILITY OF MINORITIES AND SENSITIVE GROUPS IN ADVERTISING

Marija OcoKoljić

Master of Communication Studies, Non affiliated, independent researcher,
marija.ocokoljic@gmail.com; ORCID iD: 0009-0001-1893-021X

Abstract: *The research focuses on the visibility of minorities and sensitive groups in television advertising in Serbia. Ethnic, sexual minorities, disabled, the elderly and people with large body types were chosen as groups which do not fit the usual representation template in commercial communication. Content analysis of television ads aired in 2023 showed very low visibilities amongst them, while some being practically invisible. Some of these groups carry certain risks in terms of communication backlash and controversy (ethnic, sexual minorities) which could to a certain point explain their exclusion from ads. On the other hand, the invisibility of others, carrying no controversies at all (disabled) only show the fact that they are not seen, as members of society or as consumers. Their societal invisibility drives their media invisibility which makes a kind of perpetuum mobile or a circle that needs to be broken in order to start creating a more inclusive and integrated local community.*

Keywords: *visibility, advertising, minorities, sensitive groups.*

JEL classification: *M37*

INTRODUCTION

In "Ways of seeing" John Berger tells us that what we see and how we see are two different things (Berger, 2008, p. 8). The latter is a choice guided by all that we think, feel, know, believe. And by what we have previously seen. So the matter of what is visible and how we see it is important. Its relevance multiplies in today's visually driven world. Our experiences, mediated by screens, are more visualised than ever (Mirzoeff, 2023, p. 1). In the fast pace of mass communication, it is easier to process it, it takes less effort and time (Kahneman, 2011, p. 98), it is more believable (Abraham & Mesaris, 2001, p. 216).

In that kind of world, only what is visible exists. We can acknowledge it, think, talk about it, understand it. Selecting what we see, promoting certain people, topics, events etc. and leaving others in the shadows, the media, including advertisers, creates the cultural discourse, influencing our perceptions of the world around us (Zayer, Sredl, Parmentier, & Coleman, 2012, p. 333)

Those usually left in the shadows are people not belonging to dominant groups, minorities, racial, ethnical, sexual, people who look or act different compared to what is the hegemonic template. Their low visibility is bigger than just media. Ethnic minorities are heavily prejudiced, sexual minorities do not have fundamental freedoms in a lot of countries, the disabled do not have access to the basics like jobs, proper care etc. Underrepresentation in media is a perfect picture of the average ``underunderstanding`` of these people in the wider societal context.

The research is focused around minority and sensitive groups. The main research question is are they and how visible in television advertising. The paper will analyze: racial and ethnic, sexual minorities, the elderly, disabled and people with large body types. Choice of the groups was guided by the idea to analyse how advertising treats those who are not dominant or “mainstream“. This kind of analysis is not available locally so it will be of use in revealing a clearer picture of advertising and potential areas of improvement.

The structure of the paper consists of Introduction, Theoretical framework, Method, Research and discussion. In the Theoretical framework we will define key concepts like representation, meaning, visibility and set the base for understanding how selected groups are treated in advertising globally. Methods and Research and discussion set the framework for practical research and interpreting the data gathered, leading into Conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Visibility and representations

The core of any culture is in creating and exchanging meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Everything we do, every object, act, event, all that constitutes life are active elements in these processes. They mean and represent something (Barker, 2000, p. 8). Representation is never a true image of what it is related to. It is not neutral or objective. It is a selection of elements shaped in a certain way. ``It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping not merely the transmitting of an already existing meaning, but the more active labor of making things mean`` (Hall, 1997, p. 60).

Like any other media content, advertising is an active part in creating culture, infusing it with meaning. In this case meanings are strategically planned and chosen to target appropriate audiences and achieve business goals.

In this paper television commercials will be treated as cultural texts. They become one in the moment of interacting with the audience when they ``activate certain meanings or gratifications`` (Fiske, 1989, p. 180). Each cultural text is coded by the author and decoded by the viewer in the process of interpretation. Proper understanding requires a shared framework of cultural codes for its interpretation (Hall, 1997, p. 3). They change as societies evolve. The fact that they are not fixed suggests that they are or can be purposefully created. That is precisely the case in advertising. An ad is a system of societal signs and codes shaped by commercial goals (McMullan & Miller, 2010, p. 42). Each message is based on codes taken from the ``real world``. Advertising narratives are always rooted in meanings that already exist (Dyer, 2008, p. 102). It works with all that already is in the lives of potential consumers whether it is emotional, rational, practical, etc., reconnecting already existing connections in a new way (Ries & Trout, 2001, p. 5). So, an ad will reshape what is already there into a specific combination of signs and sym-

bols made to mean to the consumer (Holden, 1994, p. 452). As such, ads have formative and normative influence. In the process of creating culture, they have the power to enforce, reproduce, shine light on or obscure power relations, and inequalities. By pushing certain narratives to the front, others are left in the shadow or completely ignored. At the end of the whole process, it is important to have the audience look at the world, people, events or product in a certain, planned way (Storey, 2018, p. 81).

Visibility

In the era of modern communication technologies being visible has never been easier. Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "the degree to which something is seen or known about" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024) To be seen, something has to have the characteristic of visuality. Something that is of visual character and form may or may not be seen. Visible is an extension of visual, it is visual enriched with symbolic meaning in the process of interpretation (Mirzoeff, 2023, p. 13).

Television, which will be in focus in this paper, has the power to make things massively visible, almost instantaneously. Content to which the audience is exposed is not random, it is always selected. Certain messages are pushed to the front, other minimized. Visibility is managed (Brighenti, 2007, p. 327). Those managerial decisions influence not only what we see but how we see as well.

A certain level of visibility in media is necessary for things to "exist". What is visible becomes relevant, open to discussion, analysis, and action, and can have both formative and normative influence. Visibility can be empowering, but also limiting or paralyzing. For example, migrants are highly visible, yet often framed as dangerous or unpredictable, fueling fear and panic (Brighenti, 2007, p. 333). This places responsibility on content creators and advertisers. Given its role in shaping perceptions, visibility will be a key focus of analysis in this paper.

One of the tasks of advertising is creating objects of high visibility. The choice to put certain values, lifestyles, people to the front aims to make sure that the audience is looking at the right thing in the right way. "Pure and innocent eye is a myth" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 2). What and how we look at is a choice always deeply influenced by what we know and believe (Berger, 2008, p. 8). Looking at and seeing things in a specific way are different. We see things through filters made of our own ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by societal factors like class, gender, nationality, age, education. So, it is not just about what we see, but "how we are able to see, allowed or made to see" (Foster, 1998, p. 9).

The research question in this paper will be focused on minorities and sensitive groups and their visibility in advertising. We will research their share of visibility and how are they represented in television commercials aired in 2023. in Serbia.

Minorities and sensitive groups in popular culture and advertising

Main focus of this paper will be racial and ethnic, sexual minorities, elderly, disabled and people with large body types. Most of them have a long standing tradition of very low visibility in mass media and popular culture.

The elderly. World population is getting older. From 1974 to 2024, the global share of people aged over 65 rose from 5.5 % to 10.3 %. It is projected to double again in the next 50 years. (United Nations Population Fund, 2024). Share of people over 65

in the Serbian population is 22.3% and is continuously rising (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024).

A study of advertising across a decade showed that only 7% of characters in commercials were older than 60 (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2021). This was well below their share of global population at the moment of the study (19%). Their representations vary from leaders, authorities, being smart to being a subject of comedy (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2020).

In Serbia, in a study by Ognjanov only 14.28% of ads featured models over 65 (Ognjanov, 2017, str. 185). They accounted for only 11.78% of all models. Their roles are usually grandparents, pensioners, and people preoccupied by their health.

Racial and ethnic minorities. Around 26% of people think their ethnic groups are portrayed improperly (Unstereotype Alliance, 2022). There is a rise in the share of nonwhite races and ethnicities in ads from 25.9% in 2006 to 53.0% in 2023 (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2024). On the other hand, in commercials for toys 69% of dolls and action figures were white (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022). There is still a tendency to represent white people in contexts of business, leadership, intelligence more frequently than characters of color.

The ethnic structure of Serbian population is: Serbian 5 360 239, Hungarian 184 442, Bosniaks 153 801, Roma 131 936, Albanian 61 687 (Republički zavod za statistiku Republike Srbije, 2024). The only available research was conducted by Ognjanov (2008, str. 86). It showed that out of 254 models in print ads, only one could be potentially identified as Roma (representing 1.44% of Serbian population at the time).

Sexual minorities. A global study (IPSOS, 2021) across 27 countries shows that on average, 80% of population identify as heterosexual, 3% as gay, lesbian or homosexual, 4% as bisexual. Since the first wave of research in USA in 2012, the share of non heterosexual adults has more than doubled and is reaching 7.6%. At the front of these changes are the youngest with 1 in 5 Gen Z adults reporting LGBTQ status (Jones, 2024). There is no precise data for Serbia. If we estimate it around 5% that translates into more than 320 000 people.

Visibility of LGBTQ in ads is not changing much. From 2018 to 2023 it varied around 2-3% (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022).

Locally, there is no official data. Their presence in society as a whole, and in the media, is deeply influenced by safety and prejudice concerns. LGBTQ themed events are followed by strong conservative backlash gaining much traction in media making any kind of prejudice breaking very difficult (ERA, 2020).

Disabled. Around 16% of the global population are disabled (UNDRR, 2023). In Serbia, this group makes around 5,46% of the population or approximately 356 404 people (Republički zavod za statistiku Republike Srbije, 2024). (Republički zavod za statistiku Republike Srbije, 2024).

In 2019 only 2.2% of roles in ads were with disabilities (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2024). In a study of 175 ads for toys, amongst 406 children, only one child had a disability. They are far more likely to be depicted as “smart” than characters without disabilities (35.6% compared with 8.2%) (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022).

Body typing. World Health Organisation reports that in 2022 43% of adults globally were overweight, 16% were obese. In the last 35 years, obesity in adults has

doubled, while in adolescents it has quadrupled (World Health Organisation, 2024). As per Ministry of Health of Republic of Serbia around 30% of population in 2022 was overweight, including every third child (Andric, 2023). According to Eurostat 63% of men and 45% of women in Serbia are overweight (Eurostat, 2019).

Characters with large body types are present in 7.2% of American ads. This is radically different to the population average (43%). In terms of framing, they are often in the comic relief part of shows (20%). They are more likely to be represented as silly, eating or drinking. In 15.3% of ads they are shown as “lazy” (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2020).

In conclusion, in general, all minority and sensitive groups do not have adequate visibility in global popular culture, television, films, ads. Although there are moves in the direction of more inclusiveness, especially in some respects, there is a lot of room for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

Main research question in the paper is focused around the visibility and representations of minority and sensitive groups in advertising in Serbia. The method applied is quantitative content analysis.

Media in focus is television. Although digital is in massive expansion, television as media in Serbia is still the most consumed and influential. Average auditorium per week (watching TV at least once a week) is 85% of the population over 4 years old. In senior citizens it rises up to 95%, while for those under 18 it drops to around 75% (Nielsen Audience Measurement Srbija, 2023). The average time spent watching TV is 5 hours and 21 minutes per day. During 2023, around 12,000 specific commercials (not including different versions, lengths, cuts etc) were aired. In total over 8 million commercials were broadcasted on Serbian TV channels.

The sample can be defined as a systematic random sample. The principle of including units into the sample starts randomly, but is continued within a certain framework. In this case, the systematic aspect is choosing fourth week of January as a random start and continuing to the next week of every following month. The sample covered: 4th week of January, 1st week of February, 2nd week of March, 3rd week of April, 4th week of May, 1st week of June, 2nd week of July, 3rd week of August, 4th week of September, 1st week of October, 2nd week of November, 3rd week of December. Total sample included 12 weeks of prime time commercials aired in prime time (8 PM to midnight), on national channels across the whole year. Total number of commercials selected via this system was 625. Out of that, by the process of reduction, commercials where potential members of targeted minority or sensitive group can be identified were separated. The final sample included 130 commercials.

The unit of analysis is a television commercial. Analytical unit is the visibility of characters belonging to defined minority and sensitive groups.

Criteria for locating characters of interest were defined by the code book. All groups were identified by visual cues consisting of several dimensions. Coders looked at overall appearance, body features etc. For the elderly those were grey hair, wrinkles and similar. For racial and ethnic minorities it was the color of the skin, facial features, for larger body types appearance (the size and shape) of the body. Another dimension of visual cues are actions, body movements, interactions, positions etc. How they

walk, run, stand, interact with other, how close are they, do they touch, hug, kiss etc, were relevant in pointing out a potential member of any segment. Third aspect of visual is context. Where are the characters, what is their costume, what is happening around them, are they with family, on top of the mountain, wearing hiking gear or in a family home, maybe a hospital, bank, at the doctors etc, all of this was important to understand the whole picture about each character.

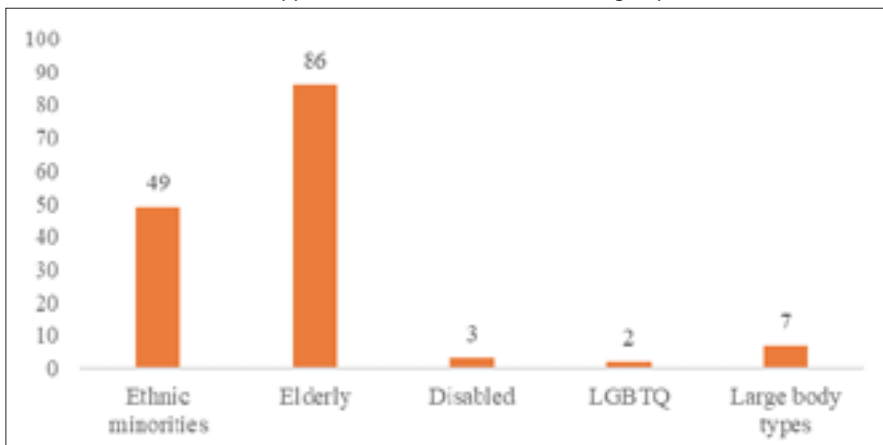
Aside from visual, audio and verbal cues were also researched. Voice over of each commercial was used as additional source of cues. Words and phrases helped in making sure the whole context of the commercial is understood and interpreted properly. For example, phrases like third life, pension, grandparents, grandchildren, keep your youthfulness etc. helped to better understand and select the right characters for the elderly group.

The sample was coded by 2 coders. Their intercoder reliability calculated as percentage agreement was 85% which is considered a good result. Analysis implemented was descriptive statistics, mostly frequencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the total number of commercials (625) there were 147 appearances characters potentially belonging to minorities and sensitive groups. The split, as represented on Chart 1 shows that ethnic minorities appear in 49, sexual in 2, the elderly in 86, disabled in 3 and those with large body types in 7 cases. Some ads show several groups so the total number of separate ads with one or more minority or sensitive group is 130. This is the sample we will use in the analysis.

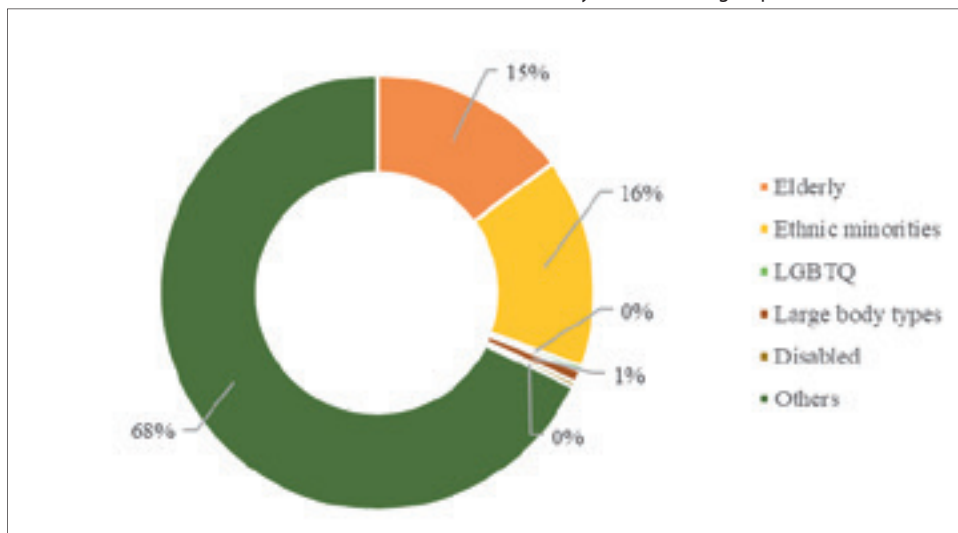
Chart 1. Number of appearances of minorities or sensitive groups in commercials



Source: Author

Amongst 1021 characters in these 130 ads around 32%, or 328 were identified as potential members of minority or sensitive groups. Share of these groups were: over 60 - 14.9 %, other races and ethnicities - 15.6 %, large body type - 0.9 %, LGBTQ - 0.4 %, disabled - 0.4 %. All others made up the majority of 68%.

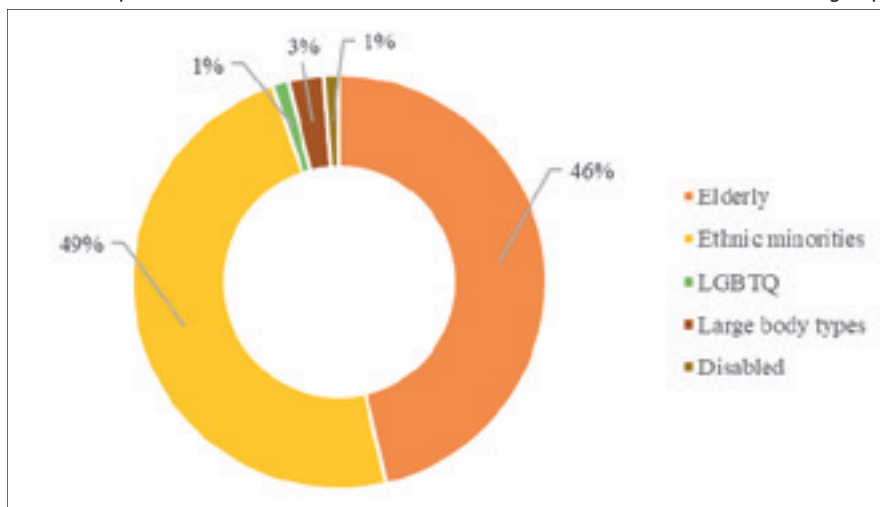
Chart 2. Share of characters in the minority and sensitive groups



Source: Author

The structure within the segment of minority and sensitive group characters is: over 60 - 46.3 %, other races and ethnicities - 48.5%, larger body type - 2.75%, LGBTQ -1.22%, disabled - 1.2%.

Chart 3. Representations in the total number of commercials with minorities and sensitive groups



Source: Author

The elderly

This subgroup is dominant compared to others in television in Serbia. They appear in 86 commercials and make almost half of representations in the minority and sensitive groups segment. Gender structure is balanced, 74 women and 78 men.

Main context the elderly are represented in is health. In 30 out of 86 ads they are preoccupied with maintaining their health and vitality. The second strongest framing for senior citizens is being grandparents. Out of 86 commercials, 15 show them as taking care of or having fun with their grandchildren.

This shows how they are looked upon as consumers. Several years back there was a strong push from banks to promote their loans for seniors. The fact that there are almost none of these in 2023 suggests that the standard of living is different, loans are not that affordable, senior citizens are no longer viable loan clients. The key concern in the life of the elderly, based on what we see in ads, should be to stay healthy. Everything else, like enjoying life etc., is secondary.

Disabled

People with disabilities appear in only 3 commercials (out of 130 representing minorities and 625 in total). Only 4 out of 1021 characters in television commercials within this segment in Serbia in 2023 were with identifiable disabilities. Out of those, 2 were with physical (leg prosthetic and vision impairment) and 2 with mental disabilities (Down syndrome). Although the sample is small and no general conclusions can be drawn, it is quite informative that both ads were foreign brands. There are no commercials for Serbian brands that show this group which accounts for around 356 404 people. So, when we look through a strictly local lens they are literally invisible.

The context in which disabled individuals are shown is positive and empowering. One ad features runners with prosthetic legs, another highlights a girl with Down syndrome in a beauty context, and a third shows a visually impaired Paralympic cycling champion. The focus on a fighting, winning mindset, while positive, is rare in reality. What's missing is the portrayal of disabled individuals living ordinary lives with everyday challenges. Their exclusion from such representation in ads reflects their broader exclusion from media and society and the urgent need to make these people visible.

LGBTQ

In the total sample only 4 characters in 2 ads could be possibly interpreted as member of LGBTQ minority. All of them are women. Both of the commercials were of foreign production, for global brands. There are no locally produced ads that show members of LGBTQ segment.

Two commercials out of 130 showing minorities and 625 in total make this unusable in terms of statistics or quantitative perspective. But it can be looked at as informative and suggestive of the overall attitude towards this group.

The contexts in the ads are jewelry and perfume, it is very feminine, romantic, and sensual. In each commercial 2 women are standing very close to each other, looking at each others' eyes, on the verge of kissing. There is a strong suggestion that they are a couple. The interesting part is that none of the commercials show them kissing. The possible gay dimension is only a suggestion. This can be interpreted as a sign of Serbian media and society being unready to show and the mass audience unready to see this minority group. Advertising, as always, is just following what society is living. Although not in this sample since it was aired earlier, another example of this is a commercial for a famous chewing gum brand. In the version aired on the Serbian market two young women are sitting in the car, being kind of bored. They take the chewing

and start smiling and moving to the music from the radio. In the version aired globally after taking the gum, they kiss with the message ``Do not hold yourself back``. The ad was purposefully edited to be in line with the local cultural context.

Gender is an interesting perspective in this case. All 4 potentially gay characters are women. This can suggest that it could be easier for mass audiences to start accepting women in these ``roles`` than men. The reason behind that is hidden in the centuries of modeling masculinities and femininities which can be an independent direction for further research.

Race and ethnicity

Total of 159 characters in the sample were identified as members of races other than white and ethnicities not dominant in Serbia. They make up over 48% of all characters in selected ads (1021). This percentage seems quite large considering the ethnic structure of the country (80% is of Serbian ethnicity). Looking closer into the specifics of the content this discrepancy becomes clearer.

Most of these representations appear in ads for global brands, produced around the world. They show races and ethnicities more in line with their home countries than the local ones. In only 2 commercials 5 characters can be identified as a minority relevant for Serbia. They are Roma. All others (154) are black, Asian, Latin, Middle Eastern and other races and ethnicities non relevant in the Serbian context.

For the minority we can see, though very little, they are represented in the usual stereotype – as a band playing on a wedding, with comical, almost caricatural atmosphere in the whole commercial. Overall, Serbian audiences are radically more exposed to racial and ethnical representations of people who are not a part of their society than those they live with.

It is important to note that it is not easy to identify these minorities without strong ethnic symbols which are not often shown in advertising. This dimension is quite sensitive in Serbia due to a number of historical circumstances. By not getting into this area brands are avoiding potential communication risks, backlash etc. That is why this data should be interpreted carefully.

One commercial is not enough for solid conclusions, but it is suggestive. And in line with results for most other minority and sensitive groups. Their lack of visibility is acute.

Body typing

Only 9 characters out of 1021 were of large body types. This is significantly below the real global (43%) and local share of overweight people (30%). With only 7 commercial featuring them, they are practically invisible in this subgroup (130) and even more in the total number of ads (625).

Majority of large body types were women (7), shown in commercials for cosmetic/beauty products (menstrual pads, hair treatments and deodorant). All these commercial were foreign productions, adapted for Serbian market. Out of the 2 men, one is shown as an illustration of pain, being annoying. The other one is a lead in a commercial for chips. Both were locally produced.

Although the sample is again too small for general conclusions, the idea of overweight women being represented in a context of beauty (so still working hard to main-

tain some kind of a ideal) and men being shown as having fun while eating chips can be informative. It seems as men are allowed to be off the normative more than women. This is in line with the long standing “tradition” of pressure on women to maintain a certain kind of appearance.

CONCLUSION

That which is not visible in the today's world almost does not exist. It is not a matter to be addressed, discussed, analyzed, improved, resolved. In terms of minorities and sensitive groups being visible is their chance to be seen, recognized, better understood and integrated into societies.

Advertising is fundamentally a business focused on commercial goals. It rarely leads social change. Instead, it often selects topics and trends from society that align with its brand narratives. Commercials are designed to be relatable to a broad audience regarding what and who they depict. However, the situation is different for minorities and sensitive groups. While they are present in society, most remain nearly invisible in advertising.

The low visibility of all analyzed groups is striking. For certain groups, such as ethnic minorities in the local context, this can be somewhat understandable. Given the sensitivity and complexity of depicting these subgroups, it makes sense from a business perspective that brands, which tend to be risk-averse, often choose not to include them.

The elderly, compared to others, have a bit of visibility. Although the numbers are not in line with national averages, we can see them in television commercials in Serbia. Their representations tell us a lot about what is to be expected from third life in the country. Taking care of their health and their grandchildren are two main contexts. More active lifestyles like traveling, going out, having fun are not seen as relevant for senior citizens in Serbia judging from what we can see in ads.

Sexual minorities are not just underrepresented; they are essentially invisible in advertising. Only two commercials featured characters that could be interpreted as lesbian. Given the situation in Serbia—lack of rights, prejudice, and safety concerns for this group—their absence from ads is unsurprising. While LGBTQ issues may not be controversial elsewhere, they remain risky in Serbia. Brands avoid topics that could trigger backlash. Once these issues are no longer contentious in society, advertising will likely follow suit.

People with large body types are barely seen in ads, except in globally produced ones, reinforcing long-standing body stereotypes in media. This group doesn't fit the normative image of being slim, fit, or athletic. Their low visibility isn't due to risks, as with ethnic minorities, but a strategic choice to stick to “prescribed” yet unrealistic standards, despite 30% of people in Serbia being overweight. This raises several research questions, including the controversial issue of how increased representation impacts the obesity epidemic.

The invisibility of disabled people is probably the most striking. With all the potential risks or challenges in showing ethnic minorities or LGBTQ in Serbia, showing people with disabilities holds no such issues. That makes the invisibility of this sensitive group more difficult to understand. One possible explanation is that they are just not present, not only on screens, but in the minds of those who produce commercials. And they are not present, because they are not visible, anywhere. It is a circle that

needs to be broken as soon as possible,

Building an inclusive society is a long process requiring all to participate and contribute. The media, as institutions crucial in today's socialization processes, are the driving force in this direction. The choice to show or not to show someone in an ad goes well beyond commercial goals. It leaves a deeper trace than just the sales of a product. Advertising cannot change the world on its own, but for sure it can contribute to the normalization, inclusion and in the end empathy and tolerance.

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