

A view from Adjoa Anim

Dropping the whitening cream: how Black Lives Matter sparked rebrands around the world

From Ben's Original to The Chicks, new names have appeared this year across commercial brands, sport and entertainment in response to calls for a more inclusive and diverse society.



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The killing of George Floyd in May sparked uncomfortable conversations and protests worldwide. It led to the biggest civil rights march on record and created a movement that brought the topic of diversity to the forefront.

Numerous organisations responded to the issue of racial injustice through corporate statements, workforce efforts, investments in black businesses and charities and apologies for historic links to slavery.

Brands have come under scrutiny, too. From French advertising agency Rosapark rethinking its name due to its similarity to the civil rights campaigner Rosa Parks to supermarket staples examining their origins, companies have made significant changes to their brands in line with anti-racism.

Health and beauty

Hindustan Unilever announced plans to **change its Fair & Lovely brand**, a beauty product sold in India and Bangladesh, with trade marks dating as far back as 1978. However, the alteration to Glow & Lovely and Glow & Handsome was met with disapproval by some, as the new names did not change the skin-lightening nature of the product, seen to promote colourism.

The L'Oréal Group announced plans to remove “white/whitening”, “fair/fairness” and “light/lightening” from the names of its products. This is likely to affect the company’s Garnier White Complete, a face wash brand sold in Asia.

Other FMCG products under review include **Darlie toothpaste** sold in Asia. The product name, which translates to “black person toothpaste” in Chinese, was originally Darkie. The mark, which includes an image of a smiling man in a top hat – earlier versions of which featured the representation of a minstrel show character – will be reassessed to counter branding that perpetuates negative racist stereotypes.

Food and drink

Mars announced plans to scrap the image of a fictional black Texan rice farmer featured on its Uncle Ben’s rice brand, dating back to 1946, with **the brand becoming Ben’s Original**. The Quaker Oats Company followed with its intention to rename the Aunt Jemima line of syrups and foods, a 130-year-old brand featuring a black woman named after a minstrel show character. The names of these products are rooted in the history of white Americans addressing elderly African Americans with the “aunt” and “uncle” prefixes, as they were deemed undeserving of “Mister” or “Miss”. Aunt Jemima was also deemed to be reminiscent of the “mammy” – a black woman content with her lot in life of serving her white masters.

Similar announcements were made for ConAgra Foods’ Mrs Butterworth’s brand, B&G Foods’ Cream of Wheat porridge brand, incorporating the Chef Rastus character, and Dreyer’s Grand Eskimo Pie ice cream bar. The packaging of the latter includes the image of a boy dressed in winter clothing. “Eskimo” is a contentious term used by colonisers for the indigenous areas and people of the Arctic region, including the Inuit and Yupik.

Nestlé SA also stated plans to rename Colombia’s Beso De Negra (which translates to “kiss from a black woman”), and Australia’s Red Skins and Chicos confectionery brands, amid plans to review all its product names. “Red skin” and “chicos” are derogatory terms for Native Americans and people from Latin America, respectively.

Sport

Very recently, businesses behind several US sports teams and names appeared to have supported the postponement of games and matches in protest against James Blake’s shooting. This was surprising, particularly, as racial justice and sport have long been uncomfortable bedfellows. The controversy surrounding the names of some North American sports teams are an example of this problem.

After a refreshed recent wave of objections, including from sponsors, the Washington Redskins American football team changed its name to the Washington Football Team. The Cleveland Indians baseball team is doing the same to “embrace their responsibility to advance social justice and equality”. In 2019, the baseball team had dropped the inappropriate “Chief Wahoo” logo from its uniform. Canadian football team Edmonton Eskimos recently announced plans to drop the “Eskimos” element, after three years of consultation.

Whether other teams will follow in the footsteps of the above three remains to be seen. At present, the Atlanta Braves, are not considering a name change and the Chicago Blackhawks issued a statement to defend the use of the name. Meanwhile, nothing has been heard from the Kansas City Chiefs yet.

In the UK, Exeter Chiefs Rugby Union team decided to keep its name and logo – use of which was deemed “highly respectful” – and retire its disrespectful Big Chief mascot. The team officially adopted the name and logo, containing the representation of a Native American, in 1999, but claim that the name dates to 1900s Devon.

Entertainment

One Little Indian Records, a UK record label, changed its name to One Little Independent Records, stopped using a logo that – according to its Twitter announcement – “perpetuated a harmful stereotyping and exploitation of” indigenous Americans, and made donations to relevant charities.

An amicable band name change was that of The Chicks, formerly The Dixie Chicks, arising from the negative connotation associated with the “Dixie” element. The band mentioned that it was co-existing with a New Zealand band duo of the same name. Due diligence is of utmost importance in these circumstances, even during times of urgent action.

It appears that The Chicks carried out the trade mark searches and sought to put out potential fires by seeking out their New Zealand counterparts and agreeing co-existence beforehand.

Individual artists are making changes, too. UK DJ Joey Negro announced that he would start using his real name, Dave Lee, a day after US DJ The Black Madonna stated that she would change her name to The Blessed Madonna. Both made references to the unacceptable and controversial

nature of their names driving the need for the change. The Black Madonna changed her name following a petition asking for the same.

This is a fluid situation and we will be sure to see further similar announcements over the coming months. It seems that, even in instances where brands may not be aware of the inappropriate connections, the general public draws attention to them, quickly.

Adjoa Anim is trade mark director at HGF Limited

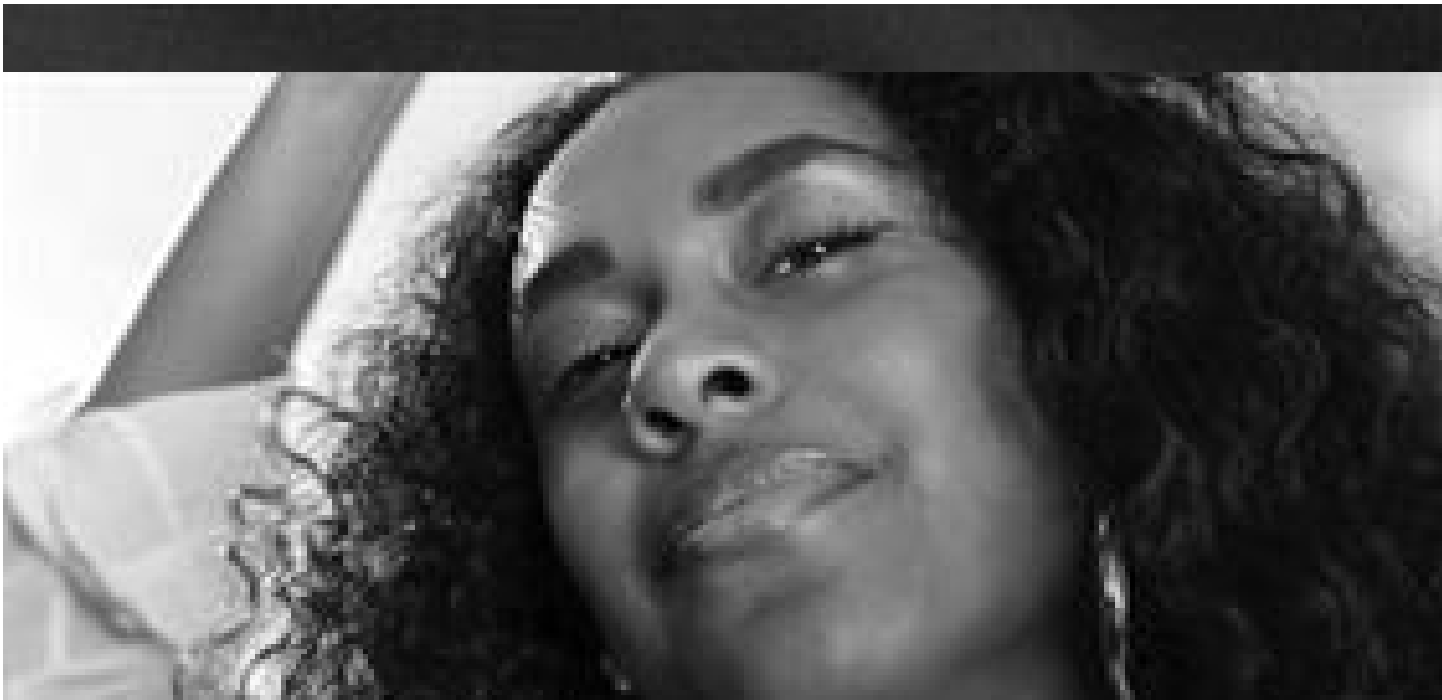
Images: Fairy & Lovely, Dixie Chicks (Matt Jelonek/WireImage), Washington Football Team (Al Bello/Getty Images), Uncle Ben's

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