

Opinion Piece

by Saran A. Nurse

The Commercialization of Race: Is Race Too Hot a Commodity to be buried?

Last week, Nike unveiled an ad campaign featuring ex NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who knelt during the National Anthem in protest of police brutality and racial injustice. After a slight dip in its stock price, and despite ongoing protests, the company's shares have hit a record high. By featuring Kaepernick, and associating itself with the fight against racial injustice, Nike gained over 170,000 Instagram followers, and, according to Wedbush Securities, increased its online sales by over 30%. This is not the first time Nike has attempted to capitalize on black culture. In 2015, it introduced a special, commemorative line of sneakers, allegedly, in honor of Black history month. Some academics and political centrists have proposed jettisoning the concept of race. But with powerful corporations like Nike profiting from race, and things race related, would the concept of race ever be abandoned?

In *End of Race?*, William A. Darity, Jr. highlights some of the arguments that have been advanced for ending race. Firstly, there is a belief that a raceless society will be more just, and free from discrimination. Proponents for a raceless society argue that race conscious public policies like affirmative action are unfair, and they instead advocate for a colorblind society based on meritocracy. Secondly, the emergence of mixed-race categories makes race somewhat meaningless. As Charles Hirschman, in *The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race* posits, the U.S. census' practice of allowing individuals to self-identify, makes race as an objective measure unreliable. Finally, the postulate with perhaps the greatest traction, is that race is meaningless since it is not biological but merely a social construct. But, as sociologist Troy Duster has argued, microbiology is not unequivocal on this conclusion. Moreover, even if race is a social construct, with no meaning in science, does this necessitate expunging race from public discourse and public policy? Duster contends that race as a social construct still has important biological consequences. For example, even if blacks are not genetically predisposed to hypertension, the inordinate amount of stress they face (a social issue) may actually lead to hypertension (a biological outcome). Duster believes that the concept of race is being buried...alive. But does Duster really have cause for concern? Is a raceless society even a possibility?

Race sells. Race as a genetic category has been used by the highly profitable pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries to obtain patent protection, drug approval and expand market share and control. The market for black hair care and beauty products is another huge revenue generator. According to Nielsen Reports, in 2017, the industry registered a whopping \$54 million in sales. Racism sells. The narrative of white superiority and the white standard of beauty is what underpins the \$4.8B skin bleaching industry. On the other side, there is a demand for, and an entire market for white supremacist products. Amazon recently came under fire for selling

necklaces with swastikas, infant clothing featuring burning crosses, and backpacks with neo-Nazi memes. Racism is also used as a marketing and promotion tool. Earlier this year, H&M released a rather controversial ad that featured a black child model wearing a hoodie with the phrase 'Coolest Monkey in the Jungle'. Last year, Unilever published a Facebook ad which depicted a black woman turning white after using Dove soap. Then there's the Heineken ad with the tagline that sometimes 'lighter is better'. Were these all faux pas? Probably not; in the crowded retail landscape, companies need a basis of differentiation, a means to stand out and create a buzz. Stoking racism seems to be a calculated maneuver.

Race also affords companies like Nike the opportunity to jump into the fight against racial injustice, to be perceived as "woke", socially conscious heroes, and cement loyalty in their customer base. Without race there would be no fight against racial injustice. Like many black consumers, after the Kaepernick ad was released, I bought a new pair of Nike sneakers to show "support" for this billion-dollar company. I am now out of pocket close to \$100 for a pair of sneakers I really don't need, Kaepernick is still not in the NFL, police brutality and racial profiling remain grave social issues but ...Nike sales have soared! In a capitalist society where corporations derive financial benefit from the concept of race, and hold both economic and political power, the idea of race probably will continue to exist. Race is too hot a commodity to be buried.