

BLACKWASHING REPORT

ARE CORPORATIONS ENGAGED IN THE RACIAL AGENDA?



2022

CONTEXT

The ultra-processed food, alcoholic beverage and tobacco industries manufacture and disseminate products linked to the development of chronic non-communicable diseases (CNCDS), which affect mainly the black population. Black Brazilians live under constant stress due to daily episodes of racism: State violence, unemployment, extreme poverty and situations of racial insult. All these factors act as potential stress factors and can trigger off unhealthy behavior, such as alcohol abuse and smoking, as well as making it difficult to adopt healthy habits, such as healthy eating and exercising².

Capitalism exploits bodies – black bodies – to keep the wheels of the engine turning: the generation of profit in order to support a minority that holds the political and economic powers at the expense of the basic rights of the largest part of the population – those of African descent. The relationship between race and class in Brazil is, therefore, dialectical³. The neoliberal perspective treats problems such as racism and health individually, placing the victims as those actually responsible for solving them, while the agents who have greater economic and political power move forward with their interests^{3/4}. Thus, the large corporations circulate freely through the global stage, influencing not only individual choices, but also undermining regulatory measures that converge with collective interests and well-being⁴.

A Outras Palavras. “Angela Davis: o racismo na era do neoliberalismo” Available on: <https://outraspalavras.net/blog/angela-davis-o-racismo-na-era-do-neoliberalismo/>

In the case of health, the transnational ultra-processed food, tobacco and alcohol industries benefit from a range of regulatory loopholes and advance with their objectives through corporate political actions (CPA), which are attempts to shape government policies in a way that is favorable to corporate interests⁵. At the same time, corporations take advantage of advertising in order to create a bond with individuals and encourage consumption of their products, even if they are harmful to health and the environment⁶.

One of these corporate practices goes by the name of *Social Washing*, whose objective is to create a positive public image for commercial brands and industries. With the heat caused by the international *#BlackLivesMatter* movement and the increasing debate on racial issues in a diversity of social spaces, large corporations have started to invest in what we refer to here as blackwashing strategies, expressed through advertising pieces featuring black influencers and/or symbols connected to Afro-Brazilian culture, in addition to actions which purport to promote racial equality in corporate environments, but fail to address the root of the problem.

The question arises as to whether these corporations would be able to act differently, given that they are sustained by a system that privileges them in detriment of the health and exploitation of the marginalized. It is a

complex issue. Hence the idea behind this study, which aimed to investigate and analyze the blackwashing actions of the ultra-processed foods, and tobacco industries in Brazil.



Image 1: Movimento pela Equidade Racial [Movement for Racial Equality] – MOVER

METHODOLOGY

We have analyzed actions taken between the years 2019 and 2021, enunciated by the leading companies in each sector. The period chosen allowed us to compare the behavior of the industries before and after the global movement in reaction to the murder of George Floyd, an African American man killed by the police, and João Alberto Freitas, killed at a branch of Carrefour supermarkets, in Brazil. We have considered those that are committed to the Movement for Racial Equality (MOVER), a movement by the business sector which intends to increase the

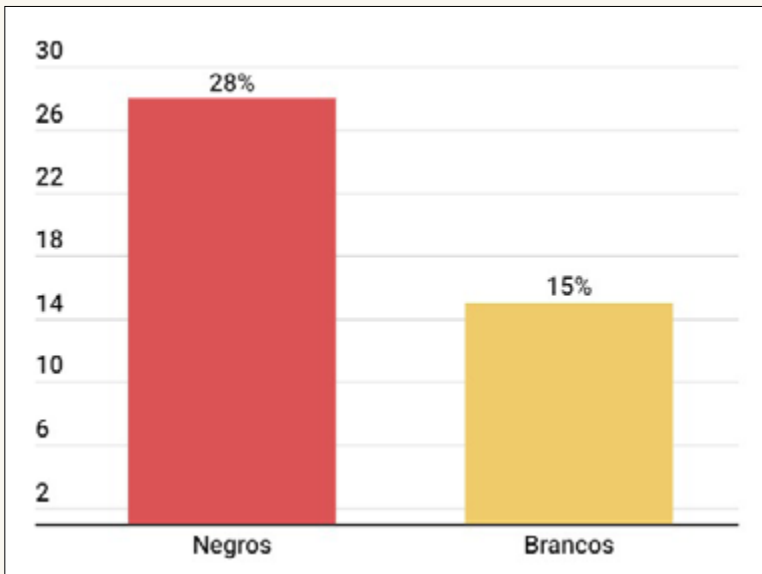
participation of black people in roles of leadership by 2030, made up of corporations from different sectors, including producers of ultra-processed foods, alcoholic beverages and tobacco.



Imagem 1: Empresas analisadas: Big Food, Big Álcool e Big Tobacco

BIG FOOD

Ultra-processed foods and drinks have a high sugar, fat, sodium and cosmetic additive content, and their consumption is linked to 57,000 premature deaths per year in Brazil, as well as increasing the risks of obesity and CNCDs, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer ⁸. National research and surveys show a higher prevalence of CNCDs among the black population when compared to their white counterparts, which impairs daily life, affects well-being and professional performance, as well as drastically reducing life expectancy^{9 10 11}.



Graph 1: Consumption of five or more ultra-processed foods one day before the interview according to race. Vigitel, 2018

Additionally, the black population has restricted access to healthcare services, take less exercise in their leisure time and consume fewer fruits and vegetables, due to reduced access to socially produced goods^{12,13}.

Production and marketing of ultra-processed foods also impact the environment and interferes in food culture, as exemplified by the advance of monocultures over quilombola territories. Therefore, the activity of the major food industries and agribusiness, which we refer to as **'Big Food'** and **'Big Agro'**, impact the health of the black population at multiple levels, causing sickness, premature death, productive incapability and cultural undermining.

In the case of ultra-processed foods, we discuss projects developed by **Coca-Cola, Nestlé, JBS, Ambev and Grupo Carrefour**, which range from advertising campaigns to programs promoting racial equity. Most of the proposed actions are still incipient and fail to tackle the root of the problem.





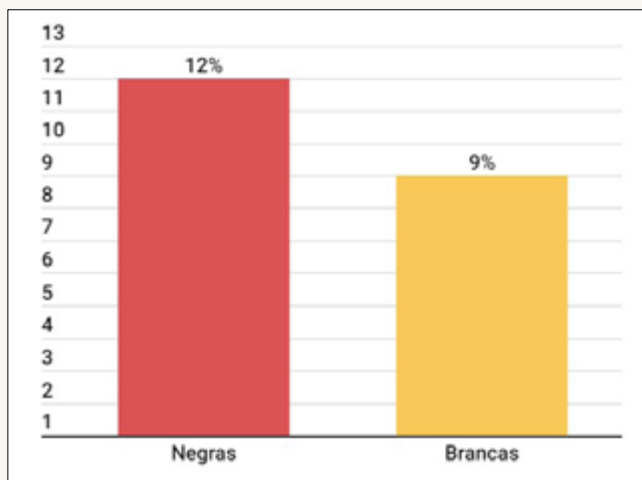
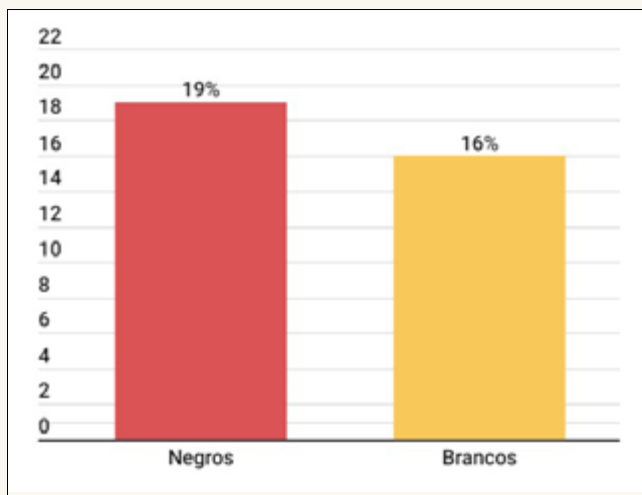
Images 4 and 5: Popular demonstrations at Carrefour supermarket branches, following the murder of João Alberto.

Following the killing of João Alberto Freitas, a black man, at one of their stores, the **Carrefour** group invested heavily in publicizing actions to combat racism. Companies such as **Ambev** and **Coca-Cola** have also mentioned the issue on their reports, albeit superficially and with unclear goals. JBS, involved in several cases linked to accusations of working conditions analogous to slavery, has shown little change in their internal policies. Their discourse has not shown much change and political lobbying, as well as accusations of racism, continue to happen. Nestlé did not even mention the issue of racial equality in their reports, and only in 2020 did they present internal policy actions for the black population.

Black people, those mostly affected by CNCDs, have the most difficulty to access health services and are marginalized and exterminated, while suffering the worst consequences of the capitalist system in force. It is therefore important to critically analyze false solutions which may contribute towards maintaining the current *status quo*.

BIG ALCOHOL

Alcohol consumption is highly encouraged by manufacturers in Brazil and around the world through advertising and marketing strategies. Thanks to these tactics, these industries have achieved extraordinary annual growth figures (15). In 2017, the world's largest alcohol producer, ABInBev, spent an estimated US\$ 6.2 billion on advertising at a global level, which is equivalent to the amount spent on public health policies by all the governments of low-income countries combined. These figures show the extent of the political and economic power concentrated in the hands of the largest corporations in the sector, which we call 'Big Alcohol' ¹⁶



Graphs 2 e 3: Comparison of the Frequency (%) of Alcohol abuse by Men and women, according to race. Vigitel 2018.

Alcohol abuse is the main risk factor for premature death and disability for individuals aged between 15 and 49, besides being a risk factor for CNCDs¹⁷. In Brazil, alcohol consumption contributes to 3 million deaths every year; 19.2% of the black population abuses alcohol compared to 16.6% of the white population. Everyday racism is identified as a potential stress factor, which contributes to the emergence of various physical and mental health problems, as well as risk behavior associated to alcohol abuse. It is worth highlighting that abusing alcohol consumption is associated to other preventable causes of death, such as alcohol-related traffic accidents and cases of domestic violence.

In the case of alcoholic beverage manufacturers, it was possible to identify that within the same corporation, brands can use a variety of strategies in order to capture different niches of the public. Devassa, owned by **Heineken**, drew attention to its rebranding process, which seeks to change its public perception from a brand denounced as racist and sexist to a beer which **“praises the legacy of black ancestry for the construction of Brazil’s culture, valuing the transformative creativity of Brazilians and promoting black protagonism”**.



Image 2: Advertisement for Devassa beer, withdrawn for discriminatory content.



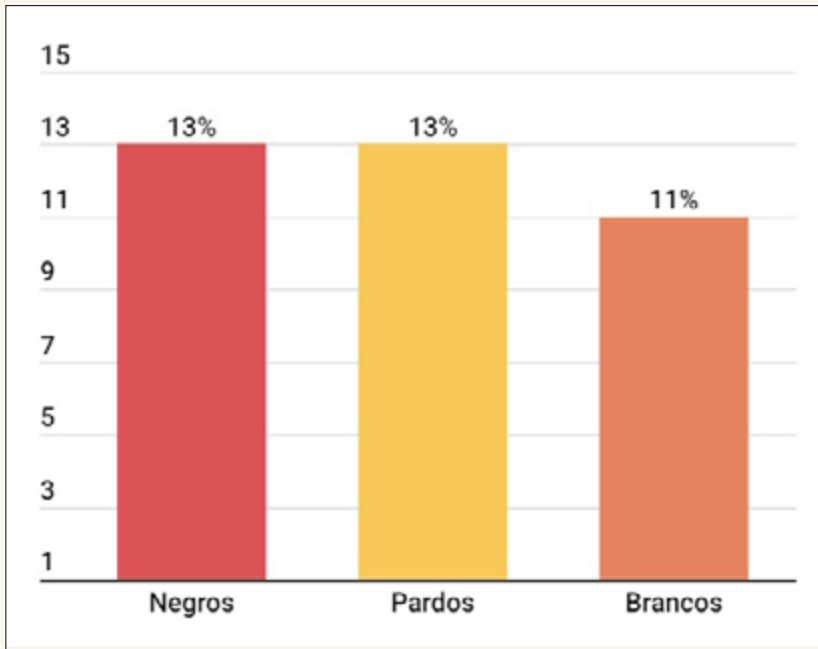


Images 3 and 4: Devassa announces new poster girls and advertises “Encontros Tropicais” [“Tropical Meetings”], to celebrate black

In all the brands analyzed, it was possible to observe a vast use of symbols of Afro-Brazilian culture, as well as partnerships with black influencers and sponsorship of events aimed at the black population.

BIG TABACCO

Smoking is responsible for around 200,000 deaths per year in Brazil and is the second leading cause of preventable death in the world, according to the WHO'9. In Brazil the prevalence of smoking is higher between the black and brown population, with 13.7% among black, 13.5% among brown and 11.8% among whites. Additionally, smoking has a direct impact on the health of the black population, as seen by the higher mortality rate from cerebrovascular disease among the black population, for example. Lower levels of education and income are risk factors for smoking in Brazil, which once again exposes the inter-sectionality between race and income levels, since African Brazilians make up the largest part of the population with lower income and education levels in the country²⁰.



Graph 4: Prevalence of smoking among black, brown and White populations. PNS, 2019

Unlike ultra-processed foods and alcohol, cigarette advertising is forbidden in Brazil, as is sponsorship of sporting events. Law 12.546/2011 made it mandatory to carry warnings about cigarette consumption and a special product tax regime was implemented. These regulatory policies are important in protecting public health and holding the manufacturers that comprise **'Big Tobacco'**

accountable for the damage caused by their products²¹. These advances have made Brazil a world reference in tobacco control.

With the regulation of advertising, however, the tobacco industry has found other ways to operate in the market. In recent years, with the reformulation of tobacco products such as electronic cigarettes and other electronic smoking devices, growth has been observed in informal trade and advertising in the country, through actions featuring influencers on digital media and sales stands at musical events, for example.

None of the three corporations investigated have committed to the MOVER project, and the documents analyzed contain few measures related to social responsibility. Tobacco product manufacturers have focused their actions on the environmental sustainability agenda and the few references to diversity and inclusion are restricted to gender equality and the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. Despite the creation of an ethnic and racial equality program in 2021, the Philip Morris representative in Brazil does not present any racial justice measures. Unlike the other products in this series, the tobacco industry findings are minimal, which may be the result of two hypotheses: 1) the tobacco industry's non-involvement in racial agenda issues or, 2) the strict regulation of tobacco advertising, which discourages the industry's efforts in blackwashing actions or which impact on more veiled actions, which are difficult to trace.

ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS

Public engagement in the discussion about tackling racism is valid. However, it is necessary to critically question the effectiveness of the solutions presented by industries to broaden the racial debate. To what extent could we be witnessing an attempt at brandwashing, which is nothing more than advertising directed at the black population, but under a new guise?

Behind the bond that corporations seek to create with political decision-makers and with the public at large, through advertising campaigns or actions linked to the anti-racist struggle, there are political and commercial angles. As previously documented time and time again, the industries that manufacture products which are harmful to health and the environment act strategically to weaken regulatory policies and obtain tax breaks in order to make their products cheaper, more accessible and more widely consumed. The tactic is by no means new; it is the packaging that changes. We need to be aware of market cooption and running out of agendas which are so important to society, so that we can move forward with effective measures to understand and tackle a problem as complex as racism. Be surveillant and act, so that tomorrow is not just yesterday under a new name^B.

^B Emicida, Pablo Vittar e Majur. AmarElo. “Pra que amanhã não seja só um ontem...” Em: AmarElo. Laboratório Fantasma, 2019.

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