

Why do some brands change racist names and logos, but others don't? Here's what the research says

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In 2020, against the backdrop of [global demonstrations against police brutality and systemic racism](#), several famous food brands around the world, including [Aunt Jemima](#), [Uncle Ben's](#), [Eskimo Pie](#), [Red Skins](#), [Chicos](#), [Beso de Negra](#) and [Gypsy Sauce](#), publicly acknowledged the

racist origins of their brand names and logos and vowed to change them.

This change was long overdue. Some of these brands, like [Aunt Jemima](#) and [Gypsy Sauce](#), have been around for over a hundred years. Despite activists and critics protesting the commercial co-optation of their cultures, [and the racist connotations of certain branding](#), over the years—[especially online via petitions](#)—nothing changed for over a century.

The perseverance of racial slurs and stereotypes in [brand](#) names and logos is striking. How were these brands that employ racial stereotypes able to stay in business, despite calls for change? And how can racialized brands successfully terminate racist branding?

My [recent study](#), published in a special issue of the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, set out to answer these questions by studying the branding change of Zigeunersauce (which means Gypsy Sauce in English), [a popular paprika-based condiment in Germany](#).

Eight years of public pressure

In 2020, [Unilever's Knorr company re-named the popular Zigeunersauce to "Paprika Sauce Hungarian Style"](#) after years of pressure from activists to discontinue the brand name because of its racist connotations. Several of Knorr's local competitors, including [Kuhne](#), [Homann and Edeka](#) also renamed their sauces.

This change came eight years after a Roma and Sinti rights organization [first publicly attempted to get the name Zigeunersauce changed](#). In 2013, the Forum for Sinti and Roma sent an open letter to five major food manufacturers asking them to change the name, but the request was rejected.

The Roma are [a traditionally nomadic clan-based people](#) who traveled from Northern India across the European continent around the fifteenth century. [Roma subgroups differentiate themselves](#) according to their clan, language dialects and traditional occupations.

The term zigeuner, or gypsy, is a derogatory term for Roma or Sinti, depending on their subgroup affiliation. Zigeuner is [derived from the Greek word athinganos](#), meaning heathen. Over the centuries, it has become loaded with negative [racial stereotypes, like associating the group with thievery](#).

To combat this racist denomination, the moniker Roma, along with a flag and an anthem, was [created by the European Roma civil rights movement](#) in the 1970s. The Roma have consistently fought against [anti-Roma discrimination, hate speech and microaggressions](#) over the years.

What drives change

Why did the first public attempt to get Zigeunersauce re-named fail? To understand why, and to understand why the name was eventually changed in 2020, I collected German newspaper articles from 2013 and 2020 that used the keyword "Zigeunersauce."

I examined the ways German news articles either publicly praised or criticized brands that sold Zigeunersauce, paying particular attention to who was interviewed. I took a critical stance on language, meaning I also focused on the choice of words used.

I found that, in 2020, companies used two main arguments to justify re-naming the racialized brand: anti-racism and social tolerance.



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The anti-racism argument was used to highlight how negative stereotypes were harming the Roma community. On Aug. 16, 2020, [a press statement from a Unilever spokesperson](#) was published in one of Germany's top selling newspapers:

"Since the term Gypsy Sauce [Zigeunersauce] can be interpreted negatively, we have decided to give our Knorr Sauce a new name. In a few weeks you will find this on the shelf as Paprika Sauce Hungarian Style."

The second argument, social tolerance, focused on the German people, arguing that Germans no longer found certain popular phrases, such as the word gypsy, acceptable.

In 2013, on the other hand, the racialized brand name was maintained using two different arguments: market dynamicizing and romanticizing. The first argument, market dynamicizing, argued that if shoppers were going to continue to buy Zigeunersauce, the brand name should remain unchanged.

A [Unilever press statement from Aug. 14, 2013](#) said,

"We refer to the long tradition of the term [Gypsy Sauce] and see no negative connotation. There are more frequently purchased products that are named after areas or ethnic groups."

The second argument centered on the Roma people themselves. Brand spokespeople romanticized the visible minority group by evoking seemingly positive—but in reality, harmful—stereotypes and fetishization associated with the word gypsy, [such as exoticness and spiciness](#).

These findings can help us understand why some companies with racist brands and logos change their branding and why some do not. It can also help us persuade these companies to finally change racialized branding to stand up for racial justice in the marketplace.

These findings also go beyond food products by shedding light on why organizations, like the [National Football League's Kansas City Chiefs](#), still have racialized logos.

True accountability

The old adage of "stick and stones may break my bones, but words shall never hurt me" is not necessarily true. Words can indeed hurt. When cartoon-like, racist representations of marginalized minorities are made widely available through the marketplace, they cause harm.

[A study on the consumer behavior of middle-class African Americans](#) found that marketplace stigma is often experienced as a deep assault on a consumer's personal worth.

Holding brands with racist logos and slogans accountable is an important step towards alleviating institutionalized racism in the marketplace. To this end, [the Race in the Marketplace Network](#) research network has been created to study, produce and disseminate critical race-related work in the market.

Yet companies should not merely change racialized [brand names](#) without giving back to the visible minority communities they benefited from for decades. True accountability means making meaningful change.

Examples of more meaningful branding strategies include concrete corporate policy changes, community initiatives and financial donations to relevant nonprofit organizations. For example, PepsiCo, which owned the Aunt Jemima brand, has [reportedly invested \\$22.3 million in Black-owned restaurants](#) as part of their [Racial Equality Journey](#) initiative that was launched in 2020.

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