

Hilltops and Marches:
A Cultural and Semiotic Analysis of Pepsi and Coca-Cola Advertising Strategies

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Abstract

The Coca-Cola Company released an advertisement in 1971 that had powerful themes of unity in a time of significant discord around the world. Almost 50 years later, the Pepsi Company released an advertisement that aimed to accomplish similar values of unity and commonality when the world seemed at odds with itself. While both advertisements sought to convey similar messages, the reception could not have been more different. Coca-Cola has experienced continued praise for their famous “Hilltop” advertisement while Pepsi was forced to take their advertisement down within 24 hours of its release. This paper utilizes semiotic theory to analyze the signs in the advertisements to create an understanding of how each advertisement was perceived differently. In order to understand a semiotic approach, this paper also approaches semiotics with respect to the historical contexts surrounding both advertisements.

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Incorporating sensitive cultural issues in advertising has always carried with it a risk of receiving harsh criticism. However, if an advertising agency can properly synthesize the message with a greater cultural perspective on an issue while continuing to promote their own product, then it might experience significant praise for being culturally conscious while also promoting a great product. On the other hand, a company might be required to engage with crisis communication after a similar advertisement if critics of an advertisement are particularly harsh.

The Coca-Cola Company and Pepsi Company have both experienced great successes and failures in their advertising endeavors. In particular, there are two advertisements that represent the extremes of such a polarity when discussing social issues in advertising. In 1971, Coca-Cola released the renowned Hilltop advertisement. This advertisement has been referred to by multiple advertising experts as the greatest advertisement of all time and received over 100,000 enthusiastic letters from viewers at the time of its release (Andrews & Barbash, 2016; Blistein, 2015). It addressed issues of commonality among races, genders, and backgrounds. In 2017, the Pepsi Company released an advertisement that approaches cultural issues of unity that still exist almost 50 years later. While Coca-Cola experienced high praise for the Hilltop advertisement, Pepsi received so much negative reception that it removed the advertisement within 24 hours of its original release (Smith, 2017). The question then becomes why the reception the two advertisements received was so different. In order to properly address such issues, this paper will explore the historical contexts in which both advertisements were created

before using a semiotics approach to analyze the signs within the advertisements. The theory of semiotics will be the guide for understanding how to interpret the meaning behind these commercials, so a brief explanation of the discipline will provide a helpful foundation.

Semiotics

Humans naturally seek meaning out of the things they interact with, and semiotics attempts to determine how and why people find meaning behind such objects (Chandler, 2018). Semiotics is a system of thought that seeks to understand how and why people find meaning in any object that is viewed or interacted with. These objects might be considered as signs.

Semioticians have focused great efforts toward understanding signs as their own entities and understanding then how those signs work together in relationship. There is some question over how exactly to define a “sign,” but Eco (1976) provides one of the most helpful: “A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else” (p. 7). So a sign is an object that represents an idea or belief. These signs imbue meaning into the object while also reinforcing the meaning behind the idea or belief. From such a sign, semioticians seek to understand systems of communication. When a sign is interpreted, signification takes place. “When – on the basis of an underlying rule – something actually presented to the perception of the addressee *stands for* something else, there is *signification*” (Eco, 1976, p. 8). Saussure refers to a “sign” and a “signified,” which will be discussed shortly (Chandler, 2018). Two crucial terms for understanding semiotics in regards to advertising are connotation and denotation.

Denotation

Denotation is the sign in its rawest analysis. Chandler (2018) defines a denotation as “the definitional, literal, obvious, elementary, or commonsense meaning of a sign. In the case of linguistic signs, the denotative meaning is what a dictionary attempts to provide” (p. 162). However, Barthes (1977) points out that denotations are different than first impressions. Instead, denotations are only understood after removing all cultural connotations that are inherent in the mindset with which an individual approaches a sign-vehicle. A sign-vehicle is simply the object that acts as the sign, whereas a sign is the representation of meaning held in the sign-vehicle. Barthes (1977) says the denotative state “corresponds to a plentitude of virtualities: it is an absence of all meaning full of all the meanings” (p. 42). Denotation is important to reflect upon because it gives both senders and receivers of messages a way to understand the foundation of a sign-vehicle’s meaning, but it is only an avenue to understanding what meaning is embedded in a message and not an ends. Therefore, the denotation is a single variable in an equation and does not produce a solution on its own. Barthes (1977) continues that denotations still possess some singular meaning and that the meaning would be sufficient, but that denotations “can appear as a kind of Edenic state of the image; cleared utopianically of its connotations, the image would become radically objective, or, in the last analysis, incorrect” (p. 42). Denotation in advertising simply refers to the literal images, words, and sounds utilized to create the advertisement. For instance, the denotation of Coca-Cola’s tagline “It’s the real thing” is literally the words used to create the tagline. Any meaning or application outside of that is outside the boundaries of denotation.

Advertising mainly focuses on connotations and codes, but denotations are crucial for understanding where connotations come from.

Connotation

On their own, the meaning of denotations is quite unclear (Barthes, 1977). However, when these denotations are connected into a system of language, they are able to have meaning assigned to them. Connotation is then the way someone connects various ideas and beliefs together to make meaning: “There is no denotation without connotation: secondary over tones may be read into any signs regardless of intention” (Chandler, 2018, p. 163). Chandler (2018) defines connotation as “personal associations for individuals, but semiotics focuses on those that are widely recognized within a culture or subculture” (p. 163). While, when reflected on, singular signs can be identified, connotations are naturally the way people understand meaning in signs. This is not simply because humans interpret a sign through a cultural lens, but even more so because a human-created sign is created through a cultural lens. Barthes (1977) clarifies this kind of perspective: “It is certain that the coding of the literal prepares and facilitates connotation since it at once establishes a certain discontinuity in the image: the ‘execution’ of a drawing itself constitutes a connotation” (p. 158). Connotation is built into the ways humans communicate, not because the signs themselves have meaning, but because humans are meaning makers and will use whatever they can to make meaning from something. This concept in advertising is found in the way advertisers connect signs to a person’s cultural context and understandings of the world. For instance, an advertisement might incorporate a color palette that is bright and music that is upbeat in order to display a message of joy and happiness. Advertisers hope that these connotations

will ultimately connect positively with consumers in order to convince them to purchase a product or buy a service.

Relational System in Advertising

The history of semiotics begins with Hippocrates and Plato, and reaches into disciplines such as linguistics, marketing, and literature (Chandler, 2018). Despite the practice being ancient, the term “semiotics” began with the two fathers of modern semiotics, Peirce and Saussure (Chandler, 2018).

Saussure, an expert linguist, created a system of semiotics that is known as the relational model of language (Chandler, 2018). In this model, Saussure describes language as being similar to a chessboard. He says that if a word (or, in the case of semiotics, a sign) is a single piece on a chess board, every time the word or sign’s meaning or use changes, every other piece on the table changes its relationship to every piece and not simply the piece that was moved (Eco, 1976). Saussure (1916) further states, “Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object” (p. 8). This perspective is explored even deeper in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: “All this brings the problem of semantic fields back...to the question of whether the form of communicative systems determines the world vision of a certain civilization” (Eco, 1976, p. 79).

Differing from Saussure’s dyadic elements of a sign as sign and signifier, Peirce posited a triadic definition of a sign. The three elements of a sign in Peirce’s model are the representamen, object, and interpretant (Chandler, 2018). The representamen is referred to as the “sign-vehicle” and is the form that represents the object (Chandler, 2018, p. 29). The interpretant is the sense made of the sign. An example of how this

relationship works is a female bathroom sign. The figure that appears as a girl with a dress on is the representamen, or sign-vehicle. The object is the women's bathroom, and the interpretant is the sense that the bathroom is for women only. A final qualification for the Peircian model is that it does not imply a direct relationship between the representamen and object. Instead, they are both directly related to the interpretant. This is why Merrell (1977), a Peircian semiotician, expressed the relationship Peirce expresses as a "three-way dyadicity" (as cited in Chandler, 2018, p. 30). In essence, these semioticians are stating that there are interconnected systems of thought that develop the way humans perceive all signs that exist in the world.

Advertising has the power to utilize such systems of thought and help direct the way someone might perceive the world. While there are many goals an advertisement might hope to achieve, the focus of this discussion is how an advertisement's audience will perceive the work. Langrehr and Caywood (1995) note that connotative meanings in advertisements are derived from the perspective of an observer. If the signs in an advertisement are to be understood, then it is important to also take into account the surrounding contexts of the observers so that connotative inferences might also be taken into account. Within advertising research, there are two main areas of study: literary theory and cultural studies (Oswald, 2012). Semiotic analysis on an advertisement employs both areas of study by reflecting on how the surrounding culture will receive the literary theory introduced by the advertisement. Through the display of a system of signs that are interconnected, semiotics provides a robust framework for understanding public reception.

Coca-Cola's Hilltop Advertisement

In 1971, Coca-Cola released an advertisement that has commonly become known as the Hilltop Advertisement. This advertisement, created by Backer of the McCann Erickson advertising agency, features the song "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" written by Billy Davis (Ryan, 2012). The advertisement, when adjusted to inflation in 2013, cost \$1.3 million (Chang, 2014). Backer created this advertisement in a way that addressed significant political and social issues of the time. Engaging such issues in advertising requires a careful understanding of what relevant perspectives are held in the greater culture followed by a strategic combination of signs that attach positively to such perspectives.

Historical and Cultural Context

War and American confidence. America walked into the 1970s with the difficulty of war. The Vietnam War was six years old when the Coca-Cola Advertisement was first aired, and American citizens' confidence that they would be victorious was at an all-time low (Borstelmann, 2012). In contrast to the earlier wars of the century, many Americans were questioning why the government had entered into such a war, and the answers from the government did not seem to give great reason. Borstelmann (2012) remarks on the ambiguity of the war for the U.S.:

Victory in the political struggle for the loyalties of the South Vietnamese remained elusive, however, even as superior firepower enabled U.S. forces to inflict enormous damage on their mostly Communist enemies and on the millions of civilians caught up in the fight. (p. 23)

While citizens were being told by government officials that there was progress being made in Vietnam, *The New York Times* released an article covering what are commonly referred to as the “Pentagon Papers” in 1971, which were classified documents pertaining to the progress of the war (Borstelmann, 2012). These documents revealed “incompetence and extensive deception of the American public by its leaders, as well as something less than liberty in South Vietnam” (Borstelmann, 2012, p. 25).

Human rights. The release of documents such as the Pentagon Papers and an unsuccessful war forced American citizens to reexamine what they found to be unique about their country. From this reexamination, citizens began to take a more skeptical approach to discussing wars and political engagement with other countries’ wars (Borstelmann, 2012). This introspective America reflected on their individualism and how they might continue to stand up for each human and advocate for their rights (Borstelmann, 2012). This emphasis on human rights “that blossomed in the 1970s resulted from the confluence of these events: the background of the Holocaust, the end of formal racial inequality, the Soviet denunciation of Stalin and the dissolution of the labor campus, the onset of the détente” (Borstelmann, 2012, p. 180). The 1970s was preceded by decades of oppression and marginalization from specific people groups to others. The 1940s held the Holocaust and murder of six million Jews, the 1950s and subsequent decades held within them the oppressive regime of the Soviet Union, and the 1960s brought the conversation of racial inequality to the forefront during the Civil Rights movement (Borstelmann, 2012). The 1970s, then, was a decade that attempted to right some of the wrongs of the past oppressive decades.

Individualism. The attention that the U.S. and other countries were giving to human rights propelled an individualism within citizens that grew throughout the decade. The markets and media were continuing to focus more on personalizing products and coverage in a way that forced other citizens to consider the humanity of those all around them (Borstelmann, 2012). For example, the LGBT movement began to gain significant traction in the 1970s. Rosen (2014) reported, “[T]he decade of the 1970s, represent a remarkable period of transformation for gays and lesbians, particularly those living in America's coastal cities. At its core, that transformation was about visibility” (para. 3). Media sources were covering stories about marginalized communities in order to appeal to the ideals of autonomy and individualism (Borstelmann, 2012).

Marketing and advertising. These movements and transitions in consumer thinking led marketers to think differently about how they could appeal to an individualistic culture. One key element in the direction marketing took was to incorporate diversity more into advertisement (“History:1970s,” 2003). The 1960s forced the market to connect with minority communities that might have been overlooked in past decades (“History:1970s,” 2003). By 1976, 69 million homes in the U.S. had at least one television set, and families would view an average of six hours per day (“History:1970s,” 2003). This pulled advertising toward the television market significantly more than in past decades (“History:1970s,” 2003). Advertising now had a medium to display even more diverse stories and messages of why someone ought to engage with the brand. This perfectly set Coca-Cola up to create an advertisement that displayed the dynamics of a television advertisement with the relevant message of diversity.

Semiotic Analysis

While there are many moving parts to the Hilltop advertisement, there seems to be a simple and direct message at the core of the advertisement. Backer, the creator of the advertisement, stated that his original intent in creating the advertisement was to “see Coke not as it was originally designed to be -- a liquid refresher -- but as a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples” (Ryan, 2012). Coca-Cola attempted to appreciate the diversity of individuals from all races and genders while also displaying what a diverse people group has in common. While it is a simple concept, it can be difficult to use signs in a way that lead a viewer to understand such a message. In terms of semiotics, the advertisement used the denotations of the hilltop, the actors, and the Coca-Cola bottle in order to connect with key cultural connotations in order to produce a sense of unity and commonality.

The setting. The Hilltop advertisement is set on a hilltop in Italy (Ryan, 2012). This setting was simple and straightforward. Throughout the advertisement, different camera angles show people standing on a hilltop that has a few trees but no significant landmarks. Aerial footage of the people on the hilltop shows an immense amount of open space that extends all around the group of individuals standing together.

The setting is denoted as a simple and clear picture, placing the focus more on the individuals standing in a group and what they are saying. Hilltops were not politically or socially charged with meaning at the time of the advertisement, and therefore make the setting an inherently neutral ground for any action to take place. Open spaces such as the hilltop that have little interference from other landmarks and structures allow viewers to imagine for themselves a world of their own within the advertisement. Because the

hilltop is ambiguous, Coca-Cola was able to display the actions taken by the actors as something outside a typical, everyday experience. In some ways, the setting as a hilltop is able to create another world that falls outside of connotations that viewers might typically attach to something like an urban setting. This is not to say that the hilltop is a blank slate. Instead, it serves as a location where people can come together in a way that transcends the everyday issues that an average citizen faces in their social and political experience. As will be seen through an analysis of the actors and the song they all sing, it seems as though Backer was creating a world where a Coca-Cola was “a universally liked formula that would help to keep them [people from all over the world] company for a few minutes” (Ryan, 2012).

The actors. The setting, however, does not become apparent until a few seconds into the advertisement. Instead, the first camera angle is a close up of a female actress. The female has Caucasian skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. Within the cultural contexts of post-holocaust, post-civil rights America, she has many characteristics of a race that had been seen as the perpetrators of oppression all across the world (Borstelmann, 2012). However, the actress’ gender shifts the viewer’s attention away from her as a Caucasian, blue-eyed person. The 1960s were a time of civil rights and equity not only for minority races but also for women (Borstelmann, 2012). Feminism and women’s equality was an important topic of diversity at the time the advertisement was released (Borstelmann, 2012). As the camera pans away from the first actress’ face, two new faces are included in the camera’s shot. They are two more Caucasian actors—one male and one female. Within the first 15 seconds of the advertisement, the first three actors are female

dominant. With the culture being filled with conversations about diversity, the viewer inferred connotations of diversity and equality within the advertisement.

As the camera changes shots from the first three actors, the new shot involves the camera panning across multiple actors from different races wearing a diversity of clothing. The clothing of the actors expresses a diversity of culture as well. An African, an Indian, and a Japanese person all wear traditional clothing that matches the style of those respective cultures. As a viewer begins to connect these denotations to connotations of where the actors might be from, the viewer can further connote that these individuals are standing together in unity. In the diversity of the individuals, there is unity in the crowd.

The Coca-Cola bottle. While one connotation of unity might come from the fact that the people are standing together, Coca-Cola strategically places another object into the images of the advertisement that attempt to connote unity as well. As the camera pans away from the first actress' face, the actors are all shown to be holding Coca-Cola bottles. When the camera passes by people of all ethnicities and races, the Coca-Cola bottles are written with the words "Coca-Cola" in different languages—presumably the languages that the people holding the bottles speak.

This display of the Coca-Cola bottle being a piece to unite the group of people is crucial because it is the product that is being marketed. The Coca-Cola bottle becomes a source of unity among everyone holding the bottle. With different languages on the bottles, it appears as though the product and creators of the product properly respects the diversity of culture while still offering the same product: a delicious soft drink. Through the denotation of the actors holding the Coca-Cola bottles, the bottles have become a

vehicle through which a viewer might infer that Coca-Cola is a brand that promotes unity and shows a level of commonality between all people.

The song. While the visuals play an important role in the hilltop advertisement, the song that the actors sing is truly the focus of the piece. From the beginning of the advertisement, the actress is shown singing a song. When the camera continues to feature more people, the chorus begins to sing along. There is significance in that all the actors are singing a song together in that it shows commonality and unity. After all, each person must know the lyrics to a song in order to sing it together.

However, the impact of the signs in the song falls mostly in the lyrics. This advertisement was part of a broader campaign that Coca-Cola was running called the “It’s the real thing” campaign (“A History of Coca-Cola,” 2012). While the song lyrics end with a significant emphasis on “it’s the real thing,” they begin the song without mention of Coca-Cola at all. The first verse preceding the chorus is sung “I’d like to buy the world a home / and furnish it with love / Grow apple trees and honey bees / and snow white turtle doves” (Backer, 1971). It is not until the chorus that Coca-Cola receives any reference. The lyrics of the chorus are, “I’d like to teach the world to sing / in perfect harmony / I’d like to buy the world a Coke / and keep it company / that’s the real thing” (Backer, 1971). The constant repetition in the lyrics is the singers saying “I’d like” followed by what seems to be a vision of a world they would create. Whatever this world is, the advertisement seems to be saying that it is the “real thing.” The song ends by saying “What the world wants today / is the real thing” (Backer, 2012).

The mention of the word “world” comes up multiple times throughout the lyrics of the hilltop advertisement. This is important in connection with the denotation of the

diverse ethnicities portrayed in the advertisement. To once again return to the intention of the advertisement, Backer wanted to show “a bit of commonality between all people” (Ryan, 2012). This world that exists within the confines of the advertisement shows commonality while not neglecting anyone because of race, ethnicity, or background. It is a global mindset that seeks to find similarities among everyone.

While the term “world” brings about global connotations, the advertisement also begins by talking about furnishing a “home with love” (Backer, 1971). Despite significant chaos throughout the world in the 1970s, the home was often a place of comfort and security (Borstelmann, 2012). In the times of war and social movements that had at times become violent, a global vision was not always inherently pleasant. However, the lyrics strategically place the global mindset within the comfort and peace of a home. Not only is the home a place of comfort, but homes have always been places where families could be more real with each other. This plays directly into the slogan that Coca-Cola is “the real thing.”

Ultimately, this advertisement gives the audience a way to escape the chaos of the current world and enter into a new one that is comfortable and inviting and inclusive. Escaping the immediate world to imagine a better one was a normal way for art to be created in order to reach people in the 1970s (Borstelmann, 2012). This utopia was an attractive place for the audience of the advertisement, but that does not answer how it made it effective for Coca-Cola as an advertisement.

If semiotics is a study of signs and their relationships to another, it is important to look at the relationship of Coca-Cola to other signs in the advertisement. In the advertisement, the lyrics first create a world that seems like utopia, and then the lyrics

place the Coke bottle into that world. Backer has created a beautiful world that people want to live in, and reminds the audience that Coca-Cola will be part of that world. The advertisement is not claiming that Coca-Cola will inherently usher in the said utopia, but simply that it will exist within it. This distinction is important because audiences might have a hard time imagining a world that allows them to escape from their current setting that is created by a soft drink. However, it is easier for an audience to associate their favorite soft drink as part of the beautiful world that is created in the advertisement.

Reception

The Coca-Cola advertisement was received with great enthusiasm in its first year of release (Ryan, 2012). With over 100,000 letters of approval into the company, this advertising campaign became popular not only on television, but also through the radio waves as people would call in to their local stations to have the jingle played (Ryan, 2012). However, the reach of this advertisement has stretched much farther than simply its first run on television. The advertisement is regarded by many people as the most popular commercial of all time (Andrews & Barbash, 2016). It was also featured as the finale of the popular television show *Mad Men*, which was a show that focused on advertising in the 1960s and 1970s (Blistein, 2015). Greenway, who helped write the jingle in the advertisement, expressed that he believes the advertisement's success was a result of a peaceful message being inserted into a turbulent period of history (Andrews & Barbash, 2016).

The writing team at McCann Erickson expertly interpreted the cultural context and cultural sentiments that existed during the time that they created the Hilltop advertisement. If the advertisement had been written at a different time, it is hard to say if

it would have performed as well as it did. From the perspective of semiotics, the hilltop advertisement was able to create a code that could be easily interpreted with messages of commonality and peace. The use of simple and direct denotations that have a significant impact through connotations that exist all throughout culture validates Saussure and Eco's ideas of communication, and in this case advertising, as a system of interconnected relationships.

Pepsi's Live Louder Advertisement

In 2017, the Pepsi Company released an advertisement that received a significant amount of attention. This attention stands in stark contrast to the attention the Coca-Cola hilltop advertisement received. The pushback from this advertisement was substantial, and Pepsi took the advertisement down within a day of releasing it (Grady, 2017). In their response to taking the advertisement down, Pepsi said their intent was to "project a global message of unity, peace and understanding" (Smith, 2017). The Pepsi Company and the Coca-Cola Company both stated that the intention of their respective advertisements was to show unity or commonality. Once again, with the Pepsi advertisement, it is important to understand both the cultural context surrounding the advertisement and then examine the advertisement through semiotics in order to understand why it was taken down so quickly.

Historical Context

As will be shown later, the Pepsi Company's advertisement seemed to relate more closely with certain aspects of what was happening in history at the time of the advertisement's creation. In a different way than the 1970s, the Pepsi advertisement came at a time that was turbulent. The 1970s were turbulent with foreign war, but the Pepsi

advertisement was released when things were turbulent at home for Americans. Most of this had to do with a new uprising in protests against law enforcement officers and violence that had been carried out against the African-American community.

Black Lives Matter. In August of 2014, Michael Brown, an African-American man, was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (Chernega, 2016). Soon after the shooting, a series of riots began in protest of the local law enforcement (Chernega, 2016). As footage of the riots began to spread on social media, news agencies began to send teams to cover the protests, and Ferguson became the beginning of riots and protests around the country to speak out against police brutality against the African-American community (Chernega, 2016).

Two years before Michael Brown's shooting, Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman in Florida (Chernega, 2016). Zimmerman went on trial for murder due to lack of clarity in why he had originally shot Trayvon Martin (Botelho & Yan, 2013). However, Zimmerman was ultimately found not guilty (Botelho & Yan, 2013). While Zimmerman was found not guilty, some people close to the situation began posting on Twitter and Facebook and using the term "black lives matter" as a way of speaking against what they saw as police brutality (Chernega, 2016).

Since these two deaths, Black Lives Matter has become an organized group that is dedicated to "working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise" (Black Lives Matter, 2017). The impacts of this organization have come in terms of awareness and policy. Before the Black Lives Matter movement, no government agency was in charge of collecting data on police shootings once a civilian was in custody (Chernega, 2016). However, Chernega (2016) says, "In the wake of Michael

Brown's death, and at the urging of the BLM movement, several news outlets starting attempting to compile such data" (p. 242). Likewise, Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016 cited the intention to reform the criminal justice system, which was a significant policy shift from her and former President Bill Clinton's policy of being tough on crime in the 1990s (Chernega, 2016).

Social media. The key for Black Lives Matter to disseminating information at its inception was to use social media (Chernega, 2016). This has been a common trend for beginning social movements as information dissemination through social media has become more common. The hashtag for Black Lives Matter became an important role in passing along information to others on Twitter: "The #blacklivesmatter hashtag was only used approximately 48 times a day before Ferguson, and in August, the month that Brown died, it was used more than 52,000 times" (Chernega, 2016, p. 237). In fact, Twitter served as the very vehicle that made the shooting of Michael Brown a national news story (Chernega, 2016).

With social media being an important part of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as other social movements, people focus attention on what people on social media are saying in order to grasp properly what is happening in the world and how people feel about any issue (Pozzi, Fersini, Messina, & Liu, 2016). The Pepsi advertisement received a significant amount of backlash on social media, which ultimately forced them to take the commercial down.

Law enforcement. Pew Research (2017) has conducted studies on the public perception of law enforcement. The survey revealed that 74% of the white population shared a favorable view of law enforcement (on a scale of 1-100, a favorable view was

51-100), but that minority communities had a more complicated view of law enforcement (Pew Research, 2017). “Just three-in-ten black Americans (30%) express warm attitudes about police officers, while 28% offer a neutral rating. Another 38% give a cold rating, including 30% who give a very cold rating” (Pew Research, 2017). Such statistics are tied to recent protests and riots from the Black Lives Matter movement. This will become an important consideration for the Pepsi advertisement. A significant amount of the criticism directed at the advertisement was due to the positive light the commercial shed on a police officer. The negative reaction was a result of negative connotations that the public had attached to police officers.

Semiotic Analysis

The Pepsi Company’s advertisement created in 2017 featured the public figure Kendall Jenner participating in a rally. The advertisement runs almost three minutes in length, and features a significant amount of involvement from different characters. Unlike the Coca-Cola commercial, there is no speaking or singing from the characters of the advertisement. Instead, the entire advertisement is backed by a song. Throughout the commercial, the march, actors, and the Pepsi can are all denotations that act as symbols to connect with the cultural ideals of commonality, unity, and the drive to make a statement in order to create a connotation between Pepsi and these ideals.

The setting. The advertisement begins by showing an Asian-American man playing the cello and taking a break to sip a Pepsi. The next shot features a Middle-Eastern woman wearing a hijab. This woman is editing photos on a desk that also has a can of Pepsi sitting within view. As both of these characters and their professions are introduced, intermittent scenes of a march happening on the streets of a city appear. This

march features blue signs that have words like “peace” and phrases such as “join the conversation” written onto them. As the march continues through the streets, the camera focuses itself on a model being photographed on the side of the road. The model is Kendall Jenner, a white model, who is wearing a blonde wig while being photographed. The context of the advertisement is set in a march setting. While there are no inherent denotations of signs from Black Lives Matter in Pepsi’s advertisement, the advertisement was released at a similar time to many of the marches and protests of Black Lives Matter, and so seemed to be focused on a similar context.

The actors. With the rise of conversations around police brutality toward African-American communities, American culture grew a stronger sensitivity to race and how it is incorporated in advertisements. The Pepsi advertisement featured people from all races and backgrounds marching in the streets. However, Jenner and the police officer also featured in the advertisement are both Caucasian. In the advertisement, Jenner is encouraged by the Middle-Eastern woman and Asian-American man to join the march, and Jenner eventually agrees. After various camera shots of people dancing and playing instruments in the streets, the crowd approaches a group of police officers. Out of the crowd, Jenner emerges with a Pepsi can in hand. She approaches a police officer who also is white. She hands the officer the can of Pepsi, and he sips it. After he drinks the Pepsi, the marching crowd begins to cheer and dance again. The police officer looks at a fellow officer and smiles.

These very normal denotations hold no significance, but connote significant meaning when attached to the cultural context. In the advertisement, diversity in race, gender, and sexual orientation are displayed. However, the advertisements’ climax is an

interaction between two white people. While the police officers in the advertisement show no force or aggression to the crowd, the connotations that arise from the cultural context surrounding the advertisement easily lead the audience to understand this remedy between the crowd and the police force as an oversimplification. The relationship between law enforcement officers and people of color is a complex relationship. The Pepsi advertisement denotes a reconciliation of a relationship between a white marcher and white police officer that is celebrated by a group of diverse marchers. This denotation was received with significant pushback from minority communities, which ultimately led to the removal of the advertisement.

The Pepsi can. While the characters play a role in defining the meaning, the Pepsi can also plays a significant role in the climax of the advertisement. In the same way Coca-Cola used a Coke bottle to show commonality between diverse groups of people, the Pepsi commercial attempts to use a Pepsi can as something to show commonality. As Jenner passes the can to the police officer, the music stops and the camera stands still on the police officer holding the Pepsi can. After he drinks the Pepsi, he smiles and everyone around him rejoices. It seems as though Pepsi is trying to connote similar things as the Coca-Cola advertisement was attempting to do. The Pepsi can becomes a vehicle of commonality.

However, there is a significant difference in the way Coca-Cola utilized the Coke and how Pepsi uses their can. In the Coca-Cola advertisement, the lyrics and bottles display themselves as part of the utopia that Coca-Cola develops. On the other hand, the Pepsi advertisement does not display a utopia but a path to engage the world in which someone lives. After the police officer takes a sip of the Pepsi, the final scene of the

advertisement is of the crowd walking forward and the words come across the screen “Live Louder.” The Pepsi advertisement uses the Pepsi can in a way that is a vehicle to make a statement that can impact culture. The essential idea the advertisement portrays is that if a crowd member from a march can simply give a police officer a can of Pepsi that they both enjoy, maybe the police officers will allow the marchers to march in peace. The Pepsi advertisement inherently attempts a more realistic approach in how it makes a statement. However, with such complex cultural content in the advertisement, many people found it offensive that the Pepsi can serve as some sort of diffusion of tensions.

Reception

In the end, the Pepsi advertisement failed to examine alternate connotations both in the use of the Pepsi can as the vehicle for making a statement as well as using law enforcement and a majority race to fix the problem, and it also failed to understand the historicity behind certain connotations in reference to the law enforcement. Activists and protestors from all across the country, including Martin Luther King Jr.’s daughter, spoke out against the advertisement under the contention that it was insensitive to the difficulties of those activists seeking justice particularly for minority communities (Smith, 2017). Pepsi responded that their intent was to “project a global message of unity, peace and understanding” (Smith, 2017). For many people who spoke out on social media, unity and peace were far from what was seen in the advertisement.

While this reaction ultimately forced Pepsi to take their advertisement down, research shows that the advertisement might not have done as much damage as social media portrayed. The Morning Consult surveyed 2,200 people and found that “nearly half of respondents had a more positive opinion of Pepsi after watching the commercial.

Specifically, 44% regarded the brand more favorably versus 28% who didn't seem to care and about 25% who thought more negatively of the brand” (Rance, 2017). While the semiotic analysis of the advertisement shows strong ties to connotations to polarizing political issues that forced them to take the commercial down, Pepsi still maintained a favorable opinion among the public.

Discussion

The Coca-Cola and Pepsi advertisements display two commercials that sought to do similar things in turbulent times. The public discussion that ensued from each advertisement was significantly different, but the research done on the Pepsi advertisement shows that the public conversation does not inherently indicate the results of the advertisement on the general public. Pepsi’s advertisement was ultimately removed because it attempted to provide a solution to a setting that too closely connoted some consumers’ pre-established cultural experiences that were negative. Coca-Cola chose a more neutral and imaginative setting to make their advertisement. In the same way, Coca-Cola was painting a picture of a utopia whereas Pepsi was engaging a picture of culture that already existed. The backlash against Pepsi’s commercial was that the picture of culture presented was close enough to look similar to culture, but too far to make a statement. Instead, the advertisement came off as offensive to these viewers. The reason for the removal of the advertisement, then, is that Pepsi did not properly understand how their signs would be interpreted through the connotations that existed in the people who watched the advertisement.

Semiotics give a framework for understanding the connections these advertisements have to the greater culture. Marketers can use semiotics to connect their creative campaigns positively to cultural ideas and events, but this venture can sometimes risk an opposite connotation being perceived. Sometimes the risk might pay off and show the world what it can look like for people of diverse backgrounds to stand together and share a simple and common pleasure like drinking a Coca-Cola. Other times the risk might render an advertisement less than desirable returns because some people see an advertisement as offensive and an infringement upon their work to create social change.

A final consideration is how an advertisement might age. With the reception the Pepsi advertisement received in 2017, it is worth considering if the hilltop advertisement would have received as much positive reception if it was released in 2017. With the rise of social media, the landscape of communication has become significantly more complex. Using semiotics to traverse this landscape can be tedious, but incredibly beneficial in the awareness of how the vast array of signs connect with each other in different ways so that marketers can be successful in their creative campaigns.

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