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COMMODIFICATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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COMMODIFICATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract:

Commodification and Consciousness

by

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The United Colors of Benetton is a high-end clothing company that has been deemed as an iconic brand because of their non-traditional print advertisements. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the Benetton campaign used photographic images to symbolize social (and sometimes controversial) messages pertaining to race, gender, religion, sexuality and multiculturalism. Benetton claims that their advertising campaign sought to promote diversity, worldwide. However, others believed that their true motive was to gain revenue by placing sensitive social, political cultural issues and messages into an exchange system. The varieties in opinions about Benetton's motives are highly dependent on how consumers interpret their advertisements. This paper will not only examine the ways in which consumers encode and decode social messages in Benetton's print advertisements, but will also attempt to understand the process of attitudinal change through a theoretical approach by using discourse analysis. Further recommendations will be given that detail the importance of how consumers can become more active in their participation of encoding and decoding messages by the use of media literacy.

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Introduction:

“To be successful advertising has to disconnect the message from the product and forget about marketing, which standardizes everything. I don’t do the same thing other people do. I use products to focus on the major problems besetting humanity. I’ve proved that it can be profitable. Since I’ve been working for Benetton, the company has grown tenfold. Advertising people hate me but they have to admit that I’ve won”(Ganeson, 2002).

Take a minute, and pretend! Pretend that you are flipping through the pages of Vogue magazine—observing all the latest fashions, trends and models who are smiling with the lips and eyes. However, while observing, your hand that holds the page comes to a halt. Now, pretend that you come across a photographic advertisement that displays a long-haired white man who is sick, frail, breathless and laying on (what appears to be) his death bed. Emotionally upset, stands his family next to him and us as consumers who are forced to participate in such an unexpected gaze. Now, pretend that in the lower left hand corner you see a logo: a small green rectangular-like box with white letters that read, “The United Colors of Benetton”. So, what are you thinking and how do you feel? Happy? Confused? Outraged?

It was Oliviero Toscani, the former photographer of the United Colors of Benetton, who said, “To be successful advertising has to disconnect the message from the product and forget about marketing, which standardizes everything” (Ganeson, 2002). His logic behind this quote is exemplified in the HIV advertisement, you imaged moments ago, because there is a disconnection of what the product is and what the company is selling. In fact, the attitude you had while imaging the HIV advertisement (whether positive or negative) is only a fraction of the reason why Toscani believes he has “won”. But, what exactly has he won?

Throughout life, we all win some and we lose some. But, whether we win ethically or morally does not seem to matter as much as it does to win. In Toscani's quote, it not only points out the significance of being different and/or abnormal, but it also says that being different and abnormal is profitable. In the advertising and marketing industry, this strategy can produce positive financial outcomes. But, what happens when the advertising strategy displays a dramatic difference and/or abnormality involving social issues that are sensitive to people on an individual, personal, and cultural level?

This is a question that people still struggle to answer when it comes to the retail brand, the United Colors of Benetton. Benetton is a company that has been criticized for their controversial campaigns, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some believe that the company's intentions were to use photographic images to promote dialogue among consumers and non-consumers, which would also promote the brand as a result. The company wasn't only criticized for their photographic images that circulated throughout the media, but also because people began to believe that their motives were associated with gaining revenue, rather than their concerns to promote dialogue and awareness about sensitive topics.

As more and more people believed Benetton's true motives for exploiting ambivalent social issues for profit share, the more the company's strategy became reminiscent upon the Marxist theory of commodification, which takes place when economic value is assigned to something not previously considered in economic terms (for example, an idea, identity or gender). The theory refers to the expansion of market trade to previously non-market areas, and to the treatment of things as if they were a tradable commodity (Tini, 1992).

In relation to Benetton, the non-economic items that are used in the Benetton campaign are messages and social issues about race, gender, religion, sexuality, disease, and politics to

name a few. Interestingly enough, United Colors of Benetton was one of the first companies to use controversial social messages in their print advertising campaigns and thus became known as an iconic brand. This is problematic not only because it shows how our society has become so focused on capital, but because it also shows that we are becoming less focused on cultural and traditional values once these sensitive issues and messages are placed into an exchange system, thus simply becoming a commodity. Unfortunately, some consumers may not even be aware of how these advertisements are slowly and unconsciously changing their opinions about social issues, because they are too busy consuming them.

Therefore, this paper will attempt to use a theoretical perspective to understand the thought-processes and attitudes of individuals who come across advertisements of the Benetton campaign from the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Understanding the theoretical frameworks behind information processing theory, theory of visual rhetoric, and selective perception theory will serve as a guide in understanding the commonalities individuals have when viewing such ads. In addition, recommendations will be given that involve how media literacy can help break down these commonalities by getting consumers to think more critically about advertisements, which may as a result decrease the rate at which social messages are turning into commodities.

Background:

The United Colors of Benetton has established more than 7,000 retail stores in more than 120 countries. The company was started by brother and sister, Luciano and Guiliiana Benetton. The siblings recognized the growing potential of the apparel industry in the 1950s. As a means of tapping into the industry, the company started out selling sweaters. When the first store opened, in 1969, the company immediately experienced success and eventually expanded across the world, building a company with strong brand equity. In addition to the popularity of the company's products, the advertising campaigns of the Benetton company was their biggest accolade due to their practices of separating their products from their advertisements. The Benetton Campaigns were more interested in communicating a message to the world, instead of simply trying to sell their products. Such a strategy received worldwide recognition for promoting diversity as a means of promoting the company, but not for long.

In the early 1980s, Luciana hired a photographer, Oliviero Toscani, who believed that in order for Benetton's advertising campaign to stand out amongst its competition, it needed to separate itself from the traditional practices of the advertising industry. Together, Luciana and Toscani decided to promote the brand as a "life style accessory" and began to do so by initiating the company's first theme, which featured teenagers from culturally diverse nations. The teenagers portrayed racial harmony through the variation of colors worn by each teenager (Table 6). Toscani explained,

With Benetton, we started out with the notion of color. By definition, Benetton means colors. So, to convey this idea of colors, we showed a group, made up of people with different colored skin. It was fantastic, so exhilarating to show the products in such a new and simple way (Ganeson, 2002).

In 1985, similar themes of racial harmony were portrayed in advertisements of two black boys kissing each other and later another of them separated by a globe with a peace symbol, symbolizing unification (Table 7). In 1988, Benetton began mixing cultures with legends that involved Adam and Eve, Joan of Arc, Marilyn Monroe and more. These advertisements involved captions that read, “United Superstars of Benetton”. Other advertisements involved animals with captions that read “United Friends of Benetton”.

However, trouble began to erupt when Toscani later decided to feature advertisements that didn’t include the products, but instead the company logo and a photograph of something that would stimulate thinking. As a means of explaining his thought process he states,

Using these images in this unconventional way is an effort by Benetton to break through the complacency that exists in our society due to the constant flow of even the most horrendous realities communicated through conventional media such as the evening news or the morning paper. By removing these images from their familiar contexts and putting them in a new context they are more likely to be noticed and given the attention they deserve as the viewer becomes involved in the process of answering the questions: What does this image mean? Why does this image appear with a Benetton logo? How do I feel about the subject of the image? What can I do?”(Ganesan, 2002.)

By 1991, Toscani introduced more advertisements that would generate a discussion of other social issues. Unfortunately, such advertisements would also begin to spike controversy and offend several individuals, groups, and cultures. For instance, some advertisements featured a cemetery that symbolized war deaths, bright colored condoms, a baby attached to an umbilical cord and a priest and nun kissing (Table 3).

In 1992, Toscani decided to combine the advertisements with more environmental and political issues such as a photographic image of an HIV positive patient lying on his death bed (Table 2). Several photographic images received mixed reviews while others were banned. Such images were displayed in journals, magazines and on billboards. Other controversial images promoted homosexuality by showing two men cheek to cheek and smiling. Another showed a white and black woman holding an Asian baby. In addition others displayed a black stallion mounting a white mare, and three hearts with captions over each labeled black, white, yellow. Over the years, more and more of the Benetton advertisements were banned.

In 1995, the government in Germany banned the advertisements featuring the HIV positive patient, a bird stuck in an oil stick and ones featuring child labor. Such criticisms were because of the belief that the ads evoked suffering. The advertisement that featured the newborn baby was banned from the media in Italy, UK and France (Table 8). Other criticisms from retailers stated, “We are talking about two different arenas here. If Benetton wanted to underwrite some cause, we’d be supportive. But we’re trying to sell products. At this point everyone should know what Benetton is. But we still find a lot of people who know the name but don’t know what they sell.” Luciano Benetton responded to retailers and other protestors about the questionable advertising themes by saying,

We are aware of the controversy that some of our images have caused, but we believe that all worthwhile stances will have supporters and detractors. Our hope is that people will move from the sterile discussion of whether or not a company is entitled to illustrate its point of view in its advertising campaigns, to a discussion of the issues themselves. In various countries, this has already happened. As more and more people understand our

position and the urgency of these issues, we hope to become the vehicle for discussion and not its focus (Ganesan, 2002).

Methodology

The research method used in this paper is a discourse analysis. Discourse analysis can be used to approach a problem or issue by critically thinking and deconstructing information. It is important to note that discourse analysis is not meant to find an answer or solution to a problem, but it is to find epistemological assumptions and interpretation behind the problem. More specifically, discourse Analysis does not provide us with absolute answers to a problem, but it will allow us to understand the conditions behind the problem which can help us understand the essence of the problem, the resolution, and the assumptions that have created the problem. This research method will contribute to understanding the explicit assumptions which allow us to view the problem from a different perspective and as a result, gain a comprehensive view of the problem. Discourse Analysis is meant to provide a higher awareness of the hidden motivations in others and ourselves and, therefore, enable us to solve concrete problems - not by providing unequivocal answers, but by making people ask necessary questions.

In terms of this study, several Benetton advertisements will be looked at using the discourse analysis method. In addition, these advertisements will be critically analyzed for existing discourses by using a theoretical approach to show why consumers have a variety of interpretations and perspectives after encoding and decoding Benetton advertisements. Therefore, five Benetton ads were selected based on the high degree of controversy that existed within the public sphere. Also, three theories were selected that attempt to explain the process of how and why people encode and decode images.

Literature Review

The literature on this issue is extremely essential because it allows for an understanding about the different perspectives of an individual's thought-process when viewing an advertisement by Benetton. More specifically, it gives insight about the similarities and differences authors have within their research. Understanding the literature is extremely essential because it provides a variety of perspectives about why consumers and non-consumers develop certain attitudes toward the Benetton's products and company.

After conducting this research, I was aware that I was able to find a number of sources that displayed a direct relationship to the topic. However, much of the information I found began to overlap. This plays as an advantage because it allows me to see what a number of authors have said about the same topic. However, it plays as a disadvantage because it limits me to further areas of research. In addition, I find this important to hear actual consumer responses towards these advertisements, rather than only hearing about a theoretical approach of how people respond to the advertisements. Therefore, secondary research was gathered to gain insight on consumer experiences with Benetton advertisements.

There are several mediums of literature that reaffirmed the company's usage of social messages to gain profitability and thus transforming a historically valuable message into a commodity. In addition, the literature attempts to explain more specific ways of how consumers and non-consumers of Benetton develop the attitudes they do about the brand.

Senthil Ganesan's case study, "Benetton Group: Unconventional Advertising," provides a company background which begins by discussing how the company's biggest accolade dealt

with the way in which they separated their advertising from their products. The company relied on the shock value to sell their products by using photographs that conveyed controversial social issues. The study notes that the company didn't want to use a million dollar budgets to create a myth that was supposed to make the consumer happy. One leading magazine reaffirmed their advertising strategy by stating that the advertisements were taking a stand towards empowerment and righteousness (Ganeson, 2002). However, Benetton's future strategies will pay more attention to the actual clothing line, though they will still involve political issues. This is significant to my study because it gives a concise and clear overview of the company, historically. It also talks about the advertising strategy from the viewpoints of Benetton himself. However, one thing the study lacked was the opinions and viewpoints of the consumers.

In "United Colors and United Meanings: Benetton and the Commodification of Social Issues," Serra A. Tinic discusses the Benetton campaign as being composed of modern art that is radicalized into the form of political and social involvement. Interestingly enough, she notes that Benetton was one of the first companies to produce print advertisements without taglines or any kind of written content in their ads. In addition, she believes that because of this, the general public lacked understanding of what social messages the ads were trying to convey. She exemplifies this by discussing particular ads that were printed in the late 1980s, that depicted visual images about racism, diseases, gender, sexuality, the environment and more.

She also brings in the terminology of decontextualization. She believes that once these ads are placed into promotional use, the social issues are devalued and are therefore turn into commodities. In conclusion, she recommends that advertisements should be critically studied. In comparison with Ganeson's case study, this study is significant to my research because the research looks at specific ads and explains how they are examples of commodification. It also

provides insight to how consumers become affected by shocking visual images. Her recommendations also give further direction for research. However, her study lacked in-depth information about the potential effects of media literacy and how it could change the way people see advertising.

Similarly, Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising is a book that takes a more modern look at how advertisements play a role in commodity culture. It also looks at how ad agencies, advertisements, and media strategies all work together to get the attention of consumers. The beginning of this book looks at Walter Benjamin's theory, "state of distraction", which focuses on how consumers decipher advertisements. It looks at how advertising creates cultural values that are constructed into commodities. Like Williamson's book, they also look at certain "signs". The authors believe that in order for advertisers to compete in the industry, their ads have to be different visually. This book adds to the Benetton research because it talks specifically about how signs play a role in advertising, which can be associated with the way people become aware of social messages in ads.

Unlike Tinic, Jutih Williamson's book, Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising, begins by discussing the concerns of the current state of advertising. Since 1976, Williamson began collecting advertisements and shortly after, realized that many advertisements are examples of exploitation. However, she makes note of the fact that she was still attracted to the ads. This helped peak her interest in studying the reader's thought-processes. She does this by looking at a number of perspectives and theories. More specifically, she does a content analysis by looking at explicit advertisements that exemplify theories such as a referent system of differentiation, signifier, signified, transference and more. This book is significant to the

Benetton research because it actually discusses the awareness and thought-process of consumers when they are exposed to an ad.

The article, “Does It Pay to Shock? Reactions to Shocking and Non-shocking Advertising Content among University Students”, looks at the affects of shock advertising on the consumer. It begins by defining shock advertising as something that deliberately startles and offends its audience. These types of offences breach the codes of social norms. He then makes a content analysis of particular Benetton ads that give off shock value. He also takes note that there hasn’t been a great deal of research on how people respond to these shocking advertisements. His article displays a table of shock appeals that include the type of shock, a description, and specific advertising examples with the shock displayed, and published authors who have also discussed the particular shock exemplified. He also discusses another table about the preliminary model of consumer reactions to shock appeals. This model shows how exposure or shock value leads to normal violation or unexpectedness, which then leads to a surprise--resulting in attention, elaboration, retention or behavior. This article is significant to the Benetton research because it takes a different approach by looking at how consumer’s emotions play a role in advertisements.

Henry Giroux’s article, “Consuming Social Change: The United Colors of Benetton,” begins by giving a brief history of the Benetton Company and their initial advertising strategy. Much of the campaign dealt with visual images of racial harmony. Giroux’s article continues by noting how advertising thrives on selling products that enhance consumer’s inequalities and individuality. More specifically, cultural differences have to be present in order for advertising to work. He goes into more depth about post-Fordism and how Benetton is associated to it and the idea of pedagogy.

Like Tinic, he goes into a discussion about the lack of text in the advertisements. He believes that the images are stripped of their political values and are left for fascination, horror and terror. When the Benetton logo is the only thing present in the ad, consumers can feel a zone of comfort and playfulness after the visual image. Giroux continues by discussing how social issues are left to a matter of perception. In addition, this study is significant to the research because it gives an in-depth look at how Benetton pushed for social change in the campaign. Giroux's discussion about decontextualization is very similar to Tinic's. However, he doesn't give many recommendations for further research.

Looking at the importance of media literacy is also something that essential throughout the literature. The article by Julian Hermida, "The Need for Teaching Media Literacy at the University Level," takes a look at how important media literacy is at the college-level. It also talks about how many areas of study are not thoroughly researched, which can cause misinterpretations. Hermida believes that it is the student's responsibility to double-check their sources. This article is significant to the study because it gives me more insight into media literacy.

Information processing model

The thought-processes of individuals at the time of exposure can be explained by understanding relevant theories such as the information processing theory, theory of visual rhetoric and selective perception. Looking at these theoretical frameworks will provide a better understanding about how one would think if they too were going through a Vogue Magazine and noticed a HIV positive man laying on his deathbed. More specifically, these theories can guide one in understanding the commonalities of an individual's thought processes. It is very beneficial to have a model that one can follow to see exactly how individuals are accumulated before and after they are exposed to an advertisement. Attitude change is one of the major constructs within the research and it is an important variable to understand, because it is a factor that inevitably affects the consumer at some in point. Therefore, understanding this attitude change can also help in understanding the impact that the social messages of Benetton's advertisements can have on society.

One way of understanding how consumers and non-consumers process and perceive information in Benetton advertisements can be explained by looking at the informational processing model. The information processing theory has been known as a historically significant model that was developed by William McGuire. McGuire believed that there were three information processing phases that one has to satisfy in order to impact persuasive communication. More specifically, if one wanted to understand the effects of variables such as fear appeals, intelligence, motivation, attention and more, they would have to follow the phases. The phases include attention to the message, comprehension of its propositions, and acceptance of the content. In 1960, McGuire believed that these three phases were only the basis for his six-step information-processing model. However, later he added on steps, resulting in a twelve-step model (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993).

In general, the information processing model was to show how attitudes occur in different steps. As a part of the steps, you needed to have exposure, attention, liking/interest, comprehension, acquiring skill, yielding, storing new attitude, reinforcement, and post-behavioral consolidating (Ball, 1). More specifically, a person must be exposed to a message, attend to it, take enough interest to process it further, comprehend the message (learning what), acquire taught skills (learning how), yield to the message (attitude change), store the message content and/or the new attitudinal position in memory, retrieve that information at later times, make decisions based on the retrieved information, behave in accordance with that decision, receive positive reinforcement for so behaving, and make the new position a part of self by integrating it into his or her cognitive structures and habit patterns (Parker, 1).

There are a large number of researchers that have used the information-processing model in their studies. One study that comes to mind is explained in the article, “Does It Pay to Shock? Reactions to Shocking and Non-shocking Advertising Content among University Students”. This was a study that was conducted to see exactly how shock, information and fear appeals in advertising can affect the attitudes of college students who saw advertisements of HIV/AIDS awareness. The study found that when asked to indicate which poster drew their attention the most, a greater percentage of subjects in the shock advertisement condition chose the experimental advertisement (84.4 percent), compared to the fear (40.6 percent) and information conditions (46.9 percent). Most importantly, the study found that 77.8 percent mentioned a specific norm violation as a factor in drawing their attention. The percentages of people identifying norm violations in the other conditions were much lower (information, 6.7 percent; fear, 7.7 percent). This result validates the researches conceptualization that norm violation (shock advertising) is the key to heightened awareness of shocking advertising content (Dahl, 7).

There is a high correlation between the results in the shock advertising study and the Benetton domestic violence advertisement shown in Exhibit 9. The advertisement displayed two women who appear to be victims of domestic violence. One woman has a bruise on her face and the other has a scar on the right side of her forehead. Several opinions about the advertisement varied in a forum that displayed the advertisement. For instance, one blogger stated,

I find it to be really damn exploitative, too. I think that it would be one thing for them to SPONSOR a campaign against domestic violence and then have their logo in the corner because they're a sponsor. That, in fact, would probably be a good thing. But this is advertising their clothing, plain and simple, and it's fucked up (Feministing.com, 2007).

According to the information processing model, bloggers with the same opinions as this one have been exposed to the advertisement and have decided whether or not they like it, which creates an attitude. Some of these constructs that are present in the blog include, recall, recognition, cognition, and feeling. Recall and recognition directly relate to cognition, even though, emotional appeals don't directly relate, but they are associated with one another. For instance, what a person thinks can stimulate an emotional affect on them as well. In addition, some of the independent variables of interest, as it pertains more specifically to my research, include the social message and the individual's thoughts about the social message. On the other hand, the dependent variable of interest is how the individual's attitude of the social message has changed.

In the bloggers comment, they explain that if the advertisement was sponsored by someone who helps in domestic violence situations then maybe they would have accepted the advertisement. But, because they have analyzed and come to understand that the company displaying the ad is that of a retail store, they have developed a disliking of the ad and question

the true motive behind their actions. The lack of information presented in the advertisement also creates a negative attitude because viewers can only assume that the brand is trying to sell their clothes rather than create some kind of awareness.

Theory of Visual Rhetoric

Because Benetton's advertisements are of photographic images with no taglines, it is essential to understand how people process the image through a visual perspective. The theory of visual rhetoric is a theory that is very recent. It describes how images can play an equal, if not better, role than verbal messages. The theory is defined as a visual image that can be used to construct rhetorical arguments, acting as symbols representing concepts, abstractions, actions, metaphors and modifies, indicating that pictures may be processed similarly to verbal information. Alternatively, visuals may also be considered transparent representations of reality or conveyors of an emotional appeal (Ball, 1).

A work that complements this theory is Robert Goldman and Stephan Papsen's book, Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising. The book discusses how sign wars can play a significant role in how certain visual images evoke emotional appeal. The authors used a number of photos from campaigns to exemplify how the usage of signs have an impact on the advertising industry (Goldman, 1). For instance, one blogger exemplifies the impact that fear and emotional appeals have in the advertisement pertaining to war by stating, "Why do you put these photos, they are very choking and it's scary. I prefer the new photos with people who wears colorful clothes" (Feministing.com, 2007). In another print advertisement for United Colors of Benetton, there is a photo of a newborn baby girl, Giusy (Exhibit 8), The photo was intended as an anthem to life, but was one of the most censured visuals in the history of Benetton ads. In Italy, there were protests that started in Palermo. The ad was then condemned by the Code of

Advertising Practice Court, which decided that the photo, “Does not take account of public sensitivity” (Ganeson, 2002).

Similar criticisms were expressed in Great Britain, Ireland and France. In another photographic print advertisement, there is a photo of a nun and a priest kissing. The initial thought of this photo started as a group of happy of multiracial kids who were replaced by “couples” representing an all-new interpretation of difference. In this cycle, the word “different” became a close cousin of “controversial.” Often, an attempt to bring different individuals together can lead to conflict instead of happiness and euphoria. These photos as well as others were based on taboos on the impossibility of co-existence. By acknowledging these differences and prohibitions, the brand appeared more involved. It took sides, rather than presenting a simple “objective” portrayal of the world. More specifically, it made a commitment to foster the cohabitation of opposites, to break down barriers and ensure dialogue.

However, as the theory of visual rhetoric discusses, these images play an equal role as the usage of words. The viewer of this ad can only go off of their visual interpretation due to the lack of text. But, even if there was text on the advertisement, the advertisement might have stirred up the same kind of controversy because people don’t need to think about what the ad is saying. More specifically, for example, they would have already determined that the ad goes against their religious beliefs.

The constructs of this theory involves recall, recognition, and cognition. These constructs directly relate to one another, because they involve cognitive thought processes. Like many of the other relationships of constructs, there is not as much emotional appeal. This theory is most effective by embedding their brand into our minds, then making us feel a certain way in order to evoke an emotion in order to gain a purchase. The independent variables of interest, as they

relate to my research, are the expectations of visual images and signs that an individual is accustomed to. On the other hand, the dependent variable of interest is the emotional appeal that the individual has after they have been exposed to the ads visuals.

Selective perception theory

A large reason of why people develop a certain opinion about a Benetton advertisement is because their minds formulate an attitude based on past experiencing and existing knowledge about the perceived message in the photographic print ads. Therefore, understanding how selective perception theory works will also help us understand why consumers and non-consumers develop the attitudes they make after exposure of a Benetton ad. The selective perception theory is defined as an interpretation of information that is influenced by previous experiences, a pre-existing knowledge, cultural expectations, wants, needs, attitudes, and other psychological factors that have measures that may be purposely misperceived to fit ones view of reality. The theory can also be explained in the form of a hierarchy that trickles-down from selective exposure, selective attention, selective comprehension and selective retention. In selective exposure, one chooses or rejects whether or not to be accessible to certain types of information. In selective attention, the individual decides to allow certain stimuli in their thought process while blocking out other types of stimuli. In selective comprehension, individuals analyze stimuli based on acquired attitudes, beliefs and experiences. The selective retention is when individuals are able to recall the advertisement over other advertisements and brands (Ball, 1).

In addition, the selective perception theory has been used in other research areas as well. For instance, in 1954, Hastorf and Cartell conducted research in order to find the validity of the theory. As a means of conquering this challenge, they analyzed a 1951 football game and question fans on both sides of the team. They questioned the fans by asking them which team initiated the most roughness. As a result, they found that fans from both teams accused the other team of initiating the roughness. The point here is that students interpreted the same event in

their own realities and interpretations. Hastorf explains this by stating, “out of all the occurrences going on in the environment, a person selects those that have some significance for him from his own egocentric position in the total matrix" (Hastorf 1954).

Overall, this study not only shows that people can have different interpretations of the same event, but it also shows how some people’s perceptions are evolved based on their cultural experiences and expectations.

In 1973, another study was conducted that involved the TV show, “All in the Family”. The purpose of the study was to examine whether or not audiences deconstructed bigotry by the use of humor, which was the TV shows main purpose. However, the study found that people who had the same beliefs as the main character, Archie, reinforced the stereotypes and praised them. Whereas, the intended purpose was to get minority audiences to devalue its usage. In conclusion, the results of this study exemplify how different traditional values and experiences of an audience can differ among the same topic due to pre-established attitudes (Vidmar, 1974).

An ad, by the Benetton Group, that is relevant to this discussion displays two young girls, black and white (Exhibit 1). The girl who is white has very blonde hair that is similar to that of Shirley Temple’s. The girl who is black has naturally-rough hair that is platted into two braids that sit up high on top of her head. Although these images seem to evoke racial harmony between two young girls who have completely opposite images, it may be perceived differently to certain racial audiences because of their selective perception and previous historical knowledge. For instances, a person who is white, may interpret the advertisement to be of two young girls who are showing each other friendly affection. In addition, it may show their innocence, youth and happiness. Looking at such an image may depict a care-free world, despite the differences that exist between people, especially people who are white and black.

However, a person who is black may focus more on the physical attributes that may draw a racial difference between the two that are not only historical, but societal and may even be intentional. More specifically, a person who is black may see a young white girl who looks a lot more innocent than the black girl because of her neatness and her cleanliness. They may see a young girl who reminds them of Shirley Temple, who in the early 1900s grew up around racial tension of blacks and whites and belonged to a high economic status. On the other hand, people who are black may see a black girl who looks poor due to her nappy-like hair and displays the image of a Pickanny. In addition, her braids are done in a shape that makes her look like a devilish figure. Interestingly enough, an article by Henry Girouxan, "Consuming Social Change: The United Colors of Benetton," discusses how many of Benetton's advertisements attempts to depict visual images of racial harmony. However, he also notes how advertising thrives on selling products that enhance consumer's inequalities and individuality. More specifically, cultural differences have to be present in order for advertising to work.

There are many key constructs that play a major role in this as well as in the selective perception theory such as perception and attitude. Attitude and perception are correlated because when one changes the other one is also altered. The way in which something is perceived can evoke a certain attitude. However, if a person's perception changes, than their attitude will also be altered. In addition, the independent variables of interest, as it pertains to my research question, are the cultural expectations, experiences, beliefs and preconceived notions about the brands social message. The dependent variable of interest consists of the individual's perception or interpretation of the social message conveyed in the advertisement.

Implications

When we understand advertising to operate without much effective control, we come to appreciate some of its further social consequences. Much like pornography, when viewed repeatedly, the discourse of advertising reiterates themes to which we ultimately become desensitized(O'barr, 205).

Desolately, when these issues and messages are placed into an exchange system, their historical value and meanings may become devalued. In other words, their meanings are given a price tag and play the role of a commodity. This is problematic not only because it shows how our society has become so focused on capital, but because it also shows that we are less focused on cultural and traditional values. Unfortunately, some consumers may not even be aware of how these advertisements are slowly and unconsciously changing their opinions about social issues, because they are too busy consuming them. An article by Julian Hermida talks about the importance of media literacy. He believes that the effectiveness of media literacy has not been thoroughly researched, which can cause misinterpretations.

Media literacy is not to teach people about the good and bad things of the media, but it is about the importance of being able to analyze and understand exactly what the media is trying to communicate. It is truly unbelievable how much the media educates people about the rights and wrongs of society. It's through the media that people learn the updated way to look, dress, act, talk, and more. It plays as a medium between us and the larger world. The media finds itself into our thoughts and homes through television, magazines, newspapers, movies, and more. There are so many forms of media today that sometimes we may not even notice how much we have been manipulated in a given day. Even though many of us know that the media is not always as accurate, we still choose to follow its agenda. However, this is a problem because as we continue

to follow its agenda, , we get caught up in the romanticizing messages and thus end up being the type of unaware consumers the media wants us to be.

It is true in many ways that this discourse reflects social practices and cultural values already present, but it is simultaneously true that it recreates them in the process of depicting them. It becomes impossible to say which one comes first: the culture of the ad.
(O’Garr, 206)

Appendix

Table 1: United Colors of Benetton Ad



Table 2: United Colors of Benetton Ad



Table 3: United Colors of Benetton Ad



Table 4: United Colors of Benetton Ad



Table 5: United Colors of Benetton Ad



Table 6: United Colors of Benetton Ad



Table 7: United Colors of Benetton Ad

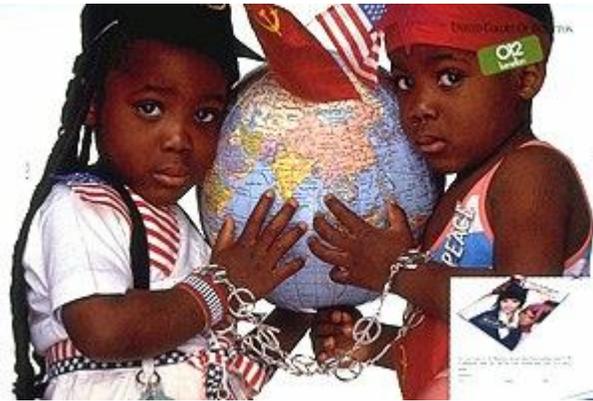


Table 8: United Colors of Benetton Ad



Table 9: United Colors of Benetton Ad



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