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Composition I
12 October 2007

“Got Milk?” . . . Got Beauty?

Advertising is a dynasty, a multimillion-dollar corporation with its fingers in every aspect of life. Ads dealing with any subject or product come in many forms. Advertisements appear in magazines and newspapers, on billboards, on radio and television, and through the Internet. More creative ways of advertising include ads on the sides of buses, on articles of clothing, or even on scoreboards in our public schools. Whatever the case, advertising is an industry in which the simple is no longer simple; it is a brutal world where only the best and wisest survive and thrive. Thus, today’s advertising not only sells a product, but it also attempts to sell ideas and values in an attempt to link the consumer to the product.

A “got milk?” ad found in the August 2007 issue of SHAPE magazine features actress Sara Ramirez in a red evening gown posing against a darkening blue backdrop and sporting the classic milk mustache. Along with the “got milk?” logo in the upper left corner, the words “Great anatomy.” appear beside Ramirez. On the bottom of the ad is a paragraph advertising milk, the phrase “think about your drink” with a nearly full, hourglass shaped glass of milk between the words “about” and “your,” and a web address. The ad, placed between a story about at-home workout equipment and the magazine’s beauty section, links milk to both health and beauty. This “got milk?” advertisement explicitly sells milk and health, but it implicitly works to define beauty, a desirable physique, happiness, and success. Furthermore, the ad implicitly sells the show Grey’s Anatomy to women between the ages of 18 and 40.
SHAPE is a women’s magazine focusing on fitness, health, and beauty. The magazine targets women between the ages of 18 and 40, both single and married, who may be at any stage in their lives, including going to school, working full or part-time jobs, or taking care of a family. Health and physical fitness as well as beauty and personal appearance concern this audience. The audience members try to fit into our ever-changing society; they feel they must conform to society’s standards of beauty and appearance. Overall, the target audience is quite susceptible to advertising because it sells products that will help the audience conform to the standards of society that they believe are important. These standards may include having a great figure or dressing in the latest fashions.

A popular advertisement that may appeal to SHAPE readers is the “got milk?” ad. “Got milk?” ads have been present for many years and always seem to feature some celebrity or popular figure in society with the now well-known milk mustache. These stars help sell milk products but in turn sell their own images whether they are prominent in a sport, a movie, or a line of clothing. One good example of this is the legendary basketball star Michael Jordan. He was one of the first major figures to appear in a “got milk?” ad. By doing so, he was also selling his game, his team, and his line of sports shoes.

How does using a famous celebrity make an ad appealing? According to Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher and rhetorician, there are three ways to appeal to an audience: emotionally, ethically, and logically. Many advertisements combine the three types of appeals to lure in potential customers. When a person looks at advertisements, he or she will probably not realize that the ads are trying to appeal to him or her in more than one way. Rather he or she will primarily determine if the ad is appealing to him or her at all. A person viewing an ad will take in only what he or she chooses to see while the brain stores all the other information. This stored
information then works subconsciously to persuade the potential buyer that he or she needs the product. Jean Kilbourne supports this idea in her essay, “‘In Your Face . . . All over the Place’: Advertising Is Our Environment” when she writes that “we don’t pay direct attention to very many of these ads, but we are powerfully influenced, mostly on an unconscious level [. . .]” (114). While the woman looks at this ad, she is unaware of all of the implicit messages that will remain with her.

This particular ad features Sara Ramirez, a Broadway and now television star, as an ethical appeal. Ramirez was originally an actress on the Broadway stages when the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) asked her to play on the show of her choice. She chose ABC’s hit medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* so ABC wrote the part of Dr. Callie Torres for her. She has had great success and is a role model for both young girls and women.

The ad uses Ramirez to not only sell milk but also *Grey’s Anatomy*. First, Ramirez is the focus of the advertisement. If someone did not know who she was, he or she may look around the ad for clues as to her social significance. The phrase beside her reads, “Great anatomy,” which might trigger the mind to recall a commercial or other type of advertisement which links her to the show *Grey’s Anatomy*. The paragraph located towards the bottom of the ad also talks about show business which again might bring back a memory. If that isn’t enough, her name is in tiny print along the right hand side of the ad, which, when googled can produce millions of hits about her life, career, and character.

Because Ramirez is a successful and well known actress, many people assume that she is also happy. Her facial expression gives a hint of happiness and fun, and she looks relaxed. This portrayal appeals emotionally to a consumer because the ad links the product, milk, with the idea that a product can bring success and happiness. The consumer may reason that Ramirez drinks
milk to help her to be successful in her career and therefore it brings her happiness. Then maybe the consumer, too, should drink milk. This is a ploy towards quick fixes which are very popular in our society. People today do not take the time to analyze their lives to figure out what they really need to make themselves happy; instead, they just pull a product off the shelf and hope it works.

This ad also sells the idea that milk has an influence on a person’s physique. This is an emotional appeal. It appeals to the insecurities felt by women who may not have the perfect body shape according to society’s standards. Ramirez is a beautiful Mexican-American with a curvy, not thin, physique; her figure is not that of a typical actress. Ramirez has curves which are accentuated by her tight red dress along with cleavage displayed by the low v-shaped bust cut of the dress. Cleavage is common in today’s society and symbolizes sexuality and beauty. On the other hand, actresses considered plus-size in our society are not usually seen sporting tight-fitting dresses.

This leads to the next idea being sold in this ad—beauty. Today, society sets the standards of beauty. These include specific weight, physique, skin, and hair ideals. Ramirez must be beautiful to be on TV and in advertisements, right? What about her weight and curvy physique? This ad may symbolize a change in the way our society looks at women and beauty. Society may be moving away from the stick-thin models and actresses that we once viewed as perfectly beautiful towards accepting that not all women will be thin and without curves, but rather that a woman can still be beautiful with curves.

This ad is explicitly selling milk and health and the link between them. The “got milk?” ads have become so common that everyone knows exactly what they are selling. But recently, milk has put a new twist on its product. This twist is the claim that it may actually be very
beneficial in watching both weight and figure. This is implied in the “Great anatomy” phrase, the “think about your drink” phrase and the advertisement’s logically appealing paragraph that follows:

In show business your figure, well, shows. That’s why I drink milk. Studies suggest the nutrients in milk can play an important role in maintaining a healthy weight. Staying active, eating right, and drinking 24 ounces of lowfat or fat free milk a day helps you look your best. Bravo.

To put it simply, milk will support both weight and overall health, or at least that is the claim the advertisers want everyone to believe, but are these claims supported?

Looking closely at the paragraph in the advertisement reveals that there is no information provided to back up these claims. The advertisers have pieced together empty words to purposely deceive the audience; these words are weasel words. In his article “Weasel Words,” William Lutz writes, “Advertisers use weasel words to appear to be making a claim for a product when in fact they are making no claim at all” (161). This is the case with the claims in this ad. Examining the paragraph closely reveals the ad’s empty message.

The ad claims, “[S]tudies suggest the nutrients in milk play an important role in maintaining a healthy weight” The first empty word that sticks out in this claim is “studies.” What “studies”? Who or what exactly was “studied,” and when were the “studies” conducted? The advertisers provide no answers to these questions, so how do we know there were even “studies”?

The next empty phrase is that milk “can play an important role in maintaining a healthy weight.” “Can” does not mean it “does” or it “will”; “can” only means that it “might” or it “could.” There is no promise, no guarantee. And what about the words “important role”; what
does this mean? How “important” is the role? Very important? Minimally important? The ad never says. And what exact “role” do the nutrients play in maintaining a “healthy weight”? What is a “healthy weight,” and by whose standards? There is very little meaning to these claims, and the advertisers do not support these claims with solid evidence.

The ad also states that “staying active, eating right, and drinking 24 ounces of lowfat or fat-free milk a day helps you look your best.” There is a classic weasel word in this statement: “helps.” “Helps” does not mean any more than “can.” “Helps” gives no promises. “Helps” only means that it “assists,” or, in this case, “may assist.”

There is also a downfall to this statement. Not only does the ad say that the consumer should be drinking milk, but it also says that she should also exercise regularly and diet. Milk is not the quick fix most people are looking for; it can only help the consumer when she actively commits to the healthy lifestyle this ad suggests.

Why does the “got milk”? ad use the tactics it does? Maybe it is because milk cannot compete on the same level as other beverage products like soft drinks, energy drinks, and alcoholic products. Milk can’t give that buzz, jolt, or high expected from pop, energy drinks, and alcohol. So what does milk have to offer besides building strong bones and teeth and its benefits to overall health? Maybe this is why the “got milk” ads feature famous celebrities and imply beauty, success, and happiness through the consumption of their product; it’s the only way to compete with the more popular beverages.

Advertising is not a simple business. The advertisers try to manipulate the consumers into buying their products through a number of tactics and techniques. Many ads succeed and many don’t. They try to tell us that we need to buy their products to become socially accepted or successful. They have turned us into a society that tries to measure up to what we see in ads
instead of analyzing them to discover they are selling much more than their products. This “got milk?” ad is just one example of an ad with more than one product to sell and the use of many tactics to sell that product.

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