Diet Coke Ad Analysis

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In her provocative essay "Jesus is a Brand of Jeans," advertising critic Jean Kilbourne (2015) writes, "The problem with advertising isn't that it creates artificial longings and needs, but that it exploits our very real and human desires" (pg. 33). The desires for sex and love are some of the most basic human longings, and, therefore, some of the most useful for advertisers to exploit, even when the product they're selling isn't particularly sexy or romantic. The Diet Coke ad “Tall, Dark & Handsome” is a good example. It uses seductive language, music, and cinematography to associate diet soda with the positive idea of sexual fulfillment.

The ad begins with the words "Tall, Dark & Handsome" displayed in a retro-style font in front of a tall, narrow glass of ice that is slowly filled with Diet Coke. In this context, "tall, dark, and handsome" refers to the beverage, of course, but most viewers will immediately think of the more common way the phrase is used to describe a good-looking man. The positive connotation of those words appeals to viewers' emotions. According to Matt Rosenau (2012), advertisers often make an emotional appeal by associating their product with a positive emotion or idea. In this case, the description "tall, dark, and handsome" subtly encourages viewers to associate Diet Coke with the positive idea of an attractive sexual partner. The verbal seduction is reinforced by the only other words in the ad, which appear at the very end: "Diet Coke: Get a Taste."

The ad uses an upbeat funk song that reminds me of famously sexy 1970s TV shows and movies. The retro music creates a playfully sexy tone, which might put viewers in a good mood. Some studies suggest that a positive mood can increase people's visual attention by 22% (Hüttermann & Memmert, 2015). If viewers are paying close attention to the ad, they are more likely to make the subconscious connection between Diet Coke and sex and, hopefully, buy the product.
The subconscious connection between Diet Coke and sex is reinforced even further through cinematography. The ad consists, primarily, of a single, long shot in which the camera slowly moves up the glass of Diet Coke. Viewers are accustomed to seeing this kind of shot in films when an attractive character first appears onscreen. Once again, the product being sold is presented in the same way a sexually desirable person might be. The slow camera movement allows viewers to notice small, sensual details, like the deep color of the liquid, the movement of the ice and bubbles, and the slight condensation on the glass. The level of detail is almost erotic, only the object of the viewer's desire is the product. By the time the final words and logo appear onscreen, the invitation to "Get a taste" seems tantalizing and even a bit naughty.

The words, music, and cinematography of the Diet Coke "Tall, Dark & Handsome" ad associate the product with the fulfillment of the basic human desire for erotic or romantic love. Because this desire is so powerful, the exploitation of it in advertising is powerful as well. If the advertisers can successfully trigger primal emotions and associate them with their product, they can expect a favorable response from consumers. For good or ill, "In the world of advertising, things are lovers and lovers are things" (Kilbourne, 2015, pg. 33).
References


