

Recognizing Values Reinforced by Advertising:

A Critical Analysis of a Recent Calvin Klein Advertisement

Though they often do not realize it, Americans are submerged in a world of advertisements. From the commercial breaks during television shows to the back covers of cereal boxes, advertisements are a substantial part of everyday life. However, many times the subliminal messages intentionally included in advertisements go unnoticed. Therefore, many people do not realize the messages they are consistently being exposed to. The values reinforced in advertisements shape perceptions of beauty, age, gender, and culture, which can often have harmful effects on the way people view themselves and the world around them. One advertising campaign in particular, the current Calvin Klein advertisements, seeks to reinforce its own set of values in an attempt to attract a target audience and improve their consumer sales. The current advertisements produced on behalf of Calvin Klein Jeans promote the importance of ownership—particularly ownership of a product, ownership of the body, and ownership of others—by taking advantage of specific advertising techniques such as advertising formats, advertising strategies, modes of address, and specific target markets.

It is important to understand the full appearance of the recent Calvin Klein advertisement in order to accurately analyze its material. The ad is featured in the October 2014 installment of *Vanity Fair*, covering two pages that were placed side-by-side (therefore, the ad covers a two-page horizontal landscape, as opposed to an ad placed vertically on only one page) (Calvin Klein, 2014). The magnification of this advertisement onto two pages allows the photographer to capture more of the image, and in turn catch the reader's eye more quickly. Though the presentation of the advertisement is significant, what is perhaps the most eye-catching is the set of models featured in the photo. A young woman and young man, who look to be in their mid-

twenties, are shown intimately lying on the ground together. The man—who is wearing nothing but a pair of Calvin Klein jeans—is propped up on his right elbow, his left elbow resting against the woman’s collarbone. The woman, in turn, has her back arched and seems to be lying down, straddled between the man’s two legs. One arm is holding her partner’s leg and the other is resting on his arm, as her back arches into him. She bears her midriff wearing nothing but a bra, Calvin Klein underwear, and a pair of Calvin Klein jeans. The ad is displayed in black and white, contributing to the simple nature of the already half-naked models. What is perhaps even more simplistic is the lack of written text featured in the advertisement. All that can be seen are the words “#MyCalvins”—implying that the campaign also seeks to engage its audience through social media—and the phrase “Calvin Klein Jeans” located subtly in the lower right corner, both which are written in minimalistic font. Upon understanding what the advertisement itself looks like, it becomes easier to recognize the hidden signs and meanings that the advertisement evokes.

The “personalized format” of the Calvin Klein advertisement further reinforces the value of ownership, as it uses the two models to exhibit the emotions associated with Calvin Klein jeans. Advertising formats—one of which is the personalized format—describe the way in which images, words and people are displayed in an advertisement, and establish the kind of meaning that the ad will consequently evoke. The “personalized format” seeks to draw a direct relationship between the product being sold and the human personality it hopes to attract. (Iftkhar, 2014). Such attributes of the “personalized format” type of advertising include displaying social admiration, fulfillment as a result of consumption, and possible anxiety if the product is not taken advantage of. Perhaps the attribute that most connects with the Calvin Klein advertisement, however, is the pride displayed as a result of ownership. After all, as stated in the thesis, ownership is the main theme of the advertisement itself. The two models seem to have a

certain confidence as a result of owning their own pairs of Calvin Klein jeans, and this self-assurance is evident in the way they shamelessly show off their bodies and jeans (Calvin Klein, 2014). By showcasing two confident, attractive people feeling good in their jeans, Calvin Klein hopes that their targeted market will view the advertisement and want to obtain that same confidence, thus purchasing a new pair of jeans.

In attempt to reach out to consumers, four advertising strategies are used in the advertisement for Calvin Klein jeans to further support the value of ownership. Advertising strategies are ways in which companies deliberately try to convince their target audience to buy the advertised product, by using tactics such as targeting emotion, featuring well-known faces, and assuring the product's benefits (Iftkhar, 2014). The advertisement for Calvin Klein jeans uses four advertising strategies in particular to display a pride in ownership and attempt to catch the eye of their audience.

Firstly, the advertisement showcases how the jeans will make one feel after wearing them. The two models are shown to be confident in both themselves and their sexuality (Calvin Klein, 2014). They obviously have no problem in attracting the opposite sex, and they seem very self-assured in their ability to do so. In reinforcement of the theme, they also appear to have a great deal of ownership over their own body, as they are displaying it without any discretion.

Furthermore, the advertisement strategically showcases the “future self” one will have if they choose to wear the jeans. This strategy is similar to the last in the sense that it glorifies ownership of one's own body, and the idea that one can obtain such confidence and sexuality by choosing to buy Calvin Klein jeans, specifically. According to the advertisement, if one wears Calvin Klein jeans, they will become more comfortable with their body and more confident in their sexuality.

Moreover, the advertisement showcases models that are known to exemplify the social values most sought after in American society presently. The advertisement features a young man and a young woman, both of whom appear to fulfill the “all-American” stereotype (Calvin Klein, 2014). Both the man and woman are white, and though the advertisement is in black and white, it is interesting to note other characteristics of both figures. The man appears to be tan, very muscular, and have dark, tousled hair. The woman, on the other hand, is blonde with enviable curves and glowing skin. Considering these attributes and the fact that the stereotypical “all-American” man and woman are known to be wealthy, successful, and admired, it is no question why these two models were chosen to represent the brand. In showcasing their models as “all-American”, Calvin Klein hopes to appeal to an audience that seeks these traits, as it will further convince them to purchase their jeans.

Finally, the advertisement strategically showcases a sense of power or control that will come to whoever owns Calvin Klein jeans. This strategy is most evident in the way the two models are connecting with one another, particularly the man with the woman. Both figures are holding onto each other in ways that suggest the two are intimately involved, or that they “belong” to one another (Calvin Klein, 2014). The man specifically seems to be hovering over the woman, as she rests in a vulnerable position between his legs. This image may convince male consumers that owning Calvin Klein jeans will give them more control in the way they attract the opposite sex and somehow gain possession of the female body. Both this advertising strategy and the previous one evoke a certain theme of having ownership over other people, whether it is in a sexual relationship or being well liked amongst one’s peers.

The modes of address within the Calvin Klein advertisement reach out to its audience in a way that demands the consumer’s attention, which in turn allows the advertisement to

successfully reinforce its emphasis on ownership. A mode of address is something that constructs a relationship between the advertisement and its audience (Iftkhar, 2014). It has the ability to reveal assumptions about the intended audience, and often uses tactics such as formality and directness (Chandler, 2014). For example, the Calvin Klein advertisement is quite informal, due to its intimacy and personal nature. This engages the audience even more so than it would on a formal scale, as it is able to connect with the consumer on a deeper level. Furthermore, the advertisement is quite direct, which is evident in the way two models stare directly into the camera lens, almost as if they are looking right at the consumer. These modes of address are strategically used by the advertiser as a way to better relate to the emotions and perspectives of the consumer.

By embracing one's desire for ownership in their advertisements, Calvin Klein successfully creates a target market comprised of young men and women who are searching to fulfill an image that evokes confidence, admiration, and the ability to flaunt one's sexuality. Target markets are one of the most important aspects of advertising, as a certain market can dictate what media sources the brand is affiliated with, as well as what image the brand wants to portray (Iftkhar, 2014). With the production of this advertisement, Calvin Klein wants to attract an individual who is of a generous income, is white, and has aspirations similar to that of many young people in America—those of wealth, success and admiration. It hopes to seek out men and women in their upper-teens or twenties, as this is the generation that has grown up in the forefront of the consumer age. It is also the generation that was one of the first to become immersed in social media, which is why the use of the Twitter campaign in the ad is so important. This targeted group is known to take great pride in their consumer items and value their sense of belonging within certain groups, and it is evident that Calvin Klein has sought to

produce an advertisement that combines both of these ideals. In fact, upon releasing the advertisements of the “#MyCalvins” campaign, Calvin Klein started to refer to their target audience as the “My Calvins” Generation, further creating an exclusive group that their consumers can label themselves as. The advertisements themselves take advantage of the targeted consumer’s urge to be included.

The use of social media as a way for companies to more actively engage their audience is becoming increasingly popular, and Calvin Klein’s “#MyCalvins” campaign is a perfect example of the hope that their audience will take ownership of their Calvin Klein jeans. By stating this twitter trend on their advertisements, it invites their audience to post their love and ownership of Calvin Klein jeans to their own social media site. This is perhaps the perfect advertising strategy, as it allows the consumers to take ownership over the product by posting it to their social media websites while simultaneously spreading the word about Calvin Klein jeans. It not only seeks to capture the consumer’s attention, but it also allows them to be involved in the marketing process.

By using specific advertising techniques such as advertising formats, a number of varying advertising strategies, modes of address and target markets, Calvin Klein has reinforced the value of ownership, a value that is often sought after by so many young people today. The particular ad featuring two models intimately positioned in addition to the social media campaign that it is associated with promotes ownership in many different forms; That is, ownership of the product (in this case, Calvin Klein jeans), ownership of one’s body and sexuality, and finally, ownership of others through both intimacy and admiration. By displaying a powerful image of two young people who exude confidence and sexuality, Calvin Klein hopes to play on their target audience’s desire to have control and ownership of their own lives. This advertisement campaign is one of many in America today that seeks to impose a set of values on its target

audience in order to influence the purchasing power of a consumer, thus increasing its sales.

Recognizing the values displayed by advertisements all around us will hopefully assist in creating a society that is more critical of the media we expose ourselves to, and will make us more aware of the impact it has on our day-to-day life.

References

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