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Seminar: Controversial Advertising: Nike, Gillette & Co.

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Nike, Gillette & Co.

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1. Session 1 / Watching Colin Kaepernick's Just do it (2018)

Before attending the seminar, I had not yet seen the *Nike* advertisement starring Colin Kaepernick that would be the main focus of the first few sessions. I had, however, seen some other ads on television in recent years that were considered controversial, and heard of the discussion surrounding American athletes who refused to stand for the National Anthem on the news. The wish to learn more about these issues and a general interest in media and marketing strategies therefore motivated me to enroll in the seminar.



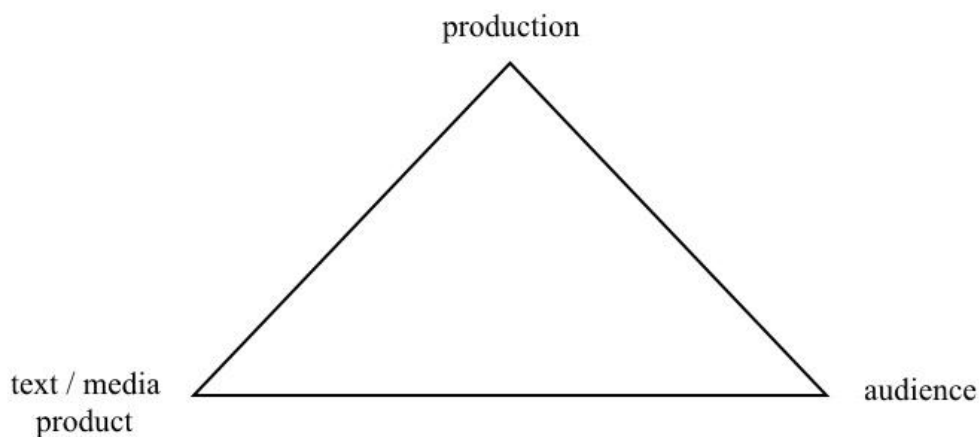
The first session was thus also the first time for me to watch *Nike's* “Dream Crazy” ad. It shows a montage of various clips of amateur as well as professional athletes accompanied by a voiceover from Colin Kaepernick as well as soft music playing in the background. My initial reaction was that I was very moved by it, and I also thought about how well made the ad appeared to be.

We were then asked to write down our first affects after watching and afterwards discussed what exactly made us feel that way in class. One thing that was mentioned and that I could identify with very well was the inspiring quality of the depiction of people who are considered “limited” overcoming their limitations and proving the “non-believers” wrong. However, another impression that was brought forward was that the ad might also make you feel pressured to “dream big” – some people may simply be content with achieving “small dreams”, which is nothing to be

ashamed of. We also found that another effect of the ad is that the viewer automatically associates Nike with tolerance and progressiveness.

As we were given some background information on the Kaepernick story, I was shocked to find out that he has not been able to get another job as a professional football player in the NFL ever since. Knowing this, the sentence “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything” said by Kaepernick in the voiceover becomes much more impactful – Kaepernick sacrificed his whole career for what he believed in.

In this first session, we were also introduced to the “Media Triangle”, which consists of the three levels production, product and audience. I found this very helpful for structuring an analysis on any media product.



2. Session 2 / Media Analysis

Our next session was dedicated to media analysis. As preparation, we read the text “The Persuasive Power of Style” by Jeremy G. Butler, which explains the different techniques used in commercials to attract and keep the attention of the viewer. In order to further engage with the text, we formed groups in which we talked about specific sections of the text that were assigned to us. My group was Group 1, and our topic the technique of *metaphor* in media products. After a short discussion on how exactly the author defines metaphors, one of us suggested a scene from the Netflix show *Jane the Virgin*, in which sex is represented through a rocket ship, as an example. When it came to presenting our findings, we watched the respective scene in class.

Group 2, whose topic was Utopian Style, came up with the example of tampon ads, which usually convey a very happy and carefree mood. As another



example, we watched the *H&M* ad “Halloween: Party Edition”, which I had not seen before and found to be a perfect example for Utopian Style. The footage of laughing teenagers or young adults roaming the streets of New York in their party outfits communicates a sense of fun and a specific “New York lifestyle” that many young people idolize and are now supposed to associate with *H&M* clothing. The very fast editing of the ad gives it a collage appearance and together with the loud music playing in the background keeps up the attention of the viewer.

“Product Differentiation and Superiority” was the assigned topic for Group 3. In Butler’s text, we were introduced to the term “unique selling proposition” (USP), something that a product needs to have in order to set itself apart from other products on the market. As a way of differentiating themselves from others and trying to be remembered by the viewers, commercials sometimes dare to be

perceived as annoying or even disturbing. Examples brought up by the group for this were *Seitenbacher Müsli* ads as well as a *Fanta* Halloween ad.

“Exhibitionistic television and intensified continuity”, the topic with which Group 4 engaged, is another technique for commercials to be memorable for viewers. In recent years, there has been a more and more mixing of genres on television, in commercials as well as TV shows. “Breaking the 4th Wall” nowadays often occurs in movies and TV shows, for instance. Generally speaking, advertisements on television have also adapted a certain “Hollywood Style” with, for example, speed of cuts and the use of a moving camera.

With sound, the topic for Group 5, it is important to note that both the visual and the audio channel have to be able to function individually. To explore this, it is sometimes helpful to turn off one of the channels and concentrate on the other one. I personally found the differentiation between diegetic and non-diegetic sound at first hard to grasp. Diegetic sound is everything that originates from within the diegetic world of the ad, i.e. the narrative that can be seen on the visual channel. Non-diegetic sound might be a voice-over or music that is supposed to trigger a specific emotion in the viewer.

When we reached discussion question number 6, we watched the *Nespresso* ad “The Quest”, starring, as usual, George Clooney as well as Natalie Dormer, as an example for intertextuality and reflexivity. With its reference to popular medieval-styled TV series, it is typical for a mixing up of genres. In this context, we were introduced to the term “metalepsis”.



3. Session 3 / Nike

As a recap from Session 2, we discussed another ad that serves as a good example for intertextuality. The *Check24* commercials usually use the form of typical American sitcoms to promote their services.

We then dived deeper into the “Kaepernick story”, starting with Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the National Anthem in 2016 up to *Nike’s* “Dream Crazy” ad. Being from a country where patriotism is far less common than it is in the US and even to a certain extent associated negatively because of our history, I will never be able to fully grasp the importance put upon an anthem or a flag and therefore have a hard time understanding how Kaepernick’s actions could provoke such strong negative emotions. However, knowing the risk he took with it, I admire his courage and approve of the message he was trying to send.

In preparation for the session, we read two articles from the *New York Times*. They focused more in depth on *Nike’s* decision to take on Kaepernick as their main advertising figure and the backlash they got from it. One of the reactions was people boycotting *Nike*, burning their shoes and shirts with the characteristic “swoosh” logo on it. In class, we then talked about the public image *Nike* wants people to associate with them through their marketing. Choosing controversial topics and siding with “rebellious” public figures like Kaepernick or tennis player Serena Williams always involves a risk for a company. But evidently, *Nike* is willing to take the risk of provoking and losing some customers for the sake of possibly getting other customers to wear *Nike* clothes more proudly, knowing that the company supports important current movements. The class also discussed whether this behavior is authentic and if *Nike* really stands behind what they are promoting or if it is just a smart marketing move from them. I personally think that it is very likely that the people behind the company actually do support *Black Lives Matter* and similar social justice movements because otherwise they would not be willing to take the risks involved in their marketing strategy.

We then went back to our “Dream Crazy” ad. In order to find the “central story” of the ad and further understand how advertising, we used the method of Reverse Engineering and tried to focus on just one of the channels, the visual channel. So, we watched it again without sound. Afterwards, we talked in class about what we noticed, for example, how long the scenes are and how fast the cuts. We concluded that the most famous athletes get the most screen time and that younger athletes or amateurs are mostly shown at the beginning. Triumphant moments stand out. Colin Kaepernick is the only athlete to be shown twice, however, never performing sports – his story is not explained. It is left to the viewers to either know about it already or be intrigued enough to inform themselves.

While the skateboarder at the beginning serves as the exposition, Kaepernick is the frame for the whole video. One of us remarked that the showing of his silhouette, especially his hair, is a very important aspect of it in connection to *Black Lives Matter*.



For us as a class, the central story of the ad is about individuals, about sacrifice and hardship to reach your goals and success. As Professor Olson put it: It's the human condition. We all fail, but that does not mean that we should stop trying.

4. Session 4 / How Advertising Works

The next step of our Reverse Engineering experiment with the “Dream Crazy” ad was switching off the visual channel. The sounds to be heard in the ad are only Kaepernick’s voice, the soft, epic piano music playing in the background and various sports sounds like the skateboard, balls being kicked or cheering crowds. Concentrating on “form to function”, we asked ourselves how the sound makes you feel and what in the form is responsible for this.

The background music has a very important role in building the emotional affect for the viewer (or rather listener). Setting in even before the voiceover, it is the first sound you hear from the ad. Over the course of the video, it builds up intensity and underscores the narrative, while the diegetic sounds become more intense as well. In the middle, when Kaepernick talks about himself (“Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.” around [1:17]), there are no background sounds except for the music. From this point of low intensity in terms of audio, it builds up again until it reaches its harmonic resolution (as one of our fellow students and music expert remarked) at the end, when in the visual channel the Nike logo pops up. We also found that the piano music omits a sense of almost sacredness and esotericism.

The second half of Session 4 was dedicated to the text “Exchanging Audiences” by Jason Mittell. Together, we answered the questions raised about it in the handout.

1) Q: *Who is involved in the advertising exchange?*

A: producer, ad agency, networks

Q: *How is the cost of viewership measured?*

A: Cost per Thousand Viewers (CPM)

Q: *What is narrowcasting and niche marketing?*

A: Narrowcasting and niche marketing are about targeting a specific part of an audience based on demographics like age, race and gender.

2) Q: *How does commercial product infiltration work (62-63)? Give examples.*

A: Products are incorporated into TV shows or other form of entertainment, like sports matches. The viewer subsequently has positive connotations to that product. For example, I found myself buying more KitKat chocolate bars after my favorite character in a TV show repeatedly mentioned them.

Q: *Why does Mittell say that advertising is subsidized (64)?*

A: The tax system allows and therefore encourages companies to spend more money on advertising because they can get some of their budget returned to them.

- 3) Q: *If advertising focuses alternatively on building product knowledge, building brand awareness, puffery, emotional associations created through representing a utopia or stressing discontent, and works through implicit persuasion and self-branding, how does the "Dream Crazy" ad function (65-67)? How does it compete against clutter and anti-ads (67-68)?*

A: As Mittell describes on page 67, "Dream Crazy" is just another example of Nike's strategy to promote brand awareness. They aim to have people associate Nike with progressiveness and support of social justice movements. Wearing a Nike product becomes almost another way of saying "I stand with #BlackLivesMatter.". In comparison to clutter ads, "Dream Crazy" is rather long, with a runtime of (...). However, it manages to capture the viewer's attention through other strategies.

- 4) Q: *Describe product integration in reality shows. How has the measurement of advertising impact changed through participatory structures? How does television not follow market logic? (91-97 for both sets of questions)*

A: Products are integrated into reality shows, for example, by having the judges on a casting show drink from Pepsi cups. Through participatory structures like telephone voting, the impact of advertising can be measured much more directly and exact. For television, there are many more aspects that determine how we view it that are independent from market logic.

5. Session 5 / Sports, Protest & USA

Session 5 was divided into three parts. At the beginning, we posed the following question: *What is Americanness, and how does the Kaepernick ad appeal to US American values?* As a class, we gathered some key words on what we associate with “Americanness”, like individualism, resilience, Protestant ethic, self-actualization, neo-liberalism and also the American Dream. The Kaepernick ad promotes these values through its message to dream big and not be dragged down by naysayers. It talks in superlatives and Kaepernick’s voiceover feels almost like a motivational coach. It encourages you to believe in your dream and represents the high regard in which sports stand in the US. We concluded that the message of the ad is “deeply American”.

Given the effect and influence that an athlete’s protest can have, there has to be something about athletes that sparks inspiration. Therefore, our second topic of the session revolved around the question *What inspires us about athletes, and which story inspires you most?*. For me personally, I admire many athletes’ strength, discipline, perseverance and endurance in terms of fitness and training. If I was myself participating in a specific sport, I can imagine that a famous athlete could also become an important role model for me and stand for an ideal that I strive to achieve myself. In class, we also mentioned that the power of an athlete’s voice relates to meritocracy and the high status of measurable visual achievements in our society.

Concerning the Kaepernick ad, there was not one single story that served as my “emotional hook”. I was, however, very moved by the visuals, together with the music, in the surfer sequence, and the story of the 16-year-old refugee soccer player. Talking about our “emotional hooks” in class, we found that the stories that inspired us the most were the ones that hit closest to home – if you are, for example, a skateboarder yourself, the display of their struggles and of overcoming them in the ad will inspire you.

The third part of our session was dedicated to the history of protest in American sports. As a preparation, I had already watched the video “A History of Black Protest in Sports” by *The New Yorker* on YouTube that had been sent to us and which provided a very helpful overview over the topic. In class, we went deeper into the subject and agreed that the kind of civil disobedience that athletes like Colin Kaepernick or also Megan Rapinoe demonstrate is not un-American. On the contrary, it is intrinsically American. One might even argue that the USA has a culture of protest, also given the fact that the country was practically founded on protest.



6. Session 6 / Nike

“In America, taking any stand is good for business; this much is clear.” This quote from the assigned article by Emilia Petrarca was our entry into Session 6, and we were asked what we think this means exactly. As a class, we widely agreed: Regardless of the possible outrage it can spark, taking a stand on a controversial topic is good for business in that it contributes to public polarization, publicity and a strengthening of the already existing fan base. The desirability of Kaepernick products by *Nike* is then due to a variety of factors, like politics, coolness factor, but also scarcity.

Next, we worked on the article by Marc Bain called “Nike’s Kaepernick ad is what happens when capitalism and activism collide”. We picked two quotes from the text and were asked to position ourselves in relation to them. The first one was the opening line to the article: “There aren’t many entities in our lives that have voices as loud as those of corporations.” We asked ourselves in what way corporations are taking a larger part in our everyday lives now more than ever. We all felt that wherever we are, but mostly on the Internet, brands and advertisement are everywhere. Even when we are watching something as simple as a Netflix show, there is bound to be some product infiltration involved. In the recent years, people have become more and more aware and also suspicious of this, especially regarding personalized ads that make you question the safety of your data online. But brands and corporations also have infiltrated our lives in terms of language – verbs like “to google” or “to hoover” have become a natural part of our everyday vocabulary.

“Where once they feared to speak up, now it can actually be a liability for them to remain silent”, was the second quote from the Bain text that we engaged with. Here, we discussed whether political silence from corporations is a liability nowadays. I personally have made the (second-hand) experience that as soon as you have a certain amount of followers and therefore influence on social media, it is expected of you to make use of this power and speak up about certain topics, especially when it comes to social justice. Staying silent then practically counts as

agreeing with injustice. Also, as we concluded in class, taking a stand creates an “us vs. them” feeling for the fan base, as well as pressure for other corporations to speak up as well.



Our last task for the day was group work on the Bain text. My group, Group A, was assigned to argue for or against the statement “Nike’s support commercializes and therefore weakens the protest”. Group B’s statement was “The ad equates protest with actual activism (armchair activism).”

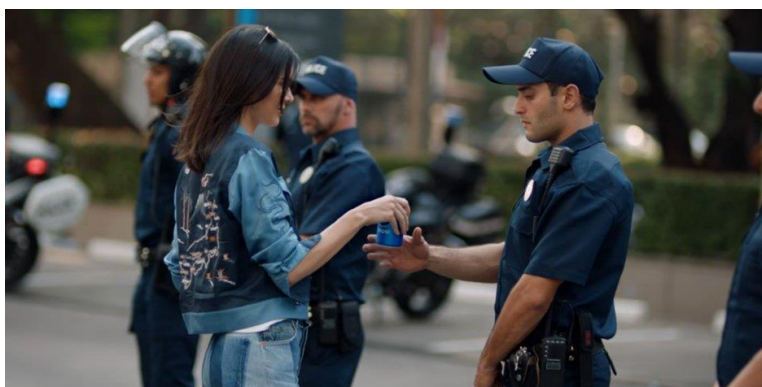
Arguing in favor of the statement, we agreed that this form of advertisement can quickly appear to be disingenuous and as using movements like *Black Lives Matter* to further their own agenda. However, we also agreed that it gives protest a stage and helps spread the word about it.

When we all discussed Group B’s statement, we debated how this “armchair activism” holds up to “real” activism. My personal opinion is: Everyone should do as much as is possible for them to advance social justice, and spreading the word through ads is still better than doing nothing, staying silent and pretending like nothing is wrong in the world. However, corporations can add real meaning to their stand when they do not just talk about social justice, but also act on it through, for example, donating some of their revenue to the right organizations.

7. Session 7 / Pepsi

As a different kind of example for “Controversial Advertising”, we watched and discussed *Pepsi*’s ad “Live for Now Moments Anthem” from 2017. Again, I was among those who had not watched the commercial prior to the seminar. My initial reaction upon first watch was boredom. I was surprised at how long the ad went on and on without anything of significance happening. Had I seen the ad on television or before a YouTube video, I am sure I would have zoned out or skipped the ad if possible simply because it did not capture me in any way.

Of course, this is not the only or most severe problem that the *Pepsi* commercial has. As a class, we gathered the different aspects of it that make it problematic. From a simple marketing strategy point of view, we found that the *Pepsi* can was shown too early. The next aspect was Kendall Jenner as the main “star” of the ad. As a part of the Kardashian Empire, Jenner represents, for us, normative and superficial beauty standards and the stereotypes that come along with being a model. As one of us very accurately put it, she is the epitome of privilege – something that is incompatible with many of the struggles that protesters for social justice go through. Speaking of protest, the viewer of the ad does not get a clear image of what the featured march is supposed to be about, since none of the signs give a clear indication of this. One could argue that the whole thing trivializes protests in general. Lastly, the depiction of the police confronting the protesters seems unnatural and unrealistic given the amount of police brutality happening in the US, especially at protests.



A very interesting, but hard to answer, question was raised in our Handout for the session: *Is a bad political or controversial ad worse for a company or brand than none at all?* There is hardly a general answer to this that fits all cases, but in the case of Pepsi, it would probably have been better to never have created this commercial at all. Controversy may be good for business, but this ad did so many things wrong on so many levels that it is practically not controversial anymore, since most people seem to agree that it is simply bad. You cannot even tell what the political message of it might be. Possibly, *Pepsi* was too hesitant to risk offending any specific part of its customers to take a definite stand.

8. Session 8 / Racism in Advertising

When we talked about racism in advertising in our eighth session, we started out with considering the difference between the concept of race and racism in Germany and that of the US. Because of our respective national and cultural history, there is a different understanding and mentality about these terms and concepts. Therefore, racism in German advertising is much more unaware than it sometimes appears in the US.

A recurring example of advertising that sparks outrage is *Dove*. Repeatedly, they have launched advertising campaigns that are easily misunderstood as racist by displaying a before and after-effect of their products, showing a model with dark skin on the before-side and one with light skin on the after-side. Even if *Dove* is not deliberately racist here, they show racial insensitivity at the minimum, and continually manage to get it wrong in their advertising campaigns.



In an article by Belinda Kayton, we found out more about the history of racism and sexism in advertising. It was very shocking for all of us to see some of the posters that were standard less than a century ago. Some were degrading women, others displaying black people as savages. Luckily, the times have changed since then and it has become unthinkable to put out the kind of ad campaigns that Kayton shows in her article. But, as the author says herself in the title “We’ve come a long

way, but still have a way to go". Like in the example of *Dove*, or the "coolest monkey in the jungle" *H&M* sweater worn by a black boy, racism in advertising today is much more subtle and often unintentional. Racially insensitive ads are often caused by colorblind racism. Being colorblind racist means dismissing or downplaying the realities of race, racism and the issues that people of color face on an everyday basis. Thinking that, as an individual, to regard everyone as equal automatically leads to equal treatment is a fallacy.

Another aspect from the context of racism in advertising that we talked about was white fragility. This is what makes it hard for people of color to call out an (unintentional) racist behavior from a fellow white person because they might become uncomfortable and try to downplay the issue or change the subject.

9. Session 9 / true fruits

In the guest lecture session hosted by Kai-Uwe Schmehl, we dealt with the controversial advertisements from the German company *true fruits*, known for their smoothie drinks sold in characteristic glass bottles. To start, we read a statement from *true fruits* explaining their brand identity and discussed how they present themselves to the public. We concluded that they aim to be identified with a cool and healthy lifestyle, a rags-to-riches origin story and environmental awareness. Furthermore, their rhetoric is full of jokes and puns, which adds to the cool, young and down-to-earth appearance.

Against this background and after a brief recap of the situation in 2017 when the advertisements came out, we looked at the billboard campaign that caused such controversy among consumers.



While it was clear that *true fruits* meant to reference the events around the immigration of refugees into Europe since 2015 and the emergence of more and more right-wing political sentiment, their personal statement on the issue was easily misunderstood. The company was accused of racism and of making jokes on the expense of the struggles that many refugees face. Instead of backpedalling and apologizing for their alleged insensitivity, *true fruits* decided to stand by their campaign and defend their decision to launch it. In 2019, after another set of controversial advertisements, they released a statement titled (translated) “Dear

friends, dear allegedly discriminated against, dear stupid people". For better understanding of the text, we were given four reading comprehension questions.

The first question was about how the company presents itself. We noted that they make themselves appear innocent, blameless and misunderstood, but also authentic, strong and self-confident.

The second question asked about the characterization of *true fruits'* critics in the statement. As indicated in the title already, they accuse those who misunderstood their advertising of being dumb and overly sensitive.

Question 3 then asked us to explain the intention of the ad campaign and how *true fruits* argue why they are not racist. In fact, they explain that their intention was not to support xenophobic ways of thinking, but rather to ridicule and criticise it.

Lastly, question 4 asked how the company rejects the accusations regarding sexism in previous campaigns. According to them, the ambiguous nature of the ads which allow it to be interpreted in this way originates in the viewers' heads, for which *true fruits* cannot be held accountable.

For me personally, the satirical nature of *true fruits'* advertising was clear the moment I first saw it. However, what satire and irony are "allowed to do" these days is controversial in itself and not everyone is familiar with that kind of rhetoric. *True fruits* should have seen a backlash like this coming, but in their statement they act as if that reaction came out of the blue and is nothing but uncalled-for. They also admit to using ambiguity, but at the same time argue that the double meaning of their ads is not created by them.

Although many people boycotted *true fruits*, I think their loyal fans will not be bothered by the issue, and again, controversial advertising has done at least as much to their advantage as it did to their disadvantage.

10. Session 10 / Gender Analysis in Advertising

On our next meeting, Taya Hanauer-Rehavia introduced us to how we can look at advertising through the lens of gender analysis in her co-teaching session. For this purpose, we were given a handout that outlines a structural approach to this kind of analysis. I found the practice of gender reversal, i.e. imagining the same advertisement with switched genders, particularly interesting and helpful.

To practice gender analysis, we watched a few example ads. The first one was from 2019 by Axe for their “Ice Chill” deodorant. Although it is not an outright controversial advertisement like others we have seen in the seminar, there are some aspects of it that might be problematic in terms of gender representation. It does, for example, make use of many stereotypes regarding the “dating life” of teenagers and young adults, showing different scenarios in which a boy is trying to impress a girl, but trying too hard. There is the cheerleader, the “pretty blond girl”, and the boy being the “typical dork”. Although the ad does show diversity in terms of ethnicity with one of the girls being dark-skinned, it also promotes heteronormativity because all of the examples are depicting boys chasing after girls. Regarding the finale scene of the ad, there was some disagreement among us on how to interpret it. Some of us saw the dynamic between the boy and the girl more critically; however, some others, me included, saw it as merely illustrating the comicalness of the situation and encouraging boys to just be themselves (with which Axe deodorant can supposedly help them, of course).



Our next example was quite a different one. *Always'* "Like a girl" ad picked up on stereotypes and clichés that people associate with the saying "doing something like a girl". At the same time amusing and infuriating to watch at first, it then goes on to subvert the stereotypes and advocate for "like a girl" to be positively connoted instead. *Always'* products are never mentioned in the ad, therefore, the company's goal with this kind of advertising is for consumers to buy their products based on them liking their image. Since *always'* target customers are women, it only makes sense for the company to advocate for feminism.

The last example ad for the day was a bit of a throwback to our last session. It was a *true fruits* advertisement called "safer snaxxx" (pun intended, as typical for the company). It depicted the ambiguous nature of eating a banana, which is often sexualized in our culture. One scene, for example, is the stereotypical scenario of a young girl being "protected" by her dad from the boy who is smirking at the sight of the girl eating a banana. Although most of the scenes are women feeling uncomfortable being watched by men while eating a banana, the last scene shows two men sharing an awkward moment because of their lunch. In a way, this breaks with the stereotype and eases the tension built up by the previous scenes in a comedic way. However, the advertisement is still constructed on the assumption that men are always thinking about sex. Additionally, it was also mentioned in class that the elevator scene might be seen as problematic when you keep in mind that this is a place where women have often had to make bad experiences regarding sexual harassment.



11. Session 11 / The Peleton Bike Ad

Another ad that qualified perfectly as a controversial advertisement and, thus, for the purpose of our seminar, was the *Peleton* Christmas ad from 2019 called “The Gift That Gives Back”.

The ad features a young family in which the husband gifts his wife with a *Peleton* stationary bike for Christmas. It then shows a sequence of short “vlog-stlye” clips of the wife’s experience with her new bike, hinting at the different features of the bike. It concludes with husband and wife sitting on the couch a year later, watching the compilation of the wife’s vlogs, which she ends with saying “A year ago, I didn’t realize how much this would change me. Thank you!”



There were multiple things to discuss after watching the commercial, and we did so in class. Most of us could agree with the notion that the whole set up of the ad seemed weird and gave a lot of room for interpretation. What *Peleton* had wanted to express with their ad was probably something along the lines of: Our bikes help establish a healthy lifestyle and workout routine into your life. How it came across to many viewers was however, more like this: Your already skinny wife should work out more, so go ahead and buy our overly expensive bikes to pressure her into doing more exercise. The actress of the wife looking into the camera with an expression that seems to say “Help me” appeared to confirm this. Apart from these morally problematic aspects of the ad, we also agreed in class that the editing was simply weird and poorly done, and the use of an old song as background music felt out of

place. All in all, we felt that the message of the ad could have easily been expressed differently.

We also had a look at some responses to the *Peleton* ad. One was a parody of the ad made by a young woman who sought to emphasize the abusive nature of the relationship presented in the original ad, where she concludes her video with the *Peleton* wife getting a divorce from her husband. Another response was from none other than actor Ryan Reynolds, who engaged the actress from the original *Peleton* ad to star in a commercial for his *Aviation Gin*. This ad can be read two ways: Either, it shows the fictional *Peleton* wife recovering from her abusive marriage with her friends; or, the actress as a fictional character, recovering from the backlash that the *Peleton* ad spawned. Either way, it presents the perfect contrast for the original as an advertisement that is done well on all levels, making use of irony and self-reflexivity.



12. Session 12 / Gillette

In our twelfth session, we examined the advertisements of the other company that gave our seminar its name. *Gillette's* 2019 ad “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” set a statement on toxic masculinity and raised a lot of support as well as objection.

The short film is a collage of different scenarios in which men as well as women make negative experiences in relation to toxic masculinity. There is a boy being bullied by other boys, women being catcalled and sexually harassed by men or being spoken over in a business conference (so-called “mansplaining”). In one scene, the classic excuse for this behaviour “boys will be boys” is being repeated over and over. However, in the middle of the ad, there is a break or “volta” in the events of the ad. A father defends the boy from his bullies, young men call out their friends on their behaviour towards women and another father encourages his young daughter to feel empowered and strong. They are breaking out of the “boys will be boys”-cycle and offer a new interpretation for *Gillette's* slogan “The Best A Man Can Be”.



Similarly to the *Nike* ad with Colin Kaepernick, we as a class felt this to be an example of an advertisement that was extremely well done and that brings forth an important message regarding toxic masculinity. Personally, for me, this was one of the ads that had me the most bewildered because of the backlash that it got. Toxic masculinity is something that is often overlooked or brushed aside in political and social discussions, which made it even more significant that a company like *Gillette*

chose to speak up about it. However, their intention of encouraging men to hold each other accountable was mistaken as an attack on men in general by some.

We examined two more *Gillette* ads that were produced after the “We Believe” video. One was from *Gillette Australia* called “Ben the Aussie Firefighter”. It pictures a man getting ready for his work as a firefighter. In a voiceover, he explains the importance of having a neatly shaved face when you do this kind of work. In a very moving conclusion of the ad, the little daughter of the firefighter touches her father’s smooth cheek and presents him with a self-made drawing, after which the two share a hug and the father leaves for work. Our Australian Erasmus student Rachel spoke up about how meaningful the advertisement was to her and explained to us that firefighters are kind of a symbol for Australia. We also agreed that the man in the ad portrays humility and non-toxic masculinity, while still representing traditional masculine values. The ad was also very interesting on a formal level. For example, the visuals and the audio complemented each other very well.

The other *Gillette* ad we watched featured a young transgender man being helped with his first shave by his father. Like the others, this ad was also nicely made. It was very inspiring to see a father being so supportive of his son. What all those ads have in common is that they focus on the values that the company wants its customers to associate with them rather than showcasing specific features of the products they are selling.

13. Session 13 / Economics, Digital Advertising

As an introduction into our topic for the session, we watched a video by Vox on YouTube called “How Ads Follow You around the Internet”. It explained the basic concepts of digital advertising like cookies and tracking. When asked whether the information provided in the video was new to us afterwards, most of us answered with No. In my experience, our generation is very aware of these things, while also being more relaxed about the privacy concerns connected to them because we know that we can’t fully escape them anyway.

A great amount of our session was dedicated to finding answers to questions given to us on the *Economist* article “A brand new world”.

- 1) *How does the example of what happened to Gillette show how small brands are competing with multinational ones?*

Small brands are becoming more and more competitive with larger brands because they sell directly and more cheaply, and manage to create a characteristic brand around their products.

- 2) *Why is telling a story about a brand easier than creating a new product?*

There are already many products on the market. What you need to do is sell a lifestyle – the story you create is what sets you apart from others.

- 3) *How is “brand purpose” changing the picture? How does this feed into so-called authenticity?*

Brand purpose is about acting in a way that matches the lifestyle you are trying to sell your products with. Being authentic in this context means, for example, donating part of your revenue to social funds. This is harder for established companies who have made bad headlines in the past.

- 4) *What strategies are “traditional brands” utilizing to brand themselves given new market conditions?*

They are making marketing decisions based on current social issues as well as risking chasing off a part of their customers for the sake of reinforcing the

support from another. Another strategy is to buy smaller, newer brands that have it easier in terms of branding.

5) *What are the pros and cons of social-media marketing?*

Online marketing through social media and influencers is cheaper and makes for easier targeting; however, it is also unpredictable and newer brands face the challenge of standing out.

6) *What conclusion does the article come to about branding at the end?*

Big, established brands remain financially powerful and relevant despite or even because of the competition with smaller start-ups.

14. Session 14 / Controversy and Storytelling and Wrapping Up

Unfortunately, due to other seminars and tests, I could not take part in our last session. When I did find the time for it, I watched the *Budweiser* Super Bowl 2020 ad “Typical American” that was part of the discussion for the session.

The ad shows a sequence of clips, narrated by a voiceover. The man from the voiceover names various deprecatory accusations towards American’s behaviours, while the video shows scenes that contradict these notions. It encourages its viewers to prove others wrong in their bad opinion of Americans and the USA. In the end, it ties the narrative up with the “typical American beer”, *Budweiser*.

In almost every aspect of it, the ad reminded me of *Nike’s* “Dream Crazy”: The epic background music, the “motivational coach” voiceover, the sequence of short clips showing moments of triumph or pride from individuals or groups. While *Nike* only alludes to “typical” American values, *Budweiser* clearly references Americanness and what it means to be American. Being shorter than “Dream Crazy”, “Typical American” was still also well-constructed.

Summing up my experiences during the course of the semester, taking part in this seminar taught me a lot about marketing strategies and the analysis of commercials. When I now watch TV, I experience the commercial breaks in a totally different way than before. Using the media triangle, concentrating on either audio or visual channel at a time as well as the technique of gender reversal were tools that I found to be extremely helpful in this context. Furthermore, the seminar made me look into many advertisements and connected social issues that I had not been as aware of as before. Recently, with movements such as *Black Lives Matter* gaining again more importance in public discussions, having learned about the history of racism in the US and in advertising in general has proven to be very valuable. In class, we also always had very interesting discussions and the diversity in origin (having multiple Erasmus students among us) and interests made our experience with the seminar and each other highly productive and engaging.

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