

Semiotic Analysis of a Diet Coke Ad

* * *

We have analyzed the ad semiotically, in order to reveal the underlying meanings suspended within the text. Semiotics refers to the sign systems within texts, and their role in creating meaning. The Sign in this particular text is the Diet Coke advertisement. It is an iconic sign, as it resembles exactly what it signifies. In this case, the signifier (the actual moving images in the advert), signifies, that young, trendy and sexy people drink Diet Coke.

We make sense of the ad through learnt codes, which are embedded in our culture. Reality is always encoded, so the ad only makes sense and seems realistic to us because it follows the convention codes, as established by our society. Many such codes are evident in this ad, including the color codes. The colors primarily used are black and red. These colors connote sexual and powerful meanings. They are also the colors used in the font symbolizing “Diet Coke,” where “diet” is written in black, and “coke” in red. The woman is wearing a red and gold top, which is feminine, colorful and exuberant. This may signify that she is bold and daring, or that she holds the power and control in this situation. The man is dressed solely in black, which may signify his diminished significance in the ad. Almost all of the clothes on the shelves in the department store are black, except for the red dress on the mannequin positioned behind the man. Again, it is the female form that is equated with the connotations of dominance and feistiness.

The aesthetic codes are also noteworthy. The woman is dressed in a manner, which our culture deems “sexy.” Her top is loose fitting, yet it has a low neckline. This showing-of skin, is considered provocative, and

underpins that she is comfortable with her sexuality. Her daring nature is evident, when she points to the naked mannequin, and the man is slightly embarrassed by her crudeness. This is an example of a binary opposition, as it is contrary to expected codes of behavior.

The technical codes used in this advert also connote specific meanings. In the beginning of the ad, the camera is angled so that it looks up at the man. This sets him in a position of authority. There is a MCU¹ of his face, and then a CU of the can as he lifts it to his mouth. The man has already been established as “sexy,” when he tugs at his shirt in the beginning, implying that he is too hot. Now, the connotation is that “this sexy man drinks Diet Coke.” Then we flash to a MCU of the woman, as she notices the man drinking from the can. There is a look of admiration on her face, but is she admiring the man, or the fact that he’s drinking Diet Coke? At this stage, the camera angle is positioned so that it looks down on her. The “click” of her opening the can is what attracts his attention, and the camera is still angled looking up towards him when he holds up the shirts for the woman’s opinion. It is only when the woman shakes her head and points to the naked mannequin that the camera angle begins to look up towards her. Perhaps this signifies that the transference of power, because it is at that precise moment that she gets “one-over” on the man.

The camera shots exchange between MCUs of the man, and the woman. This is so that we can see each of their reactions, as the other makes a suggestion. The camera is positioned from each of their point of views, and the shop window between them establishes that fact. The easy

¹ MCU = medium close up; CU = close up

flow between shots, reiterates the casual and carefree image, as presented by the actors, and the song “Baby Love” by the Supremes, also follows that easy-going style.

The codes of non-verbal communication are very much the focus of this ad. The way the two people react towards one another, suggests that they are flirting. It is the woman who makes the first move, and this goes along with the “girl power” image Diet Coke often portrays. She is walking by the shop window when she sees the man drinking from his can. She remains at the window, and fixes a coquettish smile on her face. When the man first catches sight of the woman, he gives her a double take. This signifies that he saw something that attracted him, and he wishes to get a better look. She gives a half smile, in flirtatious recognition of his admiration. He, in turn raises his eyebrows, and holds the shirt up for her approval. The eyebrows are one of the most expressive forms of non-verbal communication, and the fact that the man raises them so much, signifies his attraction for the woman. The fact that he also puts away the shirt that she dismissed, suggests that he desires her approval. The man points to the mannequin dressed in the slip, suggesting that the woman would look good dressed in it. This has sexual implications, but she takes his provocative behavior with a good sense of humor, and points to the naked model, thus implying that she would look better naked. Before doing this, she touches her chest, as if drawing attention to her “assets.” In response to this, the man shakes his head, but there is a cheeky grin on his face, which signifies that her response pleased him. The woman then cocks back her head flirtatiously and laughs. She turns around, as if displaying herself as sexually available for the man, and laughs again. These “rules” of accepted flirtatious behavior, are based on the implicit codes we have built up as a society. What constitutes as sexy in this ad might not be read the same in another culture.

As there is no verbal communication between the male and female, music has an important role to play in the advertisement. They chose to use an immediately recognizable song, Baby Love by the Supremes. It is a very catchy song, which you cannot help but sing along to and remains in your head after the ad has finished.

It immediately sets the scene for us and indicates that the ad is about a romantic encounter. With this song, the Supremes were the very first all-girl group to reach the number one position in the British charts. This fact might also have influenced the choice of song, as their success, confidence and dominance as females, is mirrored by the girl in the ad. (<http://afgen.com/supremes.html>)

This notion, of an ad being capable of having many different meanings is referred to as polysemy. Certain codes of behavior can only really make sense, because we have attributed specific meanings to them. Therefore, other cultures might not understand the implied connotations of certain types of behavior.

For example, this ad would be considered highly offensive in a Muslim country, because of the sexual power equated with the woman. In their culture, it would be considered outrageous for a woman to make sexual suggestions to a man, or for a man to be the more submissive of the sexes. For the purpose of this analysis, we have suggested that this ad depicts two strangers engaging in flirtatious behavior. But, the ad could be seen as depicting two old friends bumping into each other and joking about in a mock-sexual way. Or a gay reading might suggest that the man is, in fact a homosexual, due to his interest in shopping and appearance. The ad could also be seen as endorsing the ideas of the “new man” and

“cosmopolitan woman.” Whatever way we choose to view the ad however, it would probably not make sense, if we were not already familiar with the brand “Diet Coke.”

There are also some examples of intertextuality evident in this advert. It alludes to previous Diet Coke ad campaigns, where the man is presented as the sexual object and the woman gains pleasure by looking at him. The ads always depict “hunky,” masculine type men, and ordinary, but sexually attractive women. There are intertextual references to other Diet Coke ads including other television and poster ad campaigns. These ads also depict naked mannequins, being dressed in red underwear, which reiterates the theme represented in our ad.

A paradigmatic analysis of a media text involves looking at the opposition between choices that are actually made and those, which could have been made. It is a structuralist analysis, and focuses on binary oppositions. Therefore, by focusing on what the ad does not mean, the intended meaning becomes more apparent.

If the roles were reversed, and the male was placed, in the position of the female, the connotations of the ad would be entirely different. The ad only really works, because it is the female who is in control. The man in this ad is objectified, which alludes to previous Diet Coke ad campaigns. It is an example of a binary opposition. The intended humor and “meaning” of the ad would be lost, if it was the man giving fashion advice to the woman, and it would be considered highly sexist.

If the mannequin was substituted for a real-life naked woman, the ad would be considered highly offensive and unsuitable daytime viewing. Though the mannequin depicts the naked female form, the fact that is only a

symbolic signifier, deems it to be acceptable in our society. This is primarily because the color of the mannequin is quite grey. Had the nipples been painted pink, or more detail been painted in, the ad would probably have still been thought of as distasteful.

If we were to substitute Diet Coke, with any other soft drink brand, the intended meaning of the ad would be lost. This ad invites us to buy into the Diet Coke “lifestyle” and “brand image.” This image has been established based on many previous ad campaigns, and the meaning of one sign has effectively been transferred onto another. Diet Coke has marketed itself, as distinct from other soft drink competitors. For example the phrase “Must be a Pepsi Max Thing” would not work, because Pepsi Max has created an image on the premise of young, rebellious teenagers. Their slogan is “Live life to the Max,” which would also seem incongruous as an anchor for this particular advert.

If the young, attractive models were replaced with older or less attractive ones, the connotations of the ad would be entirely different. The denotative reading of the text would remain unchanged, but the implied meaning would alter. The use of young actors is crucial to the preferred reading of this advert, in order to comply with the intended signified message; that young, trendy and sexy people drink Diet Coke.

So, it can be seen that meaning in advertisements can only be created through use of very specific elements.