Inquiring into the Implicit Arguments of Advertisements

In a country where 95-98% of all households have a television and where we are bombarded by nearly 3000 advertisements a day (“The Merchants of Cool”), the ability to identify, analyze, and evaluate the implicit arguments made in various forms of marketing has become exceedingly important. Think, for instance, of how many different forms of advertising exist today. There are billboards, radio commercials, TV commercials, direct mail flyers, newspaper and magazine print ads, movie trailers, webpage pop-ups, banner ads, Google ads (both alongside searches and in Gmail), movie posters, T-shirts, and phone calls from telemarketers. With ads as ubiquitous as they are, is it any wonder that marketing firms must go to greater and greater lengths to persuade us to buy their products? One way is to make an ad a form of entertainment—think music videos and the Super Bowl ads. Therefore, it is the major goal of this assignment for you to analyze the language and images of an advertisement in order to understand how these elements are used to put forth an implicit argument. You will most likely require some background information to help you provide a context for your analysis. For this reason, you will need to incorporate two sources other than the ad into this essay.

Your job, then, is to find an advertisement and to write an analysis of its implicit argument. Every ad makes an argument that starts out explicitly with “You should buy this product.” However, there is always an implicit “because” that follows. An argument that makes the claim that “you should buy this product because it is cool and will make you cool” is a different argument than one based on the claim that “you should buy this product because it is better than the others” or “because it is equally as good and cheaper.” The appeal to coolness is usually implied rather than made explicit. But even these arguments are too explicit for most of today’s advertising, which must constantly explore new ways of getting our attention and, ultimately, our money. And that is why analysis of their argumentative strategies is important.

Here are some questions to get you thinking about the assignment:

- Who is depicted in the ad? What stereotypes do these people conform to or resist? What groups could they be identified with?
- Who is the core audience for the ad? How can you tell? How does the ad attempt to appeal to this audience?
- Where does the ad appear? What time of day? What kind of media? In other words, in what rhetorical context does the ad appear?
- Who has power, authority, or control in the ad? How can you tell?
- What repeats in the ad? What categories of things can you make out of items in the ad? What elements contrast within the ad? Which of these answers are most interesting and why?
- Try out the “seems to be about x but could also be about y” statement suggested by the textbook.
• What evidence in the advertisement seems to contradict or complicate your conclusions? In other words, what counter arguments could be levied against your conclusions, and how would you refute them?

• Which of the rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) does the ad employ?

These questions are merely here to guide your thinking about this assignment, so please do not write the essay by answering these questions in a list-like way. That would only make for a disorganized essay.

It should also be said that it is not the purpose of this essay for you to discuss whether you like the ad or not. That should be largely irrelevant. In fact, it is better if you approach the ad with a healthy dose of skepticism about it. You can discuss the extent to which you think the ad is particularly effective in its argumentative strategy, but you will need to explain why you think this. Therefore, spend your time looking at the aspects of the advertisement you have chosen and how those aspects reveal an argument. Keep in mind that a lot of ads are really stupid, simplistic, and not worth analyzing. Aim for an ad that has a lot going on in it, or you won't have much to say. Remember, too, that some advertisements are much more complex than they first appear, so dig deep. What feels like your most outrageous inference may be your most illuminating.

Guidelines

This essay, when submitted for evaluation, should follow MLA Style for formatting and source documentation and should be approximately 1500 words in length.

Stylistic and Grammatical Task

For this essay you must work the following stylistic elements into the essay: five sentences using subordinating conjunctions, five sentences using coordinating conjunctions, two sentences using absolute phrases, and one (and only one) intentional sentence fragment. Again, consult the handbook or ask me if you are unfamiliar with these sentence elements.

Inquire like the wind.