

Sex, Buds, and Rock 'N' Roll: Images of American Freedom and Sexuality in Budweiser's Television Advertisement, "Anticipation"

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Abstract:

During a time of economic uncertainty in the U.S., beer giant Budweiser offers a unifying rallying cry to the public with their advertisement, "Anticipation." This video text serves as a form of reassurance of a collective identity to viewers while aligning itself with images of rebuilding a country that has been downtrodden. The collage of images set to a quickening musical and visual pace induces viewers into contemplating their identities as Americans. But, between the lines, the video text reveals gender stereotypes depicting women as creatures of intimate sexuality and servitude, deliberately obscuring the distinction between what it means to be a contributing member of contemporary American society or merely a caricatured image of gender synthesized by an advertising agency.



In the 2010 "Grab some Buds" campaign, Budweiser's television advertisement, "Anticipation," communicates to its young¹, mostly male target audience that the United States is "getting back on its feet" after a tough economic downturn in the late 2000s. The advertisement simultaneously provides the audience with reassurance of membership within a collective body. Through the use of images of nation-building, behind-the-scenes labor, community, freedom, and recreational partying, Budweiser is

communicating a positive message to a nation that could use some good news at the moment: that it is free, unshackled, and moving forward. This is done, of course, with Budweiser leading the way as the signified cultural unifier of the nation. While this may be true, the advertisement is also problematic in that it uses a voyeuristic approach to female sexuality while promoting gender stereotypes through a naturalized depiction of women in their homes and in the workforce as fantasized caricatures of sexuality, naturally predisposed to serve men their beer.

It should be noted that, while interpretation of literature relies on analyzing words on a page, interpretation of a video text relies on establishing meaning through form and context. Likewise, in order to interpret and synthesize a video text, one must be able to identify momentary glimpses of action found within a video text and establish their individual significance. Literary critic and theorist Robert Scholes helps to explain how to synthesize a video text in his article, "On Reading a Video Text," by claiming,

The moments of surrender proposed to us by video texts come in many forms, but all involve a complex dynamic of power and pleasure ... they offer us what is perhaps the greatest single virtue of art: change from the normal, a defense against the threat of boredom (619).

In this sense, "Anticipation" is certainly in agreement with Scholes' argument. The video text has its own tempo and ever-increasing pulse, which is a break from the monotony of simply viewing an ordinary television commercial. With an ever-quickening pace, the steady crescendo of the rock 'n' roll music juxtaposes against the unique, (yet congruent) images; while the

1 McMains, Andrew. "Q&A: A-B's Keith Levy: He Describes Budweiser's New 'Grab Some Buds' Campaign From Anomaly as the 'Beginning of a Journey'" *ADWEEK*. 28 Sept. 2010. Web. 13 Oct. 2010.
<http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/news/strategy/e3i677c428c4dc16c2c96571eea2f6eaa03>

video text ultimately conveys to the viewer that any notion of boredom should be dispelled while *pleasure* is delivered in a powerful way. For instance, the video features faceless individuals going about their daily routine(s), depicting them as symbols of “behind-the-scenes” labor. Stagehands are setting up for the show while various others prepare the field for a baseball game or open the neighborhood bar. While these people are setting the stage figuratively in one sense, they are also literally preparing the way for an event that brings people together. The viewer delights not only in the voyeuristic anticipation of seeing these people prepare, but in the actual culmination of their hard work: from enjoying the nation’s pastime in a game of baseball, to seeing a rock concert, attending a barbeque, a party, or a neighborhood bar.

On a deeper level, Scholes’ article adds that one of the components of power and pleasure derived from a video text comes through, “narrativity and what I would like to call, at least tentatively, cultural reinforcement”² (620). “Anticipation” fits in quite comfortably with Scholes’ idea of cultural reinforcement as the viewer is left with a sense of power and pleasure - undeniably relating to the smorgasbord of imagery in some way; while gripped in anticipation, left to perhaps wonder what it all means, but presumably “happy” to have experienced it. With such a wide array of images, it is quite possible that Budweiser has cast the largest possible net on their audience. Perhaps almost any member of contemporary society can relate to at least one element in this video text, whether it is through labor (or the notion of building something), recreation, sexuality, a sense of establishing community, or socializing. Scholes may argue that these very elements indeed reassure the viewer of their membership within a “collective cultural body,” confirming ideological positions, exuding the very principles of his idea of “cultural reinforcement.”

Therefore, by the conclusion of the video text, what is collectively being built is not just a concert, ballgame, or party, but an entire nation—an establishment of community. Visual cues in the video text send the viewer a message about how the collective cultural effort lends itself to nation-building, while providing snapshots of patriotic images closely associated with “freedom.” For instance, one illustration is the image of American fighter jets roaring over the stadium. Meanwhile, the images of faceless people are demonstrative of labor—exercising their freedom to work. Likewise, there are other momentary glimpses of people exercising their freedom, from throwing caution into the wind in order to kiss someone at a party, to the personal agency needed to attend these events, and to the empowering ability to choose and place Budweiser in one’s shopping cart. Perhaps to better understand Budweiser’s role as a promoter of nation-building and freedom, one must contemplate the very meaning of the word “freedom” itself. The very definition of freedom may be clearer when contrasted with an environment where freedom has been taken away, specifically with regard to the signified cultural unifier in this text: a food product—and how it affects American people.

One of the most immediate and notable places in the United States that harshly restricts personal freedoms is in federal and state penitentiaries. In an article titled, “Passing Time: The Ironies of Food in Prison Culture, Jim Thomas, a distinguished professor at Northern Illinois University, elaborates,

For people who live in environments where resources are limited and freedom restricted, such as total institutions, food takes on far more meaning than for people who live in the free world. For prisoners, food is more than nourishment, and meals more than the taken-for-granted routine. Food symbolizes punishment and powerlessness ... (167).

Contrasted with the image of Budweiser in the video text, Thomas’ description of food has the polar opposite effect of the video text. In the world of those not incarcerated, where freedom exists and flourishes, the application of food to one’s life is the very definition of freedom. In recent history, one may argue that the greatest threat to the freedom of United States citizens is the recession. If the “punishment and powerlessness” dealt to the American people was indeed the recession, then we, as a nation, might crave a way to end this “punishment” and find a solution in order to solve the problem of economic suppression. Instead of impending punishment and powerlessness, Budweiser becomes our cultural unifier, the ultimate symbol of freedom. Through this message in “Anticipation,” it becomes clear that our country is no longer collectively shackled by economic incarceration.

In order to break these collective shackles, individuals must organize and overcome the perils and hardships of the economic crisis. Thomas argues, “Eating not only sustains us, but it also helps fill the voids in our day, symbolizes our status, identity, and social location, and becomes a focal point for organizing our lives” (166). In the chaotic anticipatory buildup in the text, Budweiser is the focal point of organization. Utilizing each aspect of the video text in order to communicate what is possible, Budweiser unites the assorted imagery and delivers it to the reader, communicating the power of possibility when each person comes together and has a sense of freedom. In this sense, it appears that each step throughout the various processes within the video text becomes a social building-block, adding to the grand structure. The freedom to work hard coincides with the freedom to enjoy concerts, parties, cookouts, hook-ups, and baseball games. It is inherently American to participate in these things and it is the essence of and simultaneously a product of our freedom. According to the video text, it is our *identity*.

However, one might be hesitant to read so much into the Budweiser text. After all, one can argue that at its core the quintessential American pilsner is “just beer.” On the contrary, Budweiser, the *true* American pilsner, represents all of the aforementioned tenants and concepts. French literary theorist and critic, Roland Barthes, helps clarify socially ascribed meaning to foods in his article, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption.” Barthes elaborates, “[It] would obviously be necessary to start out with a complete inventory of all we know of the food in a given society (products, techniques, habits), and then to subject these facts to what linguists call transformational

² Scholes defines cultural reinforcement as, “the process through which video texts confirm viewers in their ideological positions and reassure them in their membership in a collective cultural body” (620).

analysis³” (30). With this idea in mind, Barthes contends, “the changeover from white to brown bread corresponds to a change in what is signified in social terms, because, paradoxically, brown bread has become a sign of refinement” (Ibid). The “facts” that distinguish Budweiser from an ordinary American pilsner are less about a transformation from pilsner A to pilsner B, but more about what Barthes considers an overall “sign of refinement”. These facts, (the inventory of all we know of Budweiser), coincide with Thomas’ aforementioned symbols of our “status, identity and social location” in order to produce differences in signification (166). The collective body of individuals in this video text represents hard working, middle class Americans—their beverage choice is the glue that binds them together in status, identity, and social location. This is one step in transformational analysis, but it is also important to keep in mind Scholes’ analysis of video texts. The very fact that the Budweiser video text speaks to the viewer in a way as to identify “ideological positions and reassure them in their membership in a collective cultural body,” is another step in Barthes’ transformation analysis (620).

With this in mind, the message of the video text, coupled with the Budweiser brand, creates huge steps in signification. One way to test this theory is to use a controlled experiment containing a pseudo-taste-test. For instance, if pilsner A and pilsner B are set up in a taste test with consumers who viewed this video text and who are familiar with the Budweiser brand, the ambiguously labeled pilsners are equals upon first inspection. The individuals taste testing each beer may enjoy one more than the other or may find both pilsners to be quite similar. Nonetheless, when the identity of each pilsner is revealed to the consumer, the effect *cannot be undone*. Regardless of what the taste tester may think about the flavor and appearance, once one of the beers is revealed to be Budweiser, all of the learned “facts” associated with the brand and the video text are attributed to the beer revealed. This is no longer pilsner A or B—this is Budweiser, King of Beers, builder of nations, ultimate symbol of freedom. It is analogous to Barthes’ brown bread, distinguished from the mundane and coupled with all of its perceived benefits (or drawbacks).

Another way in which the viewer can have their perceptions challenged about Budweiser is by taking a closer look at some of the erotic images associated with the video text. For instance, a seemingly faceless woman—slim and attractive—shows the viewer a more intimate part of her morning routine which is strategically dispersed throughout the video text, prior to the climax. She disrobes, walks gracefully into the bathroom, and takes a shower. After her shower, she is clasping her sheer bra, sliding on her pants seamlessly, and applying one smooth stroke of gloss to her perfectly pouty lips—all with an emphasis on sex appeal. Her perfection and grace must be indicative of the natural morning routine of all women. In the climax of the video text, the viewer sees an attractive young woman at a party leaning in and kissing a man before two bottles of Budweiser are pulled from a cooler of ice. Regarding such food eroticism in advertisements, Barthes maintains,

Visual advertising makes it possible to associate certain kinds of foods with images connotating sublimated sexuality. In a certain sense, advertising eroticizes food and thereby transforms our consciousness of it, bringing it into a new sphere of situations by means of a pseudocausal relationship (32).

For viewers to be taken into a woman’s personal space and voyeuristically watch her disrobe, dress, and apply makeup in a sexy and intimate fashion, goes beyond the typical limitations for most people and becomes something of a fantasized caricature of female sexuality. Despite television rarely showing images this racy, Budweiser has *allowed it*, terrifically echoing Barthes’ idea of images “connotating sublimated sexuality.” With these images appearing in a Budweiser video text, they seem “more normal” to the viewer while simultaneously lending a marked amount of eroticism to the brand itself through the video text. One might consider to whom the eroticism is aimed—in this video text, it is obvious that it is directed toward men.

Women are not only highly sexualized in the video text; they are also the ones directly responsible for “serving” the Budweiser (presumably to the young male target audience). Some men in the video can be seen carrying kegs and cases of Budweiser, but none of them actually serves the beer—let alone makes their living by serving the beer to consumers. Their only real responsibility is presumably “picking up the beer,” whereas a number of interesting things happen in the journey of the female bartender. She is the one who opens the bar, turns on the fan and lights, and prepares to serve up the Budweiser by stocking the shelf. Additionally, two female bartenders share a brief intimate exchange in the bar, while one ties the other’s serving apron prior to their shift. The first woman (who is tying), leans into the second woman *closely* as if to almost embrace before cutting away to an image of female hands stocking the shelves of a cooler behind the bar. For women in the video text, sexiness and servitude coalesce into a seemingly solid career path.

While Budweiser represents women as symbols of sexuality and servitude, they do not merely stop with these topics since Budweiser also eagerly engages in the portrayal of women as maternal governesses. The article titled, “Feeding Hard Bodies,” by Fabio Parasecoli, President of the Association for the Study of Food and Society, explains the roles of women in magazines that are geared toward men. He contends, “Women re-affirm their nature by performing their role of caregiver. They are responsible for feeding not only their own, but others’ bodies, ensuring their survival ... cooking is perceived as one of the most identifiable performative traits of femininity” (196). While the women in the video text are not exactly cooking or being “domestic,” they are nevertheless performing the role of a caregiver, and they are responsible for meeting the needs of their clientele. In this manner, the women in the video text are not merely sex symbols but also symbols of maternal nurture.

In making this assertion about female bartenders, Budweiser has helped to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. Feminist Professor and Undergraduate Director of Sociology at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, Marjorie DeVault, may argue that Budweiser has, in fact, inserted a socially damaging aspect of gender stereotyping into the video text by portraying

³ Barthes defines transformational analysis as “to observe whether the passage of one fact to another produces a difference in signification” (Barthes 30).

women as the servers, nurturers, and providers of the beer. In the article, "Conflict and Deference," DeVault discusses stereotypes such as those displayed in the video text by claiming,

These behaviors are learned early and enforced through everyday observation of prevailing patterns of gender relations; they are rarely justified or even articulated explicitly ... for most people, these understandings have become part of a morally charged sense of how things should be, so that even those who strive for some version of equity are prey to their pervasive effects (247).

In the video text, Budweiser does a handy job of communicating the way things should be in terms of people working hard and enjoying the benefits of their freedom. However, DeVault's critique suggests that the ad is harmful to gender relations. While the clips alternate quickly, it might be easier for a well-meaning viewer (male or female) who strives for equity to fall "prey to their pervasive effects." Coupled with the eroticization of the female body, the video text actively communicates to the young, male audience a simple notion: "We are rebuilding our nation, people are working hard, things are beginning to look up, and we can still have a good time; while the woman's role in this process is to be the sexy servant. This is all the way it 'should be.'"

At first glance, it appears that what "Anticipation" sets out to accomplish is generally a positive, pro-America, post-recovery rallying-cry closely associated with, if not propagated by, Budweiser. However, upon closer inspection, it appears that in trying to target male consumers, Budweiser has hastily bought into outdated gender stereotypes of women as servants of our food and has endorsed near-pornographic voyeuristic hyperboles of female sexuality. Through the framework of viewing women as hyper-sexualized domestic attendants, naturally predisposed to their maternal instincts to provide nurture and sustenance, there is a grave risk that the viewer will miss the focal point of nation-building in its entirety and instead succumb to criminally vulgar misrepresentations.

While this video text might just be the chill-inducing, attention-getting, feel-good catalyst Budweiser needs in order to draw young males to their brand, these males may unfortunately and unwittingly buy into antiquated gender stereotypes while reaching to embrace the positive aspects of the video text. One such positive aspect is the emphasis on American freedom, but "Anticipation" ironically distorts this by proving to restrict the freedom of women to have personal agency and live unshackled from oppressive ideologies. Great times are waiting ... Enjoy responsibly.

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