A Sugary Mess: A Rhetorical Study of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s 2009 Anti-Smoking and Empty Calorie Beverage Public Service Advertisements

J.D. Smith
Faculty: Deborah Ballard-Reisch
Elliott School of Communication

Abstract:

Throughout the last decade, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYDOH) have launched numerous Public Service Advertisements (PSA) to curb the use of tobacco and consumption of ‘empty calorie’ beverages. Numerous media outlets have referred to these campaigns and their images as impeding and ill-mannered, highlighting their existence as controversial from the onset. Previous literature indicates that controversial styles of advertising, specifically those using explicit means of communication, provoke psychological reaction and recall regarding the topic of the advertisement. This study uses a triangulated approach to data analysis in answering three research questions pertaining to media and consumer reactions through the rhetorical strengths featured in each of the campaigns. The results indicate that themes emerge between proponents and opponents of the campaign that justify the use of controversial styles in PSA; information recall, questioning of health practices and discourse as a solution. In conjunction with Althusser’s (1971) Subject Positioning theory, each campaign’s rhetorical strategy is found to be effective. Future research may capitalize on identifying scales of reaction and their consequent behavioral changes in the consumer.

1. Introduction

The 2009 Anti-Smoking and empty-calorie NYC public service advertisements (PSA) embody numerous characteristics of shock advertising; including an appeal to fear and personal identity (Dahl, 2003)[1]. Aside from the initial reactions of health scholars and journalists, the campaign has attracted little interest from communication specialists or advertising analysts in its short existence. The lack of scholarly inquiry into this campaign presents a justification for research on two levels: media influence on public health trends, and the affects of shock advertising strategies when employed by government entities. This study includes three tiers of cultural analysis (Kellner, 2001) in an attempt to uncover the production intent, image interpretation and consumer reactions surrounding this campaign. The first tier provides a background to the political economy or production process, meaning the campaign’s innovation and development contextually (Kellner, 2001)[2]. The second tier analyzes the advertisement as an artifact in constant interaction with the public; this is done using an interpretive method of analysis often recurring in popular culture theory, Subject Positioning (Davies and Harre, 1990)[3]. The final tier, a content analysis of six news media sites, uses an emergent coding system to categorize audience reaction to the campaign (Frey, Botan, Friedman and Kreps, 1992)[4].

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

In completing the content analysis of the selected media examples, three themes emerged; anti-state, pro-shock, and pro-health sentiment from consumers. Using Dahl’s (2003) research as a comparative model, it was found that these thematic responses reflect what is a shock frame for advertising.

Anti-State commentary was categorized by the use of demeaning or harsh language against the NYCDOH, United States Federal Government (USFG) and other state actors. After assigning derogatory commentary to this category a second wave of pro-state posts were assigned. An example of Anti-State sentiment emerges from Village Voice;

“We thought we’d seen everything in the health-department scare ads department until Fork in the Road told us about the Department of Health’s "Don’t Drink Yourself Fat" poster, showing grisly lipids ‘n’ veins emanating from a thinly-disguised Coke bottle (Edroso, 2009)[5].”

Using the terms ‘scare’ and ‘grisly,’ Edroso condemns the intent and aesthetic of the NYCDOH campaign while also using the term ‘disguised’ to reveal the department’s PSA as an attack on the beverage industry. An example from ‘City Room’ conveys the same topic in a different attitude;
“I look forward to a day when the NYC public departments will remind me to wipe my own bum and chew with my mouth closed, don’t take out the second mortgage, and look both ways before I cross the street. Life is mostly common sense and learning, why do we need the state or the city to tell us what to do (Chan, 2009)[6]?" 

The post by ‘Phishaw’ identifies the campaign as an infringement upon citizen’s rights, using the phrase ‘why do we need the state’ to express rejection of the campaign. Other articles were noted to be in support of the city’s advocacy for health.

Pro-Health commentary was also observed on the ‘City Room’ forum. The following comment exemplifies both pro-shock sentiment and pro-health information.

“Love the ad — and it will work. The gross-out ads from NYS really helped me quit smoking (smoke free since Jan. 1, 2006). These ads will help steer people toward better food choices (Chan, 2009).”

Note that this commentator, ‘Nikola,’ not only advocates the NYCDOH ‘fat’ campaign but was also positioned subjectively by the department’s anti-smoking campaign. This data suggests that the health campaigns are proactive and do so using shock strategies. A second comment assesses the health issues of NYC on a state policy level;

“The ads attempt to educate the public – there is a huge cost to all of us in our rampant obesity (in the form of higher health insurance premiums and public medical bills) – so it makes sense to me for the state to encourage health in this way (Chan, 2009).”

The comment above positions the campaign as a form of public information with the purpose of combating high health costs. This sub-theme was continuously used by commentators on the ‘City Room’ blog.

Pro-Shock sentiment came in the form of rationalizing effectiveness. This means that commentary was suggestive of shock being more effective than informative PSAs. On example comes from the Adweek.com blog, Adfreak;

“Who did this campaign? Wow this is absurdly disgusting and very effective, if you know that's what human fat looks like. But now that I know, if I see another one of these ads the visual will be branded in my head (Nudd, 2009)[7].”

This post, by Vanderleun, uses the terms ‘disgusting’ and ‘effective’ to describe the impact of the campaign. As outlined in the literature review of this study, the element of surprise is essential to shock strategies. Using the term ‘disgusting,’ this commentator conveys an element of surprise while also rating the campaign as productive. The Vanderleun post also highlights an emerging sub-theme of the Pro-Shock category, recognition. Seven posts on the ‘City Room’ forum, as well as Vanderleun’s, remark on the ability of the audience to identify the liquid-like substance in the campaign poster as fat. Another commentator from the ‘City Room’ states;

“For the life of me, I couldn’t tell that it was human fat, pouring out of that bottle; my first reaction was that the contents were being poured too fast (Chan, 2009)!”

These reactions suggest that the campaign may be ‘hit or miss’ to an extent. In the comment above, the commentator positions themselves as rationalizing the speed of the pouring and not the content of the PSA. In the case that an audience member is not able to interpret the liquid as fat then subject positioning will be misplaced.

3. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that more research is needed before concretely agreeing to the use of shock as a method for behavioral change via PSA. It can be suggested that consumers of these campaigns found the advertisements to be controversial, while some also indicate the advertisements to be accurate and necessary. It cannot be succinctly concluded that such campaigns produce significant decreases in their relative topics.

References