

Belonging and difference

Advertisements sell both concepts of belonging (to a community, nation, family, or special group or class of people) and difference (from others). Sometimes when advertisements ask us to consume commodity signs, they attach to their products concepts of the nation, family, community, and democracy. Hence, the ideological function of many adver-

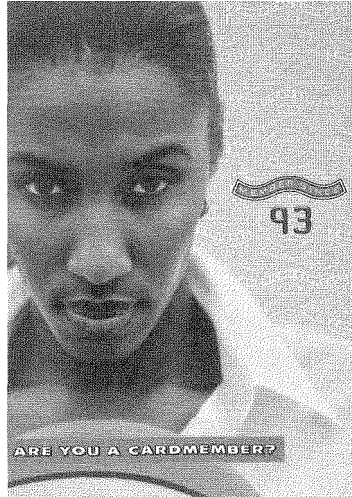


tisements takes the form of speaking a language of patriotism and nationalism, in order to equate the act of purchasing a product with a practice of citizenship. In other words, ads that use an image of America or Britain or other nations to market products are selling the concept that in order to be a good citizen and to properly participate in the nation, one must be an active consumer. These products are presented as the means by which we can participate in national ideology

Because the idea of the nuclear family is central to most national ideologies, it often emerges as a focus of advertisements. The concept of "family values" is a central aspect of political debates, and many advertisements depict the family as nuclear, concerned, and, above all, consumerist. In many ads, the family is a site of harmony, warmth, and security, an idealized unit with no problems that cannot be solved by commodities. Indeed, commodities are presented as the means by which the family is held together, affirmed, and strengthened. In these ads, people relate to each other on the most intimate levels through commodities, which are shown as facilitating familial emotion and communication. For instance, the well-known AT&T slogan "reach out and touch someone" promotes the telephone (and AT&T service) as a means to create emotional attachment.

Advertising about the nuclear family exemplifies the Marxist critique of reification, the process by which products are awarded human qualities and human relations are mediated through commodities. McDonald's can be successful in selling a fast-food meal as the proper replacement for a home-cooked family meal. In many McDonald's ads, the restaurant is presented as the place where family togetherness is reaffirmed because going to McDonald's is something the family members agree on and which they can share. In therapeutic terms, McDonald's makes up for what the family cannot do (find time to have both a meal and a meaningful experience together at home). McDonald's achieves this message, and the presumption of relevance within it (in order for viewers to not ask the question, why is an evening out at a fast-food restaurant the perfect family meal?), in part, because it has established itself as a patriotic symbol through years of advertising.

Ads that sell concepts of the nation and the family as norms speak to viewers as if they are members of these social realms. Membership in an exclusive club is often a selling point that allows consumers to feel that they can aspire to such exclusivity while feeling anxious about whether or not they really do belong there. In this ad, American Express establishes its product as not simply a credit card but a club in which one is a member (and to which famous people—in this ad, basketball player Lisa Leslie—who are unidentified



in the ad, belong). The ad poses its question in a way that can promote anxiety. The concept of membership is underscored by the fact that images of the celebrities are actually embedded within the design of the card itself. In addition, many advertisements establish particular codes for class difference and represent class relations. Ads for high-end, expensive products establish the class to which they belong through understood conventions such as classical music, references to fine art, and other codes of wealth and prestige. These ads interpellate all consumers as potential members of a class regardless of their actual class status.

In the same way that advertising sells the idea of belonging, it also establishes codes of difference in order to distinguish products. Ads often establish norms by demonstrating things that are different from the norm through marking. As we discussed in Chapter 3, the *unmarked* category is the unquestioned norm and the *marked* category is the one seen as different or other. For instance, a white model is unmarked, the normative category, precisely because consumers are not meant to register the fact of his/her whiteness, *whereas* a nonwhite model is marked by race. Traditionally, race has been used in advertising to give a product a kind of "exoticism" and foreignness.

For example, there has been a long tradition of advertisements that use images of the "islands" and unidentified exotic locales to sell things such as cosmetic products and lingerie. These unidentified locales are coded as closer to nature and offering access to the "primitive." These ads situate the tropics as the source of beauty aids precisely because they are represented as more natural, less tainted by modernity, and as the source of innocence and beauty. They work both to erase colonial politics and the reality of life in the Third World (where, in fact, most of the low-paid labor that produces First World products takes place) and to re-code these places as sites of leisure and playlands for tourists. Here again, we can see how commodity fetishism operates as a process of mystification, obscuring the complex reality of colonized places and former colonies in order to attach the meanings of difference to products. Ironically, while these products promise to white consumers the qualities of *otherness*, commodity culture is about the denial of difference, in that it *encourages* conformist *behavior* through the act of consumption.

Increasingly, markers of ethnicity and race are used in advertisements to demonstrate social or racial awareness and to give a product an element of

cultural sophistication. There are an increasing number of ads that use models of many different ethnicities in an attempt to both unmark race and to attach to their products the meaning of social awareness. The most obvious example of this is the advertising of United Colors of Benetton. Benetton ads are intended to signify racial harmony and ethnic diversity. While they have produced a famous advertising campaign using documentary images, which we will discuss in Chapter 7, in their advertisements that display clothing the company always uses models of many different races posed together. In these advertisements, cultural difference sells.

Hence, Benetton's ads both unmark race and mark it quite consciously. Viewers are meant to register the many races represented by the models and to read this diversity as progressive and hip. This campaign can be said to reduce the concept of racial identity to one simply of skin color as something fashionable, an association that simplifies the complexity of cultural and ethnic identity. In other words, racial difference is an integral part of one's identity and culture, it is not simply a color that one takes on and off. Through its association with the product of Benetton clothing, the idea of racial harmony is reduced to the idea of putting on and taking off different, colored clothing.

Benetton is selling a celebration and erasure of difference and a kind of universal humanism. At the same time, the company is promoting multiculturalism as something that one can buy. The concept of multiculturalism in some cases has been tied to commodity culture, as if one might buy one's way into another culture. Many people see themselves as participating in multiculturalism simply by purchasing products from other cultures and eating in "ethnic" restaurants. Consuming otherness is central to commodity culture in the global era.