

**Analyzing Stereotypes &
Representation: Calvin Gets a Job
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[Link to Calvin Gets a Job Commercial](#)
[Link to Dave Chappelle's Wac Arnold's Skit](#)

This paper seeks to analyze the “Calvin Gets a Job” Mc Donald’s commercial series and creator’s used encoded messages to encourage young black men to apply for employment. The messaging of this commercial will be deconstructed in part using Barthes’, Saussure’s, and Peirce’s semiotic terminology and Stuart Hall’s representation theory. These frameworks will be used to identify the image’s linguistic (words that convey a meaning) and iconic (images used to convey meaning) messaging in this three-part commercial series. Non-Coded iconic messages use images to provide a literal meaning, whereas coded-iconic contain a coded or underlying message in the image. Stuart Halls representation theory explores how this messaging is encoded by creators and decoded by an audience. The creator’s intended message is known as the dominant or preferred reading while an oppositional reading is rejected by the audience. Negotiated readings provide a compromise between their own views and the dominant and oppositional. These structures in tandem will review the different encoded messages and what images were used to represent the target audience, young black men.

“Calvin Gets a Job” premiered in the early 90s and ran through the FIFA 1994 Tournament. The commercial begins as a young black man leaves his home and heads to his job at McDonalds as the off-screen voices of two older black women inquire about him and his proclivities. The young black man is identified as Calvin by one of the ladies. The gossip-style

narration gives cultural connotation through multiple linguistic messages providing greater context to the displayed images. The dialogue style narration is superimposed over images of Calvin as he walks through an urban residential neighborhood. The address and authority of the narrators suggest they know Calvin personally, his backstory, and are entitled to know where he's going. The tonality of phrases like, "I wonder where he's headed," "I'm glad he got himself together," "you can't judge a book by its cover," and "responsibilities been good for him," suggest he was once up to no good. These phrases are superimposed over Calvin waving off his peers engaging in ambiguous group activities on a street corner, then helping a woman with her grocery cart, respectively. The commercial ends as white sneakers walk over a familiar, brown-tiled door threshold, "I wonder where he's working," asks one of the narrators. Calvin flips his baseball cap brim to the front saying, "Welcome to McDonalds, may I help you," revealing the narrator's inquiry.

The second commercial begins as a group of Calvin's friends meet up on a stoop while listening to a boom box and the displayed subtitle "Boys On the Block" with the golden arches logo to the right (linguistic and non-coded iconic messages). They greet each other and start questioning Calvin's whereabouts, begin teasing him for working at McDonalds, and imply he is missing out on fun with his friends. The commercial cuts to scenes of Calvin's activities at work superimposed over his friend's banter. Phrases like "he's missing out on big fun" and "I heard he has a plan" coincide with images of Calvin enjoying time with co-workers and being promoted to management. Calvin calls his mother via payphone to share the news. Back on the stoop, the conversational tone shifts as they acknowledge Calvin's "fresh" clothing (connotation of nice or

good looking) as he walks up. They greet and tease him about his job at McDonald's by referencing the hat turn from the previous commercial saying, "welcome to the hood." One of his friends inquired about a job application "for a friend" and the two walk upstairs together.

The final commercial in the series shows the word "Grapevine" and the golden arches at the bottom of the screen. The storyline continues from Calvin informing his mother of his promotion. After they hang up, his mother proceeds to call her friend Anna (played by Loretta Divine) to share the news, telling her son who shares with friends and the greater community. In a telephone-style commentary that continues throughout the commercial ends with an older lady asking Calvin if he "owns McDonalds," answering back enthusiastically, "not yet."

This commercial series is less than two minutes in length and was marketed towards young black men looking for employment in the early 90s. Although the intentionality was positive, it used some biases that might skew the representation of young black men and black people. The single consistent non-coded iconic message (images that represent a literal meaning) is the Golden Arches logo present throughout. The intention is for the audience to decipher immediately they are viewing a McDonalds commercial. From the start, the logo appears intermittently throughout with a reminder at the end. The featured music is the familiar McDonalds melody produced with a hip-hop/new jack swing adjacent style providing connotation that the target audience is young black men.

Other linguistic messages can be observed through subtitles displayed at the start of the second and third commercial. The first commercial sets up the introduction and backstory of Calvin. The creator intended for this gossip-style narration to give context to Calvin's backstory and the community's perception of him before and after getting a job. The stand outs of the ladies' statements include phrases like, "I'm glad he got himself together," and "you can't judge a book by its cover." Later a gentleman, likely a former teacher or principal commentary chides, "Calvin who used to hang out on the corner?" imply Calvin had a reputation for engaging in unspecified activities on a corner. Although not specified, the cultural connotation of "the corner" often implies a location common for the sale of street pharmaceuticals.

The early 90s also marked multiple sociopolitical issues, specifically the wake of the 1980's crack epidemic and the war on drugs that caused longstanding effects and disproportionately affected black and brown communities throughout the United States. The commercial was in rotation up to and likely after the passing of the Violent Crimes Bill of 1994. The timing of the commercial might suggest McDonalds was targeting young black men to leave the "corner" and seek employment as the preferred or dominant reading. This commercial series was also criticized by comedian Dave Chappelle on his 2003 comedy series, Chappelle's Show. The skit depicts Calvin's reality with a satirical take. Towards the end of the 90s, McDonald's Worker commercials shifted to a more universal tone showing the possibilities and potentials of employees.

Young black men were depicted in an ambiguous, single dimension and used hip-hop music, coded language, and stylish clothing to convince the target audience to seek employment with McDonalds. Besides knowing Calvin once used to hang out on “the corner” until he became employed, wears “fresh” clothing, and “owns McDonalds,” the audience isn’t given context about who he is or his ambitions. The representation of Calvin and his friends are shallow demonstrating and have no dimension outside of the context of his job. Furthermore, Calvin’s community at large seems to know his reputation as well. One could question why Calvin is the subject of so many conversations. His mother shared news of the promotion and likely the reason “the grapevine” knows so much about him.

Works Cited

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