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Communication Design Theory
12 October 2024

Mark Your Man

In the mid-20th century, the media often utilized advertisements to convey messages, and these messages frequently relied on stereotypes that reinforced societal biases. The "Mark Your Man" ad comes from the television series *Mad Men*, which offers a rich opportunity for semiotic analysis. Using Roland Barthes' analysis alongside the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, and Stuart Hall, this essay will analyze the "Mark Your Man" advertisement, revealing stereotypes and reinforcing societal expectations for women.

The "Mark Your Man" ad is illustrative imagery from the fictional campaign in *Mad Men*, reflecting what advertising was like in the 1960s in the United States. It was created for a lipstick brand called "Belle Jolie." This ad targets women, particularly housewives or working women who seek to claim ownership over their male partners. The first two elements that stand out when I see this ad are the woman's face and her lips. The red color on her lips symbolizes passion,

desire, and femininity, communicating that the kiss is an act of marking territory. The bold typography of the tagline "Mark Your Man" conveys confidence, clarity, and strength, reflecting

the woman's power through her ability to mark her man. This portrayal of gender roles is key to

understanding how the ad communicates its message.

According to Roland Barthes' "Rhetoric of the Image," the signifiers used in this ad are the

lipstick, kiss mark, and the slogan. The message behind these elements is the woman's control

over her romantic partner, which is achieved through beauty and physicality. The linguistic

message of this ad is the text "Mark Your Man," which reinforces the idea that the lipstick allows

a woman to secure her partner. This reflects the coded iconic message within the ad, where the

woman's beauty and the lipstick become tools of possession and control. However, the

non-coded iconic message is simply a woman wearing lipstick and kissing her partner. The

denotation and connotation of the ad are closely related to the coded and non-coded iconic

messages, as both highlight the themes of marking and possession.

Using Barthes' semiotic terms, the polysemic sign is the "kiss mark." It can mean different

things, like love and intimacy, but the ad makes its meaning clear through the tagline and images,

focusing on ownership and control. Additionally, his idea of naturalization shows that the ad

presents this message as a natural truth about relationships, making it seem obvious and

unquestionable. Moving to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, he emphasized that the

relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and culturally constructed, meaning that

the kiss mark comes to symbolize romantic control only within the context of 1960s gender

norms. Charles Peirce's model of signs provides further understanding, where the kiss mark can

be understood as an icon, resembling an actual kiss; a symbol representing beauty and attention,

and an index indicating the action of kissing.

Lastly, the ad reflects common beliefs about gender roles. It suggests that a woman can mark her

man, supporting the idea that relationships are about possession and power. A common belief in

1960s advertising, a woman's success and identity were often seen as dependent on her ability to

attract and keep her man. Stuart Hall's theory adds another layer to the analysis by examining

how audiences understand and respond to media messages. In addition, today's audience might

respond to this ad with criticism and discomfort because they value gender equality and

individual achievement. Thus, they may see it as promoting harmful stereotypes that undermine

women's independence. Overall, the "Mark Your Man" ad seems outdated compared to today's

values, leading to calls for better representation of women.

In conclusion, the "Mark Your Man" advertisement demonstrates how the media can reinforce

biases using stereotypes. By analyzing it through the lenses of Barthes, Saussure, Peirce, and

Hall, we see how semiotic tools are used to fix meaning and persuade the viewer.