

ANALYZING ADVERTISING

Choose five advertisements from any source and analyze each for its selling strategies. What's the underlying psychology? How does it try to persuade? Does it employ emotional appeals or is it more rational, fact-based? Who is the ad targeting and how can you tell? Think seriously about each ad and take time to notice details that you normally overlook.

The ads may be from any medium—television, magazines, pamphlets, etc. But do not use retail or classified ads; use only national consumer advertisements. You'll need to turn in a copy of the ad with your finished assignment. For print ads, include a photocopy; for web ads, include a URL, and for TV commercial(s), bring in a videotape.

Be sure to go beyond superficial observations and pay close attention to details. Below is a list of questions that may help you get started. (You don't need to use all of these, they are just here as a guide.)

When you have finished analyzing each ad individually, compare and contrast the ads as a group. What strategies, if any, do they share? Are there any interesting patterns you notice? If you had to categorize each ad based on its strategy, how would you do so? (For example, “celebrity endorsements” and “before-and-after” are two possible categories.)

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How does the ad design convey the advertisers' message? Why do you think particular aesthetic elements (typefaces, photographs, camera etc.) were chosen? How do they help establish an overall mood for the ad?

Ads tend to communicate more through images (and in the case of television, through movement and music) than words. How are images, camera angles and movements, music and other visual elements used to convey messages in the ad?

In the imagery, what appears in the foreground versus the background? Why do you think these choices were made?

Precisely what is the product being offered for sale? What do you learn about its objective qualities? (Try to distinguish here between factual versus emotional appeals.)

Look at the people pictured in the ad. What might you infer about their states of mind from the ways they are presented? How might the intended audience respond to these representations?

Look carefully at the locale of the scene. Where does it take place? What significance is the locale likely to have for the intended audience?

Sometimes it is not what is in the ad that pulls the viewer in, but what is missing. Is there anything missing in this imagery that the intended audience might supply?

Is this ad idealizing some aspect of life? If so, what is it and how is it presented?

What might this ad be inferring about the nature of human relationships?

What messages does this ad say about what it means to be a man or a woman? About self-identity? About personal happiness, sexual attractiveness, or other forms of self-fulfillment?

What does the ad convey about social status or class? About racial or ethnic identity?

What kinds of cultural beliefs are promoted in this ad? Try to imagine yourself as an outsider to this society, viewing this ad. What seem to be the values of the ad's creators and its receivers?

Advertising is often linked with the process of commodification: that is, taking a human value or need and equating it with the process of buying and using a product. From that standpoint, ask yourself: what human needs and values is this ad attempting to commodify?

—*Adapted from Medicine and Madison Avenue study guides, scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/mma*