

Introduction to Semiotics and Communication

Course Assignment – An Analysis of an Advertisement

August 6, 2002

The advertisement is one for ‘Silken Vodka’ (a made up company). The Vodka bottle was taken from the ‘Smirnoff’ website and the model for the ad was taken from ‘Cosmopolitan’ magazine (June 2000 issue). Additionally, the slogan was taken from the ‘Find Your Voice’ campaign for ‘Virginia Slims’. The meaning that is being sent out is a statement of female independence and self-sufficiency while still retaining the exterior beauty and luxury associated with being female.

‘Silken Vodka’ attempts to make the advertisement as ambiguous as possible in order to add power to the ad. Through minimalization of the positive space, the negative space (and its lack of detail) enhances the subject. The first impression of the ad implies any number of suggestions that discreetly hint at every possible product targeting women, including makeup, perfume, jewelry, or beauty aids. However, upon closer inspection, the article is in fact an advertisement for alcohol.

Initially the viewer’s eye is first drawn to the face of the women. From there, a subtle string of font leads the viewer’s eye to towards the product name and slogan. This small line of words acts as a visual guide (an index), rather than as text, finally pointing the way to the iconic signifier (i.e. the vodka bottle). The icon seems to gleam silver (a colour often associated with sleek, subtlety and strength) greatly drawing the attention of the viewer towards the product.

When the viewer finally focuses his/her attention on the text, he/she will encounter a vague catch phrase that can be interpreted on infinite levels. This message willfully strikes the consciousness and provokes thought. "NEVER let the goody two shoes get you down." One can only assume that the woman in the ad is the speaker since there is no other person present. With whom is the narrator communicating with? One conclusion would be that the narrator is speaking to herself. However, the viewer of the ad may also take it as a personal message to himself/herself and adopt the message as his/her own.

The general message sent out to the public by the ad is self-empowerment and independent thinking. The capitalization, larger font, and the differing direction of the word 'NEVER,' in relation to the rest of the phrase, helps to emphasize a strong drive and resistance to a particular object or action. The text has several possible connotative meanings. In general, 'Goody two shoes' represents a person who always does the "right" or moral thing. The 'goody two shoes' could be both an external or internal force. Denotatively, the word "down" implies a direction. However, connotatively, "down" can also mean to feel badly or to be upset. How then, can a 'good' and moral person (i.e. the 'goody two shoes') cause another person to become guilty or upset? One can only conclude that the action contemplated or completed by the other person must have been 'wrong' or socially unacceptable to receive reprimanding from a 'goody two shoes'. The text can be interpreted for one not to feel guilty over a decision already made, or it can involve a decision to be made in the future: whether to drink at all. Since neither of these actions are clearly defined as the "immoral deed", the text connotes that the woman in question employs this attitude in many other aspects of her life. Sex, food, money,

cigarettes; all of which could easily substitute alcohol in this ad, easily identify themselves as borderline controversial subjects in modern society. Therefore, due to the vagueness of the text, the ad may be connoting a broad, pseudo feminist lifestyle approach. By using the concept of “holding to your choices” the text may be hinting at broader issues than just the alcohol seen in this ad.

The positioning of the text also can be interpreted to show that the model in this ad had been freed of the confinement of the ‘goody two shoes’ attitude. The initial word of the text, ‘NEVER’, is read vertically as opposed to the remainder of the text, ‘let the goody two shoes get you down’, which is read horizontally. The verticality of the word can be iconic of someone standing up. One can almost see in one’s mind a person standing up in aggressive opposition in order to voice their opinion. This adds further meaning to the catch slogan ‘Find Your Voice’ in which the word ‘NEVER’ has taken a stance to voice its autonomy. Hence, the direction of the initial word “NEVER”, further adds independence, power and voice to the word itself. The horizontality of the remainder of the phrase is iconic of someone lying down. ‘Let the goody two shoes get you down’ invokes the image of goody two shoes getting his/her way and thus, “walking all over you”. Consequently, one can only be walked over if they are lying down, which symbolizes submissiveness and passiveness of the horizontal phrase. The ad is showing that if you ‘let the goody two shoes get you down’ you will be letting someone walk all over you. Finally, to show that the woman has indeed been freed of the goody two shoes, first notice that the text begins underneath the earlobe of the woman. “NEVER” is read downwards pointing to the remainder of the phrase which is positioned at shoulder level of the model which, as it turns out, is below chin level. This symbolizes that the model

has moved to a place above where the goody two shoes can get her down. Additionally, notice that phrase appears behind the model's head and she is looking in the opposite direction of the text with her eyes focused upwards, showing that she has 'left it behind' – 'it' being the goody two shoes and his/her moral attitudes - and is looking forward to something better and more enlightened.

The catch slogan "find your voice" then reinforces the concept of adhering to decisions in quite a vague manner. Taken by its literal denotation, the phrase is actually absurd because a voice cannot be found. A voice has no physical form. Consequently, it cannot reside within any physical space and therefore, cannot be found. However, this particular phrase has taken on a whole set of connotated meanings. When one loses his/her voice, it means that he/she can no longer speak his/her thoughts. Conversely, when one finds his voice, he can then articulate his position. The concept of speaking one's mind has been assimilated into the empowerment of a group subject to oppression. Freedom of speech has always been a merit of the North American lifestyle, and actively utilizing this right makes one a patriot. The slogan actively plays on this ideology of speaking out and voicing one's opinions. In keeping with the revolutionary theme, one would expect that the font of this message would be bold and dramatic. However, in this advertisement, it is written in swirly, childish font, which shows signs of playfulness. Furthermore, the color of the font is printed in white, which symbolically denotes purity and cleanliness. Through this methodical subversion, the text can be reinterpreted as "seemingly innocent", which contradicts the original meaning of the text.

The brand name of the product is can also been seen as iconic. The word silken refers to a smooth texture which can be interpreted by the viewer that like the silk one many find in clothing, Silken Vodka, by comparison, is just as smooth when it as it goes down the throat. Other factors will further reinforce the 'silken' quality of the vodka such as the kinesics and physical features of the model which will be discussed later on in the essay.

The vodka bottle itself, is an icon – a picture of the actual product. Not only does the icon seems to gleam silver which shows its monetary value, the clear silvery image amongst the brash background of black and red also invokes a vision of lakeside serenity in a harsh and brutal world. It is almost as if the lake is inviting one to take a dip in its cool refreshing waters. The mental image of the lake, which is iconic of Silken Vodka, will allow one to slip away from the harsh and brutal world into the paradise of its waters – into an alternative peaceful and utopian world.

The message, of course is even further reinforced by the visual imagery which, as I mentioned before, is what you notice first. To begin with, the ad itself is very dramatic. African-American woman's upper body profile is portrayed against a solid red background. The denotative meaning of the color itself is of no significance, but in our cultural context it is a very big part of the cultural code of "boldness." It therefore functions as a symbol for all of traits of our culture's "empowered woman", like confident, independent, and powerful. The red color is also associated with female sexuality - the passionate and alluring seductress who takes no regard as to what others may think of her. Think of all the female icons who are associated with wearing red –

Betty Boop or Jessica from 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' – both of which are icons representing female sexuality but also making a statement of power and empowerment. Once again, the background colour invokes the icon of a modern-day empowered woman (as opposed to the traditional, dainty, submissive woman) is suggested to the viewer within his/her mind. Not only does the fiery background colour make a statement regarding the lifestyle the advertisement promotes, the bright, bold, yellow letters that are used for 'Silken Vodka' also reiterates the same principle. The bold, block letters of the signifier, clashes against the intense background, drawing in the viewer's eyes and making a statement of brashness. Therefore, the message in the text is further reinforced by the non-conformist ideals and raw, primal colours.

There are more subtle details in the way that the model herself is presented that further add to the nature of the message. Like in most advertising directed at women, there is an implied "male gaze." The unfocussed, upward glance of the woman is the expression of someone who is not looking at anything, but is rather engaged in the act of being looked at. However, the lighting on the model's face gives the appearance of looking up to something surreal, and in so doing, the model's face also reflects and radiates the transcendent power. Furthermore, the silhouette of the model on the red background produces a mysterious effect, and by doing so, makes her even more dynamic. The smooth arches of her figure and the observed silky texture of her skin are connotative of silky and smooth feeling one gets when drinking 'Silken Vodka'. Fingers set in feminine arches along with the touching of the neck also reinforces the act of 'posing' and suggests that the model knows and is in control of this moment of being on view. The arched pose of the model is almost statue-like resembling the ancient Greek

gods which is symbolic of power and confidence but yet, also untouchable beauty. This new age empowered woman is alluring because she is bold; and bold because she is alluring. The body language in the pose conveys a message of strength, power but also a very feminine beauty. The dainty positioning of the fingers bringing attention to the outstretched neck suggests sexuality for the male audience. The positioning of the fingers on the neck also has other connotative meaning such as the model reaching for her voice; or her delight in how smooth and 'silky' the vodka was able to go down her throat. Her open and unfocused expression shows that she knows she is being watched and may connote that she is using her sexuality as power rather than making an attempt at autonomy.

Another symbol of female autonomy is the model's hairstyle. In the ad it is clear that the model either has very short hair or even no hair at all. It implies that she has shorn what is often considered a burden women carry for men and made herself equal to men by matching her hairstyle to theirs. In keeping a short hairstyle, the model has made a statement of her freedom from the confinements of the typical female beauty and empowered herself to be regarded equal to her male counterparts.

One minute detail, although slight, which makes a grand statement, is the accessories the model chooses to wear. The diamond earring located on her lobe is the ultimate contradiction to a woman's independence. While it can be expected that a woman would select her own ensemble, the diamond earring surfaces the popular "romance myth", which implies a significant other who may have purchased them for her at some point. The implication of traditional romance is one of the foundations of a

society. However, it is also one that generally dictates that women will be married and consequently, lose their autonomy. Additionally, the use of red, shiny lip gloss on the model reinforces the feminine quality she possesses. It shows that despite the empowered and autonomous attitude she retains, she still has a need to be beautiful and the eyes of society. Both these characteristics show the femininity of the model contradicting the original underlying message of the text.

To conclude, the ad suggests that Silken Vodka is a definitive stepping stone in becoming the autonomous “superwoman”, who despite her androgynous merits, succeeds in maintaining her femininity. Even though the act of alcohol consumption is clearly defined by its social use, it also entails the statement of female independence which does not require that you give up "pretty" clothes, makeup, or even extravagant gifts from a male admirer. The new aged woman is more independent, calling her own shots, and choosing to consume a drink made especially for women. Silken Vodka is offering a possible female identity, albeit an impossible one.