

## **Popularity Sold Separately**

*By Lydia Montgomery*

Looking around in the media these days, one can quickly become overwhelmed by all of the advertising out there. Advertising in this country constantly bombards Americans from every angle with catchy slogans, tempting images and guarantees of immediate satisfaction. The campaigns are as diverse as the products they attempt to sell. An advertisement's main function is to present a product in a way that persuades potential customers to buy it. Many different tactics are employed to reach this goal. Depending on the intended audience, advertisers carefully create their campaigns to accommodate the changing climate of popular culture.

Some campaigns take the "populist" approach, addressing the majority of the population. Others use the "elitist" approach, aiming their focus on a small and specific portion of consumers. Both of these approaches are discussed by author Jack Solomon in his essay entitled "Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising." He states, "The American dream [...] has two faces: the one communally egalitarian and the other competitively elitist" (Solomon 138). Some companies attempt to appeal to both. I found this to be the case in a print advertisement for Unionbay, a brand of sportswear targeted towards youth. This particular ad ran in a recent issue of Seventeen magazine. It has the look of a typical fashion advertisement aimed at teenagers. However, the methods that it uses to reach its audience are somewhat unconventional. This ad uses techniques that are a combination of "populist" and "elitist."

The most obvious way that an ad appeals to the viewer is by visual appeal. The two-page spread pictures a group of young people modeling the clothing line. They pose with arms linked together, draped in loose embraces, one girl rests her chin on another's shoulder. Their body language suggests a casual and friendly mood. The expressions on the models' faces are smiling or otherwise complacent. The group is apparently having a great time just hanging out together. One characteristic that is conspicuously absent from this picture is sex appeal. The clothing is conservative, yet fashionable. The garments themselves vary little from one model to the next; they are almost unisex in style. One girl wears a "lumberjack" plaid button-down shirt, the others are dressed in modest turtle neck sweaters. This is not typical of most modern fashion ads. "Everywhere else, sexual fantasies, which have always had an important place in American advertising, are beginning to dominate the advertising scene" (Solomon 143). In recent years, this

trend has begun to turn up in ads pitching everything from beer to breath mints. Fashion is usually a major culprit in the use of sexual imagery in advertisements. It is refreshing to see an ad that does not use sex as its focus. Unionbay succeeds in marketing their brand without making use of bare skin or provocative poses. In doing so, it appeals to the populist sensibility. This ad does not seek to offend the viewer or exclude them based on their appearance. While visually this ad is quite different from the norm, perhaps an even more unusual aspect of it is the copy.

The written copy of the Unionbay ad incorporates a method known as a homily. Author Diane Barthel introduces this concept in “A Gentleman and a Consumer,” an essay that explores techniques of advertising, specifically those aimed at men. In that piece, Barthel defines a homily as “a short sermon, discourse or informal lecture, often on a moral topic and suggesting a course of conduct” (Barthel 157). The written copy of the Unionbay ad follows this definition to the letter. In the lower left corner of the page,

“Love Thy Neighbor” is spelled out in bold white lettering. This statement has obvious religious reference, evoking the biblical command. The connection between homilies and the populist approach is presented by Roland Marchand in the essay, “The Parable of the Democracy of Goods.” Marchand proposes that advertising uses homilies “[...] as a secularized version of the traditional Christian assurances of human equality [...] Promises of the essential equality of those possessing the advertised brand recall the promise of equality of access to God’s mercy” (Marchand 136). Advertisements that use this type of message have the potential to reach a large audience. Messages that create a feeling of equality appeal to the populist majority. Homilies, to some degree level the playing field, or at least convince consumers that it is level. “Many of the advertising homilies have a self-congratulatory air about them; after all you do not want the consumer to feel bad about himself” (Barthel 157).

At first glance, this ad appears to present a scenario of brotherly love and acceptance. Upon closer inspection, a disturbing image appears. In the background of the picture, looking past the crowd of smiling faces, a solitary figure stands. Their face is masked by a shadow, their identity unrevealed to the viewer. While the inclusion of this mysterious person may seem odd, actually, their presence and position plays a crucial role in the ad. The models in the ad are doing more than showing off the latest style in clothing, they are telling a story as well. In an essay entitled “Creating the Myth,” author Linda Seger discusses the role that characters play in telling a story. There are various specific roles, known

collectively as archetypes. These roles apply to advertising as well. The person in the Unionbay ad represents an archetype known as the “shadow figure” (Seeger 314). Shadow figures are usually present for the contrast they provide to the rest of the scene. The presence of an oppositional role serves to enhance the status of the “hero.” In this case, the crowd represents the hero. At first the crowd seems to represent the populist majority, however, now it appears that it represents the elite. This advertisement recreates a scenario that is a real part of many young people’s lives. Young people can be fiercely competitive within social circles. This behavior creates divisions between groups. Often, part of the appeal of the popular crowd is their exclusiveness. The elitist approach is effective for this reason. Youth look to symbols to represent who they are and what they aspire to become. Brand names and popular icons become associated with status. The Unionbay logo is prominently displayed on several articles of clothing pictured in the ad. This is no coincidence; outward appearances are important. Clothing styles are often the “common thread” that a group uses to distinguish itself from others. The proud display of high-status brand names recall the practice of cattle being “branded” by their owner’s mark. Groups that consider themselves to be elite affiliate only with others who share the marks of prestige. It is a natural human desire to be accepted as part of a group. Advertisers exploit this desire to their advantage by promoting their product as they key to gaining acceptance. Just as homilies suggest the promise of equality, elitist ads operate on the belief that buying status objects will make the owner better than everyone else.

The origin of these completely opposite methods of appeal is explained by authors Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon in their essay, “Brought to You B(u)y.” “This swing between elitist and populist approaches in advertising reflects a basic division within the American dream itself, a mythic promise that at once celebrates democratic equality and encourages you to rise above the crowd and be better than anyone else” (Maasik & Solomon 125). Looking in depth into the system of advertising reveals something about the culture that constructs it. American culture is structured around a diverse set of ideals that cannot be reduced to one common denominator. This accounts for the wide variety of strategies that are used to sell products. Advertising will always be as fundamentally different as the individuals that it caters to. Understanding the methods of advertising does not change this reality, but it does provide insight to help make sense of it.

## **Works Cited**

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