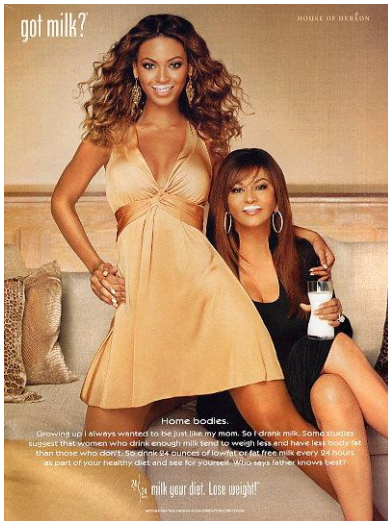


Basic Media Critique

As I was flipping through magazines of various types for a media subject to critique, I began to discern patterns in advertising messages which substantiated several points highlighted by the media literacy readings. I realized that the media text (the total construction of the message) employed in advertisements depended a lot on the kind of magazine in which they appeared. The ads were surely framed with the target audience in mind. For instance the ads in news magazines like TIME and Newsweek had much more text in them than did ads in magazines like Sports Illustrated or Vogue. The images employed to market the same product also differed with the magazine type, with more objectification of women in broad-stream fashion and gossip magazines than in the more serious news magazines. It would have been very interesting to do a comparative study.



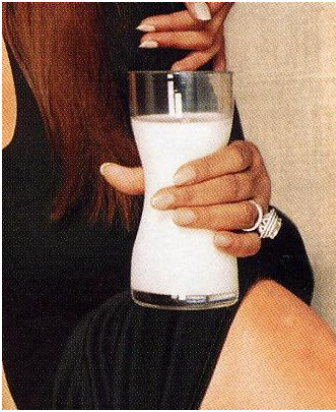
For the present critique, I have chosen an image from the 'Got Milk?' campaign which appeared in the 15 January, 2007 issue of TIME magazine. The advertisement features celebrity figures Beyonce Knowles and her mother Tina Knowles and at first glance seems to be a milk promotional campaign sponsored by the American dairy industry. No particular brand of milk is being promoted and the very small print at the bottom center of the page copyrights the ad to 'America's Milk Processors'. However, as I analyzed the ad and did some research, I realized that this particular ad represented a shift in paradigm. It was marketing more than one product and had many value and life style messages packed into this one image.

Analyzing the composition of the ad and the creative elements used:

Use of stridence: The ad attracts attention by casually incorporating a loud and discordant element into an aesthetically pleasing composition. The white 'milk mustaches' on the beautiful celebrity women makes us stop and look a moment to see what's wrong, rather than flip the page.

Color scheme: The color scheme is almost monochromatic and uses value contrasts of the basic brown hue to create a range of shades and textures from the beige sofa, smooth bronze skin, glossy satin and snake-skin cushions, shimmering matt-gold dress, dark brown-bronze hair, oak wood paneling and fawn colored wall. This color scheme not only complements Beyoncé's complexion but also creates a softness and harmonious blending. This is accentuated by the use of back lighting which creates an aura around the figures and front lighting which plays up the smooth complexion and soft contours of the

figures. The overall effect achieved by the play of light and color in this composition is that of glowing health and an atmosphere of golden elegance.



Contrast and Focus: The other two colors used in the scheme are the black dress of Tina Knowles and the white milk in the glass and on their lips. The main purpose of the black dress is to create a color contrast whereby the glass of milk in Tina's left hand will stand out. The other side of the dress is partially hidden by Beyonce's posture, to control the starkness and concentrate attention on the milk. A big silver ring has also been put on her finger to ensure that the viewer's attention is drawn to that area of the picture. So the elements of contrast and focus seem to have a function in supporting the content.

got milk?

HOUSE OF DEREON

milk your diet. Lose weight!

Text: The typeface used in the text and its layout follows the basic rules outlined in the reading. The placement of the catch phrases follows the 'Z pattern' reading convention – upper left, across and down. So the 3 messages that a reader gets at first glance are: 'Got Milk?' (Set on the upper left corner where the back lighting has created a darker area); 'House of Dereon' (on the right corner upper corner darker area) and 'Milk your Diet. Lose Weight' (bottom center). Focus and emphasis has been maintained by size and boldness of the text. The first and last phrases form a message unit and are set in the same font, but their hierarchy is shown by difference in size. The contrasting white color of the font also guides the eye from one catch-phrase to another, despite the text in the middle. The font used for the catch phrases are elongated sans serif with a slimming effect consistent with the message they carry. To prevent the font from jarring with the softness of the images, it has been used in the lower case, which gives better character spacing and appears trendy. The text at the lower bottom conveys some direct messages including that of weight loss. The font used for this is a light, rounded sans serif which is crisp and no-nonsense, like the sentence structure in the text. The text itself is centered and flows across the bottom of the page and over the legs of the two figures, giving the impression that they are supporting or 'backing' this message. The 'House of Dereon' on the top right stands apart from the rest of the text in color, placement and typeface. Its placement makes it prominent, but the color gives it a low profile. This will be discussed later in more detail. The use of borders and separators is completely absent as it would interfere with the effect of smoothness and unity.

The ad as a milk campaign:

The ostensible purpose of the ad seems to be to promote milk as the ‘in thing’ in a healthy diet. The ‘Got Milk?’ campaign has always used celebrity figures, both male and female, as a persuasive device to promote milk as part of a healthy diet, especially among the young. By tying it up with the life style of the rich and famous, the campaign plays on celebrity obsession by portraying drinking milk as ‘fashionable’ habit, which is accessible to all. The ‘milk mustache’ on beautiful, successful people has become its most famous byline.

Media have embedded values and points of view:

Previous ads have emphasized the nutritive value of milk and its role in maintaining healthy bones for both men and women. One of the things that attracted my attention to this particular ad was the shift in the message and the target audience. The stress here is more on losing weight and the message is now directed solely towards women with the use of visual metaphors such as the milk glass in the shape of an hour-glass – which is the most commonly used metaphor for a desirable woman’s figure. The logo next to the catch phrase - ‘milk your diet. Lose weight’ is also the profile of a perfect figure and although the number 24 on the inside and outside of it are qualified as 24 oz (of milk) (every) 24 hours, the print is too small to read. The numbers immediately brings to mind the inches of a perfect waistline. The embedded message is that the only avenue for success for a woman is through a perfect body and if she has that, she will be able to achieve success and popularity. So the message is emphasizing the attractiveness of a woman’s body over her personality, and is ‘normalized’ through the portrayal of those few who possess it. Such messages go a long way in framing society’s image of women and in turn, a woman’s mental image of herself.



The text also categorically eliminates the male element by use of language such as ‘Growing up I always wanted to be like my mom. So I drank milk..... Who says father knows best?’ The text, along with the postures in the image conveys a closeness and bonding between mother and daughter, despite their difference in age and attitudes (represented by mother dressed in dignified black, daughter in bold shimmering gold). The importance of a close mother-daughter relationship and the role of a mother as a ‘model’ for the daughter is being emphasized as a desirable social value. So while such strong family values are being conveyed, I am puzzled by the statement, ‘Who says father knows best?’ Does it convey feminism at the expense of the male?

Media messages are ‘constructed’

Some of the computer technology used in the production of this ad is worth mentioning as an example of how media images are ‘constructed’. I did not know who Tina Knowles was, but the text in the ad conveyed that she was probably Beyonce’s mother, though she

looked more like her sister. Her youthful appearance made me suspicious so I started digging on the net and found a picture of Tina which had not been touched up (below). (<http://www.afroamericansyndicate.com/images/tinaknowles.jpg>).



Thus, Tina's youthful appearance in the ad is a miracle of computer graphics! Graphic tools have been used to dramatically alter Tina's face, removing neck lines and wrinkles and firming and smoothing the skin. In conjunction with the color scheme discussed above, the overall effect conveys radiant health, reinforcing the message that milk is essential to remain young looking and share this lifestyle.

Who created this message? Why is this message being sent?

Beyonce dominates the image forming the central focus. What immediately draws attention is Beyonce's awkward posture. She has one leg tucked under her on the sofa and the other stretched behind her mother's crossed legs to form a hip thrust. One of her hands is on her mother's shoulder while the other is stiffly held over her mother's around her hips. In this semi-crouched frontal position she is portrayed in the fullest. I started thinking about the reasons for photographing her in this posture for a milk ad. As discussed above, one possibility is that this posture serves to cover part of Tina's black dress to reduce the starkness of the contrast and attract attention to the milk glass. But the same effect could have been achieved with having them both sitting down on the sofa in casual proximity. However, it was not until I started researching the relevance of 'House of Dereon' did I realize the true dual intent of the ad. House of Dereon is a line of fashion



clothing owned by Beyonce and her mother. (<http://www.houseofdereon.com/intro/>). Beyonce's posture is a typical modeling stance and I found evidence of this in photographs of her modeling for clothes on their website, complete with the hip thrust (see below) (<http://www.dereon.com/shop.php>). So this particular ad which seemed to carry an innocuous and well meaning public awareness message for a healthier lifestyle is actually also an ad to promote a fashion brand of clothing. The portrayal of Beyonce at her best advantage and the message of 'thin is in' are thus all geared towards selling the fashion line. The original message of nutritive value of drinking milk has been diluted and just its role in helping the weight loss is emphasized. So the message now is that thin is desirable – and milk as well as clothing from the house of Dereon can make you so. The 'House of Dereon' thus stands as an endorser or maybe a sponsor for the ad and in return subtly blends in this dual message into milk promotion, tying it up their brand of clothing.

Different People experience the same media message differently:

Depending on the perspective I adopt to look at this ad, I can attach different meaning to the symbolisms in it. I had just seen the documentary 'Killing us softly' by Jean Kilbourne, where she talks about representation of women of color in the media often being animalistic, or associated with some wild animal to send a message 'not completely human'. When I saw the snake-skin cushions in the ad (the lower fold almost looking like the head of a snake), this point of view immediately came to mind. Does such symbolism still exist – or am I reading too much into it? Others might interpret this as conveying a wild and expensive lifestyle and unusual taste – an attempt to be unique. Some might even look at this portrayal of two successful and rich black women as the realization of the 'American Dream' – where if you work hard, you make it. Others working in the area of social justice might see it as a perpetuation of the 'myth' of the American Dream by the media, which lead to stereotypical ideas about the poor and those who don't make it as not trying hard enough and undeserving.

From a cultural and gender perspective, the catch phrase 'Got Milk?' when associated with images of women is something which is very suggestive and open to potential misinterpretation by the opposite sex. It's a loose enough phrase and, as my friend said when I showed her the ad, she can absolutely imagine her brother's 'dirty' mind interpreting it in a totally different way specially if associated with the voluptuous Beyonce. I agree with her because coming from a different culture, this was also my first reaction to the catch phrase and imagery. Some of the other reactions I got from people were centered round the text 'Home Bodies' which they interpreted as using sex/bodies to sell milk. Incidentally, Tina Knowles young looks always received a special mention by anyone I showed the media text to.