

A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Got Milk's PMS Advertising Campaign

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The California Milk Processor Board originated in 1993 to promote milk consumption (www.gotmilk.com). On July 11, 2011, the Board and its advertising agency Goodby, Silverstein & Partners released a new campaign under the “Got milk?” theme called “Everything I Do is Wrong.” This campaign was similar to an unsuccessful one they had tried in 2005 called “Milk to the Rescue” in which men frantically bought gallons of milk to try and please their wives (Ward, 2005). The main point of that advertisement was that calcium reduces the symptoms of PMS. There is some evidence, though not a lot, showing that women who take calcium supplements show fewer symptoms of PMS after three months (Blue, 2011, para. 8).

So the California Milk Processor Board tried again with the “Everything I Do is Wrong” campaign in July 2011 with the same message that calcium in milk could reduce the symptoms of PMS in women. The advertisements mainly used humor to address how men are also affected by PMS that occurs in the women in their lives. Each advertisement includes a photograph of a man looking very distressed and holding a milk carton. Sentences placed above the men’s heads include “I apologize for the mutual understanding-that was clearly my fault,” “We can both blame myself,” and “I’m sorry I listened to what you said and not what you meant.” The bottom of each advertisement also gives an address for a website called EverythingIDoIsWrong.org and beneath it the following sentence: “Milk can help reduce the symptoms of PMS.”

An intense backlash occurred against these advertisements that mostly called them sexist. A petition was even drawn up against the California Milk Processor Board on Change.org that received 784 signatures and had a logo that read, “got sexism?” Within two weeks this campaign was pulled, but it should be examined because of the implications the advertisements seemed to make about American culture being sexist. The advertisements reflect a vision that women

become extremely hormonal and belittle the men in their lives, and one way of examining the concepts of this campaign is through the use of Ernest G. Bormann's fantasy theme analysis.

Bormann was heavily influenced by Robert Bales when devising his theory. Bales discovered a dynamic process of group fantasizing, which helped critics understand "how dramatizing communication creates social reality for groups of people and with a way to examine messages for insights into the group's culture, motivation, emotional style, and cohesion," (Bormann, 1972, p. 396). The more important discovery from Bales was the process that a group used fantasies to initiate an established society, or bring people together who shared the same views (Bormann, 1972). When members of a group respond emotionally to a situation, the common theme becomes a public one because so many people react to it.

These advances by Bales assisted Bormann in forming fantasy theme analysis. This theory is summed up by Bormann himself when he writes that "fantasies are shared in all communication contexts, that there is a connection between rhetorical visions and community consciousness, that sharing fantasies is closely connected with motivation, and is an important means for people to create their social realities," (1982, p. 289). Fantasy theme analysis looks at small group fantasies emerging from shared interests and inspirations and examines how the fantasies becomes larger visions of the society and shapes the world in which the society lives. But to understand the theory it is necessary to first learn the vocabulary of the theory.

In *Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality*, Bormann (1972) cites Bales in defining a fantasy chain as the culture of a group of people that is built on the past and influences the present by enclosing group members into what seems like a new world with people who share the same thoughts, emotions, and opinions (p. 398). Bormann also

refers to a fantasy theme, which is a striking or exaggerated subject that “might relate to the repressed psychological problems of some or all of the members and thus pull them into participation,” (p. 397). Fantasy types are certain categories of fantasies or fantasies based on standard scenarios, like “an old fantasy type in which a God persona had inspired mortals to inscribe a sacred text,” (Bormann, 1982, p. 292).

When a fantasy evolves within a small group, the fantasy then chains out by moving into the public realm. Chaining out is when a fantasy theme or dramatization catches on in a small group and evolves to create a unique group culture (Bormann, 1972). When the group conveys their fantasy through a communication outlet, the fantasy theme is chaining out to reach public audiences, and a rhetorical vision is formed. A rhetorical vision is “constructed from fantasy themes that chain out in...all the diverse settings for public and intimate communication in a given society,” (Bormann, 1972, p. 398). It refers to all communication contexts and generates emotional responses.

So according to this theory, a small group of people with similar personalities and motivations come together to discuss a common problem, and it becomes dramatized as a theme that becomes important to the group. Then the group becomes more emotionally involved and the fantasy chains out into a rhetorical vision or “common symbolic reality filled with heroes and villains,” (Bormann, 1972, p.399). The vision will then become public and have messages created for mass media if necessary.

There are a few fantasy themes present in the “Everything I Do is wrong” campaign. One main fantasy theme is that “men do not know how to handle women as they approach their period,” (Flock, 2011, para. 5). This theme states that men become clueless when women are

experiencing PMS since men themselves never have a menstruation cycle and therefore do not understand what women are feeling during that time. The advertisements showcase this theme through the men who have distraught looks on their faces. The facial expressions show that the men are confused and almost look desperate for a solution. Another thing the men are doing is holding at least two milk cartons. If milk reduces symptoms of PMS, then the men are going to get as much milk as they can because it is the only solution they can find to deal with a woman experiencing PMS.

Another component of the campaign that communicated this ‘clueless man fantasy’ was the “Everything I Do is Wrong” website. According to the article “Campaign Says: ‘Got PMS? Get Milk’” by Stuart Elliot (July 11, 2011), the website had mock tools to help men cope with PMS with a “current global PMS level” status, a chart to determine whose fault an argument belonged to that showed men in the wrong at 99.97 percent of the time, and tools to ease the “wrath of women” with a “Puppy Dog-Eye-Zer” that women cannot stay mad at and a “video apology enhancer.” This website was most likely a marketing strategy to interact with men and convince them that the women in their lives needed to drink milk so they would not be so emotional and take their feelings out on men.

The website was taken down and redirected to GotDiscussion.org that provided the different reactions and comments to the campaign. The motive of the campaign seems to express a fantasy type that people need to talk about relationships and how different genders interact with each other. The Board’s fantasy about fairness in relationships did not seem to chain out and become a rhetorical vision, however, because of other fantasy themes that were more prominent in the campaign.

There is one more fantasy about men that is depicted in the advertisements that is different than the previously discussed ‘clueless men fantasy.’ The other fantasy theme portrayed is that men are victimized and emasculated by women with PMS symptoms. This ‘victimized men fantasy’ characterizes all men in society as emotionless and weak because they are constantly under attack by pre-menstrual women. The advertisements show this through the phrases seen above men’s heads that are obviously unnecessarily placing the blame on themselves. Such sentences include “I’m sorry I listened to what you said and not what you meant,” and “I apologize for not reading between the right lines.” These men should not be apologizing for women who do not communicate what they want, but they say they are sorry anyways because their faces show they are scared of how women will react.

The ‘victimized men fantasy’ chained out to become an integral part of the rhetorical vision that women attack helpless men during PMS. This is also seen as sexism against men, according to Ms. Magazine’s website. In the article “Why the Sexist Milk Campaign is Bad for Men, Too,” Leah Berkenwald writes that men are seen as “oafish, dumb, submissive and insincere” and they must adhere to “masculinity that doesn’t permit emotional expression or empathy,” (2011). Since this fantasy theme entered the public realm through advertising, it became a rhetorical vision that men are helpless and totally clueless when it comes to dealing with women experiencing PMS.

This idea brings up the last fantasy theme that ties into the main rhetorical vision of the advertising campaign, which is that women become psychotic nightmares when they are experiencing PMS. The advertising agency clearly shows this vision through the frightened looks on men’s faces and the men blaming themselves during instances of misunderstandings. The

scared reactions of men willing to do almost anything to please women show that women have intense emotional outbursts during PMS that frighten men. If these men were not scared of the pre-menstrual women in their lives, they would not need to seem so apologetic and submissive.

The ‘pre-menstrual psychotic women fantasy’ describes women as “completely irrational beings during their time of the month,” and blames PMS for this (Abad-Santos, 2011, para. 8). This fantasy chains out with the other fantasy themes and they all become part of the main message of the campaign. The rhetorical vision of the “Everything I Do is Wrong” campaign is that women are crazy during PMS because of hormones and they take their emotions out on helpless men, so men should buy milk for their women to try and control PMS symptoms.

There were two main reactions that occurred from the campaign. Some people thought that the advertisements were humorous because of the images of the men looking helpless elicit laughter (Flock, 2011). But the other reaction that seemed to occur more among audiences was that the advertisements were incredibly sexist. The petition posted on Change.org ends the plea for signatures with the appeal to “bring back the milk mustaches, lose the sexism.” A few negative reactions have already been mentioned in this paper, and there are many more that have occurred. So while the campaign may be clever and funny, it seemed that the overall reaction was that it did not come off as humorous as the creators had hoped, causing a quick response from the advertisers.

Ten days after the New York Times reported on the release of the advertising campaign, a second article titled “Under Fire, PMS-Related Milk Campaign Shut Down Early,” announced a huge outcry against the ads that resulted in the campaign being ended early (Elliott, July 21, 2011). According to this article, the site EverythingIDoIsWrong.org was supposed to be live until

August of 2011 but was replaced by GotDiscussion.org. Steve James, executive director of the California Milk Board Processor, is also reported in the article as regrettably mentioning that the campaign was not designed to offend people and they realized that a line had clearly been crossed. Even though James apologized he still thought that the campaign was not a failure, but had served its purpose (Nudd, 2011). However the website was still taken down to “turn down the heat...to have a more toned-down, more reasoned discussion,” (Elliott, July 21, 2011).

However, the advertising campaign did not seem to have a negative impact on milk sales. According to the United States Department of Agriculture’s Agriculture Marketing Service website, the consumption of fluid milk products in federal milk order marketing areas increased from 3,324 pounds in July 2011 to 3,612 million pounds in August 2011. Fluid milk products include whole milk, fat-reduced milk, and buttermilk. So even though a lot of people were offended by the campaign, they still bought milk.

The rhetorical vision of the campaign chained out to other media outlets and even resulted in parody advertisements from FunnyOrDie (Bhasin, 2011). On FunnyOrDie.com’s page titled “6 Rejected Milk Ad Campaigns (Even More Sexist Than the Original),” potential advertisements are shown that have the same characteristics as the “Everything I Do is Wrong” advertisements. These advertisements are definitely more overt in their sexism with references to sexually objectifying women, the physical inferiority of women who will not fight back against men, and even one fake advertisement questioning how women received the right to vote because they should not be voicing their opinions. So while the posters from the California Milk Processor Board may just seem like mere strategies to sell milk, they elicit profound commentary

about sexism in society and the fantasy that women are more emotional and less rational than men.

Bormann's fantasy theme analysis is very helpful in explaining the fantasies that prompted the rhetorical choices made by the advertisers. Each fantasy theme is easily identifiable and they all logically form together into the rhetorical vision. Since the media artifact is an advertising campaign that reached into the public realm, the rhetorical vision was easily distinguishable and clearly caused passionate emotional responses from people who viewed the advertisements. Fantasy theme analysis also allowed for an examination of not only the campaign, but also of certain fantasies present in American society and the public opinion.

But one shortcoming with using Bormann's fantasy theme analysis is that it does not necessarily examine how the fantasies arose in the first place. It would be beneficial in future applications of the theory to understand the rhetorical vision of a society by knowing the underlying behaviors and realms of experience. Another weakness with Bormann's theory is that it is not easily falsifiable, and this includes distinguishing when groups form and when fantasies arise from experiences.

A lot of women had negative responses to the "Everything I Do is Wrong" campaign, but it is hard to tell if these women grouped together in petitions because they were disgusted by the ads or because they had previous negative experiences involving PMS symptoms. The people who created the advertisements are also not examined in their motivations and experiences. The theory does not address how the rhetorical vision of the campaign arose and if it was just based on the experiences of the creators or from every man in society.

There are multiple of social implications from the California Milk Processor Board's "Everything I Do is Wrong" advertising campaign. The rhetorical vision of the campaign is that men need to give the women in their lives large amounts of calcium from milk to alleviate the highly emotional symptoms that women experience during PMS. So according to this campaign, women become borderline psychotic during PMS and always take their anger out on men. This view is extremely sexist because it stereotypes females as crazy and hormonal. Some people may also think that this is unfair because women did not choose to have menstrual cycles and it is a natural process that women just have to handle without a lot of control.

Another social implication of this campaign is that society should show pity for men because they do not know how to respond to a pre-menstrual woman and always end up as the recipient of a woman's anger. Men may seem clueless in society because they never experience PMS themselves, so they understandably do not realize everything that a woman experiences at that time. However, that does not necessarily mean that men should not expect a woman to show symptoms such as stress and irritability when she is pre-menstrual, and this is not shown at all in the "Everything I Do is Wrong" advertisements.

A different conclusion involving humor can also be made about the advertising campaign. Humor is largely used in society today as a sort of escape from the real world into a place where people can relax and enjoy themselves. But humor is also used to address sensitive topics that involve intense opinions and emotions. So while humor may not be very serious, it can address critical subjects in culture and can elicit intense responses if the humor is offensive.

The final implication about this campaign involves its poorly supported foundation. The advertisements are based on the idea that milk eases PMS symptoms, but there is not a lot of

strong scientific evidence that proves this claim (Blue, 2011). And even though easing PMS symptoms is supposed to be the main point of the advertisements, the public has mostly focused on the sexism of the ads and not the lack of compelling evidence. This is interesting because it shows how American society was quick to accept this weak claim just so they could criticize it as unfair to the women who are the main purchasers of milk. If people did more research on the factual claims made by the advertisements, then there would be a stronger argument against the campaign.

So while the “Everything I Do is Wrong” campaign strived to stimulate conversations about relationships through the use of humor, it instead came off as hurtful and stereotypical to both women and men. And even though the campaign was shut down earlier than expected, it began a debate on how sexism is represented in media. Another accomplishment from the campaign was that it gave some publicity to the California Milk Processor Board. Even though most of the publicity was negative, people were still talking about the company and the “got milk?” campaign.

Americans are constantly exposed to all types of media during every hour of every day. So it has become a trend in advertising today for companies to have controversial, shocking advertisements so people will remember them. This makes sense because advertisements are seen everywhere. But advertisers must be careful this new tendency because, as the “Everything I Do is Wrong” campaign has shown, advertisements are sometimes too controversial and can possibly turn people away from their product because the rhetorical vision conveyed is seen as extremely distasteful.