Advertising Appeals and the Perfect Pair of Jeans

I was in the fourth grade when I realized that your clothes are not just your clothes. I was nine, and starting a new year, at a new school, in a new state. I had no friends and no idea what to expect, but one of the first things I learned was that if I wanted to be liked, I had to wear FILA. I had no idea what FILA was; I didn't know whether it was an abbreviation, an acronym, a sports team, or something else entirely. I had no frame of reference for the brand except that I knew the most popular students in my class all wore shoes, jackets, and hats emblazoned with FILA's distinctive logo and color scheme. And I knew that I wanted some. I know now that it's a clothing company named after two Italian brothers (History of Fila), and that the reason I wanted them was not because of the clothes themselves, but because other people had them and I wanted to be a part of their group. I didn't learn those things that year, though. Instead I learned other things, like long division, that the peregrine falcon is the fastest creature on earth, and that it isn't what you have that's important… it's what people *think* of what you have.

Reading that paragraph, perhaps you laughed at your own similarities of discovery, or reminisced about that one item you just *had* to have in your grade school days, and you may have, for a moment, thought, "I'm glad those days are behind me." But this paper will show, through a close examination of an advertisement for the Lee Jeans Company, that the desire to attain a social class is still very much a part of everyday adult life, and that while the techniques of inspiring that desire have become more subtle, they have also become more complex, moving from simple appeals for clothing brands to appeals based on gender roles and socio-economic status.

The advertisement we will be examining is a half-page magazine ad featuring an attractive man wearing mainstream casual clothing, holding a coffee cup and leaning against a yellow car, while an equally attractive woman, with whom he is making eye contact, walks by in

the background (Lee 25). At the top of the page, in an orange header with white lettering, is the phrase, “Comfort Never Looked So Good” and “The New Lee Modern Series,” accompanied by the Lee logo. At first glance, however, we cannot tell what product this ad is selling. This tells us that the jeans themselves are clearly not the primary selling point of this ad, but rather that the advertiser must be intending the imagery to convey some other message about the jeans – what one marketing strategist describes as an emotional appeal, where the “graphic elements of the message itself speak to consumers through a subconscious language” (Orwig). But what is the presented message?

Looking for meaning in these subconscious signifiers, the first thing that stands out is the bold yellow car the man is leaning against. You see only a portion of the vehicle, but it is enough to suggest the aggressive lines and oversized engineering of an American sports car. This stands in juxtaposition to the cup of coffee the man holds, which is small and virtually non-descript, a white cup in a brown cardboard sleeve – though the cup itself could stand as a subtle indicator that the man buys coffee from a shop, having the money to pay a premium for something simple. Together these images speak of a man who is interested in the finer things of life, but with a firm moderation; this a man who does not grasp for more than he needs, but knows what he wants. Furthermore, he is positioned before an urban storefront, indicating that he is also sophisticated and worldly, at home and comfortable in a big city; these aren’t farmers’ or cowboys’ jeans. While any one of these images could individually be taken as incidental, when taken as a whole, they provide a very clear image of the social status Lee wants consumers to associate with its jeans. This becomes even more significant when viewed in light of a report published by the American Marketing Association that determined “[s]ocial status is one dimension…that is likely to influence consumers’ feelings of distinctiveness and their advertising response,” and that “social status involves consumers’ perceptions of the relative position of groups in society

based on a particular characteristic" (Grier and Deshpandé 217). Or in this case, a *set* of characteristics which defines both the man and the ad's target consumer, and shapes the perceived value of each in relation to other groups.

The final prominent element to analyze in this ad is the role of the woman in subconscious communication. She is well-dressed, and well-styled, with clothing and jewelry that look expensive. Her face and posture are both open, calm, and relaxed. The movement of her hair gives the indication that she is in motion, walking by the man, and her face is turned toward him, showing that she is taking note of him as she passes. She is self-assured, attractive, confidently on her way to *somewhere*, and the man not only catches her attention, but returns her interest, and they share a flirtation in the brief moment captured in this ad. Some might argue that since she isn't overtly sexualized, her role could be to appeal indirectly to the women who will see this ad, to give them a point of association which might be intriguing enough to buy the jeans for a man in her life, which is the argument made in a 1995 study which found that when women were shown advertising images of romance and courtship they "became emotionally involved in these ads, able to self-project to a tremendous degree and to create imaginative stories about the people portrayed in the [them]" (Williams). While that could be a valid interpretation in many such ads, I would disagree with that intention in this one. I disagree for the simple reason that this woman has no interaction with the advertised product whatsoever; her vantage does not offer her any view of the man's pants, and she is in fact separated from the man by one of his own possessions. The incongruity of those observations is only further exaggerated by another: that the jeans themselves are never completely represented in the ad. They are shown, but there are no details to make them stand out, you cannot see the full silhouette or waistline, and there is not even *one* unobstructed view of *one* leg. Assuming it were actually possible for her to see them, there is nothing about the jeans for the woman to notice!

Considering those facts, it is clear that the woman, rather than being an individual character or a romantic interest, has become just another aspect of affirmation for the consumer, a set piece to further indicate the social status of the man and, by extension, the jeans and the consumer himself.

On its face, this ad is selling modern, comfortable, and good looking jeans by the Lee Jeans Company. My argument is that this ad isn't selling jeans at all. It is selling a lifestyle. The product is almost incidental, in fact, to achieving the societal standing you desire, rather like a ticket for a train. When you buy the ticket, it isn't the paper you want, but the destination. In the same way this ad isn't about jeans, it's about social status and perceptions of sophistication, attraction, and popularity. Or perhaps more succinctly: it's about what people *think* of what you have.

Works Cited

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