The Power of Words and Images
-A Discourse Analysis of Vodka in Advertisement-

Research Paper

Course
Media Worlds – an introduction to discourse analysis
SS 2006

University lecturer
Felicitas Macgilchrist

Author:
Tim Dörflinger (Matr. 13718)
August-Bebel-Straße 118
15234 Frankfurt/ O.
Email: tim.dörfinger@gmx.de
## Contents

### Part I
Introduction into the subject matter: sexist, racist, yet successful .................................01

### Part II
Theoretical concepts on discourse analysis and advertisement .................................03

2.1. "Dressing the ad" - the importance of discourse analysis for creating ads ..........03

2.2. The concept of social class and identity – producing identity through language ....04

2.3. "Us" vs. "Them" – The SKYY Vodka consumers, a very special clientele ............05

### Part III
Taking the ad apart – An analysis of four different SKYY Vodka ads .........................06

3.1. SKYY Vodka is different - a representation of lifestyle ......................................06

3.2. SKYY Vodka and the power of words - advertising in the print media ...............06

   3.2.1. Analysis of the textual level ........................................................................07

   3.2.2. Analysis of the discursive practices ............................................................08

   3.2.3. Analysis of the social Practices ...................................................................09

3.3. SKYY Vodka and the power of images - advertising in cinemas .........................10

   3.3.1. Distal and proximate context in advertising ...............................................11

   3.3.2. Construction gender and the use of omissions ..........................................12

3.4. SKYY and Absolut - two brands, two concepts .................................................14

### Part IV
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................16

Attachments .................................................................................................................I

   SKYY Vodka- Printed ad in *Cosmopolitan* .............................................................II

   SKYY Vodka – Cinema Ad: “Bubble Over” .............................................................III

   SKYY Vodka – Cinema Ad: “The Antagonist” ......................................................IV
SKYY Vodka – Cinema Ad: “In the Shade” ............................................................... V
Absolut Vodka – Absolut Larceny ........................................................................ VI
Absolut Vodka – Absolut San Francisco ............................................................... VII
Absolut Vodka – Absolut Madrid ......................................................................... VIII
Dolce & Gabana Beachwear ................................................................................ IX

Bibliography .............................................................................................................. X

Abstract ..................................................................................................................... XII

Declaration of originality ......................................................................................... XIII
Part I – Introduction into the subject matter: sexist, racist, yet successful

“Drink dirty Martinis, not dirty Vodka”
-SKYY Vodka Advertisement-

When SKYY Spirits LLC entered the market for alcoholic beverages in 1992, introducing its first brand SKYY Vodka, one of V&S Absolut Spirits\(^1\) strongest opponents was born. Although Absolut had already been present in the U.S. market of alcoholic beverages for 13 years at the time, SKYY Spirits LLC did not have any difficulties entering the market segment because of lack of market entry barriers\(^2\) from Absolut Vodka. The company SKYY Spirits LLC was founded by Maurice Kanbar in 1992, its birthplace is San Francisco, California. Ever since then, the brand SKYY Vodka has achieved high standards of popularity and sales volumes have increased phenomenally\(^3\). Today, only 16 years later, SKYY Spirits LLC is one of the fastest-growing enterprises in the market, due to the fact that the main product is a premium quality, high priced vodka. This is one of the sectors most dynamic segments.

Here the question of the origin of this success can be raised. Entering the Market SKYY Vodka quickly offered the same products that Absolut has in its assortment as well. The similarities that occur when the two enterprises are being compared are astonishing. Just like Absolut, SKYY offers berry, vanilla, peach, orange, melon and citrus flavoured vodka. In marketing terminology the copying of products without disregarding property and patent rights is referred to as “Me-too-product”. From a consumer point of view it does not make a lot of sense to buy new, unknown vodka that only offers already existing flavours. Therefore SKYY had to change its strategies, in order to reach more customers and to be successful on a partially saturated market. To achieve this goal, SKYY Spirits LLC focussed on a completely different strategy concerning marketing and sales. Through breaking with the “universal shape of the Absolut Vodka bottle”\(^4\) the U.S. Company not only distinguished the brand from its Swedish opponent but also aimed at a different type of customer. Whereas Absolut has

---

\(^1\) V&S Absolut Spirits belongs to the V&S Group, a company owned by the Swedish state. V&S produce different types of alcoholic beverages, Absolut Vodka being the most famous and well-known outside of Sweden. Besides the above mentioned flavours that are also offered by SKYY, The V&S Group additionally produces whiskey, liquors, wines and beer. A special product, the “Absolut Vodka Red Label” has 100 proof, the other flavours have 80.

\(^2\) The term refers to hindrances that a firm may face trying to enter an industry or trade group. An example for Market entry barriers is customer loyalty (see Wikipedia.Com, 2006).

\(^3\) In the last five years, SKYY Vodka has doubled its sales volumes, selling approx. 2.2 million nine-litre cases in 2004 and growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17 per cent (see beveragedaily.com, 2005).

\(^4\) The term “Universal Shape” refers to the fact that the shape of the Absolut bottle can be embedded in any desired context. For comparison see the different ads introduced in the “Absolut Book” by Richard W. Lewis.

Tim Dörflinger (# 13718)
been following a very subtle and classic public advertisement strategy, SKYY has ever since been aiming especially at upper-class and well-heeled clientele guaranteeing the brand to be associated not only with social standard, class, fame, lifestyle, savoir-vivre but also with excellence, quality and perfection. The colour blue has been chosen for the bottle, compensating the somewhat unspectacular yet practical shape. Colour, as mentioned by Lester (2000: 11) attracts attention to a particular detail like no other visual attribute and is used to create specific associations with elements of nature: the colour blue is associated with the colour of the sky where, referring to ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology “the gods lived”, the sky therefore being something heavenly and pure. The fact that the company is promoting its product SKYY Vodka as the “purest” Vodka available on the market confirms the idea of this so-called “sociological” use of colour in advertisements.

In the United States, marketing is a crucial part of the alcohol supply chain. Alcohol companies spent at least $4 billion to advertise and promote their products to Americans in 2001. Of this amount, $1.57 billion was spent on the traditional measured media (television, radio, print, and outdoor) (Impact Databank, 2002b). While SKYY’s opponent Absolut only advertises in print media, often working together with famous artist like Edward Newton or Andy Warhol as well as fashion designers and producers of cartoons and caricatures, SKYY uses different communication channels to reach their customers.

The aim of this piece of work is to critically analyse how SKYY Vodka is being promoted in the print media and in cinemas. After examining one ad published in Cosmopolitan, three cinema ads will be scrutinised thoroughly by applying different theoretical models from linguistic research but also from a more sociological point of view. By doing so, this essay wants to prove that SKYY Spirits LLC works with partially sexist, gender discriminating and racist advertisements, in order to only attract the previously defined “attractive customers”. Finally, this work will conclude with a comparative analysis of the measures used in advertising by Absolut and SKYY to pinpoint the differences between two companies that are completely different from a historical, social and cultural point of view whilst focusing on the same market and the same products.

5 Unlike most liquor bottles, which have long necks and square shoulders (like SKYY Vodka), Absolut bottles have short necks and round shoulders. Before Absolut appeared, every liquor bottle featured a paper label (like SKYY Vodka). It was the Swedish team’s brilliant innovation to print all the label information directly onto the bottle in bold, colourful type. Whereas Absolut has been inspired by the shape of a traditional vodka bottle, SKYY adapted to the needs of bartenders, creating a bottle that was easy to grab with a colourful logo that did not permit customers to see “through” the bottle at the back bar (see Lewis, 1996: 5). Since SKYY is using a less classy bottle the focus needs to be put on other elements such as colour and label.
Part II – Theoretical concepts on discourse analysis and advertisement

2.1. “Dressing the ad” – the importance of discourse analysis for creating ads

Within the last 50 years not only the public interest in media and advertisement has increased tremendously. Academia has also found advertisements to be a very interesting tool for communicating messages from sender to receiver. Ever since Lasswell introduced his “Communication Model” in 1948 (see Lasswell, 1948) Linguists, discourse analysts, social and psychological researchers have all dedicated time to the analysis of newspaper, TV and radio ads. During the last 10 years internet has introduced new forms of advertising, facilitating the research that is taking place in the field of the World Wide Web. The different results and insights in the many fields of marketing and communication have never been more versatile.

A great number of studies on the effects of advertisement on society have been conducted during the last two decades and discourses have elaborated different theories on media, communication and marketing. In 1978 Williamson mentioned that “Advertisements are selling us something else besides consumer goods: in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods, are interchangeable, they are selling us to ourselves” (p. 288). According to Dyer we analyze cultural texts because we theorize that their repetitive and systematic deployment in our culture contributes to the way we make meaning about our world and that they tell us what is important and valued, and by contrast what is marginal and undervalued in our culture (1982). Since an ad “needs to present its message in an extremely short time span, and depends heavily on the successful exploitation of the connotative power of signs”, consumers have noted a shift in the way ads are designed nowadays. Our so-called “Attention Economy” requires ads to be both provocative - to eliminate the competition - and easily accessible - to reach broad masses of differently qualified consumers - and, on top, revolutionary and classic in contrast, in order to satisfy the needs of traditionalists and experimentalists. If the ads are then new, innovative and witty, success is almost certain. Discourse Analysis in advertising can therefore be used for two things. As already mentioned above, one is to analyse the effects that advertisements have on the recipients. The other aspect is to use ones knowledge of the effects of advertising on human beings through the

---

6These days "Attention economics" is primarily concerned with the problem of getting consumers to consume advertising. Since the cost to transmit advertising to consumers is now sufficiently low that more ads can be transmitted to a consumer than the consumer can process, the consumer's attention becomes the scarce resource to be allocated (see Wikipedia, 2006). Since the average time span people dedicate to an ad in the papers or on posters are approximately 2.5 seconds, ads need to be special in order to attract interest in the product and to distinguish themselves from all the competition that might be found on the same page.
The Power of Words and Images – A Discourse Analysis of Vodka in Advertisements

analysis of discourses, to create new and even better ads, hence targeting the needs of enterprises by helping them sell their products and, in reverse, helping customers satisfy their needs through even better and more innovative products. Keeping in mind that the content of reality not necessarily reflects reality, but speaks about a culture, its values, fantasies, desires and norms (Frith, 1998: 232), a completely new perspective of SKYY Vodka ads is created. We may assume that SKYY, as an American brand intents representing American values which are often associated with wealth, unlimited possibilities, leisure, freedom and other hedonistic values such as individualism, modernity, success and lifestyle (see Schütte, 1996: 225). After briefly reviewing the concept of social class and identity the next chapters will analyse how “identity” and “social status” are being produced through the use of language in advertisement and how SKYY vodka distinguishes between “their” customers and “other” consumers of Vodka.

2.2. The concept of social class and identity – producing identity through language

The discussion on identity has grown during the last years, catapulting the concept of identity into cultural studies. With regards to George Herbert Mead (1934), identity is being produced through social interaction. Social interaction, such as communication and experiences through contact with other human beings leads to the development of ones identity. Mead’s concept of identity consists of two basic elements which he refers to as “mind” and “self”. In order to simplify the understanding of this analysis, the author will work with the concept of social identity, meaning the sum of all attributes ascribed to members of a social class for the purpose of distinguishing these members from other groups. An example is the differentiation between upper-class and middle or lower-class.

For the analysis of SKYY Vodka ads the focus will be put on linguistic identity referring to the fact that “how you talk, along with other kinds of social codes such as how you dress or how you behave, is an important way of displaying who you are, in other words, of indicating your social identity” (Thomas and Wareing, 1999: 136). By defining linguistic identity as mentioned above, the authors aim at explaining that the question of identity, therefore of who we are, how we perceive ourselves, and how others perceive us, is not only defined by factors such as social and educational background or economic resources. We are rather constantly building and negotiating an identity through interaction with others. Hence language in media and advertisements can be used as a means to aggravate the production of identity, and by creating associations of identity with a certain product, attract a specific
The Power of Words and Images – A Discourse Analysis of Vodka in Advertisements

clientele and hinder the people that are not desired consumers from gaining access to the product. The empirical part of this essay will then deal with the fact that advertisements are being designed in a specific matter in order to not only promote the desired image of a brand but also to make accessible - or deny - all the intended elements of lifestyle which the brand implies7.

2.3. “Us” vs. “Them” – The SKYY Vodka consumers, a very special clientele

In today’s world of advertising and selling, the brand of a product is often the only way to distinguish it from other similar goods. For many people, vodka will always be vodka regardless of where and how it is produced. Only the people interested in spirits will dedicate their time to differentiating between products and eventually choosing their favourite one. This is exactly the clientele that SKYY Vodka is aiming at. Since products from SKYY Spirits LLC were never intended to reach the broad masses8 the strategies in marketing and advertisement used by the SKYY Spirits LLC executives aim at attracting wealthy upper-class buyers9. Hall and Whannel (1964: 315) note that “advertisements for the more expensive products appear in those papers and journals which are able to develop a reputation for reaching the wealthier type of reader, the ‘decision-maker’, the ‘opinion leader’ or the ‘trend setter’”. In the context of a discourse analysis dedicated to politics and the construction of ideology authors like Martín Rojo (1995: 49-80) and van Dijk (1998: 21-63) illustrate the idea of “in-groups” and “out-groups” in texts, but conveying this to the concept of SKYYs’ products is only partially possible. In addition SKYY uses almost no words in their ads but creates what the authors refer to as the understanding of “us” and “they” through images. The following chapters will therefore take a closer look at four previously selected ads, one of them making use of words, the others merely being pictures in order to demonstrate what measures SKYY is taking to produce the effects mentioned by Van Dijk and Martín Rojo, in a completely different context.

---

7 This is especially relevant for luxury goods such as Gucci, Porsche, Dolce & Gabana, Armani or Mercedes just to mention a few.
8 This assumption is based on the fact that, in relation to other vodkas, SKYY Vodka is not as affordable. The following example will support this thesis. A bottle of SKYY Vodka holds 75 cl. of 80° PROOF spirit. The price of 2 cl in bars range from € 1.90, - in Frankfurt (Oder) to € 2.50, - in Berlin. At the same time an entire Bottle of Vodka Gorbatschow can be bought in almost any supermarket in Germany with prices from € 4.99 to €5.99, depending on the point of sale.
9 This can again be verified by the fact that the company has introduced its first so-called “luxury vodka “SKYY 90” which comes after 10 years of development and a $25 million investment in an advanced distillation facility in Kansas. The vodka is distilled from amber winter wheat using a computerized distillation process and “was designed for today’s martini drinkers, who desire higher quality and luxurious indulgences” (see San Francisco Business Times, 2005).
Part III – Taking the ad apart – an analysis of SKYY Vodka advertisements

3.1. SKYY Vodka advertising

In order to attract different customers through different media, unlike its Swedish counterpart, SKYY is not merely focussing on advertisements in print media. The three main channels through which SKYY communicates with the customers are print media, using magazines like Cosmopolitan, cinemas airing picture ads and still images in the preview session before the film start and their own video clips, which are being published on the official website and shown on film festivals. The majority of the material that can be found on the internet is not working with any other lexical items than the name of the product or, because it is always embedded in the context of the vodka bottle, the company’s logo “SKYY VODKA”.

3.2. SKYY Vodka and the power of words – advertising in the print media

Just like Absolut Vodka, SKYY has centred its interest on ads that work with powerful images, rather than working with explication texts and comments. In this chapter only one ad that is actually incorporating textual elements will be analyzed because of lack of more comparative material. The ad was taken from the March issue of the magazine Cosmopolitan in 2004 (see http://www.fll.vt.edu/Johnson/adspubs04/pwSKYY.html); a similar constellation of meaning can also be found in one of the many videos SKYY presents on the official webpage. The setting of this ad is actually an excerpt from a spot called “Feather Pimento” and can be found on www.SKYY.com in the section “SKYY Cinema” and located in the sub category “Short Film Viewing Lounge”.

In order to better understand what the producers of this ad actually intended, Norman Fairclough’s “3D-Model” will be taken into consideration as set out in Language and Power (1989: 25). In order to support the thesis that the U.S. company is focussing on the values described in chapter 2.1. the ad needs to be embedded in a special context. Fairclough’s model serves as an appropriate tool in doing so because it reaches beyond the actual text perceived by the viewer. Fairclough therefore structures every analysis in three levels, the first being the “text”, followed by “discursive practices” and thirdly by “social practices”. Whilst conducting the analysis these terms will become clearer as a point of reference (Attachment no. 1) is needed to clarify the meaning behind each of the three levels.
3.2.1. Analysis of the textual level

The first step will be to analyse the text-level\(^{10}\). This includes every detail on the ad, as well as the ad in itself. To begin the analysis a description of the ad is necessary because it forms the basis of further interpretation dedicated to the second and third level. Looking at the text the viewer immediately notes the usage of different colours and layers, the latter referring to the fact that the elements in the background appear blurry and fuzzy. The viewer also notices the different objects that seem to play an important role for the message of the ad. In the right third of the ad and in centred position the actual product, a SKYY Vodka bottle is positioned, left to the bottle a semi-full Martini glass is located. These objects seem to be standing on some sort of table or portable tray, a tie, a watch and cufflinks are also lying close by, the watch being more in the background and blurry, maybe to suppress the brand name. The ad also makes use of different colours but the overall impression that comes up is that the image is rather bluish-dark, maybe suggesting that it is night time. The removed tie, the cufflinks and the watch reinstate this impression making the viewer believe that a small amount of SKYY Vodka might have been consumed while taking off these accessories. The most important element of this ad has not yet been mentioned though. On the martini glass the viewer finds the imprint of a lipstick in lighter pinkish-red colour. This introduces a completely new perception of the ad; it now involves a somehow sexual aspect. Immediately the impression comes to one’s mind that maybe a couple or even two complete strangers have engaged in an affair and while taking of the man’s clothes, the woman seems to have been drinking Vodka. The viewer might even go as far as to associate SKYY Vodka with sex and the successful seduction of women. All the elements mentioned above create the image of a successful upper-class executive or manager (he is wearing cufflinks and an expensive watch) that might have been on a business meeting in one of the world’s metropolis and has met a woman at a bar after work. He could even have engaged with one of his female colleagues; the ad leaves room for assumptions and imagination from the viewer’s perspective. Although it could also just be the man’s wife or fiancé (there is no proof in the ad that it might not actually be like that) viewers tend to associate the image with a sexual affair\(^{11}\).

---

\(^{10}\) Text (lat. Textus), in linguistics, is a communicative act, fulfilling the seven constitutive (cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality and intertextuality) and the three regulative principles (efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness) of textuality. Both speech and written language, or language in other media can be seen as a text within linguistics (see Wikipedia.com, 2006).

\(^{11}\) During the course “Media Worlds – an introduction to discourse analysis” conducted at the Viadrina European University on Friday the 12\(^{th}\) of May 2006 by university lecturer Felicitas Macgilchrist this ad was shown to a group of ten different people out of which only one person mentioned the fact that it could actually be a couple; the other nine thought the ad was obviously referring to an affair, possibly on a business trip away from home.
The lexical items used in this ad are very important as well, especially because this is one of the few SKYY ads that actually use other words than the name SKYY, imprinted on the bottle. The text “Drink dirty martinis, not dirty vodka” creates a double meaning. On the one hand it advises the viewer to look for quality in alcoholic beverages and not just drink any vodka. But dirty martini also refers to a certain recipe which can be found on the official website. Dirty martini is also widely associated with James Bond movies, since it is the only alcoholic beverage he ever drinks if he has the choice (“shaken, not stirred”). Below the slogan there is more text: the results from independent analysis attest the product an exceptional quality, reference is being made to the web site where, apparently, more detailed results can be found. At the bottom of the ad a comparison to other brands of vodka is given, measuring the impurities of the water within the drink itself. According to this information SKYY Vodka is the purest product on the market, shortly followed by market leaders Absolut and Smirnoff. Due to the fact that the main interest of this work is to show how lifestyle is being created, the information at the bottom of the page can be disregarded, the main focus will be put on the slogan.

If the analysis of the text is now further structured into the elements valuing, representing, relating and identifying\textsuperscript{12}, even more intriguing ideas about the ad immediately come up. The value aspects of this ad can be determined quite easily and clearly. The ad is intriguing, cool and aloof, yet on the other hand it leaves room for positive associations. SKYY vodka and the drinking of dirty martini also represent success (the expensive items near the bottle) sex (the removed clothes and the lipstick) and leisure (enjoying oneself by drinking alcohol with company in a comfortable atmosphere). The ad basically relates to every successful upper-class person, especially men, animating them to buy SKYY vodka, in order to be able to make similar experiences. Since this ad was taken from Cosmopolitan it is highly likely that readers who are especially interested in the topics of lifestyle, leisure and indulgence identify with these people (who are actually absent in the ad) and their way of life.

3.2.2. Analysis of the discursive practices

The second level of Fairclough’s model will now illuminate the discursive practices behind the ad; a distinction is made between the production of the ad and its reception, the

---

\textsuperscript{12} These ideas have also been elaborated during the course media worlds and are based on Fairclough’s work “Language and Power”.

Tim Dörflinger (# 13718)

---
first focussing on the designers and the purpose of creating the ad, the latter on the perception of the viewer and the effects the ad has on the recipients. Firstly it is obvious that the ad serves as a marketing campaign in order to promote the product. The product (Vodka) and the name of the producer (SKYY) are mentioned as well as additional information on the contents of the beverage. But the ad wants more than just to sell a product. It also wants to sell lifestyle and identity. This is where the elements illustrated above (tie, cufflinks, lipstick, watch, “dirty martini”, etc.) play an important role. The main interest of the ad is to sell the product, but the intention behind it is to sell it only to those worthy of it. From a consumer point of view this is exactly what the ad achieves. People who are not interested in posh lifestyles where the spending of huge amounts of money on an every day basis is necessary in order to fulfil one’s desires and “believed” needs, will immediately turn the page and probably never think of SKYY Vodka again. On the other hand, people who aim at a similar career, travelling around the world, being a global player will find the ad very interesting and might even give SKYY Vodka a chance and buy the product on an upcoming occasion just to find out whether one feels more like James Bond with a purer vodka and an even dirtier martini.

3.2.3. Analysis of the social practices

The third and last level of the model deals with the so-called social practices which refer to both macro-themes in the social world and our every day perception of the environment we live in. In this case the ad especially aims at suggesting that success is something nice, definitely achievable and desirable making all the mentioned aspects of the ad a part of this very special lifestyle. This so-called business lifestyle is, in itself a social practice due to the fact that globalization demands more flexibility from people and often expects them to travel around the world for business meetings, conferences, etc. and stay in lush hotels an posh cities and SKYY uses this social practice to perfectly fit in its product: An high quality upper-class vodka for an upper-class executive. In order to support this thesis an analysis of other SKYY vodka ads that work without lexical items and that are being used in different contexts will be conducted in the following chapter.
3.3. SKYY Vodka and the power of images – advertising in cinemas

The Majority of the ads produced by SKYY Vodka designers work without lexical items but they are none the less effective in the communication of messages. Authors like Hall and Whannel (1964: 328) even go as far as to say that in ads specifically produced for upper class consumers the “images and the copy concentrate upon the feelings of luxury or the desirable status pictured, the product takes second place”. This thesis is easily verified by looking at more SKYY ads. Attachments No 2., 3. and 4. tend even more to display that SKYY vodka is a very luxurious product.

On the official homepage, SKYY offers all the ads that are used for advertisement purposes in cinemas as wallpapers, screensavers and registered users can even participate in a “SKYY Vodka Poster Giveaway Program”. Information on the photographers can be obtained as well. The ads that will be put under scrutiny are “The Antagonist”, “Bubble Over” and “In the Shade”. While taking a closer look at the ads the assumption that these ads are meant to be ironic could be raised because, through the use of colour and the setting, these ads seem to be much exaggerated. Taking a closer look at the photographers behind these pictures however overthrows this conjecture again. “Bubble Over” for example has been produced by David LaChapelle who recently has been ranked by American Photo to be amongst the ten most important people in photography world wide. LaChapellos photos have been published in magazines such as Italian Vogue, Vanity Fair, Rolling Stone, I-D, and The Face and British GQ. The same goes for James White whose work, according to SKYY Spirits LLC is “inherently perfect for Hollywood, combining beauty, sexiness and incredible lighting to create images that are seductive. In the past year and a half, James has emerged as one of the hottest celebrity photographers in Hollywood”. The third photographer that plays an important role in SKYY Spirits LLC marketing is Mathew Rolston who founded the “Venus” Group together with LaChapelle. The group produces high-end work for established clients such as Mercedes-Benz, Lexus, Coke and Pepsi. Again, according to SKYY, his “contributions and dedications to the worlds of fashion, celebrity and popular culture make him an obvious choice for SKYY” (see www.SKYY.com). This chapter will focus on the analysis of SKYY Vodka ads that work entirely without words; the only element containing lexical items in the ad is the vodka bottle itself.

---

13 American PHOTO is the premier showcase for outstanding photography. A reflection of contemporary culture through the camera's lens, it inspires professionals and sophisticated amateurs alike with its coverage of art, fashion, journalism, celebrity, sports, politics and advertising. The magazine has more than one and a half million readers. On the internet the magazine presents its mission statement: “American PHOTO intends to be the bible of the photographic world in the United States, covering the art and the swiftly-changing technology of photography” (see http://www.hfimus.com/HachetteUSA/Page.asp?Site=AmericanPhoto&Page=Mission).
3.3.1. Distal and proximate context in advertising

In order to analyse these ads, Fairclough’s model does not suffice but needs reinforcement by other authors. Margaret Whethere and Emanuel A. Scheglof (1992) prove to be very useful for working with this different type of ad. Referring to Schegloff, Wetherell explains that a distinction can be made between two kinds of context. On the one hand the external or distal context includes things like social class, ethnic composition of the actors, models or participants, the settings or surroundings as well as all cultural aspects involved in the ad. The proximate context on the other hand refers to the features of the interaction, such as the sort of occasion or genre of interaction the participants take an episode to be, or the way in which particular events occur (2001:388). Schegloff suggest that, in dealing merely with conversation analysis, the distal context can be disregarded. However, in the case of SKYY Vodka, aspects of distal context play a very important role in understanding how the ad actually produces the desired effects.

The idea of “upper-class” immediately raises presuppositions that can be implied through lexical items in a way that van Dijk mentions in his work on opinions and ideologies in the press (1998: 34). The change of elements in the distal context shows that our views, which normally are being acquired during the process of socialization, often differ from concepts such as, for example, the fact that “upper-class” does not have anything to do with race, gender or nationality. None the less exchanging the actors in the ads with, for example with Afro-American or Puerto Rican models would significantly change our perception of the ad. By merely changing the actors involved, the actual interaction stays the same. Attachment no. 2 will still be the same, but the effect will be a different one. Especially in America, where the public protest is raised that people with African or Afro-American descent are still being discriminated in many job positions, an ad with this change of character would certainly not produce the same effect as it does in the way that it was actually developed. The ad is clearly referring to white upper-class members₁⁴, their age group maybe ranging from ages 20 to 50. This can also be verified by taking a closer look on the web page, where different videos are being presented to the viewer. Although people from outside this “upper class” also appear, they mainly function as actors in lower social positions, such as bartenders, personal assistants

₁⁴ Although these seem to be the main target group of the ad, the product is not necessarily only dedicated to high-end consumers but also to people who are on the way to becoming them. This means that the generation of the so-called Young Urban Professionals might also find the brand interesting for it is not something that the broad mass is consuming and therefore can be used to stand out from the crowd.
of movie-stars or musicians in a Jazz Band, which might also be seen as some sort of prejudice or cliché. If it is not possible however to apply these ads onto clientele with other ethnic background the question is raised of what is to be changed to reach these consumers. Whether it would be effective to change the settings and the context as well when changing the protagonists as well, is uncertain. Hence, is questionable what measures should be taken in order to reach the Afro-American community of the United States. It would be imaginable to change the context into a gangland, hip-hop or ghetto style so frequently used in U.S. rap videos by artist such as P.Diddy, Busta Rhymes, Dr. Dre or Snoop Dogg. By exchanging the context and the models into Afro-American rap stars, dressed in white suits with golden necklaces, pendants and watches, driving in low riders, accompanied by lavishly dressed women, sipping on SKYY Vodka more than just the upper-class white consumer might actually be reached. It is also possible that this would again leave the impression of a discriminating and stereotyping brand, now only even stronger because it uses ethnicity for marketing purposes. This might even threaten the success of this “alternative” campaign and therefore be a reason why SKYY has not yet made use of a similar strategy.

Here the question of where the assumption that the viewer is dealing with an upper-class product actually comes from. The quite obvious answer lies in the examination of the ads and within the stories of the videos: actors and models tend to be dressed either in a clear business style or the alternative which might be a so-called “casual business style”. Themes always centre on the topics of pleasure, sex, deceit, money, power, leisure, enjoyment, consumption, etc. The ads and video clips cover sceneries involving actors, private detectives, rich families and their intrigues but also parties in fancy and trendy clubs in cities such as New York and Chicago.

3.3.2. Constructing gender and the use of omissions

Women seem to play a very important role depending on the ad that is perennially different from the male counterpart. Whilst taking a closer look at the plot of the videos available on the web site three categories of women were gathered. Although these are not directly transferred onto the magazine and cinema ads, they give an impression how women are being portrayed by the company. These categories are the cocky, selfish spoilt brat (“Falling in love in Ponga Ponga”), the naïve and truehearted wallflower (“Falling in love in
Ponga Ponga” and the provocative, mean and intriguing “bitch”15 ("Meeting Genevieve” and “Feather Pimento”) The men on the other hand usually play smart and good looking police detectives, private detectives (“Layover”) or movie directors. In one of the spots (“Shaken, not stirred”) men on the other hand are portrayed as predators, on the hunt for a one night stand, using all possible means to catch the attention of women, ranging from trying to impress them with intellectual debates on the meaning of love to the very direct question of whether there is a possibility to engage in sexual intercourse. Of course all these offers and intents are being rejected by the women who are immediately able to see through the façade. Whether these videos can be taken for serious is doubtful because a lot of the sense is only created through the extremely stereotypic surroundings and the way in which the actors are being portrayed.

As for the printed ads that work with lexical items or entire texts, some form of interaction is always taking place between two or more persons, normally one male and one female, sometimes two or more females; only one ad could be found with only a single male model16. The Settings in which the action is taking place varies tremendously not only from the ads designed for cinema, lifestyle magazines and on the homepage but also within these categories. The models can be found in a wide variety of different settings. Whether these are indoor or outdoor, they are richly coded with elements that connote wealth and leisure. According to Valdivia (1998: pp. 225-248) the trappings of wealth are evident in the flora and fauna, the structures, and the backgrounds. The backgrounds in SKYY ads usually incorporate lush settings like expensive hotels with swimming pools filled with Caribbean-coloured waters, apartments or penthouses in the upper floors of buildings, with a view on a beautiful skyline, theatres and operas, expensive bars, etc. But the ads not only connote wealth but also sex and adventure. Even while lingering around pools men always wear expensive suits while women either wear swimsuits displaying a lot of tanned skin or expensive and seductive clothes or dresses. The female models defiantly serve as eye-catchers17 creating a feeling of sexual desire and lust. Especially in the ad entitled “The Antagonist” the female model only serves as an asset; the male models face and body are covered by the hollow, ball-shaped seat he is in, only revealing his legs and arms, again, dressed in an expensive suit. While holding out his martini glass to the woman who apparently just finished pouring in vodka from the shaker bottle, his counterpart is rubbing her right leg at his knee, seemingly happy to serve

15 In this case the term bitch refers to the colloquial expression of a person that is very intriguing, perfidious and calculative to reach her goals with spite.
16 Out of the 12 analysed ads only four do not contain male actors or male elements that suggest the presence of males. The actual ratio is as follows: Male-Female interaction (7 out of 12), Female-Female interaction (2 out of 12), single male (1 out of 12) and single female (2 out of 12).
17 An eye catcher is a visual or textual element in advertising that serves as a means to attract the viewer’s attention to a specific message (see wikipedia.de, 2006).
him. This ad has its strongest effect in an omission leaving room for interpretation and imagination for male consumers of SKYY Vodka. Most men would probably enjoy being in this position, sitting in an expensive apartment being served alcohol by a beautiful woman. Because the face and body are not shown, one can easily imagine himself sitting in the very same seat. The same is possible in Attachment No 4 entitled “In the Shade”, were the same effect is being produced for female consumers. The main actress, in this case apparently a wealthy woman, is engaging with the waiter who is just about to serve her an alcoholic beverage made with SKYY Vodka. Just like in “The Antagonist” the one receiving the SKYY drink is always in a higher position of power, depicted through the fact that he or she is being served and can do whatever is desired with the servant who seems to enjoy the fact that somebody is seductively taking control over the situation. This relation of power can also be applied to the consumer, putting him, as a SKYY Vodka drinker, into a higher position than consumers of other brands. According to the ads SKYY is sex, power, wealth, success, lust, etc. and it seems that these experiences can be made by drinking SKYY Vodka.

3.4. SKYY and Absolut – Two brands, two concepts

Although the products offered by the two companies can be easily compared because of their extreme similarities in product lines and flavours the two are yet very distinct; the greatest difference being the way the products are being advertised for. While Absolut only focuses on print media, SKYY is shooting videos, producing ads for lifestyle magazines and is advertising in cinemas. Whereas Absolut has ever since been working with the same strategy and the same advertising campaign, SKYY has adapted to different situations. Absolut, in a way also adapts to the needs of specific markets by creating ads that refer to special cultural or historic backgrounds like “Absolut Steife Briese” or “Absolut Oktoberfest” especially designed for the German market. But one thing has always stayed the same during all the years since 1981 when the campaign was created. It embraces a single, simple idea: the Absolut bottle is the hero. No matter what context the bottle is put into, it is always centred, being the main element of the ad. This is different with the SKYY Vodka bottle. SKYY can only exist with the surrounding elements depending on actors, settings and textual messages. Especially in the ad for Cosmopolitan one might think that SKYY needs its opponents from Sweden, Russia, the United States or France for a comparison, only to justify its existence as being a product which is even purer. In addition, SKYY always needs to place the vodka bottle within the ad whereas the Swedish product has entered our consciousness, enabling ads
where the bottle is actually missing. Even with ads like attachment No. 5, 6 and 7, the majority of viewers are still able to associate the ad to the actual product - a high class Vodka from Sweden - whereas leaving out the SKYY bottle in attachments No. 2, 3 and 4 would not promote the product in any way. The ad would be useless for SKYY. This is what is being meant by the so-called “universal shape of the Absolut bottle”. The ad can exist in itself, without the bottle, still having exactly the same effects. In addition the company is being attributed a very positive sense of creativity and artistic values. The Absolut ads are not just merely means of advertising the product; they are a form of art, addressing a broad mass of people, even the ones that dislike vodka or drinking in general. According to Lewis¹⁸, Absolut Vodka’s advertising director, the big success in the Absolut campaign results from the fact that the designers, just like the product itself, have never taken themselves to seriously (Lewis, 1996: xii). Both products seem to be very successful in their own way, with annual turn-over figures speaking for themselves, but during the analysis and presentations in the seminar Media Worlds, the Absolut ads left a more positive impression because of the congenial way in which the Absolut bottle is being presented to the viewer.

---

¹⁸ Richard W. Lewis is in Charge of Absolut Advertising world wide, working for the advertising company TBWA/ Chiat Day which started producing ads for Absolut in 1981.
Part IV – Conclusion

During the course of this analysis many different elements, such as the setting in the ads, the interaction between the protagonists, the clothes and the accessories, within the ads used by SKYY disclosed that the company is directly aiming at high-end customers and people seeking prestige and social status. Further, it was revealed that the main topics in the ads are power, success, leisure and sex. The fact that the persons in charge for the production of these ads in almost all cases work with celebrity photographers that are well-known either world wide or at least in the Hollywood film industry, emphasises this assumption even more. Dedicated to reach a certain type of consumer the company mainly uses elements rooted in western values such individualism and high standards of living (see Wikipedia.com, 2006), etc. whereas Absolut is often incorporating various cultural elements reaching from arts, to geographical sites like the Temple Ruins of Angkor Wat in Cambodia or the famous Floating Market in Bangkok, Thailand. The consumers of SKYY Vodka might also be interested in these topics, but the interest in the very specific values used by SKYY is a precondition in order to gain access to the product. By using these methods the product, compared to other brands, only grants limited access making the product somewhat special and extraordinary. Through this limitation of accessibility the brand promotes its distinctiveness even more, just like Absolut does, but in a different manner.

The assumption, that the ads produced by SKYY are sexist could not be verified. Although many of these ads involve women that are submissive and inferior to the male protagonist, an equal number of ads are available where the situation is contrariwise. It is therefore impossible to state that the ads are gender discriminating but they avail very strong stereotypes, for both genders alike. Yet, the sexual elements in the ads must not be disregarded; it is therefore possible of interpreting the ads not as sexist, but as sexy. The ads address a society that is more liberal, open minded, emancipated and interested in the topics that used to be taboos. Instead of discriminating gender, the company is simply incorporating these elements in their advertising because obviously “sex sells”\(^\text{19}\).

As for the ethnic discrimination, so far SKYY has not produced ads that put other ethnicities into the centre of interest, but that does not necessarily mean that it will stay like that in the near future. Until now only white models have advertised and posed in ads for SKYY, whether this will change is uncertain. The company might actually stick to these ads because turn-over figures have increased phenomenally and so far there has been no need for

\(^{19}\) This thesis can be verified by taking a look at companies such as Dolce and Cabana, Chanel, etc. that have huge success with their marketing campaigns that often include strong sexual elements. A good example therefore is Attachment No. 8.

Tim Dörflinger (# 13718)
the change of strategy. But the fact that the United States of America are not only a melting pot for different nationalities, but also a country that was founded through different nationalities, cultures and ethnicities, it is not understandable why an American brand only focuses, judging from the different forms of advertisement, on Caucasian customers. Although no palpable elements of racism or ethnic discrimination can be found in the ads\textsuperscript{20} the viewer might still assume that the fact that cultural elements other than the ones discussed in this paper are left out, is a sign of discrimination.

Finally, this essay wants to conclude the analysis with the famous and manifold cited proverb that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” by Margaret Wolfe Hungerford. Whether the brand SKYY is interpreted as racist, sexist or socially stratifying entirely depends on the view of the recipient. Viewers might take these ads very seriously and reject the brand as a whole; others might interpret the ads as a form of self-ironic representation of western societies and therefore support the brand. It is up to the consumers to use the generous room for interpretation that SKYY is giving. None the less, SKYY definitely has to deal with a powerful and innovative competition that never sleeps and a more multicultural form of advertising might actually increase the company’s success in the near future.

\textsuperscript{20} For obvious reasons companies would not openly advertise their ideological view in public because it would severely damage the brands name, therefore ruining the company.
Attachments:

SKYY Vodka ads in print media and cinema

Dolce & Gabana and Absolut Vodka ads for comparative purposes

Attachment I: SKYY Vodka- Printed ad in *Cosmopolitan*, March 2004

![SKYY Vodka Ad](http://www.fll.vt.edu/Johnson/adspubs04/pwskyy.html)
Attachment II: SKYY Vodka – Cinema Ad: “Bubble Over”

Source: www.skyy.com/skyy cinema/skyy cinema ad campaign
Attachment III: SKYY Vodka – Cinema Ad: “The Antagonist”

Source: www.skyy.com/skyy-cinema/skyy-cinema-ad-campaign
Attachment IV: SKYY Vodka – Cinema Ad: “In the Shade”

Source: www.skyy.com/ skyy cinema/ skyy cinema ad campaign
Attachment V: Absolut Vodka – Absolut Larceny

Source: www.absolutad.com
Attachment VI: Absolut Vodka – Absolut San Francisco

Source: www.absolutad.com
Attachment VII: Absolut Vodka – Absolut Madrid

Source: www.absolutad.com
Attachment VIII: Dolce & Gabana Beachwear

Source: http://lou.mabulle.com/
Bibliography

Books


Internet Links

Absolutad.com: Absolut Vodka Ads

Absolut.Com: The Official Homepage of Absolut Vodka.
http://absolut.com (2006/06/06).


Heart Quotes Centre: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
http://www.heartquotes.net/Beauty.html (2006/06/06).

Impact Databank 2002.

Jesper’s Absolut Vodka Ad Collection

Media Awareness Network: Skyy Vodka Ad.

Skyy.Ca: Alternative Homepage of SKYY Vodka.


Skyy Vodka Bottle.

Skyy.Com: The Official Homepage of SKYY Vodka.

The many shades of the SKYY line.
http://www.skyy.ca/shades.gif (2006/06/06).

The San Francisco Business Times (2005/03): SKYY uncaps “high-tech” luxury vodka.

Usask.Ca: Ads for alcohol.


Abstract

In today’s society advertisement plays an important role in the communication of messages. Whether advertisement is used to sell new products, promote an already established brand or to produce associations with a certain product, it is an inherent part of our daily life and a society without advertising can hardly be imagined. Among others, advertising contributes to the creation of opinions, the production of certain roles that viewers take up after their idols and the creation of shared knowledge. Because advertisement reaches the broad masses through television, the print media, radio and internet people worldwide adapt the ideas that are presented to them by a company or a product. The knowledge that a specific product is trendy, cool, or stylish plays the crucial key factor for the success of enterprises.

The main aim of this piece of work is to show how advertisement can be used for creating special associations with a specific product, excluding undesired customers from access, producing an in-group and different out-groups, as well as the creation of a specific identity for the customer.

Through the analysis of the U.S. company SKYY Spirits LLC it will become obvious what special forms of address the company uses in ads in order to promote its product SKYY Vodka and what assumptions can be raised when comparing different ads of the company. The analysis conducted in this work has been divided into two mayor parts. By giving the reader an overview of different theoretical approaches with regards to researchers such as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Margaret Wetherell and Stuart Hall the work initiates the actual analysis of empirical data. In the course of the analysis four different ads produced by the company are put under scrutiny in order to verify whether SKYY is using gender discriminating or racist elements to better sell its products. After analysing an ad published in a print magazine a closer look will be taken at three different ads that the company uses in cinemas. All the ads that are discussed in this analysis have been attached, in order to give the reader a better idea of what the SKYY advertising campaign is like.

This work then concludes with a short comparison of SKYY Vodka with one of its strongest opponents, the Swedish distiller V&S Absolut Spirits and producer of the famous Absolut Vodka, widely known for its peculiar advertising strategy. To sum up the previously mentioned hypothesis, the work will briefly discuss whether the thesis that SKYY Vodka actually is a sexist and racist brand can be falsified or not.
Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this thesis entitled:

is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institute of tertiary education. Information derived from the published and unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given in the bibliography.

Frankfurt (Oder), June 25. 2006

Signed

Tim Dörflinger