Starbucks Holiday Cups

Introduction

The holiday season allows for friends and families to gather together and spend time with one another. It is also a time when many important religious practices and customs come to the forefront. For some, Christmas is solely celebrated to honor the birth of Jesus Christ; however, this is not the case for everyone. Some people celebrate Hanukkah or Kwanza, while others simply partake in the festivities without being committed to a certain religious institute at all.

Portraying Christmas as a religious celebration or a secular tradition is a conflict that all major companies and retail organizations have to address and take a stance on. Given the merriment surrounding the holiday season, stores and businesses are expected to alter their normal packaging and display designs in order to match the holiday spirit that takes over the United States starting immediately after Thanksgiving. The commercialization of Christmas has been a topic of conversation among religious groups for some time now. They fear that looking at Christmas through the lens of mere tradition of gathering and presents takes Christ out of Christmas and completely secularizes the once religious-oriented holiday.

The issue of how to represent the Christmas season through the merchandise, packaging, and marketing strategies of national companies is an important one because their beliefs have the potential to have a lasting, influential impact on their audiences and customers. Whether they realize it or not, companies are conveying their true belief systems and ideologies through their approach to designing Christmas-themed packaging and merchandise. Through their deliberate design choices, companies shape the ideological views of their audiences which consequently enables a dominant cultural belief system in regards to Christmas and its celebration to emerge.

Description of Artifact

Starbucks has been one of the most popular chains of coffee shops in America for nearly fifty years (Starbucks). With over 20,000 locations spanning across 62 countries, Starbucks has definitively established themselves as a cultural icon and dominant force in the business world (Jacobs). Since they are so well-known worldwide, their decision of how to address Christmas becomes even more vital with so many eyes on them.

Starbucks has been issuing special holiday cup designs for twenty years now (Peiper). They announce the designs in order to signal the start of the holiday season and kick it off in the way they see fit. While the first few cups differed in color by featuring deep purple backgrounds, the traditional red background canvas for the cups came about in 1999 and has stayed consistent each year until 2017 when the company released a cup with a white background and colored images (Peiper). The evolution of the cups has remained fairly consistent as each one features typical traditional Christmas and winter-themed seasonal images.

The various designs of the cups have come under a great deal of scrutiny from those of religious ideologies, claiming that the coffee chain is trying to take Jesus out of Christmas by refraining from incorporating religious-based images in their designs. The controversy came to a head in 2015 when Starbucks debuted plain, red cup design for the holiday season. A customer, Joshua Feuerstein, claimed that the company was using their heightened platform to remove Jesus from Christmas entirely (Downer). From then on, the "War on Christmas" ensued, forcing Starbucks to find a way to address their critics in order to keep customers while also staying true to and promoting their own ideologies as a company (Downer).

Specifically, the progression of the cups starting from the most controversial, the 2015 design, to now reveals where the company stands on the portrayal of Christmas and which traditions should be valued during the holiday seasons over others.

Description of Method

For this analysis, I will be looking at Starbucks holiday cups through the lens of ideological criticism. Ideological criticism allows a critic to look beneath the observable features of an artifact in order to uncover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it represents (Foss). This type of analysis allows for a critic to identify a pattern of beliefs for a certain group, which therefore allows one to determine how that particular group interprets the world, or a particular aspect of the world around them (Foss).

The form of criticism was created by a number of scholars such as Teun A. van Dijk, Philip C. Wander, Michael Calvin McGee, Raymine E. McKerrow, Janice Hocker Rushing, Thomas S. Frentz, Lawrence Grossberg, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Dana L. Cloud (Foss). Each of these men and women contributed to the field of communication by offering individual perspectives on effectively incorporating ideologies into rhetorical criticisms.

Ideological criticism analyzes ideologies that are manifested in everyday rhetorical artifacts. There are many ideologies present in a single culture, but ideological criticism allows a critic to clearly see which ideology is superior and privileged in a way that creates a dominant, hegemonic ideology for that particular culture. Determining the hegemonic ideology presented through an artifact allows one to see what a culture deems as the norm. By establishing a natural discourse, a dominant ideology has the ability to classify the world for other participants in a specific way that suggests that deviation from that norm is culturally unacceptable (Foss).

Another perspective of ideological criticism is semiotics, a subset of structuralism which was created by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Semiotics attempts to understand the purpose and functions of signs in order to study components of an artifact that will give clues to its meaning and ideology. This includes looking deeper into the important uses of color, shapes, images, and other seemingly arbitrary symbols that could have ideologies inherently encapsulated within them (Foss).

By using these perspectives, I will be able to determine the ideologies embedded in the Starbucks holiday cups and whose interests are being represented through those ideologies. By identifying both the presented and suggested elements of the cups, I will be able to accurately formulate and ideology for both the company and the culture as a whole and interpret the roles those ideologies take on in terms of society as a whole.

Findings from Analysis

By analyzing the artifact, Starbucks holiday cups, it becomes clear that Starbucks possess the ideology that Christmas is in fact a season for secular traditions and commercial endeavors based on the evolution of their designs and the executive choices that have gone into them. Starbucks promotes their holiday cups by saying that they use their designs in order to reflect scenes of joy and celebration, and they do so in a very secular manner (Peiper). To arrive at this conclusion, one must closely analyze the evolution of the cups, and the suggested ideologies of each one as well as the overall progression of all twenty. The suggested elements of the Starbucks cups' designs cluster around the categories of tradition, neutrality, and marketing.

A key idea in the designing process is the idea of tradition in a secular manner during the holiday season. Many of the cups incorporate images of decorated trees, presents, gingerbread

houses, ornaments, sleighs, and reindeer. The images revolve around secular aspects of the holiday season that everyone can partake in, regardless of their beliefs. Starbucks chose these images with the intention of promoting what they feel embodies the holiday spirit. Each of these traditional images that take on a prominent role to encourage audiences to place value and importance on the commercial aspects of Christmas, rather than the religious ones.

These recurring images of secular traditions promote the ideology of spending time with family in the home during the holiday season, not at church or in religious places of worship. They also further convey this belief by regularly featuring images of hearts and hands joined together in their most recent design. They use their designs to promote a sense of togetherness outside of an organized religion during the holiday season.

Another common theme demonstrated by the designs is the idea of neutrality. It is no secret that Starbucks has come under some heavy criticism for some of their designs from many religious groups. Particularly, the 2015 design of the plain, red cup that featured two shades of red blending together was criticized for completely taking Jesus out of Christmas (Downer). Since then, Starbucks has made a few changes to their designs that suggest that they are attempting to keep the peace so to speak among religious groups in order to retain customers while still promoting their own ideology of secular celebration.

After the 2015 controversy, Starbucks released their 2016 design which drastically contrasted with that of the previous year. In response to the designs being too plain, Starbucks designed the 2016 cup to seemingly be as busy and decorated as possible. Every inch of the cups is covered in some kind of design, whether it be words like “love” or “joy” or images of reindeer or other traditional representations of Christmas. The drastic increase of images and words on the cups is a direct response to the former complaints of religious groups. The increase in images

was incorporated in order to please those critics; however, the company still managed to promote their own ideology by making sure that the vast majority of the images remained along more tradition lines, staying away from religious or church-based Christmas images. Finding a balance between ensuring customer loyalty and still promoting their own views demonstrates the importance of neutrality to the company.

By adding more images, Starbucks was able to silence the complaints of the critics. They also were able to further meet the demands of the religious sectors by adding in images of doves and stars to the 2016 and 2017 designs. These images are objectively secular as doves are merely birds and stars are a common natural phenomenon; however, when viewed through a religious lens, a dove becomes a symbol of the Holy Spirit and the stars represent the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas day. Incorporating them in the design allows Starbucks to stand firm on their secular stance in regards to Christmas by representing the images in non-spiritual ways, while also making it very difficult for religious groups to find any legitimate reasons to criticize their products because those same images can be interpreted in religious manners if one truly tries and has the knowledge to do so.

Starbucks also demonstrated the theme of neutrality through their response that was issued November 8, 2015 following the red cup controversy. Jeffery Fields, Starbucks Vice President of Design and Content, claimed that the cups were meant to be a means to "usher in the holiday with a purity of design that welcomes all of our stories" (Fields). The statement furthers the ideology that Starbucks believes that Christmas can be just as meaningful outside of the religious spectrum while also validating the stories that religious groups have formed for the holidays as well. They are once again able to not waiver on their own beliefs while still

acknowledging the concerns of the other side of the debate in order to retain their integrity and customers as much as possible.

While these rhetorical strategies of neutrality were put into place in the most recent years in order for Starbucks to attempt to please their opposing religious counterparts, the company has actually shown a history of trying to subtlety impose its ideologies through the use of snow in almost every design for the past twenty years. Each design is individual in its own way, but the only common image over the past twenty year is snow. Whether it be snowflakes, snowmen, snowballs, or a snow-covered field, each and every cup has featured an image of snow in some form. Keeping this image as a constant throughout the years proves that Starbucks has made a conscious effort to promote the secular traditions of Christmas in the least controversial way possible. Snow is a natural, neutral environmental sensation that occurs outside of the realm of religious versus secular debates. Snow is directly associated with the Christmas season, but in a very traditional, universal way. Starbucks continuously uses these types of neutral images and responses to criticisms in ways to demonstrate their ideology of Christmas being a traditional season to promote celebrations and increase commercial businesses.

The final theme that Starbucks uses to promote their ideologies is marketing. The holiday cups prove not only that Starbucks promotes the secular celebration of the Christmas season, but that they also regard it as a prime opportunity for their business to generate a great deal of revenue from customers. The iconic Starbucks logo is consistently placed in the center of the cup over the past twenty years regardless of the designs. The green logo starkly contrasts with the red backgrounds, demanding the attention of the audience. Not only does the marketing strategy of predominately featuring the logo promote business for the company, the green mermaid image also aids to the traditional Christmas advertising of red and green merchandise. Regardless of the

images Starbucks chooses to feature in their annual designs, they are always sure to make their logo front and center.

Additionally, the fact that Starbucks was willing to remedy and address the controversy over the past few years proves that their main concern is achieving as high of a customer satisfaction rate as possible without compromising their own ideologies. First, they added an abundance of images to their 2016 cup with a red background, then they took it a step further in 2017 and made the background white. The company was able to respond effectively to their critics in order to drive up their sales. Although the white cup deviated from their traditional, signature red background for the holiday cups, Starbucks was still able to make it their own by incorporating mostly secular images, as well as depictions of the 2015 holiday cup interspersed within the new design. These small, seemingly insignificant changes were actually clearly deliberated on and executed in ways that unfalteringly upheld the company's beliefs while increasing their market value potential.

In another statement regarding the red cup controversy, Starbucks was able to enforce their marketing ideologies by saying that the cup was meant to represent a blank canvas on which every customer could project his or her own Christmas story and experience (Fields). By taking such a general stance and insisting that the cup is meant to be all-inclusive, Starbucks shows their efforts to remain appealing and favorable in the eyes of as many customers as possible in order to drive up their revenues during the holiday season.

The ideology encapsulated in Starbucks's holiday cup designs not only reveals their framework with which they see the world, but it also has implications for the audience as a whole. A strongly presented ideology like this coming from a major, international corporation influences the public in their own decision-making processes when it comes to how Christmas

should be represented and celebrated. The potential consequences of the Starbucks holiday cups are that the audience will construct their beliefs and frameworks of seeing Christmas and the holiday season the way the Starbucks is encouraging them to. Starbucks is using their platform to push their ideology to the forefront in order to encourage the general population to adopt it as the norm or the dominate ideology in our culture. The cups encourage audiences to take a secular stance when it comes to the holiday season, marginalizing the religious groups who believe that the main purpose of the season is to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

The company is sure to further their ideology as precisely as possible in order to orchestrate a desired social norm without offending the religious groups of the world; doing so would mean that they would lose a great deal of potential revenue. Therefore, they take rhetorical steps to acknowledge and validate the religious side of the argument before pushing their agenda through the designs that ultimately make it to the shelves and impact the ideologies of the world.

Contribution to Rhetorical Theory

The Starbucks holiday cups are an example of how large corporations can manipulate the designs of their seasonal packaging in order to spend specific messages to audiences. Companies like Starbucks can choose to either use their designs to represent religious or secular viewpoints in regards to the holidays in order to showcase their own ideologies and impose them onto their audiences at the same time. Doing so helps to establish the dominant or hegemonic ideology of the world.

Starbucks is not the only company to define the secular tradition ideology of the Christmas season that has now taken over the country. Coca-Cola is the largest brand name

product in the world and they advertise Christmas-themed products using polar bears and Santa Claus in two separate campaigns (Eppley). Both of those images are abundantly secular and are used to define the values of the company regarding the holidays. The same goes for Walmart, the largest retail company in the world today. In 2016, the company revealed their Christmas display and started stocking their shelves for the holidays before the end of September (Jones).

For businesses, they want to get a jump on the lucrative holiday season and start cashing in on its benefits as early as possible, given that sales go up about 50 percent during the season (Eppley & Jones). The actions and demonstrations set by these major companies dictate to their audiences the correct way to regard the holidays. They encourage purchasing and celebrating as soon as possible and do so with images of traditional festivities and nothing religious.

The ideologies demonstrated have proven to have resonated with the American public. According to a poll conducted by Pew Research, 81 percent of non-Christians celebrate Christmas with Christmas trees, Santa, presents, and other secular traditions (Baer). While religious groups allow the Bible to dictate their ideologies regarding Christmas, the rest of the population relies on cultural influences as a guide (Eppley). The ideological concept of postmodernism supports the fact that companies are working to make their ideologies known in order to redefine a new phase in cultural belief systems. Non-Christians and lapse religious group members are allowing the meaning of Christmas to be derived from greater cultural norms, thus redefining the set of values for society as whole when it comes to the Christmas season.

Through analyzing the Starbucks holiday cups, it becomes clear that every design or marketing decision made by a major company during the holiday season is deliberate and meticulously planned in order to get a specific response from the audience. This addition to

rhetorical theory demonstrates how each and every Christmas packaging and display in stores is working to send a message. Companies manipulate these messages to represent their ideologies and to reflect those ideologies onto the audience. So, when shopping during the holiday season, participants should be aware of the fact that companies are trying to sell more than just merchandise; they are selling a system of beliefs.

Appendix

Image 1: Every Starbucks holiday cup since 1997.



Image 2: The 2015 highly controversial design.



Image 3: 2016 holiday cup design.



Image 4: 2017 holiday cup design.



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