

# Have A Coke & A Sign

A Semiotic Study of Feminism in Coca-Cola Ads

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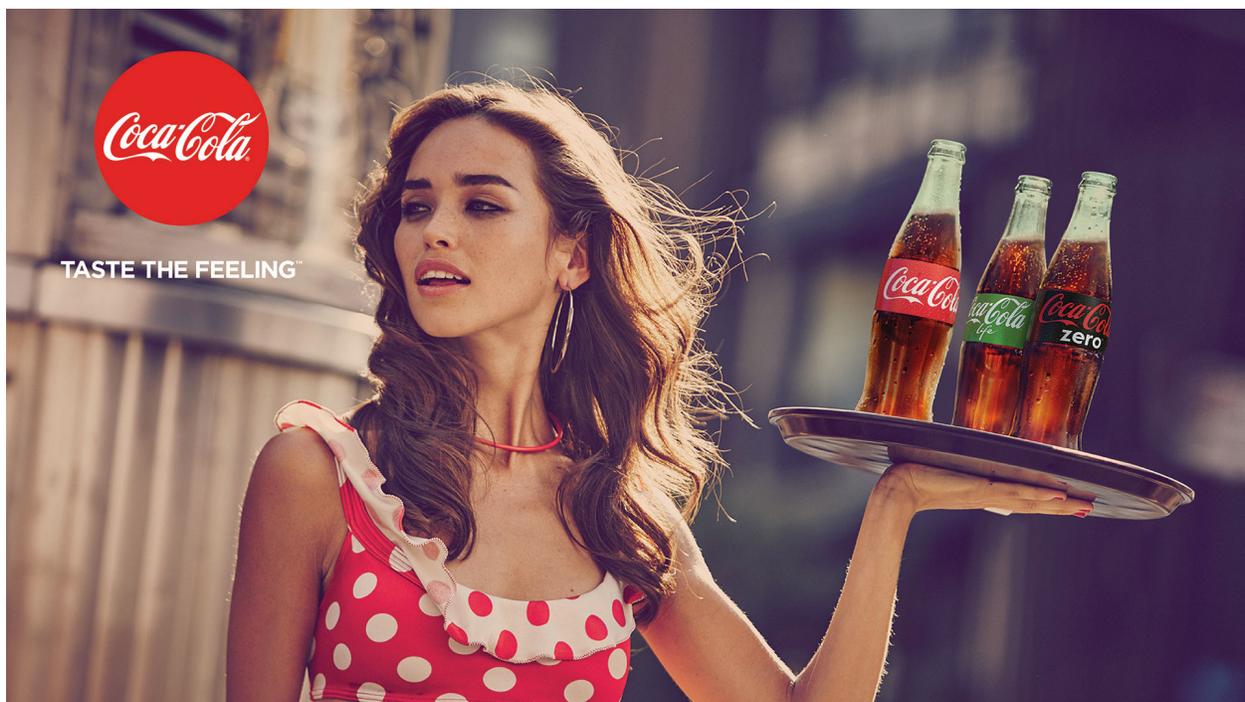


Image Source: Adweek: Here Are 25 Sweet, Simple Ads From Coca-Cola's Big New 'Taste the Feeling' Campaign

## Codes of Embodiment In Coca-Cola Ads

### Men Act While Women Appear

While Men Act and Women Appear are two separate themes, they are intrinsically tied together, and the most blatant examples of either can be found when these two roles are juxtaposed in a single image, such as this vintage World War II Coca-Cola Ad.



Here we have a very patriotic scene. Two young men in U.S. Military Uniforms and a young woman pouring them a coke.

While the woman is actually doing more work than the men in the photo itself, their outfits indicate that the men are ready for action, while the woman's outfit shows off her physical features. The curves of her dress show off her figure and expose more of her arms. Her headband also shows off that appears to be a very styled hairdo, while the men's hats conceal most of their hair. The men are valued for their faces and their hands and these are all that they show off in their outfits, while the woman's work uniform shows of a great deal more, even though it may not

be the most practical outfit for serving drinks.

### Women Are Objectified

Here we have a more modern Coca-Cola Ad featuring a couple being very close with each other while enjoying a couple of Cokes. The man is dressed in a plain white t-shirt. It could be argued that the plain white t-shirt is the peak of functional clothing, as there is almost nothing decorative about it. It signifies that this man has little concern for his appearance and has no wish to decorate himself. He also has a good amount of stubble. Overall he has a very casual look that signifies to the reader that this man is not concerned about his appearance.

The woman on the other hand, tells a different story. She is decorated with an

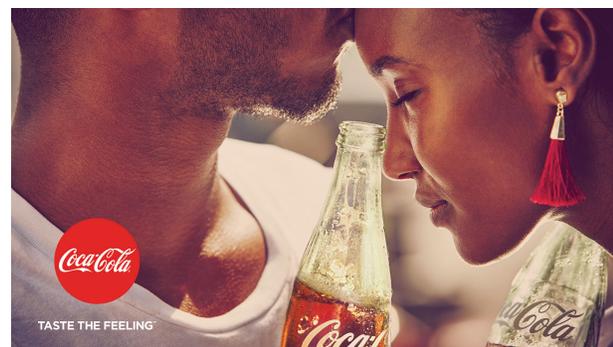


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earring. While the rest of her outfit isn't seen in the photograph, the earring is enough to signify to the viewer that the woman is concerned with fashion and her appearance.

The position of the couple's embrace and their facial expressions also signify to the viewer that this man possesses this woman, like an object. Rather than kissing each other on the lips, an action that could present them as equals, the woman is bowing her head to the man, and he is kissing her on the forehead. The woman's facial expression also is very blank, which calls into question the level of consent to this embrace.

## Women's gaze tends to be directed to the viewer (voyeur) as often, if not more, than to things within the imagery



Image Source: Adweek: Here Are 25 Sweet, Simple Ads From Coca-Cola's Big New 'Taste the Feeling' Campaign

A good litmus test I've found for how strongly one of these themes is at play in an image, is whether the person in the ad is using the product in a practical way. This image from Coke's recent "Taste The Feeling Ad" shows a woman hugging her friend from behind while drinking a bottle of coke, through a straw, and looking directly at the viewer.

Take a look at the way the woman is drinking from the straw. She appears to be biting down on the straw. In a practical sense, this is not how one would typically use a straw, but, this ad isn't here to demonstrate how to use a straw, but to get the audience to drink Coke.

People are usually drawn to eyes first, and the woman's eyes are front and center looking directly at the viewer. This signifies to the audience that the woman is inviting them to join her for a Coke, and perhaps other things as well.

## Women Are Increasingly Subjectified

In another "Taste The Feeling" ad we have a reversal of several codes that frequently appear in advertising imagery. The woman is looking away from the camera, and she is holding the man rather than the man holding her. Her body is hidden behind the man's and we can see only her head and hands. This signifies that the woman has the power (or at least that it is more evenly divided) in this relationship rather than being an object for the man to possess.

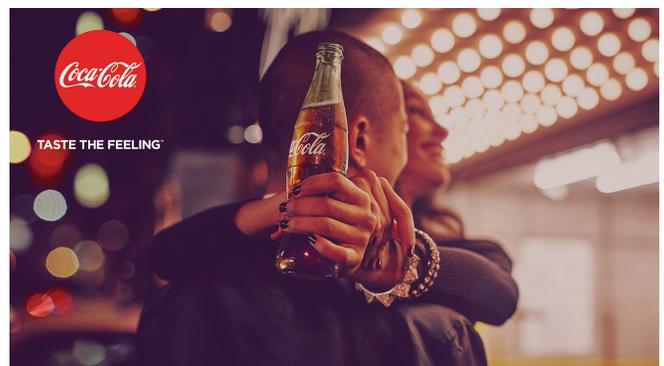


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## Men Are Increasingly Objectified

This ad may seem less familiar than the other's I've looked at so far, as it's not an American Ad, but rather one created by an Ad Agency in Singapore. One of advantages to looking at a global brand like Coke through the lens of feminism is that it's possible just to see how global these themes really are.



Image Source: Coloribus: Coke Light Abs

The ad shows a lean man reaching for a class of Coke Light while the ice cubes in the glass arrange to form the outline of six pack abs over the man's abdomen. This could signify two things: either that the people who drink Coke Light are the type of people who have good physiques or that simply the act of drinking Coke Light is enough to help you loose weight and establish better muscle definition. Either way this is a rare example of a Coke ad featuring just a man's body and not his face or occupation.

## Race and Ethnicity are still presented in stereotypical ways

Coke (unlike Pepsi, their biggest competitor) has been one of the few major brands to exist without a major race scandal in recent years, but just because they haven't made headlines, that's not to say that problems don't exist. I've a shown few ads already from Coke's recent "Taste The Feeling" ad campaign, they show people being happy, living life, and enjoying Coca-Cola products.



Image Source: Adweek: Here Are 25 Sweet, Simple Ads From Coca-Cola's Big New 'Taste the Feeling' Campaign

While the ad campaign as a whole was very diverse, featuring people of varying races and ethnicities, it should be noted that few of the individual ads featured people of more than one

race or ethnicity. They may feature an African American couple or a group of white friends, but no ads featuring a mix of races.

## Race and ethnicity are increasingly presented in non-stereotypical ways

While this is not an ad directly dealing with Race itself, it is an ad that presents people without focusing on their race.



Image Source: BuzzFeed: Coke Rebrands As Part Of A “Healthy

This ad is one of a series Coke created during the London olympics featuring silhouettes of athletes competing surrounded by Coca-Cola’s imagery.

The silhouettes are largely devoid of anything that could signify a racial or ethnic group to the audience. This is important, especially at an event like the Olympics which is an event that promotes international cooperation. The focus in these ads is in the athletic ability of the competitors rather than any racial or ethnic features they may have.

## Size matters more for women than men

Does this couple look familiar? They should, it’s the name couple I used in the section on “Women are objectified.” This image shows a happier image of the couple, but it’s important to note what they’re drinking.

While both of them appear very physically fit in the image, the drinks in their hand signify different things.

The man is drinking a Coca-Cola Classic, while the woman is drinking Coca-Cola Zero, a zero calorie version of Coke. While it is possible that the woman truly enjoys Coke Zero for the taste, Coca-Cola is often marketed as an alternative to coke for people who don’t want to gain weight. This ad signifies that weight gain is more of a concern for the woman than the man.



Image Source: Business Insider: Coca-Cola just launched a massive new ad campaign to change the conversation around sugary drinks

## We see an increasing number of GBLT persons; are the images positive or negative

In my survey of Coca-Cola ads I struggled to find any the expressly showed a person that was GBLT. Of course with the exception of ads that showed straight couple's actually engaged in romantic activities it's impossible to tell a person's sexual orientation from the way they hold a



Your courage is an example to us all.  
#NationalComingOutDay #ProudToHavePride



Image Source: Coca-Cola's Corporate Twitter

bottle of Coca-Cola. It's also possible that the women in the ad I featured in my section on "Women's gaze tends to be directed to the viewer (voyeur) as often, if not more, than to things within the imagery" could have been sexually involved, but again, nothing expressly signified to me as a viewer that these women were anything more than friends. Perhaps this is indicative of cultural norms, as if it had been a man and a woman in that position I would have certainly perceived them as being involved sexually or romantically.

The strongest example of GBLT imagery I found in Coca-Cola marketing was in this tweet from Coca-Cola's corporate twitter account. Here we see the icon of the classic coke bottle being used to invoke the imagery of the rainbow flag, a sign of GBLT pride. It is clear from this tweet the Coca-Cola corporation intends to make their brand very GBLT friendly.

## Discussion: Images and Themes In Historical and Social Context

While some of the images referenced above date as far back as World War Two, the majority of them are from Coca-Cola's 2016 "Taste The Feeling" Campaign. This shows that these codes, themes and conventions are still very much at play in today's society. It probably would have been possible to complete this list of themes using just "Taste The Feeling" ads, but it's important to show that not only are these themes current, but they have a deep foundation in the historical imagery of the world.

While advertising in general tends to attempt to portray a perfect world (or at least a world in which all problems can be solved by the product being advertised) there is an especially idyllic lens through which one sees the world in a Coca-Cola commercial. Coca-Cola has used branding to create something magical in that little glass bottle with the red label that most Americans associate with summer time and good times.

Perhaps, one theme that needs examined when looking at advertising that has been missed is the idea economic status. Coca-Cola is a fairly accesible product, most people can afford a Coke every now and then. What do the images the Coca-Cola company present in their marketing say about the size of their target customers bank accounts. Perhaps very little. Most of the ads I showcased feature very tight shots of their subjects, not revealing much about their clothing or their location, two things that could signify their level of weath. What clothing is shown is usually fairly universal (the white t-shirt, athletic wear, etc). This could be an intentional choice on the Coca-Cola companies part to not other any particular part of their customer base.