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Subverting Our Consumerism:

The Necessity of Critically Analyzing the Products Which We Purchase

In this age of incessant and lamentably often-deceptive advertising practices, it is crucial for us to be critically aware consumers before making purchases. For this Exploration Assignment #2, I reviewed the *Better Homes & Gardens Essential Oil Infused Room Spray*, Frankincense and Patchouli-scented. The intended use of the product is for consumers to spray the solution in various parts of their homes to spread a pleasant herbal scent. This product is packaged in in an eight-ounce size plastic spray bottle with a black sprayer top. The bottle that holds the solution is amber-colored. The top and bottom borders of the label are lavender-colored, and there is a golden-colored stripe in the lower portion of the label that describes the scent of the spray, simply reading "Frankincense & Patchouli." In the middle of the label are pictures of those respective herbs. On the sides are ivory-colored labels with the ingredients and directions in English and Spanish and a WARNING label in all-capital letters. This is accompanied by a salient warning symbol—an exclamation mark within an equilateral triangle. A barcode is on the other side and information about the distributor, Walmart, is present. Using critical discourse analysis to advance my observations, I note that the foregrounding of the brand name "*Better Homes & Gardens*" conveys to the viewers of this product that using it can contribute to making a better home (and/or garden). The logo's usage of

the Austin typeface in the semibold weight—with a gaudy ampersand—imbues a quaint sensibility to the product. This targets people who are interested in bettering their homes, attempting to convince them of this product's archaic inspiration. The quaintness and feigned antique quality are furthered with the deliberate coloring of the plastic as amber, which is reminiscent of amber-colored glass of yore. The pictures of the healthy green frankincense herb in the middle draw viewers' attention to how this room spray is ostensibly naturally derived. However, omissions are important, as well—there is no indication that the ingredients used in this product are of natural origin or that they were minimally processed. Lamentably, at a transitory glance, most consumers would be unlikely to critically engage with what is present on the product, and moreover, what is omitted from the product's presentation.

In my house, I found an additional product to examine for this Exploration Assignment, and I chose the *Febreze Air Effects Hawaiian Aloha Air Refresher*. The air freshener bottle is sunset-colored, and even the plastic sprayer at the top emulates the color of the sky during a sunset. In orange font, the words "HAWAIIAN" and "ALOHA" are emblazoned in the center of the label under the "*Febreze*" logo, with two yellow hibiscus flowers shown. On the left side of the front part of the label, a sunset photograph of straw umbrellas and palm trees at a beach with shimmering water is conspicuously exhibited. On the back, a list of many warnings and ingredients in English and Spanish is featured. This product attempts to persuade viewers of an alleged connection between this air freshener and Hawaii through the foregrounding of the words "HAWAIIAN" and "ALOHA." Curiously, I could not find a place on the label that states that the air freshener is made in Hawaii, which the aforementioned words should indicate to me. Certainly, for consumers who are looking hurriedly at these products, the imagery of the beauteous sunset, palm trees, and hibiscus flowers will connote a tranquil Hawaiian atmosphere,

and by extension, that using this product will impart a similar atmosphere if used in one's home. The foregrounding of these elements may confuse consumers and mislead them into thinking that this product is of Hawaiian origin. Frith's (1998) third level of the cultural dimensions of advertisements is salient here because the Hawaiian greeting "Aloha" is appropriated, for no other apparent purpose than to set the scene as being Hawaiian, for this air freshener. Additionally, the terminology of "air refresher" used and the claim that there is "100% natural propellant used" is vague and is an instance of greenwashing, which is when corporations mislead consumers regarding the environmental benefits and practices of a product (Budinsky & Bryant, 2013). Particularly for the air freshener, "natural" is not clearly explained on any part of the product label. Moreover, this declaration of naturality does not convey to consumers relevant information about if the manufacturing process is "natural," and this, too, is fraught with problems of generality. The "refresher" terminology connotes that this product will make an appreciable difference in the freshness of one's home, and the *re-* derivational prefix suggests that the air freshener can restore a freshness which has since been lost. In relation to the first product, this air freshener appears to emphasize the notion that one's house will be imbued with a sense of Hawaiian freshness, while the *Better Homes & Gardens* product conveys antiqueness. Additionally, the linguistic appropriation of Indigenous words such as "Aloha" is absent from the first product I analyzed. Perhaps these products appeal to different groups of consumer audiences through their distinct imagery which is linked to the practices of particular social classes. Both of these products, however, seek to convince consumers that their products will freshen their living spaces.

After reading "Water Protectors hold their ground in wild rice country" (LaDuke, 2021) and "What really happens to plastic drink bottles you toss in your recycling bin" (Chung, 2020),

I recognized that the products I analyzed participate in broader discourses regarding our environment and the health of our communities. The *Better Homes & Gardens* bottle is made of PET plastic, which is the subject of Chung's (2020) article. I learned that though this plastic is recyclable, much of its recycled output is used for non-recyclable applications because of the increased cost of using recycled materials. In our communities, though we may pride ourselves on recycling, the infinite cycle of "recycling" is a mere illusion. The consumerism which is characterized by a desire for inexpensively produced, convenient, and disposable products comes at the cost of being highly unsustainable, and a waste of fully recyclable plastic is evident. Additionally, in contrast to the purposes for which the Water Protectors are using Indigenous language, such as "akiing," the Anishinaabe word for "the land to which the people belong" (LaDuke, 2021), *Febreze* used the Hawaiian word "aloha" for marketing purposes instead of pursuing a social justice cause against encroachers on Indigenous lands. These products are related to ideas of imperialism and in particular, linguistic imperialism, for the use of force has caused Indigenous languages to become marginalized, and presently, they are appropriated for advertisement purposes. Words such as "recyclable," "natural," and "free" are marketable and euphonious buzzwords for greenwashing and misleading consumers, but they truly do little to benefit the environment. Because they are so vague and are not linked to any substantive pledge on the part of corporations to produce appreciable change, these words and beliefs are of little utility for consumers. Budinsky & Bryant's (2013) analytical tool of critical discourse analysis helps us resist the narratives companies wish to impose upon consumers. This resistance comes in the form of critically examining the contexts and messages of products.

Finally, critical autoethnography as a methodological frame intersects with critical discourse analysis, for it is more than just a mere description of what is readily observed—these

both engage in interrogating the power structures that operate which give rise to such stories and products. All people have different perspectives, and bearing this multiplicity in mind is principal to our analyses. In understanding others' accounts, stories, and ways of knowing and viewing, we must use our own gazes and perspectives. When we explore and interpret our own stories with others' stories, we examine the threads that form our identity and situate them into the societal context of power and influence that surround us. I reflect upon my experience of how I had thought that recycling plastic objects had made me conscious of my impact on the environment, until I learned that many locales do not recycle plastics because doing so would be inordinately costly. This was a consciousness-raising experience for me, in which I recognized the patently inimical effects of illusory advertising to consumers that suggests that their recycling will make a significant difference in the environment. When I analyze my own experiences with the structures of power and capitalism that are present in society, I become attuned to the fact that many other experiences, like mine, throw light on the need to make public policy that provides clear explanations for products' environmental impacts. Resisting capitalist subterfuge includes, furthermore, being conscious of one's own buying choices, and my consciousness-raising experience made me acutely aware of the reality of corporations' omissions and duplicity. In particular, my experiences helped me understand Chung's (2020) article and the larger power structures surrounding its topic, for I was not abreast of the fact that plastic recycling is not the unequivocal boon which some may believe it is. Ultimately, through the critique of power structures and how they manifest their effects in our lives, we can work towards policy changes that ensure a more equitable society for all people, including using truthful advertising. This requires careful analysis of our perspectives and experiences.

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