Feel Good, Buy Goods: Rhetorics Of Altruism In Advertising

A recent consumer study by the Pew Research Center found that the so-called “Millennial Generation” was inclined to purchase—or boycott—a product based on the company’s stance on social justice issues. This change from previous generations has led to a rhetoric of altruism and social justice in advertising. In this presentation, I examine some key rhetorical moves of this trend and point out the potential dangers of companies co-opting social movements for profit. While these rhetorics infuse positive messages into society, judging a company’s reputation on their attempts at identification can also have harmful effects.

One recent example is Always “Throw Like a Girl,” commercial, where children are asked what it means to throw like a girl and discuss how this can be hurtful or portray girls as inferior. Despite this positive message, the company itself has not made steps to improve the status of its female employees. For example, the parent company of Always, Proctor & Gamble, is one of the many Fortune 500 companies to have never had a female CEO, and according to a report in Cincinnati magazine, the pay gap amongst male and female factory workers has improved only 11% since the 19th century. In this way, companies tend to make nods in the direction of social justice rather than actually taking a stance on truly controversial issues; the vast majority of people would agree that it’s wrong to make girls feel bad, while an advertisement that addresses problems with the wage gap (since the market for the product is, after all, adult women and not young girls) would simply be too controversial and self-implicating.

These examples and others show the rhetorical moves of profit-motivated appeals to altruism and social justice and how this change in advertising rhetoric can deceptively build ethos for a company, despite positively reflecting a shift in society’s overall attitudes.