To what extent does Birra Moretti rely on ideology, cultural myths, and national stereotyping to sell their products?

by

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Practice in Context 3

Submitted to Hereford College of Arts

For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

BA (Hons) Graphic & Media Design Level 6

Validated by the University of Wales Trinity St David

Full Word Count: 5214

Edited Word Count: 4812

Overview

The motive of this essay is to identify the value of crafting a brand ideology that exploits national and cultural stereotyping via myths. This will be done by analysing the advertising campaign 'Simple Pleasures' (2021) by Birra Moretti and using theoretical frameworks to find the meaning. Recognising how and why the adverts and campaigns by the brand have changed over the years will provide more context. The objective is to make sense of this and to identify if it is seen in other brands, and whether it is accomplished in a similar or different way.

Birra Moretti is an Italian beer brand that today is exported to over 40 countries around the world, including the UK (Birra Moretti, 2023). Since expanding, the brand established its first global campaign celebrating the Italian way of life, unveiling the 'Simple Pleasures' campaign. The centre point and most notable advertisement from the campaign are 'Balcony Barter' (2021), which was shot in the Italian city of Arezzo in Tuscany. The adverts' goal is to present the authentic stories of Italy to a global audience, offering an insight into the Italian way of life (GroceryTrader, 2021).

Before deconstructing the advert further, it is important to understand the theoretical framework that will be used to investigate the sequence.



(Moretti, 2021).

Rhetoric of the image by Roland Barthes: The Three Messages

In order to decode each case study, it is important to understand signs, code, and semiology. In the 1964 essay 'Rhetoric of the Image', French semiologist Roland Barthes separates an advertisement for Panzani pasta into three messages: a "linguistic" message, a "coded iconic" message, and a "non-coded iconic" message. This framework will be effective when analysing the following case studies.



(Barthes, 1964, p. 151).

Firstly, linguistic messaging can be presented as captions for imagery and advertisements, which are coded by language. In his essay, Barthes describes that the message "en abyme" possesses the language code of French, and a knowledge of the language is needed to decode it. He then proceeds to discuss how the linguistic message is twofold and can have connotational and denotational meanings. This is because linguistic messaging can signify meaning, in his example, the word Panzani signifies 'Italianicity' (Barthes, 1964).

Therefore "linguistic" messaging is presented as words and arguably speech because in the following case studies, words are rarely used, however, speech is more common. Like the Panzani case study Barthes presents, speech possesses connotational and denotational meaning. All language has denotational meaning; however, an Italian accent may possess connotational meaning to a British audience, an example may be the signification of 'Italianicity'. Both aspects, speech, and words, apply to advertising.

Furthermore, Barthes adds that when reading images, it is important to also consider "coded iconic" messaging. Barthes defines that images produce a series of non-linear signs and signified values. In continuation, to read the signs, one must possess the cultural knowledge to do so. Thus, the accumulation of signs helps form a coherent whole, for example, Barthes describes that the Panzani advertisement signifies "Italianicity" due to its amalgamation of signs (Barthes, 1964).

What this means is that images are signifiers and carry connotations. Hence when I analyse my selection of case studies, it will be important to analyse the various signs and signified values attached to images separately, but also consider how they form a whole, and the message it is aiming to communicate.

Lastly, Barthes also explores "non-coded iconic" messaging. In his essay, Barthes describes "a message without code" (Barthes, 1964, p. 154) which is the literal message of the image. Barthes says the following for the Panzani example.

"For we need to know what an image is (..) and what a tomato, a string-bag, a packet of pasta are, but it is a matter of an almost anthropological knowledge. This message corresponds, as it were, to the letter of the image and we can agree to call it the literal message, as opposed to the previous symbolic 'message." (Barthes, 1964, p. 154).

"Non-coded iconic" messaging is therefore imagery devoid of code, solely the literal message of the image. When applied to the following case studies, a bottle of beer would be an example of a "non-coded iconic" or literal message.

Nevertheless, Barthes also describes that linguistic messaging is separate from coded iconic and non-coded iconic messaging. Whereas the latter share the same iconic substance, it is disputed if it is ethical to separate them as they are consumed at once (Barthes, 1964).

Since the coded and non-coded iconic messages are consumed simultaneously, the distinction between them is not spontaneous. Consequently, the non-coded iconic message naturalises the coded iconic message. However, for this essay, it will be paramount to separate the messaging to identify what messages have been naturalised by Birra Moretti and other brands. Doing so will inform us what values and signs the brand relies on within advertising and if it is successful.

Media Semiotics: An Introduction by Jonathan Bignell

To effectively analyse the signs, connotations, myths, and ideologies portrayed in the following case studies, it is also important to understand how they function. Consequently, this essay will discuss ideas presented in the book 'Media Semiotics: An Introduction' by Jonathan Bignell. These semiotic ideas are found in the work of Roland Barthes.

Firstly, one must understand mythology. Bignell presents that signs are not used solely to denote something. Rather they have connotations that are attached and that shape a particular message or 'myth' (Bignell, 2002). Bignell then proceeds with the following, "Media texts often connect one signified idea with another, or one signifier with another, in order to attach connotations to people and things and endow them with mythic meanings." (Bignell, 2002, p. 17).

What is meant by this is that media texts such as advertising will link existing signs that possess connotations to purposefully construct an idea of how life is, or in other words a 'myth'. Since media texts are connecting signified ideas, myths do not naturally occur. They are formed by people and are subject to cultural bias depending on what context they exist in. Accordingly, they are constructed to serve a particular role within society.

Another idea presented in this book is ideology. According to Bignell, "An ideology is a way of perceiving reality and society which assumes that some ideas are self-evidently true" (Bignell, 2002, p. 24). Bignell then proceeds to describe how "dominant ideology" is when such ideas about society seem natural but are subject to change as economic and political powers change (Bignell, 2002).

The following theory is important to consider when analysing the case studies. This is because advertisements are highly ideological and utilise myths to attach significations to products (Bignell, 2002). Therefore, when deconstructing the advertisement, recognising the limitations or cultural bias one possesses will be important, as within the society in which one lives in there is a dominant ideology that has been naturalised. Also, recognising how advertisements function and use such verbal and visual signs to construct myths and appeal to our dominant ideology will be paramount. As one will be able to determine if they're successful or not, if they've changed, and why.

Balcony Barter

'Balcony Barter 2021' by Birra Moretti is part of the brands ongoing advertising campaign labelled 'Simple Pleasures' (2022). The video follows a group of Italians sharing beer and food, and the following caption is used:

"In Italy, people appreciate the simple things in life; every moment, no matter how small is celebrated. Birra Moretti is celebrating life's simple pleasures time spent with friends and family, enjoying good food, good company and great beer. Because it's these simple things that mean the most. Salute!" (Moretti, 2021).



(Moretti, 2021).

Non-coded iconic messaging

Firstly, it is important to decode the non-coded iconic messaging within the advertisement, separating the code from the imagery and exploring the literal meaning. The sequence begins with an establishing shot of a town square. Then it follows a young white man with dark brown hair, retrieving a Birra Moretti beer from a fridge. The fridge is devoid of food except, for a block of parmesan and a chilli. Our protagonist then proceeds to share the beer between the balconies via a bucket on a rope. The neighbours (predominantly white and dark haired), appear joyful and are dressed casually. They receive a beer in exchange for fresh ingredients including bright red tomatoes, olives, bread, and salami. Once all the ingredients are gathered, a meal is prepared by the protagonist and then shared with the neighbours on a roof top with beer. The sequence then proceeds to a close-up view of the protagonist enjoying a Birra Moretti, closing with a textured vector graphic of the logo coupled with a Birra Moretti.

Coded iconic messaging

Next, the coded iconic messaging shall be explored, outlining, and identifying the connotative signs within the sequence. 'Balcony Barter' provides a string of signs that are drawn from cultural code. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge cultural bias, as the signs will be separated from a British perspective.

On viewing the advert, three connotative signs are prominent, however, there may be many more. Signs such as the setting, which is established in the opening shot, showcase buildings with smooth white stones, terracotta roofs, and shutters. The setting seems to be in a quiet old town square, a far cry from a busy metropolitan area, consequently this may highlight a simple lifestyle, aligning with the brand messaging of "enjoying life's simple pleasures". The weather is warm, and the sun is shining, which is particularly effective as for a British audience, we associate Italy with a sunny climate. When such signs are viewed as a coherent whole, it signifies an Italian setting hence it has conations with Italianicity. However, it is a romanticised view of the country, tapping into the charm of Italy. In addition, signs like the arrangement of ripe tomatoes on the balcony, fresh bread and salami shared in the bucket, and the varied selection of food on the table signifies

'freshness' which has connotations with Italian cuisine. Also, people collected around a table of food signifies values such as togetherness, family, friends, and a sense of community.

Linguistic

The sequence also provides a string of linguistic messages such as text and speech. Firstly, regarding Roland Barthes theory of linguistic messaging, found in his essay 'Rhetoric of the image', both the text and speech possess connotational and denotational meanings. An example of denotational meanings is the name "Birra Moretti" as well as the phrase "L'Italiana Autentica", which are presented as text on the packaging and closing graphics. The following speech is also used at the end of the sequence; "From the home of life's simple pleasures, Birra Moretti, L'Italiana Autentica" (Moretti, 2021). Nevertheless, when separate from the literal meaning, these signs could possess connotations that help construct an idea of "Italianicity". For example, the Italian language is used, which is a linguistic code, and a knowledge of the language is needed to decode it, however, from a British consumer's perspective, the language connotes an idea of "Italianicity". In more detail, although the quote used at the end of the sequence is spoken in English, it is spoken in an Italian accent which again has connotations with "Italianicity". After separating the linguistic message, it appears that it is not only used to support the sequence but also to attach connotations of "Italianicity" to the brand of Birra Moretti.

In more detail, it seems that the brand is pushing this message that Birra Moretti is 'authentically Italian', however it begs the question of what this exactly is. And whether it is authentically Italian from the perspective of a British consumer, an Italian person, or Birra Moretti? On watching the sequence and viewing the context in which the message is used, one could argue that the brand aims to construct its myth of 'Authentic Italian' culture through association with such signs of 'Italianicity'. Although this view of 'Authentic Italian' culture is highly ideological and a myth, it does present aspirational values, such as friendship or family and happiness.

Myths and Ideology

As Bignell describes, when media texts connect signified ideas with other signified ideas, attaching connotations to people and things, they form mythic meanings (Bignell, 2002). When viewing the advert as a coherent whole, and identifying both linguistic and coded iconic messaging, it's evident that Birra Moretti is utilising such signs to build an ideological view of Italian life. That being an ideology in which Italian people value good times with friends and family, fresh food, and how people look i.e., white, dark-haired, and slim. All of which are myths. Brand Unit Director at Heineken Matt Saltzstein says the following when summarising the goal of Birra Moretti with the advertising campaign 'Simple Pleasures':

"Italians are famous for enjoying the simple things in life, but those moments don't just happen. Instead, people in Italy stop and make time for them – and never more so than right now." (...) "we want to inspire them to stop and embrace the Italian way of life with great food, great company and great beer." (GroceryTrader, 2021).

The following quote showcases another part of the myth construction. For example, it is not a denotative truth that Italians are famous for enjoying the simple things in life, it is a myth. However, this is an aspect that the brand and individuals responsible for the campaign want to highlight and encourage its consumers to embrace the "Italian way of life" but the Birra Moretti way. Therefore, it is clear the brand is aiming to craft an ideology to present Birra Moretti positively, weaponising myths surrounding Italianicity to form a narrative that this is authentically Italian. One may question the reason for this, however, romanticising such values and myths, seems to help shape a positive brand perception in the consumer's mind. Nevertheless, this exploitive romanticism of the culture and country may be damaging as the advert in question doesn't feature individuals of different ethnic groups, rather it showcases stereotypical depictions of Italians i.e., dark haired and white. Therefore, it begs the question if people of other ethnicities fit into this brand ideology and if it was intentional.

Discussing other Birra Moretti examples:

Nevertheless, in recent years this seems to be the brand strategy that Birra Moretti has opted for. In 2022, Birra Moretti released an advert titled 'Villa Moretti' in which similar Italian cultural and national myths as seen in 'Balcony Barter' are portrayed. Yet, the ideology of authentic Italian culture that Birra Moretti has manufactured is stressed further in 'Villa Moretti'. For example, there are scenes depicting people driving in vintage Fiat's, individuals making pasta with 'Italian Nonna's' and enjoying food around a table with family and friends that are showcased alongside brand messaging such as "Travel the Italian way", "Discover traditional cooking" and "Live the Italian...and taste".



(Moretti, 2022).

Evolution of the advertisement strategy

On observing this, one could argue that it seems strange that a beer brand's advertising strategy would rely so heavily on its country of origin, as well as the myths and ideology attached to such association. That being so, it begs the question of the value of this strategy and how much Italian myths separate from other countries or carries more appealing lifestyle, cultural or national values to consumers.



(Moretti, 1980-1990).

For Birra Moretti, it seems that this strategy has been highly successful and valuable to the brand. Interestingly, a Birra Moretti VHS advert from the 80s-90s found on YouTube showcases how the strategy has evolved in recent years. The sequence opens with a scene of a house with the name Birra Moretti above the door. Afterward, the scenes follow the Birra Moretti mascot who seems to be giving a tour of a dining area to a group of people. In the dining area are several people dressed in the Birra Moretti outfit enjoying a beer, of which two people are comedically struggling to eat the spicy food. The scene then ends when the tour arrives at the bar where everyone cheers with their beers. The closing scene is a graphic of a beer with an animated Birra Moretti label. The linguistic messaging "Birra Moretti Sincera per Tradizione" closes the advert. This roughly translates to "Birra Moretti sincerely by tradition". This advertisement is in Italian and was most probably shown within Italy, whereas the examples from the 'Simple Pleasures' campaign are targeted towards a British audience.

Firstly, there are similarities across the campaigns. These include the use of signs that communicate an Italian setting, in addition to an emphasis on the value of food in Italian culture. Nevertheless, there are differences between this early advert and the most recent adverts 'Balcony Barter' and 'Villa Moretti'. For example, the new advert 'Balcony Barter' stresses the gathering of friends and family, seemingly highlighting the perceived Italian values of family. In addition, the Moretti mascot is featured less. In older examples such as the advert from the 80s-90s in question and more, the Moretti man is a prominent figure and the protagonist of each advert. This is different across the 'Simple pleasures' campaign as he is not featured in the advert 'Balcony Barter' and is only seen a handful of times in the 'Villa Moretti' advert. In contradiction, there is no protagonist, and happy consumers of the beer are the focus of the advert.

One can see that the brand recently has shifted towards one in which it employs and creates myths and a brand ideology surrounding the Italian culture as well as lifestyle. This strategy however is undoubtedly successful. By linking the beer to these positive and enduring elements of Italian culture, the new campaign creates a sense of mythic significance for the product, making it more attractive to existing and potential new customers.

Next, to measure the success and value of using cultural and national myths and ideology within advertising, one must compare the campaign 'Simple Pleasures' by Birra Moretti against other branded beer campaigns. Doing so will help one underpin if there are similarities between the campaigns, for example, the type of myths and ideologies used, and in addition, if this is relied on within the advertising strategy.

Carlsberg: The Danish Way campaign

The Danish way is an integrated marketing campaign that features a series of adverts in which Mads Mikkelsen explores Denmark's values and locations. The campaign was launched in the UK with the goal of repositioning the brand as a premium beer by reflecting on the rich history of the nation (Carlsberg Group, 2017).

For this essay, the advert that will be discussed is 'Carlsberg – The Danish Way'. Like the process earlier, the non-coded and coded iconic messaging, as well as the linguistic messaging will be discussed before exploring the myths and ideology presented. When such myths and ideologies are identified they will be compared to those found in the Birra Moretti campaign 'Simple Pleasures'. Later, the evolution of the advertising strategy that Carlsberg has employed will be discussed, therefore concluding if there is a shift towards using national and cultural myths within the alcohol advertising space.



(Carlsberg Group, 2017).

Non-coded iconic messaging:

Firstly, the advert follows Mads Mikkelsen cycling around the streets of Copenhagen, passing landmarks such as Amalienborg Palace and the Kastrup Sea Baths. Later in the sequence, he cycles through a forest scene of a picnic, with people gathered around a table sharing food, they seem to be smiling and happy. Afterward our protagonist Mads Mikkelsen cycles through an apartment that is decorated with modern and minimal interior design. And lastly, Mikkelsen arrives at the Carlsberg brewery, where he is served a pint of Carlsberg beer.

Linguistic messaging:

Linguistic messaging is one of the main forms of messaging in this advert, which contrasts with the example by Birra Moretti. This is most probably because Mads Mikkelsen is a vessel for the message and narration of the advert, whereas in the campaign 'Simple Pleasures' the narrator is unknown. In addition, in this example, the narration is used to deliver a string of national myths concerning the Danish way of life, whereas in 'Balcony Barter' the linguistic messaging is used to deliver the brand messaging. Interestingly, the sequence opens with the following, "They say we Danes are the happiest nation in the world, so what's our secret?". Arguably, this is the dominant ideology as the country was ranked as the 2nd most happy nation by Forbes in 2022 (Forbes, 2022).



(Carlsberg Group, 2017)

Nevertheless, the narrator discusses the reasoning for this as if it were a denotational truth for all Danes, simplifying national values and therefore accentuating perceived cultural and national myths. For example, Mikkelsen describes that Danes "find joy in nature", "keep work and life in perfect balance" and "is it that we make time for hygge? Feeling all fuzzy and snuggly together?" (Carlsberg Group, 2017). Accordingly, generalising Danish people in this way underlines cultural and national myths, and romanticises the way in which we perceive the nation and its people, depicting a cartoonish and oversimplified version of society, culture, and nation, which are inherently very complex and can't be reduced to a single aspect or essence.

Coded iconic messaging:

The advert provides a thread of signs that are drawn from cultural code. However, it is essential to acknowledge cultural bias, as the signs will be separated from a British perspective. But on the other hand, the advert was intentionally made to target a British audience and consequently I am the target demographic.

As investigated, when introducing the theories earlier in the essay, myths do not naturally occur. Bignell describes that advertisements link existing signs that possess connotations to endow them with mythic meaning (Bignell, 2002). Accordingly, the use of the brand messaging device "Authentically Italian" is interesting as Birra Moretti is naturalising the sequence presented in 'Balcony Barter'. This is accomplished by using signs and coded iconic messaging. On the other hand, the way in which 'The Danish Way' is presented differs as a string of signs is presented but, in less detail, than 'Balcony Barter'. Rather linguistic messaging is the main device, as a narrator (Mad Mikkelsen) is used to present the manufactured ideology. In some instances, the narrator appears to make eye contact with the camera, addressing the audience. Appropriately, in this example the addition of a narrator acts as a buffer, making the sequence seem less natural, and in contrast highly manufactured. Contrary, the lack of exposition in 'Balcony Barter' makes the sequence appear more natural, as if the viewer is getting a glimpse into an authentically Italian experience, when in fact it is a constructed myth, hence it appears more manipulative. It is ironic as authenticity is the opposite of an advertisement, this is because they are highly produced and do not naturally occur.

The use of Mads Mikkelsen is particularly affective as the established actor is Danish and has appeared in blockbuster films such as James Bond Casino Royale and Rogue One: A Star Wars Story. As a result, he is not only a narrator but a sign, introducing gravitas to the role and connotations with sophistication and credibility due to his appearances in film. When the advert ends and features Mikkelsen drinking a pint of Carlsberg alone in a brewery, the amalgamation of coded iconic signs such as the credible actor and Danish lager suggests to the audience that this a premium drink to be enjoyed by the sophisticated. This heavily contrasts the advertising campaign 'Simple Pleasures' which emphasises the value of togetherness by showing Italians drinking beer happily together.

Myths and Ideology

As previously described earlier in the essay, Bignell informs us that, when media texts connect signified ideas with other signified ideas, attaching connotations to people and things, they form mythic meanings (Bignell, 2002). On viewing the advert and identifying the messaging devices used throughout the sequence, like Birra Moretti, Carlsberg is aiming to manufacture an ideological view of Danish life, and the key to their happiness. The messaging used manufactures this ideology that Danes value work-life balance, nature, and happiness, which are positive aspirational values.

As described by Ryan Newey, founder & chief creative officer of Fold7 in the video "The making of the ad: behind Carlsberg's The Danish Way" on YouTube, the goal of the advert was to go back to the Danish roots of the brand and to reposition the perception of Carlsberg in the consumer's mind. Newey is quoted saying the following.

"As we know the Danes are the happiest nation in the world and perhaps if we adopt a little, a few little bits of their behaviour and rituals, we may in turn be a little happier too. So, the campaign is called the Danish Way." (Campaign, 2017).

By aligning itself with Denmark and its cultural signs, Carlsberg is able to tap into a sense of national pride and identity, creating a myth that associates the brand with the values and characteristics of the Danish people. This was also accomplished by Birra Moretti, however, a different set of values are presented that are suggested to be closely linked to the values of the Italian people. This tells us that for brands, in particular beer brands, manufacturing an ideology that weaponises cultural and national signs and values is a highly effective way to position the brand in the consumer's psyche and establish the difference between competitors. And the people responsible for creating the adverts and campaigns are aware of this.

Evolution of the advertisement strategy

Like Birra Moretti, Carlsberg has adjusted its advertising strategy over the years. Nevertheless, the change in strategy seems to have been more obvious for Carlsberg. For example, in 2007 the advert Old Lions features the English football squad playing on the same pitch together for the first time since they won the world cup in 1966. Sir Bobby Charlton, Jackie Charlton and Alan Ball joined Sir Bobby Robson and a plethora of past England stars in this advert that was featured before the 2006 World Cup (D&AD, 2007).



(D&AD, 2007).

In the older campaigns, English football is either referenced or explored as a subject. The Old Lions campaign from 2007 follows an England team of ex-players who haven't played together since they won the world cup in 1966. However, in the latest example, 'The Danish Way', the brand Carlsberg pivots away from England football themes and begins premium positioning, reflective Danish history, provenance, and culture. Whereas the older examples reflect working-class qualities/values and humour.

Consequently, it is recognised that both Birra Moretti and Carlsberg have experienced a drastic evolution in tone, and the values presented through advertising. Arguably this shift is felt more in the Carlsberg example, but by viewing old examples of advertising from both brands, it is familiar that they have both pivoted towards brands that not only export beer but also a brand ideology that uses national and cultural myths.

Conclusion

As observed in the two examples discussed in this essay, how the story and narrative of each advertisement are presented dramatically affects how we, the audience, respond to the myths and ideologies on display. Birra Moretti's advert and main case study of this essay; 'Balcony Barter', successfully naturalises and romanticises this mythological depiction of "Authentically Italian" life by linking various signs in a way that feels inherently spontaneous. No narration or exposition is describing the taste of the beer, rather we are shown an elaborate and cartoonish scenario in which people share a beer on balconies. This is later coined as an authentically Italian experience. It deceives the audience and elaborates on existing harmful stereotyping regarding the way Italians look for profit.

This strategy seems to be successful, as a correlation has been identified between the two major beer brands. However, to gather a better understanding of this, one would have to research more examples across various countries and cultures to gain a better understanding, therefore one must acknowledge the limitations of this essay. Nevertheless, it begs the question of why this is successful. It's not that the presented national values, ideologies, and myths of countries like Italy and Denmark are better or more important than each other, but it's that they are unique. Crafting an identity and brand ideology that stresses national myths can help a beer brand differentiate itself from its competitors. In a crowded and competitive market, it can be challenging for a brand to stand out. Rather than Birra Moretti discussing the subtle differences in taste compared to the likes of Carlsberg, it is more effective to craft a brand ideology that is linked with cultural and national myths unique to the brands country of origin, even if the depiction stereotypes and simplifies cultures that are more complex and different from what the brand portrays. For this reason, it seems fitting to argue that Birra Moretti is not exporting beer, rather they are exporting a highly ideological view of Italian life steeped in deceiving brand mythology.

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