Tyler the Creator’s Mountain Dew Campaign

It sounds funny, but an ad campaign where the main character is a goat named Felicia actually caused quite a stir when it was criticized for being violent, offensive, and extremely racist. In May 2013, musician and leader of the California collective, Odd Future, otherwise known as OFWGKTA (Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All), Tyler the Creator wrote and directed a series of ads for Mountain Dew. The ads are about a talking goat, voiced by Tyler, who drinks Mountain Dew and loves it so much that he goes crazy, attacks his waitress and runs away. The three television spots focus on the goat’s escape from the authorities. The tagline, “Dew It” appears at the end of each spot.

While the first ad in the campaign stirred up a response about how it showcased casual violence against women, it was the third spot that caught the attention of Syracuse Professor and African American scholar, Dr. Boyce Watkins — the man who deemed the it as being “arguably the most racist ad in history,” and started the firestorm that got the ads pulled from all media outlets.

However, these ads should be celebrated rather than pulled because like most of Tyler’s film work, they are satirical and comment on the state of American gender roles, race relations, and legal system by using the classic satirical components of exaggeration, incongruity, and parody.

Satire is “a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc.” or “humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc.” Whereas a lot of advertising perpetuates racial stereotypes in subtle ways, like a Clorox commercial that insinuates a black child is too stupid to know where to go to the bathroom, these ads use humor to show our weaknesses as a society in the way we view African American culture — calling to attention our nation’s own problems with racism, rather than perpetuating them. In addition to humor, this campaign embodies three characteristics of satire to prove its
points. The first is exaggeration, which is used to “enlarge, increase, or represent something beyond normal bounds so that it becomes ridiculous and its faults can be seen,” (Satirical Techniques Definitions). The second is incongruity: “presenting things that are out of place or absurd in relation to its surroundings,” (Satirical Techniques Definitions). And lastly, is used “to imitate the techniques and/or style of some person, place, or thing in order to ridicule the original,” (Satirical Techniques Definitions).

Tyler the Creator uses exaggeration to highlight society’s misconception about black men as criminals. We see this technique being used throughout the campaign in a number of ways. In the first spot, the goat reacts to drinking the Mountain Dew in an over-the-top manner, as he beats the waitress with his hooves. The camera angle switches to the goat’s point of view as he hits the woman, further exaggerating his reckless behavior. Because Tyler, an African American man, voices the goat it is assumed that he is coded black. Also, the woman is wearing a mainly white uniform, while the goat is wearing a mainly black outfit, which further codes the goat as black and the more evil of the two, while the woman could be seen as pure or clean. Through these exaggerated actions, this scene points out America’s misinformed view of African American males as being violent men who will hurt and intimidate anybody, even women.

In the second spot, exaggeration is again used to point out society’s skewed image of black men as criminals. This ad shows the goat getting pulled over in his car by a cop, who happens to be black. The goat appears to be under the influence of a drug as he slurs his words; in this case the drug is Mountain Dew. When the policeman opens up the trunk, he finds bottles upon bottles of the soda piled up. By using the exaggerated imagery of Mountain Dew being equated to drugs, Tyler is pointing out our country’s wrongful assumptions that black men are criminals who use drugs and transport them for a living.
In the third spot, exaggeration is used to illustrate our culture’s misconstrued view of black men as criminals, and more specifically as gangsters or thugs. The ad shows the goat from the other two commercials in a police lineup filled with African American males. On the other side of the glass, the woman, who is white and the victim of the goat’s reckless beatings, is asked to identify the suspect by a white male policeman. The men in the lineup are all extremely exaggerated portrayals of America’s perception of what a thug is. They are dressed in camouflage clothing, du-rags, eye patches, flannels with only one button buttoned, sweatbands, sunglasses, grills, white tees, and wife beaters — all of which are synonymous with the stereotypical gangster image. One of the suspects is wearing a blue flannel, which is the color of the Crips gang and throws his hands up in manner often associated with gang signs. The suspects also have funny, outrageous names like “Lil Musty,” “LBOY,” “Lamoahn,” “Tiny,” and “Beyonte.” These are more excessive versions of names commonly associated with rappers or gangsters in the African American community. For example, there are hundreds of rappers whose name includes the prefix “Lil” (short for “little,”) such as Lil Wayne, Lil B, Lil Kim, Lil Durk, etc. “Tiny” is often times an ironic name for the large, big-muscled gangster in movies and TV shows. Also, Tiny can be a title in the Crips rankings. A member who has been a part of the gang for the shortest amount of time is called a T.G. (Tiny Gangster) and the next step up is an O.T.G (Original Tiny Gangster), (rapdict.org/crips). The exaggerated names, clothing, and body language of these men all point to a satirical comment on how our society views black men as gangsters and thugs.

Another satirical element Tyler the Creator uses to shine to light our society’s flaws is incongruity. Having the main character of the campaign be a talking goat is a huge incongruity in itself. This makes every scene absurd and also allows Tyler to portray serious, controversial
issues in a satirical manner. In the first spot, the people dining at the restaurant are surprised to see a talking goat eating at the restaurant. This outrageous image makes the violent actions of the goat seem funny and unrealistic—even though it is really trying to show how America views black men as violent. This relates to the idea of humor being used in satire “so that the audience is more likely to receive a message that may otherwise come across as moralistic,” (Jackson & Hogg, 655-659). If the main character of these ads were a real human being, then it would be a lot less humorous and would come across as being less satirical and more racist.

Another area where incongruity is used is in the second ad where the goat is driving a car. The fact that a goat is driving is a ludicrous and irrational idea. Also, the goat is “high” on Mountain Dew, another outrageous idea, but one that only becomes outrageous because it is a goat that is under the influence, not an actual human. In using the goat, Tyler is able to touch on important issues like the portrayal of African Americans as being drug users, criminals, and always on the run from the police, without the commercial becoming too serious and essentially racist. This large incongruity that is used throughout is a clear indication as to why this campaign is satirical in nature.

In the third spot, incongruity is used to highlight the problems with America’s prisons, specifically the disproportionate amount of black inmates compared to white inmates. The incongruity of an animal being a suspect accentuates the real-life truth that African Americans make up a larger portion of all prison inmates, than all other races. “African Americans now constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population,” (NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet). There are also six black suspects in the lineup, if you include the goat as being coded black. Whether or not this was an intentional decision by Tyler the Creator, it speaks to the fact that “African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites,”
(NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet) — a very unsettling statistic. Whereas Dr. Boyce Watkins found this section of the campaign to be the most racist, it is actually just calling to our attention the harsh truths about African Americans in prisons and making it a problem that cannot be ignored.

It is important to note that this ad also uses satire to point out the flaws in our country’s legal system. In the ad, the white man behind the glass is paying very little mind to the beaten and traumatized woman that stands next to him. Instead, he is extremely intent on catching the convict. While tapping her bruised body with a Mountain Dew bottle he says, “We’ve got them all lined up. C,mon nail this little sucker.” This points out a flaw in our legal system’s tendency to focus so much on catching the predator that we often forget about the victim — especially when the victim is a woman. When the woman objects, he keeps pushing her to point out the guilty party and says, “It’s the one with the du-rag.” There are multiple men in the lineup wearing du-rags, so it is clear that this is a shot at America’s habit of assuming the one who’s guilty is always the black man in the du-rag and baggy clothes — again referencing back to the “thug” stereotype.

The use of parody in this campaign is yet another way Tyler adds to its satirical nature and highlights America’s misconceptions about African American culture. This tactic is used most prominently in the third spot, where the goat is in the prison lineup. When the woman is asked to identify the suspect, the goat responds by saying things like “you better not snitch on a playa,” and “snitches get stiches, fool.” For one, these lines are exaggerated African American colloquialisms, which ad to the perception of blacks being stupid or uneducated, but they also reference the Stop Snitching movement. This is the effort made by witnesses to not cooperate with authorities, often out of fear that the criminal will come after them next for giving the police
information. In the ad, the goat urges the woman to keep her mouth shut and says “When I get out of here I’m gonna do (Dew) you up.” This threatening language intimidates the woman into walking out on the identification process, yelling, “I can’t do it!” The use of parody calls to our attention the real and unsettling issue of people holding back information from the police and avoiding bringing justice to criminals. “The threatening nature of the stop snitching message intimidates witnesses and erodes trust between communities and police by undermining police efforts to involve communities in preventing and combating crime,” (Police Executive Research Forum, 6). This scene brings up a few different flaws in our viewing of African American culture. For one, this movement is often associated with the African American community because of its origins in high-violence areas such as Baltimore, and it’s perpetuation in rap music. This goes back to our society’s view of all African American males as being criminals. It is also a commentary on how the Stop Snitching movement seems ridiculous; especially when a goat is the one using threats, but that it is a real problem that has negative effects on society and on our views of African Americans.

But perhaps the backlash against this campaign is the result of media’s constant portrayal of blacks as violent criminals and women as the victim – the exact kinds of media that Tyler is commenting on. When these stereotypes are perpetuated over and over again, they become ingrained in our society’s view of gender and race, which is a big problem in our culture. So when something comes out that displays these common conceptions so openly, like Tyler’s Mountain Dew campaign, people have a very strong reaction to it because they feel that it is just another way the media is carrying on these misconstrued images. But these ads are asking us to look at ourselves as a society and to examine our own flaws and the harsh truths that we often try to deny or hide away—as any satirical work tries to do. “Unlike the lyrical poet, the satirist never
soliloquizes. He is deeply ‘committed.’ He talks to people about (other) people and about what is wrong with them. His victims are real: they may belong to a transient state of affairs or be as eternal as injustice, corruption, and affection, but the satirist regards them as actual facts, as people involved in a concrete situation at the time he is writing.” (Weisgerber, 159) As satire, these ads aren’t talking to themselves; they’re talking to us.

That being said, it is understandable why so many people, including a scholar like Dr. Boyce Watkins, were offended by this campaign and quick to label it racist. It is easy to misunderstand satire. “Most satire seems to glorify the topic being criticized, but the use of satiric elements shows that the satirist actually disapproves of the subject,” (Jackson & Hogg, 655-659). If people don’t take the time to look at things through a satirical view, then many forms of art, like this campaign, come off as glorifying racist stereotypes, rather than denouncing them. People know the misconceptions and the stereotypes, but when they so overtly portrayed, people are offended. It’s easier for people to watch commercials that perpetuate racism in subtle ways, because they are not as in-your-face as satire usually is. But satire is important. It forces society to look itself in the mirror and identify its flaws. “Satire pushes boundaries and asks individuals to take stock of the ills of their society and necessary change: change of self, change of alliances, or change within society,” (Jackson & Hogg, 655-659). If more people had taken the time to look at these commercials as satire, rather than as genuinely racist, then they might have had a greater appreciation for them.
References


