



Figure 1: Van Heusen Shirts Poster. N.D

Rhetorical Analysis for a Vintage Advertisement: "The World's Smartest Shirts"

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Introduction

As a college student, I'm not familiar with a formal shirt. I used to wear it when there was a big family event like a marriage or an official event like a commencement. But back in the 1950s, most middle-class men wore formal shirts. There were a lot of people who worked wearing them. At the same period, it was a time to see signs of racism in all parts of the society. Van Heusen is a clothing company established in 1881 in Pottsville, Pennsylvania and their advertisement for their dress shirts not only benefited them but also brought huge social condemnation.

One of their controversial ads "The World's Smartest Shirts" has much visual rhetoric to analyze and reflects the era. At that time, in the United States, where World War II and the New Deal led to an explosive increase in the middle class, making America an affluent society. Behind this neat and colorful advertisement which was made to attract people, there was arrogance and ignorance.

Breaking down one of their ads

Audience/purpose

This vintage advertisement clearly targets males and salesmen wearing formal shirts daily, showing their shirts are the world's smartest. Of course, other people could buy and wear this shirt even if they are not males or salesmen. But, as we can see, all the human figures in the ad are males. All of them are trim, charming, and smiling except for one distinct person who will be examined later in the analysis.

Fashion's new favorite! Van Roll collar in Oxford cloth. New, soft, rounded collar, without stays.

The roll's the thing! Van Roll button-down spread in Oxford. Curves from neck to collar point.

College and alumni tradition! Button-down in Oxford cloth. Casual yet always dressy.

Rumor has it that even he would gladly swap his boar's teeth for a Van Heusen Oxford!

Style sensation! Van Roll collar in Oxford cloth . . . rolls as it spreads . . . for a more casual look.

*4 out of 5 men
want Oxfords
...in these new
Van Heusen styles*

Come in whites, colors and stripes. Only **\$4.50**
A new shirt free if your Van Heusen shrinks out of size.
The ties: Van Heusen Oxford Shirtmates, \$1.50
Phillips-James Corp., N.Y. 1, N.Y. Makers of Van Heusen Shirts • Sport Shirts
Ties • Pajamas • Handkerchiefs • Underwear • Suitswear • Collars
and the famous Van Heusen Century Shirt with the soft collar that won't wrinkle ever.

Van Heusen 1893 - 1958 shirts
"the world's smartest" shirts

The purpose of this ad is to promote the company's various styles of formal shirts. Each human figure has a description adding details about the style of each shirt. Plus, at the lower lefthand corner, we can find a price highlighting their shirts are inexpensive. The price of a necktie is also indicated, stimulating someone to buy a shirt and tie together. Moreover, the ad includes a special policy that if you brought a shrunk Van Heusen shirt, they would give you a new shirt for free. All these installations in the ad were designed to attract customers.

In-depth image analysis

As mentioned in the third paragraph, there is a distinct person in the ad. This ad was created in the 1950s when there was a change in the age of racial segregation, but there was a huge lack of understanding and respect for race, especially the Black race, and culture. So, at that time, offensive perspectives could be applied to the advertisement. We still use racial stereotypes as an effective medium for advertisement; however, back then it was brutal.

color

A man in the series of figures has a darker skin color. He is not smiling and is decorated with primitive tribal ornaments. The arrangement of four white men with a fashionable shirt and ties contrasts the man who didn't wear a formal shirt. In this case, colors were used to separate the person, rather than cohere. Did the ad intend to show that their shirts are only for white men? Well, it could be. But why weren't the white men compared to any other men? What is the benefit that the ad could get using a completely different race other than their own? We can presume that at that time, there must have been a social atmosphere in which putting racist elements in advertisements was witty and effective. Also, we can suspect that the intention of ridicule for an anti-racism movement is also included because it was still whites and males who ran the company and created the advertisement.

Text/Typography

"4 out of 5 men want Oxfords.... In these new Van Heusen styles." This text showed all the men in the picture wanted their shirts. We can assume that the one who didn't want their shirt is the darker skin color man. The tone of the text sounds witty, humorous, and proud like they don't know why the man didn't want it. In contrast, the small description below the darker skin color man says, "Rumor has it

that even he would gladly swap his boar's teeth for a Van Heusen Oxford!". The ad highlights the shirt's value by suggesting even a shirtless man wants their shirts adding rumors that this darker-skinned man would exchange his traditional ornaments to get a Van Heusen shirt. Why did the company put the rumor in the ad? One of the men in the image, the shirtless man, has already stated that he does not want the shirt. The discrepancy between the text and the small description suggests that the company didn't even check for linguistic contradiction. We can figure out that this ridiculous ad reflects the era of racism.

What about their phrase? "The World's Smartest". Are the people who choose their shirts the smartest people in the world? Or are the shirts chosen by the smartest people in the world? If so, is the person who didn't choose is not smart? A simple, ambiguous, and clever joke at the time.

Back in those days, racism and gender discrimination, white people's fantasies about the difference between their mainstream culture and all other cultures, and ridicule used to be applied to advertising.

Conclusion

We can tell that Van Heusen's shirt advertisement was made to encourage as many as people possible to buy their shirts. There was a time when racist elements were used as witty devices to boost the advertising effect. Over time, they gradually lost their strength and support and transformed into a completely different form, supporting all-race advertising. During that period of change, it became possible to see even a little bit how many non-white races would have had constant criticism and demands thrown into the advertising world through rhetorical analysis to stop this kind of racism.