

Marlboro man semiotics analysis



The centrepiece of this advert is a paradigm of masculinity: a hardened cowboy set against the harsh frontier of the American West. The rugged character calls back to core facets of American heritage — simply, the cowboy represents “the ideal of individualist freedom pushed into a sort of inescapable jail by the closing of the frontier and the coming of the big corporations” - (Hobsbawm, E, The Guardian, 2013). The figure presented here is more than just a man; he's a personification of deeply instilled cultural values, he's now a symbol, forming an image that strikes a chord with those who want autonomy and are nostalgic for a heavily romanticised era long since passed.

An identity has been crafted very closely around the Marlboro cigarette — combining the symbology behind the cowboy and the mutually agreed cultural understanding of what a cowboy is with the Marlboro product. Adopting the cowboy as their emblem allows Marlboro to outlast and persist through shifts in societal norms and any negativity aimed at smoking practices, “A product can be copied by a competitor; a brand is unique. A product can be quickly outdated; a successful brand is timeless.” - (Aaker, D, 1991, p 16). As with all products new lines will be

released and old ones discontinued, but the immortality of the cowboy symbol grants the campaign and the brand itself a timelessness, safeguarding the brand's fame and notoriety.

The Marlboro Man's stoic demeanour and expressions, weathered features, and strong physique convey a sense of toughness and demonstrate traditional masculinity — an often-seen caricature steeped in deep-seated conventions of authentic manhood. This visual cues us to an archetype that ties courage and stamina to puffing on a Marlboro — a very deliberate nod to the persisting metaphor the cowboy symbol upholds.

The setting itself — the cowboy casually propped against a worn timber fence, covered in horse tack and equipment — is very stereotypical and crafts familiarity with natural, rural life, almost suggesting a simpler, better way of living. This scene suggests a bond with nature, inferring wholesomeness in this way of living, coaxing viewers into embracing relaxation with post-labour smoking as part of the natural order.

Finally, the advert draws your eye to the text: "Come where the flavour is. Come to Marlboro Country." This motto draws us into a completely fictional, free-range expanse, going beyond selling cigarettes but a lifestyle, creating brand loyalty and identity by positioning Marlboro as a destination rather than just a product. It also makes smoking seem more like a natural product with a "flavour.", attempting to further add to the allure and emphasise it as more pleasurable. Following Bedbury's assertion that "consumers don't truly believe there's a huge difference between products" and the necessity for brands to "establish emotional ties" (Bedbury as cited in Klein, 2000, p 40), the sloganeering transcends any typical product marketing — it aims to link a target audience with a brand and lifestyle alike, building emotional connections through iconic symbolism and the aspirational allure of the Marlboro Country narrative.

Reference list:

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-Klein, N. (2000). No logo: no space, no choice, no jobs: taking aim at the brand bullies. London: Flamingo.