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Rhetoric at Work: The Persuasive yet Controversial Nature of PETA's  
Advertisement Campaigns

How far is too far? The entire notion of shock value has been used throughout history to gain a reaction or spark a new conversation about a certain topic. This tactic has been used by organizations and individuals alike to serve a rhetorical purpose. Whether it is simply attention-grabbing or downright disgraceful, the effect of this method is hard to ignore by the audience. Both the civic and rhetorical work that an artifact does acts as a persuasive tool to use on audiences that can elicit a strong response that may manifest either positively or negatively for the purpose of the campaign.

“If you call it medical research, you can away with murder.” This slogan was used in a 2018 campaign by PETA in an effort to educate people on the nature of how easily animal cruelty can be disguised. PETA, or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, is one of the more well-known advocates for animal rights. They use controversial, radical, and graphic imagery to deliver their message that animal experimentation is outdated and cruel. This campaign features the image of a cat with two differently-sized pupils and a mechanical device on its head. This device showcases the horrors of vivisection, or performing experimental operations on live animals for medical research. This civic artifact was constructed to reach the

audience of PETA's 2 million members and supporters as well as individuals of all ages who may be uneducated on the issues at hand. Additionally, there are various rhetorical choices that create deeper meaning that were implemented into this civic artifact. For example, the audience is able to see pain in the cat's eyes which contribute to the idea that vivisection causes unnecessary cruelty. This campaign also features the words "Experiments on animals: Switch to a better way." This draws attention to PETA's message and also suggests a positive alternative in wake of the vivisection that is portrayed in the image. Also, the second line of this phrase is highlighted in red which subconsciously tells the audience that it is significant. This rhetorical choice also helps to draw the audience's eye to the "solution" of the problem that is displayed in the image.

The creators of this civic artifact used distinct elements in order to marshall Aristotle's three appeals of pathos, ethos, and logos. Even though these appeals are not all represented equally in size or gaudiness, the audience is able to recognize their purpose. Firstly, PETA uses the appeal of pathos to elicit an emotional response. Through advertisements that spark this reaction, PETA is able to use persuasion to gain support for the idea that animal experimentation is morally flawed. In regard to this specific campaign, PETA uses the imagery of a cat that is being used against its will to serve an unknown purpose in relation to vivisection. The audience is able to see that something is wrong with the creature due to its pupils' disturbing difference in size. The word choice of the slogan directly relates to Aristotle's appeal of pathos. Creators of this campaign chose to include words like "murder" to grab the attention of the audience and focus their thoughts on the seriousness of the issue. Also, the slogan implies that the animal testing industry is "getting away" with something they should not be. This style of persuasive

writing captures the curiosity of the audiences and makes them ponder the idea of a scheme put in place by the industry. By pushing their message through shocking images and campaigns, PETA is able to garner donations and raise awareness. In turn, more people have been realizing the horrors of the animal testing industry and putting in an effort to eradicate it entirely.

Secondly, PETA uses the appeal of ethos in their campaign in a smaller, more subtle manner.

PETA introduces credibility and trust with the audience of the campaign by placing their logo in the top right of the advertisement itself. By openly sponsoring the message that they are sending to the public, PETA is using ethos to show that the campaign can be trusted. Logically, a large, well-known organization like PETA would not just sponsor any message that relates to animal cruelty. The fact that PETA crafted this specific campaign and attached their name to it shows that they strongly believe in its accuracy. Lastly, PETA uses the appeal of logos within the actual content and wording of the slogan. After the shocking claim of “If you call it ‘medical research,’ you can get away with murder,” PETA offers a logical alternative to vivisection in its entirety.

This statement brings attention to the fact that substitute methods of research and experimentation exist that do not involve animals. The reason animal testing is so popular within the industry can be attributed to its cost efficiency and endless supply. PETA is able to deliver a clear, persuasive message in the form of this campaign through the varying implementation of pathos, ethos, and logos.

The kairos of PETA’s ideology is directly related to the fact that cruelty within animal testing has existed for years. Rhetorically speaking, there is a unified commonplace that exists regarding the acceptance that animal cruelty within vivisection has been carried out in the past. To understand the importance of this campaign, the audience must register the fact that countless

individuals believe that all inhumane practices have been abolished in modern times. PETA's entire ideology is centered around the context that animal cruelty still persists to this day, however hidden it may be. The world that PETA is working towards is considered to be an unachievable utopia to many. This organization has countless enemies that do not agree with their ideologies in both the economic and regular world. The extent of equality that PETA calls for is considered controversial because they tend to place animals on the same pedestal as human beings. The creators of this campaign try to create this reality by educating their audience on what they believe to be right. PETA's shocking campaigns have been given publicity in the media and other outlets. In recent years, the conversation around cruelty within the animal testing industry has been shed light on in various countries due to their efforts.

To serve as a contrast to this grounded civic artifact, one may introduce the highly-questionable campaign that PETA attempted to launch for the high volume of viewers during the 2020 Super Bowl. This short video entitled "Don't Stand for Injustice" features a variety of cartoon animals going down on one knee as the national anthem is hummed in the background. At the end of the video, a girl is pictured going down on one knee in front of a bald eagle. The eagle does the same motion as the video reaches its culmination. The words "Respect is the right of every living being" are shown on the screen along with the hashtag "#EndSpeciesism." The ad was allegedly inspired by 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick who took a knee to protest police brutality against African American individuals. Media outlets refused to run the campaign on television due to its controversial content. However, PETA posted it to social media anyways and were immediately met with outrage. The ad was extremely offensive and many people stated that it mocked the Black Lives Matter movement and the entire

conversation that surrounded the issue of police brutality. It is important to note that this artifact targeted a massive audience because of PETA's intention to have it played on such a large platform. The rhetorical choices of this ad were intentionally contentious to gain a bigger response. Many felt that this ad campaign was insensitive and tone-deaf, especially in light of today's social climate. Despite the controversial nature of this campaign, the audience is still able to clearly identify the effect of the rhetorical choices and their purpose.

The creators of this disputed ad used different elements to marshall Aristotle's three appeals of pathos, ethos, and logos. Similarly to the previous civic artifact, these three appeals are not all used in the same quantity in this campaign. However, the reception of this campaign was much different than the vivisection-centered advertisement. Firstly, the appeal of pathos is used to a great extent. PETA's goal was to elicit an emotional response by using Kaepernick's actions as "inspiration." By drawing on the emotional weight of the social issue of police brutality, PETA's ad ushered in an immense amount of anger due to the sensitivity of the topic. They openly placed animal rights on the same level as human rights. This action was also interpreted as racist because of PETA's comparison of their ideology of "All Species Matter" to the Black Lives Matter movement. Next, the creators of this campaign applied the appeal of ethos by flashing their logo and openly sponsoring the content of the video. This is prevalent because it is the same method that PETA used in the anti-vivisection campaign. Lastly, PETA used the appeal of logos by comparing "speciesism" to racism. Despite the clearly erroneous nature of this ideology, the rhetorical work of this artifact and its "logic" is somehow justified in PETA's mind.

The kairos of attempting to release this ad during such a pivotal time regarding the social and political climate of today spoke to the insensitivity of the organization. Directly on their website, PETA states, “For our 2020 Super Bowl ad, we envisioned a world where respect is the right of every being, paying homage to Colin Kaepernick and movements rejecting injustice. That, apparently, was too much for the NFL to handle—it reportedly put pressure on FOX to snub the anti-speciesist commercial.” Here, PETA describes their ideal world which contradicts how their advertisement came across to the public. This entire situation highlights the importance that the rhetorical work of a civic artifact has on meaning and reception of the message. It is commonplace in today’s world to stand for what is right regarding the treatment of African American people by the police force. The conversation regarding this movement takes precedence over the term of “speciesism” created by PETA.

Over time, shock value has served as one of PETA’s most effective weapons yet has also backfired in the form of their greatest mistakes. The persuasive intention of any given campaign is completely dependent on the audience’s reception and feelings towards it. The more outrageous the content, the more likely there is to be an overwhelming response, either positive or negative. It is necessary to analyze each aspect and rhetorical work that a civic artifact is doing in order to understand the reactionary style of pushback from the audience. Through the process of breaking down the idea of shock value to analyze content at a base level, the audience is able to decide for themselves what is the right thing to do, regardless of the powerful tactics of persuasion that have been set in place.