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**Controversial Advertising:
Case study of United Colors of Benetton &
American Apparel**

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Abstract:

The advertising industry has long used controversial imagery to catch the public's attention. In this academic essay, I will be looking at two fashion brands, United Colors of Benetton and American Apparel, reputed for their shocking imagery, to explore the marketing reasons and ideology behind it. It will be analysing different adverts and the semiotic within, to understand the type of messages they both send to their own audience. Both brands use different semiotic structures, one based on social awareness, the other one on sexual connotations. This essay will also explore whether controversial advertising can be effective, and if so, how?

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Introduction

The advertising industry has long used controversial imagery to catch the public's attention, and create more publicity around the product or brand shown. Our society is constantly exposed to ads, which appear through many different mediums and places, like on social media, in newspapers, on television, even in public places like on the side of a bus. Its purpose is to communicate and promote the qualities of a product or a brand to a specific public (Crow 84). This is done through different tactics and strategies, but mainly relies on the use of a visual language, a theory known as semiotics. In this academic essay, I will be looking at two fashion brands, United Colors of Benetton and American Apparel, reputed for their controversial advertising, to explore the marketing reasons and ideology behind it, as well as the type of messages they both send to their own audience.

In order to understand the importance of semiotics in advertising it is necessary to look at its origins. From the Greek word 'semeion' meaning sign, this science derives from the works of the Swiss professor of linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure, and parallelly, of the American theorist Charles Sanders Peirce in the early 1900s, who both believed that the elements of the sign or symbol can then be turned into a message (Crow 13). David Crow explains in *Visible Signs* how we comprehend the science: "there are three main areas that form what we understand as semiotics: the signs themselves, the way they are organized into systems, and the context in which they appear." (14). A good example is the traffic signs: composed of pictorial symbols, they are universally recognized and identifiable (Serna and Ruichek 78138). However, Saussure and Peirce's ideas are at a linguistic level. For semiotics in advertising, there is another figure to look at, Roland Barthes, a French theorist who applies semiotics in a visual communication context through imagery, patterns, objects, and text (Crow 62).

Barthes' approach to semiotics could be considered the opposite of Saussure's theory, explaining in his book *Elements of Semiology*: "linguistic is not a part of the general science of signs, [...] it is semiology which is a part of linguistics" (11). In this same book, he also explores the idea of

denotation and connotation to describe how we interpret signs. According to Barthes, there are two levels of signification: the first order is the literal meaning, the denotation, while the second order is connected to an interpretation, the connotation (89-91). In the book *Mythologies*, his essay *Soap-powders and Detergents* looks at the example of the detergents Omo and Persil, as well as its advertising; “These products have been in the last few years the object of such massive advertising that they now belong to a region of French daily life which the various types of psychoanalysis would do well to pay some attention to [...]” (31). He describes how the ads both use the word “white” to showcase how efficient the powders are to clean clothes. The Persil’s ads show a comparison of two clothes to illustrate how whiter they appear if washed with their product (Fig 1). In figure 1, there are two couples walking in different directions, one of them looking back at the woman’s white dress. There is the phrase “It’s a knockout!” on the top right of the image, as well as a text toward the bottom iterating the story and promotes the brand Persil. This would be the denotation level: the viewer sees an advert with an illustration and text, it is straightforward. When analysing the advert, we can see that the couple looking back seem envious, especially the woman, who perhaps envies the perceived confidence of the other woman who uses Persil. In the text, some of the words are written in capital letters, such as “SEE IT FOR YOURSELF”, “WHITENESS = CLEANNESS” and “NO SCUM”. In this situation, the viewer would prefer to be the couple with the clean white dress, and therefore know what product would be best at not only cleaning but giving the whitest result. That would be the connotation level due to the interpretation the viewer will have taken from it. Barthes explains in the essay: “they involve the consumer in a kind of direct experience of the substance, make him the accomplice of a liberation rather than a mere beneficiary of a result” (32).

If we follow Barthes’ theory, we realise that advertising depends on the viewer’s reading of it, and therefore has an important role in this exchange. Advertisers have various options on how to sell their product to their audience. As seen with Barthes, they can offer some form of experience or storytelling. Advertisements are not only informational, they also create different emotions which are projected to the viewer like fear, humour, nostalgia, and many more (Vezina and Paul 177). For instance, a burglar alarm company would perhaps use fear as an emotion in their adverts to convince the spectator that in order to be safe, one might consider using its product to protect themselves. Controversial advertising uses this technique, with shocking imagery or choosing

specific topics, to create an emotional response from the public. Also known as shock advertising, it is defined by attempting to “surprise an audience by deliberately violating norms for societal values and personal ideals” (Dahl et al 269), which creates feelings of anger, disgust or even fear. Sometimes this can lead to the ban of the advert itself. Though it may seem paradoxical, the idea behind shock advertising is that it is effective in catching the viewers’ attention (Agrawal), and ends up being debated, creating more conversation around it, therefore providing it with a bigger platform. There are different categories of shock advertising, perhaps the most popular ones being sexual and social political adverts.

The fashion industry is prone to using controversial advertising as a marketing technique, typically using highly sexualized imagery or unrealistic beauty standards (Smith). Designer Tom Ford is renowned for using this tactic, creating adverts for his own house-brand (Walker). Figure 2 shows the *Tom Ford for men* perfume advert from 2007, a highly sexual and provocative photo, where the bottle is in between a model’s breasts. In this case, the use of the model is to represent desire and arousal; she is naked, her mouth is open, imitating an orgasm. She is hiding her breasts behind her hands, her fingers bearing bright red nail polish, matching her lipstick, a colour associated with passion. Half her face is cut out of the shot, you can’t see her eyes, you cannot identify her, she is no longer a person. The placement of the bottle underlines the sexual effect it has on the woman. As this is a men’s perfume, the use of the woman is purely for a fetishist purpose, and to satisfy the male gaze. In his documentary series *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger explains the following: “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognize for oneself. A nude has to be seen as an object in order to be a nude”. The semiotics behind these sexualised campaigns are straightforward: the models or parts of their body are objectified, there are heavy sexual connotations, and encourages desire and voyeurism. This will be explored further in chapter 2 in relation to the advertising campaigns of American Apparel.

As well as sexualized images, there exists another form of controversial advertising, which revolves around social awareness and current global events. Also known as ideology ad, a term coined by S. P. Sethi in his book *Advocacy Advertising and large corporations*, it does not sell a product, a brand or service (Bennett, 22). James Bennett explains “(...) the ideology ad makes a claim for an interest or an idea, especially for a particular social program or philosophy against a rival idea or interest or program.” (22). We can see this with the United Colours of Benetton

advertises in the 1980s and 1990s, that concentrate on showing social and political issues society faces, such as racism, terrorism, the AIDS crisis and more. The brand was one of the forerunners to use a combination of marketing and social reflection (Berger 247). We will be exploring this in Chapter 1. Other brands have followed this social awareness style of campaigning, like *Nike's Equality* campaign in 2017: the ad, shot in black and white, narrated by Michael B. Jordan and featuring several famous African American figures such as LeBron James, Serena Williams, and Alicia Keys, encourages equality, justice, and respect to all (Fig 3). Here the semiotics can be analysed with the celebrities, demanding for a fairer society. The black and white shots also give a feeling of a powerful scene, as well as timelessness. The advert came out in February, to coincide with the Black History Month, as the company released their annual BHM collection, which supports organisations that help youth and communities (O'Brien). Many brands show their support for causes and associate with events like this. A popular trend is changing the colours of a logo to coincide, like to the LGBT+ flag during pride month. Yet, this can often be seen as ungenue, and done merely for marketing reasons.

Having explained their background and role, the remainder of this study shall consider how marketing tries to create controversial adverts that still feel genuine to the brand. It will look at two different fashion brands that use shocking imagery, and shall explore and analysis whether controversial advertising can be effective, and if so, how?

It's a knockout!

Have you jumped to the truth yet?

LOOK AT POOR JILL on the left! She looks as if she's right out of the running. But it's a different story with Helen. She (clever girl!) knows how many beans make five.

She's one of the 7 million women who have jumped to the fact that Persil washes whiter. (That's more than half the housewives in the country!)

Are you one of them?

SEE FOR YOURSELVES!

You see, they've tried all the other washing powders, and comparing results has only made

them more certain than ever that Persil really does wash whiter. That's why more and more women are asking for Persil every week!

WHITENESS = CLEANNES

There's no magic about Persil whiteness—it's pure and simple cleanness. Those millions of tiny oxygen bubbles certainly shift the dirt out!

A Persil-washed sheet is *white* because it's clean.

And—Persil forms **NO SCUM** even in hard water.

COLOURED, TOO

Because Persil's secret is *cleanness*, you'll find your coloureds will come up flashing bright in Persil's rich lather. Watch the difference after you've used Persil for all your wash. Watch the dirt come rolling out with Persil's *thorough, searching* lather.

And Persil makes woollens softer and silks silkier, too. Use Persil for **ALL** your wash!

PERSIL washes whiter!

22 PER 1224-431-120

Fig 1: Persil washes Whiter advert, 1951. Unilever plc and group. My Learning. Online. Web. 31 Mar. 2022.

Persil's "washes whiter" advertising showcased how efficient their product was.



Fig 2: Terry Richardson, *Tom Ford for Men*. Advertisement. Pinterest. Online. Web. 28 Mar. 2022.

This is one of the many controversial adverts used by designer Tom Ford.



Fig 3: *Nike | Equality*. Campaigns of the world. Feb 2017. YouTube. Web. 31 Mar. 2022.

LeBron James is one of the iconic figures appearing in the *Nike's Equality* campaign.

Chapter I: United Colors of Benetton

Origins

The company Benetton was founded in 1965 by the four siblings of the Benetton family in Italy (Mantle 57). Thanks to an ability to change the colours of their garment through a new method of dyeing, the brand managed to impose itself and became a huge financial success over the next thirty years (56, 57). In 2002, it was reported that the company was present in about 120 countries, with over 5500 shops worldwide (Pagnucco Salvemini 15). At its beginning, the marketing approach was to focus on a more conventional style of advertising, with its location set in Italy's typical landscapes, such as the in front of the tower of Pisa (Fig 4). The semiotics in figure 4 relate to the location, and help us associate the brand with its origin, as well inciting the viewer to think about travel, Pisa being a touristic destination. Carlo Mazzaro directed the campaigns, with the idea to market the brand primarily to a youthful public, by using girls and boys (16). Laura Oswald explains in *Marketing Semiotics* that consumers buy products to either embellish or extend their identity (17). Therefore, if they see someone who looks similar to them in adverts, either in age, sex or even physically, it will be easier to relate to the person. With the expansion of the company, the Benetton group needed to change their style of marketing that could compete with bigger brands, especially American ones like Esprit and Jordache (Mantle 127). Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani was hired as the creative director of advertising in 1983 to rebrand the image of Benetton (Pagnucco Salvemini 28). Toscani had studied at the art school *Zurich Kunstgewerbeschule*, which its various teaching and ideologies influenced his work, mainly around different themes of sociology and anthropology such as racism, politic and consumption (9, 10). He had previously worked for companies such as *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines, though he did not feel fulfilled in creating stereotypical fashion photography (10, 11). Toscani created his first scandalous advert when working with his friend Maurizio Vitali for his jean apparel *Jesus Jeans* in 1972; the photo taken featured the bottom of a woman wearing jean shorts, with a belt where the brand's name appears. In the middle of the shot, as well as the model's bottom, appears the

phrase “Chi mi ama, me segua”, meaning “He who loves, me follows me” (Fig 5). The use of the semiotic is defined by the photo as well as the phrase, which is openly blasphemous, but with an undeniable touch of humour. For Toscani, the idea was to show how the Church, capitalism and sex were all connected (Mantle 110, 111). This was only the beginning of Toscani’s shocking adverts; during his time at Benetton, he created some of the most famous and controversial campaigns in the world of advertising (Cope & Maloney, 36).

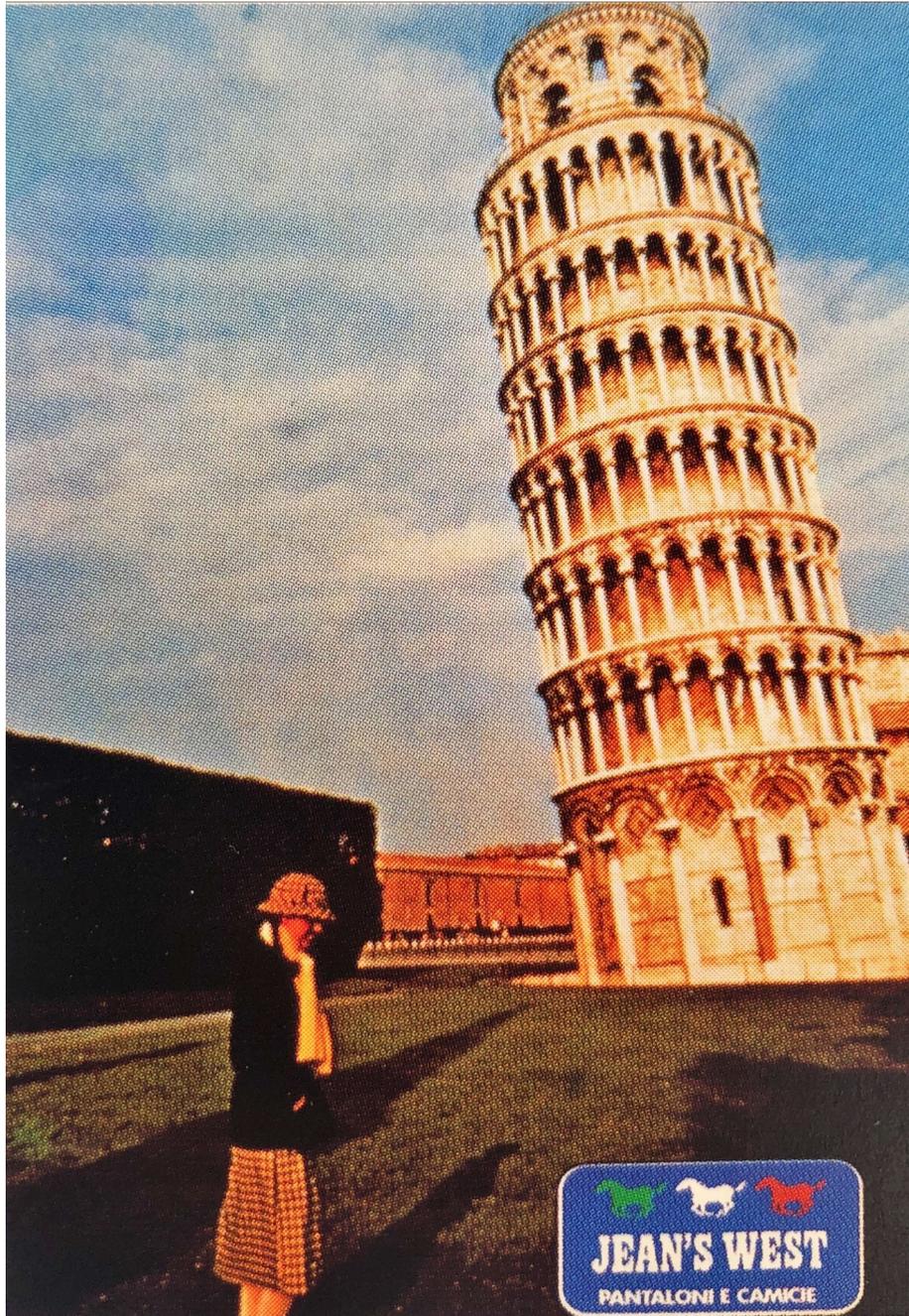


Fig 4: *Benetton campaign*. 1966-83. Advertisement. Pisa. Pagnucco Salvemini, Lorella. *United Colors: the Benetton campaigns*. London: Scriptum Editor, 2002. 16. Print.

One of the original Benetton campaign advert before Toscani became the creative director of advertising of the brand.



Fig 5: Oliviero Toscani. *Jesus Jeans*. 1972. Advertisement. Oliviero Toscani Bazaar online. Web. 28. Mar. 2022.

The *Jesus Jeans* was Toscani's first controversial advert.

Sociology

Toscani's main appeal is sociology. It is therefore not surprising that, when working for Benetton he seized the opportunity to include various social and political themes. For him, it is important to "not give the people what they want but give them what they need" (OLIVIERO TOSCANI - BE UNIQUE - Part 1/2 | London Real). The idea behind this is to shake the current views and beliefs of social consciousness (Berger 250). At first Toscani's shots were tame: he introduced the signature brand's advert with the white background and had the figures look in the shot. The first few shots involved children, either wearing different national costumes, representing unity and peace (Fig 6). An idealised vision of the world. The semiotic system is easy to grasp: children represent innocence and hope, and their different ethnicities reinforces the symbol of humanity. Known as *All the Colors* campaign, it became a success, even winning the *Avenue* award in the Netherlands, leading to the *United Colors* campaign, which ended up becoming the logo and theme of the company (Mantle 130-133). Gradually, Toscani started to head towards more taboo subjects, like homosexuality, politics, religion and even disease. These campaigns would not show any clothing from Benetton, creating a new semiotic communication that had not been seen in fashion advertisement before, strictly revolving around sociology.

Among the first controversial adverts was the 1991 *Newborn baby* (Fig 7), which showed a baby girl named Giusy, moments after being born, held by either a doctor or nurse, with her umbilical cord still attached, covered with blood and mucus (Mantle 193). Toscani believed that the image would reinforce the "united" message of Benetton (195). But the photo, which captures the essence of life, was banned in several countries, considered too graphic and repellent (Pagnucco Salvemini 50). Nonetheless, it would know its own success: it would win the Swiss prize from the *Société Général d'Affichage*, be exhibited in Holland and become the cover of Benetton's first magazine (Fig 8) *COLORS* (194). The magazine was founded in 1991 by Toscani and Tibor Kalman, with the idea to create a multi-cultured publication that would address various themes and tell stories from around the world (Muraben). Kalman, a graphic designer who worked as the creative director of the magazine *Interview*, was recruited by Toscani to set up Benetton's new publication (Cullen). The themes addressed in the magazine were generally the same as the ones found in the Benetton adverts, sharing the same photos, and therefore the same semiotics

revolving around these heavy subjects. According to Kristi S. Lekies and Bernadette Whitworth, they believed that “a semiotic perspective can contribute to a deeper understanding of human-nature interactions, including their emotional dimension” (Nichols 155). Which was Toscani’s aim through his different images and his new magazine.

Many of Toscani’s campaigns have been considered exploitative of other’s pain, such as the photo *The Face of Aids*, taken by Therese Frare and published in *LIFE magazine* in 1990. In it, we see a man, David Kirby, dying of AIDS in his bed, surrounded by his family (Genova). The virus which arises dramatically in the early 80s in the States and later in the rest of the World, killed thousands of people, and was considered a “gay disease” as it seemed to affect mainly homosexual men (Nall). The photo (Fig 9), that became a symbol of the disease, is quite shocking: Kirby is incredibly thin, his gaze seems elsewhere, as if he was already dead. He is cradled by his father, who appears in deep sorrow. Next to him is his sister, holding her daughter in comfort as they both look at him emotionally. While this is not a staged or designed photo, the semiotics are clear: the viewer becomes a witness of the epidemic happening in this period, watching like this grieving family the effects of the virus; there is grievance and a sense of hopelessness, and the unsettling presence of death. The photo has also been compared to a Pieta from the 17th century, where Kirby is like Jesus Christ dying in the arms of his parent (Pagnucco Salvemini 91). Toscani will use this very photo two years later for a Benetton campaign, with the permission of Kirby’s family. While the brand saw this as being altruistic and shedding light on an issue many would empathise with, some believed it was using Kirby’s suffering as a means for profit (Genova). Regarding people’s anger concerning the use of shocking imagery, Toscani gives this answer: “People shouldn’t be shocked by an image, they should be shocked by reality. You should be aware that not everyone thinks about shock in the same way that you do.” (Cope and Maloney 36). It seems that at times, Toscani is taking two roles: the creative director but also the journalist, reporting to the public on the current social issues. For him, it is important to show global issues: “I use photography to express my vision of what’s going on. I’m a witness of my time.” (“OLIVIERO TOSCANI - BE UNIQUE - Part 1/2 | London Real”). Ahmadgoli and Yazdanjoo state that photojournalism uses a social semiotic system which helps in “highlighting the crucial role visual images (...) and reinforcing ideological messages” (qtd In Durrani), which is the same structure used in the Benetton’s campaigns.



Fig 6: Oliviero Toscani. *Benetton campaign*. 1984. Advertisement. Pagnucco Salvemini, Lorella. *United Colors: the Benetton campaigns*. London: Scriptum Editor, 2002. 29. Print.

The first Benetton campaigns directed by Toscani involved children of different ethnicities, as a way to represent unity.



Fig 7: Oliviero Toscani. *Newborn baby*. 1991. Advertisement. Vogue online. Web. 30 Apr. 2022.

The advert was banned in several countries as it was considered too graphic.



Fig 8: Oliviero Toscani. *COLORS 1: It's a baby!*. Magazine cover. 1991. Benetton Group online. Web. 27 Apr. 2022.

COLORS was founded in 1991 by Oliviero Toscani and Tibor Kalman.



Fig 9: Therese Frare, concept by Oliviero Toscani. *The Face of AIDS*. Benetton Campaign. 1992. Advertisement. Pagnucco Salvemini, Lorella. *United Colors: the Benetton campaigns*. London: Scriptum Editor, 2002. 91. Print.

The photo of David Kirby dying of AIDS became a symbol of the disease.

Art

Is Toscani's work art or mere provocation? In an interview given in 2018 with Brian Rose, the photographer explains that it is both: "All art has to provoke something otherwise it's not art". ("OLIVIERO TOSCANI - BE UNIQUE - Part 1/2 | London Real") The social themes Toscani chooses to represent in the Benetton campaigns reflects the influence of Dadaism while at art school (Pagnucco Salvemini 10). Dada is an art movement which appeared during the First World War. It rejects the concept of establishment, rules, bourgeoisie and even art itself; Tristan Tzara, one of the father figures of the movement wrote in his *Dada Manifesto* in 1918: "Dada was born of a need for independence, of a distrust towards unity. Those who are with us preserve their freedom. We recognize no theory" (Danchev 138). Toscani rejected the use of having a marketing team to instruct him how to do the campaigns, and in doing so applied the ideology of Dadaism ("OLIVIERO TOSCANI - BE UNIQUE - Part 1/2 | London Real"). One figure of the art movement that inspired him was Marcel Duchamp. A controversial artist, renowned for challenging society and art, he is also known for his "readymades", which consists of reappropriating a mass-produced object and signing it (Ades et al 146). Though Toscani has taken many shots for the campaigns himself, he has also used photos taken by others, such as *The Face of Aids*, seen earlier. These photos are authentic and give the viewer a realistic image of current issues and are in their own way "readymades".

As well as Duchamp, Toscani was influenced by another figure in art: Andy Warhol. Known for his Pop art works, Warhol had previously worked in advertising as a commercial illustrator before becoming one of the most successful artists of the 20th century (McShine 13, 14). Most of his work would revolve around popular culture, from celebrities to commercial everyday objects like his *Campbell's Soup Cans* collection, but also on graver social themes originating from the news like accidents, death, and global tragedy (16). These would be part of his *Death and Disaster* series, and would feature car crashes, suicide, and capital punishment (Curtis). There are also some similarities with the pop art artist and Duchamp, with the idea of reappropriating and reproducing the same visual material (Mcshine 21), which Toscani himself also does. Looking at both Toscani and Warhol's work, their careers echo one another: Warhol brought the world of advertising into his art, while Toscani did the opposite. Furthermore, both used the same subjects

for their work, sometimes the exact same; Toscani's campaign featuring the electric chair from 1992 (Fig 10) which seems almost identical to Warhol's *Electric Chair* series from 1963 (Fig 11). In both images, the central piece is the instrument of execution, and there is no human presence. Already quite a sinister symbol, the emptiness around the object gives the viewer a sense of void and helplessness. Both men take a position against the capital punishment, thanks to a subtle use of semiotics, found in the chair and large empty space, creating a dehumanizing atmosphere. It can also be compared to protest art, as it is considered a form of activism through craftsmanship and engages with the public on what they consider as an important issue (Corbett).

This leads to another question; whether advertising can be considered an art form at all? It is considered a creative field that gathers different art forms such as graphic design, photography or illustration and art direction. But due to the marketing and commercial aspects of the advertising industry, it creates a blurred line: Toscani did not consider himself a salesman, but rather an artist using the medium of advertising, and challenging its traditional language (Berger 245, 251). This rings true with the lack of any clothing from the brand being visible in the campaigns, instead focusing on social awareness themes. When asked if he considers advertising as an art form, Toscani believes it can be: "(...) art needs power and power needs art. Industry needs imagery and imagery needs industry to express itself" (Cope and Maloney 36). Nevertheless, it can still be argued that the campaigns' main function is marketing, and therefore, for making profit, mainly due to the green logo found on the side of the images. In his book *Promotional Culture*, Andrew Wernick that advertising: "(...) belongs, rather, to that special branch of communication arts the ancient world called rhetoric" and is neither part of the art or information domain (27). Regarding Benetton, the company would be making profits, but Toscani could create his artwork, therefore creating advertising and art not mutually exclusive.

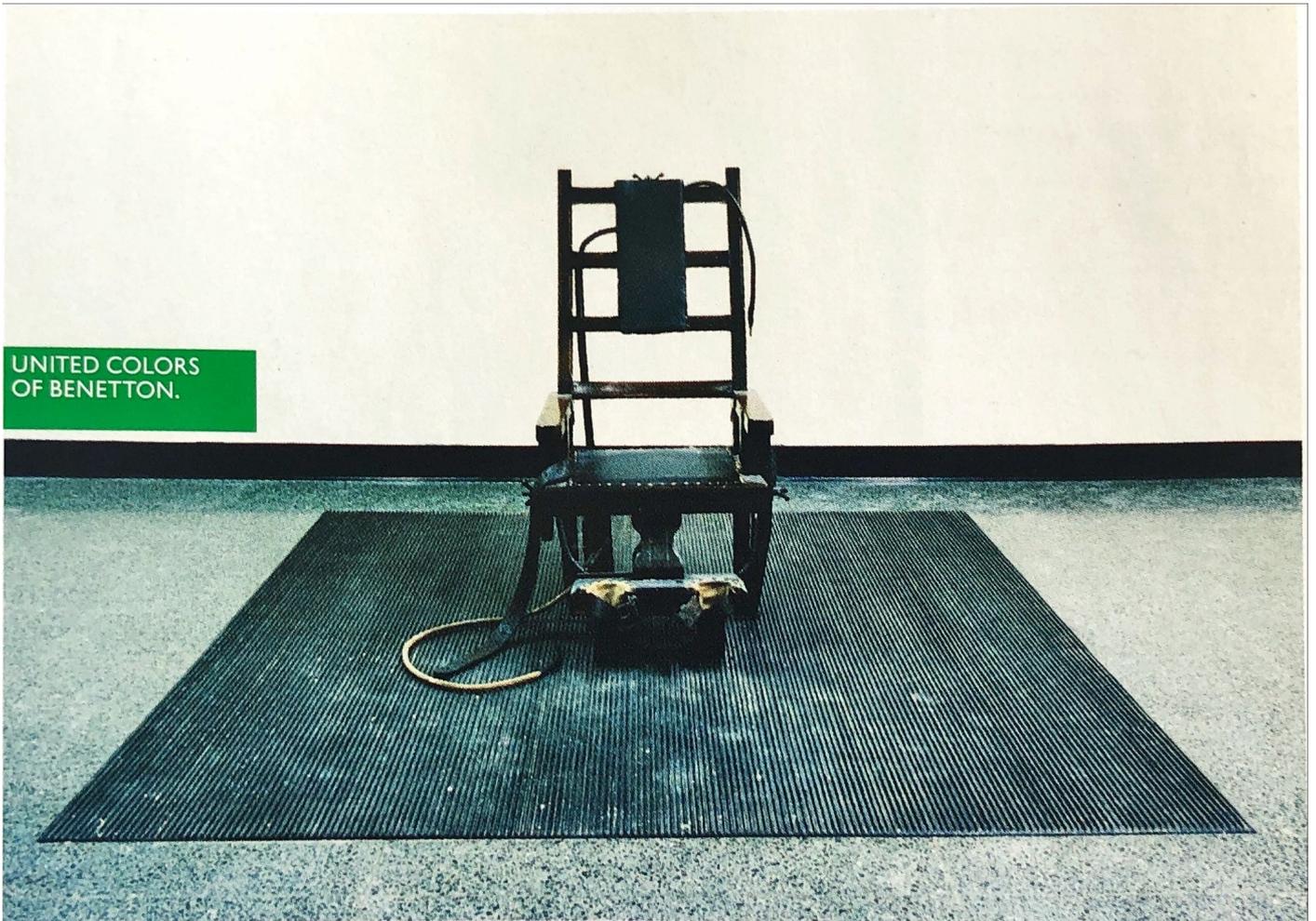


Fig 10: Lucinda Delvin, concept by Oliviero Toscani. *Benetton campaign*. 1992. Advertisement. Pagnucco Salvemini, Lorella. *United Colors: the Benetton campaigns*. London: Scriptum Editor, 2002. 89. Print.

With this advert, Toscani is taking a position against capital punishment.

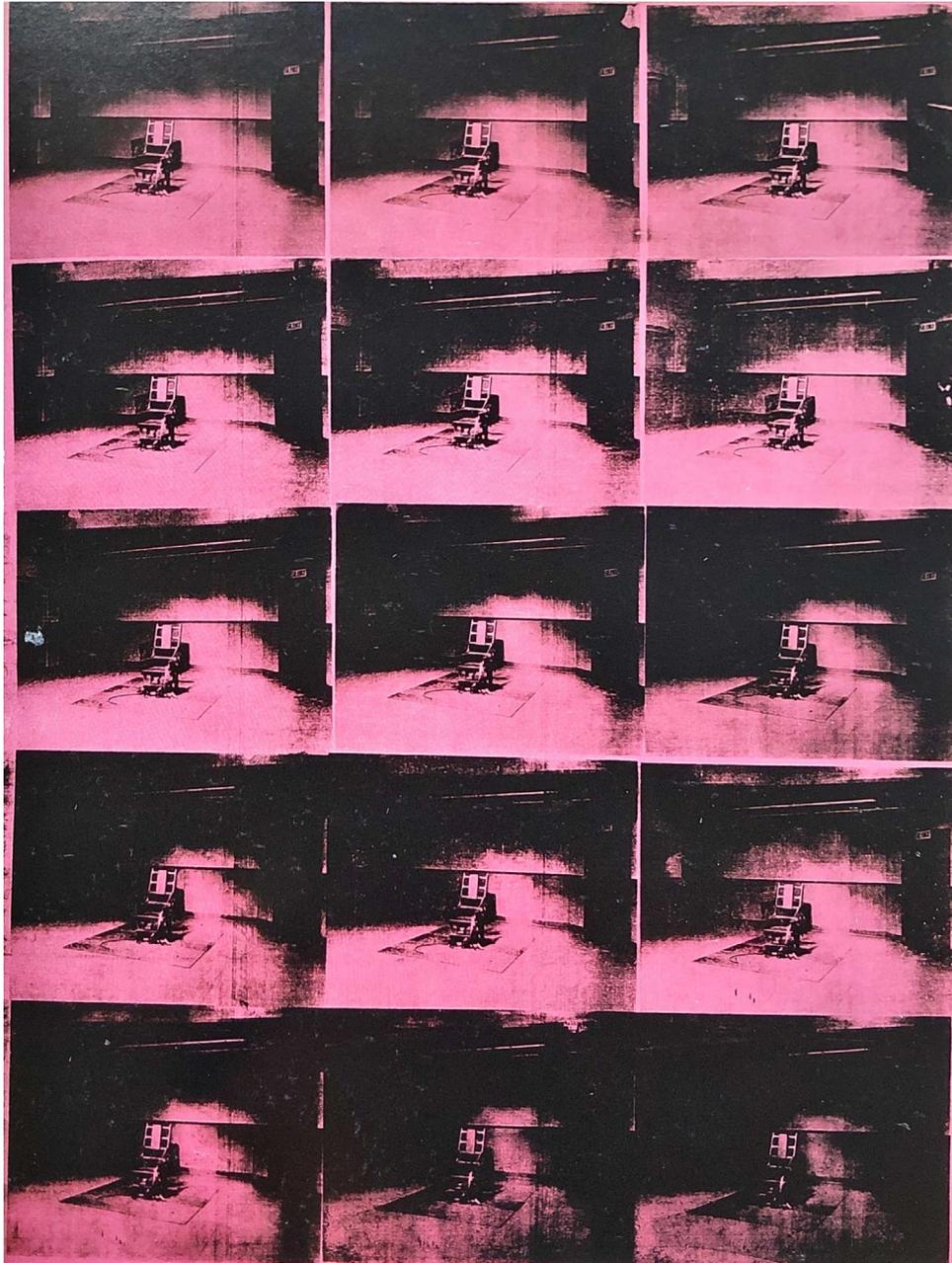


Fig 11: Andy Warhol. *Lavender Disaster*. 1963. Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas. 269.2 x 208 cm. The Menil Collection, Houston. McShine, Kyanaston, et al. *Andy Warhol : A Retrospective*. New York : Museum of Modern Art, 1989. 275. Print.

Lavender Disaster is part of the *Electric Chair* series by Warhol.

Outcome

It is undeniable that Toscani revolutionised the world of advertisement. Compared to other creative directors of advertising, he differentiates himself by refusing conventional strategies of marketing. Instead, he uses this platform to address world issues, which not only gives the company Benetton an ethos, associated with a social political stance, but also permits him to pursue his art. As he said in his interview with Rose: “Humanity is the subject. Humanity is the object. Humanity is the task (...) it’s always been for art. Any kind of art is human...”. But his *Sentenced to Death* (Fig 12) project created such outrage, that it would mark the end of his 18 years collaboration with Benetton (Pagnucco Salvemini 130). The campaign, composed of portraits of prisoners sentenced to death in the USA, as well as interviews, created a complex semiotic analysis; the sad and hopeless expressions of the prisoners would have viewers feel compassion towards them, as part of the connotation analysis, seen with Barthes. However, this interpretation might differ once they read the description of the prisoner, placed in small on the side of the advert, with the crime they committed, usually murder. This not only created division due to the subject of death penalty, but had the State of Missouri file a lawsuit against Benetton for false claims and misrepresented the purpose of these interviews (Day). Though the matter was later settled, Benetton and Toscani parted after this.

Toscani did not see this as a failure: “When I left in 2000, the brand was labelled one of the top five well-known labels in the world. The company was an incredible economical success” (“OLIVIERO TOSCANI - BE UNIQUE - Part 1/2 | London Real”). Even without Toscani, Benetton still sought the use of social shocking advert and similar semiotic structure, due to financial difficulties and facing stronger competition from other brands; they produced the *UNHATE* campaign in 2011, that consisted of photoshop images showing global leader kissing each other on the mouth, like Pope Benedict XVI and Iman Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayeb seen in figure 13 (Passariello and Clark). The concept behind the adverts was to create a vision of tolerance and understanding one another (“Benetton’s controversial ad campaign”). The deputy chairman of Benetton Group, Alessandro Benetton, said that “it was inspired by a kiss caught on camera between Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and East German communist leader Erich Honecker in 1979” (Passariello and Clark). The campaign shows how important and revolutionary Toscani’s advertising style was to

Benetton, who imitated it when in need. Benetton ended up rehiring Toscani in 2017, before once again parting ways in 2020 due to insensitive remarks about the collapse of the Morandi Bridge in Genoa (Povoledo). He left behind a long legacy of controversial advertising, that was unique, as well as a sometimes misunderstood semiotic framework.

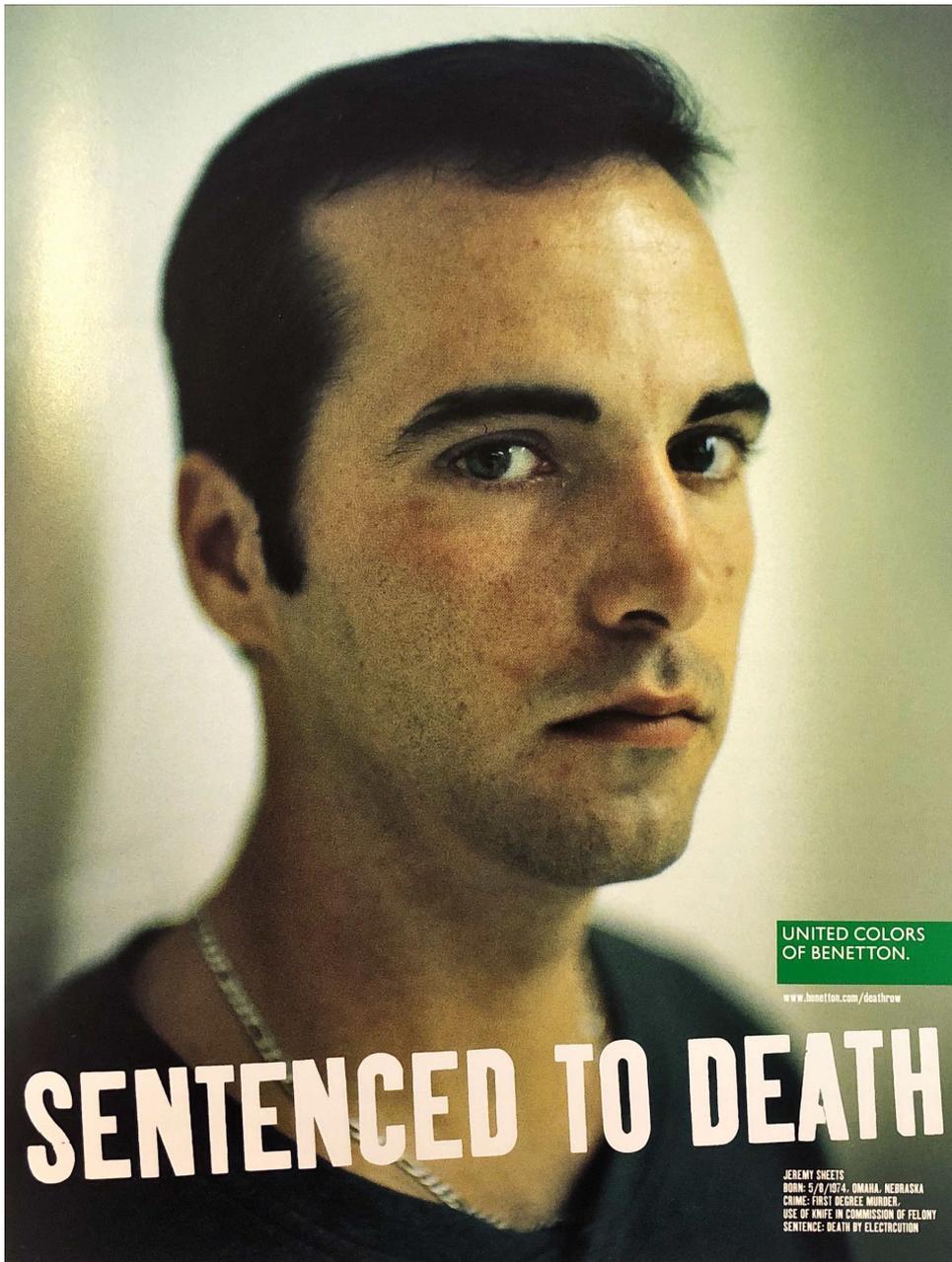


Fig 12: Oliviero Toscani. *Benetton campaign*. 2000. Advertisement. Pagnucco Salvemini, Lorella. *United Colors: the Benetton campaigns*. London: Scriptum Editor, 2002. 155. Print.

Toscani's *Sentenced to Death* project created such outrage, that it would mark the end of his 18 years collaboration with Benetton.



Fig 13: *UNHATE* campaign. 2011. Advertisement. Campaign Live online. Web. 24 Apr. 2022.

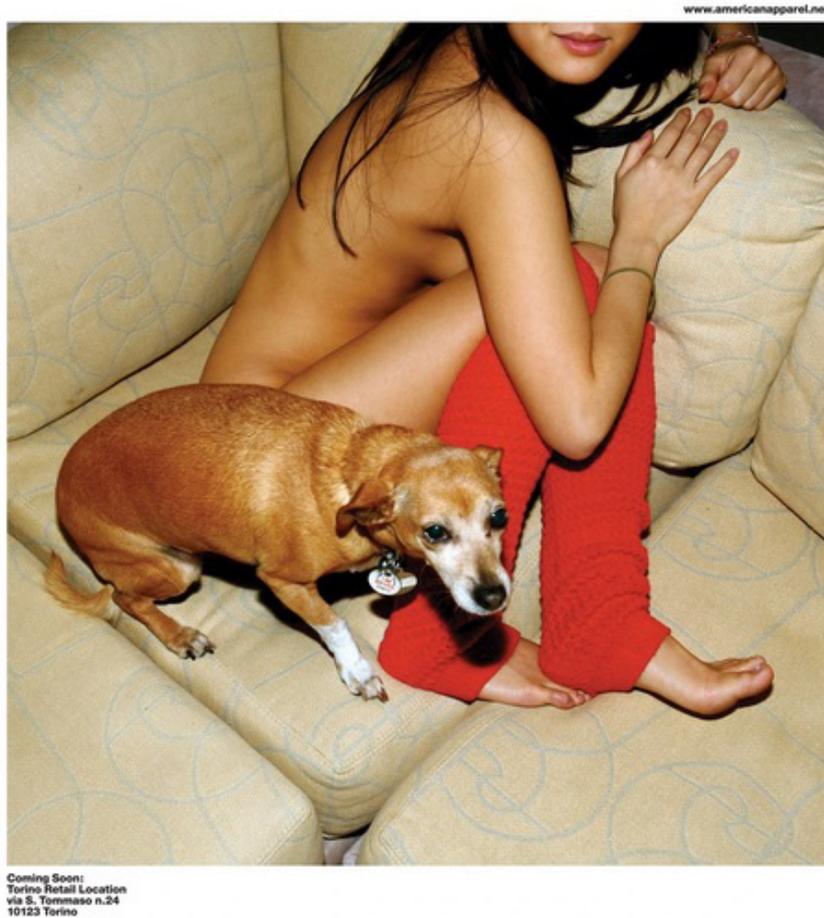
Benetton sought the use of social shocking advert, similar as to Toscani used.

Chapter 2: American Apparel

Origins

American Apparel was founded by Canadian Dov Charney in 1989. After quitting university, he started manufacturing t-shirts in 1997, having been obsessed with American cotton that had a “superior feel” growing up (Howland). Starting off at first as a simple clothing business, it rose to popularity during the early 2000s, becoming one of the top selling apparel brands in the world and earning the company millions of dollars annually (Howland). American Apparel had over 270 stores worldwide in 2010 (Hill). The brand targeted a younger audience, interested in ethical and well manufactured products “Made in USA”, as well as with their trendy outfits and marketing tactics (Rowan). The company was ahead of its time, focusing on social issues such as immigration reform, LGBT+ rights, and domestic production which young people would want to be associated with (“The Rise and Fall of American Apparel”). Another big factor in the popularity of American Apparel was their controversial adverts. They would feature models in suggestive positions, and be underdressed, as we can see in figure 14, where the model is only wearing legwarmers. This provocative advertising and sexual semiotics structure within would become synonymous with the brand, as well as the founder, due to his inappropriate behaviour in the workplace (“The Rise and Fall of American Apparel”). Many of the shots would be taken by Charney himself, and in some cases, he would appear in the ads alongside the female model (Howland). Others were taken by Terry Richardson, another controversial figure known for his explicitly sexualized style of photography (Freeman). Most models were either amateur, wishing to launch their career while others were friends or colleagues of Charney (Glaister). Over a span of 20 years, American Apparel would be one of the most popular retail companies, charming not only young people but also celebrities (Fig 15), becoming a fashion power of its own (Howland). Chris Chafin points out how : “American Apparel very much knew its target audience”. Though this was primarily due to the social standards the company aligned itself, the advertising also played a part; American Apparel showed young people, from different ethnicities and different body

shapes (Howland), appearing carefree and enjoying themselves. Williamson's analysis from 1978 shows that for an advertisement to have meaning, it must go through a "transformation between signs, and this process takes place within us, then not only does this place us in the space of the signified, but it calls for an examination of how our own subjectivity is signified through transactions" (Forrester 121). As seen earlier in Chapter 1, the representation of the young models makes it easier for the young spectator to relate to. Even the highly suggestive semiotics of the adverts seem to appeal to people. In an article from *The New York Times*, one of American Apparel's customer in her 20s said when asked why she shopped there: "their marketing is a little bit sexier" (La Ferla). However, this would not be without major allegations and controversies.



American Apparel®

Fig 14: American Apparel advertisement for leg warmers. N.d. TIME online. Web. 15 Apr. 2022.

American Apparel's provocative advertising and sexual semiotics structure within would become synonymous with the brand.



Fig 15: Paparazzi photo of Hilary Duff wearing American Apparel's Salt pepper hoodie. N.d. Celebrity Style guide online. Web. 2 May 2022.

Hilary Duff, a celebrity wearing one of American Apparel's hoodie.

Male gaze

The main criticism of American Apparel advertising is the highly sexualized images. The adverts regularly showed the models wearing only one piece of clothing. Not only that, but many were shocked by how young the models looked, some of whom looked underage, as Mark Sweney points out in an article: “the controversial US retailer has regularly broken advertising rules for using exploitative images of young women, usually in online marketing”. The adverts shown in figure 16 for instance, was banned by the Advertising Standards Authority, the UK’s regulator of advertising, considering the photos not only gratuitous and objectifying women, but due to the model’s pose and skirt encouraged “predatory sexual behaviour” (“Britain Bans ‘Offensive And Irresponsible’ American Apparel Ads”). The skirt resembles one of a schoolgirl’s uniform, the connotation of the sign here is therefore inciting the viewer to fantasise about an underage girl. The ad also appeared alongside the *Back to school* campaigns of American Apparel and was featured in the “School days” collection on their website, which reinforces the semiotic element shown, even though the brand has defended itself by saying that the model was 30 years old and not underage (“Britain Bans ‘Offensive And Irresponsible’ American Apparel Ads”). The ASA has regularly banned American Apparel’s adverts, deemed overly sexualised and irresponsible (Hobbs).

When accused of sexual exploitation, Charney defends himself: “Fashion is all about sex and function. You want to look attractive, and attractive is just another way of saying sexy.” (Glaister). As seen with Tom Ford’s campaigns, the fashion advertisement relies heavily on these types of imagery. This reflects the patriarchal culture our society lives in, where the representation of women depends on a male look. Berger explains this in *Ways of Seeing*: “women are depicted in a quite different way from men (...) because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of woman is designed to flatter him”. Janice Winship points out how the female body is regularly “represented in a ‘fragmented’ way... Women are signified by their lips, legs, hair, eyes or hands...” (qtd Walters 55). Looking back at figure 16, we can see that the model is indeed only showed partially, the shot focusing on her bottom.

As well as using young amateur models in their campaign, American Apparel have also featured porn stars in their adverts. In figure 17 for instance, the photo shows a semi-dressed woman

sitting on a couch looking up to the camera. The text on the bottom right introduces her as Lauren Phoenix, and proceeds to give her weight as well as her job but omits to say in which area of the industry she works in. However, it encourages the public to “look her up on Google”. There are also three smaller shots of Phoenix laying down in a bed and appears to be in the middle of sexual intercourse. Whether the public knows her, or other porn actresses used in the campaigns, this is clearly a deliberate choice, and the rest of the elements in the advert are meant to be perceived as highly sexual. Jonathan Schroeder enlightens us on fetishism in visual culture: “The fetish emerged as an important tool of advertising, via direct representations of a fetish objects and the fetish-like worship and power of consumer goods inherent in contemporary advertising” (150). Using porn stars contributes to the brand’s rebellious and sexy image, however the sales were already slowing down in 2005 (“The Rise and Fall of American Apparel”). This could explain why the brand went further with sexual elements in their adverts and tried to create a new controversy to help their sales.

As seen earlier, the perspective in visual culture is based on the male gaze, so one might ask why use this viewpoint in an advert for women’s clothing? One explanation is the concept of narcissism: women are encouraged to become the object of this gendered voyeurism (Wernick 62). Rosemary Betterton describes how the “woman as spectator is offered the dubious satisfaction of identification with the heterosexual masculine gaze, voyeuristic, penetrating, and powerful” (qtd Walters 59). If the adverts show the ideal female archetype seen through men’s perspective, women are expected to look like that. In the American Apparel campaigns, the ideal woman is a highly sexualised and fulfilled, which could be argued that it represents female empowerment, however the semiotic codes used, such as the youth of the models, raises objection. “Women were considered either fun and liberated enough to “be cool” with the semi-nudity, degrading poses, and innuendo of American Apparel’s advertising campaigns, or they were boring, old-fashioned and unenlightened”, says Louise Benson in her article. To approve American Apparel’s message, the viewer should be in some ways enlightened, similarly to Benetton’s campaigns in regard to their social awareness themed adverts.

Reply Retweet Favorite More



Fig 16: Em (anygirlfriday). "American Apparel – their 'back to school' skirts fuelling Lolita fantasies and rampant sexism a plenty". 6 Aug. 2014, 10:29 a.m. Twitter. Web. 27 Apr. 2022.

The ASA banned these two photos as they considered encouraged "predatory sexual behaviour".

Safe to say she loves her socks.

Now available at our retail locations:

Los Angeles	SF Bay Area
New York	Las Vegas
Portland	Denver
San Diego	Phoenix
Seattle	Montréal
Miami	Toronto
Key West	Vancouver
Boston	Ottawa
Chicago	Edmonton
Baltimore	Kingston

To learn more about our company, to shop online, and to find store locations, visit our web site: www.americanapparel.net

American Apparel™
Made in Downtown LA
Sweatshop Free — Brand-Free Clothes

Meet Lauren Phoenix.
150lbs. of magic.
Actress. Director.
Look her up on Google.

Fig 17: American Apparel advertisement “Meet Lauren Phoenix”. 2006. Dazed digital online. Web. 20 Apr. 2022.

American Apparel featured porn stars in some of their adverts.

Authenticity

One of Charney's goals for the brand was for it to be authentic (Howland). For instance, the style of photography: rather than looking like a high-end fashion shoot, the models look natural and are not airbrushed (Glaister). The photos give the impression of something more casual and intimate, which can make the brand look more appealing and approachable. Charney praises himself for using real people, as well as taking the shots in the moment rather than staged. The campaign "Meet ..." introduced the model, her age and other information, as we saw in figure 17. On a connotative level, this helps the viewer to personify the model and create an indirect introduction. "The reason that this was one of the most recognizable fashion ad campaigns or any ad campaign — a huge element of what made it special and why people connected to it — was its authenticity and its realness" he said to Daphne Howland in an interview (Howland). Authenticity in branding is a marketing technique responding to the demand of consumers; with a semiotic approach communicated through adverts, a brand can not only gain a key advantage in terms of competition, it also appears more trustworthy in the consumers' eyes (Rindell and Santos 546, 547). In the American Apparel adverts, the quality of the photos, which look like they were taken with a polaroid, give the impression of entering someone's private world. Sometimes, the model would take pictures of herself, giving her the freedom to represent herself the way she wished ("Exclusive: American Apparel CEO"). And choosing a normal girl rather than a model would make it more relatable to the female consumer, as well as making this ideal femininity more obtainable. Sarah Banet-Weiser points out that this technique "is a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy" (4). American Apparel was targeting a specific group of consumers, mainly young people, who's values were aligned with the brand, as seen earlier. All these different elements, from the model to the photography, are semiotics that reinforce this idea of authenticity. As Banet-Weiser explains: "this affective sentiment, the feeling of authenticity, often does the cultural work of an inducement, attracting and retaining consumers as loyal members of a brand culture" (219). However, even though the models would occasionally take the shots themselves, it would be Charney to decide which photos to select, therefore still responding to the male gaze. This shows flaws in the brand's quest for true authenticity.

Though it is true that most of the models were young, Charney prided himself for challenging

the norms of society, by not only representing diverse ethnicity and body shapes, but also by displaying older models, and various types of couples, including LGBT, and thus pushing boundaries (Howland). In 2014, American Apparel's underwear campaign featured a 62 year old model Jacky O'Shaughnessy (Fig 18). Though there were negative comments by people in the public, the company was overall praised for breaking the stereotypes of featuring younger women (Telfer). Representing mature women is still unpopular in the advertising industry, highlighting the ageism present in the fashion industry: "those who are thin and young are depicted as more attractive, more successful, and more desirable. Normal processes of aging such as loss of muscle tone, wrinkling of skin, and greying hair are all are evaluated as negative attributes." (Lewis, et al 101). Recently, the lingerie brand Darjeeling also tried breaking this ideology, by using 61 years old Carolina Ida Ours to be the face of their 2021 campaign (Pons). The photo in figure 19 shows Ida Ours in a field, her long silver hair down, looking at the camera, and wearing sexy lingerie. Her body and its various wrinkles and creases are also visible. In doing so both brands are not only challenging the social construct but also our semiotic system on what is considered appealing. In Charney's opinion: "people are going to buy into authenticity. It's not like everybody likes 'Walt Disney' perfect. The imperfect is often more appreciated than the perfect" (Howland). The advert is part of the "Meet ..." campaign, again creating a personal presentation, strengthening the interpretative connotation. The photo is still responding to the male gaze, however, as the model is still in her underwear and posing in a sexy way. It came out the same year when American Apparel was facing financial issues and Dov Charney left the company (Howland). The introduction of the older model could have been a technique used to respond to the criticism of using a younger model, but remained faithful to its branding style nonetheless. Whether this is "real" authenticity or just a marketing ploy, American Apparel had successfully created a name for itself.



Meet Jacky.

There was something so compelling about Jacky's look and energy when we first spotted her in a New York restaurant this winter that we introduced ourselves and pulled up a chair. After a long discussion on careers, health, age, and beauty, we asked if she would consider modeling for us. We were thrilled when she agreed.

Classic, ageless clothing and accessories made in the USA, that's American Apparel.

Fig 18: American Apparel advertisement "Meet Jacky". 2014. Glamour online. Web. 21 Apr. 2022.

American Apparel was praised for using Jacky O'Shaughnessy, a 62 years old model, in their campaign.



Fig 19: Darjeeling advertisement featuring Carolina Ida Ours. 2021. Influencia online. Web. 21 Apr. 2022.

The brand Darjeeling used 61 years old Carolina Ida Ours model for their campaign in 2021.

Outcome

As much as American Apparel campaigns were controversial, the brand was incredibly successful, even named label of the year by *The Guardian* in 2008, and Dov Charney was even a finalist for *Time's* "100 most influential people in the world" in 2009 (Hill). However, the company experienced a major downfall, due to different factors. The main issue was the founder himself. Due to the several sexual harassment cases brought against him, as well being accused of mishandling the company's finances, Charney was dismissed as CEO of his own company in 2014 (Howland). American Apparel later filed for bankruptcy twice, once in 2015 and the second time in 2016 (Brooke). The company was bought in 2017 by a Canadian retailer Gildan Activewear, making it available online but losing many of its previous ethos, such as producing clothes only in America (Brooke). Charney had also been accused of making the work environment toxic, by either behaving inappropriately or saying racist slurs ("The Rise And Fall Of American Apparel"). Another important factor to consider is how the brand was an embodiment of its founder; though the campaigns were not part of the reason of the downfall of the company, it was no longer possible to separate their sexual connotations with Charney's actions.

After Charney's departure, American Apparel tried a different style of advertisement; keeping sexual elements, they collaborated with three drag queens, Courtney Act, Alaska 5000 and Willam. Known from *Ru Paul's drag race*, to be the new faces of their commercial ads (Panisch). They would become known as the American Apparel Ad girls, eventually launching a music career following this.* This created a shift in terms of semiotic interpretation: though it can be argued that the gaze is still male, the humorous tone of the drag queens reduces the intensity of the sexual connotation towards women, taking a distance from the previous controversial adverts. In a comeback attempt, Charney founded in 2017 Los Angeles Apparel, a retail company that seems very similar to his previous brand ("American Apparel Founder Is Back, And Unapologetic (HBO)"). When asked how he plans to connect with the culture, he replied: "the same way we did

* Due to the fact that American Apparel filed twice for bankruptcy and has been bought by Canadian company Gildan Activewear in early 2017, there is limited research available about the AAA girls. The American Apparel video campaigns featuring the drag queens are available on their personal YouTube channels. They also talk about their time as the AAA girls on the podcast *Race Chaser*, hosted by two of queens: Alaska and William.

before. My previous company had an effect on the culture of young adults”. However, the success of American Apparel was from a different time, as Benson points out: “The American Apparel adverts capture a time when female submission and silence were encouraged, and normative gender ideals were peddled under the guise of the counter-culture”. With the *Me Too* movement that gained popularity in 2017, as well as other feminist movements emerging in the last years, the success of Charney’s new company is not guaranteed.

Courtney, Alaska & Willam **American Apparel Ad Girls.**



Fig 20: American Apparel advertisement featuring Courtney Act, Alaska 5000 and Willam. 2014. IMDB.
Web. 2 May 2022.

The drag queens, Courtney Act, Alaska 5000 and Willam became the new faces of American Apparel adverts.

Conclusion

Looking back at these two brands, we can see that the use of controversial advertising can indeed be effective, but to an extent. The campaigns were not able to endure as the shock value cannot be kept indefinitely. It becomes repetitive. Looking at the revenue dimension, both brands saw their sales drop down over time. There is also a thin line within controversial advertising which, when crossed, can cause a company negative results, or even bring on its downfall. Nonetheless, the use of shock advertisement was a success at the time for both companies: they were able to portray values that would best represent their identity through campaigns, whether positive or negative. Schroeder explains: “marketing campaigns (...) are not just managerial - they are ideological as well” (39). The fact that both companies used shock advertisement is revealing about them: they both challenge society’s cultural structure and concepts. The semiotic language is different for each brand; however, its goal was to create the same response: to shock people. It would also create a connection with targeted audience, who would align themselves with the ethos of the company.

Comparing the two models of advertisement, it is evident that Benetton’s was truly exceptional. Though social awareness advertising is used by other brands, like Nike, Toscani almost created a new function for the medium. The campaigns were not even linked to fashion, yet it contributed to the success of the brand, who themselves imitated his style after his departure, underlining his achievement. The semiotics of their campaigns send a message of the company’s activism. It is difficult to compare Benetton’s campaigns with other brands, as they created something unique that has not been seen in the world of advertising since. American Apparel, on the other hand, followed a popular model that is used in fashion which focuses on using sexualised semiotics. What differentiated the brand’s advertising was removing the superficial elements, like airbrushed models and high-quality photoshoot, to creating something that would appear more authentic and realistic. Both Benetton and American Apparel share this aim for authenticity, through realness and non-traditional style of advertisement.

It is important to point out that there is a difference between semiotic and shock advertisement: semiotic is the interpretation of visible signs and sends a message. The shock factor comes from society's interpretation of it. The response of the adverts depends on the viewer's established ideas and cultural codes. Benetton and American Apparel were successful in the context they existed in because their advertisement responded to the social structures of the time. Their success relied on their targeted audiences, which gave them importance. Controversial advertising is still a popular technique used, but as we have seen with both brands, needs to evolve along with their time.

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