

Misreading the Rhetorical Situation: An Analysis of the Kendall Jenner Pepsi Commercial

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PepsiCo received ample backlash after the 2017 release of its Pepsi commercial starring Kendall Jenner, especially from several outspoken Twitter users. Since the controversy is concerning an advertisement, we might tend to view it as trivial. However, this essay challenges readers to investigate the matter on a deeper level. Harnessing the power of rhetorical analysis, we find that the core of the issue is much more complex than it might seem. This case demonstrates that a more critical approach to the swirl of language that surrounds us everyday is wise. All situations are rhetorical situations, providing opportunities for analysis and better chances to address the issues that plague our society. This essay thus provides readers with an example of utilizing rhetoric to better understand culture and the language of communication.

“Tone-deaf, shallow, and overproduced” (Finley). These are some of the words used to describe the advertisement that PepsiCo released on Tuesday, April 4th, 2017, which featured 21-year-old fashion model and television personality Kendall Jenner (Kendall and Kylie). The commercial is set amidst a rather utopian looking protest, apparently inspired by a Black Lives Matter protest. The protestors hail from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, are all attractive and clean-cut, and, for the most part, are all young. The group marches through the streets smiling, laughing, playing instruments, and dancing as they go, all the while holding up relatively vague signs, several of which read “peace.” Noticing the protest, others begin to join, one of them being Kendall Jenner. She leaves her nearby photo shoot and dramatically strips off her platinum wig to join the protest. Jenner then becomes the focus of the protest. The crowd marches happily until they reach a line of

police officers. Jenner then grabs a can of Pepsi and hands it to one of the officers. When the officer takes a sip of the Pepsi, the crowd cheers and everyone hugs and high fives each other. In this commercial, it seems that PepsiCo was attempting to reach millennials, a target demographic, by riding on the wave of political activism occurring at the time.



Pepsi ad image from Saxena

The commercial received much criticism from millennials who were upset by the advertisement. Indeed, the internet exploded with backlash, Twitter in particular. I followed this controversy in real time, and by using particularly powerful tweets from Twitter users, along with some news articles, developed an analysis based on rhetorical theory as to why this commercial failed so horribly.

First, the commercial was unsuccessful because its creators failed to comprehend the rhetorical situation; in other words, the commercial was a product of failed *kairos*. Kairos is a concept in rhetorical theory referencing appropriateness and timeliness. Skilled rhetors know how capitalize on their surroundings, things like current events and general public opinion, to appeal to their audience. Kairos refers to the opportune time to perform an action. During the time the commercial aired, Black Lives Matter protests were prominent. News of Black men, women, and children losing their lives at the hands of police officers flooded American media. Certainly, especially while the shock and pain caused by these tragedies remained fresh, trivializing these traumatic events was a severe misstep.

Second, this commercial failed due to the inadequate *ethos* of both PepsiCo and its chosen lead Kendall Jenner to represent the topic of protests of this sort. Ethos, in rhetorical theory, describes a speaker's perceived credibility and trustworthiness. PepsiCo, as a snack and beverage company, is not an appropriate representative for complex political matters such as Black Lives Matter protests. Kendall Jenner, as a wealthy, white woman who is uninvolved with the Black Lives Matter movement, does not have the social position to portray an authority figure

in a protest that mimics a Black Lives Matter protest. This paper argues, then, that due to weak ethos and failed kairos, PepsiCo's commercial was unsuccessful.

The Twitter Reaction

The demographic represented in the commercial and PepsiCo's decision to cast Kendall Jenner as the lead suggests that millennials were its target audience. Because millennials heavily use Twitter to express their satisfaction and distaste, the social media site has clout when it comes to judging how the commercial fared with PepsiCo's target audience. Twitter users certainly did not disappoint when it came to giving PepsiCo feedback on the commercial. One particularly poignant tweet came from a Twitter user named Taryn Finley. On April 4, 2017, Finley posted, "Kendall Jenner gives a Pepsi to a cop and rids the world of -isms. Y'all can go somewhere with this tone-deaf, shallow and overproduced ad." In order to understand Finley's claim, it is first important to understand why giving a Pepsi to a police officer during a protest, and from that action ridding the world of everything that is wrong with it, would cause Finley to claim that the commercial is "tone-deaf" and "shallow." Literally handing a police officer a can of soda during an active protest, especially a Black Lives Matter protest, is very unlikely. We live in an America where police officers have mistaken cellphones, pizza, and hairbrushes for guns. The fact that Jenner simply strolls up to an armed officer and directs an object toward him without fearing for her life is indicative of her privilege and indicative of PepsiCo's lack of knowledge about the context of protests of this sort. Then, the gleeful celebration over the fact that the police officer takes a sip of the Pepsi

Jenner offers him is absurd. This scene makes it seem as if the price for positive social change in this country is as cheap as a can of soda. Considering the many lives that have been sacrificed to make the United States a more just and equitable society, this is certainly not the case.

Like Finley, others took to Twitter to protest the commercial. With over 150,000 retweets, one tweet in particular garnered a lot of attention. It came from Bernice King, the daughter of the late civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On April 5, 2017, a day after PepsiCo aired the commercial, King tweeted, “If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi,” accompanied with a picture of her father being pushed back by police.



Meme tweeted by King.

King’s comment is a great example of how skilled rhetors use *ethos* well to make their claims persuasive. As the daughter of a respected and renowned civil rights leader and an activist herself, King has credibility when it comes to the matter of protests. More than her words, it was her reputation that made her comment so powerful, so

much so that others became emboldened to speak up for themselves—as was the case for a Twitter user named Antonio Gobeo. He posted a picture of a Black person yelling in apparent anguish as his hair is aggressively pulled by a police officer. The caption under the picture reads, “Kendall please! Give him a Pepsi!”



Image tweeted by Gobeo.

Gobeo’s tweet is very effective because it uses emotion-evoking visuals to demonstrate the drastic juxtaposition between protests in reality and the PepsiCo’s fantasy portrayal of them. Because PepsiCo made the mistake of airing its commercial in the midst of Black Lives Matter protest prominence, Gobeo had a plethora of relevant images to choose from in order to make this point. This is yet another reason it was not the opportune time to air such a superficial commercial: the resources to disprove PepsiCo’s portrayal were so readily available and obvious. With this wisely constructed tweet, Gobeo can make a point that the realities of police brutality and pro-

testing are not to be trivialized, and that the systemic injustices people are protesting cannot be solved with a mere gesture such as the offering of a can of soda. Activism is serious, and is not to be downplayed. Like King, many Americans protest because they have witnessed or experienced their kin—mothers, brothers, grandfathers, and sisters—being murdered at the hands of police for no legitimate reason. People’s feelings are still raw and open. PepsiCo’s insensitive commercial added insult to injury as a result of the company’s lack to ability to correctly analyze the rhetorical situation.

Despite the backlash, PepsiCo initially stood by the commercial. It released a statement which read, “[The commercial] depicts various groups of people embracing a spontaneous moment, and showcasing Pepsi’s brand rallying cry to ‘Live For Now,’ in an exploration of what that truly means to live life unbounded, unfiltered and uninhibited” (Elizabeth). Unfortunately for PepsiCo, this statement only gave critics another criticism, suggesting that the company lacks the credibility and the understanding necessary to allude to Black Lives Matter protests in its commercial. There are several reasons for this. First, PepsiCo chose a protest inspired by a Black Lives Matter protest, a setting in which participants are faced with the possibility of death, as an inspiration to “Live for now.” Many believe that PepsiCo’s ignorance stemmed from the fact that the company piggybacked off of a movement that it was not affiliated with, and therefore, had no credibility to speak from. Both failing to recognize the seriousness of the situation and then trying to rationalize that failure by drawing attention to an irrationally optimistic slogan, totally disconnected from the rhetorical situation, destroyed the already

weak ethos of the company in the production of this ad.

Further, some viewers also believed that PepsiCo had no credibility because it, being a snack and beverage company, was most likely motivated by profit. Making matters worse, the way in which PepsiCo attempted to profit off of the Black Lives Matter movement was to pass it off as “trendy.” The company’s statement attempted a claim that, because of timing (*kairos*), missed its intended purpose. The company tries to argue that the commercial is about the “exploration of what that truly means to live life unbounded, unfiltered and uninhibited,” and by using a protest in order to accomplish this goal, the ad insinuates that protesting is “edgy” or “rebellious” in a trendy way. That is, it appeared that PepsiCo tried to reach “this generation” by capitalizing on protesting—a triggering subject that should not be capitalized on. Elle Hearn, the executive director of the Marsha P. Johnson Institute and formerly an organizer for Black Lives Matter, expounds on this sentiment. She states, “No one is finding joy from Pepsi at a protest.... That’s not what it looks like to take bold action” (Victor). Essentially, Hearn is arguing that protesting is not a means to “live on the edge” but rather is a real life struggle. A sip of Pepsi is not going to make one forget that their child has been murdered or that their father has been on death row for 30 years for a crime he did not commit.

A Twitter user under the pseudonym “Discount Chris Pratt” echoes Hearn. He tweets, “Pepsi Exec: We need to boost sales. What are the youth into these days? / Intern: protesting / Exec: Good. We endorse it. But make it subtle” (Lewis). Pratt uses humor in claiming that PepsiCo co-opted the Black

Lives Matter movement as a marketing strategy but did not really support the movement. Rather, the company merely tried to profit from the timing of it. In addition, because not all viewers would support the movement's goals, the company watered down the commercial, only hinting at Black Lives Matter itself. Viewers are asked to ignore current events and just think of the situation in the ad as being about *any* protest movement. Yet again, PepsiCo demonstrates a failed kairotic understanding and a failed, untrustworthy ethos.

PepsiCo's decision to cast Kendall Jenner as the spokesperson in the commercial was another reason why many viewers perceived the commercial to be distasteful and wrong. This misstep made PepsiCo's lack of understanding of Black Lives Matter apparent. Many observers felt that rich, white, thin Kendall Jenner did not have the ethos to portray an activist in this setting. The Black Lives Matter movement is about uplifting the voices of the unheard and the disenfranchised. It's about advancing the lives of those whose lives do not seem to matter or to be valued. Clearly, this is not something that Jenner's persona relates to. It is problematic for Jenner to be depicted as the head of a protest that echoes the Black Lives Matter movement because she, in many ways, is the very representation of the oppressive factors that the movement is working to dismantle. Jenner appeared as a "white savior" coming in to speak of behalf of people of color. As *Teen Vogue* author Fariha Róisín explains,

The white savior somehow always ends up usurping the narrative. And in this centering of whiteness and white characters, the POC characters end up becoming props.... Whiteness is again

normalized, and POC are decentralized. This is particularly problematic because whiteness is not only favored in Hollywood but also in society at large; white privilege is ever-present and ubiquitous.

Róisín speaks perfectly to Jenner's role in the commercial. Jenner became the focus of the protest and saved the day, while the people of color, just like props, were only there to fill the background. Jenner, a white woman, was given all of the credit for the things that people of color actually have fought for and, understandably, many felt that she had no right to do so because she, in the past, was not aligned with the movement and has never used her position of power to speak on the issues that the movement protests. Jenner's motives thus appeared questionable, like she only agreed to be the face of this protest in order to advance her modeling career.

Jenner also received criticism because she appeared to be literally impersonating Black Lives Matter protester Ieshia Evans, as seen in an iconic picture depicting Evans' arrest by police during a Black Lives Matter protest in Baton Rouge following the death of Alton Sterling, an unarmed black man murdered by police. In the picture (right, bottom) captured by Reuters photojournalist Jonathan Bachman, Evans stands gracefully as three armed police officers in full combat gear rush her. She doesn't resist. Instead, she simply surrenders her hands to be handcuffed. This occurred because she approached police during a protest. That Jenner, in contrast, as a white woman could approach a cop during an active protest without fear of being arrested or harmed (right, top) is indicative of her privilege. A black woman such as

Evans in a similar situation would not be as fortunate. It seems that there were several factors working against Jenner's ethos here, and, in the end, many observers felt that she was unfit for this role.



Images from Victor (top), Advocate Staff Report (bottom)

In poorly reading the kairos of the situation and due to weak ethos, this Pepsi commercial failed. PepsiCo demonstrated both a lack of understanding of their co-opted topic of choice, the Black Lives Matter movement, and a clumsy attempt to profit from it. Further, the company chose to indirectly reference a Black Lives Matter protest during a time when it is currently active—a complete miscalculation of timeliness. Lastly, both PepsiCo and Jenner were deemed unfit spokespersons for an ad of this political nature.

In the end, PepsiCo was no match for the rhetoric stacked against the commercial and so, merely a day after its airing, the commercial was taken down and PepsiCo issued a public apology. Rejecting its previous defense altogether, PepsiCo's apology read, "Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize" (Advocate Staff Report). Incidents like these show why the proper execution of kairos and ethos are essential to communicating a message. A failure to master these principles can result in miscommunication between audience and speaker and, as was the case for the Kendall Jenner Pepsi commercial, failure.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Joonna Trapp for recognizing my potential as a writer and for being my cheerleader and mentor throughout this publication process. I would also like to thank Professor Annette Vee and Dr. Doug Downs for their editing expertise. It aided me tremendously while polishing my work. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for instilling in me values pertaining to social justice, which I drew on while crafting this piece.

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