

DISCOVERING THE TRUTH: THE OPERATION OF ETHOS IN ANTI-SMOKING ADVERTISING

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In 1998, the Florida Tobacco Pilot Program (FTPP) launched a \$25 million Truth® advertising campaign to alert teenagers to the dangers of smoking and to reduce teen tobacco use. The Truth® campaign began when studies conducted by the FTPP and other tobacco control efforts determined that smoking is equated with rebellion and teen self-realization and that the theme of “industry manipulation” held broad appeal among young people (Zucker, Hopkins, Sly, Urich, Mendza-Kershaw, and Solan). This campaign portrayed the tobacco industry as manipulative and smoking itself as an uncool habit, and it tapped into teens’ need to rebel by depicting tobacco use as an addictive habit marketed by an adult establishment (Zucker, Hopkins, Sly, Urich, Mendza-Kershaw, and Solan 2).

The campaign has since spread nationwide, sponsoring advertisements in magazines, television, and radio. It has its own website with a link to a photo blog, a “Find Facts” page where visitors can learn facts that the campaign has gathered about tobacco companies and the effects of smoking,¹ and a “Whatta You Think” section where teens can voice their opinions on issues relating to the tobacco industry and smoking.

The reach of these ads has extended across the nation and impacted a number of teens. Between the inception of Florida’s Truth® campaign and 2000, results within the state included “a 92 percent brand awareness rate among teens, a 15 percent rise in teens who agree with key attitudinal statements about smoking, a 19.4 percent decline in smoking among middle school students, and a 8.0 percent decline among high school students” (Zucker, Hopkins, Sly, Urich, Mendza-Kershaw, and Solan 1). More recently, among 12 to 17-year olds in the U.S., 75% can accurately describe one or more of the Truth® ads, 90% reported that the ad they saw was convincing, and 85% responded that the ad gave them good reasons not to smoke (Citizen’s Commission). Furthermore, the Commission’s website states, “Monitoring the Future, one of the nation’s most comprehensive substance abuse surveys, reported dramatic declines in smoking rates among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, citing Truth® as a factor in this public health success story” (Citizen’s Commission).

From such statistics, it is easy to conclude that these ads have been effective in drawing teenage audiences, but it is not as easy to conclude *how*. In this article, by turning to Aristotle, I examine these advertisements as contemporary examples of rhetoric to understand how they function. In doing so, I illustrate that the Truth® campaign alerts us to the efficacy of rhetoric at its best—rhetoric that alerts us to the truth of a matter rather than manipulates us into being falsely persuaded by appealing images and illustrious word play. In a culture where the word “rhetoric” is often associated with scheming political speech or gimmicky advertising, the rhetoric of the Truth® campaign aims at something different. Rather than reverting to “that powerful instrument of error and deceit” (827) that John Locke refers to in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the rhetoric of Truth®’s advertising more

closely approaches Plato's definition of rhetoric as "an art which leads the soul by means of words" (*Phaedrus* 157).

The Use of Ethos

Aristotle first discusses *ethos* in Book One of his work, *On Rhetoric*. *Ethos*, or persuasion by character, is built "whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence" (38). The rhetor who purports to have the audience's best interest at heart and who successfully conveys this in her speech will persuade by building character (*ethos*) in the speech rather than by relying on a preconceived notion the audience may have of the rhetor. This is the most effective means of swaying an audience; the ethical appeal is "the controlling factor in persuasion" (38), as Aristotle puts it.

An example of the attempt to persuade by invoking *ethos* in the Truth® ads is apparent in a series of magazine advertisements, which tell teens, "Their brand is lies. Our brand is truth." This tagline is the most blatant appearance of such character building as it communicates that Truth® ads are serving the purpose of truth rather than manipulation. As Aristotle points out, "The true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites" (34), and the Truth® ads build character by upholding this precept.

The visual statements in these ads further build *ethos*. The dual presence of smoking and bodybags in several of Truth®'s ads illustrate this point, for the message is simple: smoking kills. This message is present in many of Truth®'s advertisements, including the Marlboro-like ad discussed in more detail below. These visual statements communicate the campaign's *ethos* by pointing out the stark contrast between their advertising and that of tobacco companies. Truth®'s ads cleverly call attention to the deceitful tactics of tobacco ads that promote a habit that can kill and that target an audience (those between 12 and 17) which cannot legally engage in that habit.

Practical Wisdom (phronisis)

The *ethos* of any speech must contain three components: "practical wisdom [*phronisis*]," or good sense/knowledge of the subject the speaker is addressing; "virtue [*aretē*]," or good moral character, which also has ties to the desire to communicate "the true and the just" (Aristotle 34); and "good will [*eunoia*]," or having the good of the audience as the speaker's (at least perceived) main interest (121). Aristotle further states that a rhetor may become less persuasive if he fails to demonstrate any one of these parts, but "a person seeming to have all these qualities is necessarily persuasive to the hearers" (121).

In the Truth® ads, practical wisdom involves knowledge of the strategies and manipulation used in cigarette advertising and knowledge of the audience (teens between 12-18). Truth® communicates practical wisdom relative to Big Tobacco by containing on its website a "find facts" page that enables teens to broaden their knowledge by scrolling through various statements related to tobacco advertising and health risks associated with smoking. It also communicates practical wisdom more subtly by acknowledging and appealing to teens' need for rebellion in encouraging teens to stand up to the adult establishment of Big Tobacco.

Many Truth® ads communicate knowledge by alluding to tobacco ads. The newer “Seek truth” advertisements, shown on television and available to view on the website, feature teens set up outside “a major tobacco company in New York” asking hard-hitting questions of the executives from a podium set up on the sidewalk. Their podium has a “Q:” sign attached to the front, and after a question is asked, the camera turns to a podium with an “A:” sign that is situated in front of the tobacco company’s building with nobody standing by it. These ads encourage teens to ask questions and rebel against what the smoking advertisements are saying. One particular ad shows a Virginia Slims poster which tells women to “Find Your Own Voice.” The young adult in front of the podium introduces her older friend to ask a question to the tobacco company executives. This woman, using her artificial voice box, asks, “Is this the voice you expected me to find?” The camera then flashes over to the empty “A:” podium, followed by silence. The ad ends with script stating, “Ask questions. Seek Truth.”

This advertisement resonates with the audience because it shows the campaign’s knowledge of its subject and appeals to teens’ independent nature. The Virginia Slims advertisement communicates to women that smoking Virginia Slims will lead to independence and finding one’s voice. But the Truth® ad is a stark reminder that smoking causes cancer, which may attack one’s throat and lead to the need for an artificial voice box. Women will lose their physical voices rather than find figurative ones.

To fully succeed in satisfying the “practical wisdom” requirement of *ethos*, the Truth® campaign must relate to its audience, teens. Cornelia Pechmann, Guangzhi Zhao, Marvin E. Goldberg, and Ellen Thomas Reibling identify seven recurring themes in antismoking advertisements aimed at teens: Disease and Death, Endangers Others, Cosmetics, Smokers’ Negative Life Circumstances, Refusal Skills, Role Model Marketing Tactics, and Selling Disease and Death. They explain that the choice of theme in the advertisement may affect the result the rhetor obtains in persuading the teen to refrain from smoking.

Pechmann, Zhao, Goldberg, and Reibling claim that the most effective message themes are Endangers Others, Refusal Skills Role Model, and Smokers’ Negative Life Circumstances. The Endangers Others theme stresses “how secondhand smoke, and smoking in general, can seriously harm smokers’ family members, coworkers, and peers” and “convey[s] that smokers may encounter strong social disapproval from nonsmokers” (3). The Refusal Skills Role Model theme operates by explaining why “many attractive role models view smoking as unappealing and demonstrate refusals of cigarette offers” (4). The Smokers’ Negative Life Circumstances theme stresses that smoking is a barrier to appearing “mature, independent, savvy, attractive, and cool” (4). Many of the advertisements of the Truth® campaign employ the Smokers’ Negative Life Circumstances theme. These commercials revolve around a dictum encouraging teens and young people to “Ask questions” and “Seek truth.” By prompting such discourse, the Truth® advertisements communicate that, unlike the tobacco firms who encourage youth to passively accept their message, this antismoking campaign challenges them to become “mature, independent, [and] savvy” by prodding these industries for answers and by intelligently drawing out the consequences of smoking. The Truth® campaign thus addresses one of the most successful messages in antismoking advertising aimed at youth: rather than telling teens tobacco companies are manipulating them, these ads encourage teens to ask their own questions of this industry, empowering them to be more mature and savvy in a way that tobacco industries discourage.

Good Virtue (*aretē*)

In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle says that virtue “is an ability [*dynamis*], as it seems, that is productive and preservative of goods, and an ability for doing good in many and great ways, actually in all ways in all things [1366b]” (79). The subdivisions of virtue are “justice, manly courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, and wisdom” (79-80). “The greatest virtues,” he continues, “are necessarily those most useful to others. For that reason people most honor the just and the courageous” (80). Indeed, the “just and the courageous” are present throughout all of the Truth® ads. Along with wisdom, they comprise the main subdivisions of virtue at work in this form of rhetoric.

One Truth® billboard depicts an older man in a bikini holding a cigarette; the caption is “No wonder tobacco executives hide behind sexy models.” This advertisement demonstrates both the “just and the courageous” by implying that tobacco companies’ ads do not have these qualities. This billboard communicates that tobacco executives are not courageous because they need to hide. The Truth® campaign points to the virtue of their counter-advertising campaign, telling their audience, “Their brand is lies. Our brand is truth.” This statement appears as a warning, much like the Surgeon General’s warning in a cigarette advertisement, suggesting that the Truth® campaign does not danger the public. Their product (so to speak) is the quest for knowledge, the desire to point out the lies that are perpetuated by advertising paid for by the tobacco industry.

As James L. Kinneavy and Susan C. Warshauer point out, virtue “is established when speakers give evidence that they are sincere and trustworthy. The audience must be convinced that the speaker will not deceive them” (174). Truth® establishes its sincerity: while never directly telling the audience to refuse cigarettes, it does encourage teens to find the facts out for themselves. Thus, Truth® is like an ethical orator because it presents its audience with facts they may use to make informed decisions.

Kinneavy and Warshauer also discuss the relationship between *arête* and the Greek word *Ariston*, which means “nobility” or “aristocracy.” This etymological relationship points to the consideration of culture in the ethical argument: “The effectiveness of an ethical appeal thus depends on one’s ability to gauge society’s values and to display them—indeed to affirm them—in one’s speech” (175). This explanation reinforces the point that consideration of the group to whom one is speaking is crucial to making a successful ethical argument, specifically in the case of these advertisements for Truth®. Kinneavy and Warshauer imply that in persuading the audience that she is virtuous, the rhetor must be able to convince the audience that she would not deceive them. This is also accomplished in the Truth® ads, which point to the lies that are perpetuated in the advertisement of cigarettes. Truth® recognizes that it must appeal to its teenage audience’s values of independence and desire to be neither misled nor controlled by adult or establishment figures.

Good Will (*eunoia*)

This intent to clarify rather than deceive leads into the third component of virtue, which is good will [*eunoia*]. As Kinneavy and Warshauer state, good will consists of “the speaker’s display of good intentions toward his or her audience” (176). The speaker displays this good virtue by identifying with his audience by “holding some of their basic aspirations, speaking their language, and if necessary, sharing and affirming their prejudices” (176). In the Truth® campaign’s parody of a Marlboro adver-

tisement, a cowboy rides through a rugged landscape, followed by three horses carrying body bags instead of three more cowboys. The tagline asks, “What if cigarette ads told The Truth?” At the bottom where the Surgeon General’s warning would be in an actual Marlboro ad, a caption states, “YEE HAW! You Too Can Be An Independent, Rugged, Macho-looking Dead Guy.” This ad communicates to teens that the cigarette ads are trying to deceive them by stating smoking will make them “independent, rugged, and macho-looking,” but that those ads also leave out the crucial point that their product will also kill you, and it’s not possible to be any of those things once you are dead. The ad speaks the language of teens and lets them know that the big advertising firms are manipulative.

Kinneavy and Warshauer also point out that another important consideration in a discussion of good will must be its ties to pathos, or persuasion by appeal to the emotions. They argue, “By arousing a particular emotion—and sharing it with members of the audience—a speaker may appear more closely identified with them” (176). In addition, and of great import in examining the effectiveness of the Truth® advertisements, “having common enemies as the object of shared anger allows the speaker to strengthen this identification” (176). Kinneavy and Warshauer argue that how well a speaker is received by his audience depends upon his ability to communicate his good intent by emphasizing the presence of “common enemies and common friends as well as common values” (177). Many, if not all, of the Truth® ads construct Big Tobacco’s lies as the enemy.²

According to Aristotle, anger may be defined as “desire, accompanied by [mental and physical] distress, for conspicuous retaliation because of a conspicuous slight that was directed, without justification, against oneself or those near to one” (124). This “desire . . . for conspicuous retaliation” is present in the Virginia Slims and other Truth® ads, including one that is a parody of a movie poster. In this poster, one man is in the foreground above the movie title, “Secrets of a Tobacco Executive,” with two other executives in the darkness behind him. The tagline states, “Business is war. And he has the body bags to prove it.” Underneath the title of the movie is a school hallway with two teens walking through it. This parody suggests that the tobacco executives are targeting teens due to their own selfish business motivations and are selling teens a product that they know to be illegal for those under 18 and lethal for everyone.

This invocation of anger, this appeal to *pathos*, indirectly supports the *ethos* of the Truth® campaign. By invoking anger, these advertisements construct a common enemy: an adult establishment that is trying to manipulate youth. As Zucker, Hopkins, Sly, Urich, Mendza-Kershaw, and Solan put it, the program’s key message consists of “exposing the lies and misinformation perpetuated by tobacco industry marketing” (2). The anger that arises out of these ads comes from a sense that tobacco companies are belittling teens by using lies and manipulation. Further, as Aristotle explains, people become angry “against those rejoicing at misfortunes and generally taking pleasure in others’ misfortunes; for it is a sign of being either an enemy or a belittler. And [they become angry] against those who do not care if they are suffering” (129). This form of anger is invoked by most of the Truth® ads, for in exposing the lies of tobacco firms, the ads imply that these firms do not care that they are harming those who buy their product.

Objections?

One important objection that may be raised against this counter-advertising campaign is whether

it creates the same ethical mistake of which it accuses the tobacco industry. That is, as an advertising campaign in a capitalist system, does it accomplish its ends by manipulating the audience? Is the Truth® campaign's version of "the truth" merely a means to make more money to keep the campaign alive?

In discussing *ethos* and ethics, Kinneavy and Warshauer state, "The gap between seeming ethical and being ethical may be great" (183). Indeed, this matter of appearance versus reality of *ethos* appears in Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* as well. This is a pressing question, for, according to Aristotle, "it belongs to the same capacity both to see the true and [to see] what resembles the true" (33). Aristotle argues that humans "have a natural disposition for the true" and so a speaker's ability "to aim at commonly held opinions [*endoxa*]" is a characteristic of one who also has a similar ability to regard to the truth" (33). One interpretation of this statement is that a speaker who aims at commonly held opinions of what appears to be true is more likely to be perceived by his audience as persuasive. The skeptic may argue that it makes no difference whether the rhetor speaks or "seems to" speak the truth because the appearance of truth is just as convincing as its reality.

James E. Porter furthers this argument in his work, *Audience and Rhetoric*. He asks, "Is it ethical to change an audience's beliefs without providing them sound reasons and a basis in fact for changing their beliefs?" (18). Porter believes that Aristotle creates a situation in which "a knowledgeable orator facing an ignorant audience is placed in the position of (possibly) manipulating the audience" (18). The orator may try to force her belief upon an ignorant audience without providing much basis for why the audience should believe her. In trying to understand the true, the audience may be misled by the knowledgeable orator.

Do the Truth® advertisements end up resorting to this deception? By turning again to Porter and to Truth®'s website (a soapbox of sorts for our "orator"), we may answer this question with an emphatic "No." Porter explains that the rhetorical situation Aristotle envisions

involves a knowledgeable rhetor more or less in possession of "the truth" and an ignorant audience. And of course in such a situation, the rhetorician has nothing to learn *from* the audience; she only learns *about* the audience, through audience analysis, in order to better manage their responses. In this view, the rhetor is the privileged entity whose search for knowledge and truth is accomplished prior to the rhetorical act (in dialectic or scientific method), not through it or in conjunction with an audience. (18, emphasis in original)

The Truth® ads do not fall subject to this general criticism, as they contradict such a rhetorical situation in two important ways. First, they do *not* assume an ignorant audience. Their success stems from the fact that they effectively communicate that their search for knowledge is incomplete without the participation of their audience. The "About us" page of the website states, "truth is not here to tell you, or anyone else, what to do. We hate when people do that" (*Truth About Us*). These ads suggest that they are aiming for the truth, but it is up to informed teens to complete the quest for truth and knowledge.

The skeptic may raise a question here of whether this is just a marketing tactic. Truth® creators know they must appeal to youth who do not like being told what to do; thus the campaign must make it seem like it is not telling teens what to believe, when in fact it is. Immediately after saying that its

audience is “never gonna hear any ‘just say “no” to cigarettes’ stuff from us,” it jumps into a tirade about

an industry out there that makes billions of dollars selling a product that’s responsible for over 1,200 deaths a day in the U.S. alone. This industry spends more than \$34 million each day advertising and promoting those products, and it’s entrenched itself in our culture by deceiving and manipulating the public. Truth just thinks everyone ought to know more about that industry and the things they do. (*Truth About Us*)

Isn’t Truth® an orator that is trying to convince its audience of the credibility of its position? And if it is, is it really that far of a step to say that the campaign, despite its claims otherwise, is in fact telling its audience what to believe? Further, if one accepts this view, then how is the advertising strategy of the Truth® campaign that different from the deceiving strategies employed by tobacco advertising?

Most important, Truth® does not attempt to deceive its audience; it is a campaign based on presenting facts to an audience that has already been manipulated. It even broadens its scope to the entire idea of “truth” itself; it is not reaching for an *appearance* of truth, but truth’s reality. Again, Truth®’s website clarifies this claim: the campaign aims to ensure that all the facts are available so that when teens make their own decisions, “they can be based on all the information, not just those things tobacco companies want you to think” (*Truth About Us*). Furthermore, the website states its understanding and support of the individual’s right to smoke, but because nicotine is physically and psychologically addictive, it also states its creators’ belief that “responsibility should apply not only to the smoker, but to the individuals who choose to make and sell tobacco products as well” (*Truth About Us*). Truth® does not merely use appeals to *pathos* in the anger aimed at big tobacco present in many of its advertisements, nor does it resort to a simple version of *ethos* to present itself as a moral entity. Both play important roles but are reinforced by a simple appeal to the *reality* rather than mere *appearance* of truth. As stated on the website, the campaign “gets its information from respected news sources and organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, and the American Cancer Society” and assures readers that “all of our information undergoes a stringent, multilayered review, stripping it of any and all extraneous assumptions, dangerous leaps in logic, and subjectivity.”³ Truth® is not merely trying to persuade its audience, but rather is attempting to shatter manipulation in a quest for the truth about tobacco and its advertising. The campaign centers teens in this quest, stating, “We can’t do this without you” (*Truth About Us*).

Conclusion

Truth®’s advertisements operate using a powerful combination of appeals to *ethos* and *pathos* to resonate with the teenage audience. As a result of the campaign, teenage smoking rates have dropped significantly. Truth®’s creators recognize that individuals are responsible for their actions and provide teens straightforward facts. The Truth® campaign is necessarily tied to Aristotle’s ideas of rhetoric but must not be interpreted as mere tactics, as the skeptic may aver. To do so is to miss the goal of the campaign and of rhetoric more generally. While “rhetoric” has come to connote negative images in much of our modern society, it often communicates the true and the just. The Truth® campaign is among our society’s most convincing examples of this ideal.

Notes

¹ Some of the facts mentioned on this page include the following: “About 1 out of every 5 deaths in the US can be attributed to tobacco products”; “Every day about 2000 youths become daily smokers”; and “In 1989 millions of cases of imported fruit were banned after a small amount of cyanide was found in just two grapes. There’s thirty-three times more cyanide in a single cigarette than was found in those two grapes.”

² Though it should be noted that Truth® takes care not to have smokers or tobacco firms specifically as their target, Truth®’s website states, “truth is not anti-smoker. We love smokers. . . . truth isn’t about passing judgment on people or the choices they make” and further, “truth supports the individual’s right to smoke. Tobacco is a legal product in our country, available legally to those above a certain age. It’s produced by a legal industry. truth understands this. You’ll never hear us call for a legal ban on smoking” (“About Us”).

³ See also the website’s “Whatta you think” page, where visitors can write in answers to such questions as “Do you think tobacco companies should list cigarette’s ingredients on their packaging?” and “Tobacco companies won the right, in the Supreme Court, to advertise near schools and playgrounds. Why do you think they would do that?”).

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