

Megan Range

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### Forging a Path of Acceptance

For my essay I chose to pick a commercial I encountered while watching On Demand on my iPad. It involves three male teenagers sitting in a pizza parlor, noticing a strange-faced chef statue holding a plate of statue pizza. One of the kids remarks, “That’s so gay!” and another agrees. Directly following that, the comedian Wanda Sykes rises from the table in front of them and says, “Please don’t say that. That’s insulting,” and compares calling something distasteful “gay” to calling the same unpleasant thing “16-year-old boy with a cheesy moustache,” which is an accurate description of the boy who uttered the comment. The commercial is most definitely geared towards teens, as it is a group of teens featured in the commercial making the offensive comment. Also, the show I was watching, *Doctor Who*, while it has a varied audience, is most popular with teenagers. The organization behind the ad is the GLSEN, or the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. This group tries to promote better treatment of homosexuals and the various terms applied to them in schools. Another contributing organization was the Advertising Council, an organization that works on public service campaigns. The commercial appeared on October 8, 2008. The campaign, which moves to educate students about the consequences of using anti-LGBT language, is called thinkb4youspeak. The commercial created by these organizations uses a celebrity’s credibility, logic of word definition, and the old adage of “how would you feel if...” to stop the use of the word “gay” in an offensive context.

Many similar campaigns were present at the time thinkb4youspeak made its commercials. In 2008 a brochure entitled *Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth* was mailed to many public schools (factsaboutyouth.com). Its purpose was to promote the feeling of normalcy surrounding homosexual presence in schools. The fight for normalcy was also going on within states, as Connecticut, and briefly California overturn bans on same-sex marriage in 2008. On the opposing side, Florida and Arizona initiate a ban, with California playing a Benedict Arnold and re-initiating theirs. The years immediately surrounding the making of thinkb4youspeak's commercial also saw the topic of homosexuality getting attention worldwide, as South Africa, Norway, and Sweden legalize the marriage rights of homosexuals (gaymarriage.procon.org). Thus, the time was ripe for an ad describing how the derogatory use of the word "gay" was offensive, as the status of those that felt hurt most by its usage was increasingly recognized by governments and by the public as "legal".

The main claim made in the ad is that using the word "gay" to mean stupid or otherwise distasteful is wrong because it makes people feel bad, because it denotatively does not mean anything warranting its unpleasant usage, and because it is denounced by Wanda Sykes. The argument in the advertisement starts with showing the audience what not to do, which is the scene with the kids insulting the chef statue. It then moves on to showing why they should not use the word "gay" as a derogatory comment. The commercial appeals to ethos by using Wanda Sykes, a famous comedian who happens to be homosexual, as a spokesperson, giving credibility to the organizations' cause. Logos is used when Sykes tells the kid not to say "'gay' when you mean 'dumb' or 'stupid'"; the audience knows that the definition of the word 'gay' does not include either of those words, thereby making it an illogical word choice. The audience's emotions are evoked when Sykes stands up right after the comment is made, making the offense

more direct, and having her use the simile of calling distasteful things “Sixteen-year old boy with a cheesy moustache”, thereby showing how such language makes people feel bad. The style is informal, with a conversational feel, and at the end a direct appeal is made to the audience to “knock it off”.

The comments following the advertisement’s debut on YouTube are very interesting. There are many that use good rhetoric to agree with or challenge the ideology the commercial is trying to convey, but there are also a plethora of comments that do no analysis or rhetorical challenge of the information given. For example, there are at least four comments that say, “This commercial is so gay”, alluding to a complete apathy towards and misunderstanding of the topic, and a lack of any rhetorical skill. Other comments vaguely mention that the ad violates their freedom of speech, which, though a slightly better use of the commenting space, is a mere throwing-around of the commonplace of the first amendment. Still others refer to the fact that “gay” did not originally mean “homosexual”, thereby negating its insulting effect. This is a fair try at rhetoric, but seeing as the original definition was “happy”, the use of the term as a derogatory descriptor makes no sense. Most of the other comments were enraged, better-phrased refutations of these three statements. Luckily, however well thought out or virtually worthless the comments seemed, the sheer number of them shows that the commercial is reaching people, and possibly getting some to stop using the word “gay” as an insult.

The campaign thinkb4youspeak, supported by GLSEN and the Ad Council, made these commercials in 2008, and, six years later, they are still circulating. Why? Because the issue is still deemed important. With the growing number of states granting same-sex couples the right to marry, and the topic being brought up a few times on the federal level, campaigns against discrimination based on sexuality have gained even more momentum. With help from the

government and celebrities, and a good use of pathos and logos, I predict that commercials like these will gradually make the phrase, “that’s so gay” become obsolete.

Works Cited

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