

Challenging Brands' Calculated Messages of Hope during a Pandemic: Twitter-User Response to COVID-19 Advertising Campaigns

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Abstract: Typically, consumer advertising is designed to promote or build brand identity for goods or services. Yet when a major crisis disrupts the everyday flow of life, advertisers often pivot from directly pitching their brands to conveying messages that somewhat reflect the tone of public service announcements. After examining the nature of much of the television advertising produced shortly after the United States was placed on lockdown following the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic, this exploratory study investigates posts to Twitter to begin to address the question: To what extent did viewers' interpretations of pandemic-themed commercials either accord with or challenge the advertisers' intended messages of hope? The results show that targeted consumers demonstrated a greater tendency to contest advertisers' inspirational themes than to passively accept them. These findings are discussed within the context of advertising's ideological function as propaganda aimed toward especially active audiences in the age of social media.

Keywords: advertising, audience studies, COVID-19, propaganda, Twitter

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1. Introduction

Numerous media scholars have demonstrated that, as it promotes or positions branded products and services, advertising also serves as propaganda (e.g. Adams 2020; Ellul 1973; Jhally 2009; Jowett and O'Donnell 2006; Pratkanis and Aronson 2002; Schudson 1986) and indirectly functions as an ideological force (e.g. Berger 2015; Croteau and Hoynes 2019; Ewen 1976; Frith 1997; Goldman and Papson 1996; Leiss et al. 2018; Nickolson 1997; O'Barr 1994; Ott and Mack 2014; Schudson 1986; Vestergaard and Schroder 1985). Yet, clearly, there is no ideology that advertising perpetuates more than a worldview grounded on the supposedly widespread benefits of consumerism. Indeed, in the United States, the vigorous purchasing and consumption of branded goods largely underpins the American Way of Life.

But, in times of cultural crisis, advertisers often depart from (or at least symbolically mask) the fundamental purpose of hawking goods and services, sensing that to do so would be socially inappropriate and place them in an especially tactless light. As a case in point, during World War II, not only did government agencies use advertising as propaganda (Witkowski 2003), but many corporate advertisers, in keeping with the spirit

of the age, also launched campaigns intended to boost morale, patriotism, and support for the war, as well as to encourage consumers to make personal sacrifices, such as rationing (see e.g. Brasted 2018; Jones 2009; Leff 1991; Salisbury 1943; Stole 2012; Tansey and Hyman 1993; Yang 1995; 2005; Young 2005). Likewise, in response to the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, consumers were in no mood to buy new sofas and flatscreen televisions – and marketers recognised this disposition. Instead of crassly persuading mourning citizens to procure their merchandise, advertisers transmitted motifs of patriotism and comfort (Kinnick 2004).

Nearly 19 years later, another attack – this one invisible – activated calamity in the United States (as well as the rest of the world). On March 11, 2020, on its website, the World Health Organization characterised COVID-19, the potentially life-threatening illness caused by the contraction of a novel coronavirus that had first emerged abroad, as a pandemic. Two days afterward, then-President Trump declared a national emergency (Taylor 2021). Lockdowns across the 50 states quickly followed, sparking disturbingly elevated levels of unemployment and economic havoc.

Surely this was no time for Corporate America to peddle high-priced sneakers and fresh lines of mascara. Accordingly, numerous brands shifted gears to produce television commercials that conveyed a tone more reflective of a public service announcement than a sales pitch (Hess 2020). Echoing the cause-marketing or advocacy promotion they have increasingly embraced since about the dawn of the new millennium (Einstein 2012; Wright 2001), a bevy of advertisers downplayed their goods while foregrounding montages and scenarios portraying the general US citizenry as heroes for making the best of sheltering indoors, and its “essential workers” as the most valiant of all for not only attending to the debilitating health concerns of those stricken with COVID-19, but also for delivering boxes from Amazon and stocking grocery store shelves (Hess 2020).

Without doubt, the creators of this advertising output – shielding onlookers from the reality of low-wage employees, while often highlighting beaming labourers – meant it to be inspirational. Yet how the targeted audience actually responded to their carefully crafted vehicles is another matter altogether. This study, then, attempts to begin to address the following question: To what extent did viewers’ interpretations of pandemic-themed commercials either accord with or challenge the advertisers’ intended messages of hope? Situated within the context of an ever-increasing viewership regularly engaged in multitasking across screens, an exploratory content analysis of posts to Twitter, a popular social media platform for culturally and politically engaged users, was conducted to assess how those exposed to the television advertising campaigns centred on the pandemic decoded them and expressed these understandings via social media. After providing the theoretical perspective that helped frame this study and surveying the literature on the ideological function of advertising as propaganda, this article will outline the methodological approach that guided the investigation. Finally, the research findings will be presented, followed by a discussion of the implications of these results for scholars interested in the cultural impact of advertising on active audiences in the digital age.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study incorporated two theoretical angles that both take a ‘bottom-up’ approach by placing emphasis on the interests of everyday people – especially those on the lower end of the class spectrum – over those of the elite who dominate social structures of power. To begin, the inquiry was informed by the critical media studies tradition. Critical theory,

per se, produces knowledge not simply as a goal in its own right, nor, as Fuchs (2011) puts it, merely “discusses norms, but analyses how society is related to processes of oppression, exploitation and domination”. Critical theory, he adds, “should be considered as having a normative dimension that aims at fostering research and theories that can help advance the public good” (2011). Drawing from Horkheimer, he succinctly states that “Critical theory is intellectual class struggle” (Fuchs 2011). Likewise, Kellner (1989) notes that critical theorists provide “a critique of a full range of ideologies from mass culture to religion”. Their approach “is thus informed by a critique of domination and a theory of liberation” (1).

Striking a similar tone in relating critical theory specifically to media, Andrejevic (2009) declares, “To put it bluntly, critical Media Studies is not interested in media for their own sake, but for society’s sake” (35). Historically, its focus has not been “directed solely toward a particular set of media structures (top-down, one-way, etc.)” but with how such structures have “helped reproduce power and social relations” (36). Anderson (2020) points out that the discipline examines media with an emphasis “on the discursive constructions of power and persuasion and how these discourses shape and are shaped by both the purveyors and consumers of media” (61).

Critical media studies encompass a wide array of perspectives – far more than can be covered in the present study. Further, their popularity has waxed and waned over time, with heated debate among academics, particularly in regard to their roots in the theories of Marx. Lately, however, the field has experienced a revival of sorts, even in its restoration of the concept of ideology (e.g. Dahlberg and Phelan 2011), which, in past years, has received dismissive treatment by some scholars. “Because Marx’s ideology critique promises intellectually and politically fruitful interventions”, Rodino-Colocino (2012) asserts, “it is time to revive both the concept and method in Critical Media and Communication Studies” (459).

Pertaining to the current investigation, advertising, in particular, plays a central role in the ideological work performed by the commercial media system. Assimilating observations by Knoche (2005), Fuchs (2011) notes that advertising “is necessary for the selling of media products, for the sales of services and consumer goods and for the ideological reproductions of capitalist relations”.

The second theoretical framework steering the present exploration recognises that, though they might be relentlessly exposed to the promotional vehicles of a field devoted to disseminating propaganda, consumers do not merely absorb the advertising industry’s biased messages unthinkingly. Consequently, in analysing the social-media response to the TV commercials conveying themes associated with the COVID-19 crisis, the study relies on understandings generated by work conducted under the rubric of audience reception studies. Originally formulated in reaction to the notion that the only true meanings reside solely in media texts themselves, as Livingstone and Das (2013) explain, audience reception studies have revealed that people produce “readings” that do not necessarily coincide with the creators’ intentions. Still, viewers’ and listeners’ interpretations are not wildly individualistic (nor do they inevitably constitute an act of resistance (see e.g. Gitlin 1997), an assumption Cultural Studies theorists often mistakenly make), but are influenced by various social positions and the specific social contexts in which they are engendered. Ultimately, the theoretical approach has made it clear that audiences are not passive but have the power to “reshape and remediate media texts and technologies” (6).

For decades, much research has acknowledged the role of the ‘active audience’ (for

an example occurring after the turn of the century, see Cooper and Tang 2009). And now, as the digital age further matures, according to Sundar and Limperos (2013), the assumption that everyday people are lively users of the media can scarcely be contested. “Thanks to the Internet”, Sundar and Limperos say, “the concept of ‘active audience’ has now reached a pinnacle” (504).

In the end, the critical media and audience reception studies traditions can work in tandem with one another. “The critical and cultural theories that have been imported into media scholarship”, Thomas Streeter (1989) argues, “are not just more sensitive to domination, nor more sensitive to plurality, but offer a reconceptualization of both” (88). Emilie Zaslow (2012) puts it well, contending that “polysemy does not suggest that all reading positions are equally likely to be inhabited”. Instead, “dominant ideologies are likely to skew our reading position. In mass media, particularly, texts are frequently encoded with the hegemonic desires and values of the advertisers and other ideologues who finance media production and distribution” (194-195).

3. Advertising and Ideology

Though many scholars proffer similar definitions of ideology as it relates to media studies, this article will turn to one advanced by the sociologists Croteau and Hoynes (2019). An ideology, they write, “is basically a system of meaning that helps define and explain the world and that makes value judgements about that world” (191). The authors explain there is a debate about the extent to which the media support the “dominant ideology”, that is, “the worldview of the powerful” (192). Of all forms of media developed by major companies, however, advertising is undoubtedly encoded with the most consistent ideological messages. As one team of researchers once stated it, “Advertising is permeated with a uniform ideology” (Andr n et al. 1978). It goes almost without saying that, first and foremost, advertising, as the “*face of capitalism*” (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, emphasis in original), perpetuates a view of life based on endless consumerism. For, as Croteau and Hoynes (2019) note, “there is an underlying commonality to almost all advertisements. They are fundamentally about *selling*. They address their audiences as consumers and celebrate and take for granted the consumer-capitalist organization of society”, an outlook, they add, that is “decidedly ideological” (216, emphasis in original).

4. Advertising as Propaganda

In their book *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Jowett and O’Donnell (2006) associate the practice of propaganda with advertising in particular, stating that “advertising is the most ubiquitous form of propaganda in our society”, serving as “the primary means of stimulating the sales of the products of our consumer-oriented society” (146).

Promotion for branded commodities dominates advertising expenditures. Yet, as mentioned earlier, calculated as a public relations move of sorts, some campaigns shift from relentlessly promoting specific products to taking the form of public service announcements (PSAs). An excellent case in point involves ‘green advertising’, in which businesses attempt to give the impression they are working to solve environmental problems, while, in reality, they are doing little or nothing to mitigate the damage (or worse yet, exacerbating the trouble; Nakajima 2001).

The act of appropriating meaning and signs of social progress is but one illustration that demonstrates how advertisers adjust to key developments in each era, thereby acting, to a certain extent, as “society’s mirror” (Coleman 1998). A reflection of the current

social milieu was in plain display when, in response to the unfolding lockdown in the US, advertisers began to produce television campaigns whose themes centred on the COVID-19 pandemic. The audience reaction to them on social media – the focus of the present investigation – provides some indication of whether they were effective and, even more importantly, sheds light on the field's role in spreading propaganda meant to support the country's capitalist economy even amidst a national crisis. Did consumers merely receive the commercials in a manner that aligned with how advertisers had encoded them? Or were they more apt to generate negotiated or even oppositional readings (Hall 1980)?

5. Research Questions and Methodology

As identified in the introduction, the following primary research question set the direction for this study:

To what extent did viewers' interpretations of pandemic-themed commercials either accord with or challenge the advertisers' intended messages of hope?

To address this central query, two sub-questions were generated based on the discussion above, and these guided the methods developed to provide valid answers:

1. What was the distribution of positive, negative, and neutral sentiments that Twitter users expressed toward the commercials in general and by commercial category?
2. What themes did Twitter users convey in reaction to the commercials in general and by commercial category?

5.1. Selection and Analysis of Commercials That Focused on COVID-19

Though content analysis is not necessarily the first methodology of choice for audience studies researchers, in this study it made sense to adopt this approach because we were examining actual written text rather than conducting interviews. Indeed, studies investigating tweets, in particular, commonly draw upon the method (see, for example, Declercq et al. 2019; Giglietto and Selva 2014; Miller and Behm-Morawitz 2017). While our design contains quantitative elements, it is also undergirded by the assumption that “numbers are integral to qualitative research, as meaning depends, in part, on number” (Sandelowski 2001, 1). Suitably, then, our study is on the whole qualitative and non-positivist in nature, as the Discussion and Conclusions section below especially makes evident.

Using ISpot, a public database of commercials, we identified 317 commercials that focused on COVID-19 and appeared on US television between March 15, 2020 (when a national emergency due to COVID-19 was declared in the US) and April 30, 2020 (when the national lockdown restrictions were somewhat eased). To help ensure the accurate measurement of public opinion of these advertisements, we limited our sample to the 317 commercials that were also identically posted to the brands' Twitter accounts and that received at least 10 top-level comments ($n = 36$). As a means of developing a coding scheme for commercials related to the COVID-19 pandemic, we scanned newspaper articles and other media reports that provided insights into how such advertisements could be categorised (see Hess 2020; Microsoft Sam 2020). The final codebook was established after several revisions and included descriptions, examples, and suitable

application of the codes (Saldaña 2009). Table 1 provides a description of each of the six thematic categories we designated.

Commercial Category	Description
“We Are Here for You”	The brand comforts viewers by letting them know it is ready to serve them, including “essential workers”, during the crisis. Message might include emphasis on what cleaning and safety measures have been put in place to reassure viewers that they needn’t be afraid to buy from the advertiser amid the pandemic.
“The Public Service Announcement (PSA)”	Brand encourages viewers to keep safe by methods such as staying home, practicing social distancing, wearing masks, or engaging in self-care routines. The objective is to reinforce the scientific recommendations regarding COVID-19.
“God Bless Our Heroes”	Brand applauds the “essential workers”, including medical personnel, restaurant employees, and others designated as such by government documents, as well as “everyday” heroes who are going out of their way to help others navigate the crisis.
“We Are in This Together”	Focus is on the brand’s indication that it is united with viewers in getting through the crisis together. Emphasis may be on people finding ways to cope with sheltering in place thanks to the brand’s products or services.
“Hard-Sell”	Brand shows some awareness of the coronavirus pandemic, but it also strongly encourages the audience to continue to buy the advertised product or service.
“Other”	The commercial does not fit any of the categories above, or it never directly or implicitly references the coronavirus or pandemic.

Table 1: Description of the commercial categories used for coding

To maintain consistent coding, the two authors and a trained undergraduate student independently coded all 36 commercials for the six category types and compared their findings. Advertisements that received only partial agreement (eight), full disagreement (three), or were coded as “Other” were eliminated from the final sample. As a result, the researchers analysed only the 22 commercials that all three coders had independently reached full agreement on in terms of category.¹

5.2. Sentiment Analysis of Tweets: Coding Procedure and Development

To answer the central research question in relationship to the first sub-question, a sentiment analysis was conducted, with the unit of analysis for coding consisting of one unique tweet. Prior to coding the actual tweets in the sample, the three coders practiced

¹ For information about the breakdown of the sample by brand, commercial title, and the frequency of tweets for each category, see the Data Availability Statement below.

with similar tweets that were not included in the study. The codebook was revised until discussion among the coders indicated a consensus of the theoretical validity and a mutual understanding toward the execution of the codebook. The final codebook was then applied to a random selection of 10% of the tweets from the study sample ($n = 136$), a proportion that is considered appropriate for establishing intercoder reliability (Lombard et al. 2002). The three coders read each tweet in its entirety and coded for the most dominant sentiment conveyed in the tweet (Myrick et al. 2016). Tweets that did not relate to the commercial, the brand, or the COVID-19 pandemic were coded as “Other”. Table 2 displays a sample tweet for each type of sentiment (excluding “Other”).

Coding for Sentiment Analysis	Example Tweet
Positive	You guys in Bk are awesome for doing this for our fighters (Burger King)
Negative	So we are still paying full price for amazon Prime and deliveries are taking weeks for Prime items! While other companies are giving there customers discounts why isn't AMAZON? Trust me we don't have Prime for the steaming video services! At least I don't anyway! Amazon is fake! (Amazon)
Neutral	You can best respond by totally ignoring the rollback of EPA restrictions. Trump will be gone in Jan 2021 & people will still want low emissions, high mileage, & electric vehicles. (Toyota USA)

Note: Tweets are reproduced exactly as they were posted, including misspellings, grammatical errors, all punctuation, and use of capitalisation.

Table 2: Example tweet for each type of sentiment used in the sentiment analysis

Cronbach's *kappa* statistic was used to ascertain the level of agreement among the three coders (Cohen 1968): the intercoder reliability coefficient for the sentiment analysis was 0.79. Determining what constitutes an “acceptable” degree of intercoder reliability is not an entirely straightforward process, but it is generally agreed that coefficients of 0.70 and above are considered suitable for exploratory research (see Lombard et al. 2002 for a detailed discussion of assessing intercoder reliability). In addition, to obtain the greatest extent of coding consistency, the researchers identified ambiguous tweets and relied on intensive discussions until they arrived at a group consensus (Saldaña 2009). After establishing an acceptable level of agreement, the codebook was then applied to the complete sample of 1,361 tweets, with each member of the research team coding one third of the total sample.

5.3. Thematic Analysis: Coding Procedure and Development

To further interpret the meaning of each tweet with respect to the second sub-question, we used an inductive approach to identify any repeating themes within each type of sentiment. Arriving at a framework involved each coder individually examining the data for possible themes. Next, the lead author used the observations that were uncovered to

produce an initial codebook, which was then revised following feedback and comments from the other two researchers and a deliberation over disagreements among the coders. The final codebook included the following four themes:

- Theme 1. Affirms the intended message of the commercial or expresses a positive stance toward the company in relationship to the pandemic.
- Theme 2. Challenges the intended message of the commercial or expresses a negative stance toward the company in relationship to the pandemic.
- Theme 3. Expresses a positive stance toward the commercial or the company that is unrelated to the pandemic.
- Theme 4. Expresses a negative stance toward the commercial or the company that is unrelated to the pandemic.

Tweets whose meanings could not be interpreted and those that did not contain original content in English were coded as “Can’t Determine Meaning” or “Blank/Not English” respectively. Tweets that did not fit any of the outlined categories above were coded as “Other”. Table 3 provides a sample tweet for each of the four main themes. The final codebook was then applied to a random selection of 10% of the tweets from the study sample ($n = 136$). Each researcher independently coded all the tweets in the sample and together reached an intercoder reliability coefficient of 0.91 for the thematic analysis. After this suitable intercoder reliability had been established, each member of the team coded one third of the total sample.

Coding for Thematic Analysis	Example Tweet
Theme 1: Affirms the intended message of the commercial or expresses a positive stance toward the company in relationship to the pandemic.	What a beautiful tribute to our workers on the frontline! Thank you Dove! (Dove)
Theme 2: Challenges the intended message of the commercial or expresses a negative stance toward the company in relationship to the pandemic.	Still no hazard pay for your employees (Papa John’s)
Theme 3: Expresses a positive stance toward the commercial or the company that is unrelated to the pandemic.	Send me pizza, love u (Pizza Hut)
Theme 4: Expresses a negative stance toward the commercial or the company that is unrelated to the pandemic.	y’all the leading cause of diabetes (Burger King)

Note: Tweets are reproduced exactly as they were posted, including misspellings, grammatical errors, all punctuation, and use of capitalisation.

Table 3: Example tweet for each of the themes used in the thematic analysis

6. Results

Pertaining to the first sub-question above, out of the 1,361 tweets analysed, across all commercial categories, 327 (24.03%) carried a positive sentiment, 713 (52.39%) generated a negative sentiment, and 212 (15.58%) evoked a neutral sentiment. Commercials in the “Hard-Sell” category produced the highest positive sentiment, based on tweets per category (35.46%), followed by the “We Are Here for You” (26.60%) and the “God Bless Our Heroes” (22.04%) categories. The breakdown for negative sentiment followed a different pattern: the commercial category “We Are Here for You” evoked the highest negative sentiment (64.04%), followed by “We Are in This Together” (58.50%) and “The PSA” (57.02%). These numbers represent a clear finding: regardless of commercial category, Twitter users produced a higher percentage of negative tweets than positive ones. On the other hand, the smallest difference between positive and negative sentiment was for the “Hard-Sell” commercials (35.46% positive and 36.65% negative).²

Turning to the second sub-question, across all commercial categories, 263 tweets (19.32%) affirmed the intended message of the commercial or expressed a positive stance toward the company in relationship to the pandemic, while 453 (33.28%) challenged the intended message of the commercial or expressed a negative stance toward the company in relation to the pandemic. In addition, Twitter users posted 63 tweets (4.63%) that expressed a positive stance – yet with no relationship to the pandemic – toward the commercial or the company behind it, and 262 tweets (19.25%) indicated a negative stance – again, with no direct or implied reference to the pandemic – toward the commercial or the company that produced it. Commercials aligned with the category “We Are Here for You” generated the highest percentage of disapproval from Twitter users, with 40.85% of the tweets conveying discontentment with the commercial’s intended message and 23.62% of them communicating displeasure toward either the company or its products or services that bore no relationship to the commercial’s intended message. “Hard-Sell” advertisements sparked the highest percentage of affirmative comments from respondents, with 21.91% of the tweets voicing approval of the commercial’s intended message and 13.55% of them expressing appreciation for the company or its products or services, while exhibiting no relationship to the commercial’s intended message in regard to the pandemic.³

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Plainly, the findings show that most reactions in the Twitter sample to the commercials that focused on COVID-19 signalled resistance to the advertisers’ intended messages. Indeed, of the 1,361 tweets analysed, over half expressed a negative sentiment, while only approximately a quarter conveyed a positive one. The thematic results yielded similar patterns: 23.95% either affirmed the intended message of the commercial or communicated a positive stance toward the company or brand at large, while 52.53% either challenged the commercial’s intended message or criticised the company or brand in relation to some other concern.

² For information about the percentages of positive, negative, and neutral sentiments by commercial category, see the Data Availability Statement below.

³ For information about the percentages of Twitter themes by commercial category, see the Data Availability Statement below.

“Oppositional” readings (Hall 1980) ran rampant. Many were very politically charged, often relating to the ways in which the corporations mistreated their workers in general (e.g. “Perhaps if you showed kindness to your warehouse workers they wouldn’t be protesting tomorrow. That is why we #BoycottAmazon”⁴) or specifically within the context of the pandemic, e.g.

clap because you care? i’m getting word left and right that you plan to reopen [Macy’s] stores as soon as NEXT. WEEK. so who exactly are you clapping for? the very people that will no doubt be working on your customers and retail workers when they fall ill? you’re no better than the rest.

Numerous tweets exposed an advertiser for its perceived hypocrisy. For example, in response to a State Farm commercial asking viewers to call if they needed help during the pandemic, one person wrote, “That’s BS – I asked for a lower rate and you gave me the runaround”. A different Twitter user offered an even more heated retort to a similar message from Toyota:

#1- LIARS!!!!!! YOU ARE NOT HERE FOR ME! YOU ARE NOWHERE! I HAVE BEEN CALLING FOR HELP AND SOMEONE ANSWERS ONLY IF I WANT TO BUY A CAR! I SENT 6 MESSAGES AND NO REPLY! WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU? I NEED HELP! SHAME ON YOU!!!!!!!

Many respondents demonstrated dismay toward a company for any one of a host of reasons. “If amazon didn’t sell China items they wouldn’t be in business!” one critic remarked. “Bizarre propaganda”, another commenter posted in reaction to a Burger King advertisement, adding, “obesity kills far more people and BurgerThing shares culpability for those deaths”. Elsewhere, comparing Uber to brands that long ago established that success could be built on a gig-labour model, one observer wrote, “Amway & May Kay also worth Millions, by the way #uberred”. Taking a dismissive position toward a Facebook commercial while associating the tech behemoth with shady communication practices, another Twitter user scoffed, “Whatever! Facebook pushes propaganda 24/7”.

In a testament to the futility of advertisers attempting to convey persuasive messages – whether overt sales pitches or mawkish points about the nature of humanity – to consumers who have already had direct negative experiences with a brand, one of the most common antagonistic attacks to emerge centred on a company’s poor customer service. Facebook, FedEx, and Macy’s especially stood out on this front. Below, for example, is but a tiny sample of venom aimed at FedEx:

Y’all suck! Everytime I have a delivery with @fedex you never deliver on the day it’s supposed to be, and when I do get my packages they are always damaged. My package was supposed to be delivered yesterday was on truck and it’s still not here.

Why would my package be stuck in the same location for a week?

⁴ Tweets are reproduced exactly as they were posted, including misspellings, grammatical errors, all punctuation, and use of capitalisation.

Got a package for other address delivered to my house. There's no separate "customer service agent" for this kind of problem (no online way). Not waiting forever on phone to fix your screw up. Maybe I'll try to deliver it the next time I'm in that area. No wonder FedEx is a joke.

I have two differing notifications from FedEx saying my package is in two different places will be delivered two different days...

Through these brutal remarks, viewers seemed to indicate they couldn't care less about whatever stirring words and images were delivered by a corporation whom the respondents recognised as an icon of incompetence – a company that cannot even fulfil its everyday responsibilities simply has no credibility behind its efforts to inspire.

Closer inspection of tweets by commercial category yields especially illuminating discoveries. For example, all of the groups of commercials that put an especially high emphasis on COVID-related issues intending to arouse feelings of hope and connection rather than on traditional selling messages evoked much more negative than positive sentiment. "The PSA", for instance, scored 16.53% positive versus 57.02% negative sentiment. Similarly, advertisers that attempted to portray themselves as semi-public servants or emblems of community spirit generated still greater percentages of negative responses: "We Are Here for You" received the highest proportion of negative sentiment at 64.04% (versus 26.60% positive) and, though it had only the second-highest negative sentiment mark at 58.50%, "We Are in This Together" conjured a meagre 7.48% of positive sentiment. These figures strongly suggest that Twitter users frequently perceived the brands' messages as hypocritical at worst and disingenuous at best. Yet when the lens was directed externally toward the health-care employees and other essential workers who laboured in the middle of the crisis, users were considerably less likely to rebuke advertisers through their posts – "God Bless Our Heroes" sparked only 44.35% negative sentiment (still, it hardly attracted an outpouring of praise, as positive sentiment stood at just 22.04%).

On the other hand, the commercial category that produced the most balanced sentiment percentages (35.46% positive versus 36.65% negative) was the "Hard-Sell" format. Contrasted with the overwhelmingly uneven degree of negative sentiment garnered by the brands that seriously downplayed sales pitches, these figures signify that, even amid severe cultural disruption, perhaps advertisers should simply stick to their true mission, that is, to promote their branded products and services.

Diving still deeper, the categories that sparked the greatest challenge to the intended message in relationship to the pandemic were "The PSA" at 47.11% (versus 15.70% affirmation) and "We Are Here for You" at 40.85% (versus 22.13% affirmation). Interestingly, as alluded to above, despite the high percentage of negative sentiment expressed toward "We Are in This Together", most of that vitriol was channelled not in the direction of the intended message per se (11.56%), but in conveying low regard for the companies for reasons independent of the pandemic (46.94%), such as poor product quality (e.g. 'Burger King contributes to diabetes') or bad customer service (e.g. 'Facebook shuts down accounts for no justifiable cause'). Once again, direct usage or experience with the brand overshadowed whatever idea or vision an advertiser hoped to trumpet. At the same time, not surprisingly, based on the sentiment analysis just summarised, respondents communicated affirmation for commercials within the "Hard-Sell" category (21.91%) to about the same extent as those coded for the "God Bless Our

Heroes” category (20.16%). Though this percentage of agreeable reactions to “Hard-Sell” commercials was also nearly identical to the one in reply to “We Are Here for You” (22.13%), challenges to the intended message for the former were substantially lower than they were for the latter category (31.87% versus 40.85%).

Despite the limitations of the sample size and the relatively small and unequal number of tweets examined by commercial category (see “Limitations” section below), in answer to our research question – To what extent did viewers’ interpretations of pandemic-themed commercials either accord with or challenge the advertisers’ intended messages of hope? – the results of our exploratory content analysis offer one clear conclusion: the Twitter users who posted the tweets we investigated were often highly resistant to adopting brands’ propaganda, particularly as it related to corporations portraying themselves as communal stewards of goodwill rather than as capitalists out to grow their bottom lines on behalf of shareholders. In terms of the classic encoding/decoding model developed by Hall (1980), the engaged audience members who produced the material we examined consistently offered considerably oppositional responses.

Though it is true according to the Pew Research Center that in the US, “Twitter users are younger, more highly educated and wealthier than [the] general public” (Wojcik and Hughes 2019), Pew’s study also shows there are significant percentages of users who do not have a college degree (60% versus 69% for the general population) and make less than \$30,000 per year (23% versus 30%). While it is safe to assume that the composition of the people who posted the tweets in our sample skewed toward the more highly educated and well off, it is likely that it was also partly comprised of members of the working class or unemployed. Ultimately, it is impossible to determine the exact demographic makeup of the group under consideration. It should also be noted that the Pew findings reveal that Twitter users lean significantly more Democratic (60%) than Republican (35%). Considering that political liberals have a greater tendency than their conservative counterparts to resist corporate dogma, such an imbalance probably partially accounts for the extensive pushback our results uncovered.

No doubt, given its propensity to expend mental energy on a social media platform as a means of commenting on the advertising it views, the audience included in this study represents a particularly active one. Nonetheless, it would seem to indicate a dismissive outlook on the general population to assert that, regarding their level of sophistication and media savvy in interpreting commercial messages, Twitter users display a degree of intelligence that is of some magnitude higher than the public at large. As many media theorists (e.g. Van Brussel 2017; Fiske 1987; Livingstone and Das 2013; Streeter 1989; Zaslow 2012) argue, people are not ignorant dupes, passively swallowing the avalanche of intentional theses conveyed through screens and earbuds. Particularly in an age of ‘prosumers’, the complex narratives of Peak TV, and the interactive experience demanded of digital devices, the synapses in the brains of media audiences are presumably activated like never before, as individuals navigate a dynamic terrain in which the mediated and unmediated realms have converged into one ever-shifting milieu.

The findings of this study also suggest – though not as boldly – that the messages of advertisers ring more sincerely when they adhere to the true purposes of their promotional vehicles instead of hiding behind the mantle of do-gooders advocating for social justice, supporting marginalised groups, backing popular causes, and bringing hope to the world.

Still, if the advertising trade magazines are to be trusted, younger generations are supposedly pining for brands that demonstrate a ‘social conscience’. “Trends show that

young people gravitate towards brands with purpose”, declares an *Adweek* columnist (Sternberg 2019); “Stand for something, Gen Z says, and we’ll reward your company with our attention and dollars”. As a case in point, shortly following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer, Monica Marie Zorrilla (2020) cited a report by Edelman to reveal that, according to her *Adweek* article headline, “Consumers Want Brands to Take a Stand on Racial Justice”.

But, then again, perhaps when buyers, especially younger ones, are surveyed by advertising industry researchers with questions that ask whether brands have a duty to be morally responsible, the results are bound to be tilted in favour of respondents showing an interest in corporate beneficence. Ultimately, however, whether brands deliver hard-sell pitches or depict themselves as the world’s faithful stewards, they relentlessly propagate an ideology centred on consumerism, a way of life that, at least as it is currently structured, will only contribute vigorously to further environmental degradation and climate change, whose effects will impose the most harm not on the corporate chieftains sipping cocktails in gated communities, but on the planet’s already most subjugated populations (Serkez 2021).

8. Limitations

Several limitations to this study should be mentioned. Firstly, we did not examine all of the commercials focusing on COVID-19 that advertisers produced. Instead, the commercials in the sample were released between two important events during the early rise of the pandemic, namely, between the time of the declaration of an emergency in the US and the partial easing of nationwide lockdown restrictions. While we were strategic and intentional in determining this time frame, the exact cut-off dates were inevitably somewhat arbitrary in nature. Our results, therefore, should be evaluated with the understanding that non-probability sampling cannot lead to generalisable results. Secondly, no more than two brands were coded for two of the commercial categories (“The PSA” and “We Are in This Together”); accordingly, the findings for this pair of groupings should be assessed with caution. Thirdly, because the study did not take place in a controlled environment, it cannot be determined whether the Twitter users who commented on commercials in the sample had initially seen them on television and then gone to the site to share their reactions. Consequently, the replies on Twitter cannot be solely associated with the messages that were conveyed through the commercials during their telecast for a mass audience. Fourthly, as mentioned above, the demographic composition of the audience that posted the content in our sample by no means represents the educational and class standing, nor the political orientation of the population at large. Finally, it should be noted that our results offer insight into the public perception of brands’ communication efforts within the context of a global health issue. In interpreting these findings, then, it should be kept in mind that public perceptions of social issues, experiences with brands, and motivations to engage with them constantly evolve. It would be advantageous for future research to continue to monitor public opinion of brands’ social messages to identify similarities and differences.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study – including a breakdown of the commercials that were used by brand name, commercial title, and the frequency of tweets by commercial categories; a breakdown of positive, negative, and neutral

sentiments across commercial categories by frequency and percentage; and a breakdown of Twitter themes across commercial categories by frequency and percentage – are available from the corresponding author, T. K., upon reasonable request.

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