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Rhetorical Analysis: “Spotlight” Distracted Driving PSA

Every day, drivers make small choices that can have devastating consequences. One of the most common choices is the decision to take focus off the road and look at a mobile device. More specifically, picking up these devices leads to texting and driving. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 2023, 3,275 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes that involved distracted drivers (“Distracted Driving”). The Ad Council's “Spotlight” PSA directly addresses this issue as a widespread public safety problem. Through its stark staging, emotional delivery, and powerful sound design, the “Spotlight” PSA heightens the sense of personal responsibility in distracted driving and urges viewers to pay attention on the road as a matter of life and death.

The PSA's visual staging, especially the use of a single spotlight, conveys isolation and responsibility, forcing viewers to focus on the driver's choices. The ad opens with the main subject of the PSA, a younger man who appears to be driving. He is getting texts from his mother while behind the wheel, who is saying that he will be late, encouraging him to arrive at the destination faster. As he picks up his phone and attempts to respond to his mother, he crashes. Throughout this scenario, spotlights come on in small scenes, illuminating lights on different individuals. To end the PSA, the man who was in the crash appears in the last spotlight. From this, it can be assumed that the individuals shown under the spotlight have lost their lives due to distracted driving, including the man at the end. The spotlight itself becomes a visual metaphor for accountability. The driver is literally placed “under the light,” unable to escape responsibility. At the same time, it also serves as a rhetorical device of identification. In Samuel Head's “Teaching Grounded Audiences: Burke's Identification in Facebook and Composition,” he examines this theory. According to the article, Kenneth Burke described it as something that is “revolved around a rhetor ‘identifying’ with an audience” (Head 31). Each illuminated figure represents an ordinary person whose life has been cut short by a seemingly small decision. The

dark background strips away any distractions and forces the audience to focus only on the figure in the center. This minimalist staging mirrors the message of distraction-free driving. The use of the spotlight can also create a sense of universality. Each person highlighted under this spotlight could be anyone. The ambiguity strengthens identification because it prevents the viewer from dismissing the victims under the spotlight as different from themselves. Instead, the PSA implicitly asks viewers to imagine themselves or others they know in the same position. This can draw them into the emotional weight of the storyline. Burke's ideas of consubstantiality are described in Head's article as the idea that humans seek to feel substance in common with others (Head 29). This can help to explain why the PSA comes off as effective. By framing distracted driving as a shared risk, the PSA dissolves any boundaries that may be created by the actors and the viewers. Through simplifying visuals, the PSA directs the audience's eyes and reinforces the idea that a single decision can affect one's life tremendously.

The actor's performance, from body language to delivery, evokes tension and seriousness, appealing to viewers' emotions and making the PSA resonate on a personal level. Using pathos, the PSA taps into the audience's empathy, making them imagine themselves or their loved ones in the same situation. The actor's body language communicates intensity and focus, further amplifying the message. Each actor who appears in the spotlight delivers tones that are direct and urgent. Even though there are no spoken words, the looks on their face say all that needs to be said. Their body language and facial expressions communicate a sense of finality. Through this, the audience is reminded that these characters, though they may be actors, represent real people whose lives were cut short by distracted driving. According to Head's article, Burke argues that identification is not about abstract agreement, but about lived and felt connection (Head 30). The PSA creates that connection by relying on universal emotions such as grief, regret, and fear. At the end, the PSA breaks the fourth wall through its closing text. It addresses the viewers directly by saying, "Every day, too many people die in distracted driving crashes. Don't drive distracted." This appeal transforms this into more than just a PSA; it is also a personal warning, directly positioning the audience as the ones who must act differently. The breaking of this fourth wall is important when it comes to rhetoric. By shifting from dramatic scenes to more direct scenes, the PSA moves from narrative to exhortation. Burke would argue that this moment eliminates the distance between representation and reality. This can push viewers into what he calls "identification by antithesis," forcing viewers to ask which category they want to belong to

(Head 29). The power of this identification strategy is that it doesn't just inform the audience, but it also implicates them.

Strategic use of sound and pacing builds intensity, reflecting how quickly a moment of distraction can lead to irreversible consequences. The contrast between quiet moments and the louder, dramatic music highlights how quickly calm can turn into chaos when driving distracted. The deliberate pacing of abrupt cuts in scenes mirrors the idea that split seconds matter when driving. The simplicity of the ending phrase, “Don’t drive distracted,” matches the simplicity of the overall message of this PSA, which is that driving distracted is a choice every driver can make. Additionally, the sound design also works as a tool of identification. It mirrors the stress that drivers feel when they get distracted on the road. This pulls the audience into a felt experience of the danger. According to Head’s article, Burke’s identification theory implies that the media often persuades most effectively when it creates a sense of shared experiences (Head 34). By mimicking the suddenness of distraction and the silence that follows, the PSA makes the viewers inhabit the emotional sound themselves. Through this design and rhythm, the PSA ensures that its message is not only seen but also felt. The PSA also strategically engages ethos. The Ad Council is a nonprofit organization that is known for impactful public service campaigns, according to its website (“Our Firearm Injury Prevention Initiative”). Viewers are not only emotionally drawn into the PSA but also persuaded that this is a legitimate and pressing social issue.

In conclusion, the Ad Council’s “Spotlight” PSA demonstrates how rhetoric can transform a common issue into an urgent call to action. Its stark visuals highlight accountability as the emotional performances connect through empathy. The ad reframes distracted driving as not just a bad habit, but a life-or-death situation, reminding viewers that even a single lapse in focus can be fatal. Ultimately, the PSA proves that powerful staging and rhetorical strategies can make an audience stop, watch, and reflect on their decisions before they get behind the wheel. The PSA goes beyond warning and wanders into connection. It reminds audiences that distracted driving is not an abstract danger but also a shared vulnerability. This connection is what makes the PSA not only persuasive but also transformative.

References

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