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Pepsi and Social Justice: An Example of Corporate Cultural Appropriation

If all it took to solve the world's problems was a can of Pepsi, then world peace would've been achieved back in 1893 when it first hit shelves as an indigestion drug. In 2017, PepsiCo aired an advertisement entitled "[Live For Now](#)" that received widespread backlash over the ad's appropriation of social justice movements, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement. The ad clearly shows that Pepsi has a profound lack of understanding of social justice movements, but to understand why it's problematic, we have to look at the political and social climate of 2017.

On July 6, 2016, 32 year-old Philando Castile was shot and killed by a police officer from the Saint Paul Police Department. This was one of several instances of police brutality that had been picked up by large media organizations and spurred protests across the United States. The officer who murdered Castile was acquitted on all charges, causing widespread outrage not just among African-American communities, but all over the country (M. Smith). As media organizations started to pick up on more stories of police brutality, more people were exposed to just how violent and racist police departments in the United States are. As more of these stories made national headlines, the results were almost always the same; The officer is put on *paid*

leave, taxpayers are forced to foot the bill for the officer's legal defense, and the officer is acquitted because of qualified immunity, despite the video of their actions being available to everyone. In addition to the rise of tensions between police departments and the communities they are supposed to serve and protect, Donald John Trump was elected to be the 45th president of the United States of America on November 8, 2016. Trump became only one of four presidents in U.S. history to win the presidency through the electoral college, but lose the popular vote. Between racial inequality and police violence being laid bare for the world to see, a very unpopular president coming to power, and many other events that caused social and political turmoil, the average American was not too happy about the state of their country.

Pepsi, seeing the fragile social and political climate of the United States, capitalized on social justice movements to not only market their products, but to also in their words, "project a global message of unity, peace and understanding." (A. Smith). Pepsi now needed a spokesperson for their ad. You would think this would be a wonderful occasion to uplift an African American model or actor, but in all their wisdom, Pepsi decided to select Kendall Jenner. Jenner is a white, rich nepotism baby whose position in society alone has afforded her a majority of the opportunities she has had in her life. This casting choice is in stark contrast to the Black Lives Matter movement, which attempts to uplift underprivileged voices. The ad begins with Jenner doing a photoshoot, when a group of protesters marches by. The protesters are smiling and carrying signs that all have purposefully vague language and symbols such as "love", "join the conversation", and peace signs to avoid drawing a direct comparison to one specific movement or idea. Beckoned to join by a handsome cellist, Jenner decides to rip off her wig, wipe off her lipstick, and join the march. The protest in the ad is a very stark contrast to protests

in real life. In the ad, the protesters can be seen smiling, dancing, and making music, whereas protests in real life often involve anger, frustration, and police brutality in some form. The protest then comes up on a line of police officers, who unlike most officers that work protests, are not wearing riot gear or carrying weapons. Jenner grabs an ice cold Pepsi from a cooler and hands it to one of the officers. The protesters erupt into cheering and hugging, implying that the simple act of giving a cop a Pepsi solved whatever issue they were protesting. The target audience for this ad is millennials. While social justice movements involve people of all ages from all walks of life, they were and still are incredibly popular amongst young people. (Parker, et al.). Pepsi used social justice not only as a way to market their product to young people using a topic that was very popular, but also to signal that their brand is supportive of these movements. Kendall Jenner was chosen only because she was, and still is, an incredibly popular celebrity in the United States.

The ad aired on April 4th, 2017, drawing criticism from activists and the millennial audience they were targeting. One of the major problems this ad suffers from is that it trivializes the entire Black Lives Matter movement, especially the part of the ad where Jenner “fixes” police brutality just by giving a Pepsi to a police officer. Bernice King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., criticized and mocked Pepsi’s trivialization of the struggle for racial justice by tweeting, “If only daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi.” (King), along with a photo of Dr. King being pushed by a line of police while protesting. The fight for racial justice has been a constant struggle for black people all around the world for many centuries. If police brutality and racism could be solved by the simple act of giving an officer a Pepsi, the world would be a very different place. On top of that, Pepsi chose Kendall Jenner of all possible actors.

This is problematic as Jenner is seen by many to be an embodiment of white privilege. She was born into wealth, and as such has never had to struggle to have her basic needs met, she hasn't been disadvantaged in her life in any meaningful way due to her skin color, and she doesn't use her platform to draw attention to or support social justice movements unless she is paid large sums of money to do so. These flaws, along with numerous smaller problematic aspects of the ad, show not only that Pepsi has a complete lack of understanding about social justice and racial equality, but also that they thought it was acceptable to appropriate the pain and suffering of black people just to make a quick buck.

Corporations are not necessarily known for much besides doing anything and everything they can get as much capital as possible, regardless of morals. This ad is no exception to that. Pepsi advertised by taking advantage of the rising social awareness of young people to try to appeal to them. Rather than use this production to amplify black voices and bring awareness to the issues that are at the root of these protests, Pepsi cast a rich, famous, white woman in an effort to use her clout to increase the effectiveness and influence of their advertisement. The largest issue most people have with the ad is the implication that racism can be solved by offering the police a soda. Racism is an issue that is deeply baked into human society, and it will surely take more than a can of Pepsi to make strides towards a truly tolerant society.

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