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Nowadays, adverts are quite well thought out and brands are extremely careful when choosing what their ads contain. It doesn't matter whether it's a printed ad, a TV ad, an online ad, or even a radio ad, you can be sure that there have been many meetings in which every single aspect of the ad was scrutinized and analyzed in order to get to a stage where it was deemed appropriate for its target audience. Especially with the politically correct culture we have today. A few decades ago, however, it seems that this wasn't the case. Well, it probably was the case but because things were less strict in terms of advertising, a lot more controversial ideas slipped through the net than they do today. In fact, there have been quite a few controversial ads over the years and although they almost certainly wouldn't be allowed today, they give a good representation as to how advertising has changed through time. So, here are some of the most controversial vintage ads that were actually used to advertise products.
#1 - Coca Cola Today, Coca-Cola is a worldwide brand, and each day, millions of people consume the sugary beverage. However, just because we consume it doesn't mean that we know it to be healthy; in fact, Coca-Cola is known to be an extremely unhealthy soft drink that can not only spike blood sugar levels but also rot teeth and have a number of other negative effects. So, obviously, you wouldn't find Coca-Cola advertising their product as healthy, would you? Well, as you can see from the ad above, this is exactly what Coca-Cola once did. The ad talks about how you should give your newborn baby Coca-Cola to give him/her a better start in life. It even goes into detail about how it's been proven that babies who start drinking soda will fit in better during their teen years. It also says that Coca-Cola promotes a healthy lifestyle, boosts personality, and gives the body essential sugars! #2 - Lucky Strikes Made famous by the hit TV show Mad Men, this ad for Lucky Strikes definitely wouldn't be allowed today. As you'll probably already know, advertisements for cigarettes are getting stricter all the time and, in a lot of countries, advertisements are no longer allowed at all. However, this hasn't always been the case, as you can see from the ad above. The ad actually uses a picture of Santa Claus to help market cigarettes as a great Christmas gift. It's not often that you see Santa Claus enjoying a smoke but this was one occasion where this was the reality and clearly, it wouldn't be allowed today. It's likely that this ad was made to appeal to not only adults but also children/youth adults too. #3 - Segs Nowadays, Segs has fallen behind somewhat in the computer gaming world as Sonic and Microsoft have taken over. Back in the day, however, Segs was a huge company and was actively advertising their latest products and in a pretty controversial way, too. This ad for their game console was one of many rather provocative ads driven by sexual puns and euphemisms. The ad runs the strapline "The More You Play With It, The Harder It Gets". Yes, although technically, it's referring to the game console depicted in the image, it's clear what the ad is really talking about. I guess when things were in black and white, you had to be a little more creative. #4 - Kellogg's Today, Kellogg's is known for making a number of family cereals and vitamin bars. Therefore, their ads tend to be pretty straightforward and classy. However, this wasn't the case back in the day, as you can see from this hugely sexist ad from the company. The ad promotes a 1950's style relationship in which the woman would be used to stay at home and take care of the household while the man would go out to work. It runs the strapline "The Harder A Wife Works, The Cuter She Looks". Again, this wouldn't be allowed today in any shape or form and the worst part about the ad is that it promotes a Kellogg's product as the reason she loves to do the housework so much. "Vitamins darling, I always get my vitamins" - she proclaims. So, if you want to enjoy housework, perhaps you should invest in Kellogg's PEP? #5 - Cocaine Toothache Drops Cocaine is classed as one of the worst drugs available these days but it seems that a few decades ago, it was perfectly fine to use cocaine in toothache drops. This ad for cocaine toothache drops from Lloyd Manufacturing Co. depicts the product as an instant cure for toothache - something that definitely wouldn't be possible today. Not only this, but the ad also (for some reason) features children; they're more than likely being cured by the Class-A drug product and left to get on with their day. #6 - Alcoa Hytop Here's an extremely sexist ad from the guys at Alcoa Aluminium. This ad was created to show just how easy it is to open the new Hytop, which was added to tomato sauce bottles and many other household condiments. However, it's the sexist way in which the ad chooses to do this "ease" that's so shocking. Check out the way the ad is written and the rather sexist ad that it is rather than the headline of the ad that it is. The ad reads "You mean woman can open it with an image of what appears to be a 1950's housewife who seems to be shocked at how easy it is. Basically, the ad is saying that it's so easy to open, even a woman could do it. It's extremely sexist and certainly wouldn't be allowed by today's advertising standards. #7 - Chase And Sanborn Here's yet another hugely sexist ad from the 1950s. This ad was created by the coffee manufacturer and retailer Chase and Sanborn in 1952. As you can clearly see from the ad itself, a husband appears to be spanking his wife; but why is this? Well, if you take a quick look at the ad copy, everything will become apparent. Basically, it appears as though the man's wife hasn't been checking that the coffee she's been buying has been packed for extra freshness. As you can see, this hasn't gone down too well and, therefore, his wife has earned herself a spanking. Essentially, the ad promotes a unique selling point of the Chase and Sanborn coffee, but clearly, in the most sexist way possible. Much like the previous ad, this advert just seems to show how far we've come in around 70 years in terms of advertising. There's no way that sexist ads like this one would be allowed today and quite rightly so too, although it probably does still pay to check for freshness before you buy, whether you're male or female. #8 - Chesterfield Another area of advertising that has come a long way in recent years is that of tobacco advertising. These days, tobacco advertising is not allowed in the UK and many of the other western countries; but this hasn't always been the case. Around 60 years ago, tobacco advertising was perfectly legal and if you've ever watched the hit US show Mad Men, you've probably already seen a few of the tobacco-related adverts that were created in this time period. This advert for the tobacco brand Chesterfield is perhaps one of the worst, as it depicts a woman (and a young Donald Reagan) who have placed in print another Father's Day advertisement. The ad is celebrating Christmas by showing a pack of Chesterfield cigarettes being lit by a young boy on Christmas morning. The ad is clearly promoting as Father's Day gift and it's a little bit of a cheeky one. However, it's the way in which the woman is being used to sell the product that's so offensive. The ad is clearly promoting as Father's Day gift and it's a little bit of a cheeky one. However, it's the way in which the woman is being used to sell the product that's so offensive. The ad is clearly promoting as Father's Day gift and it's a little bit of a cheeky one. However, it's the way in which the woman is being used to sell the product that's so offensive.
#9 - Chesterfield (another one) To show just how out of touch tobacco advertising got in its heyday, I wanted to include at another advert from the tobacco brand Chesterfield on this list. If you thought the ad above was bad enough when it used a political and well-respected figure to advocate the use of cigarettes, you can see that this ad goes a step further by using a child in the advertising campaign. This ad promotes Chesterfield cigarettes as the perfect birthday gift for fathers and it uses a child to do this. In the ad, you can see that the child and his mother have bought the child's father a pack of Chesterfield for his birthday for three reasons: they're milder, they taste better, and they're cooler. So, this ad not only depicts a child promoting smoking but also talks about how their brand of cigarettes is both cooler and better tasting. It's certainly something that we wouldn't get away with today and, truthfully, we shouldn't have gotten away with it all those years ago either. #10 - Kenwood Chef Yet another hugely sexist ad is this one from the likes of Kenwood, a brand of kitchen appliances that is still trading today. In particular, this ad is promoting a new appliance from Kenwood named the Kenwood Chef. Clearly, it's an electric mixer-type device that many of us likely have in our own homes today. However, when it was introduced by Kenwood, this was a revolutionary device that had the power to do a whole host of tasks automatically that would have only been able to be done by hand previously. So, how do you market a device that makes cooking easier? Well, you compare it to your wife, of course. The ad runs the copy "The Chef does everything but cook, that's what wives are for." It's an ad that is once again extremely offensive to women, as it makes out that wives are only good for one thing: cooking. The ad features a cheesy-looking married couple, too; the kind of image you would expect to see in a 1950's domestic magazine. The ad also features a young girl who is holding a cigarette and looking at the camera. The ad is clearly promoting as Father's Day gift and it's a little bit of a cheeky one. However, it's the way in which the woman is being used to sell the product that's so offensive.
#11 - Gillette Safety Razor #19 - 7up #20 - Van Heusen #21 - Fairy Soap #22 - Chlorinol #23 - Cocacola Candy #24 - Hoover #25 - Elderflon
You might think ads are pretty controversial these days and yes, a lot of adverts are a lot more sexual than the ad of the past, but to be honest, I find a lot of the ads mentioned in this post more offensive as quite simply, a lot of them depict extremely harmful products in extremely enticing ways (such as the Lucky Strikes ad for example). So, although online advertising might still not be so highly regulated, I personally feel that the regulations in place for TV, radio, and print ads are for the best. One thing we don't want is to be sold cigarettes and other harmful products (such as cocaine toothache drops) thanks to inventive advertising campaigns. This article was written by Josh, who is an advertising enthusiast with a particular interest in advertising over the years. He now works for the UK printing company DBP on the creative marketing aspect of the business. Originally published in June 2013; Updated May 2021 Today's marketers face enormous creative challenges when it comes to designing and promoting print advertisements. Let's face it, you've probably seen millions of print ads and commercials over the course of your lifetime. You can probably think of a few memorable ads right off the top of your head. And you can probably think of at least a couple controversial print advertisements too! What makes ads and commercials memorable? Commercial ads have more than one purpose. Sure, ads are intended to inform, but they're also intended to arouse some kind of emotion that propels viewers to take some sort of action like: Buying a product Using a service Donating to a cause Preventing a sickness or tragedy The most effective marketers are pretty good at creating ads that are controversial, yet non-offensive. Why? Controversies get people talking. They have the potential to create a widespread buzz. From a marketing standpoint, that's a great thing! Effective marketers also know they need to make a connection with their audience. They want their ads to have an impact on their target audience. The ad shows a woman cleaning a sparkling window and a little girl pointing out the window in the act of offending the other. There are no shortages of opinions in the world, right? It's a huge balancing act to walk the line between being big and bold without crossing the line that fuels anger and discontentment. Controversial print advertisements that choose a side on sensitive social issues (race, gender, tragic events, stereotypes, etc.) can be a huge hit or a devastating miss. At the end of the day, marketers that get controversial ads right half as heroes, and those that fail end up with viral bloopers. To demonstrate our point, we're giving you a snapshot of 9 of the most controversial ads in recent years, including some effective ads, and a few offensive ads too. In 2015, Protein World launched a series of ads to promote their protein supplements to users. They released the ad on the London Underground. The caption on one of the posters read, "Are you beach body ready?" It didn't go over well with the general public. Onlookers blasted negativity on social media over the ad, alleging it promoted an unhealthy body image. It's on our list of controversial advertisements because it led to public outrage, vigilantism, and vandalism. Individuals circulated a petition to have the ads removed. The Advertising Standards Authority in the U.K. received 378 complaints about it, and the ad was banned on the basis of making unauthorized health and nutrition claims. Was it worth the risk? Protein World spent £250,000 on the ad campaign. Their sales skyrocketed to over £1m. You be the judge. Source Benetton Group missed the mark with a controversial ad that showed world leaders kissing. Leaders like Obama, Merkel, and Sarkozy were featured kissing someone else in the ad. The intent of the ad was to speak to the idea of kissing as a universal symbol of love. The ad ran on billboards the world over. The ad was eye-raising especially considering they'd previously launched a controversial advertisement that depicted a nun and a priest kissing. The ad of Pope Benedict XVI kissing a top Egyptian imam was swiftly condemned by the Vatican and was removed shortly after. The ad was removed from the London Underground. The ad was eye-raising especially considering they'd previously launched a controversial advertisement that depicted a nun and a priest kissing. The ad of Pope Benedict XVI kissing a top Egyptian imam was swiftly condemned by the Vatican and was removed shortly after. The ad was removed from the London Underground. The ad was eye-raising especially considering they'd previously launched a controversial advertisement that depicted a nun and a priest kissing. 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