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Subliminal Messages and Hype Behind Buc-ee's

Few establishments have a closer bond with American culture than the roadside convenience store Buc-ee's. The Texas-based company is widely recognized for its many claims to fame, such as owning the "world's cleanest restrooms" as of 2012, the "world's largest convenience store", and the "world's longest car wash" (Buc-ee's). These achievements fast-tracked the brand into the public consciousness, and as it expanded across Texas and into other states, Buc-ee's quickly became a staple of not only Southern culture but of nationwide popular culture. Having lived in Texas for a short while, I have been asked on multiple occasions "Have you been to Buc-ee's yet?", usually followed by the statement "You haven't been to Texas if you haven't been to Buc-ee's". To investigate the hype surrounding Buc-ee's, I dedicated one Saturday evening to taking a trip to the location in Bastrop, analytically logging my thoughts and experiences. I noticed that beyond the extravagance of gas pumps and barbeque galore, Buc-ee's demonstrates its Southern pride through the products and features it advertises in store. Though this may be a given for the majority of Texas-based companies, the hype culture surrounding Buc-ee's amplifies the themes displayed in stores. This ultimately encourages traditional Southern values that Buc-ee's supports, such as tight-knit families, barbequing, heavy consumerism, and Christianity, to be more easily normalized and accepted in society, which perpetuates social norms in America that claim citizens are family-oriented, obese, and greedy.

Hype culture is a powerful social force that can completely alter the perception of a product or idea. Author Devon Powers in his article “Notes on Hype” characterizes hype as “a state of anticipation generated through the circulation of promotion, resulting in a crisis of value” (Powers, 863), arguing that hype artificially augments the value of the objects it affects. One of the most substantial factors in Buc-ee's popularity and success is the self-awareness of its hype. The company's business model is purposefully centered around huge stores, cheap prices, and a large selection of sweet, salty, or deep-fried foods to tap into Americans' love for their culture. The appeal of such a uniquely American store is intensified by the patriotic mindset of “go big or go home” (Gibson), as hype “exists in, and is born of, context” (Powers, 860). This generates a significant amount of hype for Buc-ee's, which in turn makes consumers much more enthusiastic about the convenience store.

While enthusiasm may be assumed to simply promote the business and products that Buc-ee's has to offer, the views and messages that the company supports are indirectly supported by the shown common interest of consumers. In reference to the philosophical question, “Can the artist be removed from their art,” Buc-ee's cannot be removed from the products customers purchase. Buying products from Buc-ee's is, whether intentionally or not, supporting their practices and beliefs. Even if one is not an avid fan of Buc-ee's or chooses other convenience store options, the hype surrounding the company still encourages the values of the business as it seeps into the unconscious mind of the public.

One of Buc-ee's biggest factors of hype is their emphasis on family. An interview with Buc-ee's founder Beaver Aplin by the Texas Monthly newspaper reports that “eighteen-wheelers were banned in an effort to differentiate the store from truck stops and attract families” (Benson, 150). Catering a convenience store toward traveling families makes the store much more niche,

increasing its intrigue to consumers. Beyond this, creating a convenience store meant only for families creates an environment that fosters family values. The modern family is described by philosopher Rebecca Sear as a family unit in which children are raised by two caregivers, (Sear, 3), which implies that the family is a close-knit unit with multiple children. The idea that Buc-ee's is supportive of this bonded family is observed in the services that the convenience store has to offer. Buc-ee's hires a mascot to walk around the store to take pictures with anyone who wants one, which is a huge selling point for many families attempting to find a roadside stop. Due to hype, both parents and children are likely to know about the mascot inside of Buc-ee's stores. With mascots being closely associated with fun and entertaining environments such as Disneyland or Universal Studios, families will feel more inclined to stop at Buc-ee's rather than any other store. Through the hype surrounding Buc-ee's family-friendly atmosphere, the social norm of having a more traditional family is spread around the community of not only customer, but also those who simply are aware of the company. With a chain so large building its name around such kid-friendly features, the idea of having what is considered a "normal family" becomes idolized and indirectly encouraged through society. Consequently, it is likely that this hype unintentionally discriminates against families who either do not have children or do not fall into the category of belonging to a traditional family, as they may not feel seen or understood by their community.

Buc-ee's hype culture is also unintentionally non-inclusive towards minority religious groups in America. Buc-ee's sells a variety of Christian Evangelist merchandise, ranging from shirts with biblical references to home decor items marked with crosses and Bible verses. As Buc-ee's was founded in the Bible Belt of America, the majority of its consumer base consists of Evangelical Christians. Researcher Stanley D. Brunn studies the changing landscape of the

Bible Belt in his article “The Bible Belt in a Changing South”, detailing how in the South, “54 percent of those attending church weekly consider the Bible the absolute word of God and church attendance is highest” compared to other regions in the United States (Brunn, 514-515). Knowing this, the advertisement of Christianity plays a role in attracting more consumers and helping them feel more welcomed and recognized in stores. Although the hype may not directly reference Buc-ee’s unannounced religious affiliation, consumers will feel more attached to the convenience store because of the connection they share via Christianity, resulting in the circulation of good reviews. Although the hype around Christian themes makes the majority of shoppers feel appreciated, other religious groups in America experience discrimination and a lack of support from a greatly influential institution. Promoting Christianity and no other religion strengthens the social norm of being a dedicated Christian in America and supports the stereotype that all Americans are Christian. The lack of diversity present in institutions and their fan bases such as Buc-ee’s creates division across America and prevents people from becoming more understanding and accepting of others’ differences, leading to prolonged social injustice.

In addition to Buc-ee’s furthering social issues in the U.S., the company also has been shown to encourage American cultural stereotypes. Buc-ee’s has generated much of its hype through the production of many stereotypically American foods. Upon entering the majority of Buc-ee’s stores, customers are bombarded with sights of a wall covered in countless candies, nuts and jerkies, a fountain hosting an array of sodas and specialty drinks, and an entire barbeque kitchen and deli. These are not features typical for a convenience store but are crucial for the hype and business model of the chain. Food culture is so prevalent in American society that during political campaigns, the foods certain candidates eat have been shown to both increase and decrease their approval ratings. As explored by Sheila Bock in her journal entry “Fast Food

at the White House”, 2003 presidential candidate John Kerry attempted to sway Pennsylvania voters by ordering a cheesesteak at a restaurant, and when he supposedly ordered it incorrectly, his campaign was negatively impacted by his “failure to be aware of and respect local food custom” (Bock, 18). In the case of Buc-ee’s, the Texas-local founders are aware that “fast food is understood to be quintessentially ‘American’ fare” (Bock, 22). By implementing large quantities of house-made American-beloved foods into their business model, Buc-ee’s was destined to generate hype rapidly, thus increasing its presence in American popular culture. The glorification of sugary and fatty food prolongs the social norm of indulging in binge eating and avoiding signs of poor health. This results in the reinforcement of the stereotype that Americans are obese and lazy, which further creates a cycle of normative behavior of bad dieting in America. With people eating unhealthy foods from Buc-ee’s, the norm that Americans live in an obese society is supported, which then allows more citizens to fall into bad dieting habits.

An additional American norm that is upheld through Buc-ee’s hype culture is the idea that Americans are hedonistic in their habits of over-consumption. The most notable aspect of all Buc-ee’s stores is their massive spaces and their utilization of that space. Every store is packed up to the ceiling with merchandise, food, utilities and gas pumps, all selling at competitive prices. Buc-ee’s has even been accused of marking their prices specifically on gas to be too inexpensive as a method of extracting customers from other convenience stores, resulting in the 2019 lawsuit *Oasis Travel Center v. Buc-ee’s Alabama* that demanded the company stop utilizing monopolistic tactics (Sharp). Cheap price tags are enticing to consumers around the world, but recently has become a bigger marketing strategy for many businesses as costs of living are on the rise. In 2002, the President of the Consumers Union of U.S., Inc. Jim Guest spoke at an annual meeting regarding the economic state of U.S. citizens, claiming that about “29

million households in the U.S lack sufficient income to meet even a minimum-needs budget” (Guest, 146). This speech was given around the same time as the opening of the first Buc-ee’s Travel Center in 2003; in 2024, approximately 29% of American households cannot afford basic necessities, which is an increase over two decades (Dickler). If this large proportion of Americans cannot afford minimum necessities, they are more likely to seek out the cheapest products. If people are able to pay less for their store purchases, then they are also more likely to buy more products, contributing to the large consumerist culture in the U.S. With Buc-ee’s making a name for its competitive prices, the store is likely to resonate well with consumers wanting to buy more for less, generating hype for the convenience store. With people being encouraged to buy more products, the norm of obtaining wealth and spending money whenever possible is more standardized and prolonged in American culture. This culture creates a deeper class divide between Americans, as the upper classes are more able to indulge in splurging than the poor and working classes.

Buc-ee’s is only one example of a company whose values are further amplified by the hype that surrounds their brands. Take Crumbl and Chick-Fil-A for instance—both brands perform highly through the hype they have built up through years of marketing, and consequently ooze their religious beliefs into the minds of consumers. However, Buc-ee’s underlying messages are more subtle than these brands, as they do not directly affiliate themselves with any Christian religion. This indoctrination of values in consumers ultimately serves to benefit these companies, as the more people who buy into the ideas, the more they buy products from these companies. Hidden themes are present everywhere in marketing, and for Buc-ee’s, their fan base, relatability to Americans, and roadside accessibility make their values more pervasive and harder to trace when found in society.

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