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“Don’t ‘Axe’ Don’t Tell”: A Critical Commentary on Axe’s Chocolate Man

Alicia Horton

What’s behind the success of Unilever’s line of Axe toiletries for men? It’s not a secret ingredient for concocting sprays with “woody overtones” and “oriental spice”—Axe is notorious for its commercials depicting the instant, uncontrollable attraction of young, good-looking, thin and scantily clad women who happen upon any pasty, scrawny teenage boy doused in the sexual scents of Axe body spray. Axe’s marketing strategy for increasing the popularity of the line amongst their target demographic – young, white, heterosexual men – capitalizes on the perpetuation of masculine, sexist, and racist stereotypes and heterosexist sentiments. Indeed, Axe’s recent commercial, the “Chocolate Man,”¹ reeks of a nasty tradition in North American entertainment.

1. Commercial can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgfzdgWgEZ4>.

The commercial depicts a young, white male who sprays himself with Axe’s newest scent, “Dark Temptation,” and instantly turns to “chocolate.” The animated Chocolate Man then roams the streets greeting women with a caricaturized and fixed expression reminiscent of the early minstrel shows of the late 1800s and early 1900s. As the Chocolate Man walks down the city street, women get wind of the scent of Axe’s “Dark Temptation” and he is suddenly the object of intense female sexual desire. He is depicted with numerous attractive women with whom he shares parts of his body in the form of ice cream toppings, chocolate sauce, and hot chocolate. Attractive women (and only attractive women) press themselves up against the glass at a gym trying to get a taste of the Chocolate Man. At a movie theatre his face and ears are licked by two women simultaneously. His chocolate behind is bitten by an attractive blonde woman on a bus and his arm is ripped off by a woman in a passing convertible.

What’s the mystery pheromone that allegedly drives hoards of women to any teenage male saturated with Axe’s Dark Temptation? According to Axe’s website (axe.ca) the answer is simple: “Everyone knows that women can’t resist the scent of chocolate.” Furthermore, young consumers are urged to “discover the power of chocolate with Axe Dark Temptation and become as irresistible as chocolate.” In case women’s rampant sexuality becomes uncontrollable at a whiff of the stuff, Axe warns “do not ingest product” and further offers commercial slots on the website as to the deleterious effects



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2. Spot available at <http://www.axe.ca/main.html#en-section-player>.

of using Axe irresponsibly (huffing Axe decreases your chances of “hooking up” as does igniting yourself using the spray).² Apparently, the key to women’s sexual desires is the noxious combination of derogatory sentiments, sexist ideals, and cheap body spray.

Furthermore, Axe’s Chocolate Man is a racist parody and reincarnation of the historical minstrel entertainment shows that depicted white actors in “blackface” makeup (Nasaw, 1993). Like Axe’s Chocolate Man, shows that portrayed white actors in make up in an attempt to appear African American were intended as a source of comedy and entertainment for patrons of vaudeville shows in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Nasaw, 1993). Nasaw suggests that negative stereotypes of “blackness” including “the imbecile sputtering nonsense...the lazy fool... [and] the razor-wielding ‘coon’... as... sexual and dangerous” served “to unite the audience in a celebration of its own ‘whiteness’” (1993: p. 54). Furthermore, Axe’s commercial employs notions of the African American “trickster” in depicting the Chocolate Man playing a trick on an injured, vulnerable white woman resting in a hospital bed by placing his chocolate hand in a gift box. In his analysis of the “indecent” Other during the period of vaudeville amusements, Nasaw stresses that “it is impossible to overstate the popularity of such black misrepresentations” (1993: p. 54). Like these racist caricatures of the 1890s and early 1900s, Axe’s Chocolate Man has been celebrated and enjoyed much popularity as evidenced by the numerous parodies of the commercial on Youtube.com, extended versions of the ad, and creation of Myspace and Facebook groups that attest to the entertainment value of the Chocolate Man.

Establishing the caricaturized Chocolate Man as a source of comedy, Axe’s commercial exploits stereotypes of African American sexual prowess and promiscuity for the purposes of peddling the body spray. When the white teenager becomes the Chocolate Man, he oozes sexual appeal and attracts numerous white women; the implicit assumption is that white women desire and succumb to the “Dark Temptation” of his obvious-yet-unmentioned chocolate appendage. Axe’s Dark Temptation becomes synonymous with stereotypes of African American promiscuity, and to reinforce the point, Axe’s website confirms that, indeed, “Size Matters.” The website warns that “unexpected mating game opportunities can happen at any time, in any place” but reassures the sexually inexperienced teenager that, with the purchase of Axe Dark Temptation bullet body spray measured at 7.7 cm, one can gain confidence and go forth without worry of “looking too anxious because you stuffed a full size can of body spray in your jeans.” Indeed, the unconfident and sexually repressed teenage male can “be cool and at the ready with new Axe bullet body spray.”

Furthermore, the majority of women depicted on Axe's website are young and white with the exception of one African American woman who appears naked alongside the Axe's "Unlimited" body spray. With the image, Axe's accompanying text suggests "the first person to ever say 'the possibilities are endless' must have sensed that there would soon be a day where fragrance would be created that could open up the boundless potential in the individual who wore it. That's Axe unlimited." Presumably, Axe's "boundlessness" opens "unlimited" sexual opportunities for white males to engage in promiscuous and "taboo" interracial sexual encounters. Despite the overrepresentation of white women in Axe's commercials and websites, Axe's "Unlimited" spray reassures consumers that variety of women ripe for sexual conquest is not limited.

Though the racist, heterosexist, and sexist stereotypical images and sentiments described above are unsettling, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Chocolate Man commercial is the combination of entertainment, ridicule and exploitation of African Americans, capitalist gain and explicit violence. The Chocolate Man is depicted in a series of violent encounters with women: bitten, dismembered, disfigured, and indeed, *consumed* by white actors. As sources of comedy for the purposes of accumulating capital, the racist overtones and violence against an identifiable group render a shameful site of exploitation. Though Axe might retort that the implicit message is that chocolate, like Axe body spray, is a desirable commodity, the lack of foresight (or, lack of concern?) as to how their advertising, particularly the Chocolate Man commercial, lends itself to a rather obvious interpretation of blatant racism and sexism is appalling.

It seems as though this marketing strategy is celebrated by audiences on an international scale as exemplified by the commercial's Gold Lion win at the Cannes International Advertising Festival (2008). Axe might be inclined to protect the source of success of its toiletries by adopting a "don't ask don't tell" attitude regarding the sensual mystery of how its body spray became synonymous with promiscuous sex. What's the real source of success behind Axe's Dark Temptation? It's not a mystical spray that enhances sexual appeal; it's the exploitation of unconsciously held and ideologically implicit stereotypes, the humiliation of targeted groups, and the perpetuation of entrenched racism and sexism in the Western tradition that ensures an increasing accumulation of profit among Axe executives.

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