15 December 2025

How does Coca-Cola's *'Share a Coke'* Campaign Use Personalization and Identity Building to Promote Consumerism by Aligning the Product with Individual Identities Rather Than Emphasizing the Product Itself?

The *Share a Coke* campaign was created to introduce the key idea that the famous Coca-Cola logo would be replaced with popular names on their bottles to create a more individualized experience for the consumer, marking a huge departure from traditional marketing advertisements. The advertisement was originally launched in Australia back in 2014 before it expanded globally to the rest of the world in 2016. From an ideological standpoint, the campaign aligns with the specific criticism by serving as a prime example of how advertisements are able to showcase the collected beliefs and values that are within a society. The commercial reflects our understanding of identity, relationships, and consumer behavior, and it is through its personalization that the product is able to emphasize the theme of social connection. The Coca-Cola campaign upholds a consumerist ideology that happiness and personal identity can be bought through branded products. This paper will answer the research question: How does Coca-Cola's *'Share a Coke'* campaign use personalization to promote consumerism by aligning the product with individual identities rather than emphasizing the product itself? By going into an in-depth analysis of the commercial and its components, this essay will showcase how the advertisement mirrors cultural values and consumerism.

First, it is important that there is a summary of what exactly the advertisement entails. The commercial starts with a young teen visiting a convenience store to buy a Coke, and when she opens the fridge, she is met with an array of Coke bottles that are personalized with popular names. She finds the two that share the name with her and her friend, then she checks out and

goes to hang out with her friends. As the commercial progresses, the girl keeps returning to the same convenience store, but each time with more and more friends who find their own individualized Coke bottles before they set off to do a different activity together. Every time the girl goes back to the store, she brings even more friends than before until, right as the store is closing, she goes back to the cashier and hands him his own customized bottle as a romantic gesture. At the commercial close, we see both the teen and the cashier, along with hundreds of others, participating in a lively street parade when the ad ends with "Share a Coke with…" and we are met with a Coke bottle rotating with many different names to suggest that there is a never-ending list of people that you can share a Coke with.

This 2016 campaign was considered highly successful at the time. There was a significant increase in Coca-Cola sales, especially prevalent in younger demographics like teenagers. As a result, there were roughly 1.25 million more consumers in the teenage age group during the following summer of the advertisement launch. The campaign increased the brand's sales by more than 2%, which in turn, reversed the decline of more than 10 years in Coke consumption. Following the original commercial, Coca-Cola introduced many variants to extend the campaign, such as implementing nicknames like "bro" and song lyrics from 70 popular songs.

The *Share a Coke* campaign had a significant cultural impact, specifically due to how personal the product was. There was no brand in the same sector that was doing a campaign like Coca-Cola, which led to an influx of traction, engagement, and sales. The advertisement shows us just how strong the power of advertising is. It allows the consumer to see themselves as a part of the product rather than just seeing the product on its own. As an artifact, this advertisement

can fit under ideological criticism because the message of the campaign coordinates the actions of the individuals who adhere to the ideology of group cohesion. Ideological criticism states that ideologies make sure that people who belong to a group usually act similarly to one another in similar situations and thus are able to cooperate in group tasks and, in turn, contribute to the reproduction of the group. This campaign was very popular at the time of its release, and it began to probe the question: How is Coke being represented? What does Coca-Cola want us to think about Coca-Cola?

There should be some background information on ideological criticism and how the commercial aligns with it. The commercial fits perfectly under ideological criticism because it deals with ideas like the values of a person and patterns of beliefs that can potentially determine a group's interpretation and perspective on some aspects of the world. Ideological criticism highlights different concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of imagination that a group uses to define the world. Additionally, ideologies are made up of evaluative beliefs that can spotlight specific positions on social beliefs. The statements of an ideology a most likely to identify the principles of a group and, in turn, these principles and beliefs cover an ideology that can serve as the foundation for the knowledge, attitudes, and motives of groups that adhere to a specific ideology. Examples of ideologies can be patriotism, Christianity, conservatism, and vegetarianism, and each of these ideologies is made up of a set of beliefs that can interpret and analyze timely issues and topics for a group and as a result, stimulate a particular attitude towards them. The advertisement taps into ideologies surrounding individualism, belonging, and identity. The advertisement does not just promote Coke as a product, but instead, it promotes a belief system where identity and unity are celebrated through consumption. This Coca-Cola

advertisement makes the viewer think either consciously or subconsciously about a multitude of different things. However, the most prevalent key areas are personalization and identity construction, as well as the shift from product-centered advertising to consumerist ideology.

The advertisement makes the viewer connect to the ideology of personalization and identity. The campaign made people gravitate towards an individualistic feel where they can purchase a bottle that is customized with their name on it. Because the video's main idea was finding the bottle that is individual to a person's identity, it suggests that the product is not just a drink, but rather an identity. People love to feel like they belong to something, and when you are able to go to a store anywhere in the world and find an item with your name on it, it is a reflection of personal belonging and identity. The names on the bottles bring up a discussion of how the inclusion of individual names has the ability to turn a product into something more than a generic product that people see every day. The object itself becomes personal, which creates a connection between an individual and the brand. Seen, is a direct link tying consumerism and identity that suggests that you need to buy a Coke that is personalized with your name to feel connected or special. Although the campaign imposes a process of identity building, it is still framed within the context of consumption. The campaign suggests that if you want to feel like you see your identity reflected in the world, you need to buy a Coke. The personalization strategy of the brand makes the consumer feel as though the popular product is unique and tailored toward them.

Secondly, the campaign makes a shift from product-centered advertising. Traditionally, in advertising, brands and companies are usually focused on the product itself–its advantages, features, and good qualities. Typically, advertisements emphasize how a product works and how

you should use it, frequently spotlighting its functional merit, like taste and how refreshing it is, and in what ways it is superior to other brands. However, the *Share a Coke* campaign takes a step away from the product-centered routine. Instead of centering around the qualities of Coke specifically as a soft drink, Coca-Cola shifted to emphasizing the experience and social interaction that can come from purchasing and drinking the product. The advertisement uses an emotional appeal to invoke a feeling of connection between the product and positive emotions. With the campaign, the brand was able to shift its approach. Untraditionally, the focus was no longer spotlighted directly on the product but rather on the experience when drinking it. The shift can be due to a trend in contemporary advertising, where experience and social connection are more important to the consumer than the product features. Because of this advertising switch, the Coca-Cola brand was able to pivot itself from being seen as just a product but rather a symbol of personal and social experiences. Within the context of ideological criticism, the *Share a Coke* campaign was able to suggest that identity is a consumable experience and reinforces the capitalist belief that personal identity and social connection can be purchased. Similarly, the shift shows individualism within a capitalist society, where consumers are urged to find their identity through popular brands and products that surround us in everyday life. This campaign has had more than just a short-term shift, the advertisement completely revolutionized the way that products are marketed to the public. It created a market that prioritizes relationships and emotional connections with the consumer.

Finally, the *Share a Coke* campaign has many themes of consumerism that can be analyzed under ideological criticism. Consumerism as an ideology upholds the belief that happiness, success, and personal identity can be obtained through purchasing a product. In this advertisement,

identity can be tied to consumption. Who you are as a person can be shaped by what you own and what you buy, and we can see this in the commercial. Because the campaign used personalized Coke bottles with individual names, this instilled a notion in the consumer's mind that personal identity can be consumed. The central theme of the campaign is personalization and how you can find identity through consumption. The act of finding your name on a Coca-Cola bottle allows the consumer to feel seen and recognized in the consumer world. Additionally, the commercial highlights the way that consumption can spark social connection and unity with those around you. This campaign is a perfect example of how consumerism can be turned into an ideology. Instead of focusing on the functional qualities of a product, the ad focuses on emotional appeals that promote connectivity and personal identity.

Coca-Cola's *Share a Coke* campaign is a great example of how advertisements and marketing can make a shift from traditional practice in order to promote a more modern consumerist ideology that can frame products as completely essential in order to create a feeling of belonging and social connection. By straying away from a product-centered to an emotional/experience-based angle, the campaign was able to suggest that personal and social identity can be bought.

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15 December 2025

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Feedback:

When I went into Professor Sackey’s office hours, I got some amazing feedback on the direction that I should focus on taking my criticism paper. He suggested some broad questions to guide the outline of my paper like: What does Coke want us to think about Coke? How is Coke being represented? He also suggested that I should look into the power of advertising and in what ways does this commercial try to get the audience to see themselves with the product. I definitely used his helpful feedback when writing my essay. Additionally, I had one of my friends who is an English major proofread my essay to make sure that there were no grammatical errors or mistakes. They also helped my with different ways to frame sentences to make them less wordy.