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"The Number 'Three' In The Media"

When I was told the number "three" is a commonly used motif in Western Civilization, I did not quite understand or agree with the statement. My journey towards comprehending began with a definition of the word "motif" from a dusty Random House College Dictionary. The explanation was, "a recurring subject, theme or idea." So I set out, searching the pages of "Vogue" magazine for proof that the number "three" has significance. Proof actually came quickly when I found a statement by Simon J. Bronner in his book, Piled Higher and Deeper. Bronner said, "'Three' in American society is a symbol of completion. 'Three' suggests magical power." Though Bronner is a professor of Folklore and American Studies at Penn State, his statement did not prepare me for the magnitude of the use of the number "three" in advertising that I would find.

In only three issues of the publication I found 30 examples of the number "three". However, the distribution between issues was not equally divided. The quantity of ads using "three" doubled from the month of February to March and remained consistent from March to April. My personal explanation for this is that the introduction of Spring clothing usually occurs in the month of March. In the February issue, all of the ads consisted of beauty products, footwear, and accessories. While in the March issue, half of the examples were of Spring clothing. Not only does March often signify the onset of spring weather, but it is also likely to be the first month that one has financially recovered from holiday expenses. Within the clothing ads, only 15.3% of the subjects pictured were men. This did not seem unusual since "Vogue" is a women's magazine, until I considered the extent to which women are

used to sell men's apparel and accessories. As an additional observation of the "three" motif, I noticed when a man was shown in an ad, he was often pictured accompanied by two women.

Of all the ads, 90% actually presented the product or products being sold, with the most common use of the "three" motif being a photograph of three of the products of a particular product line. The backdrop for these was usually simple, with the focal point being the product. Rightly so, since in advertising, the product often plays a "savior" role to the buyer. For example, "Dermasil" hand lotion is the focal point among three sets of photographs of painfully dry and chapped hands. The product is clearly presented as the remedy to this condition.

Only one of my examples actually used the number "three" written in numerical form. The advertisement provided three steps to beauty through use of the product. Three photographs of a model were provided with the numbers "1", "2", and "3" in order to depict the steps clearly and simply. The "Loreal" ad also effectively divides the layout into three sections, each of which details a benefit. The benefits all begin with the letter "R", further reinforcing the motif.

After completing a search for examples of advertisements which included the "three" motif, my perceptions have expanded to all uses of "three". I have noted its use in media, religious customs, as well as in daily personal decisions. When beginning my quest, for example, I automatically chose to reference three issues of "Vogue". I am grateful to have acquired this recognition for the "three" motif, which clearly permeates Western society.

Works Cited

Bronner, Simon J. (1990). Piled Higher and Deeper. Little Rock, AR: August House Publishers, Inc. p.205.

Random House College Dictionary. (1984). New York: Random House. p.871.