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Coca-Cola: The All-American Brand

Coca-Cola, one of the best-selling beverage companies in the world, is all about tradition. Established in 1886—over 125 years ago—the Coca-Cola company has prided itself on remembering its roots. The Coke formula has only been changed once—and quickly changed back; the classic hourglass Coca-Cola bottle shape has been in use for over 100 years; the Coca-Cola logo has changed amazingly little since its first appearance—unlike Coke’s ever-rebranding competitor, Pepsi. Pepsi, interestingly, is similar to Coke in origin but entirely different in application. Pepsi-Cola was incorporated in 1898, and since then has changed its logo nearly ten times. Indeed, changing a logo is not uncommon for major companies, and is often used to reinvigorating falling sales numbers. Nearly all companies—Pepsi included—go through periods of change, of facelifts, of rebranding—Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Kraft, the list goes on. Why, then, does Coca-Cola—itsself just another beverage company, like Pepsi—insist on keeping its overall appearance to the consumer a constant? Why won’t Coke change their logo?

To understand Coca-Cola, it might be helpful to compare it to its closest competitor, Pepsi. Karen Benezra and Becky Ebenkamp explore the differences in marketing strategy between Coke and Pepsi in an article published in *Brandsweek*. In brief, they find that while Pepsi nearly always looks ahead in its marketing—poaching topical and popular celebrities for endorsements, riding and exploiting trends, seeking youth appeal—Coke uses familiar elements

and looks back.¹ Their conclusion is clear: Coke doesn't want to appear new or fresh—a startling revelation in an internet-driven market ever searching for the next hot thing. Coke, rather, “leverages its heritage” to place itself as a vital piece of American history and, therefore, American identity.² Coke doesn't hide from its past. Rather, Coke seeks it.

Interestingly enough, the Coca-Cola Company does quite a bit to maintain its past. Coke keeps up a website called “Coca-Cola Journey” in which the company relates “behind-the-scenes” information about the company, the corporate culture, and the drink. The website has six main tabs for the six main sections of the website: among them, “Front Page,” where Coca-Cola announces new products and general corporate news; “Brands,” where Coke enumerates and details its many global beverages; and others.³ So far so good—sounds like a normal corporate web portal, probably most useful for investors, owners, or corporate officers. However, two pages stand out in particular: “Our Way Forward” and “History.” Both are interesting choices as part of the six most important things the Coca-Cola Company wants the general public to know about its brand. An in-depth examination reveals a bit more. First, “Our Way Forward.” A click here takes the casual browser to nothing extremely out of the ordinary. Several links lead to standard corporate goodwill programs: Coca-Cola invests in sustainable farming in Paraguay, Coca-Cola Japan launches billion-dollar brands in Asian markets, Coca-Cola innovates with new soda fountain technologies.⁴ However, the most striking article stands out quite a bit. At the top of the page is a highlighted article link that says “The World is Changing. So Are We.” The article itself is somewhat disappointing—it presents several vague guidelines for how Coca-Cola is adapting to meet a changing market: more sugar-free drinks, less unsustainable packaging, and

¹ Benezra, Karen & Ebenkamp, Becky. “Tale of two colas.” *Brandsweek*, vol. 38, no. 42, 10 Nov. 1997, pp. 35.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Coca-Cola Journey*. Coca-Cola, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/>.

⁴ *Our Way Forward*, Coca-Cola, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/our-way-forward>.

a policy to never target ads to children.⁵ The article asserts: “...As people’s tastes and lifestyles change from day to day, from generation to generation, we must change alongside, too. And we are.”⁶ This, then, is what Coca-Cola qualifies as necessary change: engage in the “global fight against obesity.”⁷ It’s worth noting that Coke’s necessary and so-called socially-conscious evolution does not involve changing the formula of the flagship brand Coca-Cola Classic. Coke may very well introduce low-calorie options, clarify calorie content, and package smaller portions, but evolution for Coke does not mean a fundamental change to Coca-Cola—the drink—itself. As national and global concerns about health rise and high-sugar soda slowly goes out of style, why, then, does Coke consider it necessary that their central tenet be preserved?

Of course, Coke (the soda) is valuable enough—Interbrand estimated the brand itself to be worth \$73 billion in 2016.⁸ One way or another, Coca-Cola has certainly established itself in the beverage market to be still worth so much and yet changed so little. A look into Coca-Cola’s self-defined history might be critical to understanding our key questions. Coca-Cola Journey’s History page is an immense trove of evidence. A sub-page lists collectibles and pictures of historical Coke-related object—bottles, fountains, coolers; another has articles about Coke ads from the recent past to the twenties.⁹ Coca-Cola even links to a self-run Instagram account called the “Coke Archives” whose goal is to “collect, preserve, & exhibit Coca-Cola history since 1886.”¹⁰ Another article linked in the history section is one that tells its reader how to start one’s own private Coca-Cola collection. “Walk into any antiques store in the United States and you

⁵ Anonymous. “Our Way Forward: How We’re Keeping People at the Heart of Our Business.” *Coca-Cola Journey*, 7 Feb. 2017, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/our-way-forward>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Anonymous. “Coca-Cola Rankings 2016.” *Interbrand*, 2017, <https://www.interbrand.com/best-brands/best-global-brands/2016/ranking/cocacola/>.

⁹ *History*, Coca-Cola, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/history/>.

¹⁰ *Coke Archives*, Coca-Cola, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/coke_archives/.

would be hard-pressed not to find a Coca-Cola memento of some sort,” it reads.¹¹ They’re right—Coca-Cola archives are omnipresent. Most interestingly, the article continues: “While these marketing and advertising items were never intended to be collectors’ items, their presence in people’s lives has gained them sentimental as well as real dollar value the world over.”¹² Here’s something we can latch onto. Coca-Cola recognizes that it has created objects never intended as sentimental items—so they claim—that have nevertheless become valuable. Coke is certainly self-assured of its importance—or, at least, centrality—to American culture. I suspect they maintain these self-edited archives to show just that. ‘Coke has been a part of America for... well, longer that *you* have,’ they might want us to think. They’re not wrong. Moreover, Coca-Cola ads, products, and other items have transformed through time to become artefacts that aren’t simply distant reminders of a more distant past. Coke ads are reprinted because they are consumed. Retailers—including one called “Nostalgia Products”—recreated and sell old-fashioned Coke items.¹³ Indeed, Nostalgia Products’ corporate website says it best: “Whether it’s that familiar comfort of our favorite childhood foods, a style from a bygone era, or a memory we have or wish we had, we have a unique way of looking towards an innovative future while holding on to the best parts of what came before.”¹⁴ In this case, of course, we as Americans must therefore long to hold onto Coke bottles. People, I suppose, like to look back on things such as the artefacts Coke produces and has produced in proxy. It feels assuring to hold onto an item that emblemizes some simpler, earlier time. A Coke bottle becomes an artefact of some pure, simple, and corporate-constructed American past. The magic pull, however, comes from

¹¹ Callahan, Ashley. “Starting your private Coca-Cola collection.” *Coca-Cola Journey*, 22 Oct. 2012, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/starting-your-private-coca-cola-collection>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Coca-Cola Archives*. Nostalgia Products, <https://www.nostalgiaproducts.com/product-category/coca-cola/>.

¹⁴ *About*. Nostalgia Products, <https://www.nostalgiaproducts.com/about/>.

believing in the authenticity of the Coca-Cola American history. As the famous Coke slogan goes, “It’s the real thing.” We like to believe that.

Coca-Cola does too. In 2007, the Coca-Cola company opened a museum entirely about the history of Coke called “The World of Coca-Cola.” There’s a lot going on here: the World of Coca-Cola features a bottling facility, a 4D theatre, the Coca-Cola polar bear, a Coca-Cola store, the vault where the secret Coca-Cola formula is kept, and “Milestones of Refreshment”—a ten-gallery interactive exhibit detailing the history of the Coca-Cola brand.¹⁵ The entire museum, it should be noted, is both run by the Coca-Cola Company and charges an admission fee. It seems to be more of a soda-themed amusement park rather than a museum. Nevertheless, the World of Coca-Cola engages with the beverage’s history in many ways. The Milestones of Refreshment gallery offers visitors the chance to encounter “more than 1,000 original artefacts.”¹⁶ Coke self-determines their objects to be artefacts, implying value and worthiness of historical study. Indeed, the World of Coca-Cola seeks to prove the historicity of Coke through presentation of artefacts. Critically, the museum also calls for Coke consumers to engage with the product in a personal and emotional way. In the Pop Culture Gallery, visitors can leave behind an account of their “Coke Story”—a personal memory a consumer has had of Coke that is collected and displayed by the museum staff.¹⁷ Not only is Coke significant to American history—Coke is also significant to personal history. In creating such an interactive and historical experience in the World of Coca-Cola, the Coca-Cola company evokes personal memories of Coke within the consumer while simultaneously creating a new and perfectly-controlled Coke memory in the

¹⁵ *The World of Coca-Cola*. Coca-Cola, <https://www.worldofcoca-cola.com/>.

¹⁶ *Milestones of Refreshment*, Coca-Cola, <https://www.worldofcoca-cola.com/explore/explore-inside/explore-milestones-refreshment/>.

¹⁷ *Pop Culture Gallery*, Coca-Cola, <https://www.worldofcoca-cola.com/explore/explore-inside/explore-pop-culture-gallery/>.

experience of the museum. Coke defines its own history through its archives and defines popular memory in part through the World of Coke.

Coca-Cola has been the picture of success in performing such a function. Coke is intrinsically central to 20th and 21st century American history and is further well-impacted within our own personal memories. A few micro-examples show this. Coke evokes collective memory through their use of Santa Claus in marketing. Santa has been a part of the company's visual identity since the 1920s.¹⁸ The ads are brightly-colored and jolly, presenting Santa himself drinking Coke center-frame.¹⁹ The effect such an ad has is brilliant. Coca-Cola, connecting itself to Santa, connects itself to Christmas—a very central and widely-celebrated American holiday. Coke, perhaps, hopes to connect its product to the feelings of joy so many Americans experience at some point in their lives around the holidays. Coke implants itself in a basic American collective memory—thus, Coca-Cola is personal. When speaking of marketing, it's helpful to remember that classic Americana painter Norman Rockwell did a series of paintings as advertisements for Coke.²⁰ The paintings depict young boys fishing, lounging with puppies, and drinking Coca-Cola. Moreover, the paintings provide a clear visualization of what the classic Coca-Cola-American imagined history would have looked like. The scenes are idyllic and timeless. The boys could be Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Coke, then, is American. Coca-Cola's American pop-culture impact is sizeable, too. Andy Warhol made a painting of Coke bottles.²¹ The painting today is hung in the Whitney Museum of *American Art* (yes, I realize Andy Warhol

¹⁸ Anonymous. "Five things you never knew about Santa Claus and Coca-Cola." *Coca Cola Journey*, 1 Jan. 2012, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/coke-lore-santa-claus>.

¹⁹ Anonymous. "History of Coca-Cola in Ads." *Beautiful Life*, 13 Aug. 2018, <http://www.beautifullife.info/advertisement/history-of-coca-cola-in-ads/>.

²⁰ Ryan, Ted. "American Originals: Norman Rockwell and Coca-Cola." *Coca-Cola Journey*, 23 May 2013, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/american-originals-norman-rockwell-and-coca-cola>.

²¹ Warhol, Andy. *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*. 1962, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

is American. However, the Whitney Museum's website notes that the museum is a "preeminent institution devoted to the art of the United States."²² I take this to mean artwork by Americans about America). Interestingly, Coca-Cola even collaborated with Paramount Pictures to co-promote the classic American film *It's a Wonderful Life* and the soda on the film's 65th anniversary.²³ As the ads for the promotion said, "Two of your favorite classics ... [*It's a Wonderful Life* and Coca-Cola] ... together make for wonderful holiday memories."²⁴ Coca-Cola thus engages with American pop culture by connecting itself to a classic staple of American culture and further writes itself into the collective American holiday memory.

Coca-Cola's advertising, in general, participates in what advertisers call "nostalgic advertising"—most broadly, utilizing feelings of nostalgia to market and sell a product. Coke is a prime candidate for such a campaign. As Wieden + Kennedy, the advertising agency that currently handles Coca-Cola's advertisements, puts it, "[Coke is] an iconic brand that reminds Americans of what they share."²⁵ Indeed, Coke—and nostalgic advertisers—seek to do just this. Nostalgic advertising "taps into two consumer needs that overlap but are subtly different: a yearning for a time past and the fondness attached to personal childhood memories."²⁶ Plenty of companies try to do this: Bacardi, Audi, the list goes on. Corporations profit greatly if they can tie their product to a sense of a brighter past or warm, fuzzy childhood memories. Coca-Cola fits the bill. Print ads and paintings remind us of Coke's relationship with an imagined American past, and Santa ads pair the soda with one of the most safe and happy times of many American's memories. There's plenty of research to support this. Kathryn Latour concludes that strong

²² *About the Whitney*. Whitney Museum of American Art, <https://whitney.org/about>.

²³ Hein, Kenneth. "Coke's Wonderful 2010 Holiday Plan." *Brandsweek*, vol. 50, no. 43, 7 Dec. 2009, pp. 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Coca-Cola: It's Beautiful*. Wieden + Kennedy, <http://www.wk.com/work/coca-cola-it's-beautiful>.

²⁶ Grant, Rob. "Past masters: the power of nostalgic marketing." *Marketing Mag*, 21 June 2017, <https://www.marketingmag.com.au/hubs-c/past-masters-power-nostalgic-marketing/>.

childhood memories when linked with Coca-Cola promoted significantly higher overall positivity to the Coke brand.²⁷ Similarly, Vander Casaqui and Viviane Riegel found that Coca-Cola's overall marketing—including its reach towards nostalgia and collective memory—forms a brand presence of happiness and cooperative work.²⁸ Nostalgic advertising works, and Coca-Cola has emphasized itself as fundamentally American—and fundamentally a part of our own lives—to form its brand and to therefore profit.

Right before I wrote this paper, I spoke to a few friends about their perception of the Coca-Cola brand. My friend Alyssa said that, to her, Coke is fluffy polar bears and a ruddy, smiling Santa Claus. My friend Joe frankly admitted that he likes the taste of Pepsi better. However, he quickly noted that there's something about Coke that just *makes him think of America*. As he put it, Coke is the Levi Strauss & Co. of soda—or the Ford Motor Company, or the Elvis Presley. (The interview went on a bit longer than what I've written above. As a Christmas present to you, I've transcribed it and attached it below. My friends speak very candidly yet somehow confirm much of what we've hit at in Media, Memory, and History. It might be interesting—read at your own digression) Joe and Alyssa are right: there's something fundamentally American about our perception Coca-Cola—or, maybe, there's something fundamentally Coca-Colan about our perception of America. For a nation that prides itself on always looking ahead, we love to drink a soda that always looks back. Interestingly, Pepsi has recently begun a push towards a more nostalgic-based style of advertising. In the past few years they have released a Pepsi variety called Pepsi Throwback—a Pepsi made with real sugar that is

²⁷ Latour, Kathryn. "Coke is It: How stories in childhood memories illuminate an icon." *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2010, pp. 328-36.

²⁸ Casaqui, Vaner & Riegel, Viviane. "Management of happiness, production of affects and the spirit of capitalism: international narratives of transformation from Coca-Cola brand." *The Journal of Internal Communication*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2 July 2016, pp. 293-314.

bottled with the Pepsi logo from the 1970s and 1980s. In a TV ad released for the 2018 Super Bowl, a narrator proudly proclaims “This is the Pepsi that your father drank—and *his* father drank.” Pepsi in 2018 is the “Pepsi for all generations.” Coca-Cola, on the other hand, continues its current campaign of Share-a-Coke with ads saying that there’s a Coke for everyone.²⁹ Nostalgic advertising undeniably pays—Pepsi is sure to find this out very soon. Coca-Cola today, however, has perhaps moved beyond simple TV ads that cite specific pop culture moments and show images of old-fashioned kids in an idyllic American scene. Though careful branding, artefact-making, and history-curating done over the course of more than a century, the Coca-Cola has become something culturally more than a soda brand. We as Americans believe Coca-Cola to be fundamentally American.

²⁹ Anonymous. “Coca-Cola Launches ‘A Coke for Everyone’ with Debut of New Ad Campaign During Big Game.” *Coca Cola Journey*, 1 Feb. 2018, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/press-center/press-releases/coca-cola-launches-a-coke-for-everyone-with-debut-of-new-ad-campaign-during-big-game>.

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