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Doing well by doing good: The Sallies, altruism & identification

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly secularised society in which overall membership of Christian organisations is declining (Lambert, 1999; Melton, 1998), denominations are seemingly obliged to compete among themselves for members (Giggie & Winston, 2002; Voyé, 1999). Clearly, the different denominations feel the need to market themselves as much as any secular organisations do when they have a product to sell. We propose that beliefs and belonging, both fundamental to the Christian community, have become by virtue of marketing, less matters of faith and personal choice and more commodities in a crowded marketplace. There is a proliferation of communications, which are embedded with symbols that purposively induce identification (Cheney, 1983) with the church and establish prototypical characteristics for identifying members (Hogg & Terry, 2000). In order to interrogate this proposition, we apply Cheney's (1983) rhetorical identification typology to a series of television advertisements for the Salvation Army's Red Shield Appeal, which were broadcast in New Zealand in 2010.

KEYWORDS

Identity
Identification
Salvation
Army
Religion
Rhetorical
analysis

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper was to explore the advertisements produced for the Salvation Army's yearly fundraising campaign for evidence of attempts to construct member identity and identification. Anecdotally, the Salvation Army is held in esteem by New Zealand

society because they are seen as applying Christian faith in a practical way to help the unfortunate and the suffering. We analysed the Salvation Army's advertisements because we perceived that the ostensible altruism was underpinned by a more pragmatic goal of winning and maintaining memberships in a culture of religious pluralism (Gedicks, 2005; Kitagawa, 1967; Voyé, 1999). In other words, the Salvation Army has followed commercial organisations and other denominations in developing hybridised texts, which not only position members in a "general order of existence" (Geertz, 2002: 63), but also market the church to a fragmented audience in a secularised society (Giggie & Winston, 2002; Lambert, 1999; Melton, 1998; Moore, 1998; Voyé, 1999). The everyday communications that emerge from efforts to reach members, existing and potential, are pervasive yet not readily visible (Fairclough, 1989) attempts to induce identification (Cheney, 1983).

Religious identity, the adoption by an individual of the theology, norms, and practices of a religious organisation (Greeley, 1985; Minkler & Cosgel, 2004), is formed by and inextricably bound with the organisations that deliver the master trope of religion. According to Rymarz and Graham (2006) individuals with a strong or salient religious identity derive high levels of satisfaction from the traditions of their religion, and ideally, the relationship between members and Christian organisations would be one of mutual and equal benefit. However, in a pluralised and secularised society (Giggie & Winston, 2002; Lambert, 1999; Melton, 1998; Moore, 1998; Voyé, 1999), Christian organisations employ strong persuasive strategies to gain and maintain membership. Persuasive communication may seek to influence audiences by drawing on a range of strategies such as creating fear (Sutton & Hallett, 1988; Witte, 1992) or inducing guilt (Basil, Ridgway & Basil, 2006; Coote, Coulter & Moore, 2005; Miceli, 1992), and both these techniques have been endemic in church teachings, particularly during the evolution of rhetoric in the middle ages (Cockroft & Cockroft, 2005; Perelman, 1968). Rhetors may also emphasise the credibility of the message source and use techniques such as repetition and 'pester power' (Berger & Mitchell, 1989; Greenwald, 1968; Miller, Brickman & Bolen, 1975; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Tittle and Welch (1983) suggest that individual religiosity, and increased exposure to church communications, increases members' susceptibility to externalised identity construction by the church.

It is in the best interests of any organisation for its members to feel strong identification with the prevailing culture because strong identification manifests as conformity with organisational rules and policies (Cheney, 1983, Dutton, Dukerich, &

Harquail, 1994; Hogg & Terry, 2000) with the result that the “goals of the organisation and those of the individual become increasingly integrated and congruent” (Hall, 1971: 176). In itself, identification with an organisation is not sinister because individuals may experience belonging, a sense of self-worth and other psychological benefits (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Swann Jr, Milton & Polzer, 2000). However, organisational identification is sometimes achieved by the manipulation of individuals’ personal beliefs and inclinations through the deliberate use of the strategies of persuasive communication. In such cases, individuals are essentially controlled by the organisation: their autonomous decisions may be curtailed (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) and directed towards promoting “the perceived interests of the organisation” (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998: 299). Given competition from other categories of identification such as, for instance, family (Abrahamson & Anderson, 1984; Albert & Whetten, 2004; Brewer & Gardner, 2004; Dutton et al, 1994), organisations cannot fully control even those individuals who do identify with them, which may increase organisational persuasion towards the enactment of normalised attitudes and behaviours (Areni & Lutz, 1988; Taillard, 2000).

METHOD

DiSanza and Bullis (1999) propose that the unconscious or covert techniques used by organisations to construct member identities and invoke identification can be revealed by the application of Cheney’s (1983) rhetorical identification typology, and to this end, we analysed advertisements of the Salvation Army broadcast in 2010.

Cheney’s (1983) rhetorical identification typology was developed out of Burke’s (1969) theory of identification, which argues that if social division is overcome, consubstantiality (communication and cooperation) would be created with the audience. Burke suggested that such identification could be achieved if rhetors established common ground with their target audiences by dissociating groups from one another and by using the guise of the “transcendent we” to subtly merge the disparate interests of the audience with those of the rhetor. The identification strategies operationalised by Cheney (1983) in his rhetorical identification typology have borrowed heavily from Burke, and include the *common ground technique*, *identification through antithesis* and the *transcendent ‘we’*, and further, extend Burke’s tools of analysis by including *unifying symbols*. The common ground technique examines the overt ploys by which the rhetor “equates or links himself or herself with others” (Cheney, 1983: 148) by offering an identity to the people in the communication

relationship through the expression of desirable values and goals, and the success of the technique depends on tactics such as *expressions of concern for individuals*, *recognition of individual contributions*, *espousal of shared values*, *advocacy of benefits and activities*, *praise by outsiders* and *testimonials*. It is outside the scope of this paper to explain all of the tactics comprising the common ground technique, but those identified in the television advertisements are captured in the data analysis to follow.

The second of the identification strategies is that of *identification through antithesis*. In identification through antithesis, the communication from the organisation encourages members to unite against a common enemy, usually external to the organisation. By encouraging members to unite against a common enemy, the organisation creates “an explicit dissociation from one target [which] implies association with another” (Cheney, 1983: 153), promoting the development of identification.

The third identification strategy, the “*transcendent we*” (Cheney, 1983: 154), occurs when the organisation uses the first person plural pronoun (or surrogate forms) to imply a link between and among parties who may have little in common. As Cheney (1983: 154) puts it “the assumed ‘we’ and the corresponding ‘they’ are found in statements where a common bond amongst members of an organisation is taken for granted, but the nature of the relationship is not well defined”. The nature of the relationship is maintained in an ill-defined form because a clear definition might allow the groups to recognise and act on their differences. Of the three identification strategies, the “transcendent we” is considered the most subtle and powerful because it is often unnoticed by the audience.

The Burkean identification strategies do not readily accommodate Cheney’s (1983) addition of unifying symbols, which emphasise the name, logo or trademark of the organisation. These symbols may be proffered to members as objects of reverence that reflect organisational identity.

DATA ANALYSIS

The findings recounted in this section emerged from applying Cheney’s (1983) rhetorical identification typology to four television advertisements produced by the Salvation Army. The purpose of the advertisements was twofold: first, to raise the profile of the organisation, and second, to encourage donations to the Red Shield Appeal. Severally and together, the four advertisements accentuate the “Sallies” as they serve society. They tell personal stories

of assistance to the poor and struggling, the addicted and ill, and of the “Street Outreach Service”.

The common ground technique was used to remind the audience of their luck. In an *expression of concern for individuals* (Cheney, 1983), the bus driver featured in advertisement four describes how the organisation distributes food parcels to the homeless, and in so doing, demonstrates the concern of the organisation for its identifying and contributing members. For example, the bus driver says, “We’re meeting people... and we become their family, someone they can talk to”. The positive attitude embedded in the content and style of the employees’ work stories suggests a deep identification with the social goals of the Salvation Army. Deep identification is often created through the consistent and coherent messages disseminated by an organisation over time (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). Thus, the Salvation Army’s advertisements have allowed members to articulate their feelings of being valued by the organisation and their identification with the organisation. Pride in belonging to an organisation which contributes so much to society may well strengthen members’ identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and encourage others to join in order to share the same sense of contributing to the ‘greater good’. The advertisements also express concern for society: by identifying the Salvation Army and its people as the last bastions of help for the disadvantaged and suffering, the members gently remind New Zealanders that needs are great and resources limited. A guilt-appeal that does not point a finger of blame is still, subtly, a guilt-appeal. Miceli (1992) argues that guilt-appeals develop an artificial responsibility in audiences and push them into enacting pro-social behaviours. Obviously, the organisation hopes that donations will reward the good works depicted. Furthermore, transmitting a positive image of the Sallies is likely to encourage members to feel that their organisation shines with altruism, boosting the feelings of belonging and self-esteem that accompany identification (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005).

Another of the common ground tactics identified in the advertisements is recognition of individual contributions (Cheney, 1983). According to Cheney, this tactic emphasises members’ ‘belongingness’ to the in-group. All of the spokespeople in the Salvation Army advertisements define their role identities (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) and in so doing, become exemplars of ideal behaviour for aspiring ‘true’ members. For example, when the bus driver says “We’re meeting people and we become their family, someone they can talk to”, she is presenting the Salvation Army and its members as warm, ordinary and helpful, while subtly suggesting that if they do not already do so, members need to adopt these essential attitudes

and behaviours. Constructing prototypical characteristics to which members should conform may mean that people wanting to form close ties with the organisation will need to amend their identities to be accepted and validated by the in-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

The *common ground* strategy often employs the *advocacy of benefits and activities* tactic to achieve its impact (Cheney, 1983). Advocacy of benefits and activities tactic is an overt attempt to create identification with the organisation by presenting certain aspects of organisational life as advantageous to members. The key organisational activity present in all four of the advertisements is good works, which are achieved primarily through the accumulation of donations. Consequently, the advertisements depict donating as self-rewarding and donors as people who should feel positive about themselves because they have restored “hope to people and families in need”. The positive self-assessments and self-esteem that accompanies donating can develop into identification with the organisation in order to maintain such positive feelings. At the same time as they encourage donating, the advertisements also indicate to active members that merely donating is not enough, in which case the advertisements function as a hybrid text (Fairclough, 1989) that combines instruction and information with persuasion. For example, they inform the public about how to donate, but they also include comments such as “...to touch somebody’s life in that way is very special and very rewarding”, which encourages direct action like helping with distributing food parcels. ‘True’ members, then, should not merely donate from a distance, but should conform to organisational expectations (Hogg & Terry, 2000) by “touching people’s lives”. Therefore, to avoid feelings of exclusion, members may participate in providing services, which inevitably binds them more closely to the organisation and creates a virtuous cycle of active participation and reward (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Burke & Reitzes, 1991). The enacting of services on behalf of the church may well improve members’ self—esteem and promote self-enhancement, but such activities are also beneficial to the organisation, who reap benefits of citizenship behaviours such as altruism (Basil, Ridgway & Basil, 2008; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Organ, 1988; Podasakoff, Mackenzie, Paine & Bachrach, 2000).

Among the strategies identified in the advertisements was the *transcendent we* (Cheney, 1983: 154). As mentioned previously, the transcendent we subtly weaves the pronoun “we” into the text in an attempt on the part of the rhetor to connect parties who may or may not have anything in common. For example the bus driver states that ‘we’ are supporting those in need, and ‘we’ are the people who become their family. Using the collective pronoun to represent the beliefs of all the members of the Salvation Army produces

a universal voice for the entire organisation and suggests that belonging depends on developing and expressing similar positive feelings about service. Those members who want to feel included as part of the organisation or in-group (Tajfel, 1982) may need to emulate the bus driver, whose testimony was singled out for attention, perhaps because her views reflect what the organisation wants in its members.

CONCLUSION

Although the advertisements incorporate a number of rhetorical tools to persuade the audience, they are essentially formulaic and effectively limit the range of possible interpretations. Persuasion is achieved by the creation of common ground and by offering information that will result in a desire among members and non-members to serve society through the medium of the Salvation Army. The advertisements allow the audience to respond on a number of levels, from the barest commitment by giving money, through to a full engagement of time and service. On the one hand, the organisation may not meet its goals if only the minimum response is given. On the other hand, it limits the chance that the audience will disidentify as the messages are not controversial. The use of rhetorical devices to achieve identification with the organisation (Cheney, 1983), in other words, obscures the desired intention to do well within the desirable message of doing good.

Additionally, although the advertisements of the Salvation Army do not overtly construct the identities of members, they do strongly promote the organisation's identity, which in its own way defines 'ways of being' for identifying members. The advertisements show the Sallies in the process of providing what the fourth Labour government terminated in their restructuring of social welfare (Evans, Grimes, Wilkinson & Teece, 1996). By extension, people who identify with such a worthwhile organisation will be obliged to conform to organisational attitudes and goals in order to receive the benefits of belonging, such as self-esteem. Members are to personify the ideal attributes of the organisation as its representatives to the public.

In all, the advertisements build an unvaryingly positive image of the Salvation Army by emphasising its socially desirable characteristics (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000) in order to affect outsiders' perceptions so that they develop positive understandings of the organisation (Hatch & Schultz, 2004). When members feel outsiders are viewing their organisation positively, it tends to strengthen their identification with the organisation (Dukerich, Golden, Shortell, 2002) because they assume that by association, they too will be

assessed favourably (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton et al., 2002). Inasmuch as the advertisements encourage the external audience to give money to the Salvation Army cause, to the internal audience, they stress the importance of the organisation and its uniqueness in order to instil the feelings of pride that will maintain member identification (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia et al., 2000).

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