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In Doers We Trust?

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### In Doers We Trust?

Imagine this: you're a freelancer in New York. You're probably dehydrated, sleep deprived, and running on caffeine. Your city is famous for never sleeping, and you are a true citizen of this city. You get on the subway to go from one meeting to another, and you see a set of ads papering your subway car that speak to exactly your experience. And oh look, it also provides a way for you to expand and improve your freelance career by offering your services on a convenient social media platform designed to help freelancers find employers in need of their services. You take out your phone and sign in to the new Wifi that was recently installed on the subway to help people like you do work on their way to work. You look up the platform Fiverr and create an account. You've just been reached by the message of the Doer campaign.

The Doer campaign sells its platform by selling a narrative of freelancing; this narrative glorifies freelancing, making Fiverr's users feel proud of their professions. The aesthetics are meant to take the often harried and messy life of a freelancer and make it look like a polished, cool lifestyle. It presents freelancing as a choice people make because they love their work, rather than something people do because it's the only model of work available to many. The situational presentation of the ad campaign made people feel like they were part of an elite section of the population, the Doers. The goal was to get people to use Fiverr by getting them to identify with this idea of the Doer and presenting the app as a part of this glorified lifestyle. However, Fiverr's business model reveals that the message is deceiving its receivers, making them believe they are choosing to be overworked when they are really overworked due to companies like Fiverr that make freelancing harder not easier.

The frameworks used to analyze the verbal, visual, and overall rhetorical effect of the “Doer” campaign will bring its significance into focus. Auer’s framework for criticism states that the rhetorical critic does not shy away from the “judging” aspect of criticism; for Auer, the rhetorical critic would not be doing their job if they only reported and analyzed (Auer, 1981, 3-4). Auer further lays down theoretical constructs a critic can use. These are traditional principles that analyze how the speaker or source of a message creates identification in the listener, situational principles that focus on how the message reaches the receiver and how the receiver interacts with it, and dramatic principles that focus on the desired goals of each actor in a communication situation. The use of ethos in Fiverr’s campaign make a traditional analysis appropriate, while its position on the subway makes the situational perspective relevant as well. Bitzer’s elaboration of the situational perspective, which classifies any rhetoric as a situation, will be vital here (Bitzer, 1968, 3). Foss, who sees all communication as rhetoric, supports this position (Foss, 2009, 3). The dramatic perspective will become especially important when it comes to this paper’s narrative analysis of the ethics of Fiverr’s campaign. This analysis will also be based on Sillars and Gronbeck’s framework of using narratives to discover a society’s beliefs. For Sillars and Gronbeck, a narrative is not just a narrative, but often a call to action (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, 212). In support of these theories, this paper will analyze aesthetics according to Evans and Thomas’s framework that understands visual design as a “visual vocabulary” (Evans and Thomas, 2013, 29). This allows visual design and its meaning to be analyzed in a similar way to verbal rhetoric. Together, this way of analyzing the Fiverr campaign will allow this paper to come to conclusions about the deeper message and wider social implications of the campaign’s seemingly commonplace or pedestrian aims.

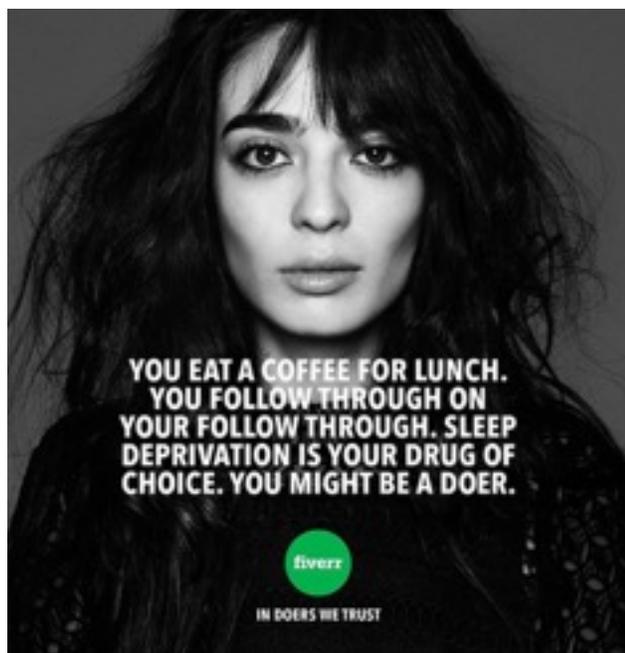


Figure 1. Fiverr subway ad. From *Fiverr Doer campaign*, by Fiverr, 2017, [https://media.newyorker.com/photos/59097f69f-ba4e90c8d8d8fa8/master/w\\_727,c\\_limit/Tolentino-TheGigEconomyCelebratesWorkingYourselftoDeath.jpg](https://media.newyorker.com/photos/59097f69f-ba4e90c8d8d8fa8/master/w_727,c_limit/Tolentino-TheGigEconomyCelebratesWorkingYourselftoDeath.jpg). Copyright Fiverr 2017.

With this framework in mind, the Fiverr campaign has much more at work in its aesthetics and rhetoric than a simple invitation to join a social media network. The images in the “Doer” campaign are all in the same format. They feature a person dressed and made up to look like a fashionable, alternative-styled New Yorker, presented in black and white looking directly at the camera. In white overlay text, a message encapsulating the “Doer” ethos is presented. This message is typically in the vein of “You eat coffee for lunch. You follow through on your follow-through. Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice. You might be a Doer” (Figure 1). The Fiverr colors of green and

white are featured in the Fiverr logo underneath the message. The image element can be looked at through Evans and Thomas’s visual rhetoric framework to give the viewer a sense of the visual rhetoric at work. There is unity in this design, tying all the images together into a single campaign. Looking at each of the images clearly evokes the other images; there is no way one could not connect these sharply similar images after seeing many of them. describe the message and apply the principles to the message. Meanwhile, the variety of the faces and messages create variety. This balance between unity and variety is pleasing, giving two complementary principles a

visually coherent relationship (Evans and Thomas, 2013, 5). The result is the sense that the people in the ads are a series of representatives for the same lifestyle.

The type of person Fiverr is presenting to the viewer, and its visual representation of them, is telling of the ethos they are trying to set up. Foss sees all communication as rhetoric, so these pictures should not be seen as only pictures but rather as expressions of an ideal (Foss, 2009, 3). This ideal shows what Fiverr is presenting as the ideal worker. The photographs are portraits, putting the person's identity in the fore of the image's content. Meanwhile, the portraits are rendered in a gritty photographic style with heightened black-white contrast. This creates a visual comparison to the "heroin chic" trend of the 1990s. The "heroin chic" trend was meant to glorify a sickly and harrowed aesthetic in models. Its visual characteristics can be seen from this Calvin Klein ad featuring Kate Moss (Figure 1). Moss

is presented as looking very thin and tired, and the framing and position of her as a supermodel implies that her hypothetical use of heroin has given her a beauty that has negative effects on her health. If Evans and Thomas are correct that visual vocabulary is similar to verbal rhetoric, there is a wealth of conclusions that can be drawn from this information (Evans and Thomas, 2013, 29). The connection between heroin use and being a "Doer" is in line with captions to Fiverr's images that imply "Doers" eat nothing but coffee and never sleep. Fiverr's campaign

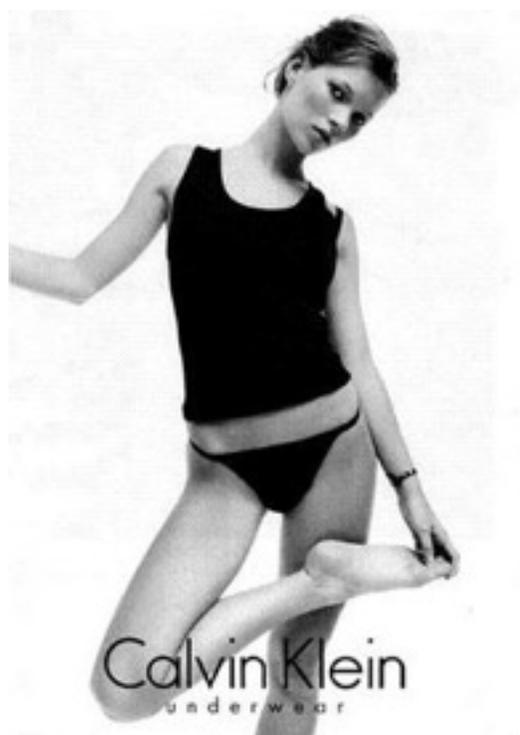


Figure 2. Heroin chic Calvin Klein ad. From *Calvin Klein Obsession campaign*, by Calvin Klein, 1993, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kate\\_Moss\\_Calvin\\_Klein.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kate_Moss_Calvin_Klein.jpg). Copyright Calvin Klein 1993.

is glorifying a disregard for health in favor of pursuit of career success, while heroin chic is also glorifying disregard for health. Many people who look at these ads will not notice the connection between workaholicism and heroin use, which means that the implication that “Doers” are killing themselves with their work will probably go unremarked upon in most cases.

Analyzing Fiverr’s ads through traditional and situational lenses show that this “workaholic chic” lifestyle of the “Doer” is being marketed in specific ways that make people feel like they could be (and want to be) the subjects of Fiverr’s “Doer” posters. The situational analysis draws attention to the way the ads are placed and how their repetition is structured. Since rhetoric is situational by nature, the way this campaign presents itself on the level of location and the variation of its differences is vital to understanding the full message it has to communication (Bitzer, 1968, 3). The structure of the ad campaign puts roughly the same kind of picture and roughly the same kind of message together in each picture. The pictures are all of distinctive looking “Doers,” looking glamorously unhealthy as discussed above. The pictures do not always go with the same message; the content of the message is unmoored from relevance to any one face. The unconnected recombination of faces and messages is vaguely like a social media network’s profile pictures, each face putting itself on display as a way to market its personal brand. This brings to light the way the traditional rhetoric aspects of this campaign work. Like a social media network, the “Doer” posters offer viewers the chance to become one of the faces on the subway. A viewer might see these posters and feel like they could have been chosen for this campaign, due to their identification with the people featured in the posters. This creates success by the standards of traditional rhetoric (Auer, 1981, 7-8). All they have to do to become one of

the faces of Fiverr is to sign up for Fiverr, literally adding their face to the many already on the platform.

The ethical problems in the Fiverr campaign come from the implications of its narrative's call to action. The narrative that comes from the ethos discussed above is that freelancers are not just workers like any other, but a special population that works much harder than other people. Their ability to work hard makes them exceptional, and they are glorified for their ability to push themselves. This narrative of freelancers comes with the information about Fiverr, a platform for freelancers like the ones in the posters. Sillars and Gronbeck would see this as the call to action featured in the narrative (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, 212). This call to action would theoretically succeed if a freelancer were to see this ad on a subway, identify with the ethos in the image, and desire to join the faces on the subway and gain the glamour of the posters. This would be achieved by the freelancer joining Fiverr. As Auer notes, dramaturgic analysis focuses on the motives of actors in communication relationships (Auer, 1981, 8). The motive here is that Fiverr is attempting to get people to join their platform in order to attain the ideal of the "Doer." What this narrative is doing is getting people to buy into the idea of "Doers," and then presenting them with Fiverr membership as a way to act on the values carried by the narrative. However, an analysis of Fiverr's business model shows that this call to action is not all it seems, because Fiverr's actions as a business have been to exploit the people it claims to glorify.

Fiverr is a platform where freelancers can make profiles and seek out people to hire them for freelance jobs; the platform is notoriously exploitative to freelancers. Users can create "gigs" as a way to structure their work, one gig being one project a freelancer would perform for an employer. The original base price of a gig was five dollars, which is where the name Fiverr

comes from. This reveals that Fiverr is in many ways exploiting an already vulnerable population. Five dollars per job is a rate that does not allow for a sustainable living. The freelancers who use Fiverr are led to believe they are being helped by the platform, while they are actually giving their money to a new middleman in their professional lives. As the “Doer” posters themselves state, freelancers tend to be overworked and stressed. This is because freelancers work without protections from unions and often without benefits like healthcare. These difficulties are added to the need for freelancers to constantly be looking for new jobs rather than simply coming into an office for a steady job. One interesting note to this analysis comes from an interference with the purpose of the message, created by citizen critics seeking to counter Fiverr’s narrative. Some have critiqued the campaign by annotating the ads on subways, subverting the ad within its own context. These subversions illuminate that Fiverr’s use of a glorified narrative of freelancing is a cynical way to draw in freelancers in order to exploit them with unfair business practices.

Fiverr’s “Doer” campaign presents freelancers in a glorified light in order to draw them into promoting their freelancing services through its platform. Its posters use visual vocabulary to make “Doers” look like a model of excellence for their exceptional capacity for work. In terms of traditional rhetoric, this sets up an ethos in the posters that will create an aspirational identification in any freelancers who see the posters. The situational context of the posters gives a social media literate audience the feeling that they could become part of the ad campaign if they sign up for the platform. In dramatic and narrative analysis, it can be seen that the posters are meant to use the narrative to get people to join the platform. However, Fiverr’s mistreatment of the people they glorify in their ads shows that they are not running an ethical campaign. In fact, they are deceiving the people they are communicating with by claiming to value “Doers.”

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