
The Green Revolution and its Portrayal in South Park

In America there has been a social shift of the way we consume, especially in regards to green products. The efforts for sustainability are often led by social groups that are “green extremists”. The most prevalent consumer trend in America for buying green among non extremists has been purchasing hybrid cars. Social constructions that have been built around hybrid car owners have grown quickly as the owners feel they are helping more by being “greener”. Crowley (2011) explains the redevelopment and resurgence of loving nature at a time when there is an environmental crisis. Given the current crisis, many people are getting involved and falling in love with nature along the way. The connection between the emotional aspects of nature and the actual actions taken to help the environment are not simple. Just because an individual loves the environment does not mean they will help solve the problem in any major way. Crowley looks at different ways to love nature in terms of the relationship to action. While trying to fix the problem, a sense of entitlement has been seen by hybrid owners. This is because they feel more “environmentally savvy” than traditional car and truck owners. Since our culture has adopted this “green revolution”, the television show South Park decided to parody it.

South Park is an animated television show on Comedy Central that makes fun of social, political, and economic topics pertaining to the country at the time the episode is produced. Trey Parker and Matt Stone created South Park and they use their four fourth grader characters as a medium to share their opinionated and sometimes offensive stories. The characters include “the fat and egocentric Eric Cartman, the average Stan Marsh, the Jewish Kyle Broslowski, and the poor Kenny McCormick. As these descriptions suggest, the characters are in many ways stereotypical, a fact that is emphasized by the naive, two-dimensional style of South Park’s animation” (Nixon 12, 1999). Trey Parker and Matt Stone use the “town” as a stage for their constructed characters to perform.

South Park has millions of viewers for each episode and their ratings continue to rise. Nixon describes the different influences on children from the popular animated series. Nixon argues that South Park's popularity among an audience of children has caused parents and teachers to be scared. He addresses many of the influences seen on children as well as addresses the show as a whole. The children's perceptions of the characters are thought of highly because they are simply cartoons. The messages the characters joke about are much more complex than what the children understand. Without understanding the context of the jokes and that it is all a parody, the skewed values that the children comprehend and adopt are terrible, rude, but also comical. The children's perceptions are shaped differently because they have a different understanding of the context of the jokes (Nixon, 1999).

There are many examples of interpersonal communication within the television show series, but many of the jokes and conflicts within the episodes deal with opposing perceptions. In an episode dealing with hybrid car buyers and entitlement, we can see that the perceptions of the hybrid owners, gas guzzler owners, and self perceptions differ between characters. The episode's title is named Smug Alert! as many of the green car buyers change their attitudes to be more arrogant, egocentric, and “smug” about their self perceptions.

Chua (2010) argues there are many reasons why car buyers have particular purchasing decisions. Car buyers who purchased regular gas powered vehicles reported that they considered "quality and performance" as the most important determinants for purchasing a car (Chua et al 1). In addition, they reported that the image they would receive from driving a certain type of car as being the least important determinants of buying a car. Similar to the episode, hybrid car buyers had the exact opposite responses. They said that the social influences of having a green identity were most important, and that the car quality and popularity were not important. Advertisers who focus on defining images have an advantage because they understand a selection process and a personality type of purchasing traditional or eco-friendly vehicles. Chua's research helps reinforce the theme of 'green identity' in the Smug Alert! South Park episode. Within the episode there are three short interactions that expose different perceptions of characters.

This particular episode focuses on the children's parents because they are the car buyers. However, there is an absence of the children because their views are expressed immediately by thinking Gerald's feelings and actions are stupid. In the episode, the first interaction is the opening scene where Gerald (Kyle's father) and Richard (a neighbor) talk about Gerald's new hybrid car. Gerald stops while driving by Richard's house to show off his new car. Richard acknowledges Gerald's new purchase but doesn't care about it and continues to shovel snow. Gerald still feels entitled and believes that Richard does care about his purchase. Richard simply says "good for you..." in a sarcastic tone to literally make Gerald feel better about his car, but to tell the audience that nobody cares (Parker & Stone, 2006). This quickly sets the tone for the rest of the episode.

Connolly (2008) writes about how consumers are given information about the environmental problem, and then told to adapt consumption habits to help the environment. Using in-depth interviews with green consumers, he explores the ways green consumers actively participate in environmental issues each day. Connolly specifically examines green consumption in regards to the consumers' self-identity. The political standpoint of environmental issues greatly impacts the need to buy, act, and advocate for green change. The political benefits from buying into the green movement have not caught up to our desperate need for change, but the social impact has been present for a while. There are many preconceived notions about the self-identity of green consumers that have changed their identity to be different, get attention, help the environment, or feel better about trying something new.

The original interaction is a great example of conflicting perceptions of the two characters. The process of human perception includes selection, organization, and interpretation. Within organization we find that personal constructs are used to measure a person or situation along a bipolar dimension of judgment. The personal construct used to measure the situation seen in the first scene is judged differently by the two characters. This difference causes a conflicting perception of the situation and of each other. Conflicting perceptions occur throughout the beginning of the episode because Parker & Stone purposely reinforce this conflict in the viewers' mind prior to the characters understanding that the differences exist.

The second interaction is when Stephen (Butter's father) and Mr. Garrison (the children's 5th grade teacher) are talking about how Gerald's hybrid has changed him. Their perception of Gerald is actually a change in Gerald's perceptions about them. This meta-perception makes the conflict even stronger as the original perception might not be true. However, in this scene Stephen and Mr. Garrison are correct as the hybrid car has completely changed Gerald's

attitude. Stephen comments on the point that Gerald now feels “high and mighty” about driving a hybrid and Mr. Garrison says how he “feels better than everyone else” after buying the car (Parker & Stone, 2006). Following this scene, it cuts back to Gerald telling a truck owner at a stop light how driving a hybrid is better for the environment. Our cultural scripts and norms say that the only times we talk to someone in the car next to us at a stop light are if they have a light out, if one needs directions, or if you personally know the person. Scripts guide us to action and they control our conversation by using past experiences. In this case, the script is not followed and an egocentric and superior attitude is imposed on the gas guzzler truck driver. Egocentrism and conflicting views only exaggerates and aggravates the already broken script. There are many occurrences in other South Park episodes where scripts are broken in order to create a 'problem'. When there is a change in script that doesn't follow experienced scripts, conflict will naturally arise.

The third interaction is when Gerald takes Kyle and Ike to the hardware store to put fake tickets on gas guzzlers for failing to care about the environment. The difference between this scene and the other scenes is that conflict actively arises. For example, many of the truck drivers get upset and Gerald tells them that they should drive hybrids to protect the earth. They respond with complaints and other threats. The response in turn shocks Gerald as he was unaware of the gas guzzlers' perspectives. Gerald then uses the product he just purchased to shape his views on the environment and continue to share his new views with others who don't care. Following this scene, Gerald concludes that the people of South Park are not eco-friendly enough and that he needs to move the family to San Francisco. Later in the episode, the characters in San Francisco explain the lifestyle choices they make and how they are superior to the rest of the country. Interestingly, Kyle understands that moving to San Francisco was pointless and explains it to the viewers by making a silly song.

Whitmarsh & O'Neill (2010) address the cost-effectiveness and socially acceptable ways of persuading the public to adopt their current lifestyles to more environmentally-friendly lifestyles. They specifically focus on UK policy-makers who believe starting new behaviors such as recycling may cause a catalyst of people willing to make pro-environmental behavioral changes. In terms of improving or changing a lifestyle choice to stand out, environmental identity is something that is progressive and will help the world so the identity is highly regarded. Whitmarsh & O'Neill found that self-identity was a significant behavioral influence towards creating a specific lifestyle.

The third scene from the episode is a great example of Gerald's attribution error because his different perceptions are exposed to himself. Attribution errors are common errors people make about themselves. In addition, Gerald has a self serving bias about his lifestyle due to the green purchasing decision. The self serving bias interferes with Gerald's previous lifestyle because the hybrid car has made him more egocentric. Self serving bias and attribution errors in general are very common reasons for conflict. In Gerald's situation, the environmentally conscious bias is enhanced because of a green product.

DeLaure (2011) says that comedy causes us to see us as imperfect people who are guilty of contributing to environmental problems as well as people who are helping the earth breathe and survive. The performance of a green identity is exactly what the South Park episode displays through a comedic rhetoric. DeLaure argues that using the medium of comedy to explain these types of positive and negative impacts on our environment is easiest. This is because the individual can 'laugh off' the idea of them not contributing positively and feel good about their

support in the future. This article is relevant to my topic because it encompasses both comedy and the green identity. Since many people feel that both of these identities are positive, there is a prewritten script that associates hybrid owners with the stereotype the episode creates. These three interactions from the episode best explain its entirety even though they are only a few seconds each.

The perceptions that the town has of Gerald are very different from what Gerald actually thinks. It is fun to watch this play out in the episode as the viewer knows how the rest of the community feels. Comedy is a great rhetorical medium to get a message across to an audience when talking about global warming and other environmental issues. Most people understand there is a problem, but taking it too seriously can cause a backlash for getting individuals to contribute to a solution. With most political issues, viewers have already heard the information previously and they do not want to hear it again. The television show South Park successfully skews the viewers' perceptions and script in order to offer a satirical perspective on an important topic. In Smug Alert!, it is interesting and entertaining to see characters have conflict due to different perceptions while the viewer also creates a new perception on the topic as well. By breaking the rules of common sense and day-to-day scripts, the proven perception impact and changes from purchasing a hybrid vehicle can be explained and performed.

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