The Worst Ad of the Year

Is this the worst ad of the year? I ask, in all seriousness. Because rarely in the annals of modern advertising has such a poorly-made ad, for such a big brand, been the recipient of such a huge global media budget. The campaign has been haunting me across various international airports for weeks. I stand transfixed, fascinated by its strange ineptitude, and bemused by why it was made so badly.

The whole premise is shaky. Three celebrities with nothing in common, or any apparent link to the fragrance, gather in an artificial, confined space. Michael Porter once told us that strategy is choice. Well, not if you're selling Hugo Boss parfum. Someone clearly thought they could tick every box by having a Hollywood star, Latino musician and Brazilian soccer player all jammed up together like this and cover all their target market bases.

The tagline that usually appears around the ad is "Boss recognize Boss". This literally makes no grammatical or semantic sense. Last week on LinkedIn someone suggested the ad was an example of bad AI creative. I disagree. Even AI, for all its six-fingered flaws, has never been this amazingly shonky.

Campaign asset from Boss Bottled Beyond*BOSS Fragrances*
Consider the gobsmakingly bad production quality. The ad literally looks like it was made by a sixth grader for their “Introduction to Photoshop” assignment. Look at the way the white boss logo is dropped carelessly behind Bradley Cooper’s hair. Wonder at Vinícius Jr’s lack of fake shadow. Or lower right arm. Ponder at the logic of photoshopping a vague six pack onto Cooper’s T-Shirt. Who approved this?

Look at how the celebrities have been staged. The rapper Maluma, to his credit, looks like he wants to be there. But Vinícius Jr. offers the uneasy half-smile of a man unsure what is happening or how he got here. He is trying — manfully — to pull it off. But his eyes betray a man with deep misgivings.

And then, there is Bradley Cooper.

His rictus stare is something we rarely see in the upbeat, idealized world of advertising. What is he trying to say with that stricken look? Is he asking for help? Forgiveness? Is he remembering the day back in drama school when his professor warned him about stuff like this? His weary sadness is striking. Haunting even. Not only does it fail to sell the premise of Boss cologne, it makes me question the whole premise of modern advertising.

I have stared for unhealthy amounts of time at Cooper in this ad trying to work out how this specific shot made it into the final ad. Did the production team only take one photograph? Was he trying to sabotage the campaign? Did the art director want to inject some strange French notion of existential angst into the work? So many questions.

And then the finishing touch. At the bottom of the ad we are asked to imagine the pleasures of "The New Ginger-Leather Fragrance." Ginger and leather. Like chainsaw and kindergarten, these are two words that should never exist in the same sentence. I'm always up for a little bit of exotic European nonsense when it comes to fragrances and their vivid descriptors. And it would have helped here. In French it translates into "Cuir Gingembre." I could get behind that. But on what planet is anyone looking for Ginger-Leather? Serious question.

There is a 30 second TV spot too. Remarkably, it's almost as bad as the poster. Also themed around the unintelligible "Boss recognizes Boss" theme, it opens with Maluma on his own in a cinema weeping at a Bradley Cooper movie.

Yes, weeping. Vinícius Jr. stands spookily emotionless at a Maluma concert staring at the rap star. Suddenly we are in a stadium and Vinícius Jr. scores the winning goal. He has eyes for only one man – you guessed it – Bradley Cooper up in the stands who appears manically excited. How can we keep criticizing the quality of AI-created ads when we humans are

capable of this?

The real victim here isn't the consumer. Or, despite his expression, Bradley Cooper. The people to really feel sorry for are the team at Hugo Boss because this is not their fault. It is not a Hugo Boss ad.

> *Ginger and leather. Like chainsaw and kindergarten, these are two words that should never exist in the same sentence.*

This ad was made by Coty, the French perfume giant that operates the license for all Hugo Boss fragrances. It's common for luxury brands to sell a long-term license to eyewear companies, perfume manufacturers and the like for eight or nine figure royalty checks.

It's also common for the brands in question to then express extreme frustration at their licensees who inevitably have a different vision for the brand, shorter timelines and, the worst part, gigantic media budgets that often overshadow the ad budgets of the brands themselves.

Hugo Boss has recently been doing very good new work under James Foster, the brand's global head of marketing and communications. But Foster must be tearing his hair out at the state of this campaign and the fact that almost everyone will assume he is the man behind the work. For once, the Boss at Boss probably prefers not to be recognized.

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