Theorizing Advertising and Promotion

Chapter Outline

Before the book develops its descriptive account of the advertising business and its role in marketing, this chapter introduces some theoretical concepts for understanding the nature of the engagement between advertising and its audiences. ‘Theory’ is, in this chapter, a word used to indicate ways of articulating the everyday experience of advertising. The chapter particularly stresses the practical and theoretical inadequacy of conceiving an advertisement as a univocal message and discusses other intellectually richer possibilities.

Advertising is ‘parasitic’ (Cook, 2001) in the sense that it draws from, and refers to, other discourse forms. Intertextual references evince other ads or other genres. Early ads often evoked inter-generic genres of, say, scientific reports (with a white-coated, male actor as ‘objective’ spokesperson for the proven qualities of the brand), the sales pitch (delivered by a man in a loud tie and check jacket) and the confidential piece of advice from the older woman experienced in household management to the younger (examples are taken from Cook, 2001: 194). Intra-generic intertextual references to other ads have become more common in ads since the 1950s.

In research with young British consumers, O’Donohoe (1997) has shown how these intertextual references frame and form the way ads are understood. Many creative executions use intertextuality deliberately to engage their audience or to connote certain values by
linking the brand with the discourses of, say, sport or movies. For example, ads for Fosters lager parodied the Australian Mad Max movies (and ads for Carling Black Label lager parodied the Foster’s ads parodying the Mad Max movies).\(^2\) Other ads evince analogies of TV quiz shows, news announcements, fashion photographs, courtroom dialogue and TV situation comedies. In many cases ads deploying intertextual references are then featured on compilation TV shows of funniest ads, completing the circle by drawing ads into mainstream entertainment.

Creative professionals may use intertextuality as a tactic to try to engage consumers with points of shared cultural reference. Intertextual references are often used in a spirit of parody to break down consumer resistance to advertising appeals. In such cases the marketing message is predicated on the target consumers getting the reference and appreciating the wit. In one example a car chase from the movie ‘Bullett’ was reproduced with the car digitally replaced with a Ford Puma, driven by the laconic star Steve McQueen. The ad mocked the sporty pretensions of the Puma but in a way that might be appreciated by its audience, since it broke the advertising cliché of earnestness about the brand. Ads that make parodic intra-generic intertextual reference to advertising as a genre have become common. There is no sales message as such, merely an assumption that consumers will understand that the self-mockery is as insincere as the earnestness of stereotypical advertising. The marketing aim is not to make a sales pitch but to endear the desired group of consumers to the brand.

Why Theorize Advertising and Promotion?

Business people, marketing and advertising professionals included, rarely have much time for theory. Theory is popularly understood as a synonym for complex, esoteric, abstract. The term ‘in theory’ is often used in a pejorative sense to refer to ideas that are seen as irrelevant, impractical or obscure. But theory can be seen in another, more constructive way. It can be viewed as a form of everyday understanding that allows us a sense of control over our world and, sometimes, helps us to predict outcomes based on previous experience. Rudimentary theories allow us to understand our world in ways that are not possible if we are solely concerned with concrete experience. We all live by implicit theories: knowing that rain gets you wet therefore you should put on a coat before you leave the house may strike you as obvious, but it involves an abstraction from
particular experiences of getting wet and it informs our behaviour. It may not be as complex as a theory of relativity but it is the kind of theorizing that most of us are more familiar with.

Practical theory guides behaviour and action in the workplace even though it may be implicit rather than explicit. In one study (Kover, 1995) creative professionals in advertising worked to differing implicit theories of communication, which guided their approach to addressing creative briefs and solving communications problems. In another study (Hackley, 2003d) account team professionals worked to differing implicit models of the consumer. These models implied quite different ways of understanding, and therefore of communicating with, consumers. Advertising people hold their own theories of advertising communication and of consumers, which guide the assumptions they make when solving practical problems at work.

Intellectually, theorizing allows us to use our imagination to move from the concrete to the abstract. We can compare and combine ideas and speculate on new ways of understanding the world. Our understanding of any social phenomenon requires some theoretical dimension in order to raise it beyond the trivial. One can say without fear of vehement contradiction that books are made up of words, but to compare different books and to offer views on their qualities one has to invoke implicit theories of, say, prose style (‘this book is well-written’) theories of narrative (‘the plot was exciting’) or theories of dramatic characterization (‘the characters were not believable’). We have an opinion of what constitutes good writing or effective characterization even though we may not be at all familiar with intellectual traditions of literary criticism. Advertising is a field particularly concerned with human communication, thought and behaviour. Advertising professionals are practical people who develop experience in particular areas and know what works for them in given situations, but advertising as a category can hardly be spoken of at all without some basic theoretical assumptions to guide us. In this book, then, theory is not considered a byword for obscurity. At a rudimentary but decidedly non-trivial level it simply allows us to articulate the world in ways that go beyond the unimportant or the obvious.

How Can We Theorize Advertising and Promotion?

Models of Advertising Effects

The research fields of mass communications, artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology, social psychology, sociology and anthropology have all influenced advertising research in differing ways and degrees. We will not offer a detailed history or critique of communications research in relation to advertising here, but will outline some major themes in order to set the foregoing discussion in a broader context.
Linear Communication and the Hierarchy of Effects

What we will call the linear information processing theories of communication and persuasion have been highly influential in both advertising and marketing communications textbooks (Buttle, 1994) and also in professional practice (for a discussion see Crosier, 1999). These theories generally reflect the methods and assumptions of cognitive psychology. In particular, they draw an analogy between the information processing of computers and that of humans. These research traditions have been drawn on by advertising and communications theorists to develop ‘hierarchy-of-effects’ models of advertising persuasion (review in Barry and Howard, 1990; also see Lavidge and Steiner, 1961; Rossiter et al., 1991; Vaughn, 1986). In the hierarchy-of-effects theoretical tradition the consumer is seen as an individual entity who is resistant to marketing communication until the accumulated weight of persuasive messages finally results in acquiescence (that is, in purchase). The consumer’s resistance, so to speak, is broken by an accumulation of advertising effects, hence the expression ‘hierarchy-of-effects’. The consumer, like a computer, is assumed to process information sequentially, according to rules.

Hierarchy-of-effects models of advertising persuasion tend to be variations on Strong’s (1925) AIDA (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) sequence in which the consumer is moved along a linear continuum of internal states from unawareness to awareness, then interest is elicited and desire (for the brand) aroused. Finally, the consumer is stirred into action in the form of a purchase (hence the acronym AIDA). The ‘hierarchy-of-effect’ represents ‘compounding probabilities’ (Percy et al., 2001: 36), as each step in the process is a necessary condition for the subsequent step. This ever popular model of persuasive communication has been criticized for its main virtue: for enthusiasts it is succinct, for detractors it is simplistic. It is also criticized on the grounds that it conceives of advertising consumption as an essentially dyadic process, transmitted through a media channel to an individual viewer and consumed in social isolation. A further criticism is that it represents only high-involvement purchases: many or most purchases are more spontaneous and do not engage consumers in this sort of rational processing.

Other approaches have argued that, in contrast, advertising consumption should be properly understood as an ineluctably social process (Ritson and Elliott, 1999). We do not generally view ads in an experimental booth – our interpretation of them is normally framed by the social context in which we encounter them. A further criticism of linear models of advertising persuasion is that they risk overplaying the role of economic rationality in the consumption of advertising. Subsequent models have incorporated stronger elements of consumer emotionality into the persuasion process (Elliott, 1998; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) to reflect the often irrational and quirky motivations behind consumer behaviour (review in Dermody, 1999).
Of course, this implies that promotional communication may not be particularly effective as a persuasive sales pitch, a point made forcefully by research that emphasizes the ‘weak’ theory of advertising effect (see p. 34).

One well-known generic model incorporated emotionality into purchase decisions by using a three-stage conceptualization: cognitive, affective and conative (known colloquially as think-feel-do. For discussions see Bagozzi, 1979; Barnard and Ehrenberg, 1997; Lutz, 1997). Cognition (thinking) refers to the rational appeal of advertising as, for example, a motor-car ad which includes data on engine performance or utility features such as fold-away seating. The affective stage refers to the emotional response of the consumer to an ad. Not only does the ad seek to engage with the consumer on a rational level by emphasizing product benefits: it also tries to elicit a positive emotional response with aesthetically pleasing imagery and alluring symbolism. Motor-car ads, for example, usually feature the engine and other product data within a carefully shot picture of the car and its occupants in a pleasing setting, perhaps an attractive and affluent family laughing gaily as they travel along a coastal highway. The emotional response is desire, triggered by identification. Finally, conation refers to action: the combination of rational and emotional appeal in the same ad might then act persuasively and motivate a purchase response.

The think-feel-do hierarchy is a commonsense (or self-evident) conceptualization which tells us that many ads combine rational with emotional appeals. It cannot tell us which of those appeals will prove more powerful or what the right balance of rational-emotional appeal should be. Neither can the model explain to us which aspect of the appeal is rational or emotional. For some motor-car ad consumers, small-print text describing the brake horsepower of a car has an emotional appeal if they are excited by the idea of a very powerful engine. For others, such technical data are less than exciting. The appropriate degree of balance between the two kinds of appeal is neither fixed nor clear. Intrinsic product virtues can be implied rather than stated, while symbolic references can be highlighted or hinted at.

Häagen-Dazs ice cream is one good example of how a whole product category was re-energized through an overtly stylized brand advertising (and PR) initiative which used overt intertextual references to sex and celebrity while also implying through the pricing and packaging that the product itself is intrinsically of high quality. An appeal on the basis of the dairy wholesomeness of Häagen Dazs ice-cream (like the UK Wall’s ice-cream ads of the 1960s) would hardly have had the same impact. Levi’s 501s and Benetton are, similarly, brands that have eschewed the rational appeals sometimes characteristic of those product categories (hard-wearing, colour-fast, well-made) in favour of intertextual visual, musical and linguistic references that draw more complex meanings into the ad and the brand. Picking apart the rational from the emotional in such communications is a task of detailed and somewhat subjective analysis.
The Linear Model of Communication

The linear theory of communication, so-called because it suggests that communication can be modelled as a linear sequence of events, has been another influential feature in advertising theory. It is closely associated with Schramm’s (1948) work on mass communication and has been influential in other communications research (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld, 1941; Lazarsfeld, 1948).

An advertisement can be said to communicate a message to receivers. A message is said to have a source, the sender of the message. The sender has to encode the message into a form that will carry the desired meaning. Encoding will put the message into a form in which communication is possible, such as words, pictures, gestures, music or a combination of all of these. The receiver has to decode the message in order to retrieve the meaning intended. The surrounding environment may have noise of various forms that distracts from the message. Noise can be construed metaphorically as anything that might disrupt the communication by, say, distracting the attention of the receiver. In an aural communication it may be literal noise that disrupts the communicative process. With visual communications such as roadside advertising poster sites, noise may be all the activities of an urban road that might distract a person’s attention from the poster, such as pedestrians, cars, shops, stray dogs or whatever.

This simple conceptualization has many descriptive uses. It has been a mainstay of marketing communications and advertising texts because of its economy and descriptive scope. It can be applied to almost any communications scenario and will have a degree of applicability. But all conceptual models have their limitations. A model is no more than a textual representation

![A Linear Model of Communication.](image-url)
that captures by analogy some, but by no means all, of the features of the phenomenon it purports to represent. In other words, models as theoretical representations have weaknesses.

Some Limitations of the Linear Model of Communication

One weakness of the linear model of communication is that it is easy to interpret in such a way that meaning and message are understood to be synonymous. This risks misconstruing the interpretive possibilities that subsist within a given promotional communication. Cultural and linguistic studies of advertising have noted that advertisements often deploy ambiguity as a virtue (Forceville, 1996: 102, citing Pateman, 1983). The openness of the advertising text can draw consumers into a deeper engagement as they ponder on the possible meanings of the ad. In the UK, many cigarette ads have used cryptic visual metaphors, such as when the Silk Cut brand deployed a poster of a cut silk sheet with no supporting copy. The poster carried no meaning as such, and indeed no message, but merely winked a knowing eye at consumers who were already familiar with the brand name. Constructs such as message, and indeed meaning, seem ill-suited to cryptic ads such as this.

The construct message may be a convenient shorthand for whatever meaning (or meanings) that may emerge from a communication, but creative professionals know very well that encapsulating a preconceived message into a given communication in such a way that it will be similarly interpreted by culturally heterogeneous consumers is a complex challenge. It is telling that advertising agency professionals seldom use the term ‘message’, preferring to speak of ‘advertising strategy’ to express the communication theme they wish to capture in the ad. ‘Strategy’ (discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4) is less precise a term than ‘message’ and allows both creative professionals and consumers some scope of interpretation while maintaining a focus on a theme that will support the client’s marketing objective.

The linear model, then, risks oversimplifying the consumer’s cognitive engagement with advertising by emphasizing a singular message that has one, unproblematic meaning. The use of linearity itself in social research has been attacked. In artificial intelligence research, for example, the linear processing that is said to characterize computer data processing has given way to the notion of parallel processing. In other words, the assumption that computers (and human brains) can only process one bit of data at a time has been challenged by more complex models which indicate that information (data) can be processed by more than one channel simultaneously. Clearly, this has implications for understanding how consumers engage with advertising in environments which are full of competing advertising messages. It may suggest, for example, that just because we do not pay explicit attention to an ad it does not necessarily mean that we are not conscious of the ad or that it has no effect on us. Conventional linear models of advertising effect
In an oft-told story of advertising miscommunication, a 1950s cigarette brand was advertised in the UK with cinema ads. The ads featured an actor alone on London Bridge at night, mock heroically lighting up a Strand cigarette to the accompanying strapline, ‘You’re never alone with a Strand’. The brand failed to sell and it transpired that cinema audiences felt that the user was a lonely soul who couldn’t find friends. To ad agency types familiar with Hollywood movie heroes such as Humphrey Bogart, it seemed inconceivable that cigarette smoking could be seen as anything but the act of a streetwise tough guy whose heroic destiny was to be alone. The audience decoded a different meaning from the one the agency had planned to encode into the message. The reason for the miscommunication was not known: it may have been the actor was unconvincing as a hero, the clothes, the set or the props – all may have undermined the intended effect. Today such a mistake would be unlikely to happen. Most major advertising campaigns are carefully pre-tested on trial audiences before launch. The story reveals the subtlety of meaning in advertising communication.

BOX 2.1 Miscommunication in Advertising

Imply that ads must get our explicit attention in order to be effective, and furthermore that we filter most ads out of our field of attention because they do not pass our criterion of interest. But if we are conscious of advertising to which we are not paying express attention, it suggests that advertising works in quite a different way from a personal sales encounter.

The linear model of communication with its sequential processing translates conveniently into a model of persuasion if the sequential stages are replaced with attitudinal or behavioural states (awareness, interest, desire and action). Much experimental and survey research effort in advertising is invested in measuring these psychological states on the assumption that they indicate the likelihood of purchase and therefore are indicative of the success (or otherwise) of an ad campaign. These intermediate states may be a necessary condition for advertising to accomplish its marketing aims, but they may not be a sufficient condition. A further problem is that they may not predict the outcome of an advertising campaign, because consumers may be aware of and like an ad without buying the product. However, even though most ads no doubt fall into this category for many consumers, an ad that is liked but not acted upon may not have failed as a marketing device, as we shall see.

In some cases, and in some cultures, the direct sales appeal has greater relevance. For example, as a generalization, much US advertising contrasts with that of Europe, Australasia and Asia in the direct style of its sales appeal. US consumers may be simply more accustomed to this
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style of advertising and, perhaps, more receptive to its method. The ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ advertising appeal may not be mutually exclusive. Even though the sales appeal may be direct, the ad can still carry important values and connotations that contribute to long-term brand-building and maintaining the communications objective. And ads with an indirect appeal may often coincide with contiguous purchase behaviour that immediately follows exposure to the ad.

Strong and Weak Theories of Advertising Effect

Strong Theories

The hierarchy-of-effects traditions have influenced theories of how advertising works (for a review see Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999). The verb ‘works’ can be construed in different ways: for many clients, a campaign only

BOX 2.2 ‘Strong’ or ‘Weak’ Advertising Appeals

Many contemporary ads eschew the ‘strong’ sales pitch format in favour of a more tenuous brand reference (Ehrenberg et al., 2002). Since short-term memory only accommodates six or seven pieces of information, consumer choice sets are limited. Brands have to ensure that they have a place in this choice set by reminding consumers that the brand remains salient and relevant to their lifestyle. Many car brand ads for, say, BMW or Mercedes-Benz, evince general brand values because consumers may only buy that car brand once or twice in a lifetime. They need to be consistently reminded of the brand’s relevance and values for the time when they might be in a position to buy. Where a brand has built a sense of prestige through its advertising, and this prestige is acknowledged among stakeholder groups such as employees, shareholders and the non-consuming public, this can translate to indirect but tangible market benefits such as share price, positive PR and word-of-mouth approval. Many consumer purchases are, like cars, infrequent. A new suit, a holiday, life insurance, a house, a new watch are relatively rare purchases for most people. Brand advertising must be persistent and enduring to have any effect on the purchasing behaviour of such people. When one considers that there are around 60 million people in the UK, over 200 million in the USA and 1000 million in China, we can see that being an infrequently purchased item for each individual translates into a huge potential market because of the number of such individuals that can be accessed by advertising.
works if the sales graph speaks upwards within a few days of the campaign launch. This direct, causal relationship between advertising and sales is often what is implied in the metaphor. Campaigns do often result in sales increases but the causal link can never be proven, even though the circumstantial evidence that advertising caused the sales increase may seem compelling. There will always be other possible causal variables influencing purchase patterns, such as seasonality, changes in disposable income and topical events.

The hierarchy-of-effects theories of persuasion clearly assume that advertising works in a directly persuasive way (or ‘strong’ way (Ambler, 1998)) on individuals. The best attempts to demonstrate advertising’s effect on purchasing trends are where multivariate statistical analysis isolates a number of variables so that it becomes reasonable to assume that advertising was a causal factor in the sales pattern. Many advertising case histories have done this. Even in such studies, the results are not beyond dispute and only offer reasonable grounds, rather than proof, for suggesting that the advertising caused a given sales pattern. ‘Split-run’ studies can offer interesting evidence by measuring sales in regions with similar demographic characteristics but showing slightly different ads. The sales difference might be attributed to variations in the ad design or to how frequently it is aired. Nonetheless, evidence remains inconclusive and an inadequate basis for generalization.

**Weak Theories**

Weak theories of advertising assume that the advertising cause and the sales effect are far less directly linked than strong theories. The link is, nevertheless, powerful and enduring. Ads may often exercise influence over long periods of time, they may be designed to influence parties other than buyers or potential buyers (such as shareholders or employees) and they may be intended simply to remind consumers that the brand is still around and still relevant. In many consumer markets the only way a brand can hope to compete is to match competitors’ advertising expenditure (or adspend). If they do not, the consumer might infer that their brand is somehow second-rate or less serious than the more heavily advertised brands.

An important function of branding is that it is a badge of reassurance for the consumer. Consumers are often insecure about making difficult purchase decisions. None of us wants to get our purchase home to find that it is defective in any way or that our peers regard it with disdain. Brand names offer reassurance for the consumer that the purchase we have made is safe in the sense that the brand is credible and the quality good. Brand advertising, then, supports this sense of reassurance by reminding consumers that the brand is current, relevant and successful.
In other words, the advertising supports the brand by creating and maintaining a favourable consumer predisposition towards it over long periods.

There is rarely, then, a specified point at which a given ad clinches a sale. The power and the limitations of ads need to be understood in terms of the intrinsic limitation of mediated communication to directly persuade. Individual consumers seldom leave their living-room immediately after seeing an ad to buy the product at the nearest store. Advertising simply places a brand in the consumer’s awareness in association with certain contrived values and qualities. In this weak role, advertising may portray brands in persuasive ways but their main task is not persuasive: it is to provide reassurance.

This weak, reminding role is important since advertising does not engage with consumers singly but collectively. Advertising is a social experience (Ritson and Elliott, 1999) in many senses. It draws on cultural reference points that subsist in interactive social contexts. Large numbers of consumers are exposed to ads, of whom it is statistically likely that a proportion may be thinking of purchasing a particular category of product or service. The brand then has a positive presence in the consumer’s set of choices when next in a position to buy that product category. Given that the short-term memory of humans is estimated at about seven chunks of

**BOX 2.3 Whassup with Weak Advertising Appeals?**

Anheuser-Busch has used various creative approaches to promote their Budweiser beer brand, for instance ads that emphasized the brewing process and highlighted the intrinsic quality of the beer (‘King of Beers’). They have also drawn on American provenance to position the brand in an heroic light. More recent campaigns have shifted the positioning somewhat to broaden the appeal. One campaign placed the beer as a minor set prop in a narrative form that appeared to be more like a movie clip than a TV ad. One execution had a set of apparently Afro-American friends going about their domestic business and greeting each other with an increasingly loud cry of ‘Whassup?!’ (see colour insert). The characters are in a variety of situations familiar in TV domestic dramas or situation comedies: watching TV, working at a computer, bringing shopping home (a bag of Budweiser), talking to a lover on the telephone. The brand was implicated in the plot as the choice of working professionals of any ethnic origin but with an authenticity coming from their use of street slang, street clothes and love of TV sport. The ads hinted that the brand itself had the same authenticity as the characters (‘Budweiser. True’).
information, the buying set from which we choose for most purchases is relatively small. Simply being in the recalled buying set of several million consumers is useful, and indeed necessary, for a consumer brand in a competitive situation.

Self-evidently, there must be some occasions when an individual ad informs and persuades a particular consumer to purchase the brand. Weak theories of advertising effect hold that such occasions are relatively rare and that the majority of purchase decisions are made by default. In other words, most consumer purchases are influenced by brand perceptions that are formed and sustained over long periods. Advertising is only one of many possible sources of brand perceptions, but it is an important source because of its high public profile, persuasive authority and huge reach in developed economies. The interpretive theories that this book draws upon to conceptualize the consumer–advertising relation are perhaps most compatible with weak theories of how advertising works.

‘Weak’ Theories of Advertising and Ambiguity of Meaning in Communication

Sperber and Wilson (1986, cited in Forceville, 1996) noted that all non-verbal communication can be seen as ‘weak’ communication. By weak communication they mean that the meaning of the communication can never be precisely ascertained, there will always be room for alternative interpretations. Many conceptualizations of advertising link the notion of advertising message with advertising effect without fully exploring why these links can be assumed. The point of view held in this book is that a univocal notion of advertising meaning conceived in a social vacuum, decoded by an individual receiver and understood independently from both the sending and receiving contexts, cannot adequately capture the complexity of the communicative engagement between ad and consumer.
In the rest of this chapter a number of interpretive constructs will be introduced.

The Social Context of Advertising and Promotion

The Social Constructionist Standpoint on Advertising

Most theorizing contributes something to our understanding of the world. Constructs deriving from cognitive psychology such as memory and attitude are self-evidently relevant, in some way, in the communicative engagement between ad and consumer. Such constructs are, as we have seen, conceived as intermediate states in the communication-purchase sequence. But in and of themselves they only permit a superficial understanding of this engagement. What we remember of ads and what we express as attitudes to brands in response to questionnaires have no necessary connection with the meaning that ads and brands have for us in our lives as consumers and citizens. If you are asked to fill in a consumer questionnaire concerning household goods, you may well express opinions on brands which you have heard of but have never purchased. There may be some value for brand marketing organizations in establishing the attitudes of non-consumers to particular brands. There are also limits to the usefulness of such information in strategy formulations.

Developments in cultural psychology have suggested that constructs such as memory and attitude cannot be understood only at an individual level (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Our cognitive understanding of the social world is not only private: it is inherently social. Our preferences and attitudes are culturally primed, and we choose them from a range of possibilities presented to us in our own cultural field. Consumers do not typically engage with advertising in experimental viewing booths. We understand advertising as part of our cultural landscape. It is simply there, like road signs, newspapers and TV shows, and conversations in bars. All are normal parts of our social world. As a normal feature of social life advertising reflects and reveals values and social practices in this world. The ways we interpret advertising, and the attitudes we form of the brands portrayed, are not only our own: they are views borrowed from the social worlds which we encounter.

If a brand is popular, such as Nike or BMW, its consumers are well aware that they are not the only people to favour this brand. Indeed, they will very likely have an idea of the kind of other person who likes the brand. They may well have gained this impression from advertising. Our senses of discernment and preference are not fixed or given by nature. They are culturally learned in interaction with our social worlds.
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Advertising seeks to create meanings that will resonate in some way with our sense of social identity and our culturally derived values, aspirations and fantasies.

Advertising as Commodity

Advertising is not merely a force acting upon us. We actively use it in our own social lives. Research studies have drawn attention to the ways advertising is actively used in social life (O’Donohoe, 1994) as well as being passively consumed in some contexts. Advertising research often emphasizes the individual encounter with an individual ad (McCracken, 1986) when, in fact, we usually consume ads socially in the sense that we often view them in the company of others and we discuss our interpretation of them and modify it in the light of other views. Ritson and Elliott (1999) showed how important advertising can be in the everyday conversation of adolescents. By expressing preferences and finding certain ads funny or enjoyable the researchers found that the adolescents were also expressing their sense of social identity and group membership.

Brand Advertising and Social Construction

Advertising’s meaning draws on the cultural environment within which it is framed. Our understanding of ads and the brands they promote is formed in the light of the social contexts within which such communications subsist. This inherently social aspect of human understanding reflects a broader concern with the socially constructed character of social reality (Berger and Luckman, 1966) and the socially constructed nature of individual psychology (for introductions see Burr, 1995; Nightingale and Cromby, 1999). In important respects we maintain that brands and their advertising cannot be properly understood simply as self-evident entities. They must also be understood as entities that exist in the realm of social interaction, sustained through the way they are talked about and used. In other words, brands can be seen as social constructions.

A great deal of marketing activity can be seen to have a socially constructed character (Hirschman, 1986, cited in Hackley, 2001: 47) in the sense that it has an existence that is sustained in the social world beyond the tangible realities of product features, packaging and price. A brand's meaning as portrayed or implied in advertising subsists in the social space between the organization, the advertising and its interpretive communities of consumers.

Social constructionism is sometimes identified with the extreme idealism of the philosopher Bishop Berkeley, but unlike it, social constructionist theory does not contend that the mental is all that is real and
the material world is a chimera. Rather, it maintains that the social and material worlds co-exist but do not share the same rules (Hackley, 1998). Social constructionism is not really a metaphysical position at all but a psychological one. It acknowledges that it is in the nature of human communication that meanings can be produced that are self-sustaining, because in talking to each other we generate new meanings. It is this human tendency to reify or to treat the abstract (the socially constructed) as if it were real that brand marketing exploits. Consumers know very well that wearing Nike sports shoes does not make them any more likely to be a winner nor does it make them into a street-smart urban survivor. They do know that these very connotations are embodied in the brand

**BOX 2.4 Nike as Social Construction**

The Nike sportswear brand was developed through its proprietor Phil Knight’s obsession with designing running shoes. Knight’s original running shoes were endorsed by track star Steve Prefontaine. The brand acquired another dimension when it became fashionable street wear in Los Angeles. What had been a brand associated with sporting excellence and promoted through a policy of personal endorsement by sports stars acquired new connotations of street authenticity, toughness and resistance to conformity. The Nike ‘Swoosh’ is one of the most universally recognized icons of twenty-first-century culture. Although its connotations are controlled by Nike, to some extent there are elements that are beyond control because a brand within public discourse has a self-sustaining momentum. Nike became a feature of urban culture as well as a marketed brand: the values and connotations inspired by its association with sporting performance have become inseparable from those of street coolness and opposition to authority. The brand’s marketing has been able to exploit its street authenticity, but arguably it did not create that authenticity. It is a good example of a brand as a social construction, since its cultural meaning is bound up with wider discourses (in this case, those of class, ethnicity, urban identity and the American sense of individuality).

Brands as social constructions are then no more or less than what we as consumers think they are. If Volvo is seen as safe, Rolex as prestigious, Marlboro as tough, Body Shop as environmentally conscious, such perceptions are produced by consumers in interaction with each other. Brand marketing organizations try to influence this brand discourse through their brand and communications policies.
and they know that others know it too. The brand’s socially constructed meaning is part of the communication game we play with each other in negotiating our social identity.

Marketing executives and advertising and communications professionals are all interested in what advertisements mean to consumers. They use different vocabularies to articulate their views, reflecting the theoretical traditions which they draw upon (Cook and Kover, 1998). This book takes the view that in order to adequately theorize communication within advertising, it is necessary not only to ask what ads mean. It is important also to ask how ads mean. The interpretive intellectual traditions assert this very question. Interpretive traditions of social research (outlined in, for example, Burrell and Morgan, 1979 and developed in Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) have been adopted by many academic researchers in advertising and consumer research (Hirschman, 1986; Stern, 1998) as viable alternatives to the positivistic and managerialist traditions of articulating marketing phenomena.

Interpretive Concepts for Advertising

Advertising as Discourse

We have referred to advertising as a form of discourse (following Cook, 2001). Discourse is described in cultural theory in various ways. It is a way of seeing the world, a way of describing things and a thing that can be described. The term is often used in conjunction with ‘social text’. A text in cultural studies is a linguistic and/or orthographic (written) description of any event or entity whatsoever. It is anything that can be described in words, that is, converted to text. Particular discourses may be groups of social texts that usually conform to certain rules and conventions, such as the discourse of advertising, of medical consultation, of literary appreciation or of marketing management. These discourses are comprised of accepted conventions of speech, manner, subject and tone. As we have seen, many ads refer to non-advertising discourses in order to enhance the resonance of their meaning for consumers.

The conventions of a given discourse form can be very difficult to ascertain under conditions of normal social interaction. If, say, a medical consultation was recited in iambic pentameters, or shouted, or if the medical professional told the patient jokes rather than diagnosing the problem, the interaction would seem odd and socially inappropriate. These examples are less outlandish than they seem: the social conventions of speech and manner that govern acceptable behaviour in given contexts are often noticeable only when they are broken. We tend to take them for granted within the cultures with which we are familiar. Many advertisers have won our attention by challenging our ideas of what conventions an ad should conform to. Direct mail ads for charities are sometimes printed
in a child’s handwriting to give the emotional appeal an extra resonance; TV ads are sometimes filmed in a documentary or newscast style.

The accepted conventions and practices of advertising discourse are not given or obvious to the uninitiated. They have to be learned, and they vary between different cultures and eras. TV or press ads from the 1950s now seem odd and funny, or sexist and inappropriate to a young viewer in 2003. Many alcohol ads of today would seem deeply inappropriate to a viewer in the 1950s. Indeed, many contemporary ads would be unrecognizable as ads if they had been shown to viewers in 1950 because those consumers would not recognize the intertextual references in much contemporary advertising. The textual conventions of advertising discourse have, perhaps, changed in the intervening years. Discourse, then, refers to the sets of communication conventions and practices that characterize a particular kind of social phenomenon (such as advertising) in a given context. These practices and conventions are constantly in negotiation. One of the ways in which ad agencies have kept the discourse form of advertising fresh and novel has been to continually challenge those conventions by appropriating new textual forms.

Advertising Text and Context

Discourses consist of texts in context. Advertising acquires meaning not only by its content but also its context.

Appreciating the context of communication is an important part of understanding the way meaning is construed. For Cook (2001) the contexts of advertising (that is, marketing communication) discourse include the following:

- the physical material or medium which carries the text (such as the cathode ray tube, newsprint or radio waves); the music and pictures that may accompany the text
- the gestures, facial expressions and typography that constitute the ‘paralanguage’ of the text (in the UK, TV ads for Nescafé Gold Blend instant coffee featured romantically linked characters who created a sexually charged atmosphere, while interacting in settings that suggested affluence and social poise)
- the location of the text in time and space, on an outdoor poster site, in a magazine or during a commercial TV break
- the other texts that connect to that text such as the other ads in the same magazine or the other brands appearing or mentioned in a TV show
- the connections with other social discourses implied in the ads (for example intertextuality)
- the participants, that is, the intended audience, the apparent originator or sender of the ad and their respective assumptions, intentions and communicative idiom (Cook, 2001: 2) (ads sometimes have a particular
Advertising and Promotion

‘voice’ designed to give it authority with its audience, such as when ads for children’s toys feature adults speaking the voice-over in the tone and patois of children).

Clearly, this list of the contexts of advertising implies that research studies which analyse the recall and attitude of an individual consumer to a single promotion by exposing the consumer to the ad in a viewing booth risk ignoring some of the most powerful influences on how ads are interpreted and understood. Given the many features of communication which impinge on the consumption of advertising and promotion, it is not surprising that advertising professionals have learned to exploit the persuasive potential of this complexity. Ads that have no evident meaning, or ads that seem to carry numerous potential meanings, are far from uncommon. Ads that have no determinate meaning can be useful because (as noted above) they can draw consumers into a communicative engagement as they try to puzzle out the enigma of the ad. Just what is it saying? Similarly, ads that have many potential interpretations can exploit this polysemy to create consumer interest and enhance communication.

Polysemy in Advertisements

Polysemy refers to the potential of a social text such as an ad to have many possible meanings. This perspective, of course, is not really compatible...
with the linear model of communication and its implied emphasis on a single, unequivocal message. The meaning of some ads is indeterminate: none of the polysemic meanings is prior to or stronger than the others. This opens up an interpretive space through which consumers can engage creatively with the ad. This gives advertising a particular power. It is us, the audience for advertising, who impose particular meanings on a given ad, helped, of course, by the cues placed in the ad by the creative people. This freedom to interpret advertising and to use it creatively in our own lives gives advertising a dynamic character as communication. Advertising agencies, far from being limited by the complexity of advertising meaning, exploit the ambiguity of advertising (Pateman, 1983, in Forceville, 1996) to create an intimate and personal engagement with consumers.

The polysemic potential of ads was striking in the famous (and infamous) Benetton campaigns. In some cases the same ad that won awards for creativity in Europe was the cause of consumer boycotts in the USA (for example, the visual image of a black-skinned woman’s breasts suckling a white Caucasian baby). The Benetton ads exploited polysemy to generate a powerful and high-profile debate about their meaning, particularly concerning whether they should be construed as offensive or socially worthy. The brand’s management of this polysemic creative strategy came unstuck when the negative interpretations of ads began to have commercial consequences (discussed in Chapter 8).

Ads that are deliberately obscure can seem inaccessible to older consumers and, by implication, aimed at younger consumers. Ambiguity of meaning in ads can, as we have noted above, be used as a deliberate strategy. In addition, carefully coded ads can create a sense of conspiracy by communicating in a way that excludes non-targeted groups. One way of signalling the desired market segment in an ad is to be seen to be excluding other segments. A TV ad campaign for Frizzell insurance in the UK (see p. 71) deliberately deployed a creative execution that would mainly be of interest to older viewers because they wanted to signal that younger consumers were not the primary desired market segment.

**BOX 2.6 Diesel Ads Exploit Polysemy**

A series of print ads for the Diesel clothing brand throughout the 1990s made use of both polysemy and intertextuality to try to draw the consumer into a deeper engagement, and at the same time to signal the quirky, witty, but irreverent values of the brand. One ad featured an enigmatic scene of bodybuilders wearing white sailor caps and bathing briefs. The scene included scientific equipment and puzzled spectators viewing the scene from behind a red rope, as if they were at an exhibition or performance.
The only direct reference to the brand was a brand name logo in small type in the corner. The ads were visually intriguing because they challenged our preconceptions about images and visual context. The viewer wanted to make connections between the images: humans actively try to make sense of sense data, imposing sense even where there is little to be made. Perception is subject to a Gestalt impulse whereby humans try to complete visual cues to form a coherent whole. In polysemic ads that mix visual cues drawn from unconnected discourses this impulse draws us into the ad as we try to make the visual cues into a coherent whole.

A long series of similar Diesel print ads used bizarre visual intertextual references drawing on cultural texts as diverse as museum attendance, public health advertising, educational announcements, British seaside beauty contests, soccer reports, shoot-'em-up movies and news reportage of war zones. Short, inappropriate passages of copy were imprinted on the posters to make the scene even more puzzling. The effect was to provide an entertaining visual puzzle which consumers could try to figure out. Of course, there was no definitive answer to the meaning of these ads. The creative people at the agency were just having fun in the interests of the brand, playing with cultural meaning. Underlying the apparently incoherent images was a clear advertising strategy. Viewers were expected to infer that the Diesel brand, like the ads, challenged convention in a quirky, youthful and irreverent yet cool way.

**Interpretive Communities**

Saying that an ad carries many possible meanings does not imply that advertising is a hit-or-miss marketing communication device. The possible meanings it carries are only arbitrary to unintended audiences or in poorly designed ads. Effective advertisements are designed through a detailed understanding of the kinds of meaning a given group of consumers may impute to a given advertisement. This is why advertising development is a complex and painstaking exercise. Understanding the cultural and linguistic idiom of a given consumer group is the key to designing creative strategies that will resonate. The term ‘interpretive community’ refers to an identifiable group that shares a sense of common meaning with regard to some area of consumption practice. For some interpretive communities, polysemic ads make intertextual references to postmodernist themes in films and literature to which they are accustomed. This familiarity with polysemy (and intertextuality) creates a sense of the ad being an in-joke that excludes outsiders (or other interpretive communities).
An interpretive community may have little in common apart from its mutual interest in one particular consumption category. ‘Brand communities’ is an expression used by some advertising agencies to try to capture the apparent connection between consumers of different ages, sex and nationalities who appear to have one interest that transcends all other cultural boundaries, that is, their common interest in the brand. The concept of interpretive communities can be useful to marketing strategists where there is a range of communicative practices that characterize a given consumption practice. Agencies can find out the favoured values and vocabulary of a group and use this insight to make their own advertising resonate with meaning for those specific people (see also discussion of consumer communities in Chapter 1).

Ostensive and Covert Meaning in Advertising and Promotion

Much interpretive theory has been devoted to understanding the process whereby consumers read meaning into advertising. The levels of possible meaning in a given ad can be theorized in a number of ways. Forceville (1996: 105) refers to a distinction made by Tanaka (1994: 41) between ostensive communication and covert communication in advertising. This distinction allows us to theorize what is implied in ads as opposed to what is clearly and unambiguously claimed. The ostensive communicator makes the intention of the communication clear. The covert communicator does not. Many ads make clear and unambiguous claims but they are strictly constrained by law and industry regulation from making claims that are

**BOX 2.7 The Community of Soccer Fans Get Extra Value**

Young soccer fans joining Manchester United’s membership scheme in 2003 receive a mock front page of the *Manchester Evening News* newspaper. It carries the new fan’s name in the headline followed by ‘signs for champions’. Some UK soccer clubs just give young members a plastic card. This promotional innovation is exciting for the new members and generates goodwill from their parents or guardians. The involvement of the *Manchester Evening News* makes the mock front page more authentic while incidentally publicizing the newspaper as belonging to United’s multinational fan base. Manchester United has one of the largest global followings of any soccer team. Followers are avid consumers of club merchandise and television coverage of games but have no demographic in common other than their enthusiasm for Manchester United.
untrue or preposterous. They get around this inconvenience by implying covertly those claims that could be seen as ridiculous or would open them up to criticism if they were made explicitly.

Advertising cannot compel us to believe particular claims or to accept that certain values are embodied in a given brand. Rather, advertising suggests, implies and hints. It places images and words in suggestive juxtaposition to imply that consuming a given brand will symbolically confer certain qualities and values. If you use a Gillette razor you are enjoying ‘The Best A Man Can Get’ (at least, according to the ads) and you might even acquire some of the characteristics and lifestyle of the actor in the ads. Driving a prestigious motor-car brand such as a Toyota Avensis will (we are invited to infer from the TV ads), confer a symbolic social status on us that reflects our success and desire. The ads don’t actually say these things: they merely imply them, hoping that viewers will read the desired implication.

Ads frequently imply that consumers will be more sexually attractive, more powerful or will appear more materially successful if they consume a given brand. Much advertising acquires its motivational force through its non-explicit suggestions rather than through its explicit claims. Where branded products are juxtaposed with images of attractive, happy and successful people, the link between the two is implied but not stated. Most importantly, it is not necessary for the advertising audience to believe these implied suggestions for the theory of covert communication to hold. It is only necessary that the audience can retrieve the meaning implied. We can see what ads are suggesting even where we neither trust the advertiser nor believe the covert implications. We know that a deodorant brand will not make us sexually attractive. We also know that the ads are implying that it will.

Covert meaning is often conveyed in advertising though pictorial, auditory or linguistic metaphor. If a branded bottle of alcoholic drink is pictured juxtaposed with scenes of fit, young, affluent people, then the metaphoric link is clear. For example, Martini used to be advertised in the UK as a drink enjoyed by swimsuited young men and women diving from a yacht moored at a tropical island. The juxtaposition of a branded alcohol drink with apparent wealth, attractiveness and physical fitness is exactly the opposite of what one might reasonably expect, since alcohol drinking is quite likely to make exponents fat and unfit, and may also make them poor if they drink enough. The covert communication in this campaign was preposterous but was nevertheless clear. The Martini brand was used as a metaphor for sexual attractiveness and the good life. It matters little that the drink may often be consumed in social contexts that are, on the face of it, as far from the good life as one might wish to be.

Recent Bacardi rum TV campaigns in the UK have featured the rough-hewn charm of a certain professional footballer turned movie star flirting with beautiful women in a scenario that has the brand as the hero.
The ad is set in a wildly partying bar scene with a Latin theme. The campaign, which has drawn criticism for contributing to the sexualization of alcohol advertising, implies covertly that consumption of the brand opens a door for the user to a semi-illicit world in which excitement and sexual allure are normal parts. A British woman ordering a Bacardi and soda in a terrace pub on a rainy Monday night in Doncaster will not, of course, be transported, even in her imagination, to a scene of elegant bacchanalia in downtown Havana. The Bacardi brand, nevertheless, features in the drinker’s set of buying choices because of the powerfully evocative advertising.

Ads as Visual Rhetoric

Another way of understanding the levels of advertising meaning theoretically is to view ads as visual rhetoric. Visual consumption (Shroeder, 2002) is a powerful aspect of advertising’s influence. We not only consume advertising and promotional images, we seek to understand their persuasive intent: we wonder what they are saying to us. Promotional communication has a persuasive motive, so the analogy with linguistic rhetoric is telling. In rhetoric, what is not said but left implicit is often considered to be as significant, or more significant, than what is explicitly said (Billig, 1987, 1991). In advertising it is the implication, rather than the overt (or ostensive) claim that is often the most potent and persuasive element of communication.

The underlying or suggested meanings in ads can also be theorized as **sub-texts** subsisting beneath the level of the ostensive text. The advertising text might tell a story of brand value and product quality. The sub-text might tell a slightly different story by, for example, suggesting by pictorial juxtaposition that consumers of this brand may assume some of the qualities and lifestyle of the actors who feature in the ad. The advertising text may be a quite prosaic ‘buy this brand’ appeal while the suggested and implied sub-textual meanings are more complex, subtle and, to the viewer, more interesting.

Many perfume ads in lifestyle and fashion magazines make no direct reference to the odour: instead, they juxtapose sensuous images with an enigmatic strapline or slogan that evinces some abstract notion of the brand. The visual organization of image and copy is carefully designed to rhetorically support the implicit claims made about the brand. A UK press ad for an Estée Lauder perfume portrayed a woman with flowing hair against images of waves, scattered flowers and sunlight with the copy ‘Introducing the new fantasy in fragrance’ and ‘Beyond paradise’ with the explanation that it offers ‘an intoxication of the senses’. The ad had visual impact: it made a striking image when placed in a double-page section immediately inside the magazine cover. By its size and page location
the ad was rhetorically declaring that its subject matter was important, more important, perhaps, than the magazine’s editorial. The woman’s face engages the reader eye to eye with a questioning and provocative expression that seems to be asking ‘Dare you join me in paradise?’ The face rhetorically supports the idea that this brand transports the ordinary woman from the everyday to a different world in which she can be free to be any self she chooses. The French brand name draws on the cultural idiom of style and sophistication to imply that the perfume has those qualities and so, by association, will the reader who buys the brand. Of course, consumers will decide if they like the odour, but the odour is designed to be pleasant. Once again, the powerfully suggestive aspect of this ad is not only in its message but in its creativity. The ad is rhetorically organized to support certain implied meanings.

The visual rhetoric of ads is not, then, confined to the copy. An ad is an argument, a persuasive communication. Every part of it must support the main argument, must be persuasively suggestive. A press ad for Retinol Activ Pur face cream used a clever visual metaphor to support a claim that the cream reduced facial wrinkles. The ad featured two juxtaposed images of a beautiful (Caucasian) woman. She was wearing what seemed to be a white robe, folded over one shoulder like a Roman toga. In the background was a pure blue sky and a suggestion of white pillars, of the kind in a Greek temple. One picture was cracked, like the surface of an old oil painting. The other was smooth. The metaphoric reference was clear: the cracks suggested wrinkles, but in an elegant way that was complimentary, not demeaning, to age. Old paintings are things of classical beauty but the paint does tend to crack with age. The ad was designed to draw the eye across aesthetically appealing images while giving the reader heavy hints about the classic beauty they might aspire to if they were to consume the brand.

However the levels of meaning in advertisements are theorized, acknowledging their presence lends a new dimension to the analysis of advertising as persuasive communication. It brings to light some of the subtlety and complexity of advertising design while also allowing us to draw an intellectual connection between the various artificially differentiated categories of marketing communication.

In principle, then, any communication is open to varied interpretations since meaning itself is rooted in culturally-based forms of understanding. Once the incorrigibility of meaning is acknowledged, the complexity of the task facing marketing communications specialists can be understood. Creative professionals in advertising overcome the problem of the indeterminacy (or polysemy) of meaning in advertising by hinting through suggestive juxtaposition that certain values are associated with certain brands, rather than by making claims which, if taken literally, would seem ridiculous. More importantly, advertising agencies put up claims that, if they were made explicit, would open them up to criticism or censure. It is a measure of poor general understanding that advertising regulation and
legislation focus on the ostensive content of ads and ignore the far more significant implied or covert meanings that ads carry. Guinness ads make no claims at all as such but imply that the brand is a major global player, with the connotations of glamour that this entails.

The polysemy of meaning in advertising creates the space for consumers of advertising to use some licence in reinterpreting ads creatively according to their own cultural reference points and reflecting their own sense of identity. The text of advertising, its *prima facie* meaning, can sometimes be its least interesting aspect because consumers may reject marketing strategies that seem too contrived or obvious. They may, however, use advertising and the brands that are advertised in ways that subvert the marketing text but reflect the consumers’ own values and social strategies. For example, UK consumers once mocked ads for the Skoda car by inventing jokes at the brand’s expense. Skoda improved the quality of their products and then exploited the fact that their brand had become so well known by creating ads that referred to its poor public image with Guinness advertisements are often media events in themselves. The brand has created a strong tradition of creatively flamboyant and often expensive advertising that does not carry a sales message as such. The famous ‘White Horses’ ad produced by a large UK agency, AMV BBDO, portrays a group of middle-aged beach bums on an exotic island waiting for and finding their perfect surfing wave. The creative strategy exploited the frustrating fact that ordering a pint of Guinness in a bar entails a fairly long wait while the beer settles. The voice-over states that ‘he waits, and he waits …’ until the perfect wave arrives. There is no explicit (or ostensive) marketing message, other than a brief shot of a pint of stout to help those completely in the dark about the manufacturer generously funding this lavish entertainment. Guinness (or the brand owners, Diageo) is well aware that its famous stout is an unusual, acquired taste. They are, it seems, content that their off-the-wall advertising tradition keeps the brand in the public domain and lends it a mystique which, when you think about it, is quite an achievement considering the prosaic origins of the product they have to work with. A quirky local beverage with a history of being the tipple of choice of working-class Irish men does not, on the face of it, have great potential as a global brand. The prominence of the brand can be attributed in no small part to its tradition of creatively striking, intriguingly entertaining and deeply ambiguous advertising.

**BOX 2.8 Guinness Rides the Waves of Ambiguity**

Guinness advertisements are often media events in themselves. The brand has created a strong tradition of creatively flamboyant and often expensive advertising that does not carry a sales message as such. The famous ‘White Horses’ ad produced by a large UK agency, AMV BBDO, portrays a group of middle-aged beach bums on an exotic island waiting for and finding their perfect surfing wave. The creative strategy exploited the frustrating fact that ordering a pint of Guinness in a bar entails a fairly long wait while the beer settles. The voice-over states that ‘he waits, and he waits …’ until the perfect wave arrives. There is no explicit (or ostensive) marketing message, other than a brief shot of a pint of stout to help those completely in the dark about the manufacturer generously funding this lavish entertainment. Guinness (or the brand owners, Diageo) is well aware that its famous stout is an unusual, acquired taste. They are, it seems, content that their off-the-wall advertising tradition keeps the brand in the public domain and lends it a mystique which, when you think about it, is quite an achievement considering the prosaic origins of the product they have to work with. A quirky local beverage with a history of being the tipple of choice of working-class Irish men does not, on the face of it, have great potential as a global brand. The prominence of the brand can be attributed in no small part to its tradition of creatively striking, intriguingly entertaining and deeply ambiguous advertising.
straplines such as ‘It’s a Skoda – honest’. Consumers knew that the brand was mocking their poor (and flawed) perception of it, but the manufacturer gambled that consumers would enjoy the joke at their expense and understand that the joke had a serious point: that Skoda cars were much improved.

Marketing organizations can use the indeterminacy of advertising meaning to play games with consumers, second-guessing their interpretation with ironic or self-deprecating ads. In this way, for example, brands may be regarded as ‘cool’ if they appear to subvert the establishment discourse of brand advertising by producing self-consciously bad, outrageous or uncomfortably frank ads. Some brands (such as Skoda or Marmite) even use a self-deprecating creative strategy, gambling that the consumers’ advertising literacy is of such sophistication that they will not take the self-deprecation at face value and will understand that it is meant to be ironic.

Advertising and Semiotics

Semiotics deserves a brief mention because of its influence in studies of advertising. Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning. American influence (particularly that of Charles Sanders Peirce) has broadened the field from the study of linguistic signs, also called semiology (Saussure, 1974) to include the study of any signs whatsoever (Peirce, 1958; introductions in Danesi, 1994; Hackley, 1999a). Advertising and marketing have attracted much attention from semioticians (Barthes, 1972; Williamson, 1978). Ads are seen by semioticians as ‘strings of signs’ (Umiker Sebeok, 1997), assemblages of collections of signs in the service of the brand. Such signs (copy, typeface, soundtrack, positioning, image, colour, objects) rhetorically support the sub-textual or covert meanings that are central to the persuasive force of advertising. The meaning of a given sign depends on the context, the receiver and the communication codes that form the cultural expectations of the sender and receiver.

The message, if one can be discerned among the cacophony of signification in many ads, is only one part of the complex process of communication that is going on when a consumer engages with an ad and attempts to interpret its meaning. In an example used above press ads for Diesel clothing were described to illustrate their use of intertextual cultural references. Another way of analysing these ads is to look at the signification properties of each part of the ad, the visual images, the copy, the relation of images to each other and so on. Semiotics seeks to recover the communicative codes through which we receive messages from word, visual, auditory or other signs. A crucial aspect of the communicative power of promotional communication is that humans actively seek meaning by completing a Gestalt whole from even incoherent visual or other cues.
Cleverly designed marketing communication can allow consumers licence to play with meaning in an interpretive space that reflects the brand’s personality and values. Marketing as a whole is a rich source of signification (Sawchuck, 1995) that reaches into the most intimate areas of our lives to transform the meaning of everyday signs. The acts of shaving, washing, even personal cleanliness are superimposed with marketed values (is your toilet tissue extra-soft?). Advertising lies at the fulcrum of marketing’s semiotic mechanism, symbolically articulating the brand values contrived by the strategists.

We will return to some of these concepts as the book progresses through its account of the advertising and promotion field. It is hoped that readers will bear in mind these concepts when they are reading how particular campaigns came about or how consumers reacted to given promotions.

Review Exercises

1. Choose three print advertisements and three TV ads. For each, construct descriptions that distinguish the covert from the ostensive meanings in the ad. Compare your interpretations with colleagues: do they differ?
2. What is polysemy? What is its importance in the work of advertising agencies? Collect several magazines: can you find ads that appear to be polysemic?
3. Choose one print ad and form a group with three collaborators. Try to pick out all the individual signs that might carry meaning in the ad. These might include the copy (the words, the position of the copy in the visual and the typeface or font that is used), the models, the props in the set, the background, the relation of objects and bodies to each other, the gestures, the quality of paper and use of colour and the other brands advertised in the magazine.
4. What is a message? To what extent is meaning carried unequivocally within an advertisement? Compare three ads to discuss this.
5. Using any promotional communications that you have collected as a basis for discussion, describe intertextuality and examine its use in contemporary advertising. How can intertextuality be of use to advertisers?

CASE St Luke’s Prickly Heat Powder

In South-east Asian countries the extreme heat can be uncomfortable. A product that would be described as talcum powder in the UK is marketed because of its cooling effect on the skin. In Thailand the brand leader is St Luke’s ‘Prickly Heat Powder’.
It is a popular remedy for the discomfort that can be experienced in very hot weather. The client asked the agency Publicis Thailand to develop a creative execution that could energize its marketing, maintaining its brand awareness and market-leading position.

Publicis Thailand apply a consumer insight tool they call ‘Streetsmart’ to their advertising development. They encourage the whole account team to gain a consumer's-eye-view of the client’s brand category. In many cases this means taking the account team to consume the brand in typical settings. Their aim is to ground their advertising development in an intimate understanding of the consumer. If the whole account team shares this understanding, then the problem of having one function persuade another of its point of view is avoided. The consumer insight that drives creative development is considered to be self-evident, since all the team have experienced it first-hand.

Thai consumers are discerning. They are highly brand-conscious and love to be amused and intrigued by advertising. In the case of St Luke’s (like many Asian brands, the brand name is displayed in English on the packaging) the challenge was to create a succinct visual image that won the consumer’s attention and at the same time clearly indicated the brand’s utility. If the creative solution could be amusing as well, then so much the better.

The award-winning creative solution involved a simple visual metaphor portrayed in high-quality photography. Three print ads were created that featured the product packaging metamorphosed into a fire extinguisher, a refrigerator and an ice-cream. The ads’ visual metaphor succinctly reinforced the product’s utility while doing so in a way that would amuse (see also colour insert). The client’s marketing objectives were accomplished.

Case Exercises

1. Using a visual metaphor to indicate brand functionality may seem a simple solution to a communications challenge. Can you guess what prior cultural knowledge would be required for a consumer to fully understand the communication in the St Luke’s campaign?
2. Collect examples of five ads that deploy visual metaphors. Do they all use them in the same way? Can you think of any product categories or markets in which visual metaphors would not be useful? Why?
3. Some of the most troubling challenges facing account teams
Further Reading

**Introductions to interpretive concepts and methods**

**Advertising as discourse, from an applied linguistics perspective**

**Semiotics**

**Reviews of advertising effects research**

**Some useful academic journals**
These can normally be obtained through academic libraries and electronic databases.

Advances in Consumer Research (Proceedings of the Association of Consumer Research: downloads are available at www.vancouver.wsu.edu/acr/home.htm)

*European Journal of Marketing*

*International Journal of Advertising*

*Journal of Advertising*
Advertising and Promotion

Journal of Advertising Research

Journal of Business Research

Journal of Consumer Research

Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising

Journal of Economic Psychology

Journal of Marketing

Journal of Marketing Research

Psychology and Marketing

Notes

1 Cook (2001) maintains that advertising is no different in its ‘parasitic’ character from any other discourse form. Intertextuality can be discerned in culturally valued discourse forms such as classical art, drama and literature, as well as in ‘low’ or popular cultural forms such as movies, comic books and popular theatre, as well as advertising.

2 The examples were referred to by O’Donohoe (1997).

3 The consumption metaphor here is extended to consuming (viewing, reading, thinking about) advertising itself.


5 The Advertising Standards Authority is the industry body responsible for the voluntary regulation of British press and poster advertising (www.asa.org.uk).

6 In Hello! magazine No. 781, 9 September, 2003.

7 My thanks to Publicis Thailand.