The Interpretation of ‘Open Text’ Advertisements

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This study explores how ‘interpretive communities’ construct symbolic meaning from ‘open’ advertisements. A reader-response approach was adopted and conducted through in-depth interviews. Our findings reveal that there is a difference in interpretation based on the gender and social class of the participants. The findings demonstrate how ‘interpretive communities’ go about interpreting advertisements, and explore the implications for designing marketing communications.

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to understanding the complex systems and practices by which spiritual capital and other forms of capital may be related, depicting spirituality as an aesthetic taste which is complexly interrelated with other forms of capital within specific fields of power.

Secondly, unlike its economic counterpart, ‘spiritual capital is not a stable currency’ (Verter 2003, p.159). Due to its highly symbolic nature, the value of spiritual currency is in constant flux, subject to the fluctuations of the spiritual market and its players. This instability is particularly salient in a ‘sub-field of restricted cultural production’ (Bourdieu 1993, p.185) such as SIP, where cultural goods are produced by producers for their own consumption, rather than for consumption on the mass-market (the ‘sub-field of large-scale production’, 1993, p.186). In a sub-field of restricted production, producers develop their own criteria for the evaluation of their cultural goods. These criteria are a source of struggle for control over the right to define legitimate cultural forms. Thus, this study is exploring the processes by which members of the subcultural group identify and co-define their sources of spiritual capital.

Finally, in the same way that individuals adopt certain economic investment strategies, they also pursue both conscious and unconscious ‘investment strategies’ for other more symbolic forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, heeding Arnould and Thompson (2005, p.876), this study explores how consumers select the investment strategies that guide their accumulation of spiritual capital, allocating spiritual, economic, and cultural capital resources between competing spiritual market offerings.

As such, this study responds to calls for further research into ‘the micropolitics of consumption’ as a basis for affiliation and distinction in everyday life (Holt 1998, p.22).

References

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There has been a noticeable shift in print advertisements from functional to symbolic approaches as the use of rhetorical style in magazine advertisements has grown progressively more complex and elaborated over time (O’Donohoe, 2001). Thus the interpretation of brands and marketing communication has become extremely challenging, mainly due to the plethora of available cultural meanings and interpretive perspectives in combination with the instability of social categories (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002; Kates, 2002). The aim of this paper is to examine print advertising interpretation by different ‘interpretive communities’, in order to empirically explore how audiences interpret ‘open’ advertisements.
Multiple Readings

Empirical studies have not only established the existence of multiple readings of advertisements (Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson, 1993, Elliott and Ritson, 1995, Mick and Buhl, 1992), but they have also suggested that ambiguity and complex, non-anchored rhetorical figures may increase elaboration, because the consumer must figure out the advertisement’s message (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Mothersbaugh, Huhman and Franke, 2002; Warlaumont, 1995). Increased elaboration in turn may increase the memorability of the advertisement (Kardes, 1998). In addition, consumers’ pleasure in solving the puzzle of a rhetorical figure can lead to increased attention (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996) and a positive attitude towards the advertisement (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy, 1994). In contrast, advertisements that explicitly spell out the meaning of a rhetorical figure to consumers may lead to dislike of the advertisement (Phillips, 2000).

Open and Closed Texts

Advertising is consumed in a society composed of a variety of groups with different, often conflicting interests, requiring its texts to be what Eco (1979) calls open’. By this he means texts that do not attempt to close off alternative meanings and restrict their focus to one, easily attainable meaning.

This does not, however, imply that reading is completely idiosyncratic. In contrast, reader-response theorists believe that reading is based on collective conventions and that groups of readers can share certain reading strategies, allowing for the possibility of grouping similar readings and shared responses (Scott, 1994a).

Interpretive Communities

One way of achieving this, is through the concept of ‘interpretive communities’, which was introduced by Fish (1980) and proposes that it is “Interpretive communities…that produce meanings…Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies…” (p. 14). Regarding advertising, interpretive communities have been envisioned as a cultural formation with a shared social and historical context that results in similar interpretations (Elliott and Ritson, 1997; Schroder, 1994). As a result, the current study examines interpretive communities based on gender and social class.

Gender and Interpretation of Advertising

Gender differences in meaning interpretation of advertisements has been previously reported by Mick and Politi (1989) where males and females interpreted advertising visuals in noticeably different ways. Also Elliott and Jones (1995) found considerable differences in the way males and females responded to overt sexuality in advertising.

Social Class and Interpretive Codes

Consumers of different social classes code reality, language, products and advertisements in different ways (Durgee, 1986). Research by Bernstein (1973) on social relationships and linguistic patterns among middle and working class London school children, found two code types, restricted codes and elaborated codes.

Their implications for consumer behavior and advertising interpretation suggest that lower class consumers may perceive products based on their implied meanings and rely on context for their evaluation. They may prefer advertisements that use literal and concrete language and convey an image of a gratifying world in which products fit functionally into the drive for a stable and secure life. On the other hand, middle and upper class consumers may be more attuned to subtle differences of design and style and prefer appeals to more distant benefits, through the use of more symbolic and abstract language (Durgee, 1986).

Method

A reader-response approach was adopted since it emphasizes the meanings that consumers draw from advertisements (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Mick and Politi, 1989; Scott 1994). We conducted 40 in-depth interviews in the U.K. with working and middle class participants within the age range of eighteen to sixty years old. Ten advertisements were selected, mainly from magazines, but also other types of print advertisement, such as posters and billboards, based on their open versus closed approach to meaning and on the product categories whose target groups’ correspond to the audience of the research. The concepts emerged were analyzed using the interpretive thematic analysis technique (Spiggle 1994).

Findings

The analysis suggests that not only do participants of different gender read the advertisements differently but in some cases the emergence of different theme patterns would occur. More specifically, when shown a print advertisement for Absolut Vodka, a romantic theme for women and a friendship theme for men became prominent:

“…I am thinking of a romantic weekend with my boyfriend to the Scottish mountains…”

(female participant, 27 years old)

“This ad takes me to a ski resort, where after skiing… I catch up with my mates…and enjoy our time away from city life…”

(male participant, 31 years old)

It has been also noted that participants of different social classes interpret print advertisements differently. Participants from the working class used simple language and responded better to uncomplicated and implicit meanings.

In responding to an open Chanel ad for the male perfume Egoiste
"It's a guy using a perfume"

But participants from the middle class used elaborated, rich language and enjoyed talking about implied meanings and how these could be seen in different contexts:

“A young, good looking, well built, successful… person… going through an internal battle, maybe comes face to face with his other self, a selfish self, probably his dark side…”

Thus this study provides insights into how people interpret advertisements and explores through the use of reader-response theory, the symbolic meanings that are drawn by them when consuming an advertisement. These findings present implications for designing marketing communications, with regards to the search and formation of different strategies concerning positioning and brand relationships, towards more flexible, multidimensional tactics and ambiguous messages, in order to be successfully communicated to multiple target groups conceptualized as ‘interpretive communities’.

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