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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Advertising Ideology and the Role of Advertising Agencies as Cultural Intermediaries

Advertising has a pivotal role in ascribing symbolic meaning to consumer goods, and forms an integral part of the textual tapestry of social and cultural life. The pervasive influence of advertising within society has drawn many researchers to the view that advertising constitutes a powerful ideological force within consumer culture (Elliott and Ritson 1997; Eden 2001; Hackley 2002; Jhally 1987; Wernick 1991; Williamson 1978). The discourse of advertising has a dialogic and reciprocal relationship to other cultural institutions and social systems such as family, religion, arts, literature and music (Cook 1992; Tharp and Scott 1990), and through this interactive and fluid relationship advertising has developed into a potent “cultural system” which shapes and reflects consumers’ sense of social reality (Sherry 1987).

Advertising agencies mediate the communicative exchange between consumers and marketing institutions as “cultural intermediaries” who generate symbolic meanings for commodities (Featherstone 1991), and they provide a critical link between these institutions and culturally based consumption meanings (Thompson and Haytko 1997). However the process through which advertising agencies encode meanings and the work practices of agency practitioners remain under-explored within marketing and consumer research literature. Studies that have adopted an agency and production perspective have often relied on interview-based approaches to understand the work of advertising practitioners (Cronin 2004; Hackley 2000; Hirschman 1989; Kover 1995; Nixon 2003; Soar 2000). Most recently the use of ethnographic methodologies within advertising research has proved insightful in providing interpretive accounts of the internal workings of advertising agencies (Alvesson 1994; Dewaal Malefyt and Morean 2003; Hirota 1995; Miller 1997). This study is positioned within a similar interpretive framework to develop theoretically and critically informed insights into intra-advertising agency processes and practices.

Research Methodology

An ethnographic research approach was adopted during which time the researcher spent a period of six weeks immersed within an Irish advertising agency as a non-participant observer. A number of data sources were accessed and generated during the ethnography including internal strategy and creative meetings, agency documentation, personal interviews with advertising planners, copywriters and art directors and personal notes and observations which were recorded in a methodological diary (Hirschman 1986). Hackley (2001, p. 44) has noted how advertising is socially constructed through the discourse of clients, advertising practitioners, and consumers, which makes the advertising process ripe for discourse analytic exploration. This study adopts a discursive framework to talk and text generated during the ethnography to identify common “interpretive repertoires” from the data (Edley 2001; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wood and Kroger 2000). Interpretive repertoires are the metaphors, tropes and resources that are drawn upon by advertising practitioners in interviews, meetings and documents which characterise the processes and practices they engage into to produce advertisements. These discursive interpretations are enriched and combined with contextual ethnographic insights to develop a reflexive account of intra-agency advertising production (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000).

Main Findings

A number of common interpretive repertoires and patterns emerged from the analysis. The knowledge of culture that advertising agencies and practitioners have was a central resource that was drawn upon in the encoding of advertising meaning. Advertising copywriters and art directors described in interviews how they would develop idiosyncratic advertising ideas through their knowledge of other discourses and areas of culture such as art, music, movies, books, newspapers, films and other advertisements, which they used as reference points for the development of their own material. Planners and creatives also discussed how they drew upon their own life experiences and experiences and stories of other friends and family members in developing campaigns which influenced their work.

These interviews and observations illustrated how advertising practitioners utilise embedded cultural knowledge as consumers in the development of advertising (Soar 2000), and how discourses and narratives within cultural and social life become an encoded component of advertisements’ ideological structures. Consumer knowledge in the form of research also had a central role in the development of advertising ideas and campaigns. Codified knowledge was fed into the advertising process through qualitative and quantitative consumer research which was used by advertising planners to write creative briefs, and this knowledge was often filtered from the research departments and structured systems of larger clients. However, un-codified knowledge such as informal research conducted by creatives and planners in the form of informal conversations with consumers and observations of consumption situations also had an integral role within the advertising development process. The “panoptic” metaphor which Hackley (2002) has applied to the role of advertising agencies was found to be particularly appropriate within this context, as agency practitioners valorised formal and informal cultural consumer knowledge to develop strategies of power for large corporate clients (Foucault 1980). Large clients had a particularly dominant role within the campaign development process, and the power relationship between agency and client was particularly evident in everyday practices. As the Irish market is relatively small, the agency was extremely economically dependent upon larger clients.

The strategic processes of larger clients such as idea screening and campaign development checklists were often the mechanisms through which campaigns were produced, and client discourses and ideologies permeated through these processes. In interviews, practitioners acknowledged there was a “client way” of developing advertising which was dominant within the process, and this relationship had to be accepted by the agency as it was the client who “paid the bills”, as one planner explained. These processes were often viewed as rigid and inflexible by creative teams, particularly when it came to evaluation practices such as copytesting advertisements with audiences. Some of the teams drew from the
analogy in interviews that advertising was intrinsically of the art world, and clients sought to rationalise the creative process through the application of science. One copywriter described how the process of audience copy testing reduced advertisements to the “lowest common denominator”, and some of the creative teams drew upon the metaphor of how they had to “do battle” and “fight” hard for their work through the evaluation process. This was interpreted as a clash of managerial and creative ideologies within the advertising process, and the struggle between creative integrity and commercial imperatives was evident in interviews with creative teams.

Conclusion

While the findings of this study are based upon one advertising agency within one context, they illustrate how cultural meanings are filtered and encoded through the advertising process, which is structured through corporate strategic goals, and how this process is a central dynamic in the construction of advertising’s ideological power. Advertising agencies are institutions where cultural creativity and commercial business objectives co-exist and collide and the discourses of capitalism and culture become enmeshed and intertwined. The findings in this study provide some insights into how this process takes place and the role of advertising agencies and practitioners within it.

References


