The Role of "Interpretive Communities" in 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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behavior change outcomes. Finally, individuals with high levels of hope should have a more positive outlook on the possibilities present in the future, which should enable them to have more positive attitudes towards changing in the future.

Methodology

An internet survey of 363 people who are currently trying to diet was completed. Modifying the procedure employed by Bagozzi and Warshaw (1990), data was collected in two stages, one month apart. Participants were asked to complete a series of measures in the first stage designed to capture their attitudes and intentions to try, the frequency and recency of prior attempts at trying to change behavior, and their current levels of self-esteem and hope. At stage two, one month later, individuals completed a second survey including measures of trying, the outcome of trying, and attitudes towards trying again in the future. Participants will also complete measures capturing their attributions for the outcome of their attempts at behavior change, as well as their updated levels of self-esteem and hope.

Discussion

Overall, this research will enlighten the discussion of how people repeatedly change their health behaviors. The theoretical model extends the Theory of Trying (Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990) by presenting a framework for understanding the various factors affected by the success or failure of a goal and how those factors then feedback into the attitude system. By incorporating concepts such as attributions, self-esteem, and hope into the feedback loops, we introduce several factors that are important in the interpretation of behavior change failure as well as the persistence towards the goal post-failure. There are important implications for both marketing and public policy as a result of this study. From a consumer behavior perspective, this model should shed some light on the effects of goal failure on an individual’s attitudes and behaviors. From a public policy perspective, this study could suggest ways in which social marketing campaigns, policy recommendations, and health interventions should be designed.

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).

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), and Stern (1992) where males and females interpreted advertising visuals in noticeably different ways. Also Elliott (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).

Research Questions & Method

More specifically, this study will aim to answer the following:

- How do males and females interpret open advertisements?
- How do working and middle class audiences interpret open advertisements?

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 from magazines, 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

Findings of the in-depth interviews indicate that people of different genders and from different social classes do interpret print advertisements in different ways. As a result and based on the different themes that emerged during the data analysis, we organised our initial findings in the following four propositions, where the first two propositions refer to the gender differences and the last two propositions refer to the social class observed differences.

Proposition I: Male participants approach the advertisement in a descriptive way.

When an advertisement was shown to a male participant, he would approach it by describing it as a picture, stating its figures and elements and by giving an interpretation based on the intended meaning by the advertiser. It can be therefore inferred that the primary concern for males is to state that they are smart enough to understand the advertisement and capable of reading between the lines.

Proposition II: Female participants approach the advertisement in an interpretive way.

On the other hand, when an advertisement was shown to a female participant, she would talk about the elements of the advertisement as they appealed to her and then try to reveal the advertiser’s intended meaning. This observation leads us to think that females are willing to talk about and share personal emotions and past experiences more openly and more quickly than males. Consequently, it seems that females want to appear as free thinkers who no matter what, have something to say.

Proposition III: Working class participants approach advertisements in an implicit way.

Participants from the working class found advertisements that use simple adjectives and descriptors more appealing to them and more appropriate to convey a message that stressed the inherent quality of the featured product. Hence, they approached advertisements in a context dependent way and seemed to be more interested in the implicit fit of the product with their total lifestyle.

Proposition IV: Middle class participants approach advertisements in an explicit way.

In contrast, participants from the middle class approached advertisements in an explicit way. They enjoyed talking about implied meanings and how these could be seen in different contexts.
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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