

Polysemy in Advertising

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ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS	
Abstract	The article reviews the conceptual foundations of advertising polysemy – the occurrence of different interpretations for the same advertising message. We discuss how disciplines as diverse as psychology, semiotics and literary theory have dealt with the issue of polysemy, and provide translations and integration among these multiple perspectives. From such review we draw recurrent themes to foster future research in the area and to show how seemingly opposed methodological and theoretical perspectives complement and extend each other. Implications for advertising research and practice are discussed.
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POLYSEMY IN ADVERTISING

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POLYSEMY IN ADVERTISING

The article reviews the conceptual foundations of advertising polysemy – the occurrence of different interpretations for the same advertising message. We discuss how disciplines as diverse as psychology, semiotics and literary theory have dealt with the issue of polysemy, and provide translations and integration among these multiple perspectives. From such review we draw recurrent themes to foster future research in the area and to show how seemingly opposed methodological and theoretical perspectives complement and extend each other. Implications for advertising research and practice are discussed.

... and then the Gillette ad came on the telly and I heard the man singing ‘The best a man can get’, and I laughed to myself and thought, I’ve got it now, thanks. I told Catherine about the slogan and how I had once made it my maxim. She said that she had never interpreted the phrase in the same way as me. To her it was not ‘the best a man can get’ as in get for himself, grab, acquire, have; it was the best a man can be, the best he can grow, the best a man can become.

John O’Farrell, *The Best a Man Can Get*, (2000), pp. 299-300

The topic of this article is polysemy in advertising: the occurrence of multiple meanings for the same advertising message across the members of an audience. In recent years advertising practitioners have emphasized the ephemeral nature of advertising interpretation (e.g., Hackley 1999; Malefyt 2003). For example, Benetton’s creative director Oliviero Toscani emphatically stated that “our advertising is a Rorschach test of what you bring to the image” (cited in O’Sullivan, 2003, p. 2). Similarly, Calvin Klein suggested that “people read things into my commercials that didn’t even exist” (cited in Schroeder, 2000, p. 41). Advertising metaphors have dramatically increased in complexity and frequency over the past 40 years (Phillips and McQuarrie 2002) and nowadays ads habitually include complex rhetorical devices and, in general, are “open” to different interpretations (e.g., Hirschman and Thompson 1997; McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Scott 1994; Stern 1996). As a consequence, market research firm Millward Brown has recently designed a service named Perceptual Focus Interviews™ that promises “a fuller understanding of the potentially idiosyncratic ways in which individuals process and interpret your advertising” (Millward Brown 2002, p. 3).

The contrast between these managerial practices and traditional marketing thought is stark. Marketing research has conventionally focused on the internal content of advertisements, conceptualizing ad comprehension as “the grasping or extracting of pre-specifiable meanings from the message” (Mick 1992, p. 411). In this paradigm, the researcher decides what the ad “means.” Everything else is often labeled as “miscomprehension” (e.g., Jacoby and Hoyer 1982).

The reasons for the predominance of this approach to advertising meaning among marketing scholars are various but mainly stem from relying upon information processing models and metaphors (e.g., McCracken 1987; Scott 1994; Schroeder 2002). Some scholars argue that consumers' "advertising literacy" has grown, producing active, creative consumers, eager to decode, deconstruct meanings they see in ads (e.g., Friestad and Wright 1994; Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994). Despite these theoretical developments, no framework has been developed to explain the antecedents of the occurrence of multiple meanings in advertising interpretation. The goal of this article is to draw an inventory of the factors that enable or inhibit the natural occurrence of advertising polysemy.

Toward the goal of conceptual integration, we attempt to "translate" terms from divergent fields and scholarly traditions to provide conceptual connections between similar – yet somewhat isolated – research streams. We endorse a multidisciplinary perspective: as all disciplines encounter "meaning" useful contributions to the topic of advertising polysemy can be found in several different sources, including psychology, literary studies, semiotics, and marketing.

Our aim is three-fold. First, to foster our theoretical understanding of how advertising works by uniting in one framework scattered findings and themes related to advertising meaning. Second, we offer practitioners a tool to organize their intuitive understanding of the phenomenon and recommendations for the management of inter-segment variability in interpretation. Third, we intend to show how in the area of advertising polysemy consistent patterns across disciplines can be identified and applied to marketing scholarship. The theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper are generally considered to reflect opposed conceptualizations of social science discovery processes and, as a consequence, are often pitted against one another to exemplify different epistemological stances – for example, interpretive research and the cognitive paradigm

in psychology, or structuralist semiotics and postmodern literary criticism. We contend that this categorization has not served the marketing community well, hiding the fact that these disciplinary approaches have more in common than typically recognized.

Advertising Meaning

We define advertising meaning as a subjective decoding of an advertisement. Such subjective decoding is the outcome of an interpretation process that, in turn, is shaped by the individual's socio-cultural milieu (Martin, Strack, and Stapel 2001; McCracken 1986). We define advertising polysemy as the existence of at least two distinct interpretations for the same advertising message across audiences, or across time and situations. The most obvious type of polysemy in advertisements occurs across two audiences at a certain point in time – the synchronic aspect of advertising polysemy. A typical example might be an ad that means one thing to one group of consumers and something quite different to another (e.g., Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). A diachronic dimension, however, can also characterize multiplicity of meanings during advertising reception, when advertising polysemy occurs in the same individual across situations – such as upon first viewing an ad, or viewing an ad on repeated occasions (e.g., Kirmani 1997).

In the last two decades a number of researchers have attempted to resolve the fracture between the “real world” and the prevailing academic stance on advertising polysemy highlighted at the beginning of this article. Many who participated in this paradigmatic shift stressed the subjectivity of each individual's experience in meaning-based models of advertising (e.g., McCracken 1987; Mick and Buhl 1992). Another research stream focused on the shift of

power from the text to the audience: the audience becomes “active” and the use of advertising “social” (e.g., Hirschman and Thompson 1997; O’Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliot 1999; Scott 1994). Other researchers underlined the influence of cultural and ethnic differences on advertising interpretation and the occurrence of “unintended” meanings across an audience, invoking such concepts as target and nontarget markets, ethnic self-awareness, and consumer ontology (e.g., Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999; Keck and Mueller 1994). Despite innumerable references to advertising’s multiple meanings, and calls for research on the mechanisms behind such meaning constellations, no contributions have reviewed the theoretical foundations of advertising polysemy and unified them in one framework.

The Present Review

Recent integrative contributions of advertising research have provided valuable insights into consumer response to advertising by taking a psychological perspective and focusing on variables such as persuasion (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999), behavioral and intermediate responses (e.g., Vakratsas and Ambler 1999), or attention (e.g., Grunert 1996). We broadened the theoretical scope of the literature review to include other disciplines within the social sciences and focusing on semiotics, psychology, linguistics, as well as on interpretive and postmodern theories of production and consumption of cultural objects. Sociological and anthropological writings were also examined. The choice of these fields of inquiry was motivated by their relevance to the topic of advertising polysemy and by the existence of traditions within marketing of drawing from these disciplines to gain insight into advertising consumption.

To derive an inventory of the antecedents of advertising polysemy we generated a number of recurrent themes within the multidisciplinary literature considered. Given the breadth of research on the topic of multiple meanings, in our review we relied on the interpretive notions of emergent design (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and hermeneutic circle (Schwandt 2000). For interpretive researchers, theory building follows an inductive approach that revolves around “an interactive process of coding, categorizing, and abstracting data” (Schouten 1991, p. 454) and resulting in a sequence of part-to-whole iterations (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Accordingly, we performed an iterative reading of the literature which led to the emergence of a number of “global themes” (Hirschman 1990) across the various fields of inquiry. The framework presented is the result of this iterative reading of the multidisciplinary literature. The empirical and theoretical contributions from which the framework was drawn were assembled following inter-text citations and using electronic search engines such as the ISI Citation Index, PsycINFO, and ABI/INFORM. While the review is necessarily not exhaustive, effort was devoted to maximize the breadth of the material examined in order to guarantee the representativeness of the publications on which the framework is based.

Consistently with previous theoretical integrations of advertising literature (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999), we first examine the prevailing approaches to polysemy within each field of inquiry and then present the results of the iterative reading process described above.

The Polysemy of Polysemy

Psychology

Psychology offers a rich tradition of exploration of meaning and polysemy. Here we review standpoints on polysemy from different areas of psychological inquiry.

Cognitive and social cognitive psychology conceptualizes interpretation as a function of accessibility (e.g., Anderson et al. 2004; Higgins 1996; Martin et al. 2001). Multiple interpretations of the same object are possible because the accessibility of knowledge structures is never set – either across or within individuals – but changes in response to contextual variables and to the psychological mechanisms governing memory decay (Wyer and Srull 1989). Priming experiments often use stimuli amenable to two contrasting interpretations and assess how exposure to a prime drives participants towards one of these interpretations (e.g., Higgins, Rholes, and Jones 1977). In these studies the occurrence of polysemy allows inferring the effect of experimental manipulations on cognitive activity. As a consequence, variability in meanings within the experimental sample must be tightly defined and monitored. In other words, the meaning of a cultural object in priming experiments must be assumed to conform to the researcher's own definition of the object.

In a choice setting, behavioral decision theorists, who are heavily influenced by the rational actor view of the individual fostered by economic theory, define ambiguity as the result of a lack of dominance (for a representative publication see Ha and Hoch, 1989). The use of normative benchmarking derived from value maximizing assumptions implies that in decision theory two objects or choice options are ambiguous if they cannot be univocally ranked. Other areas of research within psychology have taken a more reader-centric perspective.

Theories of social cognition assume the use of complex mental representations such as schemas or situation models during text comprehension (e.g., Wyer and Radvansky 1999). Such situation models are developed via experience or observation and as a consequence can reflect idiosyncratic experiences and highly subjective knowledge. A *subjective* view of message comprehension argues that personal meanings are more important determinants of overall text evaluation than measures of *objective* message learning (Mick 1992). For example, research has shown that which goals are activated during reading influences the inferences that will be drawn from text (e.g., Albrecht, O’Brian, Mason, and Myers 1995). Similarly, educational psychologists have stressed how individuals construct idiosyncratic meanings during the process of reading (e.g., Bogdan and Straw 1990; Schraw 2000). According to these perspectives, a text is ambiguous if its hermeneutic depth is great enough to support different interpretations.

Semiotics

Semiotics provides a framework for understanding both the encoding and decoding of meaning within advertisements as well as the overall process of meaning making that characterizes advertising reception (see Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel and Brannen 2004, for a review). Much of semiotic research on advertising has been devoted to unveiling dominant cultural codes using a deconstructive approach (Mick et al. 2004; e.g., Barthes 1977; Williamson 1978). In these analyses, researchers deconstruct the layers of meaning within an ad to present readers with a picture of its architecture of signs. Similarly to the stance on polysemy taken by most psychological inquiries, under this paradigm researchers therefore tend to infer a link between the semiotic method and consumer response and to “assume a correspondence between what they ‘see’ in a text and people ‘out-there’ see” (Tomaselli 1996, p. 32). Semiotics needs not

be relegated to decoding or deconstructing meaning, however, for semiotics also describes the process of constructing meaning, for instance by exploring the processes used by consumers to interpret signs (Eco 1979). Nor does semiotics need be constrained by “structural” perspectives that downplay consumer meaning negotiation (cf., Schroeder 2002).

In sum, semiotics cannot be reduced to structural, post-structural, or postmodern assumptions. Despite this confusing polysemy, it is safe to say that for semioticians the role of advertising is to imbue consumption activities with meaning: “by swathing the product in advertising language, mankind gives it meaning and thereby transforms its simple use into an experience of the mind” (Barthes 1994, p. 178). In this way, consumers actively create meaning, in a process of “negotiation.” As an art historian suggests, “to talk about an image is not to decode it, and having once broken its code, to have done with it ... To talk about an image is ... an attempt to relate oneself to it and to the sight it represents” (Leppert 1997, pp. 7-8). Advertising meaning, then, may change with culture, context, and consumer experience.

Linguistics

Linguists and psycholinguists distinguish between polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy is the presence of multiple senses in a word where such senses reflect a “core” meaning, via metaphor (e.g., the *eye* of a person and the *eye* of a needle) or metonymy (e.g., a morning *paper* and the *paper* it is made of). Homonymy requires no such core meaning to exist and refers to the coincidence of unrelated words with the same name (e.g., an investment *bank* and a river *bank*). Most of the work in the area of linguistics has been devoted to the study of how these two types of ambiguous words differ in memory storage and activation patterns (e.g., Klein and Murphy 2001). Linguists typically use single words as experimental stimuli, making the implicit

assumption that single words can be ambiguous but that words in context cannot (see, e.g., Kishner and Gibbs 1996; cf., Nerlich and Clarke 2001).

Literary, cultural, and media studies

Under this heading we include research that investigates the mechanisms of production and consumption of cultural objects as well as the role of mass media in today's society and that can be broadly characterized as endorsing post-structuralist and postmodern positions.

These schools of thought share the important assumption of the idiosyncrasy of meaning, stressing the subjective nature of interpretation and defying the notion of "right" reading (e.g., Scott 1994; Stern 1996). For these writers meaning is always and only polysemic and as a consequence there are no other texts than polysemic texts. Within this line of thought two particularly influential perspectives are reader-response theory and cultural studies.

Reader-response theory focuses on how audiences bring their own perspectives to whatever they "read" or process (Radway 1984). For reader-response theorists no reading of a text is privileged – that is, valued as more accurate or insightful – over another. Thus, what the producer intends constitutes only one factor in the reading experience, not the final word on how an advertising text can or should be read (Scott 1994). Reader-response theories document a shift of power from text to viewer and therefore offer insights into advertising polysemy. However, they are often characterized by a lack of consideration of the social responses involved in the text-viewer interaction (Elliott and Ritson 1997), or of cultural and historical influences on meaning (Brown, Stevens, and Maclaren 1999). Sociologically informed efforts, such as cultural studies, attempt to provide such a contextualization by focusing on the cultural dimensions of experience.

Cultural studies emerged as a response to literary studies that overlooked popular culture and working class experience (Turner 2003). Today, cultural studies encompass a wide range of techniques united by a set of theories and research practices about cultural processes, particularly popular culture, including advertising (Hall 1997). Cultural studies emphasize the contradictory manners in which texts can be decoded by differing audiences and provide an integrative framework for investigating contemporary cultural processes (du Gay 1997; Hall 1997). Issues of power and ideology are at the heart of cultural studies' discussion of advertising, a discourse best represented by notions of hegemony, resistance, and subversion.

In the following pages we present a framework for understanding and investigating advertising polysemy. Despite the great difference in conceptual paradigms, methodology, and research agendas, several recurrent themes emerged during an iterative reading of the multidisciplinary literatures reviewed here. In the coming sections we draw an inventory of the antecedents of advertising polysemy based on these themes.

Theme # 1: Culture

According to anthropological and sociological research, culture has the dual role of shaping both our "interpretive lenses" and the world we perceive (e.g., Griswold 1987; McCracken 1987). For literary and cultural theorists the process itself of representing an object by way of language or images shapes its meaning (e.g., Hall 1997; Stern 1998). This notion of representation stresses the cultural determinants of the process of making sense of advertising.

The social constructionism that underlies these approaches provides the key for understanding representational practices and the occurrence of advertising polysemy.

Accordingly, advertising acts as a representational system that produces meaning outside the realm of the advertised product.

This perspective is reiterated by semiotics. Through what has been called “the logic of appropriation,” advertising turns culture into consumer signifiers by drawing on symbolic referent systems (Goldman and Papson 1996; see also Hirschman and Thompson’s, 1997, notion of “recombinant culture”). First, advertising imagery appropriates and transforms existing referent systems from literature, art, science, or other cultural discourses (Schroeder 2002). In addition, advertising creates its own referent systems. Although this is a debated theme (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1997), semioticians have stressed that advertising helps shape “common sense” notions by providing informative guidelines for behavior (e.g., Goldman and Papson 1996; cf. McCracken 1986). Further, ads are intertextual or self-referential. They often refer to other ads, brand names, and advertising itself, in a process of taking meanings from one context and placing them into advertisements where they become part of a different meaning system (Williamson 1978). In sum:

P1: Ads draw on culture to generate advertising meaning.

In addition, culture shapes the interpretive frames that consumers use to perceive cultural products such as advertisements (McCracken 1987). This process is well illustrated in psychology. Compelling evidence has been gathered supporting the conclusion that psychological processes of key importance for advertising interpretation such as self-identity and motivation are shaped by cultural factors (e.g., Miller 2001). For example, Hong, Morris, Chi-yue, and Benet-Martinez (2000) document the phenomenon of frame switching. Chinese-English bilinguals were primed with symbols pertaining to either one culture or the other and were then

asked to interpret an image portraying a school of fish, where the first one was separated from the others by some distance. Respondents primed with American icons were more likely to select an internal cause (“the first fish is leading the group”), whereas those primed with Chinese icons were more likely to choose an external cause (“the first fish is chased by the group”). Therefore:

P2: Their cultural background determines how consumers make sense of advertising.

Theme # 2: Social and Media Context

Context plays a key role in opening and closing an ad’s range of possible interpretations, what linguists and semioticians call its heteroglossic range (Bakhtin 1981; Eco 1976).

Advertising does not exist in a vacuum – contextual variables, such as cultural norms and mass media influence advertising reception (Brown, Stevens, and Maclaren 1999). These macro variables have been demonstrated by contextual priming experiments (e.g., Hong et al. 2000; Kleine and Kernan 1991; Yi 1990) and subculture studies (e.g., Kates 2002).

A critically important antecedent of advertising interpretation is media context, the programming or editorial content surrounding an advertising message. Media context can close or open an ad’s heteroglossic range by providing disambiguation or ambiguation for its meaning. The importance of such effects is demonstrated by the breadth of advertising research dedicated to the influence of media context on advertising response (e.g., Pavelchak et al. 1989; Yi 1990).

Another important contextual variable is social context. The social milieu has the power to both expose the consumer to an alternative reading (Kates 2002) and to prime a consumer with the interpretive spectacles needed for the alternative reading (Ritson and Elliot 1999). In sum,

P3: Social and media contexts can either provide cues for the disambiguation of a polysemic message or can turn an apparently “closed” text into a polysemic one.

Reader-response theorists acknowledge that interpreting a text relies on shared conventions or interpretive frames (e.g., Scott 1994). An interpretive community consists of a group of individuals that share the same “interpretative strategies:” the ways these individuals approach and digest a text (Fish 1980). Similar considerations are also expressed in psychology, for example in the classic 1950s “They saw a game” study by social psychologists Hastorf and Cantril about a hard fought match between Dartmouth and Princeton’s college football teams. They found that students from the two colleges held widely divergent interpretations about which team started the rough play that sent several players to the sidelines (Hastorf and Cantril 1954; cf., Pavelchak, Antil, and Munch 1989). As a consequence,

P4: Groups of readers will share certain reading strategies in ad decoding, leading to the emergence of a discrete number of viable interpretations.

Theme # 3: Power

Culture enables the existence of meaning in an ad. Context provides cues to help an ad’s understanding. Now the act of interpretation can take place. On one side there is the reader. On the other side there is the author – advertising copywriters, marketing managers –, appearing here in the form of the ad itself. When approaching the issue of how a reader relates to the message and to the author who produced it we have often found mention in the multidisciplinary literature examined to a confrontational dialectic, for example to the existence of a “power

struggle” between reader and writer. This theme therefore refers (1) to whether readers decode the message as the author had hoped or they instead construe meanings inconsistent with those originally intended; and (2) to the origin of this dissociation between source and recipient.

The power struggle for control over the meaning of ads is the keystone of interpretive disciplines such as reader-response theory, cultural studies, and post-structuralist semiotics (Elliot and Ritson 1997; Scott 1994). In particular, research identifies three types of polysemy according to the agent who activates the polysemic reading (Ceccarelli 1998). *Resistive reading* occurs when a subordinate audience develops an understanding of the text that differs from what the author had intended. Resistive readings are potentially subversive because the audience affirms its power over the text (e.g., Kates 2002). *Strategic ambiguity* is instead planned by the author and results in groups of readers converging in praise of a text. In this case, the power over textual signification remains with the author, “who insert both meanings into the text and who benefits economically from the polysemic interpretation” (Ceccarelli 1998, p. 404). Finally, *hermeneutic depth* is initiated by the critic who “enlightens” others who may not have fully appreciated the text’s density of meaning.

Psychological models of subjective text comprehension also underscore the role of the reader’s baggage of experiences and current goals in generating meanings that are incongruous with those originally intended by the authors (e.g., Mick 1992; Schraw 2000). These models therefore resonate well with the audience-centered perspectives within literary, cultural, and communication studies.

Similarly, in pragmatics, a field within linguistics devoted to how language is used in conversations, Nerlich and Clarke (2001) stress the issue of power by introducing the notion of “semantic trap.” A semantic trap is associated to a speaker’s breaking of conversational

principles and refers to the “uncooperative exploitation of the unintentional conversational effect on the side of the hearer” (Nerlich and Clarke 2001, p. 17). In sum,

P5: A key characteristic of the process of reading an ad is the degree to which the reader or the author is “powerful.” Power here refers to a consumer’s capability and willingness to create meanings that were not planned by the author (resistive readings) and to an author’s capability and willingness to produce semiotic structures that support multiple interpretations (strategic ambiguity).

Theme # 4: Evaluation versus Interpretation

In this and the following theme we move towards a micro-perspective, one that more than in the earlier themes concerns the nature of consumer information processing. Across disciplines we found multiple references to the importance of the distinction between evaluation and interpretation.

In a key contribution to the discussion on polysemy within literary, cultural, and media studies, Condit (1989) argues that polysemy occurs only when two audiences have different interpretations of the events described in a text. When two audiences have the same interpretation of a text but diverging opinions about it we have “polyvalence”.

The distinction between interpretation and the affective notion of liking occurs times and again within psychology. Here we mention few examples. Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957) introduced the semantic differential as a measure of meaning. They identify three dimensions of meaning: evaluation (good vs. bad), potency (strong vs. weak), and activity (active vs. passive). The semantic differential has proven itself a popular tool for assessing meaning but has been

accused of fostering a theoretical confusion between “attitude” and “meaning” (e.g., Szalay and Bryson 1974). Research on attitudes has also reflected similar concerns. For example, one influential model of attitude structure – the expectancy-value model (cf., Eagly and Chaiken 1993) – conceptualizes an attitude as a multiplicative function of beliefs about an object (i.e. the subjective probability that the object possesses a certain attribute) and the purely evaluative aspect of these beliefs. Finally, this distinction has not eluded advertising researchers. For example, in his investigation of the effect of media context on advertising response Yi (1990) distinguishes between the influence of “cognitive context,” the increased accessibility of a primed attribute, and “affective context,” the affective valence of the programming surrounding the ad.

The body of research reviewed here indicates that interpreting an ad is inherently different from liking or disliking it. Advertising researchers have largely focused on the latter process, exploring for example attitude formation and change. The present article tries instead to articulate a theory of advertising meaning and therefore focuses on the former process:

P6: Interpretation and liking are distinct processes. Advertising polysemy occurs when people generate different basic understandings of the same message, not merely different attitudes.

Theme # 5: Two-Stage Process of Meaning Creation

One characteristic of the meaning making process that repeatedly emerged in our multidisciplinary exploration of the polysemic qualities of advertising is the two-stage nature of meaning making. Semiotics refers to these stages as denotation and connotation. Psychology

calls them instead lexical and psychological meaning. In consumer research these stages have been variously defined as attribute and performance dimensions of meaning (Kleine and Kernan 1991), comprehension and interpretation (Mick and Polity 1989) or, more generally, as “recognition/identification” and “interpretation”.

Structuralist semiotics identifies two levels of meaning, thus distinguishing between denotational meaning (a sign’s definitional meaning, for example what the dictionary should provide) and connotational meaning (a sign’s cultural, ideological and personal implications; Eco 1976). For example, at the denotational level the logo of information technology giant Apple is made of a signifier – the iconic design – and a signified – a bitten apple. At the connotational level an additional layer of meaning is attached to the denotative sign and from a simple bitten apple the logo’s meaning is transformed into the biblical apple of knowledge.

Denotations represent a utopian, radically objective, level of signification. Clearly, no polysemy is possible at this stage. Connotations represent instead the sign’s ideologically charged meaning. According to this notion, every text is “symbolic.” Each person masters a number of signs and “the image, in its connotation, is thus constituted by an architecture of signs drawn from a variable depth of lexicons” (Barthes 1977, p. 47). Within this mass of lexicons and social dialects polysemy occurs.

From a general point of view, much psychological research endorses, not surprisingly considering psychology’s epistemological tradition, the structuralist notions of denotation and connotation (Richins 1994). Psychologists have often distinguished between lexical meaning and psychological meaning (Szalay and Bryson 1974; cf., Friedmann and Zimmer 1988). Lexical meaning refers to the conventional relationship between a word and its referent. Psychological meaning refers instead to a person’s subjective perception and affective reaction to a stimulus

(Szalay and Deese 1978). The notion of psychological meaning opens the possibility of polysemic readings (Kleine and Kernan 1991).

Structuralist semiotics and psychology argue that polysemy occurs in most cases at the second, ideologically charged, stage of the meaning making process. In other words,

P7: Chances of observing disagreement on the meaning of a cultural object, such as an ad, grow as interpretations increasingly rely on connotative meanings.

Discussion

Following an iterative analysis of a multidisciplinary literature we proposed a framework for explaining the occurrence of polysemy in advertising founded upon five themes: culture, social and media context, power, evaluation versus interpretation, and two-stage process of meaning creation. Both the process of generation of the cultural object and the act of reading take place in a culturally constituted world – culture provides the ultimate source of advertising polysemy. The way culture exerts its influence on advertising polysemy is determined by context, both social and media. Exposure to the cultural codes of a certain interpretive community via social relations, for example, can spur alternative readings. At this stage the issue of how the reader relates to the text and to the author who produced it becomes prominent. The third recurrent theme that we identified is therefore the ongoing power struggle between the reader and the text. Finally, the last two identified themes have an inherently intrapsychic flavor: the distinction between interpretation and evaluation and the two-stage process of meaning creation. The first refers to the difference between heterogeneity in evaluations that rest on the

same basic understanding of the ad and truly polysemic readings; whereas the second refers to the locus of ideologically charged meaning within the semiotic structure of an ad.

Implications

Considering advertisements as social objects implies attention to the role of both culture and individual cognition in the meaning making process (Griswold 1987). Successful advertising decisions can be made by paying specific attention to the processes by which advertisements transform culture into consumer signifiers. Understanding how the meaning of an ad or communication strategy feeds off culture – both high and popular – could provide guidelines into the management of heterogeneity in interpretation across audiences belonging to different cultures as well as, from a more general point of view, into efficient marketplace translation of brand positioning statements.

Social relations and the media play an important role in shaping the range of viable interpretations for the same advertising message. Particularly important, because both pervasive and under-investigated, is the role of social context (Levine, Resnick and Higgins 1993). This suggests that the predominant focus on the text-viewer interaction displayed by both advertising researchers and practitioners (Mick 1992) needs be redirected towards a greater consideration of social variables if marketers are to understand the expressions and strategic implications of advertising polysemy.

We point to advertising meaning's broader domain that our approach to polysemy affords – one that attempts to encompass reader-response, semiotics, and information processing. Advertising encourages “*audience participation within a small set of approved responses*” (Peñaloza 1999, p. 348, emphasis in original). These rarely include broader political, social, and

historical contexts that might interfere with preferred image decoding. In other words, advertising conventions encourage use of a narrow set of positive expectations to decipher imagery. Contrary to museum going, for instance, looking at ads seems to require checking one's cultural knowledge at the door, so that ads become spectacles of visual consumption (Schroeder 2002). The perspectives reviewed above argue, however, that the interpretive context of advertising remains critically important for understanding meaning making.

The consequence of this line of reasoning is that polysemy represents an important consumer segmentation variable, one generally overlooked in academic and managerial investigations of segmentation (e.g., Kotler 2000; Simonson 2005). For example, Bock and Uncles (2002) carried out a taxonomic study of market segments. In their reassessment of consumer heterogeneity they present five types of differences between consumers: product benefit preferences, consumer interaction effects, choice barriers, bargaining power, and profitability. We argue that polysemy constitutes an important addition to this list.

In our discussion of context we mentioned that the advertising canon promotes and presumes the use of a narrow set of positive expectations in advertising interpretation. The issue of power as an antecedent of advertising polysemy suggests that this managerial conception may be misleading. Advertising research indicates that subversive, idiosyncratic interpretations are often the results of boredom (e.g., Kirmani 1997) or, more worryingly, of the frustration felt by consumers when facing ads that display insensitivity to the cultural code of the subculture they belong to (e.g., Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999). The manifestations of polysemy suggested here are not inherent to advertising as such, but are instead the product of managers' misplaced beliefs about the balance of power over the textual signification of their ads. Ads do not need to be repetitive, condescending, or patronizing.

The power struggle between the author of the persuasive message and the consumer has also implications for literature on persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994). The keystone of persuasion knowledge theory is that during message reception awareness of a persuasion attempt causes a “change of meaning” to occur. The model describes the coping strategies used by consumers during a persuasion attempt and therefore portrays consumers as active constructors of meaning, coherently with the perspectives reviewed above. The framework proposed in this article places the change of meaning principle within the broader theoretical context of advertising polysemy.

From a methodological point of view the role of culture as an antecedent of advertising polysemy has important implications for marketing researchers because the generation of idiosyncratic meanings can influence attitudes and memory (e.g., Mick 1992). When cross-cultural analyses ignore the cultural determinants of polysemy the risk of a systematic bias is made more acute by the fact that in studying the consequences of cultural differences random assignment of participants to conditions is not possible. This discussion and the distinction between evaluation and meaning stressed earlier suggest the appropriateness of complementing currently used measures of advertising effectiveness such as memory or liking with an assessment of meaning and interpretation. Such an assessment could be carried out using established techniques such as continuous word association (Kleine and Kernan 1988; Szalay and Deese 1978). Differential responses to the same copy across segments of consumers could also be measured by testing memory for specific ad elements. For example, in a recognition test distractors could be selected to represent alternative interpretations of these ad elements. An analysis of false alarms could shed light into the marketplace effects of the occurrence of advertising polysemy across segments of consumers.

Advertising cues vary in their potential for generating ideological and symbolic connotations and therefore in the likelihood of leading to polysemic responses in the marketplace. These considerations have consequences for advertisers when trying to define the architecture of signs within an ad. What are the ideologically charged signs within the copy that rely most on connotative meanings? Keeping this question in mind would be important for managers who want to include an understanding of polysemy among their marketing tools. The implication for advertising testing is that it may be useful to assess (1) the stability across consumer segments of the meaning of those specific ad cues that have been identified as most heavily relying on connotative meaning, and (2) the prevailing interpretive codes used within consumer segments of specific interest – as well as overall heterogeneity in interpretations (e.g., Pechman et al. 2003).

Conclusions

We attempted to integrate diverse research traditions within advertising research, including social cognition, advertising interpretation, and media consumption. We do not mean to downplay crucial epistemological assumptions that underlie these different approaches, rather to draw together a vast stream of literature to illuminate a central issue within marketing: how different consumers create polysemy. From our perspective, these camps – often at odds or ignorant of each other’s research – complement and extend each others.

As one step in potential reconciliations, we have provided conceptual translations between interpretative and information processing approaches to help bridge these disciplinary gaps and to highlight a number of recurrent themes observed across such diverse disciplines:

An academic discipline is a culture, with shared norms, practices, terminology, and implicit understanding. As a consequence, communicating across disciplines requires learning aspects of the other's culture and language ... Without such conscious attention to issues of translation and efforts at mutual understanding, researchers from different disciplines frequently "talk past" each other, ... missing much of the richness and complexity of theory and interpretation that are available from the other's perspective (Brewer 2005, p. 218).

Polysemy provides a fruitful perspective for marketing and advertising research, one that relies on interdisciplinary insight and that offers researchers a grounded method for understanding and contextualizing images. In connecting advertising to the subjective context of reading, consuming, and interacting, we gain a more thorough, yet never complete, understanding of how advertising works. Semiotic and interpretive approaches to polysemy place advertising within a multidisciplinary matrix, underscoring its complexity and its cultural connections; whereas psychological perspectives provide a vocabulary for framing semiotic and cultural issues of polysemy within an experimental paradigm, well suited for marketing and consumer research.

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