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The Social Uses of Advertising

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The Social Uses of Advertising: An Ethnographic Study of Adolescent Advertising Audiences

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Advertising research has focused exclusively on the solitary subject at the expense of understanding the role that advertising plays within the social contexts of group interaction. We develop a number of explanations for this omission before describing the results of an ethnographic study of advertising's contribution to the everyday interactions of adolescent informants at a number of English high schools. The study reveals a series of new, socially related advertising-audience behaviors. Specifically, advertising meanings are shown to possess social uses relating to textual experience, interpretation, evaluation, ritual use, and metaphor. The theoretical and managerial implications of these social uses are then discussed.

In the film *Witness* (Weir 1985) Harrison Ford plays John Book, a Philadelphia detective who has to go under cover in a local Amish community. On spending his first morning with the Amish family he is there to protect, Book is asked to join them at the table for breakfast. An embarrassed silence falls on the group as they begin their meal. Book, sensing the unease his presence has created, takes a long audible swig from his mug of coffee and exclaims, "Honey, *that's* great coffee!" The three members of the Amish family who have never seen television advertising before, and who are therefore unfamiliar with this catchphrase, look up in surprise and then confusion. Book is suddenly embarrassed by his attempt at humor and tries to explain his outburst: "It's a joke. . . . It's a commercial . . . on television." He looks down at his plate still embarrassed and suddenly aware of the very different culture in which he is now immersed.

THE SOLITARY SUBJECT OF ADVERTISING RESEARCH

Consumer research has generally failed to address the sociocultural settings (Costa 1995) that contextualize all consumption activity. In the specific case of advertising theory, researchers have failed to explore the phenomena associated with advertising reception in "ecologically valid contexts" (Stewart 1992, p. 15) and have thus tended to ignore the social dimensions of advertising in favor of an emphasis on the solitary subject (Mick and Buhl 1992). Thus the audience that current theories of advertising describe is not an audience at all but rather an "aggregate of individual consumers" (Sheth 1979, p. 415) who respond to advertising stimuli while remaining "islands of cognitive and affective responses, unconnected to a social world, detached from culture" (Buttle 1991, p. 97). At the center of the great majority of theories in advertising research stands a lonely individual, cut off from the social contexts in which he or she, you and I, actually reside.

This prevalence of the solitary subject within advertising research is exemplified in the theoretical treatment of the term "context" within consumer research. Previous studies have defined the context of advertising reception as either the sponsoring media or program content in which the ad is located (see, e.g., Gardner 1985; Norris and Colman 1992; Pavelchak, Antil, and Munch 1988; Yi 1990) or the other advertising messages that immediately precede and follow a particular ad (see, e.g., Fowles 1996, p. 91; Pieters and Bijmolt 1997). It is significant that both definitions focus on the semantic context that surrounds the message rather than the social context in which the reader or viewer of the advertising message is located. This omission contrasts with other fields of media research where the term context generally refers to the social and cultural settings of the audience and has little or no relevance to message-based elements (see, e.g., Anderson and Meyer 1988, p. 26;

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Leeds-Hurwitz 1989, chap. 4). Moores (1993, p. 32), for example, employs the term context "to refer specifically to what we might call everyday micro-settings . . . the routine physical locations and interpersonal relations of reception."

Several reasons exist for the presence of the solitary subject in advertising theory. The first reason is disciplinary. From its outset consumer research has borrowed heavily from cognitive psychology (Costa 1995, p. 215; Wells 1993) and as a result consumer research has developed an inherently individualistic model of the advertising audience based on psychological theories that, by their nature, concentrate on the individual as the "locus of meaning and significance" (McCracken 1987, p. 123) and that tend to de-emphasize the role of social context (Holbrook 1995, p. 93). Thus, despite the many advantages of the psychological heritage of consumer research, one of the drawbacks to this lineage has been the exclusion of many questions centered around the social phenomena that surround consumption activity (Uusitalo and Uusitalo 1981, p. 561). Theories of advertising that developed from this psychological orientation have emphasized the individual at the expense of a more social orientation (Lannon 1985).

A second explanation for the solitary subject can be attributed to the focus on managerial relevance in advertising research. Research on consumer behavior in general has tended to focus on why individuals buy a particular product at the expense of how that product is used and consumed within the context of the consumer's life world (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Similarly, research on advertising has focused to a great degree on the effect of the ad on the consumer's decision-making process, specifically the role of advertising in guiding product preference and postpurchase dissonance reduction (Mick and Buhl 1992, p. 335; O'Guinn and Faber 1991, p. 357). This emphasis on purchase orientation ensures that the focal point of most advertising theory is the singular shopper, buyer, or decision maker (Sheth 1979, p. 415) rather than the socially active, interacting audiences that populate "non-consumption institutions" (Nicosia and Mayer 1976, p. 70) and that use advertising for nonpurchase based, socially oriented activities (Buttle 1991, p. 95). Although these socially active audiences may not appear to be as immediately managerially relevant as hypothetical consumers, once these audiences eventually do make purchases there is no reason to believe that these social interactions would not influence their decision making and subsequent behavior.

A third explanation for the presence of the solitary subject can be drawn from the dominance of the information-based paradigm in advertising research (McCracken 1987; Mick and Buhl 1992). In common with other researchers focusing on information-processing models of communication studies (see Jensen [1987], p. 31, and Livingstone [1990], p. 192, for reviews), advertising researchers have assumed that the advertising text provides all of the meaning in the text-viewer interaction (Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994). As a result, if the text already contains a priori meaning, then the focus of message research will inevitably be biased toward the study of the textual features of adver-

tising (Mick 1992, p. 411), and the role of the viewer will be relegated to an assessment of the degree to which the audience "gets" the message (Domzal and Kernan 1993, p. 3). Thus, the vast majority of advertising research conducted within the information-processing paradigm manipulates the textual features of the ad while attributing the role of the advertising viewer to that of an "artifact" of the research design (Scott 1994, p. 475). As a result the information-based paradigm "divorces the individual from their cultural context" (McCracken 1987, p. 122), thus minimizing the importance of the social interactions of the audience.

A fourth explanation for the solitary subject can be attributed to the ontological and epistemological assumptions that "undergird" (Peter 1991, p. 543) advertising research, which, like the majority of consumer research, has been conducted within the paradigm known variously as positivism, sophisticated falsificationism, or logical empiricism. The general consensus within consumer research suggests that this paradigm is predicated on an axiomatic assumption that reality preexists (Hudson and Ozanne 1988, p. 509; Mick 1986, p. 207) and thus the main goal of the researcher is to map or chart this external reality. Consistent with this ontology, the epistemological goal of advertising research has been to develop a nomological body of knowledge (Arnold and Fischer 1994, p. 60) built from universal laws that hold true across many different contexts (Lincoln 1985). Clearly within an epistemological orientation that emphasizes context-free theories (Peter and Olson 1983, p. 123) the tendency in advertising research has been to study the viewer in abstract, acontextual settings where findings could be held up to the logical empiricist criterion of generalizability (Hunt 1983). As Lull (1980, p. 198) notes, in positivistic mass-communication research the "subtle peculiarities of the social world are sometimes ignored in order to facilitate cleanliness, parsimony, and predictive strength." The solitary subject is therefore also partly a function of an ontological and epistemological orientation that privileges an asocial, acontextual perspective (Buttle 1991, pp. 97–98; Uusitalo and Uusitalo 1981, p. 561).

The final explanation for the presence of the solitary subject can be attributed to the methodological preponderance of experimental studies of advertising effect (Lannon and Cooper 1983). The dominance of experimental research in laboratory settings has led to a "methodological individualism" (O'Shaughnessy 1992, p. 150) in which the social contexts that the consumer operates in have either been completely ignored (Deighton and Grayson 1995, p. 673) or treated as "exogenous variables" (Costa 1995, p. 215). In a recent laboratory experiment on advertising reception (Bierley, McSweeney, and Vannieukerk 1985), for example, the authors' methodological description exemplifies this approach to social context: "The subjects were tested in groups of four and were comfortably seated between partitions *that prevented them* from seeing or talking to each other" (p. 318, emphasis added). Although this kind of experimental research is by no means ancillary to future advertising research agendas, the emphasis on laboratory settings as the "supreme context-free environment" (Chris-

tians and Carey 1989, p. 363) has typically resulted in the exclusion of social interactions from communication research (Buckingham 1993, pp. 103–104; Silverstone 1994, p. 144). Laboratory experiments tell us much about an individual's advertising reception, but these results are susceptible to criticisms of low external validity (Harre and Secord 1972, p. 54; Wells 1993, p. 492), specifically in relation to how this solitary subject's interpretation changes as he or she encounters "natural, real-life situations [where] there are innumerable and inter-related variables affecting people's reactions to advertising material" (De-Groot 1980, p. 129).

THE SOCIAL USES OF ADVERTISING

The dominance of the solitary subject at the epistemological center of advertising research has resulted in only a partial understanding of the effect of advertising texts on their audiences. Specifically, because the solitary subject receives, processes, and acts on advertising messages with no interpersonal interaction with other audience members, advertising research has generally ignored the social uses that emerge from advertising reception. The absence of theoretical and empirical insight in this area contrasts with other disciplines concerned with the study of various kinds of mediated communication and popular cultural forms. Over the last 15 years most of these disciplines have shifted from concentrating exclusively on the text as the source of all meaning in reception and increasingly included the post-viewing social activities of the reader as an equally important area for empirical study (see Jensen [1991], for a review). This movement, known as "reader response theory," has used ethnographic methods (Drotner 1994, p. 341; Moores 1991, p. 1) in order to explore the "endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which media are integrated and implicated within it" (Radway 1988).

In a move that parallels the uses and gratifications approach to mass communication (Roscoe, Marshall, and Gleeson 1995, p. 88), reader response theory has explored the role that mass-communicated meanings play in the lives of its audiences. In stark contrast to the uses and gratifications approach, however, reader response theory has emphasized the social role of these mass-communicated meanings rather than the individual, psychological uses of the text. Lull (1980), for example, developed a typology of the social uses to which television meanings are put in everyday life. Radway (1984) described how a group of midwestern American homemakers used their shared interpretations of romance literature to build and strengthen their social group. Hobson (1982) drew on an ethnographic study of a British soap opera audience to show how the women in the study used their viewing experience as a way of structuring their day and how they used their interpretations of the soap opera as a conversational resource with other members of the audience.

Despite the wide variety of media explored from a reader response perspective, no study has yet attempted to ap-

proach advertising in this way. This article reports the results of an ethnographic study of the social uses of advertising within an adolescent audience. The authors propose to use the "methodological situationism" (Ang 1996, pp. 70–71) of reader response research as an empirical antidote to the "methodological individualism" of advertising theory recognized by O'Shaughnessy (1992, p. 150). In doing so, this article shifts the empirical focus to the social viewer and begins the process of identifying and conceptualizing a new phenomenon in consumer research: the social uses of advertising.

METHOD

One of the advantages of the emergence of ethnographic approaches in consumer research has been a heightened awareness and sensitivity toward the social contexts in which all consumer behavior takes place (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, p. 485). In a growing corpus of ethnographic studies conducted across a variety of settings there exists an explicit recognition of the social functions that consumer goods often fulfill. For example, ethnographic studies in contexts as diverse as American homes during Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), gatherings of Harley Davidson owners (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), or homeless communities living on the streets (Hill and Stamey 1990) have explored how consumer goods are a central or contributing phenomenon to a variety of social interactions. One criticism of this growing corpus of ethnographic studies within consumer research, however, is that the empirical emphasis has remained exclusively with consumer goods with no ethnographic insight being generated into the social uses of advertising. Several theorists have acknowledged this apparent gap in advertising theory and have directly called for ethnographic approaches to be applied in the exploration of advertising meaning (see Buttle 1991). Some limited empirical evidence also exists to support the contention that advertising is used socially. For example, O'Donohoe (1994) discovered both marketing and nonmarketing uses emerging from discussions with young adult consumers. Alperstein (1990) recorded 200 separate incidents in which advertising-derived language was used in everyday settings. Scott (1994), in particular, has recognized the extant limitations of current advertising theory and has suggested reader response theory and ethnographic methods as one possible solution to this problem.

The emphasis on ethnography in other disciplines as the optimum method for the reader response approach, combined with the application of this method within consumer research to understand the social uses of products, suggested that an ethnographic method would be the most suitable approach for this study. No uniform ethnographic method actually exists, rather the specific approach is always dictated by the phenomenon being explored (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). In order to clarify the actual ethnographic method used in this case the main features of the study are now described.

Naturalistic Setting

Following from previous audience ethnographies, the first goal of the research was to identify a particular social group (Schroder 1994, p. 341) or community (Ang 1996, p. 74) to form the empirical focus for the study. Adolescent audiences were purposively selected because this particular group has been shown to be particularly active in the social use of a variety of different forms of popular media (Willis 1990). Indeed the adolescent advertising audience has been identified as being particularly "advertising literate" (Ritson and Elliott 1995) because of their ability to use advertising meanings for the purposes of social interaction. In order to gain access to this demographic group, six schools in the northwest of England were approached by the first author who volunteered to teach a nationally required media studies class lasting six weeks in return for fieldwork access to each school. All of the schools that were approached agreed to the proposed research, and all six were included in the study because the researchers felt that sampling across a number of similar sites (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, p. 76) would maximize the range and quality of the data (Denzin 1989, p. 95).

The media class being taught typically occupied one hour per day, and the researcher spent the rest of the school day immersed in a variety of scholastic contexts. It was clear that the data for this study could not have been collected from the students being taught by the researcher. Instead, aside from a few exceptions when naturally occurring events took place in class, the researcher used the teaching role to gain a backstage pass to the rest of the school. The researcher initially sought out "strategic vantage points" (Lang and Lang 1991, p. 197) within each school that would enable the interviewing and observation of groups of students who were not part of the media studies class as they interacted in naturalistic social contexts. After exploring a variety of different social contexts within the first two school settings, the researcher decided to focus on one particular subgroup of the school, the "sixth formers." In England all students who graduate from high school at age 16 can elect to stay on at school for two further years of study in preparation for entrance to a university. This group, named "sixth formers" because they enter into a sixth and then seventh year of high school, find themselves at a curious juncture between the freedom of university study and the constraints associated with school life. For example, although the sixth formers were assigned free periods each day when they were not taught and were left unsupervised, they were not allowed to leave the school grounds. A particular area or building in each school, usually consisting of a series of large rooms with some food provision, had been assigned exclusively for the sixth formers to use during these free periods. This area was out of bounds to younger children and the teachers, who taught their sixth-form classes in the main school building. In effect, each sixth-form area formed a naturalistic "area of congregation" (Lindlof 1995, p. 159) for students who had just completed a lesson and who inevitably formed smaller groups within

the sixth-form area to talk, eat, or simply to "hang out" in between classes.

> The common room at [the school] is simply a large open space with a quiet area for those working and a larger social space where the rest of the sixth formers sit around in small pockets. Each hour brings a different group into the common room as the previous individuals leave for their lesson and new pockets form. Lunch hours, morning break, and home time bring the whole sixth form group crashing into this one space. Outside these times it is quiet with between 4 or 5 small groups sitting around a table or by a window quietly talking. Occasionally laughter or a loud conversation will break out and everyone in the common room, even those working, will look up and sometimes join in. (researcher note, January 26, 1995).

The schools selected for this study were located in an area of less than 20 square miles and the sixth-form settings at each school were remarkably similar to each other, both in terms of their physical layout, sociocultural constitution, and student schedules. The sixth forms proved to be an ideal site to explore the role that advertising meaning played in the socially contextualized everyday lives of these adolescents because most of the postreception, social interactions that were derived from advertising texts took place in and around this area.

Observation and Interviewing

Reader response research has typically adopted a "loose form" (Willis 1990, p. 7) or "quasi-ethnographic" (Schroder 1994, p. 244) method that uses only interviews at the expense of longer periods of immersion in the field (Moores 1993, p. 4) and observational data (Evans 1990, p. 154). In this study, however, protracted periods of time were spent immersed on site, and observations were included in the final analysis. This was partly because of the more balanced methodology advocated in consumer research (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) and also because observational data provide important insight into the contextual settings of ethnographic studies (Becker and Geer 1970). The researcher adopted the position of "participant as observer" (Denzin 1978, p. 164) because this role is well suited to the exploration of small group behaviors (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, p. 487), because it enables the study of a greater range of phenomena in one particular context (Lindlof 1995, p. 145), and because it would have been clearly impossible to adopt the more involved role of "complete participant" and become a 17-year-old high school student (again). In the first two schools the researcher collected data for one full day a week at each site. At the remaining four schools the researcher switched to a full-time schedule, which usually consisted of five days per week at each site. In total, almost six months were spent collecting data for this study.

The field researcher was initially introduced to a particular sixth-form group at the earliest opportunity by a staff member. The students were informed that the researcher would be spending several weeks at the school teaching classes and conducting interviews with the sixth formers

about their opinions on advertising. In each case the researcher then spent six weeks either at one particular school site or sharing his week between two schools. The initial presence of the researcher typically created a significant degree of attention within each sixth form. Within a few days, however, his presence was accepted, and relationships with sixth formers began to develop. These relationships generally varied from daily conversations on a first-name basis to occasional group interviews. This research, like any other form of ethnographic study, can not claim that the researcher's presence did not alter the behavior of the informants to some degree. However, within the six-week immersion period the sixth formers' initial sense of unease at the presence of a stranger within the group was replaced with either a general obliviousness to his presence or partial acceptance of him as a surrogate member of the sixth form who was sometimes included in a conversation or debate. The researcher found that working on a particular task (often related to the research or teaching in the school) significantly accelerated the sixth formers' shift from unease to acceptance. Rather than a strange individual watching their every move, the researcher was simply another (albeit unusual) individual with work to do, who was also susceptible to distraction and conversation. From this vantage point, the researcher was able to observe a wide range of advertising-related interactions and exchanges within the context of the sixth form. These interactions were recorded, and each evening the researcher would compile a summary of the days events culminating in a 240-page diary of observational data. It should be noted that, despite the detail present in these notes, the authors suggest that future ethnographies of the advertising audience should aim for even more detailed note taking. Although the notes appeared to be expansive during the fieldwork stage, many details such as the names, actual ages, or specific details of the informants were not recorded, and the absence of this data did prove detrimental to parts of the study during analysis.

The unpredictable and private nature of many of the advertising-based social interactions often meant that the observational data could not include every single example of the social uses of advertising. Interview data was, therefore, also included to supplement observational data and provide the informants' own accounts of their interactions. In previous ethnographic studies of mass-media reception, researchers have elected to use either individual or group interviews. Group interviews were used in this study primarily because the researcher found that informants tended to "pool accounts" (Roscoe et al. 1995, p. 89), and this multiple reconstruction of previous events served to bolster the validity of the accounts, to increase their detail and richness, and often also to provide several different interpretations of group interactions. Homogenous samples of naturally occurring, in situ groups were selected for interview (Patton 1987, p. 54), with many of these initial groups providing snowball samples for later interviews (Lindlof 1995, p. 127). In the first two school sites, interviews were brief and exploratory and notes, rather than tape recordings, were made. In the final four school sites, a total of 68

interviews were conducted with sixth formers. These interviews ranged from 20 to 90 minutes and were later transcribed to produce over 500 pages of interview data.

In practice, two kinds of interview were tape recorded. In the first instance, a group was approached and an open interview (Denzin 1978, p. 43) conducted in which the researcher ensured that the informants' responses were "behaviorally grounded" in lived experience (Denzin 1989, p. 96). Thus, rather than exploring abstract answers such as "I always talk about ads at school," the informants were asked to recall specific episodes from the past and use other members of the group who were present at the time to confirm and expand on this occurrence. These interviews were often initiated by the sixth formers themselves who would proudly approach the researcher and recount a specific social episode that had recently occurred in which advertising had played a specific role.

> Angela approached me after Assembly had finished and proudly declared, "Ere, I've got a good one from last night." She then goes on to tell me about how she and her three girlfriends had walked home singing the jingle from the Kwik-Fit garage ads. After completely re-singing the jingle, with breaks for embarrassed laughter, she had asked if her recollection was "any use" to me. (researcher note, December 6, 1994)

The second form of interview data was collected either from observing, and later exploring, a naturally occurring piece of discourse about advertising or when an open-ended interview sparked or resurrected an advertising interaction between members of the group in which the researcher was temporarily ignored. These examples of "embedded talk" (Lindlof 1995, p. 135) proved particularly insightful. The protracted periods of immersion in the sixth-form setting were invaluable in enabling the researcher to observe and then explore these particular instances of naturalistic interaction.

Analysis of Data

With the fieldwork completed, the researcher established a requisite distance in order to complete the analysis of the data that had been collected (Hill 1993). The data consisting of notes and tape recordings were analyzed using a hermeneutic, iterative approach (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1994). The goal of this analytical stage was to gain an etic perspective through the development of a series of cultural (Spradley 1980, p. 141) or interpretive (Hill 1993, p. 59) themes. Throughout the fieldwork period the researcher continually attempted to organize the data being gathered into thematic categories that helped structure the different kinds of social interactions that advertising contributed to in the sixth forms. As this process of continual review and revision progressed, and as the data collection continued, the categories of interaction became more robust. Eventually any new incidence of advertising interaction could be incorporated into one of the existing categories. Although only the first author was involved in data collection, at the

end of the fieldwork stage of the research both authors conducted their own independent analyses of the textualized data, and despite very similar emergent themes, the differences between the two interpretations provided a final, highly productive stage of discussion and reanalysis of data (Miles and Huberman 1984, p. 60). In order to illustrate the themes that emerged from this analysis, "archetypal episodes" (Buttle 1991, p. 106) were selected for this article that illustrate the different categories of advertising-based interaction that were identified within the context of the sixth forms being studied. Excerpts from researcher-initiated interviews, naturally occurring conversations that were observed and recorded, and excerpts from the field researcher's notes are all reproduced in the "Cultural Themes" section. As with many other published ethnographies, these excerpts represent only a distillation of a much wider empirical base (Lull 1980, p. 201).

CULTURAL THEMES

Experiencing The Text: The Phatic Role of Advertising Meaning

The lack of previous studies exploring the role of social contexts in advertising reception means that the first and most basic finding of this study was simply the presence of advertising-based discourse and interaction within the social contexts of the sixth-form settings. In each of the six schools the researcher was able to observe a range of advertising-derived social interactions that occurred on a daily basis. These interactions varied from the simple mimicking of a jingle or catchphrase for a few brief seconds to extended conversations about a particular advertising execution. Advertising executions along with the other forms of popular culture, such as music, film, and television programs, were used as a central conversational resource by those inhabiting the sixth form. Indeed the sixth formers showed a detailed knowledge of recent advertising campaigns and were able to recall complete story lines and expertly mimic verbal excerpts from the ads.

> Charlie, who had been mentioned earlier to me by several of the informants from my group interview as someone I should go and talk to because he "does stuff like that all the time," was sitting on his own doing his art homework. While he was uninvolved with any of the groups that sat near him, he was recalling out loud the Reebok sports shoe ad. As he drew he ran through the whole ad dialog, closely copying the original voice-over in both accent and intonation, even down to the names of all the football players featured in the ad. Two things strike me. First the mimicry is so good, so accurate, that this cannot be the first time Charlie has verbally replayed this ad. Second, despite my amazement at his outburst, not another single sixth former had even looked his way throughout the "performance." It appeared that Charlie's outburst did not strike his fellow sixth formers as unusual in any way. (researcher note, February 17, 1995)

Although individual exclamations were unusual, there were numerous examples of ads being used by a small group of sixth formers in conversational exchanges. Conversations about advertising were often initiated when one sixth former described the content of a new ad to his or her peers.

> *Interviewer* (*I*): So, what is your favorite ad at the moment?
> *Female* (*F*) (1): Well, that one about the Mushy Peas one, but I haven't seen it.
> *I:* But how do you know about it if you haven't seen it?
> *F* (1): She [points to friend] told me about it. She said to me, "Oh, it's dead good! 'Cause it cries."
> *F* (2): No, I told you it cried because it used to be in its pod with its brothers and sisters.
> *F* (3): Yeah, and then it says, "Nobody makes a pea mushy like Bachelors."
> *I:* What was your reaction to not having seen the advert?
> *F* (1): I want to see it. It sounds dead cute. I want to see if it's as good as everybody says. (research interview, March 15, 1995)

In these kinds of interactions the viewers discussed both the ad itself and the visual and discursive pleasure derived from its decoding (Pateman 1983, p. 201). The viewer clearly has taken a great deal of pleasure from the interpretation of this particular ad, and the informant wants to experience that same degree of pleasure. There is, however, a more subtle rationale for the desire to see a particular ad. The social interactions that formed during free periods in the sixth form were an opportunity to strengthen existing group structures and interpersonal relations through the discussion of the latest advertising executions. In order to take part in these group interactions, an individual had to have actually experienced the text through reception. Experiencing the ad becomes the ticket of entry into a particular part of the group's social exchange, and this experience in turn contributes to the ongoing structure of that group. Without the experience of the text, individuals were unable to participate in these social exchanges, and the rest of the group continued to discuss the ad while the unfortunate individual remains physically present but semantically absent from the group.

> *Male* (*M*): Everyone was waiting to see what was going to happen next [in the latest ad]. Whether she was going to get into bed with him or what. But, like, the next day they were all going on about what had happened, and they tried to describe what had happened, but it just wasn't the same as seeing it, you know.
> *I:* Who was talking about it at the time?
> *M:* Oh, it was everyone in the common room.
> *I:* And how did you feel when you didn't know what they were talking about ?
> *M:* I was trying to catch up with what they were saying, but they were already talking about it, so they wouldn't explain what had happened. I felt left out, I suppose. When I did see it, I finally knew what they were talking about. And the next time the conversation came up, I could say "Oh, I did see that." (research interview, February 2, 1995)

There were many incidences in which informants described the experience of being "left out," "talked around," or "blanked" when they were unable to participate in a

particular exchange because they had not experienced the text. For sixth formers, adolescents highly attuned to their social affiliations, the experience of being present in a chosen group but being unable to exhibit membership rites was a particularly agonizing one. The motivation to view a particular ad stemmed from both the individual desire to enjoy the pleasures of the text and the socially contextualized need to experience the text in order to ensure participation in any future advertising-based interaction that maintained one's position within one's chosen social group.

Many theorists have noted that ads provide the "incentive for much of our word of mouth conversation" (Sherry 1987, p. 441), but in these types of interaction the informants are describing the phatic role that advertising plays in the social life of the sixth form. Fiske (1990, p. 36) defines the phatic function as that which "keeps the channels of communication open. . . . It is oriented towards the contact factor, the physical and psychological connections that must exist." Phatic speech exists as a precursor to other, more important social interactions, and it depends on finding a common subject matter, such as the weather (Liebes and Katz 1990, p. 92), that all participants are familiar with and can therefore discuss in order to open and then maintain everyday discursive relationships. Television programs and their "common referents" (Lull 1980, p. 203) have been recognized as an important source for phatic communication (Buckingham 1993, p. 40). Advertising's peculiar media goals of maximal exposure and continued repetition, however, ensure that, over and above television programs and all other forms of popular culture, it is "the most widely shared experience in our culture" (Wright and Snow 1980, p. 326) and thus the most likely to have been experienced by all the members of a particular group. This interpretive ubiquity provides the ideal fodder for phatic speech as textual experience provides semantic entry into the later social interactions and exchanges that contribute to group identity.

> *F:* If you're sitting there and someone starts talking about adverts, and you haven't got a clue what they're going on about, you feel dead left out . . . and you can't, you know. . . . You say, "Oh, I didn't see that," and then they just carry on talking around you. But if you've seen it, you can join in, and you know what they're going on about, so it makes you feel . . . like . . . more in with the group . . . part of it more. (research interview, February 24, 1995)

Many of the informants could recall being "blanked" by a social group during a phatic interaction, and some were also able to describe subsequent attempts to overcome the absence of textual experience that had originally caused this situation to occur. In some instances informants attempted to create a surrogate viewing experience by imagining what the ad was like by listening to the conversation of others who had seen the ad and then pretending that they too had experienced the text. In more extreme cases several informants described their efforts to see an ad that has been featured in a phatic interaction in the sixth form.

> *M:* You look out for it. . . . You always look for it when the adverts are on.
> *F:* Yeah, you sit and watch the television and see if you can see it.
> *I:* Why would you wait for the advert to come on?
> *F:* Just so you know what they are talking about then . . . so you can join in.
> *M:* So you can say, "Oh, yeah—seen that." Because you feel left out sometimes. (research interview, February 10, 1995)

This image of a viewer sitting in front of a television actively seeking out the advertising message completely contradicts the low-involvement conception of the advertising audience characterized by passive absorption and a lack of personal activity (Krugman 1965, p. 355). This apparent contradiction between the unmotivated passivity of the traditional advertising audience and the involved proactivity reported in this study can be explained by the paradigmatic divide that exists between the conception of advertising as information and advertising as meaning (McCracken 1987). Advertising as information is used predominately by the consumer to "seek out and manipulate information in order to make choices between consumer goods and purchases" (McCracken 1987, p. 121). From this perspective, advertising therefore occupies a relatively ancillary role in the life world of the consumer. If, however, the advertising text is socially contextualized and its role in negotiating social settings is recognized (Scott 1994, p. 475), then it is clear that the advertising medium will occupy a far more important place in the life world of some individuals. This is particularly relevant if the individuals in question are hypersocialized teenagers. The sixth formers who claimed that they sat with their faces pressed against the television switching from channel to channel in search of a particular ad had not suddenly developed an unusual, irrational obsession with consumer culture or product purchase. They were merely displaying a postmodern manifestation of an age-old teenage phenomenon: the need to fit in.

Interpreting the Text: The Power of Advertising Meaning

Experiencing the text via reception proved to be sufficient for the sixth formers to enter the phatic discussions described above. When, however, the conversation shifted to the actual meaning of an ad, the situation required that the viewer had both experienced the ad and interpreted it in a meaningful way. Experiencing the text and interpreting its meaning are two very different activities. As Fiske (1990, p. 164) points out, "Reading is not akin to using a tin opener to reveal the meanings of the message." Rather, the viewer must *construct* meaning from the text through the act of interpretation. Although the text itself offers some guidance in structuring the reader's interpretation, all texts are to some degree open or polysemic in their interpretive scope (Jensen 1995). Indeed, the advertising text has been recognized as a particularly polysemic medium that "admits a range of possible alternatives" to the advertising audience (Myers 1983, p. 216). Complicating this wide semantic

range are the puzzle-like hermeneutic tasks that advertising texts often contain. In many instances advertising meanings are deliberately opaque in order to increase involvement in the message and the product being promoted (Williamson 1978). This combination of an open, interpretive range and hermeneutic puzzles often left sixth formers unable to interpret the ad in a meaningful way. Informants described seeking out interpretive assistance from their peers.

> *I:* Do you ever talk about ads to each other?
> *M* (1): I was explaining that one to you this morning, wasn't I?
> *M* (2): Oh, Yeah.
> *I:* Tell me about that.
> *M* (1): It was the *Daily Star* one. We were just talking about adverts, and he said he didn't get the one where a cat jumped out of this bag. And I explained to him that it was a catch phrase, "the cat's out of the bag," . . . you know. (research interview, April 6, 1995)

This kind of interaction has been observed in television viewing and defined as mutual aid: a conversation that serves in "legitimating understandings, interpretations and evaluations . . . of what the program means" (Liebes and Katz 1990, p. 83). Many of the sixth formers recalled instances when they had either asked or been asked what a particular execution meant. The sixth formers appeared to accept mutual aid as an acceptable everyday interaction within the context of the sixth form and in the company of their immediate friends, where there was an implicit equality within social groups. Indeed in many cases their first recollection of discussing ads was inquiring about the meaning of a particular ad from their friends. In contrast, several informants recalled the experience of asking for mutual aid from family members to be an embarrassing one.

> *I:* Any adverts that you just don't understand?
> *F:* That "Tizer" one.
> *I:* How did it feel?
> *F:* I just felt dead stupid until I got someone to explain it.
> *I:* Who did you ask?
> *F:* My sister. Well, I didn't ask. She just said, "That's funny isn't it?" And I said, "Yes," and she said, "You don't know what it means, do you?" and I said, "Yes, I do," and then she told me.
> *I:* Why did you pretend you did know what it meant?
> *F:* Well, because she's only 13, and that makes you feel really stupid. She likes to feel cleverer than me. It makes me feel thick [stupid]. (research interview, February 17, 1995)

In this instance, the inability to possess a meaningful interpretation of an ad placed the informant in a position of weakness in relation to her younger sister and, because of the inversion of the usual familial hierarchy of older/younger sibling, this caused acute embarrassment. Morley (1986) describes the role that access to the television played in the politics of the family and noted that one member of the family often exercised their dominance over others through restricting or limiting the act of television viewing. Within this study, however, the locus of power was not only the access to, or experience of, the advertising media but

also the meaningful interpretation of the text. This Foucauldian combination of power and knowledge positions the interpretation of advertising meaning as a contributory element to the social hierarchies that sixth formers exist within. The powerful potential of advertising interpretation was also noted by O'Donohoe (1994, p. 68) who described informants desperately trying to work out an ad's meaning before it came up in conversation. Without a meaningful interpretation of an ad, individuals find themselves in a weakened position relative to those who have been able to make sense from the text, and this powerlessness often contradicts the extant hierarchies that exist within the family.

> *F:* Some of the adverts my Mum and Dad watch . . . they won't understand what it means.
> *I:* Really? And what do they do then? Describe that situation.
> *F:* Well, you'll be sitting watching an advert, and they usually are aimed at young people. You can see on her face that she doesn't understand it . . . not just that she doesn't understand it, but why they advertise it in that way. She'll just wait for the next one to come along . . . 'cause it would probably embarrass her.
> *I:* Why would it embarrass her?
> *F:* Cause I know and she doesn't. She's my Mum and she's supposed to know. She likes to think she knows everything. (research interview, February 21, 1995)

Evaluating the Text: Advertising Meaning as Eisegesic Token

Buckingham (1993, p. 73) observes that in talking about the television programs we like and dislike "we are inevitably 'positioning' ourselves" relative to others in the conversation. Mick and Buhl (1992, p. 333) use the term "eisegesis" to describe how the interpretation of a particular ad can reveal an individual's viewpoint to others. Within the sixth form, the most common form of advertising-based interaction was the critical evaluation of the ads that the group had seen. In these instances, an individual first experienced, then interpreted, and finally verbally evaluated the advertising text with others. These conversations began with one individual describing a particular execution to other members of the sixth form. Rather than a simple phatic acceptance that they too had seen the ad, however, the conversation then progressed to each individual commenting on that ad or introducing an ad that they too either loved or hated. In all of these interactions, the sixth formers were polarized between ads that were perceived as "cool" and those that were "crap." As the following exchange illustrates, sixth formers often elicited particular ads that they had enjoyed in order to exhibit their particular tastes in front of the rest of the group.

> *F* (1): We were talking about adverts this morning, weren't we?
> *F* (2): Yeah, we were.
> *F* (1): We were talking about all our favorite adverts. You know the car ones, . . . the ones that make you believe they are having an affair. You know that advert where she . . .

TABLE 1

EXAMPLE OF ADVERTISING DIALOGIC COMMUNITY

Participant	Discourse	Group identification motive
Female (1)	"That old Persil one is back on, that one with laddo on when he does his own washing."	
Female (2)	"Oh, yeah, and he goes . . ."	We share the same viewing experiences.
All	[imitating ad] "'Oh, Mam!'"	We share a knowledge of, and appreciation of, the same moment in the text.
Female (1)	"That's back on again."	
Female (3)	"That's my brother, that is." [laughs]	I can identify with your retelling of the ad.
Female (2)	"What's it for . . . Persil?"	
All	"Persil."	We all know what the ad is promoting.
Female (2)	"And he goes . . . erm [imitates ad] 'I want my green shirt!'"	We share a knowledge of, and appreciation of, the same moment in the text.
Female (1)	[imitating ad] "'It's in the wash.'"	
Female (2)	"And he goes, 'What am I going to do?' and she says . . . ."	
Female (1)	"'Wear the white one.'"	
Female (2)	"'Wear the white one,' and he goes, 'Oh . . .' and he puts the washing powder all over the floor, and he can't work the machine and then . . ."	We share a knowledge of, and appreciation of, the same moment in the text.
Female (1)	"And then you see him at the end wearing his white shirt, so he ended up not washing it."	
Female (3)	"I think that's everybody's brother, isn't it?"	All of us can identify with this portrayal because we have all had similar experiences.

SOURCE.—Observed conversation, February 13, 1995.

F (2): Where she asks for a ride?
F (1): Yeah, you think it's his mistress, and it turns out to be his wife at the end.
F (2): Yeah, and he's got . . . like . . . four kids.
I: Why were you talking about that one, then?
F (1): It was just a cool advert. (research interview, January 30, 1995)

Willis (1990, p. 48) notes from his research on British youth audiences that the question, What is your favorite ad? has taken on a great degree of cultural significance in recent years. Within the sixth form, all the individuals appeared to possess a continually updated personal portfolio of favorite executions that had been socially evaluated and endorsed within a larger group. This process of socially evaluating cool ads often went further than simply affirming the selection of another member of the group. Cool ads were "exploded" into their constituent semantic parts, and then each element was retold within the group. As these retellings progressed, it was possible to note how each member of the group was simultaneously identifying themselves with the group through their shared knowledge and interpretation of the text as well as helping to recount a particular execution (see Table 1).

The repetitive nature of the advertising media, particularly for low-involvement products such as the soap powder example in Table 1, enables this kind of dramaturgical group retelling of the text. Instead of a basic endorsement of one member's selection of a particular execution, the group acts as a "dialogic community" (Arnold and Fischer 1994, p. 57) and enters into the text in order to hermeneutically re-view it. This activity serves to strengthen the group's shared interpretation of the ad and extends its members'

sense of a shared identity. The narrative limitations of a 15- or 30-second advertising text do not limit the eisegesic potential of advertising in these kinds of interactions. Rather, their brevity and simplicity ensures that every element of the text is familiar to those who have encountered it, and this familiarity enables this kind of group retelling of the ad. In other examples, sixth formers were also observed picking up on specific narrative or aesthetic elements of an ad or alternatively replaying the ad's dialogue in character roles or as a synchronized group.

> Darren showed me how he and his "mate" Paul had said goodbye the previous evening after rugby practice. Smiling throughout he had recalled, "So I said to Paul, 'Here's what I'm gonna get now,' and I did the Chicken Tonight thing . . . you know!" Then he tucked his hands under his armpits and ducked out his head a few times, imitating the actors from the Chicken Tonight ad for me. The sight was funny and I had begun to laugh. With growing hilarity Darren had then recalled that Paul had mirrored his actions and said, "Aye, me too." They had both left the field laughing. (researcher note, January 27, 1995)

The sixth formers proved equally adept at identifying ads that they did not like and that were typically classified as being "crap." Again the eisegesic function of this discourse serves to identify where a particular individual stands but in this case in terms of what they do not like. Often these interactions took the form of simply listing "crap" or detested executions that sixth formers had interpreted.

> *F:* Oh, that chicken one. I hate it when they change into those chicken costumes, and they're dancing in their office.
> *M:* I hate that one for chips, when he says, "Mine's crinkle

cut, and they taste really great!" As if you'd talk like that. It makes you want to punch them.
F: And the one for Bodyform when they are in the desert and the radio says the weather is going to get hotter and it just is . . . oh, I hate it so much. (observed conversation, April 3, 1995)

Willis (1990, p. 51) notes that "collectively criticizing advertisements affirms the evaluative criteria that young people themselves are developing." Widdicombe and Woofitt (1990) similarly conclude that the explicit, verbal display of evaluative criteria is often the key to achieving authenticity within a particular group of young people. The dismissal of particular advertising executions and the reasons for their rejection can act, as in the case of cool evaluations, as a way of confirming group identity and an individual's membership within that group. In the most extreme cases of negative eisegesis, sixth formers were observed evaluating an ad negatively and claiming that they were unable to understand it. This reaction was particularly prevalent in male members of the sixth form and their evaluations of female-oriented ads.

> *I*: Do some people understand adverts better than others, then?
> *F* (1): The lasses get the Gold Blend ads much better than the lads, 'cause the lads just don't see the romance story behind it.
> *F* (2): [Laughs] Do you get the Gold Blend ads, John?
> *F* (1): Do you even know what we're talking about?
> *M:* [Embarrassed] No. I don't! (research interview, February 24, 1995)

Rather than experiencing, interpreting, and then evaluating the ad, many male informants, when faced with an ad perceived to be feminine or designed for a female audience, portrayed themselves as unable to interpret the text meaningfully because its content was radically opposed to the masculine self-image they were trying to project. Ads such as the Gold Blend ads that featured female protagonists, or that promoted products that were perceived to be feminine, were often interpreted with this incomprehensible reaction.

> *M:* Right, she's just come off doing some kind of sport, and she says, you know, "I want to wash and go," and all this crap. So she gets into the shower and washes her hair, and she says, "I hope I get hair like the lass off the advert." . . . But she is the lass on the advert and tosses her hair about and all that.
> *I:* So what's your reaction to that ?
> *M:* It's just crap, eh? (research interview, January 31, 1995)

Faced with a text containing dominant female ideology, the male interpreters are keen to display their inability to successfully interpret the meanings of the text. They perform an "aberrant reading" of the text (Hall [1973] 1980, p. 135) in which the reader is "aware of the dominant aspects of the text's repertoire and the conventions for interpreting it and chooses for various reasons, be they literary or cultural, to read the text differently" (McCormick and Waller 1987, p. 207). For example, in one British advertising campaign a series of female protagonists were portrayed

as being so involved in the consumption of Flake candy bars that they ignored mundane occurrences such as a ringing phone or an overflowing bathtub. Several male sixth formers expressed incomprehension that the women in the ads would let the phone ring or let water seep over the bathtub and into the apartment. In the latter example, one informant complained that it would cost a "fortune to fix up the spot she's flooded." This emphasis on a rational interpretation of an overtly hedonic portrayal draws a clear parallel with the contrast between the different ideologies of logical masculinity and sensuous femininity noted by Hirschman (1993). Although the heightened sensitivity to gender identities during adolescence suggests that this finding would be somewhat reduced in other age groups, it is clear that advertising eisegesis can contribute to gender construction.

The negative evaluation and aberrant reading of ads serve the same purpose as identifying favorite executions. By sharing the same portfolios of "cool" and "crap" ads and by exploding their content, and with it the rationale for either liking or loathing them, groups of sixth formers were able to use adverting evaluations as tokens in their systems of social exchange (Willis 1990, p. 49). In effect, particular groups of sixth formers formed interpretive communities (Fish 1980) around advertising texts because the proximity of their social location and cultural competencies had led them to interpret the text in a similar way and with similar semantic results (Radway 1995, p. 63). Indeed several groups showed an awareness of their membership in an interpretive advertising community.

> *I:* Do you ever see an advert on TV which you don't understand but the rest of your friends do?
> *M:* No, because most of us lot, we just don't understand what . . . like, if I don't understand it, he [points to his friend at the table] wouldn't understand it either, eh?
> *I:* Why do you think that is?
> *M:* 'Cause . . . we're both . . . like, just say we're sitting in a room, and I'll say, "Oh, I didn't understand that [advert]." Like most of our mates will say, "Oh, I didn't understand it, either." I don't know why, like . . . probably because we all understand the same stuff. We understand the same things. I don't know. (research interview, April 10, 1995)

The conjecture by these informants that they understand the same kinds of ads would suggest an explicit recognition of the existence of interpretive communities centered around advertising texts. Just as conspicuous consumption represents the construction of individual and group identities through the visual display of consumer goods, the sixth formers continually participated in conspicuous reception in which their interpretations of the advertising text, whether good or bad, brief or extended, provided verbalized evidence of both their individual identities and their affinity to the particular social groups that they interacted with. Once again the semantic ubiquity of advertising meanings heightened the suitability of this medium for conspicuous reception. As Myers (1994, p. 8) notes, unlike all other forms of popular culture, most people eventually see the latest advertising campaign, and as a result, most will have an opinion about it. The ubiquitous presence of advertising

within any culture makes it an ideal point of reference for eisegesic evaluations.

Ritualizing the Text: The Transference of Advertising Meaning

Advertising and ritual have often been linked together in a variety of ways (Sherry 1987; Wright and Snow 1980). Otnes and Scott (1996) have recently developed this association by describing a two-way relationship between advertising and ritual in which advertising can influence existing rituals, while those same rituals can also be incorporated into ads in order to convey meaning. Wicke (1988) extends this connection further by demonstrating how advertising texts, very much like organized religion, can often provide the basis for ritualistic audience interactions. The sixth formers demonstrated this link by providing examples of how their interpretation of an advertising text could provide the basis for new ritualistic interactions that were then enacted within their life world. For example, in a very popular series of ads the car company Renault portrayed the relationship of a French father and daughter who, aside from both driving Renault cars, repeatedly found themselves in a series of comedic situations that always ended with the daughter inquiring "Papa?" and the father replying "Nicole!" The repetition of these ads and the resulting salience in the awareness of the television audience provided the "stereotypical script" (Bird 1980, p. 20) for a ritualistic encounter between one sixth former named Nicola and her father.

> *I:* What's the best ad on television at the moment?
> *F:* I like that Nicole one.
> *I:* Why do you like that one?
> *F:* Oh, because my dad calls me Nicole because of it.
> *I:* Tell me about that.
> *F:* The first time he seen it, it was like . . . the bloke on it goes, "Nicole," and she goes, "Papa," and my older sister used to call my dad "Papa," and I used to say, "Oh, my God, as if you call your Dad that!" So now he will always say "Nicole," and I've got to say "Papa," or else he will get in a mood [laughs].
> *I:* When does he make you do that, then?
> *F:* When he comes home. He'll just sit there and say "Nicole," and I have to say "Papa." (research interview, February 13, 1995)

The scripted, dramaturgical nature of this repeated encounter and the exchange of meaning that occurs when the cultural categories of father and daughter are reimpressed through ritualistic exchange (Berger and Luckman 1966, p. 70) establish this interaction as a ritual (Bird 1980). According to Rook's (1985) typology, the only missing element from this interaction is the lack of any physical artifact to accompany the ritualistic performance. This omission reflects the fact that this ritual, like all of the other instances of advertising ritual observed during the study, can be classified as a "verbal ritual" (Douglas and Isherwood 1978, p. 43) in which the material exchange of a physical good is replaced by the exchange of a verbal artifact in the form of an advertising interpretation.

The most prevalent example of advertising ritual was derived from an ad for Tango orange soda. This ad featured the humorous portrayal of a Tango drinker who is surprised by a very obese, naked bald man colored from head to toe in orange representing the beverage's shocking orange taste. The large orange man runs up to the Tango drinker and slaps him violently across each cheek before disappearing. This physical action led to the widespread imitation of the ad across playgrounds at each of the schools as children, eager to surprise peers who had yet to see the ad, replayed the ad's denouement.

> *M* (1): Well, sometimes you'd re-enact it, eh? And you'll slap their face and say, "You've been Tangoed!"
> *M* (2): Yeah, give them a good slap [laughs].
> *I:* And you've actually done that?
> *M* (2): Oh, Yeah.
> *M* (1): Yeah.
> *F:* Someone did it to me, and I hadn't seen the advert, and they came over and smacked me in the face and said, "Have you ever been Tangoed?" and I just didn't know what they were going on about.
> *I:* And how did that make you feel?
> *F:* [Laughs] I was just, like, "What was that for?" I didn't know what was going on because I hadn't seen the advert, eh? So I didn't know what it was about.
> *I:* What happened once you had see the advert?
> *F:* Well, I didn't realize that that was why they had done it, yeah? I just thought that someone had done it just for the laugh, eh? Then I saw the advert, and I still didn't click [realize] until someone did it to me again, and then I finally realized. (research interview, February 24, 1995)

Once again the ritual of approaching a peer, slapping them across the face, and repeating the catchphrase of the advertising text represents a repeated, scripted performance in which the "symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation" are used to "express and articulate meaning" (Bocock 1974, p. 37). In this instance, the lack of awareness of the victim regarding the latest advertising campaign is used to highlight their lack of cultural competency. The prevalence of this particular ritual was such that the original advertising campaign was banned by the British Independent Television Commission because children all over Britain were reenacting the ad in the social contexts of school playgrounds (Hatfield 1992). The ritualistic reenactment of advertising scripts clearly suggests the need for caution on the part of practitioners in developing executions containing aggressive or violent story lines. Furthermore, this kind of mass reenactment suggests that advertising rituals, like rituals in general (Rook 1984, p. 279), vary across a continuum that ranges from personalized reenactments such as the Papa-Nicole ritual to the mass endorsement of the Tango ritual that was described in interviews by many different social groups and encountered in each of the six research sites. One group of informants even described different advertising rituals as being "in" for a particular period of time at school suggesting that advertising rituals, like the texts that spawn them, exist within a social context for a limited period of time before losing their "ritual vitality" (Rook 1985).

The Tango ritual stands as a very simplistic example of how advertising ritual can be used in marking services (Douglas and Isherwood 1978, pp. 50–52) that distinguish between the "weak outsiders" and the "accepted, often powerful members of the community" (Wright and Snow 1980, p. 328). In the Tango ritual, this power stemmed from experiencing and interpreting the advertising text. In effect, this kind of advertising ritual is a means of highlighting disparities in what Bourdieu (1984, pp. 65–80) would classify as the "cultural capital" of different members of the sixth form. A more complex but equally commonplace example of this use of advertising ritual was derived from the advertising for Dime Bar candy. The ad featured an apparently dim-witted consumer whose shopping cart was filled to the brim exclusively with Dime Bars and who was being interviewed by a television reporter about various issues of the day. To every one of the reporter's questions the man replied "Dime Bar" in a deep, monotone voice.

> *M* (1): I've got a better example. Like, the Dime Bar example. Like, if someone's not clever, and, like, you tell them a joke or something, and they don't get it, you go up to them and say, [imitates voice from ad] "Dime Bar! Dime Bar!" Don't you?
> *I:* And who specifically would you do that to?
> *M* (1): Anyone. Anyone who doesn't get a joke, like, . . . say, everyone is laughing, and he's saying, "What's going on here?"
> *I:* Tell me about that.
> *M* (2): Well, say I tell a joke, like, . . . these three were laughing, and you were thinking, "What's he going on about? I'll have to think about it." Then I'd say, "Oh, God! You Dime Bar," you know, to say that you are thick [stupid].
> *M* (1): And then everybody would laugh at you [laughter].
> *I:* And would I not know what the Dime Bar thing was?
> *M* (2): Not unless you'd seen the advert. (research interview, January 31, 1995)

This ritualistic reenactment of the Dime Bar ad, which again was observed by the researcher or recalled by informants across every one of the sixth-form settings, was designed to convey meaning. Specifically, the ritual was always directed at a particular member of a group who was unable to interpret a joke, story, or situation in the same way as the other members and as a result was frozen out using the symbolic application of ritualistic meaning (Douglas and Isherwood 1978, p. xxii). Bastien and Bromley (1980, p. 49) note how the ritual of a public trial can isolate the defendant as a nonmember, while simultaneously enhancing the community and solidarity of everyone else in attendance. In the same way, groups of sixth formers used the Dime Bar advertising ritual to repeatedly isolate those members of the group who were not able to make meaning in the same way as the rest of an interpretive community, thus identifying these individuals as being different, while simultaneously strengthening the group identity of the ritualistic audience (Rook 1985). The Dime Bar ritual also provides an interesting illustration of how the intended function and meanings of advertising messages can change as they migrate from the textual context of their presentation to the
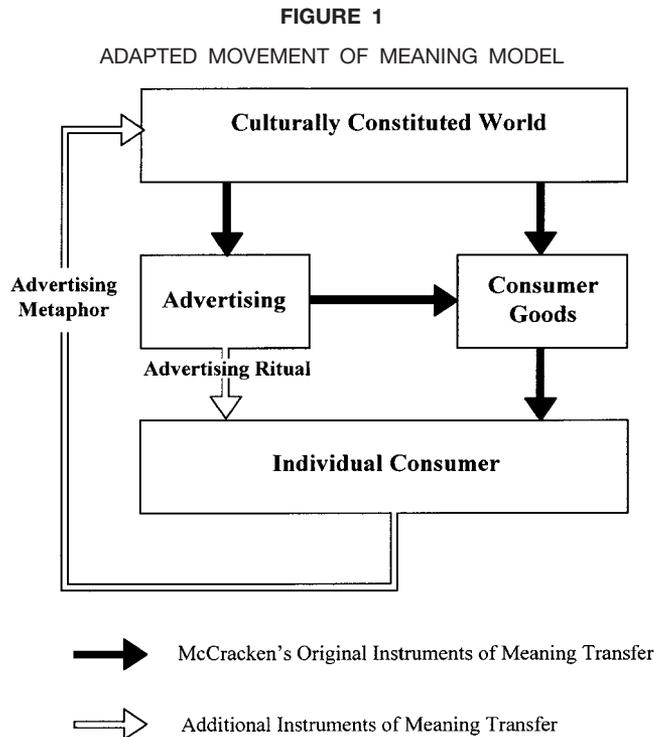
social context of their ritualistic reenactment. Without acknowledging the social context that follows advertising reception, this particular dimension of the Dime Bar advertising execution would have remained hidden.

While ritual has long been recognized as a method for deriving meaning from consumer goods (Rook 1985), ritual can also be used to derive meaning from a particular advertising text. The examples of advertising ritual observed in the sixth forms suggest that, aside from influencing extant public rituals, such as the conception of marriage, for example (Otnes and Scott 1996), advertising can also form the basis for its own unique array of ritualistic interactions that perform the same semantic functions as more traditional rituals, albeit in a more limited and temporary way. In McCracken's (1988, chap. 5) seminal model of the movement of meaning (see Fig. 1) advertising is defined as an "instrument of meaning transfer" that acts as a conduit by capturing cultural meanings and investing them into the consumer good through a process McCracken (1987, p. 122) describes as "a die-casting mechanism." These tangible goods then act as way stations of meaning for the consumer who derives meaning from them through a variety of different product-related rituals. The fact that the advertising rituals enacted by the sixth formers occurred with absolutely no usage of the products featured in the ads suggests that McCracken's model, although insightful, may underestimate and oversimplify the role of advertising in meaning transfer (see Otnes and Scott [1996], pp. 33–34, for similar criticisms of this model). Although it quite correctly shows advertising as a contributory force in product-consumption rituals, it fails to conceptualize advertising as a

cultural product in its own right (Friedmann and Zimmer 1988, p. 31) that can have its meanings consumed by the audience independent of the product that it features (Nava 1992, p. 174; Willis 1990, p. 49). Thus aside from contributing to product rituals by investing those products with symbolic meaning, the findings of this study suggest that the advertising text can also provide an independent source for rituals that are enacted in a variety of social contexts in order to confer meaning onto their participants and audience.

Applying the Text: The Role of Advertising Metaphor

> In the middle of my afternoon class the fire alarm suddenly went off and I hastily tried to evacuate the class. Following my class out of the school I managed to get them to line up outside the main building in parallel with all the other classes. We waited out there in the sun for maybe 20 minutes and the initial excitement was replaced by an odd calm as the pupils waited to see if [the school] was about to burn down to the ground. Suddenly from the back of the line one of the male students, perfectly imitating the voice and intonation of the original speaker, shouted at the top of his voice, "Oh, Tony, I think she's gonna explode!" The whole of my class and those immediately next to them in the drill lines erupted into laughter. (researcher note, n.d.)

This phrase was taken from the Tango ad that replaced the banned execution featuring the large, slapping man. The obese man was replaced by an old lady, again orange from head to toe, and holding a balloon. She sneaks up behind the drinker of Tango and literally explodes herself and the balloon in front of the individual, prompting one of the two commentators to say the line that was imitated during the fire drill. This short outburst and the laughter that followed it illustrate another role for advertising meaning in the social context of the sixth form: that of advertising metaphor. When individuals encounter a phenomenon or experience that is new to them they seek to make sense of it through metaphor (Leary 1990). Metaphor is defined as the "juxtaposition of two normally unaffiliated referents" (Radman 1997, p. xiv) that are conjoined together in order to take elements of the known, accepted meanings of a concrete concept and apply them to an abstract concept that is unknown to the group (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 113). As in the case of advertising ritual, the result of advertising metaphor is the transfer of meaning; but unlike the scripted, repeated ritualistic interactions, advertising metaphor is a spontaneous, one-time transfer of meaning by one individual. In this instance, the class's concrete conceptualizations of a familiar ad are transferred to this new and potentially threatening situation in order to apprehend and make sense of it.

Aside from this informative function, metaphor can also be used for expressive purposes (Fernandez 1977, p. 104), where the metaphoric role is not simply to make sense of a new phenomenon but to "transform our perception" (Wright and Snow 1980, p. 328) and thus define an existing phe-

nomenon in a new way. In several schools, informants described the use of advertising metaphor to position members of the teaching staff in unusual and often humorous ways.

> *F* (1): Oh, and Mr. Kinsella, . . . when that bloke used to be on the Hamlet advert with the hair and his head, and we used to . . .
> *F* (2): Oh, yeah, Mr. Kinsella.
> *F* (1): Oh, and we used to call Mr. Kinsella that because every time it's windy his hair always blows back, so it's dead funny.
> *I:* And who would call him that?
> *F* (1): Everybody in the school.
> *F* (2): Everybody would say "Hamlet Man." (research interview, January 27, 1995)

The Hamlet ad featured a bald man with one long strand of hair combed backwards trying to get his photograph taken in a booth and repeatedly making a fool of himself. Crocker (1977, p. 47) notes that metaphors are often comic in nature in order to achieve the social goal of "providing a perspective in which a threatening 'this' can be discussed in terms of an aptly incongruous 'that.'" In this instance the advertising metaphor emphasizes one particular attribute of Mr. Kinsella in order to make light of his authoritarian presence at the school. The fact that most of the sixth formers have experienced the threatening presence of Mr. Kinsella, the topic for the metaphor, and they have also experienced the humor of the Hamlet ad, the metaphor vehicle (Zaltman 1995), means that the "cross fertilization" (Radman 1997, p. 167) of these disparate meanings provides both a new way of seeing the world and also enables the sixth formers to unite behind this new interpretation and thus oppose one element of the powerful hierarchy of the school.

In another instance, the researcher's first experience in one of the schools provided another example of advertising metaphor.

> I was escorted up the stairs to the Headmaster's office by Mrs. Jones, a very obese and friendly Deputy Head. She left me, I sat outside the Head's office, while she went to tell him that I had arrived to talk about coming into school next term. Seated opposite me were two 12-year-old boys who were seated quietly, perhaps fearfully, on their chairs—their faces were pale and quiet. I assumed they were there to be punished and had been sent here to also see the Headmaster. As soon as Mrs. Jones entered the Head's office and closed the door behind her the two boys erupted into whispered laughter and one, red faced with laughter, swung round on the chair and whispered audibly to the other: "She's like the Tango fella, great big . . . fat." Both dissolved into hysterics only to return to silence the minute the unknowing Mrs. Jones re-entered the waiting room and asked me to come with her. I caught a glance at the two boys as I picked up my briefcase; both were once again impassive. (researcher note, December 14, 1994)

In each of these three examples, pupils are faced with a threatening and potentially frightening situation or individual and the use of advertising metaphor serves to garner humor and thus defuse the threat being encountered. The familiarity and humor of the metaphor vehicle (the ad)

contrasts with the strangeness or seriousness of the original metaphor topic (the fire drill, Mr. Kinsella, Mrs. Jones), and this reduces its impact on the metaphor audience. Advertising's role as a source for metaphoric meaning is predicated, once again, on the general semantic ubiquity of its presence in the interpretive repertoires of the sixth formers. Typically, any metaphor vehicle is derived from a shared "experiential basis" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 19) that all the members of a group can draw on in order to make sense of the topic of metaphoric transfer. The source of the metaphor "consists of understandings about a particular domain held in common by members of a culture" (Sapir 1977, p. 10). Although traditionally this has meant that metaphors have been derived from universal domains such as animals, body parts, or sensations, within the social context of the sixth form the advertising domain was also an almost universal source of shared experiences and interpretations. Advertising possesses vertical ubiquity in the sense that an individual will often see a particular ad a number of times and thus become remarkably familiar with its content. Advertising also possesses horizontal ubiquity in that it is experienced across a wide number of individuals and groups. Advertising's vertical ubiquity ensures familiarity and, as a result, it is often the first source of meanings that the metaphoric user draws from when creating a metaphor. Advertising's horizontal ubiquity guarantees that the advertising metaphor, once created, will resonate with the group it is verbalized within and thus represent a readily comprehensible transfer of meaning.

Aside from being used to reconceptualize teachers in comic, nonthreatening terms, advertising metaphors were also used to transfer meanings to fellow sixth formers and position them in new, more disparaging or insulting ways.

> *F* (1): Yeah . . . but it gets talked about when [laughs], certain people have got quite a lot of makeup on and [laughs]. Well, basically there is the girl who wears rather a lot of makeup, a Tango coloration. I was talking to my friend on the phone about it the other night.
> *F* (2): Were you?
> *I:* What were you saying?
> *F* (1): He was just talking about one of my friends, and how she looks, and he just says, "But she's rather tanned, 'cause she wears a lot of makeup," and I said, "Yeah, she has got a Tango coloration." I've even had an argument about it . . . like . . . erm. She made some comment about how I looked, and I said to her that she reminded me of a certain "Tango person." (research interview, April 11, 1995)

The shared awareness of the metaphoric reference to the "Tango person" draws immediate recognition from both the addresser and addressee, thus guaranteeing that the attempt to semantically reposition the latter individual will have its desired effect. Rather than using a literal statement that the individual wears too much foundation or is indelicate with her makeup, the sixth former uses the exaggerated, performative nature of metaphor (Gergen 1990, p. 274) to draw a more humorous and unflattering portrait. In effect, advertising metaphor is being used in the construction of an adolescent pecking order in which one sixth former attempts to position his- or herself above another in the social hierarchy using advertising meanings.

Although the actual motivation underpinning the use of advertising metaphor will vary idiographically, in each instance the metaphoric application of the advertising text represents a clear example of how advertising is used as an important sociosemantic resource in the constant making and remaking of a meaningful conception of the everyday world. Advertising has been recognized as a cultural system that both expresses reality and structures experience (Sherry 1987, p. 447) and one that is used by individuals to "negotiate their lives" (Mick and Buhl 1992, p. 336). Advertising provides a "repertoire viewers can draw upon both for representing and understanding themselves and for making sense of external reality" (Giaccardi 1995, p. 114). The use of metaphor in applying advertising meanings to everyday people and events represents a particularly explicit method of transposing the representations of reality found in advertising onto the viewer's life world. It is almost as if the invisible join that separates the mediated reality of advertising from the lived reality of existence could be glimpsed for a few tantalizing seconds.

The existence of advertising metaphor suggests a second modification to McCracken's meaning transfer model (see Fig. 1). For McCracken (1988, p. 88), when the individual consumer transfers the meaning of the consumer good to their self-concept through product ritual, the flow of meaning has "completed its journey." Meaning, however, is created by the "continual circularity of significance" (Eco 1981, p. 198). As a result, the movement of meaning is circular rather than vertical, and its location is transitory rather than terminal. Advertising metaphor, shown in Figure 1, represents the final stage in this semantic circuit, as symbolic meanings are transported from culture, invested into the advertising text, extracted from that text by interpretation and ritual, and then finally reapplied to the cultural world through the metaphoric sense making of the interpreter.

DISCUSSION

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this study is the acceptance that advertising can form the basis for a wide variety of social interactions. Furthermore, these interactions can potentially influence both the qualitative nature and quantitative magnitude of the effect of a particular execution on members of the target audience. Different social contexts are, therefore, just as likely as different media contexts to have an influence on advertising effect. This conclusion suggests an expansion of the concept of advertising context to include the social setting of the viewer alongside the textual setting of the ad. Furthermore, the observational and interview data from this study suggests that the sixth-form informants were able to use advertising texts independently from the product that the ads were promoting. In all the many different social uses of the advertising texts recorded during this study, such as the Dime Bar ritual, for example, no product cue was required

and no mention was made of any aspect of product consumption. The researchers did not, on an a priori basis, attempt to avoid the influence of product consumption on advertising interactions. This connection simply did not emerge from the research. The absence of any reference to product consumption in this study represents a significant finding because it empirically illustrates the theorized contention that advertising may be consumed independently of the product it sponsors. This, in turn, suggests that it may be time to elevate the concept of advertising above its status as a complex, but nonetheless intermediary, conduit in the process of product consumption. Instead, consumer researchers must accept that advertising is itself a cultural product that can, through experience, interpretation, evaluation, ritual, and metaphor, conspicuously confer and convey personal and group meanings. This is a shift that is consistent with the postmodern emphasis on signified meanings over their initial signifier. Symbolic meanings that were intended to only have an impact when experienced in connection with the product signifier are sometimes consumed directly from the ad itself. Irrespective of its managerially relevant role as a promoter of products, advertising represents a phenomenon that is often consumed in its own right and its exploration and conceptualization should be regarded "as an end in itself" within consumer research (Holbrook 1995, p. 15).

Rather than simply proposing that advertising, in common with all other forms of popular culture, is often consumed in and of itself in the social contexts that follow from its reception, we must also associate the unique nature of the advertising text with a set of qualitatively different audience practices. Advertising, as Scott (1994, p. 477) reminds us, is not like other texts, and a comparison between the social uses discovered in this study and those derived from Lull's (1980) exploration of the social uses of television, for example, reveals that very different social practices emerge from these different genres. Just as the advertising text differs from the program material that surrounds it, so too the kinds of social interactions that use advertising meanings are different from those observed in the audiences for television programs or the readership of a particular genre of the popular press. The important point to note here is that the social interactions that surrounded the advertising texts in this study occurred because of, not despite, the mundane, repetitive, and everyday properties of the advertising genre. For example, without the simplistic format and repeated showing of advertising texts, the power of advertising metaphors to offer an alternative description of reality that resonated across a particular group would have been significantly diminished. For too long advertising has occupied a subsidiary position to that of other forms of popular culture and mass communication because of the perception that, as a genre, advertising is in some way subordinate to the sponsoring media that it is inserted into. If, however, as Raymond Williams argues, culture is the ordinary, then no other text occupies a more cultural position in the life world of the viewer/reader/consumer than advertising, and this position suggests further empirical attention.

Speaking to the more banausic perspective, it is also possible to see how the study of advertising's role in the social contexts of the everyday can contribute managerially relevant insights into product consumption. Accepting that advertising may well be interpreted and used independently of the consumer good it features does not permanently divorce the ad from the product. Rather, it speaks to a more subtle and realistic portrayal of the advertising audience than the simple stimulus-response models that still dominate consumer research (Scott 1994, p. 475). Clearly, for example, the heightened eisegesic evaluations of an ad multiplied across a particularly active social context could have enormous positive or negative implications for a campaign's effect on a target audience. Managerially relevant advertising theory must extend its horizons beyond oversimplistic cause-and-effect models of advertising response and begin to take into account the subtle influences created by the social contexts that exist between reception and purchase. The fact that these influences are not empirically accessible within the dominant paradigm of advertising research and are not relatively simple to calculate and predict does not reduce their validity as an important variable in understanding advertising effect.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The future exploration of this potentially rewarding area of consumer behavior is predicated on epistemological shifts in both traditional and interpretive research agendas. Traditional advertising researchers must accept the inherent limitations in the external validity of laboratory experiments and acknowledge the role of naturalistic inquiry in providing an essential empirical window on everyday advertising reception. Interpretive researchers must also recognize the importance of naturalistic explorations of advertising interpretation and shift some of the empirical focus away from product-oriented studies of consumption to advertising-oriented studies of reception and meaning use.

The findings explored in this article are drawn directly from the intersection of a particular social context found within a very small area in the northwest of England, a very restricted sample of 17- and 18-year-old sixth-form students and their interpretations of a particular period of British television ads. Thus this particular article, like any other ethnographic project, cannot offer a nomological panorama of advertising's total role in the social interactions and exchanges that occur in any and every social context. Rather, this research describes one particular group, in one particular place, at one particular time. The phenomena recorded and interpreted in this study are, therefore, inextricably linked in an holistic fashion to the particular social contexts that were encountered during the study. Clearly different groups, encountering different ads, in different social contexts, and at a different stage in their lifetime, may well use advertising meanings in very different ways. The emphasis lies with future interpretive research to build a variegate corpus on the social role of advertising meaning that can confirm, reject, or expand on the thematic catego-

ries of advertising interaction identified in this particular article. The authors strongly encourage this endeavor and believe that at least four areas can be identified for future research.

First, other social contexts and the groups that inhabit these contexts must form the basis for future research. Different social contexts will reveal different phenomena, and it is only with a wide array of contexts that consumer research can begin to develop a more general theoretical awareness of the social implications of advertising meaning. Second, all the informants in this particular study, as in the case in O'Donohoe's (1994) research, exclusively limited their interactions to television advertising. This represents a meaningful finding in itself, but other studies could explore naturalistic settings in which the other forms of advertising media could be observed in social contexts. Third, the lack of stores and consumption activity within the sixth-form setting may have severely restricted the interaction of product consumption with advertising-based interactions. Research that studies the social uses of advertising in a setting where products are more readily available may reveal more about the role of product consumption in advertising-based interactions and vice versa. Finally, the absence of research on the social uses of advertising is by no means the only implication of the prevalence of the solitary subject in consumer research; many other forms of social phenomena related to advertising remain unarticulated and unexplored. The most obvious and arguably most important future study in this area would be an ethnographic exploration of the actual act of advertising viewing or reading in a variety of different social settings.

The conclusion that advertising plays a role in the social contexts of everyday interaction is hardly revelatory. In the vignette that began this article, John Book's attempt at a comic retelling of a familiar advertising catchphrase to ease an otherwise uncomfortable situation is an action all of us can identify with. We all have anecdotal experiences of conversations or social interactions that centered around particular advertising campaigns or executions. The absence of research in this area, however, means that the empirical and theoretical foci of advertising research will remain with the solitary subject until we fully accept and explore the social contexts that contain, constrain, and convey the meanings of the advertising text.

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