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The article reviews the conceptual foundations of advertising polysemy—the occurrence of different interpretations for the same advertising message. We provide a cross-disciplinary perspective on advertising polysemy, with examples from research and advertising practice, and a framework to explain the conditions that lead to the emergence of multiple interpretations for the same message. We review what we call purposeful polysemy as strategic ambiguity. Propositions for research are provided, and implications for studying and understanding polysemy's prevalence in advertising are discussed.

The topic of this article is polysemy in advertising: the occurrence of multiple meanings for the same advertising message. In recent years, practitioners have emphasized the difficult nature of advertising interpretation (e.g., Hackley 1999; Malefyt 2003) and over the past few decades the trend in advertising copywriting has been towards an increase in the frequency and complexity of metaphors (Phillips and McQuarrie 2002). Benetton's creative director Oliviero Toscani, for example, has made explicit reference to his strategic attempts to imbue his work with polysemic possibilities. According to Toscani, "our advertising is a Rorschach test of what you bring to the image" (cited in O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 2). Similarly, Calvin Klein acknowledged that his advertising is replete with multiple (albeit unintended) meanings when he suggested that "people read things into my commercials that didn't even exist" (cited in Schroeder, 2000, p. 41). Often discussed as a problem for advertisers, or a barrier to comprehension, polysemy can also be considered as a strategic resource.

Although in theory all ads are potentially polysemic, in practice one meaning is likely to dominate the interpretation in the marketplace of simple commercial messages, such as classified advertising. Nevertheless, contemporary ads often include complicated rhetorical devices and, as we will argue, with an in-depth understanding of polysemy all ads are "open" to different interpretations (e.g., Hirschman and Thompson 1997; McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Scott 1994). Furthermore, some researchers argue that consumers' "advertising literacy" has grown, producing active, creative consumers, eager to decode and deconstruct meanings they see in ads (Friestad and Wright 1994; Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994). The commercial importance of advertising polysemy has not gone unnoticed in the marketing research industry. For example, branding consultancy Millward Brown offers a service named Perceptual Focus Interviews™

that promises "a fuller understanding of the potentially idiosyncratic ways in which individuals process and interpret your advertising" (Millward Brown 2002, p. 3).

Despite these recent theoretical and managerial developments, no framework has been developed to explain the occurrence of multiple meanings in advertising interpretation. Research into advertising has conventionally focused on the internal content of advertisements, conceptualizing ad comprehension as "the grasping or extracting of pre-specifiable meanings from the message" (Mick 1992, p. 411). Within this paradigm, the researcher generally decides what the ad "means"—everything else is often labeled as "unintended consequences" (e.g., Pollay 1986) or "miscomprehension" (e.g., Jacoby and Hoyer 1982). The reasons for this approach to advertising meaning are various but mainly stem from a reliance on information processing models and metaphors (McCracken 1987; Schroeder 2002; Scott 1994).

The goal of this article is to foster our theoretical understanding of how advertising works by defining the construct of polysemy as it applies to advertising and by describing the factors that lead consumers to generate multiple meanings for the same message. Toward the goal of conceptual integration, we introduce terms from different scholarly traditions to provide conceptual connections between similar—yet somewhat isolated—research streams about polysemy, and we propose a typology of strategic uses of polysemy. We endorse a multidisciplinary perspective: as all disciplines encounter "meaning," contributions to the topic of advertising polysemy can be found in several different sources, including anthropology, psychology, literary studies, semiotics, and marketing.

DEFINING POLYSEMY

… and then the Gillette ad came on the telly and I heard the man singing 'The best a man can get', and I laughed to myself and thought, I've got it now, thanks. I told Catherine about the slogan and how I had once made it my maxim. She said that she had never interpreted the phrase

in the same way as me. To her it was not 'the best a man can get' as in get for himself, grab, acquire, have; it was the best a man can be, the best he can grow, the best a man can become.
John O'Farrell, *The Best a Man Can Get,* (2000), pp. 299-300

We define advertising meaning as a subjective decoding of an advertisement shaped by the individual's socio-cultural milieu (Martin, Strack, and Stapel 2001; McCracken 1986; Ringberg and Reihlen 2008). We define advertising polysemy as the existence of at least two distinct interpretations for the same advertising message across audiences, or across time and situations. Given the prevailing focus of advertising research on attitudinal process, it should be stressed that interpreting an ad is inherently different from liking it. Polysemy occurs when people generate different basic understandings of the same message, not merely different attitudes (Condit 1989).

Synchronic Polysemy

One form of polysemy in advertising occurs across two audiences at a certain point in time—the *synchronic* aspect of advertising polysemy. The typical case is an ad that means one thing to one group of consumers and something different to another (e.g., Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). For instance, an ad targeting members of a subculture may feature cues that can mean different things to different people depending on the level of subcultural knowledge. As an example, an ad that refers to an animal strongly associated to a sport team (e.g., an alligator or a tiger) could be interpreted by different consumers either as an expression of support for the team (e.g., Gators or Tigers) or as an attempt to signify a given product quality (e.g., strength), depending on the relevance and accessibility of sport-related knowledge.

Diachronic Polysemy

A *diachronic* dimension can also characterize multiplicity of meanings during advertising reception, when advertising polysemy occurs in the same individual—such as upon first viewing

an ad, or viewing an ad on repeated occasions (e.g., Kirmani 1997). For example, a woman may interpret a laundry detergent ad's depiction of a happy family as a conventional way to sell detergent the first time that she sees the ad. After repeated exposures, however, certain details in the family scene may attract her attention. She may, for instance, think about the stereotypical portrayal of gender roles in the ad and, as a consequence, start to give a different meaning to it. And, of course, she may tire of the ad over multiple exposures. Another example could be slogans—such as "you get more in return" by a tax preparation service (Dimofte and Yalch 2007)—with two apparent meanings, one subtler than the other. Diachronic polysemy could occur when for a consumer the second interpretation becomes visible after few exposures. Other ads may invoke reverie in some consumers via a retro-appeal; what was once a fairly neutral stimulus may gain nostalgic value over time (e.g., Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003).

Although it is convenient, as in the examples above, to discuss the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of polysemy as independent and exclusive, this is a simplification and it is possible to observe polysemy across both groups *and* time. In these cases, advertising polysemy displays both synchronic and diachronic aspects. An example is the change in the prevalent interpretation of pre-war ads in terms of gender relations between researchers writing in different decades (Scott 2005).

In the following pages, we explore how advertising meaning, and hence polysemy, is created. We focus on encoding, transmission, and decoding meaning to understand how the intention of advertisers, the context in which the message is experienced by consumers, and consumers' goals and interpretive frames can lead to the emergence of advertising polysemy.

ENCODING MEANING

A fundamental premise of modern marketing thought is that segmentation leads to targeting, which leads to positioning, which then leads to the development of advertising messages. Central to this systematic approach is the general acceptance that clear and unambiguous messages are designed specifically for one particular target segment. In most instances, the traditional assumption of advertising research that only one key meaning is encoded in an ad by advertisers is therefore likely appropriate.

Brands allow firms to serve mass-markets with a standardized offering. In recent years, however, the trend towards market disaggregation due to new technology and shifting social trends has started to raise questions about the role played by brands in society (Dawar 2004). In the age of "one-to-one marketing," "mass customization," and online forums such as YouTube, brands must be able to serve the specific goals and situation of each consumer or otherwise risk becoming obsolete. One way for managers to adapt to this changing landscape may be to create ever narrower brands focused on specific benefits (Rust, Zeithaml, and Lemon 2004). Another strategy may be instead to create more flexible brands that are able to speak to consumers with different needs and concerns (Kates and Goh 2003). The notion of *purposeful polysemy*—advertising polysemy emerging as a consequence of a firm's strategic efforts—should therefore become increasingly relevant to both academics and practitioners.

Occasionally, advertisers deliberately design ads to support multiple interpretations. For instance, Absolut vodka is often described as a brand that tailors its meaning to different audiences using visual cues that are amenable to multiple interpretations (Kates and Goh 2003; Schroeder 2002)—as in an ad featuring a painting by artist and AIDS victim Keith Haring that could be interpreted as stressing Absolut's support of the avant-garde or of the fight against AIDS, depending on the audience's knowledge and characteristics. In an influential review of

polysemy within communication research, Ceccarelli (1998) defines *strategic ambiguity* as an important source of polysemy. Strategic ambiguity is planned by the author and results in groups of readers converging in praise of a text (Brown 2006; Fiske 1986; Kates and Goh 2003). In this case, the power over textual signification remains with the author, "who insert both meanings into the text and who benefits economically from the polysemic interpretation" (Ceccarelli 1998, p. 404). We identify four basic types of purposeful polysemy depending on the firm's goal.

Targeting Goal

The first type of purposeful polysemy occurs when the advertiser designs a polysemic message in order to appeal to two different audiences with the same message (*targeting goal*). For example, the slogan of Hellmann's mayonnaise is "Bring out the best." To food-focused consumers, the slogans may imply that Hellmann's enhances flavors. To brand conscious consumers, the slogan may instead underline the social cachet of the brand (Bring out flavors vs. bring out to the table). Gay vague advertising, ads that covertly target gay consumers (Wilke 1997), is another relevant example. Gay vague advertising contains subtle cues that, while not explicitly referring to gay lifestyle, can be interpreted by individuals with subcultural knowledge as signifying an endorsement of gay culture. At the same time, the message of these ads should also speak to heterosexual consumers. Gay vague ads, therefore, allow advertisers to target two segments simultaneously with the same ambiguous message.

Purposeful polysemy with a targeting goal can be described as being chiefly focused on the synchronic aspect of advertising polysemy (i.e., polysemy across audiences). Meaning-based models of advertising (Mick and Buhl 1992) argue that consumer response to an ad depends on the meaning given to it in the context of the goals that are salient in the consumer's life. For sophisticated targeting to be carried out via purposeful polysemy, audiences must be given the

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opportunity to interpret the content of an ad according to their own interpretive frames. In other words, for two audiences to form different meanings from the same ad, the message must be constructed in a way that each audience is allowed to apply its own interpretive frames to "fill in the gaps." Considering again the example of gay vague advertising, many print ads in fashion and lifestyle magazines feature the photo of a sensual and well-groomed male looking at the camera provocatively. In the absence of any cues that clarify the events portrayed in the ad, readers are left to guess the nature of the situation portrayed. This allows gay and heterosexual consumers to generate different interpretations of the same ad. This discussion leads to the following proposition: *for purposeful polysemy with a targeting goal to succeed, it requires the strategic avoidance of explicit information that can direct the reader toward a certain interpretation (P1).*

Positioning Goal

Purposeful polysemy with a targeting goal relies on synchronic polysemy (i.e., between individuals) to accomplish its strategic role. Firms, however, can also meet strategic objectives by focusing on diachronic polysemy (i.e., within individuals). Specifically, purposeful polysemy can be implemented in order to communicate and underline to target customers (multiple) core features of a brand in a succinct and effective way (*positioning goal*). To exemplify this notion, consider Flowserve, the worldwide leader in the production of valves and pumps for the oil and chemical industries. Flowserve's mission statement is "Experience in motion." This stresses two different characteristics of the company: 1) "Experience in motion" as "experience in the business of moving fluids." This emphasizes the core area of operation and helps identifying what the company does. 2) "Experience in motion" as "experienced company that does not rest

on its laurels." This focuses attention on the firm's heritage while at the same time underlining its drive to remain at the leading edge of its industry in the future.

The protection and reinforcement of core brand associations should be the paramount concern of brand managers (Roedder John et al. 2006). The adoption of purposeful polysemy with a positioning goal in the design of critical elements of a brand's communication strategy, such as slogans or mission statements, should result over time in the strengthening of multiple brand associations. These associations, moreover, may become better connected in memory as a consequence of being simultaneously presented to consumers. These aspects—strength and fit of core associations—are crucial building blocks towards a high order and differentiated positioning (Keller 1998). Besides the documented positive response to artful expressions in marketing communication (e.g., Dimofte and Yalch 2007)—which is the focus of the next type of purposeful polysemy, stressing multiple core brand features should therefore have beneficial repercussions. In particular, relative to simpler statements focusing on one association, *purposeful polysemy with a positioning goal should lead over time to the strengthening of multiple brand associations as well as to more integration between them (P2).*

Aesthetic Goal

The third type of purposeful polysemy occurs when the advertiser designs a polysemic message not for strategic reasons but as a way to increase interest and appeal of an ad (*aesthetic goal*). The use of ambiguous statements to deliver a pun, as in the slogan of a clothes coloring company "we will dye for you," is a common and powerful copywriting tactic (Dimofte and Yalch 2007; McQuarrie and Mick 1992). Accordingly, ambiguity is a rhetorical tool designed to increase the enjoyment and involvement of target consumers (Toncar and Munch 2001).

As in the case of purposeful polysemy with a positioning goal, this type of purposeful polysemy can be seen as emphasizing the diachronic aspect of polysemy. Consumers take pleasure in decoding complex meanings in advertising (Lagerwerf and Meijers 2008; McQuarrie and Mick 1992). For example, a verbal anchor that gives away the intended meaning reduces the pleasure that consumers take from complex visual metaphors (Phillips 2000). Purposeful polysemy with an aesthetic goal is therefore useful for generating messages that will be perceived by consumers as amusing or funny. As a consequence, *purposeful polysemy with an aesthetic goal is likely to be implemented in the context of humorous messages (P3).*

Social Norms Goal

The fourth type of purposeful polysemy occurs when the use of ambiguous messages allows the advertiser to promote a controversial message without breaking advertising conventions or societal standards of appropriateness (*social norms goal*) (e.g., Stern 1992). An example is the 1910 slogan "the skin you love to touch" by Woodbury soap. As pointed out by Scott (2005, p. 237), "if the reader was interested in looking sexy to her husband (or to others), then the line might win her interest in the product. At the same time, the mask of the double meaning satisfied the need to appear chaste." Purposeful polysemy with a social norms goal becomes an increasingly attractive strategy as the potential backlash from the intended message grows. As a consequence, *purposeful polysemy with a social norms goal is more likely to be used to promote a given message in more socially conservative markets or, more generally, when the intended message breaks a taboo within a society (P4).* Given that the goal of this strategy is to reduce negative reactions to controversial messages, another implication is that firms have no incentive to disclose its adoption. As a consequence, we expect that *when probed about this*

possibility, firms will generally deny the use of purposeful polysemy with a social norms goal

(P5).

A Typology of Purposeful Polysemy

The four types of purposeful polysemy reviewed here can be organized along two axes (see Table 1). The first one is the strategic versus tactical orientation of the decision to rely on purposeful polysemy. The adoption of purposeful polysemy with a targeting or a positioning goal must stem from strategic considerations concerning a brand's target market and its positioning. As in the case of purposeful polysemy with an aesthetic goal, purposeful polysemy with a social norms goal can be instead better described as a tactical element of a firm's communication strategy. The second dimension is the emphasis on synchronic versus diachronic polysemy. Like purposeful polysemy with a targeting goal, purposeful polysemy with a social norm emphasizes synchronic polysemy (i.e., some individuals are meant to decode one meaning and some others another). Like purposeful polysemy with a positioning goal, purposeful polysemy with an aesthetic goal emphasizes instead diachronic polysemy (i.e., target customers are meant to generate multiple meanings over a period of time).

[Table 1 about here]

As a final remark on purposeful polysemy, it should be noted that the four motives reviewed here are not mutually exclusive. Advertisers can rely on purposeful polysemy to accomplish multiple goals. For example, in addition to delivering a message that speaks to two different audiences (targeting goal), gay vague advertising also satisfies a social norms goal. In most societies, gay men are a stigmatized minority and these ads are designed to speak to gay consumers while minimizing the risk of backlash from consumers that might be otherwise offended by gay themes (e.g., Borgerson et al. 2006).

TRANSMISSION MEANING

Semioticians, linguists, and social psychologists concur that contextual variables play a key role in opening and closing an ad's range of possible interpretations (e.g., Bakhtin 1981; Eco 1976; Kishner and Gibbs 1996; Kleine and Kernan 1991). Contextual influences on advertising polysemy can take many forms. We focus on the media context surrounding an ad and on the social context at the time of message exposure.

Media Context

Consumers interpret advertising messages based on their content as well as the medium used to transmit it (e.g., Malthouse, Calder, and Tamhane 2007). For example, Diesel built a fashion brand positioned at the delicate intersection of youthful playfulness and exclusive luxury. Careful media planning is crucial to the management of the brand because the same message can be perceived quite differently by consumers depending on whether it is placed, for instance, in a fashion magazine versus a lifestyle publication targeting the young. This discussion stresses that media context is a critically important antecedent of advertising interpretation. Media context— the programming or editorial content surrounding an advertising message—can close or open an ad's range of tenable interpretations by making its meaning more or less ambiguous. The importance of such effects is demonstrated by the breadth of advertising research dedicated to the influence of media context (e.g., Pavelchak, Antil, and Munch 1989; Yi 1990).

The iconic "Sunday afternoon" ad for Volkswagen, broadcasted in North America in 1997, provides an example of how media context can be responsible for advertising polysemy (available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_s5-R_JE4c). In this ad, two young males are aimlessly driving a car in a suburban area. The ad lent itself to multiple interpretations: The two characters could be for example interpreted as bonded by friendship (e.g., fraternity

members) or by a romantic relationship. The ad was in many respects similar to countless other ads, but it caused a sensation because the feasibility of the latter interpretation was greatly increased by the fact that the ad was aired for the first time during the episode of the TV series "Ellen" in which the main character revealed her homosexuality (Ritson 2003).

Social Context

Social context provides another important contextual variable. The social milieu has the power to both expose the consumer to an alternative reading (Kates 2002) and to prime a consumer with the interpretive spectacles needed for the alternative reading (Ritson and Elliott 1999). For example, consumers can become aware of an alternative reading for a given ad because others inform them of this interpretation. In this case, the viewing companion acts as a critic who enlightens the consumer about the possibility of a different interpretation. Ceccarelli (1998) calls this polysemy generated by critics "hermeneutic depth."

The social context, moreover, can influence advertising polysemy in more subtle ways. An alternative interpretation does not need to be verbalized for a consumer to be influenced by a group, and social presence can affect consumer interpretation of advertising messages even in the absence of direct interaction. For example, Puntoni and Tavassoli (2007) showed that, relative to socially neutral cues, cues related to social desirability are remembered better when exposure to the advertising message occurs in the presence of others. Although Puntoni and Tavassoli (2007) did not measure interpretation of the ads, they found that social context's influence on memory was traceable to an influence on semantic, not perceptual, processes. Thus, social context influenced memory by increasing consumer attention to the meaning of social desirability cues.

Media and social context can, moreover, not only lead to the emergence of advertising polysemy, they can also restrict it. For example, whereas placing the "Sunday afternoon" ad

discussed earlier within the Ellen episode made the alternative interpretation of the two

characters as gay partners more viable, placing the same ad within a program targeted at

fraternity members would have likely led to the opposite effect of media context on polysemy.

Similarly, the social context can restrict an ad's range of viable interpretations. For example,

viewing an ad together with others may put pressure on a consumer to share the preferred

reading of the viewing companions, reducing the likelihood of different interpretations emerging.

In sum, *social and media contexts can either provide cues for the disambiguation of a polysemic*

message or turn an apparently "closed" text into a polysemic one (P6).

Advertisers are sometimes able to anticipate features of the social context. Examples are

social viewing during the Super Bowl (Pavelchak et al. 1989) or specific forms of

communication such as transport or outdoors advertising. Nevertheless, it is in general difficult

to predict the social situation in which a given consumer is likely to be when encountering a

message. For example, print ads in a magazine may be read in the privacy of one's home or in a

public space. Their greater ability to control the media than the social context surrounding

consumers at the time of ad exposure suggests that *firms should be more likely to rely on media*

than on social context to strategically influence advertising interpretations (P7).

DECODING MEANING

In understanding how an audience can interpret an ad differently from other audiences,

three key aspects stand out as critical. The first one concerns the meaning making process, that

is, the process of making sense of the information contained in a message. The second concerns

the role of heterogeneity in consumers' situations, and the third concerns the influence of

consumers' goals in the decoding process.

The Meaning Making Process: Denotative and Connotative Meanings

The two-stage nature of meaning making consistently emerged in our multidisciplinary exploration of polysemy. Semiotics refers to these stages as denotation and connotation. Psychology calls them lexical and psychological meaning. In consumer research they have been variously defined as attribute and performance dimensions (Kleine and Kernan 1991), comprehension and interpretation (Mick and Politi 1989) or, more generally, as "recognition/identification" and "interpretation."

Structuralist semiotics identifies two levels of meaning, thus distinguishing between denotational meaning (a sign's definitional meaning, for example what the dictionary should provide) and connotational meaning (a sign's cultural, ideological and personal implications; Eco 1976). For example, at the denotational level, the logo of information technology giant Apple is made of a signifier (the iconic design) and a signified (a bitten apple). At the connotational level an additional layer of meaning is attached to the denotative sign and from a simple bitten apple the logo's meaning is transformed into the biblical apple of knowledge. Denotations represent a utopian, radically objective, level of signification. Clearly, no polysemy is possible at this stage. Connotations represent instead the sign's ideologically charged meaning. According to this approach, every text is "symbolic" (Barthes 1977).

Much psychological research endorses, not surprisingly considering psychology's epistemological tradition, the structuralist notions of denotation and connotation (Richins 1994). Psychologists often distinguish between lexical meaning and psychological meaning (Friedmann and Zimmer 1988). Lexical meaning refers to the conventional relationship between a word and its referent. Psychological meaning refers to a person's subjective perception of a stimulus (Szalay and Deese 1978). The notion of psychological meaning opens the possibility of polysemic readings (Kleine and Kernan 1991; Mick 1992). Structuralist semiotics and

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psychology therefore argue that polysemy occurs in most cases at the second, ideologically charged, stage of the meaning making process.

Semiotic models empower the individual with the capability of selecting a specific reading from a potentially infinite number of interpretations. Texts are defined as open or closed as a function of the breadth of tenable interpretations (Eco 1976). The range of possible interpretations for a message, however, is not the same across all readers. A text's degree of openness is jointly determined by characteristics of the text (i.e., its inherent potential for polysemic readings) and of the reader (i.e., his or her cultural competency in detecting such ambiguities; McQuarrie and Mick 1999). Connotative meanings are less stable than denotative meanings because in general more knowledge is needed to decode connotative meanings than denotative meanings. As a consequence, *chances of observing disagreement on the meaning of an ad grow as interpretations increasingly rely on connotative meanings (P8).*

Despite academics' debate about how advertising works and practitioners' uncertainty about which of their ads work, there is no doubt that advertising often does work. For example, the terms that consumers are likely to use to describe brands such as Coca-Cola, IKEA, or Disney will tend to consistently include certain associations. This implies that in many instances consumers decode advertising messages in the way their creators had intended. Often, however, consumers will create meanings that are not those that advertisers had intended. In this case, the emergence of advertising polysemy presents a potential problem for marketers because this type of advertising polysemy implies a loss of control over the meaning of brands. Such unintended meanings can emerge as a consequence of consumers' different interpretive frames or of consumers' active attempts to give a message a meaning that is different from that intended by the message's sponsor. These two types of unintended meanings are reviewed below.

Consumers' Situations: Interpretive Communities

Different interpretations can emerge across an audience as a function of consumers' different interpretive frames, as in the literary quote presented earlier. Reader-response theorists acknowledge that interpreting a text relies on shared conventions or interpretive frames (Radway 1984; Scott 1994). An interpretive community is a group of individuals that share the same "interpretative strategies:" the ways they approach and digest a text (Fish 1980). Similar considerations are also expressed in social psychology, for example in the classic 1950s "They saw a game" study by Hastorf and Cantril about a hard fought match between Dartmouth and Princeton's college football teams. They found that students from the two colleges held widely divergent interpretations about which team started the rough play that sent several players to the sidelines (Hastorf and Cantril 1954; cf., Pavelchak et al. 1989).

During a class discussion with MBA students, for example, one of the authors discussed the intended meaning of this claim by Colgate: "we don't make toothpaste for anybody else." These students, aware of the involvement of some national brand manufacturers in the production of private labels and of the risk of this strategy for the long-term prospects of national brands, interpreted the statement as an attempt to clarify to consumers that Colgate does not engage in this practice. A class of high-school students was asked to similarly explain the intended meaning of the same claim. The large majority of these teen-agers interpreted the claim as a way to say that Colgate cares for its customers. In other words, for the MBA students the "else" in the claim referred to companies and for the high-school students to customers. In sum, *groups of readers will share certain reading strategies in ad decoding, leading to the emergence of a discrete number of viable interpretations (P9).*

Consumers' Goals: Resistive Readings

When approaching the issue of how a reader relates to the message and to the author who produced it, we have often found mention in the multidisciplinary literature examined to a confrontational dialectic, for example to the existence of a "power struggle" between reader and writer. The struggle for control over ad meaning characterizes interpretive disciplines such as reader-response theory, cultural studies, and post-structuralist semiotics (Ceccarelli 1998; Scott 1994). Psychological models of subjective text comprehension also underscore the role of the reader's experience and goals in generating meanings that are at odds with those intended by the authors (e.g., Mick 1992). Similarly, within pragmatics, a field that studies how language is used in conversations, Nerlich and Clarke (2001) stress the issue of power by introducing the notion of "semantic trap," occurring when a speaker's naïve expression of an ambiguous phrase is exploited by the listener, as in a slapstick comedy where an unintentional double entendre generates laughter in the audience and embarrassment in the speaker.

Resistive readings consist in the subversive act of "forcing" a preferred reading upon a text (Ceccarelli 1998). Resistive readings are potentially subversive because the audience affirms its power over the text (Kates 2002). For instance, gang members in the US often appropriate brands as signifiers of gang membership, such as interpreting the Louis Vuitton logo as standing for "Vice Lords" (Struyk 2006). Literature within cultural and media studies has focused on resistive readings as a practice of discriminated and antagonized minorities (Hall 1997). According to these writers, the practice of resistive reading has therefore strong political overtones. This approach offers a fruitful perspective for understanding advertising polysemy, as indicated by advertising research that focuses on the reading strategies of discriminated groups (e.g., Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999). In sum, *resistive readings are more likely to be generated*

by consumers who belong to a minority or a discriminated group than to the dominant group within society (P10).

This proposition should not be interpreted as implying that members of a dominant group never generate resistive readings. An example of active resistance by members of a dominant group is how some consumers "straighten up" ads intended for gay target markets by ignoring or denying fairly overt gay content, and interpreting them as heterosexual in content (Borgerson et al. 2006). The reason for the greater prevalence of resistive readings among minorities predicted earlier stems from the fact that most advertising messages do not contradict prevailing cultural conventions (Williamson 1978). In the case ads do so, however, members of the dominant group are likely, as in the example above, to interpret the ad is a way that fits with prevailing stereotypes or standards of appropriateness (e.g., Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). As a consequence, *whereas resistive readings help members of minority or discriminated groups undermine the status quo within a society, resistive readings help members of a dominant group preserve it (P11).*

Our discussion of resistive readings has so far focused on social tensions as a key antecedent for their occurrence. The notion of resistive reading is, however, useful for understanding advertising polysemy in a broader set of circumstances than implied by this approach. Advertising polysemy as active resistance can simply be the product of consumers' social use of advertising (Ritson and Elliott 1999), for example when a resistive reading is used as a source of jokes in conversation (Nerlich and Clarke 2001). In this context, the act of forcing an alternative reading upon an ad is motivated by the social benefits afforded by the exploitation of ads for conversational purposes (Ritson and Elliott 1999). Thus, *in the absence of political*

overtones, resistive readings are likely to be generated by consumers in social situations and for social purposes (P12).

<div align="center">**A FRAMEWORK FOR ADVERTISING POLYSEMY**</div>

In this section, we build on the previous arguments to articulate a framework for understanding advertising polysemy. We first review the steps of the communication process. We then overlay on this sequence various influences on consumer interpretation to highlight the importance of both micro and macro factors in advertising interpretation. Finally, to exemplify the usefulness of the joint consideration of these perspectives, we review and qualify two earlier propositions.

The Communication Process

Communication results from the combination of *actors* (sender and receiver), *processes* (encoding, transmission, and decoding), and *outcomes* (the encoded and decoded messages). Based on their commercial objectives, marketing professionals design an ad to communicate a certain message. Purposeful polysemy can occur for four reasons: to target multiple segments with one message, to position a brand in the mind of target customers, to increase the effectiveness of a message, or to cover socially sensitive messages. The encoded message is then transmitted to consumers through a media channel. Upon receiving the encoded message in a social environment, consumers can decide to ignore the message (e.g., zapping) or to process it and try to understand it. If they process the message, consumers decode the cues contained in the ad to give it meaning.

Influences on Consumer Interpretation Processes

Our discussion of the factors that influence advertising polysemy has so far focused on the advertising message as a vehicle of meaning: How is a message encoded? How is a message

delivered? How is a message decoded? An alternative perspective, however, is to distinguish between different levels of influence on consumer interpretation processes. In particular, the factors that drive advertising polysemy can be distinguished using different levels of detachment from the consumer's situation: consumer knowledge, proximal context, and distal context.

Consumer Knowledge. The first factor influencing the interpretation of advertising messages is the knowledge held by the consumer who decodes the message. Meaning-based models of advertising (Mick and Buhl 1992) underline the role played by consumers' life-world in influencing interpretation. Different consumers have different backgrounds and thus their interpretation of a message is influenced by the intersection of the same ad with drastically different experiential contexts. The idiosyncratic nature of consumers' backgrounds and experiences introduces an inherent unpredictability to advertising interpretation. For example, the same German tune in an ad may be interpreted by one consumer as a way to stress the product's country-of-origin and features such as durability and technical excellence. In another consumer, the same tune may instead trigger nostalgic memories of an earlier visit to Germany and generate an emotional reaction. In this example, the same cue triggered "cold" versus "warm" processes, depending on the background of the consumer.

Proximal Context. The second layer of influence on consumer interpretation processes is proximal context: the immediate circumstances in which the decoding act takes place. In general, advertisers have control over the medium through which their message is transmitted. Media planning forms, therefore, integral part of the strategy of purposeful polysemy. Advertisers have instead much more limited control over the other main source of transmission meaning: social context. The influence of social context on advertising interpretation can take many forms, from

explicit ones (see, e.g., the notion of hermeneutic depth) to more implicit ones (e.g., social context as a prime for knowledge structures).

Distal Context. We distinguish between proximal and distal contexts to discriminate between the effect of the broad cultural context that influences both encoding and decoding within the communication process and the effect of the specific situation in which decoding takes place. Advertising does not exist in a vacuum—variables such as cultural norms and mass media influence advertising reception (Brown, Stevens, and Maclaren 1999). These macro variables have been demonstrated by priming experiments (e.g., Hong et al. 2000) and subculture studies (e.g., Kates 2002). It has long been established across a number of disciplines that culture shapes the interpretive frames that consumers use to perceive cultural products such as advertisements (McCracken 1987). Culture does not influence only the act of decoding but also that of encoding. Advertising copywriting relies on a canon of established rules (Scott 1994; Solomon and Greenberg 1993). These dos and don'ts of advertising practice are the expression of cultural conventions. Moreover, beyond the advertising canon, advertisers are influenced by their cultural background when they design ads. For example, research has documented cross-cultural variability in advertising copy (e.g., Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996).

Summary

Whereas focusing on the communication process underlines the chain of events leading to advertising polysemy, focusing on influences on consumer interpretation processes underlines the breadth of factors that can affect advertising polysemy. Although the two approaches are to some extent overlapping, their concurrent consideration affords a more complete picture of advertising polysemy, providing greater depth to, and suggesting additional ramifications of, the propositions presented earlier.

For example, avoiding explicit information that can deter a segment from feeling targeted by an ad (P1) requires sensitivity to the cultural environment that will inform advertising interpretation (distal context). This suggests that purposeful polysemy with a targeting goal requires advertisers to develop an in-depth (as opposed to stereotypical) understanding of the targeted segments. It also suggests that advertisers may overlook critical issues in purposeful polysemy due to an inability to question certain assumptions, because distal context influences encoding as well as decoding of advertising meaning.

Alternatively, consider the argument that the existence of interpretive communities tends to result in a limited number of interpretations (P9). This proposition may be seen as portraying the influence of consumer identity on interpretation as relatively static and predictable. However, an appreciation of the idiosyncrasy of consumer knowledge leads to the recognition that individuals hold multiple selves (Markus and Kunda 1986) and that the same message may speak to more than one identity. Moreover, psychological theories of self-categorization and social identity demonstrate the situational determinants of identity salience and the dynamic nature of social categorization (Deaux 1996). The sense of who we are can therefore change in response to situational cues and affect the interpretation of an ad (proximal context). See Figure 1 for a schematic representation of the theoretical framework.

[Figure 1 about here]

DISCUSSION

There is an inherent contradiction in attempting to unite a disparate literature on polysemy into a single theory. Nonetheless, the importance of polysemy for advertising demands a more concerted attempt to understand and articulate it. Polysemy can occur as a consequence of strategic attempts of advertisers or of unintended meanings created by consumers. The success

of advertising slogans often lies in their ability to appeal to large numbers of consumers by delivering different messages to different audiences. For example, Nike's "Just Do It" speaks to the student planning to run a marathon ("Don't be afraid: Just do it") as well as to the fifty-something intending to join a gym ("Stop making excuses: Just do it"). We reviewed how advertising meaning is created and how advertising polysemy can arise. We proposed a series of propositions that offer insight into advertising polysemy and avenues for further research. Table 2 summarizes the propositions

[Table 2 about here]

We provided a theoretical basis for understanding purposeful polysemy, and we distinguished between different types of purposeful polysemy, depending on the advertiser's goal. These approaches can be summarized using two dimensions: the focus of the company (strategic vs. tactical) and the type of polysemy emphasized (synchronic vs. diachronic).

Purposeful polysemy with a targeting and with a positioning goal are especially interesting from a brand strategy perspective. Developing a broad customer base requires that different consumers feel connected to the brand and developing a loyal customer base requires a brand positioning that is differentiated, relevant, and communicated effectively. As a consequence, a marketing strategy needs to be flexible and sophisticated enough to support the targeting of multiple audiences or the delivery of a differentiated and meaningful positioning under the umbrella of a coherent strategy (see also Kates and Goh's 2003 notion of brand morphing). For example, as a Burberry manager puts it: "we want to appeal to the young, 25-year-old guy who's on his first job—the guy who wants to wear something really hot, but we want also to appeal to a 60-year-old investment banker—the guy who wants great quality and a modern, classic look" (cited in Moon, 2004, p. 4). The brand relies on "targeted brand

expressions" to target multiple consumer segments (Burberry 2006, p. 8). Burberry does so by exploiting the multiple connotations of their core association, "British," hence walking the fine line between classic and contemporary. This complexity demonstrates the strategic heart of purposeful polysemy. For instance, in the beverage industry, Snapple's Ken Gilbert enthused, "… that's the nature of the brand. People make Snapple their own, so it ends up meaning lots of different things to lots of different people" (quoted in Deighton 1999, p. 8). Another relevant example is Skoda's slogan "Simply clever." By means of purposeful polysemy with a positioning goal, the car manufacturer attempts to connote positively its communist-era heritage of low price and low quality ("Simply clever" as "Clever in a simple way"), while at the same time trying to differentiate itself from other manufacturers with a sobering, no-nonsense attitude ("Simply clever" as "Just clever"). The two claims benefit from the coincidental presentation, strengthening and lending credibility to each other. Future research should address purposeful polysemy empirically to explore its viability and effectiveness in different settings.

We also highlighted how consumers interpret ads in ways that were not intended by the advertiser and distinguished between different settings in which such unintended meanings may arise. The power struggle between the author of the persuasive message and the consumer has implications for literature on persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994). The keystone of persuasion knowledge theory is that during message reception awareness of a persuasion attempt causes a "change of meaning" to occur. The model describes the coping strategies used by consumers during a persuasion attempt and therefore portrays consumers as active constructors of meaning, coherently with the perspectives reviewed above. The proposed framework places the change of meaning principle within the broader theoretical context of advertising polysemy.

Advertising research indicates that active resistance is often the result of boredom (e.g., Kirmani 1997) or, more worryingly, of the frustration felt by consumers when facing ads that display insensitivity to the cultural code of their subculture (e.g., Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999). These manifestations of polysemy are not inherent to advertising as such, but are the product of managers' misplaced beliefs about the balance of power over the meaning of their ads. We point to advertising meaning's broader domain that our approach to polysemy implies—one that attempts to encompass reader-response, semiotics, and information processing. Advertising encourages "*audience participation within a small set of approved responses*" (Peñaloza 1999, p. 348, emphasis in original). These responses rarely include broader political, social, and historical contexts that might interfere with preferred ad decoding. In other words, advertising conventions encourage the use of a narrow set of positive expectations to decipher imagery. The perspectives reviewed above argue, however, that the interpretive context of advertising remains critically important for understanding meaning making.

Polysemy also represents an important addendum to the traditional approach to target marketing usually taught to MBA students. When Bock and Uncles (2002) carried out a taxonomic study of market segments, they presented five types of differences between consumers: product benefit preferences, consumer interaction effects, choice barriers, bargaining power, and profitability. We argue that polysemy constitutes an important addition to this list. Heterogeneity in advertising interpretation can be used in two ways for segmentation purposes. First, individual differences in the tendency to access multiple meanings when processing a polysemic text, such as a slogan, can be measured (Dimofte and Yalch 2007). This approach to segmentation could provide insight into the feasibility of purposeful polysemy with a positioning or an aesthetic goal. Second, segmentation can be performed relying on advertising polysemy at

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a campaign level. For a given message, managers may be able to predict (either from past results or pre-testing) the likelihood that consumers from different target segments will generate one or another interpretation from the same ad copy. The underlying value of strategically managing polysemy should be clear: the potential to reach multiple segments with different messages without the need to create multiple executions or make multiple media purchases.

From a methodological point of view, advertising polysemy has important implications for marketing researchers because the generation of idiosyncratic meanings can influence attitudes and memory (Mick 1992). When cross-cultural analyses ignore the cultural determinants of polysemy, the risk of a systematic bias is made more acute by the fact that random assignment of participants to conditions in this context is not possible. This discussion suggests complementing current measures of advertising effectiveness like memory or liking with an assessment of meaning. This assessment could be carried out using established techniques such as continuous word association (Szalay and Deese 1978). Differential responses to the same copy across segments of consumers could also be measured by testing memory for specific ad elements. For example, in a recognition test distracters could be selected to represent alternative interpretations of these ad elements. An analysis of false alarms could shed light into the marketplace effects of the occurrence of advertising polysemy across segments of consumers.

CONCLUSION

We integrated diverse traditions within advertising research, including social cognition, advertising interpretation, and media consumption. We do not mean to downplay different assumptions that underlie these different approaches, rather to draw together a large stream of literature to illuminate a central issue within marketing: how different consumers create polysemy. We have provided conceptual translations between interpretative and information

processing approaches to help bridge these disciplinary gaps and to highlight a number of recurrent themes observed across disciplines.

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

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TABLE 1
Purposeful Polysemy

	Strategic focus	**Tactical focus**
Emphasis on synchronic polysemy (between individuals)	Targeting goal	Social norms goal
Emphasis on diachronic polysemy (within individuals)	Positioning goal	Aesthetic goal

TABLE 2
Summary of Research Propositions

Propositions

P1: For purposeful polysemy with a targeting goal to succeed, it requires the strategic avoidance of explicit information that can direct the reader toward a certain interpretation.

P2: Purposeful polysemy with a positioning goal should lead over time to the strengthening of multiple brand associations as well as to more integration between them.

P3: Purposeful polysemy with an aesthetic goal is likely to be implemented in the context of humorous messages.

P4: Purposeful polysemy with a social norms goal is more likely to be used to promote a given message in more socially conservative markets or, more generally, when the intended message breaks a taboo within a society.

P5: When probed about this possibility, firms will generally deny the use of purposeful polysemy with a social norms goal.

P6: Social and media contexts can either provide cues for the disambiguation of a polysemic message or turn an apparently "closed" text into a polysemic one.

P7: Firms should be more likely to rely on media than on social context to strategically influence consumer response to advertising.

P8: Chances of observing disagreement on the meaning of an ad grow as interpretations increasingly rely on connotative meanings.

P9: Groups of readers will share certain reading strategies in ad decoding, leading to the emergence of a discrete number of viable interpretations.

P10: Resistive readings are more likely to be generated by consumers who belong to a minority or a discriminated group than to the dominant group within society.

P11: Whereas resistive readings help members of minority or discriminated groups undermine the status quo within a society, resistive readings help members of a dominant group preserve it.

P12: In the absence of political overtones, resistive readings are likely to be generated by consumers in social situations and for social purposes.

FIGURE 1
A Framework for Advertising Polysemy
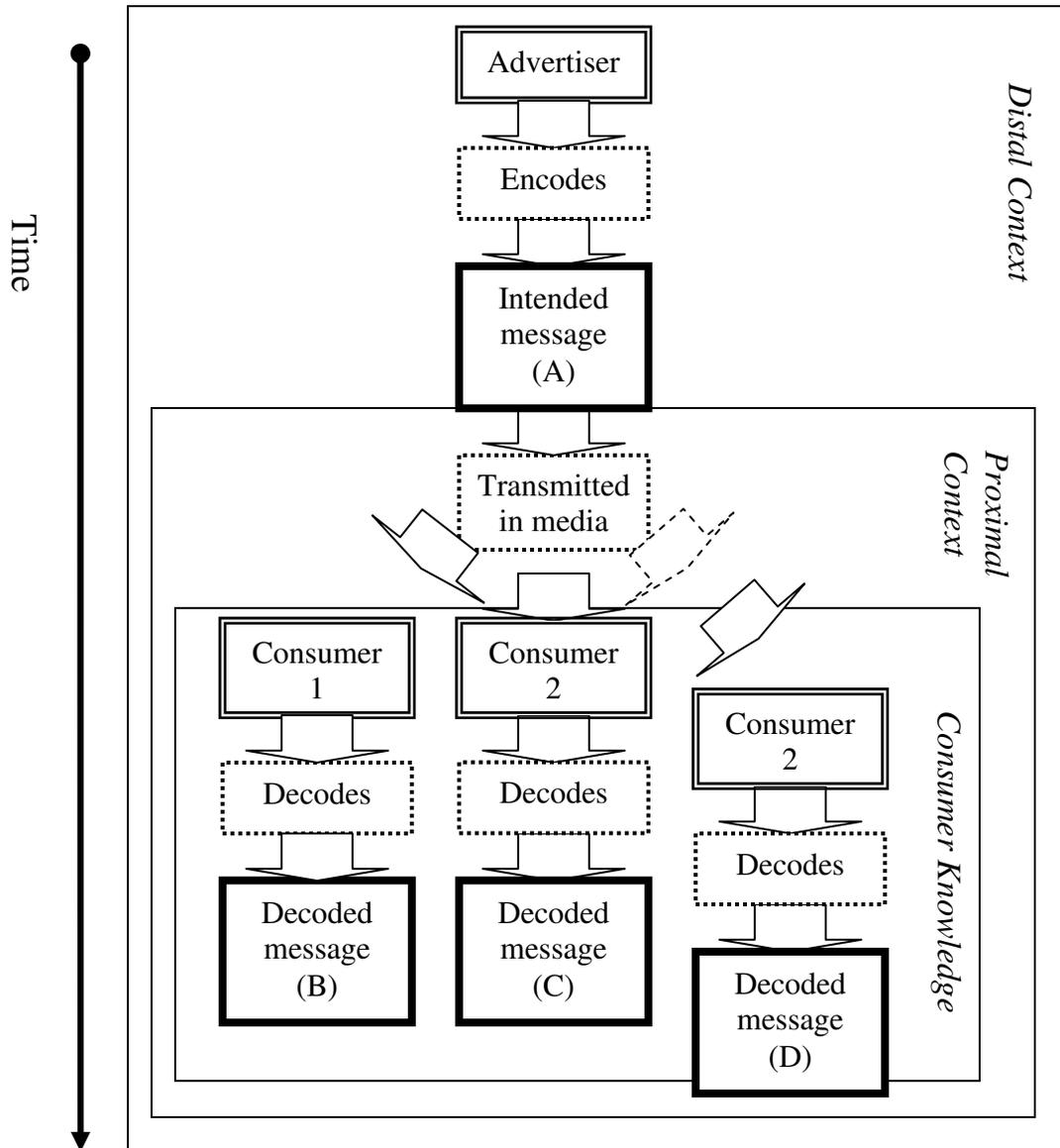
Legend: | Actors | Processes | Outcomes

If A > 1: Purposeful polysemy; if A ≠ B: Unintended meanings; if B ≠ C: Synchronic polysemy; if C ≠ D: Diachronic polysemy