

2 Visual representation and the market

Consumption is inherently visual, yet consumer researchers have seemed reluctant to embrace art history and visual studies as critical fields for study. This chapter is part of a larger call for inclusion of art historical issues within the marketing research canon. I present theoretical concepts about representation and introduce art as a key visual representational system. I then discuss identity as a critically important issue that connects consumption and representation, and conclude with a set of propositions that reflect a more image-based model of consumption, and its consequent effects on notions about competition. Three streams of thought are developed: (1) representation and semiotics as tools for understanding visual consumption, (2) the connections between art and advertising via a focus on the image, and (3) implications for consumer theory and competition derived from taking images seriously as a driving force of consumer behavior. These three streams are woven together to develop a model of visual consumption, informed by art historical, psychological, and cultural issues.

Marketing research often treats visual issues solely as an information-processing variable even though, as one consumer theorist points out, “[i]t is chiefly the visual aspect of the advertisement that conjoins the world and object between which a transfer of meaning is sought” (McCracken 1988: 79). Furthermore, advertising research generally focuses on the internal content of advertisements, by looking at the design of the ad, what it claims, and how it links the product to consumer benefits. These are substantial issues, but advertising also acts as a representational system that produces meaning outside the realm of the advertised product (e.g., Belk and Pollay 1985; Ritson and Elliot 1999; Stern and Schroeder 1994; Venkatesh *et al.* 1993). To more fully understand how images work it is necessary to link perceptual and cognitive processes to larger social and cultural issues via a semiotic approach to visual consumption.

The visual representational system of advertising

Marketing scholarship has turned to the concept of representation for insight into diverse market-related phenomena, including advertising imagery (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998), war propaganda posters (Hupfer 1997),

research methods (Stern 1998), and photography (Schroeder 1998). As representation refers to meaning production through language systems (cf. Stern 1998), how that language is used is central to creating that meaning. Using representation as an analytic tool, recent studies have emphasized how cultural practices – such as laws, rituals, norms, art, and advertising – contribute to meaning production within marketing (e.g., Hirschman 1986; Messaris 1997; Pearce 1999; Schroeder and Zwick 1999; Scott 1994a). Conventional views of representation hold that things, whether object, person, or consumer, exist in the material and natural world, and that their material characteristics define them in perfectly clear terms; representation, according to this view, is of secondary importance in meaning making.

Meaning produced or constructed by social and cultural forces would suggest that representation is of primary importance, however. In this view, representation enters into the very constitution of things, since an object's or idea's meaning is shaped by the very process of representing it by way of language or images. For example, representations of "islanders," stoked by tourist marketing brochures, colonial literature, and advertising imagery, help construct an islander identity that may bear little resemblance to actual people who live and work on tropical islands (Borgerson and Schroeder 1997). Research using this approach has been characterized as falling into two categories, semiotic and discursive (Hall 1997). Semiotic research, or the *poetics* of representation, is concerned with how representation produces meaning. Discursive research, or the *politics* of representation, stresses effects or consequences and connects representation to power and culture (du Gay 1997). Both types of research – at times overlapping, at times discrete – are necessary for a full examination of representation as meaning producer. For my purposes these two approaches correspond roughly to the interest in understanding how marketing creates things like brand images, customer satisfaction, product identity on one hand, and more macro issues like the role of marketing in society, ethics, and consequences of consumption.

Often, advertising research focuses on the internal content of advertisements – what the ad claims, how it links the product to consumer benefits, or the design of the ad. These are important considerations. However, advertising also acts as a representational system that produces meaning outside the realm of the advertised product or service. As McCracken observed:

Advertising is a kind of conduit through which meaning is constantly being poured in its movement from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods. Within advertising, old and new goods are constantly giving up old meanings and taking on new ones. As active participants in this process, we are kept informed of the present state and stock of cultural meaning that exist in consumer goods. To this extent, advertising serves us as a lexicon of current cultural meanings.

(McCracken 1988: 79)

This meaning production contributes to advertising's status as representation (cf. Nava *et al.* 1996).

Advertising, a pervasive form of communication and representation, both reflects and creates social norms. As one critic believes:

The ways in which individuals habitually perceive and conceive their lives and the social world, the alternatives they see as open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves and others are shaped by advertising, perhaps without their ever being consciously aware of it.

(Lippke 1995: 108)

This *seeing* of "lives and the social world" is intensified and magnified by the information technologies of photography – which include still photography, video, film, and digital imaging – and representation today depends on photographic imagery to accomplish its many tasks (e.g., Solomon-Godeau 1991). Sociologists Goldman and Papon point out the close interconnected relationship between advertising and photography:

[t]he power of advertising lies in its ability to photographically frame and redefine our meaning and our experiences and then turn them into meanings that are consonant with corporate interests. This power to recontextualize and reframe photographic images has put advertising at the center of contemporary redefinitions of individuality, freedom, and democracy in relation to corporate symbols.

(Goldman and Papon 1996: 216)

In addition, the information technology of photography is central to understanding how advertising produces meaning within a circuit of production and consumption.

Photographic representations of the advertising process ripple through the culture, circulating information about the social world, even the world itself has taken on "a photographic face," according to Cadava (1999). What emerges as a significant rippling effect is how these cultural translations become key concerns of visual consumption. Although photography – encompassing still, video, film, and digital photography – is arguably the most pervasive form of communication in the world, most of us have had little formal training in the historical background of photography, the processes of photographic production, or the function of pictorial conventions. Advertising, like photography, seems to present a world that just is, even though photographic images are cropped, selected, edited, and circulated for consumption. A fully developed art-centered research program will include issues of film theory and criticism, graphic design, prints, and artistic production, to name a few. I will discuss photography in greater detail in chapters 3 and 4.

Advertising is linked to the good life. Ads once focused on products, providing information about how to incorporate new items into one's lifestyle:

Advertising addressed both production and consumption domains: while creating demand to solve the problem of overproduction, advertising would simultaneously persuade workers that the satisfactions not available in the workplace were available in consumption.

(Leiss *et al.* 1990: 31)

Advertising today concentrates on the social and psychological meaning of consumption. Older ads used text to guide viewers' interpretation of the visual image. Advertising now provides its own codes, as well as drawing upon cultural referent systems. "Ruled by its overriding imperative to communicate quickly, advertising first raids the ceremonial practice in our daily existence for its material, and then returns them to us in exaggerated forms, accentuating many of their least attractive features" (Leiss *et al.* 1990: 218). All ads:

- create positive associations for the product, service, or organization,
- are as carefully constructed as art,
- are aimed at a specific "target audience,"
- must dwell in the future,
- propose that their product or service is part of the good life,
- influence, construct, and reflect consumer identity.

Semiotics

Semiotics – the science of signs – provides a framework for understanding both the construction and decoding of meaning within advertisements and the overall process of commodification that characterizes the market (cf. Goldman and Papson 1996). Semiotic analysis centers around the sign, made up of a signifier – the sign's perceptual component – and the signified – the concept to which the signifier "points." David Mick suggests succinctly that "semiotics analyzes the structures of meaning-producing events, both verbal and nonverbal" (1986: 197). Semiotics need not be relegated to deconstructing meaning, however, for semiotics also describes the process of constructing meaning. Goldman and Papson argue that semiotics provides interpretive conventions for advertising via the logic of the commodity form, which consists of three elements: abstraction, equivalence exchange, and reification. Abstraction refers to the process of removing an action or relationship from its context. Equivalence exchange is the process of making something universally exchangeable – money, for example, is perhaps the ultimate exchange agent. Reification centers around imparting human attributes onto objects. I will use bananas – a

major symbolic stumbling block between US and European trade laws – to illustrate the intertwined processes of semiotics and commodification.

Bananas were abstracted via colonization and industrial agriculture techniques that transformed a locally occurring food source into an international commodity that fueled much colonization of the Western Hemisphere. Once bananas became commercially cultivated and distributed, they entered the arena of commodities – a realm where prices linked to agricultural products are bought and sold via a thriving, complex futures market. Bananas were originally marketed as an exotic and novel fruit that signified tropical life. Banana advertisements also abstract the fruit from its neocolonial production arrangements, promote an exchangeable sign value of fun and authenticity, and reify the banana through characters such as the animated “Chiquita banana” that sings and dances. Furthermore, companies like Banana Republic – which originally sold adventure clothes, but now focuses on dressy casual clothing lines – incorporate the banana’s symbolic lifestyle value and colonial signifier. Of course, customers may relate more to the plantation master than the native workers. The banana remains a potent signifier of economic relationships between colonizer and colonized, modern and primitive, and the US and Europe. Thus semiotics provides a theoretical perspective to understand two powerful historical forces that underlie the contemporary consumer culture, the rise of mass produced commodities and advertising’s emergence as the engine of the economy (see Slater 1997).

Aesthetic appropriation

Through what has been called “the logic of appropriation,” advertising turns culture into consumer signifiers by drawing on symbolic referent systems (Goldman and Papson 1996). First, advertising imagery colonizes and appropriates existing referent systems from literature, art, science, or other cultural discourses. For example, Nike, of course, existed first as a Greek god. In Scandinavian countries, the Norse myths are routinely drawn from to provide vivid corporate imagery. Telia, the huge, recently privatized Swedish telecommunications company, took its name from the ancient Icelandic word *telia*, to narrate or reveal, as used in the mythical sagas that are part of every Swedish child’s reading. Second, advertising creates its own referent systems. This contention is controversial – many scholars believe that advertising can only reflect culture, not create values and beliefs. It is not my desire to resolve the reflection or creation of values debate here, I will only point to the long-running DeBeers diamond campaign that first established diamonds as the standard engagement ring stone, and then created a cultural belief that an appropriate amount to spend on such a gift is “two months’ salary.”

Clearly, advertising is capable of producing beliefs and creating cultural values, partially due to the source effect – we often remember

“facts” but not where we learned them. Further, ads are *intertextual* or self-referential – they refer to other ads, brand names, and advertising itself, in a “continuous process of taking meanings from one context and placing them into the advertising framework where they become associated with another meaning system” (Goldman and Papson 1996: 15–16). An example is a recent Pepsi television spot that refers to Coke’s famous “Mean Joe Green” ad in which the imposing American football star Green gives his sweat-stained jersey to an awestruck young fan who offered him a drink of Coke. In the more recent Pepsi ad, the scenario has shifted to soccer, the fan asked for a player’s jersey, only to use it to clean off the can and hand it back. Understanding this ad doesn’t rely on an awareness of the older ad, rather it deepens the connections and complicates the meaning. Third, advertising taps referent systems to generate image value, turning signs into a kind of myth designed to sell lifestyles (Goldman and Papson 1996). Advertising often positions products as authentic, or the path to individuality, selling badge-like images to subcultures, consumer target markets, or even offering products to resist consumer values.

Identity and consumption

Ads depict our consumer society as a fountain of personal freedom and satisfaction, where citizen and consumer are almost interchangeable expressions of identity. Through appropriation, ads turn controversy, hardship, and oppression into consumable spectacles. For example, ads regularly use images of inner-city life – the “hood” – as a sign of coolness or authentic toughness. Often ads use counter-positioning – suggesting what a product or brand is *not* as a key to understanding its sign value. These themes will be explored in chapter 7’s examination of the CK One campaign.

Ads hail the viewer by promoting a personal connection between viewer and sign. This *signwork* is a key to understanding the visual landscape of contemporary society (Goldman 1992). As consumers, we cannot connect with every ad – or even most ads. Only a few brands and products puncture our awareness and match our lifestyle goals, psychic longings, or bank account. Thus, most of us are not deeply affected by most advertising we see. Furthermore, ads provide reasons not to buy products more often than not – we create our own images by what we don’t consume as well as what we do consume.

Consumption “is crucially about the negotiation of status and identity – the practice and communication of social position” (Slater 1997: 30). What is the relationship between our things and our identity? Russell Belk has written extensively on this question, pursuing answers of consumer behavior and existence (1988, 1990, 1995). He presents several lines of evidence of the rich connections between possessions and identity.

- 1 *Consumption and self-perceptions.* Belk finds that people often incorporate their possessions into their version of the self-concept. Our body, and its internal processes, ideas, experiences, and those persons, places, and things that we feel some control over, or attachment to, all are examples of possessions that people consider part of themselves. This brings up important philosophical questions relating to the mind/body distinction. For example, we usually say “I have a tan” instead of “I have a tanned body.” But we also say “I am tired” rather than “I have a tired body.”
- 2 *Loss of possessions.* Typically, when someone loses their possessions in a fire or other disaster, they report that they miss their photographs the most. They often feel as if they lost a part of their self – their home, their possessions. Institutions often enforce this diminishing of self, such as the military issuing uniform haircuts, dress, and titles.
- 3 *Investing objects with identity.* We often make things our own through ritual, alteration, or customization. People report investing psychic energy into their favorite possessions, especially ones that require time and effort to maintain. In many cultures, the dead are buried with their possessions or a significant possession. Recent auctions of celebrity estates show how much of a person is thought to be invested in their objects – from Andy Warhol’s cookie jar collection to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s fake pearls.
- 4 *Possessions and personal history.* I have a watch that I inherited from my Grandfather Schroeder that reminds me of him each time I wear it. Our sense of the past – our memories, our heirlooms, our scrapbooks – are critical to our identity. Objects are a useful way to “store” meaning – a souvenir reminds us of a trip, a photograph represents a important accomplishment, a dog-eared paperback signifies an important book. Our collections reflect the identities we are constructing. We display things that are pleasing or valuable, and those that give us a connection to the past in a way that is similar to museum display of a shared culture. Much is left out, edited, and hidden from view. We rarely find photographs of ourselves in our bad moments, unsure, unhappy, or worse.
- 5 *Collections.* As the spectacular success of the online auction house eBay demonstrates, collecting is popular and often profitable. EBay started out as a giant flea market, connecting individuals with stuff they wanted to sell to others who might be interested in acquiring treasures. Our collections, which often require vast amounts of time, money, and energy, often reflect totems, or favored animals, favorite activities such as music or shell collecting, or intellectual pursuits. What we collect and how we organize our collections are closely linked to our identity (Belk 1988, 1995).
- 6 *Money.* Money, the last taboo, plays a complex and powerful role in the self-concept. In this society, to have more is better, to be wealthy

seems to be an end goal, and many people experience money as the ultimate identity marker. Money is exceedingly exchangeable, yet it is also reified and worshipped for its own sake. Further discussions about money are found in chapter 6.

- 7 *Gift-giving.* What we give, how it is received, how much it cost all are crucial variables in our relationship with gift-giving. Once again, our consumption choices reflect our values and goals. The gift-giving concept has expanded in recent years to include so-called “self-gifts” – those items we buy ourselves for reward, retail therapy, or just because “we deserve it.” Gift-giving is a useful way to problematize competition, for what can serve as a gift is usually competing with a wider variety of possible products than a competitive industry model. For example, traditional gifts to bring to a party include wine, flowers, or candy – fairly disparate product categories that end up competing for the gift-giver’s money. Framing consumption within a gift-giving approach makes clear that products serve symbolic purposes, and that image competition is much wider than functional competition, based on industry classification. In other words, wine-makers can be said to be competing with flower-growers in terms of the symbolic meaning the consumer seeks.

Identity, expertise, and quality

Think of your possessions – clothes, watch, pen, shoes, eyeglasses, briefcase – all have been nationally advertised. Most things we buy are heavily advertised: whether we own them or not is a function of the effectiveness of ad campaigns for competing products, and more importantly, competing uses for our time and money. Most items manufactured today are made in such a way that “performance” or “wear” is not an issue. We no longer produce what we consume: we sell our labor for wages and buy goods produced by others. Thus, we are in need of information about goods and services and rely on trust and implicit contracts to live within a consumer society. For example, when I buy a shirt, I am unable, by looking or feeling, to determine whether it will last or how well it is made. Furthermore, in this hyperaffluent society, that is not much of a consideration for me – I own at least twenty-five dress shirts alone, and if one wears out, I can easily wear another.

Consumers have no special expertise about most products that they buy. The vast array of goods that we consume precludes knowing much about their production, construction, or quality – without experiencing them for ourselves. We no longer know much about quality, as measured by longevity of products – quality is often in the mind of the consumer. For example, I have little ability to assess a computer, a car, or a pair of shoes as to their construction (Sirgy and Su 2000). What do we do instead? Well it is important to realize that performance in a hyperaffluent economy