

Chapter 3

Measuring the Effects of Advertising Polysemy on Branding

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ABSTRACT

In the advertising research literature, polysemy is defined as different interpretations for the same advertising message. The multiple ad-interpretations can be attributable to complexities and diversities in culture and/or consumers' own demographics, perceptions, attitudes, lifestyles, values, behavior, and psychographics. We provide a bipolar and dichotomous perspective on advertising polysemy as positive and negative polysemy with research and practice examples from the print advertisements for alcoholic beverages and corporate social responsibility to explain the conditions that lead to the emergence of positive and negative polysemic contexts for the same message. Furthermore, the study explores how polysemy leads to better branding. The research investigates the concept of polysemy and the generation of idiosyncratic meanings, and examines the impact of advertising polysemy on consumer-based brand equity. The research proposes and measures the advertising polysemy and consumer-based brand equity conceptual framework supported by accommodation theory, consumer response theory, and theory of hierarchy of effects, leading to stronger ad-evoked feelings, ad and brand attitudes, and consumer-based brand equity.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising polysemy is defined as a subjective decoding of an advertisement shaped by the individual's sociocultural milieu (McCracken 1986;

Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008). Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson (2010) defined advertising polysemy as the existence of at least two distinct interpretations for the same advertising message across audiences, or across time and situations. There

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are two broader types of polysemy—synchronic polysemy and diachronic polysemy, as discussed in the research by Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson (2010). The synchronic aspect of advertising polysemy can be explained through an example of the advertisement which means one thing to one group of consumers and something different to another group (Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson, 2010). For example, international advertising often has problems with synchronic polysemy. A “thumbs-up sign,” which signifies affirmation in most Western nations, has offensive meaning in some countries, such as Russia and Poland if the palm of the hand is visible but is acceptable if the back of the hand is shown. Often the use of colors is interpreted differently in different cultures. In Japan, India, and many Asian countries, white is a color of mourning and purple is associated with death in many Latin American countries. This kind of unintended misinterpretation of the same advertising message by different cultural and/or sub-cultural groups is an example of synchronic polysemy. Heineken beer print ad’s slogan is “Brewers don’t have to be good talkers” with a sub headline—“When you make a great beer, you don’t have to make a great fuss.” The word “fuss” may have different interpretations for individuals from different cultures and countries and may lead to perceived synchronic polysemy. As a result, this Heineken ad could not be translated in a meaningful way into many other languages (Belch & Belch, 2009).

However, a diachronic dimension of advertising polysemy can also characterize multiplicity of meanings during an advertising reception, especially when exposed to the advertisement on multiple times—first impression of the ad and then subsequent impression about the same ad on repeated viewings (Kirmani 1997; Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson, 2010). For example, Absolut Vodka ads are very creative.

When we look deeper into polysemy from advertising perspective, we realize that at the end of multiple viewings and multiple ad interpretations

of polysemic ads, there is always one predominant feeling which stays with every individual. This feeling is either a positive or negative ad-evoked feeling which further defines the individual’s positive or negative ad and brand attitudes leading to either positive or negative branding for the advertised brand. We conceptualize two different advertising polysemy appeals – positive and negative. Positive advertising polysemy will evoke positive feelings for the ad and the brand leading to positive ad and brand attitudes and hence, positive branding. For example, the Old Spice Guy, Isaiah Mustafa, has received fame from endorsing Old Spice in the Super Bowl commercials, “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like.” The commercial received 3.4 million views on YouTube in the first week that it was released. The personality based advertising successes like Jack from Jack in the Box, the King from Burger King, the Cavemen from Geico, the Most Interesting Man in the World from Dos Equis, and the latest Old Spice Guy—they all have distinct, likable characteristics, genuinely funny ad content, and an incredible online presence via videos, websites, and social networks to engage their fans.

On the other hand, there are some polysemic ads which evoke many feelings on multiple viewings of the advertisement, but the predominant feeling may be negative at the end, leading to negative ad and brand attitudes and negative impressions on branding. We call this “Negative Advertising Polysemy,” which predominantly evokes negative feelings for both the advertisement and the brand, leading to negative ad and brand attitudes and hence, negative branding.

Although in theory all advertisements are potentially polysemic, in practice, each one of us attributes certain meanings to the advertisement. These meanings may vary on multiple viewings of the ad but in conclusion only one dominant meaning and/or feeling is attached to the advertisement. This dominant meaning or feeling or message received by the receiver (person) can be either positive leading to positive advertis-

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