Beyond sophistication: dimensions of advertising literacy

Stephanie O'Donahoe and Caroline Tynan

In the spirit of the IPA's bridge-building initiatives between industry and academia, we argue that academics can enhance practitioners' current understanding of consumers' advertising literacy. Reviewing language and literacy theories, we suggest that this offers fresh avenues for exploring consumers' relationships with ads and advertising. We report on a study exploring young adults' advertising literacy and identify three dimensions of consumers' advertising literacy, each of which implies a different relationship between audience and ads. Finally, we discuss the implications of advertising literacy for the ways in which ads are researched, developed and consumed.

INTRODUCTION

I once thought the absence of links between the academic world and the commercial world in Britain was unfortunate; I now see it as a distinct advantage.

Lannon, 1985, p 520

Judie Lannon's participation in the recent bridge-building event organised by the IPA and the International Journal of Advertising suggests that she is willing to reconsider the view expressed in her 1985 paper. That view is understandable, however, especially since those at the leading edge of the advertising industry tend to change their practice long before critics change their theories (Myers, 1994). This has certainly happened in the case of advertising literacy. Meadows (1983) described consumers as 'advertising literate', understanding the vocabulary, elements and styles of advertising, while Lannon (1985) discussed consumers' ability to decode complex visual imagery and make brand inferences from minimal cues. The term 'advertising literacy' resonated with many practitioners and inspired other articles (Drake, 1984; Iddiols, 1989; Goodyear, 1991). Insightful and provocative as these papers were, they were based on experience and overviews of proprietary research, and 'literacy' was used primarily as a label for consumer sophistication.

While academics have been slow to acknowledge consumers' advertising literacy, this paper argues that academics can still enhance current understanding of advertising literacy by bringing to practitioners' attention the insights offered by the literacy metaphor into consumers' relationships with ads and advertising. Following a brief review of language and literacy theory, we report on a study exploring young adults' advertising literacy, and consider the implications for advertising consumption, research and development.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ADVERTISING LITERACY?

Interviewed about their understanding of advertising literacy, advertising research practitioners spoke of consumers' awareness of a 'spectrum of different kinds of ads', sensitivity to production values, and ability to describe various techniques. Consumers were said to understand many advertising conventions, to have 'a flavour for what the advertising is trying to do', and they often 'came out with the jargon of the industry' (O'Donohoe, 1995). Such views are supported by Gordon's (1982) research among 18-55-year-old women. The younger women in particular were aware of a range of advertising styles. They used a well-developed and quite cynical set of ground rules to make sense of ads, assuming for example that 'members of the public' endorsing brands were paid. Similarly, a diary study conducted for the Leo Burnett agency found that consumers appreciated various technical details, identified advertising objectives, and used terms such as 'a send-up of nostalgia commercials' (Rawsthorn, 1990).
Stepping back from practitioners' usage of the term, 'literacy' in its strictest sense refers to the ability to read and understand texts. Many recent definitions offer a broader perspective, however, referring to 'the ability to produce, understand and use texts in culturally appropriate ways' (Graddol, 1993). In keeping with broader views of literacy, it is increasingly recognised that films, television programmes, music, paintings and even ads may be treated as texts to be read (Cook, 1992; Fairclough, 1995). There has also been a shift away from viewing literacy simply as a set of skills and competences, and towards considering its role in social practice (Maybin, 1993). Furthermore, Street (1993) reminds us that literacy is not neutral: it cannot be isolated from specific social and cultural contexts or questions of power and ideology. This in turn suggests the need for research exploring 'how literacy is actually lived in concrete practices and daily interactions' (Rockhill, 1987), such as ethnographic studies of language use and acquisition (Schieffelin and Gilmore, 1986; Maybin, 1993).

Advertising texts - the 'literature of consumption' (Scott, 1994) - form an extremely rich and complex signifying system, indicating that the concept of literacy may be useful here. Considering what ads require of their audience in order to be understood at all, Scott argues that advertising texts imply a reader who is:

selective, active and sceptical during the reading experience...able to make subtle inferential distinctions using a variety of verbal and non-verbal cues simultaneously...an agile reader, who can change frames and strategies even within the temporal space of a single reading and alter expectations as the textual task seems to suggest...an experienced reader, one with a broad-based interpretive repertoire, including a capacity for highly metaphorical, imaginative thinking.

Scott, 1994, p 475

Advertising consumers/readers are also socially and culturally situated. We interpret ads in the context of our own life histories and life experiences, and we may use ads as symbolic resources to shape our personal identities and life projects or to facilitate social interactions and relationships (Buttle, 1991; Elliott and Ritson, 1995; McCracken, 1987; O'Donohoe, 1994). Indeed, applying their meaning-based model of advertising experiences to the case of three Danish brothers, Mick and Buhl (1992) found that apparently 'idiosyncratic' interpretations of ads could be understood as patterned readings, intertwined with the brothers' life histories and current life-worlds.

Some academics have considered explicitly what it means to be advertising literate; able to read advertising texts. Such studies have often focused on young people, who are seen as particularly skilled in decoding advertising messages, cross-references and visual jokes (Nava and Nava, 1990; Etienne, 1997). Relating children's advertising proficiency to the acquisition of metalinguistic competencies, Young (1990) found that most eight-year-olds were aware of advertising's commercial function and use of imagery. Buckingham's (1993) study of children's 'television literacy' found that even seven-year-olds were aware of advertising's persuasive intent. Children generally demonstrated an understanding of narrative conventions and technical details. They could consider why advertisers might take certain approaches, what reactions might be expected from the audience, and to whom particular ads may appeal. This supports the idea that as consumers, we possess 'schemer schema' (Wright, 1986) or 'persuasion knowledge' (Friestad and Wright, 1994), in that we can draw on our 'folk wisdom on persuasion' to recognise, interpret and respond to marketers' influence attempts.

Building on various literacy theories, Ritson and Elliott (1995) propose a model incorporating 'practice' and 'event' accounts of advertising literacy which resonate with academic and practitioner literature on active audiences. Literacy practices concern the concrete skills and purposes surrounding the 'reading' or making sense of ads. Literacy events are the social interactions facilitated by those readings, and the ways that these interactions are used to construct self and group identities. These two interdependent processes account for the creative negotiations, or co-creation, of advertising meanings constantly undertaken by consumers.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The discussion of advertising literacy which follows is drawn from a broad qualitative study exploring young adults' everyday experiences of advertising. Eighteen small group discussions were used to obtain peer interaction while allowing individual contributions to be explored in some depth. To complement the group discussions, 16 individual interviews were also conducted: these allowed detailed exploration of individual informants' experiences and interpretations (Robson and Foster, 1989). In order to address a range of
experiences, quotas were based on age (18-20, 21-24), gender and broad occupational status (student, working and unemployed, with older working groups divided into graduates and non-graduates). The research was conducted in Edinburgh, mainly in the spring and summer of 1991. Eighty-two young adults participated, with tape-recorded discussion generally lasting between one-and-a-half to two hours.

Rather than focusing on pre-selected ads, the study's informants were asked to talk about any ads which they liked, disliked or remembered for any reason, and from any time or medium. Subsequent discussion emerged from, and was grounded in, their own experiences and descriptions of ads. The ads which the young adults tended to discuss came primarily from television, although at the end of each session, informants looked through some magazines and talked about any ads which caught their eye. Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), an attempt was made to develop grounded theory, emerging from and illustrated by the data collected. This calls for the joint collection, coding and analysis of data as far as possible, and a constant comparative method of analysis. Tentative categories and their properties were modified and developed by comparing them with instances from further fieldwork and other cases, by searching through the transcripts for negative instances, and by discussing interpretations with colleagues from different social science backgrounds.

FINDINGS

We never cease to be amazed at the subtleties and the understanding of the punters, the consumers in the marketplace. They've a much more finely-honed critical faculty about advertising than we often give them credit for.

Practitioner, in O'Donohoe, 1995

According to the practitioners' criteria, the young adults were undoubtedly advertising literate, frequently displaying the 'finely-honed critical faculty' mentioned by the practitioner above. They appeared to have acquired this from many sources. Certainly, as Goodyear (1991) has pointed out, exposure to film and television allows consumers to absorb many conventions used in ads. In this study, however, the mass media also played a more explicit educational role. Informants often described documentaries, magazine and newspaper features they had seen on advertising topics; they also mentioned comedy programmes featuring ads from around the world, and films and television dramas partly set in ad agencies. Some had touched on advertising in school or on university courses ranging from politics to engineering. Others had sold advertising space for student magazines or local theatre programmes, and a few had picked up insights from friends studying photography or communications. Much of their understanding, however, appeared to have been acquired by osmosis, from the cumulative experience of being 'faced with them [ads] day in, day out'.

While the young adults' advertising literacy may be discussed in terms of particular skills, Ritson and Elliott (1995) emphasise the need to examine how, why, and in what context such skills are used. This study found that they could be categorised into three broad groupings, each of which allowed the informants to adopt a particular role in relation to ads and advertising. These groupings - competent consumers, surrogate strategists, and casual cognoscenti - are discussed in turn below.

Competent consumers

These kids [Generation X], we are supposed to believe, deconstruct ads faster than Yale critics on amphetamines.

Twitchell, 1995, p 240

The young adults in this study certainly displayed finely tuned interpretive skills, readily making sense of complex imagery and allusions to the world beyond advertising. Indeed, 'you think you're pretty stupid if you can't understand an advert'. Thus, while no one actually used semiotic terminology, the iconic function of the woman wearing a brown silk dress in ads for Galaxy Ripple chocolate was well understood:

Oh, it's just chocolate put on film. Oh, it's this girl and she's wearing like brown, it actually makes me think of chocolate as well. It's in glossy magazines and so on and it's just got flowing brown clothes, and it's falling into ripples, you know, as in like Galaxy Ripple.
Informants demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation of advertising conventions, styles and trends. Cigarette ads, for example, used complex imagery and ‘like you to think you’re smart by working out who’s selling the advert’. Informants also had well-developed antennae for subtle comparative ads. Looking through a magazine, a young worker found a Galaxy Ripple ad which asked ‘Why have cotton when you can have silk?’. Without batting an eyelid, she announced ‘that’s like saying “why have a Flake, when you can have a Ripple?”’

Turning to advertising styles, one frequent distinction was between ‘direct’ or ‘straightforward’ ads, and those which were ‘indirect’, ‘subtle’ or ‘obscure’. Other common categories were ‘lifestyle’, ‘stereotype’, ‘humorous’, ‘music’, ‘public service’, ‘low-budget’, ‘glossy’ and ‘wee mini-series’. In all these cases, the classifications were much more nuanced and detailed than can be demonstrated here. For example, humorous ads featuring established comedians were often categorised according to whether they ‘stick to their own style of comedy’ or not. ‘Hilarious’ ads relied on visual humour, while ‘quirky, off-beat’ ones contained ‘good lines’ to listen out for. Another frequently mentioned type of humour was the ‘rip-off’ or ‘mickey-take’, which might take the form of ‘adverts slagging off other adverts’, or parodies of non-advertising material like film genres or scenes. Humour was also classified according to its relevance to the product, and many informants distinguished between ads which were funny, those which tried to be but failed, and those which were unintentionally funny, such as low-budget cinema ads. A keen sense of advertising’s evolution was evident in many comments. Various ‘new’ styles and themes were discussed, and in general ads were thought to rely less than before on ‘the same actors and the same voiceovers and the same sort of set’.

Surrogate strategists In keeping with practitioners’ observations and Wright’s (1986) notion of ‘schemer schema’, the young adults discussed a range of advertising objectives and measures of effectiveness, shrewdly second-guessing the intentions behind particular ads and campaigns. Comfortable with the language as well as the concepts of advertising strategy, they used terms such as ‘exposure’, ‘high awareness’ and ‘brand-switching’. Several informants pointed out that ad agencies had to ‘make a name for themselves’ through their work. Advertising’s reminder function was also understood:

> there’s that many products coming on the market anyway. If the ones who are at the top don’t keep advertising, keep on pushing their product, because other products are coming in, people are going to use them, they may be cheaper or a lot better.

Advertisers were thought to consider ‘who to appeal to’, so that they could ‘target’ or ‘aim’ messages towards ‘different sections of society and stuff’, such as men or women, ‘our sort of age-group’, ‘housewives’, ‘yuppies’, ‘aspirers’, ‘quirky, off-beat people’, and the not entirely accurate ‘ABs, B2s, C2s’. Positioning issues were also discussed. Ads often portrayed brands as stylish, superior or part of a particular lifestyle, and they could ‘change people’s perceptions’, as when Guinness transformed its image from the choice of ‘the hard drinking man’ to ‘something you go into a posh bar and ask for’. On various occasions, informants discussed the market conditions facing advertisers. Thus, Radion entered ‘one of the most saturated markets going’, and the ‘obscure’ style of cigarette ads came about ‘because they’re quite restricted in how they can advertise’. Campaigns were generally understood as a series of ads for a brand, built over time and possibly across media, by ‘repeating slogans’ or using ‘consistent themes’. Media planning revolved around ‘the people you want to attract’, and scheduling could prevent consumer boredom, for example by ‘putting out maybe four at a time and then break’.

Casual cognoscenti

The young adults’ advertising literacy sometimes extended beyond the roles of consumers or strategists, with discussions of techniques, costs and the making of ads evoking images of casual cognoscenti. Informants were very sensitive to production values. Sometimes ads were simply described as ‘quite classily done’, but specialist terms were often used: scenes were ‘edited’ or ‘spliced up’, cameras could ‘pan down’, and some ads used a ‘tinted lens’, ‘freeze frames’ or ‘spectacular aerial shots’. Dialogue was ‘scripted’ and sometimes ‘presented to camera’. Such terms generally seemed to be used appropriately, and were often accompanied by descriptions of techniques. ‘Amateur’ ads were readily identified. In the cinema, for example,
Some of them are dubbed over...they just look as if the voice isn't moving at the same time as the lips, they crackle in between and everything, and there are big scratches on them.

Female student 21-24

Turning to advertising costs, there were some wildly inaccurate estimates: Tina Turner was said to have received 'fifty million or a thousand or something' for endorsing Pepsi, while someone else claimed the ad cost 'seventeen million' to make. Although informants lacked precise costing knowledge, they insisted that 'you can tell, you can always tell' when ads were on a low budget. Signs of cheapness included 'cheap advertising times' such as very late at night, 'cardboard shots', 'wonky pictures', and 'elevator' or 'pornographic xylophone' music. A distinction was made, however, between ads which were 'cheap to make' and those which 'looked cheap', because 'cheap adverts don't have to be bad'. The use of special effects, celebrity endorsers or directors, 'tons of people', and exotic sets or locations signalled 'big budget', as did ads telling a story, lasting for more than 30 seconds, and involving 'a lot of thought'. While low-budget advertisers were the butt of many jokes, informants were puzzled by 'cheap' ads from companies which could have afforded more expensive ones. Thus, some informants interpreted Radion's 'home-movie' ads as a parody of stereotypical washing powder ads, and others suggested that 'cheap ads might be a way of communicating the brand's low price'.

Informants also traded stories about advertising, such as Levi's initial use of a session singer rather than Marvin Gaye for Heard it through the grapevine in the 'laundrette' ad. Others discussed ads which had won awards, encountered problems with celebrity endorsers, or had been particularly complicated to make. Even if these stories were not true, it is interesting that they were offered at all, that they were told with confidence and authority, and were received with interest by others. This suggests that the young adults felt comfortable enough about the world of advertising, and their relationship with it, to talk about it in ways which did not seem far removed from stories found in Campaign or conversations between practitioners.

DISCUSSION

This study supports and illustrates practitioners' claims that consumers are advertising literate, and it extends such thinking by describing young adults' advertising literacy skills in terms of three dimensions - competent consumers, surrogate strategists and casual cognoscenti. Given the increasing emphasis placed on relationship marketing, and the importance of communication in building consumer-brand relationships (Dalla Costa, 1996; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998), it is particularly interesting that each dimension of advertising literacy essentially means adopting a different role in relation to ads and advertising.

In this study, literacy appeared to be absolutely fundamental to any understanding or description of the young adults' advertising experiences. For example, their attitudes to advertising emerged as highly ambivalent. While this in itself is hardly surprising (Tylee, 1989), it is interesting to note how the young adults' ambivalence appeared to be shaped by their advertising literacy. There was, for example, a sense in which the young adults saw advertising as something to be enjoyed and yet endured. Thus, they welcomed ads which respected them as competent consumers by posing interpretive challenges, which offered something for the casual cognoscenti to appreciate (or denigrate), or which aroused their curiosity as surrogate strategists, in that they wondered why a brand was being advertised in a particular way. At the same time, however, their ability to assume each of these roles meant that they could be jaded by ads on more levels, becoming bored not just with particular campaigns, but with various conventions, techniques or strategies.

Another tension evident in the young adults' attitudes was between a sense of invulnerability and one of insecurity with respect to ads. Thus, as competent consumers and surrogate strategists, they felt confident that they could 'see through' ads and advertisers' intentions. On the other hand, precisely because they could assume the role of surrogate strategist, they understood that advertising effects were not necessarily immediate or obvious, and this added a sense of wariness in their dealings with ads:

I think it's probably a lot more subtle than you think. I think you probably are influenced by it. It's just because you don't like to admit that you're being manipulated.

Female student 21-24
The ease with which the young adults in this study played the roles of competent consumers and casual cognoscenti endorses practitioners' search for challenging, intriguing ads which provide scope for consumer creativity and involvement, without sacrificing credibility or brand relevance. In this context, Lannon (1992) outlines the evolution of British advertising styles as consumers have become more adept at decoding, and as the complicity required of them has increased. Some campaigns develop complex language codes, adapting symbols and metaphors to express brand character in ways which recognise and demand audience complicity. Ultimately, brands invent their own language: not needing to explain themselves, ads focus on stretching and engaging their target audience's imagination. This approach can lend itself extremely well to integrated campaigns, such as those for Tango or Martini in recent years: consumers can be invited to extend their participation - and their relationship with the brand - through the use of telephone lines, Internet sites and other initiatives. For example, following the tongue-in-cheek 'beautiful people' Martini ads, consumers were invited to send in photographs of themselves in order for judges to decide whether they were 'beautiful' enough to drink the brand. Apparently, those who did send in pictures of themselves received T-shirts printed with their photograph, together with the line 'Not quite beautiful enough to drink Martini!'

Although advertisers targeting young adults may assume the highest degree of literacy and potential complicity, this is not to suggest that all 'youth' ads should suddenly install themselves at the far end of Lannon's continuum. Advertising codes evolve, and it may be this gradual development which encourages consumer complicity and rapport. Furthermore, given the transparency of advertisers' motives to the surrogate strategists in this study, brands shifting position too radically may be dismissed as 'jumping on the bandwagon' or resented for presuming they knew how to appeal. This fate befell one youth ad mentioned in this study, which was:

*all hip-hop, flashing lights, and 'yo kids, let's go groovin'. I could imagine the advertising executive sitting at his desk thinking 'oh, this'll appeal to the kids, this'll drag them in, they'll fall for this one.'*

Male student 18-20

Academic theories of literacy are particularly helpful in exploring issues of consumer cynicism and subversion. As literacy is considered empowering, Nava and Nava (1990) wonder whether young people's decoding skills may enable them to resist advertising messages. Similarly, Ritson and Elliott (1995) speculate about consumers making 'strong' readings by organising, selecting and connecting different aspects of an ad from those intended by advertisers. This resonates with 'uses and gratifications' theory, which recognises that consumers and advertisers may pursue very different agendas (Buttle, 1991). In this study, the young adults' awareness of advertising conventions and intentions helped them to make many strong readings. Some extremely low-budget, 'horrendous' television ads, for example, appeared to have acquired cult status similar to that of B-movies among film buffs. Celebrating rather than denigrating such ads allowed them to express their understanding of, and independence from, the advertising system. While some 'Legendary Crap Ads' (Rowland, 1994a) aimed at young adults have benefited from such notoriety, attempting to wrest control over irony from consumers is very dangerous. There are always those: 'consumers avoiding advertising's slings and arrows of intentional meaning - and finding another place from which to watch and laugh' (Rowland, 1994b, p 24).

Recognising the increasingly 'unmanageable consumer' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995), it could be argued that assuming the roles of surrogate strategist or casual cognoscenti allowed the young adults in this study to 'reject the text' (Scott, 1994) and their inscribed role as potential purchasers. Thus, advertising literacy may 'empower' consumers to distance themselves from advertising's influence and disengage from its mystique, just like a magician's audience which has worked out how the tricks are performed.

Future research could assess the feasibility of using the three roles identified here as audience segmentation bases. In this study, however, each role was adopted by every grouping of informants. This supports Scott's (1994) description of consumers as 'agile readers' of advertising texts, particularly as shifting roles implies a shift in the consumer-ad relationship, and different kinds of ads and different aspects of ads were related to in different ways: one informant approached one ad as a vegetarian, another as a Robbie Coltrane fan, and others as a member of a women's group, for example. Young adults may possess distinctive skills and deploy them in distinctive ways, however. A fruitful research avenue could be to explore among other groups (in terms of age and lifestyle) the dimensions of their advertising literacy skills, and the roles with respect to advertising which these imply. Indeed, given the dynamic nature of advertising, it is vital that the dimensions, roles and relationships are explored over time.
This study also has implications for how advertising research is conducted. It challenges the validity of studies which repress consumers' ability to adopt the roles of surrogate strategists or casual cognoscenti. Indeed, if studies are based on the premise of consumer naivety in such respects, participants may feel patronised or fundamentally misrepresented by researchers, and this may in turn affect their responses. In a sense, acknowledging advertising literacy makes the research practitioner's task easier: literate consumers may be very willing to discuss the effectiveness of advertising messages, techniques and strategies. However, they may use their knowledge and 'professional' vocabulary to distance themselves from ads: 'they put up their shields and talk to you about "it's designed to do this thing and that". And you say 'does it work?' and they say "of course not, we know what it's trying to do''' (practitioner, in O'Donohoe, 1995).

The challenge for research practitioners is to focus discussion on consumers' responses to particular ads as consumers, while acknowledging their ability, and indeed their right, to adopt other roles in relation to advertising. More fundamentally, this study suggests that the young adults' ability to adopt different roles in relation to advertising is bound up with, and draws heavily upon, experiences of everyday life - experiences including, but not limited to, the mass media in general. This view of consumers as active and socially situated readers of advertising texts does not sit well with advertising theories or research methods which treat consumers as passive or, in Buttle's (1991, p 97) eloquent phrase, as 'islands of cognitive and affective response, unconnected to a social world, detached from culture, removed from history and biography'. If we accept that advertising literacy (or advertising experience for that matter) is socially and culturally situated, then localised, sensitive and flexible research approaches are required - research which takes time to learn about the contexts and perspectives which may shape the encounters of particular consumers with particular ads. In this, as Buttle (1991) has pointed out, we have much to learn from anthropologists and their accounts of ethnographic research. Indeed, their approaches may help us to recognise the complexity of consumers' relationships with advertising, and to connect 'the way we think about advertising in our work to the way we know it in our lives' (Scott, 1994, p 478).

**REFERENCES**


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**NOTES & EXHIBITS**

**Stephanie O'Donohoe**

Stephanie O'Donohoe is senior lecturer in marketing at The University of Edinburgh. A graduate of the College of Marketing and Design, and of Trinity College Dublin, she worked in the Irish alcohol industry and completed her Ph.D. at Edinburgh. Her research addresses consumers' experiences of advertising, with emphasis on young adults' attitudes, involvement and literacy. Her published work explores how (or whether) academic theories in marketing, literary, cultural and media studies can account for everyday experiences of advertising.

**Caroline Tynan**

Caroline Tynan is professor of marketing at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University and a member of the Associate Faculty of Henley Management College. Her publications address market segmentation, qualitative research methodology, consumer behaviour and supply chain management, and her current research focuses on aspects of relationship marketing in service sectors.