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## Living with ambivalence Attitudes to advertising in postmodern times

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**Abstract.** *Although the ambivalence of public attitudes to advertising is often acknowledged, it has been undertheorized. This paper begins with an overview of prior research on the structure of attitudes to advertising, and a case is made for ambivalence as a central characteristic. It is also argued that research on attitudes to advertising has generally focused on the content of attitudes at the expense of contextual factors, yet consumers do not relate to advertising in isolation from their experiences of popular culture, postmodernism and advertising literacy. Ambivalence in consumer attitudes to advertising is revisited by considering three sets of tensions which are related to these contextual factors. The paper concludes by considering the implications for advertising production and consumption in postmodern times.*  
**Key Words** ● advertising ● advertising literacy ● ambivalence ● attitudes ● popular culture ● postmodernism

There is a wealth of research on public attitudes to advertising, with studies motivated by various factors. Advertising's visible and pervasive role in everyday life has attracted the attention of public opinion researchers (Zanot, 1984; Calfee and Ringold, 1988), while marketers are concerned that public attitudes to advertising may influence perceptions about the need for government regulation (Pollay and Mittal, 1993) or even people's willingness to participate in marketing research projects (Bond and Griggs, 1996). Of more direct interest to marketers is the potential influence of consumers' attitudes to advertising in general on their brand attitudes and behaviour. Bauer and Greyser's (1968) classic study of American attitudes to advertising found that these general attitudes were related to respondents' rating of specific ads as informative, enjoyable, annoying or offensive. Since then, the influence of attitude toward the ad (Aad) on brand attitudes

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and preferences has been established (Mitchell and Olsen, 1981; Brown and Stayman, 1992; Mehta, 2000), with attitudes to advertising in general seen as a potential antecedent of attitudes to specific ads (Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989).

Thus, public attitudes to advertising emerges as a topic deserving of academic and practitioner attention for several reasons. While many studies have pointed to the complexities and contradictions of such attitudes, this paper argues that their ambivalent nature has been undertheorized and that research has often focused on their *content* in isolation from their *context*. The paper begins with an overview of prior research on the complex nature of attitudes to advertising, and a case is made for ambivalence as a central characteristic. Turning to contextual factors, relationships between advertising, popular culture, postmodernism and advertising literacy are considered. Attitudes to advertising are then revisited by considering three sets of tensions in light of these issues. Finally, the implications are considered for our understanding of advertising production and consumption in postmodern times.

## Attitudes to advertising – complex and multidimensional

While quite negative public attitudes to advertising apparently prevail in the USA (Alwitt and Prabhaker, 1992; Mittal, 1994; Shavitt et al., 1998), many international studies present consumers as generally well-disposed to advertising (Bonnal, 1990; Heyder et al., 1992; James, 1995). This certainly appears to be the case in Britain; the latest Advertising Association survey (Advertising Association, 2000) found 76 percent of respondents approved of advertising 'a lot' or 'a little'. This rate has been stable over the past 20 years, with around three-quarters of people approving in four-yearly surveys. Attitudes also seem stable across demographic groups: the Advertising Association has consistently reported that basic opinions do not vary greatly according to gender, age or social grade, although younger respondents tend to be more positive. Similarly, Bond and Brace (1997) discuss various segmentation studies which found advertising 'acceptors', 'players' and 'rejectors' in significant numbers across all sectors of the population. Other studies have found attitudes varying according to age and wealth, however (Alwitt and Prabhaker, 1992; Shavitt et al., 1998), and the latter study found women less approving of advertising than men.

Moving beyond general approval rates in the Advertising Association studies, there are some indications of complexity. In the 2000 survey, for example, attitudes were not consistent across media: 48 percent of respondents claimed to like advertising on television, compared with 36 percent in newspapers and magazines and 33 percent on posters. Other studies have also found variation in attitudes across media (Mittal, 1994; Smit and Neijens, 2000), and indeed product category (Tylee, 1989; Gullen, 1999).

Returning to the Advertising Association studies, while the 'don't know' responses to the approval question fell to an all-time low in 2000, the percentage



approving or disapproving 'a little' was 69 percent, and the proportion has never fallen below 50 percent since 1966. While this may be explained in terms of extremity bias in responding to rating scales (Smith, 1975: 137), it also seems to reflect contradictory attitudes. Support for this interpretation comes from Tylee's (1989) reference to the British public's 'love-hate' relationship with advertising, since few respondents to a *Campaign* survey were completely in favour or completely against advertising. This pattern was also evident in a 1995 BMRB survey reported by Mintel (1998). Conflicting views are not unique to Britain: reporting on US attitudes, Shavitt et al. (1998) note that theirs is 'not the first survey to suggest ambivalence in public opinions towards advertising'. Indeed, Pollay and Mittal (1993) identified consumer segments which they labelled 'compromised concerned' and 'conflicted Calvinists', while 60 percent of Crane's (1991) Canadian respondents expressed 'mixed' rather than positive or negative views.

Such tensions suggest that attitudes to advertising are multidimensional, or at least based on a range of beliefs; generally positive attitudes often coexist with unfavourable beliefs about particular elements (Barnes, 1982). Different classifications of the beliefs underlying consumer attitudes to advertising have been suggested. For example, market segments have been based on views about the extent to which advertising is interesting, entertaining, devious and annoying (Bond and Griggs, 1996; Bond and Brace, 1997). Some fundamental distinctions have been made between attitudes to the *instruments* and to the *institution* of advertising (Bauer and Greyser, 1968; Sandage and Leckenby, 1980), and between *personalized* and *generalized* attitudes (Reid and Soley, 1982). Overall, published research indicates that consumers' attitudes to advertising are shaped by their cumulative personal experiences of ads, and their beliefs about wider issues regarding its relationship with society. Such issues are brought together in the model offered by Pollay and Mittal (1993). These authors suggest that attitudes to advertising are based on perceptions of its *personal uses* (product information, social role and image, and hedonic/pleasure value) and its *societal effects*, such as its impact on the economy and materialism, the extent to which it corrupts values and appears false or lacking sense.

In general, there seems to be a consensus that consumer attitudes to advertising are complex, multidimensional and ambivalent. While many authors comment on this, they accept rather than explore issues of ambivalence in this context. The next section of this paper considers how the concept of ambivalence can enhance our understanding of consumers' attitudes towards advertising.

## Ambivalence

As Otnes et al. (1997) point out, consumers often experience mixed emotions when dealing with the marketplace. These authors are not alone in identifying consumption-related tensions, with postmodern perspectives in particular highlighting and celebrating the paradoxical (Brown, 1995). Noting that consumers often act in unpredictable and inconsistent ways, Gabriel and Lang (1995) view

fragmentations and contradictions as core features of contemporary consumption. Consumption as a site of contradictions is a theme also addressed by Elliott (1997). Arguing that conflicting themes of freedom and control are played out through consumption, he discusses five consumption-related dialectics: between the material and the symbolic, the social and the self, desire and satisfaction, rationality and irrationality, and creativity and constraint.

Finding little which addressed ambivalence explicitly in the consumer research literature, Otnes et al. (1997) turned to psychological, sociological and cultural theories. Although 'ambivalence' was used first to explain the characteristics of schizophrenia, psychologists soon recognized that people in general can experience simultaneously pleasant and unpleasant feelings for an object. The more complex an object, and the more dealings we have with it over time, the more likely we are to develop psychological ambivalence towards it. Sociological and cultural perspectives on ambivalence move beyond notions of internal emotional struggle to consider the role of external factors. Cultural values may collide, for example, and multiple loyalties, conflicts and pressures can arise from different social roles, relationships and statuses. In this context, Hagen (1994) found Norwegian viewers of a television news programme torn between the roles of private person and citizen, in that they experienced ambivalence when their everyday news viewing differed from what they expected of an imagined 'ideal' viewer. Drawing on psychological, sociological and cultural perspectives, then, Otnes et al. (1997) identified four interrelated sources of consumer ambivalence: tensions between reality and expectations, task and choice overload, conflicting roles, and conflicting cultural values.

These various perspectives on ambivalence can be applied readily to advertising. As a familiar and ever-changing part of consumers' everyday experiences, it is susceptible to psychological ambivalence. Tensions between reality and expectation are also likely: Berger (1972) for one noted that advertising works because it feeds upon the real, yet is never simply about the product or service it promotes. Rather, it is about the future buyer, and how the product or service can transform his or her life. We may imagine how buying a new advertised cream may make our skin younger or smoother, for example, yet we may own others which never delivered on such promises. The range of choice in the marketplace, and the many everyday pressures on consumers, mean that choice and task overload are likely backdrops to numerous advertising encounters. We may also expect conflicting roles and cultural values to play their part: the same person may have very different attitudes to advertising as a parent, as a feminist, or as a film buff, for example. In terms of cultural collision, advertising constantly renegotiates boundaries of taste and decency, as witnessed recently in Britain by the debate surrounding the erotic/pornographic, empowered/exploited pose of the model Sophie Dahl in ads for Opium perfume (Watson-Brown, 2000).

While the Otnes et al. framework makes consumer ambivalence unsurprising, Zigmunt Bauman (1991: 1) argues that ambivalence is a fundamental part of the human condition: 'Ambivalence, the possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category, is a language-specific disorder: a failure of the naming



(segregating) function that language is meant to perform.' Bauman describes order and chaos as modern twins, with the task of ordering paramount among the many which modernity set itself. Ordering involves fragmentation, breaking the world down into manageable problems to be solved. Culture, and language in particular, is a vital part of this ordering process: by naming and classifying, language places itself 'between a solidly founded, orderly world fit for human habitation, and a contingent world of randomness' (p. 1).

Modernity's ambition outstripped its achievements, however: the struggle against ambiguity is self-destructive and self-propelling. To eliminate ambivalence, we must classify more precisely, thereby placing heavier demands on the world. Ambivalence, then, is the debris of modernity – 'the overlapping meanings in the world of tidy classifications and filing cabinets' (Bauman, 1991: 9). This resonates with literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, which views language as constantly 'in a state of flux, where meanings are never singular or uncontested but plural, debatable, contradictory, open to multiple interpretations' (Brown, 1998: 137). In the field of cultural studies, Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model suggests that receivers of television messages do not necessarily take the 'preferred meaning' (one typically reinforcing the institutional, political or ideological order) from them. Different readings – negotiated or oppositional – are possible, signifying 'the structural conflicts, contradictions and negotiations of economic, political and cultural life' (p.16). In this context, Stern (1993) deconstructs cigarette ads from the perspective of postmodern feminist literary criticism, discussing gendered advertising texts and readings.

Again, Bauman's analysis is readily applied to advertising, and it offers a broader, deeper perspective on ambivalence by moving beyond notions of multiple emotional states. Viewed through his lens, advertising can only be produced and consumed through language and culture. Since these are carriers of ambiguity, advertising is no more immune to it than other aspects of human existence. Advertising texts are inherently polysemic; while text and context place some constraints on readings, they are open to multiple and not necessarily consistent or compliant interpretations.

## Advertising and popular culture

Various studies have asked questions about the entertainment value of ads in relation to programmes or editorial content (Advertising Standards Authority, 1990; Gordon, 1984; Pollay and Mittal, 1993). There has also been some examination of attitudes to advertising in relation to particular programme contexts (Barnett, 1987). Such studies, however, offer limited recognition of the relationship between advertising and the 'spectacular vernacular' (Scott, 1993) of the mass media and popular culture in general. Furthermore, consumers' views on advertising in this context have received very little attention.

Advertising is an 'ongoing conversation within a culture about the meaning of objects' (Twitchell, 1996). It channels desire, and 'what is drawn down that

channel, what travels with the commercial, is our culture' (p. 4). In other words, advertising's primary discourse consists of ideas about goods and services, but it constructs a secondary discourse about society and culture along the way (Leiss et al. 1990). Therefore ads are 'a fluctuating and unstable mixture of the voices around them, constantly transmuting and re-combining' (Cook, 1992: 217). As Leiss et al. (1990: 193) observe: 'The substance and images woven into advertising messages are appropriated and distilled from an unbounded range of cultural references . . . The borrowed references are fused with products and returned to cultural discourse.' The postmodern concept of intertextuality is helpful here, as it emphasizes the interdependence, interpenetration and indeterminacy of texts (Cook, 1992; Wernick, 1991; Worton and Still, 1990). Writers are also readers, and so any text is permeated by past and present references, quotations and influences. The influence of texts on each other is deep-rooted and pervasive; according to Barthes (1977: 160) 'the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas.' Texts also enter each other through their readers or co-producers, who relate them to broader frameworks of language and knowledge, cross-fertilizing particular readings with other discourses drawn from their social and cultural experiences. Such 'leaky boundaries' (Fiske, 1989) between ads and other communication forms have been analysed in detail (Brown, 1995; Cook, 1992; Fowles, 1996; Nava and Nava, 1990; Wernick, 1991).

There appear to be particularly leaky boundaries between advertising and popular culture. Fowles (1996) sees these two as 'allied symbol domains', woven into the fabric of everyday life, and knitting together contemporary expressive culture. Advertising and popular culture are jointly mediated to many people: they each seek to reach, please, and relate to consumers, who often ignore or reject them. Both are economic as well as symbolic entities, the careful product of 'culture industries', and produced with revenue as a prime consideration. Ads provide the mass media with an important source of income, while likeable popular culture presents ads in good company (and, of course, allows audiences to be packaged and sold to advertisers). Both advertising and popular culture have artistic pretensions, pay great attention to style and frequently borrow from each other, as Fowles demonstrates in his analysis of interactions between ads and programme during an episode of the television comedy *Roseanne*. Often treated with disdain and suspicion by critics, advertising and popular culture are able to absorb attacks, and 'even convert criticism into usable material'. Finally, each assists consumers in their quest for self-identity and psychological maintenance.

## Postmodernism and advertising literacy

Television has been described as 'the heart and soul of postmodernism because of its relentless scrambling of signifieds and signifiers, mixing and matching meanings' (Goldman, 1992: 202). Advertising is at least as deserving of this accolade, however. Detailed accounts have been provided of ads indulging in postmodern



practices such as fragmentation, de-differentiation, hyperreality, chronology, pastiche, pluralism and anti-foundationalism (Brown, 1995; Goldman and Papsen, 1994; Scott, 1992). These practices are not just associated with ads themselves – they pervade the consumption of ads by audiences. For Wernick (1991: 192), the 'promotionally addressed subject' in postmodernity faces the challenge of building '... an identity and an orientation from the materials of a culture whose meanings are unstable and behind which, for all the personalized manner in which its multitudinous messages are delivered, no genuinely expressive intention can be read.' Firat and Schultz (1997) are more sanguine about this, suggesting (in suitably ironic fashion, no doubt) that fragmentation may be the meta-narrative of postmodernism and that this, together with the loss of commitment to any one way of being, results in '... "bricolage" markets, that is consumers who do not present a united, centred self ... but instead a jigsaw collection of multiple representations of selves and preferences even when approaching the same product category'.

If consumers are indeed bricoleurs, using ads as one symbolic resource to create 'moments of identity', however fleeting, for themselves (Valentine and Gordon, 2000), it seems that they are sophisticated and advertising-literate bricoleurs. Meadows (1983) and Lannon (1985) highlighted consumers' sophisticated understanding of the vocabulary, elements and styles of advertising, with empirical support for such claims coming from practitioner studies such as Gordon (1982) and Setford (1990). More recently, a Mintel report (Mintel, 1998) discussed the nature and implications of consumer sophistication, drawing on group discussions with men and women aged 18–50. It found respondents familiar with the vocabulary of advertising, aware of various trends and of how ads are targeted towards programme audiences, and able to explain the rationale of various ads to each other. They also expressed a range of plausible theories concerning how advertising affects behaviour, and what advertisers were trying to achieve with approaches such as humour, teasers, irritation and image-based ads. While younger respondents appeared particularly sophisticated, according to Mintel (1998: 84):

There seems to be no doubt that today's consumers are noticeably different in their approach to advertising and marketing than those of a decade or so ago. The dividing line between consumers and those attempting to target them is now much less clear.

The blurring of boundaries is a theme often raised in discussion of post-modernism. It resonates here with notions of intertextuality, since consumers as well as advertisers learn from cumulative exposure to advertising. Despite the claimed increase in consumer sophistication, however, many of the themes addressed in the Mintel report were identified by Gordon in 1982.

Turning to academic work in this area, some researchers have focused on issues of persuasion, while others have explored the nature of advertising *literacy* by drawing on work from language and literacy studies. The persuasion-led approach may be traced to Wright's (1986) presidential address to the Association



for Consumer Research, in which he suggested that consumers have developed 'schemer schema' or intuitive theories about marketers' attempts to influence them. Developing this notion, Friestad and Wright (1994) draw marketers' attention to 'folk models of persuasion', observing that consumers learn about persuasion in many ways: from everyday social encounters, from observing marketers and other persuaders, and from media commentary on marketing and advertising tactics. The diffusion of psychological concepts and language into our culture also plays a role, as does formal education in schools about marketing issues. Developing over time, consumer's persuasion knowledge is an important factor shaping their response to attempts to persuade.

Drawing on language and literacy studies, Ritson and Elliott (1995) outline similarities between developments in literacy theories and active audience perspectives in the advertising literature, using these to develop a model of advertising literacy incorporating practices and events. Literacy *practices* refer to the tangible skills and purposes surrounding the 'reading' of ads, while literacy *events* are the social interactions made possible by those readings, and how they are used to construct self and group identities.

Also drawing on a view of literacy as more than a neutral set of skills, O'Donohoe and Tynan (1998) discuss young Scottish adults' advertising literacy in terms of three roles which they adopted in relation to advertising. In this qualitative study, participants presented themselves as *competent consumers*: they demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of advertising conventions, styles and trends, and made sense of complex imagery and allusions to the world beyond advertising. They also slipped easily into the role of *surrogate strategists*, showing their understanding of advertising objectives, positioning, media and targeting issues. They were very plausible in applying these marketing concepts – and the associated vocabulary – when talking about specific ads. Finally, they sometimes adopted a role which can be labelled *casual cognoscenti*, reflecting their awareness of general issues of cost, production techniques, and their trading of 'behind the scenes' stories about the making of particular ads.

Several issues concerning those three roles should be noted here. First, all three roles were evident throughout the sample – among male and female, student, unemployed, and working (graduate and non-graduate) participants – with participants switching seamlessly between roles. Second, adopting the roles of surrogate strategist and casual cognoscenti meant stepping outside the position of potential purchaser, the role presumably intended for them by the advertiser. Discussing the 'fissure between signifier and signified', Firat and Schultz (1997: 192) note that everything, even an object designed to perform one particular function, is 'only arbitrarily connected to that function'. In this context, it is not surprising that advertising-literate consumers may choose to consume ads independently of the brands which they promote. This is consistent with discussions of advertising uses and gratifications (O'Donohoe, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1999) which emphasize how consumers engage with ads for purposes which may not match those of the advertiser. Finally, while the three roles outlined above were identified among young adults, they are consistent with data presented elsewhere



(Buckingham, 1993; Gordon, 1982; Setford, 1990; Mintel, 1998), indicating that these roles may be relevant to a broader range of consumers.

## Attitudes to advertising revisited: three postmodern paradoxes

So far, this paper has reviewed studies indicating the complexities and contradictions in consumers' attitudes to advertising. It has also argued that contradictions must be expected if we accept ambivalence as part of the human, postmodern condition. For Stern (1994), paradox exists at the very core of commercial communication, since 'authenticity' is realized by the skilful use of actors, scripts and settings. Furthermore, she argues that the coexistence of apparently oppositional traits 'suggests that a feature of postmodern authenticity in the marketplace is less the resolution of paradoxes than the acceptance of their complementarity' (p. 391).

In the next section, the paper argues that consumers' experiences of postmodernism, popular culture and advertising literacy each contribute to the contradictions in their attitudes to advertising. Three sets of tensions, or postmodern paradoxes, in consumer attitudes are proposed and related to these themes.

### Distinct identity, intertextual entity

Over time, advertising appears to have become something to be appreciated in its own right, sometimes more entertaining than the editorial material it interrupts (Tylee, 1989; Advertising Standards Authority, 1990). Without this sense of advertising as a distinct cultural form, it would be difficult to imagine an institution such as the Victoria and Albert Museum holding an exhibition on *The Power of the Poster*, for example, or television programmes devoted to advertising, such as the BBC documentary series *The Ad Factor* and comedy programmes like *Carrott's Commercial Breakdown*.

There is direct support from consumers for this view of advertising as something to be appreciated in its own right. Indeed, Gordon's 1984 study was called 'The ads are better than the programmes – so say some of us'. Similarly, Buckingham (1993) cites a 12-year old who claimed 'I just watch the adverts all the time, I sort of turn on the TV, first thing I watch is the adverts, then I watch the programmes.' Certainly, the young adults taking part in the study reported by O'Donohoe (1994, 1997; O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998) regarded advertising as 'very entertaining in its own right'. Treating it as something with its own history and cultural identity, they talked about ads and styles of advertising from the past, making reference to 'classics' and 'the best adverts of all time'. They also referred to advertising variations across cultures, distinguishing between Scottish and English ads for example, and making jokes about the 'hard sell' of US ads in comparison with British ones (O'Donohoe, 1997). Similarly, older respondents in the Mintel (1998) study discussed how advertising styles and the kind of products

featured had changed in their lifetime, and respondents generally had clear views about differences between US and British styles of advertising.

At the same time, consumers clearly experience advertising intertextually. Consumers in Gordon's (1982) study described ads in terms of other genres, such as pop videos and soap operas, for example, and they recognized allusions to the world beyond advertising. Even the children in Buckingham's (1993) study made reference to 'advert serials', 'home video' formats, and ads 'sort of like a TV programme', and they noticed that the same people sometimes featured in different ads. O'Donohoe (1997) shows how the boundaries between advertising and other cultural forms were very fluid for young adults. They enjoyed ads that parodied others, and drew on knowledge of previous ads to make sense of new and otherwise puzzling executions in a campaign. They also described ads in terms of other cultural forms, including television programmes and genres, paintings, films, and magazine formats such as the 'problem page'. Furthermore, they observed how advertising fed into other cultural forms, and they described how their experiences of each influenced the other. Similar themes are evident from the 1998 Mintel study. For example, one respondent mentioned the appropriateness of a De Beers ad during a showing of the Bond film *Diamonds are Forever*. Allusions to 'personalities' or 'celebrities' from other fields in ads were understood. This did not always lead to favourable judgements: a young woman noticed the conflict of interests created by Jennifer Aniston endorsing L'Oreal in ads when *Friends* was sponsored by rival Wella, for example, and an older woman criticized a One2One ad featuring Terry Thomas, who 'died in poverty' and 'could have done with the money in his lifetime'.

Intertextuality and advertising literacy are also intertwined. Goodyear (1991) argued that consumers can absorb film and television styles and conventions from the media in general, and apply this knowledge to advertising. While this is undoubtedly the case, programmes such as *Tarrant on TV* provide more explicit lessons about advertising, showing consumers ads from around the world and commenting, even if just for laughs, on aspects of their approach or execution. This wider educational role for the media in general was evident in the Mintel (1998) study, and in O'Donohoe (1997). Thus, the plethora of marketing-related documentaries on television and advertising features in the general press is likely to broaden and deepen consumers' advertising literacy. Furthermore, working through such layers of meaning seems to be one of the rewards which advertising can offer competent consumers.

## Enjoyment and endurance

From Bauer and Greyser's classic 1968 study to more recent research (Tylee, 1989; James, 1995; Mintel, 1998) researchers have commented on how consumers claim to enjoy advertising but also complain that it is boring or irritating. Consistent with psychological perspectives on ambivalence (Otnes et al., 1997), much of this may be attributed to the varied nature of ads themselves: as consumers generalize from the experience of individual ads, this contradiction is likely to emerge.



Advertising literacy feeds both sides of this tension. As competent consumers, advertising audiences are likely to welcome ads which respect and challenge them, and invite them to join the 'hunt for meaning' (Goldman, 1992) by identifying intertextual references. Intriguing details or issues of targeting and purpose may attract and involve them as casual cognoscenti or surrogate strategists.

On the other hand, it is not surprising that advertising-literate consumers, capable of adopting different roles in relation to advertising, believe that it often insults their intelligence (Buckingham, 1993; Mittal, 1994; Shavitt et al., 1998). Various studies have also highlighted consumers' dislike of repetition, and the sense of clutter which lengthy commercial breaks create (Mittal, 1994; Mintel, 1998). Intertextuality can exacerbate this sense of overload: an ad may be seen not just during the commercial break, but may also be reproduced in the features pages of a newspaper or magazine, or alluded to in other media and contexts. Wonderbra, Opium and Budweiser's 'Whassup?' campaign are examples of ads whose presence has been magnified as they are reproduced, discussed or joked about by various media commentators and personalities. This may increase awareness, but also lead to feelings of being 'bombarded' or 'oversaturated' with advertising, as seemed to be the case especially among the younger respondents in the Mintel (1998) study. The pervasiveness of advertising, and the sense that there was no escape from it, was captured by participants cited in O'Donohoe (1997: 249):

'How can you actually stop someone from seeing adverts?'  
'Blindfold them, deafen them, tie their hands, I dunno.'

(Male workers, 21–24)

Finally, if consumers can move between the three literacy roles, this suggests that they can become jaded with advertising on different levels. It is not just the repetition of individual ads that becomes tedious: at a more general level, advertising formats and styles, and even media schedules, such as multiple campaign executions over a short period, can become predictable and boring.

### Invulnerability and insecurity

Defending its role in society, the advertising industry tends to describe how it informs rational, sovereign consumers about the choices available in the marketplace. Such a picture probably appeals to consumers as well, since it positions them as in control. Various surveys indicate that the informational role of advertising is not accepted wholeheartedly by consumers, however. Shavitt et al. (1998) found 68 percent of respondents sometimes or often used advertising information to help make purchase decisions, but 69 percent had sometimes or often felt misled by advertising; only 38 percent agreed that 'in general, I feel I can trust advertising'. In Britain, only 30 percent of BMRB's sample agreed that advertising 'tells you about new products or services', while 24 percent agreed 'it tries to sell you something you don't need' (Mintel, 1998).

These figures suggest a tension between acceptance and wariness of advertising

as an information source, a tension which again appears to be heightened by advertising literacy. Consumers able to adopt the roles of competent consumer and surrogate strategist feel confident that they can decode ads and 'see through' marketers' intentions and tactics. After all, if advertising tends to insult people's intelligence, they have little to fear. One group of children interviewed by Buckingham (1993: 257) discussed an ad for Lucozade featuring the footballer John Barnes, for example:

Tracey: . . . they [the advertisers] thought, they think that if they [consumers] drink that drink and play football, they will score something and it will give them more strength.

Interviewer: *And do you believe that?*

Tracey: No!

Ajita: No! Anybody who believes that, they're really stupid.

Similarly, a student was very disparaging about ads targeting youth audiences:

' . . . 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 students, 18–20, in O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998)

Older consumers in the Mintel (1998) study tended to emphasize their cynicism and experience with respect to tactics such as celebrity endorsements:

'We're more aware of the reason they're doing it, whereas a younger age group would probably give them the benefit of the doubt that they're sincere about what they're saying.'

(Male group, 35–50)

Similarly, Gordon (1982) reports that women in their 50s saw themselves as practical, rational in their choices, and not 'taken in' by advertising. In this context, Pollay (1986) refers to the 'myth of personal immunity' from advertising. The same defences are not attributed to others, of course: other, less worldly-wise people than the respondent will be misled by advertising or succumb to its siren call. Thus, the children interviewed by Buckingham (1993) claimed that adults were more gullible, and older respondents in the Mintel (1998) study believed that they were more cynical than younger audiences. Students taking part in O'Donohoe's study believed that those without a university education were more susceptible, whereas young adults in that category painted a picture of themselves as less gullible than friends, family members and others.

At the same time, as surrogate strategists, consumers are aware that advertising effects are not always obvious or immediate: this leads to consumers *knowing that they don't necessarily know* whether advertising is having an effect on them. Thus, advertising literacy may feed concerns about being 'hypnotized', 'brainwashed' or 'seduced' by advertising. As one respondent in the Mintel study put it,



'I think the advertisers want you to think you're in control, and you don't have to rush out and buy things because of their advert – that's probably why they're trying to make them more entertaining. You probably think, I'm not being told to go and buy this, it's my own decision.'  
(Male, 18–35, Mintel, 1998)

Intertextuality, insofar as it extends and magnifies the presence of advertising, may increase concerns about being 'got at'. All this may be expected to foster a wariness which is generalized as well as directed towards particular product claims or advertising executions: on guard against being taken in by advertising, they may be unwilling to accept it at face value. An old cartoon from *Private Eye* captures this tension superbly: it shows someone watching a commercial, saying that he can't decide whether it is a sly and self-referential parody or just a dreadful ad! Indeed, such issues were debated in many groups of young adults: was poor acting in ads due to members of the public being cast, or because good actors could convey the woodenness of amateurs? Were 'bad' ads just bad because the advertiser had a small budget, or were they created professionally to give that impression, either to communicate a low price or to parody well-known advertising conventions? (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998).

Similar tensions are likely to exist when considering advertising effects at a societal level: on the one hand consumers may feel that they personally are not gullible enough to be affected by stereotypes of the perfect man, woman or family, for example. However, appreciating that advertising sometimes results in subtle shifts in perceptions over time, there is likely to be a concern that they may not be immune to the cumulative social messages which accompany (or sometimes constitute) various brand claims.

## Discussion

Valentine and Gordon (2000: 195) argue for a paradigm shift in marketing practice 'from predictability to unpredictability, from rigidity to flexibility, from a need for certainty to a tolerance of ambiguity'. This is certainly the case when we consider consumers' attitudes to advertising. The complexity of these attitudes is well documented, but this paper has argued that they are fundamentally ambivalent. Postmodernism, advertising literacy and advertising's relationship with popular culture all seem implicated in this.

Three sets of tensions, or postmodern paradoxes, in consumer attitudes were discussed and related to these themes. Drawing on a range of studies, it was suggested that consumers experience advertising as a distinct yet intertextual entity: they see advertising as having its own historical and cultural identity, yet they draw on their understanding of genres and conventions from other cultural texts to make sense of it. Second, consumers appear to treat advertising as something to be enjoyed as well as endured: as a form of popular culture it offers various hedonic, aesthetic and intellectual rewards, but at the same time its repetition of form and content can jade sophisticated palates. Finally, it seems

that consumers' advertising literacy skills encourage them to feel immune yet vulnerable to the persuasive and ideological powers of ads.

The creative challenge then, seems to lie in addressing consumers in ways that respect the breadth and depth of their advertising literacy. Imaginative content, targeting and media planning (such as using ambient media in innovative, brand-relevant ways) can entertain and intrigue competent consumers and surrogate strategists, for example. 'Behind the scenes' stories in the media about the making of particular ads may appeal to the casual cognoscenti. However, resonating with postmodern notions of fragmentation, advertising literacy gives consumers more reasons for consuming the ad independently of the brand. Thus, a further creative challenge is to close that gap, weaving together the ad's cultural and commercial meanings. Finally, since advertising literacy may enhance consumers' cynicism and sense of vulnerability to the effects of advertising, advertising must constantly strive to earn consumers' trust. This is necessary at the level of individual claims and ads, but the notion of intertextuality reminds us that it also matters how members of the advertising industry present themselves in the media overall: it is not just their colleagues who will read and react to their opinions and stories of how they go about their business.

As Friestad and Wright (1994) observe, consumers are 'moving targets', whose knowledge about persuasion is constantly changing. Clearly, advertising researchers cannot afford to let this moving target out of their sights. While various studies indicate that advertising literacy is not the sole preserve of young adults, a more detailed understanding of its nature and extent among different groups is needed: advertising literacy may involve playing different roles for different groups. Researching individual campaigns, it is important to recognize that consumers may engage with ads in a variety of ways and roles; research which ignores this may miss crucial dimensions of consumers' relationships with ads and advertising. Bearing in mind the potential gap between ad and brand consumption, however, it is also important to understand what routes might exist for consumers to relate to the ad as a potential purchaser.

The 1998 Mintel report refers to the dividing line between sophisticated consumers and advertisers becoming less clear. This is not to suggest, however, that their interests always coincide. Many studies refer to the suspicion and cynicism that consumers bring to advertising. One way of overcoming consumer resistance is to provide pleasure, perhaps in the form of 'code-play' – self-reflexive uses of language (Cook, 1992) such as jokes, puns, parodies and puzzles, which involve consumers and give agencies considerable creative licence. This may lead, as Lannon (1992) has suggested, to a sense of complicity between advertiser and audience. However, this is no panacea – if all advertisers strive for this, code-play will become just one more advertising convention that consumers have seen, done and are done with. Furthermore, even if consumers enjoy playing such a game, advertising effectiveness will not necessarily follow: 'A conspiracy is sometimes orchestrated between clever advertiser and smart consumer at the expense of supposedly dull advertisers, dumb consumers, or even the very manufacturer who is paying for the commercial' (Gabriel and Lang, 1995: 64).



Thus, it seems that the relationship between consumers and advertising is destined to flicker constantly between collusion and collision. Advertising-literate consumers and advertising agencies may frequently share the desire for interesting, entertaining and intriguing ads, but their interests collide when the ad is consumed independently from the brand, or when consumers feel that they are being manipulated or misled. Indeed, at an ideological level, Elliott and Ritson (1997: 213) suggest that advertising interpretation may be the battleground for a 'clash of the Titans' between advertisers and audiences. Certainly, both advertising literacy and ambivalence have been seen as potentially empowering in that they can encourage critical awareness in audiences (Nava and Nava, 1990; Hagen, 1994). Bauman (1991: 238) has a different vision, however, which implies that the Titans will confine themselves to shadow-boxing rather than going for the jugular: 'Dashing the hope of empowerment-through-knowledge amounts to the emphatic disavowal and rebuttal of the power struggle aimed at ultimate domination. It also amounts to the promotion of coexistence: the only condition whose stability, nay permanence, it allows.'

At a more general level, the richness and complexity of attitudes to advertising suggest the need for more wide-ranging research which explores the *context* as well as the *content* of such attitudes. Advertising is not experienced in isolation from the social and cultural world (McCracken, 1987; Buttle, 1991), and this has to be incorporated into research design for advertising studies. Three contextual elements were highlighted here, but many others are likely to be bound up with consumers' attitudes to advertising. Different groups, in different contexts, are likely to experience advertising differently, and attitude research cannot afford to gloss over or obscure such differences. Relating gendered readings to the literature on antecedents of attitude to the ad, for example, Stern (1993) notes that men and women may have different perceptions of the credibility of advertising in general. Finally, ambivalence itself appears a powerful concept for exploring consumption, and the lived experience of ambivalence in different consumption contexts offers a potentially fruitful research avenue.

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