

# Open versus closed advertising texts and interpretive communities

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This paper examines the interpretation of print advertising by different interpretive communities, and explores how audiences interpret open-text vs closed-text advertisements. A reader-response/reception theory approach was adopted and conducted through depth interviews. Our findings reveal that there are meaningful differences in interpretation based on the social class and gender of the participants. The study demonstrates how interpretive communities use different interpretive strategies, and explores the implications for designing marketing communications.

## Introduction

There has been a noticeable shift in print advertisements from functional to symbolic approaches as the use of rhetorical style in magazine advertisements has grown progressively more complex and elaborated over time. Whereas advertisements from the 1950s used only one rhetorical figure and explained it in words, advertisements from later time periods tend to use unanchored rhetorical figures and layer them more thickly (Phillips & McQuarrie 2002). Advertisers appear to have assumed a greater degree of competency with respect to consumers' ability to read and understand rhetorical figures and other stylistic devices, and as a result have developed an increasing preference for figures that will be likely to evoke elaboration on the part of consumers (O'Donohoe 2001). Thus, they have moved from telling consumers how to interpret rhetorical figures to showing them the figures and leaving the interpretation up to them. Consequently the interpretation of brands and marketing communication has become extremely challenging, mainly due to the plethora of available

cultural meanings and interpretive perspectives in combination with the instability of social categories (Firat & Venkatesh 1995; Holt 2002; Kates 2002). As there have been few studies that have explored real consumers' interpretations of advertising texts, the aim of this paper is to examine print advertising interpretation by different interpretive communities in order to establish empirically how audiences interpret open and closed advertising texts.

## **Multiple readings and elaboration**

Previous studies have not only established the existence of multiple readings in advertisements (Mick & Buhl 1992; Elliott *et al.* 1993; Elliott & Ritson 1995), but they have also suggested that ambiguity and complex, non-anchored rhetorical figures may increase elaboration, because the consumer must figure out the advertisement's message (Warlaumont 1995; McQuarrie & Mick 1999; Mothersbaugh *et al.* 2002). Increased elaboration may, in turn, increase the memorability of the advertisement (Kardes 1988). In addition, consumers' pleasure in solving the puzzle of a rhetorical figure can lead to increased attention (McQuarrie & Mick 1996) and a positive attitude towards the advertisement (McQuarrie & Mick 1992; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy 1994). In contrast, advertisements that explicitly spell out the meaning of a rhetorical figure to consumers may lead to dislike of the advertisement (Phillips 2000).

Overall, audiences are active meaning producers and imaginative pleasure seekers: 'utopia is the essence of any communication and social practice' (Laclau 1991, p. 93). In relation to advertising, images provide viewers with 'dreams of identity' through which consumers can participate in a shared cultural mythology that encodes allegorical meanings about how to live one's life (Stern 1989; Hirschman & Thompson 1997). Fiction is said to have the power to stimulate a reader's desires and define his/her values by encouraging the reader to enter a text and imagine living in the character's world (Harding 1968). This refers us to the concept of possible selves, which represents the ideal selves that we would like to become, such as the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self. They are also the selves we could become and the selves we are afraid of becoming, such as the alone self, the depressed self, the unemployed self. Possible selves are considered to be important,

because they function as incentives for future behaviour, and they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self. Thus, possible selves provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation (Markus & Nurius 1986).

### **Open and closed advertising texts**

Advertising is consumed in a society composed of a variety of groups with different, often conflicting interests, requiring its texts to be what Eco (1979) calls 'open'. By this he means texts that do not attempt to close off alternative meanings and restrict their focus to one easily attainable meaning, but rather ones that are open to a richness and complexity of readings that can never be singular.

This does not, however, imply that reading is completely idiosyncratic. In contrast, it should be noted that reader-response theorists believe that reading is based on collective conventions and that groups of readers can share certain reading strategies, allowing for the possibility of grouping similar readings and shared responses (Scott 1994a). Moreover, reception theory maintains that a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, and it is virtually impossible to analyse a text without also analysing the reading process (Iser 1991). Effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor of the reader; a text represents a potential effect that is realised in the reading process.

Audience activity can not be studied nominalistically, decontextualised from the larger network of social relationships in which it occurs (Schrøder *et al.* 2003). It is important to go beyond an understanding of audience activity as an isolated object of research, and explore the embeddedness of audience activity in a complex network of ongoing cultural practices and relationships (Ang 1996).

### **Interpretive communities**

One way of achieving this contextualisation is through the concept of interpretive communities, which was introduced by Fish (1980), who proposes that it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and that are responsible for the emergence of formal features.

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies ... these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around ... An interpretive community is not objective because, as a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather than neutral; but by the very same reasoning, the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view.

(Fish 1980, p. 14)

In relation to advertising, interpretive communities have been envisioned as a cultural formation with a shared social and historical context that results in similar interpretations, with particular reference to the use of discursive modes of interpreting media content (Schröder 1994; Elliott & Ritson 1997). This study examines two interpretive communities based on the fundamental cultural categories of social class and gender.

## **Social class and interpretive codes**

We focus on interpretive communities based on social class, in an effort to build on theories that explain how social class still patterns everyday consumption practices (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998; Ustuner & Holt 2003). Consumers of different social classes code reality, language, products and advertisements in different ways (Durgee 1986). Sapir (1949) suggested that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group, and Whorf (1956) stated that different linguistic systems imply different social experiences. Social structure conditions linguistic behaviour and this reproduces social structure: 'this relationship is the reproductive part of a more vital relationship, which is the determination of linguistic behavior through the social structure' (Dittmar 1976, p. 6).

Research by Bernstein (1973) on social relationships and linguistic patterns among middle- and working-class London schoolchildren, found two code types: elaborated codes and restricted codes. A speaker is employing an elaborated speech code when he can make extensive use of the structural possibilities of linguistic material, expressing him in such a way that his verbal behaviour clearly identifies him as belonging to the middle class. On the contrary, a speaker is employing a restricted speech code when he uses only part of the structural linguistic possibilities and can not

correctly verbalise complex thoughts or logical relationships. This speech behaviour is associated with the working class. As a consequence, people using elaborated codes are able to express complex relationships and to impart personal emotions and intentions, while people using restricted codes do not usually use language to convey qualified information so much as to express common orientation (Dittmar 1976) (see Table 1).

The implications of restricted and elaborated codes for consumer behaviour and advertising interpretation suggest that working-class consumers may perceive products based on their implied meanings and rely on context for their evaluation. They may prefer advertisements that use literal and concrete language, and convey an image of a gratifying world in

**Table 1: The impact of restricted codes vs elaborated codes in language, social relationships, time, physical environment and personal feelings**

	Restricted codes	Elaborated codes
<b>General characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasise description and contents of objects</li> <li>• Low differentiation of objects</li> <li>• Meanings are implicit (context dependent)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasise analysis and interrelationships between objects: hierarchical organisation and instrumental connections</li> <li>• High differentiation between objects</li> <li>• Meanings are explicit</li> </ul>
<b>Language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few qualifiers, few adjectives or adverbs</li> <li>• Verbal communication relies on non-verbal qualifiers to communicate personal feelings</li> <li>• Short sentences</li> <li>• Concrete, descriptive, tangible symbolism</li> <li>• Small vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language rich in personal, individual qualifiers</li> <li>• Stress on verbalisation of feelings</li> <li>• Language seen as a set of theoretical possibilities for communicating unique experiences</li> <li>• Large vocabulary, complex conceptual hierarchy</li> </ul>
<b>Social relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress attributes of individuals over formal roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress formal role structure, instrumental relationships</li> </ul>
<b>Time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on present; have only general notion of future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on instrumental relationship between present activities and future rewards</li> </ul>
<b>Physical space</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rooms, spaces located in context of other rooms and places (e.g. 'front room')</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rooms, spaces identified in terms of usage; formal ordering of spaces (e.g. 'dining room', 'financial district')</li> </ul>
<b>Personal feelings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low differentiation of feelings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High differentiation of feelings</li> </ul>

Source: Durgee (1986, p. 334)

which products fit functionally into the drive for a stable and secure life. In contrast, middle- and upper-class consumers may be more attuned to differences of design and style, relate to more distant benefits, and prefer advertisements that use more symbolic and abstract language (Durgee 1986). For Bernstein, only two classes are relevant: the working class and the middle class. Based on people's membership of either class, the use of their communicative symbols of verbal and non-verbal nature differs accordingly (Dittmar 1976). As Bernstein relates this division to the English class system, so we are concentrating on these two social classes in the UK and explore how middle-class people vs working-class people interpret open and closed advertisements.

## **Gender and interpretation of advertising**

Gender differences in meaning interpretation of advertisements have previously been reported by Mick and Politi (1989), and Stern (1992), where males and females interpreted advertising visuals in noticeably different ways. Also Elliott & Jones (1995) found considerable differences in the way males and females responded to overt sexuality in advertising.

Furthermore, the relationship between language and gender has been the focus of much research and, in our interpretation, we were sensitive to a number of models. The deficit model sees women as disadvantaged speakers because of their early sex-role socialisation (Lakoff 1975); the dominance model sees women, often through an ethno-methodological frame, as negotiating their relatively powerless position in interaction with men. Male social privilege is made manifest in recurrent patterns of language use (Zimmerman & West 1975; Fishman 1983), and the cultural difference model makes analogies between gender and other social divisions such as ethnicity (Maltz & Borker 1982). Theorists of language and gender support a sex-role socialisation model in which becoming a woman or becoming a man is something accomplished at an early stage of life, either in the pre-school years within the family or, slightly later, in the single-sex peer group. They suggest that gender identities precede and give rise to linguistic practice.

In summary, our research has been divided into two studies, in order to address the following research questions.

**Study I:**

- How do middle-class audiences interpret open and closed advertisements?
- How do working-class audiences interpret open and closed advertisements?

**Study II:**

- How do males interpret open and closed advertisements?
- How do females interpret open and closed advertisements?

**Method**

In order to explore social class and gender aspects of the interpretation of open and closed advertising texts, a reader-response/reception theory approach was adopted since it emphasises the meanings that consumers draw from advertisements (Mick & Politi 1989; Scott 1994b; McQuarrie & Mick 1999; Elliott & Elliott 2005). Reader-response/reception theory emphasises the study of reading over formal textual analysis; it ‘tries to show how a text works with the probable knowledge, expectations, or motives of the reader’ (Scott 1994a).

We conducted 30 in-depth interviews in the UK with male and female participants of the working and middle class,<sup>1</sup> from all over the country (Britain, Scotland and Wales), within the age range 20–60 years. The participants for this study were recruited as following. First, we employed the snowball sampling method, asking the interviewees to recommend close friends as respondents for the study. Second, we created and posted flyers in the Midlands area of the UK, asking for interviewees for a research project on advertising and rewarding them with £5 for their participation. We then selected our respondents based on their social class background, their gender and the fact that they should be of British ethnicity (see Table 2).

Ten advertisements were selected, from magazines, based on their open vs closed approach to meaning and on the product categories whose target groups corresponded to the audience of the research. We initially selected

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<sup>1</sup> There are six social classes in the UK: A = upper middle; B = middle; C1 = lower middle; C2 = skilled working; D = working; E = those at lowest levels. The UK socio-economic classification scheme is measured as a combination of occupation, income, education, wealth and other variables (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys).

**Table 2: Characteristics of in-depth interviews' participants**

Name	Age	Educational background	Working position	Geographical area	Marital status	Children	Gender	Social class
Mary	20	A levels	Hairdresser	Leamington Spa	M	2	F	L
Keith2	21	Part-time BSc student	Security employee in Sainsbury's	South London			M	L
Helen	22	A levels	Sales box office at cinema	Coventry	M	1	F	L
Anti	23	Graduate in psychology	Analyst in consulting company				F	M
John	25	A levels	Construction worker	Coventry	M	2	M	L
Keith1	26	A levels	Waiter in Italian restaurant	Yorkshire			M	L
Katie	26	A levels	Saleswoman in chocolate shop	Birmingham			F	L
Tom	26	BSc student	Bs student in Finance	Derbyshire	S	0	M	M
Alex	27	Part-time Bs student	Supervisor in family-run laundry equipment business	Birmingham			F	L
Ollie	27	BSc student	Bs student in Law & Business	South London			M	M
Matt	28	BSc student	Bs student in Management				M	M
Elena	28	Part-time Bs student	Runs a family B&B	Leicester			F	L
Fleur	28	Postgraduate in social studies	Manager in non-profit organisation				F	M
Derek	29	BSc in IT	IT consultant		S	0	M	M
George	29	A levels	Bus driver	Coventry	M	3	M	L
Rebecca	29	A levels	Nursery nurse	Leicester	S	0	F	L
Janine	29	Postgraduate in English literature	Marketing consultant	Scotland			F	M
Anne	30	BA in fine arts	English teacher				F	M
Ben	31	A level	Construction worker				F	M
Christopher	31	Postgraduate in English literature	Researcher, former management consultant and teacher				M	M
Laura	32	Graduate in developmental biology	Research analyst in consulting company	London			F	M
Toby	34	Graduate in civil engineering	IT specialist for IBM	Leamington Spa			M	M
Jonathan	35	A levels	Floor manager in home appliances store				M	L
Jamie	35	Postgraduate in physiology, medicine	Doctor	Exeter			F	M
Nick	39	A level	IT networker				M	L
Penny	42	A levels, degree in education	Trains teachers for elementary school				F	M
Robert	42	A levels, degree in real estate	Property manager	Leamington Spa	M	2	M	M
Susan	43	A levels	Secretary in consulting company	Kenilworth	M	3	F	L
Mike	50	MBA	Chartered surveyor in oil industry	London	S	0	M	M
Christine	55	Comprehensive school until 15 years old	Cleaning lady	Coventry	M	4	F	L

Number of female participants: 15; number of male participants: 15; number of middle-class participants: 15; number of lower-class participants: 15

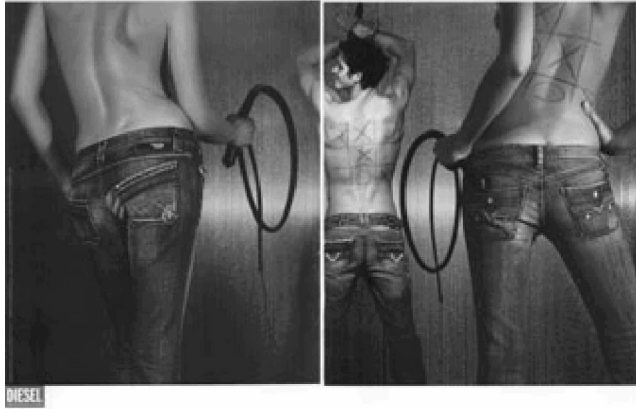
30 advertisements according to the above criteria and conducted four pilot focus groups, in order to ensure their accurate representation of open and closed texts; we then selected the ten that best served our research purposes. In more detail we distinguished between open and closed advertisements based on limited (one or two) vs multiple interpretations generated by our participants during the pre-test process (see Figure 1 for examples).

The transcripts of the depth interviews were analysed using the interpretive thematic analysis technique where, through pattern recognition, we attempt to 'construct a representation of meanings as recurring themes producing an interpretation of interpretations' (Spiggle 1994).

In relation to social class, Bernstein elaborated the concepts of linguistic codes and speech variants, described as restricted and elaborated code, where restricted code orientates the speaker towards particularistic orders of meaning, while elaborated code orientates him/her towards universalistic ones. Bernstein argues that the class structure, and particularly working-class socialisation, limits access to the kind of universalistic order of meaning that is realised in individualised role relations. Bernstein's concern is not language as such, but social structure and social interaction in its symbolic realisations through forms of speech. He stresses not the syntactical and phonological questions, but the social relationship and moral orders that are realised through different sociolinguistic codes (Trutz & Brown 1982). For that reason, and even though we are not intending to conduct a sociolinguistic analysis for our research, we are taking into account our participants' use of language in an attempt to better understand the way they create meaning and express their thoughts and ideas, in order to gain a profound and possibly holistic explanation of their interpretations. Thus, throughout our analysis, we examined the way our participants of different social classes used language to express themselves. We mainly concentrated on their use of long vs short sentences, large vs small use of vocabulary, rich vs limited use of qualifiers, adjectives or adverbs, use of explicit vs implicit meanings, and use of symbolism.

In relation to gender differences, and as noted above, many linguists and social scientists report that the speech of women and men differs significantly. Hence in our analysis we centre our attention on identifying differences such as that women are more conservative in their speech than men (Jespersen 1922), women are more polite than men (Lakoff 1975),

Figure 1: Examples of open text (Diesel ad) and closed text (Tesco ad) advertisements used in the study



**Milk.**  
**We sell it 24 hours a day.**  
**Why?**  
**Because we don't mind**  
**when you buy it.**  
**Just where you buy it.**

**TESCO** | *Every little helps*

Subject to availability. Many stores open from 8am Monday to 10pm Saturday.

women seek more verbal intimacy than men (Tannen 1990), women are less secure and more status conscious in their speech than men (Labov 1972) and women use standard speech more than men (Trudgill 1972).

## Findings

Findings of the in-depth interviews indicate that people from different social classes and of different genders interpret print advertisements in different ways.

### *Study I: Social class differences in interpretation and use of language and open texts*

*Proposition 1: Working-class participants approach advertisements in an implicit (context dependent) way*

Regarding the way participants of different social classes interpreted print advertisements, we found differences in their approach towards the advertisements, as well as in the language they use in order to communicate the implied meanings. Participants from the working class find advertisements that use simple adjectives and descriptors more appealing to them and more appropriate to convey a message that stressed the inherent quality of the featured product. Hence, they seem to be more interested in the implicit fit of the product with their total lifestyle. In responding to a Diesel advertisement for jeans (open text):

*'What is this all about? I guess they want to say that Diesel is a very sexy and aggressive brand, for both sexes, so its products are of good quality and can't be damaged that easily, so they can be wore when doing a heavy task or under bad weather conditions ...'*

(male, working class, 29 years old)

*'Nice ad! Well looks like Diesel wants to be perceived as a super cool and sexy brand ... it's the brand you would wear when you are going out and want to look very sexy and behave badly ...'*

(female, working class, 26 years old)

Regarding the use of language, we noted that participants from the working class used simple language. In responding to a Chanel advertisement for the male perfume Egoiste (open text):

*'It's a guy using a perfume'*

(male, working class, 39 years old)

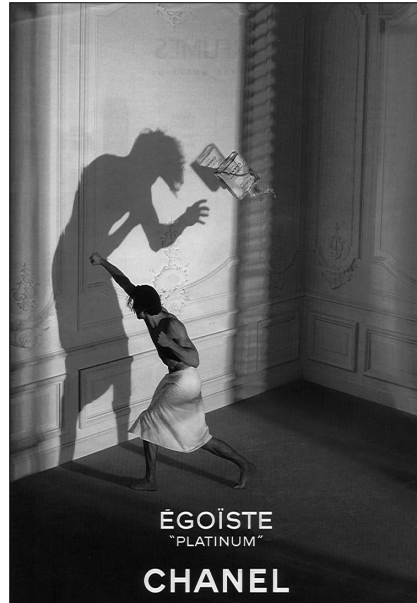
*'It's an ad about a perfume'*

(male, working class, 35 years old)

*'It's about a naked guy advertising a perfume ...'*

(male, working class, 26 years old)

Through the analysis of their responses, we notice that their answers were mainly given in short sentences and with the use of a small vocabulary. Whenever they were describing an image or a situation, they were using few qualifiers and few adjectives. Thus their descriptions were concrete and given through tangible symbolism.



*Proposition 2: Middle social class participants approach advertisements in an explicit way*

In contrast, participants from the middle class used elaborated, rich language with a complex conceptual hierarchy, enriched by personal and individual qualifiers, and enjoyed talking about implied meanings and how these could be seen in different contexts:

*'It seems to be a young, successful, wealthy person with good and expensive taste that must be going through an internal battle, maybe comes face to face with his other self, a selfish self, probably his dark side ...'*

(male, middle class, 34 years old)

*'It's an ad about a perfume and if I combine the picture with the product, I can assume that it's about a very selfish person who can't stand no one, not even himself and that's why he attacks his own shadow ...'*

(male, middle class, 28 years old)

*'At first glance, someone could say that it's about a person in conflict with himself. But one could also argue that it's about someone who just made a transition from being egoist to being something else, something better, superior .... he left the darkness, where he was*

*hiding from everyone and faced the sun again ... and the only remaining thing from his former life, his former self is his perfume, a souvenir from his past which he would like to keep ...'*

(female, middle class, 32 years old)

In relation to the use of language, participants from the middle class employed complex adjectives and descriptors, and, in response to the Diesel ad (see page 18), stressed the product's instrumental ties to distant benefits:

*'This ad wants to communicate a style of painful fun. You have the man and the woman, naked, with a pictured game in their back, which implies that it was shaped by the whip, therefore through pain. So it's about something fun, a game, but also something painful. Actually it's a combination that applies to many things in life, like a nice and attractive body through lots of exercise, succeeding in your profession, where you have this sense of accomplishment and recognition that feels great but at the same time you have to devote all this time and miss out on so many other things, or being happy in your personal life, something that doesn't come that easily and especially without compromises ...'*

(female, middle class, 35 years old)

*'This seems interesting ... I would say it's about domination. Domination probably over others, like your partner. So by wearing this brand you become empowered and able to get what you want ...'*

(male, middle class, 26 years old)

*'Looks like an interesting ad. Seems like a conspiracy between these three ... like a secret pact so they can have fun their way, which seems to be quite a unique way. So we could say that Diesel is for people that are aware of this secret pact, it's their way of recognising each other and communicating ...'*

(female, middle class, 32 years old)

## **Study II: Gender difference and open text advertisements**

*Proposition 3: Male participants approach the advertisement in a descriptive way*

A noticeable difference in the interpretation of advertisements between males and females was that, when an advertisement was shown to a male participant, he would approach it by describing it as a picture, stating its figures and elements and by giving an interpretation based on the intended meaning by the advertiser. It can therefore be inferred that the primary concern for males is to state that they are smart enough to understand the advertisement and capable of reading between the lines.

Moreover, our analysis revealed the emergence of different theme patterns. When shown a print advertisement for Absolut Vodka (open text) and Tesco (closed text), a friendship and a national theme for men became prominent, respectively.

### Friendship theme

*'This ad takes me to a ski resort, where after a full day of going up and down the slides, I catch up with my mates to talk about our day and enjoy our time close to nature and away from everyday life in the city ...'*

(male, middle class, 31 years old)

*'The ad makes me think of a cold winter day on a mountain, where you have nothing else to do than drink ... It reminds me when we get together at my mate Chris's cabin and spend the whole time chatting and drinking ...'*

(male, working class, 29 years old)

### National theme

*'This ad is about Tesco, emphasising its Britishness ...'*

(male, middle class, 50 years old)

*'It advertises Tesco and the fact that it sells British products...'*

(male, working class, 39 years old)



### *Proposition 4: Female participants approach the advertisement in an interpretive way*

On the other hand, when an advertisement was shown to a female participant, she would talk about the elements of the advertisement as they appealed to her, and then try to reveal the advertiser's intended meaning. This observation leads us to think that females are willing to talk about and share personal things, emotions and past experiences more openly and

more quickly than males. Consequently, it seems that females want to appear as free thinkers who, no matter what, have something to say.

The above finding refers us to Bleich's (1986) study regarding gender differences in the reading of novels, where he observed that men retold the story as if its purpose were to deliver a clear, simple structure or chain of information, in an effort to portray that they are getting the facts of the story straight. Women, on the other hand, presented the narrative as if it were an atmosphere or an experience. Bleich's explanation is that concepts appear more rapidly when men retell a story because they are more instinctively distant from the text. Women, however, are more inclined to enter into the human relationships presented by the story, and therefore they retell it in terms of interpersonal motives, allegiances and conflicts rather than in terms of the perspective of a certain character or the author.

An additional finding, which relates to the differences in language use among participants of different gender, was revealed when participants were shown a Diesel advertisement for jeans, which portrayed three people whipping each other. In this case, we noticed that female participants seemed to appear more conservative in their way of thinking, use of language and, as a result, their reading of the advertisement:

*'Oh! I don't like this. I don't know, because it's a sadomasochistic thing, not socially acceptable ... I guess they want to say about Diesel jeans that they are cool, but why whipping people is cool? Why? I don't know. I am not sure about that one.'*

(female, middle class, 28 years old)

*'Cool ad! I wouldn't mind being that bloke! He seems to enjoy himself ...'*

(male, working class, 25 years old)

In the case of theme emergence, when female participants were exposed to the above-mentioned advertisement for Absolut Vodka (open text), a romantic theme became noticeable.

### **Romantic theme**

*'Looking at this ad, I am thinking of a romantic weekend with my boyfriend to the Scottish mountains, being in each other's arms by the fire place, talking and drinking ...'*

(female, working class, 27 years old)

*'This ad makes me think that I am somewhere high in the sky, so high that the figures and shapes on the ground could be ... could seem so much different, as I would like them to be. So in a sense I could say that with Absolut, anything can be as you would like it to be ... like I would like to be on this mountain with my husband and watch the sunset ...'*

(female, middle class, 28 years old)

Another theme that became apparent through our analysis of the female participants' interviews is their references to popular culture, particularly films and TV. When presented with print advertisements of Monsoon (open text) and Diesel (open text), they included in their interpretations references to television series and movies:

### Media theme

*'... looks like a sixties photography. It kind of reminds me of Jane and Tarzan. I am sure if you go back you will find some pose to the dessert similar. The dress is quite sexy and the sandals as well. Quite an old fashion look I guess.'*

(female, middle class, 30 years old)

*'It's quite filmic the style of the ad. Using the tree, the sky, the beach and she is posing, she is quite illuminating. Remember this TV show, Lost as well? Looks like that, the whole stuck on a dessert island look.'*

(female, middle class, 29 years old)

*'I don't like this ad ... Because it is about whipping people. Have you seen the Passion of Christ?'*

(female, middle class, 28 years old)

*'The shape of the naked tree looks like a V, this makes me think of Da Vinci code.'*

(female, middle class, 42 years old)

Females seem to think of advertising as something 'trendy', which follows the latest fashions in the media, and in their perceptions the themes of television series and movies are interrelated to advertising. So when they are exposed to an advertisement, they seem to be creating theme analogies and as a result introduce interpretations inspired by these media.

Our studies also revealed certain similarities in the way participants approach the advertisements, regardless of their social class or gender. All participants attempted to decode the advertisement or, as Fiske said, solve the puzzle (Fiske 1987):

*'Oh! I know! They want to say ...'*

(female, working class, 29 years old)

*'... it's too obvious what they want to say with this ad ...'*

(female, middle class, 23 years old)

*'I am not sure I understand what they are trying to say here ...'*

(male, middle class, 27 years old)

*'Have no idea what this is all about ...'*

(male, working class, 31 years old)

Once participants seemed to have decoded an advertisement, their attitude would change. This accomplishment would make them happier, inspire them with greater confidence about themselves and, as a result, they would become very talkative. But when they seemed to be troubled about its meaning, they would adopt a more reluctant approach towards the advertisement and would limit their responses to a couple of phrases. In cases where the advertisement appeared to be too open for them and as a consequence they could not think of any interpretation, they would adopt an indifferent or even negative attitude towards it:

*'... I don't know ... Well if I had seen this ad in a magazine, I would not have paid any attention, I would have simply turned the page ...'*

(female, middle class, 29 years old)

*'... Have no idea. It just doesn't do it for me. I would not have paid any attention to it, it is not a successful ad ...'*

(male, working class, 31 years old)

*'... I never pay attention to the advertisements in a magazine, I just read through them, I don't even glance at a print ad ...'*

(male, middle class, 31 years old)

The last participant (above) spent five minutes talking in detail and with a lot of enthusiasm about a Smirnoff print advertisement that he had seen in a magazine three years ago and loved it.

Aristotle (Slatoff 1970) pointed out that audiences try to find a unity in what they see, a central theme or meaning or idea around which the various details of the play or story come to a focus. All readers need to make

sense of what they are reading, otherwise they would complain of obscurity and express varying degrees of discomfort and anxiety, as ‘meaning, that is the act of making sense of a text, works as a defence against some source of anxiety. Each reader therefore will search out a unifying idea that matches his particular needs for sense and logic’ (Holland 1975, p. 14).

Moreover in their efforts to decode the advertisement, the concept of possible selves appears, as they are trying to transfer the advertisement’s meaning and intention into their lives and perceptions of themselves:

*‘I would not mind looking like this! ... She is clearly beautiful, has a great figure, she is gorgeous and very feminine ...’*

(female, middle class, 29 years old)

*‘... they want to tell us that by getting this product, we are going to look like that bloke in the ad. Yes, right like this is going to ever happen ... I don’t think I even know a person who looks like that ...’*

(male, working class, 31 years old)

There were also responses that indicated participants’ desire to be perceived as members of a different social class, or even gender. Participants will assume that a certain advertisement is targeted towards working-social-class readers for instance, and they would respond in a way that would differentiate them from being part of this interpretive community. Or they would assume that an advertisement emphasises elements of masculinity and they would structure their response based on a more sensitive, ‘feminine’ approach. In these cases, even though participants belong to a certain interpretive community, they would employ the reading strategies of the community they would like to be part of, and as a result they would try to portray themselves as such:

*‘I don’t like it at all, it looks very greasy. It’s about pizza, Dr. Oetker, and looks very colorful, simple, but I just don’t like it, it is not working for me, maybe because it is in a box, seems cheap. They are also trying to make it pretentious by having the glass of wine ... Very different style, I guess because it is made for an entirely different audience, housewife maybe.’*

(female, working class, 43 years old)

### *Closed text advertisements*

The in-depth interviews suggested that the participants' interpretation of closed advertisements resulted in very similar readings across interpretive communities, characterised by easily attainable meanings. In responding to a Tesco advertisement (closed text):

*'It's an ad about Tesco saying that Tesco is the place to get your milk because you can get it at any time of day or night.'*

(female, working class, 22 years old)

*'This ad even though it seems to be about milk, its really about Tesco and wants to communicate the fact that you can shop at Tesco twenty four hours a day. I guess they want to stress the fact that they are able to serve customers around the clock, so no matter what time you want to shop you can go to them.'*

(male, middle class, 26 years old)

*'It's an ad about milk ... not about Tesco, saying that you can get things there at whatever time of day or night.'*

(male, working class, 21 years old)

Similar observations were obtained in response to a Ben & Jerry's advertisement (closed text):

*'This ad says that the intention of Ben and Jerry is to make nice ice cream, which is so true ...'*

(female, middle class, 30 years old)

*'Its about Ben and Jerry, I love their ice cream ... it's a very simple ad, saying that the mission statement of the company is to make nice ice cream. That's it, what else can I say?'*

(male, middle class, 29 years old)

*'It's a happy, simple ad, mainly saying that what Ben and Jerry really want to do is nice ice cream.'*

(female, working class, 28 years old)

In the case of closed ads, the decoding process poses no challenge to the readers, in fact it becomes too easy for some of them, especially the middle-class participants, and as a result they miss out on the satisfaction of having 'solved the puzzle'. Consequently they would rarely distinguish

and really like an ad like that, as shown when presented a Dr Oetker and Tesco advertisements:

*'This advertisement presents no interest at all. They are really trying to sell this pizza. They stretch like four times that they have won an award. Good for them. They tried their hardest, their absolutely hardest to sell this pizza. But that's it, nothing more.'*

(male, middle class, 42 years old)

*'... kind of nails down the point that they want you to buy at Tesco. I don't like it; it's not really my kind of advert. I like adverts that are a bit more image based, instead of feeding it to you with so many words.'*

(female, middle class, 23 years old)

Working-class participants, on the other hand, might recognise that the advertiser is being quite 'honest' in this case, as he/she says in a very straightforward way 'buy my product', without using complicated figures and meanings in order to 'trick' the reader and communicate something more than it is actually there:

*'It is very Tesco isn't it and I think that is the clever thing, I don't particularly like it but you wouldn't have to think about it to associate it with Tesco. At least they are being honest with us. They say this is who we are and come to us to do your groceries.'*

(female, working class, 55 years old)

In this respect they would express positive or indifferent feelings towards the ad but they would still rarely pick an advertisement like that as one of their favourites, when asked at the end of their interviews to choose their preferred one. A total of 28 of our participants selected an open advertisement as their favourite one.

## **Discussion**

There has been a growing acknowledgement of consumers' advertising sophistication, and the complexity of the relationship between advertisements and their audience. In recent years, academics have argued that research should address what consumers do with advertising, rather than what advertising does to them (Buttle 1991).

This study provides insights into how people interpret advertisements. By distinguishing between open and closed text advertisements on the one hand, and by considering the audience as active co-creators of

meaning on the other, this study explores through the use of reader response, the symbolic meanings that are drawn on by people when consuming an advertisement. In our effort to empirically establish how audiences interpret advertisements we have explored the concept of 'interpretive communities' and now we want to consider the 'interpretive strategies' that these communities employ.

### *Interpretive strategies and their implications for advertising*

People belong to the same cultural group, not only because they have similar behaviours, but because they construe their experience in the same way. Our findings reveal a difference in interpretation based on the gender and social class of the participants.

Male participants approach the advertisement in a descriptive way, while females approach it in an interpretive way. In the case of females, advertisers should pay more attention to the implied meanings, as female readers would immediately attempt to interpret the advertisement, find associations and search for inferred meanings. When creating an advertisement for working-social-class readers, advertisers should emphasise the description and contents of objects, represent low differentiation of objects, and their meanings should be implicit. In contrast, when they are addressing their message to middle-social-class readers, they should emphasise the analysis and interrelationships between objects, represent high differentiation between objects, and their meanings should be explicit, in order to give readers more interpretation options.

Further observations from our studies reveal that the representation of the advertisement's theme, mainly through its style and colours, evokes different reactions and attitudes. A black and white advertisement, for example, was interpreted by females as artistic, while males referred to it as boring. A sunset pictured in light colours was perceived as romantic by females, while males considered it a cliché. In addition, females referred to movies for inspiration. Participants of the working class preferred clear and simple advertisements, while participants of the middle and upper social class liked advertisements with complicated meanings that take them on a conceptual journey in their efforts to read them.

We have noted that participants of all interpretive communities concentrated mainly on the visual part of the advertisement. They seemed to

look for and read the text only when they had difficulties in comprehending the advertisement, and as a consequence they searched for clues in the advertisement's text. If they still couldn't understand it, their attitude towards the advertisement became either indifferent or negative, because it made them feel that they were not clever enough to be able to grasp its meaning. This observation implies that practitioners should concentrate on the development of the visual part of the advertisement and try to convey their message through the image rather than the text. Having in mind that any included text would most probably not be read by the consumers, they are advised to add text mainly for explanation purposes in very open advertisements with abstract and complicated meanings. A further recommendation would be to include details of the company's website, as many participants stated that in cases where they are really interested in the product they would need this type of information in order to gather relevant information regarding the product's characteristics and the available distribution channels. Again, this entails meaning code research with the relevant interpretive communities.

As we were concerned with the way members of different interpretive communities create meaning, we paid close attention to the use of language by our participants. Many sociolinguists have emphasised the idea of language being used as an 'act of identity', by which they mean a conscious or unconscious linguistic marking of an identity that exists prior to the act. People use language to mark their gender, class, ethnicity, membership in a local network or a tight-knit peer group (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985).

People who speak differently may think differently, but much communication stems from the common beliefs, assumptions, practices and traditions in the communities to which they belong: 'There can be no communication without commonalities of thought' (Clark 1996). At this point we should refer to education as a prominent factor in the use of language and expression of meanings. Examining our participants' responses in relation to their educational background, we notice that participants with higher education can think more freely, out of the box, and are able to come up with alternative meanings based on the same stimuli. They can think in an abstract way, while participants with lower education think in a more concrete way and have difficulties in providing alternative meanings. As education is closely related to the way language is used and is one of the determining factors of social class, it has been argued by Bernstein

(1973) that the restricted speech code, which is used by people with lower educational attainment, is largely predictable and circular, whereas the elaborated code is not. In addition, it was noted that participants that have travelled a lot or spend some time abroad working were more receptive to alternative meanings and used their imagination more. In a sense, spending considerable time abroad, and especially being exposed to a different culture, seems to be as significant as education as it has similar, even though not as powerful, effects on participants' interpretation of advertisements. Thus advertisers who target audiences with higher education whose receipt and understanding of advertising messages is not predictable, and as a result will seldom interpret advertising messages as intended, can benefit from the above observation by including limited texts with abstract meanings that could potentially appeal to multiple groups of readers, as each group could generate different interpretations, which nevertheless will appear equally appealing to them.

Another observation in relation to participants' educational background is that the more educated an interviewee, the less interested he/she seemed to be in advertising. In a sense they would not dignify spending time thinking about an advertisement, as they consider it as something superficial and materialistic that does not deserve to be talked about. A similar observation was made by older people, who had a more cynical approach towards advertising in general. They would show interest, however, if the advertisement featured a product that they are loyal to, or was from a product category in which they are interested – for example, a product category that relates to their hobbies such as gardening, travelling and real estate. They would argue that advertisements are there mainly to make people buy things, except for more specialised advertisements, which provide information about a product or area of their interest. For this audience advertisers should concentrate more on the information presented in the advertisement than on its visual element. Conversely, younger participants seemed to be entertained by advertising and, for them, 'solving' the advertisement is an indicator of them being clever and intelligent (see Table 3).

In conclusion, to uncover the meaning-codes used by specific interpretive communities entails the use of interpretive research, such as ethnography (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott 2003) to locate these codes in their socio-cultural context.

Table 3: Summary of interpretive strategies

	Style	Colour	Visual part	Textual part	Richness of info	Meaning creation and related themes
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Classical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black and white: 'artistic'</li> <li>• Light/subtle: 'romantic'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draws attention</li> <li>• Stimulus for meaning creation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not draw attention</li> <li>• Read it only when face difficulties solving the ad</li> <li>• Useful to include website</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretive approach</li> <li>• Own experiences</li> <li>• Romantic theme</li> <li>• Movies, TV series, books inferences</li> </ul>
	Male	Modern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black and white: 'boring'</li> <li>• Light/subtle: 'cliché'</li> </ul>		Either	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Descriptive approach</li> <li>• Friendship theme</li> <li>• National theme</li> </ul>
<b>Social class</b>	Middle	Abstract	Prefer light		Prefer low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit meaning creation</li> <li>• Think out of the box</li> <li>• Use imagination</li> <li>• Provide alternative meanings</li> </ul>
	Lower	Specific	Prefer strong		Prefer high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implicit meaning creation</li> <li>• Think in a concrete way</li> <li>• Provide single interpretation</li> </ul>
<b>Educational background</b>	High	Complicated	Prefer light		Prefer low	Provide alternative meanings
	Low	Simple	Prefer strong		Prefer high	Provide single interpretation
<b>Age</b>	Young	Complex	Either		Prefer low: website info	They consider advertising as a way to communicate their cleverness, regardless of the product advertised
	Older	Clear	Either		Prefer high: product-related info	Interested only in ads of favourable products

Further research will involve a parallel study of both advertisers' and consumers' interpretations of advertisements, in order to explore the relevance of their interpretations and note the similarities and differences between them. In addition, as almost all of our participants tended to approach advertising with reluctant feelings because, they argue, they are aware of the motives of its creators, it would be interesting to explore participants' interpretations of open advertisements in the case where they would not be aware that they are exposed to a print advertisement. Future research could therefore involve the study of two groups of people, where the first group would be aware that they are being shown advertisements, while the second group would be told that they are looking at a different kind of stimulus, such as a modern work of art, and compare their interpretations.

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