

Advertising theory and semiotics



Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University

Spring 2023

- As is the case with all disciplines and topics, also advertising has been theorized from very different perspectives
- There are many theories of the effects of advertising, how it works, what the role of the consumer (audience) is...

Learning goals for today's lecture

- You'll learn about different **theoretical perspectives and models of advertising**:
 - Linear information processing theories
 - Information based perspective
 - Meaning- and cultural-based perspective
- You'll learn **basics about semiotics** and how to **interpret advertising** through semiotics
- At the end we'll ponder the question: **does advertising work anymore?**

Different theories of advertising



Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University

Spring 2023

Reminder: Hackley and Hackley (2022) on advertising

“We use the term advertising to cover **all media content that has, at some level, a promotional motive**, from social media content to street billboards, TV spots to radio ads, branded packaging to branded content, product placement to sponsored influencer posts, not excluding the content produced by social media users such as likes, shares, and reviews of, or comments on, brands, products and consumer experiences.

This is a broader definition of advertising than is common in introductory advertising, marketing, or ‘marketing communications’ textbooks. **Advertising is often defined as a paid-for promotional message on a mass medium with an identifiable source, but our view is that this definition has never been adequate to cover the vast realm of promotional media content** in which the promotional motive is implicit, the author/source uncertain, and/or the payment indirect or absent.”

5min warm-up exercise: Discuss in small groups your experiences of advertising

Can you remember advertisements that you have seen or heard lately? Take a moment to think about the advertisements.

1. Why do you remember them? What do you remember about them?
2. At whom were they aimed?
3. What, exactly, were they trying to communicate? How did they make you feel?
4. Did you rush to buy the brand?
5. Which medium conveyed the ads?

How is cognitive psychology used in advertising? Cognitive psychology is the science of how our mind processes information. **Advertisers use cognitive psychology to influence our thoughts and convince us that we need to buy or use their product or service.** 2019 research suggests that ads often rely on memory to do this.

<https://psychcentral.com> › [blog](#) › [the-psychology-of-adve...](#)

The Psychology of Advertising: 5 Surprising Techniques

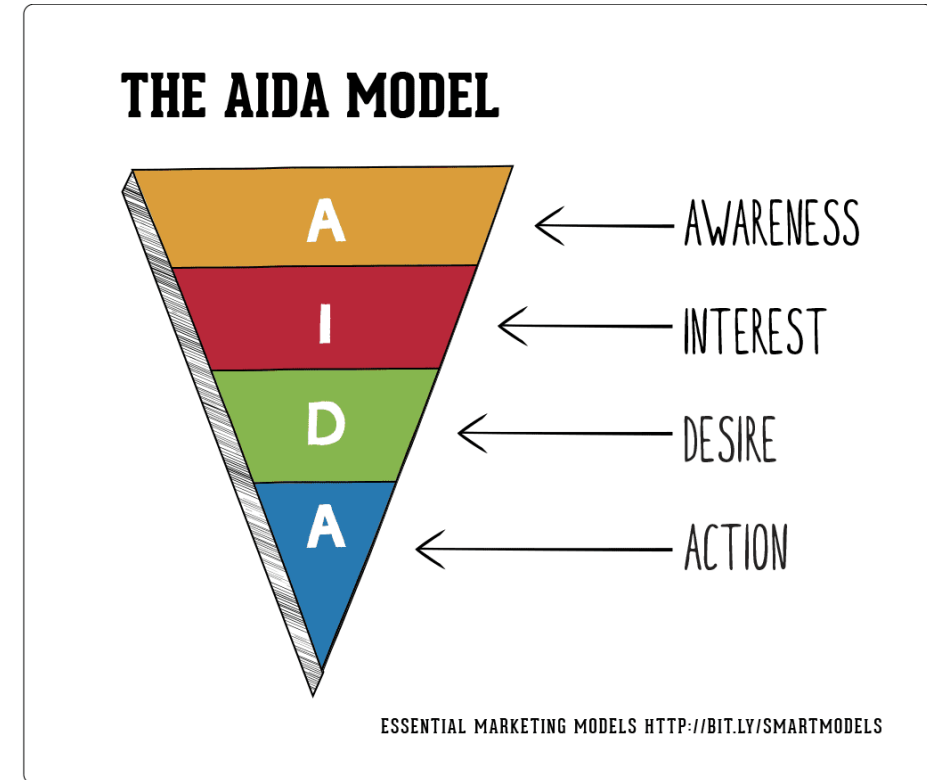
Linear information processing theories of communication (from cognitive psychology)

- The analogy between the information processing of computers and humans
- **Hierarchy-of-effects:** assumes that consumers resist marketing communication until the accumulated advertising effects lead to persuading the consumer to accept the message and buy the product
- **“The consumer, like a computer, is assumed to process information sequentially, according to rules”**



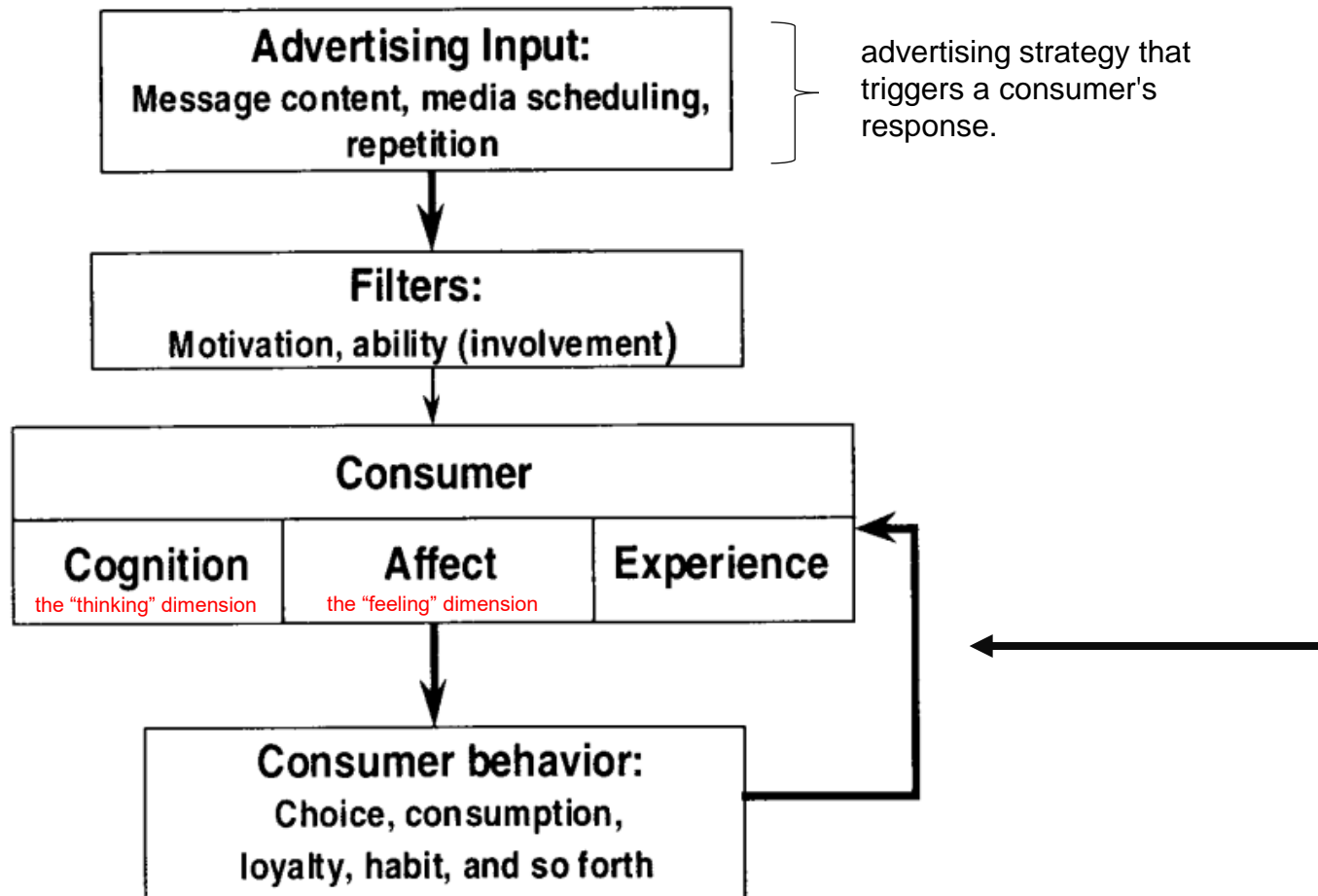
Hierarchy-of-effects models of advertising persuasion tend to be variations of AIDA

- AIDA: Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action
- Each step of the linear continuum is important, the consumer is “pushed” into the right direction through advertising



How advertising works from a cognitive psych perspective

FIGURE 1
A Framework for Studying How Advertising Works



“Consciously or unconsciously, advertising must have some **mental effect** (e.g., awareness, memory, attitude toward the brand) before it can affect behavior.

For most products, the consumer's mind is not a blank sheet awaiting advertising but rather already contains conscious and unconscious memories of product purchasing and usage. Thus, behavior feeds back to experience.”

(Vakratsas & Ambler 1999)

The linear model of communication

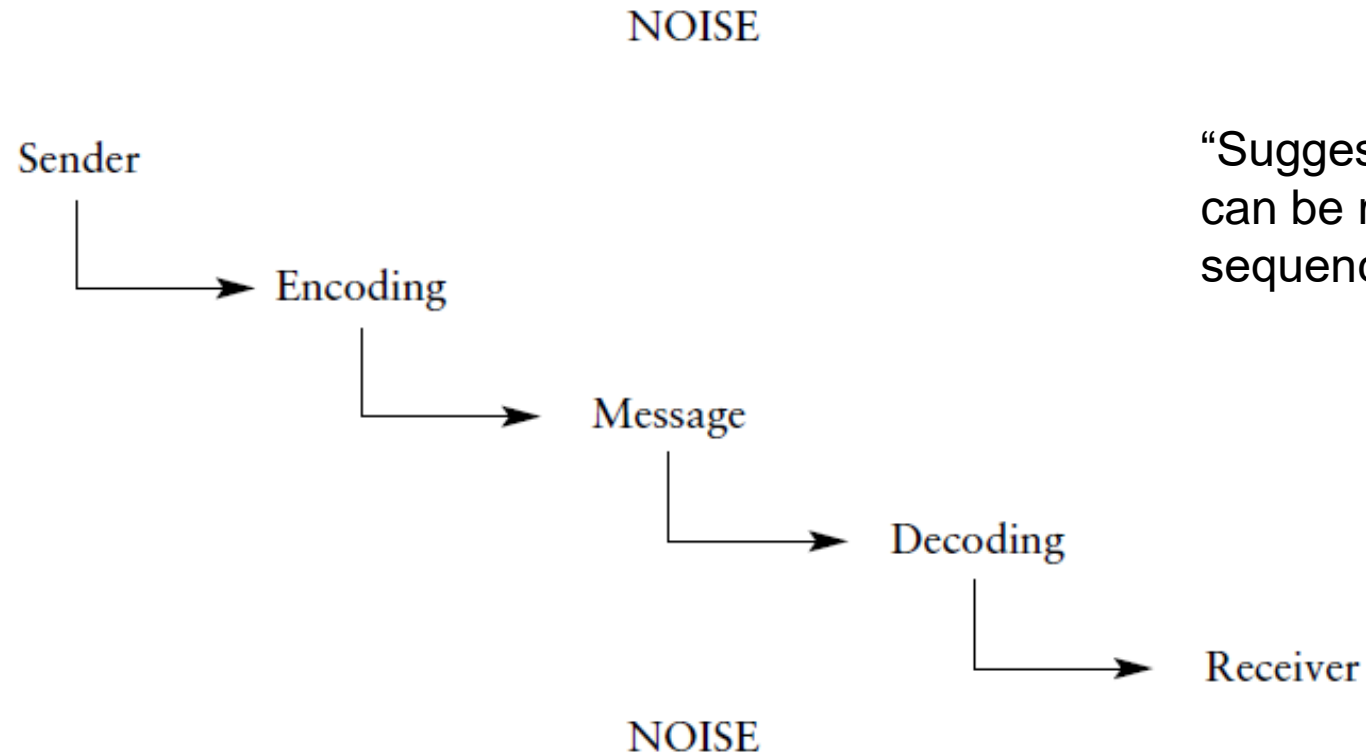


Figure 2.1 A Linear Model of Communication.

What are the limitations of a linear model of communication?

Some limitations of the linear model of communication:

- Assumes that meaning and message are synonyms
 - In reality, consumers can interpret advertising messages from very different perspectives
 - The complexity of social and cultural meanings!
- Oversimplifies the consumer's cognitive engagement with advertising (= "emphasizes a singular message that has one, unproblematic meaning")
- Meaning is seldom interpreted in a linear fashion (interpreting multiple messages at a time, from multiple channels)

Can you explain the difference between strong and weak theories of advertising?

Strong vs. Weak theories of advertising

Strong theories (Hierarchy of effects models) assume that advertising works in a directly persuasive way

- E.g. AIDA (Attention → Interest → Desire → Action)
 - Originally a model of personal selling, adapted later for advertising
 - Assumes that cognition is followed by affect (cognition → affect → behavior)
 - Advertising = persuading the consumer to buy (more)
- passive consumer (can easily be persuaded)

Weak theories (Low-involvement hierarchy models) assume that the advertising cause and the sales effect are far less directly linked

- Advertising serves to reinforce behavior over a long time. Advertising may create awareness, increase familiarity and identification, but affect and brand preferences are formed through time, and after product trial and experience (cognition → experience → affect → behavior)
- active problem-solving consumer (makes own judgements and cannot that easily be persuaded)

Let's have a quick exercise!

Consumer psychology exercise

- Take Coca-Cola as an example
- Shout out words that you think of when you think of Coca-Cola
- Anything: emotions, colors, word associations, positive/negative etc.



Consumer psych exercise

Associations

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- ...



Consumer psych exercise

- From a consumer psych perspective, advertising strives **to strengthen/weaken certain associations** (or create new ones!), and increase salience in a product category
- Advertising messages and content are designed to meet this objective
- You can also think of it as "in which order do certain ideas come to mind"
 - TOM (top-of-mind measures)



Consumer psych exercise

Current associations

1. Refreshment
2. Enjoyment
3. Unique bottle
4. Sugary
5. Santa Claus
6. Superior taste
7. Family
8. Red

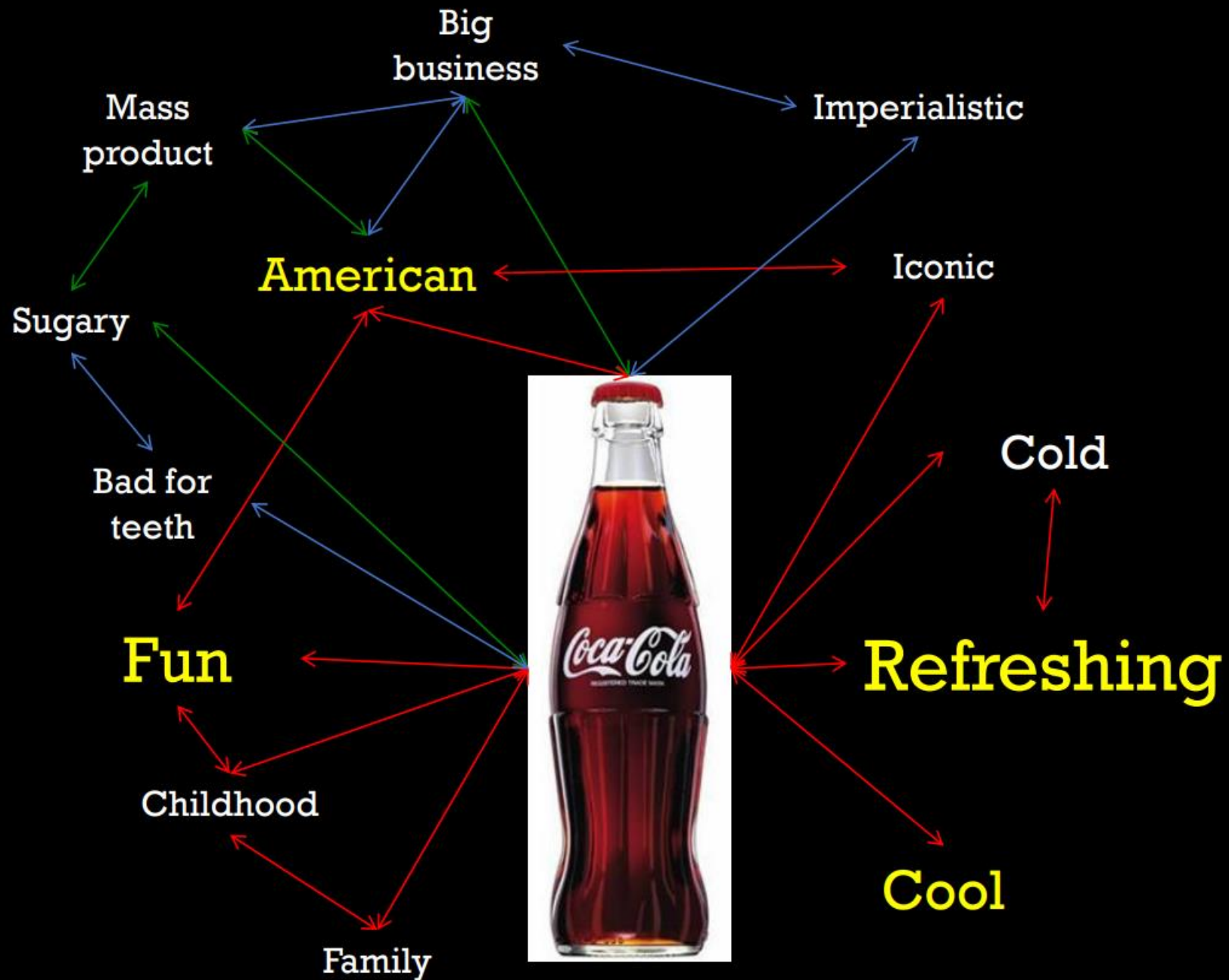


Desired associations

1. Superior taste
2. Refreshment
3. Enjoyment
4. Family
5. Santa Claus
6. Unique bottle
7. Sugary
8. Red

Associations that marketing aims to strengthen/weaken often relate to:

- Quality (e.g., “let’s strengthen consumers’ associations with our brand/product and superior quality”)
- Price (e.g., “let’s strengthen company X as a price leader”)
- Functionality (e.g., “let’s strengthen consumers’ associations about the usefulness of our brand / products”)
- Symbols / status (e.g., “let’s strengthen consumers’ associations on the luxury aspects of our brand / products”)
- Brand persona (e.g., “let’s strengthen consumers’ associations of how cool our brand is”)
- ...





**What do you think are the associations
the ad aims to strengthen?**

Do you think it was an effective ad?


Why/why not?

Information-based model of advertising

- The purpose of advertising is to provide factual information
- Such models of advertising purely as information transfer are termed “**cognitive information**” → they rely heavily on economics and assume that consumers are ultimately highly rational in their way of processing information and making decisions
 - Consumers “as information processors”, rational and autonomous
 - Information about the world handled via cognitive processes
- The role of advertising is to provide information and/or utility → to help consumers to make better buying decisions (for example by reducing search costs and providing easy access to information about product attributes)

However...

Our preferences and attitudes are culturally primed, and we choose them from a range of possibilities presented to us in our own cultural field. Consumers do not typically engage with advertising in experimental viewing booths. We understand advertising as part of our cultural landscape. It is simply there, like road signs, newspapers and TV shows, and conversations in bars.



A certain advertising message can be understood entirely different based on the sub-culture or context

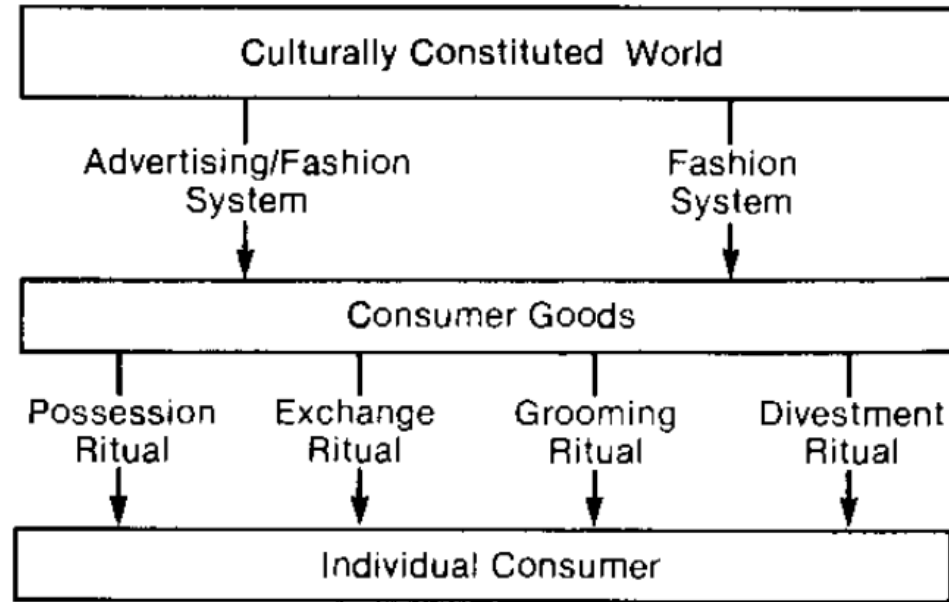
Cultural (meaning based) perspective to advertising



Cultural perspective to advertising

- Criticizes the information-based view, which approaches advertising as an overly simplified, linear process: one party communicates certain associations, symbols and information in a transactional manner to another party, with all participants understanding the meaning of those associations, symbols and information in the same way
- The information-based model has worked and may work in some situations and product categories; however, it does not explain the multitude of consumer interpretations, nor the cultural meanings that advertising may transfer

Cultural meaning transfer (McCracken 1986)

FIGURE
MOVEMENT OF MEANING



KEY:  Location of Meaning
 Instrument of Meaning Transfer

- According to the model, the role of advertising is to **transfer meaning** (= an ideology, cultural attribute etc.) **from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods.**
- By consuming these consumer goods, consumers are able to transfer those meanings to their own lives and identities.
- Through advertising, new and old consumer goods receive and lose constantly their meanings – **advertising keeps the consumer up-to-date of the cultural meanings and symbols of different goods, and can therefore be seen as a “guidebook” for cultural meanings.**
- The consumer acts **not isolated from but as part of a cultural context**, which constitutes around ideas about individuals, objects, actions, time and space, and participates in continuous cultural projects

Note: **The individual consumer doesn't necessarily interpret and use advertising information as intended by the advertiser (= to make rational buying decisions), but actively participates in the meaning transfer process and interprets advertising based on a web of existing cultural meanings.**

Remember Colin Kaepernick and Nike?




Since last week, the “Boards of Change” booths have been traveling around the city to neighborhoods with historically low voter turnout. Each booth is equipped with a QR code that allows passersby to register on the spot, with the help of When We All Vote, the non-profit founded by former First Lady Michelle Obama.





PEACE
JUSTICE
EQUALITY
BLACK LIVES MATTER

A group of approximately 15-20 people is gathered in front of a large, multi-story brick building. They are holding up various signs and banners. The scene appears to be a public demonstration or protest. The building has many windows and a central tower-like structure. The sky is overcast.

BOARDS OF CHANGE

The board of change –campaign

**Warning: the beginning of the video
entails violence**

**[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlOc1
MnJaiY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlOc1MnJaiY)**



The cultural meaning of what it means to “be a girl” is transferred via advertising to the Always brand and its products. By consuming the products, consumers can transfer those meanings into their lives.

Semiotics



Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University

Spring 2023

What is semiotics?

How would you describe or define it?

Semiotics as a method of analysis

- ‘Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign’ (Eco 1976, 7)
- **A sign** = **anything that stand for something else**
- In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects (Chandler 1994/2004/2017)
- “semio[tics] confronts the question of how images make meanings and produces detailed accounts of the exact ways the meanings of an image are produced through that image (Rose 2016)
- Study of signs, or **how signs convey messages**
- Networks of signs

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

- Swiss linguist
- Lecture series or seminars in "general linguistics" (1907-11)
- The founding father of semiotics



The “sign” is the most fundamental unit of mainstream semiology.

By putting together signs, we create meaning.

I – drive – a car

Saussure

Anything that conveys
meaning

Sign

The object / thing



Signifier

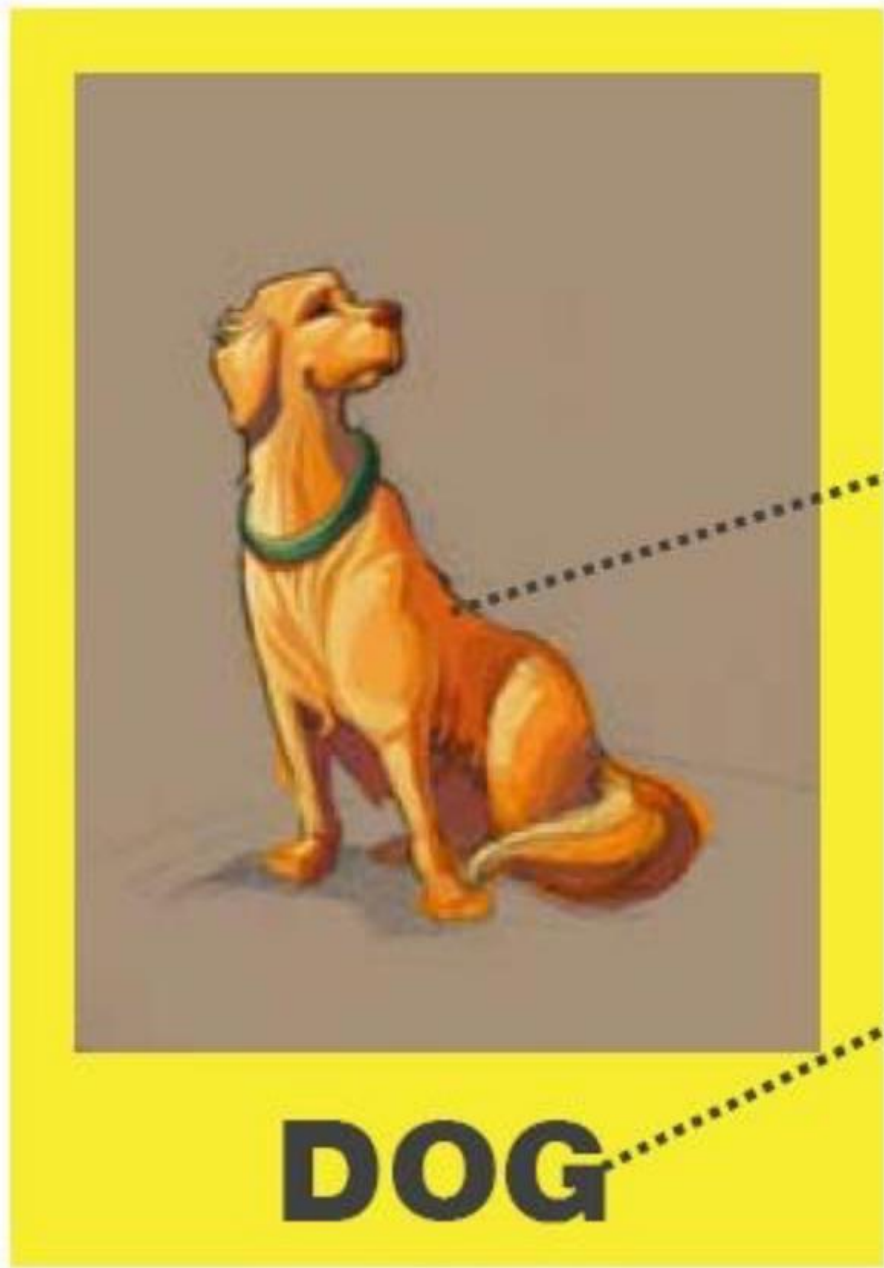
The physical existence
(sound, word, image)

Red / Leaf / Round / Apple

Signified

The mental concept

Fruit / Apple / Freshness / Healthy
/ Temptation / Teacher's pet /
Computer



Signified

Signifier



Sign

Brands as signs



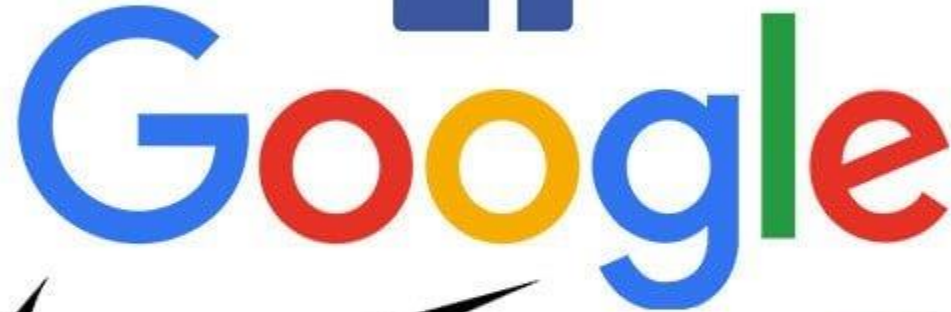
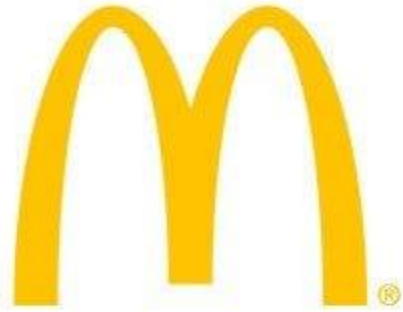
+ **VANS** =



Sing:

Er: Vans shirt

Ed: independence, non-conformity



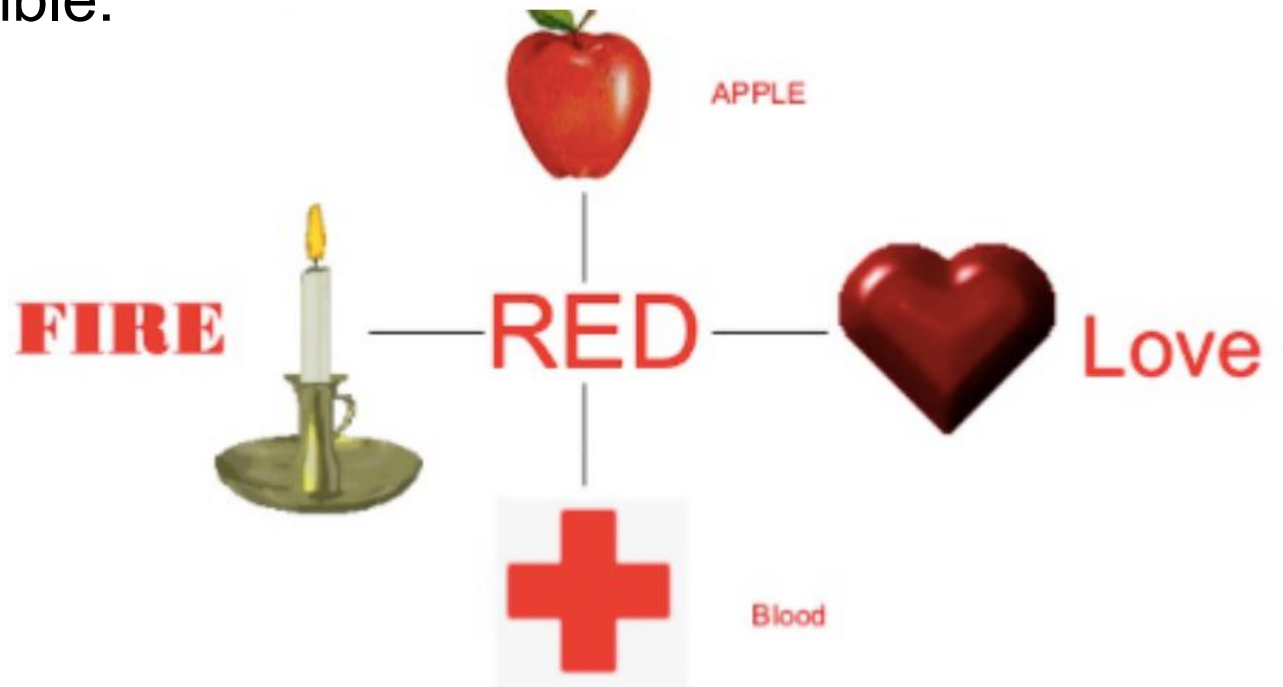
Advertising and semiotics: the message is only one small part of the process where consumers try to interpret the meaning of an ad

- Ads are seen as strings or assemblages of signs that serve the brand
- Signs are e.g.: copy, typeface, soundtrack, positioning, image, color, objects
- They are used to covert meanings that the marketer sees as essential for the consumer to understand the brand and be persuaded to buy its products
- The meaning of a sign depends on the socio-cultural context

Signifiers can have multiple signifieds (concepts):

Think of signifier red

A number of signifieds are possible:



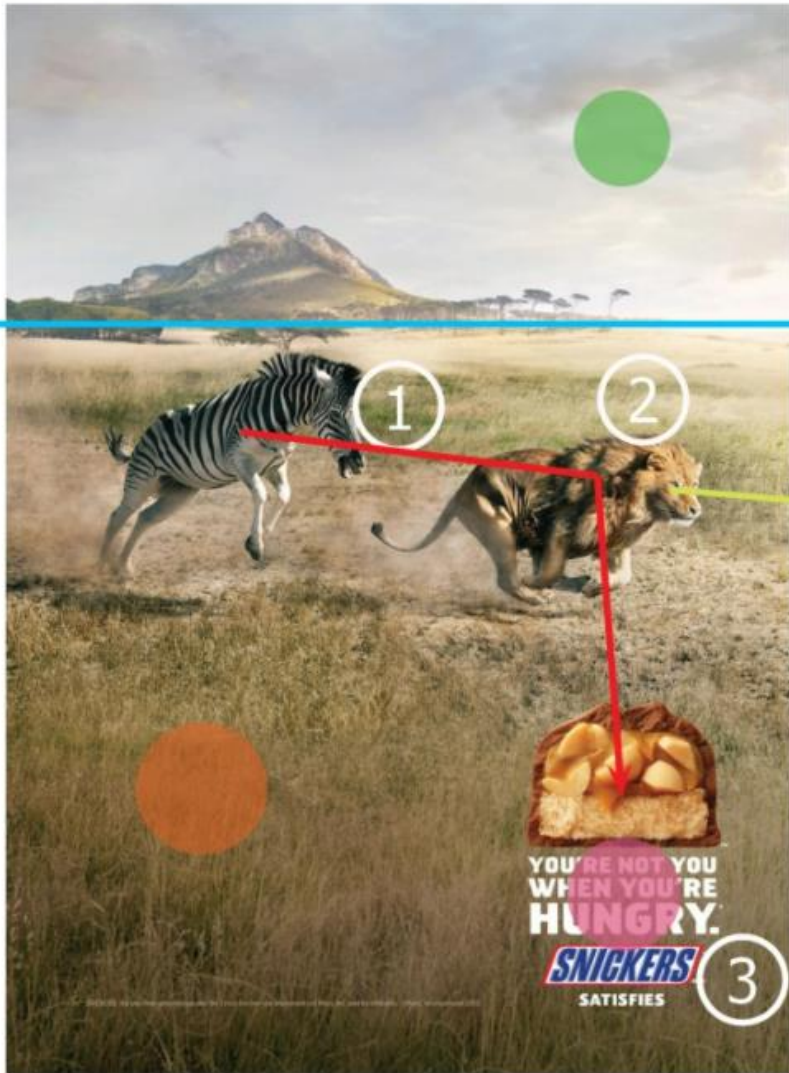
Let's interpret a couple of ads from a semiotics perspective!



YOU'RE NOT YOU
WHEN YOU'RE
HUNGRY.

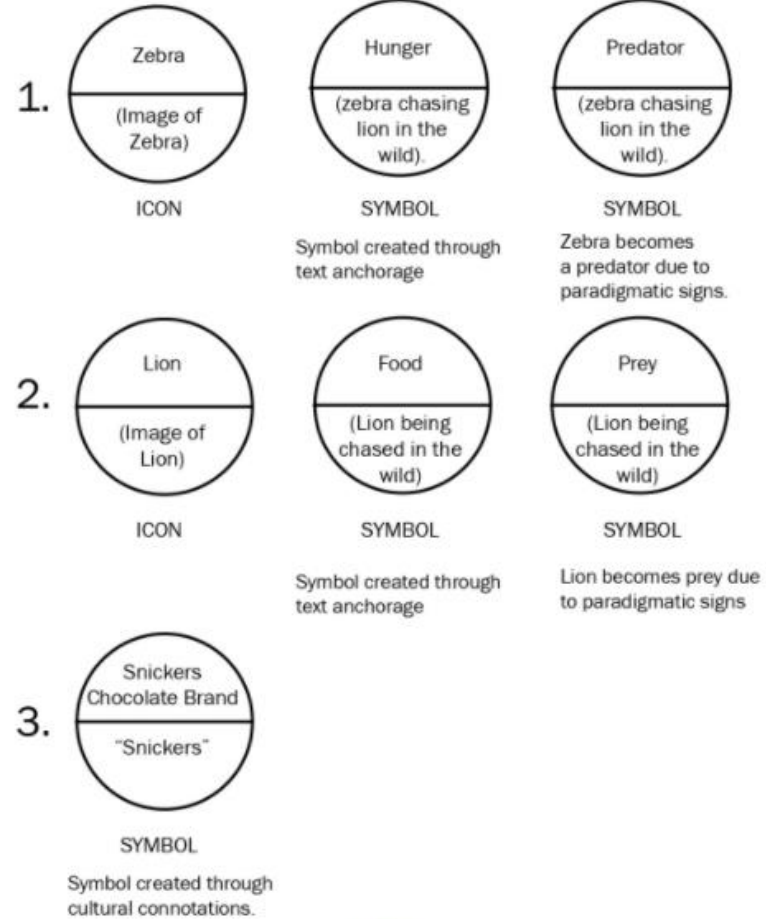
SNICKERS
SATISFIES

HORIZON LINE:
Above the subjects which indicates the viewer is looking down on the image, observing.



The gaze of the Zebra leads viewers eyes along to the lion and down to the product image

Focalisers indicate implied spectators



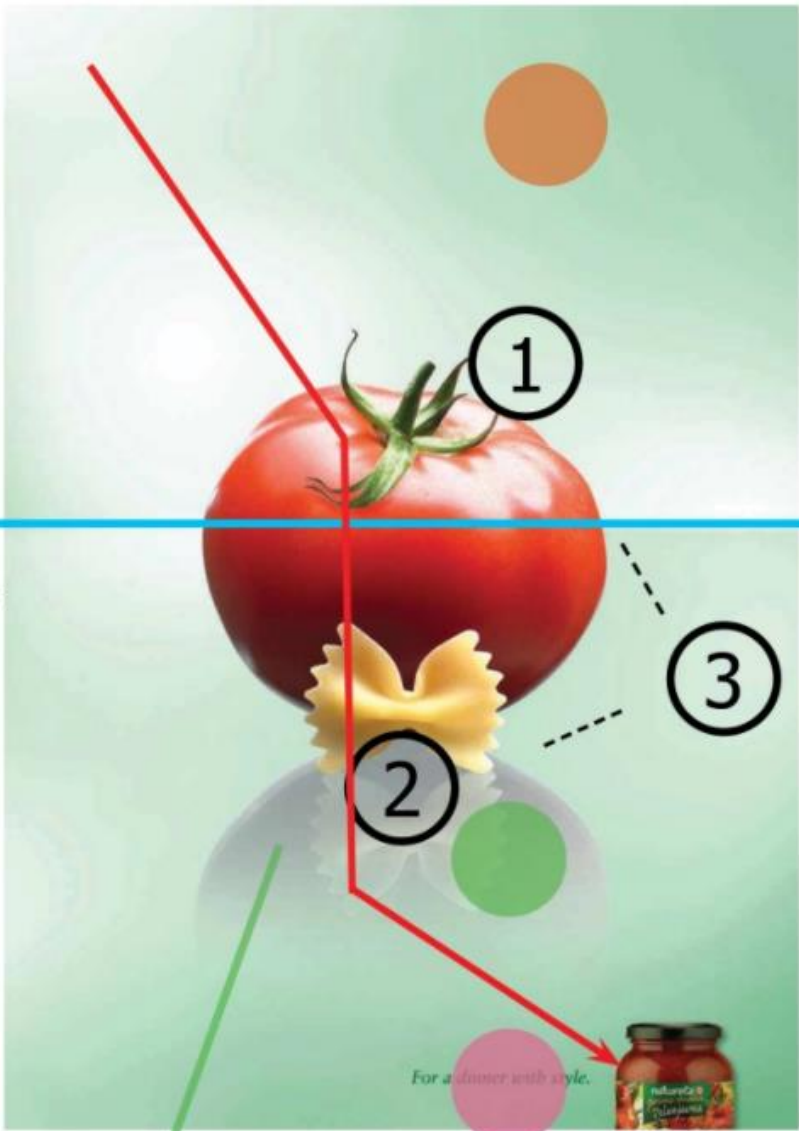
- Light: Natural, realistic
- Colour: Hues: brown, green, grey. Dull saturation, high value.
- Text as anchorage, pins down meaning of image.



For a dinner with style.

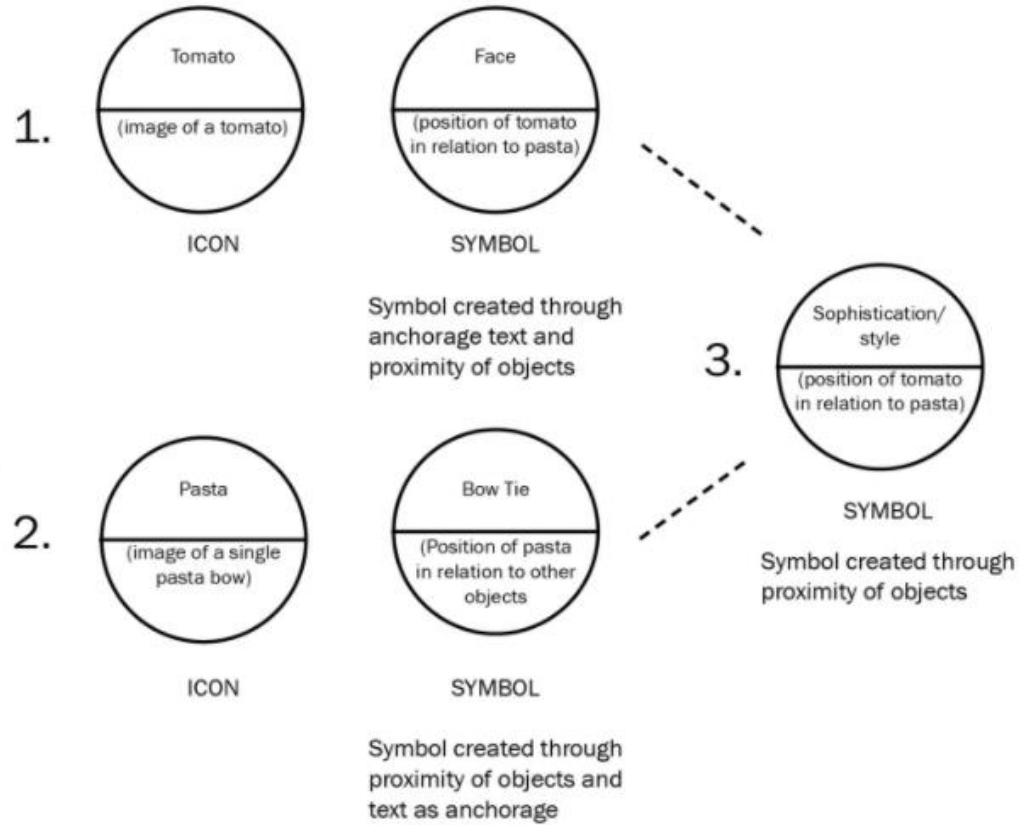


HORIZON LINE: At eye level, viewers are positioned to be equal with the subjects



Reflective light creates feeling of class/sophistication

Light is used to draw viewers eye from the top corner of the image down through the subject to the product image



- Colour: Highly saturated, vibrant, high vaues
- Light: Bright, unrealistic.
- Text as Anchorage focuses viewers mind on the meaning of the image

About reading advertising

A vintage-style portrait of a woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and red lipstick, smiling slightly. The image is partially obscured by text on the left side.

How to Read
ADVERTISEMENTS

Does advertising work?



Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University

Spring 2023

5 min exercise, discuss in groups!

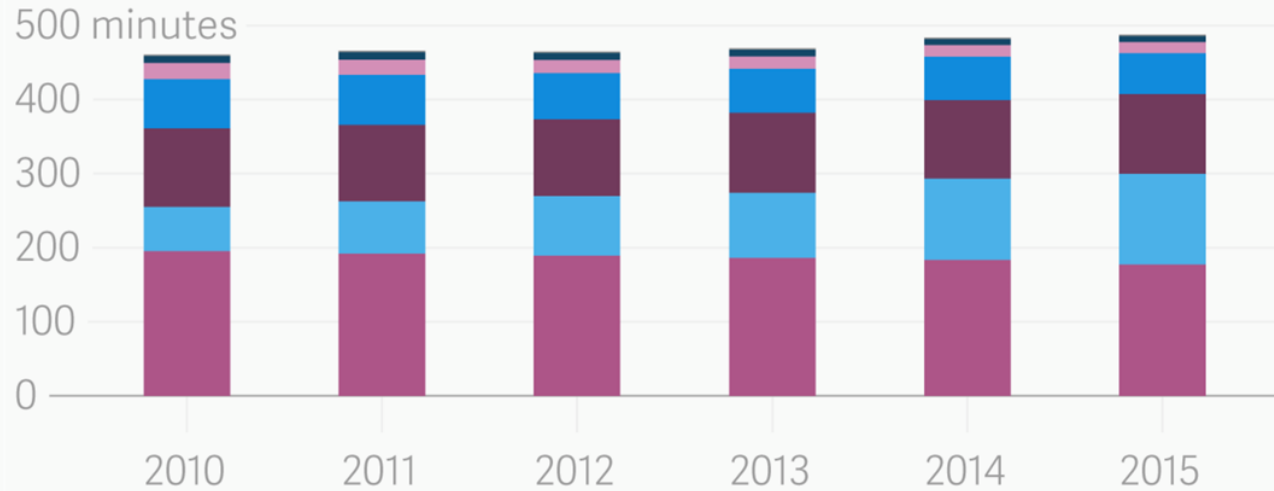
What do you think? Does advertising work? Reflect on yourself as a consumer!

Do you remember advertisements of different brands?
What brands?

Have you made some buying decisions based on the advertisements you've seen?

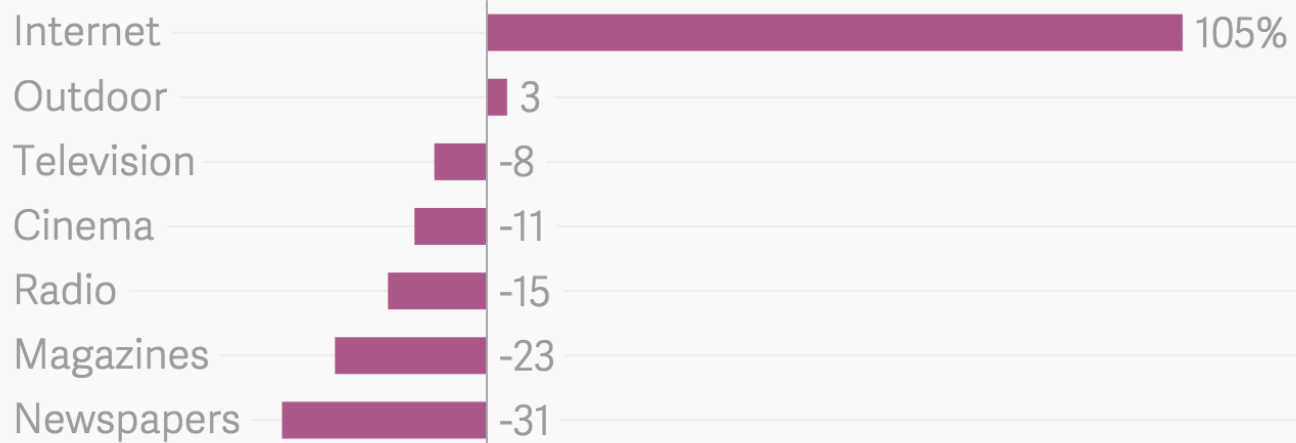
Average daily media consumption

Television Internet Outdoor Radio Newspapers
Magazines Cinema



Change in average daily media consumption

2015 vs 2010



Media As We Know It Today





Does advertising even work any more?

Mark Duffy | July 5, 2016

3100

Mark Duffy has written the Copyranter blog for 10 years and is a freelancing copywriter with 20-plus years of experience. His hockey wrist shot is better than yours.

Is it all just a big waste of space, time and money? I'm talking about all types of advertising here: internet, native, TV, video, mobile, print, branded content, matchbooks, stunts, product placement, sandwich boards. All of it.

I think it just might be



Two years ago, The Atlantic asked a “dangerous question”: Does Internet Advertising Work at All? Short answer: probably not! Long answer: nobody knows. Nobody. Not even your Ad Tech Daddy, “Big Data.” This includes all Facebook ads and Google search ads: All of them are very likely useless. And nothing’s changed about that answer in 2016.

How about social media advertising — all those retweets and likes must add up to something? Yes, they add up to approximately nothing worth anything: Only 5 percent of people say social media has “a great deal of influence” on their purchasing decisions, according to a 2014 Gallup State of the American Consumer report; 30 percent copped “some influence.”

Millennials, apparently, are — somehow — immune to advertising, even creative ads and videos with great visuals and crackling copy. Way to kill my career, assholes.

What should a brand do, then? Whelp, it definitely should stop spending money on advertising its products. Immediately. And give up on your marketing MBA bullshit: no hard sells, no soft sells, no devious sells ... no selling!

Your only options left are to non-sell or un-sell. Here are some examples.

...kka
...er Jesper Møl
...n, oplyser Toms
... i en pressemed
...esper Møller har
...dsen for selska
...r. Det forventes
...art vil være klar
...atliggere navnet
...y direktør hos

ffører har toiletter

Buschauffører
steder i landet
i tre timer eller
de kan komme
tet. Det skriver
k. Kjeld Hou
nsen, miljøkon
3F, kalder toilet
ne for uanstæn

lder år

der og job

...er længe tror du, du
... kunne holde til at væ
... på arbejdsmarkedet?
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 60 år.
... 23 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 65 år.
... 40 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 70 år.
... 23 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 75 år.
... 10 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 80 år.
... 5 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 85 år.
... 2 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 90 år.
... 1 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 95 år.
... 0,5 procent
... - Til jeg bliver cirka 100 år.
... 0,1 procent

idea:
mm

MAKE AN AD SO DUMB,
PEOPLE WILL ACTUALLY WANT
TO LOOK AT THE BOTTOM
TO SEE WHO THE HECK
PAID FOR THIS SHIT.



LEMON. ICE. AND ALCOHOL.
KIND OF GENIUS. KIND OF.

DRINKING RESPONSIBLY. IT'S KIND OF GENIUS.

We made this ad
look like street
art so you
would like
it better
than if it
was just
an ad.



THE ORIGINAL
**OAT-
LY!**
HAFER
HAVER
BARISTA
ENTHUSIASTEN

100% Hafer
100% vegan
2L
It's
Swi-
dich!

EAST-SIDE-HOTEL

HOTEL

EAST-SIDE-HOTEL



**WAITING FOR
SOMEONE?
JUST LOOK
COOL AND
PRETEND
TO BE
READING
THIS.**



**MAYBE A SOCIAL
MEDIA CELEBRITY
WILL TAKE A PHOTO
OF THIS POSTER
AND YOU WILL
SEE IT ON
INSTAGRAM
AND LIKE IT
WAY MORE
THAN YOU
DO RIGHT
NOW.**



**YOU
ACTUALLY
READ
THIS?
TOTAL
SUCCESS.**



**POSTERS DON'T
HAVE FEELINGS!
SO YOU DON'T
HAVE TO
PRETEND
THAT
YOU'RE
INTER-
ESTED.**



DEUTSCHES
THEATER
BERLIN

NEW MEN

**THIS IS THE
ULTIMATE
FOODIE
AD FOR
FOODIES
WHO DON'T
CARE THAT
WE DON'T
USE
FOODIE
PHOTOS
TO SELL
OUR FOODIE
PRODUCTS.**



A DELICIOUS
MOUTH-WATERING
FOOD PICTURE
HERE WOULD MAKE
YOU 73% MORE
INTERESTED IN
TRYING OUR
OAT FRAICHE.

APPARENTLY,
WE ARE NOT
VERY INTERESTED
IN SALES.



**TAKING
SUPER SEXY
PHOTOS OF
FOOD CAN BE
EXHAUSTING
SO WE JUST
USED THIS
PACK SHOT
INSTEAD.**



**ANOTHER AD
FOR OUR
COOKING
CREAM THAT
PROVIDES
NO REASON
AT ALL WHY
YOU SHOULD
BUY IT.**

**IF WE
HAD
HIRED
A FOOD
STYLIST,
A PHOTO-
GRAPHER
AND AN AD
AGENCY, THIS
POSTER WOULD
PROBABLY
HAVE
BEEN MORE
SUCCESSFUL.**



“It is **difficult to remember more than a few** of all the hundreds of promotions you see every week. Advertising has become such **a feature of daily life** in developed market economies that sometimes it seems as if **we hardly notice it**. Advertising pervades our cultural landscape (...) and we carry on our lives **taking it for granted, as if it were as natural as grass or trees.**”

“Advertising is, of course, so powerful precisely because it is taken for granted.”

Ad Meter 50 for 50th: ranking the 50 best Super Bowl commercials ever

By [Alan Siegel](#) January 21, 2016 2:55 pm ET



SHARE



TWEET



EMAIL



MOST POPULAR



Watch Tom Brady make pancakes in Intel's Super Bowl LI ad



Ad Meter 50 for 50th: ranking the 50 best Super Bowl commercials ever
January 21, 2016



Toyota's 'Stand Together' crowned Rio Ad Meter Bracket champion
August 24, 2016

SUPER BOWL

The 10 Best Super Bowl Ads of 2020

It was a year that leveraged celebrities in unexpectedly fun ways



Porsche energized its image with a fun spot about a heist involving its new electric vehicle. Porsche

Q&A



Aalto-yliopisto
Aalto-universitetet
Aalto University

Spring 2023