Chapter 12
Interactive Advertising: Displays of Identity and Stance on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

Recent attempts to theorize identity using sociolinguistic, discourse analytic, and conversation analytic frameworks have focused on discursive constructions of speakers’ identities, especially emphasizing the point that identities are constructed moment by moment through social interaction. Although such frameworks arguably are designed with face-to-face, synchronous interaction in mind, it is well known that other types of discourse, traditionally thought of as distant, asynchronous, and solitary (or non-interactive), are being used in new ways, due to rapid developments in technology. These developments suggest that all language use is inherently interactive, if not interactional (i.e., synchronous). In this chapter, the author uses insights from social semiotics and frameworks grounded in the analysis of spoken interaction to analyze a commercial in conjunction with unelicited comments from people who viewed the commercial on YouTube. The author’s analysis focuses on the multimodal expression of meaning potentials as well as their uptake and the stances displayed in response.

INTRODUCTION

It is by now well established that consumption plays an important role in social positioning, a trend that has become increasingly apparent over the past few decades, with the rise of post-Fordist “flexibility” and the associated changes in labor markets. In addition, scholars in many areas have noted that discourse is playing an increasingly important role in such positioning. For example, a common feature of advertising is the use of linguistic or other semiotic means such as imagery to position recipients in desirable identities, associated with consumption (Fairclough, 1995). Furthermore, over the past few decades, the communicative function of promotion has been generalized and effectively “colonized” other genres, to the extent that everything – “goods, services,
ideas or people” – are now viewed as objects of sales transactions (Fairclough, 1995, p. 138). As Bucholtz (2007) argues, “neoliberalism’s guiding metaphor for the organization of institutions also invites people to reimagine themselves as consumers first and foremost” (p. 371).

Not only has there been a generalization of promotion as a communicative function, there has also been a broadening of the kinds of appeals used in promotional discourse. For example, corporate advertising, the prototypical promotional discourse, makes use of what Klein (2000) refers to as “lifestyle branding” (p. 16), which promotes the selling of “a philosophy of life” (Boggio, 2010, p. 146) rather than just a product. This type of advertising, also called high-concept advertising, has a goal of “transcend[ing] the prosaic function of the product and bring[ing] it to a higher spiritual … level in order to make those who wear or use these products feel as part of an experience, a lifestyle” (Boggio, 2010, p. 149). Clearly, in order to be effective, these ads must create not only lifestyles, but also identities, both of which potential consumers evaluate positively.

In the second decade of the 21st century, the changes described above might seem ubiquitous, unremarkable, and therefore not warranting further study. However, the fact that promotion has become such a naturalized communicative function in a relatively short period of time is what makes it significant. In addition, much of the existing research on this topic has used a non-interactive, “one-sided” approach, examining the discourse produced by advertisers and excluding people’s reactions to it. Indeed, the goal of these studies is to examine how language and other semiotic resources are used in ads to create meaning potentials, or possible interpretations. There are few studies of whether and/or how people who view ads actually take up these meaning potentials and respond. Bucholtz’ (2007) study is an exception. She critiques some of the recent work on advertising and consumer culture as strongly deterministic, arguing that people’s responses to advertising and brands are projected rather than actually investigated. Focusing on how adolescents make sense of and interact with global market forces at a local level, she argues that “youth do not simply fall into a predetermined economic script written by corporate marketers, but take up much more complex and ambivalent relationships toward consumption” (p. 372).

It is true that how children and adults respond to and interact with advertisements in their everyday lives has not drawn much attention from researchers. Although marketing firms do surveys, focus groups, and now even track hits and likes on the internet, this information does not explain how people respond to ads as they are viewing them. Even in my own previous work, involving Starbucks Corporation, I took a one-sided approach, examining only the discourse produced by Starbucks. (See Mayes, 2010.) In this chapter, I intend to add to these findings, by incorporating another side of the story – the unelicited responses of people who view advertisements on the internet and post their comments on YouTube.com. Analyzing an advertisement, in conjunction with these responses, will enable further investigation of how semiotic resources are used in identity work. One of my goals is to further our understanding of the discursive construction of identity and stance in relation to an advertisement, but I also have a second, methodological goal of furthering our understanding of how people interact with the semiotic resources of promotional discourse in a new way. Indeed, the possibility of responding to ads, as well as to other people who view the same material, is a relatively recent development. As these new, interactive ways to disseminate and respond to semiotic resources are developed, linguistic and discourse analytic theories that