Identity And Iteration:
Marketing Images And The Constitution Of Consuming Subjects


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Introduction

Marketing communications depict consumer society as a fountain of personal freedom, choice and satisfaction, where citizen and consumer are almost interchangeable expressions of identity. The apparent insight that consumers construct identities with brands, images, and market choices has exerted a profound, foundational influence for marketing and consumer research in recent years. However, a paradox of identity construction, or subject constitution, emerges when the consuming subject, in choosing among and constructing identities, is shown to draw upon a repertoire of iterated, or pre-existing, identities provided by marketing, advertising images and consumer culture.

In this paper, we problematize the notion that “the consumption of symbolic meaning, particularly through the use of advertising as a cultural commodity, provides the individual with the opportunity to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings” (Elliott 1997, p. 285). This stance assumes several things: that ads make identities available to consumers as raw materials for identity construction; an active consumer who appropriates meaning; and a position from which the consciously aware consuming subject can choose to consume particular symbolic meaning in relation to desires and motivations. We do not disagree that ads interact with identity. However, we contend that marketing communication, including advertising, corporate web pages, annual reports, brochures, market segmentation strategy and so on, repeat – or iterate – identities and symbolic meaning clusters in the form of discourses. Furthermore, such iterations are circumscribed and limited in their potential polysemy of subject constitution by tacit interpretation processes as well as stereotypical representations of identity. Our contribution is to bring together three strands of thought – interpretive consumer research, social attribution studies, and contemporary phenomenological theory – to articulate traces of iterative processes that hold consumers captive.

Drawing upon recent philosophical approaches to subjectivity that illuminate the interstices of identity, marketing, and consumer culture (Butler 1993; 1997; 1999; 2002; Derrida 1978), we theorize marketing communication through the notion of iteration – as repetition of performative gestures – and critically discuss how iteration functions in marketing images. Contemporary philosopher Judith Butler argues that iteration expresses a continued occurrence or pattern without assuming that there was at some point in time an original instance, natural state or ideal of which the continued instances are simply re-iterations. Thus, the theoretical specificity of iteration calls attention to the lack of essential, ‘natural’, or ideal implied categories – that would exist prior to an iterative appearance within a causal chain from natural, pre-existing category to representation.

Marketing images are a crucial representational practice of iteration. That is, ads do not simply reflect identities – providing material for open-ended identity construction – but ads perform iterative gestures. In this way, the iterative normativity or conventionality of marketing communication contributes to the construction of ideal categories – such as male, female, black, white, European, immigrant, straight, gay, rich, poor – that circulate in culture. As iterations,
marketing images play a powerful role in constructing, maintaining, and endlessly re-communicating normative values and identities made available to and existing in tandem with the subject in consumer culture. Whereas the iterational status of gestures makes possible shifts and alternatives, we see in tacit interpretive processes, which militate against free and creative subject constitution, potential blocks to such shifts (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003b).

Whereas Butler has profoundly influenced contemporary theory, few studies within marketing have used a developed notion of Butler’s philosophical thought; Butler, although critical of status quo institutions, rarely discusses advertising and visual representation. We join recent work that discusses advertising as discourse or representation (e.g., Berger 2000; Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Domzal and Kernan 1993; Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999; Pearce 1999; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Schroeder and Borgerson 2003a). We show how Butler’s influential work on subject constitution, in conjunction with interpretive processes, illuminates the relationship between advertising and identity within the context of consumer culture, and focuses attention on how ads themselves perform identity within cultural discourses.

We move away from recent models that posit relationships between consumers and ads, exploring instead how identities are constructed within ads themselves. (Brands, for example, have been conceptualized as having personality, character, or identity.) The consuming subject may perform identity, but ads, moreover, as iterations of normative subject positions, perform identities as well. Research on what we call “tacit interpretation,” framed within theoretical concepts of identity construction, suggests that given the prevalence of particular versions of identities in advertisements, represented iterations often reproduce a limited realm for identity construction within consumer culture. We use gender as our main example of an identity category, but our analysis is relevant for other identity realms, including race and class. Butler’s work on subject identity constitution – via gender roles, for example – demonstrates that performative iterations are not simply the playing out of natural or pre-existing ways of being in the world. Each iteration plays the role of recreating and maintaining the illusion of natural categories of identity, similar to what in consumer research has been called a process of “recombinant culture” (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Consumers may draw on ad identities, yet we argue that the stock of identity is not always liberatory, not fully deconstructed.

We suggest that identities that are iterated and made available via ads overwhelm the possibilities of the consuming subject, reconfiguring concepts of an ideal category, rather than offering the ‘new’ identities that individual consumers are said to be able to construct, either by imagining their ideal identity in an ad, or through consumption processes (cf. Holt 2002). As researchers increasingly acknowledge cultural codes, consumer response, and deconstruction as essential in understanding how marketing produces meaning, our multidisciplinary approach aims toward integrating knowledge from psychological and philosophical research to critically interrogate marketing’s influence on and interaction with perception and culture. In the following sections, we present a brief discussion of the interaction between consumption and subject constitution and the related issue of the relationship between interpretation of marketing images and consumer subjectivity. We then introduce Butler’s approach to iteration, illustrated with examples from current marketing imagery, and then close with some thoughts on how iteration limits consumer’s negotiation of marketing meaning and the implications this has for critical marketing research.
Consumption and The Subject

Consumer behavior has been studied as instrumental in the construction of consumer identity or self-concept, what we refer to as the consuming subject (cf. Belk 1988; Yahklef 1999). Consumption is often framed as identity construction: “in the same way that a consumer’s use of products influence others’ perceptions, the same products can help determine his or her own self-concept and social identity” (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard 1999, p. 181). Consumer research attempts to work with self-formation as an active factor in explaining consumer interactions with products and images, whereas advertising research has been more concerned with congruence between consumer subjectivity and advertising rhetoric (cf. Hackley 2002; Lury and Warde 1997; Ottes and Scott 1996; Zaltman and Coulter 1995). Recent models of consumers’ interpretive relationships with ads posit a subject that must ‘relate’ to ads in particular kinds of ways; consumers construct pastiches of images from marketing messages that circulate in culture (Hirschman and Thompson 1997).

The “subject” of this paper is not a person or an individual. That we theorize the roles of ads in the subject’s construction and constitution apparently marks the simultaneous emergence of the consumer subject in relation to iterated ad identities. We note that the subject is a category of some confusion and contention (Deleuze and Guttari 1987; Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh 1995; Oliver 1996). Theorists have presumed, assumed and hypothesized a variety of subject forms, including related processes around the constitution of the subject. Butler articulates the subject as follows:

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The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a “site”), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is a linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency (Butler 1997, p. 10-11). As such, this subject takes form from the language and gestures given and accessible to it. The subject’s intelligibility or legibility is limited by the available, as well as the foreclosed, repertoires of performative iterations.

Advertising and Interpretation

Advertising acts as a representational system that produces meaning beyond the realm of the advertised product, service, or brand (e.g., Kates 1999; McCracken 1988; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994b; Stern and Schroeder 1994). Considering ads as cultural artifacts helps connect images to broader cultural issues or discourses that help create meaning (e.g., Berger 2000; Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999; McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Mick and Buhl 1992; O’Donohoe 2001; Schroeder 2002). In the words of one art historian: “despite our resistance and growing cynicism, we remain to one degree or another caught in the light of what we see—what we are shown. Images show us a world but not the world [...] When we look at images, whether photographs, films, videos, or paintings, what we see is the product of human consciousness, itself part and parcel of culture and history” (Leppert 1997, p. 3). Moreover, marketing images play an important role in the production and reproduction of identities, not merely reflecting or
portraying them (e.g., Martin and Gentry 1997; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997; Richins 1991; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998; Shields 2002). Ads hail the viewer by promoting a personal connection between viewer and sign (cf. McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Mick and Buhl 1992; Reynolds and Gutman 1984; Stern 1996). This **signwork** is a key to understanding the visual landscape of contemporary society (Goldman and Papson 1996). From this perspective, reality and advertising do not constitute two separate spheres acting upon one another; advertising and the mass media, as engines of iteration, contribute to the visual landscape.

Recent work has shown that ads are interpreted or read in multiple ways, prompting an important and illuminating reconsideration of how advertising ‘works,’ and shifting attention from ad producers toward consumer response to understand how advertising creates meaning (e.g., Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Elliott, Eccles, and Hodgson 1997; Firat and Schultz 1997; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Kates 1999; Scott 1994b; Stern 1999). Cultural codes, ideological discourse, consumer’s background knowledge, and rhetorical processes have been cited as influences in advertising interpretation and consumer’s relationships to advertising and mass media. Consumers are seen to construct and perform identities and self-concepts, trying out new roles and creating their self-image within and in collaboration with, consumer culture (e.g., Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard 1999).

Missing from these theoretical insights, however, is an awareness of basic perceptual mechanisms of attribution and impression formation. That is, such analyses overlook processes of which consumers themselves are frequently unaware, are not in conscious control, and which often operate without intention or effort, yet influence interpretation. In contrast, social psychological research into what we call **tacit interpretation** identifies interpretive processes that consumers use without awareness in making social attributions (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003b). This phenomenon includes “nonconscious ideology” (Bem and Bem 1970; Chen and Bargh 1997), “automatic stereotyping” (Banaji and Hardin 1996) “implicit social cognition” (Greenwald and Banaji 1995), “non conscious system justification” (Jost and Hunyady 2002), and “face-ism” (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, and Barrios 1983). Such documented processes should not be confused with the long standing contentious claims around so-called “subliminal advertising” that suggest advertisers place particular messages or images within an ad in a strategic effort to tap unconscious human response.

Tacit interpretation mitigates against the apparently transparent interpretation of ads that forms a crucial component of postmodern and poststructural descriptions of the consumer’s interpretive relationships with ads (e.g., Brown 1995; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Kellner 1992; Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999; O’Donohoe 1997; Elliott and Ritson 1997; Scott 1994a; Stern 1996). Tacit processes lead people to interpret on the basis of subtle visual cues, social categories, and cognitive schemas, and generally serve to psychologically justify the status quo, operating as an identifiable and stable interpretive convention (Jost and Banaji 1994). These tacit interpretive processes constrain, rather than determine, interpretation, yet by-pass the kind of conscious active choosing implied by many versions of identity construction. As social psychologist John Bargh recently stated in the *Journal of Consumer Research*: “consumer research has largely missed out on [...] key developments in social cognition research: the growing evidence that much of social judgment and behavior occur without conscious awareness or intent…” (2002, p. 280). Bargh’s critique focuses on cognitive decision making and motivation, without much discussion of advertising interpretation or social attribution. We have extended his argument, and claim that these ‘automatic’ social attribution processes work against much deconstructive, playful, queering, or resistant interpretive work, often claimed to operate in
the consumer’s identity construction activity (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003b). Tacit interpretation, then, serves as a boundary condition, or limiting factor, of advertising polysemy and interpretative creativity, particularly within the realm of consumer identity construction.

Iteration, Performance and Visual images

Butler argues that identity via iteration forms over time and is maintained through repeated performances of socially constructed characteristics and appropriate gestures and signs, including marketing images. Infamous for supposedly claiming that gender was simply a performance (1990) – and hence could be worn or not worn rather like a particular combination of clothing – she remains, regardless of her theory’s evocativeness for gender fluidity and drag performances, primarily not a queer theorist, but a phenomenologist. Like others in the phenomenological tradition, Butler has sought to understand the paradoxes and complexities of poles of meaning and being, the ideal category and the particular instance, and the interrelations between them. Further examples include the irrepressible dialectic of the finite and infinite (Hartmann 1966), typicality and anonymity (Natanson 1986), Other and Self (Levinas 1969), black and white in a racist antiblack world (Gordon 1995), fashion and substance (Miller 1994), and, of course, masculinity and femininity (Butler 1987, 1990). Thus, despite prophecies of dualisms collapse (e.g., Brown 1995; Firat and Schultz 1997; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Venkatesh 1999) they remain key categories of identity attribution. We do not mean to imply that these binaries are normative, rather that they continue to influence cultural discourse.

Theory from many disciplines struggles to understand how hierarchical dualisms in the arenas of gender and race function ontologically when contingent social and psychological constructions nevertheless define and limit embodied human agents (cf. Borgerson 2001; Borgerson and Rehn 2004; Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Bourdieu 2000; Butler 1990, 1993, 1999; Diprose 1994; Gordon 1995, 1997). These dualisms, although contested, have not disappeared. For example, despite gender bending, queering, and androgyny, gender remains a fundamental social, psychological and cultural category: “masculinity, for example, in a philosophical tradition that values rationality, is associated with a superior ability to reason, femininity with a denigrated intuition of emotion” (Bartky 2002, p. 70). Repeated, or re-iterated, versions of gender and race underlie and continually revitalize what is considered natural, typical and, often, appropriate for specific groups. Stereotyped and, perhaps, damaging, representation of iterations derived from essentialist, often sexist and racist, understandings remain a crucial concern for marketing communications (e.g., Cortese 1999; O’Barr 1994; van Leeuwen 2000). Iterations occur in many cultural forms, including marketing images.

Gestures and performance of identity must be repeated endlessly to maintain the illusion of a natural category. Butler takes her lead from French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida’s essay “Structure, Sign, and Play”, arguing that iterability counters a structuralist ideal or moment that simply or naturally exists. Indeed, the attempts to reveal the essence of a category constructs the category; or in Butler’s terms, the anticipation of the awaited moment in fact creates the moment (Butler 2002; Derrida 1978/1967, 1992). The iteration of anticipation in the waiting is all that the moment-to-be-revealed consists in. There will be no final revelation of the real. Thus, the lack of the moment creates the context for the moment’s presence: The lack of an essential category creates the context for the category’s presence. This is also the insight around identity ideals—and their lack—generally, and, specifically for Butler, the categories of masculinity and femininity. Thus, masculinity as a ‘true’ category is constructed through
attempts to embody, and thus reveal, the essential, or real, ideal masculinity via performances of stereotypically male gestures. This work of performative iteration creates masculinity and supports prior work. If a structure or ideal must be iterated, or re-signified, then it is not absolute or ideal, as the existence resides in the iteration. Ads make substantial contributions to such performance and reenactments.

Sociologist Erving Goffman’s work on performance or self-presentation bears some resemblance to Butler’s philosophical understanding of performative iterations (Goffman 1959; 1979). By focusing upon behavior as ‘performance’, Goffman challenged the distinction between the image and the real. His approach to pictorial and social-psychological images has been influential, particularly within contemporary gender theory (Tseëlon 1995). The performance metaphor for understanding social interaction paves the way toward Butler’s (1990) influential analysis of gender performance, thus Goffman’s work supports the discourse regarding “performing” gender roles (Butler 1990; 1993).

Theories of gender, in particular, those arising from notions of iteration and performance, stand against essentialist understandings of the relationship between femininity and the female, masculinity and the male. Queer theory “regards ads as forms of cultural representation made understandable by extant sexual discourse ... reinforcing a heterosexist status quo” (Kates 1999, p. 28). Moreover, it is the iterability, repetition, and representation of characteristic traits and gestures that creates and sustains these various categories of identity. Iterations function as a socially powerful force that, as iterations, must refer and defer to certain intelligible meanings. Even as consumers resist, they recognize and utilize the dominant discourse, perhaps inadvertently maintaining the status quo (cf., Desmond, McDonagh and O’Donohoe 2000; Jost and Hunyady 2002). Iterations, then, undergird cultural categories of identity that operate within a variety of social arrangements. Marketing communications, including advertisements, as iterations, contribute to this process. Acknowledging the risk that our selections may place undue emphasis on one or two instances, we present some recent exemplars to show how iteration works within advertising. We focus on these images as theory-building cases, rather than mere illustrations, and are not necessarily concerned with their representativeness.

Ads as Iterations

Seagram’s Coolers, fruit-flavored malt based alcoholic beverages targeted to young women, are currently running a multi-media “It’s What Women Like” marketing campaign featuring an elaborate website—complete with a *Cosmopolitan*-like online magazine, cable television spots, and print ads. The print campaign, a series of images that compare women’s and men’s tastes, revolves around the notion that “women and men like different things.” In one noteworthy example, two photographs of cakes appear side by side above the script “Women and men like different things.”
One ad image is of a traditional wedding cake adorned with bride and groom figurines (figure 1). The other is a picture of a bikini clad woman ‘popping’ out of an enormous tiered cake – a retrograde office party ritual (that neither of the authors has experienced, but that they have seen iterated in countless movies and television programs). We read this as positioning the
viewer in particular ways. These images seem to claim that women like weddings (including their own), whereas men like scantily clad women appearing for their amusement and pleasure. Women favor monogamous marriage, men want sexy strippers. Women want human relationships, men desire objects of visual pleasure. We don’t dispute that some men and some women have different preferences (cf. Bristor and Fischer 1993). Moreover, there are certainly ways to deconstruct, queer, or laugh at this rather campy – and perhaps ironic – ad. However, once again, the images iterate notions of identity that reinforce cultural stereotypes of essential gender differences, differences that encompass everything from human relationships to alcoholic beverages, reinforcing sexist notions of what men and women “like.” Further, we contend that the Seagram’s ‘Wild Berries’ coolers – with an emphasis on wild – provide the semiotic, alcohol infused power to transform the woman viewer into what men “like.” Consume a cooler, and any woman can become the sexy stripper, a desirable shift within the logic of heterosexual culture, and the woman’s magazine genre, given the resonance of the ‘Wild’ berries with the object of attraction, and the static, diminutive, wax bride figure on the other cake (cf. Williamson 1978).

Ads not only iterate visually, however. Some ads “come out and say it” – reiterating and prescribing identity via text as well as image. For example, celebrated former Chicago Bears football player and coach Mike Ditka’s massive frame fills a recent ad for Consort hair spray, by Alberto Culver. An American football, its iconic white stripes immediately recognizable to those who grew up with the National Football League (NFL), visually reinforcing his close connections to the sport, looms behind him as he points, somewhat menacingly, toward the viewer, with a big cigar (see figure 2). “Ditka’s Rules” appear to his superimposed on his right. These include: No bubble baths. No chick flicks. No leopard print underwear. And no “girly” hair spray. The ad concludes by informing us that Consort hair spray is “made only for men.” ‘Cuz guys are different.” Without “reading in” too much to this ad, it is clear that it takes essential gender differences for granted, disparagingly associating women with “chick flicks,” “girly” hair spray, and the leopard print underwear and reasserts the binary categories of male and female. Ditka’s appearance coaches the viewer in male roles, masculine rules, and the risks of male feminization, reiterating retro stereotypes about grooming, ‘girls’, and gender (see the Consort images on the Alberto Culver website: http://www.alberto.com, accessed 5/21/03). The disparaging and degrading “girly” epithet starkly outlines the apparent danger for men who use “women’s” products, and re-iterates notions about gender taboos. We find little that is ironic, playful, or liberatory in this image – one that circulates in ads, locker rooms, and on the Web.
Mediated Discourse, Negotiated Meanings, and Iterations

Our analysis, and criticisms, of these examples result from certain interpretations of what the ads mean, informed by an understanding of tacit interpretation, textual and visual analysis, and cultural discourses (cf. Scott 1994b; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998; Stern 1989). As philosopher Susan Bordo reminds us: “in a world in which appearances can be so skillfully manipulated, the notion that everything is ‘open to interpretation’ is no longer an entirely edifying one. Without toppling into absolutist conceptions of truth, we need to rehabilitate the notion that not all versions of reality are equally trustworthy, equally deserving of our assent” (Bordo 1997, p. 12). This does not put our position necessarily at odds with those who would argue that different consumers interpret ads differently. Our understanding of marketing communications and ads, and our ability to offer meaningful interpretations of them, is fully in line with Stuart Hall’s notion of the unintentional agent who nevertheless contributes to an overarching ideology: “As historical subjects, they [marketing communications producers] unconsciously and unwittingly ‘speak’ dominant discourse(s) and adapt certain tacit, unquestioned ideological positions and conventions ...” (Hall quoted in Kates 1999, p. 38). Whereas the authors of this paper would not undermine the intelligence and training of
advertising professionals in this way, the possibility of this scenario does not disrupt our argument.

We contend that cultural discourses and negotiated readings augment the ability of ads to construct and represent legible identities. We are not “textual determinists” (Kates 1999, p. 34). Nor are we locked into a structural approach to meaning. That is, we do not subscribe to the position that the text is imbued with a concrete meaning put there, in some simplistic sense, by the author or producer. Rather, in the complex web of understanding a variety of consumer positions, various signs, semiotic codes, and tacit interpretation, processes are put into play in a way that increase the likelihood of readings that place the product or product image in a positive light, especially in relation to its target market (cf. Floch 2001). A target market, however specific and small this might be, is obviously marked by an understanding of its designated social discourses; advertising professionals certainly are aware of discourses that affect ad interpretation (cf. Johar, Holbrook and Stern 2001).

Recent advertising research on ad interpretation is reflected in the view that “consumers do not “decode” ads with identifiable and unproblematic conventions and in the determined ways that marketer’s “intend” or might desire” (Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999, p. 47). However, it is contradictory to argue that discourses and negotiated readings make it impossible to offer an interpretation—or to give an analysis of what an ad ‘means’—as it is precisely the ability to designate the social and historical discourses and the likelihood of negotiated readings that makes it possible to create ads that will be understood in certain ways by consumers. That meanings and interpretations can be negotiated and differ depending upon the position of the consumer is not equivalent to the notion that consumers can ‘create’ their own meanings from the representations and signs given. In other words, it is the discourses and negotiated readings that make it possible for ads to mean anything at all.

Discussion: Iteration and Identity

Insofar as advertisements reiterate characteristics, gestures, and representations of particular groups in ways that further essentialist or natural understandings, they simply continue to revitalize and reproduce congealed and stereotyped normative categories. For example, even within innovative and evocative ad queering the feminine continues to play the subordinate role traditionally prescribed to it, drawing upon the entire sphere of femininity’s semiotic coding to make sense of the queered ad (see, for example, Kates 1999; Schroeder and Borgerson 2003a; Stern and Schroeder 1994). Thus, queering the ad reenacts the iteration of negative femininity even as it disrupts conventional categories of heterosexist understanding (cf. Bartky 1991; Clark 2000). In other words, disruptive readings continue to depend on normative, stereotypical categories, entrenched in cultural discourse.

One way to read ads is as performative iterations, largely scripted by stereotypes about the way males and females interact (Goffman 1979; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). Advertising, then, is largely about performance—and gender is one of its’ main themes. Goffman points to the scripted nature of gender performance, showing how visual conventions substantiate stereotyped gender relations. Butler extends and amplifies the notion of performativity, arguing that performances as iterations express the absence of essential categories of identity. Ads sustain the idea that there are natural categories and essential, hierarchical differences between men and women, blacks and whites, such that “pictorial stereotypes often become misinformed perceptions that have the weight of established
facts…when pictorial stereotypes are repeated enough times, they become part of a society’s culture” (Lester 1995, p. 103).

Clearly, women’s roles have changed, but we reject the notion that advertising accurately reflects these changes, and point to many studies that document this contention (e.g., Bordo 1997; Furnham 1993; Hall and Crum 1994; Martin and Gentry 1997; Shields 2002). Rather, advertising may be reacting to these changes, and attempting to reinforce the status quo, reiterating the female subject through retro representations, sexist ads, and so forth. We point to the face-ism phenomena and iterations of identity as major impediments to profound transformation within gender representation. Perhaps in magazines aimed specifically at women, images of women have improved, but fashion photography, men’s magazines, websites, and general interest magazines may not reflect such changes. Furthermore, many retro images, dredged up from the past, also circulate in advertising (Brown 2001). Many of these images perpetuate pin-up imagery, domestic female roles, and retrograde gender relations. Examples include Camel cigarettes recycling pin-up ad images from the 1950s in their current print campaign, United Airlines re-using a 1950s-era hula girl ad, and the Seagram’s Cooler series discussed here (see Borgerson and Schroeder 2003).

Iterations form the basis of all categories that purport to be ideal, natural or absolute. Hence, ad images do not draw upon ideals, nor express ideals or ideal traits. Rather, ads in their iterative function work together to form the illusion of fixed and stable categories. This is the work of ads. Not to express or make available identities from which the consumer subject can pick and choose, but the work of ads is to iterate endlessly legible norms and social codes that reinforce, even in challenging, the dominant discourse.

Implications: Advertising Research, Ethics, and Consumer Identity

Researchers adopting meaning based consumer response perspectives have often proposed that consumers interpret ads in personal, expressive ways, without identifiable conventions and often at odds with advertiser’s intentions (see e.g., Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994a). Furthermore, recent work also suggests that consumers resist, deconstruct, and otherwise subvert ad messages, in playful, ironic, or creative interpretation (Elliott and Ritson 1997; Kates 1999; Scott 1993; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Though we acknowledge that consumers are active in the interpretive process, we contend that these researchers have overlooked critical perceptual processes that underlie image interpretation. Elsewhere, we introduced the concept of tacit interpretation to characterize a class of perceptual and attributional effects that operate below the level of awareness to influence how consumers interpret representations of identity, and thus undermine unhindered or unconventional consumer response to advertising imagery (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003b). We propose that tacit interpretation processes inform all advertising reading, they interact with iteration, and that they have a profound, if unrecognized effect on interpretation. This strand of experimental social psychological research focuses what people experience – similar to a phenomenological approach – pointing out perceptual conventions that influence how subjects are constructed and perceived in ads.

Tacit interpretations may operate in ways similar to gender bias in research (Bristor and Fischer 1993), heterosexist responses to homosexual ads (Bhat 1998), or nonconscious stereotyping (Jost, Pelham and Carvello 2002). We are not suggesting the advertisers
consciously portray men and women in stereotyped ways, such as men with greater relative facial prominence, but that these representational practices are iterated over time, throughout visual culture, and subtly affect fundamental conceptions of identity (cf. Pollay 1986). By extending Butler’s framework to advertising, we have tried to show how performative iteration interacts with experimental social psychological research on visual representation and attributions of identity.

Research on advertising interpretation and its connection to consumer culture needs to take tacit interpretation into account. Even within postmodern consumer culture, interpretation is not fully disconnected from basic perceptual processes, nor are consumers fully liberated to interpret images in any way they see fit. Interpretations are influenced by iteration, within the genealogy of repetition of images over space, time, and generations. Whereas resistance to iterated identities is possible, the perpetually reiterated and perceptually reinforced presence of certain identities that ads conjoin with dominant ideologies and social practices make anything but uncontested legibility unlikely.

Mythical structures underlie marketing images (e.g. Holt 2003: Johar, Holbrook and Stern 2001; Thompson 2003). To understand the role of these complex cultural processes, we must delve into marketing’s ontological underpinnings, including the iteration concept discussed here. We concur with Holt’s recent assessment that “such knowledge doesn’t come from focus groups or ethnography or trend reports – the marketer’s usual means for “getting close to the customer.” Rather, it comes from a cultural historian’s understanding of ideology as it waxes and wanes, a sociologist’s charting of the topography of contradictions the ideology produces, and a literary critic’s expedition into the culture that engages these contradictions” (Holt 2003, p. 49). To which we would add, a philosopher’s engagement with the historical and theoretical significance of ideas, identity, and iterations.

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