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Mirror or molder? The discursive impact of advertising on the construction of cultural identities

Advertising and culture have long been renowned for standing in a complex dynamic relationship. On the one hand, promotional discourse commonly appropriates cultural norms and values in order to create desirable product images. On the other hand, advertisements also exert a strong influence on the individual, which may at large impact society in return. It has thus been highly debated whether advertising acts as a mirror or rather as a molder of culture (Richards/MacRury/Botterill 2013). The present paper, as part of a larger dissertation project, explores these reciprocal dynamics by outlining how collective identities have been discursively construed in advertisements over the past 400 years. Therefore, a selected corpus of British, American, and Australian print ad copies, promoting various household items e.g. coffee, chocolate, and cars, is analyzed. The diachronic research investigates the combination of attitudinal and ideational meanings across semiotic resources in order to describe which coupling patterns are characteristic for a particular cultural community and/or time (Zappavigna/Dwyer/Martin 2008; Martin/White 2005; Thompson 2014). Amongst other results, the empirical paper demonstrates that consumer identities are constructed through a balanced interplay of verbal and visual choices. Written product appraisals are conventionally reinforced by graphic valuation through e.g. contextualization, aestheticization or depictions of reaction [invoked]. In further coupling such positive reaction with attributive relational processes, advertisers have developed a potent tool to encode long-lasting product associations e.g. chocolate + affect: happiness/satisfaction. Some of these discursively construed values seem to have even shaped socio-cultural perceptions and to “rally” national affiliation around the consumption of a particular commodity e.g. coffee + affect: liberty/independence in eighteenth-century America (Knight 2010). This interdisciplinary study thus not only sheds new light on the impact of advertising upon cultural identities, but also details the evolution of the genre from the late seventeenth century to the present.

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