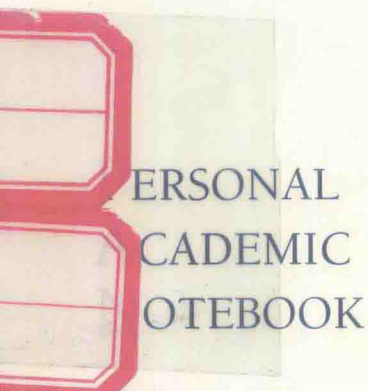


INTERACTIVE ENGLISH

LESSON 3.2

Interpreting Advertisements



PERSONAL
ACADEMIC
NOTEBOOK



ACADEMIC
SYSTEMS

INTERACTIVE ENGLISH

LESSON 3.2

Interpreting Advertisements



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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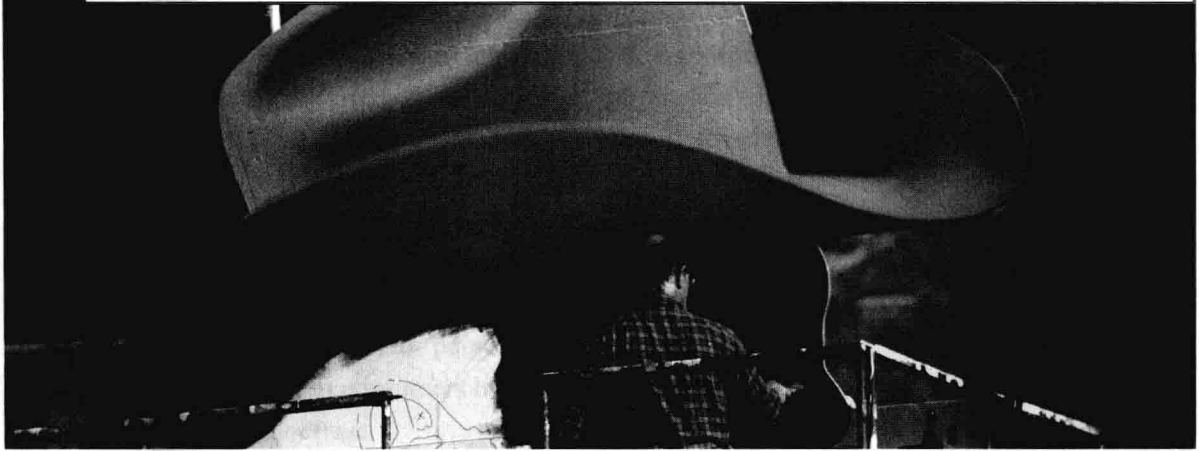
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LESSON 3.2

Interpreting Advertisements



Advertisements are not simply artistic pictures that provide product information. They are very carefully designed to persuade consumers. This chapter will help you get behind the surface of advertisements and become aware of what is not

shown or said directly, but only implied. The materials that follow provide ideas that you will be able to use as you work through the **Explore**, **Focus**, **Draft**, and **Revise** modules for this assignment.

EXPLORE

Writing becomes interesting when writers communicate new insights to their readers. Writing about advertisements may become boring—and reading about advertisements certainly will—if

you don't come up with some discoveries as you work on this essay. Explore what you already know about advertisements, and watch for new ideas.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

If you haven't already written your responses to the questions below, do so now. Allow yourself enough time to think on paper. If possible, dis-

cuss your responses with a classmate. These responses may be useful when you actually draft your essay.

❖ What role, if any, do advertisements play in the choices people make when they buy? Do they ever influence **your** choices?

❖ How do advertisers get people interested in their products?

❖ What sort of hidden messages can you find in ads?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Read all paragraphs of this assignment; they include useful hints on selecting the kinds of advertisements that will lead to good interviews. You won't be able to write your essay without good responses from your interviewees.

Advertisers have been called the hidden persuaders. They spend hundreds of millions of dollars to try to persuade us to buy their products. They find out what needs and desires consumers have, but they also create desires in us that we otherwise would not have.

For this essay, select two magazine advertisements for name brands of one type of item (a car, a perfume, a brand of cigarette). Notice that some ads rely not only on surface messages like "Buy Brand X," but also on implied ones, suggestions about what benefits (health, wealth, lifestyle) may be yours after you use the product. Choose ads that use both ways to persuade.

Then—using informal survey/interview questions—ask friends and acquaintances in the "target audience" (for example children, adolescents, housewives, young executives) how they would choose between the products, based on the ads you have selected. Do they respond to specific words, specific images? What interests them in one brand more than another? Do they respond to the hidden as well as the obvious message? Take notes so you can later use what you discover.

Select one of your ads. Write an essay in which you explain how the advertisement tries to encourage, or even create, a desire for the product in the people you interviewed. What language and images did they respond to? Were they aware of the hidden messages sent by the ad? Cite material from your interviews to support your point.

READING TO EXPLORE

The three reading selections for this lesson all show how advertisers use words and images to communicate hidden messages, but they do it differently. The first two, by Jack Solomon and

Jib Fowles, examine the techniques advertisers use to appeal to potential consumers. The poem by Ekua Omosupe then takes the consumer's point of view and shows some effects of these techniques.

READING SELECTION ONE

Know the Author. Jack Solomon teaches at California State University, Northridge. He is the author of *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age* (1988), and coeditor of *California Dreams and Realities* (1955). He has also authored a textbook that deals with advertising, *The Signs of Our Times* (1988), from which we take the selection below. It has been edited from a longer version.

Prepare to Read.

Watch for the specific examples that support and explain the writer's analysis of American

advertising.

Your Reading Goal is to understand how the examples support and clarify the writer's ideas about hidden messages in ads.

Prepare to Make Reading Notes. This essay uses academic words to express concepts about advertising, especially in the opening paragraphs. They may be unfamiliar to you, but the examples that follow clarify them. As you read, mark the examples that stand out for you and that help you understand the ideas. A chart for your reading notes follows the selection.

MASTERS OF DESIRE: THE CULTURE OF AMERICAN ADVERTISING *by Jack Solomon*

Amongst democratic nations, men easily attain a certain equality of condition; but they can never attain as much as they desire.
—Alexis de Tocqueville

On May 10, 1831, a young French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in New York City at the start of what would become one of the most famous visits to America in our history. He had come to observe firsthand the institutions of the freest, most egalitarian society of the age, but what he found was a paradox. For behind America's mythic promise of equal opportunity, Tocqueville discovered a desire for *unequal* social rewards, a ferocious competition for privilege and distinction.

The American dream, in other words, has two faces: the one communally egalitarian and the other competitively elitist. This contradiction is no accident; it is fundamental to the structure of American society. Even as America's great myth of equality celebrates the virtues of mom, apple pie, and the girl or boy next door, it also lures us to achieve social distinction, to rise above the crowd and bask alone in the glory. 2

The contradictory nature of the American myth of equality is nowhere written so clearly as in the signs that American advertisers use to manipulate us into buying their wares. "Manipulate" is the word here, not "persuade"; for advertising campaigns are not sources of product information, they are exercises in behavior modification. Appealing to our subconscious emotions rather than to our conscious intellects, advertisements are designed to exploit the discontentments fostered by the American dream, the constant desire for social success and the material rewards that accompany it. America's consumer economy runs on desire, and advertising stokes the engines by transforming common objects—from peanut butter to political candidates—into signs of all the things that Americans covet most. 3

But by reading the signs that advertising agencies manufacture to stimulate consumption, we can plot the precise state of desire in the audiences to which they are addressed. Let's look at a representative sample of ads and what they say about the emotional climate of the country and the fast-changing trends of American life. 4 Because ours is a highly diverse, pluralistic society, various advertisements may say different things depending on their intended audiences, but in every case they say something about America, about the status of our hopes, fears, desires, and beliefs.

We'll begin with two ad campaigns conducted by the same company that bear out Alexis de Tocqueville's observations about the contradictory nature of American society: General Motors' campaigns for its Cadillac and Chevrolet lines. First, consider an early magazine ad for the Cadillac Allanté. Appearing as a full-color, four-page insert in *Time*, the ad seems to say "I'm special— and so is this car" even before we've begun to read it. Rather than being printed on the ordinary, flimsy pages of the magazine, the Allanté spread appears on glossy coated stock. The unwritten message here is that an extraordinary car deserves an extraordinary advertisement, and that both car and ad are aimed at an extraordi- 5

nary consumer, or at least one who wishes to appear extraordinary compared to his more ordinary fellow citizens.

Ads of this kind work by creating symbolic associations between their product and what is most coveted by the consumers to whom they are addressed. It is significant, then, that this ad insists that the Allanté is virtually an Italian rather than an American car, an automobile, as its copy runs, "Conceived and Commissioned by America's Luxury Car Leader—Cadillac" but "Designed and Handcrafted by Europe's Renowned Design Leader—Pininfarina, SpA, of Turin, Italy." This is not simply a piece of product information, it's a sign of the prestige that European luxury cars enjoy in today's automotive marketplace.

- ⁶ Once the luxury car of choice for America's status drivers, Cadillac has fallen far behind its European competitors in the race for the prestige market. So the Allanté essentially represents Cadillac's decision, after years of resisting the trend toward European cars, to introduce its own European import—whose high cost is clearly printed on the last page of the ad. Although \$54,700 is a lot of money to pay for a Cadillac, it's about what you'd expect to pay for a top-of-the-line Mercedes-Benz. That's precisely the point the ad is trying to make: the Allanté is no mere car. It's a potent status symbol you can associate with the other major status symbols of the 1980s.

- American companies manufacture status symbols because American consumers want them. As Alexis de Tocqueville recognized a century and a half ago, the competitive nature of democratic societies breeds a desire for social distinction, a yearning to rise above the crowd.

- Status symbols, then, are signs that identify their possessors' place in a social hierarchy, markers of rank and prestige. We can all think of any number of status symbols—Rolls-Royces, Beverly Hills mansions, even Shar Pei puppies (whose rareness and expense has rocketed them beyond Russian wolfhounds as status pets and has even inspired whole lines of wrinkle-faced stuffed toys)—but how do we know that something is a status symbol? The explanation is quite simple: when an object (or puppy!) either costs a lot of money or requires influential connections to possess, anyone who possesses it must also possess the necessary means and influence to acquire it. The object itself really doesn't matter, since it ultimately disappears behind the presumed social potency of its

owner. What matters is the signal it sends, its value as a sign of power. One traditional sign of social distinction is owning a country estate and enjoying the peace and privacy that attend it. Advertisements for Mercedes-Benz, Jaguar, and Audi automobiles thus frequently feature drivers motoring quietly along a country road, presumably on their way to or from their country houses.

Advertisers have been quick to exploit the status signals that belong to body language as well. Tilting his chin high in the air and gazing down at the world under hooded eyelids, the aristocrat invites observation while refusing to look back. We can find such a pose exploited in an advertisement for Cadillac Seville in which we see an elegantly dressed woman out for a drive with her husband in their new Cadillac. If we look closely at the woman's body language, we can see her glance inwardly with a satisfied smile on her face but not outward toward the camera that represents our gaze. She is glad to be seen by us in her Seville, but she isn't interested in looking at *us*!

Ads that are aimed at a broader market take the opposite approach. If the American dream encourages the desire to "arrive," to vault above the mass, it also fosters a desire to be popular, to "belong." Populist commercials accordingly transform products into signs of belonging, utilizing such common icons as country music, small-town life, family picnics and farmyards. All of these icons are incorporated in GM's "Heartbeat of America" campaign for its Chevrolet line. Unlike the Seville commercial, the faces in the Chevy ads look straight at us and smile. Dress is casual; the mood upbeat. Quick camera cuts take us from rustic to suburban to urban scenes, creating an American montage filmed from sea to shining sea. We all "belong" in a Chevy.

Where price alone doesn't determine the market for a product, advertisers can go either way. Both Johnnie Walker and Jack Daniel's are better-grade whiskies, but where a Johnnie Walker ad appeals to the buyer who wants a mark of aristocratic distinction in his liquor, a Jack Daniel's ad emphasizes the down-home, egalitarian folksiness of its product. Johnnie Walker associates itself with such conventional status symbols as sable coats, Rolls-Royces, and black gold; Jack Daniel's gives us a Good Ol' Boy in overalls. In fact, Jack Daniel's Good Ol' Boy is an icon of backwoods indepen-

dence, recalling the days of the moonshiner and the Whisky Rebellion of 1794. Evoking emotions quite at odds with those stimulated in Johnnie Walker ads, the advertisers of Jack Daniel's have chosen to transform their product into a sign of America's populist tradition. The fact that both ads successfully sell whisky is itself a sign of the dual nature of the American dream.

12 Beer is also pitched on two levels. Consider the difference between the ways Budweiser and Michelob market their light beers. Bud Light and Michelob Light cost and taste about the same, but Budweiser tends to target the working class while Michelob has gone after the upscale market. Bud commercials are set in working-class bars that contrast with the sophisticated nightclubs and yuppie watering holes of the Michelob campaign. "You're one of the guys," Budweiser assures the assembly-line worker and the truck driver, "this Bud's for you." Michelob, on the other hand, makes no such appeal to the democratic instinct of sharing and belonging. You don't share, you take, grabbing what you can in a competitive dash to "have it all."

13 By reading the signs of American advertising, we can conclude that America is a nation of fantasizers, often preferring the sign to the substance and easily enthralled by a veritable Fantasy Island of commercial illusions. Critics of Madison Avenue often complain that advertisers create consumer desire, but semioticians don't think the situation is that simple. Advertisers may give shape to consumer fantasies, but they need raw material to work with, the subconscious dreams and desires of the marketplace. As long as these desires remain unconscious, advertisers will be able to exploit them. But by bringing the fantasies to the surface, you can free yourself from advertising's often hypnotic grasp.



As an example, here are reading responses done by one student. When you have finished making your reading notes, discuss them with a partner if possible.

Those Budweiser ads in the bar always seemed silly to me. Next time I'll look more at how they work.

Author's Example

Idea It Illustrates

My Response

Activity Two: An Experienced Reader's Thoughts While Reading

Experienced readers often use specific details in the text as well as their own prior knowledge to help them understand the author's important ideas.

In the left column below, an experienced reader describes how he used the evidence in Solomon's essay to understand his main points about hidden messages in advertisements. The right column tells you what this reader did, so that you can use these strategies yourself.

This author uses so many difficult words that I have to look half of them up. I even have to break down the sentences before I can figure out the whole idea.

Even the first sentence about the American dream is confusing. I used the dictionary to look up "egalitarian" and "elitist" and then I tried to figure out why the author says that these two ways of acting are two faces of the American dream.

I think he's saying that most people feel two ways about the American dream: They want to believe that all people are equal, but each person wants to feel somehow better to others. Okay, I can understand this sentence. I've even seen it happen at work. We all act like buddies, but still each of us wants to get a promotion and make the most money.

If an idea seems very complex, break it down into smaller parts and try to rephrase each part in your own words.

If you get stuck, use the surrounding sentences to help you.

Wow! I never thought of an ad as a kind of "behavior modification" that "manipulates" us. I've never run out and bought a product just because I saw it in an ad. I wonder who does this kind of thing. I want to know more about this.

In the next paragraph the author says that not only do ads appeal to our desires but they also create desires (at least I think that what he means by "creating the things that Americans covet most").

Finally some examples! I understand the General Motors example because I've seen it and it worked. It made me think that the Cadillac Allanté was like a Mercedes, and I didn't even realize I was thinking how great the Italian name made the Allanté sound. So that's what the author means by ads that appeal to our desire for social status symbols.

Wait, here's a sentence that seems important because the writer uses the signal word "then" to make a point and define what status symbols are.

But what do these social status symbols have to do with the earlier stuff about the American dream and

As you read, try not to worry if you don't understand every issue. **Read curiously and think about the points that seem interesting.**

Here the reader checks the examples that he is reading against his own experiences to help him make sense of the writer's main ideas. **Connect what you are reading to your ideas and experiences to get a clearer understanding of the writer's points.**

Look for signal words that indicate an important point or an important relationship among ideas. Notice how this reader uses the writer's signal word to understand that the writer is presenting a key idea in this paragraph.

about the hidden messages in ads? I better keep reading. Maybe the connection is in the next paragraph? Yes, it is. The author says that ads appeal to our desire to have social status by showing people in different poses with different attitudes. I get it: Body language, clothes, and accessories communicate hidden messages about the people who use the product!

Now I can read quickly. I understand what the author's saying about the way that advertisements for liquor and beer appeal to people's desires. Sometimes they want to be real sophisticated, other times they want to be "one of the guys."

I'm beginning to like the way he uses words. I really like the part where he says that ads work because our country is a nation of "fantasizers." I get his main point at the end—that we need to understand how the hidden messages in ads appeal to our unconscious desires if we don't want to be suckers and buy products we don't need. But he makes it sound so easy. If these desires are unconscious, how are we supposed to "bring them to the surface" and understand them?

Read up and down. **Connect what your eye is reading to prior information and ask questions about how all the details fit together to make sense.**

When you recognize an author's strategy, you can read more quickly.

Understand and enjoy the author's writing, but at the same time, continue to ask questions about his or her assertions. Notice that this reader understands the writer's assumptions and main ideas, but continues to question the soundness of the author's assertions.