

Creation of Interpretive Communities through Contextual Priming and Perception Manipulation in Print Advertisements

ABSTRACT

An interpretive community, according to Fish, is a group of people who share similar social and institutional goals, purposes, and interests. To read a text, a competent reader, as a member of an interpretive community, employs interpretive strategies or a set of community assumptions which exist before the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read. Some theorists suggest that what constitutes an interpretive community is still unknown to us and that a general theory cannot be expected about the creation, maintenance and dissolution of such groups. This implies the necessity for empirical investigation in the field. But existing literature shows that not much work has explored the creation of interpretive communities following a systematic empirical investigation. Fish in his writing suggests that meaning is possible only within a structure or a system or an interpretive community. The structure is not abstract. It can change when a particular situation with all its previous purposes, practices and goals, changes into another. Thus it will be interesting to explore how a new structure or interpretive community emerges or is created when one situation is purposefully changed into another. The present study attempts to do so in two ways in a print advertising environment. First, it attempts to explore if interpretive communities can be created by manipulating the perception of the audience through priming. Two different priming texts, informative and aesthetic in orientation, are provided to the audiences after which they are asked to respond to two sets of images of fruits and a mountain. Eye tracker is used to record their gazing behavior, and audience response is used to identify their preferences and their reaction to the images. Secondly, it tries to examine if interpretive community can be created during the process of viewing the advertisement by directing attention to specific visual and textual rhetorical components. Four pairs of proxy advertisements, with minute changes in visual and verbal rhetoric in each pair, are introduced to different audiences in noncomparative and comparative manners. Preference, persuasiveness and open response to the ads under the two conditions are documented. Findings in the first case suggest that contextual priming effectively manipulated the perception of the audience and they commented or reacted in two different ways. In the second case, results suggest that the effect of minute changes using visual and verbal rhetoric were not perceived distinctively when the ads were presented noncomparatively; however, when presented comparatively, the paired ads created interpretive groups whose ways of interpretation were significantly affected and similarly modified by the presentation strategies. The distinct pattern of responses by the two audience groups in both cases provides preliminary evidence and support for the creation of new interpretive communities on a short-term basis, before and during the audience presentation to the advertisement. The results have implications for the theoretical expansion of Fish's concept of interpretive community in general and suggest ways that interpretive communities can be strategically manipulated and formed in the context of media.

Keywords: advertisement, audience, image, interpretive community, text