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SYMBOLOC MEANINGS, CONSUMERS' RESPONSES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF POSTMODERN FASHION ADVERTISEMENTS

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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*****

The Ohio State University
2000

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ABSTRACT

Many postmodern fashion advertisements are solely visual images without any written or verbal descriptions of the product. These visual images have increased the ambiguity of messages and consumers are often confused about advertisements. The main purposes of the study were to gain an understanding of symbolic meanings of postmodern ads and how consumers view and interpret postmodern fashion ads, as well as to investigate consumers' responses concerning the evaluations of ads and purchase intention.

Constructivism was the paradigm for the study. Banana Republic and Calvin Klein Jeans advertisements were selected for the study. Semiotic analysis was used to understand the meanings of the selected ads and discover the hidden characteristics of postmodern consumer culture. Twenty transcribed semi-structured interviews and survey data gathered from the informants were used for the study. Hermeneutic circle, an iterative spiral of the interpretive process, was used to develop a holistic understanding of the transcribed interviews.

Semiotic analysis revealed that visual images in ads are representations of a cultural system, specifically, postmodern consumer culture. Interpretations of informants' meanings indicated that they had shared cultural knowledge and individual differences. Informants understood the ads based on the relationships of signs they found
them, such as models' body poses, styles of dress, and backgrounds. Informants had a certain amount of previous ad knowledge, which was a part of their cultural knowledge and used as a guideline in interpreting ads. Some unique postmodern characteristics appeared in the informants' reading. Informants' interpretations were closely related to their evoked emotions and related to lifestyles the ads portrayed. The act of interpreting ad messages appeared to help them to create/ reinforce their own self-images.

There were similarities and differences in informants' interpretations based on social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and cultural capital. Informants' evaluations of ads were somewhat related to the possibility of purchasing, but positive or negative evaluations of ads did not always result in purchase behavior.

Implications concerning creation of effective postmodern fashion ads were discussed. Also, further study on gender-based reading, different conditions of involvement, understanding postmodern consumers' lifestyles and tastes were discussed.
Dedicated to my mother and father, 
Daesoon Han and Hunyoung Lee
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"To the end that my glory may sing praise to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever"
Psalms 30:12

I thank my God with all of my heart for giving me a desire and wisdom to finish my study.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Consumers experience a flood of advertisements from the media in their daily lives whether they want to or not. Advertisements are one of the most significant cultural artifacts reflecting and influencing our lives (Williamson, 1978). Advertising sells products and provides us with a structure through which we learn and seek to understand ourselves (Scott, 1994b; Williamson, 1978). Although advertising is originally intended to sell products, it significantly influences a consumer’s construction of social values, habits, and identity both directly and indirectly (Lury, 1996; Gardner, 1993).

Advertising not only gives information but also communicates meanings (Baudrillard, 1988; Featherstone, 1991; Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990; Martineau, 1957; McCracken, 1987; McCracken, 1990). Through the process of reading advertisements, consumers obtain product and cultural knowledge as well as meanings related to the product or image which are created or transferred. The meanings are constructed by a combination of the consumer’s past experiences, values, ideologies, needs, and emotions within a given culture.

Culture is an essential part of understanding advertisements. Images in advertising are carriers of culturally assigned meanings which represent consumers and
their culture (Baudrillard, 1988; Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990; Lury, 1996; McCracken, 1990). Postmodern advertising, especially, portrays cultural values and characteristics (Brown, 1993; Stern, 1994) and the increasing use of complex visual images is one of its conspicuous characteristics (Featherstone, 1991).

Postmodernists (Baudrillard, 1988; Featherstone, 1991) believe that fashion is an important subject in the study of culture. Indeed, Morgado (1996) argues that fashion is a center of postmodern consumer culture. One common characteristic of postmodern fashion advertisements is an increased usage of complex visual images. Different from utility products (e.g. home furnishings, kitchen appliances), fashion products are not only an expressive medium in which to present the wearer’s aesthetic tastes, but they also signify the wearer’s cultural principles (i.e., ideas and values according to which cultural categories are constructed) and cultural categories (e.g., class, gender, status, age, and occupation) (McCracken, 1987). From this perspective, the fashion product has more visual and symbolic characteristics (MacCracken, 1987; Mick & Politi, 1989) than any other product categories.

Statement of the Problem

Many postmodern advertisements contain paradoxical characteristics (Foster, 1983; Wilson, 1989). One characteristic is that advertisements do not give very much information about the product being advertised, such as the products' utilitarian properties. Many advertisements are solely visual images without any written or verbal descriptions or explanations of the product. Since the 1920s, visual images in
advertisements have replaced the written and verbal language previously used to explain the products' uses or benefits. These visual images have increased the ambiguity of messages (Phillips, 1997) and the images are seldom simple or straightforward. Also during this time, the advertising focus has shifted from the product's utilitarian value to the meaning of the product (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990; Lury, 1996). For example, in past decades car ads focused on economic advantage and functionality. However, today consumers frequently see car ads focused on expressing symbolic meanings such as family or love relationships.

Researchers (Gardner, 1993; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992) contend that consumers are often confused about advertisements because they do not know which product is being advertised. Advertisers acknowledge that they are not able to construct advertisements in which all consumers will understand the primary message; instead the message is directed toward a target consumer group (Phillips, 1997). Mick and Politi (1989) found that target consumers do not always interpret messages as advertisers intend and advertisements are immoderately open to every possible interpretation.

Owing to their visual and symbolic characteristics, fashion ads have increasingly used more complex visual images than any other products. The problem is that target consumers may not be able to understand the primary messages. As a consequence, consumers may experience confusing or negative feelings about the product and the ad. Such feelings may cause them to react in either an indifferent or negative manner toward the message in an advertisement or the product, and/or the company.
The main goal of advertising is to guide the target consumers’ interpretations of the messages as intended, that is, to make them purchase the products (Phillips, 1997). In order to increase positive brand attitude and purchase behavior, comprehension about consumers’ understanding of the primary messages in an ad is essential. Considering the huge amount of money spent for creating fashion ads, a failure to send a clear and persuasive message to consumers is likely to be problematic. Although there has been a tendency toward increasingly complex visual images in advertising, little research has been done to investigate how consumers interpret these ad images (Mick & Politi, 1989; Phillips, 1997; Scott, 1994b). Therefore, the study of the responses and interpretations of consumers to complex visual images in fashion ads calls for investigation.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to understand how consumers view and interpret postmodern advertisements. The objectives of the study are three fold: (a) to understand the symbolic characteristics of visual images contained in selected fashion ads; (b) to investigate consumers’ interpretations of visual images in these ads—how consumers infer their meanings to the ads from their cultural knowledge and experiences; and (c) to investigate consumers’ responses to the visual images of the ads concerning their evaluations, possibility of purchasing, and their understanding of ads. From the understanding, I want to suggest strategies for marketers to create effective advertisements in the postmodern cultural context.
Definitions

To clarify concepts used in the study, key terms are defined in this section. Key terms are listed by alphabetical order.

1. **Connotation** is a term describing the secondary meaning of sign. Connotation is mainly cultural meanings grounded in social as well as a cultural stock of knowledge (Baker, 1985).

2. **Denotation** is the literal meaning a sign conveys so everyone in a group has a clear understanding of one meaning. It is similar to the concept of a signifier (see #11). For example, if one says that there are four (4) apples, the number, “4” or the word “four” clearly shows to everyone what the meaning is.

3. **Icon** is a kind of sign which has an arbitrary or conventional relationship with its objects (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). For example, a flag is an icon which has a meaning of its nationality.

4. **Image** is a visual representation of an object, event or scene which is either a mental or visible picture (Berger, 1995).

5. **Index** is a sign established by the cause and effect relationship related to its object as a correspondence of fact in a casual relation (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). The relationship between smoke and fire is an example. One sees only smoke but knows the existence of fire, correspondently.

6. **Implicature**—“information that is implicitly communicated to an audience” (Phillips, 1997, p.78)
7. Interpretation/reading— is the activity done by the medium of language in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the object or reality (Gadamer, 1997). In the study, "reading" and "interpretation" are used interchangeably.

8. Metaphor is a form of figurative speech explaining or interpreting one thing in another way (Berger, 1995). For example, a man says to a lady that his love is a red rose. A rose becomes a metaphor of the man's love.

9. Semiotics is the science of signs and meaning. It is a study to understand surface and hidden meanings by deconstructive analysis and of verbal and nonverbal signs and how they function in a particular culture.

10. A sign is "anything that can be used to stand for something else" (Berger, 1995, p.75). Saussure (1966) divided the sign into two systems: Signifier and signified.

11. Signifier is a sign image that is perceived as a sound, object, or the like.

12. Signified is a mental concept that refers to a signifier such as meanings, ideas or concept.

13. Simulacrum is a term used by Baudrillard which indicates unreal form or semblance of image.

14. Symbol is something used to represent something else; a material object often represents something immaterial.

15. Text is an "interpretive frame; any cultural artifact, i.e. a visual artifact, written document, conversation, speech" (Morgado, 1996, p.43).

16. Transformation effect is a creation of connection between the consumer's experience of the advertisement and of using the brand. Once the connection is established, the
consumer’s recall of the brand is connected with the experience generated by the advertisement.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides concepts about and characteristics of postmodern consumer culture. The first section provides a discussion of postmodernism and offers a comparison of modernism and postmodernism. The characteristics of postmodern consumers, the importance of symbolic meaning consumption, and consumption community in the postmodern era are also addressed, followed by a discussion of Baudrillard’s notion of “hyperreality” in consumer culture. In the second section, the purposes of advertising, development of advertising and visual images in ads are addressed. An historical approach to advertising in print media is discussed, followed by a discussion of prints ads from modernity to postmodernity in section three. Postmodern fashion and postmodern fashion ads in magazines are discussed in the fourth section. In the fifth section, important effects of photography and its messages, and fashion photography are addressed. Advertising and its semiotic characteristics are discussed in the sixth section of this chapter. In the seventh section, understanding of culture by applying Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital is discussed. Finally, in section eight,
empirical studies of consumers’ interpretations of and responses to advertisements are reviewed and summarized.

Postmodern Consumer Culture

Postmodernism. The real origin of the term “postmodern” is uncertain, although we do know that the word was first used in 1934 by Federico de Onis in Madrid. In 1942, Dudley Fitts used the term again in his *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry* and Arnold Toynbee picked up the term in 1947 (Hassan, 1987). Young artists, writers and critics such as Rauschenberg, Cage, Burroughs, Barthelme, and Fielder used the term in New York in the 1960s, after which the term became popular (Berger, 1995). The term was widely used in architecture, the visual and performing arts, and music in the 1970s. In the 1980s, it was greatly used in different academic areas to identify subtle differences from modernism (Featherstone, 1991). The term postmodernism is strongly based on a negation or opposition to the modern, expressing a perceived abandonment and break with or shift away from the definitive features of the modern era (Featherstone, 1991). It signifies “after,” a break or rupture with the modern era. Its ubiquitous characteristics of irony, ephemerality, fragmentation, and paradox clearly contrast with modernity.

A family of terms derives from the postmodern and the modern such as modernity-postmodernity and modernism-postmodernism. First, modernity and postmodernity suggest the epochal meaning of the terms. Modernity, in generally, came into being with the Renaissance and was defined in relation to Antiquity, as in the debates
between the ancients and the moderns. Consequently, postmodernity suggests an epochal break from modernity, involving the emergence of new social principles (Featherstone, 1991). Jameson maintains that postmodernity originated in the post World War II era (Jameson, 1984), while Baudrillard (1988) and Lyotard (1984) assume that postmodernity is the post-industrial age. Jameson’s epochal category (post WWII-current) and definition of postmodernity is used in this study for two reasons. One is that industrialization brought modernism and it reached its peak by World War II. The other is that the new generation of baby boomers who have different ideology and lifestyles appeared after WWII. Baby boomers born just after World War II were the first generation of postmodernity. A detailed discussion about baby boomers is provided in the section on postmodern consumers.

Second, the terms modernism and postmodernism indicate two different styles of culture. Modernism is used to express the styles of the artistic movements which originated around the turn of the century and which dominated the various arts (Featherstone, 1991). Featherstone writes about modernism:

The basic features of modernism can be summarized as: an aesthetic self-consciousness and reflexiveness; a rejection of narrative structure in favour of simultaneousness and montage; an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous and uncertain open-ended nature of reality; and a rejection of the notion of an integrated personality in favour of an emphasis upon the destructed, de-humanized subject (p.7).

He writes about postmodernism:

Amongst the central features associated with postmodernism in the arts are: the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favoring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony,
playfulness and the celebration of the surface "depthlessness" of culture; the
decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer; and the assumption that
art can only be repetition (p.7-8).

Gitlin (1989a) offers a slightly different perspective on postmodernism:

It self-consciously splices genres, attitudes, and styles. It relishes the blurring or
juxtaposition of forms (fiction-nonfiction), stances (straight-ironic), moods
(violent-comic), cultural levels (high-low)... It pulls the rug out from under itself,
displaying an acute self-consciousness about the work's constructed nature. It
takes pleasure in the play of surfaces and derides the search for depth as mere
nostalgia (p.52).

As Featherstone points out, it is hard to distinguish modern from postmodern in
some cases because some of the features of modernism in the arts are similar to
postmodern works of art. Featherstone (1991) maintains that modernism still exists in the
postmodern era. Hassan (1987) also assents that modernism is ever present and exists as a
subset of postmodernism. In the postmodern era, modernity exists to make postmodern
"more postmodern." There is no postmodern without comparison to modernism.
Postmodern only exists with the modern so one has to understand what modernism is to
know what postmodernism is not. In addition, as Featherstone (1991) points out, some of
the features of modernism in the arts are similar to postmodern arts. Thus, it is hard to
distinguish modern from postmodern in some cases. Truly, as contradictory as it may
seem, both modern and postmodern concepts are inextricably related in the form of
similar as well as different.

Postmodernism has emerged as a critique of modernism as well as a philosophical
and cultural movement. The main focuses of postmodernism are ideas related to culture,
aesthetics, symbolic meanings, literary expressions, language, and narratives (Firat &
Researchers argue that postmodernism is a problematic and confusing concept (Featherstone, 1991; Hassan, 1997; Morgado, 1996). Morgado (1996) pointed out that the problem and confusion is generated not only by an inconsistency in its application to various areas, but also the general lack of agreement regarding postmodern theory itself. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest that it is more appropriate to call the term postmodernisms (plural) than postmodernism (singular) to identify various postmodern themes. In this light, it is appropriate to accept various definitions of postmodernism. Therefore, any definition of postmodernism calls for a dialectical and plural vision (Featherstone, 1991).

The basic philosophical assumptions related to postmodernism are “nihilism” and “critical theory” (Morgado, 1996). The philosophy of nihilism was introduced by Nietzsche’s (1967) work, The Will to Power. For the Nihilist, there are no objective grounds which can serve as a foundation for evaluating any social values. Neither are there absolute grounds for judging the nature of truth, including those truths that result from scientific inquiry (Morgado, 1996). Therefore, the truth is always subjective, and that subjectivity is constructed by an individual’s or a group’s justification of their own particular purposes. The philosophy of nihilism can be called the philosophy of difference – different interpretations are based on subjective values. The philosophy of difference suggests that all distinctions between what is identified as true or false, rational or irrational are a product of concepts embedded in language.

Critical theory originated in the Frankfurt school and introduced a post-Marxist interpretation of culture. The analysis is based on the premise that social and cultural
forms are determined by economic systems. Thus, capitalism is not just a matter of economics, but rather a matter of the ideology existing in the structure of human consciousness (Berger, 1982; Kellener, 1989). French thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Jacques Lancan, and Jean Francois Lyotard, and cultural critics such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and Claude Levi-Strauss in the United States are the main theoreticians in the realm of postmodernism (Berger, 1995). Among them, Jean Baudrillard's notion of hypereality is pertinent to the understanding of symbolic meaning and is elaborated upon later in this chapter.

Postmodern consumers. Schuman and Scott (1989) suggested that people are a product of their times. To understand the postmodern era, one must understand the postmodern consumer which reflects the era. “Baby boomers,” (born from 1946 to 1964) are associated with the beginning of postmodern consumption (Lipman, 1999). Domzal and Kernan (1993) characterized them by describing their experience in society:

The cold war, rock music and synthetic instruments, pop psychology, the sexual revolution, minority and women's rights, the fitness craze, the ecology movement, supermarkets, shopping malls, drive-in restaurants and fast foods, a fetish for education (but an aversion to reading), a skepticism for bureaucracy and public institutions, and morality that “it is OK if it feels right” (p.7).

The baby boomers were not alive during World War II, but they lived through the Post World War II, Post-Vietnam, Post-New Left, Post-Hippie, and Post-Watergate eras, which caused tremendous frustrations for them (Gitlin, 1989a). They are the people who experienced production and consumption, inflation, and interdependent economics (Domzal & Kernan, 1993). These economical fluctuations brought social frustrations. Through this series of social as well as economical fluctuations, the baby boomers lost
their faith in political narratives and religious authorities. After going through these experiences, baby boomers are trying to find their own ways to live and think.

Generations X and Y are other segments of postmodern consumers. While Generation Y includes the 30 million Americans aged 12 to 19 years old as of 1999 (Ebenkamp, 1999), Generation Xers are the 77 million Americans born between 1958 and 1978. Generation Xers are today’s main workforce, as well as the main actors in postmodern consumer culture (Brancato, 1999). Generation Xers were brought up with new technology and an ever-changing environment. They grew up with fast food, microwave ovens, instant food, video games, automatic teller machines, pagers, computers, cellular-phones, and latchkeys. Also, high rates of divorce, increased focus on sexuality, and commuter marriages have transformed their ideas about family and community (Dunn-Cane, Gonzalez, & Stewart, 1999).

Generation Xers have experienced diversity in gender, family relationship, ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation. Xers adapted different ideals about work and family. They are characterized by pragmatic as well as cynical realism. They are extremely realistic and believe more in cause and effect than in ideas or theories. While baby boomers have respect for authority, Generation Xers do not have respect for authority. Xers also do not have loyalty to organizations, thus, they no longer stay with the same corporations, religious affiliations, political parties, or health care providers, which also is different from the baby boomers (Dunn-Cane, Gonzalez, & Stewart, 1999).

Postmodern consumers have experienced dramatic changes in social, political, and economic changes. Thus, postmodern consumers express their unique sentiments
through a "celebration of skepticism, subversives, irony, anarchy, playfulness, paradox, ephemerality, fragmentation, style, spectacle, self-referential, and above all—by hostility toward other generations" (Brown, 1993, p.1).

In order to compensate for the gap between social reality and the ego, postmodern consumers tend to seek fantasy and crave satisfaction for their desires through the transgression of the meanings of objects, as well as of visual images, with the expression of irony, bricolage, and paradox.

Also postmodern consumers juxtapose with the mixing of codes to create parody, pastiche, irony, and playfulness. Juxtaposition of opposites is another important characteristic of postmodern cultures (Firat, 1991). Postmodern consumers believe that "anything can be juxtaposed to anything else" (Gitlin, 1989b, p.350). Postmodern consumers have experienced diversity in every day of their lives (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, and political affiliation). This diversity is also brought up their postmodern ideology, relativism.

Meaning consumption. There were unique characteristics related to meaning consumption in the modern era. In modern society, people shared common meanings of objects, so there was no conflict between the object and its meaning. Meanings were neither manipulated nor individualistic. Meanings, thus, asserted themselves with the same apparent obviousness as the realistic value of the objects for modern consumers (Ewen & Ewen, 1982). Good taste (e.g., a nice color match of clothing to the skin tone of the wearer), originality (e.g., a real Chanel suit from the design house of Chanel), and
product function (e.g., permanent press shirts) were the main concerns modern consumers had.

In postmodernism, consuming signs and symbols is a significant activity (Glassner, 1990; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992; Holbrook, 1987; Levy, 1963; Strinati, 1996). In the postmodern era, continuing industrialization and technological advancements, in line with mass production and mass communication, made it possible for people to participate in interpretation activities (Barnald, 1996). The importance of the relationship between signs and objects is stressed in the postmodern era (Barnald, 1996).

Ewen and Ewen (1982) pointed out that originality and singularity in objects are no longer important in the postmodern era. They note that technology makes it possible to replicate the same products (e.g., paintings, originally hand made crafts) in large numbers. In the postmodern era, unlike the modern era, value is not placed primarily on craftsmanship, product origin, and tradition in the postmodern era; instead, consumers value symbolic meanings. What the object (product) means to an individual is the most important product utility in the postmodern era. Therefore, it is clear that there is a break between modernism and postmodernism. This break is related to the fact that singular meanings of objects no longer exist. Postmodern consumers experience various meanings assigned to objects.

Baudrillard (1988) draws on semiology to study consumer culture and suggests that consumption entails the active manipulation of signs. He argues that the manipulation of signs is a central phenomenon of the late capitalist society in which sign-
commodity becomes "commodity-sign." Signs are able to float freely from various objects and the manipulation through advertising and media allows signs to have new meanings. He indicated that the powerful role of advertising continuously ratifies consumer society.

**Consumption community.** Consumption is a social and cultural process involving cultural signs and symbols. Consumption plays an especially central role in the life of people as they use consumption patterns to define their sense of identity, self-realization, and group membership (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Belk, 1996; Boorstin, 1968; Featherstone, 1991; Firat, 1991; Gidens, 1992). Through the action of buying products, people join a certain group—a consumption community—that exists through their shared reverence for certain brands; it is a certain kinship that exists with global brands across national boundaries. "Community" can be defined as those persons who are held together by some common interest or concern. The consumption community is a reality that is created from simulated kinship by the activity of purchasing. The users of the same product become members of the community (Boorstin, 1968).

The simple act of buying a product extends membership to the community, so it is easy to become a member if you are affluent enough to buy the product. In addition, there is no required profession of faith, credo or orthodoxy, or ritual to join the consumption community. This consumption community welcomes people of all races, beliefs, and religious and political creeds. As globalization is realized, consumption communities have been increasing. Still, older forms of community such as family, nation, and religion bind members together, but this simulated community coexists to
some degree with older forms of community. The consumption community is the result of the active manipulation of signs embodied in commodities.

**Hyperreality.** Boorstin’s notion of the consumption community reflects Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality. Hyperreality is a reality without origin, or a reality which is created from simulation and becomes a referential being or a substance (Baudrillard, 1983a, b; 1988). According to Baudrillard (1988), reproduction, the endless reduplication of signs, images, and simulations through the media effaces the distinction between the image and reality. The over-production of signs and reproduction of images and simulations lead to a loss of clear meanings previously shaped by people in society. Manipulation of signs and symbolic meaning is evident in the design and imagery of the production and marketing processes. The product becomes embedded or situated in a symbolic context that imparts meaning to the product beyond its constituent elements or benefits.

Baudrillard (1983,1988) introduced the notion of “hyperreality” in postmodern society. In postmodernity, industrialization brought mass-production, and technology allowed for producing exact copies of original objects. Objects lost their intrinsic as well as traditional meanings. As Baudrillard points out, individual consumers imbue objects with different meanings, therefore, the transgression of symbolic meaning is linked to each individual’s pure pleasures. Postmodern consumer culture is filled with visual images. Images created by simulation attract consumers’ attention by way of various media such as television, music video, magazines, billboards on streets and on buses, as if this simulated reality were real.
As consumers live with these visual images, the simulated reality becomes a reality which, as Baudrillard describes, is “more real than real itself” (1983a, p.147). Simulation and simulacra, which are not real, thus become realities, which Baudrillard (1983a, b, 1988) calls hyperreality. In doing so, realities are changed and appear in different states so there is not a single, ultimate truth, but multiple realities. Signs in the social hierarchical system have lost their clear meanings and previous meanings have been gradually changed. People may experience of reconstructing the relationship between sign and object (Baudrillard, 1983a,b, 1988).

Each person selects one’s own meaning thus hyperreality refers to a word of self-referential sign. It is a reality without origin, or a reality that comes from simulation (Baudrillard, 1983a,b, 1988). Therefore, the concept of the self-referential sign is different from the concepts of the sign for materialists, phenomenologists, realists, and historians. For them, the institutionalized concept of the sign is true. But for the postmodern consumer, individuals determine the meaning of a sign, and for them that meaning is real.

Hyperreality is a reality that exists in the symbolic world and is not historically shared but is constructed by people in the postmodern society. As an example, industrialization in the past, brought an endless supply of signifiers (commodities) born with empty meanings and upon which new meanings are given by producers as well as by consumers. In addition, the postmodern market environment promotes an atmosphere that contributes to the creation of simulated images/realities which are hyperreal and blur the distinction between the real and non real (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).
Hyperreality is the tendency of people in a culture to experience, realize, and reconstruct simulation. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) maintain that the simulation tends to capture the imagination of consumers who start to behave in line with their imagination; thus, simulation becomes the social reality of the culture. The consumption process consists of paradoxically combining “the real” and “the imagery,” so one consumes objects, their embodied meanings, and their images all together (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Advertising

Advertising is not an accidental portrayal of culture (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). As McLuhan (1964) claimed, ads of our time are the most faithful daily reflections that any society ever made. Advertising not only reflects reality but also creates new meanings by reintegrating materials from our daily lives into meaningful systems (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990; Williamson, 1978). The different stages of advertising history show the evolution of characteristics of postmodern consumer culture.

Purpose of advertising. This section is based on the advertising literature as well as advertising professionals’ opinions. To obtain opinions of professionals in advertising, I interviewed three advertisers working at Marketing Resources which is the foremost technology marketing company located in Columbus, Ohio. The interview was held at the office of the Marketing Resources, April 20th, 1999 and lasted about two hours.

The main goal of advertising is to affect the relationship between people and object (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). The main goal of an ad is fulfilled by three
strategic purposes of ad creation. According to Leiss, Klein, and Jhally (1990), Hawkins, Best, and Coney, 1989, and E. Johns, J. Barrett, and M. Volpatt (personal communication, April 20th, 1999), three strategic purposes for ad creation are: (a) creating demand; (b) brand building and identification; and (c) impacting the financial community.

First, creating demand is one of the purposes of advertising (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990; E. Johns, J. Barrett, & M. Volpatt, personal communication, April 20th, 1999). Creating demand is criticized as the exploitative relations of advanced capitalism (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1990). To create demand, advertisers usually modify consumers’ behavior as well as value systems with advertising messages. Ads also indicate the way consumers use products being advertised. In other words, ads provide opportunities for consumers to think about their need for the product. For example, The Gap ran a television commercial campaign, the “Khaki” ad series, in the spring season of 1999. The ads are mainly focused on increasing the sales volume of khakis. In the khaki series ads, young dancers wear khaki pants and dance to music. Once consumers see the TV ads, they feel a need to own a pair of these pants. They might not have thought of wearing the pants before, but now they think that they need them because they will be very comfortable (E. Johns, J. Barrett, & M. Volpatt, personal communication, April 20th, 1999).

Second, brand building and identification is aimed at increasing awareness of the brand being advertised (E. Johns, J. Barrett, & M. Volpatt, personal communication, April 20th, 1999; Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 1989). Many fashion ads are created
precisely for the purpose of building the brand in order to get consumers' attention. Consumers' recall of the brand being advertised is the principal goal of this purpose. Brand identification is the last purpose. Also, brand identification makes consumers feel a certain way about the product or brand being advertised. Benetton ads have used shocking and controversial images (e.g. wars, racism, blasphemy). The ads are identified for their unique controversy. It is the key to selling more products and increasing profits for the company. This perspective is closely related to consumers' feelings (or emotions). Once consumers purchase and use the product, they feel that they are identified as a certain kind of person, as the ad says (E. Johns, J. Barrett, & M. Volpatt, personal communication, April 20th, 1999).

The third purpose is to impact the financial community (E. Johns, J. Barrett, & M. Volpatt, personal communication, April 20th, 1999). To impact the stock market, postmodern ads are placed and created differently than ads in the modern era. A good example is the Victoria’s Secret ad which appeared in the Wall Street Journal during the first quarter of 1999. Considering the characteristics of the Wall Street Journal, it does not seem to be appropriate to run a fashion lingerie ad in it because the journal mainly deals with financial reports. The hidden intention behind this ad is that stockholders might read the journal and this might increase their awareness of Victoria’s Secret in the stock market.

Development of advertising. Advertising history is categorized into four stages based on its characteristics (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). First is the Product Orientation Stage from 1890 to 1925 in which advertising was oriented toward the
product. This stage is closely related to the development of commercialized print media offered by printing and photography. Although illustration and visual layout also were used, the written text was the core of the advertisement. Advertisers used written text to explain the reasons why consumers needed the product; they enumerated the advantages consumers could experience from purchasing the product (Jhally, 1995). An ad for Lycra panty hose ad that prominently displays the panty hose and describes its performance would be an example.

The second stage is the Product Symbols Stage (1925-1945). In this stage, advertisers became professionalized and made ads which influenced public policy. Advertisers were interested in the marketing concept and put less emphasis on the product and its uses. The focus of ads shifted from product information to nonrational or symbolic characteristics of consumption related to social as well as cultural notions. Advertising focused on the quality of life desired by consumers— notions of glamour, reduction of anxiety, and happiness were presented in advertisements (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). An example would be an advertisement for Wool depicting family members having a happy leisure time together.

The third stage, Personalization, includes the years from 1945 to 1965. The communicative potential of television offered many new challenges to consumers through its various images, patterns of attention, and programming formats. The advertisers sought to gain access to the psychological makeup of consumers through personal concepts (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). Ad agencies realized that consumers were the center of the success of an ad. They started to explore the consumers’
psychological “black box” with the question, “what will make them purchase the products? (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990).” Ads depicted products as personalized items for consumers. For example, a mink coat ad suggesting romantic feelings and luxury sought to influence female consumers’ emotions. Women consumers believe that if they worn the mink coat, they could possess the same romantic feelings and luxury.

Stage four is Market Segmentation (1965-present). Leiss, Klein, & Jhally’s (1990) work covered the period from 1965 to 1985, however, I believe that their description is appropriate even for the latter part of the 1990s. Advertising is precisely targeted at particular groups of consumers. Marketing skills are highly developed, thus advertising began to be seen as part of the marketing mix rather than as the route to promoting consumption. By the mid 1970s, researchers had to rethink “image creation” and “image management” in producing ads. Since then, the image has become an important factor in the understanding of consumer behavior. It is the connecting link between consumers’ value systems and their preferences for products (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). Through advertising, ad producers try to make connections between certain target consumers and particular products to create symbols of exchange in the market place (Williamson, 1979).

Visual images in advertising. All images have linguistic natures. Ad images are important because consumers learn the meanings embodied in the images and practice the meaning in their lives. These images are the means by which material objects are able to act as carriers of meanings in social interaction (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990).

Advertising, in particular, may attach images of fantasy, romance, and the good life to
brands and consumer goods. Also, images in ads help people substantiate their own negotiations of new meanings.

Sherry (1987) noted that “advertising is a cultural system, a way of presenting and apprehending the world” (p.441) and visual images in advertisements are used to present the characteristics of postmodern consumer culture. Advertising is used to differentiate products by giving them meanings and providing them with an “image.” Ads are a powerful medium for transferring, as well as creating meanings. Visual images in ads, in particular, which are a collection of signs, are powerful tools in communicating their symbolic meanings.

In purchasing commodities, images and symbols are also consumed (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). According to Featherstone (1991), dreams and images are consumed as pleasures to satisfy people’s desires. Lury (1996) points to the postmodern characteristics of image, saying that those images show symbolic inversions and transgressions of the mainstream culture such as uncontrolled emotions, and blurring of differences between art and everyday life. Therefore, what is to be considered as reality in postmodern consumer culture is closely related to the images found in ads.

Advertising in Print

History of ads in print. To obtain an understanding of postmodern print advertising and its characteristics, a historical perspective of the print media, in which advertising has evolved, needs to be given consideration. The development of print media started with the beginning of the industrialization of the communication processes.
The invention of print media made communication an important product in the market place in the selling of information and consumer products. Newspapers and magazines have been the main print media for dissemination of ads.

Newspapers were the earliest, as well as most predominant products of the press in the modern era. The first regularly published newspaper was the Boston News Letter by John Campbell in 1704 in the American colonies. It was filled mainly with dull and mundane events that had taken place in Europe (Campbell, 1998). From the early 1700s to the early 1800s, newspapers were read only by a small percentage of the population and the largest circulation of these papers rarely reached 1500 (Campbell, 1998).

By the late 1820s, the average newspaper costs 6 cents a copy and was sold not through street sales but through annual subscriptions priced at $10 to $12. The price represented was more than a week's salary for most skilled workers, and it was not easy for average people to purchase them (Campbell, 1998).

The Industrial Revolution made possible the conversion from expensive hand-made to inexpensive machine-made paper. In the 1820s, the steam powered press replaced the mechanical press and publishers could produce as many as 4000 newspapers an hour (Campbell, 1998). Printer, Benjamin Day, was a pioneer who established the "penny newspaper." He founded the New York Sun and revolutionarily cut the price to one penny, and other penny newspapers also appeared in succession. One of them was New York Morning Herald founded by James Gordon Bennett. Bennett wanted to focus on issues that affected middle and working class readers, different from previous newspapers which focused on issues of the upper class. Penny papers were the first to shift their
economic base from political party subsidies to advertising revenue, and thus the content was not limited to political issues. Rather, the content covered various needs and interests of diverse individuals. At its peak, the *Morning Herald*’s readership equaled 80,000 and it became the world’s largest daily paper at the time (Campbell, 1998).

Technological advancement led modernization and people become more conscious that they were living through times of change and modernity (Barnald, 1996). Individual households purchased newspapers across the social hierarchy. Newspapers helped people gradually understand modernity and further take part in the process of modernization. New technologies for printing were developed during the Industrial Revolution. The expansion of the press in both Britain and North America brought rise to the readership of printed material. Newspapers became a mass medium and the public sphere truly became public (i.e., enjoyed by the masses) (Campbell, 1998; Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990).

By the 1840s, ads were regarded as consumer news, in that they introduced products to consumers (Campbell, 1998). As time went by, advertising revenue became new capital and new profit for the media business. There were three main reasons for the development of the ad industry. First, technological progress directly influenced the ad industry and brought dramatic increases in advertising volume, growth in numbers of publications, in issue size, and in circulation (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). Second, new and various products were provided in the market place which also accelerated the development of the advertising industry through product introduction and competition.

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Third, the development of other media (e.g., telephone, telegraph) also accelerated the ad industry. As a result of these advancements, the ad industry thrived.

Advertising was developed as an independent genre of newspaper content. Although publishers imposed style restrictions for ads in early newspapers (e.g., the only variations allowed were in spelling, the use of repetition and the use of bold type), the industry grew continuously as a significant business (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). Profits were continuously invested in new print technology which was a cornerstone for the expansion of advertising revenue, as well as commercialization of the newspaper.

Magazines competed with newspapers for advertising in the early stage of modernization (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). Magazines developed as yet another means of communication. The first magazines were developed in France in the 17th century (Campbell, 1998). Magazines have an editorial style which is located somewhere between newspapers and books, in that they borrow ideas and writing styles from both places. Magazines have an editing style that is like a book, having a bound format, but the content is like that of a newspaper, dealing with current news or information.

The idea of specialized magazines for certain readers developed throughout the 19th century and magazines gradually became innovators of services desired by advertisers, as well as a forum to discuss readers' various interests (Campbell, 1998). Compared to newspapers, magazines differentiated themselves based on the special characteristics of their audiences, such as age, sex, income, region, and life style. For example, the ads in women's magazines focused mainly on women's cosmetics and personal care. Also by the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of cultural diversity had taken
on a different meaning, that is, distinctions were made regarding gender, age, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. For example, the African American oriented magazine, *Ebony* has developed into a leading popular magazine for social life and Black politics in the US.

As magazine circulation began to increase, ad pages also increased. For example, *Harpers* devoted only 7 pages to ads in the mid of 1880s, nearly 50 pages by 1890 and more than 90 pages by 1990 (Campbell, 1998). From the early 20th century, advertising became a major financial source for newspapers and magazines and publishers began to segment their audiences into certain groups to which advertisers would target their ads. Fashion magazines become a public forum for introducing new fashion styles and various fashion brands to different groups of consumers.

**Print ads from modernism to postmodernism.** There are historical trends in advertising in printed material which clearly differentiate the modern and the postmodern eras (Barnald, 1996; Ewen & Ewen, 1982). The characteristics of postmodernism can be seen only by comparison between what is modern and what is not modern which is, in other words, postmodern. Without considering history, one cannot establish the concepts of modernity and postmodernity. In both the modern and postmodern eras, consumers consume products and meanings are consumed, although the importance placed on each is different in these two eras.

Copy writing was the most important element in print ad creation in modernism. Until the 1960s, success of most US ads was determined by the slogan and the captions (Campbell, 1998). In modern copy writing, the emphasis of the ads rested mainly on the
product information itself (Barnard, 1996; Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). Thus, the product was the center of attention of all the elements in ads.

Clearly, the text provides the overall interpretation of the relationship between the target consumers and the product being advertised in the modernism. In the 1920s and 1930s, text in ads often covered explanation of the meaning of the illustration in the ad. Thus, the visual images were illustrated as well as stated directly in the form of written statements. The text provided consumers with an explanation of how to read the visual illustration in the ad and also guided the interpretation of the ads. The text essentially explained the image and its logic to provide a key to the interpretation of the visual image so consumers did not have to practice their symbolic interpretation abilities to understand the visual images in ads. Also the text prevented any ambiguity that might emerge from the process of consumers’ interpretation of visual images (or illustrations) in the ad. Ads were used as a tool to teach consumers how to decode the ads themselves by following the guidelines the text suggested.

Written text was used to explain the reasons for consuming (the product’s benefits, performance, or construction), the appropriate social context for use, or the benefits of the product in the modern era. In the 1930s, ads were mainly used to introduce information about target consumers and the consumers’ experiences with the product. For example, an advertisement for a custom-made jacket included the consumers’ opinions about how comfortable the jacket was. By the 1950s, ads increasingly provided information about “the social context” of the products, that is, how consumers use the product in their social lives.
As industrialization and technology brought new products into the market place, a modern style of ads were also used to educate audiences about new kinds of products. Ads developed consumers’ needs for products they had not previously known about or desired. During the 1920s and 1930s, ads were used to teach consumers about new products such as deodorants and safety razors. Since the ads reminded the audiences of the importance and advantage of the products, consumers began to use the products as essential items in their lives.

There are differences between the modern era and the postmodern era in ads. As Faurschou (1987) stated, “ambiguity, vulnerability, [and] unreified hints of subjectivity” (p.71) have become main characteristics of postmodern culture. Each object’s subjective value relies on the individual consumer. Thus, the importance of copy writing to explain product related properties diminished compared with that of the modern era. Instead, visual images in ads help to open their interpretations widely to consumers and each consumer assigns his/her own meaning to them. Barnald (1996) states that the change from modernism to postmodernism gave consumers the chance to practice their individual capacities for symbolic investment.

During the 1960s and 1970s as the postmodern design phase developed in art and architecture, visual images were increasingly used in ads. Ads in the modernism, writers were the most important professionals who determined the success of ads. Ads in the postmodernism, visual artists who create images are the most significant professionals who determine the success of ads. As the importance of the visual images increased in
ads, agencies developed teams of artists who took responsibility for their visual images (Campbell, 1998).

In addition, ads contain fewer written captions such as slogans, or explanatory words in the postmodernism. Textual information has been greatly reduced; the ad’s actual content and emphasis changed, and the quality and function of language was transformed, not to present messages, but to support the more dominant visual images. In the US, fashion advertisements, as part of a visual revolution, accelerated in the 1960s because of imported European artists. For example, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* increasingly hired European designers as art directors. Thus, naturally they brought with them the European style of ad design—strong visual focus and few words. In European countries, the ad philosophy was to use fewer words in their advertising campaigns (Campbell, 1998). European artists who were accustomed to the style of ads without text naturally created visual image focused ad without using any written word.

The increased use of art and photography also promoted the development and expansion of visual images since the 1960s. With the increasing usage of photo reproduction, the visual image became the major channel of expressing meaning in postmodern advertising. The visual images in ads convey the ‘story’ and reasons for consumption, and construct imaginary linkages between the product being sold and the consumer (Ewen, 1988). The shift from the text to the visual image in ads constructed new relationships between language and visual images within the basic context of advertising. Thus, postmodern advertising has become more symbolic and more ambiguous than that of the modern ad.
By the mid 1980s, there was a revolution of visual images aided largely by the visual techniques of MTV. This significantly influenced changes in advertising style (Campbell, 1998). MTV promoted an innovative appearance in ads such as 'compressed narratives' and adopted instant shocking images (Campbell, 1998). In fashion ads, the visual revolution increased the compressed narrative trend and designers identified their brands with the look of their unique visual image.

Since the 1970s, visual images have been increasingly complex (i.e., unusual or absurd) (Leiss, Klein, & Jhally, 1990). Visual imagery in postmodern ads aims to capture the reader's attention, and build free and strong associations with various symbolic meanings and thus, a high degree of ambiguity. In general, major factors used in representation of postmodern advertising such as person, product, setting, and language are like those of the modern ad. However, there are clear differences between these styles. The postmodern trend encourages the tendency to place the product within a symbolic rather than utilitarian context because postmodern consumers have learned to place importance on consuming meanings, rather than products themselves. Unlike the modern era, contexts of the ads are not necessarily related to the potential use of the products being advertised. Settings are often multidimensional and provide ambiguous bases for the interpretation of the product image. For example, most recently fashion photographers have used facilities such as jails and gas chambers for ad photo shoots.
Postmodern Fashion and Postmodern Fashion Advertisements

Postmodern fashion. In the modern era, fashion was defined as the prevailing style accepted and used by a specific group of people in a particular place, at a particular time (Nystrom, 1928; Sproles, 1979). This definition means that fashion was a look or style that had shared meanings for a group of people. However, in the postmodern era, it is hard to define postmodern fashion as one definition. As postmodernism is multifaced (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), postmodern fashion is also varied and has many definitions. Clearly, postmodern fashion today is a refined commodity reflecting characteristics of postmodern consumer culture. The open-ended meaning of fashion items, the diversity of style (Barnald, 1996; Kaiser, 1990; Morgado, 1996), the increased juxtaposition of disparate stylistic elements (Morgado, 1996; O’Neal, 1996; Wilson, 1985), the collapse of hierarchical distinctions between high and mass culture (Featherstone, 1991; Gitlin, 1989a; Kaiser, 1990; Morgado, 1996), and the high visibility of ethnic and subcultural styles are the main characteristics of postmodern fashion (Kaiser, 1990; Morgado, 1996).

Fashion was a direct symbol of social and economic position with shared (public) meanings in the modern era. Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1904) maintained that wearing a certain item of fashion represented class differentiation and power. Veblen (1899) further maintained that “elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance not only because it is expensive, but it is the symbol of leisure” (p.18). Leisure, when Veblen wrote, the privilege of special groups of people who did not have the responsibility of performing manual work. Within the context of the modern era, feminine bonnets with large brims and French high heels are good examples to symbolize the wearer’s high social position.
because these articles of fashion were far from the clothing worn by lower classes (Veblen, 1899).

In the postmodern era, style differentiation is not a clear indicator of social class or economic power (King & Ring, 1980). If miniskirts are in fashion, for instance, consumers can purchase them from high fashion stores or discount stores at various price ranges. Although there might be quality differences (e.g., textiles, fitting, sewing) between the miniskirts from a high fashion store and one from discount stores, consumers at different levels of social status can have the fashion style. In this perspective, to some degree, postmodern fashion style has lost its signifying function as an emblem of social status (Tseelon, 1995).

Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton (1995) maintain that the marketplace offers a chance for customers to engage in the act of selecting and personalizing symbols. Each individual consumer is able to create his/her own self image in a dynamic social/cultural context. Different fashion styles are given various meanings by people, and these created meanings have become the real commodities of postmodern consumer culture (Morgado, 1996). For example, a cross pendant is used to symbolize sacred religious meanings. A popular singer, Madonna wore a necklace with a cross pendant and it immediately became a fashion item. Although one did not know whether she wore the cross pendent with religious intention or not, the cross became a fashion item for consumers with secular meanings related to commodification.

Marketers sell meanings embodied in fashion commodities. In some cases, consumers purchase the commodity only for its meanings. Advertisers frequently use
celebrities to impose meanings on commodities. A few years ago, Nike introduced Michael Jordan’s Air Nike shoes, which were in vogue for young kids. Young consumers bought the shoes to obtain the celebrity endorsed meaning, these are the shoes Michael Jordan wears, so if I wear these shoes I may have the same athletic skills he has. The shoes may not have big differences in quality compared to other brands of shoes. However, the Air Nike shoes have endorsed symbolic power, which is like magic or a myth. However, the symbolic meaning embodied in the products differentiates the shoes as unique and special compared to other brand shoes.

As a phenomenon, fashion consists of free-floating, reference-free signs. A good example is blue jeans, which were originally associated with manual labor as a working class work-garment. Later, however, they become a symbol of youth, then transformed into expensive designer styles with high status symbolism. Still blue jeans are widely used as a working garment as well as offered in expensive designer styles. A fashion item is not limited to one meaning. Instead, it can have various meanings like blue-jeans, which are now a social status free garment (Morgado, 1996).

The second characteristic of postmodern fashion is “diversity of styles.” Increased juxtaposition of several disparate stylistic elements of fashion by combining disordered styles and fabrics adds more diversity in postmodern fashion (O’ Neal, 1996). The phenomenon is called “bricollage” or “pastiche” fashion (Morgado, 1996, p.46). It can also be termed “eclecticism and the mixing of fashion style codes” (Kaiser, 1990; Morgado, 1996, p.48). Models wearing incongruent fashion items together are frequently seen in fashion magazines. For example, combining a ballerina tutu with a leather jacket
is considered to be a fashionable style for young people (Kaiser, 1990). Thus, there is not one style, which represents postmodern fashion but a diversity of styles.

Many fashion styles from different historical eras are popular in the postmodern era simultaneously (Morgado, 1996; Wilson, 1985). The adoption of diverse styles from different historical eras is based on the postmodernist’s belief that history is neither linear nor progressive. Postmodernists experienced WWII and the Vietnam war, social and economic fluctuations, and doubt the future of progress. Postmodernists’ nostalgia of modernism resurrects the styles prevalent in the past instead of creating new fashion styles. An assortment of diverse styles and borrowing from different historical eras also existed in the modern era. However, there are differences between the diverse styles of the modern era and those of the postmodern era. Diverse styles in the modern era were based on designing rules (e.g., golden rules, how items are to be worn and coordinated). But in the postmodern era, diverse styles are based on order as well as disorder. Postmodernists do not believe that there are absolute design rules which they have to follow. They are free from any absolute rules. They create new styles with new meanings. Postmodernists sometimes intentionally use unstable aesthetic codes to express their rejection of authority (Morgado, 1996).

Thirdly, the increased juxtaposition of fashion styles is also related to the notion of “the collapse of hierarchical distinction between high and mass culture” ( Featherstone, 1991; Gitlin, 1989a; Kaiser, 1990; Morgado, 1996, p.48). It is also related to the phenomenon of the “decline of originality” and “rejection of authority” (Morgado, 1996,p.48). Many ads for couture houses (e.g. Chanel, Givenchy) increasingly show styles
coming from the street, rather than from professional design studios. Same models in couture ads look more like average people on the street than like high status individuals who can afford to buy couture apparel.

Lastly, the increasing use of styles and items from decentered, marginalized ethnic and subcultural groups (Kaiser, 1990; Morgado, 1996) is also a characteristic of postmodern fashion. Styles from African tribes or from persons with alternative life styles such as body tattoos and body piercing are examples of these trends. These postmodern characteristics are not mutually exclusive and are frequently seen in current fashion.

**Postmodern fashion advertisements in fashion magazines.** Fashion magazines have unique postmodern characteristics. One characteristic concerns their editing styles. The first change can be seen in the increasing number of multi-page ads. For example, the October 1991 issue of *Vanity Fair* included a polybagged 116 page supplement from the Calvin Klein company. It was the equivalent of 29 ad pages. This 116 page supplement was the largest extended ad ever to run in the US. The extended ad is considered to be a new way to reach the postmodern consumers (Sloan & Donaton, 1991). Multi-page ads (especially, two pages and four pages) appear in fashion magazines quite often. For example, the Calvin Klein Company ran a two-page folded ad for its perfume product, *ck one* in the September 1994 issue of *Vogue* and an eleven-page serial ad for *ck be* in the September 1996 issue of *Vogue*. The Anne Klein company ran a series of extended ads across eighteen pages (four folded pages and eleven separate pages) in the September 1998 issue of *Vogue*. The ad producers considered the
characteristic as "sharing of voices" (E. Johns, J. Barrett, & M. Volpatt personal communication, April 20th, 1999). Currently, magazines are filled with numerous pages of product advertising and they distract consumer attention. Multi-page ads can cut through some of this clutter and get more consumer attention. Multi-page ads increase the degree of brand exposure. They capture more audience attention. And lastly, they make it possible to tell a story through reading the pages. Once the audience is involved in the multi-page ads, individual readers can mediate their own stories based on their reading of the series (E. Johns, personal communication, April 20th, 1999).

Another feature of the postmodern editing style is the increase in the number of series ads: two or three multi-page ads within a series are frequently seen in fashion magazines. Even though ads for the same product are never the same; they are part of a single campaign. Ads have the same theme so consumers can determine that the product being advertised is the same, but the ad itself is never the same. For example, Calvin Klein’s perfume product, cK one has three different formats consisting of one page, two pages, or four pages (two folded pages). Even the one page ads, however, are never the same. That is, while all one-page cK one ads contain common factors such as the cK one bottle, young models, and a black and white background, the number of models and the position of the cK one bottle shifts from ad to ad. For example, in a cK one ad in the August 1995 issue of Harper’s Bazaar, one male model stands to the right side and one female model stands to the left, and a cK one bottle is placed at the center of the ad. In the August 1997 issue of Vogue, however, the composition of the ad had been changed: a
male and a female stand together at the center and the cK one bottle has been moved to the right side of the ad.

Yet another postmodern change in editing features is variation in the page layout of fashion magazines. In the case of a few serial ads, advertisers place the ads on each even page of the fashion magazine. The left side of the page presents different stories (e.g., beauty articles, fashion news) and the right side of the page runs serial ads over three or four pages. Thus, consumers might experience a fresh feeling with each new page of the serial ads. It might be a postmodern way of gaining the attention of the consumers.

In addition to shifts in editing style, Baudrillard's postmodern concept (1983, 1989) of hyperreality also can be seen as a characteristic of fashion ads. Different from modernity, real people and real backgrounds have replaced the faked models and faked settings for a photo-shoot. Advertisers utilize the concept of real people. The Calvin Klein Company uses caricatures of grungy young people for their advertisements. For example, the cK be ad uses young people as supposedly real people for the ad. The company introduced the concept as "real people." The Anne Klein company also presented the idea of "real people" by running a series of "Significant Women" ads presenting over twenty successful women in different careers (e.g., from a previous State Governor to an actress) in the September 1998 issue of Vogue. The caption reads,

The allure of intelligence. The radiance of imagination. The clarity of conviction. Anne Klein is proud to celebrate significant women. Because no matter what a woman does, without real substance there is no real style.
All of these "real people" wear Ann Klein dresses, and each real person's name and occupation is printed under their image in the ad. This ad is an extended serial, having all real women wear dresses, formal wear, and casual clothing with accessories. In the March 1999 issue of Vogue, the Anne Klein company ran the same theme as the previous serial with fourteen "Significant Women."

In addition to these real people, the background for a photo-shoot has become a "real background" for the ad. Scenes showing models preparing for the photo-shoot sometime replace the final scenes presented in ads. In addition, the intentional exposure of models' personal belongings and of typically unseen staff members such as photographers, assistants, hair-dressers, and make-up artists are also featured in the ads. Sometimes, the background of a postmodern fashion ad is a place we never expect to see, such as a jail or a gas chamber. It characterizes postmodern consumer culture as suggested by Baudrillard.

A third unique postmodern characteristic of fashion magazines is conspicuous of the body (Domzal & Kernan, 1993; Lee & O’Neal, 1998). Shilling (1993) stated that bodies reflect unprecedented individualization in postmodern consumer culture. Postmodern people consider their own bodies as objects which they can manipulate and use to produce meaning. Bodily decoration is related to symbolic communication and becomes cultural production (Farschou, 1987). For example, the perfume product cK one and cK be ads show the human body as a conveyer of their messages. The bodies are figures which form the backdrop for the ads. Each model's bodily pose is seen as a unique language to express his/her individualism. Gestures and facial expressions are
their own narratives to communicate themselves. The bodies are signals and symbols for symbolic diversity.

In addition to increased foregrounding of the body, fashion ads have also expressed different kinds of moods (Gitlin, 1989a). Models' gestures and facial expressions are used to present unique moods. These moods are different from those of modernist ads in that images are not limited to emotions such as happiness, joy, and love. Instead, postmodernist moods are multifaceted, ranging from apathetic to violent. Sometimes models in ads are seen as having no feelings. Their eyes often tend to be askew and their faces do not face the front (Lee & O'Neal, 1998).

Clearly, postmodern philosophy is expressed through fashion ads. Hedonism and relativism are frequently seen in ads. For example, cK be shows the postmodern philosophy of the Calvin Klein Company in their ads. The ad for cK be used the caption "to be," "not to be," and "Just be" (see the September 1996 issue of Vogue) which insinuates that life and death are not matters of importance. The important thing is "just as it is"—i.e., naturalness, representing the notion of conforming to rules in a given society even though it may be a matter of life or death. "Just be" hints at the hidden concepts of hedonism and relativism. First, the hedonist thinks that pleasure is the most important thing in life so one should enjoy and be satisfied, hence, "Just be." The ad suggests that there is no conflict between the real and ideal self and it seems to say just accept yourself as you are, that is the reality of real people. The ad also shows relativism. To some extent, relativism is closely related to individuality. Every individual is equal. There is no absolute truth: no inferiority, no superiority. It doesn't matter whether the
consumer is beautiful or not; “Just be” is the solution for everything in his/her life. Everything can be truth. To “Just be” is the truth and the thing he/she needs to be proud of (Lee & O’Neal, 1998).

Finally, postmodern fashion ads are left to open interpretations (E. Johns, personal communication, April 20th, 1999). Postmodern fashion ads tend not to have captions. Captions help a consumer’s reading since there can be a different connotations depending on the wording in an ad (Barthes, 1991a). Without captions to fix the meaning consumers engage in their own readings of the ad through individual reflection—what it really means to each of them. In the modern era, words in most of the ads were limited to only a description of the product or company being advertised (e.g., the utilitarian perspective of the product), but in the postmodern era, words are not directly related to the product or the company. Rather, they stimulate consumers’ self-thinking (or reflection) related to a given culture.

Currently, fashion ads sometimes contain “double-entendres texts.” The captions are not directly related to the product nor the company being advertised. Rather, the captions just give some double-meanings to consumers. For example, the shoe company Charles David ran a two page serial ad on human rights, both in the March 1999 issue of Vogue and the April 1999 issue of Elle. These ads had a caption entitled “Walk with us.” The text in each of these ads was about the afflicted leaders of Tibet. The left page of each ad had a picture of a Tibetan leader, and each of the right pages of the ad had a female model wearing shoes. The following text was in the April issue of Elle.
On May 14, 1995 a six year old boy was recognized as the 11th Panchen Lama, the second highest Lama in Tibet. Days later, he became the world's youngest political prisoner. His name is Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, his crime, simply being born. On April 25th, he will be ten years old. Please join us as we seek to gather 1 million signatures in a petition for Gedhun Choekyi Nyima's release. Give a voice to those who can't speak. And walk with us.”

The text is not directly related to the products of the Charles David Company. It does not describe the characteristics (utilities) of their product. The text is about a social and political issue which is not related to the product. The caption links the product (shoes) with the words “walk with us” and the title “walk with the company”. This notion is what Stern (1996) calls “reader-driven meanings.” Meaning is not fixed and molded; it is open to all. Readers can decide what the words mean to them and develop their own meanings related to the product being advertised. Therefore, each individual reads the same ad, but each has a different interpretation.

Photography, Fashion and Advertisements

Photography. The main purpose of photography is to document or record events, objects, and people. Photography keeps a reality which is memory of time and space. As Barthes (1991a) explains, photography is a “perfect analogon (p.5)” and “the photographic scene itself is the literal reality” (p.5).

Historically, photography has been developed into various genres by the increase of capitalism. Among many genres of photography, portrait photography was an emblem of the rise of Capitalism. In the feudal society, a portrait in oil was a form of expressing one's social power and wealth, showing one's ability to hire someone to paint a portrait
(Ewen & Ewen, 1982). Displaying one's portrait (oil painting) on a wall symbolized the owner's social power and status. Since drawing was the only way of keeping images in the early modern era, only the aristocrat could afford to possess these images. During industrialization technology accelerated, photography was invented, and the rise of the middle and lower middle classes increased the demand for photographic portraits. The photographic portrait was available at a good price with a symbol reminiscent of aristocratic social meaning (Wells, 1997). Owing to the technological development of photography as well as the increase of the mass market, images were no longer limited to the wealthy; the democracy of images was realized. Also, the commodification of imagery has been continuously promoted (Wells, 1997).

The developments of photography and the printing press brought forth the development of photojournalism. Photojournalism is also related to capitalism. The photos in newspapers are an important aspect in selling of printed press. Thus, the news photos create "spectacles" to induce readers' attention to make them buy the newspaper. In this perspective, the photograph is an important commodity in consumer society.

Photographs also have commodified objects especially in marketing and advertising. Photographs borrow and mimic every genre of cultural and art practices to enhance the meanings of commodities and to increase consumer desire to buy the meanings embodied in the product. Thus, the images in advertising are more connoted and structured than those in the news. The photographic image is crucial in the creation of meaning in that advertisements are constructed and structured ideologically to support commodity culture (Wells, 1997). Photographs commodify the human relationships and
also create images that evoke emotions which give products superficial or false meanings structured by advertisers. The power of photographic images lead consumers to accept the meanings in the images, and create a desire to buy the products.

**Linguistic message in photography.** Barthes maintained that a single linguistic message has a double structured message: denotation (literal message) and connotation (symbolic message). He stated that the distinction between the denotation and the connotation is operational, and there is no denoted message in a pure state; a denotation is always completed by a connotation. Thus, the characteristics of the denotation cannot be substantial, only relational. Therefore, where there is a denotation, at the same time there is a connotation.

The analogon of the object is a denoted message, and the way to read the analogon might be a connoted message. Consumers are not necessarily aware of the level of the connoted message conveyed by a photograph. Photographs in ads have many connotative factors, such as the photographer's way of treating, selecting, and composing the object according to his/her professional, aesthetic, or ideological norms (Barthes, 1991a).

The manner in which the photograph is produced (selection, technical treatment, cropping, layout) determines connotation, which is a natural resonance of the fundamental denotation constituted by the photographic analogon (Barthes, 1991a). Connotation is produced by a modification of reality through the photographic production and the denoted message strongly influences connotation (Barthes, 1991a). Barthes argued that the photographic paradox results from the coexistence of these two messages:
both those without a code (photographic analogon) and those with a code (rhetoric of photographic artistic perspective).

Photography represents social reality and meanings embodied in the society. The meanings in photographs are context dependent. Connotation in photography is historical and cultural. The reading of photography is, therefore, always historical and cultural. Like other cultural products, photographs tend to present, as well as perpetuate ideas that are pervasive in society (Wells, 1997). Commercial photography represents social hegemony in that it constantly borrows idea and images from the wider cultural domain. Since commercial photographs are only produced to sell products, they construct structures which perpetuate stereotypes in society such as race, gender, and classes, as well as their hidden meanings (Wells, 1997). For example, Berger (1991) discussed Sander’s photograph taken in the 1910s. He explained how the photograph presents the social identity of the peasants who wear suits. Berger stated, “the clothes convey the same message as the faces and as the history of the bodies they hide. Suit, experience, social formation and function coincide” (p.428). Because a suit might become a classic, it is easily taught as an example of class hegemony. He compared the suit styles of peasants to those of the professional ruling class, called gentlemen.

A photograph is not just an exact copy of the original; rather, it is a source of significant clues about society as well as culture. As Barthes (1991a) discussed, it is a paradox which “makes an inert object into a language and transforms the non-culture of a mechanical art into the most social of institutions” (p.20). Therefore, photographic connotation is an institutional activity, which perpetuates social hegemony and hierarchy.

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Fashion photography. Fashion photography has two functions. First, it constructs a record of the fashion of the moment. This was the primary reason for fashion photography in the 19th century. Thus, the main purpose of a fashion photograph was to get a clear record of garments. The first record of photography being used to keep a record of fashion was in 1856. It was in the form of an album of 288 photographs of the Countess de Castiglione in her gowns. In the early years, fashion photos were taken in front of a mirror so that both the front and back of the ensemble would be visible (Hall-Duncan, 1979).

During the 19th century photography was used with illustrations in fashion journals (Hall-Duncan, 1979). Until the 1890s, illustration was highly preferred for its association with art schools and decorative styles, while photography was classified as an "objective" technique for simply recording objects (Farber, 1978). Fashion editors and designers thought that photos were not appropriate to express fashion glamorously and also fashion photography was not considered as an artistic expression at that time. Illustration was more favored by fashion editors and designers than photos because they wanted to show their clothes glamorously and exotically (Craik, 1995). The popularity of photography did not increase until World War I when it became flexible and cheap and could be a substitute for fashion illustrations for the sake of economic reason.

Historically, the first American fashion photographer, Baron Adolf de Meyer changed the trend from simple record keeping to artistic expression. In 1914, De Meyer’s approach of pictorialism, such as his use of limpid atmosphere and shimmering, liquid light effects to create a vague, imaginative, and suggestive mood, was introduced
in *Vogue* magazine as a first attempt to discard information of a garment’s detail (Hall-Duncan, 1979). His models’ body poses were like those used in 19th century stage and early movies—with one hand on hip and head tossed back. He depicted wealth and glamour in a fairy tale haze (Farber, 1978). Since then, artistic expression and movement have influenced fashion photography, and people recognize fashion photography as not just a record of dress styles, but an artistic expression as well (Farber, 1978).

Around the 1920s, Man Ray appeared and began applying technical experimentation of surrealism in fashion photography. He totally disregarded the conventions of fashion photography which were until then primarily for the purpose of record keeping. In contrast to the previous fashion photos which contained complete structural information of the garments, Man Ray’s fashion photos only gave information about a costume’s cut and texture (Hall-Duncan, 1979).

In 1923, Edward Steichen began to work for *Vogue*. He abandoned the theatrical poses and settings of de Meyer (Farber, 1978). He changed the soft focus effects of pictorialism to the clean geometric lines of photographic modernism. Fashion photos were taken in front of geometric paintings or settings. Photos were taken of models wearing geometric styles. European modernists’ paintings with other artistic experimentation was also gradually used in fashion photography (Hall-Duncan, 1979).

Since the 1930s, the process of color reproduction had also accelerated the popularity of fashion photography (Craik, 1995). During the 1930s, more natural as well as modern styles were used (Farber, 1978). In 1933, a Hungarian sports photographer, Martin Munkacsi, was hired by *Harper’s Bazaar* and introduced “blur motion”, an
exuberant vitality and a natural informality which made his photos seem more than snap shots (Hall-Duncan, 1979). He brought forth "the democratization of fashion photography" as an expression of the consumers real world (Farber, 1978). Realistic effects in fashion photos, such as portrayal of the casual and active life opened a new style and created a new image for the American woman. Realistic fashion photography offered the modern women a vision, which she could apply to her own life (Hall-Duncan, 1979).

In the 40s and the 50s, Toni Frissell and Louise Dahl-Wolfe were the pioneers to change women's image from an object of transcendent beauty and desire to independent and self-sufficient subject. Since they were both women, their efforts to change woman's image were from their own experience. From post World War II to the 1960s, Irving Penn and Richard Avedon were the main photographers. They increased the sophistication of cameras and equipment, and color photography in fashion photography. They also opened up new possibilities (e.g., expressing the 60's cultural upheavals) for fashion photography.

Second, the importance of fashion photography rests in its obvious characteristic of semanticity (Barthes, 1991b). Fashion photography is a simple representation of clothes realistically but also creates ways to express social and cultural meanings aesthetically between clothes, wearers, and contexts (Craik, 1995). For fashion photos, Barthes (1991b) used the term, "image clothing" to explain the transformation from object (e.g., real garment) to the symbolic representation (e.g., exotic fashion photo). Image clothing is not just a simple resemblance; it has its own units and rules and it
forms a specific language expressing its own meanings (e.g., sexy clothing). Image clothing is representative clothing. Real garments satisfy functional needs such as protection, modesty, and adornment while representative clothing no longer serves to protect, to cover, or to adorn, but to signify the symbolic meaning of protection, modesty, or adornment—representative garments have a semantic function (Barthes, 1991b). Through the fashion photos, symbolic codes (of tastes, emotions, and narratives) are transcended, and they illustrate meanings related to fashion (Barthes, 1991b; Craik, 1995).

Since the 1970s, there have been significant movements in the visual arts, reflecting a "return to the figurative" (Wells, 1997). In the post-1970s, the power of the visual image is predominant, and symbolic meanings in fashion photography are considered an important expression (Rabine, 1994). Fashion photography is regarded as art, as well as history. Fashion photos in magazines heighten self-reflexivity offer a more blatantly sexy look, and present the voice of progressive social movements to elicit the readers' desire for identity. Fashion photography is still a matter of fantasy, art and imagination (Farber, 1978). Each element intensifies the power of the visual image and erases the dichotomy between fantasy and reality at a more obvious level (Rabine, 1994).

Advertising and Its Semiotic Characteristics

Object and meaning. A sign is something, which stands for something else. Saussure (1966) explained that the first something (signifier) is the object and the other something (signified) is its concept, and both are united into a form of one word (sign).
He explains that sign is constituted as a double structure of signifier and signified. Barthes (1982) also explained the relationship between signifier and signified as an interior relationship because both are unseen and united as a sign, a “concrete entity” (Barthes, 1972, p. 113). For example, a wedding dress signifies a wedding, a ceremony for uniting two people into one family. It is an automatic cognitive response that does not require thinking or analyzing why and how the signifier, wedding dress, is linked to the signified: the wedding ceremony (only based on the assumption that the spectators live in the given cultural context in which this cultural knowledge is shared). In reality, it is impossible to separate the signifier from the signified. The “wedding ceremony” and “dress” existed before uniting and forming the sign, “wedding dress”. However, it is not possible to segregate the meaning of wedding from wedding dress.

People who are familiar with objects give meanings to them within the context of history and culture. Meaning is always context dependent. Therefore, the meaning given to an object (images or/and events) is only justified within a specific context. First, meanings differ historically. Barthes agreed that the relationship of meaning is always history related (Barthes, 1982). Color is a good example showing different meanings based on context. Historically, in western culture, black is the color used in funerals and white is the color used in wedding ceremonies. Black traditionally has meant “solid or stained”, “evil or wicked and disgrace” (The Random House Dictionary, 1973) while, white has meant “honest, decent” and “morally pure and innocent” (The Random House Dictionary, 1973). In the case of the wedding dress, white signifies a bride’s purity and virginity. Few people in the past wore black outfits for wedding ceremonies because
people were aware of the color black's negative connotation within the context. Although white still remains the preferred color for weddings, people may also wear black nowadays if they are participating in the ceremony. Because the meaning of the color black is no longer limited to funerals, its meaning has blurred. The postmodern connotation of black in fashion apparel is that it is chic and glamorous, and it makes its wearers appear thinner. Thus, few question the choice to wear black at a wedding ceremony.

Also, meaning is related to cultural context. Different from western culture, in Korea, white is the traditional color for funerals. In the past, all people wore traditional white dress at funerals. White reflects a wearer's pure sadness. However, since the westernization of Korea, people also have begun adopting western styles and wearing black for funerals. Both black and white are used as colors for mourning in Korea nowadays. As previously discussed, the change of meaning of black attire in Korea and the West is different based on its time and place context. In this light, meaning is transmutable in its linguistic character.

Meaning is also transferable. People from one generation to the another generation share meanings given to objects. Many objects have retained their meaning over time. For example, a rose connoted 'love' in the past and in the present. A hundred years ago and now, men give roses to women as an expression of their love. The connotation of a rose as love has not been changed.

People within a context of time and space share meanings with each other. Communication, the activity of sharing one's meaning with others, is the prime element
in distinguishing a group of people or a culture (Fiske, 1990). People as members of a culture engage in social interaction, and reciprocally affect each other. The interaction provides an individual with group membership by communication. People in the same context of time and space have the same shared cultural knowledge upon which meanings are established. Meaning is given to objects and is communicated and transferred in the process of social interaction between members in the given time and space context.

Advertising interpretation. McCracken (1990) and Williamson (1978)’s understandings of the interpretation process are based on the proposition that consumers and advertisers in a culture have shared cultural knowledge. On the basis of this proposition, researchers discuss how consumers understand meanings in advertisements. McCracken asserts that meanings are continuously transferred from the outside world to the object. He remarks that ads are a kind of conduit in which meaning is constantly transferred. According to his understanding, through advertising, old and new goods are constantly divesting themselves of old meanings and taking on new meanings.

Williamson (1978) also argued, based on the same idea as McCracken, that people within the same cultural context share the same cultural knowledge. Williamson’s concept of “ideology” is the same concept as McCracken’s “cultural principles.” Williamson (1978) decoded 116 magazine advertisements in her book, Decoding Advertisements. Williamson used a structural perspective in interpreting ads. Through decoding the ads, she sought to understand the meaning process involving denotations (surface meanings) and connotations (deep meanings) of visual images. She argues that there are two systems of meaning which have their own structures. The first system is
the "ideological system," maintaining that the system already exists for consumers to derive meanings for the ads. According to her, consumers borrow meanings from the ideology, an existed structure of meaning, and fit it into the system of advertising to complete the structure of the system. She regards ads as a form of created structure by advertisers and asserts that meaning is decided by the consumers' ideology. According to her, meaning is not created but it already exists in the outside world (i.e., ideology) and is borrowed by readers to understand the structure of ads. Thus, meaning is absent in ads and the readers fill in the meaning from that which already exists, and finally consumers obtain an interpretation of the ad and its complete symbolic meaning.

To some degree, as McCracken and Williamson maintain, consumers refer to the existing meanings from the cultural world to interpret ads. However, the existing cultural meanings are not always consistent with consumers' interpretation for two reasons. First, as Barthes (1982) discussed, signs have internal (signifiers and signifieds) as well as external (paradigmatic and syntagmatic) relations. Also signs are related to other signs and create other meanings by comparing and associating with other signs. Thus, the meaning of an object is not a simple action of borrowing from existing cultural knowledge (or ideology). The "meaning" is decided by the consumers' continuous action of comparison and association with other signs within the context of the ad. Therefore, new meanings can be created in the process of ad interpretation. Second, when ads are used as an educational tool to teach consumers about new products consumers can learn new information from the ads. For example, a model in a skin care product ad becomes a symbol of clean and healthy skin. The new meaning, "clean and healthy skin" is created
and assigned to the model in the ad. Thus, the meaning is culturally constituted as McCracken (1990) and Williamson (1978) suggest, but also is created by their active interpretation. Ads are not just conduits of meanings; rather they are tools through which consumers create new meanings.

Although there is shared cultural knowledge, the one who decides the final meaning of the ad is the consumer. Meaning is myth in that language has its opened meaning to everybody and it comes from the abstractness of its concept. In other words, language always has a variety of possible meanings (Barthes, 1972). Consumers are the ones who assemble the pieces of the puzzle to make one coherent story. Once consumers infer the meanings, they freely combine them and process them to reach a holistic understanding of the ad. Thus, consumers' interpretations of ads are more than the simple collection of the obtained meanings. Consumers interpretations are complex and individualized creations. Thus, the whole (interpretation-story plot) is more than the sum of its parts (signs).

Semiotic studies of advertising. Most of the interpretive studies on the analysis of visual ads have been grounded in semiotics theory (Scott, 1994b). Semiotics is a way to discover the sophistication and richness of ads in a given culture. By analyzing an advertisement, one might learn how it is constructed and discover its underlying message. One might also find the way in which words and pictures work together to reinforce the message.

Some authors focused on the importance of signs in ads (Barthes, 1991a; McQuarrie, 1989; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Mick & Politi, 1989; Williamson, 1978;
McQuarrie (1989) developed the concept of resonance of meanings. He showed how meanings are supported by the aid of sign elements in visual ad images. Resonance is a repetition of elements within an ad, which occurs with an exchange, consideration, or multiplication of meaning. He maintained that resonance is an aspect of the formal structure of advertising that is used as figurative speech for a persuasive effect. Four types of resonance were specified for magazine ads: Visual, Verbal, Verbal-Visual, and Visual Puns. One example he used was Aziza Mink Coat Mascara, which has an elaborated visual resonance. The eyelashes of the model are echoed by the spikes of mink fur and the triangle of the model’s face outlined by a mink coat, while the mink hat emphasizes the shape of an eye photographed in profile. The use of resonance of the meaning is a rhetorical device through which the producer may communicate non-literal intentions while resonance might generate ambiguity and paradox.

Zakia (1986) also showed an example of how semiotics can be used to analyze a visual advertisement. Zakia shows how an ad works and mediates as a sign between the consumer and the product. He used a triad relationship (Representamen, Object, and Interpretant) and an interpretive matrix (iconic, indexic, and symbolic) to analyze a Schnaaple, beverage ad. He explained that the object to be represented is the product (Schaaple), the representamen is the advertisement, and the interpretant is the process of consumer’s interpretation. To determine the different meanings the ad might have, Zakia conducted a simple exploratory study based on a free-association test. The test was intended to access consumers’ quick responses to the ad. The variety of word responses
supported the complexity of the ad and indicated the polarity of the responses. Then the ad’s elements that supported the meanings assigned iconically, indexically, and symbolically were listed.

In sum, advertisements display symbolic meanings through their verbal and nonverbal elements. Visual images in ads function as rhetorical devices or figurative meaning transfer through which multiple meanings can be communicated to consumers. Symbolic meanings of visual images involve denotation and connotation which are linked to one’s cultural knowledge. A semiotic analysis of ad images is a guideline for understanding relationships between society and consumer culture. Leiss, Klein, and Jhally (1990) investigated the close relationship between images of advertising and social influences, especially, how ad images reflect social as well as cultural characteristics. This study rests on their belief that there is an essential linkage between images and culture; advertising is a “privileged form of discourse (p.1)” about a given culture.

Understanding of Culture: Cultural Capital

Culture is generally defined as “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another” (The Random House Dictionary, 1973, p.325). Thus, culture includes “the values, ideas, artifacts, and other meaningful symbols that help individuals communicate, interpret, and evaluate as members of society” (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1990, p. DG-4). In other words, culture is “a socially-historically specific, internally shaped symbolic system” (Lipuma, 1993, P.14).
A French sociologist, Bourdieu understands culture based on the anthropological point of view with applying the notion of cultural capital. His notion of cultural capital is rooted from the concept of the symbolic system which decides distinction between classes (Bourdieu, 1996). To investigate French consumers’ cultural capital, Bourdieu surveyed 1,217 French people in 1963 and 1967-1968 and presented his analysis based on statistical data. According to him, the notion of cultural capital is determined by two factors: educational capital and social origin. First, the different cultural capital is recognized and taught by the educational system. Schools and institutions transmit cultural capital to each individual and they are the places where people accumulate cultural capital. For example, people who do not experience art and music in the family milieu, can learn the symbolic meaning of “a Picasso painting”- how it is different from Impressionist paintings- in art classes (Bourdieu, 1993). Second, at equivalent levels of educational capital, the weight of social origin in practice and preference determines a person’s cultural capital. Parents’ education can be an indicator of children’s understanding of culture, as well as of their accumulative cultural capital. For example, if parents have high educational qualifications their children are more likely to experience legitimate cultural capital (i.e., classical music, paintings) than those who have parents with lower educational qualifications. Thus, parents’ high education qualifications help to increase one’s understanding of legitimate areas of culture. Bourdieu regards parent’s educational qualifications as one’s social origin.

According to Bourdieu, education teaches to recognize hierarchy in the arts, genres, schools, corresponds to a social hierarchy of consumers. Education also provides

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opportunities for people to learn symbolic systems, which predisposes tastes which
differentiate each class. Cultural capital provides cultural distinctions and helps
reproduce and express different tastes of each individual using different symbolic
systems (Lipuma, 1993). Bourdieu's survey mainly seeks to determine how the cultural
capital is revealed in the nature of the cultural goods consumed based on individuals from
the legitimate areas such as paintings and music, or the personal ones such as clothing,
furniture and food. The survey establishes that cultural capital (i.e., cultural practices and
preferences in literature, painting or music) is determined by one's educational capital
(measured by qualifications) and social origin (measured by father's occupation).

Although Bourdieu's anthropological understanding of culture based on the
relationship between capital, filed, and symbolic power is an insightful approach, his
understanding of cultural capital raises an argument in this postmodern consumer culture.
First, Bourdieu's study was done in the modern era so his understanding of cultural
capital needs to be revised to apply for the postmodern consumer culture. Second,
Bourdieu's understanding is only based on the data from the survey of French consumers.
However, the relationship of cultural reproduction to economic and political power varies
cross-culturally as well as historically (Lipuma, 1993). In this postmodern consumer
culture, cultural capital (or symbolic system) is different owing to differences of race,
gender, and ethnicity. In this postmodern consumer culture, thus, Bourdieu's
understanding of culture needs to be extended to incorporate the notion of race, gender,
asc well as ethnicity. In addition, his understanding of cultural capital is based on the
educational system by which a person's symbolic system is established. However,
Bourdieu did not explain how the symbols are given meanings and used by each individual consumer within the social system. Bourdieu needs to explain this to understand the whole cultural system.

Consumers’ Interpretations of Advertisements

Advertising is a quasi-fictional, culturally constituted system of symbols. Eco (1984) stressed three factors to consider in communication: advertiser (sender), consumer (reader), and culture (context). In the process of interpreting an ad, the consumer is an active interpreter. Consumers become the final arbitrators in interpreting ads as a principal way of understanding their world and themselves (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

Gadamer (1997) argues that understanding is an interpretation because it occurs during the process of interpretation. All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words. He uses the concept of conversation in explaining interpretation. He calls interpretation the “concretion of historically effected consciousness” (Gadamer, 1997, p.389) because interpretation is an output of consumers’ cultural knowledge which is space and time dependent. For Gadamer, understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same.

Consumers’ interpretations of ad messages have long been an important and controversial research topic for two reasons. First, this unique research perspective is different from that of the positivists (i.e. the findings of interpretations are nonparametric.
outcomes) (Mick & Politi, 1989). Second, as complex visual images have increased, consumers' confusion and multiple interpretations of the ad messages have occurred.

**Multiple reading.** In postmodern culture, ambiguity is the main feature of advertising (Kaiser, Nagassawa, & Hutton, 1995). Ambiguity might be one possible reason why consumers give multiple interpretations to visual images. Ha and Hoch (1989) defined ambiguity as “the potential for multiple interpretations” (p.354). Ha and Hoch (1989) found that high cue repetition results in a narrower range of interpretation. In addition, they discovered that ambiguity is an important determinant in shaping consumers' interpretations of ads. They investigated the influence of ambiguity in advertising and its transformational effect on consumers. Transformational effect is the creation of the consumers’ favorable affective response which makes an intimate relationship between consumer and the product. During the interpretation process, ambiguity determines the degree of involvement as well as transformation effect. For this reason, increasing ambiguity in ads might be intentional on the part of the advertisers to make a connection between the consumers and the product, inducing the transformational effects.

Consumers have multiple interpretations of ads, ranging from the message the advertiser intended to unexpected negative interpretations. There has been an ongoing argument pertaining to whether text is open or closed. Bertin (1984) claimed that there is a “monoemic system” (fixed meaning) for graphics in which for “certain domain and during a certain time, all the participants come to agree on certain meanings expressed by certain signs and agree to discuss them no further” (p.3). However, as Baker (1995)
argued, the dominant semiological attitude to literary interpretation is in contrast to this "fixity of meaning." He noted that "the idea of consensus in interpretation is unsemiological and the concept of denotation is not useful because it does not and cannot happen" (Baker, 1995, p.164). One cannot assume that consumers have one assented interpretation. Diverse consumers who have various interests, ideas, and experiences may read a single advertisement, and the interpretation of the ad is open to all these diverse individuals.

There are empirical studies that indicate consumers' multiple interpretations of ads (Barthes, 1991a; Mick & Politi, 1989; Phillips, 1997; Zakia, 1986). Zakia (1986) also supported the notion of open interpretation. He strongly contended that no one meaning is possible. He maintained that "an ad must have multiple meanings if it is to attract a large and somewhat diverse audience" (p.10). He argued that one should not "string words into sentences to describe the images" (p.10).

Phillips (1997) observed consumers' interpretations of six full page color ads, which contained pictorial metaphors and discovered consumers' multiple interpretations. During the process of his study, he showed ads to informants and asked questions designed to elicit the meanings of the visual advertising images. Informants' written responses to the ads and 30-minute focus group interviews provided in-depth information about the consumers' interpretations. Interestingly, consumers were confused when they interpreted the messages of the ads.

Phillips (1997) used a term, "implicature" to indicate the ensuing meaning of the image. The term designates "information that is implicitly communicated to an
audience” (Phillips, 1997, p.78). He found that consumers infer advertising messages from complex visual images, which are used as a figure of rhetoric. Although Phillips agreed that consumers have multiple interpretations, he ascertained that consumers have only positive statements about advertisements because he found that his informants were clearly inclined to draw only positive implicatures to the complex visual ads he used. He concluded that the ad producers’ intentions were to create positive evaluations of the ad so consumers’ interpretations matched ad producers’ intentions accordingly. His proposition is that consumers understand advertisers intended messages in their readings of ads. However, his conclusion is questionable in the postmodern cultural context and his statement about consumers’ tendencies for creating positive interpretation is not always true. Postmodern ads increasingly use complex visual images. Complex visual images tend to evoke consumers’ feelings of confusion, which is a negative evaluation. Furthermore, advertisers do not always intend to elicit consumers’ positive evaluations. In a few cases, advertisers intentionally create ads which evoke negative feelings in that the ads might bring consumers’ recall. For example, Benetton ran a controversial ad of a nun kissing with a priest. The ad evokes negative evaluations in some consumers who find the image morally corrupt. However, consumers remember the ad longer than other ads for its controversy, as the advertiser intended.

Mick and Polti (1989) also agreed that there is no one interpretation of ad images, there are only multiple interpretations. Mick and Polti’s discussion (1989) is different from Phillips’ study (1997). Phillips (1997) asserts that consumers understand the advertisers’ intended meanings in their reading of ads. However, Mick and Polti
maintain that consumers rarely understand the ads intended meanings and consumers’ interpretations are not the same as the advertisers intended. Mick and Polti conclude that the concept of denotation in ads is not appropriate for analyzing visual images because it is impossible. They concluded that visual images are open to every possible interpretation and visual images are always connotation-based.

Barthes (1991a) also pointed out the importance of visual images which elicit multiple meanings. "Every image is polysemous; it implies, subjacent to its signifiers, a floating chain of signifiers of which the reader can select some and ignore the rest" (p.28). Barthes (1991a) asserted that "polysemy" means that certain elements (signs) within ads have been made to convey extra meanings they would not ordinarily have when they stand alone. Polysemy is what Barthes called discontinuous signs (p.23). There are many discontinuous signs. For the Panzani ad, Italianicity, knowledge of French, and still-life are examples of discontinuous signs. All discontinuous signs require cultural knowledge to understand them.

As many researchers have maintained, consumers’ interpretations of a single visual image are varied. Some researchers regard open interpretation as a natural consequence of advertising concerning its symbolic as well as communicative characteristics. Especially for complex visual images in fashion ads in postmodern culture, consumer interpretations are certainly multifaceted. To this end, the reader (consumer) is the main entity in deciding the meaning of the image.

Culture and interpretation. Although there are multiple readings of ads, consumers’ shared cultural knowledge is the basis of their interpretations. The
understanding of a culture is, thus, necessary for interpreting images in ads. Ad images are not merely a visual perception but are symbolic artifacts of a particular culture. Sherry (1987) considered “advertising as a cultural system” (p.441) and maintained that ads contribute to the organization of experience through the shaping and reflecting of our reality. All signs in images presume cultural knowledge. Stern (1996b) argued that consumers and ads are not separable from the culture which sustains them. In this respect, the process of reading an ad is “a dialogue between a historically situated intentional author and a culturally informed, self-motivated reader” (Scott, 1994b, p.474). An understanding of behavioral and cultural research on ads helps researchers’ interpretations of advertisements as expressions of contemporary consumer culture. Stern believes that deconstruction can be used to make hidden meanings overt and to track cultural influences.

In the process of interpretation, consumers draw their symbols and signs from the cultural knowledge they have. Barthes (1991a) used the concept of “anchoring and relay” (p.28) to explain the relationship between denotation and connotation. In an ad, a written (or spoken) caption can be an anchorage for the consumer’s interpretation. From the caption, one can stabilize one’s own meanings. The connotations and denotations are built on the basis of cultural knowledge. Using the knowledge, the consumer is able to interpret the ad’s meanings.

Phillips (1997) stated that consumers use cultural, product, and advertising knowledge to infer meanings from advertising images. Ad producers, who share a time/space social and cultural context with consumers, create ads. So each ad is created
on the basis of cultural knowledge, experience, and expressions that people share. Ad producers and consumers use the shared knowledge of various conventions, vocabularies and experiences, personalities and identities of a given culture (Scott, 1994a, 1994b). Therefore, cultural knowledge is the basis for consumer interpretation (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Scott, 1990, 1994a, 1994b; Stern, 1990).

Cultural differences contribute to different interpretations. Life theme and life history in a given culture also affect how the individual consumer interprets advertisement. Mick and Buhl (1992) researched the culturally situated act of ad interpretation by using open interviews with three Danish brothers and recording their experiences to five contemporary magazine advertisements. Mick and Buhl's empirical study provides an understanding of the close relationship between the interpretation of an ad and the life story of the respondent including consumption behavior and identity. The interview was conducted in both English and Danish to access the informants' personal history and experiences more closely. Consumer experience was investigated in order to understand how the brothers shape and create their own ad meanings. In Mick and Buhl's study, the ad experience was largely decided by three factors: the ad (its sign structure and denotative content), the consumers' personal histories, and the socio-cultural context. Two humanistic concepts—life themes and life projects—were the main focus for explaining the three Danish brothers' interpretations of the ads' connotative meanings. First, life themes (i.e., identity themes) are indicators that make consumers' behaviors and experiences anticipatory because consumers have consistent life themes. Consumers interpret advertising on the basis of their life themes, which are
closely related to their social and cultural backgrounds as well as on the basis of their transformational experiences. Life themes, thus, are important factors that decide how the consumer interprets ad meanings. Second, life projects, which can also be called “personal projects,” are extended sets of personally relevant actions. These life projects are not consistent; they can change along with one’s circumstances and life cycle. As McCracken (1987) explains, life projects are related to the meaning of one’s personal development and refinement established from a cultural knowledge. Thus, life projects are about the meanings associated with oneself and others such as private self, home and family, community, and nationality (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

Mick and Buhl (1992) suggested a meaning-based model of advertising experiences which shows how consumers construct their own meanings of ads (Appendix A). In the model, the consumer is shown in a socio-cultural context, which is the basic frame for all consumers. Within the context, four different spheres are culturally constituted: personal history, a current life-world, life themes, and life projects. The relationship among the four spheres is that the consumer has his/her own personal history but also a current life-world that includes two humanistic concepts: personal life themes and life projects. Most of the ads are created and used within the same socio-cultural context as the consumer. Each ad has two basic components—sign structure and denotative contents—as well as connotative meanings. Consumers make sense of an ad and of themselves by understanding the ads’ connotative meanings, which are decided by their life projects, as conjoined by their life themes. Through the connotation process, the lived experience of advertising can result. Interview data from the three Danish brothers
on their life histories and individual experiences provided supportive evidence for the meaning-based model.

**Consumer Response**

Several researchers conducted empirical studies on the subject of consumer response to ads. The research interest in consumer response is related to the recent theoretical shift from "text-centeredness" to "reader-centeredness." Initially, formalists as well as structuralists concentrated on the form of the text. "New criticism" was an American version of formalism from the late 1920s to the early 1960s. New criticism’s main interpretive technique was "closed reading"—new critics believed that interpretation should focus on the text itself.

However, "reader response theories" are open text-centered theories of the study of reading, and they consider how a reader reads a text (Scott, 1994b). As Scott mentioned, "Reader-response theory is not a ready made model but a collection of critics who share the agenda of moving from theories of text to the study of reading" (p.463). Reader response theories have different orientations in different academic areas. Some are socially and others are psychologically oriented, so the text is interpreted differently by different readers. The main purpose of the reader response theory is to show how reading an ad influences a consumer’s response to an ad. A consumer-response interpretation tries to show how an ad works with the knowledge, expectations, or motives of the consumer.
Reading an ad is in some ways different from understanding other texts. Scott (1994b) asserted that a theory of consumer responses to ads would need to be studied differently from consumer responses to other texts. Interpreting advertisements requires an understanding of the ad as an effort to sell. Scott (1994b) argued that when interpreting a dynamic form like advertising, the consumer must be very creative. Interpreting complex visual images in fashion ads requires more creativity to make sense out of them than does interpreting any simple visual image, because, in many cases, complex visual images do not contain any clear messages about the product being advertised. Consumers draw their meanings from their cultural knowledge, as well as from personal experiences to make the image understood. The act of interpreting an ad is an exercise in informed socio-cultural inference. The meaning is not contained in words, but it occurs in time as the consumer works with the ad (Scott, 1994b).

Semiotics is used as a way of studying advertising texts. Usually semiotics is widely used to postulate the meaning underneath the ads in connection with the structuralist perspective. However, one must also consider the fact that structuralist semiotics only focused on the meaning of the sign. It does not consider the context in which sign is used. Hence, to explain a consumer's responses to an ad, one cannot rely on a theory of signs because exposing the structure of an advertisement and accounting for its impact on consumers are not the same thing (Scott, 1994b). One branch of consumer response theory focuses on the relationship between self-creation, subjective affect, and the ad itself. Recognition of self in the ad is central to interpretation, and the
ad experience also helps create or reinforce a personal identity (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1994b).

There are a few marketing researchers interested in the relationship between texts and consumer responses (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1994b, Stern, 1996b). The importance of reader response theory is that it helps researchers study the process of reading as an essential link between the advertising text and consumer response. Stern (1996b) used textual analysis in advertising and studied reading ad text and its influences on affective consumer responses. Scott (1994b) also stressed the significance of interpreting ads for understanding consumers' responses.

Consumers' responses to ads are understood on the basis of factors such as gender and moods (or feelings). First, consumers' gender differences need to be considered. Stern (1993) examined how consumers read ads and respond from a postmodern feminist perspective. She supposes an ad to be a "gendered text" and consumer response to be "gendered reading." Two ads, Marlboro Man and Dakota Woman, were analyzed for examples of gendered text and gendered interpretation. She argued that consumers' attitudes toward the plot and characters were different on the basis of their gender. When interpreting text, males are likely to focus on only the facts literally stated in the story's text and to produce a plot without their own personal comments and empathy. Stern maintained that men are detached readers (outsider readers) who tend to read a story from an outsider's perspective. In contrast, women readers are more likely to draw general inferences related to their personal experiences and feelings. For women, interpretation of text is a process of finding their own meanings. Stern described that females are
participatory readers (inside readers) who tend to read a story from an insider’s perspective. Concerning miscomprehension of readings, there were different responses on the basis of gender. When male consumers failed to comprehend the ad message (plot), men tend to negatively express more frustration than females. Female readers were less likely to evaluate a story negatively if they failed to understand it. The females’ interpretations were more concerned with empathy and vicariously experiencing the characters’ interpersonal relationships. The women respondents showed less anger at their lack of comprehension of the difficult stories.

Second, moods and feelings toward ads also influence consumers’ responses to ads. Holbrook and Bartra (1987) studied the emotional aspects of consumer behavior toward ads. They advocated a broadened view of consumption-related emotions, focusing on the role of emotions in mediating the effects of advertising. They examined intervening emotional reactions that mediate the relationship between advertising content and attitudes toward the ad or brand. Holbrook and Bartra (1987) found that emotions (i.e., emotional, threatening, mundane, sexy, cerebral, and personal) mediated consumer responses (i.e., pleasure, arousal and domination) to advertising, and consumers’ emotional responses were discovered as an important factor influencing attitude toward the ad.

Edell and Burke (1987) also studied consumers’ feelings toward TV ads. They asserted that viewers’ feelings should be more important than their judgments of the ad’s characteristics in predicting consumers’ attitudes toward the product. They noted that those semantic judgments of the ad’s characteristics, the consumers’ feelings, and
responses about the ads are not uniform across all ads. Edell and Burke (1987) divided
the ads into two types: informational and transformational and stressed the importance of
the transformational perspective of the ad. Transformational ads create a connection
between the consumer’s experience of the advertisement and of using the brand, so that
whenever consumers remember the brand, they always recall the experience generated by
the advertisement. Edell and Burke (1987) found that negative and positive feelings co-
occur when consumers interpret a single ad. The presence of positive feelings for an ad
does not imply the absence of negative feelings. An ad may cause two contrasted feelings
at the same time—sadness as well as happiness. Feelings might also be affected by other
characteristics of the ad, such as viewing environment or situation (e.g., the sequence of
the ad) and other factors. The important point is that feelings and judgments occur
differently, and therefore they may create qualitatively different responses to ads. One
may have positive feelings toward an ad, but nonetheless have a negative judgment of it.

Edell and Burke (1987) argued that feelings are activated by nonverbal elements of the ad
such as strong visual images. Thus, feelings might make consumers have different
responses to the ad.

Considering the unique characteristic of ads as texts with the intention to sell
products, they should be studied differently from other forms of texts. The ad is an open
text through which multiple interpretations can occur. Consumers respond differently to
ads based on their interpretations. Responses are associated with readers’ knowledge,
expectations, and/or motives. Consumer responses are decided by their individual
characteristics (e.g., personal experiences, gender, mood, feelings).
CHAPTER 3.

THE RESEARCH PARADIGM

The main purpose of the study was to understand how consumers respond to postmodern fashion advertisements. Symbolic characteristics of the images in the ads and how consumers infer meanings from the images in the ads were studied. An interpretive research approach was used.

A "paradigm" is a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) which represents a worldview that shows the possible relationships between that world and its parts (Guba & Lincoln, 1996). Specifically, constructivism, one of the interpretive research approaches, was the paradigm for this study. The aim of constructivism is to reconstruct a reality based on one's understanding (Schwandt, 1994). Thus, the paradigm focuses on how people understand their worlds and how they create and share meanings about their lives (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Interpretivist approaches are ontological, that is, they seek to delineate the form and nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to the interpretivist paradigm, the nature of reality is assumed to be made of multiple and intangible constructions, which are socially and experientially based, and local and specific in nature. The form
and content of realities are dependent upon the individual person or group holding the construction. The construction is assumed to be alterable and is associated with different realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

There is an epistemological assumption that both the researcher and the researched are interactively linked, according to this paradigm. The findings are literally created as a result of the investigation process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Individual constructions can be explained only by the interaction between "the researcher" and "the researched." I have an etic perspective by which the researched is investigated from an outside position. I believe that through a process of interpretation, I can construct the meanings associated with postmodern fashion ads in American magazines and obtain an understanding of the system of meanings therein. I was originally born and raised in Korea and came to the US to continue to study in graduate school four and a half years ago. As many archeologists successfully study other cultures they do not belong to, I am studying American culture albeit popular culture. My study perspective can catch special features embodied in postmodern fashion ads in the culture, in that I do not take phenomena in the culture for granted. From this perspective, my cultural difference might lead to acute understanding (construction) of a reality embodied in the postmodern consumer culture.

A hermeneutic approach was used. The term "hermeneutics" is defined as the philosophy of the interpretation of meanings in texts (Bleicher, 1980). Hermeneutics focuses on an individual's understanding of one's life experiences, which reflects broad cultural viewpoints exclusively through language (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994).
The main goal of hermeneutics in this study is the discovery of consumers' meanings and responses to advertisements.

The process of hermeneutic analysis is regarded as the “hermeneutic circle” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989, 1990; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). The hermeneutic circle is an iterative spiral of the interpretation process. In this study, each transcribed text was interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to developing a sense of the “whole” (whole text). Through iterative process of interpretation, a comprehensive and integrated understanding of specific elements of consumers’ meanings and responses gradually became a whole. Through the reading, initial understandings of a text were modified by repeated reading over time, as later readings provided a more sophisticated sense of the meaning as a whole. As a result of the hermeneutic interpretation process, I obtained a joint construction of a reality representing consumers’ interpretations of and responses to postmodern fashion ads.

Research Process

Reasons for selecting magazine ads. One encounters many fashion ads in different channels of mass media, from fashion bulletin boards on buses to the Internet. Magazines are the most powerful media for the fashion industry. There are several reasons why fashion magazines were selected as the source of ads for the study. First, consumers have easy access to fashion magazines in grocery stores and bookstores. Consumers can easily update their fashion knowledge and have a chance to see new products and brands by skimming through magazines.
Second, historically, the development of the fashion industry has been closely connected with the development of fashion magazines. Fashion magazines have been a favorite medium of the fashion industry because they are not only the most useful way to obtain knowledge about the fashion trends of a particular time, but are also the fastest way to showcase a designer’s work (Barthes, 1991b).

Third, many consumers who are fashion conscious subscribe to fashion magazines in order to keep abreast of new styles. Consumers can learn what the newest trends are, and they can keep a record of the styles in their homes. Lastly, fashion magazines allot a significant portion of their content to advertisements. Aside from short beauty and fashion stories, most fashion magazines consist largely of fashion ads, and the numbers of these ads have been steadily increasing (Gremillion, 1997b). One reason for the increasing number of fashion ads is the increasing number of new apparel lines. Once a new apparel line is launched, the brand usually runs ads in magazines (Gremillion, 1997b), as magazines are the most powerful medium that is used to reach people in the fashion industry as well as in the public sphere. Another reason for an increase of fashion ad pages is the current boom in corporate branding and expansion in international fashion trade (Gremillion, 1997b). These trade changes have caused an influx of ads highlighting new products. Even in entertainment magazines, fashion advertising has significantly increased. Some entertainment oriented magazines—including Time Inc.’s, Entertainment Weekly, Ticketmaster’s Live!, Hachette Filipacchi’s Premiere, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, TV Guide, People and US—devoted as much as 12% of their pages to fashion advertising in 1996 (Gremillion, 1997a). The reason may be attributed to the
influence of entertainers on the fashion world. Clearly, printed material (especially fashion magazines) is the most prevalent source offering information to consumers and the fashion industry.

**Selection of advertisements.** I selected two fashion ads for the study: the Banana Republic chino ad which appeared in the April 1999 issue of *Vogue* magazine and the Calvin Klein Jeans ad which appeared in the March 1999 issue of *Vogue* magazine (Appendix E). The criteria for the ads selected were: (a) each ad was for a fashion product (e.g., clothing); (b) each brand sells both men and women’s products; (c) neither ad contained any explicitly stated product-related characteristics (i.e., utilitarian advantages such as quality and price); (d) each ad was visual (image-focused) having minimal written descriptions (i.e., only brand names and/or store locations); (e) each ad consisted of a two-page series; and (f) each brand had high consumer recognition.

**Discussion with advertisers.** I wanted to listen to what advertisers think about when they create and evaluate postmodern fashion ads. To get expert opinions and insights about the two postmodern fashion ads, I interviewed three professional advertising producers working at the Resources Company, Columbus, Ohio. The company was acknowledged as one of the biggest technology-based marketing companies located in Columbus, Ohio. The company received its fame from two famous creations. In January of 1999, the Resources Company created a television commercial for CompuServe to air on Super Bowl night, 1999 and a Victoria’s Secret ad on-line fashion show, the first time in fashion history.
The meeting was held April 20th, 1999 for two hours at the office of the Resources Company, downtown, Columbus. A professor teaching textiles and clothing at The Ohio State University, and three ad producers, and I were present at the discussion. The format of the meeting was free discussion, during which both the purposes and creation of advertising in general were discussed, as well as the characteristics of postmodern fashion ads in particular.

The advertisers’ discussion about purposes of advertising was summarized in the section of an advertising (see Chapter 2). These advertisers agreed that the selected ads were decidedly postmodern ones. Their insightful comments were useful guidelines in understanding informants’ readings as well as their responses. From the interview, the importance of the research was reconfirmed in terms of benefits for consumers and marketers alike.

Pre-analysis of advertisements. Using semiotic analysis, visual images in the selected fashion ads were deconstructed. Semiotics is closely related to the cultural form of communication (McCracken, 1990), focusing on the structure of the meaning of signs (Mick, 1986). Semiotic analysis involves deconstruction, and thus draws on the researcher’s value-mediated introspection and subjective interpretation of texts (i.e., ads). By deconstructing, I rely upon my personal insight to understand the ads’ hidden meanings. The analysis provided me with an idea of how the ads work in consumers’ minds and what they communicate before the process of interviewing the informants began.
Criteria for selecting informants. To select informants, I considered two criteria. One was the target market for the products shown in the ads. The target market for Banana Republic includes female and male consumers between the ages of 25 and 45. These consumers have professional jobs and a casual “dress down” office life style (Lippert, 1998). They are people who like wearing not only fashionable clothing in neutral palettes, but also comfortable clothing at home and at work (Lippert, 1998). The target market for Calvin Klein Jeans is members of Generation X who enjoy modern (trendy), sophisticated, sexy, clean and minimal styles (Lockwood, 1997). Generation Xers are considered to have different life styles and mind sets (e.g., strong self-identity) as compared to those of the previous generation, the baby boomers. Brancado (1999) asserted that if “generation X and baby busters are synonymous, then the group actually starts with the babies of 1958 to 1978” (Brancato, 1999, p.6). According to him, Generation Xers are “the 77 million Americans born from 1958 to 1978. As of 1999, their ages are 21 through 41” (Brancato, 1999, p.6). However, some researchers believe that Generation Xers are the Americans born between 1964 and 1978 (Carey, 1999; Dunn-Cane, Gonzalez & Stewart, 1999).

The other criterion for selecting informants was “the placement of the ad,” which is related to the target market of magazines. Advertisers place ads in different magazines because they know their readerships. Both ads were taken from Vogue magazine. Readers of Vogue are primarily female—“median reader ages ranged from 28.8 to 35.7 years and median household incomes ranged from $35,499 to 49,634” (Englis, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994, p.54).
In order to decide the total number of informants for this study, I reviewed interpretative research using hermeneutic analysis about advertising. Mick and Politi (1989) and Phillips (1997) interviewed 20 informants, while Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1990) interviewed 10 informants. Another study done by Thompson, Pollio, and Locander (1994) had only three informants. Hermeneutic research has a comparatively small number of informants than that of quantitative research in that the specific features of the study are to glean depth of understanding of a phenomenon from the interviews. From reviewing total number of informants in previous interpretative studies, as well as considering the characteristics of this study, the final number of informants I selected was twenty. I was interested in gender-based responses and interpretations; thus, half of the informants were male and the other half were female.

**Informants.** Demographic information regarding the Banana Republic and the Calvin Klein Jeans target markets and readership of *Vogue* magazine were considered as main factors in selecting informants. Since the demographic information about *Vogue*'s readership offers only "median" statistics, I decided to combine members of both the target groups of Banana Republic (age 25 to 45) and the Calvin Klein Jeans (age 21 to 41). Eighteen informants' ages 25 to 41 and two beyond the age range, at ages 44 and 42 were chosen for the study. I included the two older informants based on their familiarity with the brands and high level of fashion consciousness. All informants' educational levels were determined to be higher than a Bachelor’s degree. Their annual income was above the level of $30,000-39,999 which was considered as an acceptable wage level for professional men and women working in Columbus, Ohio. Detailed information is
All informants held professional jobs and their fashion style was "office dress-down." Fifteen informants were Caucasian and the other five were Asian. Asian informants were judged to be fluent English speakers. Pseudonyms were assigned to informants for the purpose of anonymity (Appendix B).

To insure informants' jobs were professional ones and their typical dress style was office dress-down, I visited each work place and confirmed it by observation. Interviewee's jobs were professional and included such positions as financial planner, graphic designer, web coordinator, computer programmer, and actuary. Informants were selected purposively with the help of an acquaintance who worked in these careers. Informants were asked to participate a week before my visit. Interview times were set at the convenience of the informants at informants' work places.

Pre-interviews. I conducted preliminary interviews with two informants who were graduate students in The Ohio State University's Textiles and Clothing program. The interviews were used to determine the amount of time that would generally be required per interview and to test some of open-ended questions related to the research interests. From the pre-interviews, additional questions were formulated to guide the interviews while others were modified. The questions are listed in the next section of this chapter.

Semistructured in-depth interviews. To obtain a first person description of consumers' interpretations of and responses to the postmodern ads, semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted. The format of the interview was not linear ("linear"
means that the interviewer asks questions in order and the informant answers), but was
circular (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

I started the interview by asking an open-ended question, “Would you tell me
your story of this ad?” and the informant talked freely in response. Follow up questions
and probes were interjected in the process of interviewing. During the interview process,
if the interviewee began to discuss an area of research interest before I brought it up, I
allowed the interviewee to continue and skipped the question when it came up later. To
encourage continuous dialogue as well as an in-depth approach, I occasionally repeated
what the informant previously said as O’Neal (1998) did in her research. I attempted to
elicit information from the informants about the areas of interests (see the listed questions
in p.84) during the process of interviewing. The predetermined questions were asked of
informants directly (by using exactly the same questions listed later in this section) as
well as indirectly (by using different sentences having the same intentions) to obtain the
informants’ own voices. Thus, the interview design was quite flexible throughout the
study. During the process of interviewing, new and various questions were asked to
probe new ideas and unexpected themes that the informants brought forth.

Informants were interviewed individually. They were told that the purpose of the
study was to learn about their interpretations of fashion magazine advertisements. They
were told the research was intended to uncover their natural thoughts and feelings about
the ads. Informants were shown each visual image of the fashion advertisements taken
from the fashion magazines. The Banana Republic ad was shown first and the Calvin
Klein Jeans ad followed.
After the interview, informants completed a one page information sheet about themselves (Appendix C). All informants were assured of anonymity. Each informant received an Ohio State University mug as an expression of appreciation for participating in the study. Each interview took 15 to 30 minutes. Once transcribed, the audio-tape recorded interview become a text for interpretation.

Questions used to guide the study were adapted from research by Mick and Politi (1989), and Phillips (1997). Also, additional questions were added after the pre-interview.

Questions including areas of interests guiding the interviews are listed below:

1. Would you tell me your story of this ad?
2. Tell me what you think and feel about this ad.
3. What do you think the advertiser was trying to communicate with this ad?
4. How do you know what the advertiser was trying to communicate in this ad? / What makes you think so?
5. Do you think you understand this ad?
6. Would you buy the product? / What makes you think so?

Survey. Five months after the interview, a survey was conducted with the original twenty informants in order to understand their cultural backgrounds, lifestyles and tastes which were believed to be necessary in interpreting their interpretation of the ads. The survey was designed to provide information about how the informants arrived at their interpretations. E-mail messages were sent to each informant to get their
permission to send them questionnaires. One week later, survey questions were sent to each informant and their responses were returned to me via e-mail.

Based on Bourdieu (1984)'s approach to cultural capital, a survey questionnaire was created to understand informants' cultural capital. Some questions were adopted and modified from Bourdieu's questionnaire (1984, pp.512-514), while other questions were created based upon this particular research topic. Questions regarding educational capital (i.e. informants' education), social origin (i.e., parents' educational qualifications), ideology (e.g., belief, religion), demographic factors, personal values, lifestyle (e.g., vacation, leisure, hobbies, sports), consumption style, artistic taste, music, beauty, TV and radio programs listened to were asked of informants (Appendix D). Survey information was a useful basis upon which to understand informants' interpretations and responses toward the postmodern fashion ads.

Interpretation of data. A transcriptionist was hired to transcribe the twenty audio-taped interviews. Through the process of iterative interpretation, the transcripts were read multiple times to reach a holistic understanding of the consumers' meanings and responses to the ads. Each time a narrative was read, ideas, themes and interpretations were noted and color-coded in the margins and between lines on the transcripts to obtain consumers' context-driven meanings. Through the study, I constructed a reality, which I believe represented consumers' meanings and responses to postmodern fashion ads.
Credibility of the Study

The study is a qualitative one in which the credibility is judged by its coherency, comprehensiveness, transparency, contextuality, and potentiality (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). First, the study had coherency in the interview process and the interpretation of the transcripts. I maintained coherency to obtain a holistic understanding of specific elements of consumers’ meanings and responses. For example, I kept the consistency by having the same procedure throughout the interviews across the informants. I always explained the research purpose before starting the interviews, then showed the Banana Republic ad first and the Calvin Klein ad second.

Second, my goal was for comprehensiveness in the study. I read all the texts carefully, multiple times, and took account of all thoughts as a whole and did not ignore any information which bore on the research interests. An attempt was made to deal with all questions and answers thoroughly because both were essentially important to investigating informants’ meanings and responses (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The third judge of credibility is transparency. I maintained careful records of the interview process, including what I did and saw in order to make the research transparent to others and to myself. The original records (i.e., notes or recordings) were maintained in a way that others can read them or replay to them (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Themes and ideas were borne out of the informants’ responses, and not established before the interview process.
The fourth is contextuality. I studied the visual images in the ads and the interview narratives in a given time/space context—the postmodern consumer culture. Without consideration of the postmodern cultural context, one risks interpreting informants' meanings and responses inappropriately.

Finally, to achieve potentiality (suggestiveness), I sought to understand consumer interpretation with the potential for suggestions that might be helpful for advertisers and marketers in developing their own effective advertising strategies in the future.
CHAPTER 4

SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

This chapter analyzes the postmodern characteristics as well as the symbolic meanings of the two postmodern fashion advertisements. Semiotic analysis is used to interpret characteristics and meanings of the selected ads and the analysis is considered as a way of discovering the hidden characteristics of postmodern culture embodied in the ads.

Advertising not only sells products but also creates a system of meaning. To sell products, ads intentionally create meanings that are appealing to consumers because consumers purchase products to consume the meanings embodied in ads (Ramamurthy, 1997). Ads express the symbolic exchange value of the products. Analyzing ads is a way of seeing a reality, represented by a medium, which is linked to our own lives. To understand ads' symbolic meanings I used Saussure’s dichotomous concept of signs which are comprised of signifiers of meanings and signified meanings.

The Banana Republic ad that appeared in the April 1999 issue of Vogue and the Calvin Klein Jeans ad that appeared in the March 1999 issue of Vogue were selected for
the study (Appendix E). The brand information is provided first, the semiotic analysis of symbolic meanings and the postmodern characteristics follow for each ad.

The Brand Background: Banana Republic

Banana Republic is a branch brand owned by the Gap Company. Banana Republic launched its business in 1978 primarily as a mail order business and was bought by the Gap in 1983 (Lippert, 1998). Banana Republic stopped its catalogue order business in 1988 and shifted its focus to retail. Since then, the emphasis on safari style clothes has changed to fashionable male and female apparel, from bottoms to tops and accessories.

During the 1990s, Banana Republic has provided “cool but polished clothing and accessories for people who live casual and dress-down office life styles” (Lippert, 1998, p.34). Banana Republic is for people who need “modern silhouettes” in “neutral palettes” (Lippert, 1998, p.30). The brand provides simple and clean, and classic styles, which go well with modern and chic dress-down office styles. Also, the styles are well coordinated with their neutral but classic colors, which are not loud, to get attention, but appeal to wearers. Mainly, neutral colors such as off white, light gray, heather brown, light sky blue and black are used in the products. The brand has gained its popularity from young adult male and female consumers in the 25 to 45 aged group who like to wear comfortable clothing for home and work (Lippert, 1998).
Banana Republic Advertisement

The selected ad is for items called "Chino" in the spring season of 1999. Chino is a cotton fabric used primarily for casual bottoms. Banana Republic's eight-page serial ad was published in the March 1999 issue of *Vogue*, and a shortened two-page version of the ad appeared in the April 1999 issue (Appendix E). I selected the later two-page serial ad for the study.

In the ad, a male model wearing chino pants with a black shirt stands in the foreground, and a female model wearing a chino skirt lies on her back in a field. The ad is image-focused, with only minimal written expression. The caption, "BANANA REPUBLIC, CHINO" and the telephone number is written at the bottom of the ad to help consumers locate Banana Republic shops or receive a catalogue. The situated position of the ad is to sell the image of the brand, Banana Republic. The ad does not focus on providing information about the cost of the items or the quality or features of the product. Rather, the ad tries to project the image of the chinos by the manner in which the models are posed and the chosen background. The ad is oriented to suggest to consumers a feeling of Banana Republic's chino apparel.

Postmodern characteristics. Several postmodern characteristics were found in the ads. As is the case with postmodern ads, interpretation is left open to consumers. Consumers are allowed to practice their individual capacities for symbolic investment and develop their own interpretations. Baudrillard's postmodern notion of hyperreality is
applied to open interpretation. Open interpretation suggests that there is not a single interpretation, but multiple interpretations as the notion of hyperreality suggests.

Two characteristics in the ad allow for open interpretations. First, the models’ bodies, especially faces, are cropped. Thus, consumers are able to direct all their attention to the product itself and avoid the distraction of seeing the models’ faces. Since human bodies serve as props used to communicate meanings, facial expressions are often cues to understanding or interpreting the mood. Omission of model’s faces allows the consumer to imagine the mood or project one’s own mood into the ads. The cropping of the image helps consumers actively take part in the practice of imagining the unseen.

The cropping in the ad opens its interpretation to all consumers regardless of their age, race, and attractiveness. Consumers cannot see how well known the models are, how young the models are, what their races are, or how attractive their faces are in the ad. Consumers complete the unseen parts of the models’ bodies in their own minds. Consumers might simulate the image and imagine their own faces on the models’ bodies as if they were the models.

In addition, the product image in the ad has been cropped. Thus, cropping of the garments brings a lack of product information. Because one can only see half of the chino pants, the chino skirt, and the black cotton shirts, consumers might imagine the unseen parts of the chino pants and skirt in their minds. The simulation is not real but becomes real to consumers. The simulated images in their minds replaces real images that are hyperreal. As Zakia and Nadin (1987) argued, the cropped image could help consumers participate in the fantasy that exists within the ad.
Cropping has been used as an important advertising editing style both in modern and postmodern ads. However, there is a difference in using cropping between these two ads. In the modern ad, the protagonist was a product being advertised; thus cropping was a way of getting consumer attention to the product of the ad. Images of models' faces and background, which may raise distractions preventing focusing on the products were cropped in order to focus consumers' attention on the products. Modernist ads always contained the complete image of the product. In the postmodern ad, however, the protagonist is no longer the product. The focus has shifted from the products to the consumers who read the advertisement. Postmodern advertisements invite consumers to the ad and entice them to actively participate in readings the ads. Thus, cropping provides ambiguity, which stimulates involvement and is used as a way to open the ad to numerous interpretations. Images of the models' faces and other body parts, background, and even sometimes the image of the product, which were not cropped in the modern ad, are often cropped in the postmodern ads. Thus, consumers are not able to see the complete image of the products. This lack of information adds ambiguity and causes consumers to use their imagination to complete the messages in the ad.

In the chosen ad, this cropping is aimed at postmodern consumers who are "Generation X'ers." Generation X'ers tend to be very self-reliant as well as independent—they typically love to think and act independently as well as uniquely. Carey (1999) notes that Generation X'ers' self-reliance stems from their personal experiences. The children of baby boomers, they grew up at a time when the US divorce rate was tripling. In addition, the mothers of Generation X'ers were entering the work
force in record numbers, with Generation X’ers subsequently ending up as “latchkey kids” or spending substantial time in day care centers. As a result of their personal experiences, they typically become self-reliant. Also, as compared to their parents (baby boomers) Generation X’ers value products and companies differently based on their own thoughts. Baby boomers sought security by buying, wearing, and doing the same things as other people. Authority seriously influenced baby boomers. In contrast, Generation Xers are more prone to new, unique, or unusual things. They are less influenced by any authoritative figures (Carey, 1999). The cropping of the image makes room for Generation Xers to actualize themselves in the ad.

Second, the ad is very ambiguous in that there is no one standard interpretation of the images it presents. There is no written expression explaining why the models are in the field, what they are doing, and what kinds of product qualities Banana Republic Chinos have. The ambiguity allows for the consumers’ curiosity as well as their multiple interpretations. Ha and Hoch (1989) noted the importance of ambiguity as a factor that evokes a personal relationship between the consumers and the ad (or the product). Consumers attempt to understand the ambiguity, so they interpret the ad on the basis of their personal experiences and imagination. Through the reading process, the ambiguity is transformed into their stories. As a result of the reading, consumers can experience intimacy with the ad and distinguish the brand from that of other similar clothing companies. Postmodern consumers are open to new and different experiences (Carey, 1999) which provide excitement. They do not hesitate to become actively involved in
new things. Thus, an ambiguous ad catches their attention and contributes toward long-term memory of the brand.

Lastly, the gestures and body poses are to be considered. The body has been a significant issue not only in academic research but also in popular culture (Craik, 1995; Kroker & Kroker, 1987; O’ Sickey, 1994; Shilling, 1993). The position of the body in contemporary popular culture reflects unprecedented individualization; people express their identities through their bodies. For the postmodern consumer, the body is the foundation upon which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self and the world. The body has significance as a personal resource as well as a social symbol which expresses messages about a person’s self-identity (Shiling, 1993). In the ad, only the human bodies are used as props. The models’ gestures and body poses are used as a communication tool expressing the advertiser’s intention, which is to increase product sales.

Messages in the ad. In the ad, the body poses of the models are set in a natural background and the chino products combine with the atmosphere to make a harmonious sign: a free casual style. The male model stands in the foreground with one hand opened and the female model lies on her back in a field with one leg stretched toward the sky. The models’ body poses are natural and relaxed. The poses are cues signifying freedom and their lifestyles, which are carefree, easy going and relaxed. Also these relaxed, natural, and carefree signs suggest some degree of familiarity between the two individuals.

The background of the ad is a natural horizon and field which signify nature, which is related to the natural feeling of chino. The background also signifies their
relaxed life style. The background is well coordinated with the product. The chino products signify a casual, comfortable easy-wearing style. The clothing items are signifiers of causal wear that further signify the feeling of nature and relaxation. In the ad, the products, chino pants and skirts, represent freedom and relaxation.

The theme of the ad is “nature.” The signifiers, which are body poses, the background, and the chino products create resonance of the signified, “nature.” First, the models’ body poses are different those of in modern era. The models’ body poses signify the sign of “nature”. In modern era, models’ body poses in ads were limited in certain ways for example, putting one arm on the waistline with one leg put one step forward. However, in the ad, models’ body poses are very natural and free which were rarely seen in modern era. Second, the background, a field, is another signifier expressing the theme of the ad, “nature”. A field is not a studio setting but a natural place where is neither modified nor manipulated. Third, the product, Chino is a signifier of the theme, “nature”. Chino is comfortable as well as casual fashion item which consumers can wear in their daily lives.

The female model lies in the field with one leg extending toward the sky and the male model extends one arm with an open hand. It is an important postmodern theme, which implies “do what your natural feelings say.” Naturalism also signifies freedom and unrestraint. Naturalism is also related to the choices that postmodern consumers make. Materialization due to the development of technology brought opportunities to postmodern consumers experience various life choices. Postmodernists do not abide by rules, which modernists trusted and never doubted, but rely on choices they make which
are based on their individual wills and desires. Featherstone (1991) discussed one of the postmodern characteristics, which suggests that “there are no rules, just choices.” The concept of naturalism is closely related to the postmodern concept of “relativism.” Relativists strongly believe that there is no one standard of reality upon which everyone must rely, but rather, there exist different realities. In the ad, the field is a place in which “anything goes” because everything is based on ones’ natural feelings and self will.

Color in the ad acts as a signifier of nature. The background color is very light and harmonizes with the color of chinos worn by the models. This natural background tone also signifies comfort and relaxation. The earth tone of the chinos is echoed in the natural background color as well as the light beige color found in the dried field. The other color connection is the black of the male model’s shirts and of the female model’s shoes. The color, black signifies trendiness. Black shoes and shirts signify that the Banana Republic clothing is also trendy. Thus, the color match of both earth tone chinos and black, and the female model’s black shoes signify that consumers can wear this style at the office as well.

Other elements in the ad signify sex. First, the female wears a short mid-thigh length skirt while lying on her back in a field with one leg in the air. Considering social norms in the given culture, a woman wearing a short skirt does not lie in a field with one leg stretched toward the sky. Her way of posing is a signifier of the signified, her sexual intention to get attraction from the man. Second, the ad signifies sex in the open field. It insinuates risk-taking and thrill seeking which young postmodern consumers might do. The ad also signifies the commodity fetishism insinuating the male phallic nature. The
male model’s pants’ pocket is pulled inside out and possibly represents the phallic nature of the male model.

The Banana Republic ad differentiates its chino products from other brands of chinos. The brand suggests to consumers that if they want to have free and relaxed lifestyles, and sex with their partners, buy these chinos. In the process of differentiation, image is most often manipulated by marketers. Therefore, consumers who have never tried The Banana Republic chinos believe in the difference consciously and/or unconsciously. Actual product differences in quality, fabrication, and construction may not exist between this and other brands. The framing and structural devices which the advertisers use are so well established that consumers read them unwittingly.

Photographs have played an important role in the production of signs in ads. In the Banana Republic ad, the background appears hazy and the male model’s chino pants are the main focus. Camera angles decide the signifiers and the signifieds which are from a constructed and coded image. In addition, photography also creates images expressing human emotions and relations. In the ad, sexual connotation such as the phallic nature of the male model and the female model’s sexual appeal is created by photography. The photo-image is cropped and zoomed so the main focus of the ad is the male and the female model’s body poses. Also the free and natural feelings are created and stressed by photography.
The Brand Background: Calvin Klein Jeans

Fashion designer Calvin Klein graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology in 1962 and founded his company in 1969. In the fall of 1992, Calvin Klein changed the name of his men’s and women’s line of apparel from Calvin Klein Sport Collections to simply Calvin Klein (cK). He also named one part of Calvin Klein Sport, the denim collection, “Calvin Klein Jeans” (Parola, 1992). Calvin Klein Jeans has grown rapidly. After an explosion in growth from 1994 to 1996, the brand increased its sales from $59 million to $472 million (Socha, 1998).

As of May 1998, cK jeans had roughly 400 shops in department stores. Some 125 were in misses’ departments, 40 in juniors, and the balance in men’s and children’s areas. According to the market research firm Glad Stone, “cK Calvin Klein Jeans controls the largest market share in department stores in both misses’ and junior categories for jeans over $40: about 40% shares in misses’, and 34% in juniors” (Socha, 1998, p.12). Calvin Klein’s philosophy for designing is “better, more sophisticated and cleaner” (Lockwood, 1997, p.22). Calvin Klein said the following about his design concept: “I have always had a clear design philosophy and point of view about being modern, sophisticated, sexy, clean and minimal” (Lockwood, 1997, p.22). He added,

Sticking to that design philosophy helps to build the images. Then you have to market it. You think about the advertising and what the product is all about. In terms of the whole business, it’s once again, thinking about what modern people need....I can apply my design philosophy to Generation X and think about young people and to more sophisticated people who want luxury clothes” (Lockwood, 1997, p. 22).
Calvin Klein Jeans is positioned in the market as the brand for every male and female, from child to adult. Its products are currently being sold globally. Despite cultural sensitivities, Klein does believe that sending the same message to various parts of the world is an effective strategy. “We are in the world of communication. People know instantly what is going on everywhere. The same campaign can work all over the world” (Lockwood, 1997, p.24). Thus, his ads have been distributed globally, with the same style clothing and the same theme.

Klein’s ads have achieved notoriety for their sexually suggestive content. These ads have brought him much attention, both positive and negative, even more than he himself expected. The attention began with his controversial ad of 15 year-old actress Brooke Shields wearing tight Calvin Klein Jeans and saying, “You know what comes between me and my Calvin’s: Nothing” in TV ads in 1980 (Lockwood, 1997, p.24). Television stations, WCBS and WABC in New York, banned the ad. His ad for Obsession fragrance featured the nude model, Kate Moss lying across a sofa and was banned in London by the UK Advertising Standards Authority. A six page jeans ads appeared in teen magazines such as YM, as well as Rolling Stone and Mademoiselle which featured a teenager touching her breasts and a centerfold of a woman wearing white panties which were visible beneath her denim miniskirt (Lockwood, 1995a). Consumer objections centered on the designers’ use of teen-age models in poses that evoked images of child pornography (Lockwood, 1995b).
Calvin Klein continues to do controversial jean advertising, and he has said that he runs the risk of being misunderstood. Calvin Klein added, "I like to think our ad is on the edge and is very contemporary. I feel the mood has to be prettier, healthier and not so down. We are focusing on cool, real people not people using drugs. We can see how that can be misinterpreted" (Lockwood, 1997, p.24). "If someone thinks these ads are pornographic, they are reading something into them that was not intended" (Lockwood, 1993, p.2).

**Calvin Klein Jeans Advertisement**

The Calvin Klein ad selected for the study is a two-page black and white photograph. There is a young male model in the center and a young female model on the left side with only the cK jeans brand logo on the right page. Both pages of the ad attract consumers attention because of its layout and the black and white color scheme. The left page, in particular, catches consumers attention for its young, attractive models and suggestive mood, while the brand logo on the right page also attracts consumer attention for its conspicuous color (i.e., red and white on a black background) and its simplicity.

**Postmodern characteristics.** First, the ad is multipage. The ad producers I interviewed described multiple page usages as a postmodern characteristic (E. Johns, M. Volpatt & J. Barrett, personal communication, April 20, 1999). Although multipage ads existed in the modern era, they were rarely over 2 or 3 pages. In the postmodern era, many fashion brands are frequently presented in ads of more than 5 pages. One example is Calvin Klein’s perfume “cK be” which was published in 1999, in fashion magazines in
an 11 page series. Calvin Klein as well as other fashion designers use many series of multipage ads. The goal is to get more consumer attention by using more magazine space. Magazines are filled with numerous advertisements for different products which distract the consumer attention. Mulitpage ads increase the degree of exposure of the brand, reduce clutter, and get consumers attention.

Second, the ad expresses a postmodern mood (Gitlin, 1989a) as seen by the models’ gestures and facial expressions. These moods are different from those of modernist ads in that the images are not limited to emotions such as happiness, joy, and love. In the modern era, ads contained only positive images. However, moods illustrated in postmodernist ads are multifaceted, ranging from apathetic to violent which were never presented in the modern era. The facial expression of this ad is apathetic and possibly rebellious. The male model does not have any facial expression. He expresses no emotions. The female model looks apathetic and mysterious which intrigues consumers. She is not happy, sad, or angry. Her eyes are staring toward the camera. She looks rebellious as if she wants to say something to the consumers. According to Goffman’s study (1979) women in modern advertising only have positive emotional responses such as pleasure, delight, laughter, and glee (states of happiness) transported by their faces. However, in the ad, the female model’s emotional state is not positive but ambiguous. The female model seems to express her rebellious feeling to the audience. This lack of clarity defined emotional state delineates this ad as a postmodern one.

Third, the use of black and white photography is a postmodern characteristic. Modernists believe that history moves in the direction of progress that is aided by
technology, science, and rational thought. Postmodernists, however, believe that history has ended and progress is not linear (Firat, 1991; Morgado, 1996). Although technology makes it possible to reproduce a perfect “photographic analogon” (Barthes, 1991a), advertisers use the classic look of black and white photos to entice postmodern consumers. Modern advertisers have typically used glossy, high-color photography to create glamorous and fantastic worlds of desire for their products. However, recently some postmodern advertisers have chosen black and white imagery which might foster an image of no-nonsense frankness (Wells, 1997). A black and white trademark is used for both cK jeans and Calvin Klein perfume (e.g., Eternity, Obsession, cK be, cK one).

Black and white photography suggests a reality (Wells, 1997), perhaps reminding consumers of old documentary films (e.g., the 1920’s and 1950’s war documentaries), which depict historical reality. In addition, the black and white ads insinuate nostalgia of modernity, which attract more consumer attention than a perfect photographic analogon (i.e., color portrait pictures).

Fourth, the concept of “real people” is a postmodern characteristic. Calvin Klein says that the real people concept is about honesty rather than fake glamour (Sloan, 1996). The ad depicts real young people in a real life situation. The models’ body poses and their way of wearing their clothing and hairstyles are very natural. The female model’s hair is tousled and her mouth is open. For fashion shooting, models usually have a glamorous look and typical body poses such as putting one arm on the waistline with one leg put one step forward. However, the models’ body poses are very natural as if they were in a real life situation. The garments (denim pants, T-shirt) have wrinkles that look
as if the models have worn them for hours. The background is the beach—a natural place. Consumers can feel more intimacy with this naturalistic setting than with any studio setting because the background and the models are real and consumers can easily put themselves in the ad.

Fifth, the ad is also related to Boorstin's (1968) concept of the consumption community. Lifestyle is a characteristic which stylizes one's life by the purchase and display of consumer goods (Featherstone, 1991). There is no requirement of faith, credos, and rituals to join the community. All that is required for the membership of the community is the purchase of this product. Purchasing the product means possessing not only the product but also the meanings related to the lifestyles described in the ad. To be a member of a consumption community means having the fantasy of lifestyle the community members have. In the cK ad, youth, sex, and carefree lifestyles are the fantasy cK jeans members have.

Messages in the ad. In the ad, the main themes are sex and youth. These themes are connoted by the signifiers in the ad. First, sex is repeated by several signifiers which are the background, the models' body poses, and their manner of wearing clothing. The repetition of sex by the signifiers provides resonance in the ad. Although there is no written copy explaining the images in the ad, consumers easily decode the signified as sex. The background, a beach at night, is a signifier, which represents a romantic place where people might engage in sexual activity. The manner in which the clothing is worn also signifies sex. The male model's drawstring-pants are hung low on his hips while the upper part of the body is exposed. Her T-shirt is short and her baggy pants are hung over
her hips with her hipbone exposed. In addition, the female model seems to not be wearing any underwear which seems as a signifier of her morality—promiscuous and sexually alluring. It also suggests that she is easy to involve in sexual activity—"casual sex," which young people might choose as a lifestyle. Also the bottom of the male model’s and the female model’s pants are wet. The wet pants are signifiers of the models’ intimate relationship. The wet pants insinuate the relevance between these models; the models may have spent some time together and had romantic relations on the beach in the past and they stand on the beach together at night in the present.

The models’ appearances and body poses are other signifiers of sex. The models are young and possess the cultural ideal of beauty. The male model has a good looking and well-built body. The female model also has a good looking and thin body which fit the ideal of beauty. The female model’s hair is tousled and her mouth is open which are sexually suggestive. The male model’s eyes are fixed on the female model’s body, specifically on her breasts and he is touching his abdomen which suggests that he is sexually interested in the female model’s body.

The second theme of the ad is youth. The cK ad differs from the Banana Republic ad, which has a cropped image, because consumers can clearly see the complete picture of the products (T-shirts, drawstring pants, and chinos). However, the main selling point of the ad is not the products themselves but the image of a youthful lifestyle. The term, “lifestyle” is used to refer to the “distinctive style of life of specific status groups” (Featherstone, 1991, p.83). “Lifestyle” connotes “… individuality, self-expression, and stylistic self-consciousness” (Featherstone, 1991, p.83). The lifestyle in
the ad is very casual, carefree, rebellious, and independent. The models stand together, but they are detached because there is distance between them. Also the models do not look into each other’s faces. The male model is watching the female model’s body. He is doing what he wants to do. The female model does not care what he is doing and is only staring at the camera. Their body poses and the focus of their eyes are signifiers of their “independence” and “lack of care” from one another. Only both of their wet pants are the commonality and the cue to their relationship. The pants signify that the models’ know each other and they have a certain relationship. They might be sexually interested in each other, but it does not mean that they are either really concerned or know each other well. This pose is congruent with the description of the personal characteristics of Generation X’ers who are the main actors of postmodern consumer culture.

As in the Banana Republic ad, the models’ bodies are used as a communication tool. On the one hand, the male model’s body is tilted toward the right side where the female model stands. His head is tilted downward and he looks at the female model’s body. His left leg is extended one step toward the female model and his left hand is on his abdomen. The way his body pose is a signifier of the signified: Calvin Klein’s signature “c”. On the other hand, the female model’s head is leaning down and her left arm is folded backward. Her pose is slanted. The female model’s body pose is a signifier of the signified: Calvin Klein’s signature, “K.” Calvin Klein’s logo is “cK. The “c” is a small letter and “K” is a capital letter. The amount of attention the models have signifies the difference between the small and the capital letter. Although the models’ body sizes are similar, the female model occupies the center of the ad and gets more
attention than the male model does. These models’ bodies on the left page signify the brand logo, “cK,” which is coordinated with the alphabetical logo on the right page. The models’ bodies are used as figurative speech to denote the designer’s logo, cK.

In the ad, the female model is placed in the center and is the one whose eyes make contact with the camera (or audience). This signifies dominance, confidence, and rebelliousness because women are rarely photographed in ads staring directly into the camera. In contrast, the male model is looking at the female models’ body and not the camera. The lowering of the male model’s head signify his efforts to withdraw attention from the scene and conceal his feelings. His body pose and eye focus are signifiers of a lack of confidence and objectification of the female body.

The models’ image portrayed in the cK ad is different from the one the modernists’ culture portrays. In the modernist culture, males are usually depicted as older and cleverer than females, and the males are portrayed as the leaders of the relationship between them. In the ad, however, the male model looks to be in his teens, and the female model looks to be in her early twenties. The female model looks more mature than does the male model. In addition, women are usually portrayed as passive, but men are portrayed as the protagonists who lead a story’s plot in modernist’s culture (Carroll, 1995). In the ad, the female model’s body is objectified by the male model’s gaze. The male model is staring at the female model’s body. Although the viewer can not overlook the fact that she is displayed as an object of voyeurism, the female image in the ad is clearly different from those prevalent in most modernist ads.
The models' body poses, fashion styles, background, and cK logo combine to form a single text that suggests, "if you want to be like these cool models who enjoy nights of romance at the beach and have a carefree, independent lifestyle, purchase these cK products and become a member of the cK community." Wearing a certain kind of garment may differentiate a person from others, but may also show one's affinity for a particular group. Consumers know that there are various choices of lifestyles represented in various styles of clothing, leisure activities, consumer goods, and bodily dispositions. Consumers depict their own lifestyles by consuming fashion goods with symbolic messages that express their self-identities. The advertisers and marketers continuously establish a monopoly in defining legitimate cK tastes within the cultural realm, and these created tastes become indicators to distinguish between what is tasteful and what is not tasteful for young people. The cK membership, therefore, is used as the logic in the symbolic system to produce distinctions in tastes which contribute to the reproduction of the existing relationship between the members (who purchase the product) and nonmembers (who do not purchase the product).
CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF CONSUMER MEANINGS AND RESPONSES

This chapter provides an analysis of consumers' interpretations of and responses to the two selected postmodern fashion advertisements. Data from twenty transcribed interviews were used in interpreting consumers' meanings and responses to the ads. The hermeneutic circle, an iterative spiral of the interpretative process, was used to develop a holistic understanding of the transcribed interviews.

In the first part of this chapter, I discussed the different perspectives of the informants' interpretations of meanings to construct a reality of postmodern consumers' understanding of postmodern fashion advertisements. First, story plots the informants created for the purpose of their interpretations were analyzed. The analysis supported the idea that 1) informants undeniably shared cultural knowledge and 2) individual differences as they pertained to symbolic meanings found in the ads. Second, informants' interpretations were created based on observable cues in the ads such as background, models' body poses, and products. Therefore, I discussed what informants read from the ads. Third, advertising knowledge is an important part of cultural
knowledge many informants shared. Thus, previous advertising knowledge, which guides the informants’ interpretations of the ads was discussed. Fourth, the informants’ interpretations presenting unique characteristics of postmodern consumer culture and postmodern fashion advertising were discussed. The interpretation provided an understanding of how postmodern consumer culture and postmodern fashion ads were different from modern consumer culture and modern fashion advertising. Fifth, evoked emotions (feelings) and messages about lifestyles in the informants’ interpretations of the postmodern fashion ads were analyzed. The analysis revealed how the informants arrived at their final meanings from the readings, and how those readings led to their purchase intentions. Sixth, through the process of reading, informants’ self-recognition was studied. By investigating consumers’ interpretations of visual images in the ads, I was able to understand how the informants infer meanings in the ads based on their cultural knowledge and individual experiences.

In the second part of this chapter, the similarities and differences of the informants’ readings were discussed. Different social situations such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and cultural capital were considered in explaining the similarities and differences in the informants’ readings.

In the third part of this chapter, the informants’ responses to the ads concerning their evaluations and the possibility of purchase were discussed. The discussion provided a guideline for marketers to understand postmodern consumers in order to create effective postmodern fashion advertisements.
Interpretation of Consumer Meanings

Interpreting consumers’ meanings requires an understanding of both consumers’ tastes as well as a “broader narrative context of historically established cultural meanings” (Thompson, 1997, p.440). Cultural knowledge, which includes cultural meanings, is the primary basis for consumers’ interpretations (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Scott, 1990, 1994a, 1994b; Stern, 1990). Eco (1984) suggested that three factors are important in understanding consumers’ interpretations of ads: (a) advertiser (sender); (b) consumer (reader); and (c) culture (context). These three factors are essentially related, and they influence consumers’ understanding of an ad. Advertisers create ads on the basis of cultural expectations, and consumers interpret advertising based on the type of cultural knowledge they have acquired. “A culture is a living legacy of historically established meanings that provide the conditions of intelligibility from which people make sense of their lives” (Thompson, 1997, p.449).

Individual differences also exist in the process of informants’ interpretations of the ads. Consumers make their own interpretations of ads based on their individual backgrounds, such as their gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, and so on. Interpretations are intrinsically social and interactive processes of perceived meanings. Consumers develop interpretive viewpoints from their own individual backgrounds (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson, 1997). Cultural meaning is itself constituted and conveyed through a consumer’s interpretation of ads, which contains the consumer’s personal history and collective meanings used to create one’s sense of social identity (Thompson, 1997).
Story telling. Thompson (1997) stressed the importance of “story
telling” (narratives) in understanding consumers’ self-identities. These identities present
established cultural meanings as well as individual differences in the study of advertising.
Consumers usually create the story plots in their readings of complex visual images in
ads. Plot is defined as a “narrative structure that imposes a chronological order upon
events and organizes these events into a meaningful whole” (Thompson, 1997, p.443).
Story telling entails the creation of a plot which is continuously revised in the consumers’
interpretation process to make sense of the advertising (Thompson, 1997).

Each informant was asked to tell a “story” for each ad. Informants demonstrated
both shared cultural knowledge as well as individual differences in their story telling. In
this section of the study, informants’ stories of the Banana Republic ad were told. They
drew upon both shared cultural knowledge and their individual differences to create
meaning.

In the Banana Republic ad, many of the informants’ story plots were created
based on two of the significant cues, the male model’s pulled out pocket and the male
model’s empty hand. Informants understood the cues as an indicator of having ‘no
money’ or as ‘missing something’.

Henry: Um......What it looks like to me is he’s pretty much saying, “I
don’t have any money”, they’ve gone for a walk, a couple have
gone for a walk. That’s what I think the story is. Maybe they
wanted to stop somewhere and he said, “Ah. I can’t stop
anywhere. I don’t have any money”.
... My guess is that the intention was to give the impression that if
you’re wearing chinos, be causal, you’ll have a good time, you’ll
be with somebody (laughs you’ll) and you don’t need any money.
Well, in fact I think pulling the pocket inside out is a way of suggesting that, “we’re not so expensive”, but, you know, so they’re trying to give this message without actually saying it, and, unfortunately, I think they are very expensive for what they sell, so....at least compared to what other things you can buy.

Hanna: Uh, this one, I’m thinking he doesn’t have money. He’s like spent all of his money.

Alex: Oh, well, uh, it looks as if they are trying to convey that something was going on in the hay here and the gentleman’s stood up and now he has nothing left in his pocket where he thought something should have been. Maybe his car keys, because his hand’s out in sort of an exasperated fashion and her heel is kicked up. His empty, his pocket being pulled out says to me that he’s missing something. He can’t find something so he is, either she took it, took the car keys so they’d stay out there together longer, or he’s lost them somewhere in all this.

Mary: Uh, he’s out of money and she’s laughing her head off. She’s, she’s laughing so much that she’s on the ground. Other than that, I don’t really see all that much of a story.

Jimmy: Um, well basically it looks like, uh, more or less the guy’s standing there in a field and, uh, the girl’s trying to seduce him with the legs and he has no money.

Mark: I can really find, the guy’s flat broke and she’s either laughing (laughs) because the guy’s broke so...or she’s shocked the guy’s broke.

Victoria: The first thing that comes to mind is that they spent all their money on their clothes...... .... Apparently he is out of something but I have no idea what it is.

Hanna: I don’t know. It’s almost like two separate pictures because I think
of something totally different when I look at this with the money, um....which I don’t think this is really a good ad because it, people could interpret that as you lose, if you buy these clothes, I mean you spend all your money. Your pocket is empty. (Said with almost a laugh). Um, but, yeah, that’s probably, probably about it. This, I don’t have really any interpretation. It’s sort of like she’s laying in the field or something. I mean I don’t, I don’t interpret it to be like a sexual attraction or anything like that so much.

Dave: Well my other one, interpretation is the negative side of that, saying that she took all the money.

Issac: Um, I don’t exactly get why he has this thing [the pulled out pocket] out here. What that has to me, I suppose that is kind of indicating to me that he has spent quite a bit on this girl here. (laughs)

For many informants, the pulled out pocket and the male model’s empty hand meant “I don’t have anything left” or “I don’t have any money left” or “I lost something.” It shows that the informants had shared cultural knowledge about what the male model’s body pose and the pulled out pocket meant. Although there were no written expressions about what the body pose and the pulled out pocket meant and how they related to the scene, the informants understood what the cues signified. Thus, the meanings of the cues are an example of shared cultural knowledge for the consumers in US culture.

Although many informants had shared meanings of the two significant cues (i.e., the male models’ empty hand and pulled out pocket in the ad) some informants also had their own individual meanings of the cues. Victoria’s statement (see previous excerpt) insinuated that she caught a subtle sexual connotation from the cues. Victoria stated in her interview that the models spent all of their money on their clothes. She understood
the male model’s empty hand and the pulled out pocket indicating a lack of money. But, ironically, in her next statement, she added that she did not know what he was missing. This was a contradiction; she admitted that she believed all their money was gone, but yet she believed the male model was still looking for something. This suggests that she thought something else was missing but perhaps did not want to discuss it in the interview. Since she interpreted that the male and female had an intimate relationship and were likely to engage in sexual relations, it is presumable that she thought that the male was looking for, but could not find a condom. Victoria is a 30 year old, single, Caucasian, and web designer. The reason she did not want to talk about the sexual connotation she obtained might be due to her religious beliefs. She is an active Christian (Protestant) and goes to church three times a week and belongs to a bible study group. It is likely that her devotion to the Christian faith precludes her from openly discussing sexual matters. It is possible that she subconsciously decided to avoid discussion of the ‘missing condom’, and instead claimed she did not know what was missing.

Luke’s interpretation of the ad is another example. At first, Luke suggested that the female seduced the male to spend all of his money on her. His interpretation of the pocket and the male model’s empty hand, initially, was that he had “no money.” But in the middle of the interview, he suddenly added a statement about sexual connotations he perceived being present in the ad. He commented:

Luke: Oh.....I just got like sexual kind of a connotation out of this....
He's looking for something in his pocket. And he can't find it.
(laughs)
I,... I...., I don't want to go into detail with that thought.
Um, now I'm seeing it's, it's telling a story. (laughs)

Before I didn't understand so I was kind of confused so I didn't like it, but I think it's like typical ad, um, typical fashion ad. It has like a sexual... connotation. Yeah.

I think typical fashion advertisement, they concentrate on sex and, and sort of...I think it's, what I think is, uh, true, I think this is like better example.

Luke is a 30 year old, single Asian engineer. He clearly knew what was missing for the male model: a contraceptive. However, in his interview, he was clearly uncomfortable discussing it. He murmured a bit and tried to avoid mentioning it directly. He stated, “I,... I...., I” and gave up talking about it. He added, “I don’t want to go into detail with that thought.” He is a Christian (Protestant) and a regular church-goer. His religious beliefs might be a possible reason that he was uncomfortable discussing the sexual connotations with the interviewer. Perhaps another reason was that he and I (interviewer) were acquainted with one another prior to the interview. Since I was not a stranger to him and since I am a female, he might have felt uncomfortable discussing the sexual connotations objectively. One possible reason he did not want to talk about ‘what was missing’ might be due to his ethnicity. He is a Korean American and I (interviewer) am a Korean as well. In Korean culture, discussing sex openly is taboo. Even though he immigrated to the US more than 20 years ago and received all of his education in the US, he knows Korean culture well. Thus, it is likely that he did not want to act in an improper or disrespectful manner by elaborating on what he believed were sexual connotations.
Two female informants interpreted the male model’s pulled out pocket to connote a phallic symbol. None of the male informants mentioned that they thought the pocket served as a phallic symbol. Instead, male informants pointed to the female model’s leg as a sign of sex appeal. One female informant briefly stated the phallic symbolism in the ad during the interview:

Sally: .... Um, this sort of looks phallic to me, but maybe I’m just strange I don’t know. (laughing)

During the interview, she never mentioned the sexual connotation of the pocket again. Instead, she interpreted the pocket as suggestive of the male model’s “lacking money” in the remainder of her interview. Sally is a 25-year-old single Caucasian web designer. Her personal values might be one reason for her to avoid talking about the sexual connotation. She believed that “making moral choices” is the most important thing in her life. Probably, she did not think that her interpretation about the phallic symbolism of the male model’s pocket was appropriate to discuss, based on her morals. Another possible reason she did not want to talk about the phallic symbol of the male model’s pocket might be her religious beliefs. She is Catholic and she goes to church every week. Catholics consider morality as one of the important doctrines of their religion and an open discussion of sexual connotations might not consistent with her moral views.

Amy also insinuated the sexual connotation of the male models’ pocket, but she could not say that it was surely the advertiser’s intention.
Amy: I mean it [the pulled out pocket] could have sexual, you know, they’re some games people can play with that, but...it’s not, um, it’, not, oh how do you say, coherent. It doesn’t tell a good, picture.....a good story. It’s not smooth or even clever. But, that’s all I can see is maybe with the hand he’s extending it to help her up. I don’t know.

After the interview, Amy added to her statement related to the sexual connotation in the ad. It is presumable that the reason she said it after the interview was she did not want to tape record the sexual component of her interpretation. Amy is a 36 year old single Caucasian statistician. She might think that the sexual connotation did not relate to this study and thus, tried to avoid discussing it in her interview. In her interview, she was curious about the advertiser’s intentions in the ad and expressed frustration at not having a clear understanding of the advertisers’ intention.

The informants seemed to believe that the sexual connotations they obtained from the ad were negative interpretations. As Phillips’ (1997) study suggested, if informants believe an ad has negative insinuations (e.g., sexual connotation) they tried to avoid the negative interpretations and instead drew positive interpretations. It was not always true that the informants obtained positive interpretations from these postmodern ads. However, the informants seemed to want to attribute positive interpretations. More discussions about the tendency of avoiding negative interpretations of the ad are provided later in this chapter.

In summary, informants’ interpretations were open and multiple. As I discussed previously, certain cues, for example the male model’s pocket and the empty hand were decoded differently based on each individual’s interpretation. Informants understood the
pocket as an indication or sign of "having no money," "missing car-keys," "missing contraceptive devise," or "a phallic symbol." In addition, each informant's story plots were different based on how one signified the cues one obtained from the ad and how one projected oneself into the ad. Many informants had the shared cultural meaning of the signs in the ad (e.g., the male model's empty hand means "no money" or "lacking something"). However, their stories were multiple and various based on their own cultural experiences, cultural knowledge, and individual characteristics.

Ad images are a visual cue as well as a symbolic artifact of a given culture. All signs in images presume cultural knowledge. Consumers decode the messages in the ads from the cultural knowledge they hold. As Stern (1996 b) discussed, consumers cannot separate themselves from the culture which surrounds them. The informants' interpretations of the male model's pocket and body pose suggest that target consumers who share a cultural context have common as well as individual differences in their reading of ads.

**What informants read.** Informants understood the ads based on relationships between signs they found in the ads. Models' body poses, styles of dress, and backgrounds were mainly used in determining relationships. There were two relationships most of the informants used: one was between the male and the female model, and the other was between the models and the product. First, Alex's interpretation of the Banana Republic ad (see previous excerpt) was about the two model's relationship in the ad. He told a story about the male model's empty hand and pulled out pocket based on the models' relationship in the ad (e.g., "... it looks as if they
[the models] are trying to convey that something was going on in the hay here”). The relationship was the foundation of his story telling of the ad. Second, Henry's interpretation of the Banana Republic ad (see previous excerpt) was about the relationship between the models and the product. Since the informants were aware of that they were asked to interpret the ads, their interpretations were connected with the products being advertised. Henry interpreted that the male and the female models were a couple and he thought that the models had a good time in the field. He stated that the product, Banana Republic Chino pants, was casual wear and if someone wore Chinos, one might also have a good time with a friend in the field. Victoria's interpretation of the Banana Republic ad (see previous excerpt) was also about the two relationships between the models and product. She interpreted that the models had spent all their money on their clothes. Her statement showed that consumers are aware that the ad’s intention is to sell a particular product, so their interpretations were related both to the cues they found in the ad (e.g., model's body pose and background) and the product being advertised.

Many of the informants interpreted the relationship between the male and the female model to be one of a sexual nature. Jimmy’s interpretation of the Banana Republic ad (see previous excerpt) was one example of many interpretations. He believed that the female was using her outstretched leg to entice the male into having sex with her. Jimmy thought that they represented a prostitute/john relationship. Jimmy added, however, the male did not have money to pay her for her services. Thus, Jimmy thought that the male model extended his hand in this manner as a sign of exasperation.
In the case of the cK ad, Dave’s interpretation is an example of many interpretations describing the model’s sexual dynamics.

Boy meets girl and they’re both kind of fascinated with their young bods. She’s uh, very attractive.

...She’s a little bit less on the heroin looking chic that’s Calvin Klein’s so poplar [sic], um, which is good. She looks healthy, albeit a little bit thin. Well, quite a bit thin... Um, I think this is more about, “Hey. Good looking guy,” because every guy thinks they’re good looking, “If you want to get to bed [with the attractive girl seen in the ad], wear Calvin Klein.”

He understood that the ad’s main message was one of sexual attraction. Initially, his interpretation began by describing the appearance of the models. Later, his comment, “If you want to get to bed [with the attractive girl in the ad], wear Calvin Klein” meant that the Calvin Klein’s symbolized sexual attraction and attractiveness. Another interpretation of the cK ad expressing the model’s sexual relationship is present in Charles’s interpretation. Charles, a 33 year old single photo-editor commented:

Charles: Um....they’ve just had intercourse and they’re on a beach and she’s gotten caught in the headlights of, of somebody who’s taking a picture of them. They’re fabulous. They’re, they’ve just been caught on film. Their paparazzi have been like stalking them on the beach and, and, um, he’s pretty oblivious.

Charles’s story was clearly based on the models’ sexual relationship (i.e., “they’ve just had intercourse and they’re on a beach...”). Although many informants did not openly discusse sex, as I previously mentioned in the first section of this study, sex was the main theme informants used in their interpretations of the ads.
Advertising knowledge. Many postmodern consumers have advertising knowledge. This knowledge is a part of their shared cultural knowledge. The Calvin Klein Company has spent millions of dollars on its advertising campaigns. Informants were well-informed about the brand as well as the style of cK ads in general. Jimmy's statement is an example of his familiarity of the meaning as well as the style of the ad. He commented:

Jimmy: And I think, and I does [sic], and I do think it works because I have, I have gone and bought one Calvin Klein jeans and that was just because of the ads. And basically all the jeans I buy are based on, because of advertisement.

Uh, no. I think, uh, I don't know, that's basically it was um, I think it's, the ads are done, are done very well and they're very powerful. Basically they've, they don't have to write anything else, just Calvin Klein and then everyone knows already what it means. Their advertising has been here for so long and they've been consistent with it, so everyone already knows exactly what it means. It just a, it's just a feeling of, the, the brand name just brings up a feeling of being, of a young feeling. It makes one feel young and free and that's what it definitely shows.

Jimmy is a brand conscious consumer, as he acknowledged in his survey. When he purchases fashion products, he always considers how the products help him to create his persona. Advertisement is a vehicle that consumers used to understand brand images and differentiate one brand from another. Jimmy believes that he can assume the image the ad describes when he wears the product (i.e., "...basically all the jeans I buy are based on, ....[the] advertisement "). For Jimmy, the reason he buys cK jeans is to obtain the purely symbolic meaning the brand provides (e.g., "the brand name just brings up a
feeling of being of a young feeling. It makes one feel young and free”). He stated that “Their advertising has been here for so long and they’ve ....been consistent with it, so everyone already knows exactly what it means”. Jimmy was confident that his knowledge of cK advertising is shared by other consumers.

Some informants commented on their knowledge of the brand and the ad style. Some comments are:

Esther: My perception is that their ads are very typical of this where they’ve been, you know, a lot of gray scale with younger models, usually, thin waif like women and, the shirtless men.

Kevin: This picture is just a classic to me, Calvin Klein. You know, all his poses [the male model] he [Calvin Klein] uses young, even more so it’s like her [the female model] too. It seems like a lot of his [Calvin Klein’s] male models tend to be as thinnish, very thin too, more androgynous and she still [sic] what is somewhat androgynous but clearly female, but lots of time [sic] his males tended to be more that [thin and androgeneous] way. That’s classic Calvin Klein.

Mary: Oh, I think it definitely says Calvin Klein even if his name wasn’t on it just because of the way that they’re dressed. I mean if you showed this to me, I would probably guess that was [sic] Calvin Klein ad.

...It seems like he’s done that for a couple of years now.

Informants appeared to know the typical style of cK ads. This knowledge was well expressed in their responses, such as “their ads are very typical of this....,” “That’s classic Calvin Klein,” and “I think it definitely says Calvin Klein even if his name
wasn’t on it.” Some of the elements informants perceived as ‘typical Calvin Klein’ were selected colors (i.e., “gray scale”), models (“thin waif like women and shirtless men,” “thinnish… more androgynous”), their way of wearing garments (“of the way that they are dressed”), and their body poses (“all his poses”). Informants appeared to understand what cK ads generally depicted.

Informants have shared cultural knowledge about the cK ad. Thus, their readings were similar, using two main themes, sex and youth. Examples are described in the following excerpts:

Kevin: She’s wearing jeans. (laughs)...Calvin Klein’s always been this way. He’s very suggestive. He sells sex.

His jeans are always related to sex... and he’s always appealing to youth. Very much a big appeal to youth. I mean these, her’s [the jeans that the female model wears] too, but his [the jeans that the male model wears] in particular are just barely on. (laughs). And the big baggy [sic], they’ve been out on the beach. Again, they’re [sic] beach. It’s carefree, it’s youth, but, he [the male model] is just selling that...he’s using sex to catch your, sex appeal on him. She [the female model] is too. This is [a] somewhat provocative pose as well, um, her jeans again are slightly loose but certainly not as low as his. Um, but it’s very provocative.

Jimmy: They’re basically just selling that. They’re not selling anything else. It’s just an image meaning that if you wear Calvin Klein you are very sexy, you’re very seductive and I think that’s all they’re trying to show here and then you’re very, you’re very young and you’re in style and Calvin Klein is very rebellious. It’s showing they’re really seductive yet rebellious look and I think that’s all they’re trying to sell and that’s why their black and white images are so powerful because it just brings out the rawness for the advertising. It’s very clever. I mean, uh, they know what sells
Kevin, a 44 year old professor has previous knowledge about cK’s advertising philosophy, ‘sex selling to youth’. His statement, “Calvin Klein always been this way” asserted that he was confident about his knowledge of cK advertising. He knew that the cK ad described sex and youth. In his interview, he pointed out the models’ style of dressing (i.e., her’s [the jeans that the female model wears] and his [the jeans that the male models wears]... are just barely on) and the style of jeans (i.e., “big baggy”) as signifiers appeal to young people. He also pointed out that the background, a beach, is a carefree place where young people can easily have sex. Jimmy, a 29 year old actuary also pointed out the two main themes of sex and youth, in the ad. He used the words “sexy”, “seductive”, “rebellious”, “young”, and “sensual mood” in telling his story of the ad. In his last statement, “They know that they are selling a sensual mood ....[a] younger generation” summarized a main point of his interpretation including these themes. As these two examples show that most informants identified the codes of sex and youth in the ad. It clearly suggests that the informants had a certain amount of shared cultural knowledge related to the signs and meanings in the cK ad, explaining why there
is an undeniable existence of some shared interpretation across reading experiences (Scott, 1994b). Hirschman and Thompson (1997) used the term “cultural code” (p.45) to explain how the symbolic meanings embedded in advertising are commonly understood within a culture. They argue that most consumers within a culture are fluent in reading multiple forms of this code and can readily provide a basis for understanding an ad. In the study, informants are well aware of the symbolic meanings embedded in the cK ad and their interpretations are very similar.

With advertising knowledge, especially knowledge of a particular brand of advertising style, consumers are easily able to get involved in their readings of ads. Fashion magazines include many advertisements in one issue; consumers’ fluency in reading ads enables them to cut through the clutter. Advertising knowledge increases consumers’ involvement and might be a way of increasing consumers’ purchase intention (e.g., Jimmy’s statement, “…basically all the jeans I buy are based on, …[the] advertisement ”). In addition, advertising knowledge was used as a guideline in interpreting the ads. In the case of the cK ad, some informants’ previous exposure to the ad helped them to interpret in the way the previous ad was interpreted. Luke’s statement is an example of how his knowledge of the cK brand was used in his interpretation of the ad.

Luke: It [the ad] makes me remember Calvin Klein as a brand. Actually if I didn’t know what Calvin Klein was, I would be confused as to what this ad is.
Because of Luke's previous exposure to other cK ads, he felt that his interpretation of the ad was the one intended by the advertiser. In the latter part of his interview, he interpreted the ad based on his previous advertising knowledge which includes the themes of sex and youth. These two themes were clear guidelines for his understanding the ad. In the reading of the ad, he confidently expressed his own interpretation of the ad and believed that he understood the ad as the cK advertisers intended. This finding supports Phillips' study (1997) in which informants relied on cultural, product and ad knowledge to determine the meanings of pictorial metaphors in ads.

**Postmodern consumers and postmodern ads.** According to Phillips (1997), consumers believe that the intention of advertisers is to elicit positive interpretations of their ads, thus, the informants gave mostly positive interpretations. Several informants mentioned negative statements initially, but in the process of their readings, their negative interpretations were never mentioned again or changed to positive statements. Dave interpreted the Banana Republic ad in two different ways. He stated,

I would say that it had to do with fun, and carefreeness of two young lovers that [sic] fairly wealthy and they're out in the farmland having fun and, they're just having a good time, and he’s just carrying on and she’s carrying on as well.

...Well, my other one, interpretation is the negative side of that, saying that she took all the money. (laugh). She’s taken all of his money and now he’s gotten rid of her. He’s like, “what am I going to do next?”

... but I don’t think that’s the interpretation they want to say, so I’m saying, well, you know, they both look to be wealthy, affluent based on the clothing. It looks like it’s very well done and it looks brand new and they look clean and the legs are very sexy. And what are they doing out here in the country but rather than, other than to, to spend some time together and have some fun.
And this, the way they’re gestured, the hands and legs look like, you know, we’re all hanging out, you know. Just kind of having fun.

Dave expressed both negative and positive interpretations in the first half of this excerpt. However, in the process of interpretation, he assumed that the advertisers’ intention was to convey only a positive brand image. Thus, his final interpretation of the ad was that of two lovers having a good time. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, two female informants’ interpretations of the Banana Republic ad, relating to its sexual connotations, were initially mentioned but never elaborated on in their interpretations. Apparently, the informants considered the sexual connotations as a negative factor in the interpretation of the ads.

Unlike Phillips’ conclusion (1997), however, there were several informants who expressed negative interpretation of the ads. Amy, the informant who expressed a negative interpretations of the Banana Republic ad, commented,

The only thing I can think of is, because I don’t understand it so I’ll remember it because it’s so disjoint and I’ll think, “that’s a stupid ad.” So, but I’ll remember, so I’ll remember that came from Banana Republic because it was, you know it evoked this strong sort of opinion so you remember it.

Amy assumed that the advertiser’s intentions were to create a confusing ad which consumers would have a hard time understanding. Postmodern advertisements are different from those of the modern era. Sometimes advertisers purposely use ads that
attract attention by presenting shocking images to consumers that allow for recall of the product and/or the brand. Thus, sometimes consumers experience ads which elicit negative evaluations. Amy expressed that the ad brought a negative evaluation, and therefore, she could recall the brand. The study’s interpretation suggests that consumers do not always draw only positive interpretations of ads in postmodern consumer culture.

Black and white photography in the cK ad is another postmodern characteristic. Postmodern ads use gray-scale black and white photos while modern ads used glossy, high color photography. Some informants expressed favorable feelings toward the black and white photos in the cK jeans ad. Examples are:

Victoria: I don’t know that I’d spend much time on it. Um-hm. I mean, I’d stop and look because it is black and white which is appealing to me. Um... and it is, you know, people on one side and nothing on the other side so it is pretty stark contrast.

Dave: I think that the, what is it, um, film noir, um, does a lot. To me all the time black and white always is just very sophisticated.

Issac: I like black and white stuff, and go on.

Amy: I like black and white photos personally, so it is, it is nice... Nice. Nice is so undescriptive.

Eve: I like black and white feel.
Many of the informants expressed that the CK ad did draw enough of their attention to get them involved in the interpretation process. They expressed that black and white photos catch their attention and make them stop and linger on the ad. Thus, black and white photography is an effective way of alluring postmodern consumers.

Also, ambiguity and open interpretation are other features of postmodern advertisements. Advertisers try to provide a certain degree of ambiguity to postmodern consumers to get them involved in the reading and interpreting processes. As Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton (1995) maintained, ambiguity is the main feature of the postmodern ad. There is no one interpretation of an ad (Mick & Politi, 1989) and it allows for multiple interpretations of the visual images (Ha & Hoch, 1989).

In the process of interpretation, ambiguity results in a transformational effect making it possible for consumers to personalize themselves in the ad. Advertisers intentionally leave the interpretation of ads open to postmodern consumers and informants understood this, as the following excerpts show:

Esther: ...I think, I think a lot of times, magazine ads, especially, leave things up to your interpretation, and they're not (laughs) they're not really meant to tell their story. They leave things open so that you can make your own story.

Alex: I would, I like the ones that actually invite you to interpret or draw your own conclusions, which this one [the Banana Republic ad] does. There could be several scenarios going on here.
Ambiguity captures attention. To a certain degree, ambiguity in ads increases postmodern consumers’ curiosity, encouraging them to get involved in active interpretation. However, marketers should consider the degree of ambiguity in the ad; if an ad is too ambiguous consumers are likely to dismiss it. Luke’s interpretation of the Banana Republic ad is an example. At first glance, Luke failed to notice any sexual connotation in the ad.

But during the process of interpretation, he caught the sexual connotation of the ad and expressed a favorable opinion. Luke commented:

Before I didn’t understand so I was kind of confused so I didn’t like it, but I think it’s like a typical ad, um, typical fashion ad. It has like a sexual... connotation. Yeah.

I think if I was looking through a magazine, it’s a little too complicated. I, you know, that I missed that. I would just like skip over this one. Not get anything out of it. I think overall this is little too complex [sic] advertisement.

I kind of see like, oh, like, uh, quirky sense of humor behind it, but if I would look through a magazine I typically do, I would just pass over this not knowing what, what it is.

I think this ad is more memorable. It’s stays in, pretty good ad because it sticks to your head because they’ve a catchy joke behind it.

...I think they were just trying to catch the, uh, catch attention and make it memorable so like later on people will talk about, “Oh, I saw that ad,” you know.

Luke stated that had he happened upon this ad in a magazine, he would have probably been confused by its ambiguity, and would have quickly dismissed it. However, because he had been asked by the interviewer to study the ad carefully, he was able to make sense
out of the ambiguity. And when he perceived the sexual connotation, he admitted to
actually liking the ad and described it as memorable. In the later part of his interview, he
stated that the ad gave him a desire to visit a Banana Republic store to check the products
out.

In addition, cropped images in an ad are also used as a way of encouraging
multiple interpretations. Informants speculated as to various reasons why advertisers
cropped the images in the Banana Republic ad:

Kevin: I think that it's intentional not to show faces. Because sometimes
without showing faces you're more free to contribute your own
idea to the emotions they're experiencing. You don't see the face,
you don't interpret that and I think also more people are [sic], it's
easier for you to put yourself in the image, to me, without the face
being there.

Victoria: I suppose it gives you a little bit more room for imagination than...
again I don't like, I am more attracted to things that it [sic] doesn't
give you the full [sic], you kind of have to wonder about it so I'm
more attracted to pieces, parts anyway.

In the dialogue, Kevin’s understanding of the cropped image is that it provides intimacy
between the postmodern consumer and the product being advertised. Facial expressions
are important communication tools in understanding the mood of the ad. In the absence
of facial expressions in an ad, consumers develop more creative, personalized
interpretations. Consumers can more easily place themselves in the scenario and
symbolically participate in the action. Victoria’s comment shows that cropped images
open consumers’ imaginations and increase their involvement in the ad. She expressed
that she personally liked the ad specifically because it left the interpretation open to the consumer. Postmodern consumers, especially Generation Xers, are self-reliant and independent. They want to be creative and unique in many aspects of their lives. They value products and ads differently than previous generations based on their own thoughts. To a certain degree, cropping is a way of pleasing postmodern consumers in that it invites their active participation.

Also, cropped images, especially cropped faces, work for a variety of target consumers, regardless of differences such as race and ethnicity. The models in the ad can represent many types of consumers. In the study, informants' practices of imagining unseen parts of the ad provide them with a chance to connect to the ad. In addition, the practice might facilitate a recall of the brand, as Edell and Burke (1987) suggest.

**Emotions and lifestyles.** Consumers' interpretations are closely related to their evoked emotions and feelings about reading ads. Holbrook and Bartra (1987) studied the emotional aspects of consumer behavior and asserted that emotions mediate the effects of advertising. Edel and Burke (1987) also stated that consumers’ emotions are more important than their judgments of the ads’ characteristics in predicting consumer responses toward the ad. Emotions are especially generated by nonverbal elements such as strong visual images (Edel & Burke, 1987). These imageries are unique characteristics of postmodern culture (Featherstone, 1991).

James' and Jimmy’s comments on the cK Jeans ad illustrate their understanding of the advertiser’s use of sexual cues to stimulate positive responses.
James: It [the cK ad] is probably appealing to your baser, baser side. Your sexual instincts or whatever and so getting you to desire the jeans based on your desire, your sexual desire, your sexual drive or whatever and, um, thinking [sic], you know, appealing to your sexual motives to get you into the store to buy these clothes.

Henry: It’s [the Banana Republic ad] kind of saying, um, it’s not really showing all the clothing. It’s really, it’s more saying like, “we can give you this mood if you come into Banana Republic”, so it’s only hinting at what the clothes are like. It’s more kind of hinting at the message at, to entice you to come to the store. So, I, I don’t think it’s really focusing in on the clothing at all.

...in the ad they’re, they’re not going to show the prices for starters, and so just suggest that this is the kind atmosphere that we have and that you can have too if you buy our clothing. I think it’s a good ad.

...I think it’s much more focused on image than clothing.

Jimmy: The intention here is to make people feel that they can get a certain mood instead of the clothes. I think, clothes is [sic] secondary and the first thing is the mood of the whole, the advertisement. Make the people feel like, “Isn’t this where you want to be? Don’t you wish you were like this person or in this situation.” I think the clothes are just part of [sic], or just secondary. They are trying to say that: “if you wear these clothes, this is the type of person you are.”

...I think the ads are done very well and they’re very powerful. Basically they don’t have to write anything else, just “Calvin Klein” and then everyone knows already what it means. Their advertising has been here for so long and they’ve been consistent with it, so everyone already knows exactly what it means. It’s just a feeling of the brand name just brings up a feeling of being, of a young feeling. It makes one feel young and free and that’s what it definitely shows.

Since the cK ad uses young, sexy models and presents them in a real life situation, it evokes the informants’ sexual emotions. Informants could easily imagine themselves as the sexy, young models presented in the ad. James’ explanation of the ad is that it evokes
consumers' sexually derived emotions and this may contribute to their decision to purchase the jeans. Henry's comment on the Banana Republic ad also supports the importance of 'mood' in the ad. His statement further suggests that the ad sells a desirable mood which can be achieved if the clothing is purchased. Henry also believed that it was mood, and not clothing, per se, that was being advertised.

Jimmy's statement clearly attests to the importance of the 'feeling' of the ad (i.e., "I think, clothes [are] secondary and the first thing is the mood of the whole, .... advertisement "). Jimmy strongly believed that the advertiser's intention was to sell the emotions depicted in the ad to consumers, rather than the clothes themselves. The reason Jimmy expressed that "clothing is secondary" was that the ad did not focus on the product's characteristics such as price and quality. His rhetorical question, "Isn't this where you want to be? Don't you wish you were like this person?" further supports the notion that the product is secondary to the brand image. Jimmy's statement, "The feeling of being young and free" describes the ad's symbolic meaning. Jimmy admitted that he purchased his cK jeans because of the emotions the cK ad campaign evoked in him. Evoked emotions aid in the interpretation process and serve as an impetus for purchasing the product.

Kevin discussed the importance of feeling related to the lifestyle that the Banana Republic ad portrays:

I think the advertiser is trying to show you [sic], I get the impression that this is the kind of person and this is the kind of lifestyle or the kind of life that you have in these kind of pants. Trying to create that persona of, you know, out in the country, you're just free Sunday, you know, an afternoon.... You know,
making your own fun kind of thing. It’s selling a lifestyle I think… I liked it.

Yeah, I think they [the Banana Republic ad and the CK ad] are both suggesting a different type of lifestyle, targeting out a different age group or people whose [sic] or their life priorities are a little bit different. I think they [the Banana Republic ad and the CK ad] are both selling, hey’re both selling clothes and they’re selling lifestyles saying, “If you buy these clothes, well this may be the life that you can have.”

For Kevin, the advertiser’s intention is to sell a feeling related to the lifestyle, and this lifestyle is represented in the product being advertised. In his comment, “If you buy these clothes, well this may be the life that you can have” clearly showed that Kevin understood the symbolic meaning assigned to the product in the ad. As Baudrillard (1983a,b) discussed, there are simulations of meanings in the ad, which efface the distinction between the image and reality. When consumers wear these jeans they may experience a simulation of the lifestyle the ad describes (as Kevin stated, “… this is the kind of person and this is the kind of lifestyle that you have in these kind of pants”). He understood what lifestyle the Banana Republic ad describes such as “free Sunday… Make your own kind of fun.” His reading suggests that informants had cultural knowledge and they understood the lifestyle the advertiser presented in the ad.

Lifestyle selling is a more powerful strategy than simple product selling. The desire to portray an image and the desire to achieve a certain lifestyle can increase the consumers’ possibility of purchase by affording them the opportunity to experience the fantasy lifestyle the ad promotes. Consumers not only consider the product in their
interpretations of ads, but also consider who its consumer is likely to be (e.g., Kevin’s excerpt, “if you buy these clothes, .... this may be the life that you can have”).

Commodities are given meanings by advertisers’ manipulation (Baudrillard, 1988).

According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural intermediaries, such as designers and advertisers, create new symbolic meanings as well as aesthetic stances. Each brand differentiates itself from other similar brands based on the articulation of its symbolic meanings.

Consumption accompanies the active manipulation of signs in postmodern culture (Baudrillard, 1988).

**Self recognition through reading.** Through the process of reading the ads, informants appeared to see themselves reflected in the ads. Recognition of self is an important part of interpretation. Also, the act of interpreting ad messages helps create and/ or reinforce a personal identity (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1994b). Consumers create meanings related to themselves through interpreting ads (Thompson, 1997).

Thompson (1997) asserted, “exchanges of meanings” (p.438) become important in marketing studies. Previously, ads were mainly considered as a source of information, but in this postmodern era, ads are a source of consumers’ cultural meanings. Kevin’s statement about the cK ad is an example that shows how consumers interpret ads based on their own self-identity.

Kevin: They’re perfect examples of the ideal of young people. I’m always hoping that “the clothes can make the person.” But in this ad, I always look and say, “It’s the person that’s making the clothes.” “If you don’t look like this, these clothes aren’t going to look good on you.” So I’m always sort of likely to dismiss this. It’s like, well, “I don’t look like that. Those clothes won’t look like that on
me.” And I think that’s probably the opposite of what they’re trying to say: “if you wear this, this is who you could be.”

Interviewer: Oh, so, do you think that is [the] advertiser’s intention?
Kevin: I think that’s sort of the intention. This is who you could be or this is how you could identify yourself and this is how you look, how you could change your self-identity by wearing these clothes. It’s just who you could be. But I think I’ve always looked at it the other way so. That’s not who I am so it ain’t going to look like that on me.

The narratives of personal identity are themselves contextualized within a complex background of one’s historically established cultural meanings and belief systems (Thompson, 1997). Kevin is a 44 year old professor. In Kevin’s interpretation, the ad provided him with an opportunity to project his self-identity onto the images in the ad. He understood the advertiser’s intention: if you wear these baggy cK draw-string pants lower down to the hip, you could look like this young, good looking model in the ad. However, he knew that he was not young and the way the pants were worn in the ad was not appropriate for his real lifestyle, occupation, and social status. Thus, he did not want to wear these clothes. For Kevin, interpreting the ad is a process of projecting his self-identity, which makes him compare himself to the young people in the ad. Reading an advertisement is a continuous communication process between the ad and the reader. Advertisers seek to provide room for consumers to read into the ad and find personal meanings through the process of reading in order to give affinity between the brand and consumers.
Similarities and Differences in Interpretation

In this section of the study, I investigated the informants' interpretation of the ads based on four important social characteristics that were thought to influence informants' tastes and differences: gender, ethnicity, religious background, and cultural capital to interpret the informants' reading. First, informants' readings were interpreted by the interviewer on the basis of gender to determine if there are unique characteristics of female and male informant's interpretations and levels of involvement of the ads. Second, since the informants in this study represented diverse ethnic backgrounds (five Asians/ fifteen Caucasians), ethnicity was selected to study the informants' readings. Third, religion, which might be a basis for the informants' values and ideologies was considered. And fourth, I selected Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to study the informants' interpretations of the ads.

Gender. Researchers argue that there are different patterns of reading based on gender (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Stern, 1993). Male informants have a tendency to read only obvious cues or signs, as outsider readers using their judgments and evaluations. Male informants' interpretations tended not to go further than the obvious facts. One extreme example of reading the Banana Republic ad by Mark was the following:

Interviewer: Would you tell me your story of this advertisement?
Mark: My story. (laughs) I have no idea.... I don't get it.... The guy's broke and she's shocked that the guy's broke... No idea!
Interviewer: No idea?
Mark: No idea.... I don't get it.

Mark’s interpretation was a simple description and he did not want to think more deeply into it. These observations seem to support Stern’s (1993) research that males tend to focus on the facts literally stated in the story’s text, and they tend to produce a plot without their personal comments and empathy.

In contrast, many female informants were likely to be inside readers. The female informants’ readings were more related to their personal experiences and feelings. Connie’s reading of the Banana Republic ad is an example:

It's a boy and a girl. They're in a field and I think she took something from his pocket. (laughs) Yeah, maybe money. I think, I think she's just kind of playing. They're just playing around, having fun. I think she took something from his pocket. That's why he's like, "uh, what are you doing?" (laughs) Like, “what are you trying to do?” (laughs). And, she's just laughing and giggling.

Many females were able to interpret the ads by using their imaginations to go beyond the empirical facts. The female informants tended to be more comfortable making up their own stories and trying to imagine themselves in the ad context than were males.

Connie’s reading shows considerable imagination. The female informants’ interpretations tended to be based more on their own previous experiences and empathy.

“When empathy is translated into consumer terms, it can be viewed as a similar dynamic
psychological response in which potential buyers ‘fell into’ or imaginatively project themselves into the consumption experiences portrayed in an ad” (Stern, 1993, p.563).

According to Stern (1993), when consumers think that they misunderstand an ad, males express more frustration than females do. Most of the male informants had a hard time explaining the ads. The male informants said “I don’t know” more often than the female informants did. It appeared that the male informants tried to understand the ads logically, but they could not make sense out of them, so they became more frustrated than the females. In addition, the male informants were not inclined to identify with the characters or to participate imaginatively.

Some female informants mentioned that the cropped image in the Banana Republic ad was somewhat bothersome. They wanted to see a full view of the product to obtain more product information. Unlike the males, the female tended to express an interest in the clothing worn by the models in the ad (e.g., chino pants, chino skirt, black shirt, and shoes). Amy complained about the cropped image of the ad:

Oh, this ad does nothing. It doesn’t entice me to go buy anything. I can’t really see the clothing fully and the actions are so disjoint [sic]. There’s no compelling reason to pay attention to it. Here we have half, a quarter body and even though the scenes are supposed to be related, it’s completely different. It is creative art, but it’s not good advertising.

…Especially with humans, facial expressions are very communicative but…You can’t see a face…You can’t see without the whole picture.
For Amy, the cropped image was a major obstacle. Biky, another female informant, also complained about the cropped image of the product:

Yeah, I think I'd want to see full figure because if I'm interested in the product, for instance the pants, and I, I see here it does say chino, um, it only shows me, you know, one part of the pants. I mean, I'd like to know what it looks like at the bottom, you know. Are they going to be wide legged pants or cuffed at the bottom, and I'm not even really fond of, you know, the flat front anyway.

Biky preferred to see the unseen parts of the product which is the style of the pants. For Biky, product information is a source of motivation that might increase her involvement with the brand and also might increase her purchase intention.

Likewise, the female informants were more interested in the utilitarian characteristics such as the “fit” of the clothing and the “quality of the clothing.” When Alison interpreted the cK Jeans ad, she explained that the ad did not seem to target her at all because of the fit and the size of the model. She said,

Alison: It's a little too radical. Of course I'm older. (laughs)
Interviewer: Do you like this product? Calvin Klein jeans?
Alison: Uh, no. I can't wear them.
Interviewer: You can't wear them?
Alison: They don't fit. (laughs). I'm not a size four. (laughs)

A key factor for Alison's lack of interest in the cK ad was the “thin young model” presented in the ad. Alison had a pre-established opinion about what constituted a good fit for her (i.e., her size and body type). She thought that the cK jeans ad did not relate to
her at all because the ad is for females who are young and thin. Mary, another informant, also pointed out that the size and the style of the jeans in the cK ad did not seem appropriate for her. She said:

Mary: It doesn’t fit any of my needs. I mean, I can’t get away with walking around like that. (laughs) Not just because of my size either. So again, I mean, sure, it’s, you know, a very young group that they’re targeting.

In contrast, the majority of the male informants did not volunteer any opinion related to the cropped image of the Banana Republic ad. However, after being asked, Charles, Henry, and Isaac stated that the cropped image was not bothersome for them, and that they were able to obtain enough information from the ad.

Charles: I mean, cropping is fine. I don’t mind that they’ve, I don’t mind that they’ve cropped off the body…

Henry: Well, if it [the Banana Republic ad] were a catalog I would mind this cropped image, but for an advertisement, I don’t think it [the full view of the image] is necessary because in the ad they’re not going to show the prices for starters, and so just a [sic], to suggest that this is the kind of, atmosphere that we have. I think it’s a good ad.

Isaac: I mean, if I am just impressed with it, looking at this, it doesn’t matter that there is a face or not because by itself if they’re just trying to put the product, and this tells me enough about the product, you know [sic].
Many male informants expressed no interest in the product in the ad. Instead, they were interested in the visual image the ad portrays. Jimmy and Charles also commented on the visual image of the CK ad:

Jimmy: I have a pair of Calvin Klein jeans. I think everyone’s got one. I think their ads sell more than their product. I think their ads are actually what makes the product good just because people will focus more on that and this is just my opinion, but I think their clothes, their jeans are not as good as their ads. I think it’s their ads that are the biggest success. So I think it’s a very good marketing campaign.

...I don’t wear too much Calvin Klein but I still like the ad. I still think, it makes me think about Calvin Klein even though I don’t wear it. It makes me go to the store and look at it. And I do think it works because I have gone and bought one [pair of] Calvin Klein jeans and that was just because of the ads. And basically all the jeans I buy are based on [sic], because of advertisement.

Charles: I think he’s... I wish I looked that good. He looks good, so....I wish I was standing on a beach running my toes through the sand. I mean it doesn’t necessarily, it’s not a call to action like “buy this now”, but it definitely implies that [by] [sic] buying it, you’ll [sic] better and have better girlfriends.

As Jimmy and Charles acknowledged in their statements, many male informants’ readings were surface readings related simply to the image they saw and they tended not to get involved in considering the product being advertised. Based on the interpretation, male informants were categorized as “product uninvolved consumers” who largely focus on visual image and the lifestyle that the ad sells. In contrast, female informants might be

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described as "product involved consumers" who placed importance on the practical characteristics of the product in the ad.

**Ethnicity.** In this study, five of the twenty informants were Asian. Three of them immigrated to the US when they were less than 10 years old, received their education in the US, and have lived in the US for more than 20 years. Two of them consider themselves Americans and one, Korean-American. One informant was Indian-Canadian (Asian Indian) and another informant was Indian (Asian Indian) and lived in the US for 6 years. There are similarities in informants' reading in spite of their ethnicity. Some examples that illustrate these similarities in reading are as follows. Alison is a 37-year-old Caucasian web designer. She noted:

You know, the not having money... and the playfulness.... A little maybe too playful and not serious enough or something. The empty pocket is pretty visual. Yeah [the ad says] open or not conservative.

Connie is a 27-year-old Asian actuary. She stated:

It's a boy and a girl. Uh, they're in a field. I think she took something from his pocket. (laughs) Uh, money.....yeah, maybe money or maybe, um something. (laughs) She's just kind of playing around and they're just playing around, having fun....

...She's just laughing and giggling. (laughs) It just, it's very playful. It's very lighthearted. Because I guess, they're in a field and, and, his pocket is sticking out. It's not a very serious moment. Kind of like, you know, it's very informal. Very lighthearted. Very playful. (laughs)
Connie and Alison have similarities in their interpretations which support the idea that the informants share cultural knowledge. For example, "light hearted," "playful," and "not having any money" are used in Connie's reading. "Not serious," "playful," and "not conservative" are used in Alison's stories. For both of the informants, the male model's pulled out pants pocket and empty hand signify "not having any money." Also, they noted that the female model's body pose (i.e., her kicked up leg) and the natural background signify "light-hearted," and "playfulness." It showed that the informants shared the same cultural knowledge. Although the two informants' ethnicities are different their decoding is very similar. A possible reason is that Connie immigrated to the US when she was 5 years old and has lived in the US for 22 years. She received all of her education in the US and considers herself American. Although her ethnicity is Korean, she has become acculturated as a result of her 22 years in the US. In this study, informants' interpretations were not clearly differentiated based on ethnicity. One reason is that the Asian informants have already been acculturated in the US culture and have acquired knowledge of western culture.

**Religion.** Religious background is one factor that may influence informants' readings because it is a basis for one's values and ideologies. In this section of the study, I only analyze the ad interpretation based on informants' religion. In the study, ten informants identified themselves as Christians (i.e., Protestant). Among them, three were very active Christians who go to religious meetings three times a week. Four informants were regular Sunday church-goers. Three informants rarely go to church but still consider themselves Christians. Victoria, a 30 year old web designer, is an active
Christian who goes to church three times a week and belongs to a Bible study group. She did not like the cK ad and indicated that she would not be persuaded by ads which relied upon blatant sex appeal. She commented:

Um, I am not usually persuaded by ads that have sexual connotations connected to them so I’d probably just flip past it and wouldn’t even think about it.

James, a 25 year old actuary who is an active Christian, goes to church three times a week, and states that his life goal is to become a good Christian. He also disliked the cK ad.

You see it’s sort of funny because whenever I see Calvin Klein commercials it doesn’t matter what product they’re selling, whether it be [sic] clothes or cologne or whatever. I always think, you know, blatant obvious sex. It’s just really disgusting sometimes how they are with their sexual overtones in their stories and in their advertising.

Mary, a 42 year old administrative associate who is a Christian and goes to church every Sunday also did not like the cK ad.

I'm not, I'm not a big fan of Calvin Klein. I think because he seems, he seems to me like he exploits young people into positions that seem kind of promiscuous.

Henry is a non-practicing Christian and did not like cK ad.

My personal reaction is that it kind of hits you over the head…
I feel that it could be overdone, you know. And in fact I think Calvin Klein tends to overdo it so that pretty much every ad you see is a variation of this... and so that, um, in fact, if I didn’t see this right here [cK logo in the ad], I think I would know this was a Calvin Klein ad. So it has, kind of has his hallmark.

... I also think that the models are really, really young, which is interesting to me. I’m not sure what the purpose of, for that is. Um, and in fact, I get kind of tired of that. You know, that all the models tend to be really, really young. It isn’t to say that they should never be, but, um, especially with Calvin Klein, you know, that’s what he uses. Really, really, really young models, and I’m not going to find that particularly appealing.

Taste is the manifest preference which delineates the difference of one’s self-identity (Bourdieu, 1990). Individuals have different tastes and the tastes are partially determined by their own beliefs, religion among them. Christian informants seemed to have a tendency to express their dislike for (rejection of) the cK jean ad, which was described as having sexual connotations. Victoria’s comment (“I am not usually persuaded by... sexual connotations”), James’ comment (“blatant obvious sex.... It is just really disgusting”), Mary’s comment (“he seems to exploit young people) and Henry’s opinion (“I get kind of tired of it) are examples that show the Christian informants’ ideology, morality, and values. Morality is an important doctrine in Christianity. Thus, Christian informants’ readings of the cK ad had a tendency to be focused more on the morality of the ad.

There were four Catholics but they did not express objections toward the cK ad. Two of them go to church regularly once a week and the other two rarely take part in the religious activities. Two of the regular Catholic church-goers did not express any interest
in the cK ad because they thought that the ad did not target them. Once the informants did not think the ad/brand was targeting them, they lost interest. Thus, their indifference might be the reason they did not express any objections to the ad’s sexual connotations.

Two non-practicing Catholic informants expressed favorable opinions toward the cK ad.

Two informants were Hindu. One goes to religious meetings regularly once a week, while the other rarely goes to religious meetings. Lastly, four informants are atheists who do not practice any religion. Jimmy believes in Hinduism and goes to religious meetings every week. He liked the cK Jeans ad and stated:

Yeah, I like it...

...Yeah, it tells me to go to the Calvin Klein and check it out. Personally I like it because that’s the type of [sic], I would like to be in that situation. I would like to be in that location.

Amy, who is an atheist and believes herself a humanitarian but has no religion, also liked the cK ad. She interpreted the cK ad:

Her hair isn’t.... I don’t know. You can’t tell, it looks kind of [sic], because of the dark, it’s kind of dark, it’s not, you know, fluffy. It’s, it’s straight like mine. You know, it’s straight, and you know, tucked behind her ears and kind of messy. It’s not perfect. You know because you’re in, you’re in advertising she has make-up on her eyes and, but it’s not as heavy as you might see in color. So it’s not, um, as, how do you say, um,...This is, you know, looks like they’re in action where as, other ads they have the perfect make-up and the pose and it’s more, what’s the word? Like you’re on a, like a set, and they, and they pose you [sic]. This is less posed. This is more realistic. I like this ad.
Jimmy liked the sex appeal in the ad. He confessed that he wanted to be in the situation the ad depicted. In Amy’s interpretation, she did not mention any positive or negative opinion concerning the sexual connotations contained in the ad. Rather, she expressed her approval of the ad based on its realistic features.

As only twenty informants participated in the study, I can not generalize that Christians have stronger morals than any other religious groups. However, the informants’ liking or disliking of ads was to some degree related to their religious background. If one is a more religious person, he/she must adhere to his/her religious doctrines (e.g., active Christians do not like the CK ad’s for its sexual connotation). However, the informants’ belief systems and their morality are often also based on their personal value, age, and other characteristics (e.g. conservative versus liberal, old versus young) regardless of their religious background. Ads are open to multiple interpretations and consumers have their own unique interpretations (Barthes, 1991; Mick & Politi, 1989; Philips, 1997, Zakia, 1986) based on their individual belief systems which are a result of various factors.

**Cultural capital.** Bourdieu (1990) understands culture by applying his notion of cultural capital to individuals in a given society. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is determined by two important factors: one’s educational qualifications and one’s parents’ educational qualifications. Bourdieu believes that the latter factor (parents’ educational qualifications) is an indicator that differentiates one’s social origin. According to Bourdieu, each person has a different level of cultural capital and the capital is a determinant of class. In addition, the capital is closely related to an
individual's symbolic system, which determines one's understanding of objects and also provides differences between classes.

Based on Bourdieu's writing (1990), I established the possession of a bachelor’s degree or higher as 'high educational qualifications'. As all the informants in this study had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, I considered only social origin (which Bourdieu defined as one’s parents’ educational qualifications) as the determinant of the informants’ level of cultural capital. In the study, informants were divided into groups based on their social origin. If both of the informant’s parents had earned at least a bachelor’s degree, the informant was included in the highest social origin group. In the study, eleven informants were included in this social origin group. Their parents hold or have held jobs such as entrepreneur, nurse, teacher, lawyer, psychologist, engineer, accountant, and so on. If only one of the informant’s parents earned a bachelor’s degree, the informant was included in the middle social origin group. Five informants were included in this group. Members of this group have only one parent with a job such as nurse, teacher, and clinical counselor and business owner. Lastly, if neither of the informant’s parents earned a bachelor’s degree, the informant was considered as a member of lowest social origin group. Four of informants were included in this group. Their parents had jobs such as carpenter, car-salesman, factory worker and foreman.

Sally is a 25-year-old web designer. She is pursuing a master’s degree part-time. Her father is a lawyer and her mother is a psychologist with a master’s degree. According to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, she is from a high social origin because both of her parents have high educational qualifications. Sally’s life goal is to be
creative in her job and make enough money to travel. She owns her own home and an investment portfolio including stocks, an annuity plan, and mutual funds. She spends her leisure time with her family and friends. She enjoys swimming, biking and listening to 1940’s pop music and Italian classical music. She usually serves family-style Italian food when she entertains at home. When she buys fashion products she considers quality, fit, price, and style. She usually buys classic styles. She likes the brands such as Banana Republic, Calvin Klein and the Gap. In the case of the Banana Republic ad, Sally’s interpretation is as follows:

It seems like they’re concentrating a lot on lines, like angular lines, and you don’t notice the clothes very much because you can’t really see how they fit. You can’t see the people’s faces and, um, they’re kind of detached body parts. There aren’t really any whole body parts except for her legs. Um,... I think we’re supposed to have the feeling like they’re together, but it doesn’t look that way because it’s out of proportion. He looks a lot bigger. You know, um...that’s really all I can think of. I do not really pay attention to it. And I don’t notice the logo down here very well, because it’s so light and the background’s light. All I notice is, you know, the picture. I wouldn’t notice what the ad’s for.

Um... I don’t know if I’d say fashionable. It’s, um, his outfit anyway is kind of classic, I would say. And her’s actually is kind of too. I mean it’s, they’re very basic, I think, classic pieces you could wear with other things. When I think fashionable I think trendy stuff that goes in and out as seasons go by, but this stuff seems pretty basic.

Henry is a 38-year-old information systems specialist. He has a master’s degree in his field. His father did not finish high school and works as an auto-parts distributor and his mother started her undergraduate degree when he was a high school student, is
ABD (has completed all but her dissertation on her Ph. D degree) and works as a clinical counselor. According to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, Henry's social origin is in the middle of the hierarchy because only one of his parents has a bachelor's degree.

Henry's life goal is to grow as a person and to increase his knowledge and life experiences. He loves to travel, both foreign and domestically. He has a mutual fund. He loves reading books, gardening, cooking, and traveling, and listens to medieval and renaissance music. He serves Asian and Italian family style meals when he has guests.

His fashion philosophy is to always consider fit, appearance, durability and comfortability. He does not have a favorite brand of clothes. Henry's interpretation of the Banana Republic ad was:

Well, for one thing, it looks like it must be warm so that it's, um, it's probably end of summer and mostly because all this grass is brown so it's either dry or maybe fall and since they're so casual they're probably not at work and they've probably taken a walk so that they're having some fun and it also looks like maybe they're kind of clowning around with each other because she's got her foot up in the air (laughs). So that's why it makes me think of a happy kind of a day.

...My guess is that the intention was to give the impression that if you're wearing chinos, you'll be causal, you'll have a good time, you'll be with somebody (laughs) and you don't need any money.

...Um, probably. Yeah, because I, one I wear pants (laughs), two I often don't have any money, and three I like to have a, a nice day. So yeah, it probably does target me.

...Well, in fact I think pulling the pocket inside out is a way of suggesting that, "we're not so expensive", but, you know, so they're trying to give this message without actually saying it, and, unfortunately, I think they are very expensive for what they sell, so...at least compared to what, what other things you can buy. You know, I, I think that for a pair of chinos, for example, I
think they would be overpriced because you could find the same quality somewhere else.

Amy is a 36-year-old statistician working at a university research institute. She has a Ph.D. degree. Her father is a carpenter with a high school diploma and her mother is a cake decorator who also has a high school diploma. According to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, her social origin is lower than the previous two informants since neither of her parents have high educational qualifications. Amy’s life goal is to travel and learn about other cultures and speak many languages. She loves knitting, sewing, baking, and gardening. She likes to go to concerts (popular music to classical music) and go to art museums. She enjoys various kinds of music such as punk, folk, rock, and some classical music. She loves domestic and foreign travel. She usually serves vegetarian food when she entertains guests. She considers fit, appearance, cost, ease of care and fabric blends when she buys fashion products. She does not have a clothing brand preference. Amy’s interpretation of the Banana Republic ad was:

Ummm.........I actually don’t know what to think. A woman is lying on the ground. Her leg up [sic] in the air. Relaxing. Maybe she just fell. The guy is extending his hand. Why his pocket is out, I don’t know.

Um-um. No. I mean it’s a man and a woman and that’s, and I don’t see any relationship between the two other than they’re probably modeling....Banana Republic clothes...and shoes. But I don’t see, you know, there’s no reason makes me to [sic] Banana Republic“. 
Through comparison of the three informants' interpretations, there did not appear to be any distinctive factors reflecting Sally's social group in her interpretation of the ads. Sally's interpretation pertains more to the layout of the ad, which seems consistent with her occupational interests as a web site designer. Also, her interpretation provides a clue of her utilitarian consumption philosophy ("you can't really see how they fit"). Henry's and Amy's interpretations are based on visual cues they obtained from the ad. Different from Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital, there were no relative differences in the three social groups' interpretations. All of the informants appeared to have their own tastes in lifestyle, music, and art, in spite of their social origins.

The limitations of this study might help explain the lack of relative differences between the members of the three groups. First, I did not consider the subtle differences of educational qualification in determining cultural capital. I established the possession of a bachelor's degree or higher as "high educational qualifications" and I only focused on the disparity of parents' educational qualifications. However, it is possible that there are differences in levels of taste between individual's with a bachelor's degree and those with higher than the bachelor's degree (i.e., Ph. D). In the case of Amy, for instance, her educational qualification is a Ph. D, but her parents' educational qualification is lower. Thus, the findings for the study might not fully explain one's cultural capital. Second, the interviews for this study focused on two postmodern fashion ads, and the range of time the informants spent being interviewed was between 15 and 30 minutes. The limited range of time may have affected the amount and quality of the information I
gleaned from the interview, and may not have been adequate to discern subtle differences in taste or social status.

Also, Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital is a limited concept that can not explain culture as a complete social and historic symbolic system. There is a contextual difference between Bourdieu’s study and this study which may explain the disparity.

Bourdieu’s work was conducted in the 1960s, however, this study was conducted in 1999. Owing to technological developments, informants have access to different kinds of information from various sources. The accumulation of cultural knowledge and tastes in lifestyle are no longer determined solely by Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (i.e., educational qualification). Academic institutions (e.g., Universities) are not the only places where individuals obtain cultural capital. One can also obtain cultural capital (e.g., good taste) from popular culture, such as various media- Television, film, newspapers, magazines, etc. In addition, ideas of what is good taste change very rapidly in this postmodern consumer culture.

Purchase Intention

In this section of the study, my goal was to understand consumers’ evaluations of the ads and how their evaluations related to their possibility of purchasing the product. There were five different patterns of informants’ responses which include different evaluations of the ads: (a) like ad —want to purchase, (b) like ad—do not want to purchase, (c) do not like ad—want to purchase, (d) do not like ad—do not want to purchase, and (e) indifference.
Like ad—Want to purchase the product. Some informants had a positive evaluation of the ad and expressed a positive purchase intention for the product being advertised. Their positive product and brand knowledge is derived from their own experiences with the product and brand. An informant commented:

Esther: Ya, I like this ad.
...I'm going to be biased about this Banana Republic ad because I like their clothes a lot. I buy a lot of clothes from Banana Republic. I like Banana Republic and J. Crew and Gap clothes and I think it's just familiarity there. A lot of their, their styles don't change that much. Um, they're fairly consistent. Their sizes are consistent. I know what my size is. It's just easier for me to shop there. I think I'm probably a fairly lazy shopper. (laughs) I don't like to try a bunch of things on. I know what size I am. I just go and buy it. I know what I am in those three stores and then, I'm fine. But I mean, I can be swayed by prices. I go [to other stores] and there's a great sale, so “oh, okay, I'll try these things on and if they fit that's great.” But, for me, I'd rather go to the stores I know even if they're more expensive. I'm getting something that I like and it's good quality and fits.

Esther had previous knowledge about Banana Republic from her experience shopping there. She likes Banana Republic's classic styles. Also, she likes the way Banana Republic clothes fit. As a busy, professional working woman, she knows that she can save time and energy by going to Banana Republic to shop. As Esther stated in the interview (“I am going to be biased... because I like their clothing”), knowledge and experience about the brand might lead her to interpret the ad positively. Once a consumer is satisfied with the product's quality (i.e., good fit and style) and has positive
experience and knowledge, one will likely to have a positive purchase intention.

Jimmy’s statement is another example. He said:

Jimmy: ...you know, it’s a nice landscape. It gives the, I guess the open field gives an idea of what type of clothes you’re wearing. You’re wearing, you know, light clothes, clothes for, you know, for the outdoors and, you know, for the free life that everyone wants. So, otherwise I think that is a good commercial.

Interviewer: So basically you like this advertisement, right?
Jimmy: Yeah, yeah. I think it’s good.

Interviewer: Okay, so what do you think about the brand, Banana Republic?
Jimmy: I thought, it’s a big brand. I think it’s a very powerful brand. They have done, um, they have pretty much conquered the youth market and also the market that’s, uh, the, the young professional market as well. Someone who’s, you know, wants to feel like they’re free and well off. Banana Republic is like a chic type of name. And that’s the image I’d get, but I wouldn’t focus on the clothes. I’d just....it’s I think that’s secondary.

Interviewer: So this one tells you, “Hey, go to the Banana Republic shop”....

He also had positive knowledge about the brand. In his interview, Jimmy’s knowledge seemed to lead his evaluation of the ad in a positive way. It was well expressed by his statement, “….Banana Republic is like a chic type of name. And that is the image I’d get....” Jimmy expressed a desire to purchase the product shown in the ad.

Like ad—Do not want to purchase the product. Some informants had positive evaluations of the ads but the evaluations were not consistent with their likelihood of purchase. The following dialogue shows that a positive evaluation of an ad does not always directly result in a purchase. Alex stated about the cK Jeans ad:
I like it from an aesthetic standpoint, but I don’t care one way or the other for the product. Just I think it’s a nice ad, aesthetically pleasing but it doesn’t really get me to think about going and getting the product.

The visual image caught Alex’s attention and involvement, but the positive evaluation of the ad was not enough to result in a positive purchase intention. Consumers’ feelings and judgments are different, as Edel and Burke (1987) concluded. Consumers sometimes view advertisements as aesthetic events (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Some ads please consumers aesthetically, but they do not necessarily persuade them to purchase the product. However, the pleasing ads might reinforce consumers’ attitudes positively. Also, they might increase their involvement in the ads and their purchase intention of the product.

Do not like ad—Want to purchase the product. Some informants who gave negative evaluation of the ads expressed an intention to purchase the products. Even though they did not like the ads, they had positive previous knowledge about the brand. Amy’s negative evaluation of the ad did not result in a negative possibility of purchase. Amy commented on the Banana Republic ad:

Interviewer: So how do you feel and think about this ad?
Amy: Oh. This ad does nothing. I wouldn’t, you know [sic] ...it’s just another Banana Republic ad. It doesn’t entice me to go buy anything.
...that there’s no compelling reason to pay attention to it. I think it’s pretty silly.
...I’d say, “oh, this is just a frivolous sort of ad that’s someone [sic], um, a creative marketing school tried to put
Amy’s statement, “This ad does nothing.... It’s just another Banana Republic ad” insinuated that she had experienced negative evaluations of other Banana Republic ads before this ad was shown to her. Her statements, “it doesn’t entice me to go buy anything...I don’t like this ad” means that the ad has not persuaded her to purchase the product. However, despite her dislike for the ad, Amy expressed her rationale for shopping at Banana Republic:

They have some styles I like. Sometimes some interesting colors. Um, the basics are very good, too. You know, T-shirts and jeans and so you can....um [sic], they also have some really interesting, um, fashionable clothes as well...so....Yeah.

...You know, you can go there and always find something really nice or something basic....

...I, you know, it [the Banana Republic ad] doesn’t turn me off.

Amy’s positive knowledge about the brand and product was confidently expressed by the statement, “…You can go there and always find something really nice....” Based on Amy’s comments, her previous knowledge of the brand’s merchandise, such as high quality (e.g., “really nice”) and high style (e.g., “interesting colors” and “fashionable clothes”), were formed from her personal experiences. Thus, these elements contributed to a good brand image and result in a positive purchase intention. Once a consumer is
satisfied with the product's quality from one's own experience, to a certain degree, he /
she is not swayed by negative evaluations of the ad.

**Do not like ad—Do not want to purchase the product.** In the case of cK Jeans,
many informants commented on the sexually explicit images the ads contained. Some
informants expressed negative responses to the ad and the brand. Mary responded to the
cK Jeans ad as follows:

Mary: I am not a big fan of Calvin Klein....
I think because he seems to me like he exploits young people into
positions that seem kind of promiscuous...

Interviewer: So you don’t like Calvin Klein?
Mary: No. I guess I have a strong opinion on that. (both laugh) I don’t
think they give human beings enough credit, you know. But
anyway. But that’s what I think.

James also expressed negative opinions of the cK Jeans ad.

James: You know, it’s just, Calvin Klein. I think, in general is blatant
sexually loaded down [sic], and that’s just their general marketing
strategy and it certainly doesn’t appeal to me whatsoever.

Interviewer: Does not affect you at all?
James: Um-um [No].
Interviewer: You don’t like it? (both laugh)
James: It’s wasted on me.

Mary’s and James’ negative perceptions of previous cK ads contributed to their negative
evaluations and responses to the cK ad they were shown during their interviews, and the
cK brand in general. Mary expressed her strong opinion against the cK ad (“...he
[Calvin Klein] exploits young people…”, “I don’t think they give human being enough credit”) for its sexual content in ads. James stated that the ad was sexually explicit and he didn’t like it (“It’s[the ad] wasted on me [him]”). Ads that evoke negative feelings (i.e., evaluations) might capture consumers’ attention and recall of the brand. In some cases, however, negative evaluations may evoke consumers’ negative reactions toward the product and the brand. In addition, once informants have negative perceptions about the brand, it might be hard to change their perceptions into positive ones.

**Indifference.** Many informants expressed that they were indifferent toward the ads and the products. Indifferent consumers do not have any strong feelings, either positive or negative, to the ad or to the product. Thus, the result of indifference is the same as a negative response. In the case of the cK ad, many informants expressed their indifference toward the ad and the brand. Esther, one of the indifferent informants, described her brand knowledge about cK jeans in the following interview excerpts.

Esther: I know what type of image they're trying to portray. Calvin Klein. They are always the young, sexy models and...sort of staring off. So I understand why Calvin Klein chooses to make these ads. But what I am saying is that I don't understand what this ad is that this ad doesn't speak to me. It doesn't, you know [sic], I don't feel like, um, like I'm as much of their target as other people would be.

Interviewer: So do you think they target you? You are the target market?

Esther: Um...they might think, because of my age group, that I am. Because of the age group and income that I am in their target market, but I don't feel like I'm in their target market. Their target market might be younger than me, actually...I probably pay less attention to those ads, just because it's not a brand that I seek out...

It's not that I like or dislike. It's just that it doesn't, it's not like, "oh", it's [sic], I don't even think the photography is that great in it.
You know...(both laugh)...I guess I, I don't really care much either way over this ad. No, no strong reaction either way.

The main reason for the informant's indifference is the marketer's failure in presenting the ad to the intended target market. When informants thought that the ad was not targeting them, they became indifferent toward the ad and the product. The indifferent informants did not get involved in the interpretive activity of the ads.

Informants did not always view the target market of an ad to be the same as that intended by the advertisers. They indicated that the target markets for both brands were younger than themselves. For example, though the target market for Banana Republic is professional men and women ages 25 to 45, many informants expressed that the target market was people ages 20 to 30, including college students. According to Lockwood (1997), the target market for cK Jeans is Generation X (age 21 to 41). However, most informants indicated that the target market was teens to twenties. In the case of cK Jeans, the Calvin Klein Company always uses young models so consumers have stereotyped the brand as being for young people. Esther's knowledge about the brand did not actively motivate her to purchase the product because she believed that the brand is not targeting her. When consumers think the ad is not targeting them, they tend to be indifferent toward the ad and do not get involved in the ad—either negatively or positively. Even though the advertisers succeed in getting some of the consumers' attention (as ascertained during the semi-structured interview), the attention may not necessarily result in purchasing behavior.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, FURTHER STUDY, AND LIMITATIONS

This chapter provides conclusions from this study's analysis of symbolic meanings, as well as the interpretations of consumers' readings of and responses to postmodern fashion advertising. In addition, implications related to the analysis of the two selected advertisements and consumers' responses are provided for marketers to create effective advertising in the postmodern cultural context, and recommendations for further study are suggested. Also, limitations for this study are provided.

Conclusion

Symbolic meaning. Semiotic analysis reveals that visual images in ads are not accidental portrayals of culture, but representations of a cultural system which not only communicate symbolic meanings of objects, but also mirror the main characteristics of postmodern consumer culture. Neither of the selected ads focus on information about the price of the items or the quality of the products, but project the image and embodied symbolic meanings of the brands and the products. In the case of the Banana Republic ad, the models' body poses, the articles of clothing, and background combine to make a
harmonious sign of casual freedom, youth, sex and consumerism. There are two themes in the ad. The first theme is “nature”. Color in the ad such as the earth tone and light beige supports signs of nature. The theme, “nature,” is also related to the postmodern ideology of “naturalism”. “Naturalism” signifies freedom and unrestraint wherein relativists believe “anything goes” because everything is based on one’s own natural feelings and will. The second theme is “sex”. The female model’s body pose is a signifier of her sexual intention. The male model’s pulled out pocket signifies the commodity of fetishism, insinuating the male phallic nature.

In the case of the cK ad, the model’s body poses, facial expressions, style of dress, and the background are used to communicate the main themes, sex and youth. The ad also signifies a youthful lifestyle, which is carefree, casual, rebellious, and independent. The models’ bodies are also used as a communication tool in the ad, by which their poses and facial expressions are used to portray the models’ identity and lifestyle, as well as the brand image and brand logo. The model’s body poses are used as a signifier of the Calvin Klein’s signature “c” and “K”. The model’s body poses, fashion styles, background and cK logo combines to form a single message that attempts to persuade consumers to buy the cK products to become a member of cK “community”.

There are several postmodern characteristics embodied in these ads. The first characteristic is open interpretation. There is not a single interpretation, but multiple interpretations of visual images in the ads. Postmodern consumers create their own individual interpretations based on their individual tastes and cultural knowledge. Open interpretation of ads is aimed at Generation X target consumers who are self-reliant as
Generation Xers respect their own unique personal characteristics and enjoy creating their own stories and actualizing themselves in their interpretation of ads.

Several devices promote consumers' open interpretations of the ads. The first is the cropping of images. In the case of the Banana Republic ad, on the one hand, the models' faces are omitted. Since human bodies are used only as props to communicate advertisers' intention to sell merchandise in the ads, facial expressions are important cues that aid in decoding the mood of the ads. Omission of models' faces provides consumers with a chance to take part in imagining what is unseen and contribute to open interpretations. On the other hand, the product image is also cropped. It is a unique postmodern cropping style. Consumers can see only half of the male shirt and chino pants. In the modern era, the protagonist of the ad was the product being advertised and was never cropped. Only models' faces and background that may distract the consumer from the products were cropped. However, in postmodern ads, even the image of the product is often cropped. It demonstrates that the focus of ad has shifted from the product to the consumers who read the advertisement. The lack of product information adds ambiguity and consumers must rely on their imaginations to complete the message in the ad. The ambiguity encourages consumers' curiosity and multiple interpretations of the messages. Through the interpretation process, the ambiguity is transformed into consumers' own stories and they can experience personal intimacy with the ad.

The second postmodern characteristic is that only the human bodies are used as a communication tool in the ads. The model's gestures and body poses are used to portray
the models’ identity, lifestyle, and the brand-image and brand logo. The models’ body poses in the Banana Republic ad express the image of the brand/product, freedom, relaxation, sex, and consumerism. The models’ body poses in the cK ad express sex, carefree, rebelliousness, and the brand logo: cK. The body in the postmodern consumer culture is used as a social symbol which presents messages about one’s identity as well as personal resources. Also, the body becomes the foundation for postmodern consumers to construct one’s sense of self and the world.

Third, these ads occupy multiple pages thus taking more space to attract more of the consumers’ attention. In this postmodern era, multi-page ads (i.e., more than 5 pages of ads) allow consumers to create their own story plots as they flip to each successive page. Multi-page ads are quite common nowadays and are considered a postmodern characteristic.

Fourth, postmodern moods are expressed by the models’ gestures and facial expressions. Unlike modern ads which depicted only happiness, joy and love, moods illustrated in postmodern ads represent multifaceted moods raging from apathy to violence. In the case of the cK Jeans ad, the female model’s face is apathetic and possibly rebellious and the male model does not have any discernible facial expressions. These moods are multi-faceted, not limited to only that which is positive (i.e., joy, happiness).

Fifth, black and white photography was used as an expression of nostalgia for the modern era in the cK ad. Postmodernists believe that history has ended and progress is not linear. Although developments in technology make it possible to reproduce a glossy,
high color photography, postmodern advertisers use black and white photography to appeal postmodern consumers who enjoy symbolically revisiting the modern era.

The sixth characteristic is the concept of "real people" depicted in the ads. The models’ body poses, and their style of dress and hair represent real young people in a real life situation. In the case of the Banana Republic ad, the background is a field (nature) and the models’ body poses are informal and unrehearsed. In the case of the cK ad, the female model’s hair is tousled and the garments the models wear are wrinkled and seem to depict the imperfection of real life. Consumers are likely to feel more intimacy with these images and can easily create their own interpretations by putting themselves in the ad.

The seventh postmodern characteristic is related to ideologies such as consumption community and naturalism. In a consumption community, a simulated kinship by consumption activity replaces the traditional concepts of kinship and common interest or concern. The consumption community coexists with traditional forms of community as a form of hyperreality (e.g., cK family who wear cK products). Also, the postmodern ideology of naturalism is related to the choices consumers make based upon their free will. Naturalism is also related to relativism, which means that there is not one standard of reality, but rather different realities on which postmodern consumer rely.

Interpretations of consumers' meanings and responses. Interpreting ads is a narrative activity by which an exchange of meanings occurs on the basis of individual's cultural knowledge and personal experiences. In their readings, informants created a plot
from the ambiguous visual images in order to make sense of them. The stories were based on signs in the ads, for example, the models' body poses, the background, and the fashion products. Signs were used in developing the stories. Some signs were shared and others were unique. It suggested that informants shared general cultural knowledge and relied upon their own individual histories and experiences in interpreting meaning.

Informants read relationships between the observable cues in the ad. Mainly two relationships were found in informants' interpretations. One was between the male and the female models and the other was between the models and the product. Sex was seen often as the underlying theme in these relationships. Although some informants appeared to interpret sexual connotation negatively and tried to avoid discussing it, the sexual component was an important and pervasive theme.

Informants had a certain amount of previous advertising knowledge related to signs and meanings. Informants used the knowledge in interpreting the meanings of pictorial metaphors. In this study, the informants showed an undeniable existence of some shared interpretation across readings of the ads. Especially in the case of the cK ad, many informants were aware of the main themes, "sex" and "youth" in their interpretations. Informants' previous advertising knowledge was a part of their general cultural knowledge and was used as a guideline in interpreting ads. The informants' previous knowledge of the brands guided them to interpret ads in the way they had previously done. Also, prior brand knowledge seemed to increase informant's involvement in reading the ad and in setting it apart from other ads in the magazine. Also,
once consumers get involved in interpretation of the ad, it increases recall of the brand when they need to purchase fashion items.

Some postmodern characteristics appeared in the informants’ interpretation. First, the informants in this study did not always express positive opinions of the ads they read. This contradicted Phillips’ (1997) conclusion that consumers tend to draw only positive interpretations. Some informants asserted that the advertisers’ intention might have been to create negative or unclear messages in the ads to catch consumers’ attention. The informants expressed that even when they did not like the ad or its messages, they found the ad or its messages memorable, thus enabling brand recall. This is different from the findings of studies in modern era.

Second, informants expressed that black and white photography in the CK ad caught their attention and involved them in the interpretation process. Informants seemed to like the postmodern style of photography which used gray scale black and white as opposed to the glossy high color photography of the modern era.

Third, ambiguity was another postmodern characteristic. Ambiguity was a significant element, which left the texts open to informants’ interpretations. Ambiguity also made it possible for informants to personalize the ads by projecting themselves into the scenarios. Many informants seemed to understand this intention. In the case of the Banana Republic ad, the cropped images might have been a strategy in promoting consumer’s open interpretation and targeting consumers of varying ages and races. In addition, as globalization prevails, this approach might be applied to diverse target
consumers all over the world. To a certain extent, ambiguity in the ad increased informants' curiosity, encouraging them to get involved in active interpretation.

Emotions (feelings) were generated by the visual images in the ad during informants' interpretations. Emotions were evoked by the visual images and the informants' interpretations were linked to the emotions and moods the images depicted. Informants seemed to understand advertisers' intentions to sell the emotions and lifestyles connected to the products, rather than the products alone. Evoked emotions are the most important factor in predicting informants' interpretations and purchase intentions. If the emotions and lifestyles consumers connect with the products are positive and pleasing, and this will increase the likelihood of purchasing the product as opposed to when the connections are especially negative.

Ads are not only used as a source of information for informants but also as a source of obtaining individual symbolic meanings. Through the process of reading the advertisements, informants developed individual meanings related to the product or image. Interpreting ads was the process of shaping informants' construction of social identity, values, and ideologies. Informants recognized their self-identity through interpretations.

**Similarities and differences.** There were similarities and differences in informants' interpretations based on social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and cultural capital. First, the interpretations suggested that consumers' reading patterns differed on the basis of gender. Many male informants tended to read only the obvious signs they could see. They tended not to be able to articulate what they did not
see in the ad. In contrast, many female informants tended to read ads through their personal experiences and feelings and went beyond what they could see. In addition, female informants had a tendency to express empathy for the ‘characters’ and imaginatively projected themselves into the ad in their readings.

Many male informants expressed more frustration than female informants when meanings in the ads were not obvious. They indicated this by frequently responding “I don’t know.” They expressed their discomfort when they were asked to interpret the meanings of the ads they were shown. In contrast, female informants tended to be comfortable creating their own stories while interpreting the meanings of the ads. They expressed less frustration than male informants when the messages were not obvious.

Patterns of involvement in ads differ based on gender. Many female informants appeared to be more involved in the product being advertised than were the male informants. They seemed to be more interested in product oriented characteristics (i.e., fit, style and quality) in the ad than the male informants. Some female informants expressed concern with the cropped image of the Banana Republic ad for the lack of product information about the unseen parts of the garments. On the contrary, most male informants did not express direct concern about the cropped image. None of the male informants expressed the desire to see the unseen parts of the garments in the ad. Many of them stated that they obtained enough information from the cropped images and they were only interested in the visual images in the ad. None of the male informants mentioned utilitarian characteristics of the products such as fit and size. Thus, the male informants were categorized as “uninvolved product consumers” who largely focused
solely on the visual image in the ad. In contrast, the female informants were categorized as “involved product consumers” who tended to place importance on the actual products in the ad.

Second, the informants’ interpretations were studied based on their ethnicity. In the study, five of the twenty informants were Asian. Three of them immigrated to the US more than 20 years ago when they were less than 10 years old. One informant was Canadian Indian (Asian) and another informant was Indian (Asian) and came to the US for 6 years ago. In the study, Asian informants appeared to have been acculturated into the US culture. Informants’ readings were based on signs they were able to obtain from the ads. There were no relative differences based on ethnicity in interpretations of the ad, and this is likely due to the global homogenization of culture.

Third, the informants’ interpretations were studied based on their religious backgrounds in that individuals belief systems are, to a certain degree, determined by their religion. From the study, there were ten Christians (Protestant) out of a total of twenty informants. In the case of the cK ad, only Christian informants consistently expressed dislike toward the ad because of its sexual connotation. Catholics, Hindus, and atheists did not express dislike toward the cK ad. In the study, there were four Catholic informants. Two were not active believers and two were regular church goers. The reason the two regular Catholic church goers did not express objection toward the cK ad was that they did not believe that the ad targeted them. Their indifference toward the ad and brand might explain why the strong sexual message was not an issue for them. It is clear that one’s tastes and opinions are due to personal beliefs and values. Religion plays an
important role in forming theses beliefs. Thus, the findings strongly suggest that the sexual messages in ads are lost on those consumers who adhere to Christian doctrines.

Fourth, based on Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital, interpretations were studied based on the differences of the informants' cultural capital. In the study, there were no specific differences in informants' reading based on their cultural capital (parents' level of education). The informants' interpretations and their culture (including lifestyles) appeared to be more related to their own personal preferences and tastes than their levels of cultural capital. Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital might well have been relevant in 1960s when Bourdieu conducted his survey, but the concept did not appear to apply to the postmodern consumer culture. Thus, Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital may need to be revised to fit the postmodern consumer culture. The limited number of informants participating in this study might be a possible reason for the lack of differences in the informants' interpretation based on cultural capital. Also, this study focused on only two postmodern fashion ads, thus, the findings of this research may not be enough to explain the subtle differences of the informants' tastes based on their social origin.

Purchase intention. Informants' evaluations of the ads were somewhat related to their possibility of purchasing, but the evaluation did not always result in anticipated purchase behavior. Previous experience and knowledge of the brand seemed to lead informants' interpretations positively or negatively. Experience with the brand (or the product) was an important element in determining the purchase intention. If an informant had positive brand knowledge, it tended to result in a positive interpretation as
well as a positive purchase intention. Some informants who had negative evaluations of
the ads expressed positive purchase intentions because they have experientially acquired
knowledge about brand and product prior to their interview. Previous product
knowledge, such as quality, price, and stylishness were elements that contribute to
positive purchase intentions.

Some informants who expressed positive experience with and knowledge of the
products also tended to have positive purchase intentions. Other informants who
expressed positive evaluations of the ads did not always have positive purchase
intentions. Consumers sometimes viewed advertisements as aesthetic events, but that
alone did not necessarily motivate them to want to make a purchase. However, positive
evaluations of ads seemed to increase informants’ involvement in the brand and
interpretation activity, and consequently might lead to the possibility of purchase.

There were some indifferent informants who had no strong feelings—negative or
positive—toward the ad or the product. The main reason for their indifference was likely
to be the marketers’ failure to convey to consumers who the actual target market was. In
light of this, an understanding of how the product is positioned in the minds of target
consumers is an important matter. In this study, both brands failed to accurately convey
who their intended target markets were. The perceived target markets for both brands
were thought to be younger than the marketers intended, and because of this it is likely
that some informants showed indifferent toward the brands /ads. When consumers
thought that the ad was not targeting them, they became indifferent toward the ad and the
product, and tended not to get involved in the interpretation activity of ads.
Semiotic Analysis and Informant’s Interpretations

There were similarities between my semiotic analysis and the informants’ interpretations of the selected ads. First, in both my semiotic analysis and the informants’ interpretations, postmodern characteristics were found: open interpretation was found owing to the ambiguity of the ad messages and black and white photography. Second, the importance of evoked emotions and lifestyles in the message of the ads were found in both of my semiotic analysis and the informants’ interpretations. In my semiotic analysis, I understood the importance of evoked emotions and lifestyles as the notion of consumption community that explained why consumers wanted to buy the products being advertised. Third, the main themes of the cK ad, “sex” and “youth,” were found in my semiotic analysis and the informants’ interpretations. Fourth, the concept of real people was also found in both.

There were, however, a few differences between my semiotic analysis and the informants’ interpretations. First, in semiotic analysis, I only drew positive interpretations of the ads. However, in the informants’ interpretations, positive as well as negative interpretations of the ads were found. Second, the main themes of the Banana Republic ad were found to be somewhat different. In my semiotic analysis, “nature” and “sex” were the main themes, but in the informants’ interpretations, “missing something”, “no-money” and “sex” were found as the main themes. The disparity between my semiotic analysis and informants’ interpretations can be explained by the difference of my cultural background, which is Korean and Christian (See limitations) and the
background of the informants'. Also, since I interviewed twenty informants, their interpretations were multiple and open, compared to my semiotic analysis, which was singular, done by myself.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that using consistent themes in creating ads is an important strategy for marketers. Once consumers obtain the knowledge about the brand and the ad, their knowledge leads their interpretations of ads. The consistent themes provide the chance for consumers to get involved in the interpretation process and the competing 'noise' of other ads is reduced. The consistent themes also help consumers recall the brand and guide them in interpreting the ad.

Marketers must increase their efforts to create positive brand knowledge in the minds of their target consumers. Although one cannot ignore the important effects of advertising on the likelihood of purchase, consumers must be satisfied with the physical characteristics of the product as well. Positive previous knowledge about the product and brand occurred mainly from personal product experience. Prior brand knowledge is an important element linked to purchase intention. Therefore, marketers' continuous efforts to produce high quality merchandise are of the utmost importance.

Who is reached and how the advertising message is processed determine the success of advertising. The main goal of advertising is to guide the target consumers' interpretations of the ad in the intended manner so that the consumer purchases the product. Additionally, marketers' efforts to present the ads to the intended target market
are an important matter in increasing purchase behavior. Consumers’ perceived target market is an important element in determining their involvement in the ad (or brand) as well as their purchase intention. If the perceived target market is different from the advertisers,’ the target consumers are indifferent toward the ad and the product. To present the ad to the right target consumers, marketers should use models who are of appropriate age, body, and status, and are depicted in scenes that are realistic to the target consumers. This would help the target consumers understand who the target market really is. From the findings, especially in the case of the cK ad, some informants stated that the teenage models do not look like them so they could not project themselves into the ad. In this light, marketers need to carefully investigate how target consumers perceive the ad. Without knowing consumers’ perceptions of an ad, it is difficult to develop an effective advertising strategy.

Consumers encounter a bombardment of advertisements from the media in their daily lives. Thus, advertisers must get consumers’ attention, as attention is necessary for positive evaluations. However, getting consumers’ attention is different from getting consumers’ involvement in reading the ad and personalizing the product in the ad. Attracting attention to an ad is not enough; the attention needs to be developed into a purchase intention. Once consumers become interested in an ad, it naturally leads to their interpreting the ad. In doing so, the consumer may begin to personalize the ad and the product, and this personalization may increase purchase behavior.

In the postmodern era, advertisers use various means to get consumers’ attention. Sometimes, the background, the model’s way of dressing and posing, the mood, and the
editing styles are those which mainstream consumers never would have expected in the modern era. Shocking ads which contain visual images and written expressions against moral and common beliefs (e.g., sexually explicit visual images) are used to get consumers’ attention in this postmodern consumer culture. However, advertisers need to carefully consider consumers’ responses toward their ads. Although some advertisers are successful in getting consumers’ attention, the attention does not necessarily result in purchase behavior. In many cases, if ads evoke too negative an evaluation, consumers tend to strongly object to purchasing the product. For example, since “sex” was found as the main theme in informants’ interpretations of the ads, marketers might use subtle sexual connotations in ads to increase not only informants’ attention, but also involvement of ads. However, when the images are too sexually explicit, it might lead a negative response toward the ad/brand. Therefore, advertisers need to carefully consider how they capture consumer attention and evoke positive evaluations from them.

In addition, providing a certain degree of ambiguity is also suggested as a way of getting consumers involvement in reading an ad and personalize in the product because an appropriate amount of ambiguity leads to open as well as multiple interpretations. However, it is hard to determine the degree of ambiguity needed in an ad. In addition, if the ad is too hard to interpret, consumers might experience frustration and avoid getting involved in the ad. The frustration may result in negative evaluations of the ad or the brand.

The findings of this study suggest that there is an important characteristic marketers need to consider when they create the ad targeting female consumers. On the
one hand, female informants tended to like to interpret ambiguous ads and make use of their personal experiences and feelings. On the other hand, they tended to be product-involved consumers who wanted more utilitarian, product-related information in the ads. Therefore, marketers need to consider these two contradictions to create effective ads for female consumers.

Further Study

In modern marketing studies, males are considered practical consumers who tend not to be swayed by non-utilitarian factors such as fashion and emotion. According to this belief, they are supposed to be more interested in utilitarian factors about products such as price, quality, and fit. However, of the informants' in this study contradicts that belief. The interpretations showed that males are uninvolved product consumers who do not consider the practical characteristics of products seen in ads. In contrast, females were the involved product consumers whose readings included the evaluation of the products presented in the ads. They tended to speculate on the practical characteristics of the product. More research on gender based readings of and response to ads in a postmodern context is recommended. Since only the female consumers were interested in product characteristics in the ads, gendered readings and responses toward “information focused ads” versus “image focused ads” would be a useful topic of study.

Studies on different conditions of involvement in ad interpretation are also needed. In this study, consumers were asked to interpret ads. In this condition, the informants were made to have a higher level of involvement in the interpretation process.
than if they were consuming advertising unmonitored. If the interpretations were not solicited, some of informants would not have voluntarily taken action in interpreting the ads. Therefore, additional research related to consumers' involvement in ads' interpretations in more natural settings is suggested. Involvement might be attributed not only to ads and consumers characteristics, but also to other elements such as ad placement, the degree of exposure (i.e., how many times consumers are exposed to the ads in their lives), and other related factors. In this light, what attributes initiate consumers' involvement in interpretations and how this involvement is developed into purchase behavior might be useful in understanding consumers' responses. Using qualitative research methods such as focused interviews is a way of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of consumers' involvement.

Understanding the culture of consumers including their lifestyles and tastes, is of utmost important criterion in marketing studies. From this point of view, marketers should carefully investigate consumer culture within today’s postmodern context. Bourdieu conducted his survey to understand culture and consumers almost 40 years ago (in the modern context - France in the 1960s). Although his study has provided firm foundations for consumer and cultural studies, his notion of cultural capital may not be applicable to the postmodern consumer culture. Thus, marketers need to revise and extend Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital by incorporating other factors that determine consumer culture and differences of taste.

From this study, I have gained an understanding of the symbolic meaning in consumers' interpretations of, and responses to postmodern ads. The constructed reality
imposed by this study, is not generalizable to all consumers but I believe that the study provides a guideline for understanding the impact of the complexities of consumer culture on interpretations of postmodern fashion ads for both marketers and consumers.

Limitations

This study has some limitations I cannot exclude. First, the findings of this study are to a certain degree subjective. Constructivism was used as an interpretive research paradigm in the study. Thus, the findings of this study constitute a constructed reality which was based on my understanding of the informants' worlds and how they create and share meanings about the selected postmodern ads. A hermeneutic approach to interpretation guided my understanding of the informants' interpretations and the survey data about their lifestyles. Thus, the findings are literally created, based on the interaction between informants' lifestyles, their interpretations, and myself.

My cultural and individual characteristics are likely to have influenced the findings of my study. Among many characteristics, my ethnicity and religious background might have affected my interpretation of the informants' meanings. I am a Korean; born, raised and educated there. I came to the US for four and one half years ago in order to pursue a doctoral degree. Although I had traveled to many foreign countries and was acculturated somewhat in western culture before I came to the US, I cannot deny that my cultural belief system is deeply rooted in Korean culture. However, my etic perspective from which the informants and their responses are investigated from an outside position, helped make me aware of subtle features embodied in the interpretations
because I did not take the interpretations for granted, as an insider might well do. In
addition, my religious background is Christianity (Protestant) and I am an active
Christian. Thus, my interpretations of findings might be influenced by my value system
which is based on my Christian beliefs.

Second, findings of the study are not to be generalized to all consumers. From the
basis of ontological premises, I assumed that the nature of reality is multiple, and socially
and experientially derived. I used ten male and ten female informants' survey data and
their interpretations to the two selected postmodern ads. Therefore, the finding of the
study is a reality among many realities of postmodern consumers and their culture.
LIST OF REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A.

FIGURE
Figure A.1 A meaning-based Model of Advertising Experiences

- **National Life Projects** involve meanings associated with nationalities and internationality.
- **Community Life Projects** involve meanings associated with residential areas, peer groups and careers.
- **Family Life Projects** involve meanings associated with family members, including parents, siblings, spouse, and children.
- **Private Self Life Project** involves meanings associated with being an individuated human being, including personal activities and interests.

A pervasive Life Theme such as being active versus being passive.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Caucasian, Married, Web Coordinator, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Statistician, No religion, Ph.D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biky</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Web-Producer, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Asian, Single, Actuary, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian, Married, Interactive Media Developer, Catholic, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Caucasian, Married, Graphic Designer, Catholic, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian, Married, Program Coordinator, No Religion, Masters Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Administrative Associate, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Web Coordinator, Catholic, Working on Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Web-Coordinator, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Graphic Designer, Catholic, Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Photo Editor, No Religion, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Financial Planner, Christian, MBA</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table B.1. (Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity, Marital Status, Profession, Religion, Education</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Computer Programmer, Christian, Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Asian, Married, Actuary, Hinduism, Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Actuary, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Asian, Married, Actuary, Hinduism, Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Caucasian, Single, Professor, No Religion, Ph.D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Asian, Single, Engineer, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Asian, Single, Systems Analyst, Christian, College Degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B.1. List of Informants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Father Education (Occupation)</th>
<th>Mother Education (Occupation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>College Degree (Entrepreneur)</td>
<td>College Degree (Teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>High School Diploma (Carpenter)</td>
<td>High School Diploma (Cake decorator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biky</td>
<td>High School Diploma (Sargent)</td>
<td>College Degree (Nurse)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>College Degree (Business Owner)</td>
<td>College Degree (Nurse)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>High School Diploma (Systems Technician)</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>High School Diploma (Car sales)</td>
<td>High School Diploma (Office Manager)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>College Degree (Teacher)</td>
<td>College Degree (Teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>High School Drop Out (Foreman)</td>
<td>High School Drop Out (Book Keeper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Law Degree (Lawyer)</td>
<td>Master’s Degree (Psychologist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Junior College Diploma (Independent Insurance Agent)</td>
<td>Junior College Diploma Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>MBA (Accountant)</td>
<td>College Degree (Office Manager)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B.2. (Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Father's Education</th>
<th>Mother's Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Master's Degree (Engineer)</td>
<td>High School (House Wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>College Degree (Engineer)</td>
<td>College Degree (House Wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>High School Drop Out</td>
<td>ABD (Clinical Counselor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Auto Parts Distributor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Master's Degree (Engineer)</td>
<td>Master's Degree (House Wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>College Degree (Pastor/ Car</td>
<td>Master's Degree (Manager)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factory Worker)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>Master's Degree (Financial</td>
<td>College Degree (House Wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Officer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>High School Diploma (Receptionist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Factory Worker)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>College Degree (Business</td>
<td>High School (House Wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Owner)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Master's Degree (Engineer)</td>
<td>College Degree (House Wife)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B.2. Parents' Education and Occupation
** This information will be used by pseudonym. The researcher assures of anonymity.**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Occupation:

*Please select one for each question.*

4. Gender: 1. Male   2. Female
8. Education: 1. Completed High School
   2. Completed College Degree
   3. Some Graduate School
   4. Completed Graduate School
9. Annual Family Income before Taxes
   1. 20,000-29,999
   2. 30,000-39,999
   3. 40,000-49,999
   4. 50,000-59,999
   5. 60,000-69,999
   6. 70,000-Above
10. Do you like Banana Republic?
    Then Why:

11. Do you like Calvin Klein Jeans?
    Then Why:
APPENDIX D
SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE INFORMANTS
1. Do you have religion?  
   (If you have one) What is your religion?  
   How often do you attend religious meeting?  
   Do you belong to religious group?  
2. How do you define your personal values? (e.g., honesty, leadership, moral, family value, etc)  
3. What would you like to achieve in your life?  
4. Do you have children?  
   Number and age of your children?  
   What type of school do they attend? (Public school, Private school)  
5. Place of residence (e.g., German Village, Downtown, etc)  
6. How long have you lived there?  
7. Do you have any money invested in stocks or mutual funds?  
8. Do you have an annuity plan?  
9. Do you have credit cards?  
   (If you have any) What are they? (e.g., Visa, American Express)  
   What is the credit limit?  
   How much do you spend each month? (Average)  
   Do you have any debt?  
10. What type of clothes do you wear to work? (Explain to me as specific as you can)  
11. What brand names do you prefer? (What are they?)  
12. What do you like about the brands listed above? Why do you like them? (Specifically)  
13. What type of clothes do you wear at home or in your leisure time?  
14. Do you prefer specific brand names for your leisure wear? (What are they?)  
15. Why do you like them? (Specifically)  
16. Which factors do you consider the most when you purchase fashion products?  
17. How often do you go shopping for fashion items?  
18. Which shopping mall do you usually go to?  
19. Do you buy your clothes by mail order or/and on line or/and TV shopping Channel?  
20. Which brands do you buy this way?  
21. How much is spent on the following items per month/or per year?
Per month______ or Per Year________


22. Which newspapers do you subscribe to/ or read? (Please write down the names)
23. Which magazines do you subscribe to/or read? (Please write down the names)
24. If you listen to the radio, what stations do you mainly listen to? (e.g., light music, classical music, news, sports, etc)
25. Do you have cable TV?
26. If you watch TV, which programs do you mainly watch?

27. Name the three persons you would consider to be attractive.

(1. , 2. , 3. )
28. Why do you think they are attractive?

29. How do you spend your leisure time?
30. Where do you go for vacation?

31. Do you like sports?

(If you like) Do you like to playing or watching?
Which sports do you like the best?

32. What kinds of art do you like the best?
33. What kinds of music do you like the best?

34. What kind of automobile do you drive?
35. What automobile would you like to own, if different from the previous question?

36. When you have a guest for a dinner, what kinds of food do you serve?; how do you like to serve? (e.g., cook-out, buffet, family style, etc). And why?

37. Name:
38. Age:
39. Occupation:
40. How long have you worked at this position?
41. Ethnic Origin:

If you were not born in the US, where do you originally from?
How long have you lived in the US?
How do you think about your cultural diversity?
Do you consider yourself as an American?
42. Please write down your parent's educational qualification and occupation:
Educational Qualification  (e.g., High School, College Degree, MBA, Etc) 
  Father: 
  Mother: 
Occupation 
  Father: 
  Mother: 

***Thanks for your cooperation.
APPENDIX E
ADVERTISEMENTS
Advertisement E.1. *Banana Republic Ad*
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