

## Book Review

Hackley, C. and R.A. Hackley (2022) *Rethinking Advertising as Paratextual Communication*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. Price: £73.37

## Nothing Outside the Text? Understanding Advertisements as Paratext

Regular readers of *Consumption Markets & Culture* will no doubt subscribe to the edict that an understanding of cultural meaning is integral to theorize marketing and branding, something which key proponents in the field have long posited (McCracken 2005; Holt and Cameron 2010; Peñaloza et al. 2012). Yet, as argued in this book, and by other cultural theorists also (Holt 2004), although advertising is a key vehicle for the transmission of brand meaning, a cultural perspective in the discipline remains a conspicuous absence from mainstream marketing communications textbooks, management books and business school curriculums. Advertising theory in many classrooms remains dominated by legacy hierarchy-of-effects communication models, of questionable continuing relevance, which largely fail to explain (or completely ignore) how advertising, marketing and brands operate at a textual and consumption level. It is in the spirit of redressing this intellectual deficit and providing a fresh theoretical perspective on advertising that this new book by Chris and Rungpaka Amy Hackley (2022) is offered.

*“Rethinking Advertising as Paratextual Communication”* builds upon a previous theoretical contribution by the same authors (Hackley and Hackley 2019). Influenced by perspectives in literary theory, particularly borrowing from the work of Genette (2010), this approach regards advertisements as paratextual entities that construct meaning for a brand through their interaction with other forms of cultural discourse and socially-situated consumer communities. As Hackley and Hackley (2019, 197) have previously argued elsewhere:

*‘A paratextual perspective reframes the boundaries of what might be conceived as advertising since it blurs the distinctions between traditional promotional mix categories. Paratextual analysis brings the constellation of paratexts that circulate around the brand within the locus of advertising strategy...’*

This approach considers how advertising paratexts develop meaning for a brand through a dialogic relationship with other texts, and also evaluates how electronic forms of discourse (websites, social media sites, blogs, influencers, customer reviews, etc.) contribute to this culturally mediated process. It shares much with previous theoretical concepts such as advertising intertextuality which explore how consumers’ derive meaning from advertisements through their previous knowledge of other cultural texts (O’Donohoe 1997). A literary theory perspective on advertising has existed since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Stern 1989; Scott 1994), although these studies have tended to focus upon print advertisements only, and it could be argued that a paratextual perspective that considers the wider array of contemporary discursive influences on advertising meaning and interpretation processes in an increasingly digital age. The authors themselves acknowledge that the concept of advertising as paratext is not entirely novel, but provides a useful way of theorizing how we understand advertisements at the level of the text:

*‘We see paratextual advertising, then, as a theoretically informed perspective, not a category of advertising. It reflects a way advertising and its effects can be better*

*understood, it does not describe a set of advertising forms, media, types or genres...We also see paratextuality as a particularly useful approach to theorising advertisements that seem to eschew all the hackneyed genre conventions of advertising and, instead, simply give a presence to a brand in a setting that confers ideological legitimacy and cultural familiarity on the brand' (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, 85).*

The book is aimed at an audience of academics, practitioners, students and interested citizens in terms of how advertisements can be understood from a paratextual perspective. While the book has a more managerial focus than some previous theoretical advertising monographs (Williamson 1978; Cook 1992; Goldman 1992), the explanation and analysis remains scholarly in focus, and the book is replete with practical case examples of paratextual campaigns (the "Compare the Market" Meerkats case features most prominently, a U.K. campaign which had to be recently tempered owing to the Russian heritage of the advertising characters and the beginning of the War in Ukraine in February 2022). It was particularly pleasing to observe how cultural perspectives from the advertising and consumption literature were given prominence in how we can understand the ways in which advertising may work in the contemporary era (Stern 1989; Scott 1994; O'Donohoe 1997), with the additional role of newer digital technologies also considered in this ongoing negotiated process. Contemporary marketing has sometimes been characterised as a perennial struggle between "big data" and "thick data" (Thompson 2019), and programmatic advertising often features centrally in advertising textbooks without considering the role of culture in the construction of the brand as well as the importance of the critical consumer reader. The book also highlights how brands have become legitimate creators of culture in their own right too, with film makers now developing advertising content for brands (it used to be that advertising was a route into making movies for British cultural creatives like David Putnam, Sir Ridley Scott and the late Sir Alan Parker), advertising as paratext has much to contribute toward everyday cultural life as well as to the development of corporate brand meaning.

Although the book is a concise, managerially-orientated text, it makes the case convincingly that a cultural understanding and appreciation of advertising texts is necessary for both theory and practice. The authors also suggest the book is the beginning of a dialogue on advertising as paratext rather than the settling of a debate on the subject, there are clearly many research opportunities that will exist to explore in the future, for instance; how agencies develop paratextual advertisements; how consumers' read and experience advertisements as paratexts; and finally, developing further case studies of paratextual advertising campaigns that incorporate different and emerging forms of transmedia (such as advertising in digital spaces like the Metaverse, and how these may interact with traditional culture and media channels). Hackley and Hackley (2022, 138) conclude as to why this approach is crucial, particularly for those charged with teaching the subject at universities:

*'A critical understanding of media texts has never been more important as part of a liberal education. Paratextuality is an important route into a better understanding of how media texts wield their influence'.*

If you have previously engaged with the cultural, interpretive and literary theory perspectives on advertising (which I suspect many readers of this journal have), the themes of this book will be familiar to you. However, they are presented in a contemporary, lively and engaging way that never feels staid or outdated, particularly in terms of the digital dimensions of how

advertising and marketing campaigns are currently presented to audiences (rather than “consumers”, as Hackley and Hackley (2022, 123) have suggested we should alternatively conceive them as). Fox (1997) has argued that many advertising ideas and theories are reproduced or repackaged for new generations of practitioners which is often a result of professional amnesia and the cult of youth of the sector (Sennett 1999), and it may be that there are people working in or studying advertising that are either unaware of or unexposed to the cultural and literary legacy of advertising theory. One could also observe that the theory of “paratextual advertising” is itself a paratextual construction of a range of theories from media studies, literary theory, cultural anthropology, advertising and marketing, and emerges all the better for this interdisciplinary assemblage. This book is a wonderful compendium of these ideas for learners old and new, and brings them into focus in the era of convergent media in a highly practical framework. It is one that comes highly recommended for all readers who wish to understand the dynamic and increasingly complex ways in which advertising, culture and consumption interact in our current age.

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