Advertising Uses and Gratifications

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There is growing recognition of consumers’ advertising sophistication and the complexity of the relationship between advertisements and their audience. In this context, various practitioners and academics have argued that research should address what consumers do with advertising, rather than what advertising does to them. In developing our understanding of such issues, a uses and gratifications approach to the study of advertising may be helpful.

According to uses and gratifications theory, the mass media constitute a resource on which audiences draw to satisfy various needs. In its conception of an active, goal-directed audience, it is consistent with emerging views of the advertising consumer. However, there has been little application of this approach to the study of advertising, either in theoretical or empirical terms.

This article provides an overview of the literature in this area. It then offers a classification of advertising uses and gratifications derived from a qualitative study. Finally, it assesses the implications of such an approach for the theory and practice of advertising and offers suggestions for further research.

Uses and Gratifications Research
Origins and Basic Principles

A uses and gratifications approach to the study of communication was first formally outlined by Katz[1]. He suggested that communication research should reverse the traditional question of what the media do to people, and ask instead what people do with the media. This formulation was not entirely original, however. It was rooted in a research stream which emerged in the 1940s as an antidote to the “magic bullet” approach advocated by the Frankfurt School since the turn of the century.

The Frankfurt School’s view of the media as exerting powerful and direct influence on individuals’ behaviour and beliefs had been undermined by findings on selective perception, individual differences and social processes. Taken together, these research strands indicated that audiences were active in their selection of content and messages from the mass media. In the 1940s, numerous studies examined the way in which audiences used various media...
and genres such as classical radio music, radio soap operas and daily newspapers[2-4].

Katz et al.[5,6] outline the basic assumptions of a uses and gratifications approach. First, the audience is active, and thus much mass media use is goal-directed. Second, the initiative in linking need gratification with media choice lies largely with the audience member. Third, the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction. Finally, the gratifications sought from the media include diversion and entertainment as well as information, and these will vary according to the social roles and psychological disposition of individual audience members.

Classifications
Several classifications of mass media uses have been suggested. Lasswell[7] suggested that they facilitated the transmission of social heritage, surveillance of the environment, and correlation, or selection and interpretation of information. In adding entertainment to the uses of the mass media, Wright[8] anticipated a category which was to assume great importance in other typologies. For example, Stephenson[9] emphasized the opportunities for play and pleasure, while McQuail et al.[10] noted that escapism appeared to be the most common motivation attributed to users of the mass media.

Schramm et al.[11] referred to deferred/reality and immediate/fantasy rewards, and Weiss[12] suggested that the mass media may satisfy informational-educational and fantasist-escapist needs. These resemble the surveillance and diversion categories offered by McQuail et al.[10]. However, these authors also suggested that the mass media may satisfy needs relating to personal identity and relationships. Similarly, Katz et al.[5] proposed that mass media needs may be cognitive, affective, or both, and oriented towards an individual's sense of self or the social environment.

More recently, Lull[13,14] proposed a comprehensive framework for assessing the social uses of the mass media. He suggested that these may be structural or relational. Structural uses could be environmental (providing background noise, companionship or entertainment) or regulative (structuring time, activity or talk). Relational uses were fourfold. First, the mass media could facilitate communication. Second, they provide opportunities for interpersonal affiliation or avoidance. Third, they offer opportunities for social learning, and finally, they allow individuals to demonstrate their competence or dominance.

Anderson and Meyer[15] offer further insights into the social nature of media use. They argue that we are socially situated beings, constantly engaged in making sense of our environment and our lives. In our society, the media form a natural and expected part of the environment. Therefore media use is embedded in the routines of social action, and we interpret mediated messages by accommodating them into the methods and practices of everyday life.
Criticisms

The uses and gratifications research tradition has been challenged on various grounds. First, while it assumes that the audience is active and in control, Lometti et al. [16] argue that uses and gratifications are mediators of, rather than substitutes for, media effects, and Barratt [2] questions the view that there are no “hidden messages” in media content.

Second, some analysts have doubted the validity of self-reports on the uses sought or gratifications obtained from the media. They argue that such an approach is too simplistic, particularly in the light of the complexity of human motivation [4,17].

The means of obtaining these self-reports have also been questioned. Many studies have used only multiple-choice questionnaires based on uses and gratifications defined a priori by researchers. While Lometti et al. [16] criticize such approaches, they suggest that in-depth interviews also have problems. For example, they argue that respondents may wish to appear more rational than they actually are. This is not consistent with the range of fantasy, play and escape uses identified in studies conducted by McQuail et al. [10]. However, Becker [18] found some respondents were unable to specify the gratifications obtained from media use when asked open-ended questions, although they readily identified them from a list of alternatives. Given these concerns about self-reports, open-ended and multiple-choice questions, the ethnographic approach used by Lull [13,14] suggests a useful way forward. Rather than relying on a direct and standardized questionnaire, administered out of the viewing context to individuals, he based his classification on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with various household members in their own environment.

Concern has also been expressed about the limited scope of uses and gratification research. Palmgreen et al. [19] argue that there is still much to learn about the relationship between gratifications sought and obtained, the antecedents of such gratifications and the ways in which they relate to media behaviour. Similarly, McLeod and Becker [17] advocate broader, more systematic and complex models of uses and gratifications. They, and others such as Morley [20] and Barratt [2], criticize the focus on common needs, rather than on the different uses to which various social groups may put the media. Morley [20] has called for research linking different patterns of gratifications sought with meanings and interpretations given to specific media messages. In his own work on differing interpretations of a particular television programme, and the family television-viewing experience [20,21], he demonstrates the promise of such an approach.

More fundamentally, uses and gratifications research has been criticized for being vague and non-theoretical. It has been accused of simply restating some aspects of selective influence theories, and offering little more than a data collection strategy and lists of reasons why people attend to the mass media [3,4].
Taken together, these criticisms may indicate that much research in this tradition is methodologically flawed and theoretically redundant. However, Severin and Tankard[4] argue that it is valuable even as an antidote to the emphasis elsewhere on the persuasion of passive audiences. Indeed, it could be argued that it has yet to achieve its potential. As we have seen, there have been calls for more comprehensive and theoretically integrated models[17,19], and Morley[20,21] and Lull[13,14] have offered some guidance on the use of more sensitive research methods.

Advertising Applications

There is at least a quarter-century of implicit support among British advertising practitioners for a uses and gratifications approach to the study of advertising. Joyce[22] insisted that “the consumer is not passive, helpless advertising fodder”, while Hedges[23] suggested that it might be more useful to think less about what advertising does to people, and more about what people do with advertising. McDonald[24] decried the “myth of causality” which implied that each ad had its own electric charge to be “transmitted to its victim on impact”. He argued that the consumer is not passive, but rather chooses to pay attention, and that an ad’s only value is that which the consumer gives it. Similarly, Meadows[25] talked about active, sophisticated “consumers of advertising”, and Lannon[26] observed that consumers expect advertising to provide aesthetic, emotional or intellectual rewards.

However, it appears that many practitioners and researchers have not accepted the implications of such a perspective: Lannon[27, p. 16] still finds herself having to argue the case for a “new model” to inform the development and evaluation of advertising,

... because the common strand running through the entire process starts from the same basis, the question of what do people do with advertising: how do they use it? And what do they use it for?

Thus there is support within the advertising industry for a view of advertising consumers as active and seeking various rewards from their encounters with advertisements. While it is plausible that some of these rewards are similar to the classifications discussed above for the mass media in general, little work has explicitly addressed the uses and gratifications of advertising.

Crosier[28], influenced by the work of May[29], suggests that we consume advertising for at least seven kinds of satisfaction, namely product information, entertainment, implied warranty, value addition, post-purchase reassurance, vicarious experience and involvement. Vicarious experience is the opportunity to experience situations or lifestyles to which we would not otherwise have access. Involvement refers to the intellectual pleasure of participation in the puzzles or jokes offered by some advertisements. More recently, Alwitt and Prabhaker[30] have suggested that consumers’ attitudes to television advertising are related to the functions which it serves for them. Drawing on some of the uses and gratifications literature, they incorporated four such
functions into their attitude model: hedonic, knowledge, social learning or contact and value affirmation. They found that all four functions were related to attitudes to television advertising, although, owing to intercorrelation, the hedonic function was the only significant predictor of attitudes.

Buttle[31] reviews various studies on the role of television advertising in interpersonal communication, and found a limited role in generating conversation. Children, however, sometimes used it to initiate or influence interaction with family members, or for ideas for play.

Some further insights are provided by Willis[32], who conducted an ethnographic study concerning young adults’ meanings and interpretations of popular cultural forms. While the focus of this study was on music, fashion and the media in general, there is some mention of advertising. He argues that young people are adept at, and enjoy decoding, complex messages, jokes and cross-references. He also suggests that they use ads as “tokens” in social exchanges, and consume them independently of the advertised product.

Thus, as a part of the mass media, advertising may offer its audience various uses and gratifications. Some of these (information, entertainment, reassurance and added value) may be related directly to marketing objectives. Others, such as personal identity, social relationships and vicarious experience may or may not be related to these objectives.

The Present Study
The classification of advertising uses and gratifications presented below is derived from group discussions undertaken as part of a larger study of the relationship between young adults aged 18-24 and advertising, focusing on their experience of advertising in their everyday lives.

This age-group has been credited with a particularly sophisticated understanding of advertising[32,33]. Therefore we might expect young adults’ relationship with it to be especially interesting, and perhaps of broader significance: Davis[34] has pointed out that cultural changes originating with this age-group often find their way into mainstream adult culture. This group also represents a lucrative but shrinking market segment in Britain, so that offerings aimed at them (including advertising) must be extremely well-targeted[35]. Finally, as this particular cohort grows, it will become the target audience for an ever wider range of advertised goods and services.

In contrast with much research on media uses and gratifications, which has relied on direct, structured, multiple-choice questionnaires, a qualitative approach was adopted for this study. Burns[36] describes qualitative research as “experiencing the experiences of others”. This was very much the intention here. While Lull[13,14] used participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews to identify a range of television uses, participant observation was not adopted in this study. Given the pervasiveness of advertising, the many media in which it is encountered, and the often private nature of its consumption, it was thought that a combination of group discussions and individual interviews would be a more useful way to begin exploring young
adults’ experience of advertising. Small groups (usually involving four participants) were used for the benefits of social interaction and idea stimulation[37], combined with the potential for exploring individual comments and interpretations in more detail than large groups allow[38]. Individual interviews were used to allow more detailed exploration of individual experiences, interpretations and idiosyncrasies[36].

Respondents were encouraged to describe their experience of advertising in their own words, in their own way, and with their own examples. In this context, it would have been inappropriate for the researcher to impose a set of ads. Instead, following some discussion of general media habits and preferences, respondents described ads which they liked, disliked or remembered for any reason, and from any time or medium. Given the age and purchasing interests of respondents, much discussion revolved around ads for alcohol, coffee, soft drinks, confectionery and jeans; as one respondent observed, “the adverts we like are the ones for things we’re interested in”. Subsequent discussion of attitudes, interpretations and uses of advertising emerged from, and was grounded in, their own experience of advertisements. Thus respondents’ thoughts were not directed immediately or explicitly to uses and gratifications, nor were they required to report on these at an abstract, generalized level.

Consistent with the principles of grounded theory[39], the researcher sought to generate theory through the joint collection, coding and analysis of data. The constant comparative method of analysis was used, whereby tentative categories and their properties are identified by comparing incidents and instances from the data obtained initially. These emergent categories and properties are modified and developed by comparison with instances from subsequent fieldwork and different cases, and others may emerge. Eventually, the theory will be delimited as fresh instances no longer point to new aspects, and categories may be reduced to a smaller number of higher-order concepts.

In order to explore a range of experiences and differential patterns of use and interpretation[17,21], age, gender and occupational status quotas were used. Given the difficulties of measuring occupational status in this age group[40,41], respondents were simply classified as unemployed, students or workers. For the older groups, the working category was divided into graduate and non-graduate. It was thought that this would provide some approximation of current buying power and future prospects, both of which may help to shape an individual’s use and interpretation of advertisements.

A pilot study involved four small group discussions and two individual interviews. The main phase of the research was conducted in Edinburgh between May and October 1991. It involved 14 groups and 14 individual interviews, organized by a professional recruiter. In total, 82 respondents participated in the project, and discussions generally took between an hour and a half and two hours.

A wide range of uses for advertising emerged from an analysis of the group discussions. Some uses may be seen as directly facilitating marketing transactions, while others have little to do with this aspect of respondents’ lives.
In making the distinction between marketing and non-marketing uses below, however, the focus is on the uses to which consumers, rather than advertisers, put advertising. For example, entertainment, which may be intended by the advertiser to gain attention, is considered here as a non-marketing use.

**Marketing Uses of Advertising**

Respondents generally talked about advertising as providing information about products, thereby facilitating choice, convenience and competition. There were also suggestions that it provided reassurance and stimulated consumption-related aspirations.

**Information**

Advertising was used as a source of information, primarily on availability and price. An example used by several respondents was looking for a new CD player, where they would look at advertisements to find out more about them and to see if there were any sales. However, they were aware of the limitations of advertising in providing information:

> A lot of adverts ... don't really tell you anything about the product, do they? It's just a story. I prefer the more informative adverts. (Female graduate worker, 21-24)

There seemed to be little expectation that advertising would tell consumers much about actual product features. Thus a male student remarked in mild amazement that a particular ad “actually provides you with some information about the car”. Another respondent was extremely cynical about the value of information provided in ads for toiletries:

> ... they talk about complex biological structures ... You just want to wash your hair, you don’t want triple DNA combinations. I mean it just means absolutely nothing. (Female graduate worker, 21-24)

One area of particular interest to respondents was information about new products. While some questioned the need for established brands to advertise, they “could understand it if it was new products that were coming out”. Even washing powder ads, which respondents tended to despise, were tolerated “if it’s something new”.

It may be that this concern with newness reflects a sense of boredom and tedium, expressed by many respondents, owing to repeated exposure to the same ads. Thus the newness of a product may offer a diversion similar to a new advertising execution. However, their enthusiasm for new product ads seems to extend beyond this into the realm of surveillance. Asked if they would miss advertising if it were to disappear altogether, respondents were consistently concerned that they would lose out:

> I think I’d certainly miss it, because how would you find out about new things? (Female student, 21-24)

> You wouldn’t like to miss out on anything like an amazing new breakfast cereal that they’re making! (Female graduate worker, 21-24)
Overall, then, respondents used advertising to some extent at least for information on the existence of new products, and the price and availability of more established (and usually expensive) products. In a minority of cases, however, the information sought or obtained from advertising went beyond this. Thus a drink-driving ad was described as “good informative advertising – the more you see it, the more you maybe think about it”, and in one of the unemployed groups, a desire was expressed for ads which provided information on sports or training opportunities, or simply things to do outside the house.

Choice, Competition and Convenience
Advertising was thought to facilitate choice in two ways. First, it stimulated competition, providing people with more alternatives, and, second, it told people about those alternatives. Without advertising,

You wouldn’t hear about any new products and there would be less competition. So you would have just the one product, not having a huge choice because you haven’t really heard of things.

(Female student, 18-20)

A male student talked about the horrors of going to the supermarket and being faced with six bottles of washing-up liquid and not knowing which one to pick. He thought that “even just an advert can help you to choose, just to decide, to pick something”.

Thus respondents did not seem to question the ideology of the marketplace and advertising’s role within it. In this last example, advertising is seen as an aid to choice, but there is no question of the value of choice when the six options are so similar that “even just an advert” can make the difference.

In another group, the idea of choice was related to convenience, in that more time would have to be spent in the supermarket to decide on what to buy. This group suggested that, even if advertising in its current forms were to disappear, other ways of drawing people’s attention to products would be found, such as “speaking cornflake boxes”.

Quality Assurance and Reassurance
As Crosier[28] suggests, advertising can be used as an implied warranty, in that a company which advertises its brands is seen to stand behind them. Thus a student talked about his sense of unease after buying a music system which was not advertised, although he had sought expert advice. Even with less risky purchases, there was still some concern:

If a brand stopped advertising, you’d think, where are the adverts? It must be going really downhill.

(Male student, 18-20)

Consumption Stimulation
There was some recognition that advertising could be used to stimulate consumption, though not necessarily of the actual product being advertised. One respondent, while having no interest in furniture ads, recognized that,
when she was older and had a home to furnish, she might be stimulated by an ad to think about buying something similar. Others suggested that they might buy a white T-shirt, for example, from looking at the way the actors in a Coke ad were dressed. In another group, sales of gold coffee-bean jewellery were attributed to the Nescafé Gold Blend ads.

Added Value

According to Willis[32], it is during our teenage and early adult years that we are formed most self-consciously through our symbolic and other activities. We may expect advertising to play an important role in this, as it often deals in images of self-identity and social relationships[42,43]. In some cases, particularly where advertising develops brand image and personality[44], it may add value by enhancing self-image. Thus one respondent suggested that several of her male friends drank Guinness to be cool like Rutger Hauer, the actor featured in the Guinness ads. Similarly, there was some discussion in one of the male working groups about merits of Levi’s jeans compared with two retailer brands. Levi’s, through advertising, had established a premium image so that:

*If you got 501s you were The person. You bought 501s and that was it.*

*When you go down to the pub on a Saturday night and everyone’s buying Holsten, if you’ve got a pair of C & A’s you feel, oh …* [laughter]

*… They’re quite homely, middle of the road, you put them on, that’s it [Marks & Spencer’s jeans]. Levi’s, you’ve definitely got a trendy pair of jeans, quite smart, a bit special.*

(Male workers, 21-24)

Vicarious Consumption

One respondent mentioned that she liked buying Vogue and Tatler magazines, which were “just purely adverts”:

*I’m only interested in looking at the adverts for the clothes and the jewellery, and it’s always like Van Cleef and Arpeľ’s jewellery and something like that.* (Female worker, 21-24)

Crosier[28] suggested that consumers may use advertising to gain vicarious access to experiences and lifestyles which would otherwise be beyond their means. As this respondent also spent an hour “going around looking at everything” in the jewellery department at Harrods on a recent trip to London, she seems to be seeking out vicarious consumption experiences. Such experiences may serve two purposes. They may be a form of escapism, if people do not expect to be able to afford them. Alternatively, they may be used as a form of consumer socialization, fuelling and focusing aspirations. In this case, where the respondent seemed particularly ambitious and confident, it is almost inconceivable that she could enjoy her vicarious consumption of the jewellery if she suspected it was a substitute rather than a rehearsal for actual ownership.

Among the unemployed groups, there was no evidence of advertising being used for vicarious consumption in either form. In fact, for the group which
expressed the least hope for the future, ads for products beyond their means seemed almost unbearable, to the extent that one respondent would pretend to herself that she had not seen the ads:

Su[6]tes, carpets, curtains, that’s the kind of adverts you get now, which I just don’t pay any attention to because I don’t have the money to buy them, so what’s the point of listening to them?

Ken, switch off while you’re watching. (Unemployed females, 18-20)

Non-marketing Uses of Advertising
In addition to using ads for purposes related to marketing transactions, respondents seemed to obtain many other gratifications from advertising.

Structuring Time
Lull[13,14] described how television programmes may be used to structure or “punctuate” time. Certainly television advertising seems to perform this function particularly well. For the respondents in this study, commercial breaks offered, at the very least, an opportunity to leave the room to put the kettle on, go to the toilet or even make short telephone calls. Indeed, there is macro-level evidence for this particular use of commercial breaks. For example, Whalan[45] refers to the “flush factor”, the drop in water pressure coinciding with commercial breaks during television blockbusters such as Roots, Jaws or The Godfather. While there were several complaints in this study about breaks which spoiled good films or football matches, a number of respondents actually complained about watching films on non-commercial stations, because “you have to sit down and watch these films for hours on end”.

Diversion
Advertising was also thought to offer some diversionary benefits. It “broke up the text” in magazines, it made life richer and more colourful, it was something to look at when travelling on a bus, and “a break when there’s nothing on TV and you’re just sort of sitting there”.

Such benefits may be offered by advertising in general, but there were some indications that particular ads were used for diversionary purposes. Thus one ad was described as “a break from your boring ads”. This may even partly explain the attraction of some particularly low-budget ads which were generally accepted as “awful”. As one respondent observed, “most adverts are slick”. Perhaps the “awful” low-budget ads, which were definitely not slick, were seen as offering some diversion from professionally produced ones, which were more common.

Entertainment
The American copywriter Robert Fine maintained that “entertainment is sort of repayment” to the audience for allowing advertisements to interrupt the editorial material and “push their way uninvited into somebody’s mind”
Audiences certainly seem to welcome such payment. According to advertising researchers, many consumers say that the ads are often better than the television programmes [33, 46]. In this study, the entertainment value of television ads was frequently discussed in relation to the programmes. In a few cases, the relationship between the two was seen as economic, in that advertising funded commercial stations:

The only thing I would agree with television advertising is that it pays for the television company ... I'd rather have adverts on BBC rather than pay money to them for a TV licence.

(Male worker, 21-24)

This view of television advertising as a “necessary evil” was not generally held. One respondent mentioned that he had read somewhere that “more kids preferred adverts than the actual TV”. Several described some ads as “like wee programmes”, while many others thought the ads were “better” or “more interesting” than the programmes, worth watching for “the enjoyment” or “a good laugh”. Particular sources of entertainment were music, humour, interesting ideas or visuals, attractive actors (usually of the opposite sex!), and “wee stories”. The Nescafé Gold Blend ads, for example, were often compared with television mini-series, with interest expressed in the couple’s relationship, what would happen next, and so on. The relationship between the story and the brand was sometimes problematic, however: the Gold Blend ads were criticized for having no relationship to the coffee, while, in the case of a Flake ad, the brand intruded into a good story:

You do get frustrated waiting for her to pick up the phone. You want to know who’s at the other end, waiting for her, and she’s eating her Flake!

(Female worker, 18-20)

Overall then, it was clear from the groups that they used advertising as a form of entertainment in its own right, and many examples were given to illustrate this. One respondent suggested that this was not surprising:

There’s an element of popular culture wrapped up in this. I mean people think it’s fun, it interrupts your telly, it’s quite amusing ...

(Male graduate worker, 21-24)

Familiarity

Respondents seemed to welcome advertising for its reflection of familiar, everyday aspects of their own lives. For example, they liked recognizing places in ads, and were pleased when ads used sets which were similar to their own homes. One student particularly liked a series of ads because they reminded her of the way older members of her own family behaved.

This may be related to Krugman’s[47] description of involvement in terms of “connections” between the content of a persuasive stimulus and the content of the viewer’s own life. However, this does not explain what use such connections may be to an ad’s audience in general or these respondents in particular. Perhaps seeing aspects of their own lives absorbed and played back to them by advertising, which generally depicts a world of desirability, provides
legitimation and reassurance that their lives are not so much less attractive than others.

Escapism
There were some indications that respondents also used ads for purposes relating to fantasy or escapism. An unemployed respondent described the glorious sunshine on the deserted island of the Bounty ads as "pure escapism", for example, and another suggested that:

You don't want to watch down to earth adverts, you want something pretend, some fantasy. (Unemployed male, 21-24)

Similarly, commenting on one of the Levi's ads, a student said:

You want someone to come driving through your office on a motorbike, get undressed under the table. Quite nice to think about. (Female student, 18-20)

Her identification with this situation was particularly interesting as she was a first-year student. For her, it was almost a double fantasy as she had no experience of full-time employment, let alone a knight in shining armour to take her away from it! In general, however, there was little explicit mention of using ads as a form of escapism, or of Crosier's[28] "vicarious experiences". Perhaps advertising was less a source of heady fantasy, and more a form of mild escapism through its offerings of "wee stories" and entertainment, and the opportunities it provided for play.

Play
Willis[32, p. 1] argues that:

... there is a vibrant symbolic life and symbolic creativity in everyday life, everyday activity and expression ... Most young people's lives are ... full of expressions, signs and symbols through which [they seek] to establish their presence, identity and meaning.

Similarly, Grafton-Small and Linstead[48] discuss the great sophistication displayed by "creative consumers" in their everyday understanding of ads, and Cook[49], writing from a linguistics perspective, suggests that advertising may fulfil a need for language play.

The creativity and "vibrant symbolic life" of respondents in this study was certainly visible in their relations with advertising. They played with advertising in the course of the discussions, frequently acting out scenes from ads, trying on, discarding and making fun of various roles, characters, lines and accents. Many characters were given walk-on parts in the course of the discussions, from Macbeth's witches, manipulative advertising executives and unloved traffic wardens, to celebrity endorsers, injured footballers and turtles waxing lyrical about controlled heating systems.

Phrases from ads were incorporated into their everyday activities to particular effect:

One of my friends uses the catchline all the time, the catchphrase, and it makes me laugh. (Female student, 18-20)
Respondents described how they sang along with their favourite (or most hated) jingles, and in several cases they performed them for the group. For example, a male graduate astounded his group with his rendition of the lyrics from the ad for Irn-Bru (a Scottish soft drink), which made fun of the style of Coke and Pepsi advertising. Another respondent described her attempts to catch the end of a jingle she liked:

They had one for Alphabites: “A is for Alpha, B is for bites, C for yourself, they taste just right [laughter]. D is for dinner, E is for egg ... A through to Z”. And I used to watch that advert and think, I must remember, and I never could catch the last bit ... video button paused ready in case it came on, so you could learn the wee tune. (Female worker, 21-24)

Respondents also selected images from magazine ads and recreated them as posters:

... I cut them out and I've got them on my walls in clip frames. 'Cos some of them are beautiful. (Unemployed female, 21-24)

Male as well as female respondents talked about using ads in this way. One respondent described a Budweiser ad which he had put up in his room. Another commented that Guinness ads generally made nice posters, and someone else (a trainee accountant) regretted that he had never managed to get hold of a copy of the Smirnoff ad with the headline which said “I used to be an accountant until I discovered Smirnoff”.

They described games they played with ads, guessing what products were being advertised, or how a particular ad would end:

I remember when I was young we used to play this game, to see who could name the ad before it actually mentioned the product [laughter]. (Unemployed male, 18-20)

One of my pals used to speak all the words before they'd speak them, speaking as they would speak them. Quite funny. (Male worker, 21-24)

In general, these jokes and games and activities suggest that advertising may offer these respondents a creative outlet, even another kind of escapism, by allowing them to pretend, to play, to make their own fun from the raw material of advertising. Without advertising, suggested one respondent, “there'd be less things to take the mickey out of”. Playfulness is described by Featherstone[50] as an essential element of the postmodern condition: when certainty breaks down, and nothing can be absolutely mastered, irony and playfulness are useful lines of defence. The behaviour of respondents may perhaps be explained in these terms.

Aspirations and Role Models

As mentioned earlier, one student suggested that some of her male friends drank Guinness in order to be cool like Rutger Hauer. In one of the male groups, there was some support for this view:

There's an image to create, to put a product in a situation that, by having that product, you yourself ... In the Guinness you're cool, it's a cool advert - in Gold Blend again it's sophistication. (Male student, 18-20)
While this, and the discussion about the merits of various brands of jeans, suggest that the male respondents did relate advertising to their self-image, they tended to discuss advertising and their personal aspirations more in terms of acquisition – cars they would like to own, for example. They suspected, however, that women perhaps used actors in ads as role models. In one of the male working groups, which was particularly taken with an ad for tights featuring Kim Basinger, there was some discussion about whether women would be interested in the ad at all:

I dinnae think women would pay much attention to Kim Basinger though. Sort of, like we would.

Oh ay. Possibly, but they can see what she would like. She uses this sort of make-up and she does this with her hair and she uses this. (Male workers, 18-20)

They accepted “to some extent” that they may look at men in ads to see what they were using, although they were at pains to point out that they were not “always trying to look good and what have you”. Female respondents certainly seemed more open in discussing their use of actors in ads as role models. While the male admissions related mainly to looking or being “cool”, female respondents were particularly interested in the physical attractiveness of the women featured in ads, rather than their lifestyle or personality. Thus they admired “gorgeous” models, who had “really nice hair” or were “beautifully dressed”. This is consistent with the study conducted by Richins[51] which found that women compare themselves with the models featured in ads. She also found that such comparisons were related to their dissatisfaction with their own bodies. One respondent, talking about the Levi’s and Gold Blend ads, said that they

... make you want to lose weight because people are dead glamorous. You go away and you want to put make-up on. (Female student, 18-20)

This difference between male and female respondents in the use of role models may be attributed to the “peacock effect” of having male respondents talk in the presence of a female researcher. They may have been less willing to admit such behaviour to a woman. Alternatively, given that they are relatively recent targets for the personal grooming and fashion industries, men may be simply less open in discussing such issues even among one another, or less conscious of their own behaviour in this respect.

Checking out the Opposite Sex

While the pattern would presumably vary according to the sexual orientation of consumers, respondents in this study tended to assess actors of the same sex as themselves as role models, and those of the opposite sex in terms of their physical attraction. Thus female respondents described male actors (particularly those in the Levi’s ads) as “quite cute”, “quite smart”, “nice lads”, “the guys, the talent”. Similarly, male respondents commented about the women in various ads:
That's quite a nice advert. I'd go out with her any time. (Male graduate worker, 21-24)

I forget the name of the tights, I'm too busy looking at her. (Male worker, 18-20)

This may reflect respondents' “surveillance” behaviour in their everyday lives, observing and assessing the extent to which they find others physically appealing. Certainly these would seem to be ideal conditions for such behaviour, as the objects of attention are remote and there is no danger of having to interact with them. However, if the idealized images of models have been found to undermine women's sense of their own attractiveness, there are grounds for concern here as well: if advertising is influential in setting standards of attractiveness for potential partners, respondents may be setting themselves up for disappointment. Furthermore, these standards may lead to distress among those who cannot meet them. It is hard not to feel for the respondent watching television with her boyfriend:

And really, it makes you think "oh no, what must I be like?" I mean you're sitting with your boyfriend and he's saying "oh, look at her. What a body!" (Female student, 18-20)

Reinforcement of Attitudes and Values
Alwitt and Prabhaker[30] refer to television advertising as serving a value affirmation function. Similarly, Buttle[31] draws on accommodation theory[15] in suggesting that advertising is essentially raw material which we process and reprocess to make sense of our world. There were some indications of advertising being processed by respondents in this way, as some ads seemed to be used to work through or reinforce respondents' attitudes and values. For example, a student described how he was troubled by his reaction to an ad for tights. He worried that he remembered the ad “for the wrong reasons”, and he then tried to untangle, or perhaps rationalize, his response to it. He could not decide whether the ad was “sexual”, “sensual” or “sexist”. He thought it might be sensual rather than sexist as it was aimed at women, but he reckoned that it “hit all men on the sexual basis”. Furthermore,

You might say well it promotes a stereotype of the woman wearing stockings and looking sexy, but then ... there is an element of independence that when her car broke down she fixed it herself, didn't get a man to do it. (Male student, 21-24)

Not all respondents articulated the working through of their values as clearly as this, but it did seem that in some cases, where respondents were describing ads, they were also telling stories which had at least as much to do with their own concerns. For example, one respondent told in great detail the story of an ad for Tennent's lager, in which a Scot returns home to Edinburgh after working in London:

It's sort of like he's down in London and you see him walking through the busy streets, tube station and all that and you can see he's really pissed off with it all. And then he gets through into his office building, stands in the lift, looks about and says to hell with this. Sort of walks away and the next minute you see him in Prince's Street and the music's quite good in the background, like a sort of song about Scotland and things like that. He comes into the bar, has
his pint with his mates and then the next second you see... the bird, obviously his bird, on the tube in London opening up the letter with his photo. And she didnae look too pleased about it!

(Male worker, 18-20)

This long description, ostensibly the straightforward telling of the tale, may perhaps tell us more about the respondent himself. Undoubtedly he is “involved” with this ad: he remembers it in detail, and he identifies with the main character to the extent that he describes his thoughts as well as his actions.

Perhaps he identifies with the ad so closely because it reinforces some of his own values. For example, the Scot in the ad leaves London and comes home to Edinburgh. As this group expressed quite a lot of pride in Scotland generally, that would have been well received. Additionally, the rejection of London in the ad may have reassured the respondent that he is not missing out on anything by having stayed in Scotland himself - he would not have liked it in London either.

Furthermore, in telling the story, this respondent also seems to endorse several values implicit in the ad. Work is not satisfying (hence the gusto of the “to hell with this” in the lift at the start of another day): what really counts in life is being with your mates and having a pint with them. Girlfriends are not so important (hence the relatively disparaging term “bird”), and it does no harm to put them in their place.

It seems clear that, in telling the story of this ad in this way, the respondent was finding some resonance between the ad and his own perspective on life. It would be interesting to know how the others in the group interpreted his story, and whether this ad was providing not just the raw material for one person’s attempts to make sense of his world, but also the basis for making these known to his peers.

Education
A limited educational role for advertising was recognized by some respondents. One male working group insisted that the privatization ads for the two Scottish Electricity companies were “putting across a lot of Scottish history”. These ads certainly featured historical characters such as Robert the Bruce, Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora MacDonald, although the educational argument was undermined somewhat by the fact that her part was played by half a comedy duo, and in drag. However, what matters here is the uses which respondents find for advertising, and at some level those ads reminded that group of their Scottish history and heritage. Indeed, the ads may have been used to legitimate their national pride, which harks back to the familiarity and value reinforcement categories previously discussed.

Other examples of educational uses for advertising were more intuitively convincing. It was suggested that bank and building society ads may teach people “how banks work” or the principles of interest. Ads were also credited with making people more aware of the environment, and of “what’s happening in the world” more generally. Respondents also recognized that some ads were
purely educational, such as those warning of the dangers of AIDS, drink-driving and so on.

Surveillance

As we saw earlier, respondents sometimes found advertising a useful source of product information. They also talked about looking at the clothes or jewellery worn by actors in ads, and were interested in seeing what style of house or kind of room was featured. Thus advertising was considered a source of information on “just up to date fashion sort of things”. In addition to its provision of information about their environment, however, respondents were also interested in advertising as part of that environment:

It’s almost as if advertising’s become a thing like sport, and it’s something you can watch, see the latest ... there’s different things you can pay attention to in your life and advertising’s just one of the things that you pay attention to. What’s new in the cinema? What’s advertising doing these days? (Male graduate worker, 21-24)

Thus, when respondents talked about advertising with their friends, it was often to ask or be asked whether they had seen “the new ad” or “the latest one” in a campaign.

Ego Enhancement

Respondents liked to know who was advertising something, and what was going on in advertisements. This may be related to the use of advertising for surveillance purposes, but it also seemed bound up in their sense of self-worth: of being in control of their surroundings, of being intelligent, getting involved[28] and demonstrating their competence[13,14]. Indeed, one respondent considered understanding ads to be a very basic skill:

Adverts in general insult your intelligence so much that if you don’t understand it you get really worried about it ... you think you’re really stupid if you can’t understand an advert. (Male student, 18-20)

In this light, his virtual panic at not being able to work one out becomes understandable:

The first time I saw the Benson & Hedges one I didn’t understand what it was and I thought “God almighty, this is horrendous, I can’t get this advert!”. And I thought “Maybe if I put all these letters together I might work it out. Benson & Hedges, thank goodness for that!”

Perhaps a clearer illustration of the use of advertising to demonstrate competence is provided by respondents’ enjoyment of ads which were generally accepted as “bad”, “awful”, or “tacky”. Cinema advertising, particularly by local advertisers, was thought to be “so corny it’s great”, and “very amusing because most of them are so silly”. Some extremely low-budget, “awful” television ads were also discussed with great pleasure:

I really love, it’s so cheap, the Balmore Double Glazing. It’s so bad ...
I like the one for Martin’s Plant Hire
Not, oh please no, oh no!
Clearly these ads are recognized as "bad". As discussed earlier, they may serve a simple diversion or novelty function, given the relative professionalism of most advertising. However, that would not fully explain the positive, almost perverse pleasure which these ads seemed to provide. Perhaps respondents found them entertaining precisely because they were so “awful”.

If the “badness” of these ads is indeed the source of their appeal, this is arguably possible only because respondents are sophisticated consumers of advertising: they recognize that these ads dramatically break the conventions of “good” advertising and they relish that. This in turn allows them to congratulate themselves for their discernment (they recognize good and bad ads) and their independent spirit (they can choose to celebrate rather than denigrate bad ads). In what amounts to knowing subversiveness, respondents seem to be like film buffs in their enjoyment of B movies: perhaps Balmore and Martin’s Plant Hire are the advertising industry’s equivalent of Godzilla, and enjoyed by the consumer connoisseurs in that spirit. The knowingness and irony which such an attitude suggests may again be related to Featherstone’s[50] postmodern condition. In terms of uses and gratifications, however, enjoying the “B movie” ads may provide respondents with a sense of their own taste, sophistication and even their subversion of “the system” of advertising. Discussing it with others presumably is a means of projecting and reinforcing these positive images of themselves.

Family Relationships
Several researchers have referred to interpersonal uses and gratifications of the mass media[5,13-15,30,31]. Advertising certainly featured in a variety of ways in respondents’ interactions with their families. It was occasionally a source of tension, as some female respondents talked about their embarrassment at watching television with male family members (particularly teasing brothers) when personal hygiene ads came on. While these ads seemed to cut across the family along gender lines, others appeared to establish boundaries across generations. Thus the British Telecom ads reminded one respondent of the way some older members of her family behaved. Generational boundaries could also be established by differential responses to ads. For example, if older family members did not “get” a particular ad, they were effectively excluded:

Me and my brother were watching it and my mum came through and we were killing ourselves laughing and she went “ha ha”. She wasn’t laughing, she wasn’t as enthusiastic as we were. (Female student, 18-20)

On the other hand, ads could be used to remove generational boundaries by establishing some common ground. For example, one of the male students said he was always looking out for something in British Telecom ads which he could use to tease his mother, who worked for that company.
Peer Relationships

The interpersonal use of advertising extended well beyond respondents’ family circles. Thus there were some indications of advertising being used for the purposes of male solidarity or “bonding”. For example, there were many male references to and re-enactments of the Hamlet “world cup” ad, with particular reference to the point where a sensitive part of a footballer’s anatomy was struck. One respondent explained that the ad had been the subject of much discussion in the pub, and that “the guys were wincing at that one!” The Hamlet ad was also a source of great amusement with female respondents. They found the injured man’s misfortunes quite entertaining, but found the ad had other pay-offs for them as well:

> It was really good how they had that at the time of the World Cup. ’Cos you were sitting in the middle of this ... and it just totally broke the ice. ’Cos you were sitting bored watching the football and you thought “Oh, that is really funny”. And that did appeal to everybody. (Female student, 18-20)

As Lull[13,14] and Anderson and Meyer[15] have pointed out, the mass media facilitate communication in that they provide common ground, and an immediate agenda for talk. Indeed, a significant use of advertising appeared to be as a topic of conversation, at three levels. The first, most basic level was purely instrumental. Advertising, particularly on television, was an easy topic of conversation, almost a default option. Everyone was familiar with the same ads, and so they were easily drawn on if things went quiet or there was nothing else to talk about. However, there were indications that it was also considered to be an interesting topic, worthy of talk in its own right:

> It’s a handy number when you’re sort of stuck for conversation and you’ve just met someone. No, I tend to talk about adverts mostly with my friends. It’s actually part of the conversation, not just filling in gaps. (Unemployed females, 21-24)

Other respondents pointed out that, even though they might be watching television with friends, it was the ads which tended to generate comment and discussion. At the third level is advertising as discourse: talking about advertising is a distinct social skill, and there are conventions and expectations regarding an individual’s competence in its practice. This may explain why the student felt stupid if he could not understand an ad, and his subsequent statement that “you’ve got to work it out in case it comes up in conversation”. It also explains the seriousness with which some respondents approached the question of “meaning” in ads:

> You probably go into work the next day and say “Did you see that advert for lager? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Is it supposed to advertise lager?” (Male worker, 21-24)

Willis[32] suggested that advertising is a form of cultural capital for young people. The different ways in which respondents seem to use it in their conversations would support this. At the first, instrumental level, we can think of advertising as small change which feeds the meter of interaction. By the time we reach the third level, however, we can think of advertising as large
banknotes to be invested carefully for their dividends in terms of social status and self-esteem.

**Conclusions**

This study focused on one age-group and one geographic region. Despite the restricted sample, it provides some empirical support for the academics and practitioners who have long argued that audiences are active, selective and sophisticated in their consumption of advertising. Furthermore, it seems that, in their playfulness, subversiveness and self-conscious knowingness, young people at any rate are comfortable and confident players with what Davidson[52] calls “advertising in postmodern times”.

In the light of the many ways in which advertisements provided satisfaction to respondents in this study, advertising seems at least as fruitful an area for the application of uses and gratifications theory as any other element of the mass media. The various uses may be aligned in several ways. Thus they have already been described as marketing or non-marketing uses. Non-marketing uses may in turn be grouped into five categories.

Structuring time appears to be quite a distinctive use of advertising. However, diversion, entertainment, play and escapism may all be described as some form of enjoyment, while surveillance, familiarity, education and checking out the opposite sex all seem to involve scanning the environment in some way. Family and peer relationship uses may be described in terms of social interaction. The remaining uses seem related to a sense of self. While ego-enhancement and reinforcement of attitudes and values seem to involve self- affirmation, aspirations and role models suggest a sense of self-transformation.

Uses may also be described as personal, interpersonal, or, in the terms of Katz et al.[5], oriented towards the social environment. This is not to say, however, that each use falls neatly into just one of these categories. For example, someone may use ads for play at a personal level by creating a collage, at an interpersonal level by guessing the brand or product with friends, and at the level of social orientation by mocking the behaviour or concerns of particular characters.

It is interesting that these categorizations have much in common with classifications derived from studies of other mass media uses and gratifications. If advertising serves similar functions to the rest of the media, this in turn suggests that advertising is well integrated into the mass media and indeed the lives of its audience.

One criticism of the uses and gratifications approach raised earlier was its tendency to provide lists of reasons for attending to the media, unaccompanied by systematic explanation. In the case of advertising, even such lists of uses are significant, as they undermine the conventional wisdom of advertising models which privilege the sender's intentions over the receiver's interpretations[53], and assume a passive rather than active audience[27]. A acceptance of the active, reward-seeking consumer requires a fundamental re-orientation of the entire advertising-planning process. Thus research techniques need to become more
sensitive and creative. Advertisements themselves can afford to be more demanding of their audience, and need to find ways of providing ostensibly non-marketing gratifications for consumers without losing sight of advertising objectives. Finally, methods of evaluation need to be based on more complex and less mechanistic models of advertising effects.

Furthermore, there is much scope for integrating studies of advertising uses and gratifications within broader theoretical frameworks. In terms of the analysis of these data, the next phase will seek to link the uses identified here with interpretations of specific messages, and look for differences in patterns of use and interpretation between respondents according to age, gender and occupational status. Such differences, while interesting in themselves, may well have implications for market segmentation and advertising copy strategy.

While Alwitt and Prabhaker[30] suggest that consumers’ attitudes to television advertising are influenced by the functions which it serves for them, advertising uses and gratifications may also be helpful in understanding other aspects of advertising experience. For example, our understanding of the state, antecedents and consequences of advertising involvement is currently inadequate[54]. It does seem, however, that the uses to which consumers put advertising may explain, at least in part, why consumers allow themselves to become involved with particular advertisements.

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<th>Summary category</th>
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Table I. A Categorization of Advertising Uses and Gratifications
While this study was not restricted to television advertising, in practice these respondents' experience of advertising seemed so dominated by the television medium that there was little scope for comparing advertising uses and gratifications across media. Perhaps this is an issue which future research could usefully address. It would also be interesting to compare the pattern of uses and gratifications identified here with those of other age-groups and other cultures.

References


