RETHINKING PROCESSES OF MEANING-MAKING TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS: THE REPRESENTATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN MEDIA RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The study that this article draws on seeks to examine the construction of cultural identity in terms of the way audiences think about television advertisements which might be influenced by their knowledge and experience about audio and visual elements they see and hear on the television as well as the devices they interact with. This study is important to explore cultural identity of a society which has different customs and traditions such as Indonesia. This cultural representation emerges in such a television program as the advertisements are designed using certain ideas which are part of the culture. Conversely, what is represented through such a program might impact on the audiences which might then also relate to cultural identity of the society being studied. This is such an important study as several themes on television advertisements might influence the audiences' way of thinking about the advertisements, moreover, about their lives. For about four decades previous research in relation to television or broadcast programs has been focused on the impact of the programs on their audiences. In relation to that, to investigate the process of meaning-making a social construction perspective might contribute in terms of how knowledge and experience of the audiences are influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds. The importance of applying such a perspective in this study is that it is useful to broaden such an analysis which is frequently conducted by quantitative method and might provide us a much richer analytical and developmental studies on television advertisements which can then be related to the discussions of cultural identity.

Keywords: social construction, television advertisement, media research, cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in many literatures, television and culture have relationships as the way audiences interact including make meaning television programs represents cultural identity of a society. This interaction is also formed by culture as the audiences deploy their cultural identities and cultural competencies to decode programs in their own specific ways (Barker, 2008, p. 331).

When the audiences watch a television advertisement text, they interact with the content of the text and may also use the television devices and its supporting tools such as remote control, speaker, and antenna to access the text. In the context of this article *text* means 'totality of the television advertisement product'. Content of the text may comprise visual and audio elements which can then be a very important component as these are the elements seen or heard by the audiences of the text. The way the audiences interact and think about the text may be influenced

by their previous knowledge and experience about the text. However, previous research with regard to relationships between television advertisements and their audiences is mainly focused on the impact of the texts on the audience dealing with the effectiveness of the texts using quantitative measurement. This measurement cannot tell us audiences' meaning-making about how and why the texts are effective or ineffective which actually may be influenced by their cultural background. Exploring such a potential meaning-making is important as it can then tell us why the texts are effective/ineffective.

Social construction studies focus on people's meaning-making which is potentially conditioned by their knowledge and experience about something. To investigate the application of a social construction perspective in television advertisement research, this article explores *why cultural background of television advertisement audiences is important to be considered in investigating interaction between the audiences and the texts* and *how a social construction approach is applied to such an investigation*. This study chooses some television advertisement texts randomly broadcasted from January to April 2012 in Indonesian national television stations for examples of analysis. In this investigation this article only provides an example of image from each chosen text in a form of still images.

This article will first discuss, in a more general sense, a brief of research traditions on television advertisement texts including its limitations followed by a short description of literature review of a social construction perspective relating to technology particularly television. Then, the article will present a possibility of applying a social construction approach in investigating television advertisement texts which is related to discussions of representation of cultural identity.

Research on television advertisements

Research traditions

The common criteria of evaluation for television research are media content analysis and audience research. Content analysis concentrates on investigating mass-mediated texts with a view to making wider claims about the content of various media channels, based on the concept of frequency. Audience research focuses on evaluating effects of media on their audiences which include audiences' behaviour and effectiveness of the media. In applying those methods of analysis, researchers usually use statistical measurement and those two methods of analysis are also frequently used in television advertisement research (McQuail, 2010, pp. 337-449).

We can see some research using those two methods of analysis in the following examples of research. Hetsroni and Tukachinsky (2006) focuses on measuring television viewing and the relationship between television-world estimates and real-world estimates in three topics, which are criminality prevalence, the share of violent crimes, and the number of old people, in Israel using content analysis. Webster, (2005) studies television audience polarisation in a multichannel world in the United States applying audience research method. Also, Schmitt, Woolf, and Anderson (2003) investigate audiences' evaluation on the reality of media texts by discussing the relationship of audience perceptions to scholars' conceptualisations and address implications for measuring media realism in the United States using audience research method. In addition, previous investigation seeks to examine behaviours of children and adult in Massachusetts, the United States during television programs and commercials quantitatively (Hall, 2003).

Limitations

Content analysis and audience research analysis are useful in evaluating media as shown in some examples of research in the previous section since they have systematic rules and procedures dealing with several important goals, for example, measuring actual and potential reach for purposes of advertising, managing audience choice behaviour, looking for market opportunities, product testing and improving effectiveness of the media from audiences' perspective. However, the two methods of analysis cannot explain audiences' potential meaning-making about television advertisement texts such as why the texts are effective/ineffective and why the audiences show certain behaviour.

A social construction of technology study, derived from a social constructionism, concerns people's ways of making meaning when they interact with products of technology. Applying such perspective in television advertisement research may extend content analysis or audience research method in terms of investigating audiences' potential meaning-making about the texts even though some researchers have combined those methods of analysis with qualitative approaches, for example semiotics (for revealing meanings of sign system in a culture) or discourse analysis (for examining turn-taking interaction between participants of communication including rules and convention in their given context). Therefore, the application of social construction approach aims to provide a significant contribution to the rapidly growing research of television advertisements in terms of audiences' potential meaning-making which can then be related to representation of cultural identity.

Social construction of technology in relation to the use of television

Social construction is a concept used in sociology which refers to something that is constructed by humans in societies. This concept emphasises the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in societies and in the construction of knowledge. The social construction concept is concerned with interaction and participation between or among individuals in constructing a social system (Berger & Luckman, 1991, pp 13-16). Within this process we see that individuals are actors who have roles. This process of social construction is institutionalised and actors construct meaning for their reality within the social system. A key aspect of this approach is that individuals always act together with others to build their social reality. Their activities which are repeated frequently become a pattern which is habitualised in their society. The society itself is a human product. Also, there are relationships between object (something that exists) and social reality (Searle, 1995). Thus, the object provides a foundation for the construction of social reality.

In relation to interaction between people and television including its content, their interaction may be influenced by their knowledge and experience in watching television programs previously or using any similar devices. This knowledge and experience is socially constructed during the lifetime of the audiences (Turkle, 1984, p. 166; Wajcman, 1993) so that such knowledge and experience influence audiences' understanding of the television programs.

The concept of social construction is useful for analysing users' understanding about television advertisement texts and tools since this concept relates to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities. The concept helps us to understand human reality as socially constructed. Since the 1980s the social construction approach has also been applied to

interactions between humans and machines, which includes the machine as a 'social actor'. We also can see such interactions as a social activity as, for example, when discussing interactions between children's minds when watching television, where the children themselves as viewers of the television (Hacking, 1999, pp. 25-32).

Television interactions can be seen as comprising interactions between humans and machines. The concept of social construction can be applied to the analysis of interactions between human and machines since this concept provides information about how the users build their understanding when interacting with machines and thinking about the machines. The way the users interact with the machine may then show whether the machine is appropriate for the users.

The representation of the audiences' interactions with the television advertisement texts, television devices, and its related tools is socially constructed; this interaction may be seen as a social activity. In this interaction the texts/tools can influence the audiences' ways of thinking about social processes when they interact with the texts/tools in a social context, just as in interpersonal communication (Laurel, 1993, pp. 43-48; Turkle, 1984, p. 166). This suggests that the texts/tools themselves can influence the audiences in the context of a social interaction. The texts/tools form audiences' meaning-making as a result of interaction between the audiences and the texts together with their related tools (Joinson, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2003). Here, the texts/tools configure the audiences in a way that the activities of the audiences are constructed as they interact with the television (Wolgar, 1991). As a result, interactions between the audiences and the texts/tools take into account social rules and procedures (Mandel, 1997, pp. 360-364, Turkle, 1995, pp. 30-34). This implies that in such interaction there are 'characters' on the television advertisement texts, television devices and its related tools that should follow the rules of interaction just as in human-to-human communication (Mandel, 1997, pp. 360-364).

Since the audiences might employ their knowledge and experience in interacting with the television programs, it can be assumed that understanding the television programs is the same as referring to reality. In addition, although television circulates texts and discourses on a global scale (Barker, 2008, p. 332), understanding the programs occur contextually which is potentially influenced by a local context. In the context of Indonesia, different types of customs and traditions are the potential influence of meaning-making the television programs.

The process of meaning construction in the television programs might show identities of the culture being studied where the identity itself relates to classification systems that attempt to define social groups in terms of similarities and differences. For example, in Indonesia in general men are socially conditioned to be more interested in technical things as there is a tendency that men are conditioned from childhood to be able to do more technical things than women. Also, in schools and families males are encouraged to be more dominant than females (Trisnawati, 2007, p. 182). Thus, in television advertisements men are shown as, for example, leaders of organisations, while the female's position tends to be inferior, and dependent on men's decisions. This implies that the men's affinity with technical things and making decisions is often seen as integral to the social construction of the male gender (Trisnawati, 2007, p. 182).

Application of a social construction perspective and its relationships to representation of cultural identity

In investigating audiences' understanding about television advertisement texts, a social construction approach examines their potential meaning-making which is influenced by their social background including age, sex, and education levels as well as their different degree of such backgrounds. These differences may explain their different interpretations about visual representation shown by the advertisement texts as well as about audio elements in the texts. These visual/audio elements might also impact on their 'actions' in these interactions. Thus, this investigation will show why the users have different opinions about the texts, which may not be expected by the designer of the texts, where this different meaning-making is not the concern of quantitative measurement of media analysis since these criteria merely provide general guidelines without considering audiences' background.

An example of the application of a social construction perspective is shown in investigating some examples of advertisement texts in Table 1-3. Audiences' potential meaning-making about the elements of the texts and the television devices as well as its related tools does not simply exist in these elements themselves. However, television itself, as the medium which broadcasts the texts, including its programs has impacted on life of any society, including Indonesian, in terms of constructing a world in which knowledge and experience implied on the programs are ever present. This means television has become an important site for the production and circulation of a proliferation of knowledge and experience about messages broadcasted via the advertisement texts.

In terms of the examples in Table 1-3 in general the audiences might employ their experience and familiarity that the colour of white symbolises 'purity' (Table 1), metrosexual refers to a new form of masculinity (Table 2), and thinness indicates beauty on contemporary women (Table 3). Although these potential meaning-making exist in Western societies, they might exist in other societies including in Indonesia as television has become globalised (Barker, 2008, p. 331). This indicates that such meanings delivered through television programs, including other media in and outside Indonesia, might impact on the way Indonesian audiences think about the advertisement texts broadcasted via Indonesian television stations. This is potential for the construction of cultural identities which always take place in a local context (Barker, 2008, p. 332).

Regarding the examples in Table 1 we know that *white* is 'pure' by learning the cultural conventions. Since white does symbolise purity in Western European culture, it will do so for us unconsciously (Marsen, 2006, p. 58), even if in the context of Indonesia in general the skin colours range from light to dark brown. This symbolisation has become part of our collective imagination supported by the same information on other media whether printed or online about this meaning. In addition, this symbolisation might apply for other cultural objects, for example, fashion.

Table 1. Some examples of television advertisement text about skin whitening and lightening products

Example of product	Name of product and its source
(1)	*Ponds flawless white*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCYc5C2ZbTQ, 1 Feb 2012
(2)	*Citra white*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWuZH3V1F0w, 1 Feb 2012
(3)	*Fair & lovely*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xW9lLEezcY, 1 Feb 2012

Vaseline healthy white;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lOTM088PIQ,
1 Feb 2012

(4)

Olay natural white;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDoeOkfKRSs,
1 Feb 2012

(5)

In terms of the examples in Table 2, the audiences might relate the texts to the concept of metrosexual men. This concept may bear in their mind as it is socially conditioned in our culture that masculinity is not characterised by softer attitudes and opinions and fondness for shopping and concentrating on enhancing one's appearance, which is usually the characteristic of femininity. However, because of the development of culture urban men tend to love shopping and pay meticulous attention to colour coordination of their clothing. Thus, there is a change in understanding masculinity and femininity in relation to the advertisement text which is conditioned in our society. In the context of Indonesia in printed and electronic media this phenomenon is indicated by the increasing of men's perfumes, cosmetics, and beauty treatments in advertisements.

Table 2. Some examples of television advertisement text about men's body treatment products

Example of product	Name of product and its source
(1)	*Vaseline men*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q11i6tEfVZM, 1 Feb 2012
(2)	*Clear shampoo*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrprAMRA0i8, 1 Feb 2012
(3)	*Rexona men*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_1g1bh2SJg, 1 Feb 2012

Gatsby water gloss;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfnldICyu-s, 1 Feb 2012

(4)

Men's Biore facial foam;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uNzhxGwFVE, 1 Feb 2012

(5)

In understanding some examples of text as shown in Table 3, the audiences' understanding about the concept of beauty is seen as symptoms of the obsession with weight and beauty including the incidence of dieting and consumption of, for example, diet food or beverages and products of the fitness industry (e.g. exercise clothing). The content of the texts and any similar texts has been socially conditioned in the majority life of society, including Indonesian society in general, that beauty refers to thinness. Within this understanding the body can be seen as a thing of culture and not merely a biological entity. The body as a natural object is shaped and managed by social forces or the development of specific regimes, for example in diet and exercise, which call upon people to take responsibility for their own health and fitness (Entwistle, 2007, pp. 278-281).

Table 3. Some examples of television advertisement text about the cult of thinness

Example of product	Name of product and its source
(1)	*Tropicana slim sweetener*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noYRY-RrMOE&NR=1, 1 Feb 2012
(2)	*Slimming tea*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lOTM088PIQ, 1 Feb 2012
(3)	*Thermolyte*; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tICaVqc2Zk, 1 Feb 2012

Kozuii slimming suit;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYpL_tQBKn0,
1 Feb 2012

(4)

Toxtea;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1yZWgwvVaE,
1 Feb 2012

(5)

The audiences' understanding about the concepts of purity, masculinity, and beauty is supported by the audio and visual elements on the texts and the relationships among the elements of the texts. How other people determine people's beautifulness and masculinity is also indicated by the chosen elements of the texts. For example, it is generally accepted in our society through social convention that the colour of pink (Table 1) refers to femininity and blue (Table 2) denotes masculinity. This understanding is employed by the designers of the texts in producing the texts.

In relation to cultural identity, the television advertisement texts might not simply represent identity of Indonesian culture as this country comprises various kinds of customs and traditions. Different social and cultural backgrounds of Indonesians might also influence the ways the Indonesians make meanings about the texts. However, as television circulates meanings on a global scale (Barker, 2008, p. 332) the potential meaning-making in the examples in Table 1-3 might also occur globally within this region even though there is potential to have different meaning-making about the concepts of purity, masculinity, and beauty due to different educational and technological backgrounds. However, since other media including printed and electronic media in this region show similar advertisements, this might indicate that the above analysis might represent the ways the Indonesians think about the advertisement texts.

In terms of the television devices and its related tools, the audiences' understanding about them is influenced by the audiences' knowledge about the devices/tools and any similar devices/tools through the audiences' life including family and schooling. In addition, different gender and age may influence differences in understanding the devices/tools. There is a tendency that men are more connected to practicality than the majority of women. In schools and families males are conditioned to be able to do more technical things than females (Trisnawati, 2007, pp. 181-187). Classification of generations for technology users may also relate to the audiences' familiarity with the devices/tools. The Net Generation (1982-1991) may be more familiar with the technological devices than the Baby Boomer (1946-1964) and the Mature (1900-1946). Those who belong to the Net Generation may use the devices/tools easily as they may use them or any other technological devices more frequently.

In addition to the investigation that the audiences' understanding about the television advertisement texts is socially conditioned in the people's life in a society, a social construction approach may also be useful to evaluate some ironies in relation to the texts. While some texts promote weight-loss products and lifestyles, on the other hand, yet they castigate as abnormal, unhealthy causing, for example, eating disorders. This may relate to the change of people's understanding about the texts. Thus, such understandings may change, has change, or is changing in our culture influenced by prior understandings about the texts.

CONCLUSION

Representation of cultural identity through television advertisement texts is not a fixed thing as we may understand identity in meaning-making processes which is an outcome of the proliferation of social relationships and sites of activity in particular in the country which has different cultural backgrounds. In relation to this, a social construction perspective as applied in this study can broaden our understanding about audiences' interactions with the advertisement texts, and thus potentially strengthen and add depth to the application of television advertisement analysis. However, this perspective also has limitations. Any analysis of audiences' understandings and experiences will necessarily be limited and mediated by the researcher's subjectivity. To overcome this limitation, relevant research instruments should aim to provide clear measurement. For example, we can use several methods of data collection such as questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and observations to know more about audiences' understanding, since this triangulation provides a greater degree of reliability in this type of investigation. Thus, limitations of a method can be overcome by the other methods. In addition, if questionnaires are used for obtaining audiences' opinions, scale responses may be used for the measurement so that we know the degree of their opinion at any rate. In spite of the methodological limitations, a social construction perspective provides a useful complement to television advertisement research.

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