



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Single Cycle Degree Programme
in Innovation and Marketing

Final Thesis

Saying less, meaning more
Intentional Ambiguity as a pragmatic strategy in
marketing communication

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Academic Year

2025 / 2026

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Introduction

Marketing language has historically followed a clarity ideal, that is to say something, say it in a direct way and repeat it until the consumer remembers it. This thesis starts from an observation that seems to go against that ideal. Some of the most efficient and remembered marketing messages in history do not say the things in an explicit way. On the contrary, they deliberately construct an open interpretative space in which meaning is not transmitted but negotiated with the recipient. The starting point of this research is a question that may seem a paradox: *can ambiguity, traditionally considered as a flaw in communication, work as a strategic resource if used in an intentional way?*

For the major part of the history of philosophy of language, the answer to this question would have been negative. From Aristotle to Frege, ambiguity has been treated as an error to correct, an obstacle to the loyal transmission of thought. Only with the pragmatic shift of the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly to Grice's contribution, communication starts being seen as an inferential collaborative process, in which the recipient actively constructs meaning starting from linguistic and contextual cues. In this change of perspective is rooted the central hypothesis of this thesis. If meaning is never only decoded but is always inferred, then a sender can construct a meaning that leave to the recipient a margin of interpretative construction, without losing the control of the produced communicative effect. This form of indirect control (not on the content of interpretation, but on the conditions of its production) is what this thesis calls intentional ambiguity, and on it constitutes the subject of the investigation.

The thesis specifically argues that intentional ambiguity, if built in a technically rigorous manner and accompanied by adequate contextual cues, constitutes a strategic resource on marketing communication, and in particular that ambiguous messages produce a superior memorability to clear and explicit ones. This affirmation requires two kinds of works, theoretical and practical, that this thesis carries out in four chapters.

The first chapter builds the theoretical foundations of the research. Since the term "ambiguity" is used, in the common language, in an imprecise way, usually confused with vagueness, under-specification or narrative openness, it was necessary, first of all, to establish what ambiguity is in the technical sense developed by philosophy of language: a property of sign that allows for a multiplicity of legitimate interpretations within a shared linguistic system. The chapter reconstructs the historical path that brought ambiguity from being a flaw to being

a resource, proposes a taxonomy evaluating the different persuasive potential it can have, and analyses the role of the context, the speaker intentionality and the interpretative participation of the recipient about transforming structural ambiguity in a governable communicative tool.

The second chapter translates these theoretical foundations on marketing. It claims that the marketer does not control the meaning of the message but guides the conditions of production and the consumer is an active agent that selects, elaborates and actively constructs the meaning to which he is exposed. The chapter describes the cognitive mechanism through which ambiguity produces its effect and verifies the plausibility through five cases study of real marketing campaigns, in addition to three cases in which ambiguity produced a communicative failure.

The third chapter transforms this theoretical implant in an empirical research design. Since the analysis of existing campaigns does not allow to isolate the specific contribution of ambiguity from other confounding variables, a controlled experiment was constructed based on a fictitious brand (Harlow), articulated in three experimental conditions between subjects: a clear control claim, an ambiguous claim without contextual cues, and the same ambiguous claim accompanied by an orienting contextual cue. The chapter presents the three-research hypothesis, related to recall, perceived cognitive engagement and purchase intention, together with the experimental material, the measured variables and the administration procedure.

The fourth and last chapter presents the results obtained by the experimental sample and discusses its implications. Results confirm the central nucleus of the thesis. The ambiguous message produces a substantially bigger mnemonic advantage than the clear one. At the same time, data give back an unexpected framework regarding the hypotheses concerning involvement and purchase intention, offering a starting point for a theoretical reflection on the relationship between memorability of a message and general persuasive effectiveness.

Taken together, the four chapters aim to show that ambiguity, when it ceases to be a semantic accident and starts becoming a deliberate communicative choice, does not represent a renunciation to the control of meaning but starts being a more sophisticated form of it, the one of a sender that will not determine what the recipient will think, but builds with care the space in which that thought could form.

I Ambiguity in language: theoretical foundations

1.1 Introduction

Language is rarely as transparent as we would like it to be: words shift, meanings multiply, and the same sentence may generate completely different interpretations depending on who's the one reading, in which context and with which expectations. For centuries, this intrinsic instability of natural language has been treated as a flaw, a structural imperfection that had to be corrected, formalized and managed with extreme caution. Much of the history of philosophy can be read as an attempt to discipline the language towards precision, to construct systems in which every expression corresponds to a single meaning and ambiguity is eliminated as it is a source of confusion and error.

This thesis proposes a different perspective: instead of treating ambiguity as a problem to be solved, we are asking ourselves whether ambiguity, and specifically the intentional one, can function as a *strategic resource in marketing communication*.

Before analyzing ambiguity as a communicative strategy, it is necessary to understand what ambiguity actually is, not in the intuitive and imprecise sense in which the term is commonly used, but in the theoretical sense developed by philosophy of language and linguistics over centuries of reflection. This first chapter aims precisely at establishing the theoretical foundations on which the entire research rests, through a trajectory that begins with the history of thought on ambiguity and culminates in a precise definition of the phenomenon, its various forms, the mechanisms that govern its interpretation and the role of both the speaker and the recipient in the construction of meaning.

The chapter begins with a historical overview showing that ambiguity has not always been seen as a resource. In fact, for the most of the traditional occidental philosophy, from Aristotle to Gottlob Frege, it was treated as a defect of natural language. Only with the pragmatic shift of the second half of the twentieth century, and in particular thanks to Grice's contribution, this evaluation began to radically change: communication started to be understood as an inferential and collaborative process, and ambiguity ceased to be an obstacle, revealing instead its potential as an open interpretative space.

This historical reconstruction, developed in section 1.2, it's not a purely academic exercise but it is useful to demonstrate that the shift in perspective proposed by this thesis is a part of a precise theoretical trajectory. After the historical overview, the chapter moves to its definitional core, establishing with precision what ambiguity is and what it is not. This

distinction is both theoretically important and methodologically necessary because of the fact that the experimental materials constructed in Chapter 3 must be genuinely ambiguous in the technical sense of the term, and not merely vague, under-specified or narratively open. The chapter clarifies that ambiguity, as adopted in this thesis, *is a property of signs that allows a multiplicity of legitimate interpretations within a shared linguistic system*, where “legitimate” refers to interpretations that a competent speaker would recognize as semantically or grammatically grounded. This definition excludes arbitrary or idiosyncratic readings, and this limitation is precisely what makes intentional ambiguity a controllable strategy rather than an abandonment to interpretative chaos.

The chapter then presents a taxonomy of the main forms through which ambiguity manifests: lexical ambiguity, arising from words or expressions capable of sustaining different meanings; syntactic ambiguity, emerging from the grammatical structure of the sentence; pragmatic ambiguity, concerning the type of speech act performed in context, and referential ambiguity, produced when an expression may be used to refer to more than one possible entity. For each form, the type of cognitive processing required from the recipient is evaluated, since this dimension underlies the assessment of its persuasive potential. The conclusion that emerges is that not every form of ambiguity is equally relevant for marketing: some trigger active and conscious interpretative engagement, while others are resolved automatically or remain cognitively inaccessible for the recipient.

The theoretical path continues with the analysis of the role of context in the interpretation of ambiguous messages. This section addresses a question that is both philosophically fundamental and methodologically urgent: if a message can support multiple interpretations, what prevents the recipient from constructing the “wrong” one, or from failing to construct any interpretation at all? The answer lies in context, that includes visual cues accompanying the message, brand identity, shared cultural competence and genre conventions. Context is the condition that transforms structural ambiguity into a governable instrument. Without context guidance, ambiguity remains an abstract possibility, while, with an adequately constructed context, it becomes a device capable of generating oriented interpretations and active cognitive engagement. This relationship between ambiguity and context provides the theoretical justification of the methodological choices in Chapter 3, where the presence and the type of contextual cues constitute the main independent variable of the experiment.

The chapter concludes with two sections dedicated to the role of the agents in the communicative process: the speaker and the recipient. The section on speaker intentionality

establishes that deliberately produced ambiguity is not a semantic incident but a planned communicative act, in which the interpretative multiplicity is not only expected but desired. Drawing on Grice's distinction between natural meaning and non-natural meaning, it argues that the sender's intention does not determine under which interpretation the recipient will construct, but rather determines the conditions under which that construction takes place, that is the structure of the interpretative space. The following section, on meaning construction, brings this reasoning to its most important theoretical outcome: through Barthes' concept of *scriptable* text, it argues that the ambiguous marketing message transforms the recipient from a passive consumer of content to active co-author of meaning. This co-authorship is guided by the structure of the message and by contextual cues, but it is nonetheless real and generates a level of engagement that a univocal message cannot produce.

The theoretical framework emerging from this first chapter provides the conceptual foundations for the entire research. The following chapters will build on these foundations: Chapter 2 analyzes the mechanisms through which intentional ambiguity works as a strategic tool in marketing, with reference to concrete cases; Chapter 3 presents the experimental design through which the theoretical hypothesis will be empirically tested; Chapter 4 discusses the findings and their implications for marketing communication theory and practice.

1.2 Ambiguity in Philosophical and Linguistic thought: from problem to resource

1.2.1 Introduction: what is ambiguity?

The term ambiguity is, with a certain type of irony, ambiguous in itself ¹. As Sennet in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2021) observes, the word can both be referred to a state of uncertainty or doubt, or to the capacity of a linguistic sign to convey multiple meanings. This dual semantic of the term is not an insignificant detail: it reflects a concept that runs throughout the history of philosophical reflections on ambiguity and is directly relevant to the aims of this research ².

In this thesis, the term “*ambiguity*” will never be used to indicate mere communicative confusion, inaccuracy or lack of clarity. The meaning adopted here is the technical one

¹ Sennet, A. (2021). *Ambiguity*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>

² Eisenberg, E. M. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs*, 51(3), 227–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758409390197>

developed within philosophy of language: *ambiguity is a property of signs* (sentences, words, images), *that allows different legitimate interpretations inside a linguistic system*. The notion of *legitimacy* is crucial because it does not refer to any possible reading of an expression, but specifically to interpretations that a competent speaker of the language would recognize as semantically or grammatically grounded. As will be clarified throughout this chapter, this definition excludes arbitrary or idiosyncratic interpretations within a shared linguistic and cultural system, and this is the boundary that makes intentional ambiguity a controllable strategy rather than an abandonment to the interpretative randomness.

In everyday language, the term “*ambiguity*” is often used inaccurately, in fact it is normally used to refer to incomplete, general or insufficiently specific messages. As Sennet points out, this usage is theoretically incorrect. Consider two common examples: when we say that the USA’s policy towards the unification of China and Taiwan is a “*strategic ambiguity*” politic, in reality we mean that it leaves the American position unspecified in respect to Taiwan’s status, but this is a case of *under-specification*, not ambiguity. Similarly, a film with an open final in which we don’t know if a character survives or not is usually described as “*ambiguous*”; but this is also a case in which we talk about ambiguity even if it is not the right term, in fact this case is called *narrative openness*. This difference, that will be detailed in section 1.3.3 and 1.3.4, is fundamental for the construction of the experimental materials in Chapter 3: the “*ambiguous*” marketing messages that will be used in the experiment must be genuinely ambiguous (that means structured to support multiple different interpretations), not just vague or uncompleted.

Ambiguity, in then technical sense we adopt here, is a phenomenon that has fascinated philosophers, linguists, logicians, cognitive scientists, literary theorists, poets and rhetoricians. Philosophical interest for ambiguity arises from multiple sources: concerns about the logical representation of the natural language, pragmatic questions about how language is used to communicate, and ethical and political debates about the manipulation of meaning. All these dimensions are relevant to this research, which examines ambiguity as a strategic instrument in persuasive communication.

As Sennet also observes, ambiguity in art can, intentionally or unintentionally, increase the interest in a work, refusing the easy categorization and interpretation. This observation is the theoretical starting point for the reflections developed in Chapter 2: **if ambiguity increases aesthetic engagement in artistic contexts, it is reasonable to hypothesize that it may play a similar role in the advertising communication**. Finally, as Sennet highlights, the *resolution*

of ambiguity is central feature of human cognitive processing and interpretative capacity, and this is the exact mechanism in which the experimental design in Chapter 3 is based.

1.2.2 *The origins: Aristotle and the Stoics*

Ambiguity has fascinated philosophers since antiquity. The first systemic treatment of the phenomenon in the Western philosophical tradition can be traced back to Aristotle, who discusses ambiguity in the context of fallacies in *Sophistical Refutations* ³, distinguishing what today we would now call lexical ambiguity, ambiguity arising from common usage and syntactic or structural ambiguity (section 1.3 will examine the different types of ambiguity). Aristotle illustrates the phenomenon with the well-known example of the expression “*knowing letters*”: both the words (knowing and letters) can have a single meaning, but together they open at least two interpretations: that letters themselves have knowledge, or that someone else knows them. This classification is already surprisingly modern, and it anticipates distinctions that the contemporary linguistics has formalized in terms of lexical, syntactic and pragmatic ambiguity, but what is more relevant to this research is the perspective from which Aristotle approaches this phenomenon: for him, in fact, ambiguity is the preferred instrument of the sophist, that is the one who exploits linguistic pitfalls to make invalid thesis appear valid. Opposite to this, the genuine philosopher must unmask and neutralize those ambiguities, because in this perspective ambiguity belongs to the domain of deception, not domain of authentic philosophical inquiry. As we can see, in the classical thought ambiguity is something that has to be avoided.

The Stoics’ approach to ambiguity is slightly different: Chrysippus, one of the main exponents of the ancient Stoicism, claimed that *every word is ambiguous*, meaning that the same person may understand a word spoken to them in several distinct ways ⁴. This observation shifts the attention from the formal structure of language to the dimension of the reception and interpretation, highlighting the relationship between the sign and its interpreter. This intuition anticipates some of the most important acquisitions of the modern pragmatics and in particular the idea that **meaning is the product of an active constructive process from the recipient**, and this is one of the theoretical foundations of this research.

³ Aristotle. (2004). *Sophistical refutations* (E. S. Forster, Trans.). In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The complete works of Aristotle* (Vol. 1). Princeton University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 BCE)

⁴ Atherton, C. (1993). *The Stoics on ambiguity*. Cambridge University Press.

1.2.3 *The Middle Ages and the Scholastic Tradition: ambiguity in the language of thought*

The conception of ambiguity changes during the Middle Ages, intertwining with the debate about the relationship between language and thought. The central question concerns whether the so-called *language of thought* ⁵, that is the mental language through which we think, could contain ambiguous expressions.

William of Ockham addresses this issue arguing that he was willing to allow ambiguity in *articulated mental propositions* ⁶, that is, in complex structures of thought, but not in *elementary mental terms*. In other words, ambiguity, in this perspective, is a phenomenon may emerge at the syntactic-combinational level, but not at the level of a basic mental vocabulary.

This position reveals a very important theoretical intuition that will later be supported by contemporary thought: **often ambiguity isn't present in the single isolated words, but arises from their combinations and the context in which they are used**. As we will see in Chapter 2, this is exactly the most frequent and effective type of ambiguity in marketing, in fact a lot of slogans aren't based on single words with multiple meanings, but on combinations that open more interpretative layers at the same time.

1.2.4 *Frege and the logical-analytical tradition: ambiguity as the enemy of precision*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the rise of the modern logic, Gottlob Frege expressed with great clarity the attitude that would dominate a large part of twentieth-century philosophy ⁷: ambiguity is a structural defect of the natural language, and the philosopher task is to construct formal languages in which ambiguity does not exist.

In an important passage of *Sense and Reference* (1892), Frege writes that if the reference remains the same, variations in sense can be tolerated in ordinary language, but they should be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science, and they shouldn't appear in a *perfect* language. His position is unequivocal: in an ideal language (for example the mathematical one) every expression should have one sense and one reference. The multiplicity of interpretations is, for Frege, a characteristic of natural language that the serious philosophy should avoid rather than valorize.

This hostility toward ambiguity has had long-lasting consequences, in fact even today we rely on formal languages precisely to disambiguate certain ambiguous sentences from

⁵ Carruthers, P. (2023). *The language of thought hypothesis*. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/language-thought/>

⁶ Spade, P. V. (1996). *Thoughts, words and things: An introduction to late mediaeval logic and semantic theory* (Version 1.0). Indiana University. <https://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/thoughts.pdf>

⁷ Frege, G. (1948). *Sense and reference*. *The Philosophical Review*, 57(3), 209–230. (Original work published 1892)

natural language (for example we use the parenthesis as a disambiguating device). Frege's influence shaped the idea that ambiguity is something to be eliminated in order to preserve logical rigor. Sennet illustrates this point with an example:

- *Babe Ruth owned a bat.*
- *Bats have wings.*
- *Babe Ruth owned something with wings.*

The sentence appears formally correct, but in reality, it is a fallacy, because the word bat is used with two different meanings in these phrases (1. Sport equipment, 2. Animal). This type of fallacy has dominated the philosophical reflection on ambiguity for centuries **building the image of ambiguity as a problem that had to be solved.**

The proposal of this thesis stands in contrast to this tradition, in fact it will be demonstrated that in the context of marketing communication, **ambiguity is not used to trick then recipient or to make some false conclusions seem true, but it is used to open an interpretative space that invites the recipient to an active participation in the construction of meaning.** This is a concept that will be analyzed in detail in the next chapters.

1.2.5 The pragmatic change: Grice and communication as inference

The view about ambiguity begins to change significantly starting in the second half of the twentieth century, with the so-called *pragmatic turn*. The fundamental contribution comes from Paul Grice, who in *Logic and Conversation* (1975) ⁸ proposes a theory of communication based not only on the literal meaning of expressions, but also on the principles that govern their interpretation in context.

The core of his proposal is the distinction between what is said by an expression, so its literal meaning, and what is implied, so the additional information that the recipient derives reasoning about the speaker's communicative behavior. Grice's *conversational implicatures* are inferences that the hearer draws on the assumption that the speaker is respecting certain maxims of cooperation: *quantity* (saying enough, not too much), *quality* (to say the truth), *relation* (being relevant) and *manner* (being clear and not ambiguous).

It is important to notice that Grice explicitly includes clarity and non-ambiguity among the maxims of cooperative communication.

⁸ Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.

His theory is built around the idea that the comprehension of a sentence is never a matter of simply decoding a fixed semantic content, but it is always an active inferential process in which the recipient constructs an interpretation based on linguistic, contextual and pragmatic cues. This shift is decisive for the understanding intentional ambiguity: **if meaning is always the product of an inference of the recipient, then the speaker can use this dynamic to guide an interpretation without fully determining it.**

The methodological principle known as *Modified Occam's Razor* ⁹ states that senses should not be multiplied beyond necessity; this invite speakers to avoid the use of ambiguity when it is not strictly required, but it also implies that ambiguity exists and has to be managed with caution, not simply be eliminated. Ambiguity ceases to be a communicative risk and starts to be a space of strategic maneuver.

1.2.6 *Ambiguity as a resource: from literature to the ordinary language*

If the logical-philosophical tradition has long treated ambiguity as an enemy to be eliminated, the literary and rhetoric tradition has instead recognized its expressive power since antiquity. As Sennet observes, authors, poets, songwriters and comedians have often found in ambiguity an instrument of extraordinary effectiveness.

There are many famous examples of this phenomenon in the arts, starting from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where it is said "*Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man*", in which the term *grave* is used to have a double meaning (serious and grave) in order to condensate in just one sentence the tragicality of death and the irony of the character. Groucho Marx, in the joke "*I shot an elephant in my pajamas*" ¹⁰, exploits the syntactic ambiguity to produce a comic effect based on the unexpected interpretation. Another example comes from music, in the song "*Every breath you take*" by The Police, where the lyrics can initially appear romantic, while simultaneously suggesting obsession and control, and this contributes to the emotional complexity and memorability of the song. In this case, the ambiguity is primarily pragmatic: the meaning of the speaker's words depends on how the listener interprets his intentions. In particular, the idea expressed by "I'll be watching you" can initially be understood as a promise of constant attention and affection, but it can also be interpreted as a threat, suggesting surveillance, obsession, and control.

⁹ Chalmers, D. J. (2012). Modified Occam's razor. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 90(2), 371–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2011.578143>

¹⁰ Heerman, V. (Director). (1930). *Animal Crackers* [Film]. Paramount Pictures.

These examples show that in the literary and rhetorical practice, ambiguity has always been considered a technique, not a flaw, so an instrument to surprise, engage and make the recipient reflect. **Language that expresses only one thing in a univocal and transparent way is usually a flat language lacking of life. Language that leaves more doors open is the one that captures the attention, that produces pleasure and remains in the memory of the recipient.** This intuition, which spans centuries of rhetorical and literary practice, will find in the second half of the twentieth century a systematic theoretical elaboration of its own, of which we will talk about in the next sections. What is important to highlight here is the fundamental **distinction between the use of ambiguity in the philosophical tradition (as an instrument of deceit to unmask) and its use in the literary and rhetorical tradition (as an engaging instrument that has to be cultivated).** Marketing communication, as we will see in Chapter 2, clearly belongs to the second tradition.

1.2.7 Conclusion

The historical path retraced in this chapter describes a long and nonlinear trajectory: from ambiguity as an Aristotelian fallacy, through the Frege's hostility toward any multiplicity of meaning, to the pragmatic re-evaluation started from Grice and the rhetorical literary rehabilitation of the phenomenon as an expressive resource. This trajectory reflects an **important change in the conception of the communication, because as long as it has been thought as a transmission of concepts from a sender to a recipient it has appeared as something bad, but as soon as it was reinterpreted as a collaborative project in which the recipient actively participates at the creation of meaning, ambiguity has stopped being just a problem and started being used as an instrument.** This change of perspective creates a series of theoretical questions that require an answer before we can analyze ambiguity in the context of marketing, for example we have to understand what exactly is ambiguity, which forms it can take, how the context can guide its interpretation, who controls meaning... These are the questions that the next sections are going to face.

1.3 What ambiguity really is

1.3.1 *The necessity of a precise definition*

The historical path outlined in the previous section has shown how the evaluation of ambiguity has radically changed over centuries, shifting from a structural flaw in the natural language to an expressive resource recognized in rhetorical and literary practice ¹¹. However, acknowledging that ambiguity can be a resource is not sufficient to build a rigorous theoretical analysis of the phenomenon. Before claiming that intentional ambiguity can function as a strategy in marketing communication ¹², it is necessary to stabilize with precision what we mean by this term, so we have to understand what ambiguity is and, maybe even more importantly, what it is not.

This will be essential for Chapter 3, where the experimental materials will be constructed on the basis of precise criteria that distinguish genuinely ambiguous messages from those that are vague, generic or uncertain. If this distinction is not stabilized in a theoretical level, the entire research would lose solidity and, for this reason, the definition that will be elaborated in this section build a methodological fundament for the research.

The main difficulty in defining ambiguity is that this term is normally used in an inaccurate way, and often it is superimposed to other linguistic phenomenon that, even if correlated, are different under the theoretical profile ¹³. Vagueness, under-specification, context sensitivity, sense and reference transfer and generality all are phenomenon that can generate interpretative uncertainty, but none of them coincides with ambiguity in its strict sense. In this section, we will clarify these differences.

1.3.2 *The definition of ambiguity: legitimate multiplicity of interpretations*

The starting point for a theoretically founded definition of ambiguity is the distinction between possible interpretations and *legitimate* ones. As Sennet observes in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ambiguity is generally understood as a property of signs (words, sentences, images) that allows multiple *legitimate* interpretations within a linguistic system or,

¹¹ Huang, R. (2020). *A study of intentional ambiguity from the perspective of pragmatics*. *Open Access Library Journal*, 7(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1106182>

¹² Nwankwo-Ojionu, C. E., Adzharuddin, N. A., Waheed, M., & Mohd Khir, A. (2022). *Impact of strategic ambiguity tagline on billboard advertising on consumers attention*. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 12(1), e202204. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcmr/11432>

¹³ Gillon, B. S. (2004). Ambiguity, indeterminacy, deixis, and vagueness: Evidence and theory. In S. Davis & B. S. Gillon (Eds.), *Semantics: A reader* (pp. 157–188). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195136975.003.0010>

more generally, within a system of signs ¹⁴. The term *legitimate* is fundamental here, because we are not referring to every interpretation that a speaker might attribute to an expression, only to those that a competent speaker would recognize as semantically or grammatically grounded within the shared linguistic systems.

This definition excludes from the domain of ambiguity all the arbitrary or extravagant readings that a particularly creative recipient might elaborate starting from a text. A message is ambiguous simply because someone interprets in an unexpected way, but also because the linguistic system, with its semantic, syntactic and pragmatic rules, authorizes two or more distinct interpretations, each of which is recognizable and valid to a competent speaker. This multiplicity is structurally grounded, and this is the one that builds ambiguity, not the general interpretative openness. This definition has an important implication for the research: intentional ambiguity in marketing is not a renunciation to the control of the meaning, but rather a different form of control that is more sophisticated. The sender does not abandon the message to the random interpretations of the recipient: he builds an expression that the linguistic system recognizes as structurally able to sustain more than one reading. **Every reading is anticipated and oriented from the speaker through the choice of the context, the register and some pragmatic cues that accompany the message. As we will see in Chapter 2, this possibility to guide the message is precisely what makes ambiguity a strategic instrument for marketing.**

The definition of ambiguity as a multiplicity of legitimate interpretations presupposes one fundamental element that cannot be left implicit: the concept of *linguistic competency* ¹⁵. When we affirm that an expression supports more legitimate interpretations, the parameter of legitimacy is the competence of the native speaker, that is, their capacity to recognize, on the basis of the internalized knowledge of the linguistic system, which interpretations are grammatically and semantically possible.

This dimension is fundamental because it excludes from ambiguity two classes of phenomena that would risk contaminating the definition. On the one hand, it excludes the creative interpretations that a speaker could elaborate forcing the limits of the semantic system (for example, the fact that someone could interpret the sentence “*The dog is barking*” as a metaphor for something completely different does not make the sentence ambiguous). On the

¹⁴ Sennet, A. (2021). *Ambiguity*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>

¹⁵ Christian Kellner, & Mark T. Le Quement. (2024). *Modes of ambiguous communication*. *Synthese*, 203(2), Article 87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-024-04570-z>

other hand, it excludes the inter-linguistic ambiguities (for example, the fact that the word “leaped” means *to jump* in English and *love* in German).

For marketing, this has a concrete implication, that is the fact that the intentional ambiguity functions only in the measure by which the alternative interpretations are accessible to the linguistic competence of the recipient. A message that requires specialized knowledge, unknown cultural references or interpretations that are not grounded in the shared linguistic system is not ambiguous in a strategic way, it is simply incomprehensible. **The effectiveness of ambiguity as a communicative strategy depends on the sender’s ability to calibrate the message to the competence of the recipient, which means having a deep understanding of the audience and of the cultural context in which the message circulates.**

This calibration is not arbitrary but it is guided by pragmatic and contextual principles that make ambiguity controllable. As Grice demonstrated, the recipient does not interpret the message randomly, but always in relation to a set of cooperative expectations and contextual cues that orient their inference towards the most plausible interpretations. This mechanism, which will be analyzed in the next sections, is precisely what distinguishes intentional ambiguity from communicative noise.

1.3.3 What ambiguity is not: the distinction from vagueness, under-specification and semantic generality

The phenomenon with which ambiguity is most frequently confused is vagueness ¹⁶. In common language the two terms are often used as synonyms, but in philosophy of language and linguistics the distinction is clear and theoretically relevant.

An expression is vague when its limits of application are indeterminate, meaning that there are borderline cases in which it is not clear whether the term applies or not. The classic case analyzed in the philosophical tradition is the one of “*being tall*”: there is no doubt that a person who is 2 meters is tall, and someone that is 1.50m is not, but between these two extremes there is a zone of indeterminacy in which it is not clear how to stabilize with certainty if the adjective can be applied or not ¹⁷. The same holds for terms such as “*heap*”: how many grains of sand are used to make a heap? There are a lot of words with this same behavior, such as old, hot, far, and so on. In marketing, vagueness appears in expressions such as “high quality,”

¹⁶ Sennet, A. (2021). *Ambiguity*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>

¹⁷ Domosławski, A. *Shifty semantics and slippery slopes: Essays on semantic plasticity and the epistemic theory of vagueness* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds). University of Leeds.

“premium experience,” “innovative design,” or “superior performance”. These terms are vague because their limits of application are not clearly defined: how much “quality” is needed for something to count as *high quality*? What exactly makes an experience *premium*? Similarly, how recent must a product, service, or feature be in order to be described as “new”? There is no precise and universally applicable point at which something ceases to be new.

What characterizes vagueness is that the problem does not concern the presence of two different meanings, but the absence of a precise boundary for a single meaning. A vague term does not have multiple meanings, it has one meaning whose limits of application are blurred. In contrast, ambiguity presupposes the presence of two or more different meanings, recognizable by a competent speaker. The term *bat* is not vague: it has two precise and distinct meaning, and the shift from one to the other does not depend on a gradual nuance but from the radical change of semantic reference.

This distinction is the core of the construction of the experimental materials of Chapter 3. A vague marketing message (for example, one that uses terms such as “*quality*”, “*experience*” without precisising the content) is not an ambiguous one. It is simply uninformative and possibly frustrating, leaving the recipient in a zone of indeterminacy without offering two readings to choose between. Ambiguity, instead, offers to the recipient one real interpretative choice, that means that it offers not just one unclear meaning, but two or more meanings that are all comprehensible, and among which the recipient has to build an interpretation coherent with the context. As we will see in Chapter 2, this dynamic of active choice is precisely what generates the emotional engagement that differentiates the ambiguous message from a merely imprecise one.

Next to vagueness, there are other two phenomena with which ambiguity is frequently confused: *under-specification* and *semantic generality*. Here too, the theoretical distinction is neat, and it has some direct implications for the definition of the experimental materials.

Under-specification occurs when an expression leaves an element of the referential situation unspecified, but it does not have multiple meanings. Sennet brings the example of “*Jane’s sister will come visit*”: if Jane has more than one sister, the sentence is technically under-specified because it does not indicate which sister will visit ¹⁸. However, the term “*sister*” doesn’t have two different meanings: it only has one, and the lack of specificity concerns the recipient, not the sense. Similarly, U.S. policy towards Taiwan has been described as one of

¹⁸ Teufel, S. (2011–2012). *Word meaning and discourse understanding: Session 1: Background to lexical semantics and word senses* [Course handout]. MPhil in Advanced Computer Science, University of Cambridge.

“strategic ambiguity”, but in this case the issue is intentional under-determination of a political position, not of linguistic ambiguity: the United States is not implying different things, but simply avoiding the explicit articulation of a single position.

Semantic generality is a related but distinct phenomenon: some expressions have a meaning that is genuinely general and includes multiple cases without being ambiguous. The term *uncle* can be applied to both the brothers of the mother or the father, but this doesn’t mean that it is an ambiguous word, it only has a single meaning that is general, and it is a semantical characteristic of the language, not ambiguity.

The distinction between ambiguity and semantic generality is particularly relevant for marketing. A lot of marketing expressions are general (for example: *“the best for you”*, *“choose the quality”*) in the sense that they are applicable to a wide class of situations and interpretations without supporting contrasting ones. These messages are not ambiguous, they are simply open or general, because a message that is genuinely ambiguous supports interpretations that the recipient would recognize as distinct, and between which he has to choose a primary interpretation. This tension between alternative readings produces the type of cognitive content that this research wants to analyze.

1.3.4 What ambiguity is not: the distinction from narrative openness

Another phenomenon that is frequently labeled as ambiguity in common language is narrative openness, which can be found, for example, in the end of a film that does not reveal what happens to a character, in a novel that does not clarify the protagonist’s motivations, or in a story that leaves some elements of the plot unresolved ¹⁹. These cases are commonly described as ambiguous, but in reality, this is an incorrect use of the term.

Narrative openness produces uncertainty at the level of the facts represented in the story (what happened, what will happen, what a character’s intentions are), but not at the level of meaning of the linguistic expression used. In an open-ended film, there are not words or sentences with different meanings, the only characteristic is that the story doesn’t have a conclusion, so the recipient experiences a factual uncertainty, not semantic uncertainty. Linguistic ambiguity, instead, concerns the expressions themselves, not what happened in the story. This distinction has some methodological consequences for Chapter 3. The marketing messages used in the experiment must be constructed in such a way so that they can sustain

¹⁹ Francesca Polletta, & John Lee. (2006). Is telling stories good for democracy? Rhetoric in public deliberation after 9/11. *American Sociological Review*, 71(5), 699–721. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100501>

distinct semantic interpretations, not merely omit information or leave narrative gaps. A marketing message that does not specify where the shops are is under-specified, not ambiguous. A marketing message that only uses a linguistic expression capable of sustaining two semantically distinct readings is genuinely ambiguous and produces a cognitive effect that is completely different for the recipient.

1.3.5 Ambiguity and intentionality: the distinction between structural and strategic ambiguity

Until now, the definition of ambiguity has been considered from the point of view of the linguistic structure, meaning that an expression is ambiguous when the linguistic system authorizes multiple legitimate interpretations ²⁰. This is ambiguity as an objective property of signs, independently from the intentions of the person who produces them. However, for the purposes of this research, it is necessary to introduce a further distinction that is only possible at the structural level, that is to say the distinction between *structural* and *intentional* ambiguity.

Structural ambiguity is a property of natural language, in fact, as Chrysippus observed, natural language is intrinsically ambiguous: every word in the lexicon has multiple meanings, almost every syntactic construction can be analyzed in more than one way, and almost every linguistic act can be interpreted as performing more than one pragmatic function. This structural ambiguity is the starting point on which intentional ambiguity operates.

Intentional ambiguity is a communicative choice in which the speaker, aware of the structural multiplicity of the language, deliberately selects expressions that support multiple interpretations, with the aim of producing a specific effect on the recipient. It is not a semantic accident or a lack of caution in formulating the message, it is a planned communicative act in which interpretative multiplicity is not only expected, but desired.

This distinction is fundamental to understand the role of ambiguity in marketing: when a copywriter chooses a slogan that can be read in two ways, they are not committing a mistake, they are consciously exploiting a structural property of language in order to obtain a specific communicative effect ²¹. Intentional ambiguity presupposes a double competence: the linguistic competence necessary to recognize the ambiguous structures of the system, and the

²⁰ Huang, R. (2020). *A study of intentional ambiguity from the perspective of pragmatics*. Open Access Library Journal, 7, e6182. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1106182>

²¹ Lagerwerf, L. (2002). Deliberate ambiguity in slogans: Recognition and appreciation. Document Design, 3(3), 245–260. <https://doi.org/10.1075/dd.3.3.07lag>

communicative competency necessary to use them strategically in function of the recipient and the context. As we will see in Chapter 2, this double competence is precisely what characterizes the most sophisticated advertising practice: not the ability to say clear things efficiently, but the **ability to construct messages that leave to the recipient a real interpretative space without losing the control of the inferences that that recipient will produce.**

1.3.6 *The boundary between productive ambiguity and communicative failure*

Now that we have established the definition of ambiguity and its distinctions from similar phenomenon, we still have to address a question that will be central to this research: when does ambiguity function, and when does it become a communicative failure? ²² The answer to this question is implicit in the definition of ambiguity, but it is important to make it explicit.

Ambiguity works, so it produces a communicative effect, when the interpretations it supports are both accessible to the recipient, both coherent with the context, and when their tension generates a communicative engagement that adds value to the experience of the message ²³. In these cases, the recipient is not disoriented, they are activated, and they perceive the multiplicity as an invitation to participate to the construction of the meaning ²⁴. This participation, as it will be shown in Chapter 2, is associated with an increase in cognitive elaboration, emotional engagement and memorability of the message.

Ambiguity degenerates in communicative failure when the conditions that make it productive are lacking: when the interpretations supported by message are too distant to be held together, when the context does not provide clues towards the intended readings, or when the generated interpretations are so semantically different that they make the message incoherent with the communicative context in which it appears. In these cases, the recipient does not perceive multiplicity as a value but as a limitation, and the results, instead of being engagement, is confusion ²⁵. So, the boundary between productive ambiguity and

²² Peter McMahan, & James Evans. (2018). *Ambiguity and engagement*. American Journal of Sociology, 124(3), 860–912. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701298>

²³ Jesús García-Madariaga, Ingrid Moya, Nuria Recuero, & María-Francisca Blasco. (2020). *Revealing unconscious consumer reactions to advertisements that include visual metaphors: A neurophysiological experiment*. Frontiers in Psychology, 11, 760. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00760>

²⁴ Chimeziem Elijah Nwankwo-Ojionu, Nor Azura Adzharuddin, Moniza Waheed, Azlina Mohd Khir, & Emem Chimeziem Elijah. (2025). *Impact of creative ambiguous cue strategies on consumer purchase decisions*. Observatorio (OBS*), 19(1), 195–222. <https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS19120252470>

²⁵ Frank R. Kardes, Bob M. Fennis, Edward R. Hirt, Zakary L. Tormala, & Brian Bullington. (2007). The role of the need for cognitive closure in the effectiveness of the disrupt-then-reframe influence technique. Journal of Consumer Research, 34(3), 377–385. <https://doi.org/10.1086/518532>

communicative failure is not determined by the structure of the message in the abstract, but by the relationship between the message, the recipient and the context, for this reason a message that works in a certain context with a certain audience may not work in a different one. This contextual dependency is not a weakness of ambiguity as a strategy but it's a characteristic that requires a conscious and calibrated use. This is exactly with in Chapter 3 we will find the variable of contextual cues (the contextual cues that accompany the message and orientates the interpretation of the recipient) as fundamental element of the evaluation of the efficiency of ambiguity in marketing communication.

1.3.7 Conclusion: ambiguity in marketing as a controlled opening to interpretation

The path followed until now has led us to the formulation of a precise concept of ambiguity that will be used for the rest of his research. Ambiguity is a property of signs that allows a multiplicity of interpretation within a shared linguistic system that are distinct, recognizable from a competent speaker as grammatically or semantically grounded and not traceable to the vagueness, under-specification, semantic generality or narrative openness. This definition has both a delimitative and proactive function, because it indicates the direction in which the next chapters will develop. If ambiguity is structurally different from vagueness and generality, then its communicative and cognitive effects will also be different, because they will trigger an interpretative process that requires the active participation of the recipient. This is the reason why, in the marketing context, ambiguity is not a flaw or a communicative failure, but a form of controlled openness to interpretation: controlled because the interpretations that the message supports are structurally grounded in the linguistic system because the sender predicted and orientated them through the choice of her expressions and contextual cues; open because the ambiguous message leaves to the recipient a real space in which she can construct the meaning. It is in this space that intentional ambiguity becomes a strategical instrument for marketing. In the next chapters, the mechanisms through which this tool works will be analyzed.

1.4 Ambiguity forms: a taxonomy

1.4.1 Introduction: the necessity of an oriented taxonomy

The definition elaborated in the previous section has stabilized what we mean by ambiguity in the technical sense: a property of linguistic signs that allows a multiplicity of legitimate interpretations within a shared system. However, this definition treats ambiguity as a unitary phenomenon, while in reality language reveals a variety of forms through which this property manifests itself. Ambiguity can come from a word with two different meanings, from the grammatical structure of a sentence, from the linguistic act that an utterance performs, or from the relationship between an expression and its reference in the discourse. These forms are not the same either in their internal structure or from the point of view of the effects they produce, which are the core of this research.

This section will establish a taxonomy of the principal forms of ambiguity recognized in the philosophical and linguistic literature: lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity and pragmatic ambiguity, together with their most important subtypes. We will not simply provide a formal description of each category, but we will consider the kind of cognitive elaboration that each form requires from the recipient, because it is in this dimension that we can evaluate their relevance for the persuasive communication.

The conclusion we will reach is that different forms of ambiguity do not possess the same strategic potential in the marketing context, because while some of them produces cognitive effects that favor the engagement and the active elaboration of the message, others generate only disorientation or remain cognitively irrelevant. This evaluation will be necessary to understand **which forms of ambiguity are possible candidates to have a strategic function in marketing**.

1.4.2 Lexical ambiguity

The most recognizable form of ambiguity is lexical ambiguity. It occurs when a single word (or idiomatic expression) pertains to two or more distinct meanings in the lexicon, and each of them has its own sense ²⁶. Sennet identifies within this category very different phenomena ²⁷: words that share the same phonetic and graphic form even though they have radically different meanings (*homonyms*), words that share the same phonetic but not the

²⁶ Díez Arroyo, M. (1995). *Lexical ambiguity in ads. Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, (3), 187–199.

²⁷ Sennet, A. (2021). *Ambiguity*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>

graphical one (*homophones*) and words that allow different semantically correlated but functionally distinct readings.

The simplest case is the one we already mentioned, the word “*bat*”, which can be refer to the animal or to the piece of sport equipment. The two meanings are semantically very far from each other, and their disambiguation happens very rapidly through the context. For example, if we say “*the bat flew out of the cave*” we have no interpretative doubt. Another example is the word “*bank*”, which can refer to a financial institution or to the side of a river; in the sentence “*she sat on the bank and watched the water*”, the context immediately eliminates the financial reading. This case shows an important limit of lexical ambiguity regarding homonyms, in fact when the meaning is very different and the context easily discriminates between them, ambiguity is almost automatically resolved, and the recipient does not even perceive it. From a cognitive point of view, the elaboration happens unconsciously, and the effect is that of normal comprehension.

The most linguistically interesting case, that is also the most relevant in marketing, is the one in which the meanings of a word, even if distinct, belong to the same semantic field or share a meaning component. For example, Sennet says that one can say “*in therapy*”, “*in Florida*”, “*in the yearbook*”, and in each case the containment relationship assumes a different form in the word “*in*”. They are not radically separated meanings, but they are nuances of the same semantic center that are different depending on the context. Sennet observes that in such cases it is very difficult to determine whether we are dealing with real ambiguity or simply with a very broad meaning that is specified differently depending on the occurrence.

This grey zone between lexical ambiguity and semantical generality is one of the most fertile the advertising communication. When a slogan uses a word whose meaning is sufficiently rich and layered to evoke several semantical correlated levels simultaneously, the recipient is not forced to choose between two conflicting readings but he can keep both cognitively and affectively active, at least for the necessary time to create a subsequent overall interpretation of the message. In this state of multiple activation, we find the cognitive engagement that marketing intends to exploit.

The case of idiomatic expression can be seen in sentences such as “*kick the bucket*”, which are structurally ambiguous between a literal reading and an idiomatic one (in this case, *to die*), and this ambiguity has historically been exploited by writers and comedians in order to produce surprise and irony. Another example is the phrase “*break the ice*”: literally, it refers to physically breaking frozen water, but idiomatically it means initiating social interaction. A

campaign that visually shows someone cracking ice while inviting consumers to “break the ice with our new app” plays precisely on this dual activation. For marketing, idiomatic or semi-idiomatic expression offer a rich terrain to work on because the recipient brings with himself a cultural competency that makes the nonliterary reading accessible, and the tension between the different lectures can be exploited to produce surprise or humor effects ²⁸.

1.4.3 Syntactic ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity is different from lexical ambiguity because it does not concern the meaning of the individual words but the grammatical organization of the sentence. The same sequence of words, each of which is ambiguous of its own, can correspond to two or more distinct grammatical structure, producing different interpretations of the message. The classical example proposed by Sennet is “*superfluous hair remover*”: the nominal sequence can be analyzed as “*hair remover that is superfluous*” or “*remover superfluous hair*”.



Figure 1. Advertisement for Mi-Rita Superfluous Hair Remover by Dr. Margaret Ruppert, 1922.

In this case, none of the words is ambiguous but the problem comes from the lack of an explicit indication of how the words are connected, which in English isn't always deducible from

²⁸ Džani, M. (2007). *Pragmatic properties of idiom modifications*. *Linguistica*, 18, 45–59.

the mere linear sequence. The sentence corresponds to two different syntagmatic structures, and the recipient must determine which one is more appropriate based on contextual cues ²⁹.

A particularly rich type of syntactic ambiguity is thematic ambiguity: some sentences allow different assignments of semantic roles to participants. For example, if we say “*the chicken is ready to eat*”, the chicken can both be interpreted as an agent or a patient, and the two readings produce completely different scenarios ³⁰. The sentence is syntactically ambiguous because the surface structure does not determine the assignment of the thematic role, leaving the question of who is performing the action. Another example is “*visiting relatives can be annoying*”: the subject “*visiting relatives*” can mean either that the relatives who visit are annoying, or that the act of visiting relatives is annoying.

From a marketing point of view, syntactic ambiguity has different characteristics from lexical ambiguity. On the one hand, it tends to produce more clearly distinct interpretations because the assignment of roles or different relationships among the sentence elements leads to less superimposable semantic constructions. On the other hand, its resolution requires a grammatical elaboration that is less accessible to the recipient’s awareness compared to lexical ambiguity, because many speakers don’t explicitly perceive that a sentence is syntactically ambiguous, but they form a preferred interpretation depending on the context, without noticing that another one, that is equally possible, exists. This second aspect can be both an advantage and a disadvantage from a persuasive point of view, and its evaluation strictly depends on the kind of effect the sender intends to produce. It is also important to notice that this difference is not always neat in the communication practice because many effective advertising messages combine both levels: they use semantically layered words within structures that multiply their possible relations, producing an interpretative density effect that goes beyond any single type of ambiguity. As Ockham noted, the most interesting ambiguity does not arise from the individual terms but from their combinations, and in this zone of interest between lexicon and syntax, marketing language finds some of its most powerful tools.

1.4.4 Pragmatic ambiguity

The third kind of ambiguity recognized by literature is pragmatic ambiguity, and for many reasons it is also the most relevant for this research, which examines persuasive

²⁹ Ezekulie, C. J. (2015). *Speech acts ambiguity as a pragma-stylistic strategy in newspaper headlines*. *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal*, 10(2), 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.5829/idosi.hssj.2015.10.2.1154>

³⁰ Jdetawy, L. F., & Hamzah, M. H. (2020). *Linguistic etiquette: A review from a pragmatic perspective*. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 14, 695–717.

communication³¹. Pragmatic ambiguity occurs when an utterance can be interpreted as the performance of several different linguistic acts, or when its illocutionary force (that is, the kind of action that it performs when it is uttered) remains indetermined.

Speech act theory, elaborated by Austin and developed by Searle^{32 33}, demonstrated that when a speaker produces an utterance, they do not merely convey a propositional content, but simultaneously also performs an action (affirming, promising, asking...). These acts differ, and the same linguistic form can correspond to different acts depending on the content and the speaker's intentions. For example, the question "*can you pass me the salt?*" is not technically a question about the hearer's motor skills, but a request, and a competent speaker can immediately recognize it. In other cases, the illocutionary force of an utterance genuinely remains open to different interpretations, and this openness creates pragmatic ambiguity³⁴.

For marketing, the pragmatic ambiguity is particularly interesting because it operates at the level of the relationship between the brand and the recipient, not only at the level of the informational content of the message. A marketing claim can be simultaneously interpreted as an assertion about the product, an implicit promise to the consumer, an invitation to act, or an expression of a value identity. These readings do not exclude one another, they can coexist in the recipient's elaboration, and each one of them can activate a different type of emotional and cognitive response. A message that operates simultaneously on different pragmatic levels produces a communicative experience that is richer than one that only has a discursive function.

A particularly interesting case of pragmatic ambiguity in the marketing field is the difference between *description* and *prescription*: a message such as "*the real connoisseurs choose X*" can be read as a descriptive sentence or as an implicit prescription, that is, an invitation to identify with that category and behave accordingly. This ambiguity between descriptive and prescriptive is one of the fundamental mechanisms through which advertising communication can exercise its influence without assuming the explicit form of an imperative, and its effectiveness depends on the fact that the recipient can oscillate between the two readings without one excluding the other.

³¹ Shi, W., & Li, W. (2020). *Analysis of modality system in English advertising slogans*. *Scholars International Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 3(10), 396–401. <https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2020.v03i10.001>

³² Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words* (J. O. Urmson, Ed.). Clarendon Press.

³³ Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.

³⁴ Nwankwo-Ojionu, C. E., Adzharuddin, N. A., Waheed, M., & Mohd Khir, A. (2022). *Impact of strategic ambiguity tagline on billboard advertising on consumers attention*. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 12(1), e202204. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/11432>

1.4.5 Referential ambiguity

Beyond the three main categories, the literature recognizes a series of cases that do not perfectly match any of them but that deserve some attention because of their practical relevance ³⁵. Among them, we can find referential ambiguity. It occurs when an expression can be referred to more than one entity in the discourse, and the context does not determine which is the intended referent. Sennet quotes the use of the pronoun “*them*” in a sentence of Thomas Pynchon: “*She handed them her car keys*”, in which referential ambiguity is deliberately exploited to evoke more object in the described action simultaneously, producing a semantic effect that enriches the literal text.

In marketing, referential ambiguity finds interesting applications in the cases where a message uses expressions that can be refer simultaneously to the product, to the consumer, and also to the use experience that gives a brand an identity. When a slogan, such as “*this is it*” or “*it’s yours*” leaves the question of what is “*it*” or “*yours*” open, the recipient is invited to fill the referential space with his most personally relevant content. This mechanism is really similar to the one that will be discussed in Chapter 2 in terms of co-construction of meaning: the message provides a linguistic structure, but leaves to the recipient the task of anchoring its referential elements to his own experience, desires, and identity.

1.4.6 Not every form of ambiguity has the same persuasive potential

The taxonomy we developed until now describes the main forms that ambiguity can assume in the natural language. However, as we anticipated in the introduction of this section, the most relevant theoretical point for this research is not the classification itself, but the differential evaluation in the persuasive potential of each form. The evaluation criteria that emerges from the reflection developed here is the kind of cognitive elaboration that each ambiguity form requires from the recipient. Research in the field of cognitive psychology has shown that the elaboration of a message can occur at different levels of depth, and that messages inducing deeper elaboration tend to produce more durable effects on memory and on the recipient behavior (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) ³⁶. From this perspective, the forms of ambiguity that require an active and conscious interpretative process

³⁵ Santulli, F. (2010). *We shall fight: Speaker-exclusive we as a grammatical metaphor*. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 4(2), 60–73.

³⁶ Hodges, B., Estes, Z., & Warren, C. (2024). *Intel Inside: The linguistic properties of effective slogans*. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 50(5), 865–886. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucad034>

are more likely to produce persuasive effects in respect to the those that are automatically resolved or the remain cognitively inaccessible.

Lexical ambiguity between radically different meanings is normally resolved rapidly through the context, without the recipient perceiving the ambiguity itself ³⁷. This kind of ambiguity has really low persuasive potential, because it does not produce that cognitive activation that is the necessary condition for productive interpretative engagement. Things are different when the ambiguous lexical meanings are semantically correlated and equally possible in the context, because in this case the recipient can keep both readings active and the tension between them contributes to the semantic density of the message.

Syntactic ambiguity has a peculiar characteristic: it often produces very different interpretations, but its resolution comes at a grammatical level that is not always accessible to awareness ³⁸. The recipient constructs a preferred interpretation without perceiving that another one exists, which means that the effect of cognitive activation is less certain than the one that produced by lexical ambiguity. Its relevance for marketing is real, but depends largely on the capacity of the context of making the presence of alternative readings salient.

Pragmatic ambiguity, together with referential ambiguity, is the most relevant form of ambiguity for persuasive communication. The reason behind this is the fact that it operates at the level of the relationship between sender and recipient, at the level of the kind of action that the message performs in the world, and at the level of the identity and the values that the brand expresses through the communication ³⁹. These dimensions are precisely those ones in which marketing operates directly, and interpretative openness at the pragmatic level produces an engagement that is not only cognitive but also emotional and identity-based: the recipient does not merely interpret a propositional content, but actively constructs a relationship between the message and his own experience and values.

1.4.7 The level of ambiguity and the question of perception

Another dimension that differentiates the forms of ambiguity is the quality of perceptibility: some ambiguities are immediately visible to the recipient, who recognizes them

³⁷ Zhou, L. (2021). *The application of lexical ambiguity in advertising English*. *Journal of Sociology and Ethnology*, 3(7), 73–76. <https://doi.org/10.23977/jsoc.2021.030715>

³⁸ Shadiyeva, S. S., & Qayimov, R. A. (2024). *Syntactic construction of advertising texts in English*. In *Innovative methods of teaching foreign languages, modern approaches in the research of translation studies and philology*. Tashkent State Transport University.

³⁹ Cappellaro, G., Compagni, A., & Vaara, E. (2023). *Ambiguity in organization theory: From intrinsic to strategic perspectives*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009358460>

as ambiguous in the moment in which he elaborates the messages; other remain below the level of awareness and produce effects without the recipient realizing that he is managing different simultaneous interpretations.

This distinction is relevant for marketing because the persuasive effect of ambiguity depends (at least in part) on the fact that the recipient perceives the presence of multiple readings as an interesting and engaging characteristic of the message ⁴⁰. An ambiguity that goes completely unnoticed can still orient interpretation in directions preferred by the sender, but it loses the dimension of conscious cognitive activation which, as we will see in Chapter 2, is associated to deeper elaboration effects and better memorability. Conversely, an ambiguity that is too marked and that makes the message difficult to interpret risks to transform the cognitive activation into frustration, with counterproductive effects on engagement. The optimal level is the one in which the recipient perceives the presence of more possible interpretations, finds them accessible and coherent with the context and uses cognitive resources in the process of construction of meaning without this process becoming tiring or frustrating. Finding and maintaining this balance is the specific competence that distinguishes the strategic use of ambiguity from its uncontrolled use.

Sennet observed that the resolution of ambiguity is one of the fundamental cognitive capacities of human interpretation, and studying how it happens in practice gives valuable information about the mechanisms of thought and comprehension. For marketing, this observation can be translated into an operative principle: designing messages that activate this fundamental cognitive capacity, exercise it in a pleasurable way and reward it with a satisfying interpretation, means to build a communicative experience that goes beyond the simple transmission of information about a product.

1.4.8 Conclusion; which are the best forms of ambiguity for marketing

The taxonomy developed in this section showed that ambiguity is not a monolithic phenomenon, but a family of phenomena that are different for their structure, in the level of linguistic analysis and the kind of cognitive elaboration they require. Lexical ambiguity rises from the lexicon and operates at the level of word's meaning; syntactic ambiguity rises from the grammatical structure of sentences; while pragmatic ambiguity operates at the level of the linguistic acts and the relationship between the utterance and the communicative context;

⁴⁰ O'Driscoll, A. (2008). *Exploring paradox in marketing strategy: Managing ambiguity towards synthesis*. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 16(1), 1-19.

referential ambiguity concerns the anchor of the expressions to the objects of discourse. These forms are not equally relevant for marketing communication. Lexical ambiguities between semantically correlated meanings, syntactic ambiguities that produce different accessible readings and pragmatic ambiguities operating at the level of the relationship between the brand and the consumer are the ones that show the greatest strategic potential. The discriminant criteria are not the complexity of ambiguity, but the quality of the cognitive elaboration that it induces in the recipient. The more this elaboration is active, conscious and productive, the closer the ambiguity comes to the persuasive function that this research aims to analyze.

The theoretical framework that emerges from this chapter provides the foundations on which Chapter 2 will build the analysis of ambiguity as a strategic tool in marketing communication. What has been shown so far is that ambiguity is not a causal or uncontrollable phenomenon, but a structured property of language that manifests itself in different forms, each with its own characteristics, and that some of them can be used in communicative context in which the interpretative engagement of the recipient has strategic value.

1.5 The context and the guided interpretation

1.5.1 The context as a condition of possibility

In the previous sections, it has been established that ambiguity is a structural property of natural language, a property that manifests itself in different forms and that can be intentionally exploited on order to produce specific communicative effects ⁴¹. However, the demonstration that ambiguity exists and can be intentional is still not enough to support the central thesis of this research. A question remains open, and it is both theoretically decisive and methodologically urgent: *if a message is structurally able to sustain multiple interpretations, what prevents the recipient from constructing the wrong one, or none in particular, or a different one for each individual in the audience?* In other words, what makes intentional ambiguity a controllable strategy and not an abandonment to interpretative chaos? The answer to this question is called context. Context is the condition that transforms ambiguity from an abstract property of the linguistic sign to a real interpretative phenomenon that is oriented and

⁴¹ Piantadosi, S. T., Tily, H., & Gibson, E. (2012). *The communicative function of ambiguity in language*. *Cognition*, 122(3), 280–291. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2011.10.004>

predictable. Without context, ambiguity remains a logical possibility embedded in the language structure: a word that has two meanings possesses them independently from every communicative situation. But interpretation (that is, the process through which a real recipient in a real situation attributes meaning to a message) does not occur blindly. It always occurs in a context, and the context orients recipient's elaboration in a way that is so powerful that it makes some reading highly likely and others inaccessible.

For this research, this has a direct implication: the experimental design of Chapter 3 cannot limit itself to exposing to participants to ambiguous messages and measuring their abstract interpretations, but must manipulate the presence and the type of *contextual cues* that accompany each message, in order to verify that the context orients the interpretation, favors engagement and determines the persuasive effectiveness of the message. The context theory that will be developed in this section is, for this reason, the theoretical justification of the methodological choices of Chapter 3.

1.5.2 *The context in Grice's theory: inference and cooperation*

The most solid theoretical starting point for a discussion of the role of context in the interpretation of ambiguity is Grice's pragmatic theory, which has already been introduced in section 1.2.5 ⁴². Grice showed that the comprehension of an utterance never reduces itself to the decoding of its literal semantic content: it is always the product of an inference that the recipient makes on the basis of two combined elements, namely the conventional meaning of the expression and the cooperative expectations that govern the communicative exchange ⁴³. The central mechanism of this inference is the *Cooperative Principle* and the *maxims* that compose it: quality, quantity, relation and manner. When a recipient elaborates a message, he does not interpret it in isolation, but contextualize it inside within these expectations: he assumes that the sender is trying to be informative, truthful, relevant and clear, and he uses this assumption as a reason to construct the most coherent interpretation possible within the given communicative context. If the literal meaning violates one of the maxims (if it is not informative or relevant) the recipient does not stop to the literal sense but goes beyond it, searching for the interpretation that would make the utterance cooperative in the context. This precise mechanism allows intentional ambiguity to function as a strategy. An ambiguous marketing

⁴² Liu, F. (2012). *A study of principle of conversation in advertising language. Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(12), 2619–2623. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.12.2619-2623>

⁴³ Belleri, D. (2012). *Semantic under-determinacy, content and context* (Doctoral dissertation, Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, Scuola di Dottorato in Mente, Logica e Linguaggio). University of Bologna.

message is never received as an isolated text in a neutral space, it is received in a context that includes knowledge about the brand, expectations about the communicative genre, the images that accompany the text, the medium of diffusion and the cultural expectations of the audience. The recipient uses all these elements to build the interpretation that makes the message relevant and cooperative in the given context. This is not an arbitrary process, it is systematically guided by the available contextual cues, and the sender that chose them can foresee their effects.

It is important to highlight an often-neglected aspect in the Grice's model, namely the fact that Grice explicitly includes clarity and the absence of ambiguity among the maxims of cooperative communication. A communication that respects the maxim of manner avoids obscurity and ambiguity. This might appear to be a thesis against the strategic use of ambiguity, but in reality, Grice's model allows us to account for the intentional violation of the maxims. When the recipient perceives that a maxim has been deliberately violated (and by this we mean that the sender knows that the recipient knows), he infers that the violation is intentional and it is useful to communicate something more than what the literal sense expresses. The deliberate violation of the maxim of manner, in a context that makes it recognizable as intentional, becomes a communicative act itself, because it signals to the recipient that he is invited to look beyond the surface meaning in order to reach to a richer interpretation. This is the mechanism through which the calculated ambiguity in a marketing slogan does not disappoint the recipient expectations, but it enriches them.

1.5.3 Context sensitivity as a property of natural language

The role of the context in the interpretation of ambiguity is not only a pragmatic question in the sense Grice intended ⁴⁴, but it is rooted in a structural characteristic of natural language that Sennet identifies as *context sensitivity*, which distinguishes natural language from the formal systems specifically constructed to eliminate this variability ⁴⁵. In natural language, a wide range of expressions changes its semantic value depending on the context of an utterance ⁴⁶. Demonstratives ("*this*", "*that*"), personal pronouns ("*I*", "*you*"), and deictic adverbs ("*here*", "*now*", "*yesterday*"), assume different referents every time they are used, depending on who's

⁴⁴ Sennet, A. (2021). *Ambiguity*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>

⁴⁵ Satta, M. R. (2016). *A defense of the ambiguity theory of "knows"* (Doctoral dissertation, Purdue University). Purdue e-Pubs. https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/open_access_dissertations/764/

⁴⁶ Sennet, A. (2021). *Ambiguity*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>

speaking, where, when and to whom. But sensitivity to context is not limited to the deictic expressions in the strict sense, but it extends to a wide variety of classes of expression whose interpretation depends on contextual parameters (the level of shared knowledge between speakers, expectations about the communicative genre, the conventions of the domain in which the communication takes place). This sensitivity to context is precisely what makes the control of ambiguity by the sender possible ⁴⁷. When a marketing message uses an expression that in abstract could be interpreted in different ways, the context in which the message is disseminated (the images that accompany it, the brand, the medium that appears, the audience) constitutes a set of parameters that the recipient's linguistic system automatically uses to calculate the most pertinent interpretation. The recipient does not interpret the linguistic text in isolation, but it interprets it as part of a complex communicative object, in which text and context interact in a systematic way.

Sennet observes that the same written sentence can correspond to different possible oral utterances in which prosodic elements such as intonation, rhythm and emphasis can exclude some interpretations that the written form could admit ⁴⁸. This observation, originally formulated in a philosophy of language context, is directly transferable to multimedia marketing. A marketing message that looks ambiguous in two or more directions can be oriented towards a preferred reading through visual choices, auditory, typographic and spatial choices, that functions in the same way as the prosody of the oral utterance. **Images, music, font and color are contextual cues that orient the recipient's elaboration without reducing the verbal text to a single possible reading.**

1.5.4 *An operative taxonomy of contextual cues*

For the goals of this research, it is very useful to distinguish between the different types of contextual cues that can accompany an ambiguous message and orient its interpretation. This distinction has some direct implications for the experimental design of Chapter 3, in which the presence and the type of contextual cues constitute the principal independent variable.

The first type of contextual cue is the one that we can define as *visual* or *iconic*: the image that accompanies a verbal text. In an advertising campaign, the image is not always accessory

⁴⁷ Dimofte, C. V., & Yalch, R. F. (2007). *Consumer response to polysemous brand slogans*. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(4), 515–522. <https://doi.org/10.1086/510225>

⁴⁸ Sennet, A. (2021). *Ambiguity*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>

with respect to the text but is an integrated part of the message ⁴⁹, and its relation with the words can be reinforcing, complementary or of productive tension. When an ambiguous verbal text is accompanied by an image that activates one of its possible readings, the effect is not always to eliminate the ambiguity but rather to make that reading the most easily accessible one, leaving the other available one as background resonance. The recipient perceives both, but the first one is the one that comes to mind more readily, the one that the visual context made salient. An example of visual cue is Volkswagen's famous "Think Small" campaign for the Beetle. The verbal message is "think Small", and can be ambiguous because it can be both referred to the car or to a new way of consumption, that is to say an invite to consume less. The image of the tiny Beetle placed in a large empty white space makes the literal meaning of "small" immediately salient, in fact the viewer first reads the slogan in relation to the physical size of the car. However, the broader pragmatic meaning is not cancelled.

The effectiveness of the slogan also depends on an important cultural cue. "Think Small" can be understood as a deliberate reversal of the familiar expression "think big," which is conventionally associated with ambition, success, progress, and positive aspiration. By replacing big with small, the advertisement produces a surprising inversion of the culturally established assumption that "bigger is better." The campaign therefore transforms a characteristic that might traditionally have been perceived as a disadvantage (the Beetle's small size) into a positive value.



Figure 2. Volkswagen's *Think Small* advertisement (1959), created by the Doyle Dane Bernbach agency.

⁴⁹ Pistol, R. (2025). A sociosemiotic study of metaphorical ambiguity in sustainability advertising discourse. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies*, 13, 1–28. ISSN 2195-2280. <https://www.ijmarketingsemiotics.com/2025-vol-13/ramona-pistol-a-sociosemiotic-study-of-metaphorical-ambiguity-in-sustainability-advertising-discourse/>

A second type of contextual cue is *brand identity*: the knowledge that the recipient has about the brand that produces the message ⁵⁰. This knowledge, in addition to be informative (the recipient knows what the brand sells, which are the communicated values, which position it occupies in the market), is also pragmatic: it orients the expectations about the type of messages that the brand usually produces, on the communicative register it uses and the target audience. A verbally ambiguous message created by a brand with an ironic and provocative identity will be interpreted in a different way from a linguistically identical message produced by a brand with a serious and institutional identity. Brand identity functions, to use Grice's terms, as a system of cooperative expectations that the recipient brings with himself when elaborating the message. An example is Diesel's "*Be Stupid*" campaign. Here the literal meaning that normally would emerge is to be foolish or irrational, an invite to behave in a negative way, but since the creator of the campaign is Diesel, the sense in which the slogan is interpreted is to be cold or instinctive. This is an example of how the slogan becomes coherent with the identity of the brand, and guides the interpretation of the consumers.

The third type is the one that can be defined as *encyclopedic* or *cultural cue*: the knowledge of the word shared between speaker and recipient, which includes social conventions, cultural references and stereotypes. When a marketing slogan uses an expression that evokes a specific cultural context (a proverb, a fixed formula of common language, an intertextual reference), this automatically activates an interpretative scheme that orients the construction of meaning. This kind of cue is perhaps the least controllable by the sender, because it depends on the cultural competence of the recipient and can vary significantly with different audiences, but it is also the one that can produce the most powerful redundancy effects when the message reaches its ideal public. A clear example is The Economist's slogan "*Great minds like a think*". The sentence works only if the readers know the familiar expression "*great minds think alike*"; otherwise, it would seem an odd sentence. If he knows the original phrase, he can understand the meaning of the slogan, in which "Great minds" no longer only refers to people who share the same opinion, but to people who enjoy thinking and developing ideas.

Finally, the fourth type of cue is that of the *communicative genre*: the conventions that govern the form and functions of a specific type of text. A recipient that receives a marketing message elaborates it with different expectations from the those he would have when reading

⁵⁰ Loef, J., Antonides, G., & Van Raaij, W. F. (2004). *The effectiveness of advertising matching purchase motivation: An experimental test. Journal of Economic Psychology*, 25(6), 803–819. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2003.10.003>

a newspaper article, a novel or a private conversation. The conventions of the marketing genre (brevity, the claim/reason why structure, the presence of a logo, the orientation towards persuasion) constitute a system of expectations that orients the reading of any textual element within the advertisement. An ambiguity that in a context of ordinary conversation would result in disorientation, assumes value in the context of the marketing genre, where active elaboration and the construction of a non-obvious meaning are valorized. A clear example is the headline “Lemon” of a Volkswagen’s marketing campaign. Normally, the adjective lemon correlated to a car means that there is some flaw in it. In this case, Volkswagen explained that that car was rejected for a minor imperfection, and this demonstrated the severity of the quality controls of the brand, transforming a flaw into value.

1.5.5 Resolution of ambiguity and preferred interpretation

A central question in the theory of contextual disambiguation concerns the mechanism through which the recipient, when faced with an ambiguous message supported by a specific context, constructs an interpretation. Sennet observes that the resolution of ambiguity is one of the most fundamental cognitive capacities for human interpretation, and that studying how it happens in practice provides valuable information mechanisms of thought. On the psychological level, research has shown that when a speaker encounters an ambiguous expression, his cognitive system does not activate all the possible interpretations with the same probability and then chooses among them in a deliberate way, but instead preferentially activates the most textually salient one, the one that their pragmatic expectations and contextual cues make most available at that moment.

This process is automatic and occurs without conscious awareness, but its automaticity does not mean that it is irreversible or exclusive: the alternative interpretations remain accessible and can be activated if the context gives signal that the initial reading is not satisfactory, or if the recipient dwells in the message long enough to explore its semantic nature in a more reflective way. This dual-level dynamic is the one that produces the semantic density effect that characterizes the more effective ambiguous messages.

For marketing, this structure has very important implications. A message that produces an immediately satisfying interpretation (coherent with the brand, the audience expectations and with the product) and that at the same time offers an alternative reading accessible through deeper elaboration obtains a double advantage: it reaches the recipients that process the message in a superficial way with an efficient and memorable communication, and, at the same

time, rewards the recipients that stops to elaborate the message with an experience of discovery, that is the perception of having found something that is not immediately visible. This experience of discovery, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 2, is associated with positive affective responses and a greater memorability of the message.

1.5.6 When the context is not enough: limits to disambiguation

In order to conduct theoretically honest research on context, we cannot avoid considering the cases in which context fails to guide interpretation in a productive way. These cases are not rare exceptions, but occur almost every time a sender undervalues the complexity of the interpretative process or overvalues the capacity of context to control the recipient's inferences.

The first limit concerns the distance between the context intended by the sender and the one that is actually available to the recipient. An ambiguous message constructed on a cultural reference that the senders consider as shared may appear unclear to a portion of the audience that does not possess that cultural competence. In this case, the context that should have guided interpretation is simply not available, and the recipient finds himself facing an ambiguity without orientation, that is a situation that can produce disorientation.

The second limit concerns the possibility of the context to orientate the interpretation toward a reading that the sender did not want to privilege, or that conflicts with the brand's values and positioning. This phenomenon, known as *ambiguity backfire*, occurs when the most contextually salient reading is not the one desired by the sender, but a lateral or opposite reading that the recipient's cultural context makes as more accessible. The result can be a distortion of the message that, in extreme cases, may damage the brand's image.

Both these limits have a direct methodological implication for Chapter 3: the confrontation between ambiguous messages with and without contextual cues does not only measure the presence of the absence of the context, but also the difference between *oriented ambiguity* and *disoriented ambiguity*. We can expect that while the former will produce greater engagement and more convergent interpretations, the latter will produce interpretative dispersion and lower satisfaction in the reading of the message.

1.5.7 Conclusion: the context as enabling factor of strategic ambiguity

The path developed in this section showed that the context is not an accessory or external element in the interpretation of ambiguous messages, but the condition that makes

intentional ambiguity possible as a controllable communicative strategy. Without having a context that orientates the recipient's inference, structural ambiguity remains an abstract property, without direction or predictable effects. With a properly constructed context, that ambiguity becomes an instrument capable of producing orientated interpretation, active cognitive engagement and an experience of meaning-construction that valorizes both the message and the recipient. The mechanism through which the context fulfills this function (from Grice's conversational implicatures to the contextual sensitivity of natural language, from visual and iconic clues to brand identity, from shared cultural knowledge to the conventions of communicative genre) combine in different ways depending on the real situation. What makes them similar is the fundamental logic that governs the recipient's inferential process, that is the way in which he searches for the most pertinent interpretation to the given context, guided by the assumption that the message has been produced with a communicative intention coherent with the context in which it is situation. It is with this inferential logic that ambiguity in marketing works best: the sender does not determine the meaning of the message because the meaning always emerges from the encounter between text and recipient. But the sender can build the context in such a way so that it makes it extremely probable that that encounter produces the desired interpretations. **The difference between casual ambiguity and strategic ambiguity is the difference between a context left to chance and a context that was designed with care to orient the elaboration of the recipient to a productive interpretative space.** This conclusion closes what we began stating in section 1.3: intentional ambiguity in marketing is a controlled opening to interpretation because control is not exercised on meaning itself but on the context that governs the reception. This form of indirect control, that is more sophisticated and, as we will see in the next chapters, more effective than the direct one, is what makes intentional ambiguity a theoretically grounded and pragmatically relevant object of study for marketing communication.

1.6 Speaker intentionality and the control of meaning

1.6.1 The problem of intentionality in ambiguous communication

The previous section showed that the context orients the interpretation of an ambiguous message by making some readings more salient than others and transforming structural ambiguity into a governable communicative instrument. This conclusion leaves a question

open, one that is both philosophically classic and practically urgent for this research: *what determines the meaning of a message?* As we have seen, the context orientates it, *but who is the one to build it?* And *how can we say that the sender is the author of a meaning if recipients must partially autonomously build it?* This is a question of speaker intentionality, one that runs through the entire philosophy of language of the twentieth century without ever finding a definitive answer. However, for the goals of this research it is not necessary to solve the problem in its generality: it is sufficient to establish what role the speaker intention plays in the production and control of ambiguous messages in marketing communication.

1.6.2 Grice and communicative intentionality as a component of meaning

The most solid theoretical starting point to face the role of intentionality in communication is, again, Grice's contribution, that in *Meaning*, a previous and complementary work to *Logic and Conversation*, introduces a fundamental distinction between natural and non-natural meaning of expressions^{51 52 53}. *Natural meaning* is the meaning that an event or phenomenon carries with itself independently of every intention. *Non-natural meaning*, which is the meaning in the full sense, the one relevant for the linguistic communication, is, instead, intentional: a speaker means something by an expression only if he intends to produce an effect on the recipient through the recognition of that very intention. In other words, communicative meaning is not merely the transmission of content but it is an act that requires the recipient to recognize the sender's intention as an integral part of the interpretative process.

This definition has an important consequence for the theme of intentional ambiguity: ambiguity deliberately produced by the sender is not a semantic incident, but a communicative act that has its own intention. The sender that constructs an ambiguous message wants the recipient to recognize the presence of multiple interpretations, and wants this recognition to produce in the recipient a determined kind of elaboration (curiosity, engagement, the pleasure of discovery). The intention is not to transmit a single meaning hidden behind ambiguity, but to open an interpretative space in which the recipient can actively move, knowing that that space has been carefully designed. This formulation of the communicative intentionality offers a precise answer on the question of control of meaning in an ambiguous message: the sender doesn't control which one of the possible interpretations the recipient will choose, but he

⁵¹ Stalnaker, R. (2005). *Saying and meaning, cheap talk and credibility*. In H. Kalven Jr. Memorial Lecture Series. University of Chicago Law School.

⁵² Grice, H. P. (1957). *Meaning*. *The Philosophical Review*, 66(3), 377–388. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182440>

⁵³ Emma Borg, Antonio Scarafone, & Marat Shardingaliev. (2021). *Meaning and communication*. [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](https://iep.utm.edu/meaning-and-communication/). <https://iep.utm.edu/meaning-and-communication/>

chooses the structure of the space in which that choice happens. The intention doesn't determine the real meaning but determines the conditions of its production.

1.6.3 Limits in the intentionalist model and the shared meaning question

The centrality of speaker intention in Grice's theory of meaning received many criticisms. The most relevant one for this research regards the possibility that the sender's intention remains opaque to the recipient, or that the recipient attributes to the message an intentionality different from the actual one. If meaning depends from the recognition of the intention, what happens when that recognition fails?

In an ordinary communicative regime, this risk is contained by the shared knowledge of linguistic conventions and the usage contexts. But in the case of intentional ambiguity, the risk is amplified: the sender intends the recipient to perceive interpretative multiplicity as deliberate and productive, but the recipient may interpret it as involuntary and a sign of lack of care in the formulation of the message. In this case, intentional ambiguity produces the opposite effect to of desired one: it generates distrust and irritation rather than engagement.

This limitation of the intentionalist model has a practical direct implication for the design of the experimental materials in Chapter 3: in order for intentional ambiguity to function as a strategy, the recipient must be able to attribute to it a recognizable communicative intentionality (that is, he has to perceive that interpretative multiplicity has been chosen, not suffered). This perception depends on context: the marketing genre, as we saw in section 1.5, carries conventions that signal to the recipient that the message is a product of deliberate choices, and that its formal characteristics, ambiguity included, are intentional. Brand identity reinforces this perception because a brand with a sophisticated and playful communication history makes ambiguity recognizable as strategy, whereas a brand with a more institutional register risks making it appear as an error.

1.6.4 Intention, interpretation and communicative responsibility

A dimension of the problem of intentionality that deserves attention is what we might call the *communicative responsibility of the sender*. If the meaning of an ambiguous message emerges from the interaction between the structure of the text and the interpretative process of the recipient, and if this process necessarily carries traces of the recipient's own subjectivity, to what extent is the sender responsible for the interpretations that the message produces? This question is not only philosophic but it has some ethical and practical implications for

marketing communication. A brand that constructs a deliberately ambiguous message assumes the responsibility of having designed an interpretative space, and this responsibility includes the (at least partial) anticipation of the reading that that space makes possible. If one of those readings turns out to be negative for some segments of the public, or in conflict with brand's values, the sender's responsibility does not disappear simply because the ambiguity was structural and did not uniquely determine that reading.

This consideration introduces a principle that will be taken up again in the discussion of the results in Chapter 4: the strategic use of ambiguity requires from the sender a linguistic and communicative competency and also a form of anticipatory responsibility, that is the capacity of mapping out the possible interpretations of the message before its diffusion to evaluate whether the open interpretative space is productive and coherent with the brand's. It is this anticipatory responsibility, exercised through the conscious construction of the context and the selection of the ambiguity forms, that distinguishes the strategic use of ambiguity from its unintentional production.

1.6.5 Conclusion: intention as projection on the interpretative space

The path that was developed in this section clarified the role of speaker intention of in the production and control of ambiguous messages. Intentional communication, in the Gricean sense, is not the efficient cause of a determined meaning that the recipient must receive, but the designing force that shapes the interpretative space in which the recipient actively constructs its own meaning. The sender of an intentionally ambiguous message does not say *"this message means Z"*: he implicitly says *"this message is built so that the available interpretations X and Y, and the context in which I share it will make Y the preferred reading, leaving X as productive background resonance"*. This form of intention is the one exercised by sophisticated marketing through the choice of expressions, the construction of the visual and cultural context and the management of the brand identity. Understanding intention in these terms is the theoretical condition necessary to address the next question in the following section, that is the interpretative participation of the recipient and the co-construction of meaning.

1.7 The interpretative participation and the co-construction of meaning

1.7.1 *The recipient has an active constructor of meaning*

The theoretical path developed in the previous sections has progressively shifted attention from one dimension of the communicative process to another. In particular, we began with the structure of the ambiguous sign, then moved to its different forms, and finally to the role of the context in orienting the interpretation ⁵⁴. At this point, a question has remained in the background emerges and must be addressed with clarity: *who is the one that builds an ambiguous message?*

The most intuitive answer, namely that the sender determines the meaning and the recipient receives it, is the one that dominated reflection on communication for centuries, at least until the pragmatic shift of the second half of the twentieth century. In this model, meaning is a property of language that the sender deposits in the utterance and the recipient extracts through decoding. Ambiguity, from this perspective, is an obstacle to the faithful transmission of content: it introduces noise in the channel and risks delivering to the recipient a meaning different from the intended one.

Gricean pragmatism has already undermined this image, showing that the communicated meaning always goes beyond the literary semantic content and that the recipient plays an active role in its construction through inference. It is above all reception theory and semiotics that have developed the most radical implications of this shift: meaning does not pre-exist to the reading as something deposited in the text, but emerges from the encounter between text and recipient, through a process in which the reader's competence, experience and subjectivity are constructive rather than merely receptive.

For this research, this intuition has direct consequences. If the meaning of a marketing message is always (to a greater or lesser extent) the product of a constructive process on the part of the recipient, the relevant question for the sender becomes: how can one create a marketing message that makes that constructive process productive, engaging and oriented to the desired direction? Intentional ambiguity is, from this point of view, the most sophisticated answer to this question, an answer that presupposes an understanding that **the control of meaning is not exercised by determining the content of the interpretation, but by designing the space in which the recipient's interpretation moves.**

⁵⁴ Ying, L. (2019). *A case study on positive function of intentional ambiguity in English*. *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics*, 5(4), 266–269. <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijlll.2019.5.4.234>

1.7.2 Barthes and the distinction between *lisible* text and *scriptible* text

The most powerful theoretical framework to describe the participatory interpretation of the recipient in relation to ambiguity is the one elaborated by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970), in which he introduces the distinction between *lisible* and *scriptible* text.

The *lisible* text is the one that Barthes describes as a classic closed text, delivered to the reader as already interpreted: a text that has a determined meaning that the reader can only receive and consume passively. The pleasure that this text produces is that of confirmation, recognition, the satisfaction of an expectation fully fulfilled. The reader of a *lisible* text is, as Barthes said, fundamentally lazy: he is not asked to produce anything, he only has to receive.

The *scriptible* text works in a radically different way. It is a text that presents itself as open, plural, crossed by meanings that intertwine without resolving into a definitive reading. The reader of a *scriptible* text does not consume an already given meaning, he produces it. He becomes, in a precise sense, co-author of the text, because without his active participation, without the required interpretative work, the text remains silent, a potential writing waiting to be realized. The pleasure this text produces is different: it is the pleasure of discovery, of production, of elaboration, what Barthes calls *jouissance*, a form of enjoyment more intense and less comfortable of the simple pleasure of the *lisible* text. Transporting this distinction in the context of marketing communication produces an intuition that is both theoretically founded and practically relevant. A marketing message that states its content completely and unambiguously ("*product X has Y characteristics and costs Z*") is a *lisible* text: the consumer receives it, elaborates it with the minimum cognitive effort, and forgets it with the same ease ⁵⁵. A marketing message that constructs an open semantic space, that leaves to the recipient the responsibility of completing one interpretation among those made possible by the structure of the message, is a *scriptible* text: it requires participation, produces engagement and generates a communicative experience that the recipient feels as his own.

This is the deeper theoretical reason why intentional ambiguity can work as a marketing strategy: because it transforms the marketing message from an object of passive consumption into an active production of meaning. The consumer who constructs an interpretation of an ambiguous slogan has invested cognitive resources in the message and produced something (a reading, a connection, an association) that pertains to his personal elaboration. What is actively constructed is better memorized, better evaluated and generates deeper identification than what is simply received.

⁵⁵ Barthes, R. (1977). *Rhetoric of the image*. In *Image, music, text* (pp. 32–51). Fontana Press.

1.7.3 *Guided co-authorship: the specificity of ambiguity in marketing*

The category of the Barthesian *scriptible* text describes a form of radical interpretative freedom, typical of avant-garde literature, in which the plurality of meaning is potentially unlimited and no reading is privileged over the others. This radicality is aesthetically and philosophically interesting, but it is functionally impracticable in a communicative context as the marketing, where the sender has precise objectives and where interpretative dispersion beyond a certain limit ceases to be productive and becomes counterproductive.

Intentional ambiguity in marketing does not aspire to the unlimited plurality of the Barthesian *scriptible* text, but rather to what we could define as *guided co-authorship*. That is a form of interpretative participation by the recipient that is real and productive, but takes space within a delimited space defined by the structure of the message and by the contextual cues that accompany it. The recipient is not free to construct every meaning whatsoever, but is offered two or three structural grounded interpretations, and can move among them and choose one interpretation within this limited space.

The most precise metaphor to describe this mechanism is the one of musical improvisations within a harmonic structure, where the musician neither performs a fixed score nor plays in a complete freedom, but he improvises within a system of constraints (a key, a harmonic progression, a meter) that makes his production coherent and communicable. In the same way, the recipient of an ambiguous message neither decodes a pre-established content nor constructs an arbitrary meaning, but he actively interprets within a communicative space that the sender has carefully designed.

This characteristic of ambiguity in marketing is precisely what makes it empirically studyable in Chapter 3. If the interpretative participation of the recipient were completely free, the interpretations found on the experiment would be too dispersed to be analyzed systematically. If it were completely determined by the message, there would be no measurable difference between ambiguous messages and unambiguous ones in terms of cognitive processing and engagement. Guided co-authorship produces instead interpretative pattern that is at the one variable (because different recipients will construct different interpretations) and structured (because those interpretations will converge to the readings that the structure of the message makes salient).

1.7.4 The subjective dimension of the interpretation and the personal engagement

A direct consequence of the co-construction of meaning is that the interpretation of an ambiguous message necessarily carries the trace of the recipient's subjectivity. Different individuals, even when they elaborate the same message within the same interpretative space, will construct readings that reflect their history, their values, their expectations and their identity position. This subjective variability, which in a communicative regime oriented toward precision would be a problem to eliminate becomes, in a regime oriented toward engagement, a resource. A marketing message that leaves space to the recipient's subjective construction can simultaneously reach different audiences with different interpretations, and each of them may be relevant for that specific segment. This mechanism is different from the simple generality of a message (which reaches different audiences because it says nothing specific), because each recipient elaborates an interpretation that he feels as personally pertinent, constructed on the basis of his own competence and perspective. The result is an individualized communicative experience that a unique and universal message could not produce.

This dimension of personal engagement is one of the elements that the experimental design of Chapter 3 aims to detect: the extent to which the recipients of ambiguous messages develop a sense of participation and identification sense with the message, that is superior to that produced by unambiguous. The theoretical hypothesis, grounded in reception theory and in the cognitive psychology of elaboration, is that the construction of meaning produces a subjective investment in the message that translates into greater memorability, more positive evaluation and stronger association with the brand.

1.7.5 Conclusion: meaning as a relational event

The theoretical frame elaborated in this section allows us to formulate a precise position on how meaning works in marketing communication when the message is ambiguous. The meaning of an ambiguous marketing message is not a property of the text determined by the sender at the moment of its production. It is a relational event, that occurs in the encounter between the structure of the message, the context in which it is shared and the interpretative process of the recipient. The recipient contributes bringing his linguistic competence, his encyclopedic knowledge and his subjectivity. Meaning emerges from this interaction, and cannot be reduced to the contribution of any of these elements alone. Understanding meaning as a relational event has a direct strategic implication for marketing: it means that effective communication requires not only knowing how to build structured messages, but also to know

how to construct spaces in which the encounter between text and the recipient produces interpretations that are engaging and valuable for both. Intentional ambiguity, governed by contextual cues and calibrated on the competency of the target audience, is one of the most sophisticated instruments for realizing this kind of communicative project. The next chapters will follow the implications of this conclusion for the marketing practice and for the empirical measurement of its effect.

1.8 Conclusion

The path developed in this chapter has built, piece after piece, the theoretical framework that supports the entire research. The starting point was a historical one: ambiguity has been condemned for centuries by the dominant philosophical tradition as a flaw of natural language, a tool of the sophist and the nemesis of logical precision. The endpoint point is radically different: intentional ambiguity, understood in its technical specificity and governed by an adequately constructed context, reveals itself as a sophisticated communicative tool, capable of producing cognitive engagement, interpretative participation and a construction of meaning that valorizes both the message and the recipient.

The trajectory that brought us from one extreme to the other has not been linear. First, it required definitional precision: differentiating ambiguity from vagueness, under-specification, semantic generality and narrative openness is not an academic exercise, but the necessary condition for constructing valid experimental materials and grounding every claim about the effectiveness of ambiguity in marketing on solid bases. It then required an oriented taxonomy: not every form of ambiguity has the same persuasive potential and the distinction between lexical, syntactic, pragmatic and referential ambiguity is not neutral with respect to the objectives of this research. It is pragmatic ambiguity above all (the one that operates at the level of the relationship between the brand and the consumer, the type of action that the message performs in the word) that is the most systemically relevant candidate for marketing communication.

The role of the context then showed that intentional ambiguity is not an abandonment to the interpretative chaos, but a form of indirect control over meaning: the sender does not determine the recipient's interpretation, but carefully designs the space in which that interpretation is constructed. This space is delimited by the contextual cues (visual, cultural, tied to the brand identity and the conventions of the communicative genre) that orient the

recipient's elaboration toward the expected readings without reducing the message to a single possible interpretation. The difference between casual ambiguity and the strategic one is, ultimately, the difference between a context left to the chance and a context deliberately designed.

The discussion on speaker intentionality clarified that this planning is a communicative act endowed with its own responsibility. The sender who constructs a deliberately ambiguous message does not merely exploit a structural property of the language but he assumes the anticipatory responsibility of mapping the interpretations that the message makes possible and of evaluating whether that interpretative space is productive and consistent with the brand's identity. This responsibility distinguishes the strategic use of ambiguity from its unconscious production, and will be taken up again in the discussion of the results in Chapter 4.

The chapter concluded with the most relevant form of ambiguity for the marketing practice: the interpretative participation of the recipient. Through the category of the *scriptable* text and the concept of *guided co-authorship*, it was shown that the ambiguous message is not limited to transfer the content in a more efficient way than a unique one, but to transform the nature of the communicative experience, making it an active process in which the recipient is co-producer of meaning. What is more actively built is better memorized, more positively evaluated and it generates a deeper identification with the brand (hypothesis that Chapters 3 and 4 proposes to empirically verify).

The theoretical frame is now completed. The questions that guide the empirical research can be formulated with precision: in which measure do genuinely ambiguous marketing messages, supported by adequate contextual cues, generate an interpretative engagement that is superior to unique messages? Is the active participation in the construction of meaning translated into measurable effects on the memorability of the message and behavior toward the brand? Which is the specific role of contextual cues into determining if ambiguity produces engagement or confusion? These are the questions to which Chapter 2 will provide the application framework and Chapter 3 the empirical answer.

II Intentional ambiguity as a marketing strategy

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 has built the philosophical and linguistic genealogy of ambiguity, demonstrating that it is not a communication flaw that has to be corrected, but a structural property of language whose meaning is built from the encounter between text, context and interpretative process of the recipient. This conclusion, even if it is really solid in the theoretical level, leaves open a question that will be faced in Chapter 2: what happens when this structural property of language is used as a professional tool inside marketing communication? If meaning is not entirely controllable, how can the sector of marketing, that lives out of persuasion, allow itself to build messages that apparently give up clarity?

This Chapter answers these questions in five steps. The first one (2.2) redefines the role of the marketer after the definition of control of meaning and control of the conditions meaning production. The second one (2.3) shifts the focus on the recipient, showing through literature on the consumer behavior that the audience is never a passive receiver but an active agent that select, elaborates and builds the meaning to which it is exposed. The third one (2.4) shows how ambiguity produces its effects, while the fourth one (2.5) subjects this theoretical model to the test of five case studies. The fifth and last section (2.6) rounds out the picture by analyzing the flip side of the phenomenon and identifies the three conditions that distinguish productive ambiguity from the kind that backfires on the brand that created it.

The thread that connects these five sections is the fact that the marketer does not control the meaning, but can guide it with a professional degree of precision.

2.2 Marketers do not control meaning, they guide it

2.2.1 The problem of the control

Chapter 1 was closed with a conclusion that deserves to be taken seriously in its practical implications, that is that the meaning of an ambiguous message is not a property of the text determined by the sender in the moment of its production, but a relational event, that emerges from the encounter between the structure of the message, the context in which it is diffused and the interpretative process of the recipient. This conclusion is theoretically founded and philosophically defensible, but brings with itself a question that is both urgent and

uncomfortable for marketing: *if meaning is not controllable, why constructing it?* And moreover, *what does it mean choosing ambiguity as a communicative strategy?*

The answer to this question requires a perspective change that is at the same time conceptual and practical. Until we think about meaning control as the capacity of determining which interpretation the recipient will build, ambiguity will appear as a renunciation to the control, a communicative risk that has to be avoided. But this conception of control is, as we saw in Chapter 1, theoretically unsustainable also for the univocal messages, because no sender determines with precision the interpretation of recipient, because meaning always emerges from an inferential process that involves the competency, the experiences and subjectivity of the recipient. The difference between a univocal message and an ambiguous one is not the difference between control and absence of control, but between two different forms of exercise for a control that can never be absolute.

What marketing can control is not the product of interpretation (so the specific reading that the recipient will construct) but the conditions of its production: the structure of the message, the interpretative space that the message opens, the contextual constraints that orient the elaboration of the recipient toward the desired readings. Comprehending this distinction is the theoretical foundation of Chapter 2, because this is what makes ambiguity a strategy and not a communicative anomaly.

This section wants to analyze **what this form of indirect control really is**, what its instruments are, what its limits are and in what measure the marketing practice has developed the necessary skills to develop it.

2.2.2 *Two different communication models*

In order to comprehend the specificity of the control exercised through ambiguity, it is useful to start from the distinction between two different communication models that dominated the theoretical reflection and the professional practice on marketing during the twentieth century.

The first model is the *transmissive one*, that sees communication as the transference of a content from a sender to a recipient through a channel. In this scheme, meaning is a property of the message: the sender codifies it, the recipient decodifies it and the communicative effectiveness is measured on the loyalty of the communication. This model is rooted on the information theory of Shannon and Weaver (1949), that was criticized by linguistics and semiotics because it presupposes a shared and stable code, ignoring the role of the context and

treating the recipient as a passive receiver rather than an active constructor of meaning ⁵⁶. In the marketing practice, this model has justified the conception of the marketing communication oriented toward clarity, repetition and unicity of the message: saying one thing, saying it clearly and saying it multiple times.

The second model is the one that we could define as *referential or inferential*, that is rooted in linguistic pragmatics, in particular thanks to Grice's contribution, which was discussed in Chapter 1 ⁵⁷. In this model, communication is not just the transmission of contents, but the coordination of intentions, where the sender constructs a text in a way that the recipient, elaborating it in the given context and applying the cooperative expectations that govern the communicative act, can infer not only the literal meaning but also what the sender wants to communicate beyond that meaning. Recipients do not decode it but interpret it, and interpreting it they bring their linguistic competency, their encyclopedic knowledge and their expectations about the communicative genre and the situation they are in.

For marketing, the passage from the first to second model has some deep implications, because this means recognizing that the consumer is a cognitive agent that actively constructs the meaning of the message as a function of his interpretative context. **And this consequently means that the marketer's task is not to formulate something to transmit, but to design a communicative space in which the elaboration by the consumer produces the desired interpretations.**

One of the most useful conceptualizations to describe the indirect control of meaning in marketing communication is the one elaborated by Erving Goffman in his work about *framing*, that was then developed by George Lakoff ^{58 59}. The concept of frame designs a cognitive structure that orientates the comprehension of an experience or of a message activating some expectations, associations and inferences. The frames are not visible in the text in an explicit way but they come from words, images, gestures and the contexts in which the communication comes from. When an expression activates a frame, all the associations that are part of that cognitive structure become available for the interpretation, even if they weren't explicitly mentioned.

⁵⁶ Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. University of Illinois Press.

⁵⁷ Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.

⁵⁸ Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.

⁵⁹ Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

For marketing, the framing mechanism describes with precision the form of control that the sender can exercise: **he cannot determine the meaning but he can activate the frame in which the consumer will construct his interpretation.** An ambiguous message that activates two frames simultaneously produces a cognitive effect that is qualitatively different from a message that only activates one, because the consumer finds himself in an interpretative space in which two different structures are operative and the tension between them generates the active elaboration that (as we will see in the next sections) is associated to more involvement, memorability and deeper identification with the brand.

The distinction between the control of the meaning and the control of the interpretative space is not only theoretical, but has some direct consequences for the professional marketing practice, that regards the phases of the construction of the message, the selection of context and the evaluation of the communicative effectiveness.

From the point of view of the construction of meaning, exercising an indirect control requires a specific competency that is not just having linguistic skills, but the marketer has to be able of mapping all the structurally possible interpretations of an expression, evaluating which ones are available to the linguist and cultural competency of the target, anticipating which reading will be preferentially activated by the context and verifying that the alternative readings will be compatible (or at least not contrasting) with the identity and positioning of the brand. This competency was theorized in literature as a form of strategic ambiguity, a concept introduced by Eisenberg (1984) in an organizational context, but applicable also to marketing communication ⁶⁰.

From the perspective of the selection of the context, the indirect control is exercised not only on the verbal text but on the entire system of contextual cues that accompany the message: the visual choices, the mean of diffusion, the moment of the communication, the positioning of the brand and the audience expectations of the given communicative genre. As it was shown in Chapter 1, this cues function as constraints that limit the interpretative space without eliminating the plurality. **The marketer that leaves the construction of the context to the fate renounces to the main control instrument that he has.**

From the effectiveness evaluation point of view, the passage from the transmissive model to the relational one entails a deep revision of the criteria with which the success of the communication is measured. In a transmissive model, the effectiveness is evaluated on the

⁶⁰ Eisenberg, E. M. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs*, 51(3), 227-242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758409390197>

faithfulness of the decoding: *did the consumer receive the message that the sender wanted to transmit?* In a relational model, the question is different: *did the interpretative space constructed by the message produce the desired elaborations? Did the consumer invest some cognitive resources on the elaboration? Did he construct an elaboration that he felt as his own?*⁶¹

2.2.3 *Marketing is not a conversation*

The marketer is not in a conversation with the buyer: he constructs a text that the consumer will elaborate without the sender, in a context that the sender designed but does not completely control. The asymmetry regards both the informational power (the marketer knows things about the product that the consumer does not know) and the intentionality, because the explicit goal of the marketer is known by the consumer but not necessarily shared. This asymmetry has some direct consequences for the control of meaning. In the Gricean framework, the deliberate violation of the maxims of cooperation works as a signal to the interlocutor that there is something more to infer beyond the literal meaning, but this mechanism only works insofar as the interlocutor shares the same expectation of cooperation and interprets the violation as intentional and productive. In marketing communication, however, the consumer does not perceive the communicative situation as cooperative. He recognizes that the message was designed to persuade him, and this recognition means that his interpretation is not governed by a cooperative intention. His attitude toward the text is therefore not one of trust in a shared communicative goal, but one of critical distance, and this shift modifies the expectations with which he elaborates the text.

In this case the *Relevance Theory* by Sperber and Wilson offers an adequate framework. Their theory is not based on the cooperation but on the relevance cognitive principle, that states that every communicative act created an expectation of optimal relevance, that is the maximum cognitive effect that can be obtained by the minimum elaboration effort⁶². This principle can be applied independently from the symmetry of the communicative relationship, and describes with more precision the way in which a consumer elaborates a marketing message: he looks for the interpretation that maximizes the relevance in the given context, and he will invest some elaboration resources if he knows that that investment will be rewarded by a sufficient cognitive effect. Ambiguity works as promise of additional relevance, because the consumer

⁶¹ Dimofte, C. V., & Yalch, R. F. (2007). Consumer response to polysemous brand slogans. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(4), 515–522. <https://doi.org/10.1086/510225>

⁶² Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986/1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (2nd ed.). Blackwell.

perceives that there is more to infer beyond the first meaning, and this perception motivates him to elaborate the message more deeply.

2.2.4 *The structural limits of the control*

Affirming that the marketer guides the meaning without controlling it doesn't mean that control is something negligible. It means recognizing that control has some structural limits that do not depend from the ability of the marketer but from the nature of the interpretative process, and the professional practice that is responsible for ambiguity requires that these limits are recognized and managed in an explicit way.

The first structural limit is the *heterogeneity of the audience*. Every ambiguous message is elaborated by consumers that have different linguistic competency, cultural background, familiarity with the brand and exposition to the message. The same text can activate different frames in different segments of the audience, producing interpretation that the sender did not expect and that can be incompatible with the positioning of the brand or damaging for its reputation. The *ambiguity backfire*, as we introduced in section 1.5.6, is biggest manifestation of this limit: when the available context for the recipient orients the interpretation toward a non-desired reading, strategic ambiguity becomes communicative vulnerability.

The second structural limit is the *temporal drift of the cultural context*. A message that is constructed on an ambiguity that was productive and coherent in a given cultural moment can become inadequate or problematic when the cultural context changes, activating associations that were not available at the moment of the construction. This limit is particularly relevant for the long-term campaigns and for brands operating in rapidly evolving cultural contexts.

Recognizing these limits is not an argument against the strategic use of ambiguity, but in favor of a form of responsible exercise of this strategy that Chapter 1 has defined as *anticipatory responsibility*: the capacity to map the interpretations that the communicative space makes possible, evaluating their compatibility with the values and positioning of the brand and intervene on the contextual cues to reduce the probability of non-desired readings. This responsibility is not eliminable through the renunciation to ambiguity because there is no message that guarantees an absolute control of the interpretation. It is manageable through competency: the linguistic competency to recognize ambiguous structure, semiotic one to construct contexts that orientates it, and the cultural one to anticipate the different readings that different segments of the audience make salient.

2.3 A clear message is not enough

2.3.1 Introduction: a premise that marketing has been slow to embrace

The previous section showed that the marketer does not control the interpretation but guides it, and this is not a limit to compensate but just the structure of every communicative act. The conclusion to which we arrived, presupposes an assumption that we need to make explicit, that is the fact that the consumer is, for his cognitive nature and not for his choice, an **active agent** in the construction of the meaning of the messages he elaborates. This assumption is not obvious on marketing, and it has not yet reached a uniform synthesis in the sector literature.

The main conceptualization on the professional marketing practice, at least until the 1970s, is the one we could define as *exposition model*: the consumer receives the message, elaborates it with the minimum effort and answers in a predictable way to the stimuli the message contains. In this conception, clarity was a necessary condition for effectiveness: the more the message was unique, direct and comprehensible, the more it was probable that it would have produced the desired effect.

This section wants to demonstrate that this conception is empirically unsustainable and theoretically inadequate, and that its inadequateness has some direct implications for the comprehension of ambiguity as a communicative strategy.

2.3.2 The cognitive shift in consumer behavior: from receiver to processor

The history of consumer behavior as an autonomous discipline is crossed by a fundamental tension between two images of the consumer: the one of the passive recipient, that mechanically answers to the stimuli of the marketing message, and the one of the active cognitive agent, that elaborates, interprets, selects and actively constructs the meaning of the message to which he is exposed ⁶³.

The first image is rooted in behaviorism and in the stimulus-response model, that says that the consumer is a black box in which the processes are not accessible or relevant, what counts is only the measurable relation between the exposition to the message and the buying behavior. This perspective justified a communicative practice oriented to repetition, simplicity

⁶³ Foxall, G. R. (1990). *Consumer psychology in behavioural perspective*. Routledge.

and saturation of the message. If the consumer answers to the stimuli, the optimal strategy is maximizing the frequency and clarity of the desired stimuli ⁶⁴.

The second image emerges from the 1970s, when cognitive psychology starts to influence the research on consumer behavior. In this framework the consumer does not answer to the stimuli in a passive way but actively selects which stimuli deserve attention, elaborates the available information according to his pre-existing cognitive structures and constructs representations of the message that are partially independent from its literal content ⁶⁵. The most influential shift in this direction is represented by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986), that offers a systematic theoretical framework to describe the conditions in which consumers elaborate the persuasive messages in a more or less in-depth manner ⁶⁶. The model distinguishes two main ways of elaboration: the central route, characterized by a slower and deeper elaboration of the content of the message, and the peripheral route, characterized by a superficial elaboration based on heuristic clues rather than argumentative content. The choice between the two ways does not depend from an aware decision of the consumer, but from variables regarding the motivation (how much the consumer is involved in the theme of the message) and the elaborating capacity (how many cognitive resources and knowledge the consumer has to elaborate the message in a deep way) ⁶⁷. When the motivation or capacities are high, the consumer uses the central route; when one or both of them are low, he uses the peripheral one. The implication for marketing communication is that the effectiveness of a message does not only depend on its content but also on the interaction between that content and the cognitive conditions with which it is elaborated: the same message can be effective for a motivated audience and ineffective for a non-involved one. For this research, ELM has a double relevance: in the first place, it demonstrates that the deep elaboration of the message produces more stable behaviors, that are more resistant to the anti-persuasion and more predictive of the effective behavior in

⁶⁴ Vakratsas, D., & Ambler, T. (1999). How advertising works: What do we really know? *Journal of Marketing*, 63(1), 26–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299906300103>

⁶⁵ Bettman, J. R. (1979). *An information processing theory of consumer choice*. Addison-Wesley.

⁶⁶ Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1981). *Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches*. W.C. Brown. Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 19, pp. 123–205). Academic Press. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60214-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60214-2)

⁶⁷ Petty, R. E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Schumann, D. (1983). Central and peripheral routes to advertising effectiveness: The moderating role of involvement. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10(2), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1086/208954>

comparison to the superficial one ⁶⁸. In the second place, the model suggests that the formal characteristics of the message can influence which way of elaboration is chosen: **a message that requires an active elaboration**, giving the consumer an implicit question or constructing an incongruence that has to be solved, **can increase the elaborative engagement even in conditions of low initial motivation**. Ambiguity, as we will see, is one of these formal tools.

ELM, in its original formulation, treats processing motivation an exogenous variable of the message: the consumer comes to the message with a given level of engagement, determined by the personal relevance of the treated theme. This conception leaves a question open: is it possible that the message produces processing motivation independently from the initial engagement of the consumer? The affirmative answer comes from a study by MacInnis e Jaworski (1989), that proposed an extension of ELM that distinguished between the motivation given the message and for the message, that means that some formal characteristics of the message (novelty, incongruence, humor, complexity) can generate a motivation to process that did not exist in the exposition ⁶⁹. They activate an orienting response that captures the attention and generates curiosity: the consumer perceives that there is something that is not immediately solved in the message, and this generates the motivation to continue the processing.

Mandler (1982) systematized this perspective through the concept of *moderate incongruity*, showing that stimuli that produce an incongruity with the preexistent expectations, but remains solvable through a deeper processing, produce engagement levels that are superior to the congruent ones ⁷⁰. This phenomenon describes an inverted u: the affective and cognitive response to the message increases as the incongruence increases up to an optimal point, and then decreases when the incongruence exceeds the threshold beyond which the message becomes unsolvable or perceived as unintentional. Ambiguity, in its most effective functioning, exactly produces this kind of moderate incongruity: the consumer perceives that the message allows more than one reading, but these reading are structurally coherent with the given communicative context. This perception generates the motivation to process more, to explore the alternative readings and construct the connections between them. The result is that a unique message cannot produce this level of processing engagement.

⁶⁸ Petty, R. E., Haugtvedt, C. P., & Smith, S. M. (1995). Elaboration as a determinant of attitude strength: Creating attitudes that are persistent, resistant, and predictive of behavior. In R. E. Petty & J. A. Krosnick (Eds.), *Attitude strength: Antecedents and consequences* (pp. 93–130). Lawrence Erlbaum

⁶⁹ MacInnis, D. J., & Jaworski, B. J. (1989). Information processing from advertisements: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Marketing*, 53(4), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298905300401>

⁷⁰ Mandler, G. (1982). The structure of value: Accounting for taste. In M. S. Clark & S. T. Fiske (Eds.), *Affect and cognition: The 17th Annual Carnegie Symposium on Cognition* (pp. 3–36). Lawrence Erlbaum.

2.3.3 Processing fluency and disfluency: when difficulty is a resource

One of the most relevant theoretical contributors for the comprehension of the role of ambiguity in marketing communication is the one produced by the research on processing fluency and disfluency, that developed a systematic framework to describe how the ease or difficulty of cognitive processing influences the evaluation of the message and the affective response to it. Processing fluency is defined as the subjective ease with which an information is processed ⁷¹. Research has shown that stimuli that are processed with more fluency are evaluated in a more positive way, seen as truer and more familiar and associated to more pleasurable affective experiences in contrast to stimuli that are processed with more difficulty. This phenomenon, known as fluency effect, brought some researchers to say that fluency is a signal that the cognitive system uses to evaluate the quality of the stimuli.

If fluency always produces positive evaluation, the conclusion for marketing communication might seem linear: messages should be designed to maximize the processing ease, so they would have to be more clear, simple and immediately comprehensible.

But this conclusion was questioned by a series of studies that have documented the positive effects of disfluency in specific contexts. Alter and Oppenheimer (2009) showed that disfluency can produce a deeper and more analytic processing: when a message is difficult to elaborate, the consumer is induced to slow down the cognitive process, verify his inferences and construct a richer and more articulated representation of the content ⁷². Song and Schwarz (2008) documented that instructions that are written in a typographic font that is difficult to read are judged as more difficult to perform but also as requiring more effort and care; an effect that can translate, in appropriate contexts, into a higher rating of the quality of the product or experience described ⁷³. More relevantly to marketing, Shen, Wan and Wyer (2011) showed that processing disfluency can increase the perception of the luxury and exclusivity in advertising messages for high-end products, because the difficulty of processing is unconsciously associated with the rarity and complexity of the product ⁷⁴.

⁷¹ Reber, R., & Schwarz, N. (1999). Effects of perceptual fluency on judgments of truth. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 8(3), 338–342. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ccog.1999.0386>

⁷² Alter, A. L., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2009). Uniting the tribes of fluency to form a metacognitive nation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 13(3), 219–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309341564>

⁷³ Song, H., & Schwarz, N. (2008). If it's hard to read, it's hard to do: Processing fluency affects effort prediction and motivation. *Psychological Science*, 19(10), 986–988. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02189.x>

⁷⁴ Shen, H., Wan, F., & Wyer, R. S. (2011). Cross-cultural differences in the refusal to accept a small gift: The differential influence of reciprocity norms on Asians and North Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(2), 271–281.

Intentional ambiguity works as a contextually justified disfluency because in the advertising genre, as Chapter 1 showed, the conventions of the genre signal to the consumer that the formal complexity of the message is intentional and not an error by the sender. The consumer elaborates ambiguity as a characteristic of the message that deserves attention and processing in-depth analysis. The difficulty is a resource, not a cost.

We need to put the focus on one thing that has some direct implications on the research about ambiguity in marketing and the experimental design of Chapter 3. Disfluency is productive, so it generates more processing engagement, memorability and positive evaluations, only until a certain limit. After that, the processing difficulty produces opposite effect such as frustration, incompetency attribution to the sender and abandonment of the message.

Lee and Aaker (2004) showed some advertising messages that require a too complex elaboration produce negative answers and reduce the intention to purchase, even when the content of the message is favorable to the product⁷⁵. Meyvis and Janiszewski (2002) documented that consumers that are exposed to messages that are difficult to elaborate show higher levels of cognitive load and, consequently, reduced capacity to elaborate subsequent information; an effect that can penalize not only the ambiguous message but the entire communication of the brand in that context⁷⁶.

Literature identifies two principal variables that determine the position of the limit of frustration. The first one is the perceived resolvability of ambiguity: if the consumer perceives that ambiguity is resolvable through a deeper elaboration (so there is a satisfying achievable resolution) the motivation to continue the elaboration is maintained high even if there are some difficulties. If, opposite to this, ambiguity seems unresolvable, the motivation drops down and becomes frustration⁷⁷. The second variable is the cultural competency of the recipient: one ambiguity that is productive for one segment because the cultural resources necessary to solve it are available, can be opaque and frustrating for a segment that does not have them⁷⁸. These two variables are connected to what we saw in Chapter 1, so the contextual cues: one ambiguity

⁷⁵ Lee, A. Y., & Aaker, J. L. (2004). Bringing the frame into focus: The influence of regulatory fit on processing fluency and persuasion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 205–218. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.205>

⁷⁶ Meyvis, T., & Janiszewski, C. (2002). Consumers' beliefs about product benefits: The effect of obviously irrelevant product information. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(4), 618–635. <https://doi.org/10.1086/338205>

⁷⁷ Hutter, K. (2015). Surprise as a marketing tool. In C. Bergkvist & J. G. Sjöström (Eds.), *Marketing communications* (pp. 135–158). Routledge.

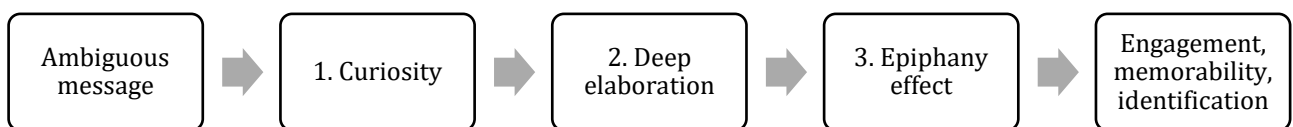
⁷⁸ Luna, D., & Peracchio, L. A. (2001). Moderators of language effects in advertising to bilinguals: A psycholinguistic approach. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(2), 284–295. <https://doi.org/10.1086/322901>

without contextual cues can go over the limit of frustration even for competent speaker, while one ambiguity with contextual cues can remain productive even for speakers with limited cultural competency. This is one of the hypotheses that Chapter 3 wants to verify.

2.3.4 Generation effect and ambiguity memorability

Research in cognitive psychology showed that the active elaboration of messages produces stronger memory traces rather than passive elaboration. This phenomenon is known as *generation effect*, and regards the fact that the information that the subject actively elaborates are better memorized than the one that are received in a passive way ⁷⁹. Slamecka and Graf (1978) systematically documented this effect showing that words that have to be completed or inferred by the subject are remembered with higher frequency than the ones presented in a completed and explicit way ⁸⁰. In the advertising context, the generation effect suggests that a message that brings the consumer to construct a part of the meaning, as it happens with intentional ambiguity, will produce a superior memorability than a message that is already completed. McQuarrie and Mick (1999) showed that slogans that use complex rhetorical figures are better remembered by controlling the brand familiarity and the consumer engagement ⁸¹. The same happens with slogan that contain multiple meanings ⁸².

2.4 How ambiguity in marketing works



⁷⁹ Slamecka, N. J., & Graf, P. (1978). The generation effect: Delineation of a phenomenon. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 4(6), 592–604. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.4.6.592>

⁸⁰ Slamecka, N. J., & Graf, P. (1978). The generation effect: Delineation of a phenomenon. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 4(6), 592–604. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.4.6.592>

⁸¹ McQuarrie, E. F., & Mick, D. G. (1999). Visual rhetoric in advertising: Text-interpretive, experimental, and reader-response analyses. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(1), 37–54. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209549>

⁸² Dimofte, C. V., & Yalch, R. F. (2007). Consumer response to polysemous brand slogans. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(4), 515–522. <https://doi.org/10.1086/510225>

2.4.1 Curiosity as initial motivation state

The first state of the cognitive dynamic produced by ambiguity is curiosity, a motivational state that pushes the consumer to continue the elaboration of the message beyond the first level of access. Comprehending the nature of this state and the mechanisms through which ambiguity generates it is the prerequisite to describe the entire cognitive sequence that culminates in the *epiphany effect*.

Lowenstein (1994) proposed the curiosity theory as *information gap*: the curiosity emerges when the subject perceives a gap between his current knowledge and the one that he sees as accessible but that he has not reached yet ⁸³. This definition can also be applied with precision to the cognitive situation of the consumer that is exposed to an ambiguous message because he perceives that the message admits more than one reading, that these readings are not all immediately accessible and that a deeper elaboration would allow him reach a complete comprehension. **Ambiguity creates the informative gap that Lowenstein describes as generative of curiosity.**

In terms of Relevance Theory, curiosity is the cognitive answer to the perception that the message contains cognitive effects that are still not realized: the consumer has access to a first interpretation of the message, but perceives that this interpretation is not the final one, so the discrepancy between expected relevance and obtained one generates the motivation to process in a deeper way ⁸⁴.

In the advertising context, Heckler and Childers (1992) operationalized this dynamic distinguishing between incongruity and relevance: a message is effective in generating curiosity when it is incongruent in respect to the consumer's expectations, but at the same time relevant for the communicative theme, so it is significantly connected to the product or the brand ⁸⁵. An ambiguous message that satisfies both these conditions produces the *diversive curiosity* (orientated to the exploration of the message itself) rather than the *specific curiosity* (orientated toward a precise information).

⁸³ Loewenstein, G. (1994). The psychology of curiosity: A review and reinterpretation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116(1), 75–98. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.116.1.75>

⁸⁴ Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (2012). *Meaning and relevance* (pp. 43–80). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139028370>

⁸⁵ Heckler, S. E., & Childers, T. L. (1992). The role of expectancy and relevancy in memory for verbal and visual information: What is incongruity? *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(4), 475–492. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209275>

2.4.2 Deep processing: from curiosity to cognitive engagement

The curiosity generated by ambiguity is not a state that is an end in itself but is the thing that allows the access for a deeper elaboration process that is the real mechanism through which ambiguity produces its marketing effects.

In the Relevance Theory framework, the elaboration of an ambiguous message entails what Sperber and Wilson call *interpretative use of the language*: the recipient does not only try to decode the propositional content of the message, but constructs an interpretative representation that includes both the explicit content and the contextual implications that make that content relevant in the given context⁸⁶. For an ambiguous message, this construction is more complex than the one for a unique one, because the recipient has to simultaneously manage more than one interpretative hypothesis and evaluate their compatibility and coherence with the context. This processing complexity produces *disfluency effects*: Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) showed that advertising messages that require active elaboration produce elaboration levels that are significantly deeper, measurable through longer response times, increased production of elaborative thoughts and better memorability after a time interval⁸⁷.

An important mechanism in this process is the one that Wyer and Srull (1989) defined as *schema completion*: when a message presents a complex or incongruent strategy, the cognitive system of the subject is motivated to complete it activating pre-existent knowledge models and constructing inferences to complete the gaps⁸⁸. In the case of ambiguity, this schematic activation is multiple because the message simultaneously activates different potentially relevant segments and the consumer has to evaluate which scheme produces the most coherent interpretation with the given context. This selection and evaluation process is cognitively more demanding than the application of the single scheme to a unique message but produces a greater memory trace and a more engaging processing experience.

2.4.3 Epiphany effect: the resolution as cognitive reward

The third and conclusive stage of the cognitive dynamic produced by ambiguity is what the literature on *wit advertising* described with different expressions: click experience (Mick and Politi, 1989), *aha moment*, *epiphany effect*... It designs a cognitive phenomenon that regards the moment in which the consumer reaches a satisfying interpretation of the ambiguous

⁸⁶ Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (2nd ed., pp. 224–254). Blackwell.

⁸⁷ Phillips, B. J., & McQuarrie, E. F. (2004). Beyond visual metaphor: A new typology of visual rhetoric in advertising. *Marketing Theory*, 4(1–2), 113–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593104044089>

⁸⁸ Wyer, R. S., & Srull, T. K. (1989). *Memory and cognition in its social context* (pp. 87–134). Lawrence Erlbaum.

message, perceives the connection between different levels of meaning that ambiguity had kept in suspense, and **experiments this resolution as a cognitive reward** ⁸⁹.

This phenomenon was analyzed by McQuarrie and Mick in their work on the rhetorical language of advertising. They showed that advertising messages that use complex rhetorical figures produce in the person who elaborates them a positive answer, that is different from the simple evaluation of the content: this answer that the authors describe as *pleasure of the text*, is generated not by the content of the message but by the act of elaborate and solve it ⁹⁰. **The pleasure is not in the meaning that was reached, but in the path that brought the recipient to reach it.**

In terms of Relevance Theory, the epiphany effect is the realization of the cognitive effect that the optimum relevance promised: the consumer invested elaborating resources in ambiguity because he expected that that investment would have been rewarded, and the satisfying resolution of ambiguity confirms this expectation producing a positive answer ⁹¹.

Ang and Lim (2006) explored this aspect by analyzing the relationship between complexity of the message and affective response among consumers with varying levels of involvement with the product category, showing that the epiphany effect is more pronounced when the consumer is already engaged with the theme of the message and when the message offers a resolution that connects the content of ambiguity with the identity of a brand in a way that is perceived as non-arbitrary ⁹². This last condition is particularly important because the resolution has to seem necessary, not casual. An ambiguity that can be resolved in a way that the consumer perceives as artificial or disconnected from the identity of the brand does not produce the epiphany effect but an answer of delusion that can penalize the evaluation of the brand.

2.4.4 *Unresolved tension as a limit case*

The model we constructed in the previous sections describes the cases in which the elaboration of ambiguity finishes in a resolution perceived as satisfying. It is necessary to

⁸⁹ Mick, D. G., & Politi, L. G. (1989). Consumers' interpretations of advertising imagery: A visit to the hell of connotation. In E. C. Hirschman (Ed.), *Interpretive consumer research* (pp. 85–96). Association for Consumer Research.

⁹⁰ McQuarrie, E. F., & Mick, D. G. (1992). On resonance: A critical pluralistic inquiry into advertising rhetoric. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19(2), 180–197. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209295>

⁹¹ Yus, F. (2008). Inferring from comics: A multi-stage account. In J. Diaz Vera (Ed.), *A web of naked nerves* (pp. 223–249). Rodopi.

⁹² Ang, S. H., & Lim, E. A. C. (2006). The influence of metaphors and product type on brand personality perceptions and attitudes. *Journal of Advertising*, 35(2), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.2753/JOA0091-3367350203>

consider that there is a limit case, that is the one in which ambiguity is not solved but **its unresolvedness is perceived as productive**.

Scott showed that some advertising messages are constructed in a way so that they can resist to the resolution: it is not possible to choose a single dominant interpretation, because the alternative ones are supported in the same way by the structure of the message and the context ⁹³. In this case, the consumer does not reach an epiphany in the sense we described before, but remains in a tension state that can be cognitively productive. The message continues to recall processing attention each time it is reworked, because it is never completely exhausted by a single interpretation.

This case is particularly relevant for some categories of products (luxury ones, those associated with complex cultural identities, and those targeting audience segments with a high need for cognition) where the unresolvedness of ambiguity is a signal of depth and sophistication of the brand.

The difference between ambiguity that culminates in epiphany effect and the one that maintains the interpretative tension open is not a distinction between effective or ineffective ambiguity, but between two different ways of effectiveness that respond to different communicative goals. The first one is more suitable to campaigns that wants to produce a precise and memorable association between the brand and a specific content, the second one is suitable to construct a complex brand identity that invites continuous reinterpretation.

2.5 Case studies: intentional ambiguity in action

2.5.1 Introduction

This section wants to verify if everything we said until now is a model that really works, through the analysis of five case studies selected based on three criteria: availability of academical documentation which we can root the analysis, the variety of the used ambiguity forms and the cultural and temporal relevance in the marketing context.

For each case, the analysis is structured in this way: (a) the type of ambiguity used, (b) the activated cognitive mechanism and (c) the documented effects on the brand.

⁹³ Scott, L. M. (1994). Images in advertising: The need for a theory of visual rhetoric. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(2), 252–273. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209396>

2.5.2 Case one: *The Economist*. Pragmatic ambiguity and construction of the identity of the reader

The Economist developed, since the late 1980s, one of the most recognizable and studied billboard campaigns of the British marketing communication. The posters of the series, produced by the agency Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO and active in different forms for various year, are constructed around an almost invariant format: red background, no images, short and ambiguous headline ⁹⁴.

A representative example is the poster that says “*“I never read the Economist” - Management trainee. Aged 42*”.



Figure 3. The Economist advertisement.

The structure of the message, in a first reading, is a direct citation of someone that declares to not read the magazine, which is an obvious anomaly for a marketing message, which normally presents the message in positive terms. The second reading, which is possible thanks to the combination of the assertion and the bibliographic detail that follows it, completely changes the sense of the advertisement: the fact that the subject is still a management trainee at 42 and not an affirmed manager is the implicit consequence of not having read The Economist. The message never explicitly says that reading the magazine guarantees professional success, but it leaves it to the reader to infer this through the resolution of the inconsistency between the statement and the biographical fact.

This message mainly operates on the pragmatic ambiguity level, in fact the sentence is perfect, both grammatically and semantically, but its illocutionary act is ambiguous. In fact, there are two distinct linguistic acts at play, one embedded within the other. The assertion

⁹⁴ Feldwick, P. (2009). *Brand communications*. In J. Jones (Ed.), *The advertising business* (pp. 197–214). Sage.

made by the speaker within the sentence itself, and the act of reporting that assertion inside an advertising message. It is this second act that turns out to be pragmatically ambiguous, in two respects: first, regarding its illocutionary force (is it a simple assertion, or a directive disguised as an assertion?), and second, regarding what it aims to achieve (does it discourage us from buying the magazine, or, on the contrary, does it push us to buy it precisely through this disorienting effect?).

The effect on the brand is documented with clarity in this case: the campaign is associated with a substantial increase in the circulation of the magazine in the British market during the 1990s, and it is still known as one of the best examples of effective communication⁹⁵. It also had an identity effect: the campaign does not sell information or economic analysis but an inspirational identity. The consumer that comprehends and appreciates the rhetorical mechanism of the message collocates himself in the group of the ones that read the magazine, that is the group that the message identifies as intelligent, ambitious and professionally advanced. This identification is possible thanks to ambiguity, because a message that says “*Read The Economist and you'll advance your career*” would produce a defensive behavior on the reader, while a message that leaves to the reader the task of completing the connection, turns that connection in a discovery of one's own, and thus into a deeper and more resistant identification⁹⁶.

2.5.3 Case two: Patagonia “Don’t Buy This Jacket”

On November 25th 2011, Black Friday, Patagonia bought one entire page of the New York Times for an advertisement that said “*Don’t Buy This Jacket*”, accompanied by the image of the jacket and a text that showed the environmental cost of its production⁹⁷.

⁹⁵ Channon, C. (Ed.). (1987). *Advertising works 4: Papers from the IPA advertising effectiveness awards*. Cassell.

⁹⁶ Aaker, J. L. (1997). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), 347–356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224379703400304>.

⁹⁷ Chouinard, Y., Ellison, J., & Ridgeway, R. (2011). The sustainable economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(10), 52–62.

DON'T BUY THIS JACKET



It's Black Friday, the day in the year retail turns from red to black and starts to make real money. But Black Friday, and the culture of consumption it reflects, puts the economy of natural systems that support all life pretty in the red. We're now using the resources of one-and-a-half planets on our one and only planet.

Because Patagonia wants to stay in business for a good long time—because we would find it hard for our kids—we need to do the opposite of every other business today. We ask you to buy less and to reflect before you spend a dime on this jacket or anything else.

Environmental bankruptcy, as with corporate bankruptcy, can happen very slowly, then all of a sudden. This is what we face unless we slow down, then reverse the damage. We're running short on fresh water, tropical rainforests, wetlands—all our planet's natural systems and resources that support business and life, including our own.

The environmental cost of everything we make is astonishing. Consider the 100% jacket shown, one of our best sellers. To make it required 135 liters of water, enough to meet the daily needs (three glasses a day) of 40 people. Its journey from its origin as 100% recycled polyester to our Chico warehouse generated nearly 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, 24 times the weight of the finished product. This jacket left behind, on its way to Chico, two-thirds its weight in waste.

And this is a 100% recycled polyester jacket, knit and sewn to a high standard; it is exceptionally durable, so you won't have to replace it so often. And when it comes to the end of its useful life we'll take it back to recycle into a product of equal value. But, so is true of all the things we can make and you can buy. This jacket comes with an environmental cost higher than its price.

There is much to be done and plenty for us all to do. Don't buy what you don't need. Think twice before you buy anything. Go to patagonia.com/CommonThreads or scan the QR code below. Take the Common Threads Initiative pledge, and join us in the 10th "T," to reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace.

COMMON THREADS INITIATIVE

REDUCE
We make useful gear that lasts a long time.
YOU don't buy what you don't need.

REPAIR
We help you repair your Patagonia gear.
YOU pledge to fix what's broken.

REUSE
We help find a home for Patagonia gear you no longer need.
YOU sell or pass it on?

RECYCLE
We will take back your Patagonia gear that is worn old.
YOU pledge to keep your stuff out of the landfill and incinerator.

REIMAGINE
TOGETHER we reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace.

patagonia
patagonia.com

*If you sell your used Patagonia product on eBay® and also the Common Threads Initiative pledge, we'll send you for your product in patagonia.com for no additional charge.

100% 100% 100%

Figure 4. Patagonia advertisement.

This is an example where the ambiguity is in the headline, because a brand that buys an advertising space to say to the public to not buy, produces a radical incongruence between format and content.

There are three simultaneously possible readings and none of them is the dominant one: the literal one, in which Patagonia genuinely asks to its consumers to consume less; the strategic one, in which the brand construct a positioning rooted on the coherence between declared values ad communicative behavior; and one, the one of a brand that says to avoid buying its product, that will evokes a response of admiration in the conscious consumer that, with high probability, translates into a purchase. Patagonia never resolves this tension, and this

is structurally functioning for the campaign ⁹⁸. Differently from *The Economist*, where ambiguity culminated with an epiphany, “*Don’t Buy This Jacket*” produces what was described in section 2.4.4 as unresolved ambiguity: all three readings remain simultaneously active and their persistent multiplicity is the source of the richest cognitive effects itself.

The documented effects of the campaign are counterintuitive: Patagonia registered an increase on sales of 30% in the year following the campaign ⁹⁹. This confirms that consumers elaborated the ambiguity in a sufficiently deep way and created a relationship with the brand that is not the ordinary one between consumer and product, but something deeper between consumer and system of values.

2.5.4 Third case: Diesel “Be Stupid”

In 2010 Diesel launched the viral global campaign “Be Stupid”, developed with the Anomaly agency and disseminated via billboards, television commercials, and the press. The format was built around provocative images (semi-naked bodies, transgressive social situations, acts of rebellion) next to some sentences that systematically contrasted “smart” to “stupid”, for example “*Smart may have the brains, but stupid has the balls*”, “*Smarts sees what there is, stupid sees what there could be*”, “*Smart listens to the head, stupid listens to the heart*”¹⁰⁰.

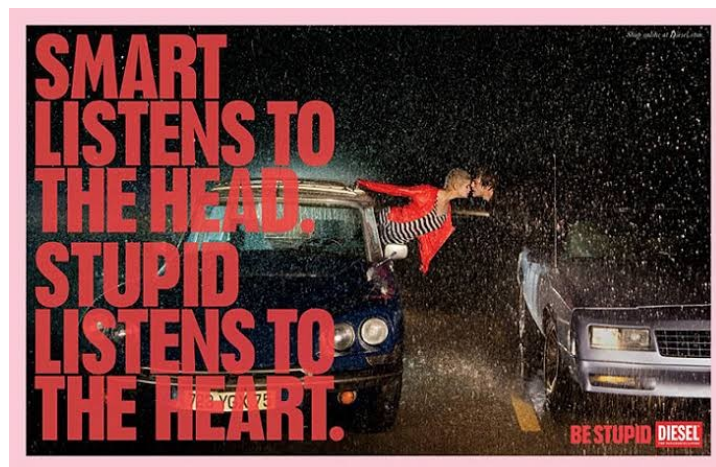


Figure 5. Diesel advertisement.

⁹⁸ Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding* (pp. 1–41). Harvard Business School Press.

⁹⁹ Marquis, C. (2020). *Better business: How the B Corp movement is remaking capitalism* (pp. 44–48). Yale University Press.

¹⁰⁰ Solomon, M. R. (2014). *Consumer behavior: Buying, having, and being* (11th ed., pp. 56–58)

The ambiguity operating in “Be stupid” is evaluative and can be collocated at the level of the moral category. The term stupid never loses its ordinary negative meaning, but simultaneously acquires, through the structure of the slogan and the iconographic juxtaposition, a positive meaning that does not substitute it but is overlying to it: be stupid as bravery, as a rejection of paralyzing prudence, as authenticity that precedes reflection. Both the two readings remain active because the consumer never stops knowing what stupid means, and this is why its positive application requires an interpretative work that the message never resolves into a stable synthesis ¹⁰¹. The cognitive mechanism is the one of the *schema incongruity* described by Mandler (1982): the slogan activates at the same time the dominant value system in contemporary Western culture (intelligence as a virtue) and an alternative scheme, that is minor but culturally recognizable, that values instincts, risks and transgression as authenticity. The consumer never solves the tension between the two schemes through an elaboration that produces a synthesis but it remains active every time he reads the slogan, and this tension is what builds the identification with the brand ¹⁰².

The effects on the brand are documented in terms of notoriety and positioning: the campaign received extensive coverage in the trade press and was selected as one of the most talked-about advertising campaigns of the year at Cannes Lions, contributing to consolidate Diesel’s positioning as a brand that speaks to a consumer that is willing to define himself through a controlled transgression ¹⁰³.

The campaign also received a lot of critiques because of the use of images that some users found as provocative or socially irresponsible, a reaction that, as will be seen in section 2.6, is itself a possible and predictable effect of an evaluative ambiguity operating close to the threshold of acceptable social transgression ¹⁰⁴.

2.5.5 Fourth case: Burger King “Moldy Whopper”

On February 19th, 2020, Burger King started a visual campaign that showed a Whopper in decomposition in the arch of thirty-four days. The images (photographs and videos) showed

¹⁰¹ Geurts, B. (2010). *Quantity implicatures* (pp. 113–139). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975158>

¹⁰² Mandler, G. (1982). The structure of value: Accounting for taste. In M. S. Clark & S. T. Fiske (Eds.), *Affect and cognition: The 17th Annual Carnegie Symposium on Cognition* (pp. 3–36). Lawrence Erlbaum.

¹⁰³ Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity (2010). *Press Lions and Outdoor Lions shortlist*.

¹⁰⁴ Phillips, B. J., & Jang, S. (2008). Advertising context and product gender: The role of gender congruence in transformational advertising. *Psychology & Marketing*, 25(5), 461–485. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20217>

that the burger progressively cover by mold, accompanied by the headline “The *beauty of no artificial preservatives*”¹⁰⁵.



Figure 6. Burger King advertisement.

In this case, the ambiguity is pragmatic and regards the illocutionary act of the message. It is a similar case to the Patagonia “Don’t buy this jacket one”, but with a radically different register. While the Patagonia campaign produced its incongruity through the verbal paradox, the Burger King’s one produces it through the visual one. The image of food in decomposition violates everything that food advertisements should show, and this violation immediately show the cognitive question that the message leaves open: *what is Burger King doing showing this?*

Three readings are simultaneously available: the one declared by the headline, in which the mold is proof of good quality; the immediate affective one, in which the image remains repulsive independently from the rational argument; and the meta-communicative one, in which Burger King implicitly affirms that it is confident enough to show what other brands hide. The tension between these readings is less stable than the one we observed in the previous cases, because the disgust response is affectively powerful and difficult to neutralize through cognitive processing, and this makes this advertisement a limit case of the model described in section 2.4., in which the reward is not a satisfying epiphany but an unresolved tension¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁵ Nudd, T. (2020). Burger King’s Moldy Whopper is the most disgusting, most beautiful ad of the year. *Muse by Clio*, February 19, 2020

¹⁰⁶ Holt, D. B., & Cameron, D. (2010). *Cultural strategy: Using innovative ideologies to build breakthrough brands* (pp. 134–158). Oxford University Press.

The effects on the brand are among the most documented of the selection: the campaign received the Grand Prix in Cannes Lions 2020 ¹⁰⁷in four different distinct categories and generated more the 8.6 billion of spontaneous impressions at the global level ¹⁰⁸. The sales of the Whopper registered a significative increase in the involved markets, with a pronounced effect in the young adult segment, confirming the relationship between high need for cognition and positive response to messages with high affective dissonance.

2.5.6 Fifth case: Cadbury “Gorilla”

In 2007 Cadbury transmitted a television spot of 90 seconds, directed by Juan Cabral for the Fallon London agency, that showed a gorilla seated behind a drum while he was listening to *In the Air Tonight* by Phil Collins. No product was shown for almost all the spot, but the chocolate became visible only in the last seconds, together with the sentence “*A glass and half full of joy*”. There was not an explicit connection between the gorilla, the music and the chocolate ¹⁰⁹.

This is the most original case of the selection because ambiguity cannot be found in a linguistic expression but inside the communicative act. The question that the spot generates (what does a gorilla do with the drums and the chocolate) never receives an answer, and this lack of answers is deliberate and structural. The consumer is left alone in front of an emotionally powerful content and the connection with the product is entirely constructed by himself ¹¹⁰.

This spot produces the *generation effect* in its purest form: since there are not contextual cues that orientate the elaboration toward a specific lecture, every connection that the consumer makes between the content of the spot and the product its genuinely his, it's not received but generated. This produces, as Slamecka and Graf (1978) documented. A memory trace that is more robust than each one that an explicit connection could have produced ¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁷ Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity (2020). *Grand Prix winners*.

¹⁰⁸ Ives, N. (2020). Burger King's Moldy Whopper wins big at Cannes Lions. *Ad Age*, 30 June 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Feldwick, P. (2009). *The anatomy of humbug: How to think differently about advertising* (pp. 112–118). Matador.

¹¹⁰ Scott, L. M. (1994). The bridge from text to mind: Adapting reader-response theory to consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), 461–480. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209411>

¹¹¹ Slamecka, N. J., & Graf, P. (1978). The generation effect: Delineation of a phenomenon. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 4(6), 592–604. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.4.6.592>

The effects on the brand showed that sales increased by 9% in the months following the airing of the commercial, the brand's market share grew significantly after years of stagnation, and the campaign was awarded the Grand Prix at the 2008 Cannes Lions ¹¹².



Figure 7. Cadbury's Dairy Milk chocolate advertisement.

2.6 Failure in ambiguity: when the interpretative space closes up

2.6.1 Introduction

The case studies in section 2.5 showed intentional ambiguity in its optimal functioning: an interpretative space built with precision, orientated by adequate contextual cues, that produces in the consumer the kind of active elaboration from which involvement, memorability and identification with the brand come up, but the theoretical model constructed in this chapter would be uncompleted and not credible if it didn't consider the conditions in which this mechanism doesn't work, or works in an opposite direction to the one intended by the sender.

Failure in ambiguity is not just the absence of its positive effects but is a specific communicative event with identifiable causes and documentable consequences that the theoretical model allows to describe with precision. Using the definition, we introduced in section 2.1.6, three kinds of failure exist: non-anticipated ambiguity, in which the sender didn't map the interpretations that the message makes available; the exceeding the transgression threshold, in which a non-desired reading is so powerful to be able to delete every other alternative reading; and the insufficiency of contextual cues, in which the interpretative space

¹¹² Heath, R. (2012). *Seducing the subconscious: The psychology of emotional influence in advertising* (pp. 144–151). Wiley-Blackwell.

is too open to be oriented towards the desired readings. The three analyzed cases in this section show each one of this kind of failures.

2.6.2 First case: Peloton (2019), non-anticipated ambiguity

In November 2019 Peloton transmitted a Christmas spot that showed a husband that gave his wife a Peloton exercise bike. The spot followed the woman during a year while she documented the physical progress made thanks to that gift, and concluding with her gratitude towards her husband ¹¹³.

The brand constructed the message around a precise intended reading: the exercise bike as personal empowerment tool, and the present as a support to the partner's goals, but the visual text made another non-intended reading available and structurally supported. In fact, a lot of people interpreted it as a husband that gave the already fit wife a weight-loss tool, and this was seen as an implicit form of control on the feminine body. This reading wasn't the result of a minor interpretation, but was accessible to everyone that as at least a bit of familiarity with the contemporaneous public discourse about the feminine body and the power dynamics on the couple relations ¹¹⁴.

This case is theoretically relevant because it shows with precision the mechanism of non-anticipated ambiguity. The brand didn't map the interpretations that the message made structurally available, and when the non-intended reading emerged in the public debate, it didn't have enough contextual cues to be disambiguated. Peloton share value fell by 9% in the next days and the brand was constricted to publish an official declaration that amplified even more the visibility of the non-intended reading ¹¹⁵.

2.6.3 Second case: Bloomingdale's (2015), exceeding the transgression threshold

In the Christmas catalog of 2015, Bloomingdale's published an insertion that showed a man that was intensively staring a smiling woman, accompanied by the headline "*Spike your best friend's eggnog when they're not looking*" ¹¹⁶.

¹¹³ Victor, D. (2019). Peloton ad [is] criticized as sexist. *The New York Times*, 3 December 2019.

¹¹⁴ Stern, B. B. (1993). Feminist literary criticism and the deconstruction of ads. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19(4), 556–566. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209323>

¹¹⁵ Creswell, J. (2019). How the Peloton ad became the gift that keeps on giving. *The New York Times*, 5 December 2019.

¹¹⁶ Wang, A. B. (2015). Bloomingdale's apologizes for 'spike your best friend's eggnog' ad. *The Washington Post*, 11 November 2015

Differently from the Peloton case in which the non-desired reading was accessible but required a cultural situated elaboration, here the non-intended reading (an explicit allusion to the administration of substances to a non-consenting person, a practice associated with sexual violence) was immediately available and so powerful to make any other possible reading impossible. The message didn't produce productive ambiguity but interpretative collapse: there was no tension between the multiple readings, but a dominant reading so charged to exclude any other one.

This case illustrated the upper limit of the transgression threshold discussed in section 2.2.4: when one of the available readings produce a negative answer, that answer is not eliminable through the cognitive elaboration, and the disfluency stops being productive and becomes paralyzing ¹¹⁷. Bloomingdale's said sorry and withdrew the advertisement, a response that implicitly confirmed the unintended interpretation and amplified its media exposure.



Figure 8. Bloomingdale "Spike your best friend's eggnog when they're not looking" advertisement.

2.6.4 Third case: Dove "Real Beauty bottles" (2017), contextual cues insufficiency

In 2017 Dove launched a line of shower gel bottles in seven different body shapes, presented as extension of the Real Beauty campaign, in which every form was thought to

¹¹⁷ Rozin, P., & Royzman, E. B. (2001). Negativity bias, negativity dominance, and contagion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(4), 296–320. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0504_2

celebrate the diversity of female bodies, and the intended message was the one of a brand that recognizes and values the plurality of silhouettes ¹¹⁸.

The campaign was a failure because of a completely different structural reason from the previous ones: not because one reading was dominant, but because the available contextual cues were inefficient to orientate the elaboration toward the desired reading. Without an adequate explanatory text to the selling point and the digital canals, the bottles with different forms weren't read as the celebration of diversity but as a hierarchical classification of bodies that exactly reproduced the normative logic the campaign intended to challenge ¹¹⁹.

The case illustrates the principle stabilized in section 2.1.4, in which the marketer controls the interpretative space not only through the text but also through all the contextual cues that accompany the message. When these cues are absent or insufficient, ambiguity is not orientated and the interpretative space opens up to directions that the sender didn't design. Dove built a visibly ambiguous object without constructing the necessary context to make it productive ¹²⁰.



Figure 8. Dove "Real Beauty bottles" advertisement.

2.6.5 Conclusion

The three cases analyzed showed that failure in ambiguity is not a casual event but the predictable result of specific lacks in the construction of the message or its context. The non-anticipated ambiguity of Peloton is the failure of the marketer as analyst of its own text, because

¹¹⁸ Kirkova, D. (2017). Dove's new bottle shapes celebrate body diversity. *The Telegraph*, 8 May 2017.

¹¹⁹ Murray, D. P. (2013). Branding "real" social change in Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(1), 83–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.647963>

¹²⁰ Heckler, S. E., & Childers, T. L. (1992). The role of expectancy and relevancy in memory for verbal and visual information. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(4), 475–492. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209275>

the one that constructs the text is the one that has the responsibility to map all the different interpretations possible before the diffusion. The upper limit of the transgression threshold of Bloomingdale's is the failure of the marketer as manager of the affective response, because some readings are affectively so powerful to be impossible to be cancelled through the cognitive elaboration, and these readings have to be recognized and eliminated already in the design phase. The insufficiency of Dove's contextual cues is the failure of the marketer as designer of the communicative space: the text is never isolated from the context in which it is received, and the construction of that text is integrant part of the communicative strategy.

Together, these three kinds of failure define, in a negative way, the conditions of success of intentional ambiguity: anticipation of possible interpretations, management of the affective response, and appropriate construction of the context.

2.7 Conclusion

The path developed in this chapter has built a theoretical and empirical model about the functioning of intentional ambiguity on marketing that can be synthetized in three fundamental takeaways.

The first one regards the nature of the communicative control. The marketer doesn't control the meaning of the message but designs the conditions of the production: the linguistic structure, the interpretative space that those reading opens, the contextual cues that orientate the elaboration of the consumer towards the desired readings. This form of indirect control is not a renunciation of communicative effectiveness but, paradoxically, its most sophisticated form: a message that leaves to the consumer the task of constructing part of the meaning produces more strong connections, and makes them resistant to the persuasion and rooted in the sender identity more than what a unique message could do.

The second takeaway concerns the consumer. The research in cognitive psychology and consumer behavior showed that the sender of a marketing message is never a passive receptor but is a cognitive agent that select, elaborates and construct the meaning of the message to which he is exposed. Intentional ambiguity powers up this elaborative activity transforming the consumer's subjectivity from a variable to eliminate to a resource to design.

The third takeaway regards the mechanism through which ambiguity produces its effects. The sequence curiosity → deep elaboration → epiphany effect, describes a cognitive process that is an experience that produces memorability and identification with the brand. The five cases study analyzed verified the credibility of this model through campaign that were

different from the point of view of their nature, register and cultural context, showing that the model is strong and generalizable.

The three cases of failure completed the framework defining the necessary conditions to the functioning of the model: anticipation of possible interpretations, management of the affective response, and appropriate construction of the context. An ambiguity that doesn't satisfy these conditions doesn't produce productive elaboration but an interpretative collapse, that is what the model wants to predict and prevent.

These findings lay the groundwork for Chapter 3, which aims to subject the model to empirical verification through a controlled experimental design. The hypothesis that Chapter 2 has theoretically developed (about the relationship between ambiguity and elaborative involvement, between contextual cues and frustration threshold, between the type of ambiguity and the nature of the effect on the brand) become measurable variables in Chapter 3, and its verification will allow us to precise the limits of applicability of the model and identify the conditions in which intentional ambiguity is a superior communication strategy than clarity.

III Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 has delineated the theoretical framework in which intentional ambiguity collocates as a strategic resource in marketing communication, starting from the redefinition of the role of the marketer, that is not the only controller of the meaning anymore but a guide that orientates the interpretation of the message without completely determining it; and coming to the conceptualization of the consumer as an active cognitive agent that has to participate to the construction of meaning through an elaboration process composed by curiosity, interpretative effort and epiphany effect. The five cases study analyzed offered a first verification of this mechanism, showing how different campaign in terms of tone and communicative strategy share a common functional nucleon: **the capacity of the ambiguous message to generate a superior cognitive engagement than the one of a non-ambiguous message.**

However, the analysis conducted until now demonstrates the theoretical plausibility of the ambiguity → elaboration → memorability mechanism through already existing campaigns, but cannot allow to isolate the specific contribution of ambiguity in respect to other variables (brand awareness, creative quality of the execution, media context of distribution). To answer in a stricter way to the central research question of this thesis (*if, and in what measure, intentional ambiguity makes a marketing message more memorable in the mind of the consumer*) it is necessary to create a *controlled* experimental design, in which the variable can be directly manipulated and its consequences can be measured in a pool of participants that are exposed to comparable conditions except for the degree of ambiguity in the message.

This Chapter describes the methodology developed for this goal. The research questions emerged in Chapter 2 are translated here in operational hypothesis (3.2) that are empirically verifiable and regard the memorability of the message (recall), the degree of cognitive elaboration perceived (engagement) and its behavioral impact (purchase intention). After that, the experimental between-subjects design with its conditions (3.3), the materials specifically designed for the study (3.4), the dependent variables and the measurement instruments used (3.5), the administration procedure and sample characteristics (3.6), and the statistical analysis plan adopted for hypothesis testing (3.7) will be presented.

The goal of the Chapter is argumentative, not only descriptive, in fact every methodological choice is justified in relation to the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter 2,

and the experimental design will be the natural empirical continuation of the theoretical path built from Chapter 1.

3.2 Research hypothesis

The three hypothesis that guide the empirical part of this thesis come directly from the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, and in particular from the curiosity → elaboration → epiphany effect mechanism through which ambiguity has been conceptualized as a communicative resource able to transform the recipient from passive receiver to active co-creator of meaning. Each hypothesis isolates a specific aspect of this mechanism (the memorability of the message, the level of perceived cognitive elaboration and its translation in behavioral intention) building a logical progression that it mirrors the three theoretical phases discussed in section 2.3: from recall to processing, and to the persuasive outcome.

H1: The participants exposed to the ambiguous claim (conditions 2 and 3) will show a more elevated level of recall of the slogan in respect to the participants exposed to a clear claim (condition 1).

This first hypothesis verifies the most immediate theoretical nucleus of this thesis: the capacity of ambiguity to produce a generation effect, that is a mnemonic advantage deriving from the fact that the receiver is called to actively generate an interpretation of the message instead of just limiting himself to receive it when it is already solved. Since this effect is attributed to ambiguity itself, independently from the presence of elements that orientate its resolution, H1 aggregates the two ambiguous conditions (with and without cues) and confront them with the condition of control.

H2: Between the participants exposed to the ambiguous claim, the ones that also receive the contextual cues (condition 3) will show a higher level of perceived engagement in respect to the ones exposed to the ambiguous claim without cues (condition 2).

This second hypothesis is concentrated on the internal confrontation between the two ambiguous conditions, isolating the specific contribute of contextual cues in respect to the pure ambiguity. As discussed in section 2.3, ambiguity devoid of any contextual anchor risks producing, in addition to the optimal threshold of interpretive activation, a frustration effect

that can inhibit, rather than facilitate, the cognitive processing of the message. The contextual cues are not intended as elements that totally solve ambiguity (that would eliminate the mechanism itself) but as a minimum guide that allows the recipient to orient its own interpretative effort without losing focus, while maintaining active cognitive engagement.

H3: The participants exposed to the ambiguous claim with contextual cues (condition 3) will show a higher purchase intention in respect to the ones exposed to the clear claim (condition 1).

The third hypothesis verifies if the cognitive advantage predicted by H1 and H2 can be translated also in a measurable behavior. It is the most exigent hypothesis from the theoretical point of view because it presupposes that the entire chain (from memorability, to elaboration, to persuasion) will be maintained coherent during all its path and does not end in the initial cognitive phases. The confrontation is limited to condition 3 (with contextual cues) in respect to the condition of the control because it is the combination of ambiguity and contextual guide to represent the most favorable condition to persuasion.

Together, the three hypotheses allow us to verify **if intentional ambiguity produces a communicative advantage, and in which conditions that advantage manifests itself** during the entire path, from memory to action.

3.3 Research design

In order to verify the hypotheses formulated in section 3.2, a single-factor between-subject experimental design with three levels was adopted. The choice of this design, alternatively to a within-subjects one, in which every participant would have been exposed to all three of the versions of the stimuli, answers to a methodological exigence tied to the nature of the manipulated independent variable.

In a within-subjects design, the sequential exposition to more variables of the same marketing claim (clear, ambiguous and ambiguous with cues) would compromise the validity of the central measure of this research, that is the slogan's recall. A participant that already saw the clear version of the claim, would never elaborate in an ambiguous way the other version, because the first exposition would give him an implicit key reading that would neutralize the

interpretative openness required from the mechanism curiosity → elaboration. In other terms, the ambiguity of the message is not a property of the text but a property that emerges from the interaction between the text and a recipient that has not had a prior interpretation; and a within-subject design would eliminate the psychological condition that the study wants to measure.

The between-subjects design, in which every participant is exposed only to one condition, preserves the integrity of this psychological condition at the cost of a lower statistical power for the same sample size compared to a within-subjects design.

The independent variable manipulated is the type of marketing claim, articulated in these three levels:

1. *Condition of control (clear claim)*: the message does not have any interpretative openness and the meaning is completely explicit and new;
2. *Ambiguous condition without contextual cues*: the message has an intentional pragmatic ambiguity, and there is not any visual or textual element to orientate the resolution toward a preferred reading;
3. *Ambiguous condition with contextual cues*: the same ambiguous message of condition 2 is now accompanied by a visual element that orientates, without determining in an explicit way the interpretative solution, toward one of the possible readings.

The assignation to the participants of the three conditions happens in a random way, guaranteeing that the possible differences observed in the groups in the dependent variables cannot be attributed to characteristics of the participants.

3.4 Materials

The experimental stimulus was appositely built for this research, without recurring to real marketing campaigns, for two methodological reasons. The first one is that the use of a fake brand eliminates the interference of confounding variables that could be tied to the notoriety of the brand, the brand equity or every cognitive association that a participant could already have for an existing brand. In this way we can isolate the specific effect of the manipulation on the dependent variables. Secondly, the construction of the stimulus allows a direct control on

every textual and visual element of the three versions, guaranteeing that they differ only for the degree of ambiguity of the message and not for others aesthetical or communicative factors.

3.4.1 The claim

The brand used in this research is *Harlow*, a fake brand whose product category was deliberately kept generic and not further specified within the stimulus. This choice directly follows the model individuated in The Economist case study (section 2.5.2), in which the communication is rooted in a short, witty headline, without a product image, set against a minimalist color background; a technique that allow to the communicative weight to be entirely on the text, without having more visual elements that can prematurely orientate the interpretation. Differently from other cases study discussed in Chapter 2 (Patagonia, Diesel, burger King), that root their communicative efficiency on a paradox mechanism (the brand that apparently act against its commercial interest), Harlow adopts a different mechanism, that is closer to the one of The Economist, in which the ambiguity comes from the wittiness of the text itself, not from an apparent contradiction between the message and the identity of the brand.

The chosen ambiguous claim is: **“Harlow. Not for everyone. On purpose”**.

The ambiguity of the message has a pragmatic nature, the sentence can be interpreted, in a first reading, as a declaration of exclusivity (the brand is reserved to a restricted circle of consumers) or, in a second level, as a declaration of identity integrity (the brand asserts its adherence to an idea, refusing to adapt to the preferences of an undifferentiated audience). The two readings are not exclusive in the recipient elaboration process, but the second one has been chosen as target reading in the condition of contextual cues.

3.4.2 The three versions of the stimulus

The first version is the clear claim (control): **“Made with care, for everyone who values it”**. The message completely explicates the meaning, eliminating every possible interpretative openness. There is no declaration of exclusivity or any pragmatic or referential ambiguity.



Figure 9. Harlow "Made with care, for everyone who values it." advertisement (experimental stimulus, control condition).

The second version is the one of the ambiguous claim without contextual cues: the claim **"Not for everyone. On purpose"** is presented alone, on a minimalist background, without any added visual element that could orient the resolution of ambiguity toward one or another reading.



Figure 10. Harlow "Not for everyone. On purpose." advertisement (no contextual cues version).

The third version is the one of the ambiguous claim with contextual cues. The same claim of version 2 is accompanied by a chosen element to orientate the reading toward the identity interpretation rather than the one of exclusivity. Coherently with this choice, the claim avoids every iconographic code associated with luxury or status (precious materials, exclusive settings, elite language), shifting instead towards an image that conveys consistency with a concept. The cue is constituted of a set of parallel lines proceeding in the same direction, from which only one line breaks away, continuing along its own trajectory. The choice of representing the fidelity to oneself through a deviation of trajectory, instead of through an isolated figure, responds to a necessity of coherence with the type of ambiguity activated by the claim: the second version of the message ("Not for everyone. On purpose") does not imply an exclusion of the recipient decided by the brand, but a choice of the brand to not conform to the others. The cue visually translated this conceptual difference, because the line that breaks away is not isolated by a group that rejects it, but it itself chooses a different direction, maintaining a visible relationship with the origin (same area, same starting point). This composition choice avoids the risk of a perspective of social exclusion rather than one of identity-based self-determination, that is a relevant distinction since the second one is the target reading.



Figure 11. Harlow "Not for everyone. On purpose." Advertisement (contextual cues version).

3.5 Variables and measures

The dependent variables of this study have been selected in direct correspondence with the three hypotheses formulated in section 3.2, and integrated with two added measures (*attitude toward the ad* and *toward the brand*) in order to enrich the interpretation of results.

The first variable is the ***recall*** of the claim (H1), that is measured through a task of free recall, administered after the brief distraction task included in the procedure. The participants are required to write, in the measure in which they remember it, the exact text of the marketing claim they have been exposed to. The answers are then codified through a gradient matching criterion (exact match, partial match, no match), to capture differences in precision of the memory, in order to prove that ambiguity produces a memory advantage, and not just a threshold effect.

The second variable measured is the ***perceived engagement*** (H2), that is measured through some items that value how much the participants reflected on the content of the claim. These items come from the advertisement engagement literature ¹²¹, that explains that the engagement toward a claim has three components (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) and reflects the degree to which the recipient's mind is engaged by the message. Since this research focuses on the interpretative process of ambiguity, only the items of the cognitive component have been used:

- *While viewing this ad, I found myself thinking about what it might mean;*
- *I tried to figure out the message behind this ad;*
- *This ad made me think.*
- *I reflected on what the brand was trying to communicate.*

Every item is evaluated on a 7 points Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 = "strongly agree"), and the final engagement score is calculated as the average of the scores obtained on the individual items.

¹²¹ Hollebeek, L. D., Glynn, M. S., & Brodie, R. J. (2014). Consumer brand engagement in social media: Conceptualization, scale development and validation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 28(2), 149–165. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.12.002>

The third variable is the ***purchase intention*** (H3) that is measured through the Spears and Singh scale (2004) ¹²². The participants are asked to evaluate the Harlow's product after having seen the claim, and express their agreement degree through these scales:

- Definitely would not buy / Definitely would buy;
- Definitely would not consider buying / Definitely would consider buying;
- Very low purchase interest / Very high purchase interest.

The Spears and Singh scale is also used to evaluate the ***attitude toward the brand***, asking respondents to rate the brand with:

- Unpleasant / pleasant;
- Unfavorable / Favorable;
- Unlikeable / Likeable;
- Unsatisfactory / Satisfactory.

The ***attitude toward the ad*** is measured through the MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch scale (1986) ¹²³, that measures the marketing exposition and its persuasive consequences. Respondents were asked to say if they found the ad:

- Unpleasant / Pleasant;
- Unfavorable / Favorable;
- Uninteresting / Interesting.

3.6 Sample and procedure

The target sample is constituted by 92 participants, divided in a random way in the three experimental conditions. The recruitment comes from informal canals (social media, university groups, word of mouth). There are not demographic restrictions because the study does not formulate specific hypotheses regarding differences related to gender, age, or other socio-demographic variables, which are collected solely for descriptive purposes.

The questionnaire has been administered through Google Forms.

¹²² Spears, N., & Singh, S. N. (2004). Measuring attitude toward the brand and purchase intentions. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 26(2), 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2004.10505164>

¹²³ MacKenzie, S. B., Lutz, R. J., & Belch, G. E. (1986). The role of attitude toward the ad as a mediator of advertising effectiveness: A test of competing explanations. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23(2), 130–143. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3151660>

The procedure is the same for the three conditions, except for the version of the stimulus presented, and is articulated in these phases:

1. *Introduction and consent*: the participants are informed about the general nature of the study (research about marketing perceptions), on the estimated duration (5–7 minutes), the anonymity of the responses, and the option to discontinue participation at any time. Coherently with the standard practice of the experimental research in this topic, the specific nature of the hypothesis (ambiguity) is not revealed in this phase, in order to avoid the answers to be biased;
2. *Exposition to the stimulus*: the participant visualizes one of the three versions of the Harlow advertisement, correspondent to the condition to which he has been randomly assigned;
3. *Primary dependent measures*: right after the exposition, the attitude toward the ad, the attitude toward the brand, perceived engagement and purchased intention are administered, in a fixed order to guarantee the comparability between the three groups;
4. *Distraction task*: a little neutral task (2 or 3 questions about a non-connected topic, for example general consume behavior attitudes) is inserted between the primary dependent measures and the recall test, in order to introduce a temporal interval that makes that recall test a measure of long-term memory, rather than immediate one;
5. *Recall test*: the participants are asked to write, in the way they remember it, the exact marketing claim they saw at the opening of the questionnaire, without the possibility to read it again or verify it;
6. *Demographical data and control variable*: age, genre and education level are asked;
7. *Closure*: at the end there is a thank you message with the disclosure of the fictitious nature of the Harlow brand and the academic purpose of the study (debriefing), to ensure transparency towards the participants.

IV Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The theoretical and empirical path that was built in the previous section comes now into its verification moment. Chapter 1 showed what ambiguity in a technical sense is, Chapter 2 translated this definition in a cognitive functioning model (curiosity → deep elaboration → epiphany effect), that was transformed in a controlled experimental design in Chapter 3 through the formulation of three operational hypotheses (H1, H2, H3). Chapter 4 closes this path presenting and discussing the obtained results through the administration of the survey described in section 3.6.

The goal of the chapter is to understand in what measure the data regarding the differences between the experimental conditions confirm or put into discussion the theoretical model constructed in the previous chapters. After a verification of the preliminary conditions (balance between the sample and the conditions, reliability of the scales used), the chapter will proceed to the direct verification of the three hypotheses, following the same logical progression of section 2.3: H1 verifies if the ambiguous claim produces a mnemonic advantage in respect to the clear claim, H2 isolates the specific contribute of contextual cues and H3 verifies if this cognitive advantage can be translated into a measurable behavioral result, that is the purchase intention. The results will then be reconducted to the theoretical categories of Chapters 1 and 2, in order to understand in which way they confirm the model and in which way they require a revision of it.

The chapter closes with a section of explorative analysis, with the discussion of methodological limits of the study and a reflection about the theoretical and managerial implications of the obtained results.

For the elaboration and the statistical analysis of the gathered data, the software IBM SPSS Statistic was used. After the coding and the organization of the answers, the software was used to calculate the descriptive statistical (means, standard deviations and frequencies), to verify the internal reliability of the scales through the Cronbach's Alpha and to test the research hypotheses through different statistical procedures. In particular, the chi-square test and the Cramer's V test were used for the claim memorability analysis, the t-test for independent samples for the confrontation between specific experimental conditions, Spearman's correlation to examine the association between perceived engagement and recall, and a one-

way ANOVA to confront the three conditions in respect to the principal considered variables. The statistical significance level was fixed at $p < .05$.

4.2 Sample and descriptive statistical

The sample is constituted of a total of 92 participants (N = 35 in the control condition, N = 28 on the ambiguous condition without contextual cues, N = 29 in the ambiguous condition with contextual cues) randomly assigned to the three experimental conditions.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample. The random assignments produced a balanced sample in numerical terms, but generated a non-negligible imbalance about the average age of the group: the participants of the control condition were, on average, considerably older (M = 44.5, SD = 15.6) than those in the two ambiguous conditions (M = 25.1, SD = 7.5 and M = 22.5, SD = 2.7).

Condition	N	Average age	Females %
1 – Clear (control)	35	44.5 (SD = 15.6)	40.0%
2 – Ambiguous without contextual cues	28	25.1 (SD = 7.5)	64.3%
3 – Ambiguous with contextual cues	29	22.5 (SD = 2.7)	75.9%

Table 1. Sample of the survey.

This imbalance, likely attributable to informal recruitment channels, constitutes a potential confounding variable and has been controlled through a sensitivity analysis. In order to verify that the results weren't biased by the demographic imbalance, the analysis have been repeated restricting the sample to the participants comprehended within the age 18 – 29 (condition 1 = 11; condition 2 = 26; condition 3 = 29; total = 66). The substantial results are confirmed, thus confirming the reliability of the analysis for the entire sample.

4.3 Reliability of the scales

The internal coherence of the *attitude toward the ad*, *attitude toward the brand*, *perceived engagement* and *purchase intention* scales has been verified using Cronbach's alpha (Table 2).

Since each construct was measured using multiple items, this analysis was conducted to verify that the items belonging to the same scale were sufficiently consistent between them so that they could be aggregated into a single composite score.

The results show a good internal coherence for every scale, with values comprehended between 0.837 and 0.926. These results support the aggregation of the items in a single average score, used in the next analysis.

Scale	N items	Cronbach's Alpha
Attitude toward the ad	4	0.843
Attitude toward the brand	5	0.926
Perceived engagement	4	0.837
Purchase intention	3	0.873

Table 2. Reliability of the scales.

4.4 Results of the hypotheses

4.4.1 H1: The memorability of the ambiguous claim

H1 predicted that the participants exposed to the ambiguous claim (conditions 2 and 3) showed more elevated recall levels in respect to the participants exposed to the clear claim (condition 1). This is the hypothesis that directly operated the empirical translation of the *generation effect* theoretical concept discussed in section 2.3.4 ¹²⁴: a message that requires the recipient to actively complete an inference, instead of limiting himself at receiving an already solved content, should produce a mnemonic trace that is deeper and more resistant.

To verify this with the maximum precision possible, the answers to the recall test weren't treated as a simple dichotomic data (recalled / not recalled), but codified in a three-level quality gradient (exact match / partial match / no match) in order to distinguish a precise and stable memory from the formulation from a memory containing only the semantic nucleus. The value 0 ("No match") was assigned to the missing or wrong answers; the value 1 ("Partial match") to the answers that only partially remembered the sentence, or reproduced the

¹²⁴ Slamecka, N. J., & Graf, P. (1978). The generation effect: Delineation of a phenomenon. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 4(6), 592–604. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.4.6.592>

meaning in an incomplete way; and value 2 (“Exact match”) to the answers that correctly stated the claim or reproduced its content in a substantially complete manner.

Condition	Exact match	Partial match	No match
1 – Clear (control)	7 (20.0%)	9 (25.7%)	19 (54.3%)
2 – Ambiguous without contextual cues	17 (60.7%)	7 (25.0%)	4 (14.3%)
3 – Ambiguous with contextual cues	21 (72.4%)	4 (13.8%)	4 (13.8%)

Table 3. Memorability of the claim.

The pattern is clear and goes to the predicted direction with a coherent gradient: the exact match goes from 20% in the control condition to the 60.7% in the ambiguous condition without contextual cues and 72.4% in the ambiguous with contextual cues one. Mirroring this, the percentage of the participants not recalling anything collapses from 54.3% to 14.3% and 13.8%.

The confrontation between the three conditions confirms that the recall levels distribution significantly differs: $\chi^2_{(4)} = 23.26$, $p < 0.001$. The chi-square test verifies if the observed distribution in the three recall categories is independent from the experimental condition. The p value lower than 0.001 indicates that a distribution this different between groups would be extremely unpredictable if there was no association between the experimental condition and the level of the recall. The statistical significance is accompanied by a Cramér’s V of 0.356, a measure of the strength of the association between the two variables, indicating that the observed relationship is not negligible.

Aggregating the two ambiguous conditions and confronting it with the control (a theoretically relevant confrontation because it isolates the effect of the ambiguity independently from the presence of contextual cues) the significance increases even more, with a $\chi^2_{(2)}$ of 22.04, $p < 0.001$, Cramér’s V = 0.489. The 66.7% of people who saw the ambiguous claim perfectly remembers it, against the 20% of people who saw the clear one. In simple terms, **ambiguity more than tripled the probability of correct recall.**

These results show that the recall level changes depending on the experimental condition, coherently with the observed pattern: **the participants exposed to the ambiguous claims present an increased frequency of exact matches and lower frequency of lack of recall in respect to the participants exposed to the clear claim.**

4.4.2 H2: Memorability and perceived engagement

H2 predicted that, between the participants exposed to the ambiguous claim, the ones receiving the contextual cues (third condition) would show a perceived engagement superior than the ones exposed to the ambiguous claim without contextual cues (second condition).

The data don't support this prevision: even if the difference is not significative, condition 2 shows a higher average level ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.34$) than condition 3 ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.50$).

For this reason, **H2 is not confirmed**. This result does not compromise the validity of H1, due to the fact that the lack of an advantage in perceived engagement in the condition with contextual cues does not imply the lack of an advantage in memorability, because the two measures are empirically disconnected.

This was shown by a further analysis: the previous section demonstrated that ambiguity increases the recall, but didn't mention why it does it. From the results of the analysis, the mechanism seems different from the hypothesized one. If firstly the hypothesis regarded the chain of ambiguous claim $\rightarrow$ curiosity $\rightarrow$ better engagement and elaboration $\rightarrow$ increased recall level, and it seemed reasonable to think that the ones declaring that they reflected more on the claim should remember it better, the results show something different.

The variables of perceived engagement and recall were put in relation, trying to verify that an increase in engagement also increases the recall level.

The results go against this hypothesis, in fact the result of Spearman's correlation is $p = 0.041$, so almost zero. **This indicates that the ones who declare to have reflected a lot on the claim don't seem to have memorized it better than the ones who reflected less.**

4.4.3 H3: Purchase intention

H3 predicted an increased purchase intention for the participants exposed to the ambiguous claim with contextual cues (third condition) in respect to the ones exposed to the clear claim (first condition). The observed result is actually opposed to the predicted one: the control condition shows a purchase intention that is significantly higher ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.14$) than the one of the ambiguous conditions with contextual cues ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.37$). **H3 is not confirmed, and the observed pattern is completely inverted to the formulated hypothesis.**

It is important to notice that this result regards the declared purchase intention, that is a completely different measure to the memorability of the message verified in H1: a claim can

be remembered with more precision without generating more favorable disposition to purchase, as will be discussed in 4.6.

4.5 Explorative measures

In addition to the three variables directly related to the hypotheses, attitude towards the advertisement and attitude towards the brand were also measured (Table 4).

Variable	Cond. 1	Cond.2	Cond. 3
Attitude toward the ad	5.21 (SD = 1.13)	4.33 (SD = 1.25)	4.34 (SD = 1.14)
Attitude toward the brand	5.02 (SD = 1.14)	4.18 (SD = 1.28)	4.16 (SD = 1.20)
Perceived engagement	5.22 (SD = 1.30)	5.04 (SD = 1.34)	4.92 (SD = 1.50)
Purchase intention	4.90 (SD = 1.14)	3.70 (SD = 1.44)	3.63 (SD = 1.37)

Table 4. Explorative measures.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted in every variable and shows a coherent path with H3: both the attitude toward the ad ($F(2.89) = 5.96, p = 0.004$), the attitude toward the brand ($F(5.42), p = 0.006$) and the purchase intention ($F(2.89) = 9.68, p < 0.001$) result significantly higher in the control condition in respect to the two ambiguous conditions, that do not substantially differ between them. The perceived engagement, coherently with H2, does not show significative differences between the three conditions ($F(2.89) = 0.39, p = 0.681$).

4.6 Final discussion

This thesis started from a question which, posed in terms of the Western philosophical tradition, would seem almost provocative. *Can a message that says less be more efficient than one that says everything?* Chapter 2 reconstructed how the history of thought on language had treated ambiguity for centuries as a flaw to be corrected, from Aristotle collocating it in the sophistic territory, to Frege considering it as the exact opposite of what a perfect language should be. Only with Grice's pragmatic turn, and the subsequent literary and rhetoric re-evaluation of the phenomenon, ambiguity could be re-thought not as communicative noise but

and interpretative space, so an openness of sense that the receiver is asked to actively fulfill, not just receive passively.

Chapter 2 translated this philosophic intuition as a functioning cognitive model applicable in marketing. A consumer exposed to an ambiguous message, if the context allows him to recognize that that ambiguity is not an error, would feel curious, engage in deeper processing of the message, and ultimately reach a satisfactory resolution (epiphany effect) that would reward him cognitively and bind him more firmly to the brand.

Chapter 3 transformed this model into a verifiable experimental design, formulating three operative hypotheses.

Chapter 4 tested these hypotheses with real data, collected on a sample of 92 participants. Now, in these conditions, we are seeing what the results mean for people that will have to decide if and how to use ambiguity as a communicative tool in marketing.

4.6.1 Ambiguity really makes the message more memorable

The most important result of this research, the one that gives sense to the title of this thesis (*Saying less, meaning more*) is the confirmation of the first hypothesis. The data show in an unequivocal way the fact that a claim that was built to support two legitimate readings is better memorized, with more frequency and precision, in respect to a claim that says the exact same thing in an explicit and unique way. This is not a marginal effect, but is a big and coherent one that is stable even with confounding variables such as the age imbalance between the experimental groups. In qualitative terms, we could say that the ambiguous claim “*Not for everyone. On purpose*” not only leaves an impression in the consumer’s mind, but leaves a precise one, that is the fact that the ones who saw it are capable, with a time distance and after a distraction task, to reproduce it almost literally in a vastly higher proportion of cases than those who saw the clear version of the same message.

This result is the confirmation of the mechanism that this thesis theoretically predicted through distinct but convergent concepts. The first one is the *generation effect* discussed in section 2.3.4, the idea that an information that the recipient has to generate or actively fulfill leaves a mnemonic trace that is more powerful than the one that an already complete information leave. The clear claim of the control condition “*Made with care for everyone who values it*” did not require any interpretative effort: the consumer read it, comprehended it and archived it (or did not archive it, as the high percentage of “no match” shows in that condition). Opposite to this, the ambiguous claim shows a minimum but real cognitive friction. The

consumer had to decide if “*Not for everyone*” was a declaration of elitist exclusivity or a declaration of identity coherence. This little act of resolution, even if very quick and not aware, left a higher mnemonic trace.

The second theoretical concept that this result confirms is the one, discussed in section 1.7, of *guided co-authorship*, inspired by Roland Barthes and its distinction between *lisible* and *scriptible* text. A fully explicit message is a *lisible* text, it is consumed, and not produced, by the reader, and for this reason it tends to be forgotten with the same ease with which it is received. The ambiguous claim, opposite to this, forces every participant to become co-author of the meaning of the message. He is the one that has to decide which one of the readings (in this case, exclusivity or integrity) was the most coherent with what a brand like Harlow could have wanted to say. What has been actively constructed by his mind, roots itself in the consumer deeper than what is just received.

This thesis can affirm that the central hypothesis of the research has been confirmed: intentional ambiguity, if built in a way that the alternative readings are both accessible and legitimate to the linguistic competency of the receiver, produces a mnemonic advantage in respect to a unique message with a comparable content. The gathered data show that **interpretative difficulty, if contained within a production threshold, is not an obstacle to memorability but its driving force.**

There is also an element that enriches and corrects the predicted theoretical framework, and it has a crucial importance to really comprehend what Chapter 4 demonstrated. The thesis, following the model of Chapter 2, predicted that the mnemonic advantage passed through a state of aware curiosity and an elaboration that the consumer perceived as such: the curiosity → deep elaboration → epiphany effect chain. If this model was completely correct, we would expect that the participants that declared to have reflected more on the claim and to have stopped in order to understand the meaning, would have been the ones to remember it better. The data tell us a different, and in some ways more interesting, thing. The perceived and declared engagement level from the participants does not have any measurable relation with the accuracy of the memory. The ones that declare to have reflected a lot on the claim do not remember it better than the ones that declared to not have reflected on it. This means that the mnemonic advantage of ambiguity does not pass through the canal of the aware reflection that the theoretical model hypothesized, but operated closer to an automatic mechanism, so it is probably an elaboration effect that activates independently from the fact that the consumer is aware of being elaborating something more complex. It is a result that reinforces the central

theme of this research: it demonstrates that ambiguity works as a mnemonic device regardless of a declared and recognized cognitive engagement; and this makes ambiguity an even more robust tool and less dependent on the ideal conditions of attention and motivation that the original model presupposed.

It is worth, at this point, to connect this result to the cases study analyzed in Chapter 2. The Cadbury “Gorilla” is the most enlightening one from this point of view. The spot did not give any explicit connection between the gorilla, the drums and chocolate, leaving the spectator to build the connection himself. The fact that the public did not have the tools to consciously solve the enigma did not stop the campaign from being one of the most memorable cases of British marketing. This is coherent with what has been observed in this experiment, because memorability can exist regardless of a full awareness about how the message works.

4.6.2 Contextual cues did not produce the predicted engagement

The second hypothesis occupied, in the experimental design, a more refined position than the first one. In fact, it was not about the confrontation between ambiguity and clarity but to isolate, inside the ambiguous condition, the specific contribute of contextual cues; those elements that, as we saw in the theory developed in section 1.5, should orientate the interpretation of the recipient without eliminating the plurality of readings, thus reducing the risk that ambiguity will result in frustration rather than productive engagement.

The result, in quantitative terms, is that this orienting function did not manifest in data. The participants exposed to the ambiguous claim accompanied by the visive clue (the parallel lines with one detaching from the common trajectory) did not show a superior cognitive engagement level than the ones exposed to the same claim but without any visive support. The observed direction is even opposed to the predicted one, even if the difference is not statistically solid enough to be interpreted as a real inversion of the effect.

This does not mean that the theory of context as a "condition of possibility" of strategic ambiguity is wrong in principle, as we saw in the cases of Volkswagen “Think small” or Diesel “Be stupid”, but it shows that the specific cue produced for this experiment did not have that function. There are at least two explanations for this situation.

The first one regards the nature of the utilized cue. As described in 3.4.2, the chosen visive element was produced to evoke the idea of auto determined identity rather than the social exclusion one. This is a subtle, almost minimalist image, consistent with the aesthetics chosen for the entire stimulus. It is possible that this subtlety, which on a conceptual level

represented a well-motivated choice of stylistic coherence, turned out to be insufficient to be noticed on a perceptual level. It is so possible that the cue was too discreet to function as an orientating tool.

The second explanation is more radical and regards the relationship between contextual cues and the mnemonic level discussed in H1. If, as we saw, the recall advantage does not pass through the aware engagement but through a more automatic mechanism, it is possible that the contextual cues act in a different level than the one measured by the perceived engagement scale used in this experiment, that was specifically designed to capture the cognitive component of the engagement. A cue can orientate the interpretation without that the recipient report in a survey to have thought about the claim more. It could have just made the reading more accessible than the other, reducing the effort instead of increasing it, but without increasing the engagement itself.

It is important to highlight that the non-confirmation of H2 does not compromise the solidity of H1. The two hypotheses measure phenomenon that are conceptually and empirically different. The fact that contextual cues did not increase the declared engagement does not mean that ambiguity does not function in its mnemonic use, but means that this specific mechanism hypothesized to explain how ambiguity produces its effects, did not find confirmation in this particular experiment.

4.6.3 Memory is not enough, indeed it turns against the brand

The third hypothesis was the most exigent one on the theoretical level, because it presupposes that the entire memorability → elaboration → persuasiveness chain would be coherent inside all the entire process, without being lost in the intermediated phases. Results show that this chain stop, and it does it in a very strong way. It does not only not confirm the hypothesis, but it also turns it upside down. The participants exposed to the clear claim declared a significantly higher purchase intention in respect to the ones exposed to the ambiguous claim accompanied by the contextual cues, that was the condition that should have represented the most favorable combination to persuasion; the one in which ambiguity is present, but controlled.

The result is extended, as it has been shown in the explorative measures of Chapter 4, also to the attitude toward the ad and the attitude toward the brand. In both of these dimensions, the condition of control overcomes the two ambiguous conditions, which do not differ substantially from each other. In qualitative terms, we can say that **participants found**

the clear claim nicer, more favorable and more able to generate a positive judgment on the brand in respect to the ambiguous one, independently from the fact that this was accompanied by the visive cue or not.

How can we interpret this result in light of everything the thesis has constructed in the first two chapters? It's crucial, first of all, to resist the temptation to read it as a refutation of the research's central thesis. The thesis did not say, and never said, that ambiguity was a universal persuasive instrument, capable of automatically generating more favorable behavior or better purchasing behavior. The research question formulated in section 3.1 specifically regarded the memorability (if and in what measure ambiguity makes a marketing message more memorable in the consumer's mind) and, at this level, the confirmation is clear. H3 represented an extension of this question toward the territory of the others behavioral effects. The fact that this extension did not find confirmation is a precious result because it delimitates the borders of applicability of the studied phenomena.

Chapter 2 already anticipated, in section 2.6 regarding failures in ambiguity, that there are some structural conditions in which interpretative openness stops being productive and becomes a communicative risk. The three failure cases studied offer a different and useful key to understanding what might have happened in our experiment. The most pertinent case for our experiment is probably the Dove one, in which it is how an ambiguous object, even if well built in the conceptual level, fails when the contextual cues that should accompany it are insufficient to orientate the elaboration, that is the exact pattern observed in our condition with cues, where the visive support do not seem to have moved the needle on the scale compared to the no-cue condition.

There is also a more structural explanation, already anticipated in section 1.6 regarding speaker's intentionality. For the violation of Grice's maxim of modality to be read as an invitation to reflect more, and not as a negligent or repulsive message, the recipient must be able to recognize a positive intention in the sender. This recognition, in real marketing, can be built in time through the history of the brand and its identity. When *The Economist* wrote "I never read *The Economist*", the reader knew the ironic and intelligent tone of the magazine, and this is how he understand that it is a rhetorical joke. Harlow, in this experiment, does not have any history behind it, it has been built to isolate the effect of the linguistic manipulation, but this choice also removed the loyalty that in the real marketing makes ambiguity a calculated risk instead of a gamble. Without this, a consumer that sees for the first time an unknown brand

saying “*it’s not for everyone*” could not have the tools to understand that it is a stylistic choice, and just read it as a rejection.

4.6.4 *Implications for marketing practice*

If these results were to be translated in an operative recommendation for a marketing specialist, the starting point would be saying that intentional ambiguity is an excellent tool to increase the probability of a message to be remembered, but is not, by itself, an instrument capable to generate more favorable behaviors or increased purchasing intention, and in some condition could even damage them. This distinction has some concrete practical consequences on the choice of when and how to use this communicative resource.

Firstly, intentional ambiguity seems particularly indicated for goals of notoriety and memory of the message, for example campaigns of brand awareness, product launches where the primary objective is for the slogan to be remembered or communications in highly competitive advertising contexts, where standing out in the consumer's memory is the main challenge. In this kind of context, a well-constructed ambiguous claim can offer a significative advantage in respect to a clear but easily interchangeable with competition claim.

Secondly, ambiguity seems less indicated for campaigns that have as a first goal the direct conversion, for example promotions with immediate sales targets or contexts in which the positive attitude toward the message in the moment of the exposition is more important than its persistence in long term memory. In these cases, the results of this thesis show that a clear message could be more efficient.

Thirdly, this research confirmed with empirical force what Chapter 2 anticipated in the theoretical level through the concept of *anticipatory responsibility*. Ambiguity is not an instrument that can be used without knowing it. A brand that wants to use it has to own or construct a sufficiently consolidated identity to provide the consumer with the communicative credit necessary to interpret the opening of meaning as an intentional choice. For a new or unknown brand (the condition that this experiment simulated with Harlow) ambiguity seem to be a communicative risk rather than an opportunity, at least if we talk about behavior or purchasing intention, even when it produces a mnemonic advantage.

The most immediately implementable practical suggestion comes from the fact that results show that contextual cues do not have to be built too subtly or too elegantly from a conceptual point of view, if the goal is for them to actually be noticed and to change the processing of the message. A marketing specialist that wants to use a visive tool to orientate the

interpretation of an ambiguous claim should test its real perceptive efficiency, not just limit to its theoretical coherence with the visive message, because, as shown in this document, a sufficiently motivated cue could result insufficient.

Finally, this research suggests a more general principle for people on the marketing sector tempted to treat memorability as a synonym of complete communicative effectiveness. A message that is remembered is not automatically a message that generates a positive judgment on the brand or a higher purchase intention. The two goals (being remembered and appreciated) have to be followed and measured separately, and a tool that excels in the first one (as intentional ambiguity) could not be excellent at all in the second one.

4.6.5 Limitations of the study

No empirical research is without limitations, and it is appropriate, when drawing conclusions, to acknowledge them.

The first limit about this research regards the use of a fictitious brand. This choice, justified in section 3.4 for experimental control reasons, has probably contributed, as discussed in the previous section, to explain the failure to confirm H3. A real brand, with its own history and positioning, could have given that communicative credit whose absence has been proposed as one of the main explanations for the results on attitude and purchase intention. Future studies could replicate this experimental design using real brands with different notoriety levels to verify if and how brand equity moderated the relationship between ambiguity and persuasion.

The second limit regards the dimension and composition of the sample. With ninety participants divided in three groups, and with a personal data unbalance between the control condition and the ambiguous conditions, due to the informal recruitment canals, the statistic power of the study, even if sufficient to gather the main effect, remain limited for the gathering of effects with more contained dimension, as probably is the case of H2.

The third limit regards the unicity of the tested claim. This research verified its hypotheses on a single ambiguous claim (*"Not for everyone. On purpose"*) and a single clear claim to confront it, and both of them were built on the conceptual model of The Economist described in section 3.4.1. It is not possible, on the basis of this only experiment, to generalize the results of other forms of ambiguity (lexical, syntactic, referential) discussed in Chapter 1, and also to exclude those ambiguous claims of other nature, applied to different product categories, produce different results patterns, especially for H2 and H3.

The fourth limit regards the auto-declared nature of measures. The perceived engagement, the attitude toward the ad and the brand and the purchase intention are all measures based on what the participants declare to think or wanting to do, not on observed behavior. It is possible that a real purchasing behavior, measured in a less artificial context than an online survey, show a different pattern from the declared intention. This is a well-known theme to the consumer behavior literature but which this study could not directly verify.

Finally, as already discussed in section 3.3, there is a limit about the methodologic choice of the between-subject design. If this choice was necessary to preserve the psychological integrity of the ambiguous condition, it also causes a lower statistic power with the same sample size compared to a within-subjects design, and does not allow to observe how the same individual would react differently to the two different messages.

4.6.6 Future research directions

The results and limits of this thesis open different research directions that would deserve a future in-depth analysis.

First of all, it would be of great interest to replicate this experimental design using real brands with different levels of notoriety and positioning to directly verify the hypothesis that brand equity moderates the relation between ambiguity and persuasion.

In addition to this, it would be useful to indagate with more sophisticated measures the automatic or conscious nature of the mechanism that produces the mnemonic advantage, in order to clarify with greater precision, the dissociation between recall and declared engagement that emerged in this study.

It would be also important to verify if an observed purchasing behavior would replicate the pattern of reversal found for the intention to purchase, or whether the gap between intention and actual behavior introduces further nuances.

Finally, it would be interesting to explore how the different kinds of ambiguity discussed in Chapter 1 produce different mnemonic paths to understand whether the result obtained in this experiment with a predominantly pragmatic ambiguity is specific to this form or generalizable to others.

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