

Old Spice versus Axe: Exploring the role of commercials in viewers' lives

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### Abstract

Research examines the role of commercials in viewers' lives. The marketing approach to commercials focuses on the impact of the commercial's persuasive appeal while the psychological approach focuses on viewers' responses to persuasion and other effects of commercials on viewers. However, the scope and methodologies of these two approaches are too narrow. The present research borrows from Dine Young's (2000) qualitative research into movies as equipment for living and emphasizes the importance of exploratory methods in the pursuit of other roles of commercials. Based on Dine Young's findings, research suggests that viewers make meaning in commercials, that the meanings made are influenced by the viewers' characteristics, that some viewers are aware of this influence, and that commercials can be used by a few viewers as equipment for living. Participants watched either the Old Spice "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like" commercial or the Axe "Snake Peel" commercial and completed an online, open-ended questionnaire designed to discover the extent to which commercials impact viewers' lives. Results indicate that viewers create various meanings in a commercial, that these meanings are heavily dependent on their personal characteristics, that some are aware of how their characteristics are influencing the meanings made in commercials, and that a few viewers do use commercials as equipment for living. Important implications for marketing and psychological approaches to commercials include that commercials serve more than just a persuasive function and that the various functions of commercials can be best analyzed with more qualitative methods.

### Old Spice versus Axe: The role of commercials in viewers' lives

Consider the following quotes:

*“Hello, ladies. Look at your man, now back to me, now back at your man, now back to me. Sadly, he isn't me. But if he stopped using ladies' scented body wash and switched to Old Spice, he could smell like he's me.”*

*“Wash away the skank.”*

For those who watch television or YouTube on a regular basis, the first quote is easily recognizable as the “Old Spice guy's” first few lines in Old Spice's popular commercial “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like.” The second quote may be less recognizable as a quote from a very similar commercial by Axe entitled “Snake Peel.” While the effect of the Axe commercial on sales is not currently known to this author, it is known that “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” commercial increased Old Spice sales as much as 106% at one point (Neff, 2010b). What was the appeal of “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” commercial? Why did viewers and consumers react so strongly to this commercial? What made it sell? As it turns out, there are three approaches one might take when addressing these questions.

#### ***Marketing approach***

To answer the question of why Old Spice did so well with “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” commercial, the marketing approach examines the aspects of a commercial that aid in its ability to persuade and get people to buy the product. This requires knowledge about the consumers' beliefs and behaviors that are obtained through extensive demographical research. These methods help gain the necessary insight into the consumers' lives that can be used to

understand how to tweak their existing beliefs about a product just enough to get them to consider buying a product.

The marketing approach is mostly looking at which aspects of the commercial influence viewer purchasing behavior. Some advertisers hope that there is a replicable formula for success that can be found in commercials similar to the Old Spice commercial mentioned here.

Therefore, most advertisers dissect successful commercials in order to better understand their success. For example, Neff (2010a) notes that Old Spice's success lies in its use of "engaging, surprising media that appeals to both genders." Advertisers at Procter and Gamble—Old Spice's parent company—found that women were buying male grooming products for men 60% of time (Edwards, 2010). Naturally, a commercial that appealed to both genders and created a dialogue between men and women was necessary to cash in on this fact (Parpis, 2010).

In addition to Old Spice's positioning strategy, they also employed an actor who created a humorously masculine persona that was able to clearly define the brand's position and persuade consumers to think about purchasing the product (Reiss, 2010). According to Edwards (2010), Old Spice was trying to abandon their outdated image as "your father's brand" in order to appeal to a younger generation. They accomplished this with a new "self-deprecating experience theme." The theme of masculinity that is ever-present in former Old Spice commercials is mocked by this commercial. Parpis (2010) describes Isaiah Mustafa, the "Old Spice guy," as a parody of who men aspire to be and what women want a man to be. The Old Spice guy is confident to the point of arrogance, but he is never to be taken seriously.

While an examination of how certain aspects of the commercial persuaded viewers to purchase a product is important, this narrow focus also limits the marketing approach. Those

who use this approach are only looking for a formula that reveals what makes a good commercial and are only concerned with getting people to buy the product advertised. The marketing approach neglects to ask if and how viewers react to the commercial beyond deciding whether or not to buy the product. Issues regarding other impacts or purposes of commercials beyond that of persuasion must be addressed with a different approach.

### ***Psychological approach***

Typically, the psychological approach to commercials examines concepts such as cognitive dissonance and mere exposure effects that affect viewers' responses to persuasive appeals. While this is important, there is some research that takes a step further to examine the aspects of a commercial that may influence viewers' emotions, thoughts, values, self-concepts, or behaviors unrelated to purchasing intent. This is a look beyond the question of "Does the commercial sell?" to ask what other effects the commercial may have on viewers.

An example of this type of psychological research comes from an article by Geis, Brown, Walstedt, and Porter (1984). These researchers showed women four commercials depicting either traditional sex roles with women as homemakers and sexualized objects or nontraditional sex roles with men as homemakers and sexualized objects. They then asked the women to write essays describing where they thought they would be in 10 years. These essays were coded for homemaking (home and family) and achievement (career and job) themes. Results indicated that women in the traditional condition emphasized homemaking themes over achievement themes and that women in the nontraditional condition were balancing themes of homemaking and achievement. However, in comparison to the tradition group, women in the nontraditional sex role group were emphasizing achievement themes much more often. The results of this

experiment indicate that the commercials were affecting women's self-concepts, or the ways in which they were thinking of themselves and of what they believed themselves to be capable. The commercials were defining for women the role of females in relation to males in socially and psychologically significant ways.

Likewise, an experiment conducted by Pike and Jennings (2005) revealed the effects of gender-stereotyped toy commercials on children's toy-related behaviors and preferences. Again, these researchers showed children commercials depicting boys playing with gender-neutral toys (the traditional condition) or girls playing with the same gender neutral toys (the nontraditional condition). They reasoned that most commercials use boy models because boys are generally thought to be more active and, therefore, more desirable for toy commercials. After showing the children the commercials, Pike and Jennings asked the children to indicate which toys could be played with by boys, by girls, or by both sexes. Results indicated that boys in the traditional condition said that only boys could play with the toys while girls in the same condition said that both boys and girls could play with the toys. In contrast, both boys and girls in the nontraditional condition said that both boys and girls could play with the toys. Again, the results of this experiment reveal that commercials can impact viewers' beliefs about what is appropriate behavior, especially with regards to gender appropriate behavior.

Finally, an example of this psychological perspective from the viewpoint of marketing reveals similar effects of commercials beyond that of persuasion. Zwarun, Linz, Metzger, and Kunkel (2006) showed participants an episode of an MTV show with an actor who was notorious for exhibiting drunken behavior. This episode was interspersed with commercials that either contained beer advertisements or did not contain beer advertisements. After the show and commercials, Zwarun et al (2006) gave participants a questionnaire to determine their beliefs

regarding the social and physical outcomes of drinking. Results indicated that participants exposed to beer ads had more positive expectancies regarding the social outcomes of alcohol than did participants who were not exposed to beer ads; for example, they felt that alcohol use increased confidence, relaxation, attractiveness, power, and social desirability. Clearly, commercials were impacting their social values and beliefs related to alcohol use in ways that most consumers would not expect.

While the aforementioned experiments clearly indicate that commercials have effects on viewers beyond that of mere persuasion, there are also limitations to this approach in addressing this question. The nature of this type of research narrows the scope of the effects of commercials on viewers. For instance, Geis et al's (1984) focus on the self-concepts of achievement was important; however, it neglects other impacts that the two commercial conditions may have had on the female viewers. The same point can be made for the other two experiments. None of them look at the broader implications for the effects of commercials' on viewers. Additionally, none of these experiments addresses the importance of the characteristics of the viewers in determining the effects of commercials on said viewers. It could be that personal characteristics such as personality and past experiences play an important role on the type and intensity of a commercial's impact on a viewer.

### ***Exploratory approach***

It is the belief of the researcher that an exploratory look into the role of commercials in viewers' lives addresses the issues and limitations of the previous approaches. The assumptions herein are based on research by Dine Young (2000) into movies as equipment for living, which states that movie watching is a symbolic activity that has numerous effects on viewers' lives.

Dine Young conducted open-ended interviews asking participants if there had ever been a movie that they had seen that had had an impact on or served a particular function in their lives. Results of this research demonstrate how viewers interpret a movie and how this interpretation is reflected in their lives. Dine Young discovered that viewers have many ways of interpreting a movie which creates diverse meanings, that viewers can consciously analyze the role a movie has played in their lives, that viewers are aware of the influence of their own social and cultural characteristics on their experiences with and interpretations of a movie, and that viewers' ways of thinking and acting can be influenced by the meanings found in movies. Viewers who are able to take all of these steps are using movies as equipment for living. The results from Dine Young's research could only have been found through the use of an exploratory, qualitative method. Any other method would have limited the scope of Dine Young's findings in detrimental ways.

Based on Dine Young's movies as equipment for living, the current research seeks to establish the full extent of the role of commercials in viewers' lives. It is assumed that commercials can serve a similar function to that of movies as established by Dine Young (2000). Therefore, this exploratory approach to commercials examines if and how viewers interpret (give meaning to) a commercial, how certain characteristics of the viewers—namely their perceived personality traits, values, beliefs, and past experiences—influence the types of meanings given to a commercial, if viewers are able to evaluate how their personal characteristics influence their interpretations of the commercial, and whether or not commercials can serve as equipment for living. The idea of commercials as equipment for living relies on evidence that meanings found in commercials can shape viewers' ways of thinking and behaving and their opinions of the commercial, the product, and/or the company. Participants watched either the Old Spice “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” or Axe “Snake Peel” commercial and completed an online

questionnaire designed to discover the nature and extent of the role that each commercial plays in the viewer's life.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

There were 45 participants who participated in this research. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 63 years old. Of the 45 participants, 24 (53%) were female and 32 (71%) were Caucasian. Thirty-one (69%) of the participants were attending college at the time that they filled out the questionnaire.

### ***Materials***

Two commercials were shown to participants in this experiment. The first was the Old Spice "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like" commercial. In this commercial, an attractive African-American man addresses a female audience and tries to convince them to buy Old Spice body wash so that their male counterparts can smell like a man. The actor moves from scene to scene while displaying desirable items, such as diamonds, designed to appeal to women. The second commercial viewed was the Axe "Snake Peel" commercial which depicts a wild night experienced by a man and a woman in their hotel room. Scenes change abruptly as the man flashes back to the night before. There is sexual activity insinuated but never explicitly shown.

Informed consent (see Appendix A) gave participants information on the nature of the research. No deception was used. The questionnaire used in this experiment was created using GoogleForms and was accessed through the Psychological Research on the Net website. It consisted of demographics (see Appendix B) and 11 open-ended questions—one of which was

optional—designed to examine if and how viewers were creating meaning in commercials, how this meaning was affected by their personal characteristics, if the viewers were aware of how their personal characteristics were influencing the meanings made in commercials, and if and how commercials were serving as equipment for living (see Appendix C). A debriefing window reminded participants as to the nature of the questionnaire and research (see Appendix D).

### *Procedure*

The entirety of the experiment was conducted online at the volition and convenience of the participant. Participants found the link to the experiment on the aforementioned website. After accessing the experiment, participants were brought to a page showing them the informed consent sheet. If they agreed to the terms, they clicked the “continue” button at the bottom of the page and were brought to a Google Form. Participants were randomly assigned to watch either the Old Spice (18 participants) or Axe (27 participants) commercial. They were provided with a link to the commercial on YouTube and could watch the commercial as many times as they pleased. After watching the commercial, participants filled out their demographics and answered the 11 open-ended questions on the questionnaire. Upon completing the form and hitting the submit button, a window popped up displaying the debriefing form and ended the experiment.

Since this was purely exploratory research, no coding scheme or predicted categories for meanings were able to be created and used by the researcher. The purpose of the research was to allow as many meanings to arise out of the participants’ responses as possible in order to understand the full impact of commercials in viewers’ lives. It was felt that analyzing the responses with preconceived notions on the part of the researcher would inhibit the exploratory nature of this research.

## Results

As was previously stated, the purpose of this exploratory research is to determine the degree to which commercials play a role in viewers' lives. First, this requires that viewers are seeing meaning in commercials. Second, it implies that the types of meaning that viewers take away from a commercial are being influenced by their own personal characteristics, such as beliefs and values. Third, viewers might be able to determine which aspects of themselves are influencing the meanings they are taking away from a commercial and understand how their personal characteristics are influencing their perceptions of a commercial. Finally, some viewers may be capable of realizing the totality of effects and impacts a commercial can have in their lives; that is, for some viewers, commercials can serve as equipment for living wherein the meanings viewers take from commercials can shape their thoughts and behaviors regarding their interactions with the product, the commercial, the company, or their own perceptions of themselves.

Research reveals that viewers are making meaning in commercials and that the meanings made are heavily influenced by their own personal characteristics. Most viewers are able to see how aspects of themselves are influencing their interpretations of a commercial, and a very small percentage of viewers do use commercials as equipment for living. An analysis of the types of meanings found in the "Old Spice: The Man Your Man Could Smell Like" and "Axe: Snake Peel" commercials reveal the degree to which these two commercials play a role in viewers' lives.

### *Making meaning in Old Spice*

Overall, the meanings created from the Old Spice commercial were positive and reflected positive characteristics of the viewers. In general, viewers tended to enjoy this commercial on several levels and made many positive remarks regarding various aspects of the commercial including the absurdity or randomness of the commercial, the portrayal of masculinity and how it relates to women's preferences, and the positioning and originality of the commercial itself.

### *Absurdity/randomness in Old Spice*

In comparison to other meanings in Old Spice, viewers overwhelmingly referenced the absurdity/randomness of the commercial. The commercial itself consists of seemingly random but very smooth transitions from one scene to the next, which people liked. For example, with an ocean vista in the background, the camera zooms in on the Old Spice guy as the props change from the actor on a boat to the actor on a horse. Many participants mentioned the "I'm on a horse" quote at the end of the commercial, saying that it felt as if it were just put there to state the obvious. Participants described the commercial as consisting of "seemingly planned randomness" and discussed the Old Spice guy and "all of the nonsense things he is doing," such as blatantly stating the fact that he is on a horse. All in all, participants found the general absurdity of the commercial to be funny, creative, witty, ridiculously exaggerated, and original. One participant said that the randomness made him laugh and feel happy. Others compared the humorous tone of the commercial to the tones set by Monty Python and Mel Brooks.

Another absurd aspect of the commercial was its mocking, parodying take on masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and previous Old Spice commercials. Gender and sexuality will be discussed in more detail later; however, it is important to mention their roles in the current meaning of absurdity. A few participants discussed how this commercial's mocking style

was “making fun of...masculine stereotypes.” They described the Old Spice guy as a parody of masculinity in which he is incredibly “macho” as the ideal man should be. Females tended to mention that the Old Spice guy and the commercial’s message are a reflection of “the absurdity of some romantic fantasies women have.” Some participants discussed the fact that this commercial appears to be a parody of older Old Spice commercials that were “stodgy” and “crusty.” It mocks the previous unimaginative and serious Old Spice commercials, showing that the company is “taking itself less seriously.” Contrasting seriousness with parody was also used to make fun of typical, ridiculous commercials claims, such as “This body wash will make you smell manly; therefore, you will be manlier.”

When participants were describing the absurdity of the commercial, a few mentioned how their own senses of humor were allowing them to appreciate this commercial. One participant mentioned her great sense of humor while another mentioned that dry humor—as he described the humor in the commercial—was the most appealing to him. The self-parody of the Old Spice commercial required that a few participants have some experience with older Old Spice commercials. These participants noted how their opinion of the current commercial was heavily influenced by their impressions of the former commercials as “stodgy.” Briefly, and so as not to further take away from the gender discussion to come, participants referenced their own experiences with gender roles as impacting the absurdity they saw in the commercial. While they disliked the use of gender stereotypes in commercials, their knowledge of gender obtained from social science curricula and their self-proclaimed feminist dispositions allowed them to see that the commercial was meant to be funny and not sexist or derogatory.

### *Masculinity in Old Spice*

Subsumed under the category of absurdity, gender was the second-most referenced meaning found by viewers in the Old Spice commercial. The meaning of masculinity as depicted by the Old Spice guy was split into two responses: a likeable and ideally masculine guy versus a guy who is way too full of himself.

Generally speaking, participants had good things to say about the masculine persona of the Old Spice guy in the commercial. The majority of the participants described the Old Spice guy's ideally masculine looks; in fact, the variations on "attractive, muscular African-American male" would add up to another page of writing on its own. The Old Spice guy was likeable, appealing, nice-smelling, wealthy, playfully confident and arrogant, and well-spoken. Some participants stated that the commercial makes a comparison between the ideal man and other, less ideal men. It demonstrates what makes a man attractive and appealing to women and shows men what they could be like. One participant described the commercial as a challenge to others' masculinity while another said it conveys that the Old Spice guy is better than other men. On the other hand, some participants did not like the ideal masculinity portrayed by the Old Spice guy. These viewers found him to be too arrogant, conceited, and "so full of himself." They resented the fact that he appeared to say that he was better than other men and that other men were weak.

The participants who found the commercial to be absurd were generally the same people who liked the depictions of the Old Spice guy as ideally masculine. These were the same people who thought that the commercial was a self-parody; in this case, the self-parody was extended to social expectations for masculinity. In the same sense, those experienced with gender roles appreciated the humorous take on gender in this commercial. However, the viewers who resented the implications of the Old Spice guy's masculinity mentioned their own feelings regarding this

implication. They mentioned the importance of individual differences and their own perceptions of themselves or their significant others as “good enough” men.

### ***Femininity in Old Spice***

Only a few viewers turned the interpretations of the commercial from men to women, which did not bode well for females. To summarize: women are gold diggers and obsessed with sexuality. It is interesting to note that most of the critics of femininity were women themselves. Viewers scorned the fact that women seemed only to be interested in and could only be satisfied by attractive, wealthy men. Some of this scorn was directed to women, but some of it was directed at the commercial’s humorous depiction of women’s obsessions. When relating their opinions of the commercial to their own characteristics, one woman mentioned how the man was not her ideal man while others were experiencing “cognitive dissonance” when considering their own opinions of gender roles and the attempt at humor and parody of gender depicted in the commercial. For the latter, the fact that females were seen as damsels seeking male support was disturbing and slightly funny at the same time.

### ***Sexuality in Old Spice***

As one participant put it, “sex sells.” Some participants found the use of sexuality in the Old Spice commercial to be advantageous, but most found it to be disturbing. For those who enjoyed it, the sexual appeal of the Old Spice guy was something that they appreciated and would talk about with others. Another participant mentioned the absurd parody theme again: the Old Spice guy was indeed sexual, but he was a parody of seduction and a mockery of the use of sex in advertising. One woman lamented the fact that this commercial was one of few she had seen in which men were being objectified instead of women. She also ridiculed the men who

were being self-conscious about this commercial, saying that the sexualization of men “will shock their fragile existence.” However, this same woman found it disturbing that the man was trying to be funny and provocative. Those who appreciated the sexuality again related it to their own senses of humor and to the commercial’s parody of sexuality in this commercial and in older commercials.

In keeping with the negative reaction to male provocative behavior, one woman mentioned that she felt the commercial was too sexual and felt that the Old Spice guy wanted women to envision him without the towel in place. One male participant was particularly uncomfortable with the notion of male objectification and sexuality in commercials, saying that its use was awkward and degrading to men. When talking about herself, the one woman who felt the commercial was too sexual mentioned that sexuality does not appeal to an older woman like her.

### ***Positioning and originality in Old Spice***

A few participants noted that the commercial’s message was addressed to women though the product is intended for men’s use. They found this to be memorable, interesting, and funny. On a related note, they found the commercial to be original, saying that it “isn’t like any other commercial.” The same woman who lamented the lack of sexualized men in the media mentioned the originality came from the fact that there are not many sexualized males on television. Another mentioned the new take on the Old Spice brand as the reason for the commercial’s originality. This was the same man with previous experience with the older Old Spice commercials. A couple of people discussed the originality in terms of the transitions from one random scene to the next.

### *Making meaning in Axe*

In comparison to Old Spice, the reactions to and meanings made in Axe were considerably less positive. Generally, the negative reactions to the commercial's perceived meaning reflected positive traits of the viewers. Themes of randomness, expectations for Axe, purification and sexism, realism, and sexuality were related to the viewers' own particular characteristics.

### *Randomness in Axe*

As it was in the Old Spice commercial, randomness became a theme in the Axe commercial; however, the interpretations of and reactions to the randomness in the Axe commercial were mixed at best. Most if not all of the participants remarked on the quickly changing images in the commercial. They found the brevity and flashing images to be too random, too confusing, and way too fast. For most viewers, the commercial made no sense. One participant aptly described the commercial as "too quick and flashy and seizure-inducing," which seems to summarize most other viewers' negative responses to the layout of the commercial. Other participants criticized the commercial's randomness as being "uncreative" and a "waste of money."

Unfortunately, viewers did not offer much about themselves as they criticized the randomness of the commercial; however, two viewers in particular offered some insight into the ways in which randomness might be considered as a negative attribute. One participant mentioned that the commercial defied his expectations for Axe commercials in that it was too fast. Another mentioned that she is a speech trainer who emphasizes effective, clear

communication and that the lack of clarity in this commercial influenced her opinion of the commercial.

On the other hand, randomness in the commercial was construed positively by those who could pick out interesting images and follow the plot. Some viewers found the animal-themed costumes in the commercial to be random and humorous, with most referencing the horse mask and snake pants the man was wearing. Others thought that the concept of randomness matched well with the wild party scene depicted in the commercial. They found it to be interesting and funny. Randomness was also used positively to create the impression of a sexual encounter without making sex explicit. For viewers who found sexuality to be acceptable, randomness in this commercial was “kinky” and funny.

The few participants who liked the randomness of the commercial referenced their own past experiences with partying and their current opinions of the party scene. One participant liked the commercial’s randomness because it reminded him of his younger days when he used to go out and pick up “skanks.” One young woman mentioned that she likes to party and found the commercial to be in line with her party experiences in that she did not have problems with random flashbacks and not remembering what happened the night before.

### *Expectations for Axe*

The meaning and impact of participants’ expectations for Axe commercials was briefly alluded to in the previous section. Once again, these reactions were mixed. Some participants

watched the commercial knowing that Axe creates “outrageous” commercials in which anything can happen. Others appreciated the implications of the party atmosphere of the commercial and related it to other commercials that use similar themes. For some, their expectations for Axe commercials led to a negative interpretation of the commercial. These participants did not expect to see what they saw. One viewer complained that typical Axe commercials emphasize getting girls as a reward for using Axe products instead of using Axe products to “wash away the skank.” Other participants were disturbed by the use of the party scene itself and mentioned that the man’s apparent use of drugs and alcohol could lead to a regrettable evening.

It is interesting to see how viewers’ characteristics that they feel to be positive influence their expectations for the commercial. Participants who liked the ideas of picking up women and of attending wild parties found that this commercial fell in line with their expectations for Axe, which led to their positive interpretations of the commercial. One participant with past experience with the commercial did not like the new meanings associated with Axe. He preferred the idea of using the product to “get girls” to the idea of “washing off the skank” with the product. Participants with similar reactions to this young man’s did not like the party scene and its implications which did not match their expectations for what an Axe product should do.

### ***Purification and sexism in Axe***

By far, the most negative meanings attached to this commercial were related to the only voiced message in the commercial: “Wash away the skank.” With two exceptions, viewers had problems with this meaning and gave numerous variations of the meaning of washing away the skank. To many viewers, the commercial was sexist and offensive, presenting women as skanks whose presence need and can be erased. Women represented grime and nastiness that came with

a night filled with “kinky” sexual acts. Most agreed that the meaning of this commercial carried an implication of sexual activity with no repercussions for men. It symbolized a double standard for women in which men could spend a wild night with a woman and simply shower it off with no lingering consequences while the woman was branded a “skank.” In a sense, men were able to purify themselves while women were not and the women unjustly suffered the backlash.

Participants described more positive characteristics of themselves in relation to this particular meaning than in any other meaning given in this commercial. Most viewers were adamant in their assertions that they neither refer to women in such derogatory terms nor approve of others doing the same. They claimed that the use of the word “skank” represented a harmful misjudgment and egregious error on the part of Axe. One man mentioned his Christian background had taught him to be respectful toward women. In the same breath, he mentioned that his religious experiences and past experiences with Axe commercials and messages had given him a very negative opinion of this commercial and the use of Axe products. Another participant wondered if the use of the word “skank” was not as offensive here in the United States as it is in the United Kingdom. He assumed that that would be the only reason that Unilever, Axe’s parent company, would be so daring as to derogate women.

It is worth mentioning that only two participants did not have a problem with referring to women as skanks or with the implication that women cannot purify themselves as men can. These two participants thought the use and meaning of skank was humorous. It reminded one participant of the days in which he himself went out to pick up skanks. The other participant, a woman, found the use of skank and the double standard to be funny since it did not relate to her and her behaviors specifically.

### ***Realism in Axe***

A few viewers noted that the circumstances and intensity of the party scene depicted in this commercial were highly unrealistic and surreal. First, Axe products could not cause or erase the events in this commercial. Furthermore, one participant stated that this commercial illustrates what everyone *thinks* a typical Saturday night is like. Another participant described the commercial as what people hope a night could be like; while the situation could happen, it could not be due to Axe products. Typically, viewers could not relate to the experiences of the man and woman in the commercial. One participant said he had never had that type of experience and could not relate to the meaning of the commercial. He felt disconnected and that the commercial itself was surreal. Another participant mentioned she had been a bartender for quite some time and had seen some wild stuff, but nothing was ever as intense—and therefore unrealistic—as the images shown in the commercial.

### ***Sexuality in Axe***

As with Old Spice, viewers felt that the message and meaning of this commercial was “sex sells.” The commercial itself was described as kinky, erotic, and sexually suggestive. Some participants felt this was acceptable: sex and partying are natural, enjoyable occurrences and Axe can help facilitate these experiences. One participant said her liberal attitudes allowed her to accept the use of sexuality in the commercial. However, other participants mentioned that the use of sex overpowered the focus on the uses of the product itself. Such people also used the lack of realism in the commercial to criticize the overuse of sexuality in the commercial.

### ***Commercials as equipment for living?***

The final purpose of this research was to determine if commercials can be used as equipment for living as movies can be. This requires that viewers acknowledge the ways in which a commercial can shape their behaviors, thoughts, and self-concepts as defined by the meanings viewers attach to a commercial. However, if one blatantly asks viewers to describe any influences a commercial has had on their lives, said viewers immediately refuse to acknowledge any influence. The vast majority of the participants in this research outright denied that either commercial had any effect on them whatsoever. The most popular response to the question of a commercial's impact was "It's just a commercial," followed by "I don't allow myself to be influenced by the media." One viewer in particular was offended by the implication that a commercial could influence her, though this offense appeared to be due mostly to a misinterpretation of one of the questions asked.

Surprisingly, given the aforementioned tendencies of viewers, there were some participants who admitted that the commercials had influenced them to some degree. For the Old Spice commercial, two participants mentioned an intent or desire to buy the body wash so that they or their significant others could smell like the Old Spice guy. The woman who wanted to buy the body wash for her boyfriend noted how her experiences with men made her wish they looked and smelled as nice as the Old Spice guy. One participant, who had mentioned his previous experiences with Old Spice commercials, said he would be more willing to watch commercials made by the Old Spice company. Another mentioned that his opinion of the Old Spice brand had improved due to the influence of the commercial. In a daring admission of self-reflection, one participant felt self-conscious of his own masculinity as a result of viewing the commercial.

Given the negative meanings attributed to the Axe commercial, people were less likely to admit to any influence. A couple of participants said they would be more likely to talk about the commercial with other people, and only one admitted that she thought that sleeping around was acceptable after having seen this commercial.

### **Discussion**

As the results of this exploratory look into the role of commercials in viewers' lives reveal, viewers are making meaning in commercials, the meanings are influenced by their own vast array of personal characteristics, some viewers seem to be aware of this influence, and a small fraction of the viewers are taking the final step into using commercials as equipment for living in which they acknowledge the ways in which they are influenced by the commercial. Several types of meanings arose out of these findings, and some deserve further discussion. For instance, why is it that absurdity/randomness worked well for Old Spice and not well for Axe? Why were there mixed responses regarding the depiction of masculinity in the Old Spice commercial and very negative responses to femininity in both commercials? Why did people generally dislike the use of sexuality in these two commercials?

#### ***Role of humor***

While there is no research to be found on randomness, there is plenty of research into the effects of humor—under which the idea of randomness could be subsumed—in commercials. Sternthal and Craig (1973) looked at marketing research into humor and summarized their findings regarding the effects of humor in persuasion. They found that the use of humor grabs attention, increases message acceptance, distracts the audience from other arguments, changes attitudes, and increases credibility and liking of the source of the commercial. A more recent look

into the effects of humor comes from a meta-analysis conducted by Eisend (2009). While he found that humor improves attitudes toward the commercial and brand, he found no evidence to support the claim that humor increases attitudes toward the product and company.

Overall, it would appear that humor (and absurdity/randomness, by extension) produces positive effects for persuasion. Perhaps the difference between the Old Spice and Axe commercials was the intent of the absurdity. While both commercials are trying to grab the viewer's attention, Old Spice is quite obviously trying to be funny, which appealed to the viewers, while Axe is trying to emulate a flashback sequence a man is experiencing after a wild night. Additionally, the attempt at humor by Old Spice seems to be negating any adverse effects that may arise due to the randomness of the commercial's plot. Clearly, Axe could not accomplish this without the use of a bit more humor than could be provided by some funny masks.

### ***Role of gender***

For Old Spice, the meaning of masculinity played an important role in the acceptance of the commercial's message. Most participants found the self-parody aspect of the Old Spice guy to be particularly enjoyable: while he was clearly everything that a man should aspire to be, his persona was usually amusing enough for people not to be offended by his implications. Given some research by Garst and Bodenhausen (1997), the use of masculine parody was a brilliant idea for Old Spice. These researchers hypothesized that the impact media has on viewers is influenced by gender roles; specifically, male models can influence persuasive appeals depending on their use of gender roles.

Garst and Bodenhausen divided participants based on whether they held traditional or nontraditional gender roles. They then showed them advertisements depicting highly androgynous, mildly androgynous, or traditionally masculine male models. Results indicated that participants had better opinions of androgynous models than masculine models and that participants with less traditional gender roles leaned more toward traditional gender roles after having seen the masculine commercials. While the Old Spice guy was clearly traditionally masculine, his appeal came not from his masculinity but his ability to parody that masculinity. The use of parody was an excellent decision for Old Spice in light of the fact that traditional masculinity seems to elicit more negative opinions from viewers than androgyny does. If Old Spice had played with traditional masculinity without ridiculing the concept, the response from viewers may not have been as positive; in fact, the company may have been better off with a less masculine model.

When it came to the depictions of femininity, both commercials elicited negative responses from viewers. Women according to Old Spice were shallow while the depictions of women as skanks in the Axe commercial were met with scorn. An excellent explanation for the latter commercial's effect comes from one of the studies conducted by Grohmann (2009). She questioned participants about their brand trust, attitude, preference, and purchasing likelihood for three brand name products and compared these responses to their concepts of gender roles. She found that, across brands, congruence between the perceived personality of a brand and the perceived self-concept of the viewer led to more favorable attitudes toward the brand, stronger preferences and higher affect for the brand, and a stronger intent to purchase the brand. This has special implications for the Axe commercial. Most viewers asserted that they did not refer to women as skanks and did not approve of the depiction of women in the commercial. Based on

Grohmann's findings, it could be that the self-concepts of the viewers were not matching the meaning of femininity in the commercial. If viewers think they treat women well and dislike derogating women, then the obvious derogation of women in a commercial is inconsistent with their impressions of their own thoughts and behaviors.

### *Role of sexuality*

There were slightly mixed responses to the meaning of sexuality in Old Spice and Axe. Sexuality was appealing in both and humorous in Old Spice; however, there were a few participants who disliked sexuality in commercials and found it was used too extensively in the Axe commercial. A review of sex in advertising conducted by Reichert (2002) reveals that sexuality in commercials usually has quite positive results. He hypothesizes that sexuality is memorable and noticeable but that it detracts from understanding the brand and message. In general, sexuality increases attention to the commercial itself and decreases recall of brand information. This seemed to be quite true for viewers in the Axe condition who complained about this very subject.

Additionally, the effects of sexuality in commercials are mediated by the characteristics of the viewers. Reichert (2002) found that the type of arousal a viewer experiences with a commercial affects his or her attitude toward the product, intent to purchase the product and susceptibility to the appeal of the commercial. Positive arousal improves the attitude toward the product, increases likelihood of purchasing the product, and decreases the degree of rationality a viewer uses to evaluate a commercial's claim. The opposite is true for negative arousal. In addition to arousal, factors such as viewer gender, age, and religion affect how sexuality is perceived. Men tend to show a steady increase in opinion of sexuality as it becomes more

explicit while women tend to show a curvilinear trend in opinion. Increasing age and religious affiliation usually decrease acceptance of sexuality.

These findings were consistent with participants' responses to both commercials. The positive arousal presented by the sexualized parody of the Old Spice commercial generally increased opinions of the commercial and brand. For Axe, the overuse of sexuality and its relation to women contributed to negative arousal and a negative opinion. In both cases, older individuals, the individual who noted his religious affiliation, and women tended to dislike the use of sexuality.

An aspect of the commercial and product that Reichert (2002) mentioned was the importance of sexuality's relevance to the product. He referenced a study by Peterson and Kerin (1977) whose findings are particularly relevant to Axe's depiction of women. They found that the use of nude women in advertising was detrimental to the appeal, quality, and reputation of an advertisement; however, a seductive model garnered the highest level of appeal, quality, and reputation. If Axe had established a female model who was not highly sexualized and "skanky," they may have received more positive responses from viewers. A seductive model and an avoidance of the concept of "skank" could have increased the appeal of the commercial.

### ***Commercials as equipment for living***

A disappointing aspect of this research was the outlook on the idea of commercials as equipment for living. Viewers are reluctant to admit that commercials can impact their thoughts and behaviors, and some adamantly deny the very idea. The question asked by Dine Young (2000) in his study on movies as equipment for living revealed that viewers exhibit degrees of understanding and acceptance of the role of movies in their lives. Some did not detect the

influence of a movie on their behavior, and some denied any influences. However, there were those who realized the impact movies had on their lives and willingly admitted to said influence. Though this basic pattern occurred for commercials, it is believed that viewers may be more unlikely to admit the influence of a commercial than that of a movie. This assumption is based on the general belief held by most individuals that they are above the influence of persuasive appeals in commercials and other forms of persuasive media. It would benefit future research to discover a way of asking about the impact of commercials on viewers' lives that does not blatantly imply that commercials have the ability to influence viewers' thoughts and behaviors.

### ***Implications for marketing and psychological research***

Though the current research was purely exploratory in nature, it is believed that the findings discussed herein carry important implications for similar research. First, research into the roles of commercials in viewers' lives demonstrates that commercials have various effects on viewers beyond that of simple persuasion. Second, the wide variety of meanings and effects that a commercial can have on a viewer could only have been accessed through the use of a qualitative research method. This suggests that both marketing and psychological research into media should incorporate qualitative data in determining the effectiveness of commercials and advertisements in general.

Third, the impact of viewer characteristics on meanings extrapolated from commercials demonstrates that marketing and psychological research should place more emphasis on potential value and belief systems and past experiences of the viewing audience in order to maximize persuasive effects. A better understanding of beliefs in particular could benefit the goals of marketing. For instance, the goal of marketing as demonstrated by Czerniawski and Maloney

(1999) is to tweak existing consumer beliefs just enough to get them to consider purchasing the product. An analysis of the previously held beliefs requires insights into the consumers' feelings, values, and experiences. These insights can then be used to play on the existing beliefs of the consumers in order to get them to turn their attention slightly toward the product advertised. It is hoped that insights into the consumers' lives can be used to change initial opinions of the product to opinions that favor the use of the product. While the practicality of the current research's methodology is still unknown, this type of analysis may benefit marketing research and persuasion by increasing the amount of insight into consumers' ways of life in ways that current methods do not.

### *Lessons for advertisers*

Based on the findings of the current research and past research, it would appear that commercials would be more effective vehicles of persuasion if they implemented the use of humor, randomness, and parody. An amusing plot and the willingness to make fun of a company, product, or social values helped lead to Old Spice's "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like" success. Additionally, the plot of a commercial should be easy to follow, as was demonstrated by Axe's "Snake Peel." Axe also revealed the detrimental effects of meanings that degrade and derogate women. Similarly, Old Spice showed that parody can be used by men to derogate masculinity with success; however, advertisers may want to use caution when considering the use of self-parody with femininity. Finally, and as always, originality is a must. Well played, Old Spice.

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## Appendix A

*Informed consent*

This research is being conducted by Alyse Craig and is designed to discover which aspects of a commercial an individual feels has had an impact on his or her life. You will first click on a link to view a commercial on YouTube. After viewing the commercial, you will be asked to fill out some basic demographic information and to reflect on your experience with that commercial. All of your responses will be typed into a survey created in GoogleForms.

This experiment will take approximately 30-60 minutes. There are no known risks involved in participating in this study beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide in your responses is completely confidential and at no time will your name be associated with the responses you give. If you have any questions before, during, or after the study, please contact Alyse Craig at [ecraig11@hanover.edu](mailto:ecraig11@hanover.edu) or Dr. Bill Altermatt at [altermattw@hanover.edu](mailto:altermattw@hanover.edu).

Appendix B

*Demographics*

1. What is your age?
2. What is your sex?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your year in college?

## Appendix C

*Questionnaire*

1. Imagine that you want to discuss this commercial with your friend. Your friend has never actually seen this commercial, so he or she asks you to describe what happens in the commercial in detail. What happened in this commercial? Be sure to describe the situation, the chain of events, and other aspects of the commercial.
2. Did you like the commercial? What about it did you like or dislike?
3. The commercial you just viewed received considerable media attention and seemed to be quite popular. Why do you think it attracted so much attention and appeared to be popular?
4. If you talked about this commercial with your family members or with a group of friends, what would you discuss about the commercial?
5. Describe your reaction to this commercial. What were you thinking when you watched it? What were you feeling?
6. How do you think your beliefs and opinions influenced your reaction to this commercial?
7. In thinking about your reaction to this commercial, do you think this commercial has had an impact on your behavior? If yes, how so? If not, why?
8. Do you think this commercial has had an impact on the ways in which you interact with others? If yes, how so? If not, why?
9. Beyond trying to entice consumers to buy body wash, describe the message(s) this commercial is trying to convey to consumers.
10. In the future, what will you remember most vividly about your experience with this commercial? It could be a particular aspect of the commercial, your thoughts and feelings regarding the commercial, or other ways that it affected you.
11. (Optional) Looking back on your reactions to this commercial and the responses you have given in this questionnaire, how have your life experiences affected your perception of this commercial and your interpretation of its meaning?

## Appendix D

### *Debriefing*

The study in which you just participated was designed to discover how you understand and interpret the influence of a commercial on your life. In the questionnaire, you reflected on your experience with a commercial and gave your opinion on various aspects of the commercial. A point of interest in this research is to discover what the functions of a commercial are and how those functions can influence viewer's thoughts, behaviors, values, and interpersonal relationships.

Your responses were sent to a data collection site; however, your responses will be kept confidential and at no time will your name be associated with the responses you have given. If you have any questions after the study, please contact Dr. Bill Altermatt at [altermattw@hanover.edu](mailto:altermattw@hanover.edu) or in room 155 of the Science Center or Alyse Craig at [eraigm11@hanover.edu](mailto:eraigm11@hanover.edu). You may also contact the administrative supervisor of the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Steve Jobe, at [jobe@hanover.edu](mailto:jobe@hanover.edu).