

## Open to interpretation

The furore caused by KFC Australia's 'cricket' ad demonstrates the polysemic nature of advertising

An Aussie cricket fan finds himself in the wrong section of a West Indian cricket stadium during the upcoming Twenty20 World Cup.

Realising his mistake, and feeling increasingly isolated among the steel drums and usual exuberance of the West Indian fans, he puts his head in his hands and looks up to camera: 'Need a tip when you are stuck in an awkward situation?' he asks. He reaches for his bucket of KFC and, sharing the meal with his new-found friends, smiles at the camera: 'Too easy!' he exclaims.

This simple 30-second spot for KFC Australia has given the company its biggest global brand crisis in years. In the US, where the ad was watched on YouTube and news programmes, the ad has been branded as 'disgraceful', 'racist filth' and 'totally unacceptable'. KFC has pulled the ad and apologised for any offence caused. That decision was met with general confusion in Australia where the ad had been showing without any apparent problems.

So who is right? Is this a racist portrayal of a superior white male using the offensive stereotyping of black people's love for fried chicken to pacify them? Or is it a simple ad for fast food, relying on the comic contrast between the serious Aussie cricket fan and his more effusive West Indian rivals? The answer, confusingly, is both.

To understand how one ad can have two meanings you must first delve into the complex but fascinating concept of

polysemy – the ability for a text to communicate multiple messages to different audiences.

All texts have polysemic potential. Shakespeare's plays, for example, have exhibited the propensity to mean different things to different readers. Advertising is, however, perhaps the most polysemic medium of all.

Thirty seconds is usually too little time to constrain a viewer's interpretation with additional exposition. As a result, advertising is often a far more open text than longer media such as film or theatre.

If you pay £20 to see a Shakespeare play, you are generally predisposed to go with the director's intent as much as possible. In contrast, audiences usually resent advertising's insertion into their chosen programme viewing and this negative attitude can often incite more

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oppositional interpretations and alternative meanings.

Contextual factors can further constrain or create polysemy. In Australia, the KFC ad was viewed as part of the cricket coverage; one of six ads in which KFC helped a cricket fan achieve uninterrupted access to the game. In the US, the ad was shown without the rest of the campaign and introduced on YouTube and by news anchors as potentially racist.

The social context in which the ad was encountered also differed. In Australia, it was seen by cricket fans instantly able to recognise West Indian supporters. In the US, it was watched by people with no knowledge of cricket who saw only a racist portrayal of African Americans.

An ad may have been created with a specific narrative and message in mind, but that is no guarantee that when it leaves the agency and enters the living room, it will be decoded accordingly.

I agree with both the Australian and US interpretations. It was a harmless piece of brand-building but also a racist and offensive diatribe.

Polysemy, you see, is much like marketing: the answer is always in the eye of the beholder. Hopefully you agree – but knowing the polysemic possibilities out there, I'll settle for you making up your own mind.

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### 30 seconds on... KFC's 'cricket' ad

#### 15 seconds on US bloggers' reactions to the KFC ad

■ 'People are going to post that they see no racism at all, because their race is not targeted. But, COME ON?!? A bucket of chicken calms a boisterous crowd of Africans? If you don't understand the history behind that stereotype, you need to be plucked and fried.' **Truthseeker1969**

■ 'Yes, it's racist. Putting aside the fried chicken stereotype, which may be specific to the United States, why is it an awkward situation in the first place? Because a white man is surrounded by people of color? Or just because a single fan of one cricket team is surrounded by the fans of another cricket team?' **Qdog112**



KFC ad fell foul of polysemy

#### 15 seconds on Australian bloggers' reactions to the KFC ad

■ 'Anyone from a cricket-playing nation would identify the people in the KFC ad as West Indies cricket supporters. I can see how the ad would be offensive in the US if directed at African Americans, but you need an understanding of the culture

in cricket-playing nations and show some respect.' **Zewolf**

■ 'An ad placed in coverage on Australian TV of a sport that America doesn't understand, which doesn't involve African Americans at all, by a company who has spent years sponsoring a non-American black cricket team, somehow constitutes racism against African Americans?' **Foxoff**