

**Purposeful Polysemy in Marketing Communication:  
Ethical Implications and Policy Challenges**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **PURPOSEFUL POLYSEMY IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION: ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY CHALLENGES**

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Past research has identified purposeful polysemy (i.e., multiple meanings in interpretation) as a strategy that enables various marketing goals to be achieved. However, an area that extant literature has largely been silent about is when polysemy can be strategically used to overcome legal boundaries. This research examines purposeful polysemy, as a practice used in varying product sectors (i.e., food, beverage, and tobacco), and explores the consumer, ethical, and policy implications that emerge from its use. This research explores whether marketers, through using verbal and visual devices, can imply multiple meanings, where one meaning pertains to a brand message (e.g., inferring a health-oriented attribute) that is navigating within a stringent regulatory environment, while additional meanings can be used as a legal and ethical defense if undergoing scrutiny for the claim being made.

This thesis is organized into three separate manuscripts that have the overarching goal of examining purposeful polysemy and its potential to circumvent the spirit of policy. The first manuscript sets up a conceptual framework and uses a well established image (i.e., a heart symbol) as a demonstration of polysemy. Using a semiological and rhetorical approach, this manuscript further delves into the ethics of using such a marketing tool. The second manuscript

provides an experimental investigation of resulting consumer perceptions from using polysemic elements such as a heart symbol. This paper extends the framework set up in the first manuscript by examining whether polysemy can be guided in interpretation through contextual cues, and discusses policy implications and recommendations. The third manuscript examines the potential of purposeful polysemy to create problems from a tobacco control standpoint and discusses marketing communication from two cigarette brands as a case illustration. The paper, by applying purposeful polysemy to an additional product sector, expands on the generalizability of the concept.

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## Chapter 1: An Introduction

As consumers become more aware about the consequences of their consumption choices (e.g., impact on health, finances, and the environment) and regulatory focus on marketing claims and messages gains momentum, advertisers may turn to creative means to strategically communicate with their audience. In such an environment, motivation may emerge for marketers to use creative routes that allow indirect assertions which stated overtly would not be possible. This thesis discusses one such strategic technique used in marketing – purposeful polysemy – and examines the strategic technique in the context of product sectors where its use may be seen as an approach meant to overcome legal boundaries.

*Polysemy* has been described as text or images that have multiple interpretations dependent on context, time, or interpreter. *Advertising polysemy* occurs when multiple meanings are drawn from the same advertising message by different audiences or at different times (Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson, 2010; Puntoni, Vanhamme, & Visscher, 2011). Since polysemy is often represented in advertising through *rhetorical figures* or “artful deviations from expectation” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996), this thesis also discusses such devices in further detail.

This thesis research applies the use of purposeful polysemy to the food, beverage, and tobacco product sectors. Awareness regarding the impact of dietary intake on health-related issues and food-borne illnesses, for example, is heightened as consumers become more conscious and aware of their food choices. Simultaneously, the impact of food-related diseases on societal welfare has created heightened scrutiny around food marketing and advertising claims. Arguably, within such an environment, there is a rise in marketing communication that asserts product benefits through polysemic messages, facilitating marketers to make inferred or indirect

assertions while avoiding the legal consequences that are likely for messages making more explicit claims.

Industries that market harmful or taboo products represent additional sectors where advertisers face notable legal and ethical pressures or scrutiny. The tobacco sector, given the inherently harmful products it markets, has often used creative and crafty marketing tactics to overcome prescribed regulations (Dewhirst, 2010). This thesis introduces purposeful polysemy within this sector to demonstrate how several brands appear to be using such a strategy to potentially infer meanings without explicitly stating them.

While conventional thesis formats use a “monograph” style, this research follows a “manuscript” approach. Manuscript formats involve preparing multiple papers or manuscripts that are suitable for potentially being published in recognizable journals. This thesis comprises of three manuscripts that follow this introduction section and include multiple methodological approaches based on the specific research objectives for each manuscript. The referencing style and format for each manuscript varies, given they have been developed to match the submission guidelines for the journals they target.<sup>1</sup>

Marketing has been a dominant subject within the business ethics literature, and ethical concerns are frequently raised for advertising content that targets vulnerable populations or encourages consumption practices of harmful products (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009;

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<sup>1</sup> The first manuscript is prepared for submission to the *Journal of Business Ethics* and focuses on ethical and moral concerns that may arise from use of purposeful polysemy. The second manuscript is prepared for submission to the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*. The readership for this journal is expected to have some familiarity with rhetorical concepts; however, purposeful polysemy is introduced within the context of implications for public policy. The third and final manuscript is prepared for the journal, *Tobacco Control* and discusses implications of polysemy from a public health and welfare perspective.

Nebenzhal & Jaffe, 1998; Treise, Weigold, Conna, & Garrison, 1994). However, this discussion has not been typically extended to the use of creative advertising techniques such as purposeful polysemy. Given that definitions of ethics encourage expanding inquiry into marketing decisions based on moral judgment (Beauchamp & Bowie, 1983; Tsalikis & Fritzsche, 1989), the first manuscript discusses purposeful polysemy and subsequent ethical and moral concerns that emerge from its use. To illustrate polysemy, this manuscript identifies the heart symbol as an element that creates multiple interpretations; hence, it is examined as a demonstration of polysemy. The methodological approach taken is based on semiology and a rhetorical analysis, where print advertisements from select food and beverage brands, which incorporate the heart symbol, are reviewed and discussed.

Using empirical evidence as a basis, the second manuscript provides insight regarding consumer brand evaluations that emerge from the use of polysemy in marketing. By presenting findings from the food and beverage sector, this research complements the conceptual foundation laid out in the first manuscript. The heart symbol continues to serve as an illustration and is incorporated as stimuli in a series of experiments for investigation. This paper ultimately aims to contribute to discussions on policy implications and challenges while providing potential recommendations for policy makers.

While the first two manuscripts discuss the use of purposeful polysemy specific to food and beverage marketing, the third manuscript shows the wider applicability of this creative technique by examining it in the context of the tobacco industry. The paper first introduces the notion of polysemy and related marketing concepts to a readership that is expected to be considerably broader. Then, by reviewing advertising from two cigarette brands as case

illustrations, this paper stresses the importance of understanding the application of such a technique. Additionally, this paper aims to expand on the implications of using purposeful polysemy (a creative yet crafty technique) from a public health and general welfare perspective.

Though literature has frequently discussed the notion of polysemy and related concepts such as ambiguity (Ceccarelli, 1998; Eisenberg, 1984; Lagerwerf, 2002; Nerlich & Clarke, 2001; Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997), it has largely been silent regarding its potential to overcome legal and ethical boundaries. By demonstrating polysemy through symbols and descriptors, and using multiple methodological approaches, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature in this area. This research aims to show how purposeful polysemy provides marketers with a means to move away from straightforward assertions and facilitate the navigation of contentious claims within stringent regulatory environments.

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## **Chapter 2:**

### **Love and Health:**

# **Purposeful Polysemy in Food and Beverage Advertising**

## **Introduction**

The notion that diet and food/beverage consumption affect health is a well accepted one. Food, as a necessity, can become a driver of good health and longevity, or the reason for various health concerns. The ability of food choice to have a consequential impact on consumer health creates interest in food advertising and content from practitioners, consumers, and regulators alike. As availability of information and education increases, consumer awareness of the impact of food choices on their health rises (Nestle et al. 1998; Ragaert et al. 2004). Simultaneously, policy makers are placing considerable attention towards the marketing of food and beverage products, particularly towards those that have the potential to increase health risks.

Within the food and beverage sector, where consumers are increasingly becoming health conscious in brand selection and regulatory scrutiny is tightening regarding marketing communication claims, it may be asserted that advertisers will have motive (and means) to move away from straightforward factual claims by adapting creative marketing techniques. In this paper, we discuss the ethics of using one such approach, *purposeful polysemy*. Purposeful polysemy can be seen as a crafty technique being used in marketing that allows indirect, creative advertising claims to be made. By *polysemy*, we refer to the interpretation of the same message in different ways by individuals (Condit 1989), whereas advertising polysemy is described as multiple interpretations, at least two, of the same message across readers or circumstances

(Puntoni et al. 2010). Purposeful polysemy can be strategically used in advertising to fulfill a number of functions (Eisenberg 1984; Warlaumont 1995; Puntoni et al. 2010; Puntoni et al. 2011), but the extant literature has been largely silent about its potential for circumventing policy or evading regulatory scrutiny and the consequent ethics of using such a strategy.

Ethical concerns are frequently raised for advertising content used in the food industry that targets vulnerable populations such as children or uses direct claims to promote food high in sugar and fat (Rotfeld 1988; Nebenzhal and Jaffe 1998; Drumwright and Murphy 2009). However, the discussion of ethics in marketing does not usually extend to creative methods of advertising that emerge in response to increased pressure from consumers and policy makers (Nestle 2013; Statistics Canada 2015). Nevertheless, innovative advertising methods have often been used by industries facing regulatory scrutiny. For example, in the U.K. an advertisement for cigarette brand "Silk Cut" (where use of the brand name was not legally permitted in traditional advertising) depicted a pool of purple silk with a large slit or cut in the middle to cleverly represent the brand name while circumventing policy.

Polysemy, with its ability to create multiple meanings in interpretation, may also allow health claims to be implied while overcoming legislative restrictions. However, this practice still raises challenges about the ethics of using messages that evade the spirit of policy. Is such marketing communication to be deemed as crafty and clever, or alternatively, as an immoral and unethical practice? The prevalent use of polysemic elements, particularly within the food industry where poor dietary choices are associated with health implications, adds to the need to further understand the practice. Health-based inferences in the marketing of food brands may



become unjustified sources of information that create conflict for individuals attempting to make informed purchase decisions (Nestle 2013).

While words and visual symbols both have multiple meanings in interpretation, visual symbols have a special ability to tap into memorable past experiences and create a place in memory that allows them to be easily remembered in the future (Roberts 2004). Visual symbols extend in recognition across cultures and nationalities and are seen as enablers of brand image (Henderson and Cote 1998; Keller 2009; Anker et al. 2011). This paper explores the strategic use of one such symbol, the heart, as a polysemic element that, through the attribution of human characteristics, creates multiple interpretations concerning brand communication. The historical and cultural evolution of the heart makes it an ideal element to create an emotional connection with consumers while continuing to be in line with the goals of the advertiser. Using the heart symbol for illustrative purposes, we examine whether purposeful polysemy is a marketing strategy used, within the food and beverage sector, through which direct regulatory scrutiny may be evaded. We anticipate that food and beverage marketers, through use of a heart, have the potential to infer that a product is “heart healthy” (which stated explicitly in words might not be permissible), yet point to expressing love for their product as the intended meaning if undergoing regulatory scrutiny.

The dominant research questions that guide our work are: Is purposeful polysemy a marketing strategy used within the food and beverage sector? Does use of a heart symbol allow advertisers to avoid direct health assertions while still conveying desired meaning (and simultaneously create an alibi by leveraging multiple and alternative meanings)? What are the ethical and regulatory implications of such a marketing communication strategy being used?

To address these questions, we examine use of the heart symbol by introducing the marketing communication of POM Wonderful (pomegranate juice), Becel (margarine), and Cheerios (cereal) as case illustrations where both love *and* health (well-being) are potentially dominant meanings being communicated that may allow brands to overcome direct regulatory scrutiny. Consistent with discussions that call for ethical behavior to extend beyond legal matters (Tsalikis and Fritzsche 1989), we also question the ethical and moral implications of purposeful polysemy as a marketing communication strategy. We begin by examining the evolution of the heart symbol and how it is embedded with multiple connotations. Second, by assessing individual ads from three specific brands through a semiological and rhetorical approach, we depict that the symbol can be used to create multiple meanings within the same advertising message. We then provide insight regarding the motivation and advantages of using such an implicit tool and, finally, discuss the morality of providing covert health messages through the symbol.

### **Purposeful Polysemy**

Text and images can encompass pre-existing meanings that have varying implications based on perspective. For example, a McDonald's advertisement featuring the image of a maple leaf may communicate numerous meanings when seen by a Canadian reader (e.g., patriotism and maple flavor). Additional meanings inferred may include the fall season (especially if the ad circulates at the corresponding time of year) or the product being "natural." The maple leaf symbol may also create confusion regarding country of origin depending on context. For example, General Mills sponsored Canadian Olympians and developed special packaging for its cereal brand, Oatmeal Crisp, which featured athletes alongside visuals of the maple leaf in colors of the Canadian flag. The company's support was largely appreciated and seen as an effective

marketing promotion (Heinzl 2009), but the fact that the product was not made in Canada could easily be missed with the packaging featuring Canadian athletes and a Canadian flag. Deliberate use of such polysemy can be strategically incorporated to serve a number of purposes such as creating a positive brand image or resonating with one or multiple target audiences, but this example also demonstrates that questions can emerge regarding whether or not such marketing communication is misleading.

As a caveat it must be stressed that to be termed as polysemic, messages are structured with a dominant meaning along with additional secondary and tertiary meanings open to interpretation by different viewers, especially since each reader brings a distinct personal and cultural history to the text (Ceccarelli 1998). Ambiguity, a related concept, has been increasing over time in marketing communication (Warlaumont 1995; Schroeder and Zwick 2004; Puntoni et al. 2010), although it has been noted that all advertisements may be described as ambiguous with multiple interpretations (McQuarrie and Mick 1992). As the social, traditional, and religious practices of groups differ so do the cues derived from different elements (McCracken 1986). For example, the color white may represent purity and peace in one culture but instead represent death in other cultures (Aslam 2006; Dewhirst and Lee 2011; De Bock et al. 2013).

While some symbols have different meanings based on cultural context, others symbols such as the heart have evolved to gain an iconic or virtually universal status and thereby attribute specific meanings across a large number of cultures (Kemp 2012; Gavin 2014). The heart has been described as:

“one that has achieved wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognition and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time

and cultures, such that it has to a greater or lesser degree transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context, and meaning” (Kemp 2012, p. 3).

Giving rise to the multiple meanings associated with the heart symbol, there are various accounts that can be found about the origin of the heart form and its evolution to the current, widely-recognized red, scallop shape that has become ubiquitous in its representation. To further understand the meanings that have been associated with the heart shape, historians have looked at accounts from anatomical science from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, to the rituals of the Aztecs and Cults of the Sacred Heart, and the evolution of the popular Valentine Day and Sailor tattoo symbols (Perloff 2010; Kemp 2012; Gavin 2014). Several accounts discuss the evolution of the existing heart shape from ancient symbolism of ivy plants associated with fidelity, sensuality, endurance, and immortality (Kemp 2012). Though there are varying views about the development of the symbol, most agreement can be found that the symbol came to be represented in popular culture through its originally religious dimension and the more current secular celebration of Valentine’s Day (Vinken 2000; Perloff 2010).

The evolution of the symbol saw it embedded with multiple connotations that stretch far beyond the literal role of the organ. One dimension credits human emotions to the symbol such as portrayed in *The Wizard of Oz* where a fictional character, Tinman, seeks a heart to experience human emotions of jealousy, pain, passion, and love (Littlefield 1964). Other dimensions have led to meanings of sincerity, commitment, well-being, health, and honesty. The multiple meanings embedding the symbol make it an ideal polysemic element (Condit 1989; Puntoni et al. 2010) and despite recognizing that there are additional dimensions that the symbol holds, we focus on exploring some of its predominant meanings – love, health, and sincerity or

commitment – that have particular relevance in its representation in food and beverage marketing communication.

### **The heart as an expression of love and passionate emotion**

Attribution of human qualities to brands, through means such as personification or anthropomorphism, contributes to the notion of consumers having interpersonal relationships with brands (Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998; Aggarwal 2004; Fournier and Alvarez 2012). Earlier definitions of “marketing” presented the practice largely as a transaction or exchange (e.g., Kotler and Zaltman 1971), whereas the American Marketing Association’s 2004 definition identified and embraced a consumer-brand relationship paradigm (Gundlach 2007). Emotional attachment to brands enables products to become practical relationship partners for consumers in their day-to-day experiences (Fournier 1998). Love, for example, is an emotional state that can be applicable to people or objects and brands (Fournier 1998; Johnson et al. 2011), where expressing a strong and continuous affection towards consumption goods has also been identified as “attachments” (Thomson et al. 2005), “lovemarks” (Roberts 2004; Batra et al. 2012), and “love objects” (Ahuvia et al. 2009).

Attribution of human-like characteristics or personality traits allow for a deeper, more symbolic association to be formed with brands (Aaker 1997; Keller 2003). For instance, while some brands manage to forge primarily utilitarian or product-based interactions with consumers, others such as Apple, Tide, and Coca Cola may create more symbolic, emotional relationships with consumers. Fournier (1998) highlights “love” as a recurring theme when individuals

describe their feelings towards certain brands, such as a respondent's "love" for her favorite scents of Opium and Intimate Musk, and another's expressions for her favorite cosmetic brand, Mary Kay.

Coinciding with the depiction of brands as love objects, use of the heart symbol has become commonplace in marketing communication. One popular and pioneering application of love being expressed through the heart symbol is the "I ♥ NY" campaign, which is found ubiquitously printed across souvenirs, t-shirts, mugs, aprons, and bags. The ad campaign slogan, promoting tourism in New York City as well as the state of New York, is read as "I love New York," where love and the symbolic representation of the heart are interchangeable. Associations of love, romance, and partnership were strengthened through the legend of St. Valentine, making the symbol a logo of love. Several brands including Pampers, Diet Pepsi, Heinz, and Intel have used a heart symbol to build on associations of love. The symbol's popularity extends to show fondness and appreciation on social media platforms such as Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram, where the heart icon can be clicked to show high regard for the material shared by other members.

### **The heart as an expression of commitment and sincerity**

Not restricted to just love, but also overlapping with expressions of dedication, emotion and passion, the symbol has been used as a logo by sports brands such as ROXY. Similarly, the National Basketball Association (NBA) champions, Golden State Warriors use the tagline,

“Heart of a Warrior” in their marketing communication that echoes the emotional connection between the team’s players and their fans.

Commonly used as a symbol, the heart can also be referred to as a metaphor that depicts different qualities. Metaphors represent a frequently used approach in advertising that allow communication of indirect claims. Classified as a type of rhetorical figure or artful deviation from expectation, metaphors compare two objects through analogies and state that one object is figuratively like another, even though in reality both objects are quite different from one another (Coulter and Zaltman 1995; McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Stern 1990). Common English phrases such as “learn by heart,” “know in my heart,” and “heartfelt” refer to the heart as a declaration of sincerity and authenticity (Korsmeyer 2011). The phrase “put your heart into it” may be used to describe dedication in sports, activities, or goal setting. Used to encourage effort, a heart symbol is frequently found on treadmills where it may functionally show the heart rate of the person exercising and also becomes a signifier of the exertion being put into the activity.

The scallop-shaped visual of a heart has also become a common depiction of what has been described as the core or essence of something (e.g., heart of the matter, and heart of the city/country). Depicted in advertising by food brands such as David’s Condiments, a red heart is followed by the phrase “made from the heart.” Restaurants such as Pumpernickels incorporate the symbol into their tagline, “we put our heart into everything we make” to emphasize sincerity towards customers. Several coffee shops (The Second Cup, Starbucks, and Aroma) also commonly use the symbol as a form of latte art, to depict effort and dedication, where it is often crafted on individual coffee cups.

## **The heart as an expression of health and well-being**

Historically cultures have been fascinated with the heart and placed it on a pedestal when compared to all other organs. Regarded by Aristotle and Leonardo as the source of life through which all vessels of the body grew, the heart became a symbol of vitality, health, and well-being (Gavin 2014; Kemp 2012). Perceived as the centre of life in ancient Egypt, the heart was the only organ returned to the human body when mummified, perceived to be essential in giving life to the dead in the afterlife (Gavin 2014). The Aztecs followed rituals of human sacrifice where they offered the human heart to their sun gods to sustain life in the universe (Harner 1977).

The heart holds a special disposition where it is both a figurative and literal representation of life. The heart's special place allows it to become representative of symbolic powers that can be associated with life itself. A beating heart depicts health or existence of life, whereas lack of a heart beat literally indicates death (Korsmeyer 2011). Hence, the heart over time came to be a carrier of various human emotions that can be associated with being alive, vibrant, and/or healthy.

Such meaning – being “heart healthy” – appears to motivate use of a heart symbol in the marketing communication of brands such as Cheerios and Quaker Oats, which highlight nutritional benefits as part of their positioning. Such inferences of being healthy may be further supported by the Heart and Stroke Foundation's “Health Check” program, which is a co-branding partnership that has undergone considerable controversy regarding the criteria for obtaining such certification and monetary payments being necessary to obtain the seal of approval (Macdonald and Weeks 2014). Other brands such as Campbell's (soup) use the heart symbol complemented with a “Healthy Request” tagline on brand packaging to signal the



product as a healthy option. Facing pressures from multiple stakeholders, marketers in the food and beverage category have motive for their products to be seen as either health promoting or, at minimum, not harmful to consumers (Sharma et al. 2010; Nestle 2013).

## **Methodology**

Using an interpretive approach based on semiotics and rhetorical analysis, we examine print ads from POM Wonderful, Becel, and Cheerios, where the heart symbol is central to the brand communication of the case illustrations (i.e., the heart is a part of the brand mark). While use of the heart has become commonplace in advertisements, the specific brands were selected due to the role of the symbol in their brand positioning, and their prominence within the food and beverage industry (a sector that faces high level of regulatory challenges in addition to internal marketing pressures). Three advertisements from each brand are analyzed to obtain a greater richness in interpretation.

Originating back to ancient Greece, semiotics was originally used to describe the visible signs in a patient that were necessary to diagnose diseases (Oswald and Mick 2007). The use of symbols to produce meaning is found in the early works of Plato and Aristotle; French linguist, Ferdinand De Saussure formalized the study of signs under semiology (Mick 1986). *Semiotics* refers to the theory of signs: signs and their meanings can be classified into “the signifier,” which is the tangible dimension, and “the signified,” which is the abstract concept of the sign (for a more comprehensive overview of the subject, see Barthes 1964; Mick 1986; Leiss et al. 1990; Anderson et al. 2006; Danesi 2007).

Penn (2000) provides a step-by-step approach to undertake a semiological analysis that starts with choosing material, such as brand communication relevant to the context of research, based on factors such as availability, and the level at which it is open to analysis. Next, the elements within the material, such as images and copy, must be identified and listed along with their literal or denotational meaning. This step is followed by recognizing connotative elements (extended meanings) in the material. Acknowledgment of polysemy is central to this step of the analysis as all elements must be classified as “first level,” based on simple linguistic knowledge, and “second level,” based on interpretation from a social and cultural context. Hence, the analyst(s) must recognize and report the implied meaning of the elements that may exist. The final step involves reporting the findings and results of the analysis.

Rhetoric, meanwhile, is seen as the discipline of argumentation (Eves and Tom 1999) or the art of persuasion (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999), whereas rhetorical figures are devices deviating from reader expectation (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). McQuarrie and Mick (1996) developed a three level taxonomy of rhetorical figures that frequently appear in advertising. While the taxonomy adequately captures verbal figures, Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) developed a classification system based on a scale of complexity and richness, which focuses on differentiation within the type of visual rhetorical figures in advertising. Phillips and McQuarrie’s typology divides the use of rhetorical figures into two categories: visual structure and meaning operations. The latter category of meaning operations holds particular interest for our purposes as elements are based on the polysemy or ambiguity they produce. Through rhetorical figures, advertisers can select from various pictorial elements to generate preferable consumer responses and the heart symbol may be one such element.

## Case 1: POM Wonderful

Produced by a United States based, privately owned manufacturer, POM Wonderful is a brand of pomegranate juice. Positioning itself as an innovative brand, POM Wonderful has kept “high antioxidant” content and “heart health” claims at the center of its marketing claims historically. Launched in novel, vibrant packaging, POM Wonderful’s strategy has focused on educating consumers about the health benefits of pomegranates (Research and Markets 2010).

As seen in Figure 1, the heart symbol is central to the brand’s positioning (i.e., a bright red heart shape is used to replace the letter “O” within the “POM” brand mark). Phillips and McQuarrie’s (2004) typology of visual rhetoric classifies the absence of a letter and its replacement by a symbol as one with the highest complexity within visual structures. Typically, the heart symbol in food and beverage advertising may signify heart health, but may also double here as a signifier of potential love a consumer could feel for the product.

Figure 1 shows three POM Wonderful advertisements discussed further in chronological order (Federal Trade Commission 2013). Central to each advertisement is the placement of the brand’s flagship pomegranate juice packaging. The distinctive and innovative curved shape of the POM bottle anthropomorphizes the product, while serving a functional role of providing a better grip for the product. Marketers are often seen encouraging anthropomorphism or the ability to see humans in non-human forms (Aggarwal 2007). This creates product credibility, allows people to make more sense of the world around them, and develops strong consumer relationships with brands (Guthrie 1993; Fournier 1998). Advertising by POM Wonderful is also attributed with human-like qualities. Red and black packaging draws parallels with human features where a cap resembles a “head,” triangles represent a “face,” and an upper and lower

sphere depict a “torso.” The round spheres also depict two large pomegranates placed on top of one another, supported by anchoring text “pomegranate juice.”

Use of white space and corresponding copy in contrasting bold, black typeface is common in the layout of each advertisement. *White space*, a well-established rhetorical device, refers to the empty space in creative communication and can be used to convey “trustworthiness, modern nature, and refined taste” (Pracejus et al. 2006, p.1). Repetition of the tagline, “The power of pomegranate juice” on all advertisements strengthens retrieval cues for the brand.

Figure 1a attributes life sustaining properties to the product. Packaging content is replaced with blood, essential to vitality. Depicted directly as a blood transfusion device, the product is placed on a stand, replacing blood. While the heart is an essential organ that allows blood circulation through vessels, blood itself provides oxygen and nutrients to the body, required to sustain health. The anchoring tagline “Life Support” strengthens the analogy of juice as blood and seems to propose that the brand may be a solution for serious deficiencies.

Figure 1b depicts brand packaging with a noose (cut or ripped from hanging) around the “neck” of the bottle and is complemented with the copy “Cheat Death” in bold typeface. Several deviations from expectation are observed within the advertisement where death, often a serious subject, is treated light-heartedly and the reader is reminded of its proximity but also reassured that POM Wonderful is a suitable, potential solution. Compounding personifications in the advertisement is the heart symbol within the branding and the deep red liquid in the bottle that substitutes blood. Exaggerated capabilities of the brand may signify that that it contains properties beneficial to health, a chance to extend one’s life span, and even potential immortality. The ad avoids direct claims but uses visuals to create implications that eventually led the

advertisement to be banned in the U.K. by the Advertising Standards Authority on grounds of being misleading and was declared as deceptive in the U.S. by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) (Marketing Week 2009; Lordan 2013).

Figure 1c depicts POM Wonderful “wearing” a red cape on the “shoulders” of the packaging, drawing an inference to popular superhero figures. The connection with superhero abilities is further strengthened through supporting copy, “The Antioxidant Superpower.” The red color of the cape draws a resemblance to the one worn by popular American comic book character, Superman, but also prompts a general association with superheroes. Red may be the color of choice due to aesthetics, but the specific choice can also be attributed to the color’s association with strong emotions, including love, across multiple cultures (Aslam 2006). Characterized with special or advanced powers that allow them to selflessly help others, superheroes are often described as earthbound gods with unlimited abilities (Reynolds 1992; Coogan 2009). Reference to such special powers is reinforced by supporting copy “Antioxidant superpower.” The depiction of the packaging with a red heart logo as a superpower transfers associated attributes of selfless, savior, or powerful to the product. Additionally, superheroes may be associated with being youthful, energetic, and fun. This allows additional meanings, including good, rescuer, noble, exciting, and caring to be associated with the product.

The brand’s depiction aids in its ability to overcome the adversity of sickness and ill health. Although it may be emphasized that the brand has relied on puffery or exaggerated claims that are literally inconceivable (Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980), it is also apparent from the choice of words, symbols, and context that the brand’s marketing communication aims to persuasively deliver health connotations. Several advertisements with similar analogies have circulated over

time to strengthen and reinforce the link between POM Wonderful and health. However, additional meanings of love for the brand or consumer well-being may also be an interpretation of such strategic advertising.

## **Case 2: Becel**

Becel is a popular brand of margarine offered in Canada and Latin America, while being identified as Flora in some European markets and Promise in the United States (Becel Canada 2014). Marketed by consumer packaged goods giant, Unilever, Becel belongs to a range of products positioned as heart healthy (McCann 1999). High dietary cholesterol found in butter resulted in margarine gaining notable prominence for its comparative benefits, although considerable debate continues over the benefits and harms of consuming either product (Miller 1989; Zock and Katan 1997).

Three Becel advertisements, as seen in Figure 2a, 2b and 2c, are further analyzed. The ad in Figure 2a, released in 2004, takes an approach that builds on fear rather than love (Coloribus 2004). While this advertisement does not specifically use the image of a heart, it does depict the brand's heart health positioning and sets a foundation for subsequent marketing communications that infer a link between the heart symbol and heart health.

Using white space as a rhetorical approach, the advertisement demonstrates a link between health outcomes and food choices. Contrast is drawn between a scalpel and a table knife by being placed next to each other on a table napkin. The napkin and cutlery serve to underline the role of meal decisions on an individual's health. The visual is complemented by a simple yet

bold statement, “How will you approach your heart health?” Lower-case copy makes the statement casual and personalizes it with the use of “you” and “your.” The implication that the right food intake (Becel) may prevent heart surgery is clearly made and the bold assertion unsurprisingly created litigation battles for the brand (Parliament of Canada 2003). Instead of using a prescriptive approach, the brand allows readers to feel that the choice of protecting the functionality of their heart is in their own hands hence empowering them. Above the brand name “Becel,” the logo depicts a person in a running position drawing reference to being active and healthy.

Additional copy next to the logo reiterates nutritional facts and claims that the brand is endorsed by doctors and dietitians, adding authority to its healthy positioning. A link is provided as a call for action to encourage the reader to visit the more copy-intensive website. The campaign’s tagline, “Becel takes your health to heart” plays on the metaphor “take to heart,” which anthropomorphizes the brand as capable of feeling and caring and humanizes the brand as an entity possessing a “heart.” However, another interpretation may be that the brand has properties capable of benefitting heart health.

Becel advertisements commonly draw on interpersonal relationship norms to communicate with its target group. Advertisements displayed in figures 2b and 2c circulated in *Chatelaine* and *Canadian Living*, respectively, and were released as part of the “Cheat on butter” campaign promoting brand variant, Buttery. Strategically, the product is named Buttery, which implies that it is made and tastes like butter. Similar to practices from other margarine brands, steering away from the term “margarine” allows the brand to avoid highlighting that it is an artificial substitute to butter (Goldman and Papson 1996).

Several common elements are communicated within both images, including the Unilever logo placed in the top right corner to provide endorsement from the renowned parent brand. A website link, “becel.ca” is provided that infers Canadian-specific information is available to readers to obtain more information regarding the brand’s heart healthy positioning and larger portfolio of product offerings.

The packaging of Becel depicts two oval figures placed side-by-side outlining the brand name with a figurative heart shape. If referring to Phillips and McQuarrie’s (2004) typology of visual rhetoric, the image falls within the fusion category of visual structures. Even though similarities may be drawn between the image used and a heart, a degree of deliberately created uncertainty still remains in interpretation. Applying the meaning operations dimension, one can deduce the properties of one image onto the other (i.e., the attribution of the heart symbol allows properties of the heart to transfer on to the product).

Anchored in the copy are terms such as “love” and “cheating,” drawing parallels with a love affair. A secondary meaning essential to inferring health is communicated by providing nutritional information: references are made to low saturated fats and a footnote points out lowered risks of heart disease through Becel margarine. The placement of positive nutritional information strategically enables a connection between the brand and health benefits to be made.

The advertisement as seen in Figure 2b was released in 2012 and shows a spoonful of the product melting on pea pods, where margarine, a high calorie product, is strategically paired with vegetables, a healthy dietary choice. Supporting copy in bold, large font, states, “Go ahead, you know you want to,” issuing an invitation to the reader that is both mysterious and indulgent in its tone. The deliberate use of the word “you” personalizes the relevance of the statement and



prompts engagement with the reader. The tagline, “Cheat on butter” gives both butter and margarine human-like qualities, legitimizes that the reader may have a relationship with both products, and creates an analogy of having an illicit affair (Fournier [1998] has identified “secret affairs” as a consumer-brand relationship form).

Figure 2c represents an advertisement released in 2014 that depicts the product partially melted on mashed potatoes. The supporting copy, “What happens in the bowl, stays in the bowl,” draws an analogy with the popular tourism slogan for the city of Las Vegas (i.e., “What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas”). The invitation to “cheat” on butter is again proposed, but the comparison with Las Vegas in this instance encourages indulgence on the part of the consumer. The original tourism campaign for Las Vegas, popularly known as “Sin City,” reflected consumer feedback about the freedom the destination provided to indulge in activities that would not be undertaken for numerous reasons when at home (Shankman 2013). The comparison between butter and Becel may aim to generate trial for the brand by playing on the consumer’s sense of freedom and fun.

Cheating or affairs in the context of interpersonal relationships may also be a result of discontentment in the current state of a relationship or unhappiness with the behavior of an existing partner. In other situations, such temptation might reflect that one person is deemed better than an existing partner and create a desire to have an affair. Using either analogy allows Becel to depict how they may be the preferred partner of choice to form a distinct relationship with (compared to butter). The advertisement reaches out to the target reader on a personal level, draws an analogy to a sensitive and emotional subject of illicit relationships, while playfully

delivering the message that Becel is supposedly superior and healthier than the reader's likely current and existing product choice of butter.

### **Case 3: Cheerios**

Headquartered in the United States, General Mills is a leading manufacturer of branded consumer foods including well-known cereal brand, Cheerios. General Mills also partners with consumer foods company, Nestle to market cereals in another 130 countries outside of North America (General Mills 2016). Marketed as a healthy breakfast and snack time option, Cheerios has depicted the heart in various advertisements and its brand packaging over time alongside references to being a heart healthy consumption choice. Cheerios provide an interesting illustration as the brand moves between meanings of love and health and can blur the distinction between the two meanings. Two print advertisements and brand packaging are appended as figure 3a, 3b and 3c, which are designed by the official advertising agency for the brand, Saatchi & Saatchi. Coining the term "Lovemarks," Roberts, chairman of Saatchi & Saatchi, highlights how Cheerios moved to the status of a Lovemark due to its ability to create an emotional and intimate connection with consumers (Roberts 2004).

Figure 3a shows an advertisement titled "Life preserver," released in 1999 (Coloribus 1999). Set against a white background, the imagery demonstrates white space and aesthetic contrast, while symbolizing honesty, trust, and openness. The visual depicts a single piece of the cereal (or what we refer to as an "o" in the following description) that is attached to one end of a loose string. Taken at face value the simple visual appears to be an anomaly. However, acknowledging advertising images as a form of rhetoric where visuals can be seen as

representing abstractions, concepts, and metaphors that can create an argument (Scott 1994), we observe an analogy to a life preserver.

The “o” represents an inflatable, circular ring of a life preserver while the string resembles the lifeline (rope) with which the preserver is connected. While there are multiple objects that are categorized as life preservers such as life jackets, belts, and flotation suits, the advertisement creates an analogy with a life ring (also sometimes referred to as a life donut). As a buoyant device, a life ring can be thrown out to those in need of assistance by allowing flotation, and hence prevent drowning. Commercial vessels are often required to keep accessible life rings on board that have already been attached with a line so that they can be readily used when in need. The ring depicted in the advertisement is shown to be in motion, appearing to being thrown out to a person drowning and signifies Cheerios as a rescuer and the consumer (perhaps due to current food choices) in need of being rescued. Positioning itself as a savior, the depiction displays a sense of urgency, reaching out to a drowning person.

The visual is supported by the simple yet powerful line, “Think of them as little life preservers,” reinforcing the brand’s depiction as an emancipator that will save the consumer’s health from its (assumed) precarious state. The ad copy further elaborates and provides support for such a claim by stating, “Cheerios has just been shown to help reduce cholesterol.” Inferring that potentially reduced cholesterol by Cheerios consumption will result in survival. Statistics from a study follow as support. It is only at the end of the paragraph that the copy states a minimal requirement of three cups of the cereal every day and provides no disclaimer regarding supporting food or exercise choices.

The ad displays informality in intonation through use of puns, “Eat to your heart’s content,” and “no fear of going overboard.” Based on McQuarrie and Mick’s taxonomy (1996), the expressions are tropes, puns, and destabilization. While the first expression draws links with previously used terms (cholesterol), it also infers properties of the heart image apparent on the product shot. The use of the term “overboard” in the latter expression is reiterated with the analogy of a life preserver in the visual imagery. One interpretation that can be made is that consumers can now eat without worrying about the consequences of cholesterol and its potential dangers (health consequences). Given the multiple meanings that can be associated with the puns, another interpretation can be connecting the meanings of a heart and infer that eating more Cheerios can actually benefit heart health.

The tagline at the end of the text, “1 and only Cheerios” uses self-referencing as a technique to enhance memorability of slogans in advertising (Singleton 2003) and the repetition of the copy on other media touch points generates reinforcement for the brand. The bottom corner of the advertisement depicts a small but vibrant visual of the Cheerios packaging.

Figure 3b depicts a Cheerios advertisement titled “Rescue” that circulated in 2008 and follows a similar theme to figure 3a with the important exclusion of explicit cholesterol claims (Coloribus 2008). The visual depicts a single Cheerios “o” as a life preserver floating and making its way through waves and foam, where milk is depicted as a large body of water (ocean/sea). Simple but powerful copy states, “Breakfast saves. Cheerios,” which reiterates the theme of rescue and saving, but can be more generalized and extend to a variety of breakfast options. Limited branding has been used in the advertisement with the actual product and brand name being key reminders for the brand. The advertisement does not depict the brand packaging

with a heart symbol, but uses a similar approach to figure 3a by depicting Cheerios as the rescuer and the consumer as the one being rescued, reinforcing the brand's health-based positioning.

Figure 3c shows the Cheerios packaging design for the parent brand, which we highlight for several reasons. First, we acknowledge that packaging plays an important role in marketing communication and delivering brand messages. Second, Cheerios uses product shots for most advertisements making it one of the core elements for our analysis. Lastly, the brand's inference to multiple meanings of the heart symbol depicted on its packaging design displays polysemy and warrants a deeper consideration.

Bold branding for "Cheerios" stands out against a vibrant yellow background. A single "o" or puffed cereal is placed on the letter "i" and can be seen as replacement within the visual rhetoric classification (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004). Lower case letters in the branding add to familiarity and approachability. Shades of yellow and red are incorporated across the packaging building on strong cultural associations of happiness, good taste, and love (Aslam 2006).

Cheerios has been a strong proponent of health benefits of oats consumption and incorporates cholesterol reduction and heart healthy messages in its positioning. In 1996 the brand introduced a heart shaped bowl on its package design to strengthen love and health associations (Klara 2015). The replacement of a standard circular bowl with the rhetorical figure of a heart shape deviates from expectations and sends out messages of the cereal bowl representing love and goodness. However, combined with low cholesterol and heart claims, the visual reinforces the brand's health positioning. Red sliced strawberries add color to the visual and strengthen associations with natural and healthy, though the actual product ingredients do not include the strawberries.

Love as a connotation of the symbol may be inferred not only through the brand packaging but also its television commercials. Popular campaigns for the brand focus on Cheerios bringing families together and enhancing bonds of love between them. One advertisement depicting an inter-racial family shows a daughter expressing her love for her father by literally pouring Cheerios over his heart to make him healthier while in another commercial they use Cheerios to communicate the arrival of new family members. Another recent “Love to Connect” campaign (The Cheerios Effect 2014) generates a secondary meaning where the words “love” and “connect” build on meanings of the heart symbol. The campaign focuses on families sharing their stories of love and connection that closes with the tagline “we all love to connect. That’s the Cheerios effect.” The play on different implications of a heart symbol, combined with the communication of heart health and cholesterol reduction, allows health as well as love, emotions, connections, and relationships to emerge as meaning transferred through the brand’s marketing communication.

## **Discussion**

While our focus has been on three specific brands, we recognize that the use of a heart as a polysemic tool is not limited to them, compounding our interest in the area. Some additional food and beverage brands that have used the symbol include Campbell’s, McDonald’s, Starbucks, Heinz, Quaker Oats, Country Harvest, Diet Pepsi, Real Bubbly, David’s Condiments, and Bisquick. Rising dietary-related diseases are a major health concern and have increased pressure on advertisers to make responsible claims when marketing food and beverage products.

In the current dynamic marketing environment, advertisements are often found to highlight the benefits of certain ingredients while simultaneously disregarding the potential negative health consequences of the same product. For example, several orange juice brands highlight the presence of vitamin C, yet skillfully avoid mentioning the product's excessive sugar content. As marketers adopt creative methods to market brands within the food industry (Nestle 2013; Statistics Canada 2015), we assert that purposeful polysemy is another strategic yet crafty tactic that allows health assertions while circumventing policy stipulations. In this discussion section, we now turn our attention to self-regulation and policy implications, legal repercussions and controversies, as well as the aesthetics of the heart symbol.

### **Policy Implications and Self-Regulation**

Use of the heart symbol in marketing communication has not been without attention from policy makers. Given the potential of the heart to carry health connotations, both U.S. and Canadian policy specifies acceptable uses of the symbol for the food industry's brand communication. However, the policies do not entirely help clarify the ambiguity or confusion in interpretation that may occur through the depiction of polysemic symbols. Pertaining directly to heart references, U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Code of Federal Regulations specifies that any claim on the labeling of food products incorporating the term "heart" or a "heart symbol," is considered a health claim and must provide substantial evidence in close proximity to support such a claim (U.S Food and Drug Administration 2016). Despite explicit guidelines, it appears that several of the brands discussed do not comply with these policy stipulations, and questions emerge regarding policy implementation and enforcement.

On the other hand, Canadian policy guidelines clearly identify the heart symbol and its usage, but simultaneously seem to invite the circumvention of policy through the use of purposeful polysemy. For example, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) states that it is:

“Generally not acceptable to use heart symbols and heart healthy claims to describe a food or food choice... on labels, menus or in advertising. The combined use may create an erroneous impression that consuming a single food or menu selection will provide heart health or prevent heart disease” (CFIA 2014).

However, clearly identified exceptions to this policy point to use of the heart symbol being acceptable where it is accompanied with health claims or is depicted as a symbol of affection. This latter exception makes the polysemic properties of the symbol particularly important. The inherent polysemy of a heart allows brands to shift between dominant and secondary meanings as required. For example, in recent campaigns Cheerios depict how the product in milk tends to float towards each other and uses this phenomenon to create a metaphor for “love” itself. The brand analogizes the connection as human tendency through the phrase, “we all love to connect... that’s the Cheerios Effect.” However, historically the brand has also used messages of health through statements such as “rich in fibre” and “oats may lower cholesterol.” The use of a heart symbol on brand communication through both contexts of love and health has been continuous and consistent. Use of purposeful polysemy has allowed the brand to shift between emphasizing heart health, love, and connection. Such shifts within meaning can present considerable challenges as attempts are made to enforce policy.



Becel is another example that traditionally promoted heart health by placing emphasis on brand functionality. Recently, the brand shifted emphasis to an emotional aspect of the heart by creating analogies with human relationships and showcasing baking and cooking (with Becel) as a way to express emotions from the heart (Harris 2016). However, the brand has historically promoted “heart health” despite being cognizant of regulatory guidelines. A case study from 1999, regarding the advertising success of the brand’s “Young at Heart” campaign, reveals how marketers behind the brand managed to find a crafty way to work around regulatory structures. The advertising agency documents:

“Because we focused on Becel’s emotional benefits (young at heart), rather than the heart health message, the regulatory boards could no longer keep Becel off TV—and we could still use print to deliver the heart health messages not possible on TV” (McCann 1999).

Communication by brands, such as the examples discussed in this paper, may often circumvent the spirit of policy but not directly defy legal regulations. However, creative marketing techniques such as purposeful polysemy still raise considerable challenges in upholding ethical standards of advertising. In practice, ethics require that decisions be made by distinguishing between “right” and “wrong,” on the basis of moral principles rather than merely adhering to the law. Such moral considerations have led, in part, to recognizing the need for industry to self-regulate and accordingly develop voluntary codes of conduct (Murphy 1998).

Several self-regulatory codes exist such as those put forward by the National Advertising Review in the U.S. and Advertising Standards Canada in Canada (International Chamber of Commerce 2014). The key moral principles identified by these divisions to uphold advertising ethics include being truthful, honest, decent, and legal in advertising approaches (International

Chamber of Commerce 2014). Though the existence of such codes prompt a better understanding of ethical expectations and standards, the use of puffery in advertising (i.e., subjective opinion and obvious exaggeration), for example, challenges what advertising is deemed to be “truthful” (Hoffman 2006).

Brand communication analyzed in this paper clearly uses puffery to enhance their brand message. POM Wonderful advertising, for example, can be seen as playfully exaggerated and it may be argued that the placement of a superhero cape or noose around the product would not be seen as a literal depiction by consumers. Similarly, ordinary consumers are not expected to have “affairs” with margarine or use Cheerios for rescue missions. Obvious use of puffery allows these brands to remain within policy boundaries, but seemingly infringes upon the expectation of advertising to be truthful as defined in self-regulatory codes. The craftiness of such communication continues to raise several questions in the realm of marketing ethics. Use of the heart combined with exaggerated depictions with respect to health claims and benefits may have a persuasive connotation attached to it without being accurate. Whether puffery is used to enhance humor or to state creatively what otherwise would not be possible, it allows brands to sidestep legal restrictions.

### **Legal Repercussions and Controversy**

Despite ethical and legal requirements regarding advertising not always being in agreement, brands in the food and beverage industries remain scrutinized for their marketing communication. Deception and the need for truth in advertising has been an area of special

focus that opens a larger debate requiring a differentiation between what should ethically be done compared to what is required by law (Treise et al. 1994). While we discuss ethics of using purposeful polysemy in brand communication, another major theme that emerges from the analyzed cases is related to the legal implications of using health messages in communication.

All three brands, POM Wonderful, Cheerios, and Becel, have at some point faced litigation and scrutiny based on their advertising claims. Bold assertions regarding POM Wonderful's supposed ability to fight diseases, including heart illnesses and prostate cancer, resulted in the FTC prohibiting the brand from making disease-related claims unless results from clinical trials were presented as evidence (McCormick 2013). At the height of a trial with the FTC, the brand used some crafty communication by picking words from the ongoing trial and playing on them as endorsement instead of criticism (Goldstein 2015). Advertisements were adapted to include claims such as "...with health promoting characteristics – FTC Judge," and were supported by a product shot. However, losing the trial forced the brand to concede and remove direct health claims from their advertising (Goldstein 2015).

Becel, meanwhile, faced a court battle where a Quebec judge and later the Supreme Court of Canada prohibited the brand from using the term "buttery" on its packaging and advertising, as it drew inferences to being a dairy product. Another key point of contention for Becel's marketing communication has pertained to the depiction of a "Health Check" stamp of approval from the non-profit organization, Heart and Stroke Foundation. Several debates continue to take place regarding the health benefits (if any) of margarine, and whether consumers are worse off when they substitute dairy products such as butter for the product (Miller 1989; Lackland and Wheeler 1990; Zock and Katan 1997). Despite these disputes, the Heart and Stroke Foundation's

endorsement may serve to strengthen heart health associations for the brand. According to the Foundation, the stamp signifies that the product may be beneficial in reducing the risk of diseases related to the heart and has received the Foundation's approval (Heart and Stroke Foundation 2008). Unsurprisingly, various controversies followed the issuing of such a stamp including CBC's report on the Foundation's poor choice of selling the use of the approval stamp to companies and certifying fast food products, thus bringing into question the authenticity of such a stamp on brand packaging (CBC 2008).

The partnership between a non-profit organization and a company that has increasing shareholder profit at the core of its functions led to several controversies including Canadian director and actor, Sarah Polley, removing her name from a Becel sponsored film that supported the Heart and Stroke Foundation, which was scheduled to show at the Oscars (Macdonald 2010). After severe criticism and claims of being misleading, the program was disbanded.

Also experiencing regulatory repercussions, General Mills was forced by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to remove unsubstantiated health claims. In 2009, Cheerios was asked to remove the claim that consumption of its product lowered cholesterol by 4% in six weeks (Schultz 2011). The brand responded by replacing the claim with a more vague statement on the potential of oats to lower cholesterol and retained the heart symbol in its packaging design.

The cases identified raise discussion and concerns over the implications of using polysemic health messages. Although debate may emerge regarding the intention of the advertiser or whether the claims in question are actually misleading or deceptive, it is evident that the advertising and subsequent impact warrants more attention.

## **Aesthetics of the Heart Symbol**

Though not central to our research purpose, discussion about the aesthetics of the heart symbol also raises interesting questions about “truthful” and accurate representation. Despite the heart’s symbolic representation of love, commitment, and health, as an organ of the body in its literal form, it can elicit disgust and horror, and generate contrasting meanings (Korsmeyer 2011). Fashion brand, Benetton illustrates this contrast in its advertising by depicting literal hearts in an attempt to shock readers and send a message that counters racism (Figure 4). A visible grotesqueness is observed with depiction of the actual organ, which contrasts with more prevailing meanings of the heart, including being a sustainer of life. Obviously, most food and beverage brands are associated with the positive figurative symbol as opposed to its literal form. Disparities and metaphors that emerge through the symbol allow further insight into why it has, over time, come to be regarded as an iconic image that can depict verbose situations in a succinct and impactful manner.

## **Conclusion**

We have illustrated purposeful polysemy through use of the heart symbol. Being an inherent symbol of life and wellness, we show that the heart can be used to promote symbolic messages of health, in addition to communicating love for a product and encouraging consumer-brand relationships. Use of the symbol facilitates brands being able to overcome regulatory scrutiny that would be unlikely if using direct verbal health claims. Nevertheless, the use of purposeful polysemy raises a number of ethical concerns and challenges. The polysemic nature of the heart enables brands to build dominant health associations while retaining secondary connotations that

can be pointed to if facing allegations of contradicting regulatory policies. In other words, the heart symbol can provide health cues that are important to a brand's positioning while its polysemic meanings become a powerful alibi once companies face legal scrutiny. However, regardless of legal outcomes, use of the symbol can still be deemed as pushing ethical boundaries as marketing communication defies the "spirit" of policy.

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## Figures

Figure 1: POM Wonderful

1a



1b



1c





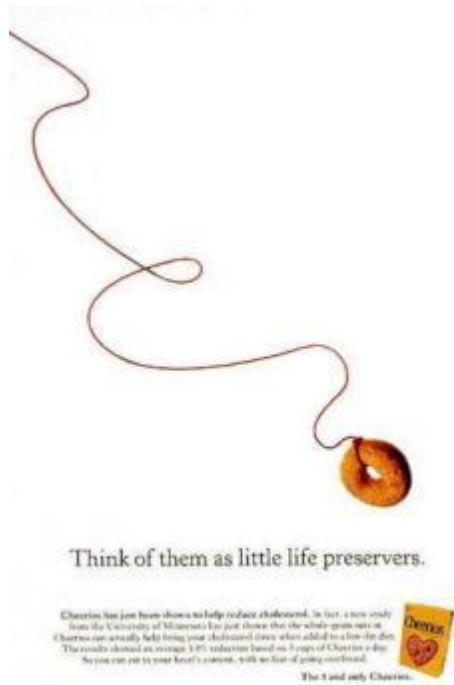
**2a**





**Figure 3: Cheerios**

**3a**



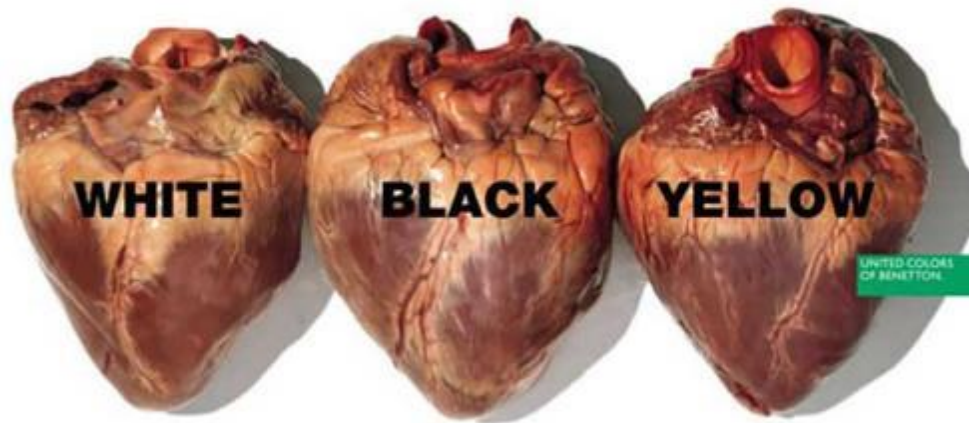
**3b**



**3c**



**Figure 4: United Colors of Benetton**



## **Chapter 3:**

# **The Heart of the Matter: An Experimental Investigation of Purposeful Polysemy in Food Marketing Communication**

Marketers often make inferences regarding product benefits in marketing communication rather than stating claims explicitly. Such indirect approaches are frequently seen in the marketing communication of controversial products or taboo subject matters that require more sensitivity due to cultural, political, or regulatory environments. For example, drugs such as Viagra, Cialis, and Levitra, in the erectile dysfunction product category, use innuendos in their advertising to infer product benefits while simultaneously enabling communication with mass audiences during prime time, as observed with the broadcast of the Super Bowl (Elliot 2004). Additionally, advertisements promoting casinos and gambling might perpetuate beliefs in luck, chance, and superstition by depicting symbols, such as horseshoes, while avoiding use of explicit claims that are more likely to undergo regulatory scrutiny.

There are varied advertising and creative tools available to marketers that can enable communication about taboo products or assist with overcoming regulatory restrictions they face. One such tool is purposeful polysemy, with *polysemy* referring to multiplicity in interpretation of text or image depending on the context, individual worldview, timing, and other circumstances (Condit 1989). As a starting point, all words and symbols can be said to be polysemic depending on the readers' socio-cultural background (McCracken 1986); the color, red, for example, may be seen as representative of luck, love, happiness, jealousy, adventure, masculinity, patriotism, and so on depending on the cultural context (Aslam 2006). With purposeful polysemy, however,

strategically there is meant to be a dominant meaning while other secondary or tertiary meanings may also be drawn from the word or image in question (Ceccarelli 1998). Purposeful polysemy occurs when multiple interpretations are deliberately created to achieve varying objectives including economic, targeting, and positioning goals (Eisenberg 1984; Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson 2010). While the extant literature discusses several of these objectives in depth, the potential of purposeful polysemy to enable the circumvention of policy appears to be an overlooked function.

Specific to the food and beverage sector, where consumption choices can have a notable impact on health, there is increased interest on industry marketing practices by practitioners, regulators, and consumers alike (Nestle 2013; Schlosser 2012). In an environment where consumers become more conscious about their consumption choices and regulators simultaneously increase their scrutiny towards marketing and advertising claims, marketers may find motive in moving away from straightforward factual assertions and adopt creative techniques such as purposeful polysemy. In this paper, we examine whether consumers perceive a polysemic symbol as having multiple interpretations within the food product category. Moreover, we examine whether such polysemic messages on food packaging are likely to prompt health-based assessments of a product. First, we provide an overview of polysemy conceptually. Next, we demonstrate polysemy by focusing on use of a heart symbol, which historically and culturally has been embedded with multiple meanings such as love, health, passion, jealousy, and life. We then discuss how such a polysemic element can enable marketers to infer meanings of being heart-healthy, yet also point to the symbol being an expression of love if facing regulatory scrutiny.

## Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

*Strategic ambiguity* is a related concept to purposeful polysemy that is described as deliberate vagueness (Lagerwerf 2002; Eisenberg 1984). In many cases, polysemy is demonstrated by the use of rhetorical figures (i.e., ‘artful deviations from expectation’), where polysemy itself is classified as a rhetorical tool (McQuarrie and Mick 1992). Rhetoric refers to the art of persuasion, which is regarded as an important objective of marketing communication. Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) have previously recognized and highlighted that rhetorical figures in advertising allow opinions to be expressed and accepted that would otherwise cause dispute or controversy. For example, Tropicana orange juice packaging depicts a straw directly inserted into an orange with an implication being that drinking the juice is equivalent to consuming an orange. Making such an explicit assertion, however, would likely undergo immediate scrutiny given the nutritional values are not equivalent (e.g., the fiber levels found in an orange are not present in equivalent quantities in juice).

For the purposes of our paper, we use the commonplace red, scallop-shaped heart symbol to demonstrate polysemy. Over time the symbol has evolved to represent several meanings beyond its literal role as an organ (Kemp 2012). Several brands incorporate the symbol in their marketing communication, including Pepsi, Intel, Pampers, Campbell’s, Cheerios, POM Wonderful, Bisquick, Kashi, and Becel. Though embedded with several meanings such as passion, jealousy, life, sincerity, and commitment, we focus on two dominant meanings of the symbol, love and health, which are particularly relevant to our discussion on polysemy within the food and beverage sector and its potential role for circumventing policy.

Anchoring or explanatory signals in marketing communication are often used to guide intended interpretation from the reader. Verbal anchoring (e.g., the use of a tagline) is one such technique that allows consumers to more easily understand images and store them in memory while reducing the amount of interpretation that is required (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). The likeability and effectiveness of advertising is often determined by its comprehensibility (Enschoot, Renske, and Hoeken 2015). When advertisements create confusion or complexity that cannot be resolved by the reader, the result is negative effects on likeability of the communication, and take away from the advertiser's objectives (Phillips 2000; Lagerwerf, Hooijdonk, and Korenberg 2012). Verbal anchoring enables the advertiser to ground rhetorical figures by allowing the audience to arrive at intended meanings while retaining a certain amount of openness in interpretation. By enhancing comprehension, anchoring cues can prompt product favorability and liking towards marketing communication from the reader (Phillips 2000; Chang and Lee 2009).

Additionally, messages that use verbal arguments (copy) to support visual metaphors tend to be more persuasive as they mobilize cognitive responses and help recipients create better structure to organize the messages than literal statements would alone (Mio 1996; Jeong 2008). Anchoring cues such as headlines positively influence beliefs regarding key benefits of a product and in turn preferences for the product (Bergkvist, Eiderbäck, and Palombo 2012). In practice, brands often accompany polysemic visuals with anchoring cues. Quaker Oats, for example, uses the heart symbol on its packaging with a simple supporting statement "Heart Healthy" that serves to anchor the meaning that is most likely to be derived from the symbol. For the heart symbol, depending on the supporting copy, image, or guiding cues provided, the heart can be

representative of health or love. Hence, as a first step to demonstrate polysemy using the heart symbol, we predict that:

**H1a: Brands using a heart symbol framed within the context of health, compared to those framed in the context of love or no heart symbol, will be perceived as being healthier.**

**H1b: Brands using a heart symbol framed within the context of love, compared to those framed in the context of health or no heart symbol, will be perceived as being more loving/caring.**

## **Study 1**

In all subsequent studies we used the heart symbol within stimuli to represent polysemy. The goal of the first study was to investigate if the heart was polysemic in meaning and if the dominant meaning reflected the anchoring of messages (i.e., the heart as representative of health when anchored in the context of health, and love when anchored in the context of love).

### *Design and Participants*

The first study was designed as a single factor between-subjects design with four levels (Heart-health vs. Heart-love vs. Plain-heart-no anchoring vs. No-heart). The necessary sample size was calculated in G-Power using a medium effect size of .25, a power of .80 and an  $\alpha$  of .05. The recommended sample size was 180 and after adjusting for missing data, the usable sample consisted of a total of 176 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21$ , 55% females) undergraduate university students that

participated for class credit. Participants provided consent and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

### *Stimuli*

Participants were shown brand packaging for a fictitious bread brand called Sunrise. A fictitious brand was used to try to mitigate confounding effects due to existing or past consumer perceptions regarding the brand. The main difference in stimuli in each condition was the use of a heart symbol and the accompanying claim. In the heart-health condition, a heart symbol was complemented with a “heart healthy” message, the heart-love condition used a heart symbol with a “lots of love” message, the plain-heart condition had no accompanying message, and the control condition used neither a heart symbol nor an accompanying message (See figure 1).

Insert figure 1 about here

### *Procedure*

The participants in each condition were shown corresponding stimuli and presented with a questionnaire where they responded to item measures of attitudes towards health and love perceptions of the brand on a 7-point Likert scale (with strongly disagree=1 and strongly agree=7). Items measuring attitudes towards health included statements such as “I think this brand is good for my heart health” and “I think this brand is heart friendly.” Items measuring attitudes towards love included statements such as “I think this brand can figuratively be described as being caring” and “I think this brand contains love.”



Since items measuring different constructs were adopted from the extant literature, it was important to test for internal consistency (Kozup, Kreyer and Burton 2003; Fuchs, Schreier and Osselaer 2015; Moorman 1990; Van Trijp and Van der Lans 2007). We used the generally accepted Cronbach's alpha being greater than .7 as a reflection of good reliability of scale (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). Using this evaluation, responses from items measuring health (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ) and love (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ) were summed and averaged for each construct. As suggested by Gliem and Gliem (2003), items that had an inter-item correlation higher than .4 and improved the overall Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value were retained. Once completing such questionnaire items, participants were then asked to complete basic demographic questions and thanked for their participation.

### *Results and Discussion*

A one-way ANOVA was used to examine effects of a heart symbol on attitudes towards health and love. It was found that the heart symbol significantly affected attitudes towards health ( $F(3, 172) = 3.82, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$ ) with 6.3% variability in the dependent measure of health being explained by the heart symbol. Attitudes towards love were also found to be significant ( $F(3, 172) = 6.69, p < .01, \eta^2 = .10$ ) with 10.5% variability in the dependent variable being explained by the heart symbol.

To further understand the between-group differences, multiple comparisons using Tukey's HSD test were conducted. For attitudes towards health, the heart-health condition ( $M = 4.36, SD = 1.22$ ) was found to be significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from the heart-love condition

( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) and the plain-heart condition ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ), but not the no-heart condition ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ , ns).

For attitudes towards love, the heart-love condition ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) was found to be significantly different ( $p < .01$ ) from the heart-health condition ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) and the no-heart condition ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), but not the plain-heart condition ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ , ns).

Results provide support that polysemic symbols can guide reader interpretation when supported with anchoring cues. Since the heart symbol is embedded with several meanings, if marketers use the symbol in the context of health, the brand is subsequently likely to be perceived as healthier as compared to a brand not using such cues. The same holds for framing in the context of love and subsequent perceptions created.

When accompanying contextual cues are provided, such as a health message compared to no verbal anchoring, the meaning of a polysemic symbol will largely reflect the cue provided (i.e., health perception). At the same time, when no cue is provided, readers may interpret the symbol with different meanings. In this case, the heart symbol without any anchoring is largely seen as having love-based meaning.

The simple presence of a heart symbol without any contextual cues ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ), compared to the no-heart condition ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), did not create any significant differences on perceptions of health. Similarly, a heart symbol without any contextual cues ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ), compared to the no-heart condition ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), revealed no significant differences on perceptions of love. One reason for this may be that being an element

that has historically and socially evolved to being representative of love, health, and other meanings, marketers would need to guide readers with cues to achieve desired positioning. When reviewing several products from the food sector using a heart symbol, one can see that accompanying cues are often provided to guide consumers (e.g., Campbell's soup: healthy request; Quaker oats: lowers cholesterol; and Bisquick: heart smart).

Our subsequent study and discussion focus on examining if using strategic polysemic messages on food packaging is likely to prompt health-based assessments of a product.

## **Study 2**

In Study 2, continuing with the heart symbol as a demonstration of polysemy, we look at whether consumers infer that a product with a heart symbol is healthier than a product with no such symbol, even when being presented with explicit nutritional information. In such circumstances, the use of purposeful polysemy may have undesirable outcomes from a consumer protection standpoint as it can facilitate the communication of health inferences in the absence of substantiating product attributes. Moreover, consumers may acquire products with the perception that they are a comparatively healthy choice when, in fact, they are not.

Indeed, consumers are often faced with a need to balance and compensate for their choices when making purchases. This balancing act is especially apparent when considering food choices given the implications on individuals' well-being, health, weight, and so on. One example pertains to decisions between products differing in calories and indulgence (e.g., salad vs. fries). Chernev and Gal (2010) find that consumers underestimate calorie content when

evaluating a combination of healthy and indulgent food choices. Dhar and Simonson (1999) show how consumers balance conflicting food choices such that they may choose a healthy main course and pair it with an unhealthy side or dessert. Similarly, Ramanathan and Williams (2007) found that consumers balance decisions by making non-hedonic food choices to compensate for prior indulgent ones.

In the context of polysemy, this raises the question of how consumers balance decisions when presented with products strategically positioned as having health benefits (e.g., placement of a heart symbol in marketing communication). Ford and colleagues (1996) found that consumers are able to examine nutritional information independent of health claims made on product packaging. The health claims they examined in their studies on unhealthy nutritional information were directly contradicting front of packaging claims (e.g., a low in cholesterol claim paired with a high fat/high sodium level in the nutritional label, where high fat or sodium directly conflict with a heart health claim). Roe, Levy, and Derby (1999), meanwhile, found that presence of health claims led consumers to truncate their information search to the front panel and view products with such claims more positively.

Our second study extends these findings by exploring consumer evaluations when presented with a polysemic message that is complemented with indirect favorable or unfavorable nutritional information. We continue using the heart as a polysemic symbol and *indirect* refers to information that does not obviously conflict with heart-health claims (e.g., pairing a heart symbol with high sugar content where high sugar is likely to be considered unhealthy but not in direct contradiction with heart-related health like salt or cholesterol content). Consistent with previous research, it is expected that the presence of a heart symbol with nutritional information provided

will result in attention being placed on nutritional facts. However, if attention is paid to nutrition facts, then this effect should be stronger for favorable indirect information (low sugar) compared to unfavorable indirect information (high sugar). Hence it is predicted that:

**H2a: The effect of a heart symbol (present vs. absent) on consumer evaluations of product healthiness will be contingent on the presence of indirect nutritional information. In particular, consumer evaluations will be more positive for favorable indirect nutritional information (low sugar) compared to unfavorable indirect nutritional information (high sugar).**

Previous research suggests that consumers balance their decision-making (Ford et al. 1996; Roe, Levy, and Derby 1999). Thus, if consumers perceive the heart symbol as healthy, these perceptions should hold even when unfavorable nutritional information is presented. It is then predicted that:

**H2b: The presence of a heart symbol with unfavorable nutritional information (high sugar) will still result in more positive evaluations of product healthiness compared to no heart symbol with unfavorable nutritional information (high sugar).**

Finally, it is also expected that the presence of a heart symbol will result in more positive attitudes towards a product than when no heart symbol is present.

**H2c: The presence of a heart symbol on product packaging with favorable nutrition information (low sugar) will result in more positive attitudes towards a product than when no heart symbol with favorable nutrition information (low sugar) is present.**

### *Pretest*

A pretest was conducted prior to study 2 with the main goal of understanding consumer perception of high and low sugar content so that stimuli developed was realistic. A total of 76 participants were asked to indicate in grams and percentage sugar content what they felt was high for one slice of bread weighing 34 g. Answers showed extreme variability as well as several responses of “do not know,” indicating a general lack of awareness concerning appropriate sugar content. The average sugar content found to be high was at 11 g and 8%, thus the manipulated values presented as stimuli were derived from this finding (i.e., High Sugar = 20 g, Low Sugar = 1 g).

### *Design and Participants*

The second study used a between subjects 3 (Heart-Health vs. Plain-Heart vs. Control: No-Heart) X 2 (Low Sugar vs. High Sugar) experimental design. Sample size was calculated using G-Power software with a medium effect size of .25, a power of .80, and an  $\alpha$  of .05. The recommended sample size was 128 and a total of 170 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19$ , 33% females) undergraduate university students were recruited as participants. Participants provided consent and were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions.

### *Stimuli*

Similar to study 1, brand packaging for a fictitious bread brand called Sunrise was used and variations of the heart symbol (with context, without context, and no symbol) were presented on the front panel. A back panel including nutritional information was also presented and shown as

stimuli (see figure 2). The nutritional panel information was consistent with average nutritional information provided on bread brands available in the market with the exception of sugar content. Two manipulations of sugar content were created in accordance with the pretest results.

Insert figure 2 about here

### *Procedure*

The participants in each condition were shown corresponding stimuli and presented with a questionnaire where they responded to item measures of attitudes towards the healthiness of the product on a 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree=1 and strongly agree=7). Items measuring attitudes towards health were kept the same as study 1. Attitudes toward the product were also measured and statements such as “How appealing is this brand?” and “How much do you like this brand?” were adapted from existing scales and included in the questionnaire (Spears and Singh 2004). Responses from items measuring attitudes toward product (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .90$ ) were averaged and items retained had an inter-item correlation higher than .4, and inclusion of these items improved overall Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  value. Once completing such questionnaire items, participants were then asked to complete basic demographic questions and thanked for their participation.

### *Results and Discussion*

A two-way ANOVA was conducted that examined the effect of a heart symbol and favorable or unfavorable sugar levels (Heart x Sugar) on health and product perceptions. There was no significant main effect of the heart symbol ( $F(2,164) = .01, p > .05, \eta^2 = .00$ ) or sugar ( $F(1,164)$

= .59,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ ). However, there was significant interaction between the effects of a heart symbol and sugar levels on health perceptions, ( $F(2,164)=3.325$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). Figure 3 shows that the effect of the heart symbol on health perceptions depends on the level of sugar. While there were no significant differences in the control and plain heart conditions, it was found that the heart symbol with context was perceived as healthier at a lower level of sugar than a higher level of sugar.

Insert figure 3 about here

This is further clarified in figure 4 that displays the means for each condition. Significant differences are observed in the heart healthy/low sugar condition ( $M= 4.86$ ,  $SD=1.51$ ) compared to the heart healthy/high sugar condition ( $M=3.96$ ,  $SD=1.66$ ).

Insert figure 4 about here

In summary, this confirms hypothesis 2a that the effect of a heart symbol with contextual cues will be dependent on the nutritional information provided. This also supports previous studies suggesting that in the presence of additional information, consumers view and try to make sense of nutritional content provided. Support is also found that the effect of a heart symbol on consumer evaluations of product healthiness will be more positive for the low sugar condition compared to the high sugar condition. However, this is only found when the heart symbol is supported with contextual cues.

Hypothesis 2b was unsupported. It is interesting to note that marketers strategically providing health cues unsupported with product attributes would be more penalized by



consumers given the negative effects. Hypothesis 2c predicted that the presence of a heart symbol with favorable nutritional information would result in more positive product attitudes towards a product. However, there were no significant main effects for sugar or heart symbol as well as no significant interaction effects for the heart symbol and sugar. Thus, hypothesis 2c was also not supported. Study 1 showed that the heart prompts consumers to think of health, while study 2 shows that additional information such as sugar content influences which products are likely perceived as healthy or unhealthy.

## **General Discussion**

Use of the heart symbol has undergone regulatory scrutiny in food marketing communication. Cheerios, for example, prominently depicts a heart-shaped bowl on its packaging and the symbol has been anchored with low cholesterol messages. Consequently, General Mills, the producer of Cheerios, has faced litigation and been asked to remove explicit claims relating to heart-health (Schultz 2011). Though the claims have been modified, the depiction of a heart symbol persists and is now anchored by a message relating to the potential of oats to reduce cholesterol.

Given the frequent use of symbols such as the heart in marketing communication, policy makers in both the U.S. and Canada have incorporated regulations surrounding its commercial use. The FDA Code of Federal Regulations classifies using the heart symbol on food packaging as equivalent to making a health claim and hence requires appropriate supporting evidence (FDA 2016). The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), meanwhile, clarifies that use of the heart or heart-health claims on food products is generally unacceptable as it may create the impression

that the product can overreach in its heart-health benefits (CFIA 2014). Nevertheless, the Canadian policy appears to invite the use of purposeful polysemy by providing exceptions for the depiction of a heart, indicating it is allowable when used as a symbol of affection.

Given such an exception, brands have often used the heart symbol for dual messages of health and love. Brands like Campbell's soup include a heart symbol and state "Healthy Request" on brand packaging while also including low sodium claims. Cheerios has used the heart logo in conjunction with low cholesterol messages but advertising has also focussed on depicting relationships and affection through the "Cheerios effect" campaign (Cheerios 2014). The polysemy in the nature of the symbol allows brands to easily switch within meanings while taking advantage of the gap in policy. Furthermore, the policy in the U.S. and Canada regarding the heart symbol has remained unchanged during the past several years without taking into account the emergence of marketing communication that seemingly allows the spirit of policy to be evaded.

The apparent use of purposeful polysemy speaks to the craftiness of marketers and the considerable challenges that policy makers face in the development and implementation of public policy. Though we illustrate polysemy through the depiction of a heart symbol, it is important to note that purposeful polysemy is applicable to a variety of contexts. One example pertains to polysemic verbal product descriptors, such as "Light" and "mild," which have historically been used in cigarette advertising (Hoek and Dewhirst 2012).

Finally, given the importance of nutritional information in helping consumers make better food choices (Kozup, Creyer, and Burton 2003; Ford et al. 1996), our pretest for study 2 also

provided insight regarding an important issue from a public policy standpoint. Our pretest revealed that consumer understanding of suitable sugar content in a staple product such as bread was highly limited and considerable confusion was apparent in stating an appropriate level. Sugar, and especially added sugar, has often been discussed with regards to nutrition labeling, due to its potential health implications, and as a commodity that adds calories but no other nutrients (Nestle 2013; Harris et al. 2009; Seiders and Petty 2004). Recent U.S. and Canadian nutrition fact guideline changes have proposed a nutrition table which will include percentages with the intention of enhancing consumer comprehension. Other suggestions include a traffic light system on the front of packaging (e.g., a red light for high levels of sugar content) or the depiction of teaspoons, a common measure, to indicate the sugar content. Using graphics or traffic light systems can enable consumers to be more aware when making decisions based on nutrition facts. If sugar content, for example, can be translated into teaspoons visually – or an easy-to-understand measure – nutrition labeling may prove to be more effective than existing labels in informing consumers and reducing their sugar consumption.

## **Limitations**

One limitation of this paper is that the experimental studies were carried out with university students who may not find their personal health to be an immediate concern or may not have similar product knowledge as typical food shoppers. Nonetheless, despite this limitation, our findings can encourage future studies and potentially use additional research techniques with participants recruited from a sample of “typical” shoppers. Using projective techniques to get

further insight into consumer concerns and varying interpretations of polysemic messages may be another possible step.

A reality of controlled experiments is that they limit possible confounds that would exist in a real world setting. A non-laboratory setting may help provide further insight about the influence of polysemic messages on consumers in a more natural environment. However, despite this limitation, we have used a laboratory setting to help ensure that polysemy was held constant as a factor.

## **Conclusion**

From a marketer's perspective, purposeful polysemy in communication allows them to guide reader interpretation while also ensuring that the message is ambiguous enough that it can be defended when facing scrutiny. We examine polysemy in a product category where consumer interest runs high, regulatory scrutiny has increased, and health and wellbeing may be in direct conflict with corporate profit goals. Our research provides a conceptual framework for examining marketing communication on the basis of polysemy. Our studies depict how ambiguous messages may be guided for interpretation through subtle context and anchoring cues. Finally, our research introduces the use of purposeful polysemy to policy makers – likely an unfamiliar concept to such stakeholders – and can hopefully facilitate consideration of such rhetorical devices when developing and enforcing policy.

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Figures

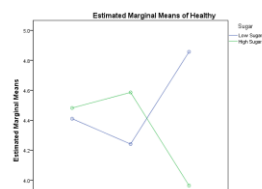
Figure 1: Study 1 Stimuli



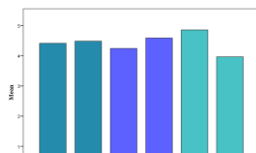
Figure 2: Study 2 Stimuli Back Panels (High Sugar vs. Low Sugar)



**Figure 3: Interaction Between Heart Symbol and Sugar**



**Figure 4: Heart x Sugar. Dependent Variable: Attitudes toward health.**



## **Chapter 4:**

### **Crafty Tobacco Marketers:**

### **An Illustration of Purposeful Polysemy in Tobacco Advertising**

#### **Introduction**

Historically, the tobacco industry has been crafty in circumventing the spirit of policy concerning marketing communication (e.g., shifting media spends towards sponsorships, creating shell companies to allow brand specific promotions at events, using colour-coded packaging to replace banned product descriptors, increasing reliance on point-of-sale and shelf displays to overcome advertising restrictions, etc.).<sup>1-4</sup> In this paper, we introduce the notion of polysemy, another strategic device that can enable crafty marketing communication practise, and depict how it is used by tobacco marketers to navigate within stringent regulatory environments.

Given the legal and ethical implications of such a strategic device, our goal is to demonstrate polysemy in marketing communication and highlight its importance from a public health and welfare perspective. First, we introduce the notion of purposeful polysemy and then, using two specific cigarette brands, Winston and Natural American Spirit, as case illustrations, we depict its strategic use in advertising as a mechanism for circumventing regulatory stipulations. We aim to provide policy-makers with an understanding of this concept so that future regulation can take such practise into account.

## Purposeful Polysemy

Although polysemy is an interdisciplinary concept discussed in the domains of linguistics, organisational behaviour, and recently marketing, less is known about it within the context of harmful products such as tobacco. *Polysemy* is described as multiple interpretations of one text across audiences or circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Multiplicity of text allows a varied but finite number of interpretations to occur; however, to be termed as polysemic, words or images are likely to have a dominant meaning as well as other secondary or tertiary meanings that can be drawn from it.<sup>6 7</sup> Informed in part by marketing research, the advertiser or marketer decides the dominant meaning that the copy and visuals are expected to generate, whereas other interpretations that occur may be described as unintentional results.<sup>8</sup> Strategic ambiguity, another concept closely related to purposeful polysemy, has been described as deliberately planned vagueness which in turn gives rise to multiple reader interpretations.<sup>5 6</sup>

Polysemy has been classified as a rhetorical tool used in language to increase complexity and interest among readers or targeted consumers.<sup>9 10</sup> Rhetoric is defined as the “art of persuasion,” where persuasion is considered the ultimate goal of advertising.<sup>11</sup> For example, using rhetorical language such as “Today’s slims at a very slim price,” as observed in Misty Ultralight cigarette advertising, may be a more effective way to gain reader attention compared to a non-figurative description for Virginia Slims advertising such as “Introducing the new Virginia Slims 10-pack.”<sup>12</sup> In this instance, “slims” refers to a reduced circumference cigarette while also conveying a reduced price or cost that provides value.

Use of polysemy may allow brands to achieve multiple objectives that factually asserted may not be permitted. One objective that may be achieved through purposeful polysemy is the

communication of brand attributes despite navigating in stringent regulatory environments. Where advertising claims are subject to notable scrutiny, marketers are motivated to provide creative yet crafty communication that may infer one thing, yet point to secondary and tertiary meanings that can be used as an alibi. We now turn to the advertising of Winston and Natural American Spirit as case illustrations of purposeful polysemy.

### **Case 1: Winston**

Produced by R.J. Reynolds (RJR), Winston advertising has featured varying polysemic descriptors that have been adapted over time. The product descriptor “real” serves as one such example. In Figure 1, a Winston advertisement from 1988 as part of the brand’s “real people real taste” campaign demonstrates polysemy with the emphasis and repetition of the word “real.”

<sup>13</sup> *Real* may mean non-fictional, factual or actually existing, while other meanings of the word can include genuine, authentic, and bona fide. Used in the context of “real people,” the word implies being sincere as opposed to being artificial or fake in character. Taken figuratively to translate as authentic, “real people” may create positive connotations and appeal to those who self identify with such a trait. Indeed, marketing planning documents from RJR, made public from litigation, describe the brand’s target audience as “independent,” “honest,” and “genuine.”

<sup>14</sup> The model’s depiction in the Figure 1 advertisement as a construction worker (apparent from attire and tools), and holding a cigarette in his hand, may strengthen the link between the brand as the choice of a person with a “real” or no-frills profession.

Nevertheless, the polysemic properties of the “real” descriptor facilitate other meanings to emerge for readers, especially when combined with the word “taste.” “Real taste” may be vague enough to evade direct regulatory scrutiny, yet at the same time can help set the stage for the brand’s “additive-free” claims that followed in subsequent marketing communication campaigns. Given the brand’s emphasis on being “additive-free,” “real taste” may prompt perceptions about being a “natural” or comparatively healthier cigarette that still has sufficient taste.

Repetition of the word in ad copy lends support to its use being planned and important. Mentioned twice in the ad, the “real” descriptor is given more emphasis than the actual brand name. Repetition creates a rhetorical operation that not only highlights the term but also enhances its memorability among readers.<sup>12</sup>

The slogan is followed by the brand logo and another vague claim, “America’s best.” The word “best” also gives rise to multiple meanings and allows several interpretations concerning whether the brand is regarded as the greatest in quality, taste, or domestic sales. The use of deliberate ambiguity may allow the brand to be defended from a legal perspective given substantiation might be required if making a more literal or explicit claim. Puffery – subjective opinion or obvious exaggeration – can help marketers defend against alleged misleading claims as they will indicate that reasonable consumers should not truly believe such claims.<sup>15</sup> Purposeful polysemy further facilitates marketers having alibi meaning to point to when defending against unsubstantiated claims.



Complementing marketing communication claims of “real,” Winston ads evolved over time to include assertions of being “additive-free.” A series of advertisements for the brand emphasised this additive-free positioning. Figure 2 depicts Winston cigarettes as containing 100% tobacco in comparison to other brands that contain 94%.<sup>16</sup> This claim implies that Winston may be a safer choice over competitors even though the benefits of lower additives or higher percentages of tobacco are not substantiated with supporting evidence. Continuous use of ad copy such as “real,” “true,” “additive-free,” and “no bull” served to further reinforce that a lack of additives was a key differentiating feature that made the brand superior to competitors. Tactfully omitting direct assertions of being a safer or healthier alternative, however, makes polysemy in interpretation a strong defence for the brand when undergoing scrutiny for the claims being made.

The incorporation of a “no bull” stamp in the advertisement directly replaces the word “real,” yet serves a similar purpose while also creating multiple meanings. The polysemic word “bull” refers to a male bovine animal, but in popular culture has come to mean untrue talk or nonsense. Hence, an inference may be that competitive brands containing less than 100% tobacco are artificial or synthetic, whereas “additive-free” may infer genuine and healthier.

Following the “No Bull” campaign is a series of advertisements that urge the reader to “leave the bull behind.” Figure 3 depicts three male models holding surf boards, presumably enjoying a carefree day at the beach.<sup>17</sup> Despite the irony of pairing a cigarette brand with a physical sport (given the harmful effects of smoking on physical well-being and stamina), this is not the first time cigarette brands have associated themselves with sports.<sup>18</sup>

The “leave the bull behind” ads also make use of purposeful polysemy. One possible interpretation of the phrase “leave the bull behind” may be leaving behind previous cigarette brands (with additives) and switching to Winston. The play on the term “smooth” in the advertisement also gives rise to several connotations. “Smooth” has been used in tobacco marketing communication to infer less throat irritation and harshness.<sup>19</sup> “Smooth” can also be described as the product’s taste or the smoothness of character for those smoking Winston. Like “real” and “bull,” “smooth” exemplifies another polysemic term that infers that the brand is comparatively pure, less harmful, additive-free, and “natural.”

## **Case 2: Natural American Spirit**

A relatively more recent brand, Natural American Spirit incorporates advertising polysemy and strategic ambiguity to position itself as an organic, additive-free, environmentally conscious, and socially progressive cigarette.<sup>20 21</sup> The brand’s emphasis on the polysemic descriptor “natural” is depicted through a series of advertisements. Use of the term “natural” is commonly seen in several product categories including household cleaners, food and beverage products, and personal care items. Large debate ranges on the precise definition of the word due to the broad variety of contexts it can be used in and, unlike “organic” for example, regulatory agencies have not given “natural” a legal definition.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely such confusion and vagueness that makes the term an ideal polysemic element that can be used to guide meanings.

Figure 4 depicts a Natural American Spirit advertisement, “Taste Nature. And Nothing Else” that focuses on elements of the environment such as leaves, flowers, a butterfly, and a

green background. Strategic polysemy is incorporated through use of “nature” where the word may describe elements such as animals and plants, but also implies that the brand contains natural ingredients. Common consumer understanding regarding the term shows that they find natural products to be more trustworthy and compelling.<sup>22</sup> Consumers have also been found to be more willing to pay for products perceived as natural and environmentally friendly.<sup>23</sup> Extending this perception to Natural American Spirit, incorporating the term enables consumers to potentially interpret the brand as more credible and relatively safe to consume.

Further connotations of “natural” are reinforced in the accompanying copy, “It’s only natural.” The phrase naturalises smoking as a habit similar to eating or sleeping. The brand packaging includes Native American imagery drawing a link with traditional tobacco consumption in the Native American community to naturalise smoking as a long-established practice. The brand strategically blurs the distinction between traditional consumption of tobacco as a spiritual act and the commercialisation of tobacco as it is today.<sup>24</sup> Another more literal meaning would be of the product being naturally sourced. The combined use of terms such as “natural” and “additive-free” alongside visuals of natural elements has prompted consumers to perceive this brand as comparatively safer than others.<sup>25 26</sup>

Figure 5 depicts an advertisement that not only builds on the brand’s use of the word “natural,” but also incorporates the copy “made with organic tobacco.” Use of both terms “organic” and “natural” may create confusion where natural can become interchangeable with organic. The inference of “natural” products lacking synthetic or artificial ingredients strengthens perceptions of the brand’s supposed additive-free product attributes. “Organic” has been shown to prompt perceptions about products being better tasting, healthier, and generally

good for them.<sup>27 28</sup> The emphasis on being organic, complemented with the positive connotations of “natural,” infers that the cigarette brand is comparatively less harmful to consume. Internal corporate documentation supports such crafty claims where the company states, “If you cannot stop smoking, then we believe it makes sense to smoke the purest cigarettes available,” where “pure” implies safe or less harmful.<sup>29</sup>

Further meanings of “natural” are communicated by the depiction of a pair of hands (presumably a farmer’s) carrying soil with two branded packs “growing” from it (i.e., drawing parallels with crops emerging from the ground). The apparent paradox lies in the comparison of crops, which may be necessary to sustain life with cigarettes that literally harm it. Humanising the visual further adds to qualities of nurturing and use of “grown” implies cultivated, originated, directly from, raised, and so on.

Following strong criticism regarding claims of “natural” being misleading for consumers, the brand moved to more visual advertising emphasising that the product contains only two ingredients: tobacco and water.<sup>30</sup> Figure 6 depicts a visual of a large tobacco leaf and a drop of water falling from its tip. The copy “tobacco and water” is accompanied by blue background drawing further attention to the aspect of water. Use of tobacco and water together emphasises attributes of natural without directly making such a claim. The company’s strategy of depicting only two ingredients in the visual equates both water and tobacco in importance. This contradiction is craftily depicted where water can be described as a source of life essential for survival, whereas tobacco is inherently harmful.

## Discussion

While the focus for this special communication is to demonstrate how polysemy is strategically used to circumvent policy, it has also been used to simultaneously reach multiple target groups. For example, Parliament, produced by Philip Morris, ran a series of ads with two versions. While in one advertisement, “The perfect recess,” a shirtless man and woman are depicted on the beach with a dog, another version of an almost identical advertisement has the female model replaced with a man. Strategic ambiguity is created in the advertisement where the reader has no way of knowing whether the two men are romantically involved or just friends at a beach, but the ambiguity allows the brand to reach out to a larger target group that includes gay audiences without excluding other key target groups.

The reviewed advertisements serve as examples of crafty use of polysemy. However, such practise is not restricted to advertising copy. “Light,” “rich,” and “smooth” exemplify brand variant descriptors which are demonstrations of purposeful polysemy. Davidoff cigarette variant, “Rich Blue,” for example, can infer being premium and expensive as is apparent in the brand’s price structure, but also imply stronger or “richer” taste in comparison to other brands. “Light” cigarette variants fraudulently inferred lower tar yields to consumers, but can also be said to describe product flavour or taste.<sup>31 32</sup> Similarly, “smooth” may infer comparative tar deliveries without explicitly stating them.

The use of purposeful polysemy has important implications from a tobacco control and public health perspective. Young adolescents found Winston’s advertising claims of “real” to imply that it is less harmful, less addictive, and generally healthier than other brands.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, claims of “natural” were found to reduce perceived harm from the advertised brand.<sup>20</sup>

Repeated use of such claims help in creating what research describes as a health halo effect. This occurs when consumers are more likely to make incorrect inferences about a product's healthiness based on brand claims. For example, chocolate marked as "fair trade" is seen as lower in calories compared to its counterpart without such labelling.<sup>34</sup> The halo effect extends to use of terms such as "natural" and "organic." Strategic use of polysemic terms allow brands to create misleading meanings of being safer or less harmful while attempting to circumvent policy. When facing legal challenges, the brand's marketers have an alibi of additional meanings to point to.

Purposeful polysemy is also apparent with the depiction of health warnings in marketing communication. For example, Export 'A' cigarettes used Health Canada's warning in their extreme sports series ads which claimed, "CIGARETTES LEAVE YOU BREATHLESS. Tobacco use causes crippling, often fatal lung diseases such as emphysema." Purposeful polysemy suggests that "breathless" can be a health concern, but also figuratively imply exhilaration and thrilling, especially in the context of extreme sports.<sup>18</sup>

In closing, understanding the applications of purposeful polysemy can help regulators in effectively devising measures that can curb such crafty methods. It may also allow regulators to extend the scope of polysemic product descriptors beyond some of the existing ones such "light" and "mild." One next step can include gaining consumer responses regarding polysemic advertisements so that future tobacco control guidelines can directly learn from consumer insights and be framed accordingly. Such insights can help create social marketing campaigns that take into account some of the prominent meanings consumers may derive and counter them

accordingly. These campaigns can then help build understanding regarding the perceived harm and risks of tobacco.

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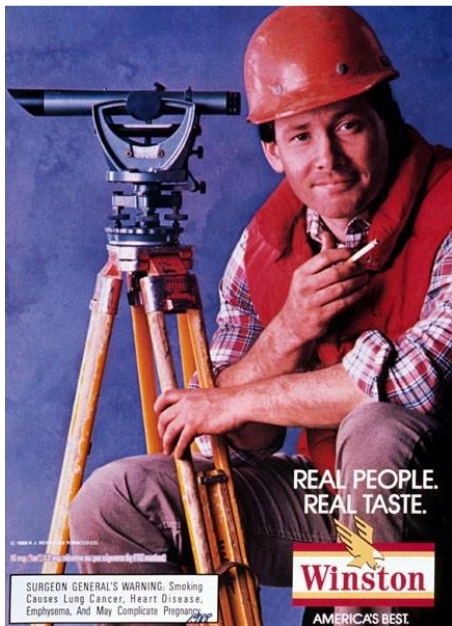
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Figures

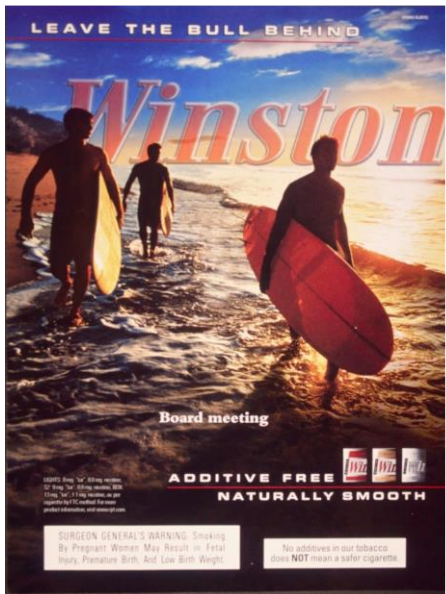
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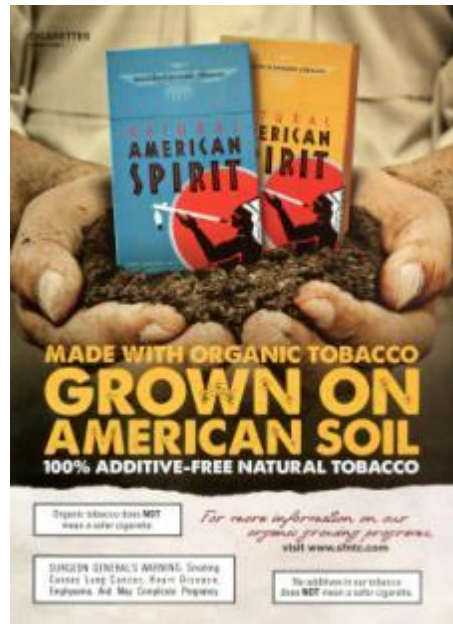
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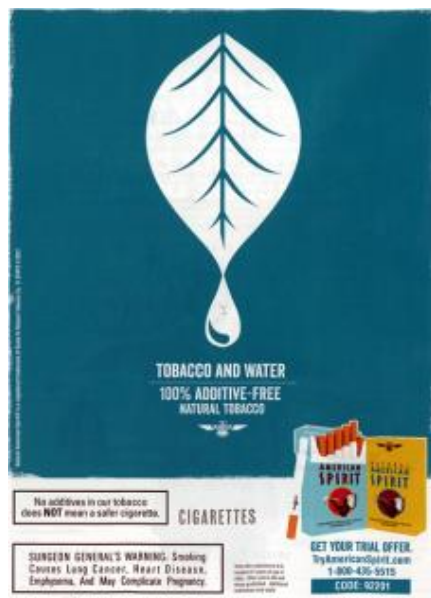
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## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This research has focused on introducing the notion of purposeful polysemy as a creative device that allows marketers to effectively provide desired messages to consumers while still evading the spirit of policy. One of the major aims of this research was to contribute to literature in the realm of marketing ethics and public policy; nevertheless, other important implications for both practitioners and consumers have emerged.

A review of polysemic marketing communication by existing brands in the market helped to highlight widespread use of polysemy in practice. Extending the findings to include consumer evaluations for a fictitious brand added to the research by controlling for confounding effects and showing resulting health perceptions that emerge through the use of polysemy. Finally, analyzing use of polysemy in a sector (i.e., tobacco) that faces considerable scrutiny helped demonstrate the generalizability of the concept (by applying its application beyond the food and beverage product category).

In validating the overarching research goals that bound all three manuscripts together, several insights emerged. Support was found for the prevailing practice of polysemy and demonstrated through numerous examples. There was also support that marketers could drive consumer attitudes by accompanying polysemic messages with anchoring cues that, despite multiple interpretations, helps ensure meaning is derived in line with brand goals. This does not suggest that marketers may always intend to provide misleading messages to consumers, but highlights the potential for such messages to create unsupported beliefs.

As consumer awareness increases so does confusion. Despite a rise in skepticism toward marketing, it remains difficult for consumers to be entirely informed on all facets of their consumption choices (Nestle, 2013). At the same time, expecting all marketing communication to pass through a funnel of regulatory measures is unrealistic. Some of the suggestions in this research describe potential options for regulators to consider that minimize the impact of polysemic messages. Finally, this research lays out a theoretical and empirical analysis of the potential of purposeful polysemy to enable unwarranted assertions while allowing marketers to use multiple interpretations as a defense. Future inquiries can focus on the persuasive effects of using strategic polysemy and exploring other areas such as its ability to appeal to multiple target markets or potentially charge higher prices for products that use polysemic descriptors.

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