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A Meaning-based Model of Advertising Experiences

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This article adopts and extends a meaning-based approach to advertising. We emphasize the consumer's perspective and seek to address important factors that motivate and shape actualized advertising meanings. A graphic model is delineated that focuses on consumers' life themes (e.g., being true vs. being false) and life projects (e.g., what it means to be an educator). The model is assessed through a phenomenological inquiry into the life stories of three individuals and their respective experiences of contemporary magazine advertisements. Findings corroborate the proposition that many actualized ad meanings are a function of the consumer's salient life projects as conjoined by life themes. Discussion focuses on the implications for advertising theory and consumer research.

Consider three men from similar backgrounds, ages 29–36, separately commenting about a fashionable suit in a magazine advertisement:

- A: Well, earlier [in my life] I didn't have the freedom to look nice. Now I have the freedom to look nice according to those norms.
- B: You wear this to create an image which isn't you, and most times it is easy to see through. It seems dishonest.
- C: It's a completely different type of man than me who has to wear such clothes. It would demand many things of me if I were to dress like this, I think.

How are we to understand such advertising experiences, especially their diversity and apparent self-significance? Unfortunately, conventional theories and research are mute on this question. Ads are typically construed as relatively fixed stimuli that contain or imply prespecifiable information (Mick 1992), while consumers are studied as if they are solitary subjects, without identities, who react to ads through linear stages or limited persuasion routes, for the principal purpose of judging

brands (Buhl 1991). McCracken (1987) labels this view the *information* approach to advertising.

A few researchers have called for an alternative *meaning* approach (e.g., Lannon and Cooper 1983; McCracken 1987; Mick 1988). In their view consumers construct a variety of meanings as outcomes of a personal interest-driven, culturally situated act of advertising interpretation. This orientation stresses the subjectivity of ad experiences within the boundaries of the ad's sign structure and denotative content and the consumer's history (past, current, and projected) and sociocultural milieu. Contemporary advertising is conceived of not as an occasional conduit of product information but rather as an omnipresent communication arena in which human reality is mediated.

Among published advertising studies that are meaning based, the vast majority are interpretive analyses of ads and their formal features, without actual consumer data (e.g., McCracken 1989; Scott 1990; Stern 1989; Williamson 1978). To advance theory and research we must look on advertising more thoroughly through the consumer's eyes. In this article our intended contributions are twofold. First, on the theoretical front we develop and empirically appraise a meaning-based model of consumers' advertising experiences that focuses on two humanistic concepts: life themes and life projects. Second, on the methodological front we introduce and illustrate the life-story method that, in this study, contextualizes and illuminates our informants' advertising experiences in a revelatory manner. We also demonstrate the usefulness of phenomenological interviewing for advertising research.

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THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Our meaning-based model is hybrid, drawing from complementary scholarship that has had little prior influence on empirical advertising research. Foremost, we adopt two critical premises from symbolic and interpretive interactionism (Denzin 1983) and existential phenomenology (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Namely, each person sees the world differently to a substantial degree, and human phenomena must be studied as they are subjectively lived and experienced. Also, we emphasize biography and motivation for a "whole person" perspective, as advocated by personological and humanistic psychologists (e.g., Buss and Cantor 1989; Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979). Third, from analytic psychology we also believe there is persistent influence of key personality factors on perception and behavior, the seeds of which are sown from relationships and events in early life (e.g., Erikson 1968; Freud 1938; White 1952).

From theories of text reception and aesthetics we adopt two additional premises: (1) the meanings of fictional texts are not given but rather must be actualized by readers, including the filling in of "empty slots" whenever necessary to achieve a cohesive interpretation (e.g., inferring a character's morals based on occupation; cf. Iser 1978) and (2) text reception takes place through horizons of structured expectations (Jauss 1982), built from the reader's epistemic contexts (sociocultural and personal) and his or her prior experiences with different text genres (e.g., novels, advertising). Horizons of expectations are the assumptions and knowledge that are necessary to fill slots and make texts meaningful (see also Scott 1990; Stern 1989). Last, from semiotics and anthropology, we also maintain that advertising is a quasi-fictional, culturally constituted system of symbols in which products are strategically synchronized with scenes, props, people, and actions (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Mick 1986). Accordingly, consumers interpret ads as a principal way to understanding their world and themselves and, in the end, they become the final arbitrators of advertising meanings (Barthes [1964] 1989; McCracken 1986).

Life Themes

Philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre and psychologists such as Allport and Kelly have observed that people structure their goals and means in an effort to create coherence in their lives. Over time this effort reflects an aspect of individuals' natures that has been given various names, including personal constructs (Kelly 1955), identity themes (Holland 1973), and life themes (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979). We will use the latter term. Definitive life themes come to represent profound existential concerns that the individual addresses—consciously or not—in the course of daily events. Through them, human experience and behavior

are both anticipatory and motivated rather than reactive. This process is central to Kelly's (1955) explanation of individual differences in the interpretations of objects and events, which he called *constructive alternativism*.

Commonly, sociocultural background and transformational experiences give rise to life themes, for example, family financial conditions and interpersonal relations, early traumatic events, and schooling. For example, one of Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie's (1979) informants, who was born of immigrant parents, recounted a boyhood injury from being hit by a car and the extensive medical bills unpaid by the driver, a physician. In adulthood the informant became a legal activist for minority groups, suggesting a life theme centered on the distinction between being for justice versus not being for justice.

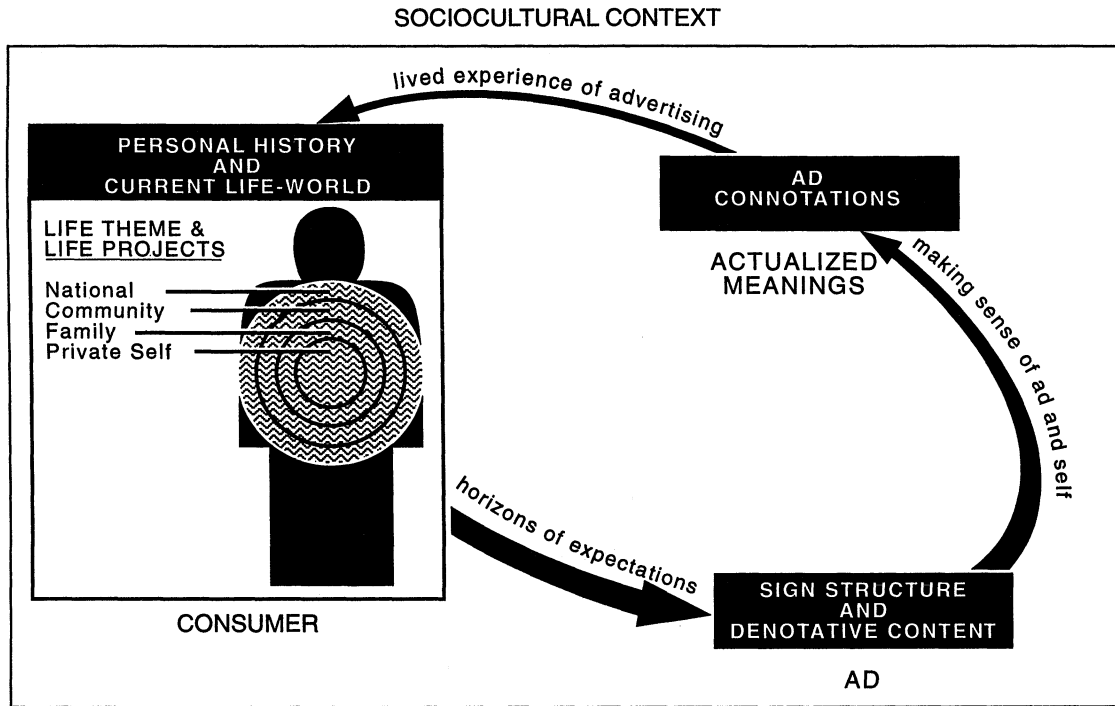
More pertinent to advertising, Holland (1973, 1985–1986) contends that literary interpretation is a function of a deeply entrenched life (identity) theme consisting of defense mechanisms, fantasies, and sense-making tendencies. Life themes both enable and delimit reading experiences, with text meanings being neither inherent to nor about a text, but of and about readers. In one case study an informant repeatedly invoked his life theme (being active vs. being passive) as he interpreted both the form and motifs of an unfamiliar poem in terms of progressing and controlling (Kintgen and Holland 1984).

Similarity and contrast are inherent in life themes through a dialectical tension, as the examples above indicate (cf. Jung's [1959] psychological types and Kelly's [1955] personal constructs). Prior research suggests that life themes are limited in number within the individual and are relatively invariant once developed (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979; Holland 1973; Kelly 1955). It is also noteworthy that, although life themes and values share some conceptual features, they are not synonymous. Unlike life themes, values are not typically linked to particular epiphanic life events or analyzed componentially as a dialectical tension.


Life Projects

In contrast to life themes, life projects are in constant flux, in accordance with changes in circumstances and life cycle. McCracken (1987) has characterized life projects as each person's development, refinement, and disposal of specific concepts (e.g., manliness, Americanism) from a range of culturally established alternatives. Thus, life projects concern meanings related to the self and extended self (Belk 1988)—including private self, home and family, community and career, and nationality—versus meanings associated with others. McCracken (1987, p. 122) has proposed that consumers look at advertising for "symbolic resources, new ideas and better concrete versions of old ideas with which to advance their projects."

FIGURE 1
A MEANING-BASED MODEL OF ADVERTISING EXPERIENCES



National Life Projects involve meanings associated with nationalities and internationality.
Community Life Projects involve meanings associated with residential areas, peer groups and careers.
Family Life Projects involve meanings associated with family members, including parents, siblings, spouse, and children.
The Private Self Life Project involves meanings associated with being an individuated human being, including personal activities and interests.

 A pervasive *Life Theme* such as being active versus being passive.

The value of life projects for consumer research is also supported by Little's (1989) work on "personal projects," which he defines as extended sets of personally relevant action. Taken collectively, the initiation and management of these projects reveal each person's specialized orientations, which, in our terminology, are life themes. Both Little and McCracken emphasize the word *project* to highlight the active, voluntaristic role of the individual in defining, planning, and coordinating a life.

Although sometimes related to social roles, life projects are not roles in the traditional sense. Role theory has depicted people as behaving in response to expectations and norms that pertain to their particular location in a social structure, also known as "role taking" (see, e.g., Solomon et al. 1985). This is a deterministic perspective on roles. Instead, life projects are much closer to "role making." That is, people also create and modify roles in their social performances because not all of the expectations and rules for enacting a role are

prescribed (Turner 1962). This constructive-adaptive process also applies to life projects, lending to them a latitude of self-discretion.

Synthesis and Summary

Figure 1 illustrates graphically our meaning-based model of advertising experiences. The consumer is shown embedded within a sociocultural context that (most likely) he or she inherited at birth and helps to maintain and modify over a lifetime.¹ This same consumer traverses through a particular life history and resides in a current life-world that includes personal life

¹Since the mutual construction between sociocultural context and consumer is not our focus here, and for the sake of simplicity in the illustration, Figure 1 does not include a two-way arrow connecting these components of the model. For the same reasons, there is no two-way arrow connecting the ad (or advertising) and the sociocultural context.

themes and life projects. Life projects are specified as four qualitatively different concentric spheres. While these spheres are presented as conceptually distinct, they will not always be mutually exclusive and some projects will involve several spheres. All four spheres are culturally constituted, meaning that one's indigenous culture establishes the basic alternatives within each sphere that are available to a given individual to develop at a particular life stage. However, all four spheres also involve individual choices that reflect the self in some way. The national, community, and family spheres represent a social self incorporating one's connections to and differentiations from other people; the sphere of the private self represents the individuated self that is autonomous and self-contained (cf. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Jung 1959).

Life themes are pervasive and repetitive in the person's life. They guide the selection, implementation, maintenance, and disposal of many life projects. To borrow Holland's (1985–1986) metaphor, a life theme is a single melody with many variations that are played out in different life situations. We believe these variations are the life projects through which life themes are manifested.

As Figure 1 also suggests, most ads originate from and disperse through the same sociocultural context as the consumer. In semiotic terms, each ad has two basic components: a sign structure and denotative content. This content represents first-order signification (Eco 1976) and corresponds to commonsense, obvious meanings (Fiske 1982). For example, regardless of the multitude of angles from which a photograph can be taken, different pictures of a man wearing a suit and sitting in a desert will generally signify those same first-order meanings. Higher-order significations or connotative meanings, such as the suit and setting suggesting that the man is a hardy executive, are more variable and less predetermined, especially at the level of the individual consumer (Mick and Politi 1989).

The consumer component of Figure 1 represents a partial abstraction of the individual's personal horizon structure (Jauss 1982) that bears on advertising experiences, particularly higher-order significations. As we entered empirical inquiry, our fundamental proposition was that consumers actualize many connotative ad meanings based on their salient life projects as conjoined by life themes.

METHOD

In phase one, three Danish brothers were interviewed separately with respect to how they experienced five magazine ads. In phase two each participated in a life-story interview that evinced his own life themes and life projects. These latter insights were used to interpret the prior ad experiences. After phase two each informant received four bottles of wine for participation (a common honorarium in Danish society).

Purposive Sampling. The informants and magazine ads were purposively sampled. The second author had been an acquaintance of the brothers for 10 years. This familiarity encouraged their participation and candor while providing us with a valuable stock of background knowledge for interpreting the transcripts. Also, by choosing three brothers we were able to study individuals with a shared sociocultural and family heritage but who were now developing distinct lives.

Prior to the first-phase interviews, the second author telephoned the brothers and inquired about their magazine-reading habits. We then reviewed recent issues of magazines that were of interest to all three brothers.² We focused on pictorial ads for relatively symbolic products that were relevant to Danish males ages 30–40. Today such imagistic ads are widespread in Western cultures (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1986). Five ads were selected. The brands and products represented were Ballantine's Scotch whisky, a René Lezard suit, Nielsen beer, a Kirk telephone, and Kurvand mineral water. Generally, beverages (Levy 1981), clothing (McCracken 1986), and technological products (Kawama 1987) are highly symbolic and richly connotative product classes. The ads appear in reduced form in Figure 2; only the Lezard ad was originally in black and white. The Appendix contains English translations of the four ads that used Danish language.

Research Team, Memoranda, and Personal Journals. We conducted the study in teamwork fashion, both of us having had experience in phenomenological research (e.g., Buhl 1991; Mick and DeMoss 1990). The first author is an American, fluent only in English, trained in philosophy, psychology, and marketing; the second is a Dane, fluent in Danish and English, trained in literature and marketing.

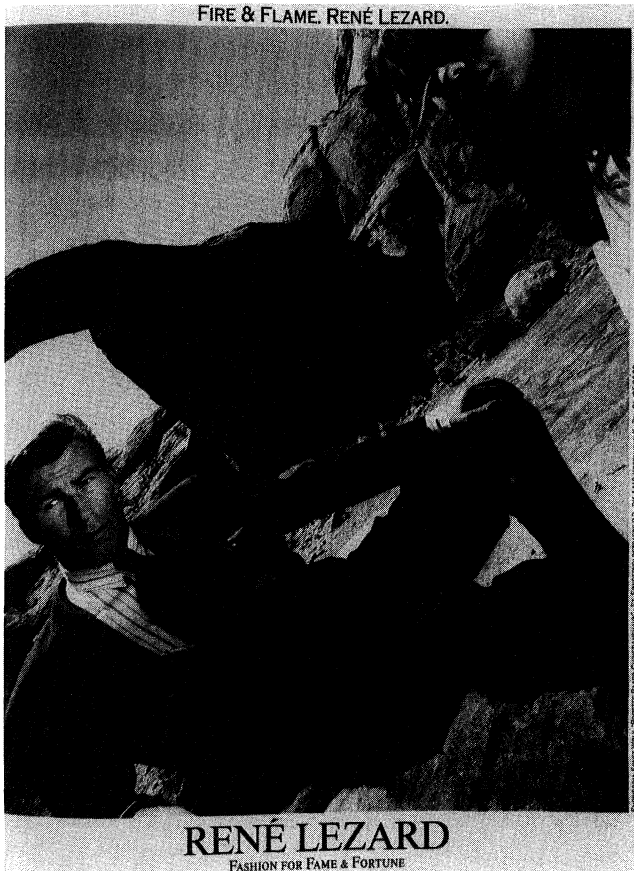
During the project we produced over 50 detailed memoranda that expressed prestudy theoretical assumptions, the project's emerging design, transcriptions and interpretations of data, and consensus formation from periodic meetings (cf. Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). Personal journals were also kept to record private views that proved useful in assessing the project's evolution.

Primary Data Collection. We used phenomenological-type interviewing as our basic inquiry mode since it emphasizes human experience as described from a first-person account (Kvale 1983). Each brother was interviewed twice at his residence with the aid of a tape recorder, two hours per session,³ resulting in a total of 106 single-spaced transcript pages. However, ours were not pure phenomenological interviews because, although unstructured, they were semifocused relative to the ads or a short list of biographical questions (cf. Ber-

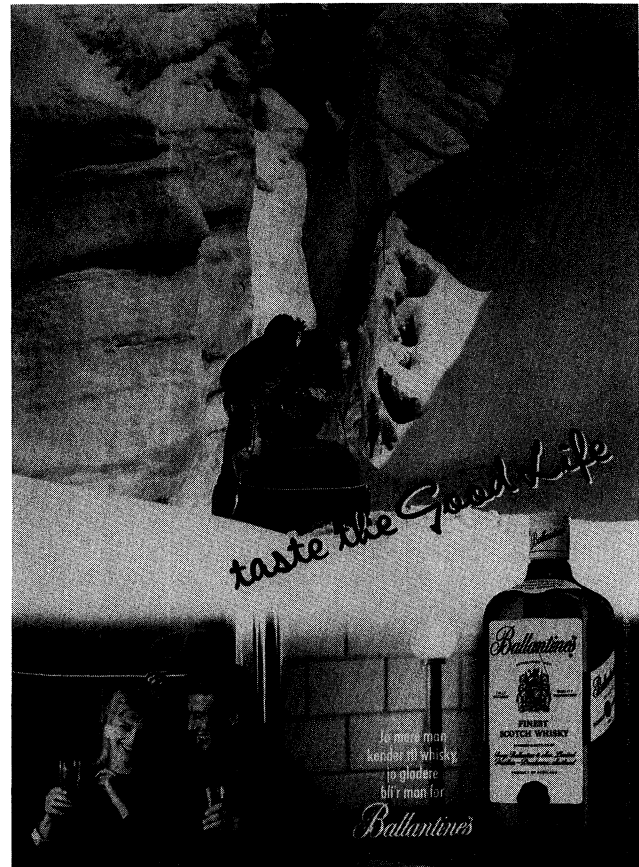
²The Danish magazines were *Billed Bladet*, *Press*, *Levende Billeder*, and *Bo Bedre*.

³By McCracken's standard (1988), this is a "long interview."

FIGURE 2
ADS USED IN STUDY



NOTE.—Reproduced by permission of René Lezard, Inc.



NOTE.—Reproduced by permission of Ballantine & Son, Ltd.

gadaà 1990), to be discussed later. This tactic was necessary since we were not inducting our framework from the interviews; instead we were evaluating the framework (cf. Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990).

In the first phase concerning magazine ads, the interviews were conducted in Danish, solely by the second author. The informants indicated the order they preferred in discussing the ads, then the ads were removed and subsequently redisplayed as the interview unfolded. Each time the interviewer's opening request was "Tell me about your experience of this ad" (English translation). All the following requests or remarks were based on the informant's own comments during an emergent dialogue.

Three months later the brothers were asked to participate in a second interview, to focus partly on Danish life-styles that were of interest to a visiting American professor (first author). Each brother willingly agreed and appointments were made. This strategy was a form of planned naïveté (Becker 1970) intended to provide

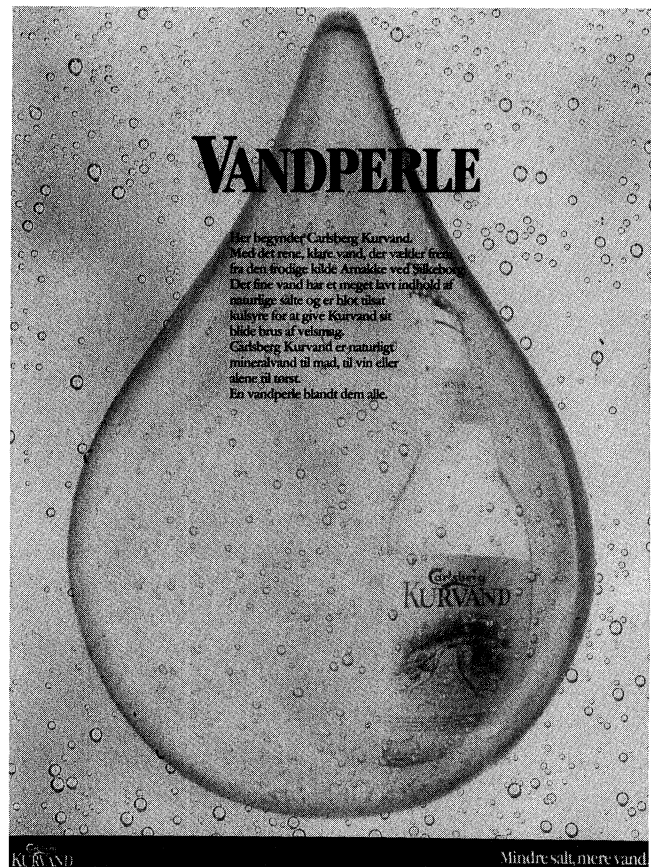
extra encouragement for the brothers to describe to an uninitiated outsider their Danish socioculture and personal lives. The brothers were also informed that we were doing joint research and that we wanted to know more about them to understand more fully their earlier commentary on the ads. The first author conducted these interviews in English (in which the informants were moderately fluent). The second author was also present so that if the informants felt more confident expressing themselves in Danish, they could do so. As it turned out, each spoke English exclusively, except for a few Danish colloquialisms that the second author translated into English with the aid and approval of the informant.

In the manner of Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979), each informant was told that we were interested first in learning about the influences he considered important in his life. To structure the interview, each was asked to tell us about his early environment, his parents, his brothers, and so on, and work his way up to the present time. These autobiographical, phase-two ses-

Figure 2 (Continued)



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NOTE.—Reproduced by permission of Carlsberg Kurvand.

sions were intended to capture a miniature but detailed life history of each brother through a life-story interview (Tagg 1985). The interviewer moderated these semi-emergent dialogues with guidelines from Denzin (1978) (e.g., seeking data on the family, developmental history of the individual, recreational and avocational activities, work career, other opinions and beliefs about life). In the end, the two-hour life-story interviews were an efficient and productive method for achieving our main phase-two goal of specifying life themes and life projects for each brother.

It is worth noting that the brothers were cognizant of each other's participation in the study. To minimize any contaminating aspects that might result from their interactions during the study, we completed the three interviews of each phase as expeditiously as their schedules permitted (within 10 days).

Data Analysis. Data consisted of the interview transcripts, brief field notes, the magazine ads, memoranda, and personal journals. The first-phase interviews were translated into English by the second author. Transcripts were then read and reread, both alone and

as a team; marginal and documentary notes were made about new and recurring insights as the readings shifted back and forth between the advertising and life-story interviews. Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, patterns were sought relating ad experiences to informants' subjective life-worlds, both within informants (idiographic analysis) and across them (nomothetic analysis) (cf. Thompson et al. 1990). The overriding goal was to identify life themes and life projects that appeared most comprehensive and most revealing for explicating individual and collective experiences of the ads.

Member Checks and External Auditor. To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings we used member checks and an external auditor (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). We provided the brothers with a draft of this article for their feedback; for purposes of privacy at the draft stage, each brother saw only the data and analysis relevant to his life story and ad experiences. Corrections were few and mainly concerned minor factual changes. The most substantial clarification was a reaming of the youngest brother's primary life theme, on the basis

Figure 2 (Continued)

Kirk Delta.
Smuk som når mørket bliver til lys.

Hvordan mon verden havde set ud uden Newton, Edison, Einstein, Ørsted og alle de andre naturvidenskabsmænd? Uden elektriciteten og EDB-teknikken? Nok mere enkel. Og meget mørkere. Kirk Delta er til for at gøre hverdagen lysere. Næmmere og smukkere. Se den i telebutikkerne hos Jydsk Telefon, Fyns Telefon, Tele Sønderjylland og KTAS.

ALCATEL
KIRK

of his response and recommendation. Overall, the brothers endorsed our renderings of their life histories and our related interpretations of their advertising experiences.

An independent bilingual peer, who was experienced in qualitative mass-communication research (Schrøder 1988, 1989), was given the complete data set (including interview transcripts in Danish and English). He critically examined the article and its claimed insights in light of its grounding in the data. He produced two letters of attestation, one on an initial draft and another on a revision (available on request). The auditor's remarks led to several important amendments to the article.

EXCERPTS FROM THE LIFE-STORY INTERVIEWS⁴

The brothers' names are fictitious here, arranged alphabetically from oldest to youngest (Anders, Bjorn,

⁴Readers wanting to approximate our experience, i.e., in first seeing the ad commentaries and then having the benefit of the life stories for interpreting them, should skip to the next major section (Illustrative Findings from the Brothers' Experiences of Advertising) and then come back to this section. This inversion will not completely work, however, since our discussion of the ad commentaries refers

Carl). For each brother we identify two life themes, a primary theme that is his alone and a secondary theme that is shared among them. This distinction is meant to suggest that the former appeared more central in our data while the latter was often evinced in terms of the former.⁵

The brothers were raised near Copenhagen. Their father was a civil engineer and their mother a homemaker. When they were young (ages 7–14) the family moved to a more affluent suburban area. However, early on

to the life-story interviews. Still, it will provide a more naive confrontation with the actualized ad meanings and, thereby, a sense of how invaluable the life stories came to be to this project. Creating in the reader a vicarious experience of the researcher's own revelations is highly valued and widely discussed among ethnographers (e.g., Van Maanen 1988). It is a topic that will require further attention in consumer research if interpretivism is to demonstrate its full value to the field.

⁵Even though our earliest memoranda in this project cited social researchers such as Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) and foreshadowed the secondary theme (on status), early drafts of this article emphasized only the brothers' primary life themes. We credit our external auditor and an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to integrate into the article a second life theme for each brother and to analyze more thoroughly the family and brotherhood issues as we had intended. The status theme allowed us to achieve both of those goals in our revision work.

the brothers were enculturated to an important Danish value of avoiding ostentation (which we will return to later). As they grew older their parents anticipated higher educations for them, paving the way for professional careers. All were encouraged to emphasize mathematics, as their father had. All three eventually attended college, though in different concentrations. At the time of the interviews the brothers were passing through early adulthood, each in a different phase.

Anders

When we arrived at Anders's house the front door was wide open. Toys were strewn in the yard and throughout the living room where our conversation took place. Anders and the two of us watched over his 15-month-old daughter as her curiosity with various objects in the room punctuated the interview. Anders, age 36, is an electrical engineer, which, he was not bashful to admit, puts him in "the *rich part* of the [income] scale."⁶ He is the only married brother, with two young children, plus an older stepson. His avocations include music, photography, local politics, and, at the time of our interview, extensive remodeling of his house. Anders is in the settling-down phase of early adulthood, establishing his own family and his niche in society and working toward advancement (Levinson 1978).

Unlike Bjorn or Carl, Anders (A) pointed specifically to his parents' decision to change residences as a significant factor in his early life. He described the initial neighborhood as "a safe place in that I didn't know quite much of people being different from us" and "I guess the major impression I had was that *people were equal in their economic possibilities*." Then his parents "bought [the] *bigger house, a bigger car, and we got all kinds of opportunities to do whatever we wished*." But he added,

A: My parents are those kinds of people that are always saving. Not spending too much. Well, in a kind of a way they say "Less might be okay." So if you have the opportunity to choose between gold and plastic, they'll choose plastic, but it's okay. And their influence was that you have to be very economical and live that way. *And I guess that limited my way of dealing with other people.*

I: Do you think that you agree with choosing plastic instead of gold most of the time when you get the choice?

A: I have changed since then because now, I guess, *I choose more freely*. In some cases I choose the less, the cheap thing. And in other ways I'll choose the more expensive or the best.

⁶Italicized portions of the brothers' remarks represent our highlighting of certain meanings as partial evidence for our interpretations. Also, readers should be sensitive to the fact that although each brother speaks English fairly fluently, each had a different level of command of colloquial English. We chose not to alter or edit their English. Throughout, I in excerpted remarks indicates the interviewer.

As he spoke of his childhood he talked of being a "spare parent" to his younger brothers, being "forced to be responsible" for them, and also learning "*to take care of myself*." In terms of early interests Anders also mentioned playing music with friends and how "*I was more and more discovering what was going on in the rhythm kind of music and in jazz*."

Anders talked too of mathematics and physics, for which he had a strong aptitude. He confided, "It was easy for me, so *I decided at a very early age* to become an electrical engineer," though he also admitted that his father encouraged his career direction. When he had difficulty finding his first job, Anders and his parents argued over whether he had been misguided. Eventually he found work in the sluggish Danish economy of 1977, but, as he said, "*the job chose you and I didn't choose the job*." Today he sees mostly benefits to being an engineer.

A: Well, the good thing about being an engineer is that *it has lots of possibilities*. It's a good platform to start from. *And, if you want to, you can get into all kinds of directions*. You can choose to be very close to the technical side and designing electronics. And you can also be in a more managing type of work, and you can go into the more administrative work. There are a lot of possibilities.

Later in the interview similar issues arose—with opposite meanings—as Anders described fatherhood.

A: Well, it's changing your life totally, turning it upside down. Before I met [my wife] Andrea I was living in an apartment and everything was . . . it was all very neat and you couldn't hardly see that anyone was living there. There was so much time left, although I spent nearly every evening out with organization [political] work. But with children you can't keep up with them moving around and putting things in places where they shouldn't be. I changed that attitude to this way of living, well, it looks like it looks. [He gestures, pointing around the room.] *And give the children the liberty of ruling over my life*.

He went on to talk about goals he and his wife had, including the location of a temporary job in another country, as he put it, "just to have the experience of being out and coming back." In line with this goal he criticized Danes because "*they haven't really opened up to the world*." Toward the end we also discussed one of his longtime avocations (e.g., playing the saxophone) in the wake of career demands and parenting responsibilities.

I: Do you feel sorry at all that you have had to give that up?

A: Not now, but there have been periods where I did. Not regretting but saying "It might have been different, it might have been better, if my life had been different." *But to me part of growing up is not looking back in that way too much, just look at where your possibility lies, not where you missed it*.

In summary, the life-story interview suggested that Anders is an active pragmatist who tends to see the world in terms of multiple options. He eschews limits, prefers to be in charge, and is quite sensitive to social positioning. Among the brothers, he is the one who is most likely to shirk the Danish value of avoiding ostentation. For Anders, life is for exploring, recognizing opportunities (economic and otherwise), taking risks, and being proud of personal accomplishments. Inevitably, some life factors are restraining (e.g., children), and these he tries to accept. His most significant current life projects include his engineering career and his roles as husband and father. We identified two life themes for Anders, conceptually separate but in his everyday life often intertwined. A primary life theme of Anders's can be described as a tension between being free versus not being free (cf. Thompson et al. 1990) and a secondary theme as having high status versus not having high status. In the abstract, status is a position in a particular pattern. Here gradations of status relate to social distinctions on the wealth dimension that constitutes a fundamental structuring principle in Western societies (Bourdieu 1984).

Bjorn

Bjorn lives by himself in a modest apartment. We sat at his old wooden kitchen table, amid scattered books, and Bjorn rolled a cigarette as the conversation became fluid. He is the second son (age 34), presently unattached, and feeling "sometimes that it's a lonely world to be without a girlfriend." Since attending an education college, he has been teaching religion, music, and social studies to children ages 7–14. However, at present he was questioning the fulfillment of teaching and feeling grim about his future opportunities, both indicative of a late age-30 transition phase (Levinson 1978). Travel, photography, and reading are his preferred pastimes.

Bjorn (B) readily differentiated himself from his brothers.

B: I was the brother who made the most trouble at home when I was in my teens and when I was young. Because when my big brother went to a party he came home with a story and tried to hide it away and . . . I tried to fight against my parents and said, "I will do this and you can't stop me."

I: You were kind of rebellious?

B: Yeah.

I: And Anders was not?

B: Anders was not, no. *He made more lies to my parents about what he did. And he didn't show them much of what he did, and the same for Carl.* He never talked to them about . . . [He pauses.]

I: But you didn't lie to them?

B: *No. In some ways I was trying to show them what I was doing.*

Moments later he added,

B: I think Carl and Anders think they owe more [to my parents]. They don't want to show my parents things

that my parents would dislike. I say "I will do this and maybe you don't think it's a good idea, but maybe I will do it, and you will have to respect it."

Bjorn admitted that his parents had planned "that I also should become an engineer," but unlike Anders he found mathematics "boring." Nonetheless, as he also pointed out,

B: I think we [brothers] all want to have a job in the middle or higher [class]. *None of us would take a job as a brick layer or something like that. That's because of the social status my parents have.*

With respect to his career, an early significant event occurred when one of Bjorn's high school teachers sparked his interests in primitive religions and mythology. He was drawn to these subjects because they concerned "the meaning of life" and they showed that "you could look at a problem in one way and then you could look at it in another way." Although he too became an educator, he was now experiencing doubts, bemoaning his inability to discipline the children and maintain organization in the classroom. For him, the worst thing about being teacher is "when you have no control."

I: So you don't like to be stiff and hard with them [the children]?

B: *I would like to, could I do that, but it's so much against my nature, my personality.* It's a hard fight to do this. And I hope I can learn to be better at it. Right now, it's a hard job.

Some of Bjorn's most memorable life experiences have occurred during his travels. As he also told us, however, his travel interests do not align well with his desire for a love relationship:

B: Sometimes when I want to go traveling I say to myself, "Out there you don't find a girlfriend, but if you go to this cafe, there could be a chance or if you go to this party, there could be a chance."

Nevertheless, as we began to discuss his trips, Bjorn proudly retrieved and displayed several photographs he had taken in India, including a few that showed indigent but smiling children. He talked as he flipped the pages of the photograph album.

B: I think they have another life-style. They live more here and now. Life has to be lived here and now because they can see death just in front of them. And everything is so much about life and you can see it in everything.

I: It's not that way in Denmark?

B: *No. It's hide away, so you think you are going to live forever. And what counts is to live in the future. You have to save things, do smart things so that later on you can thank yourself for "It was good I saved this money or it was good I bought this house or it was good I kept the job or it was good I made this family and all this."* But in India it is more here and now.

I: Live for today?

B: Yeah.

I: Do you like that philosophy?

B: Yeah, I do. Because actually you can't live in the future.

His focal point here is the matter of facing up to present reality. He believes that Danes shield themselves from many things that they should be confronting, including themselves. Yet, in another cultural comparison about daily interactions he opined that Americans "have a surface kind of communication," whereas "it's easier to get deep down with a Dane in a shorter time."

Bjorn also mentioned a trip to Prague where he purchased a decanter for whiskey and soda that he called "a symbol of high society." When asked whether he likes symbols of high society, he responded "Yeah, some. . . . I like a few." Moments later, though, he generally criticized high society:

B: When you say "I want to be this kind of person" and then you buy all the dress this person should be wearing and you make your house as this person should, I mean, it's false. *I mean it's like if you play theatre and take some costume that actually is not your own, it doesn't fit you. I mean, it's false.*

He also discussed his enjoyment of reading philosophy, especially the Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard. This brief exchange encapsulated much of Bjorn's outlook on life.

I: What do you think is [Kierkegaard's] main message?

B: *That you have to be what you are.*

According to Bjorn, this goal is difficult when societies impose values on their members. About his generation he said:

B: *It's more important now to have prestige, to be somebody, or to have something, I mean, material things. Have a house, have a car, and things like that.*

In summary, Bjorn is a philosophical, introspective person. He seeks essences. Bjorn examines the facts of the here-and-now, including his own strengths and weaknesses, and he tries to live accordingly. For him we identified a primary life theme as the tension between being true versus being false. Like Anders, Bjorn is also quite sensitive to status issues, and so for him too we identified a secondary life theme centered on having versus not having high status. However, unlike Anders, who Bjorn described as "ambitious," Bjorn is often negative about high social status and he rejects its avid pursuit. His major current life projects involve his career and role as a teacher, and his search for a girlfriend.

Carl

Carl is the "little brother" (age 29), as he himself and his older brothers called him. Although his apartment is in the same building as Bjorn's, at his request the life-story interview took place in Bjorn's apartment

(without Bjorn). A harbinger of Carl's primary life theme, this arrangement was better, as he explained, because of renovation work in the building. At the time Carl was unemployed and endeavoring to complete his college thesis, in preparation for more than two years. His girlfriend had also just moved in with him. Carl is in the first phase of early adulthood—the novice adult—trying paradoxically to hang loose while also creating structure in his life (Levinson 1978).

The topics of security and social surroundings in his early life took on special significance in Carl's (C) interview.

C: From that period [leading up to age seven] I was in a very near environment and my big brothers, I have two, *they were taking a lot of care of me and I spent the time together with my mother at home.* She was working at home.

I: Were you close to your brothers?

C: Yes, very close, and that's part of the biggest influence on my life.

I: How is that?

C: I think it made me . . . *gammelklog* ["wise for my age"]. I think, as a child, I was talking at a level of a child that was older because I spoke a lot with them.

I: So you learned a lot from them?

C: *Yeah, but I never had trouble making friends.* I was not lonely, but maybe in my relation to other children I had to play a little bit professor.

I: So it helped you, do you think, in growing up quicker?

C: In some ways and in another way I . . . *maybe you can lose some aspects of life . . . that has never troubled me* but that's . . . when I think of myself in those days.

Carl was the only brother who talked about his mother and her influence.

C: I was fond of drawing.

I: What began your interest in drawing?

C: We always draw a lot. My mother taught us to draw.

I: Is your mother an artist?

C: No, not at all. But we have always been motivated in that way to draw because *it was a way to come into contact with her*, to sit with your paper and draw. I was good at it.

Intensive family protection amid accelerated maturation is not surprising for a third and youngest child, though it is rather prophetic for Carl in other ways. His eyes teared as he recounted a tragic day when, as a 13-year-old Boy Scout, he and a friend pulled two of their scout leaders from a lake and were unable to revive them. That the issue of maturation never troubled him began to seem questionable to us.

Carl continued to emphasize his coterie of friends as an early influence. For instance, he fondly reminisced about a summer during his teens when he and four close friends sailed along the Danish coast. Interestingly, unlike his older brothers, Carl initially played down parental expectations for his life, and then spontaneously noted that low expectations "have been a help [to me]

because *you can easily make friends because you're not a threat to anyone.*" This comment reflected Carl's tendency to adhere to the Danish cultural value of not being ostentatious, which generally Anders rebuked and Bjorn supported. The topic of parental expectations continued in the interview and Carl then admitted,

C: My father began to want me to do a lot more mathematics because he's an engineer and he has always been interested in that kind. . . . I wasn't very good at it. So I had to work on it and *did it maybe more for him than for myself.*

Moments later he mused,

C: So maybe I should have picked other subjects than mathematics, but I didn't. Maybe because my father he said what I should do. *And I didn't know anything about myself. I wasn't very concerned or clear of what I was and maybe what was best for me to do, what I would like.*

With an aptitude for drawing, Carl wanted to study architecture, but his father advised otherwise because of high unemployment among Danish architects. As a compromise Carl studied geography. When asked what he likes about geography, Carl replied: "*I think it's the friends around.* The friends that I have had from the first day I started." Within the field of geography Carl majored in urban rather than natural geography. Our conversation about this choice brought to the foreground important issues that had been lurking in prior commentary.

I: You couldn't stay with the nature side of geography?

C: Yeah, I could have chosen that way.

I: But you didn't though.

C: Yeah, because at that time I thought it was more fun. It's the dilemma every time you choose you should always choose other things.

I: Always?

C: No.

I: Making choices are always . . .

C: *I try to get away from making choices.* I think that's also kind of my personality. I'm not very good at it. I don't feel myself so very good at making choices.

He went on to confess, "*I choose like the others do. I don't go my own way. I think I do as all the others.*" And then he added, "Maybe I want to make more choices for myself."

Carl lamented that he has no time for hobbies or friends now. At this point in life almost everything has a purpose, and he regrets this. He would like to do something "irrelevant."

C: I have to do right decisions now.

I: Right decisions?

C: Yes, because I have to get finished [with school] and get to work. . . . *I have to make money now, so money won't become a problem later.*

But he acknowledged that "getting a job with the education I have is hard," and being unemployed is "not the picture that my mother and my father have of me."

Determining himself emerges as Carl's key existential concern. Unlike his older brothers who have fashioned their own individuated identities (Jung 1959; Levinson 1978), Carl's psyche reverberates with questions such as "Who am I?" and "What will I be?" Even in his late twenties he is still suspended between the preadult world of friendships and frivolity and the adult world of individual differences and responsibilities, not unlike White's (1952) aptly named informant Joseph Kidd. Additionally, Carl is pendant between drawing his identity from outside himself—which he has done in the past through family and friends—and believing he can and should create his own unique self. As life-span theorists note, completing his schooling and making an occupational decision will prove crucial for Carl in resolving his early adulthood identity crisis (Erikson 1968; Levinson 1978; White 1952). Thus, for Carl, we identified a primary life theme as defining self versus not defining self, an epithet he helped to formulate via the member checks.⁷ Unlike his brothers, Carl has yet to establish a conclusive private self, though it is arguably the most intensive project sphere he works on. His noteworthy life projects take place within the social-self spheres of Figure 1, including his family relationships, his career commencement, and his girlfriend relationship.

Given the Danish value of avoiding ostentation, his family's social position, and parental expectations for his career, Carl is also tuned to the high-status issue, sharing the same secondary life theme as his older brothers.

ILLUSTRATIVE FINDINGS FROM THE BROTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF ADVERTISING

Given the specificity and multiplicity of a brother's life projects, only a small number of these (sometimes only one) will likely influence a particular ad experience. On the other hand, since life themes are encompassing, their influence should be evident for each brother in most of his ad experiences. However, this is not to say that a brother's primary life theme will lead him to actualize the same connotative meanings for every ad, or that the shared secondary life theme predisposes the brothers to identical connotative meanings about status; rather many of the higher-order significations each brother invokes across the ads will be considerably motivated and shaped by his life themes as he personally applies them.

⁷Originally we titled his primary life theme as growing up vs. not growing up. Carl did not disagree with the point we were trying to capture with that phrase, but he suggested that the root issue as it applied to his maturation as the third son might be more accurately reflected in the phrase defining self vs. not defining self. We agreed and adopted his recommendation.

TABLE 1
SYNOPSIS OF ADVERTISING EXPERIENCES WITH LIFE PROJECTS AND PRIMARY LIFE THEMES

	Three brothers		
	Anders	Bjorn	Carl
Primary life themes	Being free versus not being free	Being true versus being false	Defining self versus not defining self
Life projects:			
National	Nielsen ad: he feels he cannot drink Nielsen beer because Danes are habituated to other brands	Ballantine's ad: he dislikes this ad because it shows an insincere man, as from an American soap opera	Ballantine's ad: this ad reminds him of getting drunk, being one with friends, in the "Greenland manner" (irresponsible behavior)
Community	Lezard ad: he now has the freedom to look nice, according to the norms of this ad and suit, given that he is in a different social group	Lezard ad: the suit creates a dishonest image, especially for a teacher like himself	Lezard ad: the suit would demand certain behaviors he fears, related to a businessman's career
Family	Ballantine's ad: he cannot relate to this ad because he cannot go on winter holidays as long as he has small children	Kirk ad: he finds this ad to be a romantic, honest scene with a young woman in an open room	Kurvand ad: his mother drinks this brand and he does not want to be like his mother
Private self	Lezard ad: he thinks it is a great photograph because artistic freedoms are exercised	Nielsen ad: he finds this ad obviously intellectual and thus pushy; he wants to determine his beer preference for himself	Not clearly evident

NOTE.—The brothers' favorite ads are as follows: Anders, Lezard ad; Bjorn, Kirk ad; Carl, Ballantine's ad.

Because our meaning-based model stresses the individual's own history and current life-world, and given our goal of seeing advertising from the consumer's viewpoint, these illustrative findings on ad experiences are organized by brother rather than by ad or at an abstract level of life themes and life projects (see Tables 1 and 2 for summaries).

Anders

Primary Life Theme. Anders's experience of the Nielsen beer ad reveals the influence of his primary life theme (being free vs. not being free) and two of his life projects from the national sphere concerning Danes and the English.

A: It doesn't sell something new to me, compared to what I get by buying a Hof or Tuborg or Tuborg Gold [the most popular Danish brands of beer]. It's not new beer. Well, if you go abroad you find an ocean of different kinds of beers which people drink. *In English pubs they drink all kinds of beer: dark and light, strong and weak, and bitters all mixed. But in Denmark it is rather trivial what beers are sold.* . . . And here [comes Nielsen] with a beer and, of course, I will compare it to Hof or Tuborg. . . . And this you do with every beer in Denmark: you compare them to these.

Moments later he adds,

A: *I'm not sure that they in English pubs are as habitual in their beer drinking as the Danes.* I don't think so.

I feel that one day you would like an ale and the next day you would like a bitter and the next you like a lager. And then you choose it.

The cultural irony of this observation is not lost on Anders:

A: Beer has become such a standard product [for Danes] that *you no longer consider any other options.* This is rather strange in a beer drinking nation par excellence as Denmark.

Anders finds Nielsen beer un compelling because, like his countrymen, he faithfully drinks popular Danish brands and compares all others to them (according to McCracken [1986] such beer loyalty by Danes can be considered a cultural principle). Yet Anders seems to regret closedmindedness about other brands and types of beer, seeing Danes as overly constrained in their beer consumption. He chastizes them and admires the English for choosing beer on a varietal basis. Hence, Anders exercises his primary life theme and reaffirms some of his conceptions about what it means to be a Dane or an Englishman.

With the Lezard ad Anders works on a community life project involving his license for a broader wardrobe than before, as he is now part of a social network that accepts fashion diversity.

A: Well, earlier [in my life] I didn't have the freedom to look nice. *Now I have the freedom to look nice, according to those norms.*

TABLE 2
 SYNOPSIS OF ADVERTISING EXPERIENCES WITH LIFE PROJECTS AND SHARED SECONDARY LIFE THEME OF HAVING VERSUS NOT HAVING HIGH STATUS

	Three brothers		
	Anders	Bjorn	Carl
Life projects:			
National	Lezard ad: this ad has an American or international image of high society, the upper class, and the jet set	Kurvand ad: Kurvand is not as exquisite as the French brand of mineral water, Perrier	Ballantine's ad: this is an American ad because its colors are glamorous; no expense was saved
Community	Kurvand ad: it is fancy to drink water, and serving Kurvand shows visitors you have made an effort	Lezard ad: if you own this suit you live at Strandvejen, the most exclusive residential street in Copenhagen	Nielsen ad: this brand of beer is drunk at Graabrodre Torv, an exclusive restaurant area of Copenhagen
Family	Lezard ad: this is not an ordinary suit from a discount retailer where Bjorn, but not he, would buy	Ballantine's ad: drinking whiskey is classy, and Ballantine's is a brand that he and Carl drink together	Kirk ad: Anders owns this brand of phone, and Carl figures it was probably bought because Anders thought it would be envied

NOTE.—Since status is by definition a social oriented concept (i.e., it is positional), the private self project is not linked to a status life theme.

I: What do you mean by you didn't have this freedom earlier?

A: Well, then men my age, with my political views and ideological and social platform, they were very uniformed. It may be that I have grown older and have begun socializing with other people, which then gives me a wider spectrum. It is more fun to have a mixed wardrobe.

Prior to these comments Anders had alluded to the 1960s and 1970s when he and his friends did not change clothing according to different situations. As he said, this behavior was a "natural uprising against some conformities" of the time, an expression of "free will." Today he appreciates and employs clothing alternatives, and the Lezard suit appeals to him on that account.

Anders works on family-sphere projects (being a father and husband) as he experiences the Ballantine's ad. It pictures a couple on a winter holiday: first on a snowmobile, cascading down a mountain slope, and then standing before a fireplace, with drinks in hand. His prior experiences with whiskey ads lead him to call this one "dull" for showing "standard pictures of the young and rich who are having a good time in the right surroundings." Anders readily fills in the empty slots of the story in this ad with the additional influence of his concern with status.

I: What kind of right surroundings, can you tell me something about that?

A: It is this that you're on a skiing holiday, out enjoying the nature, and then when you get back you have to have some internal warmth. That's the kind of action which counts round and about, also here at home, that it belongs to an elite. Even though many people do it, it has a certain status about it, to go on a ski holiday.

Although he drinks whiskey occasionally, Anders has some difficulty in relating to this ad because his small children make such holidays out of the question.

I: Do you go on ski holidays?

A: No.

I: Don't you like it?

A: *I have tried [skiing] a couple of times and found it quite fun, but with all these kids, then it is nearly inconceivable.* And I don't think it's a big dream of Andrea's.

In Anders's life-story interview fatherhood partly meant accepting limits imposed by child rearing (i.e., less freedom). Also, though he has enjoyed skiing before, Anders conforms to his wife's disinterest in skiing, and in so doing he further denies the relevance of the ad to him. As he summarized, "It means nothing to me."

A notable reflection of the individuated self (and private self project) are consumers' hobbies (Belk 1988). Anders's interest in photography emerged in his comments about several ads. He liked the Lezard ad best, partly for the strategic aesthetics of the photograph.

I: You say it looks like an art photo?

A: That's what it would like to look like. First of all it is black and white, and it has some of these means which art photos have. It is composed with something very civilized and then the wild nature behind. Things which show there are thoughts behind how they are put together. And then there is a cut-off woman, which is not the first thing you'd read about in a photo tutorial. That is how to do photography, right? First, the horizon is turned and she is cut off in a wrong way. *And this is the kind of thing you do when you call upon artistic freedoms.* Clearly, they have tried to pull themselves over the ordinary.

For Anders, liberation is implicated in this ad beyond the meanings of the suit itself, involving also the avant-garde photographic composition.

Secondary Life Theme. Anders's secondary life theme, having versus not having high status, now comes into bold relief. In experiencing the Lezard ad Anders also works within the national project sphere concerning the meaning of an international image.

A: It is an international ad. It makes me think of magazines like *Vanity Fair* and like that. It has, what can I say, an image of being international, *of being high society, somewhat upper class. It appeals to the jet set milieu.*

Anders likes such ads and magazines, categorizing them as the kind preferred by "yuppies," an apparent aspirational reference group for him. As for *Vanity Fair*, he volunteered, "I have a couple [of copies] I can show you."

Looking at the Kurvand mineral water ad, Anders's secondary life theme begins to arise when he notes that "it has become fancy to drink water." Then, working within the community project sphere he says,

A: If you should get surprise visitors, then you put some on the table. *Then one has made an effort*, instead of just tap water, that you have actually bought Kurvand or Evian water. *One has an attitude, right?*

Anders recognizes that this previously mundane commodity has become a symbol of distinction. Moreover, consistent with other meanings he constructs across the ads, some products indicate special effort in certain social settings, going beyond everyday consumption practices to demonstrate conspicuously a refinement of taste.

The status concern also issues forth through a family-sphere project (differentiating himself from Bjorn) as part of additional meanings Anders attaches to the Lezard suit. At one point he contrasted the suit with merchandise bought at a Danish discount retailer (Lars Larsen).

A: It is somewhat the petit bourgeois heritage that one has, *that one would like to lift oneself up a little. One wants to show oneself and others that one has a little more control over things than to buy ordinary, right? That's the way we are in our circles. There's nothing strange about this. You wouldn't buy at Lars Larsen, would you?*

I: No.

A: *My brother Bjorn could do it.*

I: Why could he do that?

A: He is a saver.

Unlike Bjorn, Anders is able and willing to buy consumer goods to maintain and communicate a high social position. Anders doubts that Bjorn would buy a Lezard suit (a point on which Bjorn agrees). These brotherly differences even manifest themselves through their respective experiences of the Lezard ad.

Bjorn

Primary Life Theme. Bjorn has several national sphere projects, one of which arises as he experiences the Ballantine's ad through his primary life theme (being true vs. being false) and his secondary one concerned with status. For him the ad implicates Americans, whom he characterized as shallow during his life-story interview. He associates the ad with a genre of television entertainment (evening soap operas) that Europeans have become familiar with through cable television. This text genre revolves around upper-class social gamesmanship and the portrayal of sacred versus secular lives, revealed through the probity or duplicity of various characters in the story line (Hirschman 1988). Bjorn begins,

B: Yes, here again we have *an ad which appeals very much to the high society* and it is not because I am prejudiced, but I have so little experience with this way of living, that this looks more like "Dallas."

With regard to the couple standing before the fireplace, he says:

B: Frankly I don't find her attractive and he looks a bit stiff, doesn't he? *He doesn't look sincere.*

I: Doesn't he have sincere intentions?

B: No, he hasn't. And I don't know if that's very smart. *I find it a bit forced.*

For Bjorn, in this context forced means artificial. His interpretation of the Ballantine's ad includes filling in text slots by projecting bad faith to the male character's motives.

In stark contrast to Anders, through the lens of his primary life theme Bjorn's experience of the Lezard ad is mostly negative, relating also to his community-sphere career project.

B: This doesn't tell me that much. *He seems incredibly unnatural to me, being placed there [in a desert]. He's more of a mannequin figure, an ideal man, which is not my ideal of a man. . . . Well, you really have to have style to wear such clothes. If I were to buy such clothes, then I would feel very, so to speak, that I just bought myself a new identity and squeezed myself in. I would feel rather strange.*

I: You don't have a suit?

B: No. I don't have a suit.

I: And you're not going to get one?

B: No, I'm not.

I: If you were, it would be like getting a new identity?

B: *Yes, I'm a school teacher, right?*

He goes on to remark, "You wear this to create an image which isn't you and most times it is easy to look through. *It seems dishonest.*" Bjorn spurns the male model and the Lezard suit because they are out of place in such a setting and out of character for an educator like himself.

Unlike the Lezard ad, Bjorn is immediately positive about the Kirk telephone ad: "Yes, this is great. Well, it's a romantic picture." He continues:

B: Very aesthetic. It doesn't have those kinds of signals which I didn't like in the other ads—that it wants me to do something. It serves merchandise, of course, in some interesting surroundings, but not in a way where they say something sexual or something intellectual or any such things. *I find this pretty honest.*

He expects most ads to be overbearing, but this one does not try to make itself and the product something they cannot be.

B: There's a picture of her and there's a picture of a chair with a phone. And there's a lot of air between the two pictures, right? *This makes it not so pushy.*

I: This is something you find important?

B: Yes, I think so. It has to be worth looking at, right? I find this a good ad, I think so. And there's a text [in the ad,] "Beautiful as when the darkness becomes light." There's also something romantic in this. Some hopes which I find good, which function well. I would like to have such a room. I think it's great. *I would like all the things in this picture. . . . It seems honest. Generally I like this, not too-filled rooms. I like to be able to see the soul of the house.*

As noted in his life-story interview, Bjorn wants a girlfriend, and this ad with an unaccompanied woman allows him to fantasize about this desired family-sphere project through his primary life theme concerned with truth. For Bjorn, the ad is not coercive in terms of its sign structure. Instead, it invites Bjorn to fill several text slots and judge for himself whether this product and ad are right for him. He likes impressionistic ads such as Kirk's that allow him to satisfy his romantic dreams vicariously.

The Nielsen ad is a postmodern mixture that Bjorn quickly dismisses: "Yes, this is a collage and it seems very squeezed to me. I find it very messy and cheap." An avid reader, Bjorn sees himself as an intellectual, constituting part of his private self project. He scans the ad and identifies its images: Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe, Mikhail Gorbachev, and "the French café atmosphere."

I: What does all this mean to you?

B: It means I like to go to cafés and I like to go into the city. *And I prefer to go as myself. I would hate to go as some type, according to some sort of norm.* Well, I find cafés to be an excellent way of going out, because it is so stuffy in a pub. It's bright and things such as this and I find the rooms nice. And it's not at all about playing with dice and drinking beer [as in a pub] and that you only talk on that level. You can sit quietly and talk or have a cup of coffee.

I: Does the ad say anything related to this?

B: Yes it does. *It says that those who visit cafés are intellectuals and they are, those who drink Nielsen beer, they are intellectuals. . . .*

I: Where are your interests portrayed in this?

B: Well, they are all over it. These are things that fit very well to me: a little politics and a little erotica. . . . And then I think "Well, yes, it's me who's the target group here, and they think I'm this type of guy." *And*

really one doesn't like to be exposed like this in such a concrete manner. Well, "if you think this and this and this, then buy this product." Well, one feels a bit forced. Right? If one had to go down and buy beer on these arguments, which are in this here, *then you haven't thought it out for yourself.* Well, it's too explicit. Right? *If you have this in you, then Nielsen is you, and I would like to be the judge of this.*

For Bjorn, to be "exposed" and "forced" by an ad is to be potentially against one's inherent nature and best interests. As opposed to his experience of the Kirk ad, he rejects the Nielsen appeal because, if he were to be so easily persuaded, he might be resigning his responsibility to figure it out for himself—the mark of a true intellectual. He resents what he perceives as the ad's caricature of his private self-concept.

Secondary Life Theme. Bjorn's status-concerned life theme and a national project (being French) are revealed through his experience of the Kurvand ad and the meanings that neither the ad nor the brand has.

B: This seems flat too. And it seems only slightly water like. . . . I don't drink much [mineral water]. I'd rather buy a cola. I buy Kurvand or mineral water if I'm going to a party and would like to water up my red wine from time to time. Then it's good to have. But apart from this it's not a thing I drink a lot. . . . You can [buy mineral water] if there is something special happening. And there I'd say that if I did, then I'd buy, what's it called, the French bottle, what are they called? The green ones?

I: They are called Perrier.

B: *Yes, they have more style, right.* If I had an engagement and say that this is something exquisite, even if it's just water with some carbon dioxide in it, *then it would appear more exquisite with a [Perrier] bottle on the table. It gives some signals which [say] something of the French.*

This is one of the rare instances where Bjorn shares Anders's positive orientation toward high status and even ostentation, although here it involves a relatively low-priced item. Nevertheless, it is somewhat surprising that, unlike Anders, Bjorn thinks the Kurvand brand has deficient status appeal for social settings.

Through the Lezard ad Bjorn also works on a community-sphere project via his secondary life theme.

B: *It is very expensive stuff.* Well, if you are this kind or type, then *you have a villa at Strandvejen* [the most exclusive residential street in Copenhagen].

The ad text leaves open the question of where the local Lezard suit owner lives, and Bjorn readily fills in that answer with a status-informed attribution.

Within the family project sphere, while experiencing the Ballantine's ad Bjorn implicitly distinguishes himself from Anders, who had labeled Ballantine's a "banal whiskey" he would not buy. Bjorn says that "*there's something classy about drinking whiskey, something special,*" and Ballantine's is a brand that he and Carl

drink while endorsing their brotherhood. He adds, "when I have bought a bottle, then it goes quickly, *when Carl and I sit and drink.*"

Carl

Primary Life Theme. With Carl's life theme of defining self versus not defining self occurring notably in the social project spheres, his prior inclination for self-definition in terms of social relations appears fairly consistently in his ad experiences. However, his uncertain individuated identity led to little evidence of a private self project.

Carl's experience of the Ballantine's ad is not at all like Anders's or Bjorn's. Whereas Anders feels blocked from its winter sports scenes because of his children and Bjorn judges the ad scenes mainly as a high-society facade, Carl is immediately attracted to the ad. He mentions having gone on skiing holidays with his friends.

I: What happens on your skiing holiday?

C: *It's more about you sit in a cabin and drink this and play games, talk, and say stupid things.*

I: You go skiing?

C: Yes, but never on a snow scooter.

I: You have actually tried this situation here with Ballantine's on a skiing holiday?

C: Yes, yes, it's perfect.

Part of Carl's Danish national life project involves a cultural principle of when and how Danes drink whiskey, especially less expensive brands such as Ballantine's. Danes avoid high liquor taxes by making purchases at duty-free shops while departing from their international airport. As Carl explained,

C: Then you know that when you've been on a holiday and returned, then it's going to be drunk and you have to stick to it while the cork is off, *largely in the Greenland manner.*

The Greenland reference requires some unpacking. Many Greenland Eskimos have migrated to Denmark for work but have suffered high rates of unemployment and alcoholism; today they regularly congregate in parks and drink liquor. Hence, the Greenland manner means to imbibe with friends until one is drunk, connoting a break from Danish adult mores. Through the Ballantine's ad Carl activates pleasant memories of preadulthood vacations and he invokes a national project about Danes and their whiskey consumption behavior. More important, his experience suspends the strictures of adult norms about employment and intoxication, which is to say, in relating his interests to the ad he avoids defining himself in terms of those adult norms that his culture and parents promote.

Carl's experience of the Lezard ad reflects a community-sphere project, that is, whether he could or should become like the "tough businessman" in this ad. Although the ad character poses in a desert, the

man's presumed occupation is a significant text slot that Carl fills with his own career-project concern.

C: *It's a completely different type of man than me who has to wear such clothes.* It would demand many things of me if I were to dress like this, I think.

I: What kind of many things?

C: Well, it's one's whole social . . . *one's job* and one's self perception . . . if you wish to be such a one, who in some context has *to be on the top, to be a stress man, and to be active*, where activity as long as anything is happening means you're important.

Carl is worried that the suit would require him to strive, to be in control, to accept stress. Carl now faces crucial career decisions, and he feels threatened by the prospect of defining himself in terms of the Lezard man.

The Kurvand ad evokes in Carl a family-sphere project concerning his relationship with his mother. Neither of his brothers mentioned their mother in relation to this or any other ad. Recall that he was the only brother who talked about his mother in the life-story interviews.

C: I don't like Kurvand. I prefer Maarum or Ramlose [other Danish brands of mineral water]. I never buy Kurvand. I don't like the taste and I think the name is stupid.

I: What's wrong with the name?

C: I'm not on a diet [Kurvand translates as "water diet"].

I: Is this what it means?

C: Yes, to me it means that you're on a water diet, some sort of diet. . . .

I: The taste you don't like about Kurvand, is it influenced by the name Kurvand?

C: Yes, I think so, it goes all the way back to my childhood, where we drank Kurvand at home. *Or my mother drank it. And I didn't like it.* I felt it was somewhat bitter compared to Maarum. That there actually might be more salt in it than Maarum. I don't know, at least I don't prefer it to the other one. And then my mother was on a diet, right? There we have it. She was then and she still is.

He concludes that the ad "*addresses someone else, a type I do not wish to be, for example, my mother.*" In this ad experience Carl attempts to define himself in a way that differentiates himself from his mother in terms of her motives and preferences for mineral water.

Secondary Life Theme. Sharing a status-concerned life theme with his brothers, Carl associates the Ballantine's ad with other American ads (a national sphere project) he has seen.

I: You said that those types of colors, the pink up here, made it an American ad?

C: Yes, it has to do with their colors over there.

I: This is something you have seen before in ads you know are made in America?

C: Yes, and postcards from the USA. *It's so glamorous. They haven't saved anything on the coloring, be it in the printing phase or wherever.*

Compared with Danish ads in Danish magazines, Carl asserts that foreign ads "have to be something special,"

and, for him, American ads are extraordinary because, he believes, no expense is spared in their production.

Within the community-project sphere, Carl places Nielsen beer consumption in a specific locale.

- C: I know where this is drunk.
 I: Where is that?
 C: *At Graabrodre Torv* [an expensive restaurant area in Copenhagen] *and in the pubs around there.*
 I: And you don't go there?
 C: No, not very much. And when I do, I don't drink Nielsen. *It has been promoted as a yuppie beer and that sticks to it. And this might be the yuppie way of life* [he points to the ad].

Carl associates the Nielsen brand with a high-status social group that drinks in an exclusive venue.

In experiencing the Kirk ad, Carl advances one of his family-sphere projects, relating it to Anders, who again is depicted as the brother who most regularly covets high status.

- C: I know people who own a Kirk. Not this specific model. *Anders has Kirk.*
 I: Is it nice?
 C: *It's a thing you'd buy on an impulse, I think, and that you convince yourself that it's enviable. . . .*
 I: But you don't find it enviable?
 C: No, I find my own DanMark nice [a popular, comparatively inexpensive brand of Danish telephone].

Carl dismisses Kirk because he suspects it is the type of phone purchased by status seekers, something his brother (but not he) would likely do.

DISCUSSION

Nearly 40 years ago communication researchers noted that in generating meanings for mass-media messages people attempt to make the world congruent with their own lives (Smith, Bruner, and White 1956). The classical term for this propensity is *eisegesis*, defined as interpretation that reveals the interpreter's viewpoint. In consumer research, the popular construct of advertising involvement—the number of connections the person makes between the ad and his or her own life (Krugman 1965)—has pointed toward *eisegesis*, but from a meaning-based perspective has not been comprehensively theorized or researched. In this article we sought to penetrate the existential significance of advertising more deeply by developing a meaning-based model and appraising it through three intensive and interrelated consumer case studies. Special focus was placed on the relationship between two humanistic concepts, life themes and life projects, and their influence on actualized connotative meanings. Interview data from three Danish brothers on their life histories and individual experiences of five magazine ads provided supportive evidence for the model. Life projects manifesting life themes were reflected in a range of ad meanings—for brands and product classes; for situa-

tions, characters, and other ad signs; and for ad exe-
 cutional styles. Both intraindividual and interindividual ad experiences were addressed.

The brothers' experiences of the Lezard ad capsule best the contribution of this research. The life-story interview revealed two of Anders's life themes, those concerning freedom and status; important life projects were also identified, among them his engineering career and photography hobby. Anders perceived the Lezard suit as a desirable wardrobe option he had not always had, one that symbolizes economic achievement, a message that only some people (like himself) are capable of expressing. He also admired the ad for its upper-class image and for the artistic liberties revealed in its photographic composition. Bjorn's life story exhibited two life themes, one focused on truthfulness and the other on status; a prominent life project involved his teaching career. Bjorn dismissed the Lezard ad (and suit) for beckoning him to dress antithetically to his conception of an educator and more like Copenhagen's wealthiest citizens. Carl's life story displayed a life theme concerned with defining himself and another theme, like his brothers, concerned with status; he has an intensive and uneasy life project involving the selection of an appropriate occupational path. In Carl's eyes, the Lezard suit is worn by a man of activity, high rank, and power. The suit intimidates him because, if he wore it, it would signal his decisive passage into the adult business world, an identity he still anticipates with anxiety.

The concepts of life themes and life projects are new to consumer research. They represent the type of middle-level units that psychologists and anthropologists have recently employed to parse the phenomena of personality while also uncovering both its coherence (life themes) and evolvment (life projects) across time and situations (Buss and Cantor 1989; McCracken 1987). Together they provide a linkage between the uniquely individual and sociocultural aspects of human behavior, and between motivation and cognition in concrete experiential events, including advertising processing.

Each brother's life projects and primary life theme afforded us the opportunity to explore the person-specific region of ad experiences that few consumer researchers have entered. As anticipated, we found that idiosyncratic meanings are more than mere error variance. In fact, they are demonstrably significant and relatively patterned when observed across ads and analyzed against the backdrop of the individual's life history and current life-world.

Through their shared secondary life theme, we were also able to examine the brothers' common background and its role in their ad experiences. Several collective factors are likely to have contributed to the brothers' status-related life theme: their gender and the social opportunities it has made available; their rearing in an upper-middle-class suburb of Copenhagen; their father's occupation and its influence on the household; and their eventual college education. According to Bourdieu

(1984), status is asserted through social differences, while taste is the acquired disposition to differentiate classes of objects and practices that form the bases of varied life-styles. He also notes that taste becomes more conscious as one rises in the social hierarchy, which may account for the ease with which the brothers constructed ad meanings harboring status distinctions. Nonetheless, no matter how common, each brother exercised the status life theme in his own manner, in partial accord with his respective position in the family's history. That is, as siblings in a particular order, the brothers grew up while the family itself evolved, forming a context at each human development stage that was not equivalent for each brother. The firstborn, Anders, was old enough at age 14 to understand and appreciate the ramifications of the family's transition to a more affluent community. He subsequently followed parental wishes and paternal footsteps, and today he enjoys the socioeconomic advantages that accrue from his engineering profession. The second son, Bjorn, largely revolted against mathematics and materialism, becoming a teacher of music and religion, and developing a philosophic sensitivity to high status that guards him from its lure. Carl, the third son, is just as tuned to the status issue but caught between the worldly Anders and the spiritualistic Bjorn and uncertain how to choose between or synthesize these opposing life theses. Thus, as we saw in this study, by virtue of their common background the brothers shared an existential concern with high status, yet each applied this life theme in a unique way to establish different status-related meanings in the ads.

Judging This Interpretive Inquiry

Criteria for judging interpretive inquiry include (1) the nature and extent of insights on how a phenomenon (e.g., advertising) is given meaning in a person's life; (2) the consistency of researchers' interpretations with the aims of the inquiry; (3) support for the interpretations by reference to informants' commentary; (4) the extent to which the researchers understand the persons at the conclusion of the study better than the persons understood themselves; and (5) the degree to which the inquiry has contributed to the researchers' knowledge of themselves (Denzin 1983; Kvale 1983; Thompson et al. 1990). We addressed the first three criteria principally by a triangulation of sources (informants), materials (ads), and researchers (team approach), in addition to member checks and an external auditor. The latter two techniques are both fruitful in raising the trustworthiness of phenomenological and naturalistic research for cases in which engagement with informants has not been especially prolonged (Thompson et al. 1990; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). While the value of member checks and external auditors has been challenged (e.g., Holt 1991), we acknowledge their imperfections and believe nonetheless that they can provide

incremental credibility to interpretive inquiry when the final report is abridged and the full data set is not readily accessible to readers (e.g., in a journal article).

The litmus test for the fourth criterion rests also with the member checks. In reading the manuscript all three brothers expressed initial surprise and intrigue, and ultimately basic agreement. As part of the member checks each wrote answers to six open questions, including whether our portrayal of him was fair and truthful, and whether anything should be added. Perhaps most poignant, the youngest brother Carl wrote:

I'm not sure if Carl is to be depicted as when the interviews were made, or if the picture has to take into account the way I see myself today [nine months later]—partly because I feel that changes happen with one's own conception of life themes and life projects over time, and partly *because of the influence of reading your manuscript.* [Emphasis added]

As Kvale (1983) suggests, informants in phenomenological research can sometimes find the experience cathartic, and the subsequent self-insights quite helpful. Interestingly, within 10 months after reading our initial manuscript Carl finished his college thesis and departed with his girlfriend on a tour of Asia.

The fifth criterion involves knowledge we gained about ourselves. Certainly we have been left to ponder more earnestly about the content and influences of our own respective life themes and life projects. Moreover, as one reviewer proposed, our Western, Protestant-ethnic, male orientation may have predisposed our meaning-based model. That is, a framework of soul-searching life themes, woven through life projects on which one works, might have been less likely from researchers with a different background than ours (e.g., Eastern, female).

Methodological Issues

Life Stories. Idiographic case analyses have appeared before in consumer research (e.g., Tucker 1967; Thompson et al. 1990), but none has adopted a biographical tactic to develop the foundational context for enriching interpretive insights. To that end this article introduced the life-story interview. As personal narratives of informants' own lives, life stories have attendant research benefits and drawbacks (Denzin 1989; Tagg 1985). Life stories are useful for both descriptive and theoretical research; no other administrative records are necessary; the telling of life stories is relatively natural and often emotionally releasing for informants; life stories reveal personal conceptions of the past and its stages; and the product of life-story interviews is fairly readily interpretable. On the downside, life stories are subject to memory biases (forgetting, reconstruction) and social desirability (e.g., informants endeavoring to present a certain image to the interviewer). Although the former problem can never be eliminated, it can be abated by limiting probes about unimportant and long-

ago events. The latter problem may be reducible by building rapport through empathetic questioning and occasional self-disclosure by the interviewer.

Two other aspects of life stories deserve note. First, they are less suitable for strictly exploratory research because, without an explicit interpretive structure (e.g., based on prior theory or research), data collection and interpretation may become intractable (Tagg 1985). Precisely for this reason we prespecified our framework as it incorporated life themes and life projects. Second, even with a predata interpretive structure, life stories are intrinsically indefinite and open to multiple interpretations. Humans create themselves through their storytelling (Mick 1987), only to be re-created by the researcher's storytelling (i.e., publication). Thus, life-story researchers must be sensitive to the writing strategies they use to achieve their aims and not abdicate their principal responsibility to the people whose lives they have visited (Denzin 1989).

Advertising Interviews. A minority in our field has argued for increased use of personal interviews for consumer advertising research (e.g., Buhl 1991; Lannon and Cooper 1983; Mick and Politi 1989). To that end we used a variant of phenomenological interviewing. Its chief strengths are its flexibility and humaneness in data collection and, thereby, a marked capacity to examine the origins, interconnections, and potential ramifications of actualized ad meanings at the moment of their construction. Limitations include its inability to grasp meanings that are not easily or willingly articulated (e.g., subconscious or socially sensitive meanings) and its obtrusiveness relative to completely natural advertising experiences. On this second point it is necessary to question whether the meanings elicited in the interviews would have been produced by the brothers during normal advertising exposures. Our reply is that, as our informants spoke spontaneously about the ads, the brands, and themselves, the emergent dialogue focused on the words and concepts they themselves used. As a result, we believe that the meanings actualized during the ad experiences were not substantially instigated by the method itself, nor were they unrepresentative of the meanings likely to be produced by a respective brother under everyday advertising circumstances. What this method trades for its invasiveness, relative to post-factum methods such as rating scales, memory measures, and cognitive response listings, it gains in richness and relevance vis-à-vis the consumer's life and advertising reception. Further advances with a meaning-based perspective will require similarly open, empathetic interactions with informants and a familiarity with their lives that has been vacant from most published consumer research.

Two Interviewers per Informant. Finally, we do not advocate a casual adoption of the round-robin plan we used in which two researchers separately interviewed each informant. We found that this design was advan-

tageous for securing convergent insights about each brother. However, unless handled carefully, the switching of interviewers could potentially leave informants feeling abandoned by the first interviewer and/or suspicious of a research conspiracy that could compromise the cooperative spirit that is meant to permeate phenomenological and naturalistic inquiry (Belk et al. 1988; Thompson et al. 1989). We sought to avoid these problems by enfranchising the long-term acquaintance between the second author and the brothers and through the quiet presence of the second author during the phase-two life-story interviews. Under any circumstance, informants' consent should be sought and a full explanation provided before any change of interviewers.

Future Research

This study focused on three Danish males. A priority for future research should be an evaluation of our model in relation to actualized ad meanings by Danish women as well as consumers of both genders from other cultures, Western and Eastern.

Also, if advertising experiences are partially a function of life themes and life projects, then the stability of ad interpretations should be influenced by the relative equilibrium among those life factors. Life themes are presumed to remain largely intact through the onset, maintenance, and disposal of life projects. However, during major transitions when new life projects require intense focus and development (e.g., career change, marriage, parenthood), themes and projects may be in a temporary state of disequilibrium. That is, the individual is attempting, but has not yet fully achieved, an integration of the new life project into a life-theme-consistent relationship with other life projects.⁸ Future researchers might study individuals on a longitudinal basis, following them through tranquil and transitional life stages, seeking their ongoing interpretations (and reinterpretations) of advertising. Results could offer additional insights about the role of advertising in navigating life changes and the harmonization of emerging life projects with existent life themes.

For further extending the meaning-based perspective it could be fruitful to draw on the uses and gratifications paradigm in mass communications research (see O'Guinn and Faber 1991). This paradigm emphasizes a variety of motives for people processing media messages (e.g., education, entertainment, socializing, alleviating boredom). Yet, as obvious and apropos as multiple processing motives must be to advertising, researchers have continued to uphold the notion that consumers process ads for only two reasons: to gather information prior to purchases and to reduce cognitive dissonance after purchase behavior. The time has come to enlarge the motivational bases reflected in advertising

⁸See also Schouten (1991) on identity reconstruction.

theory and consumer research and to determine their respective influences on actualized ad meanings.

Finally, life-history analysis is relatively unknown among consumer researchers, and it includes an array of techniques that facilitate the researcher's entrance into an informant's subjective world of concepts and experiences. Beyond the life-story interviews that we utilized, life histories can also garner insights from diaries, letters, photography, videotaping, log books, and secondary archives (Denzin 1978; Plummer 1983). The value of life-history analyses to consumer research appears significant and unlimited. Topics such as brand loyalty, gift giving, household decision making, intergenerational influences in consumer behavior, compulsive buying, consumption patterns, and materialism could all be understood more thoroughly through reference group, family, and individual life histories.

CONCLUSION

The motivations and meanings of life are mirrored in the motivations and meanings of advertising experiences. As a result, beyond the sign structure and denotative content of contemporary advertisements, and contrary to the information approach to advertising, there are multiple legitimate interpretations, that is, actualized connotative meanings. Understanding them holistically—in light of the interacting boundary conditions (including the ad's form and the individual's motivations and epistemic contexts, both sociocultural and personal)—should become a higher priority in consumer research. Otherwise our theories and knowledge of advertising will remain mechanistic and impoverished.

The conventional question has been, What does advertising do to consumers? In a sense, the ads in our study did little to cause the brothers' actualized meanings. Rather, these meanings depended on what the brothers wanted the ads to do, which depended in part on their respective life themes and life projects. We prefer to ask, What do consumers do with advertising? The apparent answer, for better or for worse, is they negotiate their lives.

APPENDIX

Ad Translations

Nielsen

Pure Beer Pure Gold

Can you find your way in Paris and get lost in Valby? Would you prefer smoke in the kitchen to skeletons in the closet? Do you buy a 3,000 kroners jacket even though you have only 300 for the trousers? Do you think that artificial additives don't make sense in beer?

Ballantine's

Taste the Good Life

The more you know of whiskey, the more you'll enjoy Ballantine's.

Kurvand

Water Pearl

Here Carlsberg Kurvand begins.
With the pure, clear water that flows
from the generous spring Arnakke at Silkeborg.
This fine water has a very low content of
natural salts and has only added
carbon dioxide to give Kurvand its
soft sizzles of good taste.

Carlsberg Kurvand is natural
mineral water for food, wine, or
for thirst alone.

A water pearl among them all.

Carlsberg Kurvand Less salt, more water.

Kirk

(Left page)

Kirk Delta. Beautiful as when the dark turns into light.

(Right page)

What would the world have looked like without Newton, Edison, Einstein, Ørsted, and all the other scientists? Without electricity and computer technology? Simpler no doubt. And much darker. Kirk Delta is here to make the everyday world brighter. Easier and more beautiful. See it in the telephone shops at Jydsk Telephone, Fyns Telephone, Telephone Sønderjylland, and KTAS.

Alkatel Kirk.

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