# UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER CONVERSATIONS AROUND ADS IN A WEB 2.0 WORLD

**Colin Campbell, Leyland F. Pitt, Michael Parent, and Pierre R. Berthon**

ABSTRACT: User-generated online content poses a problem when it takes the form of advertising. Consumer-generated advertising challenges researchers and practitioners to understand consumers' articulated responses to ads and to the responses of other consumers, as well as the implications these may have for the brand. Traditional research methods such as viewer-response testing may be limited when the viewer becomes part of the conversation. This exploratory study attempts to interpret the conversations consumers have around consumer-generated ads using the comments they have posted to each ad's Web page. We show how conversations around ads can be mapped and interpreted, and then develop a typology of consumer-generated ad conversations. We discuss managerial implications of our findings, outline the limitations of the technique used, and trace avenues to extend the research.

Rust and Oliver (1994) demonstrated astonishing prescience around 15 years ago when they stated, "Advertising is on its deathbed and it will not survive long, having contracted a fatal case of new technology." At that time, the Internet was nascent, sophisticated search engines had not yet been invented, and click-throughs (CT), click-through rates (CTR), price-per-click (PPC), and conversion rate (CR) metrics were still a long way off. Advertising didn't die though; it just got better and adapted to new media. Research into advertising's impact failed to evolve at the same rate, however, or to keep pace with technological innovation.

Traditionally, advertising has been defined as communication and information flows originating within firms or their designated ad agencies, which create ads and pay to transmit them in broadcast or print media with reasonably clear intentions: to inform, persuade, or remind present and potential customers of their offerings or of the organization itself (Barton 1950, p. 928). Consumers were the passive recipients of these messages, reacting to them either by becoming attentive, by being converted, or by being able to recall them. More often than not, consumers simply ignored them, but determined advertisers didn't leave it at that and instead researched the effects and impacts of the ads, mostly through surveys (see, e.g., Leavitt 1970; Schlinger 1979; Shimp 1981) to which consumers respond. The data thus gathered was reasonably easy to interpret—advertisers featured more of ads that were working, and less of those that were not.

The Internet has evolved from simple information retrieval to interactivity, interoperability, and collaboration. This progression has been so pronounced that many observers have termed the Internet as we know it today as "Web 2.0." It is much more to do with what people are doing with the technology than the technology itself, for rather than merely retrieving information, users are now creating and consuming it, and hence adding value to the Web sites that permit them to do so. As a result, a lot of advertising communication today is different than in the past. Unlike in the past, ads are not unidirectional (from advertiser to audience) and responded to passively. Customers are now making their own ads, and propagating them on free Web 2.0 conduits such as YouTube. The creation of advertisements and brand-focused videos is no longer the prerogative of the organization or its designated ad agency. We term this phenomenon consumer-generated (CG) advertising, and it represents a subset of the more general swell in user-generated content. User-generated content refers to situations whereby consumers freely choose to create and share information of value (Stoeckl, Rohrmeier, and Hess 2007). CG advertising, which can be seen as a form of user-generated content, refers to specific instances where consumers create brand-focused messages with the intention of informing, persuading, or reminding others (Berthon, Pitt,

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and Campbell 2008), much like the original definition of Barton (1950) originally referred to.

Consumer communication by means of CG ads now happens alongside the traditional marketing communication of organizations; sometimes it reinforces it, at other times it strongly opposes it, or perhaps worse still, pokes fun at it. Advertisers have relatively powerful conventional tools to test the effects of their own messages, including syndicated ratings services, surveys, and viewer response profiles. Some of these tools could also be used to ascertain audience response to CG ads—for example, a sample of respondents could be surveyed to determine their reaction to a CG ad, or asked to respond to a viewer response profile. However, conventional devices may not capture the nuances in an environment where consumer feedback to CG advertising is networked rather than one-way—a dialogue rather than responses to a scale—and possibly assumes more dimensions than might be captured in a standard survey. Much of the consumer conversation surrounding consumer ads on Web sites such as YouTube might be considered just "noise." Yet within the din there are thousands of words, multitudes of conflicting voices, and countless market conversations. Firms and those that manage brands that ignore the information in such conversations might be losing out on an opportunity to better understand how consumers interact with their brand. Ironically, though, the information contained in such discussions is difficult to decipher using the traditional lenses of advertising research.

In this exploratory study, we introduce a powerful tool, the content analysis software Leximancer, for the comprehension of advertising feedback that comes from understanding conversation surrounding CG advertising. We examine user comments posted to an ad's Web page (in the case of the ads discussed in this paper, YouTube) in an effort to find meaning amongst a great deal of consumer response. Comments on CG ads on YouTube can range widely in topic, with everything from the video's content, its production, the featured brand, the video's author, the comments of fellow viewers, and many other issues coming up during discussion. Our approach encompasses all such comments.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we present a brief overview of the recent phenomenon of consumer-generated content. Then, by focusing on a simple framework of motivation for the creation of consumer-generated advertising content, we identify four well-known CG ads, briefly describe them, and explain not only the milieu in which they were crafted but also subsequent reactions to them. Our specific sample frame is participant feedback and conversation on the video hosting site YouTube. Next, we introduce a powerful tool for the analysis and interpretation of the consumer conversation that CG ads elicit. We draw conclusions from this analysis, and explain the technique's broader applicability. We end by acknowledging certain limitations in this methodology and in the paper itself, identifying avenues for future research, and outlining actions for advertisers and those who manage brands.

## CG ADVERTISING: WHEN ADVERTISERS CEDE CONTROL

The Internet has changed and will continue to: Video is becoming an increasingly important form of content on the Internet, with more than three-quarters of broadband users regularly watching or downloading video (see, e.g., Madden 2007). In January of 2009, 100.9 million viewers watched 6.3 billion videos on YouTube, or 62.6 videos per viewer (Comscore 2009). Not only are consumers consuming video, but, in a major shift facilitated by inexpensive media software, they are also creating the content. The extraordinary rise of video hosting sites such as YouTube has permitted consumers to become broadcasters, and this is fueling a revolution in advertising. While the performance of CG ads has yet to be studied, CG advertising, at a minimum, introduces considerable noise to firm–consumer communications. The medium also holds the potential to fundamentally alter broader relationships. Advertising has mutated into many different forms. While advertising has always evolved over time, for example, as different media gained prominence (from print to radio to television), and as message themes changed (for example, from "hard sell" in the 1950s to "subtle" in the 1990s), the major change occasioned by CG advertising has to do with control (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008). In straightforward terms, firms are likely losing their ability to precisely control messages about their brands.

Simple divisions between firm and customer have been breached as mass and individual communication congeal and traditional models of media management are rendered obsolete. Predictably, most firms, and those who manage brands in particular, are struggling to adapt to this new dispensation. Two important delimitations must be made at this juncture: First, while consumers can create ads about almost anything—themselves, their families, their friends, enemies, institutions, or governments—we are specifically interested here in consumer-generated content targeted at collectively recognized brands. While consumers can create ads about brands, however, these ads will have no effect until they are broadcast. Thus, the operational definition of "consumer-generated ads" we adopt in this context is: "any publicly disseminated, consumer-generated advertising messages whose subject is a collectively recognized brand."

It is only recently that advertising scholars have begun to study the CG advertising phenomenon. Muñiz and Schau (2007) have studied the marketing communication generated by the brand community centered on the now-defunct Apple Newton, a brand that was (along with its supporting

advertising) discontinued in 1998. They found that consumers can be quite skilled in the creation of brand-relevant communications, applying the styles, logics, and grammar of advertising. Members of the Newton community created commercially relevant content to fill the void caused by the lack of advertising for the brand. Brunel et al. (2007) describe a laboratory experiment that investigates whether CG ads present communication advantages (there is evidence that they do), as well as investigating the ad message and execution factors that drive CG advertising response. These researchers also conducted an interpretive study with the goal of informing a process model that would explain CG advertising effects. Here they explored holistic reactions to CG ads within a natural viewing environment to facilitate a broader probe of ad source effects for different types of CG ads. Their data source was a series of 867 unique viewer conversations about ads within YouTube, specifically about a number of CG ads as a result of firm-sponsored contests, and consumer ads that were generated spontaneously. They found very different viewer responses to the two types of ads.

It is possible to consider CG ads and their resulting conversations as a form of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, although such conversations fall outside traditional definitions restricting WOM to experiences and issues related to consumption and that occur orally (Ong 1982; Stern 1994). Nonetheless, CG ad conversations and WOM share many traits. Stern describes WOM as "utterances that can be taken as the verbal acts of real persons on specific occasions in response to particular circumstances. These utterances are personally motivated, spontaneous, ephemeral, and informal in structure—that is, they are not paid for by a sponsor; they are not composed and revised over time" (1994, p. 7)—a definition that fits the instantaneous, varied, and often colloquial comments posted following viewing of a CG ad. Research has also suggested a link between the dispersion of online WOM related to a television show and its ratings (Godes and Mayzlin 2004), pointing to the possible value of online conversations in generating buzz. Skeptics might argue that uncertainty over the authorship of comments might hurt their potential value as a form of WOM. Such thinking is supported by findings that point to WOM effectiveness suffering in the face of ulterior motives (Verlegh et al. 2004). More recently, models find that in the face of a mix of firm and consumer authors, rational consumers still value online WOM (Mayzlin 2006). This suggests that while viewers of CG ads and their associated comments may doubt their authenticity as CG creations, they may still rely on them as a WOM source.

In a number of important ways, however, CG ads differ from other forms of WOM communication. First, the communication surrounding CG ads usually occurs on a restricted platform, such as the YouTube comments forum, whereas other WOM occurs orally, face-to-face, on the telephone, on e-mail, or on bulletin boards. Second, CG conversations are always one-to-many or many-to-many, whereas other WOM communication is frequently one-to-one and sometimes one-to-many. Third, the communications surrounding CG ads are "invited" in the sense that the forums on which the ads are flighted provide space that allow and encourage comments; most other WOM communication is spontaneous and unsolicited. Fourth, whereas most WOM communication can be about products and services, prices, distribution channels, salespeople, and whole organizations, the communication surrounding CG ads typically focuses on the ad itself, although this can be multifaceted: It can focus on the ad itself (including the company, its offering and brand), the creator of the ad, and the other consumers chatting about the ad. Fifth, communication about CG ads is anonymous—contributors do not use their real names and are generally unidentifiable. In other forms of WOM communication, the communicators are usually known to each other or are at least identifiable. Finally, communication about CG ads mostly occurs in public, that is, on the ad's Web site in open forum, whereas other WOM communication usually occurs in private, between individuals or in small groups. Therefore, studying the conversation surrounding CG ads will not only enlighten us concerning this evolving form of marketing communication; it will also contribute to research concerning WOM.

Consumer-generated ads can be critical of, or complimentary to, a brand, so advertisers and brand managers have to think seriously about what they should do when their brands are targeted. Extensive negative action can make firms look like bullies, yet there may be significant brand equity at stake. However, firms may wish to engage consumers in conversations about the brand, or to tap their creativity, in which case finding just the right level of engagement with consumers is crucial. Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008) developed a framework for the various strategic stances that a firm can adopt in response to CG advertising, so that managers can anticipate, and thus deal more effectively with, some of the extreme consequences of mutated advertising. They identify and outline three basic motivations that consumers have for creating and broadcasting ads: intrinsic enjoyment, self-promotion, and perception change. These are defined as follows:

> *Intrinsic Enjoyment:* These individuals create for the sake of creation; they are either technically skilled or artistic, or both. They create for the playful enjoyment they gain from the process. What happens to the creation, and the effect the creation has, are secondary to the intrinsic creative process.
>
> *Self-promotion:* This person creates to promote him- or herself, perhaps to attract the attention of a potential employer such as an ad agency or client firm, or to have as part of a portfolio for admission to an educational institution. The ad is merely a means to the end of bringing the creator to the awareness of a specific group of people.

*Perception Change:* These individuals create because they intend for the ad to have a specific effect on a target audience(s). Their goal is to change sentiments, to influence people. Again, the ad is merely the means to the end of a desired result.

The three motivational dimensions underpinning consumer-generated ads are used as the framework and rationale for our selection of four ads that we use to illustrate our research technique. As noted by Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008), there will also be ads created by consumers where more than one—and often all three—motives will be present, so a consumer can create an ad for the enjoyment thereof, but also desire to enhance their personal status while changing sentiments. We have therefore chosen four CG ads to illustrate our analysis approach, namely, an ad created for intrinsic enjoyment, one created for self-promotion, one to change perceptions, and an ad that combines all three motivations. This not only permits us to illustrate our analysis technique over a range of ads; it also allows us to examine whether there are differences in the customer conversation that occurs around ads created for different reasons. These ads are described in the next section.

## CG ADS: THE EXAMPLES

The four CG ads chosen for this exploratory study in November 2008 were selected on the following additive criteria (in order of importance):

1. They served as good examples of the three motivational dimensions for creating CG ads (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008); and
2. Their relative popularity on YouTube (they are among the most-viewed CG ads). This was because it was assumed that the most viewed ads could be regarded as having significant impact; and
3. There were a relatively large number of viewers' comments about the ads (not all highly viewed ads had a large number of viewer comments), and there was variation in comment.

They are:

### Intrinsic Enjoyment: The iPod Dance (www.youtube.com/watch?v=XK4Vjmc6Gws/)

The case of Gabriel Stella and the "iPod Dance" video provides a good example of an ad being created for intrinsic enjoyment. Stella is a young Brazilian who "always liked to create things—images and stuff" and who describes videos as her passion. He created a video for Apple's iPod MP3 player called "iPod Dance" while experimenting with editing programs and posted it, unfinished, to YouTube. He expects nothing from Apple or anyone else in return, but plans on making more videos because he now "knows a better way to do it" and "wants to make a scene with more iPods." Asked if he would let Apple use his idea in a future advertisement should they request it, he is agreeable and says, "I don't want nothing back, maybe just the credit."

### Self-Promotion: iPhone New York (www.iphonenewyorkcity.com)

The case of Alec Sutherland and his colleagues, and their creation of the "iPhone New York" ad provides a good example of CG advertising with self-promotion as the primary goal. Taking advantage of the hype surrounding the launch of Apple's iPhone, Sutherland and his friends in the advertising industry decided to make, ostensibly for their own edification and enjoyment, a commercial touting its features. The clip is undeniably creative, but is also clearly of professional caliber. Alec Sutherland, the creative mind behind the project, says: "living in New York you are constantly surrounded by diverse people from all over the world. In a single day, hundreds of conversations go on all around that you cannot understand due to the language barriers. Well, one day I thought, 'What if they were all talking about the same thing?'" He and his group acquired a dedicated Web address to showcase the video. The ad's credits prominently acknowledge and name all of those involved, including e-mail addresses. Such facts point to the creators of this ad being interested in more than mere praise for their work.

### Perception Change: The Poor Bastard David's "Starbuck's Ad" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnbT7qt6RF4/)

The Starbuck's spoof ad provides a good example of CG advertising targeted at changing perceptions. This video, created by David (also known as "the Poor Bastard") is unusual as Starbucks eschews television or Internet advertising. Moreover, if it did, it is unlikely that it would be saying the same things that the spoof ad does. The ad opens with an attractive woman holding a Starbucks drink while giggling and saying, "I don't know anybody who doesn't love a frappuccino on a hot summer's day." The tone of the ad changes when she reminds the viewer that "they're not cheap either" and that "you could feed a kid in a refugee camp in the Sudan for a whole week on what we spend on one grande mocha half-caf no-whip frappuccino . . . a whole week . . . seven days." Humor drives the point even further during the closing when she opines, "not that anybody is gonna skip their frosty treat to save a kid from starvation. I mean, c'mon, they're freaking delicious!"

The ad focuses clearly and cynically on two key themes: First, on the Frappuccino–Starbucks' emblematic $1 billion-plus in sales-per-year drink. Second, at the ideological level,

Starbucks wants to be known for, and strongly emphasizes, its commitment to social and environmental responsibility (see its mission statement at www.starbucks.com/aboutus/environment.asp). The firm spends millions of dollars annually on social programs in developing countries, and is by far the largest buyer of fair-trade coffee in the world (Clark 2007). Yet the firm is also one of the most prominent targets of the antiglobalization movement (Fefer 1999). What differentiates this spoof ad from others is its focus on a specific irony of modern life and the relative absence of the other two driving motivations for creating such content.

### A Combination of the Three Motivations: Apple-Microsoft South Park Spoof Ad (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Id_kGL3M5Cg/)

An excellent example that encompasses all of the three motivations is a spoof ad based on the recent Apple Computer ads aimed at pointing out the flaws in Microsoft's Vista operating system, and in computers that use Microsoft software. In the Apple ads, a young, hip-looking, Apple spokesperson is speaking with a nerdy (glasses, balding, older, overweight) Microsoft spokesperson. The ads always begin with the younger, hipper, Apple spokesperson intoning "Hi, I'm a Mac" and the older, bespectacled, out-of-touch Microsoft spokesman sighing, "And I'm a PC." The ads then follow a fairly straightforward convention. The Apple dude presents something neat that a Mac can do, and the PC straight man responds either with a lame example of his own or with a non sequitur. By doing so, Apple points out the PC's shortcomings.

These ads are quite irreverent, and were they not essentially true, they would be inflammatory. They have struck a chord with nerds everywhere and have become the basis for many parodies not only on YouTube but also on television and in print as well. One popular parody of these ads adopts the Mac-PC formula, but uses characters who look like they belong on South Park—the irreverent, sometimes blasphemous, satirical, and immensely popular cartoon series. The two-minute CG ad opens with Mac complimenting PC on his newly found slimness. PC responds that it is a function of his new European operating system that is not as bloated, but leaves him with a strange accent. The ad continues with PC belittling Mac for being nothing more than a gaming computer, and Mac responding that he is in fact fully featured. Eventually, Mac gets frustrated and sends PC an e-mail with an embedded virus. PC opens the e-mail, starts hacking, and crashes. The all-too-familiar gray dialog box that PC users know from crashes of their own appears, superimposed, on the PC character. Mac looks worried and says, "control-alt-delete," the sequence that reboots PCs. The Windows reboot screen appears in the PC character's outline, and PC comes back to life, intoning, "and I'm a PC." He realizes something is amiss, however, and moves toward Mac, saying angrily, "You tried to kill me you son-of-a . . .," only to crash again while Mac tries to escape by moving off-screen. The ad closes with a computer screen displaying the words "Computers Suck," followed by credits.

There is no question that Gabriel Schwarzer, the ad parody's creator, writer, animator, and director enjoyed himself immensely while conceiving and producing this CG ad. He manages to capture the essences of the Apple ads as well as South Park and, in the process, creates a unique satirical comment on the ubiquity of computers in our lives. Beyond intrinsic enjoyment, though, he had a genuine desire to force consumers to look at computers critically and to see the ridiculousness of the massive amounts of money spent on advertising by this industry. Schwarzer also benefited enormously from the media exposure he garnered. Posted in April 2007, his ad has had over 12 million views and over 3,500 comments. It was also a final project for his multimedia production class at California State University Northridge (CSUN)—one in which he presumably received a top grade!

The ad was 1 of 11 animations nominated for a Bitfilm award (digital film and animation awards) for Flash animation (it did not win). Schwarzer went on to craft a second parody ad (Mac versus PC versus Linux), developed a Web site devoted to multimedia creation (www.qeecode.com), and launched a career in multimedia production.

## THE STUDY: LEXIMANCER ANALYSIS OF UNIQUE VIEWER CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CG ADS

To explore consumer conversations about CG ads, we conducted an analysis of a large number of unique viewer conversations about the four ads. Our purpose here is to demonstrate a new text analysis tool called Leximancer, a relatively simple but powerful device for visualizing and interpreting complex textual communication.

Leximancer (www.leximancer.com) is a data-mining tool that enables visual depiction and interpretation of prose data. Leximancer uses a machine-learning technique, in a grounded fashion, to discover the main concepts in a corpus, and how they relate to each other (for a detailed description, see Rooney 2005). To make out concepts in the corpus and how they interrelate, Leximancer does both a conceptual (thematic) analysis and a relational (semantic) analysis. Once a concept has been identified, Leximancer builds a thesaurus of words that are closely related to the concept, thereby giving the concept its semantic or definitional content. The text is then displayed visually by means of a "concept map" that portrays the main concepts and their interrelationships. The concepts are more than key words—they are best conceived of as collections of words that "travel together." The extracted concepts are

displayed on a map that details the relative importance of concepts, and the strengths between them.

Large circles represent key themes from a document, while dots represent concepts. Brighter (lighter-colored) and larger theme circles and concept dots indicate greater importance within the text. When concepts are close together or overlap in the map, it means that they also appear close together in the text. Concepts that are directly related, but not necessarily strongly semantically linked, will be far apart on the concept map, while concepts that are strongly semantically linked will be close to each other on the concept map (Rooney 2005, pp. 410–412). In this way, concepts that occur in very similar semantic contexts will form clusters. The researcher can then use the map to show an overall representation of the corpus, and to guide its interpretation.

Leximancer's algorithm is based on Bayesian theory. As evidence accumulates, the degree of belief in a relationship or hypothesis changes. When this is applied to text, the words that make up a sentence predict the concepts that emerge and can be discussed. The tool automatically and efficiently learns that words predict which concepts, and this can be done for very large numbers of concepts across very large document collections. A very important characteristic of these concepts is that they are defined in advance using only a small number of seed words, often as few as one word. The automatic selection of important concepts and entities within text has demonstrated good agreement with expert human judgments over many trials (Rooney 2005).

The tool has been used successfully by scholars across a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences in recent times. In the area of corporate risk management, Martin and Rice (2007) profiled enterprise risks in large computer companies and were successfully able to identify risk themes, concepts, and ideas from the screening and contextual analysis of business reports and corporate data. Smith and Humphreys (2006), working in the field of behavioral research validated the output of Leximancer, using a set of evaluation criteria taken from content analysis that were appropriate for knowledge discovery tasks. In the area of tourism, Scott and Smith (2005) have used the software for event image assessment, specifically to examine changes in the public representation of events over time. To the best of our knowledge, however, no one has used it in marketing to understand ad conversations.

## Method

We first copied all textual information from the unique viewer conversations about the four ads described above within YouTube into a text document. This produced a considerable amount of textual information for each of the ads, although this differed quite noticeably between the ads. For example, while the iPhone New York ad had only around 900 words of unique viewer conversations, the Starbucks spoof comprised almost 19,000 words. This text was then used, without cleaning, as input to the Leximancer package for analysis purposes. One of the advantages of Leximancer is that words with low semantic value such as pronouns and conjunctions are automatically excluded from the analysis since it builds concepts rather than just strictly counting words. Another advantage of Leximancer is its ability to handle all types of text, including the short and ungrammatical comments typical of those posted to sites such as YouTube. Likewise, it does not do stemming, which is typically done in other packages by removing or substituting common suffixes—for instance, by converting plurals to singulars and reducing adjectives, verbs, and adverbs to a common noun or word stem.

## Results: Leximancer Maps

Apart from allowing users to post videos and to comment on them, YouTube also permits them to rate the video on a five-star scale, and to add the video to their "favorites." The site describes summary statistics on the ratings, as well as reporting the number of times the video has been viewed, the number of comments, the number of ratings, and the number of times the video has been "favorited" (marked as a "favorite" by viewers). The YouTube statistics for the four CG ads are summarized in Table 1 (as of March 1, 2009). In summary, all four ads had been placed on YouTube within the past two years, and the Mac-PC spoof ad had been viewed, rated, and favorited most often of the four selected. The iPod Dance had been viewed least often, but the iPhone New York ad elicited the fewest comments and fewest ratings and had been favorited least of the four selected. The Starbucks spoof had a less favorable average rating (3.5 stars) than the other three ads (all at 4.5 stars).

The maps produced by Leximancer analysis of the YouTube unique viewer conversations about the iPod dance, iPhone New York, Starbucks spoof, and Mac-PC spoof ads, all created by consumers, are shown, respectively, in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4.

## Interpreting the Maps

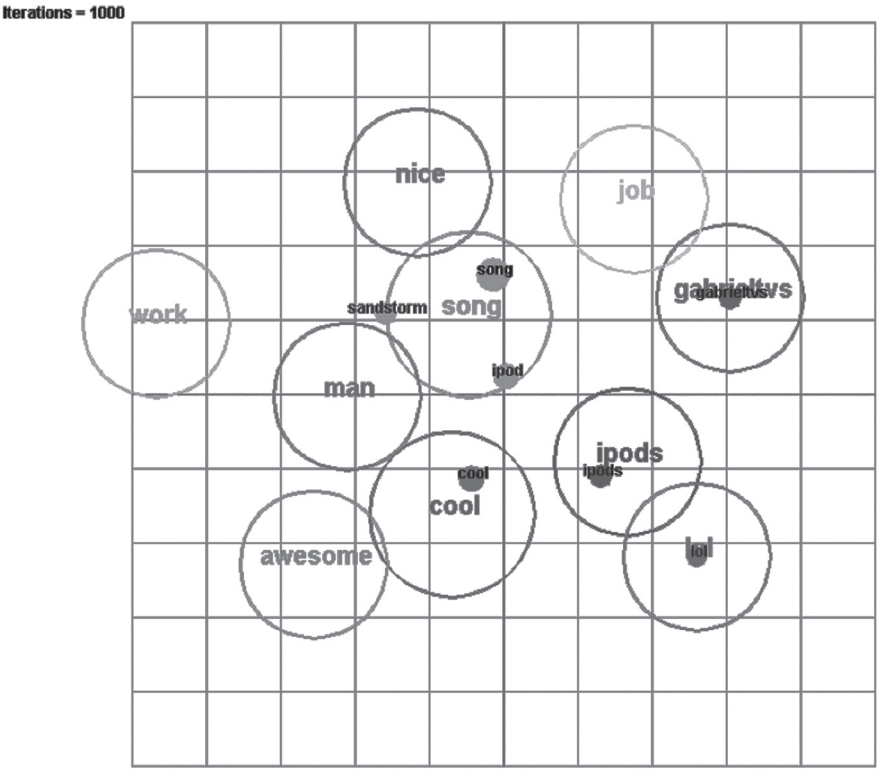
Comparing the maps in Figures 1 through 4 shows that the four CG ads have resulted in four very different conversations among their audiences. Not only do the main concepts differ between the ads, so do simple things like the number of concepts and themes, and the interrelatedness between the concepts. Five main concepts emerge from the conversations related to the iPod dance ad in Figure 1 (although three other, graphically less prominent concepts are apparent in the diagram as well) and we interpret these in relation to a detailed analysis of each ad's comments. The first concept is

**TABLE 1**
**YouTube Summary Statistics for the Four CG Ads Analyzed**

| Consumer-generated ad | Date added to YouTube | Average rating (5-point YouTube Scale, 1 = poor; 5 = awesome) | Number of views | Number of comments | Number of ratings | Number of times favorited |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| iPod Dance | Nov. 22, 2006 | 4.5 | 18,572 | 145 | 135 | 213 |
| iPhone New York | June 12, 2007 | 4.5 | 95,013 | 52 | 97 | 110 |
| Starbucks spoof ad | Aug. 23, 2006 | 3.5 | 192,352 | 558 | 472 | 309 |
| Mac-PC South Park spoof ad | April 30, 2007 | 4.5 | 12,155,273 | 23,266 | 38,606 | 36,753 |

*Note:* CG = consumer-generated.

**FIGURE 1**
Leximancer Map for iPod Dance Ad




that of "iPods"—primarily a conversation about the product among the discussants. A second theme was that of "cool"—participants talked about how "cool" or stylish the product was, but also about how "cool" the ad itself was and how it suited the product. Then there was the concept of the "song"—the music used in the ad. In this dialogue, participants were eager to discuss the music, and how appropriate it was to the ad. Many wanted to know what the name of the tune was and who performed it. Others were delighted to be able to inform them that the song was called "Sandstorm" and that an artist known as Darude performed it. A fourth concept was that of "Gabrieltvs"—the "handle," or online name, of Gabriel Stella—the ad's producer. This exchange featured questions asked as to the ad creator's identity and a number of answers provided by proud, mostly Brazilian, participants in the discussion. The fifth, less-prominent concept is that of "lol"—e-speak (used in e-mails and text messages) for "laugh(ing) out loud," used by many viewers of the ad to describe the fact that they

FIGURE 2
Leximancer Map for iPhone New York Ad

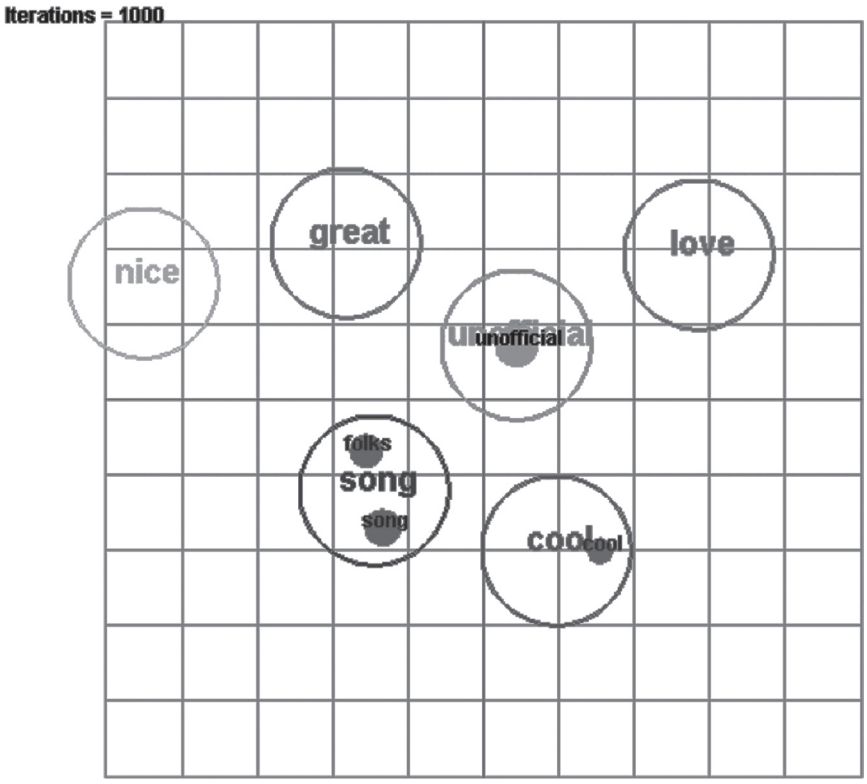



FIGURE 3
Leximancer Map for Starbucks Spoof Ad

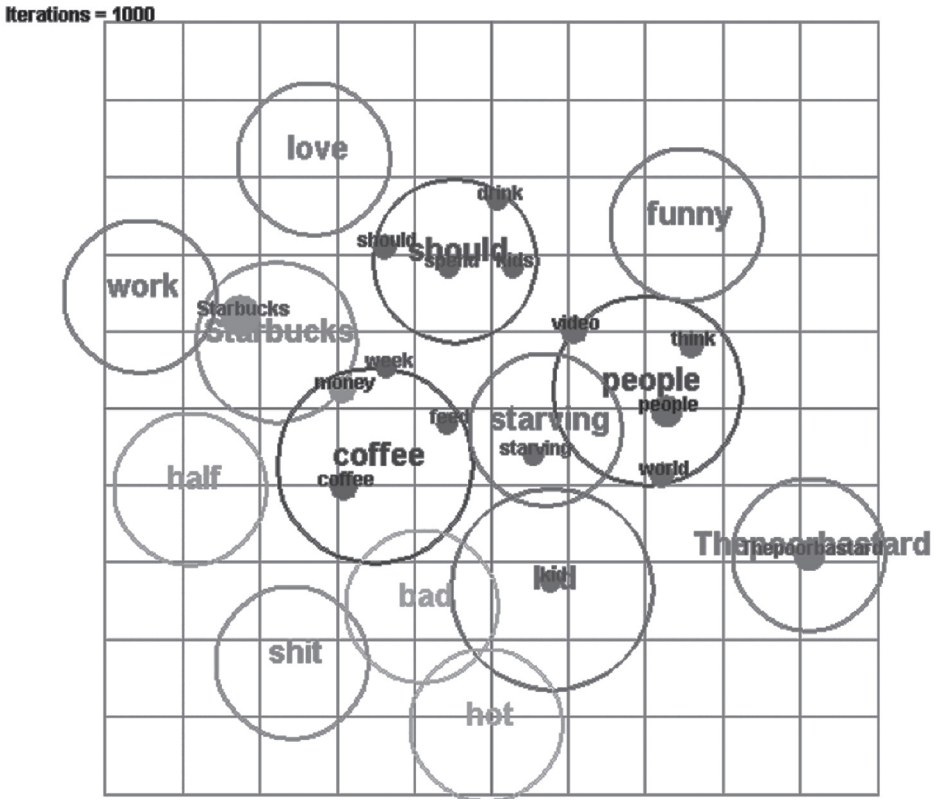
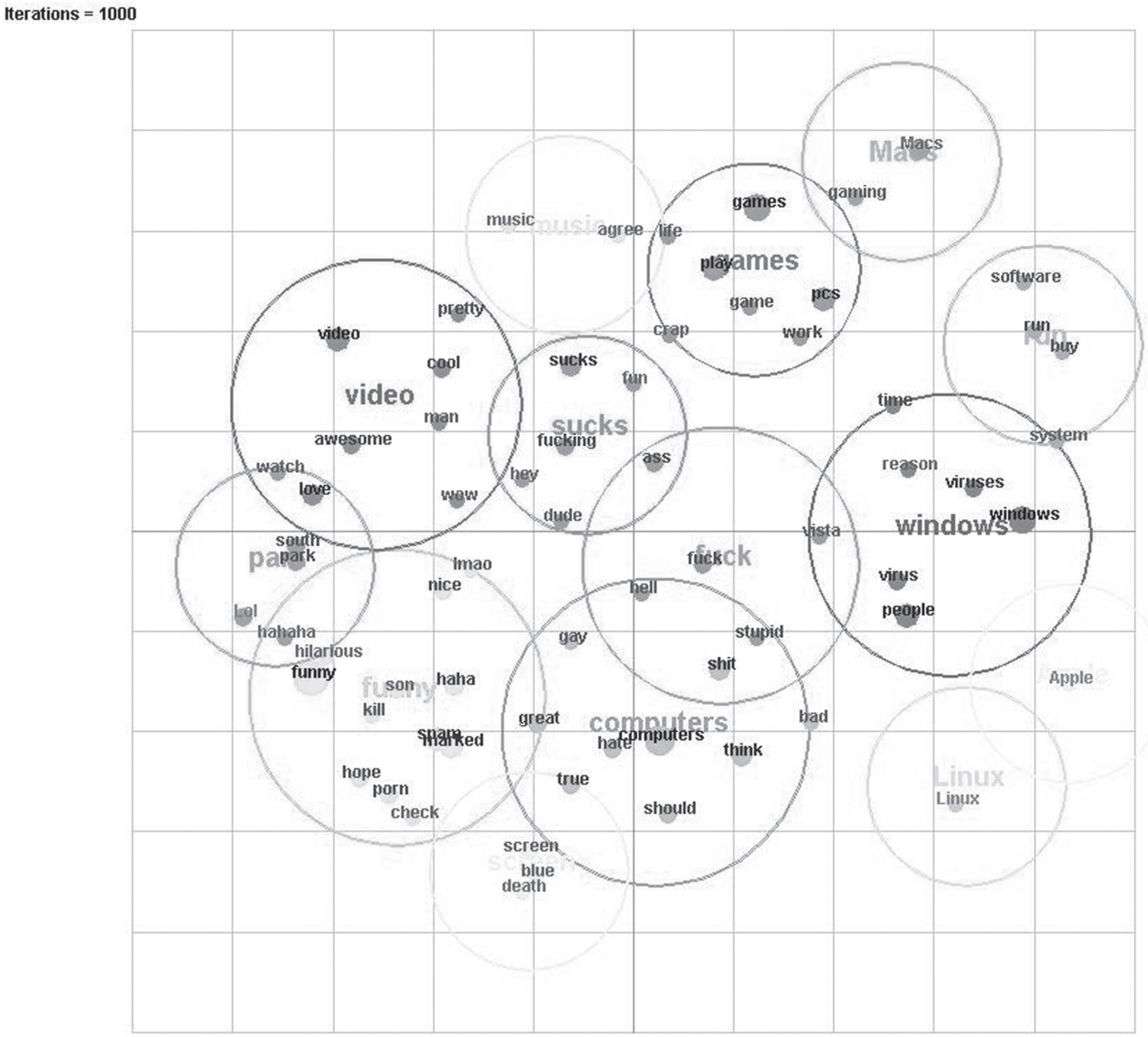


**FIGURE** 4
**Leximancer Map for Mac-PC South Park Spoof Ad**




had enjoyed the ad and it had made them laugh (out loud, presumably).

The Leximancer map of viewer responses to the iPhone New York ad (Figure 2) is simpler than the iPod Dance ad, and features three prominent concepts. The first of these is "unofficial," which had to do with a dialogue between those "in the know," who were aware of the fact that the ad had not been created by Apple or by its ad agency, and those who didn't and were asking. The second, "song," again featured a series of dialogues between those who wanted to know what the song used in the ad was and those who were able to inform them that the song was "Young Folks" by Peter Bjorn and John. The third concept was again "cool" and referred once more to how stylish and advanced the new iPhone was and how much viewers liked the ad.

Consumer discussions concerning the Starbucks spoof ad resulted in the more complex map (Figure 3) that shows a large number of concepts with considerable overlapping. Our interpretation of the overall map is that it is symptomatic of the tremendous amount of heated debate the ad caused among YouTube viewers. First there are two overlapping concepts, "Starbucks" and, not surprisingly, "coffee," which intersect on the theme of "money." This discussion positioned a pro-Starbucks contingent (a good company that brews great coffee, is profitable but philanthropic) against a group that was against the company because they believed that it exploited coffee farmers in developing countries to make money. The second concept is that of "people" (essentially that the video made one think of the world and people, but in different ways), which again featured a heated argument. This concept overlaps with

two less prominent themes of "kid" and "starving." Some viewers thought it awful that Starbucks customers spent as much on one drink as could be used to save a "kid" from starvation. Others took the very basic view that these children would be starving whether one drank frappuccinos or not and that there wasn't much that Starbucks or its customers could do about this. The third concept is that of "should," which featured viewers opining on what the parties to the ad "should" do (people "should" be able to drink whatever they want to, Starbucks "should" spend money to help kids, etc.). The final concept that is of interest in the dialogue surrounding this ad is that of "the Poor Bastard," which emerges because the ad's creator (who calls himself the Poor Bastard Dave) actively engages in mostly heated, and often profane, disputes with viewers.

The Mac-PC spoof ad garnered the most comments from viewers, and remains among the Top 100 comedy videos of all time on YouTube. Six strong, overlapping concepts emerge in the map in Figure 4. As expected, three of the themes respond to the ad's key message and have to do with all that is bad or negative about computers in general and the strong negative emotions that they sometimes generate. The "computers" and "suck" themes are replete with comments agreeing with the video that "computers suck," that they are "shit," "stupid," and "hell." What positive comments there are tend to be in support of the ad and its inherent truthfulness (e.g., "so true," "great service"). A third negative theme focuses more specifically on Windows and all that is wrong and frustrating with Microsoft's operating systems, including but not limited to how slow they are, how bloated, and how insecure or prone to viruses they are.

Two of the themes, "video" and "funny," center more on the use of South Park–like characters and on the comedic quality of the ad. Comments are very positive and convey that viewers thought the ad captured the essence of both the Apple ads and the South Park television series. Comments like "cool," "awesome," and "wicked" pepper tributes to Schwarzer's creativity. Many appreciated the humorous way the subject was treated with comments like "lol," "funny," "haha," "hahaha," and "hilarious."

The last and smallest theme came from comments about Mac computers. These were mixed. Some reinforced the impression that Macs are good for gaming and that this is a good thing. Others reiterated the ad's contention that the Mac is more than just a gaming platform—that it is a fully featured, multimedia platform capable of executing work applications, games, videos, and music. The comments in this theme were generally positive.

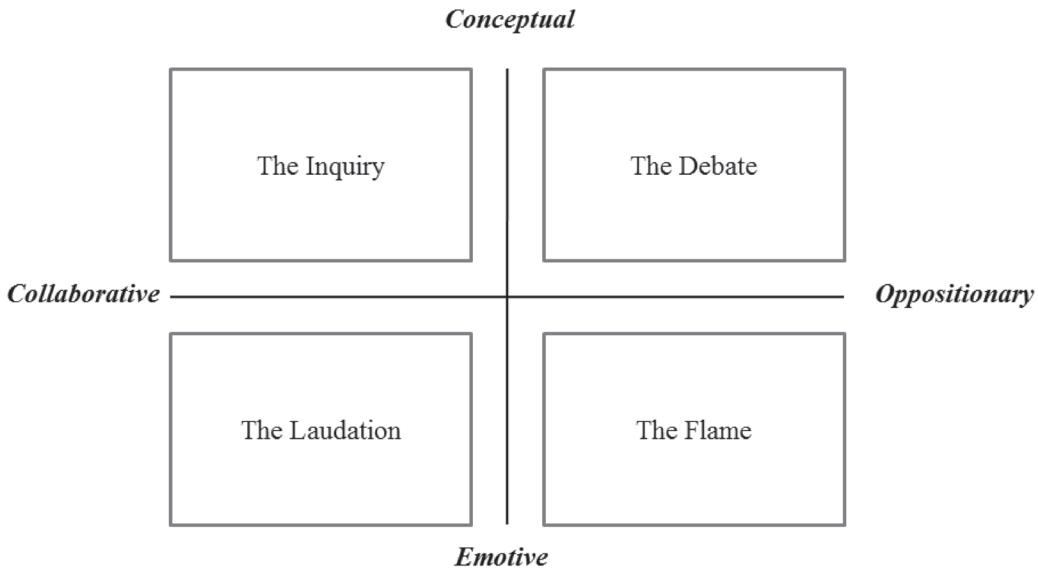
## DISCUSSION

The Leximancer maps reveal the beginnings of a typology of responses by participants in conversations about CG ads and provide a relatively rapid way of analyzing large numbers of user comments (which may, in some cases, equate to thousands of pages of text). An examination of the maps shows that the nature of the discourse about the ads ranges from a simpler, "What's this about," through a "This is really good," then a "I really agree/disagree with the views expressed in the ad," to a "this ad really makes me feel very strongly, and angry, about something." The four types of conversations identified might be construed as archetypes—abstractions designed to illustrate differences. In Figure 5, we construct a typology of viewer response to consumer-generated advertising.

Typologies provide a means of classifying phenomenon based on similar attributes and a rich history of typologies exists in advertising research. Existing typologies range in topic from categorizing the use of visual rhetoric in advertising (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004) to describing creative message strategies for television commercials (Laskey, Day, and Crask 1989). With respect to viewer response to advertising, traditional research has developed typologies based on consumer emotion, cognition, and behavior (e.g., Batra and Holbrook 1990; Batra and Ray 1986; MacInnis and Jaworski 1989), whereas more recent research (e.g., Scott 1994) focuses on classifying consumer engagement and negotiation of meaning (Aitken, Lawson, and Gray 2003). We draw on elements from both traditional and recent research in constructing our response framework.

The typology in Figure 5 suggests that the primary viewer responses to CG ads can be conceived of as existing on two dimensions. First, the response to the ad can either be *conceptual* (where the viewer is concerned with how the "concept"—the ad—came into being, or was formed) or *emotional* (responses to the ad are actuated, affected, or determined by emotion rather than reason). This first dimension echoes the classic split of advertising response into affective or cognitive components (MacInnis and Jaworski 1989), although here we focus the cognitive component as curiosity related to advertisement creation. Wright (1973) describes curiosity as a cognitive response, but limits it to the product. Second, a consumer's response to the ad can either be *collaborative* (the viewer is mostly on the side of, and desires to intellectually "work with" the ad's creator and other viewers) or *oppositionary* (the viewer is antagonistic or hostile toward the ad, and/or its creator, or those who are opposed to the ad). This dimension aligns very closely with Batra and Ray's (1986) general breakdown of affective response as either source bolstering or source derogation. Unique in our findings is the desire to engage with the creator of the ad, a finding that suggests attitude toward the creator is a necessary component in understanding response to consumer-generated advertising. This resonates with our earlier observation of the differences between CG advertising (where communication can be about the ad's creator as well as the ad, the brand, and other consumers) and traditional WOM (where communication is usually about the ad and the product or service). These

**FIGURE 5**
**Archetypes of Consumer Conversations About Consumer-Generated Ads**




dichotomies permit the identification of four response archetypes to CG ads, which we term the *inquiry,* the *laudation,* the *debate,* and the *flame.*

The iPod Dance ad illustrates the *inquiry* (collaborative-conceptual) response. Essentially viewers are saying, "That's interesting, tell me more." Here the consumer is asking for further information about who created the ad, what the song is, who composed the music, why it was created, and so forth. The response from other viewers is a provision of information, and what results is a conceptual engagement in the ad and its creation.

We term the conversation surrounding ads such as the iPhone New York creation the *laudation* (collaborative-emotive). Viewers of this ad praise it and extol its virtues. Expressing their emotional response to the ad, the conversation is about how good it is, how excellent the product is, how appropriate the music, and so forth. Questions regarding the origins of the ad are often part of this discourse—if it's so good, why was it created by an individual, and not a big agency? Frequently this is the only kind of query in this type of dialogue; there is little else in the way of further discussion or inquiry.

The Starbucks ad illustrates the *debate* (oppositionary-conceptual) response. Here different voices present divergent views or opinions on the topic of interest. A point-counterpoint discussion often emerges with argument and facts. We might expect debate conversations to grow as more and more ads are broadcast, both by hobby creators and ad agencies and their clients, featuring brands that adopt a "point of view." In the Starbucks spoof ad, its creator adopts a point of view: While Starbucks might espouse its concerns for coffee producers in the developing world, in reality, it sells expensive drinks to wealthy consumers at prices that could feed starving children (in the developing world).

The notion of a brand "with a point of view" has attracted attention recently. Deighton (2007) describes the case of Unilever's Dove brand, which in its advertising espouses the point of view that beauty is natural and not what the media tells us it is (young, extremely slender, mostly blond females). Of course, this exposes the brand to a host of debates and opposing opinions and, in a sense, means that its managers relinquish control. The ads are sent up in the mass media by talk show hosts such as Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien, as well as by countless hobby ad creators on YouTube. Yet at the same time, the fact that the brand has a point of view is praised and supported by Oprah Winfrey, news programs, and innumerable individuals.

Finally, when emotions run really high, and the conversation among viewers knows few boundaries, we find the *flame* ad (oppositionary-emotive). In contrast to the *debate,* which is a mostly level-headed discussion, the *flame* is essentially a diatribe, with diverging opinions engaged in an emotionally fueled shouting match. We choose the term "flame" deliberately, from the stem "flaming"—which has come to mean a hostile and insulting interaction between Internet users. This type of interaction is usually not, nor intended to be, constructive. It is meant to be destructive and derogatory, and a display of the contempt that the flamer holds for the other party's position. The discussion resulting from the spoof Mac-PC ad is a classic "flame" discourse, with the opposing parties engaging in a torrent of abhorrence for the conflicting perspectives of their adversaries, as well as vociferous support for, or antagonism toward, the ad's creator. The dialogue is frequently profane in nature.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

An important and surprising finding is that the maps of viewer conversations reveal that the brands are often not prominent, at least in the posted discourse concerning the videos. While this might merely be an artifact of the brands chosen in this study, the observation does at least hold equally across the four ads chosen. The discussion in most of the examples was not around the brand, but instead of other issues, such as the creators of the ad, the music in the ad, and larger social themes such as international justice, globalization, poverty, and corporate social responsibility. Brand managers may wish to consider the possibility that more functional brands will either be ignored in this new conversation altogether, or are at risk of merely being the butt of video jokes. Some brands now champion a "point of view," such as Unilever's Dove. The problem with having a point of view, especially a strong one, is that it can easily be disagreed with, and YouTube provides the ideal medium for dissenters to poke fun at the point of view, and for countless others to join in this debate, which is largely uncontrollable by the organization behind the brand.

A further observation for managers is the fact that conversations can take on a path dependency deriving from the initial comments posted. In other words, "seeds" are potentially important, and may even be able to skew the conversation, which could, in turn, determine the kind of map that the dialogue produces. For example, in the case of the Starbucks ad, vociferous participants might begin the discourse by concentrating on the fact that Starbucks is an ethical corporation that not only employs a large number of people, but is also a staunch supporter of fair trade. The conversation could then easily continue to assume that path unless others diverted it by commenting on the ethics of consumers drinking expensive beverages rather than supporting poverty, or other such themes. This immediately suggests that organizations themselves could get involved in the conversation—if they have yet to do so—in an effort to exert some kind of control over it, and to move it in favorable directions. Such an approach is similar to what Godes and Mayzlin (2009) term "exogenous" WOM—a term used to describe WOM that emerges due to specific actions and encouragement on the part of the firm. Their research suggests that WOM stemming from less loyal consumers and communicated to weaker social ties is most powerful. This finding points to the importance of sites such as YouTube that enjoy broad appeal. It is interesting to note that there is evidence that some companies are already employing professionals to act as commentators and "bloggers" to remark on, and "direct," conversations about their organizations and communication by or about them (Nelson 2008).

The managerial implications of this trend are profound. On the one hand, organizations might find it desirable to inform and direct market interactions and conversations by participating in them, either visibly or in a clandestine fashion. This may indeed be a reasonably simple, inexpensive, and credible way of correcting misinformation, and shifting attention to issues that the organization wants customers to take note of. On the other hand, it is very likely that many of the viewers on a medium such as YouTube would view clandestine participation in their conversations by firms or their agents, should this come to light, as interruptions of their conversations at best, and at worst, as cynical and devious attempts to manipulate opinions and pervert free speech. There is already evidence that furtive and surreptitious participation in online discussion by senior executives of organizations can be a public relations disaster. For example, John Mackey, chairman and chief executive of Whole Foods Market, learned a very hard lesson after he was exposed as the author, under a pseudonym, of pro–Whole Foods comments on an Internet stock message board. Corporate communications experts believed that his postings put a valuable brand at risk (White et al. 2007).

Finally, managers might find it useful to understand unique viewer conversations surrounding CG ads (and indeed the conversations surrounding their own ads that are placed online) using the framework suggested in Figure 5. This type of analysis can then inform decisions to be taken in terms of the stances to be adopted toward CG advertising, perhaps using the approach suggested by Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008).

## LIMITATIONS

Just as all exploratory studies such as this have shortcomings, like all research tools, the Leximancer approach to the mapping of unique viewer conversations about CG ads has a number of limitations. First, due to the inherent anonymity of the Internet, the authorship of both the ads and comments studied are unknown. It is entirely possible that companies—or their appointed public relations firms—have already begun seeding the Internet with content to their benefit. Still, provided such involvement is unknown to consumers, the experience is just as real as had the content come from a fellow consumer; reality, for the consumer, is what we examine in this paper, regardless of its origins. Second, like all qualitative research tools, it is inherently subjective, and relies on human interpretation to tease meaning from data (see Table 2). While it might be argued that mapping makes interpretation of complex human interaction easier, the fact remains that other advertising researchers and scholars might see things in the maps that differ from our construals in this paper. Third, our analysis in this paper only considered four ads, and a large number of checks on reliability and validity have not been carried out, which leaves a number of questions unanswered. For example, would the viewer conversations concerning other CG ads deliver similar maps that were at

**TABLE 2**
**Comparing Leximancer to Other Text Analysis Techniques**

| | Simple word counts | Content analysis | Qualitative coding | Leximancer |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *How the technique operates* | User searches for key words of interest within a document and count information is tallied.<br><br>E.g., using a word processor. | User creates a dictionary of words and associated synonyms related to concepts. Text is then input and count data on the number of words falling under each concept is used to create a map.<br><br>E.g., Wordstat (Peladeau 1999). | User manually reads through the entire textual document either coding words and phrases in an exploratory, emergent fashion or against a preexisting coding scheme.<br><br>E.g., Krippendorf 2004. | User inputs text into the program, which does an automatic analysis and plots resulting concepts and themes on a map.<br><br>E.g., Leximancer (Rooney 2005). |
| *Advantages* | Very simple to run, provides objective results, easy to observe trends. | Output is relatively easy to interpret, provided a three-dimensional (or less) solution emerges; methodology is common and well documented; provides statistical information that can be used to judge the strength of analysis. | Very thorough and detailed analysis of the text; provides ability to discover new themes and concepts while coding. | Text analysis does not rely on any sort of user settings or dictionaries for operation and thus is objective in producing maps; handles all types of text, including short phrases; doesn't require user to create a dictionary file. |
| *Disadvantages* | No information on how words group together; not clear how synonyms should be interpreted; difficult to know which words to search for. | Requires a user-compiled dictionary to operate; reliance on user input introduces subjectivity into the analysis; will only find words or concepts that have been entered into the dictionary. | Coding can be very subjective; also a very slow process that can take a considerable amount of time. | Since concepts and themes are automatically generated, the program does not allow for customized searches; subjectivity is introduced analyzing resulting maps. |

least rich enough to attempt to interpret? Would a reasonably large number of knowledgeable individuals interpret the same maps in a more or less consistent fashion? There are more limitations of this paper than of Leximancer itself, and they present worthwhile avenues for future research in the area of user-generated content.

A further limitation of Leximancer maps of text is that the charts are really just snapshots in time—they capture the essence of the text at the time it is copied and pasted for analysis, but not as it might have been, nor as it might be at some point in the future. This is a drawback of many mapping techniques used in marketing research. More than 30 years ago, for example, Wells (1975) identified as one of the weaknesses of psychographics, then the leading-edge research tool of the time, the fact that lifestyle profiles were not stable, and that when identical research was conducted some time after, entire market segments tended to have disappeared, and new ones to have arisen. Likewise, a map of the unique viewer conversation surrounding the Starbucks spoof ad may be very different some months from now than what it was at the time our research was conducted, as the discourse surrounding the video continues to evolve.

Finally, it should be obvious that while the analysis presented here tells us a lot about what consumers say and feel about the consumer-generated ads, it doesn't inform us at all about who these consumers are and what their motivations for posting comments are in the first place. This might be important to managers who wish to be informed further about the consumer profiles and motivations behind the responses. For example, if the consumers responding negatively to a CG ad for a luxury car are high school students, marketers of the luxury car brand might be less concerned than if they were affluent young professionals.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

A number of avenues for future research can be identified in addition to the longitudinal tracking and comparison studies recognized above. First, placing an ad on a site such as YouTube and then analyzing subsequent viewer discussion using a tool

like Leximancer provides a realistic and useful means for ad agencies as well as advertising scholars to gauge public sentiment. The former might want to test an ad for commercial reasons before the launch of a campaign. The latter might want feedback on an ad before using it in further research. Second, and this option could also be useful to both practitioners and scholars, researchers could attempt to "seed" discussion on viewer conversation sites and then study the effects this has on subsequent conversation, which can then be summarized by Leximancer maps. Lexical seeds can act as cues to steer (or perhaps fail to steer) conversation in a direction that might be of interest in a discussion. For example, while Dove might espouse "real beauty," one could study the effect of opposing views on the conversation by seeding the notion that beauty is "aspirational" and that while all people can't necessarily be beautiful, they can at least aspire to be.

Another direction in which future research would be both insightful and important would be to conduct a series of comparison studies across brands within a category. It would be important for brand executives to know whether and how the type of discussion that followed CG ads about their brand differed from those of competitor brands, and in what way. An even simpler, but equally important piece of research would be to compare the nature of conversations generated by a firm's own ads with those of consumer ads generated for the brand. Furthermore, it would be useful to conduct a series of comparisons of maps across the framework suggested in Figure 5 to test its robustness as a framework for the classification of ads and the subsequent conversations they evoke. Brunel et al.'s (2007) study of the differences between CG ads with separate source effects—specifically, those created in response to a competition sponsored by the company and those created spontaneously—could also be conducted by means of Leximancer and it would be interesting and worthwhile to contrast the findings achieved by the two different techniques.

As noted under the limitations section of this paper, little is known at present about the consumers who are posting comments in response to CG ads on vehicles such as YouTube. Frameworks are only beginning to be developed to understand the consumer motivations for creating ads in the first place (see, e.g., Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008); consumer response to CG ads is an even more recent phenomenon. Future research should consider not only the consumer motivations for posting comments in response to CG ads; it may wish to begin by simply describing these consumers—who they are, where they are, what they post about, and how frequently they post. This would enable researchers to build a profile of those who post and begin to understand their behavior, as well as provide managers with the means to gauge the gravity or otherwise of consumer conversations about CG ads that target their brands.

The research in this paper has not considered the valence of the advertising message, or in simple terms, whether the ad is positive or negative toward the brand. Both the iPod ads have positive valence, whereas the Starbucks ad is negative toward the brand. The valence of the fourth ad might be open to debate, as it is, in turn, negative toward Microsoft, positive toward Apple, but negative overall toward computers. The valence of the ad presents an interesting opportunity for future research and it will be possible to conduct studies that compare viewer responses to ads with positive and negative valence to determine whether the overall structure and nature of these discussions differ. Similarly, our research has not directly accounted for the total number of words in the responses to a particular ad, and whether this has an effect on the structure and nature of the Leximancer map produced. At a very superficial level, fewer total words will result in a simpler map, merely because Leximancer has less to work with. However, when commentary is short but sweet (i.e., brief but detailed), the effect on the map would be different from when there is a large volume of commentary that was simple but repetitive. Studies should be designed to explore these effects, and even things such as length of average comment and number of comments versus total number of words could be incorporated as variables in this research.

We have used the viewer responses to the ads and the Leximancer map for each ad to produce a $2 \times 2$ typology of consumer conversations surrounding consumer-generated ads in Figure 5. Future research that considers more, different consumer-generated ads might wish to revisit this conceptualization of archetypes to determine its robustness as a classification mechanism. It may well be that further research uncovers additional or different dimensions.

Indications are that 10% of the ads on YouTube are ads generated by consumers, and that this proportion is growing (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008). Advertising decision makers, whether they want to or not, will have to cope with the intricacies they will face in this age of mutated advertising. More than 25 years ago, Berman noted: "In the absence of traditional authority, advertising has become a kind of social guide. It depicts us in all the myriad situations possible to a life of free choice. It provides ideas about style, morality, behavior" (1981, p. 13). CG ads and the consumer conversations they induce do just that—they cause us to query, to praise, to argue, and to clash far more than their firm-generated counterparts have ever done in the past. New problems within a discipline are typically not solved by the better application of existing tools. They generally require the creative use of new tools. It is our hope that this is where our contribution lies, rather than necessarily uncovering new advertising theory. The nature of the problem in this case really has the potential to turn advertising on its head, as it is no longer under the control of the firm, nor is it unidirectional. Approaches such as the one we have followed here may facilitate the uncovering of new theories of advertising

by shedding new light on how advertising works when it is multidirectional, networked, and part of the conversation that firms have with their customers.

Advertising might not have died, as Rust and Oliver foretold, but it has mutated into something far less static, and far more fluid. It is continually evolving in capricious ways, so that its measurement and the measurement of its effects will perplex far more than those who create the brands embodied in advertising's messages. It is our hope that the tools and approaches outlined here will make this measurement just a little less perplexing, and remind us once more that, as Leo Bogart once said, "the Great Idea in advertising is far more than the sum of the recognition scores, the ratings and all the other superficial indicators of its success; it is in the realm of myth, to which measurements cannot apply" (quoted in Rothenburg 1994, p. 113).

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