

European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder)
Faculty of cultural and social sciences

Course: "Media Worlds – an introduction to discourse analysis"
SS 2006
University lecturer: Felicitas Macgilchrist

« Absolut Counter-Discourse »
- A discourse analysis of the counter-discourse to Absolut Vodka advertising.
Research Paper

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1. Introduction

In this paper I want to explain what counter-discourse is and what it aims at, taking as an example the counter-discourse that exists along with the official/dominant discourse of alcohol promoting brands such as the Swedish *Absolut Vodka*¹, which is reflected in spoof ads, produced for different reasons by activist (e.g. *Adbusters*) or official groups. These groups will have to be analysed and presented as detailed as possible in order to get the most precise idea of the context in which the counter-discourse takes place.

The questions I want to find an answer to are the following: Can counter-discourse be successful in the context that it is encountered in most of the times (already critic attitudes represented by activists or critics)? Are these ads to be taken seriously or are they just the expression of the joy of generally countering and provoking? Are the critics credible or do they disqualify themselves through taking too radical positions, taking their assumptions for „the final incontestable truth“, thus establishing just another ideology?

Using the 3-D-model for analysis developed by Norman Fairclough, I will analyse two spoof ads that both take over the famous bottle shape of *Absolut Vodka*, détourning the originally positive message into a critical and negative one. One of these ads will be from the activist movement *Adbusters*, the other is part of a Romanian anti-alcohol campaign.

The whole work will be theoretically backed by Stuart Halls theory of encoding and decoding and his theory of different reading positions. This latter theory will be used to analyse the intentions of the producers of spoof ads and the readers supposed reactions.

Another scholar I will refer to when analysing my own analysis and that of those who conduct the counter-discourse is Margaret Wetherell.

My assumption before beginning this paper is that the counter-discourse represents the “good” while the dominant discourse of alcohol promoting ads stands for the “bad”, although I also expect the ‘counterers’ to turn out to be just as ideological as they reproach it to their enemies. If these assumptions will prove right will have to be investigated in the following.

2. Introduction to advertising

While in its beginnings, in the 1950s and 60s, advertising was a very obviously goal-oriented matter, with hard-selling and not very subtle strategies, today it has changed into a high-gloss, arty and trend-setting commercial tool. Nowadays advertising is, as Martin Davidson, a specialist in advertising puts it, “a social language, a genre of spectator/reader experience, a technique of persuasion [...] almost a world in its own right, with its own languages, customs

¹ For more information see paper parts by Tim Dörflinger and Martin Begoll.

and history, and one that sets the tone and pace for large parts of our lives.”² “Advertising is a topic which both causes and reveals existing social divisions”³, Davidson claims.

2.1 What is an ad?

For most people an ad is something that is connected to the function of encouraging people to buy a product. This promoting and encouragement to purchasing equals an aiming at a change in attitude and behaviour. But there are also so-called non-product ads, that “only” advocate a change in behaviour without promoting any products.⁴ These non-product ads are often used in political or similar campaigns, for example anti-alcohol campaigns, and they often show the mostly scaring effects of not adopting the advocated behaviour. In the case of the counter-discourse to vodka ads it is accidents caused by drunkenness or allusions to health damage that are shown on the ads in question, which I am going to analyse in the analysis part.

2.2 Advertising as discourse type

The involvement of advertising with our everyday lives, its status of a “mass-medium culture of its own” (Davidson 1992: 5), but most particularly its social significance, its mirroring of society and vice versa, its transmitting of meaning and messages, has lead people to regard advertising as a self-contained and prominent discourse type. Guy Cook, a British Senior Lecturer of Applied Linguistics, remarks that “advertising is not a remote and specialized discourse, but a prominent discourse type in contemporary society” (Cook 1992: 199), a factor that explains and legitimizes the extensive way in which advertising is being analyzed and interpreted today.

The one thing that seems to differentiate advertising from other discourse types is its function: the selling function of ads (although this is not always the case, as I have pointed out earlier). But advertisings do not solely serve this purpose, they “also amuse, inform, misinform, worry, warn, ... though it may be argued that these function are all in the service of the main function.” (Cook 1992: 5). Either way, advertising is a very controversial discourse type and can give rise to very strong feelings. It is this rejecting position of ads receivers that I intend

² Martin Davidson, *The Consumerist Manifesto. Advertising in postmodern times*. London and New York. Routledge. 1992: 3. Martin Davidson has worked in advertising and publishing and is currently a producer on *The Late Show* at the BBC.

³ Guy Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising*. London and New York. Routledge, 1992: 199. Guy Cook is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the London University Institute of Education. He has extensive experience of teaching English in the UK and abroad and his previous books include *Discourse* (1989), and a co-translation of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Dead House* (1989).

⁴ “Ads may not always be obliged to refer to a product, but they *are* still obliged to refer, however obliquely, to a change of behaviour.” Cook, 1992: 224.

to present, analyse and explain in this paper, the refusal to accept the omnipresence of advertising in the world today and the attempts to work against it: the countering of the official discourse.

2.3 Advertising and its enemies: rejection of the official discourse through a counter-discourse

There have always been people who disapproved of advertising, and often these “enemies” had a political background, were part of Marxist, feminist, ecological or whatsoever movements. Artists are also quite strong critics of advertising, as it is hard for them to accept the way that advertising tries to assimilate arts for their purposes, “preying upon the arts, stealing many of its ideas and incorporating them into its own creations.” (Cook 1922: 201). Today, as people grow up with and used to advertising, less and less people are prepared to stand up for their concerns and movements as e.g. feminism is losing its supporters, the critics also seem to have lost their platform. Martin Davidson even thinks that they are practicing an “exaggerated critique of capitalism” (Davidson 1992: 170) and have lost their oppositional force as there are too many of them and people have grown used to them just as they have grown used to advertising.

The activists nonetheless, do not perceive themselves as being on the losing streak. The movement still exists, even though it has changed: the activists of today do not necessarily share the same background any more and come together from every imaginable direction and are driven by every possible reason, a fact that contributes to the broadness of these new movements, a broadness that could turn out to be their strongest weapon. One of these movements is the Canadian *Adbusters* from Toronto, which I will examine in detail a bit later in this work. What they do in order to weaken the advertising industry, their way of countering the official discourse, their counter-discourse is called ‘adbusting’ or ‘culture jamming’ and is carried out by a practice which is called ‘détournement’ and which I will explain in detail a bit later on.

3. What is a counter-discourse?

Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard describes counter-discourse as a “negative evaluation expressed through humour and mockery, parody”⁵ although I would like to add, that in my opinion her fixation on a negative evaluation is not an obligatory feature of counter-discourse.

⁵ Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard, “Cross-Cultural Representation of ‘Otherness’ in Media Discourse” in: Gilbert Weiss/Ruth Wodak (Ed.) (2003): *Critical Discourse Analysis – Theory and Interdisciplinarity*. Hampshire/New York. Palgrave Macmillan: 272 – 296. Page 293.

Essentially counter-discourse, just as any other ‘counter-whatever’, can not exist without the thing it is countering⁶ and this could also be something negative that is countered through a positive evaluation. Molly Andrews and Michael Bamberg think, that the “very name identifies it as a positional category, in tension with another category. But what is dominant and what is resistant are not, of course, static questions, but rather are forever shifting placements.” (Andrews and Bamberg, 2003: x). This way there is always the possibility of turning the dominant into its counter-version. Then, they mention three of their colleagues, Anita Harris, Sarah Carney and Michelle Fine, who, in their article “Counter Work”, published in 2001 in the *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, state that counter stories “expose the construction of the dominant story by suggesting how else it could be told. In providing an example of how it could be otherwise they disrupt the hegemony of the monolingual master narrative” (Andrews and Bamberger, 2003: 13). What they say about stories can, I suppose, be applied to every other form of discourse, such as advertising or its countering, the spoof ads.

4. Theory

In order to pursue my analysis with the appropriate professionalism, I will back my assumptions with the theoretical works of Margaret Wetherell and Stuart Hall, two scholars that contributed a lot to the understanding of what is going on through discourse and whose findings, I am sure, will be of great use in analysing the counter-discourse of vodka advertising. I must now clearly point out that I will be analysing the counter-discourse and not the official discourse (the “real” advertising), although I have been quite detailed with that matter. This was only done in order to establish a background knowledge of the material that is being countered.

4.1 Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall is a Jamaican-born British sociologist who is regarded as a founder of Cultural Studies. He allowed for questions about race, culture and ethnicity to be discussed in public. Until his retirement in 1997 Hall held a Profession at the Open University. An early work of his, that was published in 1973⁷, is concerned with the encoding and decoding processes in

⁶ See Michael Bamberg/Molly Andrews (Ed.), *Considering Counter-Narratives. Narrating, resisting, making sense*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004: x (Introduction): “Counter narratives only make sense in relation to something else, that which they are countering.”

⁷ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*. Paper for the council of Europe Colloquy on “Training in the critical reading of televisual language”. Organized by the Council & The Centre for Mass
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the television discourse, but I suppose that many of Halls assumptions can be transferred and applied to any other meaning or message transmitting media discourse, such as in this case, advertising and its countering. The three main aspects that Hall focuses on and that are relevant for this work are his ideas on encoding and decoding, his assumptions about preferred meanings in these codes and his theory of different reading positions of the message receiver, the one who decodes the message in the end. I want to begin by shortly explaining what Hall means by en- and decoding, because this is the more fundamental concept on which the one on the reading positions is established.

4.1.1 Stuart Hall on Encoding and Decoding

The term encoding depicts the process of production of the media message – here the ad/counter-ad – whereas decoding is about the reception and how the receiver makes sense out of the encoded message. In fact, the idea behind the encoding/decoding theory is quite simple and can be illustrated as a circle: at the first stage comes the encoding process, with all the frameworks of knowledge in the back of the producers mind. On a next level, the text/ad/whatever is, through its being transmitted, decoded and hopefully turned into a meaningful discourse and can thus be retransformed and read as a meaningful structure: „In a determinate moment, the structure employs a code and yields a ‘message’: at another determinate moment, the ‘message’, via its decodings, issues into a structure.“ (Hall, 1973: 3). After having been read as a meaningful structure the message becomes part of the discourse which re-enters the circle when it has been established as knowledge-background for yet again another production of encoded messages. The production initiates the message, but production and reception are both determinate moments as it is here that the communication will work out or fail to fulfil its designated function. If ever the producer and receiver differ too much from each other, if they do not share the same values, ideas, cultures, etc., there is a strong risk of misunderstanding.⁸ If a misunderstanding occurs, then the preferred meaning has not been recognized or not been applied. This preferred meaning is the meaning that the producer would like to transmit, but of course, “there can never be only one, single, univocal and determined meaning” and “there can be no law to ensure that the receiver will take the preferred or dominant meaning [...] in precisely the way in which it has been encoded by the

Communication Research, University of Leicester, September 1973. Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.

⁸ “What is called ‘distortion’ or ‘misunderstanding’ arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange.” Hall, 1973: 4.

producer.” (Hall, 1973: 9) These misunderstandings are “usually accounted for in terms of individually ‘aberrant’ readings, attributed to ‘selective perception’.” (Hall, 1973: 15)

4.1.2 Stuart Hall on the visual sign and ideology in advertising

In television and in advertising there is a lot of meaning transmitted through the use of signs, precisely visual signs, which are usually used much more than language. Stuart Hall remarks that sometimes, in this context of message and meaning transmission, a visual sign can take on an “ideological dimension.” (Hall, 1973: 12). He then applies this remark to the advertising business: “In the advertising discourse, for example, we might say that there is almost no ‘purely denotative’ communication. Every visual sign in advertising ‘connotes’ a quality, situation, value or inference which is present as an implication or implied meaning, depending on the connotational reference.” (ibid.) This remark could be of some importance when thinking of the universal bottle shape of *Absolut Vodka*, a sign that has become an icon with a heavy load of connotational reference, which is why it can so easily be taken over for other purposes.

4.1.3 Stuart Hall on Reading Positions

Hall distinguishes between four kinds of readings, that manifest themselves in an a) *dominant* or *hegemonic code*, b) in a *professional code*, c) a *negotiated code* and d) an *oppositional code*.

The reading position applying the *dominant code* “takes the connoted meaning [...] full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference-code in which it has been coded. [...] It is the ideal-typical case of ‘perfectly transparent communication’” (Hall 1973: 16).

The *professional code* “operates within the ‘hegemony’ of the dominant code [...], serves to reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing the hegemonic quality, and operating with professional codings” (ibid.). This code serves “to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by not overtly biasing their operations in their direction” (Hall 1973: 17).

The *negotiated code* represents something like a transition position between the two extremes of the *hegemonic/dominant* and the *oppositional code*. It knows about both ways of reading the message but does not clearly side with either of these: “Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements. [...] This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions.” (Hall, 1973: 17f.).

The *negotiated* reading position is a position that has to be renegotiated for every new reading situation.

The last position, the other extreme, that which is unmistakably and always critic is the above mentioned *oppositional code*. In this position, the reader is perfectly aware of the meaning that the producer wants to transmit, but rejects it, deliberately deciding to decode it in a completely contrary way: “He detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference.” (Hall, 1973: 18)

4.2 Margaret Wetherell

Margaret Wetherell is Professor at the Open University and the author of several works on discourse analysis and has played an important role in the development of discursive psychology.

In 2001, together with her colleagues Steven Taylor and Simeon Yates, she published “Discourse Theory and Practice” out of which her chapter “Debates in discourse research” seems of some importance for this work.

In this chapter, Margaret Wetherell raises such interesting questions as firstly, how the analysts should handle their own findings, secondly if a critical or politically engaged stance is appropriate in discourse analysis, thirdly what counts as relevant context, a question that leads to a question concerned with the relationship between discourse and the social, and finally, she broaches the issue of the complicated relationship of discourse and reality. All these questions are answered from different perspectives (e.g. CDA versus conversation analysts versus poststructuralists, realists versus relativists, etc.) which are contrasted in order to show the debate in discourse.

As I will be focussing on the counter-discourse to what can be called the official discourse, a discourse, that is mainly lead by politically engaged people, I will put my attention on the first two questions – on the way analysts should deal with their findings and the question of how and if a critical and politically engaged stance is appropriate in analysis.

4.2.1 What is the status of the analysts' findings?

The answer to this question is manifold, as there are so many and none of them can definitely be declared as true or false, as there is no clear definition of what is true and what is false (postmodernism for example “argues that truth is always relative to the discourse or language game of the moment”, Wetherell, 2001: 384), what is reality and what is constructed. Some researchers say, that analysis is always an interpretation and that there can be no truly

inductive work and Wetherell points out that it is “probably not necessary to make the point over and over again that the analyst’s conclusions are [...] constructed.” (Wetherell 2001: 397) She thinks it enough if some of the researchers take a reflexive standpoint that can be taken as an example for others.

4.2.2 Is a critical and/or politically engaged stance appropriate in analysis?

The most dated attitude towards this question of political engagement that Wetherell presents is the Marxist attitude that follows the principles of categorizing social scientist into being either “complicit with the bourgeois or [...] engaged with radical alternative politics.”. But this view seems too extreme, which is why Wetherell presents some far more interesting positions that are prevailing in the scientific discourse: the conversational analyst standpoint, represented by Emanuel Schegloff, versus the position of critical discourse analysis (CDA), represented by Teun van Dijk and Norman Fairclough and a realist position versus a relativist position.

I find it always rather difficult to sharply separate and categorize scholars in accordance with such terms and I am not sure that this is always effective, but I shall now begin by depicting the postmodern position to that topic, a position that encourages scepticism and might thus be connected to CDA.

According to Margaret Wetherell, postmodernists are against taking absolute ethical positions and reject the concept of a universal truth, as for them “truth is always relative to the discourse or language game of the moment”. This, she argues, is the fundamental ground on which critique in analysis is encouraged, because if there is no absolute and universal truth and if our readings are always interpretative, always individually coloured, then one might as well highlight ones personal standpoint out of which a critique can be drawn in relation to any other perspective or position. This personal standpoint can then be turned into the “subject of debate”. Postmodern scepticism, according to Wetherell, “encourages critique and the subversion of authority through reflexivity and deconstruction.”(Wetherell 2001: 385)

Van Dijk and Fairclough, who could in the broadest sense, also be classified as postmodernists, but whom I want to deal with as critical discourse analysts in opposition to conversational analysts, perceive the discourse analyst “as an active force in society and politics.” His/her aim, they claim, is to “feed back the knowledge gained into the political process in a way that is most likely to bring about the desired changes.” (Wetherell 2001: 384) Van Dijk stresses that a “discourse analyst should be a social critic rather than a neutral observer.” (ibid.)

Such a critical or political engaged position is probably the most prevailing attitude among discourse analysts. The applied critique, Wetherell says, “may range from research conducted with an explicit political agenda to research conducted with a broad commitment to exploring the social and political implications of findings.” (Wetherell 2001: 385)

There are nevertheless also analysts who completely reject such a critical stance in analysis and claim that the analysis should be conducted neutrally with the analyst incorporating the function of an objecting observer, whose task it is to describe and not to evaluate. Only afterwards can critique be accepted as appropriate.

Schegloff represents this attitude in analysis, which Wetherell depicts as a conversational analytical standpoint. Schegloff clearly positions himself against a critical stance in discourse analysis, arguing that this “is not just bad scholarship, it is also bad politics.” (ibid.) In his view, a critical position prevents from clearly analysing and renders the discovery of new patterns needlessly difficult if not impossible, because to the critical researcher “the world is already known and is pre-interpreted in light of the analyst’s concerns.” (ibid.) Because the researcher is already focused on what he thinks he might find out, which comes close to what the Loughborough Group calls the danger of circular analysis which circumscribes a situation in analysis that is created if you are looking for something special, something that you expect to find, and finally really discover it, but probably only because you want it to be there. Schegloff is thus accusing CDA of “potential and actual bias, at risk of not seeing clearly what is in front of them” (ibid.), and advocates for the data to be handled “as an object of study in its own right.” (Wetherell 2001: 386) He also argues that the critical discourse analyst should not interpret but simply “clarify what is already there” (ibid.), leaving critique to politicians, as his quotation “science is a different kind of activity from politics” (ibid.), clearly shows.

To sum it up in more simple words, one could say, that critical discourse analysts embrace a critical standpoint in research, while conversational analysts reject this stance.

What about realists and relativist then? The question that is of a central interest in this comparison is concerned with the existence or non-existence of a truth or reality, which is not entirely constructed. Fairclough, for example, like many other critical discourse analysts, is a realist. Most realists believe in “underlying real causes and patterns to social relations” (Wetherell 2001: 394) which serve them as motivation for political engagement. The explanation here is, that if there is a reality and a truth that exists as it does, than this can be changed by how we behave.

The contrasting position is that of the relativists, who believe that everything is constructed and that there is no truth. Believing this, most relativists tend to advocate for the earlier mentioned attitude of leaving politics to politicians and prefer not to conduct discourse analysis with a critical stance. In the realist view, this position “leads to political quietism because if everything is constructed” then there is no point in an engagement whatsoever. (ibid.)

The conclusion Margaret Wetherell draws out of this all, for herself and the reader, is that whichever position the researcher adapts when doing analysis, the outcome will be different from that of another analyst doing his/her analysis pursuing a different aim and adapting a different attitude towards the treated questions.⁹

5. Methodology: Norman Fairclough’s 3-D-model for analysis

In 1989 Norman Fairclough, one of the founders of critical discourse analysis (CDA), developed his 3-D-model for analysis which proved to be a very helpful tool. This model consists of three interconnected analytical steps to take – description/text analysis, interpretation/processing analysis of production and reception, explanation/social analysis – which are linked to three interconnected dimensions of discourse – text, discourse practices and socio-cultural/social practices.

The one good thing about this model is that the analyst can start his/her analysis at any level he/she wishes, as long as he/she takes them all into account. The other is that it aims at capturing the simultaneity that usually inheres CDA, imbedding three different approaches to analysis, one inside the other.

6. Analysis

6.1 Analysis of an Adbusters spoof ad: “Absolute AA”

Beginning with the text-level a description of the ad is necessary. The ad, which can be found in the appendix (Fig.1), is a multi-modal one, making use of text and imagery. It shows 24 red chairs on blue ground, seen from above, forming the shape of a bottle. The arrangement of the chairs evokes the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which is known to a wide audience through other media such as films on TV or in the cinema (e.g. *Fight Club*). At the

⁹ “Clearly if researchers are politically engaged but committed to a relativist position, see context in broad terms and make no ontological distinctions between cultural and material practices, then a very different kind of research will result compared to researchers who don’t buy the argument about being critical, want to focus on the participants’ activities and who see themselves as contributing objective descriptions on the way discourse actually works.” Wetherell 2001: 398.

same time it reminds of the famous bottle shape of *Absolut Vodka*. Below the chairs two words are written: “Absolute AA”.

In trying to ascribe a value to this ad, I would think it respectable, almost clinical, sober and serious, attributes which surely come from the semi-medical picture ascribed to the AA as an institution.

In my opinion this ad represents the message that alcohol abuse is dangerous, will probably cause you some trouble and might lead you to becoming a member of AA. The producer probably wants the receiver to think about where alcohol abuse can lead in the worst case, which is something no one would want to identify with. Whereas “normal” product-advertising ads offer the potential consumer something to identify with, these negatively connoted spoof ad works in the opposed direction, making an identification least desirable. So there is a rejecting counter-identification taking place that evoke the feeling of not wanting to end up like this, thus possibly avoiding alcohol abuse.

When coming to the analysis of discursive practices, the moments of production and reception become important. The producers are *Adbusters*, an activist network from Canada, whose aim in producing this ad might have been to keep people away from alcohol, or alternatively increasing their awareness of the dangers of alcohol consumption, respectively abuse. Another possibility could be that *Adbusters* just want to provoke *Absolut Vodka* as they perceive them to be a world-wide operating multi-concern that profits disproportionately from globalisation and from people being addicted to alcohol, masking its economical ambitions by putting its product ads in a fashionable and arty context, thus promoting an image of alcohol consumption which only tells one side of the story.

In receiving, or decoding this ad, there are not too many possibilities, as the meaning of this ad seems quite obvious: it is not advertising AA, but rather acts as a “warning sign”. The ad can either be read while reading the *Adbusters* magazine or surfing the web. In either case, the receiver will not be too surprised when finding the ad, as he/she might already be searching for something the like. One exception to this assumption is that the ad also appears on the homepage www.absolutad.com¹⁰ which displays a gallery of all *Absolut Vodka* ads. In this case, the receiver might well be surprised to find this spoof ad amongst all the other “real” ads. Either way, the producers seem to dominate the way in which the message is decoded, because even if there is not much to be decoded here, visually speaking, the sign language

¹⁰ This is not the official Absolut Vodka site, but one of the first hits when searching the net for *Absolut* ads. On the page it reads: “Note: This is just a hobby site. We are not associated in any way with Absolut Vodka or its ad agency.”

employed herein is quite striking, not leaving much space for different interpretations, except if the receiver does not know AA at all and does not know what the ad is supposed to mean.

Turning to the analysis of the social practices herein, I would depict alcoholism as the macro-theme being aimed at with this ad. Alcoholism is a problem for society as it affects numerous peoples lives and the lives of their entourage, with a growing tendency¹¹. It is also a problem that is mainly downplayed by alcohol producing firms, a circumstance that *Adbusters* want to change.

6.2 Analysis of the ad “Absolute Insanity” of the Bucharest Traffic Police

This ad, which can also be found in the appendix (Fig.6), is multimodal, too, with an image and a short two-word-text. The picture shows a dark highway street with a serpentine median, hinting to a curvy road or a bending street. In the centre of the image stands a bottle-shaped display of pictures of smashed and crashed cars, piled on one another. The bottle shape and the way of presentation remind of an *Absolut Vodka* ad. The text written in white letters below the bottle reads “Absolute Insanity”.

The values I would ascribe to this ad are not as easy to depict as for the other ad, but I would think it to be respectable (as it comes from a police department) and shocking. It represents alcohol abuse as leading to deadly car crashes and equates drink-driving with absolute insanity. When looking at this ad, one relates it with the plea to not drink and drive. Again, an identification is not desirable here, the counter-identification is thus, that the receiver does not want to end up dead in a car crash caused by drunken drivers (or any other way, but this is not included in the message, as the bottle-shape clearly hints at alcohol consumption). A possible, shameful and secret identification could result in those receivers who sometimes drive when having drunk. These people might experience a sort of shock and think something like “My God, this is what I ‘unconsciously’ do sometimes, and this is where it could take me or could already have taken me! This is not what I want!”.

When turning to the production process it is important to note that this ad is part of an anti-alcohol campaign conducted by the Bucharest Traffic Police, a department of the Romanian police. This campaign comprises three ads (“Absolute Insanity”, “Absolute Tragedy” and “Absolute Stupidity”, see appendix, Fig 5-8) and has been produced by the

¹¹ Alcoholics Anonymous in numbers (according to a survey conducted in the German-speaking region in 2000)
Age of the members: Under 21: 0,08 %, 21 – 30: 6,15 %, 31 – 40:21, 17 %, 41 – 50: 24, 73 %, 51 – 60: 28, 97
%, 61 – 70: 14, 26 %, Over 70: 4,64 %
Sex: Female: 32, 92 %, Male: 67, 08 %

There are over 1000 groups in the world today, the estimated success rate is of ~5 % of all the participants, the tendency is rising, the age of entrance is sinking (estimation of a member of AA staff in Berlin, 18.07.2006).

Romanian advertising agency *Mercury Promotions Romania*¹² who won the silver award of *Epica*¹³ 2004 with it.

The aim of this ad is to increase the awareness of the dangers of drink-driving and thereby reducing the number of accidents caused by drunken drivers, as such “cool” alcohol brands as *Absolut Vodka*, a brand that adapts to every possible situation in life, never take up a subject like that.

The ads were displayed in Police stations and in the toilets of bars, restaurants and hotels, throughout the Bucharest area in commercial spaces rented from *Oops Media*¹⁴, a company that rents the spaces for advertising in public toilets. This way, the reception happens while the receiver is using the washroom, the time spent on the reading being probably rather short but focussed and concentrated, as the ads are placed in the direct visual angle of the receiver, probably right over the washbasin, the toilet or the urinal. The meaning of the ad is obvious and dominated by the producers.

The macro-theme which is approached here, is the problem that alcohol causes in traffic, with drunken drivers causing far too many deaths amongst innocent people as well as those culpable and responsible for themselves. Drunk-driving is a serious problem and a risk that is difficult to estimate, a circumstance that the Bucharest Traffic Police wants to stop or at least to diminish and bring back to peoples consciences.

7. More context information for a better understanding of the analyzed media

Someone once wrote, that in order to be able to do a proper analysis, it was necessary to know as much as possible about the context in which the analysed discourse was taking place. In this case, I think it is important to clarify the context of the production of the spoof ads, and precisely concentrate on the activist group *Adbusters*, as they are somehow more active in the field of countering the official discourse than the Bucharest Traffic Police who certainly as well conducts a noteworthy counter-discourse with its anti alcohol campaign, but is not primarily known for such activities.

7.1 Kalle Lasn and the Adbusters Media Foundation

The *Adbusters Media Foundation* (AMF) was founded in the late 1980s by Kalle Lasn, a studied mathematician, who worked for the Australian Defense Department, started a market research company in Tokyo and a film commune in Vancouver, before he began to dedicate

¹² www.mercurypromo.ro

¹³ Europe’s premier creative awards. See http://www.epica-awards.org/epica/2004/winners/fin_cat10.htm

¹⁴ www.oops.ro

his entire time to his projects of the AMF, *Adbusters Magazine*, *Powershift Advertising Agency* (an agency that claims to only work for organisations that are compatible with the goals of AMF) and the *Culture Jammers Network*. The *Adbusters Magazine* is published quarterly with an estimated circulation of 35000 copies¹⁵ and is a very high-glossy stylishly layouted magazine that resembles every other fashion or lifestyle magazine. Of course, it is the exact converse. The website (www.adbusters.org) is similarly stylishly looking and displays excerpts from the *Adbusters Magazine*, information on campaigns of the AMF (e.g. the TV-turnoff-week or the buy-nothing-day) and covers the activities of the culture jamming groups. AMF also produces ‘anti-commercials’ for TV, in which they blame the beauty industry of provoking eating disorders, criticise the excessive consumption of North Americans and ask the viewers to swap their cars for bikes. Most of the Canadian and US-TV stations refuse to broadcast these ‘commercials’ and so AMF sues them, using the attention of the press to promote their vision of democratic open to public media.¹⁶

In 2000, Kalle Lasn published his book “Culture jam”¹⁷ which is often referred to as the ‘manifesto of anti-advertising’. The German translation was even given a corresponding title: “Culture Jamming. Das Manifest der Anti-Werbung”¹⁸. In this book, Lasn wants to explain the movement and their goals and submits proposals on how to live a better, less commercial, environmentally-friendly life.

The culture jammers of AMF see themselves as “the advance shock troops of the most significant social movement of the next twenty years.” Their aim is “to topple existing power structures and forge major adjustments to the way we will live in the twenty-first century.”(Lasn 1992: xi). They are striving for a cultural revolution, or, as Lasn puts it, for “an about-face in our values, lifestyles and institutional agendas. A reinvention of the American dream.” (Lasn 1992: 101) The movement seeks to continue the tradition of the Situationists, unifying such diverse groupings as punk anarchists, Hippies, green entrepreneurs, Christians, ‘lefties’, and many more, in the idea of breaking free from a media-dictated consumerist way of life and weakening the authority of ruling corporations. In fact, the real enemy of the culture jammers is the brand, the “war” they are fighting is a war against

¹⁵ Klein, Naomi (2005) *'Cross-Cultural Representation of 'No Logo! Der Kampf der Global Players um Marktmacht. Ein Spiel mit vielen Verlierern und wenigen Gewinnern'* München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag. Page 297.

¹⁶ Klein, Naomi (2005) *'Cross-Cultural Representation of 'No Logo! Der Kampf der Global Players um Marktmacht. Ein Spiel mit vielen Verlierern und wenigen Gewinnern'* München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag. Page 97.

¹⁷ Lasn, Kalle (2000) *'Culture Jam. How to reverse America's suicidal consumer binge – and why we must'*. New York: Harper Collins.

¹⁸ Published in 2006 with Orange Press.

brands. This is the logic consequence of their conception of the brand as having a destructive effect on people's identities, and thus, on society.

Tajfel once depicted the concept of identity as fundamentally a relational and comparative concept, as it is through social interaction that people assign themselves attributes out of which they construct their identity.¹⁹ Foucault also emphasizes the shifting and temporary character of identities, that he, too, describes as being the result of social interaction.

These days in western societies, social interaction takes place in an environment in which the media and especially advertising constitute regulars and are thus an integrated and important part of the context in which we build up our identities. The culture jammers want to change this, remove brand advertising from the public space and give it back to the people. "Reclaim the streets" is just one of their slogans.

One frequently employed method of culture jamming is the so-called practice of "détournement". This term is borrowed from the *Situationalists International*, a Dadaist and surrealist movement that was founded in the late 1950s in a little town in Italy and whose aim it was to free the creativity in the people and to transfer aesthetic concepts onto society²⁰.

Détournement works by making use of the exact features of the original ad but changing them in order to create a more critical statement. The original brand name or logo is altered, while a similar overall picture is maintained, which keeps the visual recognition assured. This practice lends the brand or product an additional negative connotation, that the potential consumer will keep in mind and be reminded of the next time he gets in contact with the brand. The effect might at least be negative and can be devastating. With its universal iconic meaning-loaded bottle shape *Absolut Vodka* offers the ideal goal for a détournement, and is thus often used in critical anti-alcohol-campaigns or more generally critical 'spoof ads' accusing the industry of misleading teenagers. *Absolut Vodka* is of course not the only target, *Calvin Kline* or *Camel* ads are also détourned, as the spoof ads gallery on the *Adbusters* homepage shows.

Even though *Adbusters* have ever since their foundation become somehow established and are not as revolutionary anymore, they are still a driving force in the 'culture jamming sector'.

7.2 The Bucharest Traffic Police and Mercury Promotions Romania

¹⁹ Tajfel & Turner, 1985 in David A. Whetten & Paul C. Godfrey's "Identity in Organisations", p.19, taken from Nome, Dagny 'Culture Jamming', article written in the course of 'Promotional Culture - Seminar in Intercultural Management', Copenhagen Business School. Found on http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/N/Nome_D_01.htm, 29.07.2006.

²⁰ Lasn, Kalle (2000) 'Culture Jam. How to reverse America's suicidal consumer binge – and why we must'. New York: Harper Collins. Pages 99-109.

Although I repeatedly sent inquiring e-mails, I never got any response about the reasons why the “Absolute-campaign” was started and when. My questions aimed at trying to know whether there had been raising accident numbers in the Bucharest region and if so, if these were notably linked to alcohol consumption. It also appeared important to me to know when the campaign was started and for how long it was conducted.

Due to the lack of co-operation from the Romanian side, I have to rely on the information freely accessible for everyone on the web and that are as follows:

The Bucharest Traffic Police is a department within the General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police that engages in “the field of traffic supervision, guidance and control, investigation of traffic accidents with known or unknown authors with a view to solving them, and prevention and fight against infringement of traffic rules”²¹. Within the European Integration Field they develop the National Anti-Drugs Strategy (2005 – 2010) within which I can imagine anti-alcohol campaigns being developed, too, but this is not proved and cannot be without official confirmation.

Mercury Promotions Romania, the advertising agency that produced the posters on behalf of the Bucharest Traffic Police, was established in 1993 and has since then grown into a rather big company with over 100 full-time-employees today. Their service comprises production and outsourcing management, field-marketing services, creative development for TV, radio, print, internet and point of sales, PR for media campaigns and events, event management, sales promotion, direct and interactive marketing. Their clients are *Nestlé*, *Peugeot*, *Coca Cola*, *Procter and Gamble*, *Philips* and the European Union. Their headquarter is located in Bucharest but they cover the whole of Romania with seven area managers, five regional offices, city managers in 70 cities and over 3500 people working in their field network data base. Their homepage is quite poppy, interactive, stylish and innovative which creates associations with an energetic, creative and modern agency. In the rubric “our work” one can find the presentation of their “Absolute don’t drink and drive campaign”, out of which my second model for analysis “Absolute Insanity.” has been chosen. The following text is the only information one gets on the campaign: “Drinking & driving is not a good idea and is responsible for a lot of damage and disaster. Bottles made of crashed cars, bottles drowned on the asphalt or as the sac to carry dead people are strong images that brought a lot of awareness to this campaign.” (www.mercurypromo.ro). Maybe it is noteworthy that *Mercury* also promotes beer brands like German *Holsten*, Romanian *Ursus* and American *Miller*, the latter in an internet clip that clearly associates the consumption of *Miller* with party and sexy girls

²¹ http://www.politiaromana.ro/Engleza/directia_politiei_rutiere.htm

on the American national holiday July the fourth. This shows that they are a normal advertising agency not committed to any higher motives like stopping drink-driving, when it comes to the choice of their clients.

8. Findings

At this stadium in the work I think it is time to check how the theories of Hall and Wetherell can be transferred onto the examined counter-discourse.

I assume that both *Adbusters* and The Bucharest Traffic Police decode alcohol ads (here especially those of *Absolut Vodka*) via an *oppositional reading* position, deliberately reading the ads as containing a vicious message with damaging effects on society. Although *Absolut* might solely be pursuing the promotion of their brand (which is normal for a product-producing and -selling firm), the ‘counterers’, at least the activists from *Adbusters*, reproach them to pursue a mean mission. I retain then, that the preferred meaning in which the producers (*Absolut*) have encoded their message (the *Absolut* ad) has probably been recognized but not accepted as being meant in an honest way. The encoded meaning is thus decoded in a different way than it was intended, as the encoder and decoder probably do not share the same values and world views.

When it comes to how I, as a researcher, read the spoof ads, I tend to think that I probably decode them in the right way, in the *preferred reading*, when I read them as containing a critique. In the case of the ads for the Bucharest Traffic Police I believe that their only goal is to try to diminish the accidents number on their streets, not aggressing the brand *Absolut Vodka* as such, but simply making use of a universal iconic sign, that will be decoded as hinting at alcohol abuse. In the case of the *Adbusters* ads, this is more complicated as I can not be sure, whether they really want to increase peoples awareness of the damages alcohol can cause or if the ads are ‘only’ another weapon in their “war on brands”. Believing both readings to be potentially possible, or at least not excluding either one from being potentially true, I take up a *negotiated reading* position.

When it comes to the question of the political stance in analysis I assume that the ‘counterers’, at least *Adbusters*, who conduct their counter-discourse on a rather professional, advertising-business influenced level (which is valid for the others, too, of course), using this knowledge to openly criticise, have analysed the original *Absolut* ads as well as the whole discourse conducted by *Absolut* (which includes their whole campaign, their promotional and arts-events and so on) in a very critical way, refusing to admit just the slightest ideologically acceptable motives behind the whole *Absolut*-thing. When being arty, this is probably seen as

preying upon the arts, when organising music-events, as a way of attracting young people to drink vodka (which is partly true, of course, but obviously not aimed at turning people into drunkards), and so on.

Throughout my analysis I tried to work as objective and purely analytical as possible, but a critical stance manifests itself in my inability to not criticise *Adbusters* for their attitude, which in my view, contains some inconsistencies. I resent their way of generally mistaking the receiver of ads/the public/society/people as passive and too dull to recognize the brand strategies behind campaigns, mistaking fiction for reality. I also noticed that they criticise the brand's totalitarian ways of imposing their reality, when they too, try to impose their opinions as just another ideology, another incontestable truth. In doing so, I think they are acting very fundamental and obsessive, which is sometimes too extreme and can provoke feelings of rejection. I personally must admit to having felt repelled at times when confronted to Kalle Lasns 'manifestos' declarations. Another thing that strikes me is that one could easily reproach them hypocrisy, as they declare to want to stop consumerism, but offer things to buy on their homepage, which is not really compatible with the appeal to consume less. Here, they find themselves in an ideological dilemma²² between wanting to stop consumerism and needing an income source to finance their actions. Continuing on this accusation of hypocrisy, one could also ask, why they do not use the media attention they get and the knowledge and power they have for higher goals as that of weakening corporations, masking this concern as an anti-alcoholic action, when they only attack brands for being brands, when they could also attack those who buy these brands and render the brands more powerful every day. I guess, this has something to do with their belief in the consumers dullness and defencelessness.

Having written down all this now and realizing that what I wrote sounds rather critical, I can only say, that I wanted to stay neutral but that my position changed from sympathising first with the 'counterers', then with *Absolut* and that I find myself once again in a *negotiating position*, where I do not know which side to side with.

This leads to the question what I should do with my findings. Here again, I can only present them as they are, from my very personal position and describe what I think and feel now. I will not present them as incontrovertible as I know that I have probably not sufficiently pointed out every way of dealing with the problem and of handling the subject and not presented every possible perception on the approached questions.

²² See Edley, Nigel (2001) '*Analysing masculinity: interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions*' in: Margaret Wetherell, Steven Taylor, Simeon Yates (Eds.) '*Discourse as Data*' (pp. 189 – 228). London: Sage. P. 223.

9. Conclusion: Does the counter-discourse work out, does it have the wished effect?

In the light of the analysis and the gained findings it is difficult to give a definite answer to the question whether the counter-discourse to vodka and especially *Absolut Vodka* ads is or can be successful. There are probably two possible answers, a positive and a negative. Knowing that *Absolut Vodka* threatened to sue *Adbusters* for their mocking campaign that featured all that was necessary to be recognizable as an allusion to *Absolut*, but had to draw back, when *Adbusters* in turn threatened to use the resulting media attention for a debate about brands that promote dangerous products²³, one could say, that yes, the counter-discourse seems to hold a rather powerful position. But knowing that *Absolut* quickly recovered from that unpleasant incident and decided to defend themselves via the use of self-mockery and decided to public the spoof ads on their own homepage, one could say that no, the counter-discourse was not successful as it was beaten with its own arms. This co-opting turned out to be a truly effective and clever move. It generally seems that brands and their advertisers make more and more use of this practice when they send out trend-scouts in order to find out what is really hip, hot, cool at the moment and most notably, what is underground, taking over these styles, as they know that being underground will attract new young consumers. This might be the biggest dilemma of underground or counter-culture: that it can never last unknown for long. The more so as these movements also depend on some publicity to get their aims realized and their messages to be heard. In any way, even a counter-culture is always part of the relative culture. The same is true for *Adbusters* and movements the like trying to counter what they think to be the power-holding dominant public discourse. To conclude I would thus say that yes, counter-discourse is successful as it gets our attention (which this paper demonstrates), holds a certain political force and might change something in people's minds, but that it also has to be more innovative and more alert than those which it counters, as it is vulnerable to being taken over with its ideas being assimilated and is thus involuntarily contributing to the closing of a circle in the official discourse. It is thus part of the official discourse. This last claim relies on what Foucault said about discourse and power, when he claimed that there was not on the one side the discourse of power and on the other side, the opposing discourse, but that they were both equally part of one balance of power, mutually determining each other: "Es gibt nicht auf der einen Seite den Diskurs der Macht und auf der andern Seite den Diskurs, der sich ihr entgegensetzt. Die Diskurse sind taktische Element oder Blöcke im Feld der Kräfteverhältnisse." (Foucault 1977: 123)

²³ http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/N/Nome_D_01.htm,
http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~faigley/work/material_literacy/literacy.html,
http://writing.umn.edu/docs/speakerseries_pubs/Faigley.pdf

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Appendix

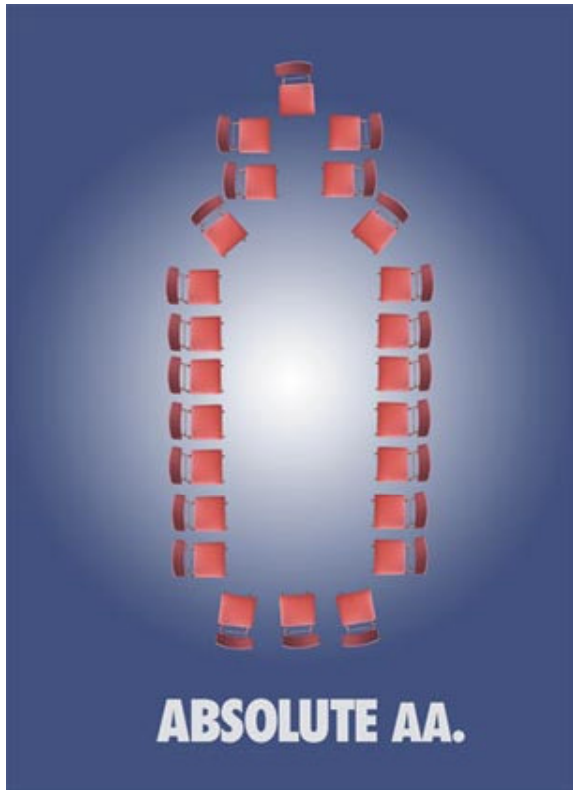


Fig. 1

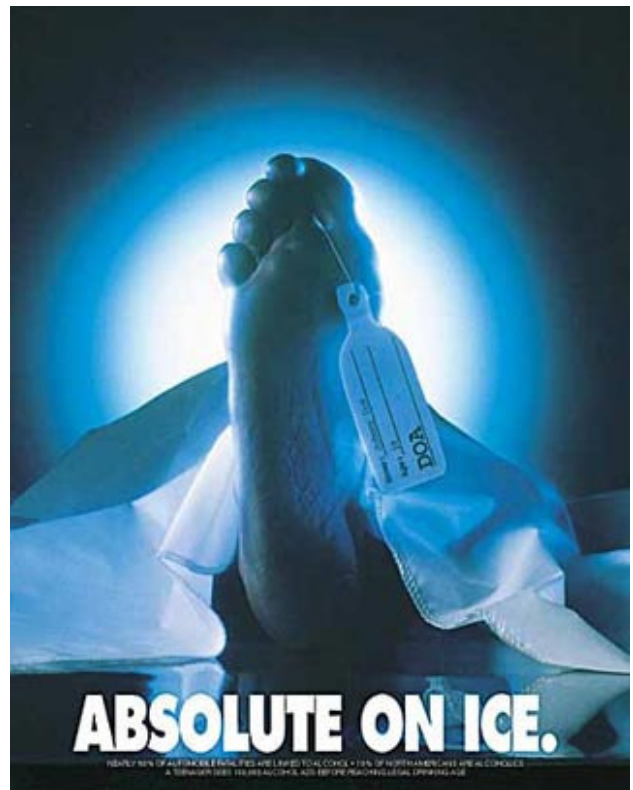


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figures 1-4: http://absolutad.com/absolut_gallery/spoofs/

Size: A3 - the ads were posted in police station
- the ads appeared in toilets from bars, restaurants. The space is commercialized by Oops Media

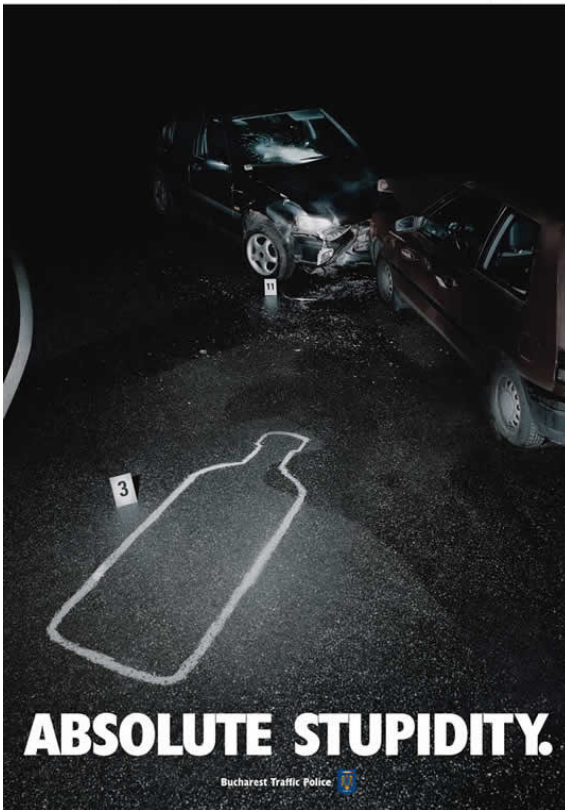


Fig.5

Size: A3 - the ads were posted in police station
- the ads appeared in toilets from bars, restaurants. The space is commercialized by Oops Media



Fig.6

Size: A3 - the ads were posted in police station
- the ads appeared in toilets from bars, restaurants. The space is commercialized by Oops Media



Fig.7

Figures 5-8: <http://www.mercurypromo.ro/>



Fig.8 (http://absolutad.com/absolut_gallery/spoofs)

Abstract

„Absolut Gegendiskurs“

– eine Diskursanalyse des Gegendiskurses zur Werbung von *Absolut Vodka*

Diese Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit dem Gegendiskurs, der neben dem „offiziellen“ Diskurs von alkoholproduzierenden und -bewerbenden Marken existiert. Ich konzentriere mich hierbei auf den Gegendiskurs, der den schwedischen Spirituosenhersteller *Absolut Vodka* zum Ziel hat. Dieser ist durch die große Bekanntheit seiner universellen Flaschenform, die seit Jahrzehnten das Zentrum jeder ihrer Werbekampagnen darstellt, zu einem beliebten und einfachen Angriffsziel von Gegenbewegungen geworden.

Der Gegendiskurs wird meist von politisch engagierten Aktivisten, aber auch von anderen, teilweise offiziellen oder staatlichen Gruppen oder Institutionen geführt. In dieser Arbeit werden zwei solche Gruppen vorgestellt – die kanadischen Aktivisten der Adbusters Media Foundation (AMF) und die Bucharester Verkehrspolizei – und jeweils eine ihrer Arbeiten analysiert. Diese Arbeiten sind sogenannte „Spoof Ads“, gewissermaßen Gegen-Werbeposter, die ihre Aussagekraft aus einer „Détournement“ genannten Technik beziehen. Hierbei werden die Merkmale des ursprünglichen Posters übernommen, jedoch mit einer anderen, meist negativen Konnotation besetzt. Das Erscheinungsbild bleibt so auf den ersten Blick gleich, offenbart jedoch nach genauerer Betrachtung die nun umgedrehte Botschaft, die eine Kritik an der kopierten Marke und allem, wofür diese steht, darstellt. Dabei kann es sich im behandelten Fall um eine Kritik an der Verharmlosung von Alkoholkonsum und den Folgen (z.B. Alkoholismus, Verkehrstote durch Alkohol am Steuer, usw.) oder an einem gezielten Angriff der Marke als solcher handeln, die in den Augen der Aktivisten ihr Geld auf Kosten anderer verdienen und zudem noch öffentlichen Raum mit ihrer Werbung besetzen und somit einen schädigenden Einfluss auf die Gesellschaft ausüben.

Die Analyse der zwei „Spoof Ads“ wird gemäß dem 3-D-Modell von Norman Fairclough analysiert, die sich daraus ergebenden Befunde durch Theorien von Stuart Hall und Margaret Wetherell in Relation zu der Frage gestellt, ob der hier untersuchte Gegendiskurs überhaupt funktioniert und etwas bewirken kann. Diese Fragen zu klären ist das Hauptanliegen dieser Arbeit.