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**Blood Brothers**

**&**

**Southern Men**

***Engaging with Alcohol  
Advertising in Aotearoa***

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Psychology at Massey University**

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**The outlines of a [text] are never clearly and stringently defined: no [text] can exist by its own powers; it always exists due to its conditioning and conditional relations to other [texts]; it is a point in a network; it carries a system of references – explicitly or not – to other [texts]...it is true that the [text] presents itself as a tangible object; it clings to the tiny parallelepiped surrounding it: but its unity is variable and relative, does not let itself be constructed or stated and therefore cannot be described outside of a discursive field.**

**Michel Foucault**

## **Abstract**

The aim of this project is to develop a robust methodological translation of the insights of 'culturalist' theoretical positions in communications studies as an alternative through which to approach contemporary media research. The focus is on engagements with alcohol advertising. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, as internationally, there is a significant body of publicly-funded research examining how alcohol advertising affects audiences. However, this thesis contends that important questions need to be asked about the adequacy of these (dominantly positivist) investigations. A review of local research identifies that in theoretical and methodological terms the majority of these studies are riddled with tensions and contradictions. In addition, when located within the context of wider developments in contemporary communication studies, an important epistemological gap is highlighted as requiring attention and debate. Comparison of this local review with international studies highlights similar concerns, particularly around 'effects' driven research, the adequacy of dominant positivist models, and the need to examine epistemological alternatives that can encompass meta, meso, and micro forms of enquiry.

A discursive-theoretical approach is then argued as an epistemological alternative that is highly congruent with contemporary communication studies, which, if more robustly translated through methodology and method, could provide a very solid 'culturalist' alternative framework for media research. Taking a contrastive, multi-voiced, context-based approach, the present research focuses on connections, divergences, or disjunctions between different participants' interpretations of, and responses to, themes, ideas and positions they perceive as existing in the ad-texts, and themes and ideas on offer about alcohol in the wider social context.

Using a methodology I describe as 'Discursive Sonar', this research highlights the socially located, interpretative complexity of advertising engagements. By unpacking that complexity, this project identifies how, and why, media engagements vary for different participants (including that of the reflexively

engaged participant researcher). By locating the interactions between participants and ad-texts within the context of wider struggles over meanings around alcohol in Aotearoa/New Zealand the research shows ways in which both ad-texts and participants reflect, employ, and debate those wider struggles.

I contrasted and compared individual participant interactions with the content and themes they identify in response to the ad-texts, with what producers intended those texts to communicate, and also with the views of the other participants. Through these analyses key textual 'mechanisms' become apparent as determining why and how engagements can be closely shared or variable between people and groups. Focusing on diversity and variance in engagements highlights cultural shifts around how alcohol is understood in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as well as significant alterations in views between the generations involved in the project. Focusing on commonalities across engagements identifies how 'interpretative communities' can be produced through textual responses, which are in turn engendered in response to commonly held constructs such as gender and age.

This project succeeds in two ways. As well succeeding in significantly developing existing 'operationalisation' of discursive theory, it also constructs a viable discursive framework through which to approach media research. It is suggested that further development of this alternative might move us beyond the barriers of abstraction and effects in media research to examine the ways in which media and other dominant discursive forms interact, and are interacted with, to shape choices in our social worlds.

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**Creativity represents a miraculous coming together of the uninhibited energy of the child with its apparent opposite and enemy, the sense of order imposed on the disciplined adult intelligence. Norman Podhoretz.**

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