

Interpretive Instability in Market-Facing Content: How Unresolved Meaning Sustains Consumer Attention

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**Interpretive Instability in Market-Facing Content:
How Unresolved Meaning Sustains Consumer Attention**

Abstract

Market-facing content can sustain consumer attention even when continued processing fails to produce a dominant interpretation. This research introduces interpretive instability, the degree to which content sustains multiple plausible interpretations without allowing one to become sufficiently dominant to end continued meaning-seeking. The theory shifts attention from the presence of ambiguity or multiple meanings to the persistence of competition among interpretations. Productive instability requires interpretive anchoring: enough stable meaning to organize continued processing while other dimensions remain unresolved. Cue conflict, cue multiplicity, and unresolved framing can create this condition, sustaining processing and prompting consumers to externalize their interpretations. In socially visible environments, those interpretations can recursively stabilize meaning or sustain interpretive competition for subsequent consumers. The theory further distinguishes attention capture, retention, circulation, and market-value capture. This distinction explains how interpretive instability can increase consumer attention and interaction while decreasing confidence in intended meaning, and why attention can circulate without producing corresponding value for the market actor. The framework identifies when unresolved meaning can retain and circulate consumer attention and when that attention can create marketing value.

Keywords: interpretive instability, consumer attention, marketing communication, consumer engagement, interpretive anchoring, brand meaning, ambiguity, social media

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3 Firms, brands, and creators compete not merely to attract consumer attention but to retain
4 and direct it toward outcomes relevant to exchange. Marketing communication has traditionally
5 treated clarity as one route toward that objective: consumers who understand an offering,
6 message, or desired response can more readily evaluate and act upon it.
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12 Marketing research also establishes that clarity is not universally optimal. Ambiguity can
13 be used strategically (Eisenberg 1984). Visual rhetoric can increase elaboration by making
14 meaning less immediate (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004). Moderate advertising incongruity can
15 outperform both congruence and extreme incongruity because consumers find successful
16 resolution rewarding (Halkias and Kokkinaki 2017). Metaphoric advertising similarly derives
17 part of its effectiveness from the cognitive work involved in discovering an underlying meaning
18 (Dehay and Landwehr 2019).
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28 These findings substantially qualify a simple clarity-is-better account of marketing
29 communication. They also reveal a further theoretical question.
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33 Much existing work focuses on uncertainty that can ultimately be interpreted, decoded,
34 integrated, or resolved. Yet some market-facing content appears to sustain attention precisely
35 because continued processing fails to produce such convergence. Consumers revisit the same
36 cues, entertain competing explanations, comment, share, and debate while several interpretations
37 remain simultaneously plausible.
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45 Importantly, such content need not be globally ambiguous. Consumers may understand
46 perfectly well what they are looking at at one level while remaining unable to stabilize what it
47 means at another. A recognizable product demonstration, tutorial, performance, workplace
48 activity, or personal narrative can provide a stable interpretive anchor while other cues
49 destabilize the content's purpose, tone, authenticity, intended audience, or mode of consumption.
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This combination presents a marketing problem not adequately captured by either clarity or confusion. Existing research already establishes that difficult or ambiguous content can attract attention, but it leaves open what happens when consumers have enough stable meaning to continue interpreting market-facing content while additional processing still fails to resolve competition among its remaining plausible meanings.

For marketing, that theoretical problem leads directly to a second question: when does the attention generated by persistent interpretive competition create value for the market actor?

When does the attention generated by that persistent competition create value for the market actor responsible for it?

This research introduces interpretive instability to address both questions.

Interpretive instability is the degree to which market-facing content sustains multiple plausible interpretations without allowing one interpretation to become sufficiently dominant to terminate continued meaning-seeking.

The construct does not replace ambiguity, strategic ambiguity, incongruity, polysemy, rhetorical complexity, or curiosity, all of which establish important reasons communication can support multiple meanings or require additional processing. Interpretive instability instead identifies a particular dynamic condition that can follow when multiple interpretations remain simultaneously plausible and competitive despite continued processing.

This distinction shifts the theoretical focus from interpretive difficulty to interpretive persistence and, in marketing settings, connects that persistence to the allocation and capture of consumer attention.

Its marketing significance arises because market actors compete for finite consumer attention while consumers increasingly encounter marketing communication in environments

where their own reactions are visible to others. Under those conditions, unresolved interpretation can affect not only how long an individual consumer processes content but whether consumers circulate it, contribute additional meanings to it, and ultimately strengthen or sever the relationship between attention and the market actor seeking value from it.

This research develops three contributions. First, it identifies persistent competition among plausible interpretations as a construct distinct from adjacent forms of communicative uncertainty and identifies interpretive anchoring as a condition separating productive instability from incoherence. Second, it theorizes how interpretive instability can retain attention and become recursively reproduced through consumer interaction. Third, it separates the circulation of attention from the market actor's capture of value from that attention, explaining why engagement with interpretively unstable content can produce either marketing value or commercially unproductive attention.

Interpretive Instability as a Marketing Construct

Definition and Necessary Conditions

Interpretive instability is the degree to which market-facing content sustains multiple plausible interpretations without allowing one interpretation to become sufficiently dominant to terminate continued meaning-seeking.

Three conditions jointly define the construct: multiplicity, which requires more than one available interpretation; plausibility, which requires competing interpretations to remain reasonably supportable from the cues available to the consumer; and persistence, which requires continued processing to fail to produce ready convergence around a dominant interpretation.

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No single condition is sufficient: multiplicity without persistence describes content capable of supporting several readings even though a particular consumer may readily settle on one, whereas uncertainty without multiplicity may leave consumers unsure what something means without providing competing explanations worth pursuing. Initial difficulty without persistence likewise describes content that becomes stable once consumers invest sufficient processing effort.

Interpretive instability, by contrast, exists when multiple interpretations remain viable through continued processing, making its temporal property central: the construct concerns not simply the state of a message at first exposure but the trajectory of interpretation as consumers allocate additional attention.

Interpretive Anchoring and Productive Instability

Interpretive instability requires unresolved meaning, but productive instability also requires something sufficiently stable to interpret.

Market-facing content can provide an interpretive anchor: a recognizable activity, object, category, narrative, offering, identity, or other organizing element that gives consumers a sufficiently coherent account of what they are encountering at a basic level.

The anchor need not resolve the content's broader meaning; rather, it makes competing interpretations intelligible relative to a common object.

A consumer may recognize that a video is a product demonstration while remaining uncertain whether it is sincere or parodic. A consumer may recognize a tutorial while remaining uncertain whether its primary function is instruction, entertainment, self-promotion, provocation, or some combination. The stable component makes the unresolved components interpretable.

This produces a distinction between local instability and global incoherence: in productive interpretive instability, some meaning remains sufficiently stable to organize attention while other dimensions remain contested, whereas in incoherence consumers cannot establish enough stable meaning to know what interpretive problem they are attempting to solve.

The theory therefore distinguishes three states—interpretive stability, anchored productive instability, and incoherence. Interpretive stability occurs when one interpretation readily becomes dominant; anchored productive instability occurs when consumers possess enough stable meaning to organize continued processing while multiple interpretations remain plausible on unresolved dimensions; and incoherence occurs when available cues fail to support either a sufficiently stable anchor or sufficiently viable competing interpretations.

This distinction matters because prior advertising research already demonstrates that moderate incongruity can outperform both congruity and extreme incongruity (Halkias and Kokkinaki 2017). Interpretive instability does not claim that nonlinear responses to communicative complexity are novel. Instead, it identifies a mechanism that may help explain why a middle state remains cognitively productive even without successful resolution: stability at one level provides a platform for instability at another.

The theoretical object is therefore not moderate ambiguity. It is persistent competition among viable interpretations organized around enough stable meaning to make continued interpretation worthwhile.

Relationship to Adjacent Constructs

A novel construct is useful only if it captures variance in a phenomenon that existing constructs do not adequately represent. Interpretive instability consequently requires explicit distinction from adjacent concepts.

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Ambiguity and Strategic Ambiguity

Ambiguity concerns uncertainty or multiplicity in meaning. Strategic ambiguity goes further by recognizing that communicators can deliberately preserve ambiguity to accommodate divergent interpretations or achieve communicative objectives (Eisenberg 1984).

This literature establishes that multiple interpretations and deliberate non clarity can be functional rather than defective.

Interpretive instability differs in its theoretical object.

Strategic ambiguity characterizes a communication strategy or property that permits divergent interpretations. Interpretive instability characterizes the continued competitive relationship among interpretations during consumer processing.

A strategically ambiguous message may produce interpretive instability, but it need not. Different consumers may simply adopt different stable interpretations. Conversely, instability may emerge without deliberate strategic ambiguity when market-facing cues unintentionally sustain competing explanations.

The constructs therefore concern different questions. Strategic ambiguity asks whether communication permits or preserves different interpretations, whereas interpretive instability asks whether multiple plausible interpretations continue competing for dominance as a consumer processes the communication.

Interpretive anchoring adds a further distinction. Content can be stable enough to establish what is being consumed while remaining unstable regarding how that content should be understood. Interpretive instability therefore need not imply ambiguity across the communication as a whole.

Schema Incongruity

Schema incongruity concerns mismatch between a stimulus and established expectations. Such mismatch can attract attention, increase processing, and under some conditions generate favorable responses when consumers successfully resolve it (Mandler 1982; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989; Halkias and Kokkinaki 2017).

Interpretive instability neither requires schema violation nor assumes successful resolution.

An incongruous advertisement can become interpretively stable once the consumer understands the relationship among its elements. Conversely, market-facing content can be interpretively unstable even when none of its individual cues violates an established schema.

The constructs therefore differ in locus: incongruity concerns a relationship between stimulus and expectation; interpretive instability concerns the continuing relationship among competing explanations of the stimulus.

Rhetorical Complexity and Metaphoric Advertising

Advertising research demonstrates that rhetorical figures vary in complexity and ambiguity and can stimulate consumer elaboration (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004). Metaphoric advertising likewise requires consumers to infer relationships among elements, and successful discovery of an underlying meaning can produce an “aha” experience and favorable responses (Dehay and Landwehr 2019).

Interpretive instability is not another theory of metaphor decoding.

Successful metaphor resolution illustrates the distinction particularly clearly. A consumer may initially experience substantial ambiguity and processing difficulty yet ultimately discover

an intended relationship. At that point, interpretive instability falls because one account becomes dominant.

Interpretive instability concerns cases in which additional elaboration does not produce equivalent stabilization.

Information Gaps and Curiosity

Information-gap theory explains curiosity as motivation arising from a discrepancy between what individuals know and what they want to know (Loewenstein 1994).

Interpretive instability need not involve an identifiable missing fact because consumers may possess the same available information yet remain unable to determine which explanation should dominate. Additional information can therefore leave instability intact when new cues continue to support competing interpretations.

Information gaps concern missing knowledge, whereas interpretive instability concerns unresolved competition among explanations.

Polysemy and Consumer Meaning Creation

Polysemy establishes that texts can support multiple meanings and audiences can generate different readings (Hall 1980; Fiske 1986). Marketing research likewise recognizes that consumers participate in the creation and transformation of brand meaning, particularly in socially interactive environments (Rossolatos 2019).

Interpretive instability does not claim novelty for consumer meaning multiplicity or co-creation.

Its theoretical focus is narrower: whether competing meanings remain simultaneously viable enough to prevent interpretive convergence and thereby alter subsequent attention and interaction.

Polysemy establishes the possibility of multiple readings, whereas interpretive instability theorizes the persistence and behavioral consequences of competition among them.

Arousal

Arousal concerns emotional or physiological activation. Highly arousing content can increase sharing and engagement (Berger and Milkman 2012).

Interpretive instability concerns meaning structure rather than activation. Content can be highly arousing and interpretively stable, or relatively low in arousal while supporting persistent competing interpretations.

Arousal may therefore amplify responses to instability without constituting instability itself.

Antecedents of Interpretive Instability

Interpretive instability can emerge from three structural properties of market-facing content: cue conflict, cue multiplicity, and unresolved framing. Whether that instability remains productive depends partly on the presence of sufficient interpretive anchoring.

Cue Conflict

Cue conflict occurs when meaning-bearing elements support explanations that are difficult to reconcile.

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Visual presentation may suggest one interpretation while language suggests another. Tone may conflict with subject matter. Behavioral cues may appear inconsistent with explicit claims. Production quality, context, brand identity, or platform conventions may similarly point consumers toward competing explanations.

Cue conflict differs from generic incongruity because the theoretical consequence of interest is not merely violated expectation. Conflict creates instability when opposing cues each remain sufficiently credible to sustain different interpretations.

P1: Greater cue conflict increases interpretive instability when conflicting cues support competing interpretations of sufficient plausibility to remain viable during continued processing.

Cue Multiplicity

Cue multiplicity refers to the number of meaning-bearing signals capable of supporting distinct interpretations.

Multiplicity alone should not increase instability because ten cues pointing toward the same explanation can strengthen interpretive stability rather than weaken it.

Multiplicity increases instability only when additional cues create or reinforce alternative viable accounts, a distinction that prevents cue multiplicity from becoming a simple stimulus-complexity construct.

P2: Greater cue multiplicity increases interpretive instability when additional cues increase the number or viability of competing interpretations rather than reinforcing a common interpretation.

Unresolved Framing

Market-facing communication often contains higher-order framing that tells consumers how lower-level cues should be organized.

Headlines, captions, explicit explanations, narrative closure, brand context, source identity, product information, and subsequent disclosures can privilege one interpretation over others.

Unresolved framing occurs when those stabilizing signals are absent, insufficient, delayed, or themselves compatible with multiple interpretations.

P3: Unresolved framing increases the persistence of interpretive instability by reducing the likelihood that continued processing privileges one plausible interpretation over its competitors.

Together, these antecedents explain how content can enter the state defined by the construct. They do not assume that market actors deliberately create instability. Interpretive instability can be designed, tolerated, or accidental.

Why Interpretive Instability Retains Attention

Interpretive instability affects attention because continued processing retains potential informational value.

Consumers ordinarily allocate additional processing when doing so can improve their understanding of a stimulus. When one interpretation becomes sufficiently dominant, further processing offers diminishing returns.

Interpretive instability delays that point because no interpretation has yet absorbed the available evidence well enough to make further processing appear unnecessary.

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Suppose interpretation A explains several cues but fails to account for another. Interpretation B explains that cue but creates a different inconsistency. Neither explanation is implausible, yet neither dominates.

The consumer therefore has reason to inspect the content again, producing a recurring cycle of interpretation, unresolved evidence, reconsideration, alternative interpretation, and continued comparison.

The interpretive anchor is critical to this process. It provides enough stability for consumers to know what they are continuing to interpret. Competing meanings are evaluated relative to a recognizable object, activity, narrative, offering, or context rather than against an unstructured collection of cues.

Unlike successful incongruity resolution, the reward is not necessarily an eventual “aha” moment. Unlike incoherence, however, the consumer has not abandoned the belief that continued processing may be useful.

This recurring effort constitutes the first central mechanism of the theory: sustained interpretive processing.

P4: Interpretive instability increases attention retention when competing interpretations remain sufficiently plausible and sufficiently anchored to make continued processing appear potentially diagnostic.

This effect cannot increase indefinitely, because as instability rises one of two failures can occur: competing interpretations may become individually implausible, or consumers may lose the stable interpretive anchor that organizes their comparison.

In either case, further processing loses expected value.

Advertising research has already documented nonlinear responses to incongruity and complexity. The prediction here concerns the underlying mechanism: attention is sustained while competing interpretations remain viable and organized around sufficient stable meaning to make continued comparison worthwhile.

P5: The positive relationship between interpretive instability and attention retention reverses when competing interpretations lose sufficient plausibility or sufficient interpretive anchoring to justify continued interpretive effort.

P5 therefore does not claim novelty merely for an inverted-U functional form. It identifies the theoretical transition from productive instability to incoherence: the loss of either viable competing explanations or the stable meaning necessary to organize them.

Interpretive Externalization

Continued private interpretation is only one possible consumer response; when consumers cannot determine which interpretation should dominate, they can make the unresolved problem social.

They may ask what others see, state or challenge an interpretation, share the content with commentary, or direct others toward a cue they regard as diagnostic.

This research terms this behavior interpretive externalization. The term describes a process rather than a second focal construct: consumers make their unresolved meaning-making observable to other market participants.

If continued private processing fails to discriminate among plausible interpretations, information from other consumers acquires potential diagnostic value. Externalization allows consumers to obtain that information.

P6: Interpretive instability increases consumers' likelihood of externalizing interpretation because other consumers become potential sources of diagnostic information when private processing fails to produce convergence.

Recursive Interpretive Instability

Socially visible consumer response changes the phenomenon because consumer contributions can alter the stability of interpretation itself.

Marketing research already establishes that consumers participate in brand meaning creation and that social environments allow consumers to contribute content and interpretations around brands. Interpretive instability adds a different prediction: consumer contributions can alter the stability of interpretation itself.

If two consumers make competing interpretations visible, a subsequent consumer encounters not only the original content but evidence supporting different readings. If another consumer introduces a third plausible interpretation, the interpretive environment expands again.

Externalization can therefore have two opposing consequences: audience responses that converge strongly around one interpretation should stabilize meaning, whereas responses that introduce or reinforce competing plausible interpretations should perpetuate instability.

Social visibility consequently matters not because interaction is inherently engaging but because it changes the pool of interpretive evidence available to subsequent consumers.

P7: Social visibility strengthens the relationship between interpretive instability and interpretive externalization because visible interaction increases the expected informational value of seeking and contributing interpretations.

P8: Visible consumer interpretation perpetuates interpretive instability when it increases the number or viability of competing interpretations, but reduces instability when it produces convergence around a dominant interpretation.

P8 produces a recursive process:

Figure 1

Socially Produced Interpretive Cues Recursively Alter Interpretive Instability



Consumers can therefore become endogenous producers of the condition influencing subsequent consumer attention.

From Attention to Marketing Value

Attention is necessary for many marketing effects, but attention surrounding content is not equivalent to value accruing to the market actor; the theory therefore distinguishes attention capture, retention, circulation, and market-value capture.

Attention capture refers to initial consumer notice; attention retention to continued allocation of cognitive resources; attention circulation to consumer behavior that extends the content or its surrounding interpretive activity to others; and market-value capture to the point at which retained or circulated attention produces outcomes valuable to the market actor, such as brand memory, strategically useful associations, consideration, relationship development, or exchange behavior.

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Interpretive instability principally explains attention retention and circulation, and that distinction creates an important marketing problem.

A consumer can spend considerable time interpreting a piece of branded content while paying little attention to the brand. Consumers can circulate a strange advertisement while forgetting its sponsor. A creator can become famous for a controversial execution that contributes little to the underlying offering. Consumers can also attach meanings to content that conflict with the association the market actor hoped to create.

Thus, attention to content is not equivalent to value for the market actor.

Attention Circulation

Interpretive instability can increase circulation because unresolved interpretation creates reasons to involve other people. Consumers may share content to solicit interpretations, demonstrate their own reading, challenge others, or invite discussion.

P9: Interpretive instability increases attention circulation when external interaction offers consumers additional opportunities to test, validate, or contest competing interpretations.

Engagement-Comprehension Divergence

Interpretive instability also generates a counterintuitive prediction: the same condition that increases attention can impede message comprehension.

As competing interpretations persist, consumers can devote more cognitive resources to the content while becoming less certain about the market actor's intended meaning.

Attention and comprehension can therefore move in opposite directions, meaning that greater behavioral engagement does not necessarily indicate more successful communication.

P10: Within the productive range of interpretive instability, increases in instability can simultaneously increase attention retention and circulation while decreasing confidence in the market actor's intended meaning.

Market-Value Capture

Whether attention ultimately benefits the market actor depends on linkage: interpretive activity must remain sufficiently associated with the brand, offering, creator, or strategically useful meaning for attention to transfer beyond the content itself.

This creates two possible outcomes. In linked instability, consumers debate what content means while the responsible market actor remains central to that meaning-making; in detached instability, consumers become absorbed in the interpretive object while the market actor becomes peripheral.

The same level of retention and circulation can therefore generate different marketing consequences.

P11: The positive relationship between interpretive instability and market-value outcomes strengthens as the market actor remains more strongly linked to consumers' interpretive activity.

P11 establishes why interpretive instability is not merely a theory of communication processing. Marketing value depends on who captures the consequences of the attention that instability generates.

Boundary Condition: Need for Diagnostic Resolution

Not all consumption situations tolerate persistent non-resolution equally because consumers sometimes process market-facing content primarily for experiential reasons, while other situations require sufficiently stable conclusions before action.

Entertainment, identity expression, cultural participation, discovery, and exploratory browsing can allow interpretation itself to become part of the consumption experience.

The relevant boundary is therefore the consumer's need for diagnostic resolution, or the extent to which achieving the immediate consumption or decision goal requires interpretation to stabilize.

When diagnostic resolution is unnecessary, unresolved meaning can remain productive; when consumers must determine price, safety, compatibility, contractual obligations, functional performance, or another decision-critical attribute, persistent interpretive competition obstructs rather than enriches the consumption process.

The same content property can therefore have different consequences depending on what the consumer needs interpretation to accomplish.

P12: The positive effects of interpretive instability on attention retention and circulation weaken as consumers' need for diagnostic resolution increases.

Contributions to Marketing Theory

This research contributes to marketing theory in several related ways.

Persistent Interpretive Competition

First, interpretive instability identifies a dynamic state not captured by the mere presence of ambiguity, incongruity, rhetorical complexity, curiosity, or multiple meanings.

Prior literature already demonstrates that ambiguity can be strategic, rhetorically complex advertising can stimulate elaboration, moderate incongruity can outperform both congruity and extreme incongruity, and consumers can construct multiple meanings.

The contribution here is consequently narrower and more precise: interpretive instability exists when multiple interpretations remain simultaneously plausible and competitive despite continued consumer processing.

The construct thereby shifts attention from the presence of uncertainty to its persistence structure.

Anchored Instability

Second, the theory identifies a structural condition separating productive instability from incoherence.

Interpretively unstable content need not be unclear in every respect. Instead, stability and instability can coexist at different levels of the same market-facing communication.

A recognizable interpretive anchor can establish enough shared meaning to organize consumer attention while other cues destabilize purpose, tone, authenticity, intended audience, motive, or mode of consumption.

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This produces an important theoretical implication: clarity and instability are not necessarily opposites, because some dimensions of communication can be highly stable precisely while others remain productively unstable.

This helps explain why content containing unusual, contradictory, provocative, or difficult-to-classify cues can remain compelling rather than simply confusing. Consumers know enough to continue asking what the unresolved cues mean.

Non-Resolution as a Mechanism of Attention Retention

Third, the theory explains why non-resolution itself can sustain consumer attention.

Prior work frequently explains additional processing as a route toward comprehension or successful resolution. Interpretive instability identifies a different trajectory: processing continues because plausible alternatives survive earlier attempts at resolution.

The theory therefore does not argue that resolution-based accounts are incorrect. It identifies a separate mechanism operating when resolution repeatedly fails without making interpretation appear futile.

Consumers as Producers of Interpretive Instability

Fourth, the theory makes interpretive instability endogenous to consumer interaction. Consumers already are understood to participate in the production of brand meaning. The new theoretical claim is that visible consumer meaning-making can alter the degree of interpretive instability experienced by subsequent consumers.

Externalization can resolve instability when consumers converge and reproduce it when consumers introduce or reinforce competing plausible interpretations.

This recursive process makes consumer interaction part of the causal system rather than merely an outcome.

Attention Circulation Versus Market-Value Capture

Finally, the theory distinguishes attention retained and circulated around content from value captured by the market actor.

Persistent interpretive competition can generate substantial consumer activity while weakening message comprehension or detaching the interpretive object from the brand responsible for it.

The central marketing question therefore becomes whether a market actor can sustain unresolved meaning long enough to benefit from consumer attention without allowing that attention to detach from the actor or obstruct exchange.

Importance for Marketing Research

The theory implies several changes in research practice.

First, researchers should not infer interpretive instability from ambiguity alone. Measures must capture multiplicity, plausibility, and persistence.

Second, researchers should distinguish global ambiguity from anchored instability. Consumers may report high certainty about the basic category or activity represented by content while simultaneously reporting persistent uncertainty among competing interpretations of its purpose, tone, motive, or intended mode of consumption.

Third, instability should be measured dynamically. A single post-exposure ambiguity rating cannot establish whether competing interpretations persisted during processing.

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Fourth, engagement measures should not be treated as interchangeable with communication effectiveness. Longer viewing, repeat exposure, comments, and sharing can coexist with weaker comprehension or weaker market-actor linkage.

Fifth, socially visible consumer response may need to be treated as part of the evolving stimulus rather than solely as a dependent variable.

Finally, research should distinguish the amount of attention surrounding content from the portion of its consequences that benefits the market actor.

These distinctions affect construct measurement, experimental design, interpretation of behavioral data, and theories linking consumer engagement to marketing performance.

Managerial Implications

Interpretive instability does not imply that marketers should make communication confusing; rather, it suggests that clarity and engagement need not always be maximized by the same content structure and that clarity need not operate uniformly across every dimension of communication.

Managers can preserve a stable anchor while allowing selected dimensions to remain unresolved.

A recognizable product, activity, problem, demonstration, narrative, or brand can provide consumers with enough interpretive stability to continue processing. Tone, motive, authenticity, outcome, intended audience, or another dimension can remain open to competing interpretations.

This is fundamentally different from making an entire message vague, because the managerial problem is not maximizing instability but managing its location and productive range.

When consumers must understand a functional claim, contractual condition, price, safety issue, or other decision-critical information, those dimensions should remain stable.

When the objective is discovery, conversation, cultural participation, or attention retention, other dimensions may tolerate or benefit from continued interpretive competition.

Managers also need to distinguish attention performance from market performance, because a campaign can generate extensive viewing and discussion precisely because consumers cannot settle what it means.

That activity is strategically valuable only if the brand, offering, or desired association remains sufficiently connected to the interpretive activity.

The practical diagnostic sequence is therefore to determine what consumers must understand immediately, what provides the interpretive anchor, which dimensions can remain productively unresolved, whether that instability retains attention, whether consumer interaction resolves or reproduces it, whether the market actor remains linked to the resulting attention, and whether that attention contributes to the marketing objective.

The managerial objective is not merely to earn attention. It is to maintain enough stability to make unresolved meaning productive and enough market linkage to make the resulting attention valuable.

Conclusion

Marketing research already establishes that communication need not always be maximally clear. Ambiguity can be strategic. Rhetorical complexity can stimulate elaboration. Moderate incongruity can be rewarding. Consumers can construct and circulate meanings beyond those explicitly supplied by marketers.

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Interpretive instability begins where those observations leave a further question: what happens when continued processing does not resolve meaning?

The theory proposes that multiple plausible interpretations can remain simultaneously viable and competitive, creating a state of interpretive instability.

Crucially, productive instability does not require the entire communication to remain uncertain. Market-facing content can provide a stable interpretive anchor while preserving unresolved competition around other dimensions of meaning. That combination gives consumers enough coherence to continue interpreting without providing enough resolution to terminate the process.

While that competition remains productive, consumers have reason to continue processing. When private processing fails to stabilize meaning, consumers can externalize interpretations to others. In socially visible environments, those contributions can either resolve instability or recursively reproduce it.

The resulting attention does not automatically create marketing value because interpretive instability can increase attention retention and circulation while reducing confidence in intended meaning, and it can generate extensive consumer interaction while allowing attention to detach from the market actor responsible for the content.

The marketing value of unresolved meaning therefore depends on four conditions: consumers must retain a sufficient interpretive anchor, competing interpretations must remain plausible, the consumption objective must tolerate delayed resolution, and the market actor must remain sufficiently linked to the interpretive activity to capture value from the attention generated.

Market-facing communication can create value by resolving meaning efficiently; under the conditions theorized here, it can also retain attention by making some meaning stable enough to support continued consumption while keeping other meaning productively unsettled.

Peer Review Version

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Figure 1

Socially Produced Interpretive Cues Recursively Alter Interpretive Instability

