

“Am I Ever Gonna Use This?": How P-CHAT Can Be a Useful Tool in Advertising

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In this article, Isabel Crabtree will explore the genre of advertising, specifically social media advertising and the conventions that make them perform successfully. Through pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory (P-CHAT), you will gain a better understanding of how advertising functions. Crabtree believes that using P-CHAT as a tool for creating advertisements will ensure effective results that leave a lasting, positive image for a business.

Advertising is just one part of business marketing, and thanks to new and improved technology, popular forms of advertising are evolving at a fast rate. While newspaper advertisements had an influence in the 1960s, most people don't even get a copy of the printed paper anymore. It's important for people working in marketing to understand current trends to stay on top of them. After all, there is plenty of market competition, so the goal is to create effective advertisements that draw in more attention, and as a result, more buyers. Every type of business looks for ways to stay relevant through its marketing and advertising strategies. But I must ask, *how do you make a successful advertisement?* Well, you can start by understanding the genre conventions of effective advertisements and the different P-CHAT terms that go into the creation of advertisements to be more familiarized with the genre as a whole.

Before we get into the bulk of P-CHAT, let's examine some other helpful terms to improve our understanding of advertising as a genre and to get some definitions clarified.

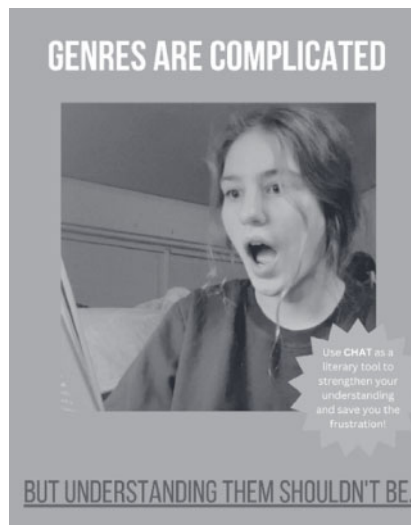


Figure 1: My own advertisement for P-CHAT.

OMG Genre and Genre Conventions?

I'm sure you have a general understanding of advertising. Whether it's a Taco Bell commercial during your Super Bowl watch party, a sponsored Instagram post promoting supplements, or an ad breaking up the jams on your wicked Spotify playlist, you can't avoid advertisements in America. But you *can* use your antecedent knowledge of advertisements to help you with your understanding of advertising. The Illinois State University (ISU) Writing Program defines **antecedent knowledge** as "all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing."

Think about what has influenced you to buy something. Was it a Jeffree Star makeup tutorial or a TikTok "get ready with me" posted by your favorite influencer? Based on your extensive experience with different kinds of advertisements, you probably have a basic idea of the genre and its conventions.

Understanding genre is the first step to being able to master a particular genre. You can't create a successful advertisement without knowing what makes up a successful advertisement first. So, let's define what genre is. Referring back to the ISU Writing Program, **genre** means "a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable." Think less of broad music and movie "genres" and more of specific characteristics that make a literary work distinguishable. Protest signs, school posters, and Connect Transit maps are some examples of genres because they have their own genre conventions. The ISU Writing Program says we use **genre conventions** "to describe all the things a writer could discover (and discuss) about a particular genre that makes us recognize it as, well, what it is."

Earlier, I gave some examples of different advertisements (social media posts and TV ads). All advertisements have one thing in common: they are trying to influence and bring awareness to a business's goods, services, or ideas. There are different subgenres under the advertisement umbrella. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines a **subgenre** as "a genre that is part of a larger genre." Some subgenres of advertising include television, radio, direct mail, Internet, and newspaper advertising. Figure 2 highlights the different categories these subgenres could fall into. Although these types of advertising are different, they are all marketing a product, brand, or image



Figure 2: The different subgenres of advertising.

to gain sales and make connections with the people interacting with them. Each type of advertising has its own benefits, and it’s up to the business—and its objectives, budget, corporate identity, and numerous other factors—to decide which advertising route to take. In Figure 2, these different types of advertising include a combination of written, oral (spoken), aural (sound), and visual (pictures) elements. By the ISU Writing Program’s definition, this would make them **multimodal**. When shopping for a new concealer, are you convinced to buy it based on an essay you read about it, or rather, the combination of written reviews, videos about its longevity throughout the day, and pictures of the bottle and the applicator? Now, I understand not everyone here is into makeup, but I do know we are all into buying our best available option due to our lack of infinite money. Usually, it takes several different modes to convince us that we’re making the right choice in our purchase, hence why it’s important to understand and use more than one mode when creating an advertisement.

Figure 3 is a thumbnail for a video from Tati Westbrook, a makeup influencer on YouTube. Her video uses different modalities. She has subtitles and a description box (written), she speaks about the details of the product (oral), and she includes images of the product on the screen (visual). She’s



Figure 3: Thumbnail for Tati Westbrook’s YouTube video “BEST & WORST DRUGSTORE CONCEALERS . . . (Up Close).”

been successful in raising makeup sales through the effective use of these different modes. Businesses have also discovered the importance of social media and social media influencers for the promotion of their products.

What Makes an Advertisement Successful?

An advertisement is successful if it captures customers’ attention and entices them to purchase products. A business’s advertising should be congruent with its overall image to maintain a positive reputation for its brand. Dany Ortiz’s article for *Cyberclick* mentions ten characteristics that make an advertisement successful:

- It’s promotional.
- It’s persuasive.
- It’s part of an overall marketing strategy.
- It’s targeted.
- It’s an investment.
- It’s original.
- It’s creative.
- It’s consistent.
- It’s personalized.
- It’s ethical.

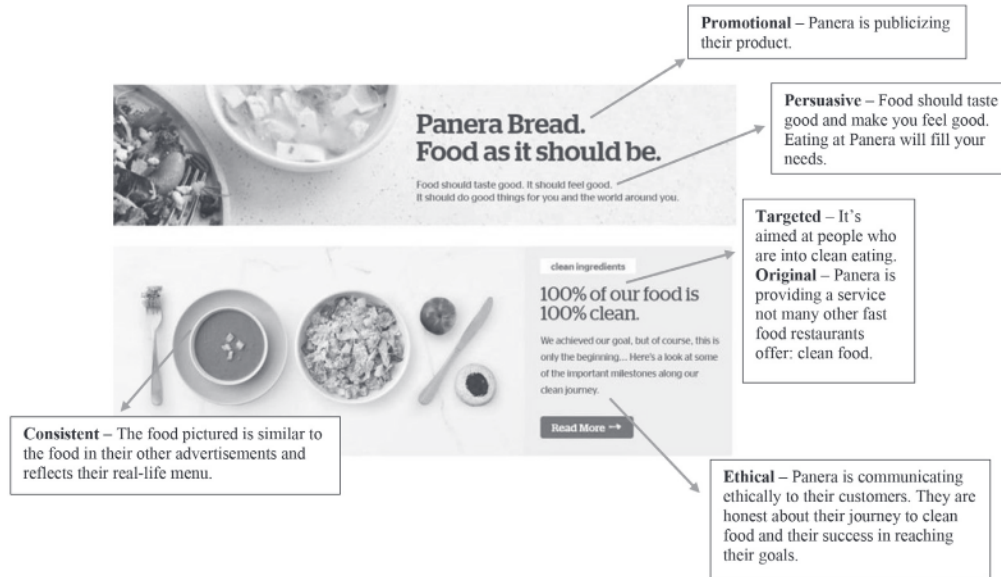


Figure 4: One of Panera Bread’s successful online advertisements (Zosimo).

Of course, not *all* these characteristics have to be used at once, but a mix of them is the recipe for an effective advertisement. We can break each of them down into easy-to-understand examples to strengthen our understanding of these important characteristics (Figure 4). A business can also use metrics to measure the effectiveness of its advertising campaigns by observing things like how many clicks its website gets and if the number of sales increases.

Could This Idea Get Me Canceled?

More than ever, people value a business that creates and sells its products in an ethical manner. Examples could be paying their workers fair wages, using vegan ingredients, or pledging donations to charity organizations. In short, we are becoming more aware of whom we are choosing to buy from and the impact our purchases have on the world—whether that means not supporting a company that tests on animals or not supporting one that relies on fossil fuels. A business is going to want to use ethical communication practices in its advertisements to appeal to the morals of its potential consumers. Ethicality is one of the components of successful advertising as mentioned in the previous section. **Ethical communication** can be defined as “honesty, clarity, accuracy, open-mindedness and a willingness to listen to others” (ISU Writing Program). If you value a business’s ethics, you would probably be

persuaded to buy from an ethically sound business instead of a notoriously unethical one because people will buy from a business whose morals align with theirs. For example, a local thrift store could lean into the fact that thrifting is better for the environment and that it's better than buying from cheap brands that rely on child labor.

A business also should consider the trajectory of its advertisements. In the context of what we'll be observing, **trajectory** is “the shifts and changes that occur in a genre as it gets used over time” (ISU Writing Program). An advertisement could become controversial as the years pass, haunting and tarnishing the image of a brand or business for years to come, especially if the conventions of the advertisement don't fit into the current standards of the genre. I'm sure you've seen a few examples of sexist American advertisements from the 1950s and 1960s (Figures 5 and 6).

I probably don't need to explain why these advertisements didn't age well. But that does pose a question: How do you predict if an advertisement will age badly? The truth is you really can't. However, a good place to start is



Figure 5: This advertisement from 1955 is from the company Lux (Jacobs and Edwards). Looks like they think it's a woman's job to do the dishes. This certainly doesn't resonate with many women today.



Figure 6: This is a 1961 advertisement made by the electronic company Kenwood (Jacobs and Edwards). This sends the message that wives are the designated cooks in a relationship . . . yikes. An advertisement like this would be the center of controversy if published in the twenty-first century.

by communicating ethically with your consumers. Ben & Jerry’s provides an excellent (and delicious) example of acting ethically and communicating that back to the customers. Their official website has an “Activism” tab alongside “Ice Cream Flavors” and “Shops & Catering.” Under the “Activism” tab, you’ll find different information about the company including how they do business, issues they care about, the Ben & Jerry’s Foundation, and their progressive values. They are committed to reducing racial inequality through awareness and activism efforts as well as reducing their carbon footprint (Figure 7). The company also supports and practices fair trade and agricultural preservation. Ben & Jerry’s has made a conscious effort to do business ethically, and they are transparent about the improvements they still need to make.

Looking back at Figures 5 and 6, both businesses don’t seem to take an open-minded or accurate approach in their depiction of women, and this type of narrative is harmful, even when it used to be socially acceptable to believe. Not only do these ads seem problematic to us now, but even at the time they were produced, they were created from the perspective of men rather than through a process of listening to or understanding women. Using these advertisements as a learning lesson and Ben & Jerry’s as a positive example, we could propose that one rule of ethical communication would be, “don’t use people (especially an underrepresented group of people) as the butt of your joke for the purpose of selling something.” Not only does this kind of advertising spread harmful stereotypes, but it certainly increases the chance of your advertisement becoming outdated and inappropriate in the years to follow.

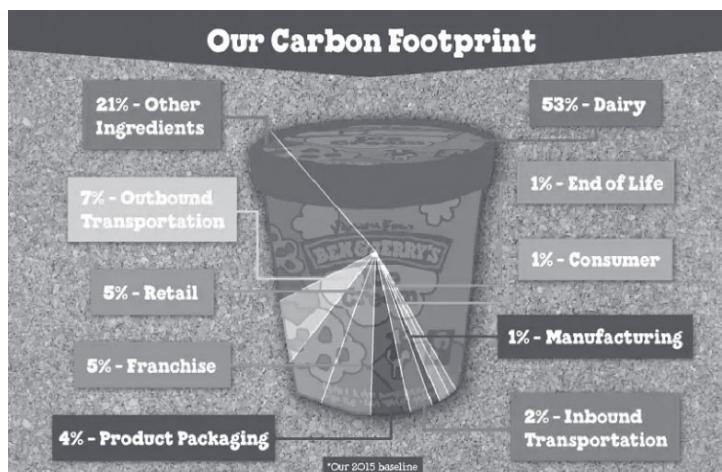


Figure 7: A breakdown of Ben & Jerry’s carbon footprint, found on their website (“Our Carbon Footprint”).

P-CHAT as an Advertising Tool

P-CHAT is a term you'll stumble across a lot if you're taking an English course at ISU. However, P-CHAT is useful beyond the activities that occur in your classroom. **P-CHAT** stands for pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, and the ISU Writing Program's take on the term is as follows: "In



Figure 8: Reference the definitions and examples of the P-CHAT terms (and other key Writing Program concepts) here on the ISU Writing Program website!

our program, we use [P-]CHAT to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world . . . [P-]CHAT allows us to focus on any aspect of the myriad elements of textual production." There are seven key P-CHAT terms including production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology (see Figure 8). In this article, we are only going to focus closely on production, distribution, and reception. As mentioned previously, there are many different types of advertisements, and they appear on many different types of platforms. Let's apply these three key terms to social media advertisements, more specifically the ones found on the video-sharing platform YouTube, to strengthen our understanding of P-CHAT and its usefulness in advertising.

Why focus on YouTube? Well, people are watching more YouTube than cable TV. According to the article "YouTube Statistics 2022: How Many People Use YouTube?" on the site *Quantum Marketer*, YouTube has two billion active users, which is about twenty-five percent of the world's population (Fitzgerald). YouTube is free and easy to use, making it accessible to anyone with access to the Internet. And its vast and diverse content options generate different types of audiences, ensuring that a business's advertisement will find its main target. This also saves a business on advertising because YouTube keeps track of the type of videos you watch and engage with, making it easy for an advertisement to find you and convince you of a purchase. Advertising on YouTube has a pay-per-view count. The same *Quantum Marketer* article provided a lot of interesting statistics, one of them being that "70% of viewers bought a product from a brand after hearing about it through a video on YouTube according to YouTube statistics" (Fitzgerald). This is important information a business would want to consider.

There are different types of advertisements you'll interact with on YouTube. The *Influencer Marketing Hub* article "How Much do YouTube Ads Cost?" by Werner Geyser and the *YourStory* article "Importance of YouTube as an Advertising Platform and Different Ad Options Available" by Tushar Chopra dive into six main types of YouTube advertising formats, which include display ads, overlay ads, skippable video ads, long and non-skippable

videos ads, bumper ads, and sponsored cards (Figure 9). It depends largely on a business’s budget. To summarize quickly, display ads and overlay ads are on the desktop platform only and are the cheaper option as far as YouTube ads go. Skippable ads are also a relatively cheap option because the cost to run the ad is cut down if the ad is skipped through by the viewer. However, this is the most common type of ad you’ll interact with on the platform. Non-skippable ads are just that, non-skippable. They are the least popular among viewers, but it requires them to watch the whole advertisement (fifteen to twenty seconds), which gives a business more time to pitch. Bumper ads are “non-skippable videos up to six seconds which a viewer must watch before seeing the main video” (Geysler). This doesn’t leave a business a lot of time to make a strong first impression. Finally, sponsored cards provide content relevant to the video, such as products featured in the main video (Chopra).

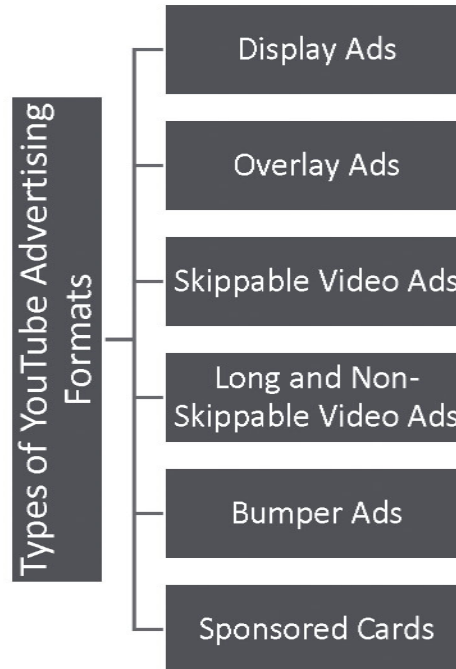


Figure 9: The six YouTube advertising formats.

All six ads have similarities, but let’s narrow it down even further and focus only on skippable ads since they are the most common type and available on both mobile and desktop platforms. As a business, you often have to choose only one or two options, especially if your advertising budget is tight.

Production

According to the ISU Writing Program, “**Production** deals with the means through which a text is produced. This includes both tools . . . and practices.” There is *a lot* that goes into the production of an advertisement, even one that’s only fifteen seconds long. Let’s break down some steps from the perspective of a business (at the most basic level) to make the production process a little less clustered.

1. Put together a marketing team or department by hiring qualified individuals with experience and education in the marketing field. (The business will need a budget for their advertising and the salaries they will pay their workers.)

2. Set up meetings to generate ideas and a plan for the advertisement that aligns with the marketing strategy set by the business—including the message they want to convey and how they want to convey it (hiring actors, artists, etc. to tell a story).
3. Cut down to the most important points the business wants to highlight due to the short run-time of skippable ads. (They want to grab the viewers' attention right away and get them invested in their message and product.)
4. The business might need to hire a videographer and editor to film and edit the ad, bringing the business's ideas to life—depending on the route the business takes, they may need to create a script as well.
5. Schedule a date and time for the actors and videographers to meet to film the ad—some items needed include a camera, a microphone, lights, a short script, and a location to film.
6. Edit the ad using a computer or laptop and editing software.
7. Have the ad reviewed by the business and possibly a sample of people, including potential customers.
8. Contact YouTube and choose the skippable ad option. (You'll need access to the Internet and a Gmail account or phone number to go on the YouTube Advertising website and request advertising.)

None of these steps are exact for *every* business. In fact, it's much more complicated. However, this gives us a rough idea of the many factors that go into the production of skippable YouTube video ads. Some key things that go into the production of YouTube ads include a Gmail account (YouTube is owned by Google), a budget for the advertisement, access to the Internet, and a team to put the advertisement together (actors, videographers, editors, marketers, etc.).

Distribution

As defined by the ISU Writing Program, “**Distribution** involves the consideration of where texts go and who might take them up.” Skippable YouTube ads are created to be distributed on YouTube since there are time limits on skippable ads (the viewer has up to five seconds until they get to skip). In general, advertisements, especially in video format, have to be quick and to the point. Our hypothetical business might consider also putting its ad on its website or on another platform, but since skippable ads are restricted by time, the business should tailor to YouTube's formatting to get the most

out of the advertisement option it is paying for. Even though there is little time until the audience can skip, choosing to distribute on YouTube increases the chance that a business’s advertisement is seen by its target audience. However, due to YouTube’s large audience, there’s no telling how people will respond to an advertisement. WatchMojo compiled a list of the “Top 10 Commercials That Became Memes.” It wasn’t each business’s intention to become a meme from their advertising, but they must consider “how distribution can sometimes move beyond the original purposes intended by the author(s)” (ISU Writing Program). One example mentioned on the list was the Trivago Guy (“Top 10 Commercials That Became Memes”). Trivago allows you to compare hotel prices and pick the best option for you. They had a tagline that went like this: “Hotel? Trivago.” Simple, right? It gets to the point and tells the audience that Trivago is where you go for your hotel needs. Well, the Internet turned this tagline into an unlikely explosion of memes (Figure 10).

Reception

The ISU Writing Program describes **reception** as dealing with “how a text is taken up and used by others.” I believe that the successful completion of production and distribution leads to a positive reception. A business will consider the reception positive if its advertisement leads to a purchase and



Figure 10: A meme tying the Trivago tagline to Marvel superheroes (“What about Thor?”).

even a friendly review of its product. Sometimes customers do the advertising *for* the business, whether it's telling their friends about a product they love, giving it five stars on Amazon or the company's website, or filming a TikTok video featuring the product. Often, if the reception is positive, customer engagement goes up, which leads to even more sales for the business. We can also use the metrics we talked about earlier to see how well our advertisement performed.

We created a plan for how to produce an advertisement, where we would distribute it (so it reaches as many people as possible in our target audience), and what tools we could use to see how the advertisement was received. These steps are the basic yet *crucial* parts of understanding and creating advertisements. After all, you can't create successful advertising without understanding its core first. This was done by using P-CHAT and some of its key terms: production, distribution, and reception (remember P-CHAT's other key terms will come in handy as well). If you're interested in marketing or creating advertisements for a business, P-CHAT is an excellent tool to add to your toolbox. Even if marketing isn't your thing, P-CHAT can be used for the creation of many different types of productions in *any* professional field.

Popping Off in My Concluding Thoughts

Marketing majors who study and create advertising are part of a discourse community, one that I belong to here at ISU. A **discourse community** is “a grouping of people who share certain language using norms and practices” (ISU Writing Program). By reading this article, you got an insight into our common practices, such as the type of research we conduct for the purpose of creating a product (aka an advertisement) that we're proud of. I'm mentioning my role in the community to let you know that I've used P-CHAT and genre analysis on projects outside of English 101. Even though its elements may seem intimidating at first, they become simple with practice. I invite you to create a P-CHAT analysis of your own for a genre within one of the discourse communities you are a part of.

Although you might be studying P-CHAT and/or reading this article for your English class assignments, P-CHAT's power goes beyond the four walls of your classroom. Hopefully, you've seen that P-CHAT is a resource you can call upon throughout your professional career. You can use P-CHAT to examine any genre that is relevant to your major or career choice. You can use P-CHAT to understand and write a medical report, a lesson plan, an infographic on an animal species, and so on. Whatever path you take,

P-CHAT can help you navigate the complex genres and creations you’ll interact with along your journey.

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