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Reflections on Classical Rhetoric and the Incidence of Figures of Speech in Contemporary Magazine Advertisements
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ABSTRACT
A key concept in Classical Rhetoric is the rhetorical figure (figure of speech), defined as an artful arrangement of words or meanings designed to produce a specific effect on an audience (e.g., metaphor, alliteration). We discuss the relevance of Classical Rhetoric to consumer advertising research, and develop propositions about the incidence and function of rhetorical figures. A preliminary study of People suggests that rhetorical figures occur frequently. We conclude with suggestions for how future research on rhetorical figures might proceed.

The purpose of this paper is to argue for and begin to develop the importance of ideas from Classical Rhetoric in understanding how advertising achieves its effects. Although there have been a few studies of individual rhetorical figures (Deighton 1985; Hitchon 1991; Ward and Gaidis 1990), and of specific devices used in ad headlines (Howard and Barry 1988; Swasy and Munch 1985), rhetorical analysis per se has not yet found its place in the toolkit of consumer researchers. Early efforts have typically lacked historical continuity with the rich literature on rhetoric that extends back thousands of years (Corbett 1990; Vickers 1988). Only recently have consumer researchers begun to offer explicitly rhetorical analyses of advertising (McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Scott 1990; Stern 1990). Even today, most ACR members would not define rhetoric as a discipline. What has been lost sight of is that advertising, as persuasive discourse, is a form of rhetoric; and that for many centuries Rhetoric enjoyed a more positive reputation as that body of knowledge that explained how to construct an effective persuasive message. We believe that present-day consumer researchers can profit by reviewing this ancient discipline for fresh ideas about the specific devices used in advertisements and their likely effects on the consumer. In particular, we would suggest that rhetoric can function as a way to focus the broader insights offered by semiotics into the formal structure of texts (see also McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Mick 1986, 1987).

Rhetoric is about constructing a form so as to achieve a desired effect. Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given situation" (Corbett 1990, p. 3). Implicit in this definition is the idea that there exists a finite set of formal devices capable of achieving certain effects, and that in any given situation some of these devices will be applicable and others not. Historically, rhetoric has been a practical discipline. It seeks to understand what works in the area of persuasive communication. What makes rhetoric noteworthy in the context of contemporary debates in consumer research is that it expects to find the answer to "what works" in a limited and structurally differentiated set of formal and stylistic devices.

The Rhetorical Figure
Classical Rhetoric refers to a body of ideas on how to persuade, move or delight an audience. These ideas were first codified in Athens during the 5th century B.C., subsequently flourished for nearly a thousand years, and then went into decline with the fall of Rome. During that period rhetoric evolved from a limited set of ideas applicable primarily to judicial oratory, into a more general discipline for successfully moving any audience, on any topic, using either oral or written means. After an interruption lasting centuries, Classical Rhetoric was revived during the Renaissance and once again became the centerpiece of the liberal arts curriculum and a leading concern of humanities scholarship. However, with the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century, rhetoric went into a long-term decline, until by the beginning of the 20th century rhetoric had almost completely disappeared as a scholarly discipline.

Today rhetoric is in the midst of a robust revival across a wide variety of humanities disciplines. Such well-known American literary critics as Booth, Bryant, Burke, and Frye have all drawn heavily from the rhetorical tradition. The reliance on rhetorical ideas is even heavier on the Continent. Such prominent structuralist and poststructuralist writers as Barthes, Derrida, Eco, Genette, and Todorov, among others, have all given extensive attention to one of the central preoccupations of Classical Rhetoric: the rhetorical figure.

In a definition that dates back to the Roman orator Quintilian, a rhetorical figure can be defined as "an artful deviation from normal usage." The best known example of a rhetorical figure, and the only one widely recognized among consumer researchers, is metaphor (Hitchon 1991; Ward and Gaidis 1990). It is safe to say that many advertisements make use of metaphors in their verbal and visual texts. It is also commonplace to remark on the presence of rhetorical questions, puns, and hyperbole in advertisements. Not at all commonplace is to point out the use of metonymy and litotes in advertising. All of these are instances of rhetorical figures. All the figures just listed have been catalogued, differentiated and interrelated for over two thousand years. And, as discussed below, all of these figures can be found in contemporary magazine advertisements.

Rhetorical analysis also facilitates an examination of the underlying principles that differentiate and unite subsets of figures. An example is the pioneering work of Durand (1987), who generates a matrix of 20 rhetorical figures by means of distinguishing four operations and five types of relations among the elements within each figure. Thus, within Durand's scheme, a metaphor can be defined as the operation of substitution performed using two elements that are similar, while a metonym can be defined as the same operation of substitution, now performed using two elements that are different. Durand's schema is one example of how rhetoric uncovers patterns and rules within the set of formal devices available to advertisers.

Humanities scholars have argued that contemporary advertising is rife with rhetorical figures. As Corbett (1989) remarks: "I have on a number of public occasions declared that the Madison Avenue ad writers are among the most skillful practitioners of Aristotelian rhetoric in our time." However, to our knowledge there have been no prior attempts to catalogue the rhetorical figures found in contemporary advertising. Hence, we formulated the

1Metonymy (me-TON-y-my) uses an associated feature of an object to stand for the object as a whole: "by order of the Crown," as opposed to "by order of the King."

2Litotes (LI-tot-eyes) refers to the deliberate use of understatement in order to accentuate the impressiveness of a claim.
following proposition to serve as a guidepost for the exploratory investigation reported in this paper.

**Proposition 1.** Rhetorical figures are widespread in the headlines of contemporary magazine advertising in the United States.

By widespread we mean that such figures can be found across a variety of audiences, magazines, product categories, and message strategies. Assuming Proposition 1 can be supported, why does advertising go beyond what is required by models of attitude structure and information integration? More broadly, if it can be shown that contemporary advertising makes heavy use of exactly the same verbal manipulations that were catalogued and used over 2500 years ago in a far different cultural context and another language, this would suggest that a study of rhetorical figures might reveal something rather basic about human communication.

To demonstrate that rhetorical figures are widespread in contemporary advertisements would require an extensive content analysis of a large and carefully constructed sample of ads drawn from a diverse set of magazines. Moreover, the subtlety with which rhetorical figures are defined, and the large number of these figures, would probably require the use of specialists in rhetoric and not just the graduate student judges routinely used in academic content analyses. Identifying whether a headline makes use of metaphor or alliteration is a going to be a more challenging endeavor than, for example, determining whether or not a headline takes the form of a question (e.g., Howard and Barry 1988).

In light of the complete absence of any research on the incidence of rhetoric, and in view of the daunting challenges posed by a rigorous content analysis, we saw an opportunity to conduct a preliminary and exploratory analysis that would provide some insights regarding the pronouncements of scholars such as Corbett and also lay a foundation for more extensive analyses. Hence, we selected one of the most widely read magazines in the United States and inventoried the contents of several issues spread over a year's time, applying our personal understanding of the domain of rhetorical figures. What follows, then, should be thought of as a tabulated text analysis and not a formal content analysis.

**METHOD**

Sample and Procedure

*People* was selected as the magazine vehicle. During the first nine months of 1991 *People* had the highest advertising revenue of any magazine, and the fourth highest number of ad pages sold. It is widely read across age, gender and education levels. Three issues were randomly selected for examination: February 4th, August 5th, and December 9th. All full-page ads were removed, numbered and catalogued. The authors examined each ad for the presence of rhetorical figures inventoried in Corbett (1990) and described below. The analysis and findings are open to public scrutiny in the form of an Appendix, a copy of which can be obtained by writing the authors, which lists the headlines and the rhetorical devices identified therein. This Appendix provides a check on any tendency to exaggerate the number of rhetorical devices, but does not foreclose the possibility that the authors have underestimated the number of certain figures. However, here too a check is possible, in that any reader may obtain the three magazine issues mentioned and conduct an independent audit.

Inventory of Rhetorical Devices

A modified version of the inventory in Corbett (1990, pp. 427-460), containing a total of 30 devices, was developed. While this is by no means a complete inventory of devices that might be found in advertising (Renaissance scholars typically identified between 100 and 200), it has the advantage of being both wide ranging and manageable. In discussing these figures, we follow the convention used by Corbett and others, and divide the overall category of rhetorical figure into two subcategories termed *schemes* and *tropes*. Whereas a figure is any artful deviation from normal usage, a scheme is further differentiated as an artful deviation in the arrangement or selection of the words themselves (e.g., alliteration), while a trope is an artful deviation in sense or meaning (e.g., metaphor). A list of the schemes and tropes along with definitions is included as Appendix A.

The examination of each ad concentrated on the headline, defined as text in a large typeface positioned so as to be the first thing read. In those cases where the headline did not contain any figure, we also examined sub-heads and taglines—i.e., text in large type occupying subordinate positions within the ad. However, the examination did not include body copy and also ignored the visual components, unless those interacted with a headline.

**RESULTS**

A total of 154 full-page ads were found in the three issues of *People*. Of these, 120 (78%) contained one or more figures in the headline. Of the 34 ads that did not, 12 did have a figure in a sub-head, yielding a total of 132 ads (86%) containing figurative headlines or subheads (hereafter, "heads"). This finding provides preliminary support for the idea that rhetorical figures may be ubiquitous in contemporary magazine ads.

The 22 ads that did not contain a recognizable figure in the heads seem to fall into 5 distinct groups. In 2 cases there was no headline or subhead at all. In 5 cases, the headline simply named the product ("Superslims from Virginia Slims"). In 3 cases, the headline took the form of an announcement of something new ("Now a national weekly entertainment magazine"). In 7 cases the headline ascribed some property to the product ("For colds and flu, doctors recommend Tylemol 6 times more often than aspirin.") Five cases were not readily classifiable.

Headlines that name, announce, or ascribe properties will be familiar to readers of advertising textbooks. Naming serves an awareness-building function; announcements harness the attention-getting power of news; and ascriptions are consistent with multiattribute judgment models in which one of the goals of advertising is to inform the consumer that the product possesses some attractive feature. The rarity with which such formulations appear in *People*, unaccompanied by any rhetorical figure, suggests that contemporary accounts that do not incorporate a rhetorical perspective may be neglecting an important characteristic of advertisements.

Turning now to the figurative ads (again, a complete listing may be obtained by writing the authors), there were 22 ads that

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3Six schemes were omitted because of some doubt whether they constitute "artful deviations" from normal speech, in view of their frequent use in ordinary discourse (e.g., apposition, parenthetical remarks). Also, two tropes (synecdoche and metonymy) were combined into one, since a number of scholars have argued that the two are not readily distinguishable. Lastly, we differentiated some puns as instances of resonance, along lines described in McQuarrie and Mick (1992).

4Included in this tabulation are ads that occupy more than one page, ads that occupy the bottom halves of two neighboring pages, and the like.
## APPENDIX A

Inventory of Figures from Classical Rhetoric With Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHEMES</th>
<th>TROPEs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figures of Repetition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Figures of Wordplay</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliteration</td>
<td>Pun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assonance</td>
<td>Pun (resonance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anaphora</td>
<td>Antanaclasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistrophe</td>
<td>Sylleps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anadiplosis</td>
<td>Figures of Indirection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Epanaleps</td>
<td>Rhetorical question</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Irony</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hyperbole</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lithotes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Periphrasis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other schemes</td>
<td>Figures of substitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parison</td>
<td>Metaphor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antiithesis</td>
<td>Metonym</td>
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<td>Antimetabole</td>
<td>Simile</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personification</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other tropes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Anthimeria</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oxymoron</td>
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<td>Paradox</td>
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Repetition of consonants (not necessarily at the beginning of words)\(^1\)
Repetition of vowel sounds\(^2\)
Repetition of words at the beginning of successive clauses\(^3\)
Repetition of words at the end of successive clauses
Repetition of a word at the end of one clause and the beginning of the next
Repetition of a word at the beginning and end of a clause
Parallel structure
The use of words opposite in meaning
Repetition of words, in successive clauses, in reverse order
Use of a word so that it can be interpreted in two different senses
A pun that interacts with a visual representation
Repeating a word but giving it a different sense the second time
Using a word so that it is understood differently in relation to two or more words that it moderates or governs
An assertion in the guise of a question
A statement that means the opposite of its literal meaning
An exaggerated claim
An understated claim
A roundabout way of naming something
Implied comparison
Substitution of an attribute or part for the thing itself
An explicit comparison
Investing an abstraction or thing with human qualities
Substituting one part of speech for another; deliberate misuse of words
Linking two words that ordinarily contradict one another
An apparently impossible statement that nonetheless contains some truth

NOTE. These definitions are based on, and in some cases drawn verbatim from, Corbett (1990, pp. 427-460), which should be consulted for additional explanation and numerous illustrations.

\(^1\)We required three or more repetitions, although there are some doubles that might be judged alliteration by Classics scholars.

\(^2\)In most cases we used the same rule of three repetitions for assonance. The exception was an obvious rhyme.

\(^3\)The idea of a clause has to be interpreted somewhat flexibly in advertising as compared to lines of verse; we considered any prose unit, a phrase in length or longer, to be a clause.

In terms of specific tropes, by far the most common is the pun and related categories (53 instances). Compared to the trend in scholarly discussions, metonyms (11 instances) are almost as common as metaphors (17). In terms of schemes, all the figures of repetition are present. Alliteration is the most common scheme (24), with anaphora (12) and parison (15) also common.

**DISCUSSION**

The results from this small sample of ads support the idea that contemporary advertisements are highly figurative and amenable to an analysis in terms of Classical Rhetoric. It is apparent that these

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ads do not simply present information; rather, they carefully arrange words and meanings into recognizable patterns that have been named and discussed for thousands of years. Future research may build on this insight to clarify both the extent and function of figuration in advertising. Our review of the People ads together with a corpus of other ads we have subsequently collected and examined suggests three additional propositions for research, and these are presented following a reminder of the limitations that characterize the present study.

Limitations

First, People may be an unusual magazine as regards the incidence of rhetoric. It is easy to identify other magazines whose editorial content and audience are very different (e.g., Business Week, GQ, Cosmopolitan, Architectural Digest), and which may similarly reveal different incidences and selections of rhetorical figures. Second, shortcomings in our understanding of rhetoric may have led us to overlook or misclassify individual rhetorical figures present in the ads. Third, because our analysis of an individual ad stopped once a figure was detected in the headline, the tabulation of figures has to be regarded as partial. In particular, the relative frequency with which individual figures appeared should be treated with great caution. A figure that is suitable for use in subheads or taglines, but not headlines, would be under-counted in our analysis. More generally, figures that mostly appear in body copy or in a purely visual representation would not be captured. Lastly, our analysis focused exclusively on the rhetorical figure. There is much more to the discipline of rhetoric than a catalogue of rhetorical figures (see Corbett 1990).

Future Research

We believe that rhetorical figures may be less common in the verbal text of advertisements for fashion clothing than the analysis of People magazine reported here would suggest. An analysis of vehicles such as Vogue and GQ would probably yield a rather different inventory. A large part of the reason is that in many such ads, the only verbal element present is the name of the product and advertiser (it would be interesting to see whether such ads are similarly bare of visual rhetoric). Along related lines, cigarette advertising does not initially appear to make intensive use of verbal rhetoric, again in part because of a minimal use of words (however, the same caveat about visual rhetoric applies). More generally, we may infer that figurative language is more appropriate in the context of certain message strategies, and less appropriate in the context of others (Wells 1988).

Proposition 2. The relative frequency of rhetorical figures in magazine advertising is contingent upon product category.

Another area where rhetorical figures appear to be less common is direct response magazine ads, in which the reader is asked to either buy the product or write away for information. These would include ads for mutual funds appearing in Money, mail order ads for knick knacks appearing in Family Circle or Good Housekeeping, ads for record and book clubs, and the like. Perhaps this is why so much of the advice on how to write advertising emphasizes plain talk, the direct approach, and the avoidance of ornamentation. Much of the received wisdom in the area of copy writing was forged in the direct mail arena, where experimental manipulations have been both possible and diligently pursued for over 60 years. If rhetorical figures are, for whatever reason, less useful in the context of direct response advertising, then this would go some way towards explaining why conventional wisdom has so neglected rhetorical figures.

Proposition 3. The relative frequency of rhetorical figures is lower in the case of appeals for a direct response.

An important counterargument to our thesis would point out that just because rhetorical figures are common does not mean they are important. Some might argue that these figures are really no more than a “sugar coating,” and of no great moment. That is, just as ads use bright colors, attractive people, diagonal elements, sharp visual angles, and dozens of other minor devices in an attempt to smooth the path of persuasion, so also ads are decked out in rhetorical figures—these figures are simply one more source of ornament. However, most studies of rhetoric reject the view that figurative language is simply an attractive ornament that can be added as an afterthought to a basic message that does the real work of communication (cf. Eco 1976). Rather, the preferred view has been that a rhetorical figure both communicates differently, and communicates more, than a straightforward delivery of the message would have (see Scott 1990 on this point). We think figures are ubiquitous in magazine advertising because of a recognition among practitioners that persuasion goes beyond rational arguments to include irrational and symbolic components.

Another way to put this is that advertisements in an expensive and widely circulated magazine such as People reflect the collective wisdom of the advertising community on how best to employ tens of thousands of dollars in media expenditure (a full-page ad in People costs about $100,000). Thus, for example, without anyone consciously deciding on this as a policy, headlines with alliteration tended to be selected over alternative headlines that lacked alliteration. Headlines that repeated key words, headlines that made use of wordplay, and so forth, also tended to be chosen over headlines that did not, as advertisers continually asked themselves, Which of these candidate executions is most likely to achieve my purpose?

It is the task of scientific inquiry to elucidate exactly what the work is that figures do. But this requires an acknowledgement that figures are widespread in advertising, and that they are put there to perform some work. And that requires that we break free of the myth that the enterprise of advertising is best compared to logical argumentation and the transmission of facts, with a little affect transfer tossed in to sweeten the pill.

Proposition 4. Rhetorical figures enhance the effectiveness of magazine advertising in a direct, primary way.

Strategies for Future Research

One strategy would be to conduct an authoritative content analysis to investigate Propositions 1-3. The criteria to be met by this content analysis would include: 1) a coherent sampling strategy; 2) a cogent analysis of the components of a magazine ad that are to be examined for the presence of rhetoric; 3) an inventory of the rhetorical devices whose presence or absence is to be detected; and 4) a reliable and valid procedure for detecting whether a rhetorical device is present. The sampling strategy should incorporate a sufficient number of magazines to reflect the wide variety in what is published. At a minimum, places to look for rhetorical devices would include the verbal elements, the visual elements, and the interaction between verbal and visual elements. A variety of inventories have been compiled over the centuries. However, the relative abstraction with which rhetorical devices must be specified, and the variety of ad components where they might be found, together with the sheer number of devices that will
be catalogued, make content analysis a daunting task. Hence, it may be necessary to use specially qualified analysts (i.e., instructors of rhetoric) in order to meet the fourth criterion.

Aside from such content analyses, the second avenue future research might take is to follow up on Proposition 4. Here it will be necessary to work at the level of individual figures and formulate and test their contribution to persuasion. Ultimately this inquiry should rest on an analytic grouping similar to that of Durand (1987), with propositions adumbrated for each analytic category of figures. Here we simply want to point to a few categories of figures to suggest how this work might proceed. A framework for experimental inquiry into advertising rhetoric can be found in McQuarrie and Mick (1992), who provide evidence for the effectiveness of the rhetorical figure they termed “resonance.”

For example, figures of repetition may facilitate both comprehension and recall. Figures of repetition include anaphora (repetition of words at the beginning of successive clauses), epistrophe (repetition of words at the end of successive clauses), epanalepsis (repetition of a word at the beginning and end of a clause), and anadiplosis (repetition at the end of one clause and the beginning of the next). Such figures may facilitate comprehension by indicating to the reader that the repeated term is a key word around which the message is organized. Similarly, repetition of stimuli is a key factor in learning and memory, hence, the probable value of a scheme that repeats a key term in a prominent way. As a second example, figures of indirection may facilitate persuasion through provoking a self-generated inference from the reader. Figures of indirection would include irony (the statement means something other than what it says), hyperbole (the statement presents an extreme claim), litotes (the statement says less than is meant), rhetorical questions (an assertion in the guise of a question), and periphrasis (a roundabout way of describing something). In his analysis of a number of these figures, Fogelin (1988) suggests that they be analyzed as indirect speech acts. These figures require the reader to correct what is said in order to infer what is really meant. “This in turn can be mapped onto Kardes’ (1988) work on self-generated inferences (see also Swasy and Munch 1985). We might say that these are figures that seduce or invite the reader into co-construction of the advertiser’s message.

We hope to have opened the reader’s eyes to the rich resources offered by the discipline of rhetoric. Once consumer researchers acknowledge the profusion of figures in contemporary advertising, theory building and testing can advance.

REFERENCES


