Persuasive Imagery
A Consumer Response Perspective

Edited by
Linda M. Scott
University of Illinois
Rajeev Batra
University of Michigan
The Contribution of Semiotic and Rhetorical Perspectives to the Explanation of Visual Persuasion in Advertising

Edward F. McQuarrie  
Santa Clara University

David Glen Mick  
University of Virginia

There are many ways to conceptualize the role of the visual element in advertising. In this chapter we address this issue from the perspectives of semiotics and rhetoric, and attempt to articulate their distinctive contributions, along with supporting empirical evidence. From semiotics we draw the ideas of sign and text. A sign is anything that can stand for something else. Text refers to any purposeful assemblage of signs, whether written or spoken, linguistic or pictorial. In light of this, pictures can be read as texts composed of signs. From rhetoric we draw the idea of a figure of speech. As developed here, figures need not be embodied in language, but can be defined more abstractly in terms of sign structure, so that visual figures are possible. To appreciate more fully the specific contribution of rhetorical and semiotic perspectives, it may be useful first to sketch briefly some of the alternative perspectives available.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ADVERTISING VISUALS

Human System or Ad System?

Perhaps the most basic distinction among perspectives is whether one focuses on the human system that processes the visual elements, or on the visual elements
contained within the ad system. In turn, this distinction tends to drive the choice
of which elements will be the focus of theoretical differentiation, as compared to
elements that will be treated in a simplified manner, held constant, or tacitly
assumed. For instance, in the study of ad visuals, a focus on the human system
might be anchored in, and most concerned to differentiate, perceptual processes as
revealed by contemporary research on the physiology of the brain, the retina, the
optic nerve, and so forth. This approach would seek to explain visual persuasion in
advertising in part by the distinct brain processes associated with visual as opposed to,
say, auditory perception. Conversely, a focus on the ad system might address the
comparative effects of color versus black-and-white images, photographic versus
drawn representations, or similar distinctions, and link these directly to persuasion
outcomes, without addressing perceptual processes per se.

A focus on the human system can also be played out in other ways. For exam-
ple, one might examine traits that differentiate consumers, and use these to explain
why visual elements may play a large or small role in determining the persuasion
outcomes of some set of advertisements. Thus, consumers might be differentiated
according to their propensity to process visual stimuli (Childers, Houston, &
Heckler, 1985).

Yet another example where the focus lies primarily on the human system is the
well-known distinction between central versus peripheral processing (along with
the cognate distinction between systematic and heuristic processing), as seen in
Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983), Maheswaran and Chaiken (1991), and
others. Here the visual element in ads is categorized as prone to being processed
by one aspect of the human system (peripheral, heuristic) as opposed to another.
The visual character of these elements is relatively unimportant in this approach;
ad visuals serve only as an example of material prone to one or another type of ad
processing.

The point to be emphasized is that when a research approach focuses primarily
on the response of the human system, with or without an emphasis on personal or
situational moderators, it tends to pay relatively less attention (if any) to differenti-
ations within the set of visual elements. In contrast, the distinctive contribution
of rhetorical and semiotic approaches is precisely to deepen our understanding of
how best to parse and comprehend the role of particular visual elements within
the ad system. Rhetoric and semiotics are text-centered disciplines (McQuarrie,
1989; Mick, 1986). As such, they make relatively simple and straightforward assump-
tions about the human system, concentrating instead on the development of
elaborate structures that can be used to differentiate types of visual content in
advertisements.

It bears mentioning that the human system/ad system contrast is not a facsim-
ile of any other extant attempt to distinguish among approaches to consumer or
marketing research. In particular, it does not line up with the positivist versus
interpretivist distinction. For instance, reader-response approaches to advertising,
as described by Scott (1994b) and others, are clearly interpretive, but they are
equally clearly focused on the response of the human system—here dubbed the reader—to the visual element. The kinds of possible readings, the depth to which these readings may be taken, and the means whereby competing readings are negotiated constitute the focus of reader-response theory; differentiations within the texts being read are not as central.

Ultimately, in our view, the goal of consumer advertising research must be to integrate the human system and the ad system, weaving together conceptually rich insights within and across each. It can be argued that historically consumer research as a whole has tended to emphasize the human system; text properties, visual or otherwise, have not been the central focus. This follows directly from the naming of the discipline in terms of consumers (i.e., human systems), and from its deep roots in social psychology. Rhetoric and semiotics offer a very different approach to consumption phenomena, in focusing their differentiation efforts away from the consumer, and on to the sign systems of ads that the consumer confronts. It is our hope that a “return to the text,” coupled with the decades of insight accumulated within human psychology, broadly construed, can significantly advance the progress of the field toward an integration of ad systems with human systems.

**Differentiation of the Visual Element**

In human systems approaches, the visual element tends to remain a poorly differentiated “black box,” defined primarily in opposition to other kinds of elements: thus, visual versus verbal, or visual versus auditory. Initial attempts to differentiate the visual elements found in ads, which date back many years and continue today, have been largely mechanical and atheoretical (Assael, Kofron, & Burgi, 1967; Greenberg & Garfinkle, 1963; Motes, Hilton, & Fielden, 1992). Examples include the amount of each page devoted to visuals; size of typeface; or types of layout of picture, headline, and other components. Similar but more subtle distinctions have also been investigated, especially by Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (e.g., 1992, 1995, 1996; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1994). These include camera angle and use of color, among others.

Mechanical distinctions are very real and some, such as color, have a long history of discussion that even predates the advent of modern advertising. Moreover, empirical evidence can be adduced that distinctions at the mechanical level among types of visual element do in fact influence consumers’ processing of ads. However, an important shortcoming of mechanical distinctions, at least as currently pursued, is their atheoretical nature. Each distinction stands on its own without any conceptual links to any other distinction. Each is backed by common sense or has some foundation in perception research, and some are supported in laboratory studies, but none is generated from a theoretical specification or nomological network. Because of the lack of an overarching theoretical structure, there is no generativity—there is no way to tell if there are 5 five more such distinctions
worthy of study, or 50, or 500, and no way to specify what the next five distinctions worthy of investigation might be.

A more sophisticated approach to the visual element can be found in Scott (1994a), who draws on art theory, among other disciplines, to differentiate advertising visuals. Perhaps most important, Scott introduces the concept of style to discussions of consumption phenomena. Style is a central idea in art theory, as seen in such common phrases as “Picasso's style,” or “Renaissance style.” Style can be thought of as a global attribute of a visual depiction. As such, it highlights the atomistic nature of such mechanical distinctions as color or degree of photographic cropping. Style is also an inherently integrative idea: To speak of the style of any single advertising visual is automatically to link it to certain other visuals, and to differentiate it from still other kinds. The mantra of stylistics is, “style is difference.” Thus, Renaissance style emerges when it is counterposed to Baroque style, just as Picasso’s style emerges when it is counterposed to Monet’s; moreover, the factors that constitute Picasso’s style emerge most clearly when one views multiple instances of his work.

Another contribution of Scott (1994a) was to lay bare the impoverished, if not altogether mistaken, theory of visual depictions tacitly held by many Western social scientists, consumer researchers included. This copy theory holds that a picture is a straightforward representation of the object(s) it depicts. Hence, in the context of an advertising experiment, when describing a visual stimulus, it is sufficient to say “sunset” or “kitten,” that is, to name the object depicted. Scott took the authors of these two examples (Miniard, Bhatia, Lord, Dickson, & Unnava, 1991, and Mitchell & Olson, 1981, respectively) to task as follows: There can be no picture of a sunset per se—there can only be a depiction of a sunset in one style or another, such as the Hallmark card style, the travel poster style, the New Age style, and so on. Nor can the picture be thought of as a simple stimulus trigger tied to a feeling. The same object depicted in different styles will produce different feelings; moreover, feelings will not be the only consumer response to such stylized pictures.

A sunset in the travel poster style will lead to one kind of reading and one set of associations, whereas one in the New Age style will be assimilated to a different stock of cultural knowledge and will point the reader in a different direction when constructing meanings for the brand being advertised. The metaphor of consumer as reader suggests that complex inferences may be drawn from an ad, and legitimates the idea that differences in the style of the visual depiction will be consequential. In contrast, the notion of pictures serving primarily as a means for transferring positive affect to the brand, and its predecessor the classical conditioning model, suggests cognitive processes more at the level of a pigeon.

How does the approach outlined in Scott (1994a, 1994b) compare to the rhetorical and semiotic approaches developed later in this chapter? Scott avowed that her approach is most definitely rhetorical, but chose to position it away from semiotics. Closer reading shows that a narrowly structuralist semiotics is the source of
this disaffection. We believe a broader approach to semiotics, in the mold of Eco (1976), is quite compatible with the approach taken by Scott. To the extent that there is a distinction between the approach of Scott and the one taken in our work, it concerns the level of systematization applied to the visual element. The global and subtle character of the notion of artistic style, in the hands of a skilled analyst such as Scott, allows for a deep and complex reading of how the pictures in an ad contribute to persuasive impact. The problem, of course, is that apprehending and interpreting stylistic characteristics of this sort depend so heavily on the ability and skill of the interpreter.

Our own approach to visual rhetoric, shaped by the semiotic tradition, is intended to be more analytic and systematic in its focus on particular sign structures within the visual image, and not so dependent on the interpretive and scholarly abilities of the analyst. (For a different approach to systematizing rhetorical figures that draws more heavily on psychological ideas, see McGuire, 2000.) The sign structure that has been the focus of our work is the rhetorical figure. In the next section we review conceptual work on the rhetorical figure; then discuss processes and outcomes to be expected when a consumer encounters a rhetorical figure in an ad, and then we describe possible boundary conditions (moderating factors). Finally, we examine the likely impact of visually embodied as opposed to verbally delivered figures.

THE RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Rhetorical approaches in general have two distinguishing features. The first is their focus on method or manner—the "how" rather than the "what" of utterances, statements, or texts. The root idea is that any proposition can be expressed in multiple ways, and that some of these expressions will be more effective than others. The focus on impact or effectiveness is the second distinguishing feature of rhetoric. In linguistic terms, rhetoric concerns the pragmatics of speech—the actions or events that are supposed to occur as a result of an utterance. In the narrower arena of speech acts, rhetoric concerns the illocutionary force of utterances—what the listener is supposed to do or experience in response to the speaker. Fundamentally, one looks to rhetoric for advice on how to communicate so as to bring about some desired outcome in the world.

Historical Perspective

Rhetoric has a long and tangled history in Western thought, and not every scholar would agree with the way we have positioned rhetoric in the preceding paragraph. In fact, the modern corpus of rhetoric is so vast and sprawls across so many scholarly disciplines that complete agreement on definitions is unlikely (Bender & Wellbery, 1990). The assessment of rhetoric's place in the grand scheme of things is
further complicated by the vicissitudes of its history and the controversies associated with it. In ancient Greece and Rome, and also in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, rhetoric was a fundamental building block in the school curriculum. It encompassed everything we would now classify as persuasion, much of what we would call communication, and a good portion of aesthetics (Sperber & Wilson, 1990).

Later, as the scientific revolution gathered momentum, rhetoric became firmly aligned, in the minds of many scientists, with the most reactionary and unenlightened sectors of the old Establishment. Science concerned the search for truth; rhetoric concerned clever arrangements of words. Science rested on real facts; rhetoric offered only embellishments, ornaments, and artifice. This uneasy relationship between rhetoric and truth actually goes back much further in history. For instance, many of the Greek sophists were teachers of rhetoric, and the notions of “sophistical” and “rhetorical” have always been semantic neighbors. There is, in the end, an extremely complicated and contentious relationship between the truthful and the persuasive (e.g., see Peter & Olson, 1983), unfortunately the only fundamental commitment of rhetoric is to the achievement of persuasion. Hence, as scientific reasoning grew to dominate the search for observable and provable truth in Western thinking, the prominence and prestige of rhetoric sank apace. By the end of the 19th century, rhetoric had been reduced to an epithet or term of opprobrium, as in “empty rhetoric.”

For reasons whose history has yet to be written, rhetoric enjoyed a revival early in the 20th century, especially in Europe. Scholars, particularly in the humanities, once more began to draw on rhetoric for ideas and concepts useful for explaining text structure. By the 1980s, the stream of books, journals, and articles, on both sides of the Atlantic, and in both the social sciences and the humanities, had grown steadily in volume. Nonetheless, as McGuire (2000) argued, the social sciences have not as yet gone very far in exploring the rich vein of accumulated craft knowledge of persuasion embodied over the centuries in works on rhetoric.

In light of this, our positioning of rhetoric as “strategies for achieving impact” might be best thought of as simply a useful definition from the standpoint of consumer and advertising research. What rhetoric offers the study of advertising visuals is the same thing that rhetoric offers consumer research, broadly speaking: guidance in differentiating text properties and linking these differentiations to consumer processing outcomes.

The Rhetorical Figure

One of the key contributions of the rhetorical perspective to advertising is the idea of a rhetorical figure, which can be defined as an artful deviation. Perhaps the best known rhetorical figure is metaphor, but rhyme is also a figure, as are puns, irony, and antithesis, along with other more obscure devices, such as ellipsis, metonym, and antimetabole. The idea of a rhetorical figure is a fundamentally stylistic notion
that concerns a particular method or manner of expressing proposition(s). The rhetorical figure, as we have defined it, is a potent device for influencing consumer processing of advertisements. Hence, this line of work is in the same vein as Scott, in arguing for the importance of stylistic analysis for understanding how advertising is experienced by the consumer.

Although the simple definition of rhetorical figures in terms of artful deviation has the advantage of being readily grasped, we intend the rhetorical figure to serve as a scientific construct capable of anchoring a theoretical framework. Hence, a more detailed exposition may be helpful, centering on the meaning of deviation. While the idea of a figure is a fundamentally rhetorical notion, the semiotic aspects of our treatment will emerge as we further articulate its definition.

**Properties of Rhetorical Figures**

The deviation that constitutes a figure does not refer to anything abnormal, and it certainly does not imply something defective. It has the more neutral connotations of “swerve” or “departure.” The deviation that constitutes a figure functions to mark out a segment of a text or utterance. The importance of text marking was discussed at length by the semiotician Mukarovsky (1964). For purposes of analogy, consider what happens, for the author and reader, when a word is *italicized* or put in **boldface**. The author intends this word to be treated differently. He or she expects the reader to notice the marking, and to respond in accordance with the author’s intention. Similarly, the reader knows to emphasize the italicized word, and understands more generally that the interpretation of the sentence hinges on or revolves around the italicized word, so that it should anchor the reading.

Thus, one way to think of rhetorical figures is to regard them as a kind of italicized text. Figures contain within themselves instructions that they are to be treated differently than the surrounding text. Conversely, readers are knowledgeable about the conventions that govern how text marked in this way is to be read. (That is, most readers are knowledgeable about conventions: the absence of such knowledge, as in the case of individuals from a very different cultural background, emerges as an important boundary condition, as developed later.) Although the convention with respect to italicized text is to give it emphasis, the convention with respect to rhetorical figures is to consider why the author was not content with a straightforward literal assertion of the underlying proposition. In other words, rhetorical figures encourage reinterpretation, or reading in additional meaning.

An alternative perspective on figurative deviation, with roots in the psychology of aesthetics (Berlyne, 1971), would approach it as a kind of incongruity. Like ambiguity and other collative properties of aesthetic objects, incongruity is arousing. More generally, incongruity tends to provoke cognitive elaboration. One can think of this as a kind of exceptions processing—congruity requires resolution, and the reader brings processing resources to bear in order to deal with the incongruity. The link between deviation and incongruity, as further developed later,
provides a bridge between the semiotic and rhetorical perspectives and the more familiar (within consumer research) cognitive and experimental psychological perspectives.

A third perspective on rhetorical figures rests on the artfulness of their deviation. Like all aesthetic phenomena, rhetorical figures have the potential to provide pleasure. The specific pleasure is what semioticians refer to as “the pleasure of the text” (Barthes, 1985). The idea is that it pleases a reader to encounter a text that sets multiple meanings into motion. These meanings are not ambiguous or unstable in the negative sense of an uncomfortable uncertainty, but playful in a positive sense. Rhetorical figures allow readers to play with their interpretation, and to cocreate their meanings, as they search out the sender's intent (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

**Taxonomy of Rhetorical Figures**

These three ideas—text marking, incongruity, and pleasure of the text—are central to our understanding of the artful deviation that constitutes a rhetorical figure. They can be integrated with yet other ideas to form the basis of a taxonomy discussed in detail elsewhere (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996) and recapitulated later in this chapter. Of course, we are not the first, and probably not the last (cf. McGuire, 2000), to propose a taxonomy of rhetorical figures. Efforts to organize the sprawling compendia of rhetorical tips and tricks go back at least to Quintillian in Roman times. The revival of rhetoric in the 20th century was accompanied by renewed attempts to differentiate and integrate the corpus of rhetorical figures, ranging from the relatively simple distinctions of Jakobson (1971) and Burke (1950) to the complex, multidimensional classification schemes of Dubois et al. (1970) and Durand (1987). However, none of these prior efforts, except Durand’s, focuses on the ad system per se, and Durand does not attempt to integrate psychological ideas. Moreover, none of these earlier taxonomies is concerned to derive causal propositions about consumer processing from their analytic categorizations of rhetorical figures. As argued earlier, only thus can the human and ad systems be effectively integrated.

The purpose of the taxonomy is to identify properties shared by some but not all rhetorical figures, or possessed to a varying degree by different figures, and then to use these properties to group figures into distinct categories (see Fig. 11.1). These categorizations can then be linked to consumer processing and outcomes, as developed subsequently. An initial distinction concerns the amount or degree of deviation present in a particular case. Individual instances of rhetorical figures can be more or less deviant, both as a function of random variation in the population of figures, and as a function of systematic variation among types of figures, as discussed later. However, the deviation must be above some threshold for a figure to be present. For example, “frozen” metaphors, which have become clichés (e.g., a tire that hugs the road), are (no longer) rhetorical figures by our definition.
As shown in Fig. 11.1, the next subdivision concerns what we have called the mode of figuration, or the type of deviation at issue. From the beginning of scholarly discussion of rhetoric in ancient times, two different kinds of figure have been distinguished, under the headings of scheme and trope. Each constitutes a distinctive kind of deviation: Schemes are excessively regular or ordered, whereas tropes are irregular or disordered. Among schemes, rhyme provides a ready example. The unnecessary echo of syllables and sounds is an instance of excessive order or regularity. Among tropes, the pun serves as an illustration. When context allows a word to carry two different meanings, or when a word can be interpreted in two very different ways, we have an instance of the irregularity or disorder that underlies any trope. Both schemes and tropes function as text marking, both produce incongruity, and both provide a pleasure of the text, but they do so using different means.

Two additional semiotic ideas can be used to give insight into the workings of each mode, and a third more psychological notion is also introduced. The first semiotic idea concerns the linguistic distinction between combination constraints and selection constraints. Texts must combine signs in certain ways to be comprehensible, and at any place within a combination, texts must select from a limited set of permissible items to fill that place. From this perspective, schemes constitute deviant combinations, whereas tropes constitute deviant selections. A rhyme combines too many of the same sounds; a pun selects a term that is “wrong” for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Figuration</th>
<th>All rhetorical figures (artful deviations)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>II. Figurative mode</th>
<th>II. Figurative mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scheme (excess regularity)</td>
<td>Trope (irregularity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less COMPLEX more</td>
<td>less COMPLEX more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>III. Rhetorical operation</th>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>Reversal</th>
<th>Substitution</th>
<th>Destabilization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhyme, chime, alliteration</td>
<td>Antimetabole</td>
<td>Antithesis</td>
<td>Hyperbole</td>
<td>Metaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anaphora, epistrophe, epoanalepsis, anadiplosis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ellipsis</td>
<td>Pun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parison</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Epanorthosis, rhetorical question</td>
<td>Irony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paradox</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the combination, but that is nonetheless comprehensible. (For those conversant
with Saussurean linguistics, combination constraints equate to the syntagmatic
axis of communication analysis, whereas selection constraints equate to the para-
digmatic axis.)

Another way of approaching schemes and tropes is to consider them as over-
coded and undercoded text, respectively (cf. Eco, 1979). Schemes carry an excess of
information, in the form of repetition or other patterning on the surface of the
text. They possess internal redundancy, which offers multiple instructions for how
they are to be interpreted. Tropes are undercoded or incomplete. The reader has to
fill in what is missing to make sense of the violation of selection constraints. Both
schemes and tropes permit multiple readings, but we might say that schemes push
these meanings onto the reader, while tropes pull them out of the reader. The
distinction between over- and undercoding leads readily to a more psychological
perspective, in terms of depth of processing. Because schemes represent deviations
that occur on the surface of the text, they are generally more sensory than tropes.
Conversely, tropes function exclusively at the level of meaning, rendering them
more semantic than schemes. Childers and Houston (1984) have shown that sem-
antic alterations are processed at a deeper level than sensory alterations.

To summarize, the two figurative modes exhibit both qualitative and quantita-
tive differences, in some cases representing a different kind of process, in others
systematically exhibiting more or less of some property. In turn, these differences
can be translated into empirical hypotheses concerning differential processes and
outcomes, as discussed later. The final level of the taxonomy makes an internal
distinction within both schemes and tropes, each having simple and complex vari-
esties. Crossing complexity with mode of figuration generates four rhetorical op-
erations, as described in McQuarrie and Mick (1996). Variations in complexity, and
also variation in the degree of deviation, together place varying demands on the
processing resources of the reader, in the sense of Anand and Sternthal (1990),
allowing figures to be utilized in diverse settings, while still hopefully matching the
resources available to the reader. (Resource availability emerges as a crucial moder-
ating factor determining the impact of rhetorical figures in specific advertising
situations, as developed later in this chapter.) In general, complexity and deviation
can be expected to have additive effects, suggesting that simple schemes on the one
hand, and complex tropes on the other, will show the sharpest distinctions in
empirical work. Although this third level of the taxonomy is key to mapping its
conceptual structure onto the named figures inherited from the classical tradition,
space constraints prevent us from pursuing it further here (for additional discus-
sion, see McQuarrie & Mick, 1996).

**Contribution of the Taxonomy**

Some kind of taxonomy is required if the rhetorical figure is to be rescued from the
Tower of Babel into which it had descended over the centuries. As an idea with
prescientific roots, knowledge of rhetorical figures, as handed down over the centuries, took the form of sprawling compendia of names, categorizations and illustrations. By the Middle Ages, the total number of named figures easily exceeded 100. In our view, one of the most important contributions of the taxonomy is that it shifts the focus away from the individual named figure to the underlying structural properties associated with that figure because of its place within the taxonomy. If valid, there is no longer any great need to ascertain the causal properties of metaphor as compared to irony, or metaphor as compared to metonym or ellipsis; one can simply speak of two complex tropes in the first instance, and of a complex trope as compared to two simple tropes in the second instance. True, irony is not the same as metaphor, and the one or the other may be a better choice in a particular persuasion endeavor, but if the taxonomy is correct, then in each case the bulk of the causal impact will be a function of their shared status as complex, tropic figures.

Thus, the taxonomy obviates the need to theorize about the specific impact of dozens of individual figures, contributing to a more parsimonious explanation of rhetorical phenomena. Conversely, it sets a high standard for work focused on any of the more common figures, such as metaphor. To continue with metaphor as an example, in our view the bane of studies on this named figure is an inability to distinguish between properties and outcomes that are peculiar to metaphor, properties and outcomes that are shared by all complex tropes, and properties and outcomes that can be expected from any rhetorical figure whatsoever. The taxonomy thus imposes a discipline on studies of any individual figure, in requiring both a differentiation of, and integration with, other kindred rhetorical figures. In this way, the taxonomy promotes a more scientific approach to rhetorical phenomena.

The taxonomy provides a similar benefit to the study of visual persuasion. It inveighs against a haphazard approach that would simply investigate a plethora of unrelated stylistic devices. It similarly protects one from a fruitless attempt to build a model of, say, visual metaphor from scratch. Instead, it argues that we already understand a great deal about visual metaphor, simply by apprehending it as the particular kind of rhetorical figure known as a complex trope (Forceville, 1995; Phillips, 1997). In turn, the virtue of this approach is that it frees the investigation to focus more tightly on the question of what difference it makes, if any, when a complex trope is presented in visual form.

The taxonomy as just set out has several additional advantages as we turn toward understanding visually expressed rhetorical figures. First, nothing about the conceptual apparatus used to construct the taxonomy is specifically linguistic. The semiotic and psychological concepts used can be applied to pictures as well as words. Pictures can incorporate artful deviance, and pictures can be simple or complex. Conversely, empirical studies of visual figures have much to offer as far as validation of the rhetorical and semiotic perspectives and the taxonomy itself is concerned. If the taxonomy can succeed in predicting empirical results obtained
with visual as well as verbal figures, then its claim to be part of a general theory of
rhetoric is strengthened. Furthermore, the claim of rhetoric itself to be a general
theory of persuasion via stylistic variation is also supported. In that sense, the tax-
onomy, as an explanation, and visual figures, as a phenomenon requiring explana-
tion, are mutually supportive.

A final virtue of the taxonomy is that it illustrates how text-centered and con-
sumer psychological concepts, the ad system and the human system, can be fused
into a single account. This is seen in ideas such as deviation, which links the semi-
otive notion of text marking to the psychological concept of incongruity. We firmly
believe that both perspectives must be brought together if the scientific under-
standing of visual persuasion in advertising is to advance.

**RHETORICAL FIGURES: PROCESSING AND OUTCOMES**

The mutual articulation of the human system and the ad system requires that the
taxonomy just presented be linked to consumer processing and related outcomes.
The failure to make this link, in our view, has prevented text-centered approaches
from receiving their due in consumer research. Without this link, conceptual
frameworks like the taxonomy are difficult to evaluate—there is no ready means
of determining whether any one framework is superior to another. However, once
linked to processing outcomes, the taxonomy becomes testable. Experiments can
be devised for determining whether rhetorical figures in advertising have the per-
suasive powers claimed. Similarly, visual figures may be empirically distinguished
from verbal figures, as appropriate. We have investigated the properties of rhe-
torical figures, both visual as well as verbal, in a series of conceptual papers and
experiments over the past dozen years (McQuarrie, 1989; Mick & Politi, 1989;
McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, 1996, 1999), and this work is ongoing. In this section
we lay out, in more detail than before, the consumer processing mechanisms and
outcomes associated with rhetorical figures, and summarize some of the support-
ing evidence. A subsequent section looks at boundary conditions. Then, issues
specific to visual figures will be examined. Throughout, avenues for future research
will be indicated.

The impact of rhetorical figures can be discussed in terms of a series of
processes and outcomes, with earlier outcomes and processes providing input to
subsequent processes and outcomes. In our view, rhetorical figures can alter a con-
sumer's initial encounter with an ad, shape that consumer's online response, and
then affect the residue left by the ad encounter. As we show, some processes and
outcomes are common across all figures, inasmuch as they derive from properties
common to all. Other processes and outcomes vary by figurative mode. Finally,
there may be additional outcomes that are specific to the four rhetorical opera-
tions, and perhaps even to specific named figures, but these are not addressed here.
One caveat applies throughout this discussion: All of the assertions concern the
hypothetical average instance of each type of figure (see the Boundary Conditions section for more on this point).

Attention

By attention we refer primarily to the selection of some particular ad or ad component for processing. The related idea of degree of attention, sometimes termed looking time, is a much more problematic notion, of uncertain value to the advertiser. That is, if one thinks of circumstances where looking time is prolonged, these are at least as likely to involve negative responses such as puzzlement or confusion (How do I make Excel calculate this value?) as to involve positive responses, as in the case of contemplation of a beautiful object. Hence, in retrospect it does not seem surprising that in one of our earliest experiments, using a relatively crude technique for assessing looking time (an event recorder), we found no difference in degree of attention paid to ads with or without a rhetorical figure (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992).

A stronger argument can be made in favor of rhetorical figures as a means of attracting attention—that is, causing the consumer selectively to attend. Under field exposure conditions, a consumer is free to attend to or ignore any ad (this is particularly true in the case of print media, which lack the intrusiveness of broadcast media). For an ad to be noticed, something must draw and at least minimally hold the consumer’s attention. Here the motivational quality of rhetorical figures comes to the fore.

First, as incongruous stimuli, figures tend to motivate further processing; second, as pleasurable stimuli, figures also motivate processing. As an incongruity that requires resolution, any rhetorical figure offers a certain incremental boost to motivation, over and above whatever the ad achieves by being personally relevant or by using more raw forms of attention-getting design elements (bright colors, etc.). In addition, because rhetorical figures have been pleasurable to process in the past, and on the assumption that consumers are pleasure seekers, rhetorical figures beckon to consumers. Thus, the incongruity that underlies a rhetorical figure, plus the promise of the pleasure to be had from resolving this particular kind of incongruity, combine to provide the consumer with motivation to process. Moreover, and this may be among their most important advantages relative to other attention-getting devices, figures have a cognitive component—one cannot pleasurably resolve the incongruity without interpreting and arranging the set of meanings engendered by the signs displayed. If the figure has been properly chosen, these meanings will serve to enhance the brand. Hence, unlike some other attention-getting devices (e.g., humor), the risk of distraction—winning attention but squandering it on the wrong subject matter—may be noticeably less in the case of (well-conceived and well-constructed) figures.

The effect of rhetorical figures on consumer attention to an ad can be further differentiated by means of the scheme-trope distinction. Because tropes are
undercoded, or incomplete, they draw attention and invite elaboration. Hence, the motivational argument introduced earlier applies particularly well to tropic figures. Deviation, and hence incongruity, is also greater in the case of tropes; thus, the pleasure of the text achieved during processing tends to be greater as well. The case for schemes is rather different. They benefit to a lesser degree from the property of deviation, in accordance with the lesser amounts of deviation present in the case of schemes. Rather, the benefit of schemes will lie in their robustness under conditions of minimal attention. By minimal attention, we mean that strictly speaking consumer attention to ads is not all or none, but a matter of thresholds. If an ad attracts enough processing from a consumer, that is, passes an initial threshold, we say that it has been attended to; as more resources are put into processing the ad, it becomes more convenient to talk about depth of processing rather than attention per se (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). Given this line of argument, there will be many cases where an ad is barely attended to—it has registered, the consumer did attend, but only barely. Here the overcoded and internally redundant character of schemes may offer an advantage.

Figure 11.2 may be useful in clarifying these points. The first thing to note is that with the possible exception of the effects hypothesized for tropes, the typical forced-exposure paradigm used in laboratory experiments on advertising does not provide a very suitable test of any of our contentions concerning rhetorical figures and attention. By definition, a paradigm that forces subjects to attend to ads cannot measure the impact of figures on attention. Assuming a design with unforced exposure, in terms of Fig. 11.2 the general prediction regarding rhetorical figures is that they facilitate the move from Zone 2, where attention is uncertain, to Zone 3, where the attention threshold has been securely crossed. The more specific prediction for schemes is that they help consumers surmount the Zone 3 threshold; to put it another way, schemes produce a pattern of results for Zone 2 consumers that approximate the pattern that normally only appears for an ad that has crossed the attention threshold and reached Zone 3. Thus, schemes survive inattention. In turn, the specific prediction for tropes is that they pull the consumer through Zone 3 toward Zone 4 and beyond. Thus, tropes secure attention.

This analysis also suggests a key factor that may moderate the overall impact of tropes versus schemes on ad effectiveness. It is important to keep in mind that the presence of a rhetorical figure is but one of many factors that contribute to an ad's effectiveness. Similarly, contextual factors independent of the ad's text may loom very large in determining the impact of a particular ad. It follows from the above that whether an ad achieves Zone 2, Zone 3, or Zone 4, and its rough position within those zones, may be fixed by other factors having nothing to do with rhetorical figures. Therefore, we predict a scheme–trope interaction such that schemes will be most effective for ads at the boundary between Zone 2 and Zone 3, whereas tropes are most effective for ads likely to achieve Zone 3. The liability of tropes is that their invitation to process can be refused, and may be most likely to be refused when processing resources are constrained or absent (as when an ad falls into
Zone 2, or is at the border of Zone 2 and Zone 3). Conversely, the liability of schemes is that their relatively small amount of deviation may lack the power to move a consumer into or within Zone 3; however, precisely because they require fewer processing resources, in being less deviant, they are more robust than tropes as the consumer falls toward to the bottom of Zone 3, or fails to quite surmount the Zone 2 to Zone 3 threshold.

Finally, this analysis has intriguing implications for comparisons of visual and verbal figures. To this point we have not been specific about where within an ad the rhetorical figure is located. It seems to us that figures that appear within the body copy of an ad are unlikely to have much of a measurable impact under any circumstances, and are certainly unlikely to affect attention, inasmuch as whether an ad will be attended to at all is probably determined before processing of the body copy begins. The remaining possibilities for figure placement are, one, locating it within the headline, subhead, or tagline, that is, presenting it in a large typeface prominently located within the ad, or two, making it part of the advertisement’s visual element. We posit that if any part of an ad is going to achieve Zone 2 processing or above, it will be the visual element; more generally, when an ad only

**FIG. 11.2.** Stages of selective attention to rhetorical figures in advertising. _Note._ To be read from bottom left to upper right. Boxed text indicates four possible outcomes for processing of ads containing rhetorical figures. Processing may terminate at any point; there is no guarantee that a particular ad will surmount any of the thresholds shown.
achieves Zone 2 or Zone 3, the bulk of what is attended to will be the visual element—hence, the value of embedding a rhetorical figure in the picture of an ad.

**Elaboration**

Once a threshold of attention has been achieved, an ad may be processed at greater depth. For our purposes, deeper processing is synonymous with greater degree of elaboration. Because both constructs are widely used in the literature, with many shades of meaning, it is important to specify what is meant by *elaboration* and *depth of processing* in the present context. An ad is elaborated when it is linked to other cognitive structures or sign complexes already present in the mind of the consumer (cf. MacInnis & Price, 1987). The greater the number of these linkages, the more central the structures to which the ad is linked, and the larger and more complex these structures, the greater is the elaboration (cf. Mick, 1992).

There would appear to be two fundamental explanations for why elaboration might be greater in the case of a particular ad stimulus. Either there were aspects of the ad that forced elaboration, that is, guaranteed it or supplied it ready-made, or there were aspects that allowed, invited, or encouraged elaboration by the consumer. In the second case a host of contingencies will govern; that is, factors outside the ad, associated with the consumer or the exposure situation, may determine whether the invitation to elaborate is accepted and taken up, and to what degree.

The two routes to elaboration roughly align with the distinction between schemes and tropes. However, all rhetorical figures that receive attention, by the nature of the artful deviation that constitutes them, probably force some minimal degree of elaboration. It is the involuntary character of this elaboration that makes rhetorical figures so appealing to an advertiser who seeks to compel a response. Although all rhetorical figures have this property, the distinction between schemes and tropes is important and can be developed further in terms of its testable implications.

As noted earlier, the deviation that underlies a scheme is in part sensory, that is, the sound that echoes in a rhyme, or the contour that is repeated in a picture, or the physically identical words in a scheme of repetition (e.g., anaphora). A scheme contains its own links, and these links involve the sensory level. The claim that schemes supply a ready-made elaboration rests on two foundations. First, the impact of incongruity is essentially involuntary. The human system is designed, for sound evolutionary reasons, to respond to discrepancies. Second, a rhyme, if attended to at all, is unavoidable. The two words are linked by a common sound; once processed at all, that link exists. Because it is incongruous (excessively regular), the rhyme will be explored—there must be a reason these words are linked.

Now stepping back a little, by and large we are skeptical that the human system can be forced to do much or compelled to respond in any very specific way in the context of advertising. This suggests that schemes should have a robust but limited impact on elaboration: robust, because the involuntary character of the elabora-
tion evoked by schemes indicates that there will be few contingencies that can disrupt or eliminate the effect (as long as attention has been achieved). Conversely, because of the sensory component, and because the deviation that constitutes a scheme tends to be less than in the case of tropes, elaboration, on average, *ceteris paribus*, will be less in the case of schemes as compared to tropes.

Complementary predictions can be made in the case of tropes. Greater deviation, hence greater incongruity, suggests greater elaboration. The more semantic nature of tropes similarly suggests an opportunity for greater depth of processing. More specifically, because tropes are, in a fundamental sense, incomplete, under-coded, or ill-specified, they require the cognitive participation of the consumer if they are to be meaningfully resolved. This is both a strength and a weakness from the perspective of advertising. The advantage of tropes is that the consumer can participate to almost any degree. Such participation may be powerfully persuasive, as the research on omitted conclusions and self-generated inferences attests. The disadvantage of tropes is that they are vulnerable to disruption by any number of contingencies. Factors specific to the consumer or to the exposure situation may forestall or inhibit the consumer's participation in resolving the trope. In sum, a trope carries the potential for a much greater impact on elaboration than a scheme. Simultaneously, a trope is much more vulnerable to the disruptive impact of contextual factors.

Study 1 in McQuarrie and Mick (1999), which used visual figures, provides supporting evidence for the proposed impact on elaboration. Here elaboration was measured by six 7-point semantic differential scales that tapped both discursive and imagistic elaboration (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Results showed that the presence of a figure led to increased elaboration. In nominal terms, the trope effect was larger than the scheme effect, but this finding did not achieve significance. Study 2 and Study 3 in that paper (discussed later) suggested that the trope effect had probably been disrupted by the inclusion of foreign-born students, who did not accept the invitation to elaborate, probably because they could not do so in view of their less developed semantic capacity (knowledge structures) for American advertising, relative to the U.S. students.

**Ad Liking**

As suggested earlier, every rhetorical figure that is successfully processed yields a quantum of pleasure. This pleasure in turn can be expected to produce a more positive attitude toward the ad. Before exploring the nature of the pleasure offered, it is important to examine the hedge in the first sentence just given. At the one extreme, if the rhetorical figure goes unnoticed because the ad is not attended, then of course no pleasure can result. At the other extreme, it is possible for a rhetorical figure to be excessively deviant. Incongruity, like many of the other arousal factors investigated by Berlyne (1971), has an impact that conforms to an inverted U pattern. In the present case, too small an incongruity (i.e., insufficient deviation)
implies that no figure is present; too large an incongruity means that the figure will not be successfully resolved. That is, as deviation becomes more extreme, the probability of its being incomprehensible goes up accordingly, and there is nothing pleasurable about a message that defies comprehension—instead, frustration or irritation is likely. Experiment 2 in McQuarrie and Mick (1992) provides supporting evidence. Here we selected figures that would be difficult or impossible for most subjects to resolve. As predicted, the positive effect on ad liking otherwise obtained for figures disappeared.

Given a moderate degree of deviation, what is the nature of the pleasure produced by rhetorical figures in advertisements? Here the semiotic phrase “pleasure of the text” is evocative. The argument is simply that any sign structure that resists immediate decoding, while showing the way to its ultimate resolution, will be intrinsically pleasurable to process. Keep in mind that rhetorical figures are artful deviations, deviations with a purpose. The art lies in showing the way to resolution of the incongruity. The first source of the pleasure offered by rhetorical figures, then, is akin to the satisfaction experienced when one solves a puzzle. Per Berlyne (1971), apprehension of the incongruity creates arousal, which is then released once the resolution is found. This arousal-release sequence, of course, is a fundamental component of many pleasure experiences.

There is another source of the pleasure to be gained from rhetorical figures. Figures are artful, clever constructions. As with any art object, aesthetic appreciation may result. This pleasure is no different in kind from that received upon encountering a graceful old building, a lovely Impressionist painting, or a melody by Mozart.

To complete the link to consumer processing, the pleasure experienced on encountering and resolving an artful deviation should, ceteris paribus, produce a more positive attitude toward the ad (Aad). This finding has been robust across stimuli, subject populations, and studies. We demonstrated a positive Aad effect for one set of figures across two experiments conducted with student and with adult populations (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). We demonstrated it again using a different set of stimuli, this time consisting of visual figures (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999).

It may also be the case that the pleasure associated with rhetorical figures can transfer to the brand, as shown in McQuarrie and Mick (1992). However, such brand attitude effects may only be a secondary result of the Aad effect just discussed. An autonomous effect of rhetorical figures on brand attitude has to be regarded as tentative at this point; it may be most likely when the figure incorporates a direct reference to the brand.

We have hypothesized that tropes will have a greater impact on Aad than schemes. Both types of figure generate pleasure by their artfulness. However, deviation or incongruity, and the potential pleasure from the resolution of same, should be greater in the case of tropes. The fundamentally semantic character of tropes also suggests that greater pleasure of the text can be expected.
The superiority of tropes demonstrated in McQuarrie and Mick (1999) was subject to an important contingency. We found that the figure effect, in the case of tropes, disappeared for foreign-born subjects (most of whom grew up in Asian countries, at a considerable cultural distance from the world of American advertising). This finding harks back to the comments made earlier about the disruptibility of tropes. The elaboration occasioned by and the pleasure offered by tropic figures have the same source—the artful deviation that constitutes the figure. If elaboration does not occur, because the consumer was unable or unwilling to accept the invitation proffered by the trope, then pleasurable processing cannot result. It appears that the foreign-born students tended not to “get” the tropes, and hence did not experience the pleasure of resolving the incongruity. Follow-up interviews supported this explanation, laying bare the difficulties foreign-born students had as they attempted to engage the tropes.

As an aside, this finding supports a crucial point long championed by Scott (1994a), who argued that visual images are not automatically available and comprehensible to any human subject, but instead require the same sorts of learned, cultural competencies as any other text. This is tantamount to arguing that all visual images have semantic components and implications. Our claim to have manipulated and experimentally examined visual tropes rests on the same presupposition—that visual images have semantic components, which in turn can only be accessible to someone who has acquired the cultural competency in which these semantic components, as always, must be embedded.

Memory

Rhetorical figures should be more memorable than comparable text lacking figures. The argument is based again on the expected impact of the elaboration that results from encountering artful deviation. Greater elaboration means more mental connections, and more mental connections imply a higher probability of retrieval. In consequence, will there be a trope superiority effect for memory, as was the case for elaboration and pleasure? Insufficient evidence exists to give a ready answer. It is entirely possible that either tropes or schemes may have a superior impact on memory, depending on the kind of boundary conditions discussed in the next section. Tropes will be more effective under conditions that favor the extra elaboration occasioned by the undercoding characteristic of tropes; schemes will be more effective under conditions that favor the redundancy associated with the overcoded character of schemes.

GENERAL BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

In the preceding section we discussed processes and outcomes likely to follow from the inclusion of a rhetorical figure in an advertisement. These were derived from either the fundamental stimulus properties of figures, drawing on the psychology
literature, or from the underlying sign structure, drawing on semiotics. Essentially we claimed that rhetorical figures make advertisements more effective across a broad front, gaining attention, inviting elaboration, producing pleasure, and leaving a stronger memory trace. The purpose of the current section is to examine the limits on this broad claim in a more systematic way, beyond the occasional contingency mentioned in passing.

The two fundamental limits or bounds that constrain assertions concerning the contribution of rhetorical figures to advertising effectiveness might be summed up as “ceteris paribus” and “on average.” By ceteris paribus, we mean that the presence of a rhetorical figure is only one of countless factors contributing to the overall effectiveness of a given ad. In the laboratory it is possible to arrange pairs of stimuli that are virtually identical except for the presence or absence of a figure, and to demonstrate under controlled conditions the incremental effectiveness of the ads containing rhetorical figures. In the field, an ad with a rhetorical figure may fail terribly, whereas an ad lacking a figure succeeds brilliantly, due to other differences between the two ads, that is, better choice of key attribute, body copy that was more personally relevant, exposure conditions that were more favorable, and so on. Many factors determine ad effectiveness, and rhetorical figures, although almost always a candidate for consideration, are unlikely to be the most important determinant of success in most situations.

The second fundamental limit is particularly apropos to the assertions comparing schemes and tropes. All of these assertions should be read with the qualifier, “for the average or typical scheme (trope).” On average, tropes are more deviant than schemes; on average, schemes have more robust processing impacts. However, individual schemes (tropes) may be all over the map as far as deviation and robustness is concerned. Any specific scheme or trope used in empirical work can be regarded as a sample drawn from the population of schemes and tropes; hence, sampling variance is inevitable.

A limitation or constraint that is specific to comparisons of schemes and tropes might be stated as “the assumption of equivalent causal power.” That is, whenever we have argued that schemes will have an advantage in one context, while tropes will have an advantage in another, we have necessarily assumed that the cognitive assist provided by the redundancy of schemes can have, in principle, an impact on ad processing that is equal to the motivational impact provided by the incongruity of tropes. Whether this kind of cognitive assist can be equated to that kind of motivational lure, in the context of ad processing, is an empirical question. If, instead, it is far more important that an ad be deviant than redundant, then empirical studies may show tropes to have an advantage over schemes across a much wider variety of situations, beyond the prototypical case where the consumer has ample processing resources available to elaborate upon the trope. This is a priority topic for future research into this level of the taxonomy.

A final caveat is that ad repetition may moderate many of the impacts suggested in this chapter; thus, the impact of a single exposure to an ad containing a rhetor-
ical figure may not be the same as the impact after multiple exposures, and in turn, a moderate number of exposures may not produce the same impact as a heavy schedule of repetition (McQuarrie, 1998). This caveat is particularly apropos to comparisons of schemes and tropes. For instance, repetition may favor the cognitive assist provided by redundant schemes, even as it dulls the motivational allure provided by tropes, producing a reversal of effect sizes as compared to the single exposure case. To our knowledge, there have been no studies of the impact of rhetorical figures under varying schedules of repetition, and this is a promising avenue for future research.

Specific Contingencies Affecting Processing and Outcomes

We have argued overall that trope outcomes will be more subject to contingencies than scheme outcomes; however, even the robustness of schemes has its limits. Nonetheless, the contingencies discussed next are particularly pertinent to tropes. Following MacInnis, Moorman, and Jaworski (1991), Batra and Ray (1986), and others, these contingencies can be grouped according to whether they alter the consumer's ability, opportunity, or motivation to process an ad that contains a rhetorical figure. In some cases, empirical evidence exists to support the supposed contingency, as cited; in other cases, the argument is from plausibility.

Ability to Process. As shown in McQuarrie and Mick (1992), Experiment 2, tropes at least can be constructed to be so deviant as to defy the consumer's ability to process the meanings set in play. The latitude of acceptable deviation, however, may be quite wide; notably, in that study only one of our two attempts to design an excessively deviant trope succeeded.

Here it is worth emphasizing that there is nothing intrinsically difficult about rhetorical figures; that is, they are not intrinsically more effortful to process than comparable non-figurative texts. At least, the extra processing provoked or evoked by figures is not consciously experienced by subjects as an energetic drain. This was demonstrated in McQuarrie and Mick (1999) using scale items anchored by “difficult” and “confusing.” We found that the presence or absence of a figure had no effect on these measures. Part of the appeal of rhetorical figures, from the standpoint of advertisers, is that they can convey more information, or carry richer meanings, without any subjectively experienced costs. It can reasonably be argued that figures require incremental resources to process, but this line of argument properly falls under the heading of opportunity to process—a state variable quite different than the trait variable presupposed by “ability.”

Perhaps the clearest example of a case where consumer processing ability served as a contingency concerns the results reported for foreign born subjects in McQuarrie and Mick (1999), Study 2. It appears that these individuals lacked the cultural competency to appreciate or engage in the pleasure of the text offered by the visual tropes in that experiment. In other words, a consumer must be equipped
with a variety of socially and culturally conveyed understandings in order to effectively process a tropic figure. This finding may generalize to other cultural, sub-cultural, and social groupings. Thus, a rhetorical figure readily apprehended by a consumer who is an expert in a particular product category may be missed by a novice; a figure that works well with an educated segment may bomb with the merely literate; and a figure readily grasped by a frequent listener to hip-hop music may be opaque to a member of mainstream culture.

As noted earlier, foreign-born subjects in McQuarrie and Mick (1999) were more able to appreciate the visual schemes than the tropes. We would argue in general that the more limited the abilities of the consumer, the greater is the effectiveness of schemes relative to tropes, and also the greater is the probability that a trope will simply fail, even as a scheme continues to provide some incremental benefit.

**Opportunity to Process.** These opportunities can be externally supplied, or may result from an internal predisposition of the consumer. Interestingly, the manipulations of externally driven opportunities most commonly seen in the literature restrict opportunity relative to some baseline or normal level (we are not aware of any manipulations in the consumer or marketing literatures that rest on a claim to have heightened or expanded opportunity). Examples of manipulations used to restrict opportunity include: (a) introduction of intrusive, distracting stimuli that compete for attention; (b) speeded up presentation rates and/or very constrained time allowances; or (c) instructions to concentrate on some task remote from the advertisement. Essentially, such manipulations reduce the probability that an ad or ad component will be attended to, or processed, or processed to any depth, by constricting the resources available to the consumer.

For these externally driven opportunity constraints, the general prediction is that rhetorical figures will survive moderate to moderately severe restrictions on the opportunity to process, provided they are prominently featured in the ad (dominant picture, larger type headlines, etc.). The reasoning is that incongruity compels attention, so that the probability that the rhetorical figure will garner some of the meager resources available is good. In addition, we would expect schemes to do better than tropes under opportunity constraints, in accordance with the general argument from robustness.

Greater opportunity to process an ad may also result from a predisposition toward processing certain kinds of stimuli, as captured by the term *propensity*. Thus, Childers et al. (1985) drew on the idea that there may be a propensity to process either visual or verbal stimuli to construct their Style of Processing (SOP) scale. If a consumer has a propensity to process certain kinds of stimuli, then ad components belonging to that stimulus class will have more opportunity to be processed. The SOP scale is clearly relevant to comparisons of visual and verbal rhetoric. (It has also been argued that there may be a propensity to process figurative language [see Yarbrough, 1991]; however, problems with the face validity of
items in this scale have made us reluctant to use it.) Nonetheless, propensity effects may be easily drowned out by other factors. McQuarrie and Mick (1999), Study 2, examining visual figures, did not show any moderating effect for visual style of processing. This may be because the forced-exposure paradigm they used gave every subject plenty of opportunity to process the ads.

At some point, propensity to process shades into the desire or urge to process stimuli of a particular sort—that is, motivation to process. A construct that straddles this boundary is tolerance for ambiguity (TOA). This refers to the consumer's comfort with, and willingness to engage, ambiguous, contradictory, or uncertain situations where multiple interpretations are possible (Norton, 1975). Given the role that pleasure of the text plays in the proposed impact of rhetorical figures in advertising, early on TOA presented itself to us as a relevant individual difference variable, and we incorporated it in our initial experiments (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). Surprisingly, TOA failed to emerge as a significant moderator in Experiment 1, perhaps due to the limited variation present in a homogeneous student population. A significant moderating effect did appear in Experiment 2, which involved a partial replication conducted with a more diverse adult population. The interaction was driven by the most deviant of the several kinds of tropes used in that study, indicating that TOA, for an individual consumer, may be predictive of the level of deviation beyond which incongruity becomes excessive and counterproductive. Although not yet empirically investigated, the results suggest that TOA is unlikely to moderate the impact of schemes, inasmuch as demonstration of an effect for TOA required particularly deviant examples of a kind of figure, the pun, that itself lies at the high end of the gradient of deviation.

Motivation to Process. Although figures in general, and tropes in particular, motivate additional processing, it still seems possible that some consumers will be more motivated to process figures in ads relative to other consumers. A good candidate for such a trait variable would appear to be need for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, Jarvis, & Blair, 1996). The specific prediction concerns an interaction between mode of figuration (scheme vs. trope) and Need for Cognition (NCOG). That is, when NCOG is high, tropes should be particularly effective, relative to both schemes and nonfigurative controls. Because the pleasure of the text is greater in tropes, a consumer who delights in thinking might particularly appreciate the play of meanings set in motion by a trope.

The prediction just made is straightforward. Close examination of the items in the NCOG scale, however, suggests a very different argument, wherein NCOG would not moderate the impact of figures or of tropes and schemes. The reasoning is as follows. A number of items in the NCOG scale suggest a taste for mental challenge, a preference for effortful mental tasks, and a disinclination to be satisfied with simple, ready-made solutions. If this interpretation of the scale governs (i.e., it actually measures “taste for expenditure of mental effort”), then there should be no moderating effect on rhetorical figures in general, because figures do not
require effortful processing. Empirical work will be required to determine which of these interpretations of Need for Cognition governs.

**Summary.** The contingencies just suggested are only a sampling from what is presumably a much larger set. Perhaps the most notable fact, however, is the relatively weak supporting evidence thus far available. Although many moderators can be imagined for rhetorical figures, it remains possible to maintain, given present evidence, that the impact of rhetorical figures in an ad on consumer processing is quite robust. If so, then although we may reasonably expect a variety of factors modestly to enhance or attenuate the impact of figures, we should not expect this impact to be eliminated under any but the most extreme circumstances.

If validated by future work—and it would take many years of effort to support the robustness claim, because it is ultimately an assertion of a negative proposition—the robustness of the figure effect would at least square with the prevalence of rhetorical figures in print advertising, as documented by Leigh (1994) and McQuarrie and Mick (1996). It is more parsimonious to suppose that a widely used device, with a 2,500-year pedigree, is robust in its impact, than to assert the contrary.

Of course, other explanations for the prevalence of rhetorical figures can be envisioned. Interestingly, however, none of the early theories of advertising response make any mention of rhetorical figures; in fact, stylistic device in general is notable by its absence. To compound the mystery, scholars outside of marketing and consumer research have been mining advertisements as a rich source of examples of rhetoric for decades (Corbett, 1990; Sheldon, 1956). We confront the enigma of a device that is widespread in actual advertisements, whose prevalence in advertising has long been noted in other scholarly disciplines, but that has been neglected for decades in the very discipline that is presumably most in search of theoretical explanations of advertising. How can this be?

**Rhetorical Figures and Naturalistic Viewing Conditions**

Three explanations can be adduced for this conundrum of long term theoretical neglect. First, mainstream theories of advertising response are heirs to the social psychological tradition in modern social science, as seen in the work of Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) and others. This tradition in turn is very much a child of the Enlightenment, which in turn has always been hostile to anything rhetorical, as an insult to reason. As a consequence rhetoric, and stylistic device in general, is naturally thought of as mere embellishment, undeserving of theoretical attention (if noticed at all).

More subtly, mainstream work in advertising response tends to emphasize manipulations of the body copy in ad stimuli. It is the body copy that contains the strong or weak arguments, the important or unimportant brand attributes, and so forth. Body copy lends itself to rational argumentation, and is a natural focus for a tradition that was initially concerned with political discourse on major topics of
the day. Unfortunately, stylistic devices are most commonly found in, and most potently enhance, the headline or picture in an advertisement. Hence, the first two explanations for the neglect of rhetorical figures, and of style per se, are one, that these irrational appeals are at variance with the intellectual tradition from which consumer research springs, and two, that style is most important with respect to two components of an advertisement that until recently were not the focus of either experimental manipulation or theoretical attention.

The third and somewhat more fundamental explanation is that rhetorical figures may represent an adaptation to an exposure condition rarely found in experimental work on advertising. We term this condition *unforced exposure*, and contrast it to both *forced exposure* and *forced nonexposure* paradigms. That is, the conventional laboratory advertising experiment, as is well known, forces exposure to advertising stimuli. Subjects are notified that they will be shown ads and asked to read them carefully; in fact, free-standing ads may be the only stimuli included in the experiment. Some years ago, when the concept of low-involvement consumer behavior was introduced, an alternative paradigm, forced nonexposure, came into vogue as the appropriate contrast to forced exposure conditions. In forced non-exposure, a subject is either motivated to ignore or dismiss ads (e.g., Petty et al., 1983), or subjected to a variety of distractions, or otherwise given little or no opportunity to process.

The problem with both of these conditions, as far as understanding advertising in the world is concerned, is their forced character. Conversely, the distinctive characteristic of mass-media advertising, relative to virtually any other category of persuasion or influence attempt, is that exposure and processing are at the option of the audience. Under conditions of unforced exposure, ads must simultaneously win attention, and be persuasive. Success at this dual task can be elusive, as research on the potentially distracting effect of humor has shown. That is, tactics capable of winning attention may be so distracting as to nullify persuasion, whereas tactics capable of effecting persuasion may be so boring that they cannot gain attention.

In short, we argue that rhetorical figures are prevalent in print advertising because they solve a problem specific to field conditions of advertising exposure, where attention is never guaranteed, and one and the same message must both gain attention and be persuasive. The artful deviation that constitutes a figure provides an efficient means of achieving both goals. The problem of unforced exposure is rarely faced in conventional advertising experiment designs, hence, the invisibility of this problem, in the eyes of mainstream theory, may explain the neglect of rhetorical figures, and of stylistic device generally.

**VISUAL RHETORIC**

The gist of much of this chapter has been that there is nothing special about the visual modality. Pictures can be signs, and semiotic theory explains the commu-
nicative function of pictures using the same constructs that explain the function of words. Pictures can take the form of rhetorical figures, and rhetoric explains the function of these figures using the same tools as for words. Last, pictures present many possibilities for stylistic variation, but so do words. In short, at the level of scientific theory, whether something is visual or verbal, pictorial or auditory, may be of little consequence. At the extreme, perhaps "visual" is only an Aristotelian category, a pre-scientific idea that, although intuitively clear, is not actually linked to distinct causal processes of the sort featured in scientific theory.

However, this complete reduction of the visual distinction to an epiphenomenon probably goes too far. It seems more likely that visual means of persuasion afford some opportunity, provide some advantage, or suffer from some constraint, even if these come only at the margin. Similarly, visual rhetoric may afford some opportunity or advantage, or suffer from some constraint, relative to verbal rhetoric. At least five such distinctive characteristics can be identified.

**Visual Rhetoric Is More Tacit**

All rhetorical figures benefit from their tacit character—figures are not the sort of direct assertions that stimulate counterargument. In fact, McQuarrie and Mick (1992) showed that ads with figures led to less counter-arguing relative to their controls. It seems to us that visual figures must be among the most tacit of all. The tacit quality of advertising visuals has been noted almost since the beginnings of advertising science early in the 20th century (Marchand, 1985). The tacit nature of visual assertions has advantages for the advertiser while posing complementary perils for public policy and regulation. For the advertiser, it appears that rhetorically structured visuals enable particularly stealthy persuasion attempts, which may be of interest when a plain or direct assertion would be rejected out of hand. For the regulator, operating under a legal framework rooted in the Enlightenment, and optimized for dealing with verbal statements, tacit visual persuasion poses knotty problems of detection and enforcement, as noted by Marchand (1985), Messaris (1992), Stern (1992), and others.

**Visual Rhetoric Is Effected on Contact**

Assume once more that naturalistic viewing conditions obtain. Now consider the typical magazine ad, containing picture, headline(s), body copy, and logo. On the further assumption that most ads encountered under these conditions receive only brief, cursory attention, and minimal processing, it seems likely that if anything will be processed in the ad, it will be the picture. To read and comprehend something, even a brief headline, requires more processing resources than a brief scene scan of the picture. Hence, visual persuasion generally, and visual rhetoric specifically, may be particularly effective, relative to verbal persuasion, under naturalistic viewing conditions.
Visual Rhetoric Enjoys Greater Prominence

To grasp the nature of this prominence, consider first the ratio of verbal content to pictorial content within the articles and other editorial content of a magazine, using a metric such as square inches of page coverage. This ratio will vary by publication, ranging from 1:1, or less, in the case of a magazine like People, to 2:1, or 5:1, or more, in the case of publications such as Business Week and Atlantic Monthly, where words predominate over illustrations. Now consider the same ratio in the case of the ads appearing in the magazine. Here the words-to-picture page coverage ratio will almost always be less than 1:1, and sometimes much less, on the order of 1:10, or even less, if fashion ads make up a large portion. Put another way, in ads, illustrations dominate. In fact, according to Pollay (1985), the word-to-picture ratio in ads grew steadily smaller over much of the 20th century.

Taking all four quantities into account, the following inequality should obtain in the case of most magazines.

\[
\frac{\text{Ad pictures}}{\text{Total magazine pictures}} > \frac{\text{Ad words}}{\text{Total magazine words}}
\]

This suggests that persuasion attempts made via pictures have less competition, as far as visual processing resources is concerned, relative to verbal persuasion attempts with respect to verbal processing resources. The typical magazine reader is exposed to a great deal of verbal material with which advertising verbs must compete. Ad pictures have much less competition from other pictures in the magazine. Once again, this disparity should be particularly important under naturalistic viewing conditions.

Visual Memory Is Stronger

Human memory for pictures, particularly recognition memory, is so strong that it poses real difficulties for experimentation, lest ceiling effects wipe out the differences of interest. Cluttered exposure environments, limits on opportunity to process, and delayed measurement are often used to manage the challenge of ceiling effects for memory of visual stimuli. The same characteristics, of course, are typical of naturalistic viewing conditions. Under these conditions, the greater memorability of ad visuals acts to accentuate the other advantages of tacit quality, immediacy, and prominence.

Visual Messages Are More Difficult To Craft

The implicit assertion of this chapter, that ad visuals are highly meaningful to consumers, does not imply that these meanings are all or mostly under the control of the advertiser, or that pictorial meanings can be easily devised or shaped to meet
the needs of a particular marketing strategy. There are good reasons why alphabets and ideographs replaced pictographs! No other modality can match the semantic fluency or protean quality of words. Despite all the advantages of visual persuasion just discussed, in many concrete advertising situations it may be difficult or impossible to craft the desired message in a pictorial format.

Summary

On balance, we are skeptical that attempts to distinguish visual persuasion as a separate category of persuasion rest on much more than an intuitively appealing Aristotelian categorization, convenient for quick communication but not particularly fruitful for building a scientific theory. However, as described earlier, it certainly seems to be the case that ad visuals in general, and visual rhetoric in particular, will be subject to a somewhat different set of contingencies with respect to ad effectiveness. Most notably, these contingencies loom largest under naturalistic viewing conditions, testifying again to the dangers of adapting, without scrutiny and reflection, experimental traditions inherited from academic social psychology. Advertising science has different needs and may require a distinct kind of experimental procedure (McQuarrie, 1998).

CONCLUSION

We have described how a combination of semiotics and rhetoric can serve to build a general theory of persuasion able to address visual as well as verbal modalities. The distinctive advantage of a semiotic, rhetorical approach is the analytic tools it provides for identifying and explaining the impact of stylistic variation in advertising. The specific focus of our work has been on the rhetorical figure, a stylistic device that lends itself to conceptual and causal analysis. We have developed a taxonomy of rhetorical figures that brings order to what had been an amorphous catalog accumulated over centuries (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). The taxonomy links semiotic and rhetorical ideas (e.g., deviation) to psychological constructs (e.g., incongruity). The taxonomy also generates testable causal hypotheses linking different properties of rhetorical figures (e.g., over- and undercasing) to important consumer processes and outcomes (e.g., elaboration, ad liking). Empirical studies over the years have demonstrated that: (a) ordinary consumers notice and reproduce the distinctions underlying the taxonomy (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996); (b) rhetorical figures lead to increased elaboration, more positive Ad, and better memory (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, 1999); and (c) visual rhetorical figures appear to have the same sorts of impact on consumers as predicted for rhetorical figures in general (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999).

This chapter afforded an opportunity to further develop and go into more detail concerning the specific consumer processes and outcomes to be expected from
an encounter with rhetorical figures. We particularly distinguished the impact to be expected from schematic versus tropic figures. In addition, we discussed a wide range of contingencies that might accentuate or diminish the processes and outcomes to be expected from these different figures. Here, naturalistic viewing conditions emerged as a key factor in explaining why rhetorical figures are so prevalent in print advertising. Finally, we articulated the specific advantages, opportunities, and constraints posed by visual rhetorical figures.

As awareness of the analytic power and generative possibilities of semiotics and rhetoric diffuse more widely, we hope they will be applied to yet other aspects of advertising style, especially visual style. The ultimate goal of any such application should be to integrate the ad system with the human system, so as to articulate causal hypotheses that connect text properties to consumer processes and outcomes.

REFERENCES


