

Summary of McQuarrie's and Mick's “Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text-Interpretive, Experimental, and Reader-Response Analyses”

Introduction

Visual elements in advertisements is a field of study with various conceptual and methodological approaches. By the time the essay was written (1999), four traditional types of research on this field of study could be distinguished, all of which show certain strengths and weaknesses:

Archival tradition means that vast amounts of samples of advertisements are collected and then analyzed to ascertain which types of visual elements are used in which frequency. The negative aspect of this practice is the lack of causality and its mere descriptive appearance.

Experimental tradition systematically omits or adds pictures, the appearance of a particular visual element or the conditions under which a visual element of an ad is received. It combines precise causal analysis and theoretical specification, but the consumer responses tend to be abbreviated, which is a rather negative aspect because the responses – and not the visual elements – form the basis of the theoretical results.

Reader-response approach uses interviews to examine the responses of consumers to elements of an advertisement. Its disadvantages include the limited ability to conduct causal analyses as well as comparatively vague statements of the consumers when it comes to showing which specific elements are linked to specific consumer meanings.

Text-interpretive perspective analyzes an ad systematically with regards to semiotic, rhetorical and literary theories. Again, responses of customers are collected and analyzed and form the basis of this approach, so that it cannot be certain whether causality to a visual element is assumed by the probands or demonstrated in reality.

The authors of the essay draw the conclusion that a new way of investigating visual elements must be invented in order to combine the strengths of all above-mentioned approaches. Therefore, they combine rhetoric and semiotics – parts of the text-interpretive tradition – with the experimental tradition and the reader-response approach to a “multimethod approach”. Their method is to analyze visual elements of advertising semiotically and rhetorically and then test the predictions in two experiments. At last, the results of the empirical studies are supplemented with phenomenological interviews. The goal of this approach is “to show the value of a critical pluralism for consumer research.”

Text structure and consumers as readers

Advertisings contain parts (“texts”) that have to be interpreted by their recipients. The way in which a text is received is influenced by idiosyncratic factors and the text structure. Text structure is not only the structure of a written text, but of any part used in an advertisement. It can suffer from stylistic variation. A change of style is a change of the appearance of a text structure which continues to communicate the same contents as were communicated before the change of the appearance of that part of the ad. However, the link between the content and the advertised brand attribute is *not* affected by a change of style. If the style itself *cannot* be separated from the content, it is certain that the style itself *does not* contain any information or meaning. From a semiotic prospective, it is not possible to change style without changing some of its meaning, which implies that a change of style should have an impact on the consumer’s response.

Rhetorical figures in advertising

McQuarrie and Mick define a rhetorical figure as “an artful deviation, relative to audience expectation, that conforms to a template independent of the specifics of the occasion where it occurs.” Rhetorical figures are not errors, but, due to their artful character, a stylistic device which makes ads more interesting and serves as a useful gain that does not affect the attribute claim of an ad. Their causal impact can be summarized in one theory because they are limited. A single compact theoretical specification can generate this countable number of rhetorical figures. In an earlier work (1996), the authors suggest to organize rhetorical figures in a three-level taxonomy:

The top level of the taxonomy includes *all* figures which share the character of artful deviation, be it as a positive or a negative impact on the reception of a text structure.

The second level splits two different modes of figuration: schemes and tropes. Schemes show an excessive regularity, such as rhymes. Tropes contain a rather irregular usage, such as metaphors and puns, which bear an accidental resemblance to the target domain.

At the third level schemes and tropes are split into simple and complex rhetorical operations. **Schemes** are constructed by repetition (simple operation), e. g. rhyme, and reversal (complex operation), e. g. antithesis. **Tropes** are constructed by substitution (simple operation), e. g. ellipsis, and destabilization (complex operation), e. g. metaphor.

This means that there are four different opportunities for adding artful deviation to an ad. By definition, rhetorical figures are not attached to individual expressions. The authors state the thesis that thereby visual rhetorical figures ought to be possible, for a rhetorical figure does not necessarily need to be expressed linguistically. Furthermore, the definition does not exclude a visual expression of the rhetorical figure. Although only the pun has been examined in visual form so far, there are far more possibilities to express rhetorical figures visually. Using more of them simultaneously in a visual form would demonstrate their power.

Impact of visual rhetorical figures

The usage of rhetorical figures causes two primary effects on the reader’s response: elaboration and pleasure.

Elaboration is the amount and complexity of cognitive activity, triggered by a stimulus. Elaboration can take the form of either **discursive thought** or **imagery**. Rhetorical figures cause an elaboration of both ways due to their artful deviance which in turn is the cause for incongruity in advertisements. Because tropes are more deviant than schemes – for schemes show more regularity and are more “complete” than tropes –, they stimulate more elaboration than schemes.

Pleasure is caused by the artfulness of a text. Here it is important that a text is neither too one-dimensional nor too difficult to read and understand. A text is most pleasurable reading when it is less simple but clearly indicates that it contains a hidden complexity. Again, it can be argued that it is tropes that cause more consumer attitudes towards the ad than schemes.

A priori text interpretation

For empiric results, four ads were analyzed by the authors: a mascara ad (containing a visual rhyme), a yoghurt ad (containing an antithesis), an ad for a motion sickness remedy (containing a visual metaphor) and an almond ad (containing a visual pun). The text-interpretive analysis is based on three traditions, namely **rhetoric**, which regards the way in which rhetorical figures are used, **semiotics**, which sees ads as selections of interpretative signs, and the **cultural approach**, in which sociocultural knowledge is taken into consideration.

Study 1

In the first study the visual rhetoric figures of the four advertisements were omitted. Each of the 72 probands was shown two ads with visual figures and two without them. Then the probands had to fill in a questionnaire. The questions served as measurements for both the imagistic responses and the discursive responses during the recipient’s elaboration. As a result, it was shown that with respect to the conveyance of the focal brand attributes it did not matter whether there were any rhetorical figures or no rhetorical figures at all in the ads. Furthermore, the unaltered ads were perceived as being more artful and clever; they also evoked more elaboration.

Study 2

A second study was carried out to focus on the competency of the recipients. The level of competency is influenced by three dimensions: the consumer’s propensity to process visual information, the familiarity with the advertised product and the cultural knowledge which is needed to comprehend the contents of the stimulus. Besides, the first study has certain limitations which may have influenced the results, namely the inconclusiveness as well as the fact that the probands may have guessed the real purpose of the study.

The instructions were the same as in the first study, as well as the four examples of ads, but in addition, a false claim for an ad was given and the probands were asked what the study might have been all about. None of them guessed the real purpose of the study. Furthermore, foreign ads were shown to them, which were more difficult to comprehend – regardless of the absence or presence of visual rhetoric figures – because of a lack of cultural knowledge background.

Study 3

A third study aimed at interviewing some of the participants to find out what meanings the ads suggested to them and what it said to them. Four of the twelve probands were from foreign countries, who were able to point out and understand the visual schemes but had difficulties in understanding the visual tropes of the sample advertisings. Due to their different origin, they were not fully able to get the tropes' meanings. Visual tropes were experienced as closed texts by those probands.

General discussion

As a result, the studies – above all the third one – have shown that it is necessary to obtain the same cultural knowledge as the one in which the advertising text is situated. Otherwise the consumer could have problems to comprehend the meanings, at any rate when it comes to the usage of visual tropes. That is, it is necessary to bear this in mind to create successful advertisements for consumers living in a multicultural country like America, otherwise the effectiveness might be low.

Own opinion and further thoughts

The studies described above seemed to be well planned and included already-known knowledge in this field of study. However, since the numbers of participants were very small – 72, 181 and 12 probands, respectively – the results are not really that representative. What is more, all probands came from a similar educational background, though four of them were non-Americans, but all of them attended universities as students. Even with a similar number of probands, the studies would be more representative if people from all social classes and from various parts of the USA would have been chosen, for their cultural knowledge might differ heavily even if they are from the same country.

What is more, the non-natives interviewed by the authors are said to have difficulties with understanding the visual tropes. From what can be gained from the text, they seem to have comprehended very well, but partly they seemed to have a broader horizon and a more critical view on the visual rhetorics (e. g. with regards on the sick motion remedy ad: “It just doesn't make sense at all (...) Driving shouldn't be a problem for most Americans.”). Nevertheless, the utterances of the four(!) foreign students induced the authors to state that generally a common cultural background is needed to deal with visual tropes correctly. Although that might be the case, the three studies are no proof for that hypothesis.

Bibliography

McQuarrie, Edward F., and David Glen Mick. “Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text-Interpretive, Experimental, and Reader-Response Analyses.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 26.1 (1999): 37-54.