

Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: A Study of Visual Indications and Applications

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the definition of visual rhetoric, its importance in visual persuasion and how it can be effectively used in advertising. The study of application of visual rhetoric in advertising includes examination of how images work on their own and ways in which they can be used alongside other elements to develop an argument that is strong enough to move target audience. Through this study a group of results could be deduced indicating the role of visual rhetoric when used in advertising as it engages the human brain in high cognitive activities that help in creation of meaning out of visual figures and its effectiveness when used together with verbal explanation to prevent confusion and lead to a more complete communication.

Keywords: Visual rhetoric, Advertising, Persuasion, Communication, Application.

Introduction

The rising competition in the commodities' market has encouraged production of substitute goods that almost resemble each other. The desire by various companies to realize higher sales on their products has therefore led to the adoption of more advertising tools. The most effective marketing approaches are those that are persuasive. The persuasive ability of visual rhetoric is hence the reason for its popularity in marketing. Even though advertisers recognize the persuasive power of visual rhetoric, not much research has been conducted in this area hence there are important factors that some marketers may not be aware of. This paper focuses on the definition of visual rhetoric, its importance in visual persuasion and how it can be effectively used in advertising.

1. Visual Rhetoric

A look at advertisements by Addidas, Midnight Poison and Elter in figures 1, 2 & 3 will be very helpful in understanding what visual rhetoric is and how it has been applied by marketers. The first is an image with no words except the Addidas logo (Figure 1). The picture contains an athlete, running around the field. He could be competing with others who are not included in the picture. Behind the athlete is a shadow which is as well running with stretched arms as if it wants to catch the athlete. Reading the Addidas logo at the bottom of the picture engages the readers mind in a thoughtful process as he or she tries to understand what the company has to do with the picture.

(Figure 1) Addidas Advertisement



The second image contains a celebrity, Eva Green, emerging from the water (Figure2). The picture also contains a bottle of perfume whose name is indicated as Dior. A viewer looking at the picture has to construct the relationship between the scenes.

(Figure 2) Midnight Poison Advertisement



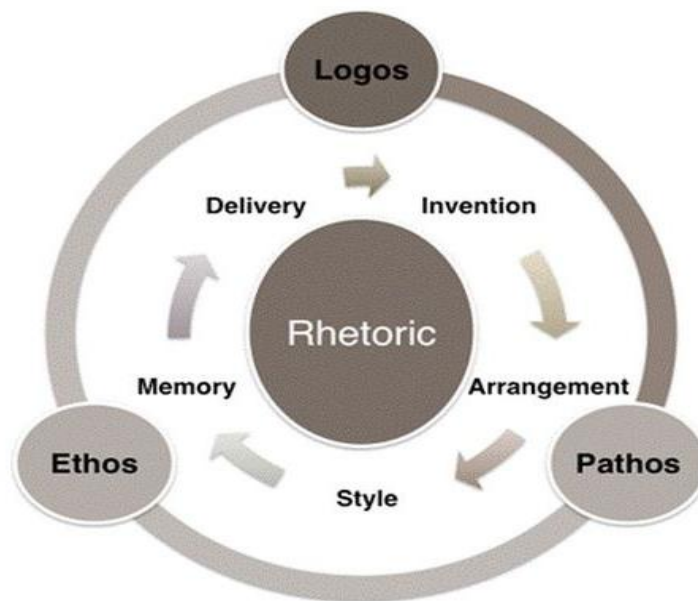
The last picture uses a metaphorical figure of a grenade in a form of a tomato as an indication of vegetables (Figure3). The explosive cloud is visible and a time bomb is used as a seal for the tomato image. The audiences have to determine the relevance of each scene to the advertisement. The interest an audience develops to study the image is identified as a positive feeling towards the advertisement. The audience is likely to come up with arguments concerning the image dictated by individual emotions.

(Figure3) Elter Ad. For washing vegetables



These images are in a visual form known as visual rhetoric. The rhetoric in it results from the unpredictable and unusual manner in which they are presented. Instead of using a picture of Addidas shoes and a phrase such as “our shoes make you run faster than your shadow can catch up” in the first picture, the advertisers simply used a combination of scenes. The scenes in all pictures show no connection with each other to allow for multiple interpretations of their own that will lead to understanding the advertiser’s implication. The second picture compares the qualities of the model with the nature of the perfume that is, exotic, rebellious and daring. The combination between the perfume and Eva Green results into a unique beauty. And in the the third picture visual rhetoric is used to inform audiences that it is important to wash vegetables properly before cooking since unwashed vegetables are as dangerous as explosives.

(Figure 4) Aristotle’s Five Canons in Advertisement



1.1 What is Visual Rhetoric?

A visual rhetoric is described as a form of communication that applies images in creating meaning or developing an argument. The study of application of visual rhetoric includes examination of how images work on their own and ways in which they can be used alongside other elements to develop an argument that is strong enough to move target audience. When used for advertising, visual rhetoric involves pairing of two parts to form a feature that neither elements could produce on its own (Bateman, 2014).

2. A Historical Background

The use of rhetoric for persuasive purposes is traced back to the ancient periods before the time of Aristotle, though he is identified as one of the first individuals to recognize the element. The ideas of Aristotle were derived from Greek theory and are based on the ability of a message to influence and persuade an audience (Martin, 2016). He suggested five canons through which a message could be passed to the audiences to ensure that they evaluated and understood the advertiser’s intention (Figure 4) (Nordquist, 2017; Martin, 2016). The first is *invention*, which is seen through the design of argument. Another canon is *arrangement* which is concerned with the organization of the advertiser’s argument. The *style* is as well an important factor that ensured appropriateness of the tools used in an advertisement. A fourth canon is *memory* which serves to ensure that the rhetoric applied could easily be recorded in the reader’s mind. The final feature is *delivery* which is related to the voice and gestures used in an advertisement.

3. Studies on Visual Rhetoric

Recent studies indicate that the rhetoric which was commonly applied in print ads now incorporates visual characteristics. Academic research has also shown growing interest in the use of visual rhetoric because of the

role it plays in persuasion. The studies have generally concluded that print advertisements, in magazines and newspapers, with visual rhetoric create a positive first impression on individuals(Andrews, 2011).

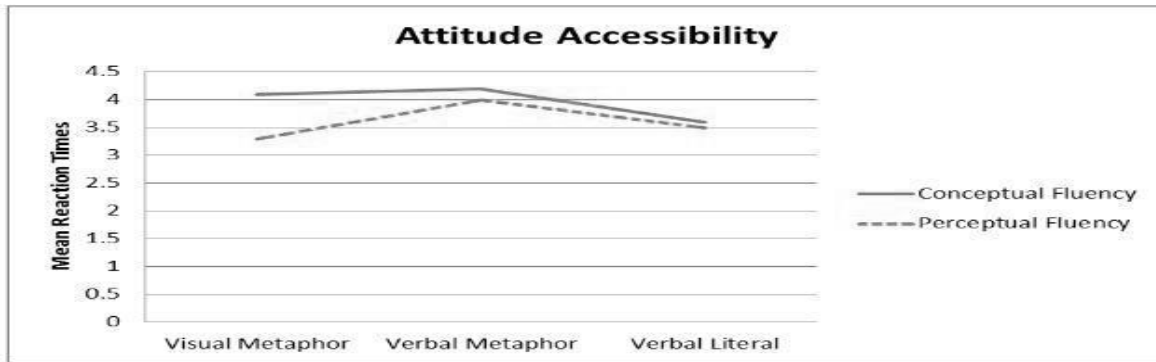
In his study, Andrews questions the strength in the first impression. It is generally assumed that visual rhetoric attracts more attention from audience and are easier to memorize compared to plain language. Visual rhetoric has the ability to engage consumers hence it induces judgment in favor of the brand being marketed. According to processing fluency research, the human brain readily responds to images by providing a positive attitude before it considers the content of the stimulus. After the brain is exposed to an image for a longer duration however, different results may be realized.

(Figure 5) How the Five Canons relate with each other

THE RHETORICAL CANONS		
CANON	TRADITIONALLY	TODAY
invention	discovery of plausible arguments and supporting material	research; development of a concept
arrangement	arrangement of arguments	organization, layout, planning
style	fitting of proper language to the argument, based on appropriateness, correctness, comprehensibility, and deliberate adornment	stylistic choices; visualization of the concept
memory	grasp and understanding of the material to be presented	skill and decisiveness of presentation
delivery	control of the elements in the presentation of argument	execution of deliverable and choice of media

The graph in figure 6 presents a case where participants' positive and negative reactions remained persistent over short term memory across different exposures. There were no observable effects on ad types over short-term memory but post-hoc comparisons showed that participants responded more positively to verbal metaphor than verbal literal. They also responded more positively to visual metaphor than verbal metaphor. The study expressed visual processing as a quick, emotion-based experience which takes place at a nonconscious level. The visual figures were also treated as a sophisticated language that require multiple reading and interpretation to understand. The complexity of the visual rhetoric results not only from the need to break it down but also due to language barriers across cultures (Abakry & Daimin, 2015). The study led to the discovery that the visual information is presented in the human brain in a manner that differs from verbal message. The visual information is as well processed based on past experience instead of the step-wise system used for verbal message. This led to the conclusion that the advertiser's intended message is conveyed differently by these two approaches.

(Figure 6) Results of Consumer Attitude Accessibility



Mzoughi and Addelhak also conducted a research to study the effect of visual rhetoric and verbal rhetoric on emotions of readers, attitude toward the advertisement and attitude toward the brand (Table1)(Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2012). They used a sample of 512 undergraduate students at a private university in Tunisia. The participants were divided into eight groups, each was provided with different ads in the form of visual, verbal figures and plain language. The participants were told to imagine the materials which were a content of a magazine and were expected to provide sincere responses. The results showed that both visual and verbal rhetoric applied in print advertising had a crucial role in persuading customers.

(Table 1) Descriptive statistics for the direct effect of rhetorical figures

Dependent Variable	Visual figure	Verbal figures
Pleasure	3.8857	3.5109
Arousal	3.6736	3.1227
Pain	2.6259	2.7405
Skepticism	3.1735	2.9896
Hedonism	3.6048	3.9115
Utilitarianism	3.5559	4.0508

And according to the stated results , rhetoric is found to encourage positive emotional response from customers concerning the advertisement. With a focus on visual figures, the research led to the discovery that they encouraged more positive response to ads and led to more positive attitude towards the brand being marketed. The results confirm that visual rhetoric directs the flow of emotions. It is therefore possible that deviation from the usual observation has a greater impact in the consumers’ emotions. It is as well clarified that figures which result in multiple readings and interpretations give pleasure to the viewer. It is therefore concluded that consumers are attracted to true yet unexpected and sophisticated impulse.

These results are consistent with the findings of other researchers who realized that visual rhetoric triggers more consumer liking towards both the advertisement and the brand compared to the case of rhetoric headlines. Visual figures thus generate pleasure that is readily connected to the consumer attitude (Albakry & Daimin, 2015). The incompatibility in figures is likely contributed to an ad being unclear to a consumer who views it for the first time. This can also lead to negative response to the advertisement as well as the brand being used to market. Scott argues that pictures are a representation of the real world. This enables them to promote persuasion because they portray meaning in a way that makes more sense to the viewers (Scott, 2014). The visual figures also eliminate chances of counter-argument by implying the intended conclusion instead of stating it.

Nevertheless visual rhetoric that provides viewers a chance to develop their own arguments concerning an image they come across is enhanced when the message that the advertiser had in mind is given by a verbal rhetoric as well. This implies that visual rhetoric makes more sense when it is accompanied by verbal messages. A viewer who finds an advertisement with both verbal and visual figures gets a feeling of accomplishment. Figures play the important role of drawing consumers to an ad but the headlines they find on the ad provides the intended message (Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2012). In other words, a combination of the two elements forms a complete communication.

Figures 7 & 8 represent two advertisements that have been used to advertise the same brand. The first ad contains a bottle of Heinz tomato ketchup (Figure 7). In the background is a shadow of the Statue of Liberty. The name of the brand is written in big letters on the bottle in the foreground of the picture. This image has the ability to attract a viewer to the ad but since there is not much information, the audience has to undergo a thoughtful process to really discover the facts about Heinz. It is only after re-viewing the picture that the viewer will be able to identify the brand and what it is used for.

(Figure 7) Heinz Tomato Ketchup ad no.1



The second ad. also contains a bottle of Heinz tomato ketchup. But the bottle is sliced into slices similar to that of a real tomato (Figure 8). At the foreground is a headline that gives the reader a particular information about the brand. The audience get to understand that the product is derived from natural ingredients that adds more to the brand advertised. This second advertisement provides a complete communication because it combines both visual and verbal figures.

**(Figure 8) Heinz
no.2**



Tomato Ketchup ad

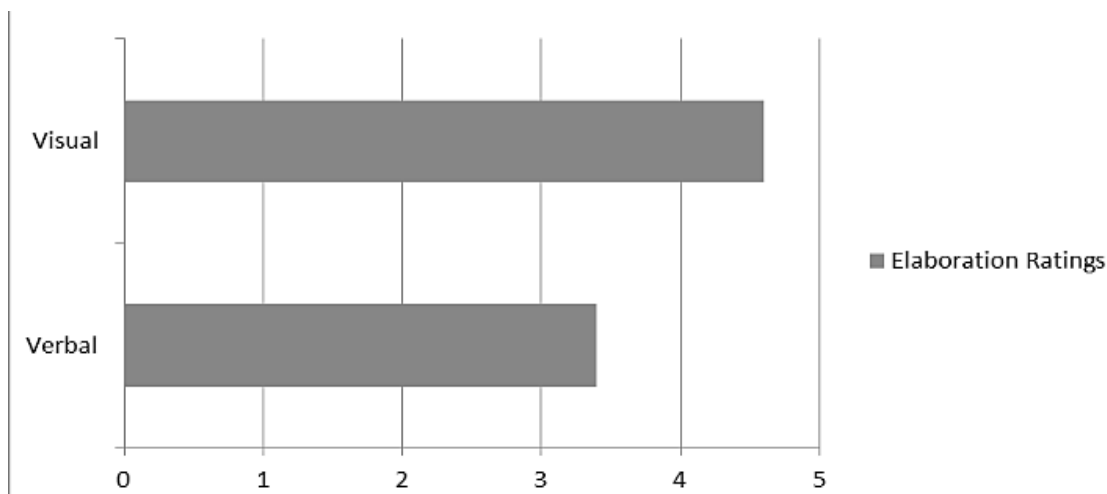
4. The Importance of Visual Rhetoric Figures in Advertising

The recent rise in variety of products has minimized physical differences between them so that they almost appear similar to the consumers. This has necessitated advertising as a way of letting consumers differentiate one brand from the other. The historical role of advertising had been to let consumers know about particular products and services. Today however, the main aim of advertisers is to establish the desired changes in the behavior of the target market and to promote sales of products through persuasion. As a result advertisers have adopted the use of visual rhetoric in marketing because of its persuasive ability (Nilsson, 2015). Visual rhetoric has commonly been used in advertising because it helps deliver more information within a short period of time since an image allows for a lot of explanations. A remarkable amount of information can be gathered from a single glance on an image (Albakry & Daimin, 2015). The use of visual rhetoric for example, allows for simultaneous transmission of image elements such as color, lighting, organization, expressions and gestures.

Visual rhetoric is as well can be of a better influence on the consumers than verbal forms because it is less ambitious as it has no direct words that require the audience to do a particular task. The application of this tool is gaining popularity because it has acquired a universal acceptance as it works well with present advertising rules that require marketers to create short advertisements. The real reason marketers use rhetoric in advertisements is to persuade consumers (Nilsson, 2015). Using the initial verbal rhetoric, the advertisers add visual figures to meet their purpose. Such a combination has proved more persuasive than when literal information is displayed on its own. Marketing researchers have realized that easily recognized metaphorical images or those that the consumers encounter frequently encourage them to develop complex cognitive conception in their minds (Scott, 2014).

It has also been observed that ads that lack verbal explanations to the visual metaphors result in the highest cognitive activities while ads containing pure literal messages attract the least cognitive activity, as shown in (Figure 9). The visual rhetoric is therefore important in that it makes the audience go through a deep thoughtful process which helps in formation of the meaning and can also lead to a stronger change in the consumer beliefs.

(Figure 9) Elaboration Ratings of Visual & Verbal Rhetoric



The visual rhetoric used in an ad makes the brand look more positive to the consumers. There is a particular pleasure that viewers derive from an ad that contains visual rhetoric figures as opposed to literal texts. This pleasure is due to the fact that visual metaphors allow for multiple interpretations. The liking for a brand is actually generated in the viewer's mind after seeing the image which leads to the development of positive attitude (Martin, 2016). It is thus observable that visual figures promote brand reputation creating an established link between persuasiveness and brand acceptability. Artful and imaginative ads thus have the ability to establish more brand trustworthiness.

5. How to Effectively Apply Visual Rhetoric in Advertising

Based on the increase in the application of visual rhetoric in print advertising, it is clear that the advertisers understand its importance as a persuasive approach despite the fact that the market researchers haven't studied it for a longer period of time.

The greatest difference between visual and verbal rhetoric is that visual rhetoric triggers higher levels of processing (Bateman, 2014). It is important for the advertisers to ensure that the intended meaning is not lost in the process of artful deviation. Marketing research has concentrated in this area because of its persuasive capability, the growing popularity, and increased acceptance of studies related to advertising communication.

5.1 - Rules for Creating Effective Advertisement using Visual Rhetoric

Throughout this study a number of rules can be deduced to guide advertisers on effective application of visual rhetoric in advertising as follows:

- 1- Advertisers should avoid complex rhetoric figures. The perception and understanding of an audience concerning the image is based on their background and life experiences. If an ad contains complicated rhetoric figures, the audience will take too long to solve the message that they even forget the brand name (Scott, 2014). Advertisers thus need to use familiar and simple rhetoric to enable the audiences interpret the information easily.
- 2- Advertisers should not use unrelated rhetoric figures. Elaboration of awareness provides an ad with increased ability to persuade. Excessive elaboration hence contributes a negative effect on persuasion because the resulting impairment from the figures has the ability to overpower the main idea.
- 3- Advertisers are required to minimize the verbal text that is used alongside the visual figures. Researchers have already confirmed that visual metaphor without verbal explanation provide viewers a greater degree of cognitive activity, enabling an ad to become more persuasive and true to the audiences.
- 4- The last rule is that marketers should only include text when they want to prevent confusion. As it is, visual figures allow for multiple interpretations meaning that several messages can be drawn from a single figure. This can alter its understanding if the audience develops an incorrect perception (Miles, 2014). The text should therefore be used to enable the audience receive the intended message. In summary, the visual rhetoric used for advertising should be symbolic, include human action and trigger more attraction for audience (Martin, 2016).

Conclusion

Visual rhetoric is among the persuasive tools that advertisers use to influence emotion and attitude in consumers towards a particular product thus its ability to attract consumers has contributed to its popularity. Through this study we could deduce that this tool engages the human brain in high cognitive activities that help in creation of meaning out of visual figures. This method has been commonly used in advertising to realize a stronger change in the consumer attitude concerning an advertisement and a brand. Visual rhetoric is effective even when used alone though some marketers can include verbal explanation to prevent confusion as the combination of the two leads to a more complete communication.

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