



# Beyond visual metaphor: A new typology of visual rhetoric in advertising

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***Abstract.** The goal of rhetorical theory is always to organize the possibilities for persuasion within a domain and to relate each possible stratagem to specific desired outcomes. In this article we develop a visual rhetoric that differentiates the pictorial strategies available to advertisers and links them to consumer response. We propose a new typology that distinguishes nine types of visual rhetorical figures according to their degree of complexity and ambiguity. We then derive empirically testable predictions concerning how these different types of visual figures may influence such consumer responses as elaboration and belief change. The article concludes with a discussion of the importance of marrying textual analysis, as found in literary, semiotic and rhetorical disciplines, with the experimental methodology characteristic of social and cognitive psychology. **Key Words** ● advertising ● figurative speech ● image ● metaphor ● picture ● rhetoric ● semiotics ● typology*

## Introduction

A distinctive feature of advertising, relative to other contemporary forms of human communication, is its reliance on pictures to persuade. Moreover, documentary evidence suggests that, in print ads, the emphasis on pictures over words has steadily increased throughout the last century (Leiss et al., 1986; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2003; Pollay, 1985). Unfortunately, there is still little consumer or marketing theory available for differentiating and organizing the variety of pictorial stratagems on display in advertising (Malkewitz et al., 2003). We take a rhetorical approach to organizing and understanding ad pictures (e.g. McQuarrie



and Mick, 1996, 2003a; Scott, 1994a, 1994b). That is, we assume that advertisers select pictorial elements from a palette; that specific pictorial elements can be linked to particular consumer responses; and, most important, that the palette of available pictorial elements has an internal structure such that the location of a pictorial element within this structure indicates the kind of impact that the pictorial element can be expected to have.

The goal of this article is to delineate that internal structure for one type of advertising picture – the kind that can be considered analogous to verbal metaphor, or verbal rhetorical figures more generally. As an example, we propose that the Tide ad shown in Figure 1 represents a *visual* rhetorical figure where liquid laundry detergent is compared to the sky. Although a variety of categorizations and classifications for rhetorical figures have been developed over the centuries (e.g. Corbett and Connors, 1999; Plett, 2001; Wenzel, 1990), the new typology makes a unique contribution by first, focusing on rhetorical figures constructed from visual rather than verbal elements and second, specifying how different visual figures might affect consumer processing and response. Because pictures are not speech, we shall argue that existing taxonomies designed for verbal rhetorical figures (e.g. McQuarrie and Mick, 1996) do not adequately capture important differentiations within the visual domain. After developing and illustrating the typology, we suggest avenues for empirical investigation, specifying the particular cognitive processes that we expect to be differentially affected by different categories of visual rhetorical figures. Among the more important contributions of the typology is its demonstration of how concepts from art theory, semiotics and kindred disciplines can be linked to concepts drawn from social cognition in a manner susceptible to empirical study.

## A typology of visual rhetorical figures

### Defining visual rhetoric in ads

We follow McQuarrie and Mick (1996) in defining a rhetorical figure as an artful deviation in form that adheres to an identifiable template. Thus, the headline ‘Can’t say no to pistachio’ is a rhetorical figure because it deviates in its arrangement of sounds from an ordinary sentence. However, readers do not consider this deviation to be an error because they have encountered this kind of repetition of syllables many times and have learned to treat it as a rhyme. Similarly, when readers encounter the verbal pun ‘Why weight for success?’ in an ad for the Diet Center, they understand it as a play on a word with two meanings (i.e. ‘weight’ and ‘wait’). Because the number of templates is limited and because consumers encounter the same template over and over again, they have the opportunity to learn a response to that figure. That is, through repeated exposure over time, consumers learn the sorts of inference operations a communicator desires the recipients to undertake (O’Donohoe, 2001; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2003; Scott, 1994a). Because of this learning, rhetorical figures are able to channel inferences.



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Figure 1

### Tide ad

Consider again the Tide ad in Figure 1. This ad deviates from realistic depictions in ads (such as ordinary products and typical users) by showing the sky contained in a measuring cup. Nonetheless, consumers are unlikely to label the ad as an error; they have seen this type of template in advertisements before. We propose that this image is in essence a visual rhetorical figure, not significantly different from the verbal rhyme and verbal pun examples just given. Consequently, although many different interpretations of the Tide ad are possible, most are likely to rest on positive similarities between the sky and clothes washed in Tide (Phillips, 1997; Tanaka, 1994): bright (blue), fresh (breeze), and soft (clouds). This is because consumers know that they should seek out similarities when they encounter a visual template of this kind. Such visual rhetorical figures in ad pictures are far from rare and, in fact, have appeared with increasing frequency over the past 50 years (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2003). It is this kind of picture that the typology was designed to address.

COMPLEXITY	Visual Structure	RICHNESS →		
		Meaning Operation		
		Connection (‘A is associated with B’)	Comparison	
			Similarity (‘A is like B’)	Opposition (‘A is not like B’)
Juxtaposition (Two side-by-side images)	Equal sweetener	Dexter shoes	Comfort fabric softener	
Fusion (Two combined images)	Discover card	Tide Reflex racquet	Kudos granola bar	
Replacement (Image present points to an absent image)	Silk soy milk	Welch’s juice	Canadian magazine industry Sunny Delight	

Figure 2

**Typology of visual rhetoric showing classification of ad examples**

**Visual structure and meaning operation**

We propose the typology in Figure 2 as a means of differentiating the various ways a visual rhetorical figure can be constructed. The typology consists of a matrix of cells generated by crossing two dimensions: (1) visual structure, which refers to the way the two elements that comprise the visual rhetorical figure are physically pictured in the ad, and where we distinguish three possibilities (juxtaposition, fusion and replacement); and (2) meaning operation, which refers to the target or focus of the cognitive processing required to comprehend the picture, where we again distinguish three possibilities (connection, comparison for similarity and comparison for opposition). Consequently, the typology asserts that there are nine, fundamentally distinct, kinds of visual rhetorical figures.

The two dimensions that generate the typology were derived in part from a consideration of previous taxonomies, notably Durand (1987), Forceville (1996),



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Kaplan (1992), and McQuarrie and Mick (1996), and in part from an examination of a large number of ad pictures collected by the authors over many years. Although elements of the proposed typology, such as particular visual structures and individual meaning operations, can be found in earlier work (e.g. Williamson, 1978), the two dimensions of visual structure and meaning operation themselves, together with their combination, are unique to the present work. Most important, prior work typically was not committed to a linkage of taxonomic categories to empirical differences in consumer response. Without that link to consumer response, a typology is vulnerable to dismissal as ‘mere categorization’ – the bane of rhetoric through the ages. Given such a link, rhetorical theory becomes testable – the hallmark of modern scientific endeavor.

*Visual structure* Visual figures, like all rhetorical figures, are fundamentally concerned with the relationship of one thing to another. Given that a visual figure must present two elements on a printed page, there are three possible ways of accomplishing this. The simplest is to juxtapose two image elements side by side. A more complex structure involves fusing two image elements together, such as in the Tide ad shown in Figure 1, where liquid laundry detergent is fused with the sky. The third and most complex way to present two image elements is to have one replace the other in such a way that the present image calls to mind the absent image. For example, the Welch’s ad in Figure 3 presents bottles of juice arranged in racks in a dusty cellar; consumers have to identify and ‘fill in’ the missing image



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Figure 3

**Welch's ad**



of bottles of wine (helped by the ad's copy and supporting realistic pictures) to make sense of the ad.

Juxtaposition, fusion and replacement are intended to constitute an exhaustive list of the possible ways two image elements can be combined within a two-dimensional representation. The typology asserts that there are no other possibilities that need to be taken into account, or, more exactly, that any visual structure omitted from this account will be found to be either a subcategorization of the three structures named or an amalgam of these structures. For instance, subcategories of the juxtaposition structure can be identified, such as horizontal versus vertical juxtaposition of elements. Our position is that, although such logical subdivisions can be proliferated, these subdivisions are not likely to be systematically related to differences in consumer response (see Teng and Sun [2002] regarding left versus right juxtaposition). Conversely, the typology argues that the difference between juxtaposing and fusing two images is substantive; the latter is a more complex processing task and this difference in complexity can be systematically related to differences in consumer response.

*Complexity of visual structure* We argue that complexity increases as one moves along the visual structure dimension from juxtaposition to fusion to replacement. Complexity is an important property because of the demands it places on consumer processing of the ad. Thus, juxtaposition imposes fewer processing demands than fusion and fusion fewer than replacement. The reasoning is that when two image elements are juxtaposed, it is relatively obvious that there are two elements and the identity of these two elements is fairly clear. With fusion, one must disentangle the two elements and some uncertainty can remain about whether the elements have been correctly broken down and identified. For example, in the ad shown in Figure 1, consumers have to identify the term LIQUID DETERGENT from the wave at the top of the measuring cup. They have to identify the term SKY from the blue color and white clouds in the cup. This fusion task seems more difficult than if a picture of a bottle of liquid detergent had been placed beside a picture of the sky, such as in a figure of juxtaposition. Most demanding of all is replacement, where it must be discerned that there is a second element, not shown, but linked to the element that is present. Identifying that missing element and deciding upon its relation to the present element is a still more complex task than disentangling two fused elements that are both present.

*Meaning operations* The typology distinguishes two basic meaning operations: connection and comparison. The operation of comparison is further subdivided to distinguish comparison aimed at identifying similarities versus comparison aimed at identifying opposition (or differences). Note that while visual structure is a matter of the physical arrangement of elements on a page, meaning operations provide instructions to consumers that direct their inferences from the arranged elements. Similarly, whereas visual structures can be arrayed according to their degree of complexity, meaning operations can be arrayed according to their degree of ambiguity, polysemy or richness of reference.



In the meaning operation of connection, consumer inferences are directed toward how the depicted elements can be associated to create a link between them. The basic meaning operation for connection figures can be stated as, 'A is associated with B because . . .' The key property that distinguishes figures of connection is that the elements are intended to be linked rather than compared. Element A is not presented as similar to element B, nor as different from element B; rather, A is connected to B. The rhetorical purpose of the connection operation is to increase the salience of some aspect of element A – the aspect that provides the link to B. To use an analogy drawn from the literature on verbal rhetoric, just as metonym<sup>1</sup> cannot be reduced to metaphor (Eco, 1979; Jakobson, 1967; McQuarrie and Mick, 1996), connection is not the same as comparison. The identification of connection as among the operations that can be set in motion by a visual rhetorical figure is a unique contribution of the new typology; the examples below will clarify how it is used.

In contrast to the paucity of prior work on connection operations, most conceptual inquiry into visual figures in advertising has examined similarity comparisons, often under the label of 'visual metaphor' (Phillips, 2003). In figures of similarity, an ad suggests that two images are the same in some way ('A is like B because . . .') and invites the consumer to compare the two images to generate one or more inferences regarding other similarities between them. That is, the ad asks the consumer to draw an analogy between the two images to understand how they relate to one another. Analogy is one of the core processes of cognition (Forbus, 2001), and the process of analogous thinking can be separated into several basic cognitive steps:

- 1 the relevant terms are accessed from long-term memory;
- 2 the source is mapped to the target to identify correspondences;
- 3 analogical inferences are made about the target, creating new knowledge; and
- 4 learning occurs when new links in memory are created (Holyoak and Hummel, 2001).

Often, the two images to be compared are intrinsically similar at a surface level, such as form or appearance (e.g. 'his eyes were burning coals'). That is, the two images share direct physical similarity (Holyoak and Thagard, 1995: 43) and inferences can be drawn based on object matching. Alternatively, the images can share structural features; that is, a system of relations that is true of one image also can be true of the other image, regardless of whether the two images look alike (e.g. 'my job is a jail') (Holyoak and Thagard, 1995: 43). When two images share structural similarities, inferences can be drawn based on relational matching (see Gentner et al. [2001] regarding verbal metaphor). Most visual figures of similarity use surface matching to help consumers draw structural analogies between the two comparison images; people tend to assume that if things look alike, they share deeper essences as well (Gibbs, 1994: 57). Figures of similarity allow advertisers to exploit this assumption for persuasive purposes.

In the operation of comparison aimed at opposition, the visual figure suggests that two images are different in some way ('A is *not* like B because . . .') and invites



the reader to compare the two images to generate one or more inferences regarding their differences. Figures of opposition often rely on basic similarities between two images to highlight areas of difference (Durand, 1987), perhaps because differences between similar images tend to be more salient than differences between dissimilar images (Holyoak and Thagard, 1995: 132). Opposition comparisons thus instruct the consumer to make inferences about both similarity and difference.

*Richness of meaning operations* Richness refers to the degree and range of processing opportunity afforded by the various meaning operations. An operation is richer if the instructions for inference that it provides allow for a larger number of alternative responses. Richness is thus a matter of ambiguity, not in the negative sense of opacity or confusion, but in the positive sense of multiplicity and polysemy.

Given this analysis, we argue that the operation of comparison, whether directed at similarities or differences, is inherently richer than the operation of connection. This is because the operation of connection has one answer to the question, 'How is A associated with B?'. Comparison for similarity has no such ready terminus because, in answering the question, 'How is A like B?' consumers can generate a variety of possible similarities between the two images. In turn, it appears that similarity comparisons are less rich than opposition comparisons. Thus, in comparison for opposition, two elements are counterposed and the consumer must identify ways these are both similar *and* different. The most correct or most satisfying inference as to the combination of similarities and differences intended by the advertiser may not be obvious. With similarity figures there are relatively fewer possibilities because the emphasis is squarely on the similarity between the two elements.

Support for the distinction between similarity and opposition comparisons comes from several areas of research. For example, children generally develop the ability to understand similarity comparisons (i.e. metaphor) before opposition comparisons (i.e. irony) (Creusere, 2000). In addition, some researchers assert that processing ironic 'opposition' utterances is cognitively more challenging than processing metaphorical 'similarity' utterances (Katz et al., 1998), because irony requires meta-representational reasoning (i.e. thought about thought) to draw a second-order inference (Colston and Gibbs, 2002).

## Nine types of visual figures

We turn now to a discussion with examples of each of the nine cells generated by crossing the visual structure dimension with the meaning operation dimension. The goal of these examples is to give some idea of the kind of inferences that consumers might be expected to draw from each type of visual figure. By extension, the discussion of possible inferences also will suggest why advertisers might choose to use a particular visual rhetorical figure. Discussion of testable proposi-





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tions concerning consumer response to the distinctions made in the typography is deferred until after the presentation of these examples. We proceed by working through each meaning operation (down the columns) in Figure 2.

### Visual figures of connection

*Juxtaposition* Consider the ad for Equal, shown in Figure 4. This ad depicts two images, an Equal package with a triangle cut out of it and a triangular piece of cheesecake. The Equal package is substituting for the cheesecake in a smaller part (e.g. ingredient) to larger whole (e.g. entire cake) relationship. The visual message associates the sweetener with the properties of a satisfying dessert. Because both the Equal package and the cheesecake are pictured, this ad uses a figure of connection via juxtaposition. Notice that no similarity comparison is elicited; the figure is not asserting that Equal is *like* a cheesecake but that 'EQUAL is an associate of CHEESECAKE'. The possibility of using Equal to bake a sweet dessert is thus made more salient.



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Figure 4

### Equal ad

*Fusion* An ad for Discover card (not shown) uses a figure of connection via fusion where a Discover credit card is fused with a computer card; both are partially pictured inside a computer. The computer's circuit boards and electronic elements are arranged to look like the familiar Discover credit card. The credit card is associated with the computer to highlight the use of the Discover credit card to obtain computer and other electronic products. Once again, a smaller part (e.g. card) is substituted for a larger whole (e.g. electronics) and a comparison is



not warranted; credit cards are not like computers, they are associated with computers. Readers of the ad are invited to connect Discover credit cards to their interest in consumer electronics.

*Replacement* The ad in Figure 5 for Silk soy milk creates a figure of connection via replacement by having the cereal in the shape of a smiling face (the present image) stand for a happy user of the product (the absent image). The smiling face in the cereal bowl is a substitute for, and elicits, a larger whole: the satisfied consumer. Through this figure, the soy milk is connected to pleasurable eating experiences generally.



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Figure 5

**Silk soy milk ad**

**Visual figures of comparison – similarity**

*Juxtaposition* An ad for Dexter shoes (not shown) asks consumers to compare two images – a shoe and a bed – to find the similarities between them. Both the shoe and the bed are pictured as the same size in a shoe box and are presented separately, side-by-side (i.e. not fused together), so that the Dexter ad creates a figure of similarity via juxtaposition. Although the two images do not look alike or share any surface features, consumers can readily see the structural similarities between the two images. That is, ‘SHOE is like BED because both are soft and comfortable.’ Consumers can draw more than one inference from this ad (e.g. ‘cushioned’, ‘warm’, ‘relaxing’, ‘casual’), underscoring the proposition that ads using similarity comparisons are typically open to rich interpretations.



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*Fusion* In Figure 6, the Reflex racquet ad asks consumers to find the similarity between a shark and a sports racquet. Both images are partially pictured and fused together. Although normally a shark and a racquet share few surface features, in this ad the shark's jaw has been superimposed on the racquet head so that they look alike. This surface similarity may help consumers to generate structural similarities between the two images; 'RACQUET is like SHARK because the racquet will help one become a fierce and aggressive competitor, like a shark.' Other inferences that have been made in response to this ad include 'inescapable' and 'brings out one's animal instinct' so one can 'chew up' the competition (Phillips, 1997).



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Figure 6

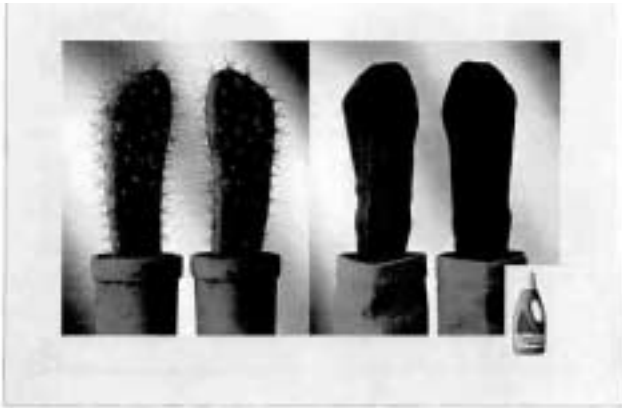
### Reflex racquet ad

*Replacement* In Figure 3, the Welch's grape juice ad provides an example of a figure of similarity via replacement in which only one of the two images to be compared is shown in the ad. Some context is given (such as the wine racks and glass) to help consumers construct the missing image (Forceville, 1994). Consumers may understand this ad's message to be, 'GRAPE JUICE (present image) is like WINE (absent image) because both provide benefits to one's heart.' By replacing bottles of wine with bottles of grape juice, this visual figure stimulates reflection on how grape juice can be similar to wine in other ways, such as in taste and value.



## Visual figures of comparison – opposition

*Juxtaposition* Consider the Comfort fabric softener ad in Figure 7. Because of the surface similarities between the two images in this ad, one might be tempted to construct the similarity comparison: ‘SOCKS are like CACTI.’ However, the product category of the ad (i.e. fabric softener) informs us that the correct comparison is an opposition; that is, ‘SOCKS are *not* like CACTI’ because socks washed in this fabric softener are soft and comfortable while cacti are prickly and painful (Phillips, 1997). The surface similarities between the two images highlight the structural differences. Because both images are presented separately in the ad, the figure is one of opposition via juxtaposition.



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Figure 7

### **Comfort ad**

*Fusion* In the ad for Kudos granola bars in Figure 8, a wicked stepmother is fused with a fairy godmother. The ad could be interpreted as saying that mothers will be perceived as nice fairy godmothers, not wicked stepmothers, if they provide a good-tasting, yet still nutritious, snack for their children. As with any figure of opposition, the consumer is invited to reflect on both the dimension that unites the opposites (in this case, benevolent vs. malevolent storybook women) and the many ways a mother is not a witch. Most importantly, the Kudos product is presented as a way to identify oneself with the fairy godmother side of the opposition.

*Replacement* In the ad for the Canadian magazine advertisers in Figure 9, consumers are confronted with a dogsled pulled by French poodles. This is a difficult figure to construe because the comparison term, huskies, is not pictured. Even so, consumers with the requisite knowledge of the issues surrounding the Canadian



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Figure 8

### **Kudos ad**

magazine industry can make sense of the ‘POODLES (present term) are *not* like HUSKIES (absent term)’ figure. Understanding this figure requires drawing the inference that because the poodles are not as strong, fast or furry as huskies, they are unsuitable to pull a dogsled. This poodle ad relies on a ‘rebuttal analogy’ (Colston and Gibbs, 1998), namely, that letting magazines from the United States serve Canadian consumers is as absurd as letting poodles pull your dogsled; neither are suited for the purpose. Colston and Gibbs (1998) explain that irony is the underlying function in rebuttal analogies. Irony is useful in communicating ridicule, condemnation, criticism, impoliteness and other negative emotions (Fogelin, 1989; Thagard and Shelley, 2001). Figures of opposition may be particularly suitable when advertisers wish to note the negative aspects of a product or competitive situation. The negative inference is evoked, but in the context of the positive emotions that attend the successful resolution of an artful deviation. The use of a visual rhetorical figure thus sweetens the attack so that it is less likely to be rejected as strident.

Another example of a figure of opposition comparison via replacement appears in the Sunny Delight ad in Figure 10. In this ad, the candy from a gum ball machine has been replaced by vitamins, suggesting that ‘VITAMINS (present term) are *not* like CANDY (absent term).’ The ad leads to the inference that because vitamins are not loved and sought out by children, parents should serve Sunny Delight to provide child-pleasing vitamins. Once again, this opposition comparison relies on a rebuttal analogy to take the sting out of a negative comment (i.e. ‘children hate vitamins’). It may be the case that all opposition comparisons via replacement use rebuttal analogies, but that is an empirical question for future research.



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Figure 9

**Canadian magazine industry ad**

## Consumer processing of visual figures

Consumer processing of visual rhetorical figures can be expected to vary with changes in visual structure and meaning operation. The processing outcomes to be expected from the use of a particular visual figure in an ad are a function of: (1) the artful deviation that constitutes it as a rhetorical figure; and (2) the location of that figure along each of the dimensions that generate the typology. It follows that the processing outcomes that are *common* across all visual figures stem from their artful deviation; conversely, the *differences* in consumer response to individual visual figures arise from the different possible combinations of complexity and richness inherent in the typology.

### Outcomes of artful deviation

A key assumption underlying the typology is that visual rhetorical figures in advertising, *ceteris paribus* and on average, will have the same positive impact on consumer response as demonstrated for verbal rhetorical figures (McQuarrie and Mick, 2003a). Specifically, we expect that attention and motivation to process ads containing visual rhetorical figures will be higher relative to ads that do not contain rhetorical figures (Huhmann et al., 2002; Mothersbaugh, et al., 2002; Toncar and Munch, 2001). Similarly, consumers are expected to respond with pleasure to



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Figure 10

**Sunny Delight ad**

a picture that artfully deviates from expectation. That pleasure arises, in part, from successfully elaborating upon the picture and solving the puzzle it presents (Berlyne, 1971; Tanaka, 1994). In fact, increased elaboration of visual figures has been documented by McQuarrie and Mick (1999), and greater pleasure, as evinced by a more positive ad, has been demonstrated for visual figures under conditions of incidental exposure as well as directed processing (McQuarrie and Mick, 2003b). In short, all nine types of visual rhetorical figures are expected to have specific positive effects, *ceteris paribus*, just as all verbal rhetorical figures, whether rhyme or pun, antithesis or ellipsis, are expected to have certain positive effects, as described by McQuarrie and Mick (1996). We turn now to differences in impact across the typology.

**Outcomes of complexity and richness**

Putting the two dimensions together, the typology indicates that the palette of visual rhetorical figures available to advertisers ranges from relatively simple and readily interpretable figures to highly complex figures open to a wide range of interpretations. At the global level, the prediction is that as one moves from the upper left to the lower right of the typology, a visual rhetorical figure will have an increasing impact on consumer response relative to an equivalent non-rhetorical picture. This is because, for the most part, complexity and richness act to augment



Table 1

**Predicted effects of complexity and richness in visual rhetorical figures**

	<b>Complexity</b> (visual structure)	<b>Richness</b> (meaning operation)
<b>Outcomes</b>		
Cognitive elaboration	✓	✓
Belief formation and change		✓
Ad liking	✓	✓
Recall	✓	✓
<b>Moderating factors</b>		
Consumer competence	✓	✓
Motivation to process	✓	✓
Need for cognition	✓	
Tolerance for ambiguity		✓
Style of processing		✓

Note: A check mark in an outcome row indicates that complexity or richness contributes to that outcome; in a moderating factor row, a check mark indicates that that factor moderates the impact of complexity or richness on one or more outcomes.

the effects of artful deviation (Berlyne, 1971). It by no means follows, however, that figures in the lower right region are better or more effective, from the standpoint of the advertiser, than figures elsewhere in the typology. We chose the relatively vague term ‘impact’ precisely to allow for both positive and negative effects of moving down and to the right in the typology. Thus, figures that are excessively deviant may fail to be comprehended (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992). When incomprehensible, figures typically cease to have a positive impact or, at least, will fail with some populations of consumers. Put another way, as one moves down and to the right in the typology, individual differences and other moderating factors will increasingly determine whether a visual figure succeeds or fails to have a desired effect.

Table 1 displays predictions for how four consumer outcomes will vary with variations in complexity and richness and indicates how five other variables may moderate this impact. The table is based on research concerning the expected impacts of complexity and ambiguity in the psychology of aesthetics (Berlyne, 1971) and on research concerning executional properties of ads more generally (MacInnis et al., 1991; Stewart and Furse, 1986). For purposes of guiding future research, these predictions can be summarized as four propositions (keeping in mind that each is subject to *ceteris paribus* conditions).

P1: More complex visual figures, and also richer visual figures, will result in more cognitive elaboration.





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P2: Richer visual figures (but not more complex figures) will result in a greater degree of belief change when specific beliefs are measured.

P3: More complex visual figures, and also richer visual figures, will be better liked.

P4: More complex visual figures, and also richer visual figures, are more likely to be recalled subsequent to ad exposure.

Increases in complexity can be expected to produce greater elaboration as part of comprehension efforts and this increased effort will be manifest as an enhanced memory trace for the ad (Forceville, 1996; McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Teng and Sun, 2002). Because complexity, within limits, is pleurably arousing, it will also be associated with greater ad liking (Berlyne, 1971; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy, 1994). However, too much complexity reduces comprehension of the ad (Phillips, 2000), so the outcome of ad liking associated with more complex visual figures is particularly likely to be subject to moderating factors (see below). Finally, we do not expect complexity per se to have an impact on the degree to which specific beliefs are changed as a result of ad exposure. By contrast, richness tends to increase the amount of elaboration, enhance recall and to be likable in itself, while in addition promoting the formation of specific beliefs. Consequently, varying the amount of richness (e.g. choosing a figure of opposition instead of a figure of connection) should, *ceteris paribus*, have a somewhat broader impact on consumer response than varying the amount of complexity (e.g. choosing a figure of replacement versus a figure of juxtaposition).

### Moderating factors

In terms of moderating factors, consumers' competence and motivation to process the ad should moderate the impact of *both* complexity and richness. Consumer competence may take several forms: it may develop as a function of cultural assimilation (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999); product category expertise; or familiarity with the particular genre of advertising (e.g. heavy magazine readers). The more competent the consumers, the more likely that they will be able to cope with complex visual structures and take advantage of rich possibilities for inference.

Motivation to process may vary with consumer trait variables such as involvement (Toncar and Munch, 2001), state variables such as imminence of purchase, or message variables such as argument strength (Swasy and Munch, 1985) and message relevance (Huhmann et al., 2002). These motivational factors can be expected to impact consumers' abilities to handle complexity, and their propensity to take advantage of richness, in keeping with resource matching theory (Anand and Sternthal, 1990; Huhmann et al., 2002). Thus, more motivated consumers will bring more resources to the processing of complex visual figures, so that interpretation is less likely to be stymied. Similarly, motivated consumers will have more resources available to pursue rich inferences.

Beyond these common moderating factors, we expect Need for Cognition (Cacioppo et al., 1984) to moderate consumer responses to complexity specifi-



cally. Consumers high in Need for Cognition have a taste for challenging mental tasks and should withstand complexity well. However, Need for Cognition is not expected to be associated with the likelihood of elaborating rich versus less rich figures, because richer figures are not necessarily more difficult or challenging to comprehend. Whether richness of reference is pursued is more a function of consumer taste or propensity; consequently, consumer response to the richness of a figure will be moderated by tolerance for ambiguity (MacDonald, 1970; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992) and visual Style of Processing (Childers et al., 1985; McQuarrie and Mick, 1999). That is, consumers tolerant of ambiguity will not be put off by rich visual figures that are susceptible to interpretation along multiple paths. Similarly, visual processors are simply more likely to pursue inferences from a picture. Conversely, Childers et al. (1985) emphasize that propensity is not the same as ability; thus, Style of Processing should not moderate complexity effects. Similarly, tolerance for ambiguity is expected to be unrelated to complexity, because ambiguity and complexity are not the same property.

## Future research

In addition to empirical tests of consumer-processing predictions derived from the new typology, future research might consider extensions to the typology. As stated initially, the scope of the new typology is limited to the possibilities for artful deviation inherent in pictures presented on a two-dimensional page. Just as McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) taxonomy, however adequate for understanding the possibilities inherent in language, does not adequately capture the important differences among visual figures (see below), so also is there no reason to believe that combinations of visual structure and meaning operation will be adequate to capture the possibilities available with video or Web animation. However, we believe it is reasonable to expect that artful deviation – the essence of rhetorical figuration – will not be limited to words and pictures but will be found to apply to animation, narrative video and other media (e.g. Wiggin and Miller, 2003). The promise of rhetoric is that, in each case, the possibilities for artful deviation in that medium can be generated from a small number of underlying operations and structures. But this generative framework must be discovered anew as the characteristic features of a new mode of expression emerge.

Even staying within the boundaries of print advertising, one opportunity for future work concerns rhetorical figures that emerge from the combination of words and pictures (e.g. Abed, 1994; Forceville, 1996). Early on, McQuarrie and Mick (1992) investigated one such combination in the form of a verbal-visual pun, termed resonance, as in their example of an ad that pictures a flashlight together with the headline, 'The gift idea that leaves everybody *beaming*.' The key question with verbal-visual figures is whether they best fit within the framework derived by McQuarrie and Mick for verbal figures, within the framework developed in this article for visual figures, or instead require their own framework. The crucial involvement of language in verbal-visual figures suggests to us that the



typology presented here may not be adequate. Data in McQuarrie and Mick (1992) indicate that verbal-visual figures are among the most common in advertising; hence, investigation of this kind of figure is a priority for future theoretical work on advertising rhetoric.

Similarly, although the examples that populate the typology contain one visual figure each, ads may also incorporate multiple rhetorical figures, a phenomenon termed 'layering' by Phillips and McQuarrie (2003). Published examples of visually layered ads may be found in McQuarrie and Mick (1996, their Figure 2: 436) and Teng and Sun (2002, their Figure 2: 303). One possibility is that the effects of layering are additive, so that the net effect of an ad with a layered figure will be similar to that of an ad with a very complex and/or very rich single figure (Mothersbaugh et al., 2002). Another possibility is that combinations of different figures place a burden on consumer processing. Further research on layering is pertinent inasmuch as Phillips and McQuarrie (2003) found that its use has increased over the last 50 years.

## **Limitations**

A limitation of the new typology proposed in this article is that it was derived from ads sampled from a single culture (i.e. Anglo North American) and a brief time interval (i.e. the last decade of the 20th century). Another limitation of this article is the lack of supporting empirical data. So little empirical work exists on ad pictures generally and visual figures specifically that the framework rests largely on informed speculation. However, we have developed the framework with enough specificity that supporting or disconfirming evidence can be readily gathered. In fact, one of the most important strengths of the theoretical framework developed in this article is precisely the fact that it *can* be tested experimentally. In our view, if rhetorical approaches are to realize their promise for integrating and differentiating the possibilities for persuasion, they must be testable. Anything less risks a relapse into the old irrelevance.

## **Contributions to advertising theory**

An important contribution of the typology is its demonstration of how the ad system – consisting of all the relationships among all the elements that make up an advertisement – and the human system – consisting of all the relationships among all the constructs that differentiate the human psyche – can be linked in order to provide a deeper understanding of advertising phenomena. In this it aligns with McQuarrie and Mick (2003a), and against the regrettable tendency, found in too many rhetorical, semiotic, art, and literary studies, to concentrate exclusively on the ad system at the expense of the powerful and useful conceptual categories developed in social and cognitive psychology. The new typology draws on work in the humanities to account for the variety of meaning operations and



visual structures available to advertisers. It thus differentiates a system of conceptual categories that captures important variations among actual advertisements. At the same time, the distinctions in the typology are linked to a system of specific consumer responses, drawing on models of consumer response developed over the past few decades. Without the subtle and insightful distinctions offered by the text-based disciplines, it seems to us that models of consumer response are condemned to remain contributions to general human psychology that fail to capture what is distinctive about advertisements as opposed to other stimuli in the environment. Conversely, without the link to models of consumer response, rhetorical categories may represent differences that make no difference, as in Samuel Butler's famous gibe that, 'All a rhetorician's rules/teach nothing but to name his tools.' We believe that continued integration of ad-system and human-system categories is essential if advertising theory is to advance.

Within that broad agenda, a key contribution of the article is that it brings needed differentiation to an important but neglected element of advertising: the pictures that have come to dominate print advertising over the last century (Pollay, 1985). A further contribution is to show how rhetorical theory can be extended to encompass some of the variety of pictorial stratagems available to advertisers. Here it might be objected that the present effort is superfluous, inasmuch as a perfectly good adaptation of rhetorical theory to pictures is already available: McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) taxonomy of verbal rhetoric, as subsequently extended in McQuarrie and Mick (1999, 2003a, 2003b). An explicit contrast with their work may be useful in further clarifying the incremental contribution of the new typology, both to the differentiation of ad pictures, and to the extension of rhetorical theory.

The essential difference is that McQuarrie and Mick (2003a) assume that conceptual categories developed to differentiate linguistic elements can equally well be applied to differentiate pictures. While we acknowledge that pictures may function like a language in that they can be used to communicate and persuade, the fact that pictures can serve the same goals as words does not mean that pictures are structured in the same way (Langer, 1951; Schroeder, 2002). Most notably, in verbal language, elements at one level (i.e. sounds) bear an arbitrary relation to elements at another level (i.e. semantic elements or meanings). Because most pictures in advertising lack this 'double articulation' (Hjelmslev, 1961), there is no ready equivalent of the sound versus meaning (i.e. phoneme versus semantic) distinction. In turn, the absence of double articulation in pictures makes it impossible to extrapolate the scheme-trope distinction – central to the McQuarrie and Mick typology – to pictures. That is, from our perspective, there can be no such thing as a visual scheme. Hence, the wealth of visual figures in advertising has to be differentiated in some other way than by distinguishing schemes from tropes.<sup>2</sup>

This article suggests that visual figures can be effectively differentiated in terms of their visual structure, defined in terms of the physical arrangement of image elements and their meaning operations, and defined in terms of the instructions for inference they suggest. Visual structure and meaning operation are funda-



mentally rhetorical ideas. They are rhetorical because they distinguish and bring out the available possibilities for creating a deviant visual template (recall that Aristotle defined rhetoric as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion). However, in contrast to the scheme-trope distinction advanced by McQuarrie and Mick (2003a), visual structure and meaning operation are derived from contemporary rather than ancient ideas, and reflect the possibilities inherent in pictorial structure rather than the possibilities inherent in linguistic structure.

In the end, the similarities that link the present effort to the prior theoretical contribution of McQuarrie and Mick (1996) may be more important than the differences. In both cases, there is a commitment to using rhetorical ideas to uncover meaningful differences across advertisements, combined with a commitment to submit these distinctions to tests via laboratory experiments that utilize established constructs in the psychology of consumer response, such as elaboration, belief, liking and recall. From this shared standpoint, laboratory experiments on advertising that do not employ rhetorical ideas tend to resort to pallid stimuli that do not capture the distinctive characteristics of real advertisements. Use of such generic textual stimuli robs the experimental method of its explanatory power, such that the underlying theoretical structure that distinguishes advertisements from other sorts of persuasive communication cannot emerge (McQuarrie, 1998). Conversely, the application of rhetorical ideas to advertising, absent a concern for testability, tends not to contribute to a *scientific* theory of advertising. Hence, to our way of thinking, to achieve its potential, advertising theory must pursue a marriage of textual analysis to experimental methodology.

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## Notes

- 1 In a metonym, a part stands for a whole, or vice versa, as in the phrase 'The White House announced today . . .'
- 2 A more extended critique of the idea of a visual scheme can be obtained from the second author.

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