Imagining Identity: Technology and the Body in Marketing Communications
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This paper investigates how marketing communications represent information technologies in increasingly corporeal ways, infusing their materiality with anthropomorphous, cyborg and perhaps posthuman qualities of body and soul. The human body and how it functions to represent technology within marketing communications is a central concern. Building upon cultural approaches to marketing communication, we analyze a cross section of ads, including campaigns from Ericsson, Sony and Telia, via critical visual analysis in conjunction with consumer response. Results and discussion focus on how images of the cyborg body create brand meaning and value, signaling shifting theoretical implications for consumer research.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

In the past twenty years, the landscape of consumer imagery has changed substantially. Not only have the number, size, and venues of pictures continued to expand, but the balance and relationship between images and verbal material has shifted measurably (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004). Even the visual representation of typeface and the space surrounding the images have come to carry meaning—and images are now widely used to represent quantities and statistics (Henderson et al. 2002; Pracejus et al. 2006; Tufte 1990). In turn, new technologies from digital cameras to Photoshop have put sophisticated image-creation tools into the hands of ordinary people. Indeed, technology has so profoundly affected the everyday material culture that the objects being pictured are themselves often new and strange. Further, as the planetary economy draws cultures with disparate sign systems into closer contact, differences in cognitive approaches to pictures versus language are being studied (Tavassoli 1999). The ubiquity, accessibility, and manipulability of imagery may have even created the world’s first democratic pictography (Scott 1993, Scott and Vargas 2007). In sum, the face of popular imagery has changed so much in recent years that new research frameworks are needed to make consumer response intelligible.

This session brings together leading researchers in consumer response to imagery to begin addressing this gap. Our intention is to point to observable phenomena in commercial imagery not currently addressed by research and to propose theoretical extensions for updating scholarly approaches. We believe this session will command attention because of the prominence of imagery in both public and academic discussions of media and the global economy. We also believe the session will have core appeal to a large subgroup of CB scholars who study visuals under a variety of methods and rubrics (see Scott and Batra 2003; Scott and Vargas 2007).

We will use rhetorical theory as the framework for this session. Language theorists have already heralded the 21st century a rhetorical age, a turn brought about by the spread of consumer culture and mass media, the decline of print communication, and the rise of multiculturalism (Bender and Wellberry 1990; Wess et al. 1996). A robust stream of work has also emerged in consumer behavior since Scott’s (1994a) proposal that rhetoric would provide a workable theory for the study of advertising images (McQuarrie and Mick 1992, 1996, 1999; Phillips 1997; Phillips and McQuarrie 2002, 2004). However, this work has focused so strongly on tropes that the field’s perception of the rhetorical approach is in danger of being reduced to a “theory of figures,” much as rhetoric was during the 19th century (Bender and Wellberry 1990). Therefore, this session will show how other basic theoretical building blocks—identification, argument, and genre—can be used to build a broad theory of rhetorical imagery beyond the study of pictorial metaphor.

The three aspects of rhetoric were chosen as a focus because of their foundational importance to theory-building. Argumentation has been understood as the skeletal structure of persuasion since ancient Greece. Any true theory of pictorial rhetoric would need to show how pictures can make statements, list evidence, offer reasons, and argue a proposition. Identification was the primary building block in the philosophy propounded by the 20th century’s leading rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke (Burke 1969; Wess et al. 1996). Genre analysis—sketching the outlines and rules of identifiable types within a corpus of texts—is the essential first step in making sense of any large body of symbolic forms. Thus, we believe this session will help the researchers in attendance to develop fruitful studies of their own. We hope also to stimulate them to look further into rhetorical theory as a basis for grasping trends in picturing.

A quick look at the references provided here will underscore the participants’ expertise in consumer imagery. We also wish to remark that our discussant, David Mick, is not only distinguished in the area of visual research, but in both sign theory and consumer relationships to technology as well. Therefore, we anticipate a high quality synthesis for this session.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Imagining Identity: Technology and the Body in Marketing Communications”
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A key strategy of contemporary marketing is to create a compelling image for products and services by associating brand names to some aspect of personal or group identity. The human body forms a basic building block of this strategy—the body functions as a radiating landmark for innumerable product, social, and emotional attributes ascribed to a vast array of products, services, and ideas in ads, websites, annual reports, and promotional brochures (Schroeder, 2002; Schroeder and McDonagh, 2005). Sophisticated, high-tech products often incorporate the ancient, basic human form within their marketing strategy, attempting to make physical and tangible complex, ethereal, and often invisible goods and services.

This paper takes a pervasive visual theme—the human body and its representation—and investigates its identity building functions within the high-tech category. In a survey of recent IT marketing efforts, information technology products and services were represented in increasingly social ways, infusing their materiality with anthropomorphic and cyborg qualities of human body and soul. We develop a typology of the body in IT ads, drawing on semiotic analysis and interviews with technology and media students, and discuss how images of the body have come to signify technological innovation. We present an interdisciplinary analysis of how the body communicates about IT to illuminate central strategic issues in marketing and representing technological innovations.

We find that within contemporary marketing communications, boundaries between the body and technology have become blurred. Consumers are encouraged to see people and bodies as if they were dispersed and fluid systems of flesh and digits. These cyborg images provide provocative themes for advertisers (e.g., Venkatesh, Karababa and Ger, 2002); this paper joins recent research efforts to theorize the cyborg within consumer culture (Campbell, O’Driscoll and Saren, 2006; Geisler and Venkatesh, 2002). Recent ads collected from magazines such as the Economist, Wired, and Time provide compelling evidence. In print, technology seems to be entering the body, exemplifying the extending capacity of IT—shifting time and space to allow humans to communicate in...
spectacular ways by expanding our cognitive, physical, perceptual, and intellectual abilities. For example, Ericsson has a series of ads that feature nearly nude bodies, painted blue, that reveal a network of circuits, cables, and computer chips integrated into the body’s skin (see figure 1). One ad portrays a bald headed woman, crouching with her palms resting on the floor, knees splayed out, staring blankly into the camera. Her pose is amphibious–she/it resembles a big blue frog, with the curious addition of computer circuits morphed onto her skin. (Consumer responses to this image vary–some find resonance with the body and the cellphone, whereas others find the image perplexing, revealing the variability of consumer response to rather abstract visual rhetoric.) Radio, internet, and television ads also give technology human-like features and attributes, thus making the nonhuman anthropomorphous. For instance, Swedish tele provider Telia ran spots that showed human “digits”—people labeled with 0s and 1s–discussing the human effects of information technology.

We argue that such ads open up a window of how identity is represented in the electronic economy. Our analytic approach draws on the cultural code of the body as conceptualized from four theoretical domains: (1) life and growth as a controlling paradigm for economics, in which growth, development, nurturance, and life cycles are routinely invoked to discuss economic activity; (2) metaphorical thought, as articulated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, about the great chain of being (cf. Wilk, 2004). This overarching metaphor places humans–and their bodies–at the top of a ‘great chain’ of life, with animals below; (3) Michel Foucault’s work on how social, economic, and political institutions interact with and influence the body; and (4) the body as an important genre in visual representation, for example the figure in painting and the body in photography (e.g., Shilling, 2005). Further, we discuss the broader significance of the body in marketing imagery, particularly when it is recruited to signify technological progress and information technology products. The paper ends with some speculations on the changing nature of representation in information technology ads (cf. Phillips and McQuarrie, 2002), and offers some conclusions about the body as a basic element of marketing communication.

“Reason and Realism: Image as Argument”

Linda M. Scott, Oxford University
Patrick Vargas, University of Illinois

Past CB research on advertising visuals has often presumed either that images do not carry brand attribute information or that images of products are used only “realistically” to warrant quality and credibility (Scott 1994a; Scott and Vargas 2007). For images to present arguments on behalf of products, they must be capable of carrying information about product features; however, a key issue emergent from new image technologies is the status of pictures as representations of the real. Not only is there a persistent concern about the alteration of images through various forms of digital retouching, the increasingly stylized visual environment raises questions about the place of the “realistic” in the context of such meaningful variety.

This presentation will begin to explore the new visual environment for brand information and product representation in an effort to conceptualize the image as a form of argument. We will begin by briefly recapping the results of our study (forthcoming JCR 2007) showing that pictures are now capable of representing as specific a list of brand attributes as are words—and that consumers accurately infer the features thus listed.

We will then show new research that explores the range and validity of pictorial “realism” in the representation of objects. This research, like our previous study, makes use of both experiments and interviews to investigate consumer response to object images. Several tasks are employed to investigate how sensitive the perception of “realism” is to context and order effects, to ask what the basis for a judgment of realism is, and to illuminate the ways that the “realistic” and the stylized are attributed meaning in a commercial context. Results in hand already suggest that the notion of “realism” in picturing is undergoing significant revision, becoming quite fluid and subject to shifting interpretations in use.

Our contention will be that evidence points to a response model in which pictures in consumer culture are making “rational” arguments, used to list attributes and to display evidence, but that previous assumptions about the centrality of realism need to be reexamined in light of emergent technologies.
“Pictures, More Pictures, Nothing But Pictures: Image as Genre”
Barbara J. Phillips, University of Saskatchewan
Edward F. McQuarrie, Santa Clara University

A distinctive feature of advertising is its reliance on pictures to persuade. Moreover, documentary evidence suggests that the emphasis on pictures over words in print ads has steadily increased throughout the last century (Pracejus et al. 2006). Unfortunately, there is still not much consumer or marketing theory available for differentiating and organizing the variety of pictorial strategies on display. Though the range of pictorial choices that can be implemented in an ad is now vastly larger because of advancing technology, consumer theory has not kept up.

Our contention is that a separation of advertising images into genres is now required to help researchers make sense of the exploding array of visual strategies. Genre is a combination of a flexible set of constitutive rules and representative members that apply to texts from more than one creator and time period (Fishelov 1993). A genre encompasses a loosely structured set of shared features that can be identified by individuals (Gibbs 1994, p. 49; Stern and Russell 2004); for example, the genre “game” encompasses Monopoly, pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, and tag. Just as consumers classify movies using genres to frame their expectations and interpretations of the movie’s content (e.g., western, science fiction, romantic comedy), it is our belief that consumers classify advertising images in the same way. That is, the style of the image in an ad provides a supplementary message that presents information to the viewer about expectation, comprehension, and ultimately, response.

One genre of advertising has eschewed most use of verbal copy for decades now if fashion advertising. Ads that present clothing as the embodiment of the latest aesthetic (Entwistle 2000) account for more than half of the pages in men’s and women’s fashion magazines. The clothing industry in the U.S. tops $180 billion in sales and a one-page ad in Vanity Fair or Vogue costs more than $110,000. Despite this economic significance, the genre of fashion images has not been examined in consumer research, perhaps because fashion has long been considered a frivolous, wasteful, or even wicked practice beneath serious consideration and study (Entwistle 2000). Alternatively, it may be that fashion images have been ignored because they are considered “natural” and do not require cultural interpretation—like a catalog picture, fashion ads are believed to represent the clothes to be sold. Although some fashion images are composed this way, many others present models in narrative story situations, and a large number of fashion ads present images that are unnatural, odd, or even inexplicable. As Scott (1994a) reminds us, even the most “representative” ads require cultural interpretation, and researchers have found that fashion ads are not easily coded into the visual categories that neatly organize ads for other products.

We suspect it is consumer knowledge of genre rules that helps fashion advertising to succeed. This suggests that other kinds of primarily visual ads may also make use of, or rely upon, the genre expectations of consumers. Genre expectations, when available, may help to counteract the risk to ad comprehension posed by the absence of verbal copy. This, in turn, indicates an opportunity to define and explore such sub-genres within the print advertising space.

In this paper we define the meaning and operation of genre rules using fashion advertising as an example. We then situate the effort within a broader body of work that attempts to differentiate the visual element within advertising (e.g., the visual rhetorical figure, as discussed by Phillips and McQuarrie [2004]). In short, we attempt to address the need for better theory and more differentiated accounts of how consumers process pictures in advertising by focusing on extreme cases where the picture is the entire advertisement.

REFERENCES


