Reason and Realism: Image As Argument

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We will examine the new visual environment for brand information and product representation. 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 present studies that expand this notion by exploring the range in the representation of objects in an age of heavy visual stylization and viewer experience with tools such as Photoshop.

[to cite]:

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http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12904/volumes/v34/NA-34

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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”
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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
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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, clothing as the embodiment of the latest aesthetic (Entwistle 2000) and do not require cultural interpretation – and do not require cultural interpretation, and researchers have found that fashion images are composed this way, many others present models in narrative story situations, and a large number of pictorial strategic games 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.

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One genre of advertising has eschewed most use of verbal copy for decades now ifashion 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


