Pictures, More Pictures, Nothing But Pictures: Image As Genre

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This presentation will examine the increasing emphasis on using pictures in place of words in print advertisements. We define the meaning and operation of genre rules within the print advertising space, focusing on contemporary ads that are dominated by their visual element, with special attention to fashion advertising as a type case. 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 general, 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.

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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 strategems 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 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.

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