The Timely and the Timeless: Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Sign Relations in Advertising Montage
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - A decade ago, Scott (1994) offered a sharp critique of past research on visual persuasion in advertising. She argued that a precondition for an adequate understanding of visual persuasion is actually practiced by sophisticated advertisers is the development of a visual rhetoric, a theoretical framework within which ad forms could be defined and classified and linked to psychological responses. McQuarrie and Mick (1999, 2002) subsequently called upon persuasion researchers to balance their traditional focus on the Ahuman system (the mind and mental processes that cognize an ad) with a proportional emphasis on the Aad system (the systematically related set of variables that may be manipulated to create alternative ad executions). In short, Scott and McQuarrie and Mick have highlighted the fact that researchers who focus on visual persuasion tend to know a lot about response processes but very little about ad stimuli. Lacking a theoretical framework that can be used to define the set of manipulable stimulus variables and the range of variation within each variable, they have been unable to produce batteries of sophisticated, realistic ads that could be used to test the interacting effects of the major dimensions of an ad execution.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A decade ago, Scott (1994) offered a sharp critique of past research on visual persuasion in advertising. She argued that a precondition for an adequate understanding of visual persuasion—as it is actually practiced by sophisticated advertisers—is the development of a visual rhetoric, a theoretical framework within which ad forms could be defined and classified and linked to psychological responses. McQuarrie and Mick (1999, 2002) subsequently called upon persuasion researchers to balance their traditional focus on the “human system” (the mind and mental processes that cognize an ad) with a proportional emphasis on the “ad system” (the systematically related set of variables that may be manipulated to create alternative ad executions). In short, Scott and McQuarrie and Mick have highlighted the fact that researchers who focus on visual persuasion tend to know a lot about response processes but very little about ad stimuli. Lacking a theoretical framework that can be used to define the set of manipulable stimulus variables and the range of variation within each variable, they have been unable to produce batteries of sophisticated, realistic ads that could be used to test the interacting effects of the major dimensions of an ad execution.

This paper responds to the call to identify important ad system dimensions and metrics for measuring the range of variation on the dimensions that are identified. It responds, in particular, to one of Scott’s (1994) specific suggestions: that “the sequence of processing as a function of visual layout . . . be investigated for the impact of order of the message on consumer response” (p. 269). To facilitate study of the sequencing effects of layout, the paper proposes a taxonomy of shot sequencing options, then, drawing upon Tulving’s work, proposes possible human system effects of the variables that have been defined.

Semiotics, the general science of signs, is the theoretical foundation of the paper. The main argument is that well-established insights in one branch of semiotics—linguistics or, more specifically, syntactics—can be fruitfully generalized from the analysis of words to the analysis of images. Fundamental to this analysis is the semiotic distinction between syntagmatic (linear) and paradigmatic (categorical) sign relations (Saussure, 1959). In linguistics, the unit of syntactic analysis is the individual word. In audiovisual genres, the obvious unit of syntactic analysis is the individual shot, the discrete icons created by camera cuts (Lotman, 1981). Shots may be related to each other either syntagmatically (by forming a linear sequence that represents a sequence of actions) or paradigmatically (by being exemplars of a shared semantic class). Drawing upon the work of Metz (1974), Genette (1980), and Korac (1988), the article develops metrics that may be used to describe, economically, various alternative syntagmatic and paradigmatic ad executions. A syntagmatic montage may emerge from the editing process as a chronological execution of the sequence of images or as one or another type of synchronic executions involving flashforwards and flashbacks. A paradigmatic execution emerges from the editing process as a series of shots that fit into one or several semantic categories.

Work by psychologists on alternative memory systems is pregnant with implications for the human system effects of syntagmatic and paradigmatic montage. In Tulving’s (1983) formulation, episodic memory stores specific, often detailed recollections of event sequences. These memories are personal, unique, and inevitably linked to a space/time context. In contrast, semantic memory is the categorical memory that stores organized, abstract knowledge about the world. Its content is concepts abstracted from particular times and places. This distinction tracks almost perfectly with the distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic sign relations. Thus, the relationship between an episodic memory and its referent is closely analogous to the relationship between a syntagmatic ad execution and the action it depicts. Likewise, the relationship between a semantic memory and its referent class is closely analogous to the relationship between a paradigmatic concept and the individual shots in a paradigmatic ad execution.

Tulving notes that information stored in the episodic system is more easily forgotten than is the information in the semantic system. Since advertisers are very interested in knowing how long the effects of an ad might be expected to endure, this difference is likely to be of interest to them. On the other hand, episodic memory may be the exclusive province of affect. So affective appeals may be more effective if the ad montage has a syntagmatic structure. In other words, formal properties of a properly defined ad system may have predictable effects on responses in the human system.

Since the human system responses are comparatively well understood, the major challenge in research on the contemporary practice of visual persuasion may be to describe the ad system adequately by defining a manageable set of variables that reflect the variation in complex advertising images. For the set of variables to be manageable, the ad-system analysis must be nomothetic. It must contain an integrated and tightly specified set of dimensions. Fortunately, semiotic analysis can provide both the nomothetic specificity and integration and the broad and deep scope that is required to facilitate a theoretically grounded social scientific investigation of artistically sophisticated visual persuasion. One important component of that nomothetic description of the image may be the distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic icon sequences and the technical notation proposed in this study for describing alternative ways of structuring the same iconic information in an ad.

REFERENCES


