

# Processing visual rhetoric in advertisements: Interpretations determined by verbal anchoring and visual structure

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## Abstract

This research investigated meaning operation in relation to verbal anchoring and visual structure of visual rhetoric in advertisements. Meaning operation refers to the relation between meaningful visual elements, and determines the number of interpretations of an image. Meaning operation 'connection' associates two visual elements, whereas 'similarity' states that one element is (like) the other. The former is supposed to elicit less alternative responses than the latter. In a first study, comprehension improved for connection but not for similarity when explanatory text was added (verbal anchoring). In a second study eye tracking measures were used to study meaning operation expressed in juxtaposition or fusion (visual structure). Similarity led to more text-image saccades and longer fixation durations on the image than connection. Interactions on saccades and perceived number of ideas suggest that fusion promotes alternative responses in connection, but not in similarity. Apparently, connections leave interpretations more 'open', whereas similarities are more ambiguous (or 'rich').

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## 1. Introduction

Visual rhetoric in print advertisements provides a fruitful topic of investigation for scholars interested in information processing (Van Mulken et al., 2010). Intriguing aspects of visual rhetoric include the role of cognitive processing as a prerequisite for experiencing pleasant feelings toward the advertisement (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999), and the moderating role of an advertisement's complexity and meaningfulness (Gkiouzepas and Hogg, 2011; Phillips, 2000). In short, to enjoy a visual metaphor one needs to understand it first.

An important framework for the analysis of visual rhetoric originates from Roland Barthes, whose essay *Rhétorique de l'image* concerned imagery and meaning in advertisements (translated in Barthes, 1977). Semiologists have developed several systems of conveying meanings from images (Eco, 1976; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Cognitive psychology addressed the perception of artful imagery (Berlyne, 1970). In pragmatics, models for multimodal interpretation were developed (Yus, 2009). For the purposes of the current research, the literature review is limited to research of advertising imagery that specifically addresses information processing in viewers.

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Table 1  
Two by two cross-classification of meaning operation and visual structure.

|                  |               | Meaning operation |            |
|------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------|
|                  |               | Connection        | Similarity |
| Visual structure | Juxtaposition | 1                 | 2          |
|                  | Fusion        | 3                 | 4          |

Adapted from a three by three classification in Phillips and McQuarrie (2004).

In advertising research, visual rhetoric was studied the past twenty years, with substantial progress in theoretical development and empirical investigation (Forceville, 1996; Maes and Schilperoord, 2008; McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; McQuarrie and Phillips, 2005; Phillips, 2000; Scott, 1994). In particular, frameworks have been developed to classify visual rhetorical figures (Forceville, 1996; Maes and Schilperoord, 2008; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004), and hypotheses of processing visual rhetoric have been tested (Gkiouzepas and Hogg, 2011; McQuarrie and Phillips, 2005; Phillips, 2000; Van Enschoot et al., 2008).

Creative executives use visual rhetoric to enhance an advertisement's indirect persuasion (McQuarrie and Phillips, 2005). In the design process, verbal copy and visual structure are probed to balance optimal comprehension and appreciation. Visual metaphors may be more or less explicitly explained by captions (variation in verbal anchoring, Phillips, 2000). Pictorial elements may be more or less pronounced in revealing a visual metaphor's meaning (variation in visual structure, Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004). These variations affect visual rhetoric's complexity and meaningfulness. The ways in which verbal anchoring and visual structure convey complexity and meaningfulness are not entirely clear, and different models have been proposed (Gkiouzepas and Hogg, 2011; Maes and Schilperoord, 2008; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004; Van Mulken et al., 2010). The aim of this paper is to assess the mechanisms of visual structure and verbal anchoring, in relation to the metaphor's meaning operation (i.e., the conceptual relation between the metaphorical objects).

According to Phillips and McQuarrie (2004), two design dimensions of visual rhetoric affect an individual's interpretation in different ways, illustrated in Table 1 (containing just a subset of the original typology). The columns represent how visual structure can be more (fusion) or less (juxtaposition) complex. The rows represent how meaning operation can be more (similarity) or less (connection) conceptually rich. Combinations of these dimensions define four image categories, two of which are exemplified in Figs. 1 and 2 (see the next section for more explanation). The more complex and rich an advertisement is, the more cognitive elaboration is needed to process it (according to Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004).

One of the main challenges in visual rhetoric research is to determine the mechanism that elicits individual thoughts. Some visual metaphors may convey widely diverging thoughts between individuals, while other images elicit much more uniform thoughts in individuals (McQuarrie and Phillips, 2005). Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) claim that meaning operation determines the richness of a visual rhetorical figure, and define it as the ambiguity in the relation between pictorial elements, determining the number of thoughts elicited in individuals.

McQuarrie and Phillips (2005), however, use the term 'openness' to explain how visual metaphors may elicit individually diverging thoughts. Openness refers to the observation that images are more open to interpretation than text



Fig. 1. Pim's cherry–chocolate cookies (“New Pim's: the fresh taste of cherries”): fusion and connection.

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