

# Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text-Interpretive, Experimental, and Reader-Response Analyses

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Text interpretations, two experiments, and a set of reader-response interviews examine the impact of stylistic elements in advertising that form visual rhetorical figures parallel to those found in language. The visual figures examined here—rhyme, antithesis, metaphor, and pun—produced more elaboration and led to a more favorable attitude toward the ad, without being any more difficult to comprehend. Interviews confirmed that several of the meanings generated by informants corresponded to those produced by an a priori text-interpretive analysis of the ads. However, all of these effects diminished or disappeared for the visual tropes (metaphor and pun) in the case of individuals who lacked the cultural competency required to adequately appreciate the contemporary American ads on which the studies are based. Results are discussed in terms of the power of rhetorical theory and cultural competency theory (Scott 1994a) for illuminating the role played by visual elements in advertising. Overall, the project demonstrates the advantages of investigating visual persuasion via an integration of multiple research traditions.

Visual elements are an important component of many advertisements. Although the role of imagery in shaping consumer response has long been recognized (Greenberg and Garfinkle 1963), only recently have visual elements begun to receive the same degree and sophistication of research attention as the linguistic element in advertising (Childers and Houston 1984; Edell and Staelin 1983; Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1992; Miniard et al. 1991; Scott 1994a). The area is now characterized by conceptual and methodological diversity, with a variety of new propositions and findings emerging.

Historically four approaches can be distinguished, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. The *archival* tradition is perhaps the oldest (e.g., Assael, Kofron, and Burgi 1967). Studies in this vein gather large samples of advertisements and conduct content analyses to describe the frequency with which various types of visual elements

appear. Archival studies may also report correlations between the presence of certain elements and specific audience responses (e.g., Finn 1988; Holbrook and Lehman 1980; Rossiter 1981). The weakness of this approach is that it is primarily descriptive and provides only weak evidence for causality. Also, the specific visual elements investigated tend to cover a wide range and are not generated by any theoretical specification.

The *experimental* tradition systematically varies either the presence or absence of pictures per se (e.g., Edell and Staelin 1983) or the nature of some particular visual element (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1995) or the processing conditions under which subjects encounter particular visual elements (e.g., Miniard et al. 1991). The strength of this tradition is rigorous causal analysis combined with theoretical specification. However, the consumer responses elicited tend to be abbreviated or impoverished, and theoretical specification is mostly applied to consumer processing rather than to the visual element per se.

The *reader-response* approach emphasizes the meanings that consumers draw from ads (e.g., Mick and Buhl 1992; Mick and Politi 1989; Scott 1994b). Extended depth interviews are sometimes used to show the rich and complex interplay between elements of the ad and consumer responses. Weaknesses include a limited ability to conduct causal analysis and a relatively vague specification of how specific types of ad elements can be linked to particular kinds of consumer meanings.

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The *text-interpretive* perspective draws on semiotic, rhetorical, and literary theories to provide a systematic and nuanced analysis of the individual elements that make up the ad (e.g., Durand 1987; McQuarrie 1989; Scott 1994a; Sonesson 1996; Stern 1989). It treats visual and verbal elements as equally capable of conveying crucial meanings and as equally worthy of differentiation and analysis. However, this tradition rarely collects or analyzes advertising responses from consumers. This raises the issue of whether the elaborate systematization of text elements actually maps onto the responses of consumers in an illuminating way. Similarly, causality is more often assumed than demonstrated.

This brief summary suggests that there is ample need and opportunity for investigations that span multiple traditions and draw on the strengths of each. Although several of these perspectives have been closely linked historically (e.g., rhetoric, semiotics, literary theory, reader-response), with a great deal of mutual borrowing, others have rarely crossed paths (e.g., semiotics, laboratory experiments). This article interweaves two strands of the text-interpretive tradition (rhetoric and semiotics) with the experimental tradition and the reader-response approach. We show that patterns of stylistic variation parallel to the figures of speech documented in language have a reliable impact on consumer response, and we explain these results using a model of the consumer as an astute and active reader of advertising texts. Specifically, we present a rhetorical and semiotic analysis of visual figures in advertising, test predictions from this text-interpretive analysis in two experiments, and supplement these experiments by means of a reader-response analysis using phenomenological interviews. This multimethod approach builds on previous attempts to show the value of a critical pluralism for consumer research (Hunt 1991; McQuarrie and Mick 1992).

## TEXT STRUCTURE AND CONSUMERS AS READERS

As a reader the consumer approaches advertisements as complex texts to be interpreted (Scott 1994b). Approached as texts, ads may be ignored or engaged, disdained or enjoyed, critiqued or endorsed. Of course, these consumer readings will be shaped by idiosyncratic factors as well as text structure (Eco 1979). Nonetheless, we assume that text structure functions reliably as a causal agent. That is, text structure tends to shape or direct consumer response, even though it does not, strictly speaking, fix or determine it. The underlying model is probabilistic; although any randomly selected consumer may or may not read an ad text in a given way, in the mass, more consumers than not will read a text in a way that is predicated on the text structure itself.

Text structure is an encompassing term that refers to any discriminable pattern in any part of the manifest ad. Our focus here is on the more narrow concept of stylistic variation. We define style to include all those aspects of an ad that can be varied independently of the assertion of a brand-attribute linkage, that is, message content. Once we create an ad text that communicates a certain brand-attribute link-

age, any subsequent change to the ad that continues to communicate that content, and that is not itself simply the assertion of a second brand-attribute linkage, is by definition a change of style. The separation of style from content in no way implies that ad style cannot convey information, cannot add meaning, or cannot concern the brand. Stylistic variation in advertising can do all these things. In fact, from a semiotic perspective, it is not possible to change the style of an advertisement without also changing some of its meaning. By contrast, it should be possible in an experiment to hold the assertion of a central brand-attribute linkage constant while varying aspects of the ad's style. Because consumers read ad texts for style as well as content, such a manipulation of style should have a predictable impact on consumer response.

Given our overall commitment to linking the text-interpretive and experimental traditions, rhetorical theory appears ideally suited to the task of generating specific predictions, amenable to experimental test, about the impact of stylistic variation in advertising visuals. With its semiotic foundation, the rhetorical tradition can provide a wealth of ideas for differentiating and integrating aspects of visual style (see, e.g., Durand 1987). Furthermore, the practical bent that has characterized rhetoric from its beginnings facilitates experimentation—rhetoricians have always sought the particular style most able to compel an audience response. Lastly, building on the link to the reader-response tradition developed by Scott (1994b), rhetorical analysis can also be applied to generate a rich account of the consumer meanings that visual style might be expected to potentiate.

In the following sections we first define, explain, and differentiate various types of rhetorical figures, concluding that a visual embodiment of this historically linguistic notion should be possible. We then develop the impact on consumer response that can be expected upon exposure to visual rhetorical figures in advertising. This impact in turn derives from the meanings set in motion by the text structure of the visual figures. Hence, we provide an a priori text interpretation that identifies some of these meanings in the case of the stimuli constructed for this project. That interpretation then provides a context for the empirical studies.

## RHETORICAL FIGURES IN ADVERTISING

A rhetorical figure is an artful deviation, relative to audience expectation, that conforms to a template independent of the specifics of the occasion where it occurs (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Familiar examples of figures of speech include rhyme and metaphor; dozens more are catalogued in classical sources (Corbett 1990). Because they are artful, rhetorical figures are not errors or solecisms; and because the template is independent of the specific content asserted, figures may be considered a stylistic device. Under this conception, rhetorical figures could be advantageous to advertisers for several reasons. Most important, artful deviation adds interest to an advertisement. For instance, a cigarette ad that proclaims "Today's Slims at a very slim price" should be more engaging to the consumer than one that

reads “Today’s Slims at a very low price.” Moreover, the advantage of any stylistic device is that it can potentially be added to an ad without disturbing the underlying attribute claim—thus, in the example above, the rhetorical figure still communicates a low-price positioning for the brand but does something more as well.

Many variations in advertising style are one-shot affairs, specific cases sampled from a plenitude of possibilities. By contrast, rhetorical figures are generated by a limited number of rhetorical operations, and this makes it possible to construct an overarching theory of the causal impact of figures, an enterprise that would be intractable if one had to work with isolated heterogeneous instances of stylistic variation. The limited number of figures also poses the intriguing possibility that the entire set can be generated from a single compact theoretical specification. McQuarrie and Mick (1996) suggested that the wealth of rhetorical figures found in advertising could be organized into a three-level taxonomy, with all the figures located at a given node sharing certain formal properties. These properties would in turn be the key determinants of consumer response to figures.

The top level of their taxonomy, which includes all figures, is characterized by the property of artful deviation as defined above. It seems likely that the degree of deviation present in specific instances of figures may vary over a wide range and systematically across types of figures, with a corresponding difference in impact on consumers. Thus, there exists a gradient of deviation, with more deviant figures having a greater impact, up to some point of diminishing returns. In fact, McQuarrie and Mick (1992, experiment 2) showed that a rhetorical figure could be so deviant as to have a negative impact, creating confusion rather than interest.

At the second level of the taxonomy, schemes are distinguished from tropes as two different modes of figuration. Schemes deviate by means of excessive regularity. For example, rhyme, with its unexpected repetition of sounds, is a scheme. Thus, an ad for motor oil that proclaims “Performax. Protects to the Max” would hold an advantage over the less deviant “Performax. The Top Protection.” Tropes deviate by means of an irregular usage. Metaphors, with their literally false but nonetheless illuminating equation of two different things, and puns, with their accidental resemblances, are tropes.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the punning headline by Ford, “Make fun of the road,” can be construed either as an invitation to scorn or to enjoy. This deviant construction, whose oscillating meanings cannot be completely pinned down, would hold an advantage over the more straightforward “Dominate the road” or “Enjoy the road.”

At the third level of the taxonomy, specific rhetorical operations, which may be simple or complex, serve to construct schemes or tropes. Repetition and reversal are the simple and complex operations that construct schemes (examples are rhyme and antithesis, respectively), while substitution and destabilization are the simple and complex

operations that construct tropes (examples are ellipsis and metaphor, respectively). In the aggregate the four rhetorical operations provide four different opportunities for adding artful deviation to an ad.

The definition of rhetorical figures as templates independent of the specifics of individual expressions indicates that *visual* rhetorical figures ought to be possible. Nothing in the fundamental definition of a figure either requires a linguistic expression or precludes a visual expression. In fact, the idea of a visual figure has ancient roots in art theory (Gombrich 1960; Scott 1994a). Durand (1987) may have been the first to propose a comprehensive catalog of visual figures. Unfortunately, most prior work in the text-interpretive tradition has focused on visual *metaphor* to the exclusion of other figures (e.g., Forceville 1995; Kaplan 1992; Kennedy, Green, and Vervaeke 1993; Phillips 1997). Of the many other figures routinely discussed in the context of linguistic rhetoric, only the pun has been investigated in visual form (Abed 1994; McQuarrie and Mick 1992).

In light of the various taxonomies of rhetorical figures now available (e.g., Dubois et al. 1970; Durand 1987; McQuarrie and Mick 1996), the most compelling demonstration of the power of visual figures would utilize multiple figures, rather than concentrating on a single instance such as metaphor, and would predict distinct impacts for different types of figures, rather than lumping all figures together. A successful experimental investigation along these lines would testify both to the cross-modal generality and explanatory power of the idea of a rhetorical figure, and to the potency and flexibility of visual style as a means of altering consumer response to advertising.

## IMPACT OF VISUAL RHETORICAL FIGURES

In this article we argue that rhetorical figures, in whatever form, can be expected to have two primary effects on consumer response. The first is increased elaboration and the second is a greater degree of pleasure.

### Elaboration

In cognitive psychological terms, elaboration “reflects the extent to which information in working memory is integrated with prior knowledge structures” (MacInnis and Price 1987, p. 475). Broadly speaking, elaboration indicates the amount, complexity, or range of cognitive activity occasioned by a stimulus. As noted by MacInnis and Price, elaboration can take the form of either discursive thought or imagery. When a rhetorical figure is embodied visually, it is reasonable to suppose that both discursive and imagistic elaboration may result.

The idea of elaboration can be readily translated into interpretivist language, as the extent to which a reader engages a text or the amount of interpretation occasioned by a text or the number of inferences drawn (Mick 1992). The fundamental property by which all rhetorical figures stimulate elaboration is their artful deviance. As texts marked by deviance, rhetorical figures indicate to readers that they

<sup>1</sup>For a more extensive list of schemes and tropes found in advertising, see Leigh (1994) and McQuarrie and Mick (1996).

should consider the communicator's reasons for so marking the text (text marking is discussed in detail by the semiotician Mukarovsky [1964]). As Sperber and Wilson (1986) argue, audiences always assume relevance on the part of the communicator. Hence, if the text is marked, then the communicator must have wanted the audience to take note of it, and the surrounding context should allow the reader to interpret correctly the reason the text was marked, provided the reader makes a competent effort. The assumption of relevance enables Sperber and Wilson to explain why the literal falseness of metaphor is only a problem for logicians—ordinary readers readily recognize that the communicator has deviated from expectation in order to make a point. In the case of metaphor, the point is typically that a variety of predications should be entertained, with no one of them fully adequate to capture the communicator's intent.

The concepts of deviation and marking can in turn be translated back into more conventional psychological terms. Deviation can be understood as the stimulus property of incongruity (Berlyne 1971). Incongruity in ad stimuli is known to provoke elaboration (Heckler and Childers 1992). Hence, it should be possible to demonstrate experimentally that an ad containing a visual rhetorical figure will produce a greater degree of elaboration relative to a baseline ad that lacks the figure.

It should also be the case that tropes will produce a greater increment in elaboration than schemes. McQuarrie and Mick (1996) argued that tropes and schemes fall at different points on the gradient of deviation, with schemes on average less deviant from expectation than tropes. Schemes are hypothesized to be less deviant than tropes for two reasons. First, in semiotic terms schemes are overcoded while tropes are undercoded. This means that tropes are incomplete, requiring the reader to fill in a gap, while schemes contain redundant cues that more directly suggest multiple meanings. Within the semiotic tradition undercoding is believed to mark the text more strongly (Eco 1979). Second, the excessive regularity of schemes is constructed from sensory elements (e.g., the duplication of syllables in rhyme), while the irregularity of tropes is constructed from semantic elements (e.g., the different meanings brought together in a metaphor). A depth of processing argument can thus be framed to support the claim that tropes are more deviant than schemes (experimental evidence that sensory and semantic elements differ in depth of processing is provided by Childers and Houston [1984]). If deviation is in fact the primary formal property of rhetorical figures that causes elaboration, then in an experimental setting it should be possible to show both a main effect for the presence of a visual figure and also an interaction in which the effect is larger for tropes than schemes. These effects are conditioned on the deviation being neither so minimal that it goes unnoticed nor so extreme as to be incomprehensible.

## Pleasure

Artful deviation is also the cause of the pleasure produced by rhetorical figures, but here it is their artfulness that is key. In semiotics a fundamental tenet is that readers enjoy a

pleasure of the text (Barthes 1985). Texts that allow multiple readings or interpretations are inherently pleasurable to readers. Texts that are simple and one-dimensional are less likely to be sources of pleasure. One may take pleasure from the referent of such a text, but the text itself does not offer the reader pleasure. Similarly, texts that are opaque or too difficult to decipher also fail to give pleasure. It is texts that resist simple readings while showing the way to more complex readings that are most likely to give pleasure to readers. Texts of this kind may be said to have poetic or aesthetic value. The initial ambiguity is stimulating, and the subsequent resolution rewarding (cf. Berlyne 1971; Eco 1979; McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1994).

The notion of a pleasure-of-the-text is readily linked to the concept of attitude-toward-the-ad (Mick 1992). Increased enjoyment while processing the ad text makes it probable that consumers will regard the overall ad more favorably. The importance of this transference is that pleasure-of-the-text is exactly the kind of text-interpretive idea that cries out for empirical testing. Of course professional semioticians derive a great deal of pleasure from teasing out complex strands of meaning from great literature—but what about naive consumers encountering ordinary advertisements? These consumers' motivation to process advertisements, their opportunity to process at any length, and even their ability to process are all open to question. It is easy to imagine rhetorical figures, especially those worked into the visual background, as having no effect on consumers at all, however delightful these figures may be to semioticians and other interpretivists. Although some positive evidence does exist for the case of puns (McQuarrie and Mick 1992), and for processes of aesthetic resolution more generally (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1994), it remains an open question whether the simple presence or absence of a visual figure can influence consumer attitudes toward the ad ( $A_{ad}$ ).

If the text-interpretive account is correct, then it can be hypothesized that tropes will produce a greater increment than schemes on  $A_{ad}$  as well as elaboration. This follows from the role of deviation in creating pleasure-of-the-text. There is no pleasure if the text lacks art; but pleasure comes from the successful resolution of incongruity, and the amount of incongruity, and hence the degree of resolution possible, is a function of the extent of deviation. As before, the assumption of greater deviation in the case of tropes yields the prediction of an interaction such that schemes and tropes are both able to produce a more favorable  $A_{ad}$  relative to baseline ads lacking visual figures, but the increment is larger for tropes.

## A PRIORI TEXT INTERPRETATION

Our text-interpretive analysis of the visual aspects of the four rhetorical ads in Table 1 is based on the synthesis of three traditions. The first, of course, is rhetoric, drawing on the fundamental character of rhetorical figures, their various types, and the underlying operations that construct them, as outlined above and discussed in detail by McQuarrie and Mick (1996). The second tradition is the semiotic doctrine

**TABLE 1**  
TEXT-INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI

Ad stimulus	Figurative mode	Rhetorical operation	Description of rhetorical figure	Semiotic relations among key elements	Manipulation
Mascara ad	Scheme	Repetition	Visual rhyme—contours of eye lashes and fur echo one another	Iconic relation between sable fur and lashes with mascara; Indexical relation between fur and “soft”; Symbolic relationship between fur and wealth, sophistication	The fur ends were airbrushed to remove spikiness, eliminating the repetition of contours
Yogurt ad	Scheme	Reversal	Visual antithesis—convex contour of beach ball juxtaposed with concave figure of woman	Iconic relation contrasts fat beach ball with slender woman; Indexical relation between ball and fun on the beach; Symbolic relationship between a slender figure and attractiveness	The beach ball was cropped to create a beach umbrella with a less convex profile, and this was angled away from the woman’s waist; the swimsuit was changed to a different color (antithesis rests on opposition within parallelism, and the change in color was necessary to break the latter)
Motion sickness remedy ad	Trope	Destabilization	Visual metaphor depicts the package as a seat belt buckle	Iconic relation between package shape and the rectangle of a typical seat belt buckle; Indexical relation between cars and motion sickness; Symbolic relation between seat belts and prudent preparation	A buckle was added to the seat belt, and the package was moved further back on the seat
Almond ad	Trope	Destabilization	Visual pun created by the “accidental” resemblance between the arrangement of items on the right plate and a smiling face	Iconic relation between plate arrangement and “happy face” (yellow circle with dots and a curved line); Indexical relation between smiling faces and happiness; Symbolic relationship connecting croissants and fine china to ideas of sophistication and status	Almonds and croissants on the right-hand plate were rearranged so as not to resemble facial features

that addresses advertising as a selection and combination of signs that have varying natures and functions in communication and meaning (see Mick 1986; Williamson 1978). The selection issue is related to the concept of paradigmatic relations (how signs come from preset groups, within which there are similarities and dissimilarities, e.g., the paradigm of kitchenware plates such as china, clay, plastic, paper, etc.). The combination issue concerns the concept of syntagmatic relations (how signs selected from different paradigms are organized, e.g., the placement of plates, utensils, glasses, napkins, etc., in order to compose a table setting). Thus, as both the rhetorical and semiotic traditions emphasize, the specific elements of ads serve as signs that have been selected from among others and combined in one manner rather than another by the advertiser so as to communicate meanings about the brand, the product, and/or the user.

A sign, by its nature, always stands for something, broadly termed its “object.” Although many varieties of this “stand for” relation have been identified, iconic, indexical,

and symbolic relations constitute three of the most fundamental. Iconic signs resemble their objects, usually through topological similarity (e.g., a photograph), leading to corresponding reactions. Indexical signs refer to their objects by virtue of a causal relation (e.g., smoke and fire), often involving some kind of existential contiguity between these signs and their objects. Symbolic signs bear an arbitrary relation to their objects constructed solely through consensus and convention (e.g., words and their meanings). A final crucial point to emphasize is that most signs in daily life participate simultaneously in more than one “stand for” relationship, rarely reducible to a single iconic, indexical, or symbolic connection.

The third tradition our interpretations draw from may be called the cultural approach (cf. Scott 1994b). That is, when analyzing the text of a highly visual advertisement, it is essential not to view the assemblage of signs as a straightforward copy of reality that viewers apprehend directly and uniformly. Rather, the experience of advertising is a function of a complex process facilitated by tacit, culturally

situated knowledge structures that predate and, to a notable degree, pattern the kinds of meanings that emerge from a viewer's interaction with advertising. These structures include the purposes of advertising; other (dis)similar ads seen before (style and content); other social phenomena that are evoked in, or can be related to, the ad; and so on.

It is worth noting that this cultural approach to advertising visuals is highly convergent with the work of leading figures in the semiotic tradition who maintain that there are no pure icons and who base their frameworks of sign production and interpretation on a foundation of cultural context (e.g., Eco 1979). Moreover, from this perspective the text reader must be competent before a lone sign or string of signs can stand for anything. Jakobson (1971) captures this requirement through his emphasis on the shared codes between message sender and receiver that are a prerequisite for the successful production and understanding of signs. Similar connections between competency and codes have been made in linguistic theory (Chomsky 1968) and literary theory (Culler 1975).

With this background on the theoretical and terminological underpinnings of our text-interpretive analyses, Table 1 displays some of the basic semiotic and rhetorical relationships that characterize the four stimuli containing visual figures constructed for the experiments (see Fig. 1 for examples of the actual stimuli). We have placed these analyses in a table to facilitate review of the key elements of the interpretations as we proceed through the remainder of the article. Some of the central cultural elements in these ads, which are more amenable to narrative rather than tabular presentation, are discussed below.

The sociocultural knowledge required to appreciate the mascara ad includes an understanding of the association between fur and wealth, glamour, and sophistication, and also of the flirtatious character of a backward, over-the-shoulder glance. Particularly knowledgeable readers may associate the style of hat with Arctic regions and infer an exotic quality for the brand. The sociocultural knowledge required to appreciate the yogurt ad includes an awareness of the beach as a place where a woman's attractiveness can be demonstrated and an understanding of the role of an hourglass figure, together with its effective display in a swimsuit, in establishing that attractiveness.<sup>2</sup> Readers may also connect the beach ball with ideas of fun and festivities, and draw the inference that only the slender can really enjoy themselves. For the motion sickness remedy, the reader must appreciate how the legal mandate to wear seat belts, together with decades of public service ads promoting seat belt use, have invested the seat belt, and in particular the act of buckling it, with ideas of safety, security, and protection, and with the guarantee of same. More knowledgeable readers may infer a general theme as to the importance of prudence, with obvious application to the idea of buying the remedy "just in case." For the almond ad, the reader needs to be familiar with the yellow happy face symbol, with the

idea of toppings as a way to improve food, and with croissants and their associations as a special or elite food within the breakfast category. More generally, the reader has to be comfortable with the idea that objects and things can experience human emotions and that food can be the source of happiness, as seen in countless ads for various packaged food products over the years.

## STUDY 1

This study is an experiment designed to test the impact on consumer elaboration of the four visual figures analyzed in the previous section. We first describe the computer-aided technique whereby the manipulations of visual figures were executed. Then we describe the experimental procedure and report the results of statistical tests.

### Stimuli Construction

The four test ads were based on actual magazine ads—for mascara, yogurt, a motion sickness remedy, and almonds—that were judged to contain instances of different visual figures and to be relevant to a student subject pool. A professional artist used a scanner and computer graphics software, first to duplicate the original ad, then to abstract the key elements that made up the visual figure, and finally to alter these according to our specifications (Table 1). Next, a fictitious brand name was devised for each, along with a matter-of-fact headline that claimed a key attribute for each brand (based on the verbal text of the original ad). Desktop publishing software and a color laser printer were used to print the resulting test ad on 8½ × 11 inch paper.

Each ad was produced in two versions, with the difference between the versions constituting the manipulation. Specifically, for each ad a small change to the visual element sufficient to remove or break the rhetorical figure was made using graphics software. For example, the original motion sickness ad for Dramamine constituted a visual metaphor in which the product package was depicted as the buckle of a seat belt. By moving the product package away from the belt, and incorporating a normal buckle, the metaphor is broken, but all the other elements represented in the picture, together with their associated semantic cues—car seat, seat belt, product package—are held constant across the manipulation. Similar manipulations were performed to remove the visual rhyme from the mascara ad, the visual antithesis from the yogurt ad, and the visual pun from the almond ad (see examples in Fig. 1 and discussion in Table 1). Hence, the stimuli include two schemes (rhyme, antithesis) and two tropes (metaphor, pun).<sup>3</sup>

### Subjects and Procedure

A total of 72 undergraduates at a private university in California participated in the experiment. Each subject received a folder containing ads accompanied by an answer booklet. The four test ads were administered in four coun-

<sup>2</sup>The authors by no means endorse these ideas; we only note their presence in the culture and their availability to readers seeking to interpret this ad.

<sup>3</sup>Copies of the stimuli can be obtained by writing the first author.

**FIGURE 1**

EXAMPLES OF THE VISUAL RHETORIC MANIPULATION



**SABLE MASCARA  
FOR RICHER LASHES**



**SABLE MASCARA  
FOR RICHER LASHES**



**MOTION SICKNESS?  
TAKE PRAMNOL ON YOUR  
NEXT CAR TRIP**



**MOTION SICKNESS?  
TAKE PRAMNOL ON YOUR  
NEXT CAR TRIP**

NOTE.—For each pair the illustration on the left shows the visual figure present (treatment), while the one on the right shows the corresponding control. The top pair of ads, for mascara, represent a scheme treatment; the bottom pair, for a motion sickness remedy, represent a trope treatment.

terbalanced orders. Figurative and nonfigurative treatments alternated within each order, so that each subject saw two ads with visual figures (these constituted the treatment condition for a given subject) and two without visual figures (the control condition). The specific ads that served as treatments and controls varied across orders. A warm-up ad always appeared first (two different ads, each appearing in two of the orders), to accustom subjects to the kind of stimuli and questions they would encounter.

Subjects were told that this was a study of advertising, that the ads they were going to see were in rough and unfinished form, and that this type of pretesting was common in the industry. They were encouraged to imagine they were encountering these ads in a magazine and to respond as naturally as possible. Each subject worked through the ads at their own pace, answering questions pertaining to an individual ad immediately after viewing it. These conditions of forced exposure were adopted to encourage subjects to act as astute readers of ad texts. Put differently, a failure to find the proposed effects under these favorable conditions would call into question the theoretical basis of the research. About 20 minutes were required to complete the study.

## Measures

*Manipulation and Confound Checks.* The perceived figurativeness of each ad served as a manipulation check, and this was measured by a seven-point semantic differential item corresponding to that used by McQuarrie and Mick (1996), anchored by “artful, clever”/“plain, matter-of-fact.” A single yes or no item was included as a confound check. For each ad, this item restated the attribute conveyed in the headline and asked whether this was what the ad was trying to convey (e.g., “Pramol prevents motion sickness”). This item was the last one completed for each ad. The purpose of this confound check was to ensure that the inclusion or removal of a visual figure did not unintentionally substitute a different focal brand attribute altogether, or convey the focal attribute to a disproportionately larger or smaller number of subjects.<sup>4</sup> Failure to meet a test of key attribute equivalence would undermine inferences about the treatment contrast; that is, it would suggest that differences in elaboration might be due to differential effectiveness in conveying the central brand attribute and not to the manipulation of ad style per se.

*Dependent Variables.* Elaboration was measured by six items designed to tap both imagistic and discursive responses. Imagistic responses were measured by three semantic differential items drawn from the vividness measure developed by Unnava and Burnkrant (1991), anchored by “provokes”/“does not provoke imagery,” “vivid”/“dull,” and “interesting”/“boring.” Discursive responses were measured by three items anchored by “I had many thoughts in response”/“I had few thoughts in response,” “the ad has multiple meanings”/“the ad has one meaning,” and “the ad

has rich, complex meaning(s)”/“the ad has simple meaning(s).” The six-item sum appears to be unidimensional (factor analysis revealed only one eigenvalue  $> 1$ ) and exhibits a high degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

## Results

For each of the four ads, the confound check showed that there was no significant difference in the extent to which the focal brand attribute was conveyed by versions with and without visual figures (all  $\chi^2 < 1.48$ ). Moreover, within-subjects comparisons using the manipulation check showed that the ads that received the visual figure treatment were perceived as significantly more artful and clever than the control ads ( $\bar{X}_{\text{treatment}} = 4.76$ ,  $\bar{X}_{\text{control}} = 3.55$ ,  $t(71) = 5.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, ads with visual figures also evoked more elaboration than the controls ( $\bar{X}_{\text{treatment}} = 4.06$ ,  $\bar{X}_{\text{control}} = 3.34$ ,  $t(71) = 3.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ). An examination of the four ads individually showed that all the mean differences were in the predicted direction, indicating that the overall effect was not dependent on one or two unusually effective ads.

*Treatment  $\times$  Treatment Interaction Effect.* In two of the orderings of stimuli the two ads with visual figures were tropes, while in the other two they were schemes. Hence, the interaction term in an ANOVA with one within-subjects factor (visual figure present or absent) and one between-subjects factor (figure treatment applied to schemes or tropes) provides a test of whether the impact of the visual rhetoric treatment is greater in the case of tropes. Although in the case of the manipulation check that measured figuration the pattern of means was as predicted (Table 2), the interaction did not achieve significance ( $F(1, 70) = 1.24$ , NS). Nonetheless, the expected pattern of mean differences was found, accompanied by a significant interaction term, for the elaboration measure ( $F(1, 70) = 24.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These latter results can be explained in terms of the more compelling invitation to elaborate offered by tropes, which are undercoded and incomplete in semiotic terms, such that subjects are drawn to further interpretation, both imagistic and discursive.

## Discussion

This initial experiment established that visual figures in advertising have the potential to alter the important consumer response of elaboration. The manipulation is arguably among the more subtle attempted for visual elements, certainly in comparison to such macroalterations as the removal of the visual element altogether (Edell and Staelin 1983) or the swapping out of depicted objects (Miniard et al. 1991; Mitchell and Olson 1981) or even the addition of color (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1996). The results testify to the acute sensitivity of consumers to both the visual element of advertising generally and to the presence of rhetorical figures specifically. In fact, we were able to demonstrate the elaboration effect using four different ads for a diverse set of low-cost consumer package goods. It appears then from this experiment that visual rhetorical

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that this confound check does not protect against the possibility that inclusion of a visual figure might provide other brand-attribute linkages besides the primary one.



TABLE 2  
RESULTS FOR STUDY 1

Variable	All		Scheme		Trope	
	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment
Confound check (%) <sup>a</sup>	81.1	86.8	85.9	90.3	76.4	83.3
Manipulation check <sup>b</sup>	3.55 (1.41)	4.76 (1.45)	3.96 (1.48)	4.58 (1.54)	3.14 (1.21)	4.93 (1.35)
Elaboration	3.34 (1.15)	4.06 (1.20)	3.97 (.99)	4.28 (1.26)	2.70 (.94)	3.83 (1.11)

NOTE.— $n = 72$ . SDs are given in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>The confound check indicates the percent of subjects in a cell who agreed that the ads making up that cell conveyed a specific attribute.

<sup>b</sup>The manipulation check took the form of a variable called figuration, measured by the item “artful, clever”/“plain, matter-of-fact.” Higher values indicate ratings toward the “artful, clever” end of the scale.

figures can be an effective stylistic device with wide applicability. Overall, the impact shown here is consistent with the frequent appearance of *verbal* figures in print advertising reported in the literature (Leigh 1994) and with prior work suggesting the potential effectiveness of visual figures (Abed 1994; Forceville 1995; Phillips 1997).

Of course, increased elaboration does not necessarily imply that consumers are persuaded by an ad. Research has shown that elaboration may indicate distraction if what is elaborated has nothing to do with the message intended by the advertiser. Thus, increased elaboration by itself may actually have a negative effect on persuasion, if the distraction is sufficiently strong. Hence, we undertook a second experiment that focused on whether visual rhetoric creates more positive or negative reactions. Because theorizing concerning rhetorical figures has emphasized their aesthetic properties, this second experiment focuses on  $A_{ad}$  as a dependent variable. If visual figures are processed as aesthetic objects, then, *ceteris paribus*, they should create pleasure for subjects, and this pleasure should be captured by a standard measure of  $A_{ad}$ .

The counterargument to this line of reasoning would be that visual figures are more difficult to comprehend. Within the Western tradition positive statements about the aesthetic value of rhetoric are balanced by negative statements that deride the needless complexity and intellectual vacuity of rhetorical constructions (Sperber and Wilson 1990). This derogatory stance can also be found in contemporary discussions of copy writing, which typically counsel against cuteness, cleverness, and gimmicks in general (e.g., Burton and Purvis 1996). If the benefits conveyed by visual figures come at a significant cost in terms of irritation or confusion, then their net effect on persuasion may be nil.

Taken together, measures of  $A_{ad}$  and comprehension difficulty enable the second experiment to adjudicate among a variety of competing explanations for the initial finding that visual figures produced greater elaboration. For example, positive findings for  $A_{ad}$  combined with a null result for comprehension difficulty would support our basic assertion about the communication gains potentially offered by visual figures as a stylistic device. Visual figures would then provide advantages—pleasure, greater engagement with

meanings—without substantial costs in terms of diminished comprehension from challenges in processing the figures. Conversely, null findings for  $A_{ad}$  in combination with a significant increase in comprehension difficulty would imply that the increased elaboration in the first experiment came about because subjects were puzzled by the visual figures. This combination of findings would suggest that visual figures, although they do affect consumer processing, do not on balance contribute to persuasion. Next, positive findings for both  $A_{ad}$  and comprehension difficulty would intimate that visual figures may sometimes be effective, but only in circumstances where the consumer is motivated, and has the opportunity, to overcome the hurdles of processing them (as commonly occurs in laboratory experiments). Lastly, null findings for both  $A_{ad}$  and difficulty would contest the findings of study 1 altogether, suggesting that they were artifactual.

Study 2 also provides an opportunity to investigate factors that might moderate the impact of visual rhetoric on  $A_{ad}$  and comprehension difficulty. The organizing theme for this set of boundary factors is competency, which was acknowledged earlier with respect to the fundamental theory of rhetoric and cultural analysis but not directly examined in study 1. As noted earlier, the pleasure of the text that visual rhetoric is supposed to produce requires some minimum level of competency on the part of readers. In other words, text creator and text reader must share common codes to some degree if the reader is to effectively interpret the text. Competency is also inversely related to difficulty, in that subjects with greater competency are likely to be more successful in processing intricate material and hence more likely to experience the pleasure of the visual figure. We explore three dimensions of competency in study 2.

The first dimension involves whether the consumer has a propensity or preference to engage in the processing of visual information *per se* (Childers, Houston, and Heckler 1985). Propensity to process visual information is important because the manipulation executed in these experiments can be easily ignored or missed. Because the nonvisual portions of the test ads are identical across treatments, a subject who lacks a propensity to process visual information may be less

sensitive to the experimental treatment, with respect to comprehension difficulty and/or  $A_{ad}$ .

A second dimension of competency rests on basic familiarity with the product category or benefit(s) being advertised. One of the test ads concerns a product used almost exclusively by women (mascara), while another concerns a benefit and appeal—lose weight to look your best—as well as a product (low-fat yogurt) typically directed at female audiences. Moreover, a third test ad addresses a condition (motion sickness) that is suffered by only a fraction of the population, for whom the proper medicinal benefits are likely to be salient and urgent. In all three cases, greater product and benefit familiarity imply more developed and differentiated knowledge schemata relative to the issues mentioned. In turn, that difference in knowledge may increase the probability that the subject will appreciate the meanings put in play by the visual figures and experience the pleasure of the text created thereby. Greater familiarity may also reduce difficulties in comprehending the visual figures, as more developed schemata increase the odds that the subject will understand why and how the visual portion of the ad has been arranged just so.

A third dimension of competency germane to visual figures is cultural competency. The importance and role of cultural knowledge in the processing of advertisements has been developed extensively by Scott (1994a, 1994b). According to her theorizing, cultural competency is necessary to appreciate the visual figures used in this research because many of the potentiated meanings require expertise concerning contemporary American culture, including its sophisticated advertising environment and English idiom, as can be seen from Table 1 and the text-interpretive analyses formulated earlier. Confronted by a visual figure in an American print ad, a person from a non-Western culture, especially one in which advertising is less advanced or conforms to different conventions, is less likely to enjoy, say, a product package used metaphorically as a seat buckle to emphasize safety, stability, and security as product benefits. However, and quite interestingly, a cultural competency deficit may or may not be manifest as a perceived difficulty or opacity in comprehending the test ad; rather, the person who lacks cultural competency may simply pass right over the cultural nuances on which the figure turns. Fewer meanings would then be unlocked, resulting in less pleasure.

A final purpose of study 2 is to address two limitations of the initial experiment. As a within-subjects design, the first experiment is susceptible to demand artifacts insofar as subjects may have guessed its purpose or focus and thereby generated findings concordant with our expectations. We included a demand check in study 2 in order to address this concern. Second, the results in study 1 with respect to the scheme versus trope comparison, which is essential to McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) framework and to this project, were inconclusive. In study 2 a larger sample is combined with the close look at three potential moderating factors (competencies) in order to permit a more definitive conclusion about the scheme versus trope distinction and its sus-

tainability as an important contribution to theorizing about visual figures.

## STUDY 2

### Sample and Procedure

Data were collected from undergraduate students at two sites, a large public university in the Midwest and the same private university in California as in study 1. In each case, subjects were recruited from class sections known to contain international students. A total of 187 subjects participated; after elimination of severely incomplete answer forms, responses from 181 subjects were available for analysis. Instructions and stimuli were the same as for study 1.

### Measures

*Manipulation, Confound, and Demand Checks.* We again used a seven-point semantic differential item anchored by "artful, clever"/"plain, matter-of-fact" as a manipulation check to assess the perceived figurativeness of ads. As in study 1, for purposes of a confound check subjects were also presented with a restatement of the attribute claimed by the headline and asked to check yes or no as to whether the ad had conveyed that message. However, when presented in isolation, as had been the case in study 1, there is the possibility that yea-saying bias would itself tend to eliminate differences between the treatment and control versions, thus undermining the credibility of this confound check. Hence, in study 2 we devised a believable but false claim for each ad, not congruent with either picture or headline (e.g., "Pramnol is used by millions of people every day"), to which subjects almost had to say no, and placed it before the key attribute claim, in an attempt to mitigate yea-saying bias. Lastly, as a check on demand artifacts, at the end of the study subjects were asked to explain what it was about.

*Dependent Variables.* Attitude-toward-the-ad was measured by the sum of three semantic differential scales, anchored by "liked"/"disliked," "unpleasant"/"pleasant," and "enjoyed"/"did not enjoy" ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Subjects also rated each ad's difficulty of comprehension using three semantic differential scales anchored by "easy to understand"/"difficult to understand," "straightforward"/"confusing," and "the meaning is certain"/"the meaning is ambiguous" ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Visual Style of Processing.* Childers et al. (1985) developed their style of processing (SOP) measure to distinguish individuals who prefer to process information visually from those who prefer to process verbally. The SOP consists of 22 items (e.g., "My thinking often consists of mental pictures or images") rated on a four-point scale ("always true"/"always false") and intended to be summed. Half the items assess preference for visual processing and half for verbal processing, which are assumed to lie at opposite ends of a continuum. Unfortunately, in pilot testing we were unable to obtain opposing scores for the visual and verbal subscales;

in fact, there was no linear relationship between them ( $n = 54$ ,  $r = .04$ , NS). Hence, for purposes of examining the interaction between visual style of processing and the effectiveness of the visual rhetoric treatment, we used only the sum of the 11-item subscale that measured visual processing ( $\alpha = .70$ ), with the sample split at the median of this measure to create a between-subjects factor.

*Additional Blocking Factors.* We also split the sample on some additional between-subjects factors to test the other moderating variables corresponding to the theme of competency. These included sex of subject (56 percent were female), whether the subject had ever suffered motion sickness (43 percent stated “never”), and the subject’s original culture (foreign or American). The latter was assessed by having subjects list all the languages they could speak and the age at which they learned to speak each one. Non-native English speakers were 32 percent of the sample, and most of these (51 of 58) grew up speaking an Asian language. The cultural homes of these individuals thus represent economic environments (e.g., China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam) where advertising is neither as pervasive nor as highly developed as in the United States and where the products featured in the ads may themselves be uncommon.

## Analyses

Each subject viewed one visual trope, one visual scheme, and two ads without visual figures. Which ad carried a trope or scheme varied across orders. The 2 (mode of figuration)  $\times$  2 (visual figure present or absent) within-subjects interaction serves as a test of whether visual tropes have a more powerful impact than visual schemes. In addition, various between-subjects factors as described above were used to test for interactions indicating a moderating role for competency.

## Results

*Manipulation, Confound, and Demand Checks.* The manipulation check showed that the ads receiving the visual figure treatment were again judged to be significantly more artful and clever than the controls ( $\bar{X}_{\text{treatment}} = 4.33$ ,  $\bar{X}_{\text{control}} = 3.62$ ,  $t(180) = 5.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As before, the confound check showed that there was no significant difference in the extent to which treatment and control versions of an ad communicated the key brand attribute (all  $\chi^2$ s  $< 1$ ). Inasmuch as the patently false claim that preceded the key brand claim was checked no in about 95 percent of cases, this null result does not appear to be an artifact of yeasaying bias. Finally, when subjects were asked to explain what they thought the study was about, no one made any reference to alterations in the pictorial portion of the ads, or to figures of speech, humor, metaphor, or any rhetorical notion, suggesting that no one guessed the hypotheses of the study.

*Treatment Effects.* Before assessing possible interactions,  $t$ -tests for paired observations were conducted on  $A_{\text{ad}}$  and difficulty of comprehension. These showed that ads

receiving the visual figure treatment produced a significantly more positive attitude than the control ads ( $\bar{X}_{\text{treatment}} = 4.63$ ,  $\bar{X}_{\text{control}} = 4.10$ ,  $t(180) = 4.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), without being any more difficult to understand ( $\bar{X}_{\text{treatment}} = 2.69$ ,  $\bar{X}_{\text{control}} = 2.73$ ,  $t(180) = -.37$ , NS).

*Block  $\times$  Treatment Interactions.* Each blocking factor was examined in turn, first with respect to  $A_{\text{ad}}$  and then with respect to difficulty of comprehension. For  $A_{\text{ad}}$ , visual style of processing did not interact with the manipulation ( $F < 1$ ), indicating that favorable responses to visual figures did not depend on a preference or propensity for processing visual information. Next we considered the within-subjects comparison between the mascara and the yogurt ad (the orders were such that for each subject, when one ad received the manipulation, the other did not), with gender as a between-subjects variable. Again, no significant interaction was found ( $F < 1$ ), indicating that subjects likely to differ in their degree of product/benefit familiarity were nonetheless equally able to derive enjoyment from the visual rhetoric. This finding was replicated in a totally between-subjects design that examined  $A_{\text{ad}}$  for the motion sickness product. Using a 2  $\times$  2 design that crossed the visual figure manipulation with the presence or absence of prior experience of motion sickness, we again found no significant interaction ( $F(1, 177) = 1.31$ , NS). Lastly, we examined the interaction involving foreign versus American subjects as an indicator of cultural competency with respect to American advertising. Here we found a significant interaction ( $F(1, 179) = 4.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ), such that the treatment effect is minimal among foreign subjects (see Table 3).<sup>5</sup> This suggests that the impact of visual figures is in part a function of adequate levels of cultural competency.

We repeated these analyses using difficulty of comprehension as the dependent variable. In no case was there a significant interaction between any of the blocking factors and the manipulation. In the case of foreign subjects there was a main effect, such that relative to American subjects they found all the test ads—both treatments and controls—to be somewhat more difficult to comprehend ( $F(1, 179) = 3.68$ ,  $p < .06$ ). This is confirmed by a reanalysis of the confound check, which showed that foreign subjects were significantly less likely than American subjects to register the key brand attribute (87.5 percent vs. 93 percent,  $\chi^2 = 5.1$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but that this slight failure to register the key attribute was constant across treatment and control ads ( $\chi^2 < 1$ ). Taken together, the difficulty measure and the confound check show that foreign subjects making their way in American culture did find all the test stimuli somewhat more refractory, as might be expected, but did not find ads with or without visual figures to be any more or less difficult to comprehend.

*Treatment  $\times$  Treatment Interactions.* With the larger sample and an all within-subjects design of study 2, we were

<sup>5</sup>After obtaining this result we reexamined the other two blocking factors in a series of three-way interactions that included culture of origin. Both of the other two-way block  $\times$  treatment interactions, involving style of processing and product/benefit familiarity, remained insignificant.

**TABLE 3**  
RESULTS FOR STUDY 2

Variable	<i>n</i>	Confound check <sup>a</sup>		Manipulation check <sup>b</sup>		<i>A</i> <sub>ad</sub>		Difficulty	
		Control (%)	Treatment (%)	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment
All subjects	181	91.2	91.4	3.62 (1.32)	4.33 (1.41)	4.10 (1.16)	4.63 (1.14)	2.73 (1.21)	2.69 (1.26)
Trope		90.6	90.6	3.35 (1.84)	4.29 (1.93)	3.83 (1.48)	4.56 (1.52)	2.85 (1.65)	2.75 (1.60)
Scheme		91.7	92.3	3.88 (1.69)	4.38 (1.72)	4.37 (1.67)	4.71 (1.60)	2.61 (1.60)	2.63 (1.48)
American subjects	123	93.5	92.7	3.59 (1.34)	4.40 (1.44)	3.98 (1.17)	4.69 (1.11)	2.67 (1.21)	2.56 (1.19)
Trope		93.5	91.9	3.30 (1.83)	4.50 (1.90)	3.64 (1.45)	4.71 (1.44)	2.86 (1.69)	2.60 (1.51)
Scheme		93.5	93.5	3.87 (1.70)	4.29 (1.69)	4.32 (1.68)	4.66 (1.64)	2.48 (1.51)	2.51 (1.41)
Foreign subjects	58	86.2	88.8	3.68 (1.27)	4.20 (1.35)	4.37 (1.11)	4.52 (1.19)	2.86 (1.21)	2.97 (1.36)
Trope		84.5	87.9	3.47 (1.87)	3.83 (1.92)	4.26 (1.48)	4.24 (1.64)	2.81 (1.59)	3.05 (1.74)
Scheme		87.9	89.6	3.90 (1.69)	4.57 (1.79)	4.48 (1.67)	4.80 (1.51)	2.90 (1.77)	2.90 (1.58)

NOTE.—SDs are given in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>The confound check indicates the percent of subjects in a cell who agreed that the ads making up that cell conveyed a specific attribute.

<sup>b</sup>The manipulation check took the form of a variable called figuration, measured by the item "artful, clever"/"plain, matter-of-fact." Higher values indicate ratings toward the "artful, clever" end of the scale.

able to obtain a significant interaction for the manipulation check that measured figuration ( $F(1,180) = 4.07, p < .05$ ). That is, tropes were judged to be significantly more artful than schemes (Table 3). Perhaps more interesting, when cultural competency is added as a blocking factor, the three-way interaction is also significant ( $F(1, 179) = 5.83, p < .05$ ). As can be seen from Table 3, foreign subjects appreciate the artfulness of the overcoded visual schemes to about the same degree as American subjects, but foreign subjects do not find the under-coded tropes to be particularly artful or clever. Examining  $A_{ad}$  as the dependent variable, the trope by scheme interaction examined in isolation was only marginally significant ( $p = .08$ ). However, when cultural competency is added as a blocking factor, the three-way interaction is significant ( $F(1, 179) = 5.52, p = .05$ ), confirming that for the American students, who are familiar with the culture of American advertising, visual tropes have an even more positive impact on  $A_{ad}$ , relative to their controls, than visual schemes, relative to their controls (Table 3). By contrast, as can be seen from Figure 2, foreign subjects are particularly unappreciative of visual tropes—in their case the manipulation had no effect on  $A_{ad}$ . No other blocking factor interacted significantly with the trope versus scheme distinction when applied to  $A_{ad}$ . Moreover, there was no trope by scheme interaction in the case of difficulty of comprehension, nor did any blocking factor enter into an interaction involving this dependent variable.

## Discussion

Visual rhetoric appears to be a subtle but powerful device capable of producing a more positive attitude toward the ad

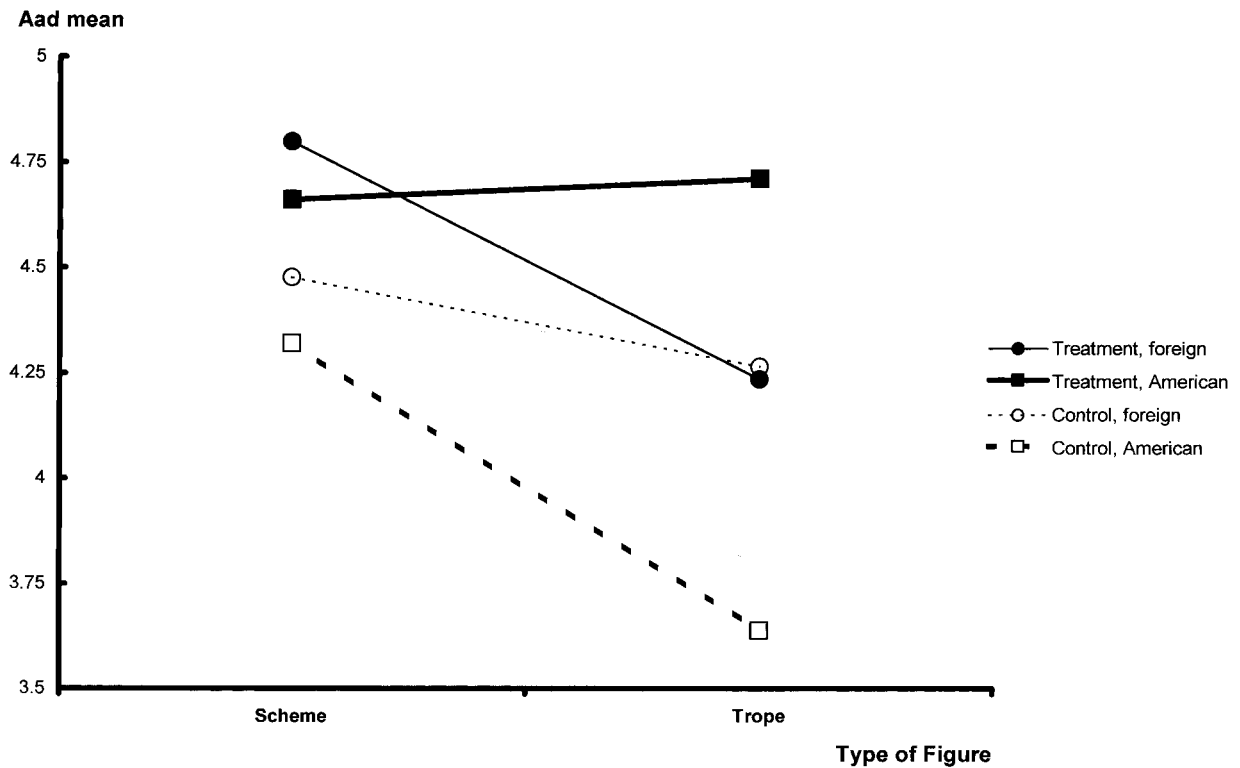
associated with a surplus of favorable over unfavorable elaboration. Moreover, the positive impact of visual rhetoric does not come at any obvious cost—ad versions with visual rhetoric are no less effective at communicating a key brand attribute, and are no more difficult to understand. The treatment effect for visual rhetoric is also well behaved, inasmuch as it conforms to the model presented in McQuarrie and Mick (1996), with the visual tropes in this study able to produce a more positive attitude than visual schemes, provided cultural competency is adequate.

Analysis of the three competency factors provides some insight into boundary conditions for the impact of visual rhetoric in advertising. Somewhat to our surprise, the measure of the propensity to process visual information had no effect. Several explanations are possible. It might be that the visual figures used in this experiment were so salient, and/or the stimuli were so simple, that no special propensity to process visual information was necessary to apprehend and respond to the visual figures. Results might be different if much more complex visual stimuli were used. Alternatively, the forced exposure conditions may have washed out any difference caused by the propensity to process visual information. In any case, this experiment does not support the proposition that visual rhetoric can only succeed in the case of a "visualizer" segment of consumers (see Rossiter and Percy 1980).

Our investigation of the role of product/benefit familiarity—via gender of subject and prior experience of motion sickness—similarly showed no impact for this factor. It appears that one does not have to be a product user or

FIGURE 2

ATTITUDE TOWARD THE AD: INTERACTION BETWEEN CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND SCHEME VERSUS TROPE DISTINCTION



NOTE.—The absolute values of the means shown are immaterial, inasmuch as the trope and scheme manipulations were executed in different ads for different product categories. The analysis focuses on the relative size of the treatment versus control differences across conditions and populations.

prospective purchaser in order to understand the visual figures used to advertise the products in question in this experiment. Possibly the gendered products were not gendered enough—that is, the schemata required to process the ads were available to both genders. Products used in private by one gender might have yielded a stronger effect. Of course, other approaches to familiarity than those used here can be envisioned. A study that distinguished, say, long-time users from novices within a technical product category and applied a visual figure that was more intimately entwined with the specialized meanings or professional argot associated with that product category might show a significant moderator effect for product familiarity.

By contrast, cultural competency emerges as an important moderating factor, especially in the case of visual tropes. Despite being implemented in the form of pictures rather than words, there is no evidence that particular instances of visual tropes (here, metaphor and pun) are equally effective for consumers from different cultures. The meanings provoked by visual tropes are not on the page or in the picture but rather require an active construal by the reader, a construal that requires a body of cultural knowledge before it can occur. These results are generally supportive of Scott's (1994a, 1994b) theory, though the data regarding visual schemes are less so, as will be discussed subsequently.

Two issues remain to be clarified. The first of these

revisits the text-interpretive analyses presented earlier. The experiments themselves provide no direct evidence that the subjects elaborated the ads in the ways suggested. A more sensitive elicitation technique is required to determine whether the text interpretations are but figments of the semiotician's imagination or instead correspond to consumers' actual reactions. If consumers do elaborate on the ads in ways roughly consistent with the text-interpretive analysis, then a more secure attribution of the treatment effects to the visual figures, and to the meanings set in play thereby, can be forged. To this end, we undertook phenomenological interviews with a small number of informants, as described in study 3 below. Second, these interviews also allow us to follow up on the intriguing findings concerning cultural competency. It appears that subjects with less knowledge of American culture simply did not apprehend the meanings set into play by the visual tropes in the study. Here again, a more thorough and sensitive exploration of the meanings actually drawn from the ads would have value in replicating and clarifying the nature of the impact of cultural competency as a moderating factor.

### STUDY 3

A dozen undergraduate students from a private university in California were recruited to participate in interviews

conducted by a graduate assistant. The interviewer gave each subject a portfolio containing five ad stimuli. The first of these was a practice ad that did not contain a visual figure, while the remainder were copies of the four ad stimuli that had contained visual figures used in the two previous experiments. For each ad subjects were asked what meanings that ad suggested to them and what it said to them. A nondirective interviewing style was used throughout. No meanings were suggested to subjects, and they were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and that we were interested in whatever occurred to them as they looked over the ads. After all the meanings for an ad were elicited, the interviewer then queried the informant about which aspects of the ad had given rise to the meanings mentioned.

Four of these informants were American females, four were American males, and four were foreign females native to an Asian country. Comparison of the first two sets of interviews against the third is useful for exploring the effect of cultural competency found in study 2, while comparison of the first and third sets against the second assists in exploring the null effect for product/benefit familiarity found in study 2. Overall, analysis of these interviews is intended to provide a reader-response perspective to complement the text-interpretive and experimental analyses reported earlier. We expected the responses of these informants, who were able to peruse the ads at leisure and speak freely and at length, to contribute to tracing the process—opening the black box—whereby visual figures achieve their impact.

The four interviews with American females illuminate how culturally competent informants readily notice and appreciate the visual figures in the ads. For instance, encountering the visual rhyme in the Mascara ads, two of these informants remarked:

The fur creates an effect like lashes. . . . She's very seductive, mysterious. (Informant no. 1)

The eyelashes go very well with the mink coat. . . . The way that the mink looks, looks like the eyelashes. (Informant no. 2)

Similarly, these informants understood both the contrast and the parallelism that make up the visual antithesis in the yogurt ad. For example:

Odd position of shapes, how she's so thin and how the ball is so fat. . . . The ball is curved to the right so my eye automatically veers to the right, drifts over, so I see the woman and her curves are kind of sexy. (Informant no. 1)

The colors in the swimsuit and the colors in the ball are relating the two shapes. (Informant no. 3)

These informants readily drew expected inferences from the visual pun in the almond ad as well.

They've formed this happy face on the second plate, kind of conveying the message that it's somehow better, makes you happier. (Informant no. 4)

That's really cute. . . . This one is obviously a smiley face, the happy croissant, saying these almonds are going to make your breakfast a lot different. (Informant no. 3)

Lastly, the American female informants grasped and ap-

preciated the visual metaphor in the ad for the motion sickness remedy.

Eye catching . . . kind of creative because it is taking something that is familiar and relates to the product and kind of combines them both at the same time. (Informant no. 3)

I get a meaning of safety, I think because they're using a safety belt with the product. (Informant no. 4)

Turning now to the American male informants and focusing on the two gendered products, mascara and low-fat yogurt, the interviews illuminate how these males, presumably less familiar with the mascara product category and with weight-loss products and appeals generally, nonetheless are able to generate some of the same meanings as the American female respondents with respect to the visual rhyme and visual antithesis in the mascara and yogurt ads, respectively.

For richer lashes, I equate the fur obviously, all the very dense texture, rich, full, I associate that with her eyelashes. (Informant no. 5)

Has that mysterious look. . . . The fur on the shawl and the hat really bring out the eye lashes. . . . Use our product and you will be more pretty. (Informant no. 6)

I like how they have a slender body on one side and a big fat round ball on the other. . . . The ad is saying eat Sophie's yogurt and you won't look like a beach ball. (Informant no. 7)

Hence, American informants, both female and male, readily played the role of active and capable readers of these ad texts.

With the foreign female informants, our primary concern is to see whether they engaged with the visual schemes while failing to appreciate the visual tropes. We found, as suggested by study 2, that these foreign students were generally able to appreciate the visual schemes. For instance, one informant noted, in the case of the mascara ad, that "the reason why they use fur is because they want to make parallel between the length of the lashes and the fur itself" (Informant no. 9, Indonesian), while another noted, in the case of the yogurt ad, "[It is] comparing a beach ball, a heavy person, and the person eating the yogurt is the thin one" (Informant no. 10, Vietnamese). The visual tropes, by contrast, caused problems, leading to aberrant readings, misinterpretations, and/or a simple failure to enjoy the figure, as shown by these quotes:

That [croissant] looks like a foot, [while the other] is obviously a smiley face. . . . Is it because they have the almond on it so it becomes a happy face, and if you don't have the almonds, then you're not happy and you become a stinky foot? (Informant no. 11, Taiwanese, with respect to the visual pun in the almond ad)

They use the box as a buckle for the belt to strap you down for people that get sick easily. I guess they shouldn't show a seat belt even though they are unbuckling it. . . . They have to get strapped down to relieve their anxiety. They shouldn't show a seat belt. Even though it shows that they are unbuckling it, still shows that you're strapped down. It doesn't say much just by the picture. (Informant no. 10, Vietnamese, regarding the visual metaphor in the motion sickness ad)

It just doesn't make sense at all. . . . I've never seen someone in their private car get motion sickness. Americans

are so used to driving. . . . Driving shouldn't be a problem for most Americans. (Informant no. 9, Indonesian, regarding the visual metaphor in the motion sickness ad)

From a semiotic viewpoint, these visual tropes function as closed texts for these foreign readers (Eco 1979). Lacking the necessary cultural background, the quotes show these foreign informants struggling to resolve and appreciate the text of these visual tropes. Thus, for example, the fact that the box containing the motion sickness remedy has been substituted for a seat belt buckle is basically apparent to the foreign informants; they know of course that a seat belt is a safety device; but the polysemic interaction of these two ideas never fully develops.

In sum, these interviews provide reader-response analyses to supplement the findings of the two experiments. The interviews show the informants variously noting and responding to visual figures. They also show the American informants elaborating several of the meanings of these visual figures along lines suggested by the earlier text-interpretive analysis. In combination, the experiments and reader-response analyses support the conclusion that visual figures have a positive impact on consumer response, that it is the figures that act as the causal agent in producing this impact and that the positive impact is achieved by steering competent consumers to read the text of the ads in particular ways.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Only in recent years have consumer researchers begun to treat visual imagery in advertising as something other than a peripheral cue or a simple means of affect transfer. Today the visual element is understood to be an essential, intricate, meaningful, and culturally embedded characteristic of contemporary marketing communication. However, detailed theoretical specifications for ad imagery have yet to be fully constructed. In pursuit of this goal, the rhetorical figure emerges from this project as a general principle of text structure that can be embodied in visual texts as well as verbal texts (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). In particular, we showed that the artful deviation characteristic of figures, and also the over- and undercoding that produces schemes and tropes, can be constructed out of pictorial elements in advertising.

Our text-interpretive analysis of four magazine ads suggested that their pictorial elements comprised a variety of rhetorical forms (rhyme, antithesis, metaphor, and pun) and different types of signs (iconic, indexical, and symbolic) so as to evoke a diverse set of meanings about the brand and/or user (e.g., sophistication, beauty, safety, fun). Two experimental analyses showed that these four ads, as compared to the same ads with the visual figures broken or removed, stimulated more elaboration and a more positive attitude toward the ad. Moreover, the effect of visual rhetoric was robust over different samples, across different ad executions, and over multiple product categories. Visual figures, like the more familiar verbal figures (Leigh 1994), would appear to deserve a place among the executional devices

available to advertisers that have a consistent and reliable impact on consumer response. This study provides additional empirical support for the theoretical taxonomy developed by McQuarrie and Mick (1996) and underscores its generality, inasmuch as we found the distinctions they proposed for ad language to also hold true when embodied in visual form.

The main boundary condition we uncovered is that the consumer must be sufficiently acculturated to the rhetorical and semiotic systems within which the advertising text is situated; that is, s/he must be a culturally competent processor of the advertising message. However, although this was notably true for visual tropes, it did not condition responses to visual schemes. This finding both corroborates and refines Scott's (1994a) provocative theory. She argued that ad visuals should not be conceived as photocopies of a pancultural reality; rather, they are often highly stylized representations that compel consumers to engage ads as meaningful texts that require an active reading in accordance with an existing stock of sociocultural insights. This is precisely what we found with respect to the visual tropes that require intricate semantic knowledge structures concerning the objects, activities, and products artfully depicted in the ads (e.g., car seat, safety belt and buckle, and motion sickness medicine; croissants, almonds, and the smiling "have-a-nice-day" face). In contrast, all subjects and informants—foreign nationals as well as Americans—seemed to appreciate the schematic visuals that are constructed by similarities and/or differences in such surface features as shapes, sizes, and colors (e.g., black fur coat, black fur hat, and thick black eye lashes). The robustness of the effect for schemes may stem from a pattern-recognition ability basic to human visual perception. Alternatively, the cultural perspective can be reasserted if it is argued that the experimental subjects were all members of literate cultures, who know how to interpret duplicate or mirror-image elements on a page. Had the experiments included members of primitive preliterate cultures, then perhaps the schemes as well as the tropes would have been shown to be dependent on cultural knowledge, of a very general sort in the case of schemes and of a much more specific and localized sort in the case of tropes. In either case, our data suggest that Scott's (1994a, 1994b) theory about the role of cultural competency in processing advertising rhetoric appears correct with respect to tropic rhetorical operations that are strongly dependent on sociocultural semantic knowledge but may be less germane to schematic rhetorical operations determined by structural regularities.

Lastly, in study 3 the reader-response analysis with 12 interviewees revealed some of the actual meanings that consumers generate when processing the four rhetorical ads in the experimental studies. It reconfirmed that those who were less culturally attuned to American society and advertising were less likely to appreciate the visual tropes, as compared to the visual schemes, in light of the meanings reflected in the earlier text-interpretive analysis.

Overall, in concert with some prior work, our research testifies to the acute sensitivity of consumers to the visual element in advertising. The present research also advances

prior work in several respects. Like Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1992, 1996) within the experimental tradition, we showed how very subtle alterations to the visual elements of an ad can, nonetheless, have a measurable impact on consumer responses. Unlike them, our suite of visual manipulations was generated by a theoretical specification that integrates and differentiates a range of possible alterations to the visual style of an ad under the concept of a rhetorical figure. Moreover, like Forceville (1995), McQuarrie (1989), Mick and Buhl (1992), Phillips (1997), and Scott (1994a, 1994b) within the text-interpretive and reader-response approaches, we postulated that consumers encounter advertisements as active readers of texts; that visual elements can be structured as rhetorical devices; and that a sufficient stock of cultural knowledge is required to interpret the rhetorical structure assembled by the advertiser. Unlike them, however, we conducted an experimental investigation to provide more secure causal inferences concerning how particular visual elements in advertisements would map onto specific consumer responses. Lastly, going beyond prior studies of visual persuasion, we attempted to synthesize the strengths of the text-interpretive, experimental, and reader-response approaches, and demonstrated how this union can be achieved, along with the benefits it can provide to the development of advertising theory.

### Limitations and Future Research

Of course, this work has certain limitations that require acknowledgement and more attention in subsequent research. As an investigation of McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) taxonomy of rhetorical figures, our two experiments are strongest and the findings most robust in relation to the top level of the taxonomy (figuration vs. nonfiguration), where we sampled and manipulated four instances of visual figures. At the next level, the scheme versus trope contrast is weaker, with only two examples of each (one schematic operation of repetition and one schematic operation of reversal vs. two tropic operations of destabilization). At the lowest level—specific rhetorical operations and individual figures—there was little opportunity to test comparisons (e.g., metaphors vs. puns), inasmuch as there was only one instance of each individual figure examined in this project.<sup>6</sup> These limitations came about partly from a need for parsimony and tractability in the experimental designs we used. Nevertheless, future research might include new ads with examples of all four rhetorical operations, in addition to multiple instances of specific rhetorical figures, to facilitate further comparisons.

More generally, it should be kept in mind that the positive impacts demonstrated here for figurative over nonfigurative treatments, and for tropic over schematic treatments, are not deterministic, necessary, or guaranteed. Rather, they are probabilistic and manifest only under *ceteris paribus* condi-

tions. Thus, an ad making a literal claim for an important brand attribute should generally have a more positive impact on  $A_{ad}$  than one making a figurative claim for an unimportant attribute. Similarly, it should be possible to find individual schemes that are superior to individual tropes. This may occur because the trope is too complicated or simply because the scheme in question is especially artful and the trope somewhat maladroit. The latter point is particularly important for understanding the limitations that constrain the experimental findings. Each of the visual figures constructed for this study was designed to be an exemplary instance of its type. Although we have emphasized the competency required on the part of consumers to process these figures, competency is also required on the part of ad creators. A rhetorical figure that is clumsy, opaque, or lame is unlikely to have a positive impact on  $A_{ad}$ . Only artful deviations will have the positive impacts hypothesized in McQuarrie and Mick (1996) and empirically demonstrated here.

On a different point, we did not demonstrate that replacing, say, the visual pun in the almond ad with a verbal pun conveying the same brand attribute would, in turn, produce the same impact on consumer response. This limits our ability to assert that, for instance, a pun is a pun, whether visual or verbal, with the same characteristic impact. Hence, the claim that rhetorical figures function as general, cross-modal principles underlying persuasion must still be treated cautiously. Future experimental research using new manipulations that enable a cross-modal test would constitute an important advance in our understanding of the basic theory of rhetoric and its applicability across processing modes.

From the standpoint of semiotics our manipulation of visual figures only scratches the surface of the sort of delicate text architecture that can be envisioned (and that routinely occurs in actual advertisements). For example, McQuarrie's (1989) work suggests that highly visual ads typically have a unity or interaction of elements that is at least as important as the individual elements themselves. Moreover, Mick and Politi (1989), Phillips (1997), Scott (1994a, 1994b), and Stern (1989) suggest that many ads are story-like, that is, they harbor an implication of a consumer problem, a potential effort or response, and a resolution. Future experimental work on visual ads needs also to consider these additional aspects of rhetorical structure in order to determine their effects.

Future research should also examine alternatives to a forced exposure setting. The effects we observed might actually be stronger in lower involvement conditions since one of the purposes of rhetorical figures is to incite consumer participation in the generation of ad meanings. Conversely, in lower involvement conditions the impact of a subtle rhetorical figure might be lost altogether.

Another avenue for future research would be to further refine the conceptualization and operationalization of cultural competency with respect to consumers reading ads. In a global business environment and in a pluralistic, multicultural society such as America, it is important to understand what kinds of stylistic devices are most culturally bound and which dimensions of culture are most pertinent

<sup>6</sup>Note that McQuarrie and Mick (1996) argue that the lowest level of the taxonomy is not the most fruitful theoretical domain to examine; in particular, individual rhetorical figures are not conceived as having distinctive causal impacts.



for discovering the factors that moderate the effectiveness of particular stylistic devices. For instance, would two different subcultures within American society (e.g., Hispanics, elderly) necessarily process visual figures similarly, even in the case of advertised products that were equally applicable to each of these market segments? What makes one group a set of model readers (cf. Eco 1979) for a visually rhetorical ad, and the other not? Refinement of the ideas of cultural competency and model readers would build on the insight shared by semioticians and reader-response theorists that the meanings of an ad are not out there in the text but arise from an interaction between text structure and the amalgam of sociocultural and personal knowledge brought to bear by the reader. Further delineation of cultural competency and model readers in the context of systematic manipulations of different aspects of advertising style would provide one means of advancing this insight.

A final avenue of research might examine the darker side of rhetoric, namely, its cunning and potential to mislead. This danger is characteristic of any stylistic device that argues its point tacitly rather than explicitly (Messaris 1992; Stern 1992), as was first noted long ago (see the historical sketch in Marchand [1985]). It would be interesting to know whether a visual figure could quickly and successfully convey an unjustified product claim that could not legally be made with words. Using a response-time paradigm for the study of inferences (cf. Kardes 1988), in the context of visual rhetoric manipulations, might further demonstrate that figures have a distinctive power for self-generated persuasion. This would entail important new implications for advertising ethics and regulation, reminiscent of the debates that have surrounded the general field of rhetoric since the time of Plato.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to understand in a more refined and systematic manner the persuasive impact of visual style in advertising, using explanations offered by rhetorical theory. In turn, the melding of text-interpretive, experimental, and reader-response traditions reinforces the promise of critical pluralism as a philosophy for generating new insights into consumer behavior.

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