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Thinking Into It: Consumer Interpretation of Complex Advertising Images

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The qualitative study reported is based on a new conceptualization that characterizes complex advertising images as figures of rhetoric from which consumers infer advertising messages. Informants interpreted the meanings of six ads containing pictorial metaphors. The interpretations indicated that shared strong implicatures as well as multiple weak implicatures were drawn from images in the ads. In general, consumers' interpretations matched the intentions of the ads' producers. Informant responses also suggested that consumers use cultural, product, and advertising knowledge to infer meaning from advertising images.

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A splash of Bacardi rum superimposes tropical windsurfers on an icy winter snowscape. Aussie shampoo transforms a moth into a butterfly. A turtle carrying a box of Winston Select cigarettes tells consumers, "Take your time." Those images are a few of the vast array of vivid, imaginative, and fantastic images being used in current advertising practice. Yet despite the increasing use of complex visual images in advertisements (Dyer 1982; Scott 1993), little research has been done to determine how consumers read and interpret them.

Previous advertising research generally has tested simple, literal advertising images as affective or peripheral cues (for a review, see Scott 1994a), and has studied the effect of such images on consumers' interpretations of verbal copy (e.g., Houston, Childers, and Heckler 1987). A recently developed theory, however, provides new insight to the use of complex advertising images by conceptualizing them as figures of rhetoric that provide information and persuasive messages to consumers (Scott 1994a). This paper explores that conceptualization by studying how consumers interpret complex visual images in advertising. Because many ads rely solely on visual images to present the advertising message, such a study is needed to improve our understanding of consumer response to advertising.

In addition, the study compares consumers' interpretations with the intent of the ads' producers, copywriters, and art directors to identify similarities or differences that add insight about the interpretation process. These two voices, consumer and creative, often have been silent when researchers previously have examined advertising images (Kover 1995; Mick and Buhl 1992).

Rhetorical Approaches to Advertising Images

Rhetoric, or the formal elements of an argument used to persuade an audience, has been the foundation of the study of verbal persuasion since the time of the ancient Greeks (Ong 1982). In recent years, the rhetorical approach has become popular for explaining how visual advertising images are understood by consumers. McQuarrie and Mick (1996) provide a framework for that approach by defining advertising rhetoric as an expression that systematically deviates from expectation through a departure from convention. They and other researchers (Scott 1994a) propose that through interactions with advertising, consumers learn how to respond to such de-
vations from expectation. If an ad does not make literal sense, consumers may assume that figurative ideas are being used, and process the ad according to learned cultural conventions. For example, the image of a teddy bear, Snuggle, is used to sell fabric softener. Consumers probably realize that the image is not to be taken literally; the advertiser does not want consumers to think that a bear will soften their laundry. Rather, consumers may understand the ad as a "figure of thought" (Scott 1994b, p. 469) that must be processed according to learned cultural rules.

McQuarrie and Mick (1996) describe several types of advertising rhetoric, such as metaphor and pun. They propose that consumer processing may differ according to the type of rhetoric used; therefore, this study investigates only one type of visual advertising rhetoric, pictorial metaphor. Pictorial metaphor was chosen because prior conceptual work provided grounding for the research. Most notably, Forceville (1994, 1995) developed a theory of pictorial metaphor supported by a study with a small group of literature and linguistics professors as informants. The current study goes beyond Forceville's work by exploring his and other researchers' propositions about pictorial metaphor and the nature of the interpretive process, and by eliciting interpretations from a target group of consumers unschooled in rhetoric.

Pictorial Metaphor

Verbal metaphor is an oft-studied figure of persuasive rhetoric (e.g., Black 1979) also examined by advertising researchers (Stern 1990; Ward and Gaidis 1990). A metaphor asserts a similarity between two terms that one does not expect to be associated, thus creating new implications (McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Tanaka 1994). A metaphor compares two objects through analogy by stating that one object is figuratively like the other object, even though the two are literally very different (Stern 1990). However, once the comparison is made, the similarity between the two objects becomes understood as reasonable (Salomon 1979). For example, Budweiser asserts that it is the King of Beer, implying that its brand rules the industry.

Only recently has it been theorized that advertising images create metaphors in the same way as advertising words. For example, Scott (1994a) describes a Clinique ad in which a lipstick is submerged in an icy glass of soda water. Her verbal translation of the pictorial metaphor is "the product, Clinique lipstick, is a refreshing glass of soda water." Although that conclusion may seem obvious, extensive cognitive processing and abstract thought are required to comprehend the metaphor (cf. Kardes 1988). Consumers must interpret and transfer relevant properties from one image to another while ignoring irrelevant similarities. The ensuing meaning of the image is called the "implicature."

Implicature

Sperber and Wilson (1986) define an implicature as information that is implicitly communicated to an audience. Implicatures are inferred by readers to provide meaning for a message. For example, Snuggle, the fabric softener teddy bear, is thought to elicit the implicature of "softness." Inferred meanings can be divided further into "strong" and "weak" implicatures (Forceville 1995). A strong implicature is the main or obvious meaning in a message. Such conclusions "made so strongly manifest that the hearer can scarcely avoid recovering them" (Sperber and Wilson 1986, p. 194). For example, the turtle in the Winston cigarette ad may elicit the strong implicature "slow."

Weak implicatures are less obvious. The consumer must "leap to conclusions" to derive them. In advertising, weak implicatures can be intended by advertisers or can be consumers' idiosyncratic readings of an ad's images based on specific personal knowledge (Tanaka 1994). For example, if consumers conclude that turtles have a long life span, they may decide that the message of the Winston ad is that the company has been in business for a long time.

Consumers are likely to develop implicatures by using problem-solving strategies to examine the message context and draw on relevant stored knowledge (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Such knowledge may include cultural, product, and advertising information. Cultural knowledge may enable consumers to rely on the meanings of symbols and cliches to draw implicatures from advertising images (McCracken 1986; Phillips 1996). For example, the butterfly in the Aussie shampoo ad is a cultural symbol of beauty. Knowledge of typical product attributes and benefits also may provide information about which implicatures are relevant (Forceville 1994). Advertising knowledge may enable consumers to process information in genre-specific ways (Scott 1994b; Stern 1990). For example, implicatures drawn from a print ad may differ from those suggested by a painting or a cartoon.

Advertising knowledge also may influence the valence of the implicatures drawn. In a study of adver-
tising puns, McQuarrie and Mick (1992) found that consumers tend to look for positive rather than negative meanings in ads. Pictorial metaphors are likely to be interpreted in the same way; because consumers know that the purpose of an ad is to promote a product, they may look only for positive or favorable dimensions of similarity between the images in an ad. The creation of a positive implicature should not be confused with a positive (i.e., liking) response to the ad itself (cf. Fristad and Wright 1994). Consumers can draw a positive implicature, such as “the ad says Clinique lipstick is refreshing,” while having a negative response to the ad, such as “I hate this ad” (Tanaka 1994).

In summary, theory provides several research propositions that can be used to guide the study of consumers’ interpretations of pictorial metaphor. The propositions pertain to the development of strong and weak implicatures, the types of knowledge used to develop implicatures, and the valence of the implicatures.

**Method**

The materials used in the study were six full-page color ads that contained pictorial metaphors (Figures 1 through 6). As Thorson (1990) recommends, the ads were selected from real print ads to increase the applicability of the findings. The ads chosen featured different products that are bought or used by college students of both genders, and were altered by removal of the verbal copy and replacement of known brand names with neutral, fictitious brand names.

Students enrolled in an undergraduate class in education at a major state university participated in the study for course credit. Students outside the department of advertising were recruited because such students do not have a special interest or expertise in advertising. In total, 49 informants participated in two groups. Each group viewed a set of three pictorial metaphor ads. The groups had approximately equal numbers of male and female informants, the majority of whom ranged in age from 19 to 21 years.

Informants viewed projected slides of three ads and provided individual written responses to questions about their inferences of each ad’s message. The questions, based on those used in Mick and Politi’s (1989) study, were designed to elicit the meanings of visual advertising images:

1. In your own words, please describe the ad.
2. Ignore what the advertiser may have intended and describe your opinions and feelings about the ad.
3. What do you think the advertiser was trying to communicate with this ad?
4. How do you know what the advertiser was trying to communicate with this ad? What makes you think so?

The procedure for the study was that recommended by Forceville (1995). A slide of the first ad was shown. Informants had two minutes to describe the ad (question 1). Then slides of the next two ads were shown, and informants responded to question 1 for each of those ads. That procedure was repeated for the other three questions. Requiring informants to respond to a single question for each ad before proceeding to subsequent questions ensured that fatigue would not disproportionately affect informants’ responses to the last ad. Most informants used the entire two minutes allotted to each question in writing their responses and provided a paragraph-length answer for each question. Informants then participated in 30-minute focus group interviews in small group settings to explore their interpretations in greater depth.

The procedure was not meant to mimic “real-life” ad exposure, where consumers view a print ad for less than 15 seconds (Pieters, Roasbergen, and Hartog 1996). Instead, it provided an opportunity for rich, relevant, and spontaneous ad interpretation by actual consumers that was not unrepresentative of the way they derive ad meanings in real viewing situations (Mick and Buhl 1992).

Informants appeared to provide their honest opinions and beliefs in their responses; they seemed comfortable in describing their confusion when they could not comprehend an advertising message and in emphatically listing what they liked and disliked about particular ads. Beyond answering the required questions, informants articulated the thought processes and reasoning behind their answers, providing details and examples they felt were necessary. The procedure of requiring informants to view each ad four times proved advantageous for analyzing informant responses; a development or progression of inferences was observed, capturing the “aha!” moment of understanding. The focus group interviews provided a similar experience when informants were exposed to others’ interpretations of the ads.

The author and a second researcher analyzed informants’ responses by means of an iterative process of examining the responses for categories and themes. The principles of grounded theory were used to allow the categories to emerge from the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). To determine the strong and weak implicatures for each ad, the author identified the ad
meanings inferred by informants and grouped similar meanings to create categories of implicatures. The second researcher also identified informants' implicatures and reclassified them within the categorization. Initial agreement for the identification of implicatures, measured as the ratio of coding agreements to coding decisions, ranged from .93 to 1.00 for the six ads. Measured by Cohen's kappa, initial agreement for the classification of implicatures ranged from .77 to 1.00. The researchers resolved all differences by referring back to original informant responses. Implicatures were labeled "strong" if approximately one half of the informants identified the same message in the ad; they were labeled "weak" if mentioned by a smaller proportion of informants.

To provide a counterpoint to informant interpretation, the art directors who created each of the ads used in the study were slated to be interviewed to determine their intended meanings for the ads. Unfortunately, three of the six art directors could not be traced, which is not surprising given the constantly changing composition of advertising agencies. However, three male art directors in the United States and Europe participated in 20-minute telephone interviews in which they discussed their creation of and expectations for the ads used in the study.

Results: Strong and Weak Implicatures

The study results show that informants were able to interpret the pictorial metaphor ads from the ads' visual images. When asked to indicate the ads' meanings, informants described both strong and weak implicatures, which are summarized in Table 1. The informants' implicatures are not presented as the correct interpretation of these ads, but instead as support for the proposition that strong and weak implicatures can be drawn from advertising images by a specific target group of consumers.

Informants drew strong implicatures for four of the six pictorial metaphor ads: Kingfisher toothpaste, Sport athletic clothing, Reflex racquets, and Comfort fabric softener. A majority of informants agreed on the primary message of those ads; for example, they described Sport athletic clothing as "tough," "strong," and "durable." Informants also identified weak implicatures for the same ads; for the Sport ad, 28% of them identified the product users as healthy and athletic, and 20% felt the user was likely to be male. Sixteen percent, who could not identify the "tough as nails" strong implicature, drew the creative inference that the users of the product are people who need to eat more iron. This example underscores the supposition that readers can make intuitive leaps when creating weak implicatures.

Informants did not converge on a strong implicature for the other two ads. For the Plan personal organizer ad, informants were divided among four weak implicatures. For the Eyecare eyedrops ad, most informants misidentified the smoke in the picture as something else, such as water. They then formed weak implicatures based on their misidentifications. For example, one informant thought the eyes in the ad were made of blue roses, and drew the conclusion that the eyedrops would help one "see beautifully."

The results of the Eyecare ad highlight an important aspect of weak implicatures: consumers who create them do not perceive them as lesser meanings, but rather seem satisfied with their interpretations and feel they are correct. For example, one informant thought the smoke in the Eyecare ad was water and drew the implicature that the drops were cool and soothing. In the focus group interview, when the smoke was identified by several other informants who gave the implicature "gets rid of smoke irritation," she resisted that inference and reasserted her own interpretation of the ad's meaning. This result is consistent with Kardes' (1993) conclusion that self-generated inferences are resistant to counterpersuasion.

Creating Meaning: The Implicature Process

In discussing why and how they drew implicatures, informants listed deviance from expectation, or "something different," as an indicator that a pictorial metaphor ad had a figurative meaning. For example, the incongruity in the Sport ad was identified by one informant as the starting point for her inferences: I think it sparks my curiosity, because you don't have nails for a meal. I want to know what it is supposed to mean or symbolize.

Informants also noted deviations from expectation in the Kingfisher ad by noting the shape of the string of pearls:

I knew what the advertiser was trying to communicate by associating the term "pearly whites" with this ad. I think this because the beads are deliberately in a smile shape, even the bead size.

Similarly, the superimposed image of a shark's jaw on the Reflex racquet was mentioned as a deviation:

Because it has something ordinary that we recognize: the handle of the racquet, to identify it as a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad</th>
<th>Strong Implicature</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Weak Implicatures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kingfisher toothpaste</td>
<td>Shiny, pearly,</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>&quot;This toothpaste can make your teeth as white and shiny as the string of pearls.&quot;</td>
<td>-Used by rich people (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>white teeth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport athletic clothing</td>
<td>Tough clothing for</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>&quot;Their athletic clothing is tough and will take abuse. He [the advertiser] was also creating the image of the type of person who needs this athletic clothing... eating nails is a tough act done by a tough person.&quot;</td>
<td>-Used by healthy/athletic people (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tough people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Masculine (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Eating an iron-filled diet (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflex racquets</td>
<td>Powerful attacker</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>&quot;If you buy this racquet, you will be a better, more powerful, more aggressive player and be able to chew up your competition.&quot;</td>
<td>-Inescapable (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Helps one to play by instinct (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Brings out animal nature (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort fabric softener</td>
<td>Softness</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>&quot;If you wash your clothes with this detergent, your clothes will be soft, not uncomfortable and prickly like the cacti.&quot;</td>
<td>-None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan personal organizer</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Organizes like a second brain (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Remembers better than a brain (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Is used by intelligent people (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-For people on the go (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyecare eyedrops</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Gets rid of smoke irritation (16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The only different thing is the head frame which implies something is different about this particular racquet.

Informants not only recognized the ads' deviance from expectations, but also identified that difference as the starting point for their search for the ads' figurative meaning.

When asked how they interpreted an ad's meaning, some informants had difficulty articulating their thought processes. Others, however, were more introspective. One informant gave a fitting new label to the creation of implicatures by stating that to understand each ad, she "thought into it." That explanation was expanded by other informants who stated they were looking for a "connection," "resemblance," "association," or "analogy" that would explain the meaning of the ad.

As expected, informant responses suggested they used their cultural, advertising, and product knowledge to connect the ad's images. Cultural knowledge included informants' recall of cliches and sayings, which helped to explain the large proportion of informants providing the strong implicatures for the Sport and Kingfisher ads. For example, one informant discussed the role of cultural cliches in the following way:

The phrases "tough as nails" or "he eats nails" are fairly common phrases at sports fields. Therefore, this ad is a display of that phrase. It's obvious when you're familiar with this particular slang.

However, pictorial metaphors need not refer to a cliche to elicit a strong implicature. Fifty-eight percent of informants gave the strong implicature "powerful attacker" for the Reflex racquet ad, which does not reflect a standard saying. That implicature does reflect cultural knowledge, however, in that it is based on the human characteristics ascribed to animals. The ad plays on the perception of sharks as ruthless and dangerous.

In addition to cultural knowledge, informants used advertising knowledge to connect the ad's images. Cultural knowledge included informants' recall of cliches and sayings, which helped to explain the large proportion of informants providing the strong implicatures for the Sport and Kingfisher ads. For example, one informant discussed the role of cultural cliches in the following way:

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Informants also used their knowledge of typical ads to interpret the Comfort and Sport ads:

There is a lot of advertising for sports equipment, clothing, energy supplements, etc. that infers that if you use their product, you will be stronger, more manly, and able to do impossible deeds. I assumed that this is no exception.

In addition to cultural and advertising knowledge, informants stated that they relied on knowledge of product attributes and benefits in interpreting the pictorial metaphor ads. For example, informants felt the Comfort ad was easy to understand because as soon as they recognized the product as fabric softener, they realized that the advertiser would be conveying a message about softness.

Individual Differences

Informants could not be grouped into ones who could easily decode ad meanings and ones who could not; all informants were able to understand at least one pictorial metaphor ad. However, a core group of "literalists" comprehended the metaphor yet argued against the ad's conclusions. The counterarguers appeared to dislike the flights of fancy presented in some of the pictorial metaphor ads. Examples of such literalism are:

A: I don't really understand what eating nails out of a bowl has to do with sports equipment. I know it's saying that the equipment is tough as nails, but do we really eat our clothing or equipment?
B: If my clothes aren’t soft, I would hardly consider them “prickly” as a cactus.

C: I would rather not have my brain compared to a notebook. What if I lost the notebook!

The literalists did not argue against every ad, and indicated that they liked several of the metaphors.

Ad Producers Speak

The creatives responsible for the original Sport, Comfort, and Eyecare ads participated in telephone interviews. They stated that they had intended to convey the implicatures “tough,” “soft,” and “gets rid of smoke irritation,” respectively, which match the strongest implicatures given by the informants for those ads. However, they asserted that they did not intend to convey any secondary messages because conveying one level of meaning was difficult enough. They appeared to be amused and a little concerned by the number of weak implicatures elicited by their ads.

The art director who created the original Sport ad acknowledged that some consumers would be unable to understand the ad’s primary message, but considered that a necessary consequence of creating fresh new advertising. He felt that only mediocre ads are comprehended by all consumers, and was concerned with appealing to his knowledgeable target consumer rather than to the general public. Such strategies appear to be common in advertising practice, for many creatives write with a specific implied reader in mind (Kover 1995). The difficulty informants had in interpreting the images in the Eyecare ad was anticipated by the person who developed it. He felt consumers’ misconprehension was minimized in the “real world” because he had created several ads with the same metaphorical theme (e.g., “eyes are smoke,” “eyes are onions,” “eyes are chlorine pools,” etc.):

You see one and you’re not quite sure what it is, and then you see a second execution or a third and they all add up.

The art directors commented that they tried to provide pleasure to consumers through their images to reward consumers for their interpretive effort. Their goal was to get consumers to like their ads and to judge them “funny” and “witty.” In addition, one creative explained that he thought consumers’ pleasure can come from figuring out the ad’s meaning:

I always like it when somebody actually has to stop and think for a split second. You don’t want it to be too complicated that they have to spend too long, but I think there should be a reward.

Mirroring the informant, two of the three art directors interviewed were unable to describe how they developed the idea for their ads. However, the creator of the original Sport ad was more introspective, relying on “connections” just like the informants:

It seemed to be a nice juxtaposition of two fairly common images. It was a way of combining two things to make something new out of it.

The art directors acknowledged that the creation of pictorial metaphor ads became easier over time; once the structure was in place, ads were created more quickly and the images were “stronger.”

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

The exploration of consumers’ interpretations of pictorial metaphor ads yields some interesting results that can further our understanding of consumers’ responses to complex image advertising. Consumers are able to interpret an ad’s message by creating strong and weak implicatures that are based on the ad’s visual images. A picture’s deviance from reality or pictorial convention can trigger “thinking into” an ad, and consumers can use their cultural and product knowledge to connect an ad’s images. Consumers also can interpret metaphors by using their advertising knowledge, which includes expectations of positive messages and awareness of different advertising formats.

In general, consumers’ interpretations matched the ad producers’ intentions, although the art directors asserted that they created ads with only one level of meaning. They felt that, in practice, any unintended inferences or miscomprehensions would be minimized by target marketing and long-running campaigns. Thus, the art directors apparently did not intend to satisfy a heterogeneous audience by allowing for multiple, weak interpretations (cf. Tanaka 1994), but did intend to offer a reward (i.e., entertainment) in exchange for interpretive effort.

Future research should examine consumers’ responses to different types of visual rhetoric and expand the number of creatives interviewed, if possible. Alternatively, researchers can examine the different kinds of images used in pictorial metaphors. Scott (1994b) suggests that different types of advertising images, such as celebrities or trade characters, may be processed differently by consumers. A next step for researchers is to subdivide the category of pictorial
Figure 1
Kingfisher Toothpaste Ad

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Figure 2
Sport Athletic Clothing Ad

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Figure 3
Reflex Racquet Ad

Figure 4
Comfort Fabric Softener Ad
metaphor into different types of metaphorical images to understand how interpretation is affected. For example, is a cartoon kitten "softer" than a photo of a real kitten? Is there a difference between using a trade character, such as a kitten, and an object, such as a feather, to convey softness? Advertising researchers must dig deeper into consumer response to advertising images if we are to understand how and why consumers are "thinking into it."

References


Figure 6
Eyecare Eyedrops Ad

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