

## **ELEMENTS OF VERBAL AND VISUAL RHETORIC SPECIFIC TO ADVERTISING**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper approaches advertising as a persuasion mechanism that underlies the relation between customers and companies in the business world. Thus, advertising is examined from the perspective of the three vectors of rhetoric – ethos, logos and pathos – in an attempt to show that advertising appeals simultaneously to the collective mentality and to individual experience in order to elicit a positive attitude towards a product or service. Finally, the paper analyzes comparatively the impact of verbal and visual rhetoric on grounds of the different encoding-decoding systems they use in order to convey a message.*

**KEY-WORDS:** *rhetoric, advertising, ethos, logos, pathos, verbal, rhetoric, visual rhetoric, symbol, message.*

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** *Z13.*

### **1. PERSUASION AND RHETORIC: ETHOS, LOGOS AND PATHOS**

#### **1.1. The importance of persuasion in human society**

Persuasion plays an essential role on every level of human communication. From every-day conversations in our personal lives to workplace relations, from political discourses to marketing strategies and, more recently, social networks, every social interaction is a negotiation of meanings resulting from symbol interpretation according to culturally determined collective mentalities and individual perceptions. Therefore, the efficiency of social interaction depends on the ability of finding a common ground, where the encoded message finds a matching decoding system so that a meaningful message is generated. Ultimately, human communication is inconceivable outside the system of symbols (language) where the world ‘makes sense’ as a result of the interplay between denotation and connotation.

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As it follows from the above, persuasion is a complex communication strategy that simultaneously informs (transmits information that is relevant in a certain context) and forms (influences the audience's beliefs in order to elicit the desired attitude towards the respective information). This means that, for the message to get through from the sender to the receiver, the former should be credible and empathic, whereas the latter should be prepared to embrace the information being transmitted. In other words, effective communication is achieved when the two protagonists share a common ground where meaning emerges at the intersection of individual beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and experiences. However, we should be aware that this common ground has a volatile nature, since individual background is historically and culturally determined. Consequently, the means of persuasion have also evolved in time in order to accommodate ever-changing social contexts.

## 1.2. The emergence of rhetoric as 'the art of persuasion'

The term 'rhetoric' originates in ancient Greece (gr. *rhetorike*) where the term referred to the art of using language persuasively. Initially associated with oratory, the art of public speaking, the term was gradually extended to cover all forms of communication that whose message exerts an emotional impact on the receiver, gaining their attention, trust and acceptance.

The status and importance of rhetoric as an essential communication skill was established in one of Aristotle's fundamental works entitled *Rhetoric*, where the Greek philosopher defines it as a form of art based on "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Rhet. I.2, 1355b26f). Aristotle also sets forth three means of persuasion that ensure a captivating and motivating discourse, namely:

- **Ethos**, that has to do with "the characteristic spirit of a culture, era or community, as manifested in its attitude and aspirations" (Rhetoric II. 19-26);
- **Logos**, "the principle of reason and judgement" (Rhetoric II.2:31-33), meant to ensure logical argumentation and coherence in a discourse;
- **Pathos**, defined as "an element in experience or in artistic representation evoking pity or compassion" (Rhetoric II.2: 31-33), refers to the emotional appeal of the discourse and its capacity to elicit empathy.

Therefore, according to Aristotle, in order to have a positive impact on the audience, a discourse should be, at the same time, in resonance with the historical and cultural context, appeal to people's reason by displaying a logical sequence of ideas and arguments, and establish emotional connection with the interlocutors. To fulfill these three requirements, the language used in order to captivate an audience should be chosen carefully and adorned with figures of speech such as:

- metaphors – to create vivid and lasting images in the mind of the audience;
- allegories – to make deep meanings more accessible;
- analogies – to connect new ideas with already existing knowledge and experiences.

By placing metaphor at the center of the persuasive discourse Aristotle intuitively recognizes the connotative power of language, which was to be situated at the center of linguistic studies and cognitive linguistic research, fifteen centuries later.

### 1.3. Metaphor and metaphorical concepts. The connection between ethos and pathos

The status and role of the metaphor in the operation of human society was to be acknowledged in a book entitled *Metaphors We Live By*, written by two American linguists, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, and published in 1980. As the authors state in the introduction of the book, their study reconsiders the traditional approach “to how people understand their language and their experience” and attempts to prove that metaphor is “perhaps the key to giving an adequate account of understanding” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. ix).

To fulfill these two central goals, the book draws on the relationship between metaphor and ritual previously studied by anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz. This relationship projects metaphor beyond the status of a mere ‘matter of words’, ‘a device of poetic imagination’ or ‘a characteristic of language alone’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4) into the depths of the collective unconscious, from where it determines the way in which we perceive our experience and invest it with meaning. This could explain why certain metaphors are to be found across different languages as linguistic reflections of deep common patterns of thought.

In this sense, the authors start from the premise that human thought is based on a profoundly metaphorical conceptual system that structures a corresponding perception of, and response to the surrounding reality. Since thought and language share the same conceptual system, it is natural that the patterns of the former should be reflected in the everyday manifestations of the latter. Thus, the authors show that linguistic metaphorical expressions are so deeply and consistently connected with conceptual metaphors that they can provide valuable insight into the way in which we perceive and comprehend our experience. Two relevant examples in this sense are the following:

1. **the concept of *argument***, whose conflictual nature determines its association in the collective mentality with the concept of *war*. This association, as the authors show, is reflected on the level of everyday language in action verbs from the semantic area of battle, such as *to attack/defend/counterattack/win/shoot down an argument*, as well as in nouns as *strategy* and *position* and adjectives as *unbeatable* or *indefensible*;
2. **the conceptual metaphor *time is money***, which reflects the way in which we experience time as a valuable commodity in such action verbs as *to spend/save/waste/invest time* or expressions such as *to use time profitably, an amount of time, or this costs a lot of time* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 7-8).

The conclusion reached based on the above is, therefore, that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.4). In terms of human communication, this means that metaphorical patterns of thought and behavior, as reflected in the use of language, compose the mechanism that ensure two of the means of persuasion mentioned by Aristotle, namely ethos (the spirit of an epoch) and pathos (the emotional connection). At this point, the connection between the two concepts becomes obvious, simply because emotional appeal is impossible to establish outside a

common cultural context. On the other hand, since cultural context is historically determined, the way in which emotional appeal is achieved will vary accordingly, this being the reason why persuasive language must adapt continuously in order to accommodate new experiences and media.

#### **1.4. Rhetoric in the twenty-first century**

In the era of information technology, human interaction in every field of social life has changed drastically due to the new available means of communication. Thus, although the rhetorical tools basically stay the same, the means through which they exert their persuasive power have become ever more sophisticated. Consequently, the persuasive discourse, whether verbal or visual, must adapt in order to keep pace with new technologies, new contexts of communication and new audiences. In comparison with face-to-face interactions, communication within the virtual space of the Internet calls for a reassessment of the persuasive means used to capture remote audiences from different cultural environments. For instance, a well-organized discourse, with a logical flow of ideas becomes less crucial than the capacity to use verbal and visual language creatively, whereas paralinguistic elements such as body language lose their importance in favor of spontaneity.

On the other hand, the surge of communication through social media platforms over the past decade has exerted additional influence on the rhetorical aspect of the discourse due to its casual and highly interactive character, causing a shift of emphasis from logos to ethos and pathos. In other words, communication over social media platforms draws its effectiveness from sharing captivating stories that elicit emotional responses rather than from delivering technically perfect discourses. Moreover, as it is meant to be displayed on the screen, the message conveyed via the Internet in general and the social media in particular has to be largely reconsidered from a visual point of view. In this context, although some communication experts still emphasize such as the presence of the speaker on the screen and maintaining eye contact with the interlocutors (Radakovic, 2010), it is clear that the virtual environment obscures the role of the sender in favor of the message, while connotation gains ground as persuasive tool to the detriment of denotation.

## **2. THE RHETORIC OF ADVERTISING. VERBAL AND VISUAL TOOLS**

### **2.1. Advertising as a marketing tool. Definition, characteristics and evolution**

The interest in advertising as a specific form of business communication has generated extensive research attempting to pinpoint its definition, characteristics and evolution. One of the most comprehensive definitions of the concept was set forth as early as 1984, in W.J. Stanton's *Fundamentals of Marketing*, where the author identifies advertising as a major marketing tool consisting of "a non-personal, oral or visual, openly sponsored identified message regarding a product, service, or idea [...] disseminated through one or more media" (Stanton, 1984, p.5) This definition acknowledges the essential role of advertising in the market economy, where it is used

as a marketing tool meant to connect vast audiences with an equally vast amount and variety of products and services. To be able to make this connection, to which all consumer-oriented marketing policies converge, advertising carries out simultaneously an informative and a persuasive function. The former is meant to introduce a product or service in a manner ‘non-personal’ enough to appeal to a diverse public, while the latter has the role to elicit their positive emotional response and, implicitly, to induce the willingness to purchase the respective commodity.

From the wide variety of studies dedicated to advertising, we can extract the following set of **characteristics**:

- It involves one-way communication;
- It is traditionally nonpersonal, but has become more and more personal due to content-based or cookie-based advertisements in social media;
- It is a promotional tool meant to boost sales in a company;
- It has wide applicability, since the persuasive discourse is an efficient tool of mass communication in fields such as businesses, political campaigns, fund raising events, educational institutions, tourism or governmental agencies;
- According to the field in which it is used, the persuasive discourse targets such objectives as increasing sales, improving brand image, building rapport with the public, opening up the market for a new product, enhancing competitiveness or raising awareness
- According to the medium chosen medium of communication, advertising is divided into conventional (printed advertisements, billboards, radio and television advertising) and digital (e-mail, mobile and social media advertising (<https://businessjargons.com/advertising.html>)).

As it follows from the above, apart from the immediate sales boosting effects due to the increase in the number of customers, advertising also has far-reaching social consequences by shaping public taste and, implicitly, changing people’s buying behavior. In the twenty-first century society, largely based on consumerism, advertising plays such a determining role in the survival and development of companies that it is considered to be of equal importance with the production process. Thus, the increasing investments in the promotion of products and services and the changing needs of the market economy spawned a genuine industry in which advertising companies, agencies and media offer new-sprung jobs such as “brand managers, creative heads, designers, visualizers and so on” (<https://businessjargons.com/advertising.html>).

Nowadays, it is common knowledge that advertising is the motor of business development, as it ensures the connection between companies and their beneficiaries, thus driving the supply and demand mechanism. Essentially, advertising is a type of persuasive discourse and, consequently, its tools have evolved in time so as to adjust to new cultural and social contexts. Thus, the evolution of media at different points in the historical evolution of mankind correspond to paradigm shifts in the field of marketing strategies and, ultimately, in the rhetoric of advertising.

The shift from ‘paper advertising’ through newspapers, magazines and posters in the nineteenth century, to audio advertising on the radio, and audio-visual publicity spots on television in the first half of the twentieth century called for successive adjustments in the persuasive discourse, which had to accommodate new media and new

social and cultural contexts at the same time. Thus, the newspaper advertising discourse, in which extensive information about a product was accompanied by sketchy illustrative images, was gradually replaced by more concise verbal presentations captioning impressive, colorful pictures in glossy magazines. Audio advertising involved a further concentration of the discourse, very often accompanied by a short melodic line meant to enhance impact, whereas the emergence of television brought about an ideal combination of image and sound that reinforce each other to stir lasting emotions in the public.

The era of information technology, culminating with the Internet, has shattered the limits of human communication by projecting it into the virtual space. Within this infinite space, communication skills and persuasive strategies are reinterpreted around the central role of the conveyed message, which becomes predominantly visual.

## 1.2. Verbal versus visual in the rhetoric of advertising

From a rhetorical perspective, advertising is a combination of verbal and visual messages that induces an emotional state meant to determine a positive attitude towards a product or service. The road from ethos to pathos is covered by successive encodings and decodings of either verbal or visual systems of signs. The different mechanisms underlying the construction and interpretation of each type of sign and, implicitly, the different ways in which verbal and visual language are received will be analyzed in the following sections.

In the first half of the 20th century, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure laid the foundations of structuralist linguistics arguing in his 1916 *Course in General Linguistics* that language is not an inventory of ‘names’ attached to ‘things’ in reality, but a system of signs that designate concepts by means of what he calls ‘an acoustic image’. The designation process is mediated by the linguistic sign, a structure that consists of two parts:

- the signifier – the material part, the physical realization of a word as part of the speech act, that mediates between sensorial perception and mental representation;
- the signified - the abstract part, the concept or the ‘meaning’ of the word (de Saussure, 2011, p.120).

Therefore, since the signifier and the signified do not pre-exist each other, but they are inherently connected, it follows that meaning is not the result of a mere process of ‘labelling’, but it is constructed by virtue of the symbolic relation between the two parts of the linguistic sign. Thus, Saussure’s theory offers a revealing background for explaining why words have different meanings, depending on the historical and social context in which they are used. Ultimately, it throws light on the way in which patterns of thought reflect in patterns of language and contribute to the construction of meaning by an infinite encoding/decoding interplay. Consequently, a verbal message can be interpreted differently from one individual to another, when differences in language or cultural background are involved.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, cultural theorist John Stuart Hall points out the implications of Saussure’s structuralist theory by acknowledging that language is the “medium in which we ‘make sense’ of things, in which meaning is

produced and exchanged” (Hall, 1997, p.1). Thus, according to the author, we recognize familiar objects around us because “thought processes decode your visual perception of the object in terms of a concept of it which you have in your head” (Hall, 1997, p.16). This statement has in view the *descriptive* or *reference* level, where meaning emerges from the direct relation between reality and mental representations. As to the *symbolic* level of representation, the signifying process is more complex, since “meaning depends on the relationship between things in the world - people, objects and events, real or fictional - and the conceptual system, which can operate as mental representations of them” (Hall, 1997, p.18). In other words, the conceptual system mediates the relation between reality and mental representation in order to form meaning. This mediation pertains to what George Lakoff identified as the metaphoric dimension of human existence which, being culturally determined, provides the common ground that enables people “to make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways” (Hall, 1997, p.18).

Corroborating the above, we can conclude that language produces meaning by *representation*, which operates on two levels, depending on the relation between reality and the way in which its mental representation is formed: direct, in the case of referential representation, and mediated in the case of symbolic (metaphoric) representation. Since both levels of representation involve an interplay between the two sides of the linguistic sign (the signifier and the signified), it becomes obvious that producing and receiving linguistic messages is a complex mental process, based on thorough knowledge of morphology, semantics and syntax, as well as on solid cultural awareness, the absence thereof generating the so-called ‘language barrier’, a generic term we use to identify the main cause of failure in verbal communication.

In comparison with the linguistic sign, the visual sign is more readily accessible to the human mind, since it resonates directly with the metaphorical dimension of collective consciousness that enables us to share our experience of the world and make sense of it in similar ways. In this respect, visual language is closer to symbolic/metaphoric representation, eliciting deeper emotional involvement on the part of the viewer, which makes it stronger than verbal language. When Hall states that visual language creates meaning at the intersection of ‘already coded signs’ with ‘deep semantic codes’, he points out precisely its capacity to elude the language barrier and touch directly upon human emotions, without being diluted during successive encodings and decodings.

In this sense, the adage ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ crosses centuries and cultures to the point where its origins melt into the universal heritage, crystallizing an ancient collective intuition that the image has a stronger impact on human mind in comparison with the written/spoken word (<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2022/07/22/picture-words/>).

### **1.2.1. Verbal tools of advertising rhetoric**

As it follows from the above, verbal rhetoric shapes perceptions, evokes emotions and elicits consumer responses through linguistic means. This involves a subtle interplay between denotation and connotation, in which ethos, pathos, and logos are brought

together to build a persuasive message. Usually used to support and enhance the impact of visual elements, verbal advertising tools primarily include what business expert Mehreen Ashfaq calls ‘power words’ (*free, limited time, exclusive*), as well as carefully adjusted tone and language style meant both to trigger mental associations with a certain brand and to elicit the desired response from the customers.

Having in view that the decoding of verbal cues is culturally determined, verbal rhetoric is also adjusted according to the cultural model that defines the perceptions, beliefs and values of the target audience. On the other hand, starting from the premise that “humans are inherently drawn to stories” (Ashfaq, 2023), the narrative structure of advertising messages is developed in such a way as to resonate within the common ground of shared experiences, emotions and aspirations, aiming at an immediate effect and a lasting impact on the consumers.

In this context, marketing expert Shona Worsman pinpoints the following main **advantages** of verbal advertising:

- Conciseness and memorability due to slogans and taglines, easy to understand and recall;
- Brand recognition and loyalty through slogans and taglines that reinforce brand identity and foster brand loyalty;
- Emotional connection, since “effective slogans can evoke strong emotional responses and cultivate positive feelings towards the brand”;
- Adaptability – the logos or slogans can be adjusted “to reflect evolving market conditions or campaign objectives”;
- Detailed information, clarity and emotional connection provided by a high-quality body copy. (Worsman, 2020, <https://embryo.com/blog/the-power-of-words-in-marketing-taglines-slogans/?hl=en-US>)

Verbal advertising also displays some limitations and challenges, such as information overload, more cognitive effort and time investment, the need for cultural adaptation, negative perception of length, and lower immediate impact (Albinsson & Huhman, 2012).

### 1.2.2. Visual tools of advertising rhetoric

As we have shown so far, the impact of visual rhetoric relies on the specific linguistic and psychological mechanisms that drive the perception, decoding and response to images. Although the statement that visual elements are processed by the human brain “60,000 times faster than text” is still highly controversial, given its fuzzy paternity and lack of scientific support (<https://cogdogblog.com/2015/03/dialed-back-to-1982/>), subsequent research has shown that “presentations using visual aids were found to be 43% more persuasive than unaided presentations (Vogel et al. 1986, p.1). This happens because of the different cognitive processes involved in the decoding of verbal and visual cues. Thus, if verbal cues are decoded sequentially, requiring elaborate semantic and syntactic mechanisms, visual cues are decoded instantaneously, on the deeper level of intuition and emotion, which is why they are more effective in terms of capturing immediate attention and leaving long lasting impressions. In this context, the main advantages of visual advertising are the following:

- **Its language is universal**, due to the use of colors, imagery and iconography that underlie the construction of persuasive narratives meant to transcend language and cultural barriers, establishing emotional connections across diverse audiences;
- **High engagement and memorability**: by appealing to esthetic emotion, visual cues reach deeper than rationally interpreted verbal information and make it easier for consumers to associate the image with a product or a company;
- **Brand identity and recognition**: the simultaneous use of color and imagery builds a brand identity and consolidates it in the consumers' memory (Eynullaeva & Woodward-Smith, 2012, pp.199-212). Illustrative examples in this sense are Coca-Cola's "Masterpiece" campaign that uses art references to emphasize the brand's long-standing presence across times and cultures and Nike's "swoosh" that is instantly recognizable and associated with the brand, even in the absence of text.

Apart from the advantages residing in the efficiency of its tools, visual advertising displays the following potential limitations and challenges:

- **Ambiguity and misinterpretation**: especially in the absence of textual support, images are open to a variety of interpretations and, implicitly, to misinterpretation due to differences in the consumers' levels of literacy and cultural background;
- **Lack of detailed information**, especially if the ad involves complex concepts or detailed product information;
- **The risk of losing impact** in a content-saturated environment.

## 2. CONCLUSIONS. THE VERBAL-VISUAL SYNERGY IN ADVERTISING RHETORIC

In the digital era, consumers' psychological profile and behavior have changed dramatically due to the easy access to a virtually unlimited amount of information and the fundamental paradigm shifts in the social and cultural values of human society. Consequently, marketing tools and strategies have been reconsidered from the perspective of different systems of values and esthetic standards.

In order to meet the exigencies of the new public, contemporary advertising relies on a combination of visual and verbal rhetoric meant to enhance the persuasive effect. As a result, contemporary advertisements display an ingenious blend of text, images and music that create the adequate emotional context for a positive response from the audience.

Whether printed or audio-visual, the efficient commercial is the one able to draw on both the direct and dramatic emotional impact of visual cues and the deeper cognitive processing on the level of verbal cues, responsible for "clarifying meaning, reinforcing brand messages, and solidifying positive attitudes" (Eynullaeva & Woodward-Smith, 2012, p.210).

Ultimately, the synergic action of visual and verbal tools in advertising rhetoric generates a powerful message, in which the two elements complement and enhance each other to fulfill a triple function, namely information, persuasion and entertainment.

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