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THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF IMAGES: AN EXPLORATION OF VISUAL RHETORICAL FIGURES IN DIGITAL ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Round the globe, highly visual advertising is employed by advertisers to such an extent as to persuade their target audiences meticulously. Certainly, different persuasive and visually eloquent devices play a crucial strategic role in the success of many brands or products. However, despite the frequent appearance of rhetorical figures in verbal discourse, their theoretical adaptation into the visual designs and the attempt to define them in visual context(s) of digital advertising has been rare or minimal. The present study intends to fill this gap by identifying various visual rhetorical figures employed in the domain of digital advertising. In this pursuit, the study is guided by four rhetorical operations (i.e., 'Repetition', 'Reversal', 'Substitution' and 'Destabilization') of McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) taxonomic framework and has explored the visual manifestations of various figures of rhetoric in the advertisements of the top three platforms of digital advertising i.e. Facebook, Google and Pinterest. The investigation has found the operation of various visual rhetorical figures in digital advertising visuals to the effect of finding the potential linkage of rhetoric and semiotics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rhetoric has always been an essential, inescapable and ubiquitous phenomenon of marketing and advertising. In fact, rhetoric and advertising share a deep-seated relationship, the roots of which could be traced down thousands of years back when Sophists "proudly advertised [their] ability to teach a young man [and] the proper care of his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also of the State's affairs, so as to become a real power in the

city, both as a speaker and man of action” (Herrick, 2005, p. 33). Such “advertising” proved irresistible to many young Athenian men, and the Sophists grew in both wealth and influence. The same is true in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is “realized by the combination of numerous physical and digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, AR, VR, machine learning, and cloud computing” (Lee & Cho, 2020, p. 1) and has obscured the boundaries among the domains of diverse advertising media among one is the ‘digital advertising’ i.e., the persuasive use of the Internet, social media (Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter), smart TV, digital signage, tablet PC, smart phone, in-game advertising, and advergame etc for the purpose of advertising. The spread of such digital technologies had such a huge impact on the operations of visual rhetoric that a new term—digital rhetoric (e.g., Lanham, 1992; Porter, 2009; Zappen, 2005)—was coined to argue that “*the digital* may have once been but one more example of [Aristotle’s] available means of persuasion” (Boyle et al., 2018, p. 251, emphasis added).

Rhetoric, throughout its standard history, has been related with words or verbal discourse. Traditionally, it was thought to be “the exclusive province of verbal language” (Kenney & Scott, 2003, p.19). However, with the unprecedented rise in the use of visuals, and its undeniable omnipresence in global advertising, rhetoricians working from a variety of disciplinary perspectives are beginning to pay a substantial amount of attention to issues of visual rhetoric. Rhetoric is “no longer the stepchild of philosophy, but rather a unique entity with its own internal power to create knowledge” (McKerrow, 2010, p. 199). Now, it is not just in litigation and oratory that rhetoric operates; “there is a range of modes—the image, the moving image, sound, gesture, movement—in addition to the verbal arts, and these can be (and usually are) used in combination” (Andrews, 2014, p. xi).

Such multimodality is now increasingly accepted as a norm in everyday life. Grabe (2020) has noted that “the sheer volume of mediated visual stimuli we encounter daily surpasses that of verbal stimuli” (p.51). Presenting visual content marketing statistics of over 200 marketers, Khoja (2020, chart 1) has calculated that “more than 70% of their content contained some form of visual”. Citing Cisco Visual Networking Index’s figure, Mawhinney (2021) has predicted that by 2025 approximately 82% of the worldwide mobile media use will be audiovisual. Thus, in its most modern sense, “*visual rhetoric* shares with semiotics the quest to reveal how meaning is being constructed through different persuasive devices and techniques” (Pauwels, 2015, p.54) and the present study intends to find this linkage.

Besides, the present study is helpful in understanding the phenomenon of *visual persuasion*—i.e., the rhetorical use of images in achieving the ultimate goal of persuasion. Nobody can deny the attempts of advertisers in swaying the target audience via the strategic alteration of visual stimuli happening on a grand scale in society. No doubt, such strategic alterations in advertising perform a decisive role in (re)shaping consumer behaviors of the individuals. The highly inflated rate of consumption of fast food chains, cosmetic brands, tobacco companies, and other media-hyped products or commodities is probably related to the slick advertising campaigns promoted by magazine ads, digital marketing and

television commercials. In this sense, the present research attempts to distinguish the *visual* forms of persuasion from persuasion in general and contributes effectively to consolidate the domain of *visual rhetoric*, in contrast to its counterpart of *verbal rhetoric*. More specifically, a lot of theoretical controversy exists about *visual argumentation* of a picture (Sewell, 1987; Jameison, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Kjeldsen, 2003; 2015, 2018), for which the present study is helpful in uncovering the rhetorical potential of an ad-image or picture by linking its discursive propositions to its aesthetic and sensual contiguity.

In fact, although too much of the research remains fixated on the ways the verbal rhetoric can operate; little is known about the structural features of visual rhetorical figures. And, the present study is significant in that its broad objective is to shed light on the *visual* forms of persuasion by identifying a set of visual rhetorical figures whose locus and function lie beyond the boundaries of verbal rhetoric. Apart from this, the study aims to decode the systematic practices of the advertisers to use those *visual rhetorical figures* as a way of articulation to aestheticize the visuality; and to find how they increase the effectiveness of the process of meaning exchange and reinforce their communication process. In a nutshell, the present research is worth-conducting in the sense that it explicitly addresses the influential power of the visual rhetorical figures in holding back the attention of the target audience and brings in light the important but rather neglected elements of both *visual rhetoric* and *digital advertising*. For this, the present study attempts to find the possible answers to the following research questions:

- i. What type(s) of visual rhetorical figures are used by the advertiser(s) in digital advertising?
- ii. How various linguistic and social semiotic resources are employed by the advertiser(s) to enhance the effect of these figures?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although, as a field of study *visual rhetoric* developed in 1950s, the first practical treatment of visual rhetoric in advertising can be found in Barthes' essay *Rhetoric of the Image* published in *Image-Music-Text* (1977). In the field of visual rhetoric, this essay enjoys "a classic semiotic text where Roland Barthes analyses an advertising image and uses it as a means of teasing out how different messages are conveyed by a system of signs—a rich layering of meanings" (Hugh, 2009, para. 1.). Focusing on key persuasive genre of advertising and studying the text-image relations, he defined visual rhetoric as "the signifying aspect of ideology" comprised of a "set of connotators" (Barthes, 1977, p.49), and stressed that the study of visual rhetoric should be focused on the classification of rhetorical figures i.e., on *elocutio*.

After Barthes (1977), a growing number of the scholars from humanities and social sciences have stressed the operative and the appellative power of the visuals. From the traditional rhetoric that was mostly preoccupied with verbal text and speeches only, rhetoricians now have shifted the focus toward non-oratorical forms: the rhetoric of campaigns and civil rights movements (e.g., Perlmutter, 1998; Hariman&Lucaites, 2007), of television and film

(e.g., Medhurst & Benson, 1991), of popular culture (e.g., Brummett, 1991), of slide presentation (e.g., Yates & Orlikowski, 2007; Kjeldsen, 2013), of X-Ray images (e.g., Mullen, 2020), and the rhetoric of digital media (e.g., Hoff-Clausen, 2013; Eyman, 2015; Boyle et al., 2018) are some recent examples of that focus. In fact, the roots for the rhetorical or *a*-rhetorical study of the visual can also be found in other disciplines within humanities and social sciences: psychology, sociology, anthropology, art history, social semiotics, media studies and propaganda.

Among these, the relationship between visual rhetoric and semiotics has always been engaging. In its essence, visual rhetoric has benefitted significantly from social semiotics (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, 2001) that “builds on, and at the same time transcends, Barthes’ ‘semiological’ approach” (Meyer et al., 2013, p. 499)—an approach “engaged explicitly and extensively with rhetoric, particularly in relation to the image” (van Leeuwen, 2017, p. 673). While the semiotics of the Paris School has been primarily interested in the study of only the “lexical” aspect of visual design (i.e. with the denotative and connotative meaning of people, places, and objects depicted in visuals), social semiotics focused on the whole “grammar”—i.e., the way in which a particular composition visually (re)presented objects, people, and places into a meaningful whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Thus, for the richer investigation of the advertising images, visual rhetoric drew heavily from the works of the individual communicative modes such as: images (e.g., O’Toole, 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), animation (e.g., He & van Leeuwen, 2019; Leao 2013), objects (e.g., Bjorkvall 2009), nonverbal communication (e.g., Martinec, 2000; Kress et al., 2001), space (e.g., O’Toole, 2004; Stenglin, 2009), color (e.g., Huang, 2019; van Leeuwen, 2011), and the voice and music (e.g., van Leeuwen, 1999; West, 2009). In Barthes’ approach (1977), the verbal text and the visual could be studied as conveying separate “messages”, which may then be conjunctively related; however, Kress and van Leeuwen’s social semiotics (2001, 2021) has “shifted the emphasis from looking at the verbal and visual dimension separately to an integration of these two semiotic modes in multimodal text analysis” (Meyer et al., 2013, p.499).

In commercial contexts, the rhetoric of visual semiotics is now extensively used to identify, anticipate, and shape trends, to understand consumer behavior, and to communicate effectively, relevantly, and accurately to consumers. For examples: Heriwati (2018) applied Barthian theory of semiotics in advertising and found that “some ads display are often not merely product offerings, but embedded certain belief systems and values...[thus] Advertisement for producers is not only a promotional tool of goods or services, but also to offer an image to consumers and potential customers about the products offered” (p. 340). Similarly, Ardianto and Son (2019) investigated television ads through the lens of ‘visual semiotics’ with the findings that “television advertising has the message contained in each video scene that is combined with verbal text... [and found] changes in typographic elements that have their own meaning to trigger emotions from consumers” (p.27).

In recent advertising contexts, the digital transformation entails more than just a change in the modes of advertising media or any technological advancement

that merely enhances the picture quality; rather, it covers a holistic view of business strategy with its special focus on the “executional factors” of advertising (Percy & Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2021; Tevi&Koslow, 2018; Armstrong, 2011), with the factor of rhetorical figures being one of the most pervasive and widely-addressed one. Although, visual rhetoric has increasingly been employed in digital advertisements and research on rhetorical figures has gained momentum in advertising (e.g., Kaplan, 1990; Phillips, 2000; McQuarrie & Mick, 2003; van Enschoot et al., 2008; Maes&Schilperoord, 2008; Yus, F., 2009; van Mulken et al., 2010; Lagerwerf et al., 2012; Rossolatos, 2013; Pérez, 2018; Chakroun, 2020), for a long time there was no considerable theory or taxonomy that may guide practitioners in differentiating or systemizing the visual elements of advertisements into meaningful categories (Madupu et al., 2013; Malkewitz et al., 2003). However, since 1980s various classifications, taxonomies and typologies (e.g., Johns, 1984; Durand, 1987; McQuarrie & Mick, 1996; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004) of both verbal and visual rhetorical figures have been proposed not only in the attempt to build up an extended rhetorical theory to cater for the needs of modern advertising interactions, but also to understand how to execute “effective” advertising on various media—including the digital one. However, despite the frequent appearance of rhetorical figures in verbal discourse, their theoretical adaptation into the visual designs and the attempt to define them in visual context(s) of digital advertising has been rare or minimal. The present study intends to fill this gap by identifying various visual rhetorical figures employed in the domain of digital advertising. In simple, it can be posited that visuals/images are not mere “windows” through which we may observe the world objectively (Mitchell, 2008), but compose “a complex system of symbolic signs” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006); and that “the visual artifacts are an equally important resource for the social construction of reality” (Meyer et al., 2013, p. 493).

3. METHODOLOGY

Generally, the present study falls under the umbrella term of CDA as it deals with the visual discourse of advertising. At the back of the study, a theory of visual rhetoric as outlined by Sonja K. Foss (2008) is employed as a theoretical framework, with the addition of taking a brief conceptual import from Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) social semiotics, which posits that a sign is conceived as the aggregate of several semiotic modes and the relationship between the signifier and the signified is charged with motivation rooted in a web of various socio-cultural domains. As far as the nature of data, research focus and methods of data collection are concerned, the *Strategic Approach* (also called the rhetorical approach) of the visual research design is utilized to investigate the rhetorical intent of the advertisers in the digital ad-text (e.g., McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). According to this approach, “Visuals are symbolic devices that exert influence and impact on audiences’ perception and evaluation of reality; they are a means of persuasion” (Meyer et al, 2013, p. 503).

Since, when dealing with the rhetorical analysis of the visuals, “the smaller quantities of data are used” (Meyer et al, 2013, p. 505), we collected 200 digital ads mainly from the top three platforms of the paid traffic of the digital advertising i.e. Facebook, Google and Pinterest—the first two of these drive

80% of the referral traffic of digital advertising, according to Business Insider¹. We searched digital advertisements randomly by using the key words of ‘advertising’, ‘unusual ads’, ‘convincing ads’, ‘creative advertising’, ‘visual ads’, ‘ads of visual rhetoric’, ‘colourful ads’, ‘digital advertising’ in the respective search engines, much like the *snowball sampling* technique, which “involves building a sample through referrals” (Zina O’leary, 2004, p. 110). After collecting 200 digital ads randomly, we *purposively* selected only those ads which incorporate one or many visual rhetorical figures in them. In this pursuit, we followed McQuarrie & Mick’s (1996) conception of rhetorical figures as “artful deviations in form” organized by their four rhetorical operations of ‘Repetition’, ‘Reversal’, ‘Substitution’ and ‘Destabilization’.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Repetition

In verbal rhetoric, “the rhetorical operation of repetition combines multiple instances of some element of the expression without changing the meaning of that element” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, p. 429). However, in visual rhetoric, the rhetorical operation of ‘Repetition’ refers to the reuse of the similar configuration of the visual elements (i.e., line, shape, typeface, font, color, bullet or format etc.) throughout the ad design. In its rhetorical functions, repetition is not a mere repetition; the same configuration of the visual elements makes you feel something completely different by the end. In advertising design, repetition can be anything a consumer may visually cognize and recognize as replication or duplication. It can be regular or irregular and even or uneven. When properly executed, the rhetorical operation of repetition may bring visual excitement and interest by conveying a clear sense of unity, harmony, and consistency. In its maneuver, the repetition can provide an inviting scaffold around which the focus of information is imparted; it may enhance the standardization of specific configurations (e.g., company logos), or it may be used for reinforcement (i.e., If you want your customers to know that your product is the cheapest or the fastest in the market, surely, you will want to tell them that on more than one occasion). However, the mundane repetition at the expense of over-creativity may produce the monotonous effect of redundancy. In our sampling, the operation produces two visual rhetorical figures: *visual rhyme* and *visual alliteration*.

Strictly defining, *visual rhyme* refers to the exact duplication of any of the visually configured elements of line, shape, color, image, object or format etc. Specifically, visual rhymes create the targeted effect of visual emphasis and intensification. For examples, look at Fortis Hospital’s campaign at World Kidney Day (see fig. 4.1 below) aimed at raising awareness about the importance of kidneys for the overall health of human body. In the left ad, a pair of broccoli is placed so purposefully that it echoes the exact shape of human kidneys. The image and the caption “EAT RIGHT FOR THEM”, actually, highlight the nutritional fact that Cruciferous vegetables being “rich in

¹ Accessed from: <https://www.digitalmarketer.com/digital-marketing/digital-advertising-strategy/> Accessed on: 25-02-2023

potassium such as brussels sprout, broccoli and kale decrease calcium loss and stop kidney stones from forming... [These] foods also have antioxidant effects that help prevent bladder, prostate and kidney cancers” (Pareek, 2019, para, 2). In the right ad, a pair of kidney-shaped joggers and the caption “RUN FOR THEM” is multimodally used to achieve the intended objective. In both the ads, apart from the visual rhyming of broccoli and joggers, color is also repeated in various modulations to create an overall ambience of advertisements. Thus, the visual configurations of broccoli and joggers, actually, echo the exact duplication of human kidneys. And, the regular or evenly distributed repetition of the shapes can be read as the rhetorical figure of *visual rhyme*.



Fig., 4.1: Examples of *visual rhyme*

In contrast to the exact duplication of visual rhymes, the rhetorical figure of *visual alliteration* refers to the multiple repetitions of relatively irregular and asymmetrical visual elements (i.e., lines, shapes, color, image, object or format). Such arrangement of the visual elements constructs a specific sort of intended (a)symmetry. In fact, *visual alliteration* generates the effect of visual cohesion and continuity by intensifying the measured flow of the intended information, thus, enhancing the force of ‘maximum sameness or minimum difference’. For example note *deuter*’s—one of the leading manufacturers of backpacks for the purpose of trekking, hiking and travelling—campaign of backpacks (see fig. 4.2 below). In the advertisement, *deuter*’s similar backpacks of varying sizes are purposefully placed and arranged to resonate the shape of vertebral column of human spine. The objective, actually, is to advertise “The Deuter Active Comfort Fit System” with the claim of “Perfect weight distribution along your spine”. In fact, the advertisers have skillfully employed the repetitive alignment of various backpacks to generate the rhetorical figure of *visual alliteration* in achieving the target message. Apart from the visual alliteration of the backpacks, one cannot help noting the use of *visual rhyme* in *deuter*’s logo of ‘d’ too.

Such mixture of rhetorical figures generate the phenomenon of “layering”(Phillips & McQuarrie, 2003)—the use of multiple rhetorical figures or multiple rhetorical operations in the single ad or image—which is employed more than often in these days by the advertisers to sway the viewers in favour of their objectives forcefully. For example, look at fig., 4.3 below, which illustrates the rhetorical operation of ‘repetition’ with the combination of visual rhetorical figures of ‘visual alliteration’ and ‘visual rhyme’. This is, actually, the advertisement of bottled-milk with the intended message that the company ‘Objav Mlieko’ provides pure milk full of ‘Calcium’—one of the essential minerals that improve the health of human teeth. This message is conveyed by placing of sixteen glasses full of milk in the peculiar shape of human teeth. In its effect, the repetitive pattern of milk-glasses creates the special effect of *visual alliteration*, in which multiple repetitions of irregular or uneven visually configured elements/signs are employed to echo the visuality of the target object. Moreover, the sixteen glasses are placed on shiny surface, which is meant to echo the mirrored effect of human jaws with complete set of thirty-two human teeth. In addition to *visual alliteration*, this mirrored placement generates the effect of the rhetorical figure of *visual rhyme* too—i.e., the repetitive echoing of the same visual scheme, design, colour or pattern aiming at the enhancement of visuality (Nordquist, 2018). Hence, the ‘Objav Mlieko’ ad intensifies the intended message by maneuvering the phenomenon of ‘layering’ generated by the simultaneous use of the rhetorical figures of *visual alliteration* and *visual rhyme*.



Fig., 4.2: An example of *visual alliteration*



Fig., 4.3: The ‘layering’ of *visual alliteration* and *visual rhyme*

Apart from the figuration, the powerful effect of both the visual rhetorical figures is further enhanced by maneuvering its various semiotic resources: there is an absence of ‘depth’ from the back-ground of the visual text so that the target viewers may not distract. Pertinently, target consumer’s attention is oriented towards the bottled-milk and its promise of healthy teeth. The promise of healthy teeth is further intensified by the modality marker of ‘illumination’—the front glasses of milk are more illuminated than the rest of the glasses, echoing the promise of sparkled-healthy teeth. In fact, the artful deviancy of the visual rhetorical figures is visually modalized to hold back the target audience in solving the visual riddle of the ad. Not only, the schema of the target consumers is visually enhanced to make the brand memorable, but also the visual imagery of the ad is augmented by persuading the target audience with the powerful combination of two visual rhetorical figures and the use of high modality of the visual.

4.2 *Reversal*

In verbal rhetoric, “the rhetorical operation of reversal combines elements that are mirror images of one another in an expression” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, p. 432). In visual rhetoric, the rhetorical operation of ‘Reversal’ is generated when deviant configuration of the visual elements (i.e., line, shape, color, object, image or format) occurs in relatively reverse order than its normal usual configurations. Intrinsically, the violation occurs at the level of visual syntax i.e., normal configuration of the visual elements is syntactically reversed to achieve the intended objective of reversal. In its function, the rhetorical operation of reversal elicits emphasis in visibility as the unexpected placement of visual elements/signs naturally captures the focus of the audience. In our sampling of the collected data, the operation is responsible for the creation of two rhetorical figures: *visual inversion* and *visual antithesis*. In consumers, via the use of these two rhetorical figures, a characteristic sort of curiosity may be

excited, and artfully prolonged, till the conclusion of the period discloses the mystery, and impresses the sense deeper in the mind.

A typical case of *visual inversion* (from the Greek: ἀναστροφή, *anastrophē*, "a turning back or about") arises when the configuration of visual elements takes an unanticipated shift against its normal or usual occurrence; which is construed as a deviation from the conventional configuration of the visual elements. More simply, in the rhetorical figure of *visual inversion*, the deviant configuration is orchestrated by visually inverting the target visual element/sign in regard to its usual original existence. For example, look at the Fig. 4.4 below, which depicts the inverted picture of black microphone against the clear yellow background with the capitalized-caption of 'FREEDOM OF SPEECH'. The picture, actually, registers a protest against the ban over the freedom of speech. In its original usual form, a microphone is used in an upright position with its mouthpiece on the top and its purpose is to voice one's opinion to the large number of audience. In the present visual, this specific visual element is not only inverted but its mouthpiece is also configured to visualize it as a prison, making the point that freedom of speech has been plucked and imprisoned. The overall message becomes: the ban on freedom of speech is like a caged bird. Apart from this, target audience is also attracted through the modality marker of colour. The maximum saturation of yellow colour—the colour famously used for taxi—is used to capture the attention of the target audience and their focus is, further, directed through the absence of depth from the background visual text. Moreover, the yellow colour, generally considered to be the symbol of persecution, intellect, hope and happiness², clearly intensifies the total message of the visual text.



Fig., 4.4: An example of *visual inversion*

Another visual rhetorical figure handed down by the visual rhetorical operation of 'Reversal' is '*visual antithesis*' (from Greek *antitheton*, "opposition". for

²<http://www.empower-yourself-with-color-psychology.com/color-yellow.html> Accessed on: 14-02-2022

"setting opposite", from ἀντί "against" and θέσις "placing"), in which the target visual elements/signs are purposefully configured in parallel but oppositely balanced configurations to meet objective of visual proposition. In both verbal and visual rhetoric, antithesis is considered to be one of the favorite rhetorical figures used more than frequently by the advertisers to enhance the competitive brands and to elicit the logical responses among the target audience. In simple, the purpose of visual antithesis is to persuade through logical visualization(s). In advertising, *visual antithesis* is orchestrated either as a visual proposition that contrasts with some vicinal visual proposition, or when two opposite visual elements (i.e., line, shape, color, image, object or format) are placed together for the contrasting effect. Intrinsically, antithesis is based on the logical argument or rational proposition (Cody, 2007).

Theoretically, a visual antithesis can be defined as a deviant configuration that involves an apparent contradiction of ideas or visual elements (i.e., line, shape, color, image, object or format) within a balanced but visually opposite configuration. In its maneuver, *visual antithesis* is employed to reinforce an argument by using irreconcilable opposites or strongly contrasting ideas are placed in sharp juxtaposition and sustained tension, to be resolved later by the viewers. Functionally, it makes the presented proposition more memorable by inviting the logical reasoning of the target consumers. For example look at Philips' ad for promoting its new electric toothbrush (see Fig. 4.5 below).



Fig., 4.5: An example of visual antithesis

In the ad, two exact, half-opened pieces of pistachio are placed just in front of each other: one with its edible brown-yellowish seed, the other with three pairs of shining-white teeth that are positioned to imply a smile incongruently. Just below, in the right corner of the ad, the product is placed vertically with its logo adjacent to it. In fact, against the implied competitor brand, the visual argument proposed is that: 'if you choose to use PHILIPS' new electric toothbrush, your teeth will shine enough that you will feel no embarrassment in smiling'; 'if not, your smile will end like brownish-yellowish pistachio'—a clear example of visualization of logical reasoning. Besides, in addition to the use of rhetorical figure of visual antithesis, the unnoticeable and un-modulated blank-white background is employed to present the sharp focus for the viewers to notice the sheen of the smile. In this ad, the use of blank-white colour in background text of the ad is not innocent on part of the advertisers. Here, white color cannot be regarded as 'nothing'. It is, in fact, a semiotic resource whose sole purpose seems to provide the rhetorical focus to the target consumers, as Pracejus et al.

(2006) have claimed that “white space is a well-known visual trope, but it is not a picture” (p. 82). Thus, the rhetorical power of visual antithesis is enhanced by using the modality marker of white-colored background.

4.3 Substitution

In verbal or visual rhetoric, the rhetorical operation of ‘Substitution’ is generated when one thing or idea is, simply substituted for another thing or idea implicitly. In advertising, the operation impinges on the syntactic manipulations, where shrewd condensation of expression and thought is required. In fact, on the semantic level, substitution derives from the figure of suppression and the substituted syntactic elements can be interpreted as representing an abstraction of reality. In our sampling, we find two visual rhetorical figures: *visual metonymy* and *visual synecdoche*. In verbal rhetoric, metonymy and synecdoche are generally considered to be similar rhetorical devices and, in practice, there is no much difference: one may arguably pick just one of the terms and use it to describe both types of rhetorical substitution. However, specifically, *metonymy* refers to the use of the name of one thing to represent something related to it, such as *crown* to represent “king or queen” or *White House* or *Oval Office* to represent “President”, while *synecdoche* refers to the practice of using a part of something to stand in for the whole thing. Two common examples from slang are the use of *wheels* to refer to an automobile (“she showed off her new wheels”) or *threads* to refer to clothing.

In visual rhetoric, the rhetorical figure of *visual metonymy* (from the Greek *μετωνυμία*, *metōnymía*, “a change of name”) refers to the situation where one artfully deviant configuration is substituted for another that is related to it implicitly. For example, notice the maneuvering of *visual metonymy* in the ad of Euro Gulf’s lubricant oil (see fig. 4.6 below).



Fig, 4.6: An example of *visual metonymy*

A small flying uprooted piece of green land is depicted with a bunch of skyscrapers erected on it. A flying airplane is shown just above the bunch of skyscrapers. High above all is placed the product of Euro Gulf’s Super 8000

lubricant oil. A short phrase of “KEEPING THE WORLD MOVE” is placed among the roots of the flying island. In fact, by depicting the small flying piece of land, the target consumers are persuaded that the whole world is using Euro Gulf’s lubricant oil—i.e., from lands to the airs, it is Euro Gulf’s oil that is esteemed to be high in efficiency and usage. In fact, the small piece of land is depicted as a substitutive to the whole world and, thus, can be read as the case for *visual metonymy*.

The second visual rhetorical figure handed down by the rhetorical operation of ‘Substitution’ is *visual synecdoche* (from Greek συνεκδοχή, *synekdochē*, 'simultaneous understanding'), which refers to the visual configuration in which a part of something refers to the whole of something or vice versa. A synecdoche (part-for-whole metaphor), in fact, is a type of metonymy, operating often by means of either mentioning a part for the whole (Latin, *pars pro toto*) or conversely the whole for one of its part (Latin, *totum pro parte*). In advertising, it is probably a designer’s most-used device, as it catches the viewers’ attention by stressing the economy of visual statement. In its functioning, *synecdoche* actually “breaks down a whole, foregrounding certain parts or qualities, then reconstructs it into something sharply delineated” (Sapir, 1977, cited in Johns, 1984, p. 309). For example of *visual synecdoche*, see the Facebook ad below (see Fig. 4.7).

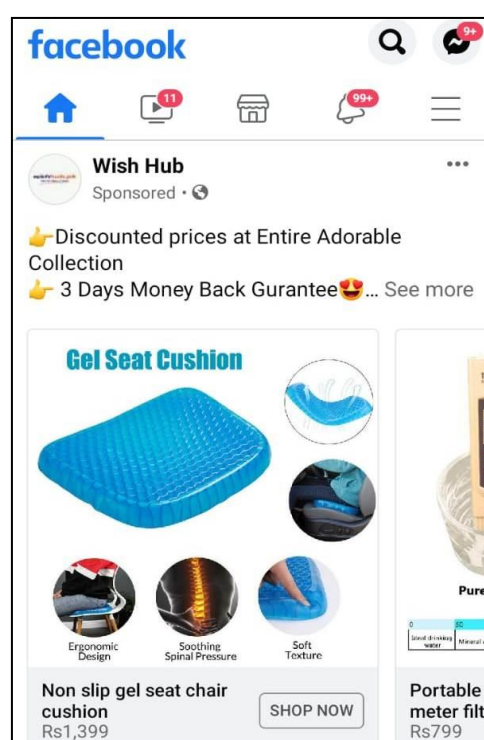


Fig. 4.7: Example of *visual synecdoche*

In the visual, “Gel Seat Cushion”—both verbally and visually—is placed towards the upper left corner of the ad, while its various positions, utilizations, texture and benefits are visually depicted in five circles. In fact, the five circles function as the parts which resonate with the whole (i.e., Gel Seat Cushion) of the ad. Moreover, the rhetoricity of the visual figure of *synecdoche* and the sharp focus of attention are further enhanced by employing the soothing white and

blue color contrast, indexical finger of pointing out the texture and the shining yellow coloring of “Soothing Spinal Pressure”. Interestingly, in persuading the target audience, not only the parts refer to the whole, but the whole also refers to the parts equally. Probably, that is why, one can find the rhetorical figure of synecdoche more than often than any other visual rhetorical figure in the digital advertising of social media.

4.4 Destabilization

McQuarrie and Mick (1996) have elaborated that “the rhetorical operation of destabilization selects an expression such that the initial context renders its meaning indeterminate” (p. 433). In visual rhetoric, the rhetorical operation of ‘Destabilization’ includes the implicit or the explicit juxtaposition of two unusual or opposite visual elements/signs in order to make a persuasive argument. In advertising, the ultimate purpose of this operation is to spark an interesting or unusual connection in a viewer’s mind to achieve the ends of persuasion. In our data, the operation is realized by three visual rhetorical figures: *visual metaphor*, *visual pun* and *visual paradox*.

In the rhetorical figure of *visual metaphor* (from the Greek word *metapherein* lit. “to transfer”), the target visual element/sign—purposefully, but uncommonly, configured in the visual text/ad—suggests an implicit comparison of the point of similarity. It describes an object or action in a way that is not literally true, but helpful in explaining an idea. In its essence, a metaphor compresses simile by turning a statement of similarity into a statement of identity, in turn, turning a statement of identity into an *enactment* of identity. Johns (1984, p. 314) has explained that “A successful visual metaphor will use a juxtaposition that has the daring of enough *dissimilarity* in it to make the arrived-at *similarity* stretch the limits of the imagination”. It may provide (or obscure) clarity or identify hidden similarities between two different ideas or objects. For example, look at Roma’s ad of PISA cream-pie-cake (see Fig, 4.8 below). In this ad, the cream-pie-cake is visually metaphorized to echo its implicit comparison with the famous Italian Pisa Tower. The point of similarity, manipulated to persuade the target consumers, is the hugeness of the cream-pie-cake and its Italian taste. Both the target points of similarity are artfully presented by giving the cream-pie-cake a bendy twist like that of original Pisa Tower. Apart from the rhetorical figure of *visual metaphor*, the attention of the target audience is also captured more powerfully by maneuvering the modality markers of *depth* (i.e., absence of depth), *illumination* (bendy side of the cream-pie-cake is more illuminated) and *colour saturation* (i.e., yellow colour—the colour of focus—is saturated) and *colour modulation* (i.e., various shades of yellow colour are used to give focus to the central visual element).



Fig, 4.8: An example of *visual metaphor*

The second rhetorical figure is *visual pun*, in which the similar deviant visual configuration of the visual elements (i.e., lines, shapes, colors, objects or formats) echoes multiple intended meanings. In verbal rhetoric, a pun is a device that is also known as a “play on words”. Puns involve words with similar or identical sounds but with different meanings. Their play on words also relies on a word or phrase having more than one meaning. However, in visual rhetoric, the play involves the visually configured visual elements (i.e., lines, shapes, colors, objects or formats). Generally, puns are intended to be humorous, but in advertising, they often serve a serious purpose. For example, look at Pepsi’s ad (see fig., 4.9) of promoting their products of ‘Pepsi’ and ‘Lays’.



Fig., 4.9: An example of *visual pun*

In the ad, the logo of Pepsi is artfully re-configured to adjust a crisp of potato in place of central white patch of the logo; thus, generating the rhetorical case for

visual pun. As in this case, the logo serves the dual purpose of advertising Pepsi and Lays simultaneously, as suggested by the verbal clue of “better together” as well. In fact, in the whole image act, the advertiser has made this appeal thorough a rhetorical phenomenon known as *visual coherence*— an inherent quality of Augmented Reality in which “the goal is to have visual augmentations blend with the real world in a visually coherent manner”³. Turner (2009) has defined the *visual coherence* as “the extent to which visual elements of a composition tied together with color, shape, image, lines of sight, theme etc”. And, one can easily note the rhetorical use of the multiple shades of blue colour—an intrinsic colour of Pepsi brand and its packaging—to entangle together the visual elements of the ads with the intended message of the advertiser. The blue colour, in its effect, intensifies the net intended meanings of the ad.

The third visual rhetorical figure of *visual paradox* (via late Latin from Greek *paradoxon* lit. “contrary [opinion]”), can be defined as a specific visual configuration in which two seemingly absurd or self-contradictory visual elements/signs (i.e., line, shape, color, object or format) are purposefully configured to present the logically unacceptable visual argument i.e., a visual configuration that runs contrary to one’s expectation. In advertising, despite its apparent invalid depiction, the rhetorical figure of *visual paradox* involves contradictory-yet-interrelated visual elements that exist simultaneously to make a rhetorical point. Functionally, it acts as a powerful tool of ‘visual stopper’, as the audience cannot help but stopping to view and re-view the intriguing chunk of visual configuration. For example, look at the ad of ‘Orbit’ chewing-gum (see Fig. 4.10 below).



Fig. 4.10: Example of *visual paradox*

In this ad, the visual text presents the juxtaposed amalgam of highly unnatural or impossible phenomenon. Garlic is shown to be grown with the slices of an

³ “Visual Coherence in Augmented Reality” (online webpage), Available at: <http://ael.gatech.edu/lab/research/technology/visual-coherence/> Accessed on: 16-12-2022.

orange. Actually, the intended message to be conveyed is that the target audience, especially teens, should keep in mind that ‘Orbit’ is far more than that just a chewing-gum. Moreover, the ad depicts the rhetorical intentions on dual front: Firstly, the reasonable argument behind this ad is to deconstruct the myth that chewing-gum is unhealthy for children generally. The advertiser wants to persuade the target audience that, in fact, Orbit chewing-gum is as healthy as an orange. It does not matter how you ate it; it just means that you ate orange covered in the wrapping of a chewing-gum. Secondly, the net inherent meaning of this paradoxical visualization—as one may never see to grow a bunch of orange slices within the garlic coverings—is that ‘Orbit’ is an antidote for the bad breaths. It will change the bad breaths of garlic into orange-flavoured ones, as the visual text/ad supports this interpretation too i.e., “NO ONE WILL FIND, WHAT YOU ATE!” How skillfully the figure of visual rhetoric is employed to promote the target argument! In fact, the highly unusual *visual paradox* is employed to hold back the target audience; as no one would care for a damn chewing-gum ad for that long a time. Here, again, in addition to the visual paradox, the modality markers (i.e., the absence of *depth*, the central use of *illumination* and the color modulation of white and grey shades) are used to capture, first, the consumers’ attention and, then, their schema is elaborated in change their existing opinion about the chewing-gum.

5. CONCLUSION

On a single note, our interpretation of the findings points out the presence and actuality of the nonverbal forms of rhetoric i.e. visual rhetoric. To be precise, the present study has highlighted commercial forms of *visual persuasion* by uncovering the visual forms of rhetorical figures. In fact, the present study aiming at identifying different rhetorical figures of visual rhetoric has found the operation of a set of nine visual rhetorical figures—visual rhyme, visual alliteration, visual inversion, visual antithesis, visual metonym, visual synecdoche, visual metaphor, visual pun and visual paradox—and has attempted to provide their brief theoretical and structural heuristics. Apart from this, the study has also marked the presence of the phenomenon of ‘layering’ (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2003) that a single ad can incorporate multiple visual rhetorical figures, as has been explained in *Objav Mlieko*’s ad above.

Moreover, finding the linkage between rhetoric and semiotics, the study has also marked the presence of some of the “modality markers” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) of the visual—like the absence of ‘depth’ from the background of the visual, the focal use of ‘illumination’ and the rhetorical use of ‘colour saturation’ and ‘colour modulation’—that are used to “heighten or limit the persuasiveness of rhetorical figures”, as was predicted by McQuarrie and Mick (1996, p. 435) in their taxonomy of verbal figures. Thus, it is safe to assume that the advertisers employ various semiotic resources to enhance the net effect of the visual rhetorical figures manipulated in the ad-text(s) and further scrutiny is suggested for the deep probing of this under-researched phenomenon.

In a nutshell, the study has claimed that a visual rhetorical figure *alone* cannot fully illustrate the exact nature of the phenomenon of ‘visual persuasion’ in digital advertising. In fact, much more is involved in the actual process of *visual persuasion*, and to account for that a comprehensive future research is needed.

An important limitation of the present study is that the detected set of nine visual rhetorical figures is based on McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) four rhetorical operations only. Future additions to these rhetorical operations are expected. Moreover, only those rhetorical figures, which emerged in our collected data, are described theoretically. Future research can be conducted to find more visual rhetorical figures on the larger and the richer data. Lastly, since the present study is limited to still-ads only, another opportunity for future work would be the exploration of those visual rhetorical figures that are incorporated into web animation ads, narrative videos made for advertising, moving banner ads and sliding pop-up ads.

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