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Persuasive Imagery: A Consumer Response Perspective
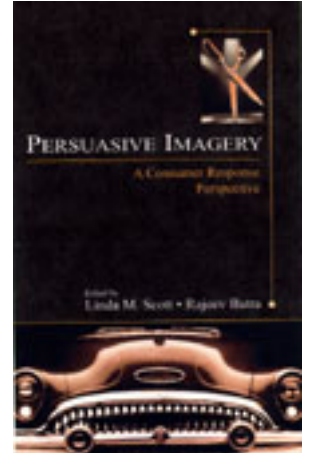
Scott, Linda M. & Batra, Rajeev (eds.)
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Reviewed by: William G. Covington, Jr., Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

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Scott and Batra are to be commended for bringing together a cadre of scholars who link rhetorical questions of the ancients with issues of the early 21st century. New channels of delivering messages to consumers and what consumers do with the images they see are matters that affect everyone in some form. The contributors to this volume bring an international perspective as well as fresh insight on the topics addressed, as many of the citations include recent conference proceedings, papers submitted for publication, and recently completed dissertations.

The first section of the book asks what we really know about persuasive imagery. Malkewitz and his colleagues address part of the question in the first chapter by a review of what is available in the literature. They concede "effective persuasion is fairly difficult to achieve in real world practice" (p. 3). Furthermore, they contend that professionals are usually preoccupied with learning new technologies of production to focus on issues of persuasion at the consumer end of the communication transaction.

In the following chapter Kenney and Scott review the literature on visual rhetoric. Their essay is designed to frame theoretical issues of visual rhetoric in addition to providing an overview of the current state of knowledge. A valid point is made that "in a mass communication society...few debates of any kind take place at one time and in one location" (p. 24). Debates whether personal or political usually extended

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over time and space in the information age they contend. Also introduced in this chapter is an issue which is addressed by other writers in subsequent sections of the book, the fact that objects themselves participate in rhetoric through their design and use.

More depth is presented in the section, "Image and Response" as five chapters are devoted to the topic. Jane E. Raymond points out how some creative producers of ads miss the purpose of convincing consumers to purchase products because the very nature of their production works against it. She uses research from neuroscience and experimental psychology to show that "fast-paced, complex visual messages frequently used in modern advertising may exceed the cognitive capacity of most people" (p. 59). She states her argument convincingly by noting, "current understanding of these processes predicts that much of very briefly presented and rapidly changing visual information presented in advertisements is simply not processed to any significant extent" (p.71).

Raymond's insight is followed by an equally intriguing idea in the next chapter by Winkielman, et al. Their focus on the influence of persuasion is in the process itself. "We contend that any variable that makes a stimulus easy to process will also increase the stimulus's appeal" (p. 76). So from the perspective of an active participant, the consumer is seen as enjoying the consumption experience. Nordhielm addresses two sides of a complex issue in her chapter, the role of repetition in advertising. What makes it complex is that some repetition is needed for the message to effectively reach the consumer, but too much repetition defeats the purpose. Pimentel and Heckler discuss a related issue in their chapter, how much change is acceptable in logo designs. Cees Goossens adds the emotional component to the analysis of media messages writing, "emotions are formed as a result of a process of appraisals of what an event/stimulus can do for one's well-being" (p. 136).

"Image and Word" is the topic of the third section of the book, to which three chapters are dedicated. Tavassoli compares English readers, who use a phonological alphabet (vocalized) with Chinese readers, whose alphabet is more logographic (symbolic). He writes "English relies to a greater degree on short-term memory's phonological loop, whereas Chinese relies more on visual short-term memory" (p. 142). Luna and Peracchio follow up in the next chapter with a presentation of the research on bilingual consumers processing of ads. They are to be commended for pointing out that a substantial part of the world's population speaks more than one language and is an important niche for research. Their sample was bilinguals speaking Spanish and English in North America. Among their findings, was that" if constructed to include congruent pictures, ads in the consumers' second language can be as memorable as ads in their first language" (p. 161). Mani and MacInnis contributed the last chapter to this section which deals

with the role of imagery instructions in a persuasive consumer context.

"Image and Ad", section four contains five chapters. In the first one, McQuarrie and Mick bring semiotics into the discussion of visual persuasion in an advertising context. In the next chapter Mulvey and Medina add the dimension of character to the rhetorical process of meaning making. In the third chapter of this section, Lambiase and Reichert debunk a cliche, "sex sells." In sum what they posit is "perhaps sex sells itself more than any product associated with sexual appeals" (p. 248). Wiggin and Miller examine verbal-visual juxtapositions in television advertising in the following chapter as they use military recruiting ads as a case study. In the final chapter in this section, Barbara J. Phillips explains how a traditionally literary device, metaphor works in a visual context.

Section five brings the book to a close with five chapters on "Image and Object." Garber and Hyatt present more unanswerable questions due to the complexity of their research topic as they examine color as a tool for persuasion. Due to individual differences there are not clear-cut answers. Bernstein and Moskowitz look at product packaging in the next chapter and find consumers in various European countries and the United States tend to have similar preferences. Schroeder takes a look at how institutions such as banks and universities continue to use architecture as vehicles of communication even on the internet. Wood and her colleagues discuss virtual models on the internet. In the last chapter, Horvath writes about how mobile telephones in Hungary communicate as objects, i.e., status symbols which are functional.

Scott and Batra have contributed to our understanding of the state of visual persuasion in the information age. Their contributors address pertinent topics, debunk myths, and point out the fallacy of producers who are so intent on creativity that the intended audience misses their message. This work fills a heretofore-missing niche in the literature.

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