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The Impact of Verbal Anchoring on Consumer Response to Image Ads

Barbara J. Phillips

Verbal copy is thought to anchor, or help explain, the meanings of complex image ads to consumers. This study examines the effect of verbal anchoring on consumers' comprehension and liking of complex image ads. Explanatory headlines that differed in level of verbal anchoring were inserted into ads containing pictorial metaphors. Path analysis results indicate that headlines that provide a clue to the meaning of a pictorial metaphor increase ad liking by increasing comprehension. Headlines that completely explain the metaphor in the ad also increase comprehension but decrease ad liking by reducing consumers' pleasure in interpreting the ad's message. Implications for future advertising research are provided.

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The marketplace of the early 2000s is filled with vivid, fantastic and complex advertising images. In some ads, the image stands alone; for example, a wordless Bally shoe ad depicts a foot-shaped cloud floating through the sky. Other images are explained by words; a striped beach umbrella is juxtaposed with a black rain umbrella in an ad that states, "Return to your senses in Florida." Is it better to use words to help explain complex images to consumers, or not? This research study begins to answer that question by examining the impact of adding verbal explanation to complex advertising images.

Previous studies of advertising images generally have been grounded in one of two schools of thought: information processing or rhetoric. Information processing research depicts an ad's images as affective (e.g., Rossiter and Percy 1983) or peripheral processing cues that influence consumer cognition (for a review, see Scott 1994a). Research in this area has concluded that images can help consumers evaluate a product when the images relate to the verbal message in the ad (Edell and Staelin 1983) and can increase ad recall under high-involvement, high-elaboration conditions (Houston, Childers and Heckler 1987; Miniard et. al 1991). In addition, this research indicates that images elicit superior recall when compared to low-imagery copy (Babin and Burns 1997; Unnava and Burnkrant 1991).

Consistent with their research objectives, information processing researchers generally use simple visual images in their ads, such as illustrations of the product or brand attributes. Rarely have these researchers examined the complex, surreal, or fanciful images that abound in advertising practice (cf. Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1994). In addition, under an information processing perspective, the ad's *words* are studied as the main message of the ad. In the marketplace, however, many ads contain images without any copy. For example, Leigh (1994) reports that in a sample of 2183 magazine ads, 10% had no headline. The proportion of all ads without copy may be understated by Leigh because his sample was not chosen from women's service or fashion magazines whose ads typically contain little copy (McQuarrie and Mick 1993).

To expand the knowledge of image effects developed through the information processing approach, advertising researchers turned to the study of rhetoric. Although researchers had examined advertising images in symbolic ways before (e.g., Mick and Politi 1989; Stern 1993), Scott's (1994a) fresh way of thinking about advertising images brought new interest to this

line of research. At the same time, McQuarrie and Mick (1996) devised a typology of verbal rhetoric that helped advertising researchers find the language to discuss ad elements from a new perspective.

From a rhetorical perspective, a complex image is a meaningful element in an ad that *by itself* can convey advertising messages to consumers (Scott 1994b). Verbal copy may not be necessary if consumers can interpret the ad's implicit message from its images. Scott (1994a) and other researchers argue that many of the images found in ads deserve study as meaningful rhetorical elements. However, few empirical studies using this perspective exist, and those that do exist explore the effects of complex images holistically without examining the verbal copy apart from the visual image. For example, McQuarrie and Mick (1992) examined the rhetorical device of resonance, defined as the interplay between the ad's headline and the ad's image. The same researchers studied the effects of four different types of rhetorical images on consumer response (1999); all of their experimental ads contained "matter-of-fact" headlines that gave the key attribute of the product in the ad. Neither study examined the effects of *adding* verbal copy to stand-alone images.

The current study attempts to draw from both the rhetoric and information processing schools of thought. It examines complex advertising images as figures of rhetoric that are capable of conveying messages to consumers without copy. However, it also empirically examines the effects of adding verbal copy to complex images using traditional measures of consumer response.

Conceptual Development

The hallmark of complex advertising images is that they allow consumers to interpret them in different ways (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Prior research has identified gender (Mick and Politi 1989; Stern 1993) and life experiences (Mick and Buhl 1992) as factors leading to differing ad interpretation. For example, in the Florida ad described earlier, consumers may associate the beach umbrella with sunshine and conclude that the advertising message is "Visit Florida for the sunshine." However, other interpretations are possible. If life experiences suggest an association between the black rain umbrella and England, a consumer may conclude that the advertising message is "Take a vacation in the United States, not in Europe."

The different interpretations of the same image in an ad cannot be judged true or false because no one objective reality exists (Mick and Politi 1989). However, from the advertiser's point of view, the ad may not be effective if consumers do not comprehend the

intended meaning of the ad or they create an undesired meaning (Ward and Gaidis 1990). Barthes (1977) was one of the first to theorize that words can *anchor*, or fix in place, the implicit meanings of images in press photos to help consumers interpret the message. More recent works have focused on the potential anchoring properties of verbal copy in ads (Dyer 1982; McCracken 1986; Pollay 1983). Verbal anchoring can make images easier to understand because the explicit verbal cues provide a link to stored knowledge in memory and thereby reduce the amount of elaboration required to complete the interpretation (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Kardes (1993) notes that as the amount of effort required to interpret a message decreases, the likelihood of understanding the advertiser's desired meaning increases. Therefore, one role of verbal copy may be to facilitate comprehension of advertising images and messages. Comprehension is important because previous research has found that successful comprehension of a rhetorical figure in an ad increases liking of the ad (McQuarrie and Mick 1992); if consumers do not comprehend the ad's message, decreased liking of the ad occurs.

Despite its positive effects on comprehension and ad liking, verbal anchoring also may produce unintended *negative* effects. Consumers enjoy and get a sense of accomplishment from figuring out the meaning of rhetorical figures without the help of explanatory copy (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 1994; Stafford, Walker and Blasko 1996). Indeed, the entertainment value of rhetorical figures is believed to be the reason that consumers expend the cognitive effort necessary to understand the advertising message. McQuarrie and Mick (1999) found that ads with rhetorical images produce deeper elaboration and a more positive attitude toward the ad than similar ads without these images. If consumers enjoy solving image puzzles, as suggested by this research, then they may dislike verbal copy that gives away the answer. In this case, *less* verbal anchoring in an image ad would lead to greater liking of the ad.

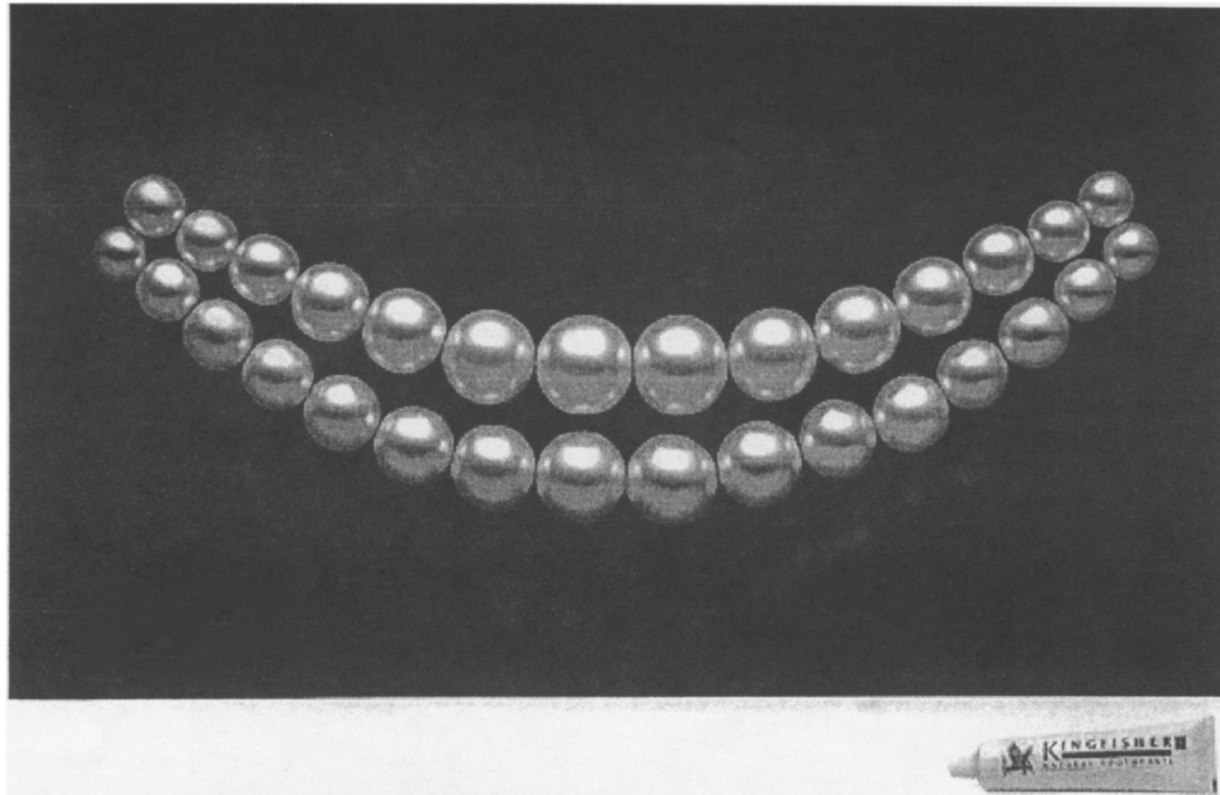
This study examines three different amounts of verbal anchoring (including no copy) added to a complex image as a first step in understanding the trade-off between comprehension and pleasure. While verbal anchoring of a complex image is hypothesized to increase comprehension of an ad, it also may decrease ad liking.

Method

Materials

Many types of complex rhetorical figures have been identified in advertising that could have been used

Figure 1



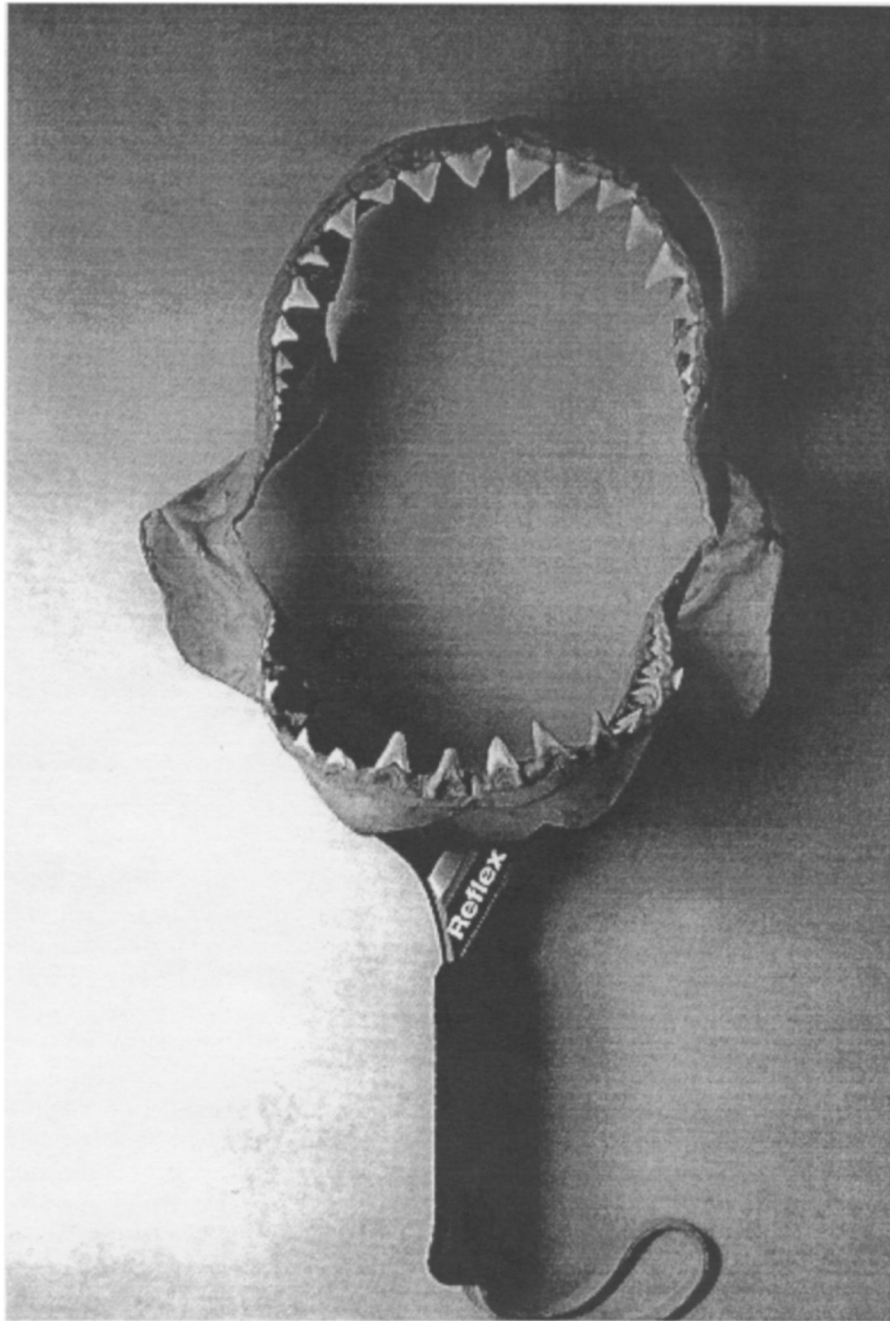
for this study. However, consumer processing may differ depending on the type of rhetoric used (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Therefore, all experimental ads used in this study contain images identified as pictorial metaphor. Pictorial metaphor is similar to verbal metaphor in that it compares two images through analogy by suggesting that one object is like another even though they are quite different (Stern 1990; Ward and Gaidis 1990). However, because pictorial metaphor allows for several possible interpretations, consumers may fail to comprehend the metaphor implied in the complex image (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). This expected variability in comprehension makes the pictorial metaphor ideal for studying comprehension and ad liking. It also limits the generalizability of this study's findings to one type of complex image.

A previously published study of pictorial metaphor was used as the foundation for the current study. Phillips (1997) gathered qualitative data to explore the inferences drawn by consumers for six pictorial metaphor ads. Although Phillips did not include verbal anchoring in her research, her findings provide a

basis for this study. Phillips observed that individual consumers draw a range of common and idiosyncratic inferences from pictorial metaphor ads. For three of her ads, in particular, consumers drew a range of inferences but the majority (58% to 92%) also drew a common inference. These three ads were selected for use in the current study because the common inferences provided a starting point to develop anchoring headlines for the ads while still allowing variability in response.

The ads used in the experiment were three, full-page, color ads for Kingfisher toothpaste (shown in Figure 1), Reflex racquets (Figure 2), and Sport athletic clothing (Figure 3). As Thorson (1990) recommends, the selected ads were real ads that appeared in print to increase the external validity of the research. A pretest with 33 students indicated that each of the products in the ads were bought or used by a majority (50%+) of college students of both sexes. The original ads were altered by removing the verbal copy and replacing known brand names with neutral, fictitious brand names. Three ads were used to reduce the possibility that the experimental results could be attributed to idiosyncratic ad elements.

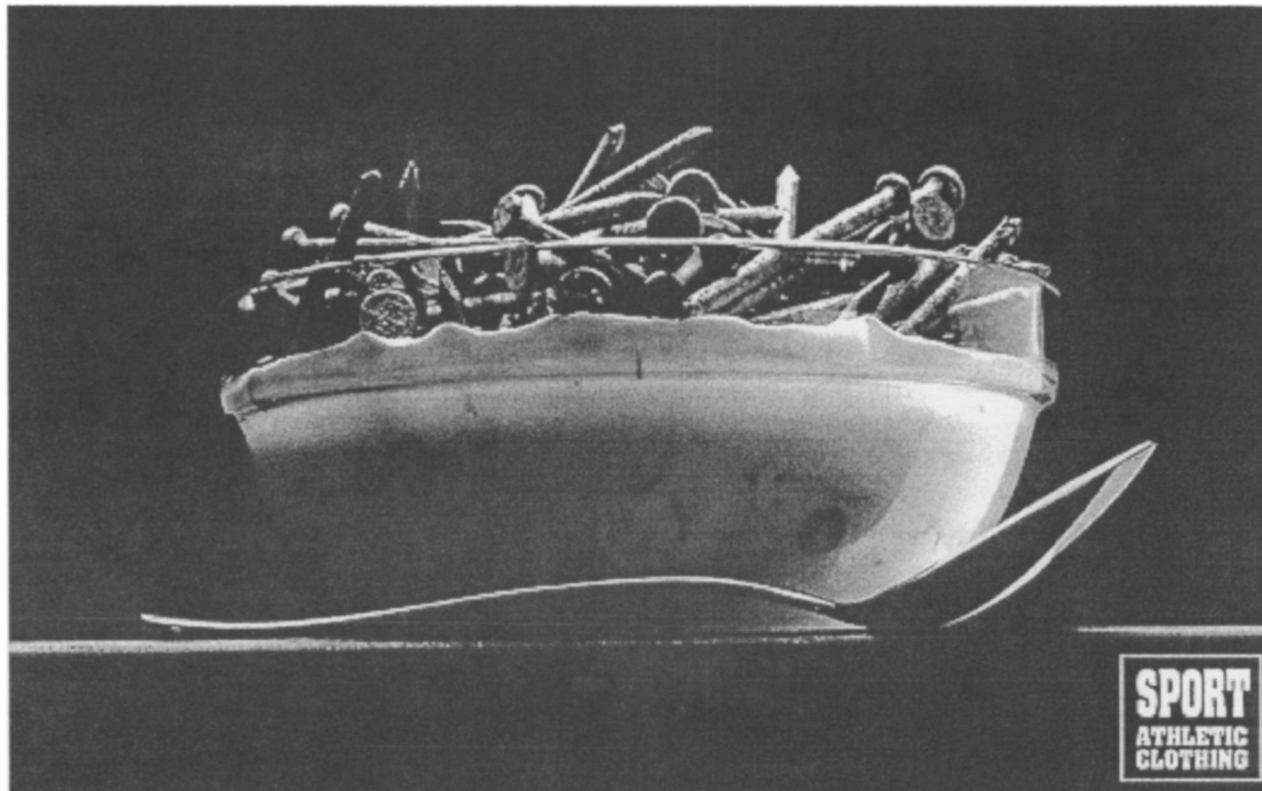
Figure 2



The image in each experimental ad suggested one common advertising message as determined by the informants interviewed by Phillips (1997); this common message was used to develop headlines using the informants' own words. Two types of headlines were created for each ad. One type of headline represented a moderate amount of verbal anchoring (i.e., a

headline that gave a clue to the ad's message) and the other type represented complete verbal anchoring (i.e., a headline that explicitly described the ad's message). By including a control condition that contained only the image (i.e., no headline), three levels of verbal anchoring were created. In all of the ads with headlines, the headlines were placed above the picture in

Figure 3



black Arial font. The primary meanings and headlines for the ads are provided in Table 1.

The headlines were pretested by 26 students who used two 7-point scales to indicate the amount of verbal anchoring provided in the ads. These pretest subjects were asked to rate whether the headline (a) does not tell/tells the meaning of the ad, and (b) does not explain/explains the ad ($\alpha=0.75$). Based on a within-subjects repeated-measures analysis of variance, these ratings verified that the moderate and complete verbal anchoring headlines provided significantly different amounts of verbal anchoring for the Kingfisher ad ($F=80.43$; $p<0.001$), the Reflex ad ($F=57.99$; $p<0.001$), and the Sport ad ($F=106.84$; $p<0.001$). In addition, one-tailed, one-sample t -tests confirm that the ratings from the moderate verbal anchoring headlines are greater than the lowest point of the rating scales (i.e., no verbal anchoring) for the Kingfisher ad ($t=9.257$; $p<0.001$), the Reflex ad ($t=11.083$; $p<0.001$), and the Sport ad ($t=4.766$; $p<0.001$). These data indicate that the amount of verbal anchoring differed between conditions as intended.

The experimental materials consisted of a booklet containing the three experimental ads and, to mask

the purpose of the study, two ads that did not contain pictorial metaphors. Each booklet contained one version of the three different product ads and the order of the experimental ads was counterbalanced to control for order effects.

Subjects

Ninety-six undergraduate students enrolled at a major state university participated in the experiment for course credit. These subjects were not the same informants used in the previously published study of ad meaning (Phillips 1997). Students who were not advertising majors were used as subjects because they are less likely to have a special interest or expertise in advertising. The subjects were 57% female and 43% male, and most (86%) were between the ages of 20 and 22. Subjects' tolerance for ambiguity has been hypothesized to affect the enjoyment they receive from solving visual puzzles such as pictorial metaphor (McQuarrie and Mick 1992). However, neither subjects' gender nor tolerance for ambiguity had a significant effect on the results reported in this study ($p>0.10$).

Table 1
Experimental Ad Meanings and Headlines

Ad	Primary Message	Headlines	
		Moderate Verbal Anchoring	Complete Verbal Anchoring
Kingfisher toothpaste	Use this toothpaste for pearly white teeth.	"Flash 'em"	"Make your teeth pearly white."
Reflex racquets	This racquet will make one a powerful attacker on the court.	"Killer"	"Attack like a shark on the court."
Sport athletic clothing	Tough clothing for tough people.	"as nails"	"Tough as nails for those who eat nails for breakfast."

Procedure

Subjects were assigned randomly to the different experimental conditions. To simulate realistic viewing conditions, the experimental instructions asked subjects to view the ads as they normally would when reading a magazine and to look at each ad for as long as they liked. Subjects then answered questions using semantic differential scales for the dependent variables: (a) comprehension ($\alpha=0.89$)—easy/difficult to understand; straightforward/confusing; and (b) attitude toward the ad ($\alpha=0.89$)—like/dislike; good/bad; enjoyable/not enjoyable. Subjects also completed a tolerance for ambiguity scale (McQuarrie and Mick 1992) and demographic questions.

Results

Path analysis was chosen to examine the relationships between consumer response, as described above, and the amount of verbal anchoring. Two dummy variables were created to capture the three levels of verbal anchoring. The first dummy variable, *presence of verbal anchoring*, represents the difference between ads with no headlines (coded as 0) and ads with any explanatory headlines (coded as 1). The second dummy variable, *level of verbal anchoring*, represents the difference between ads with headlines that provide no or only moderate verbal anchoring (coded as 0) and ads with headlines that provide complete verbal anchoring (coded as 1). Path coefficients are represented by standard regression weights (betas).

Previous research suggests that verbal anchoring facilitates comprehension of the ad's message. A multivariate regression of comprehension on the presence and level of verbal anchoring finds a positive

and significant association with each verbal anchoring variable ($\beta=0.218$ and 0.210 , respectively; $p=0.001$). These findings, as illustrated in Figure 4, indicate that as the amount of verbal anchoring increases, comprehension increases. They also suggest that comprehension is an important intervening variable that should be included in the model examining the effects of verbal anchoring on ad liking.

Beyond its effect on comprehension, verbal anchoring may also reduce ad liking if it reduces the pleasure in solving the ad's puzzle. The path analysis model examines the effects of presence and level of verbal anchoring on attitude toward the ad, with comprehension as an intervening variable. The results of this analysis, reported in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 4, reveal that the increases in comprehension caused by the level and presence of verbal anchoring translate into increased ad liking; comprehension has a significant positive effect on attitude toward the ad. In addition, this analysis reveals that the *level* of verbal anchoring is negatively associated with ad liking, supporting earlier speculation that complete explanation of a metaphorical image decreases consumers' pleasure in interpreting the ad. The mean attitude toward the ad for each condition is presented in Panel A of Table 3; Panel B shows the mean attitude toward the ad adjusted to remove the beneficial effects of comprehension. Panel B illustrates that complete verbal anchoring creates lower ad liking (11.97) than moderate (13.15) or no verbal anchoring (13.17) after controlling for the effects of comprehension.

Discussion

The findings of this experiment allow us to take the first step towards understanding whether it is better

Figure 4
Effects of Verbal Anchoring on Consumer Response when Mediated by Comprehension

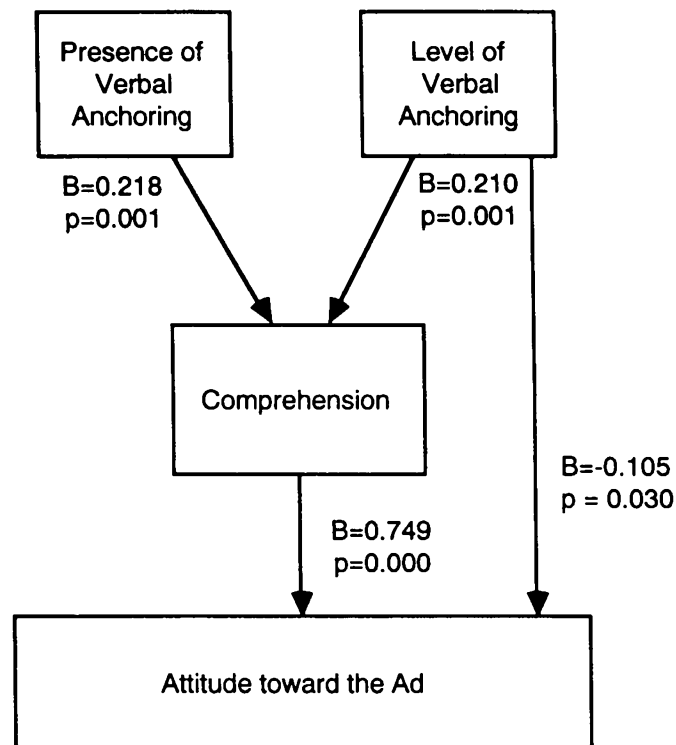


Table 2
Regression of Attitude toward the Ad on the Independent Variables

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i>
	<i>Standardized Coefficient (p-value)</i>
Intercept	4.383 (0.000)
Presence of verbal anchoring	-0.002 (0.962)
Level of verbal anchoring	-0.105 (0.030)
Comprehension	0.749 (0.000)
Number of observations	288
Adjusted R ²	0.516
F-statistic	102.873

to use words to help explain complex images to consumers. The preliminary answer seems to be, "it depends." The results of the path analysis indicate that adding an explanatory headline that offers a clue to the image's meaning increases comprehension and

ad liking of pictorial metaphor ads. Adding a headline that completely explains the image, however, results in decreased ad liking by giving away the ad's message and decreasing subjects' enjoyment of interpreting the ad by themselves.

Table 3
Mean Attitude toward the Ad by Verbal Anchoring Condition

<i>Ad Liking</i>	<i>Level of Verbal Anchoring</i>		
	<i>None (n=95)</i>	<i>Moderate (n=97)</i>	<i>Complete (n=96)</i>
<i>Panel A:</i>			
Mean	11.37	13.16	13.74
(Standard deviation)	(5.48)	(5.10)	(4.93)
<i>Panel B:</i>			
Adjusted mean*	13.17	13.15	11.97
(Standard deviation*)	(3.80)	(3.65)	(3.79)

*Adjusted to remove the effects of comprehension as a covariate.

An important limitation of these findings is the use of advertising images that are fairly easy to comprehend. Based on Phillips (1997), the ads used in this study could be comprehended by a majority of informants without copy. It is likely that subjects did not need the complete headline to understand the ad; the complete headline decreased their pleasure in the ad because it was unnecessary. The generalizability of these findings may not extend to very complex or abstract pictorial metaphors where consumers need more help in understanding the ad's message. In these alternative situations, verbal anchoring may have only a positive effect on ad liking as it improves comprehension of the ad.

These preliminary findings suggest that creating anchoring copy for complex image ads is an exercise in moderation. Advertising practitioners must provide sufficient copy (if any) to ensure consumer comprehension, while not providing such a detailed explanation of the image that liking of the ad decreases. The difficulty lies in determining the definition of sufficient copy in any given situation. While this study cannot set the parameters of verbal anchoring sufficiency, it can be used with previous research in this area to suggest guidelines for future exploration.

Audience characteristics are frequently considered when creating ad executions (Kover 1995). These characteristics are likely to be influential in determining whether a given level of verbal anchoring is sufficient. A limitation of the current study is the use of a student sample with similar inference abilities and execution preferences. McQuarrie and Mick (1992) found that a more representative group of consumers differed in their tolerance for ambiguity and thus their pleasure in solving rhetorical puzzles. It seems likely that older, less educated consumers would receive less pleasure from complex image ads. A

consumer's interest and involvement in a product category also may affect the level of verbal anchoring required. Higher involvement with a product is thought to lead to more elaboration and deeper processing of an ad for that product. Therefore, it could be hypothesized that products that are more highly involving for a target audience require less verbal anchoring.

Beyond audience characteristics, consumer expectation for a particular product class or brand is another factor that may influence the impact of verbal anchoring. As consumers come to expect complex images in ads, they may be more willing to expend cognitive effort to interpret the ad; consequently, less verbal anchoring would be needed. For example, liquor and cigarette advertising is generally known for using visual and verbal rhetoric, such as the J&B Scotch word puzzle ads and Absolut Vodka's pictorial references to modern artists. Because these brands have created a context for their ads in which cognitive effort is expected, less verbal anchoring may be needed.

Related to consumer expectations is consumer experience. The experimental method used in this study may have overstated the need for verbal anchoring because it allowed subjects to see an ad only once. Real advertising executions will be shown to the same consumers many times and consumers will have several exposures to learn the ad's message. Multiple exposures to a complex image ad are thought by some practitioners to increase comprehension of the ad (Phillips 1997, p. 83); less verbal anchoring may be needed when comprehension can be achieved through repetition instead of copy.

Future Research

This study supports the theory that verbal anchoring adds to consumer comprehension of a complex

image ad at the same time as it detracts from the pleasure of interpreting that ad. It is conceivable, however, that a verbal headline could directly increase consumer liking of an ad. In a study of verbal rhetoric, Leigh (1994) found that 74% of ads have a figure of speech in the headline. Although this study used straightforward headlines so as not to confound the results, fanciful or imagery-laden headlines increase the amount of rhetoric in an ad and may increase consumer pleasure in the ad. Future research is needed to test how the layering of rhetorical figures in the image and the copy affect consumer interpretation and response.

Finally, the trade off between consumer pleasure and comprehension inherent in complex image ads is not limited to print ads. Wells (1989, p. 17) hypothesized the same relationship in television advertising:

Writers of television commercial dramas have two demanding tasks: they must make their dramas rich enough to engage the viewer, and they must make their dramas unequivocal enough to elicit a unanimous conclusion as to the superiority of a single brand. These two objectives interfere with each other.

An examination of how spoken words and written copy on the TV screen are used to anchor the complex images viewed in television ads would extend the current research to new domains. The current study is the first step to exploring these domains; a wealth of opportunity exists for advertising researchers to examine the parameters of the trade-off between comprehension and pleasure in complex image advertising.

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