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A Q-Method Study of Visual Metaphors in Advertising

Mckenzie Joell Madsen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### A Q-Method Study of Visual Metaphors in Advertising

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Visual metaphors in advertising have been researched extensively because of their ability to persuade. However, few studies have investigated why they are persuasive from the perspective of the consumer. The purpose of this study was to identify why viewers are attracted to visual metaphor ads and provide a better understanding of the types of consumers who view them, revealing their subjective opinions and attitudes. Through the use of Q-method, four factors were identified: “Highbrows,” who prefer metaphors that are classy and refined, “Connectors,” an emotional group that focuses on interpersonal relationships and the relevance of the metaphor to the advertised product, “Executionists,” who focus solely on how well the message or idea is executed by the metaphor, and “Logical Agitators,” who can appreciate humorous body distortion because they function primarily cognitively. The results show that visual metaphors attract a diverse audience and that consumers of metaphors are much more complex than previous research implies. Advertisers may create more effective visual metaphors by constructing them to appeal to one of the four types.

Keywords: metaphor, visual metaphor, advertising consumers, Q-method

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## Introduction

Imagine you are sitting in your car at a stop light. You turn your head absentmindedly, observing your surroundings. You briefly scan the large image on the side of the bus opposite you, but as you look away, a signal goes off in your brain—something was wrong with that image. You take a second look. You see a package of pills, ordinary at first, until you realize that the little rows of oval-shaped pockets do not actually contain pills. They are bullets—and one of them is missing. Immediately you attempt to unravel the meaning in the substitution of the two objects, to draw a connection. Then you see the text under the image, reading, “Can you treat yourself better than your doctor?”

Every day, millions of Americans are exposed to media that is intended to persuade them in some way. Politicians looking for votes, organizations trying to gain support for a cause, and brands hoping to increase their number of consumers are just a few examples of those seeking to win over an audience through television, magazines and social networking sites (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009). The number of ads a person is exposed to each day is in the thousands (Simpson, 2017). This forces advertisers to become more and more creative as they try to stand out and capture the attention of the population. Thus, consumer advertising is ever-changing as brands and organizations discover new, successful methods of enticing the masses to use their merchandise or comply with their messages.

As illustrated in the opening anecdote, one creative triumph in advertising has been the incorporation of visual metaphor (Lick, 2015). Linda Scott (1994), in her landmark article about a need for a theory of visual rhetoric in advertising, explained how visual metaphors made their entrance. Images in their earliest period of creation were an effort to represent (or “mime”)

reality. From classical Greece's illusionistic paintings to the "rules of perspective" era during the Renaissance, "mimetic techniques dominated the concerns of artists" (p. 260). But in the 20th century, a new style of art, modernism, challenged the imperative to represent the real world. At first, this new art was jarring and incomprehensible to viewers. Now, "few of us have trouble seeing dancers, children, or gardens in the works of Degas, Renoir, or Monet" (Scott, 1994, p. 261). Scott continued by discussing the invention of the camera, with which the possibilities of visual representation became even more complex. Today we live in a culture that is replete with unrealistic visuals.

As these visuals became part of our culture, they became part of our advertising. In the same century that modernism was blooming, the number of words in advertisements steadily decreased, and the number of images steadily increased (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005). Soon, ads exploded with visual metaphor. Its growth was substantially more rapid than that of verbal metaphor (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002), because visual metaphors catch the attention of consumers and invite them to process an advertisement's message in a way that no other image can (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). This makes the advertisements more persuasive (Sopory & Dillard, 2002).

In spite of all we know about visual metaphors in advertising, there is more to be learned about the reasons behind this persuasive process. Though the image described in the opening anecdote would likely capture the attention of most, reactions to the image will vary based on the viewer. Some will appreciate it and some will not; this persuasion or aversion may occur for an array of reasons depending on the viewer's personal traits, comprehension, and circumstance (Mick & Politi, 1989). This thesis therefore presents a weakness in the extant research that the

author seeks to improve with the current study, namely, the lack of subjective studies conducted in this area in comparison to the overwhelming majority of R-methodological studies.

The paper begins with a literature review that provides an explanation of how visual metaphors work, their use in advertising, and previous related studies. This is followed by justification for how the current Q-method study contributes to the field of communications. The last section of the review outlines the theoretical basis that informs the research, preceding the method. By conducting a Q-method study, this thesis determines the varying types of consumers that view metaphorical advertisements and the processes behind their viewing experience, informing advertisers of the “why” behind consumers’ opinions and attitudes.

## **Literature Review**

### **Metaphors Dissected**

Metaphors by definition are a type of rhetorical device or trope, “in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the visual case, images create the analogy rather than words and phrases. This allows aspects of one object to be mentally transferred to a second object (Kim, Baek, & Choi, 2012).

Consumers enjoy the process of interpreting analogous mechanisms and the psychological phenomenon they incite. Visual metaphors gain attention through intrigue: they are “artful deviations,” which McQuarrie and Mick (1996) defined as aesthetic, “unorthodox use[s] or [violations] of some norm or convention” (p. 425). Their incongruity directs viewers to mentally hunt for another meaning. This “creates arousal that is relieved once the viewer is able to reconcile the incongruity... Feelings of pleasure, similar to the satisfaction of completing a puzzle, often ensue when a rhetorical figure is successfully processed” (Callister & Stern, 2007,

pp. 3-4). Because such ads motivate people to process in this manner, they are more likely to be persuasive, as asserted by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). This model will be discussed in further detail later on.

Not only do metaphors present viewers with an intriguing puzzle, they engage the viewer in analogous thinking, which is a core cognitive process (Forbus, 2001), and foundational to human thought (Peterson et al., 2017). During mental development at a young age, “new knowledge is assimilated in large part by making associations with existing knowledge that persist—these associations are inherently and authentically metaphorical in nature” (Peterson et al., 2017, p. 66). This assimilation, or the drawing of an analogy, occurs in the brain in four steps: “1) the relevant terms are accessed from long-term memory; 2) the source is mapped to the target to identify correspondences; 3) analogical inferences are made about the target, creating new knowledge; 4) learning occurs when new links in memory are created” (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004, p. 119). Hence, metaphors are a powerful way for consumers to learn about advertisers’ products or causes.

Sopory and Dillard (2002) further explained the relationship between two analogous objects and the function of attribute salience:

Salience is defined as the relative importance of an attribute. Empirically, the first attribute that comes to mind is the most salient, and so on. A metaphorical expression of the type “A is B” is understood by constructing the set of shared attributes, then selecting those attributes that have low salience for the target and high salience for the base. For example, “Encyclopedias are goldmines” is understood by identifying attributes such as “valuable nuggets” and “dig,” which have a high salience for “goldmines” and a low salience for “encyclopedias.” (p. 384)

In this sense, metaphors are preferable to non-figurative language because of superior organization; they evoke a greater number of semantic associations. “When these associations are consistent with the metaphor, the different arguments are connected more coherently via the many available semantic pathways” (Sopory & Dillard, 2002, p. 387). This makes the message succinct and compelling.

According to Phillips and McQuarrie (2004), there are nine types of visual metaphors. Their typology is a matrix that crosses two dimensions: a) the visual structure, or the way the base object and the target object are pictured in the ad, and b) the meaning operation, or the cognitive process used to understand the image. The visual structure may take one of three forms: juxtaposition (putting two objects side by side), fusion (fusing two objects together), or replacement (one object replaces an element of the other). The cognitive processes include, from simplest to most complex, connection, comparison for similarity, and comparison for opposition (p. 116). The authors submitted that the combination of juxtaposition and the cognitive process of connection requires the least amount of effort from the viewer of the image, and is therefore the least enjoyable, because solving the puzzle is not as satisfying. On the other hand, a replacement metaphor requiring comparison for opposition is the most difficult to process and should therefore be the most enjoyable; however, this does not always ring true. “When incomprehensible, figures typically cease to have a positive impact or... will fail with some populations of consumers... Individual differences and other moderating factors will [therefore] determine whether a visual figure succeeds or fails to have a desired effect” (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004, p. 128). These individual differences in viewers and their perception of metaphors are the issues the current author explores in this study.

First, though, we must take a look at how previous studies have found visual metaphors effective in advertisements. With the occurrence of metaphorical learning, viewers' attitudes and beliefs about a product or brand may change. This learning may also affect several other persuasion-related factors, as the following research will show us.

### **Visual Metaphors and Persuasion**

Since brands are constantly seeking to understand what forms of advertising will generate the most revenue, the relationship between visual metaphors and persuasion has been studied extensively. The following paragraphs outline the correlations that have been found between visual metaphors and consumers' attitudes, recall, and purchase intent.

**Attitude.** Consumers are more likely to like an ad with a metaphor than one without. Several studies conducted on this subject have been designed by surveying individuals in an experimental group about an image that contains a metaphor, as well as individuals in a control group about the same image that has been edited so that it does not contain the metaphor. The results are then compared between the two groups. For example, McQuarrie and Mick (1999) conducted an experiment using an ad for an anti-drowsy nausea medication. In the control image, the medicine package is sitting on the seat of a car, a seat belt lying next to it. In the metaphorical image, the medicine package actually substitutes part of the seatbelt—it becomes the buckle. The authors found that those in the experimental group were not only more likely to mentally elaborate (i.e., to have “many thoughts in response to the ad” rather than “few thoughts in response to the ad”), but also had a more positive attitude toward the ad (found it likable, pleasant, and enjoyable) (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999).

Attitude toward the brand (not just the ad itself) may also become more positive as a result of the metaphor. Lutz, MacKenzie and Belch (1983) explained that there is a difference

between ad cognitions and brand cognitions; hence, studies have been conducted to address this discrepancy, measuring variables like brand attitude and perception of product quality. In one example, McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) showed that “the use of metaphorical claims in ads appears to make consumers receptive to multiple, distinct, positive inferences about the advertised brand” (p. 17). Sopory & Dillard (2002) found that the use of metaphors builds communicator credibility. “Communicators who use metaphors are judged more credible than ones who use literal language” (p. 385). According to Aristotle, the use of metaphors is a sign of genius, because it cannot be learned from others (Sopory & Dillard, 2002). In addition, metaphors may reveal previously unrecognized similarities between its subjects. Impressed by the communicator’s ability to provide him or her with a newfound appreciation of commonalities, the receiver is likely to judge the communicator more credible (Sopory & Dillard, 2002).

Ang and Lim (2006) discovered that metaphors also influence brand personality perceptions. Their research suggested that the use of metaphors casts brands as sophisticated and exciting. “Metaphors can thus be used not only for short-term objectives such as breaking attention threshold, but also for longer-term building of brand image and personality” (Ang & Lim, 2006, p. 50). The general attitude a consumer has toward a brand may be more impactful in purchase decisions than the ad itself, which is why these findings are significant.

**Recall.** Research also shows that metaphors increase the likelihood of advertisement recall. Recently, several researchers conducted a study to verify Phillips and McQuarrie’s (2004) aforementioned typology; results showed that the stronger the metaphor is, the more cognitive elaboration that occurs, resulting in higher recall (Peterson et al., 2017). For example, the juxtaposition of two images is less visually complex than fusion, wherein the base and target

objects are merged into one. “Complex metaphors required of participants more cognitive resources to solve the puzzle. During the process, participants [generated] more associations with the ads... Phillips and McQuarrie theorized an enhanced memory trace corresponding with increased visual complexity. Our results support this” (Peterson et al., 2017, p. 71). Other studies have also found that recall is higher when metaphors are involved (Toncar & Munch, 2001; Jeong, 2008; Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2004).

**Purchase intent.** Lastly, visual metaphor studies have explored their correlation to purchase intent, because ultimately, advertisers want to increase their sales. Jeong (2008) found that metaphorical rhetoric contributed to the persuasiveness of an ad, as participants indicated higher likelihood of purchase after exposure to the metaphor. With results like these, as well as the results on change in attitude and recall, we can see why metaphors have become pervasive in the advertising realm.

### **Metaphors and Subjectivity**

How, then, could additional research enhance the literature on this saturated topic? While we know that visual metaphors work, there is less research that explores why they are persuasive from the perspective of the consumer. Most research that has tested the effectiveness of visual metaphor advertisements have been objective, R-methodological studies (such as those described in the last section). Quantitative research can only do so much to explain the effectiveness of advertisements, because as Rhoads, Thomas, and McKeown (2016) put it, “Despite revealing several intriguing and statistically significant relationships, [this] research sheds scant light on the nature of the subjectivity at play” (p. 111). Returning to Scott’s (1994) article as well, we learn that the processing of visual metaphors is an individualized experience. This is because of semiotics: one’s ability to comprehend the messages implied in metaphors depends on his or her

knowledge or personal understanding of culturally established symbols. She suggested, at the end of the article, that future research explore this by doing the following:

[Responses] to pictures may often be the result of a complex chain of deduction, comparison, selection, and combination—all of which suggest both cognitive activity and the subtleties of textual materials at work. We might ask consumers to translate visual tropes... into verbal statements—and then draw their attention back to the ad, asking them to indicate what cues they are using to make the translation. A study of this sort might also explore the degree to which the interpretations of the images converged and compare groups of similar interpretations. (Scott, 1994, p. 270)

Mick and Politi (1989) likewise agreed that a symbol in an ad will not naturally denote the same meaning to each viewer, stating that “the concept of denotation in advertising illustrations is misguided” and suggesting that “an alternative meaning model of advertising consumption is needed to more fully appreciate the complexities and nuances of consumers’ interpretations of advertising images” (p. 85).

A few studies have responded to the call for qualitative data. McQuarrie and Mick (1999) conducted in-depth interviews whose data suggested that “Scott’s theory about the role of cultural competency in processing advertising rhetoric appears correct” (p. 51). Another example is a study on Chinese college students’ interpretation of Nike advertisements, which found that “the reading of pictorial metaphor is a highly individual activity. The cultural meaning of an advert is relevant to the individual consumer” (Ma, 2008, p. 9). Proctor, Proctor, and Pappasolomou (2005) also provided significant insights, declaring that an individual’s perceptions, interests, experiences, and motivations each have an influence on his or her interpretation of a metaphor. Take the following example of a metaphorical image of a leopard in

the driver's seat of a vehicle, which participants interpreted in six extremely different ways: Participant 1 thought it had a "dangerous, cool cat" sex appeal. Participant 2 thought it represented freedom, liberty, and taking risks. Participant 3 thought it meant, "it's so easy and comfortable that even an animal can drive it." Participant 4 thought it was meant to be humorous. Participant 5 said that the car would give you a wild beast side, making you outgoing and aggressive. Lastly, participant 6 thought it was comparing the car to the leopard because of the animal's elegance (Proctor, Proctor & Papasolomou, 2005).

A study by Morris and Waldman (2011) informs cross-cultural metaphor usage even further. The researchers conducted a content analysis of 87 metaphorical ads from 5 different countries (America, France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands). Ads were taken from four culture-bound product groups: food and beverage, automobiles, insurance/finance, and personal care. The ads were evaluated through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimension scores, and the authors found that "cultural dimensions, especially power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance, are prominently reflected in ads to help ensure that messages are relevant for their intended target audiences; the ads can be seen as colorful and rich portraits of each country" (Morris & Waldman, 2011, p. 963). For example, American automobile ads containing metaphors had status and power themes, which matches their masculinity score. In the personal care category, the purity and nature metaphors in Italian ads (who are average to low users of deodorants, cosmetics, and hair care products) reflected their uncertainty avoidance score. While the current study does not compare consumer responses across national boundaries, we know that even within one nation—in this case, America—there are a multitude of cultures affecting people's worldview.

Perhaps the most recent contributor to this argument was Charles Forceville (2017), who wrote a compelling article on the requirements for interpreting a metaphor, and how cultural knowledge is an inherent component of interpretation. He stated, “While many conceptual metaphors, due to their bodily basis, are presumably widely (possibly even universally) shared on planet earth, they also inevitably have dimensions that are culturally determined” (Forceville, 2017, p. 27). He therefore submitted that a successful metaphor in advertising must meet two requirements: a) the audience recognizes the target domain (meaning the product and its brand) as well as the source domain (the entity it is being compared to), and b) the audience associates one or more positive features of the source with the target. Using metaphors always presents the risk that the addressee will connect unwanted features, whether consciously or subconsciously. In other words, success means that receivers interpret the ad the way the communicator intends for them to. The images below provide examples of ads that did not meet one of the two requirements:



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*

Figure 1 illustrates a suitcase sitting on a square white cube. Forceville (2017) explained that a metaphor is implied in the image, but only people with Dutch backgrounds will understand

it. The suitcase is being compared to a work of art, such as a statue that would normally be placed on a pedestal. Only those who live in or frequent the Netherlands will recognize the tile pattern of the Rijksmuseum, a famous art gallery, and make the connection. This shows that “visual metaphors are aimed at specific communities of viewers, who ideally are supposed to possess knowledge [about these domains]” (Forceville, 2017, p. 33).

The shampoo ad in Figure 2 is clearly aimed at an Arab audience, but would potentially make Western consumers uncomfortable. While the communicator intends for the shampoo to be associated with beauty and desirability, an outsider’s first association may be “intolerance,” “fundamentalism” or “repression of women” (Forceville, 2017). “We should never forget that relevance and meaning can never be measured objectively: relevance is always relevance to an individual” (Forceville, 2017, p. 38).

If the viewing of metaphors is such an individual experience, though, how might the knowledge of a single person’s interpretation be of any use to advertisers? We return to Scott’s (1994) words that research should be conducted to “explore the degree to which the interpretations of the images converged and compare groups of similar interpretations” (p. 270). This is why the current study researches visual metaphors in the form of Q-method: it is the ideal method to accomplish this purpose.

Q-method (Q) was created by William Stephenson, who possessed PhDs in physics and psychology and studied psychometrics with Charles Spearman, the creator of factor analysis. It can be described as a complete technical method that incorporates philosophy, ontology, and epistemology. Q is unique in that it is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and provides a “foundation for the systematic study of subjectivity” (Brown, 1993, p. 93). Essentially, Q penetrates to the subconscious to establish groups of like-minded thinkers.

Participants rank-order statements related to the research question, and then answer interview questions about the statements and why they ranked them in that order. A factor analysis then indicates how strongly a given number of participants responded uniformly and places them in categories. To know the different categories, or types of people that interpret metaphors in certain ways, would be highly valuable to brands and corporations, especially those with specific target audiences.

### **Theoretical Basis: The Elaboration Likelihood Model**

Before describing the specific Q-method employed in this study, it is prudent that the study be given a theoretical setting. The Elaboration Likelihood Model, as its title suggests, is mostly concerned with how effective a stimulus is at getting the viewer to mentally elaborate on what he or she sees. This model provides perfect support for the current study, since “studies have shown that rhetorical messages elicit greater cognitive responses than nonfigurative messages do... [and] persuasion is associated with the amount of thoughts recipients devote to a message” (Kim, Baek, & Choi, 2012, p. 78). The model’s history, components, and applications to visual metaphors are described below.

When scholars after Harold Lasswell realized that his direct effects model did not accurately describe the persuasive process (because as we just discussed, the masses and their circumstances are not all the same), they began to unravel persuasion on a more intricate level (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009). Carl Hovland was among these scholars, and he contended that the persuasive power of media depends on several moderating variables (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009, p. 127). Some of these variables include attention, interest, comprehension, memory, and reinforcement. In the 1980’s, Richard Petty and John Cacioppo built upon these moderating variables to create an all-encompassing model of persuasion, the ELM. The ELM

outlines two routes, central and peripheral, through which information must travel in a consumer's thought process if persuasion is to occur.

**The central route.** The central route “involves effortful cognitive activity whereby the person draws upon prior experience and knowledge in order to carefully scrutinize all of the information relevant to determining the central merits of the position advocated” (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009, p. 132). In this route, the consumer must be motivated to process the information, have the ability to process it, compare it to his or her previous knowledge, and find it more or less favorable than before, which will lead to a change in cognitive structure and thus an attitude change. In relation to visual metaphors, the two most important processing steps are a) motivation and b) ability. “If both motivation and ability are high and the message is compelling, the outcome is a greater number of thoughts agreeing with message advocacy and thereby greater persuasion” (Sopory & Dillard, 2002, p. 387).

*Motivation.* It is not always easy to motivate consumers to process. This could be due to several reasons, including whether or not the ad is personally relevant or presented in an interesting manner (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009). The average consumer is bombarded with advertisements everywhere his or her time is spent—between 4,000 and 10,000 ads a day, in fact (Simpson, 2017). This decreases motivation to process (it is simply not possible to process every ad thrown our way). Other common obstacles are *counter-arguing* and *ad skepticism*. Counter-arguing is the natural resistance that occurs when one is presented with a persuasive message (Shen & Bigsby, 2013); similarly, ad skepticism is “the general tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims” (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, p. 159). Product advertising is a money-driven effort; this causes consumers to be wary of advertising and to make assumptions about the integrity of advertisements (Callister & Stern, 2007). Because of these obstacles, organizations

continually seek new methods of advertising that break through the apprehension and noise to reach their audience. Enter visual metaphors, whose violation of schema stand out from the advertisement crowd, and whose incongruity viewers naturally want to resolve. This distracts them from the skepticism they may feel and reduces counter-arguments, because fewer cognitive resources are available to counter-argue when viewers are sucked into the puzzle (Shen & Bigsby, 2013).

*Ability.* The ability to process, the next important step in the central route, is another matter. As mentioned by Phillips and McQuarrie (2004), there are multiple factors that may impede one's comprehension, such as the complexity of the analogous mechanism. Individual differences may not allow for some consumers to see past intricate metaphors. Comprehension also requires knowledge about the entity that the advertised product is being compared to. "The target and base of a metaphor may have varying degrees of familiarity for a message recipient. To facilitate transport of information from base to target, the familiarity of base is customarily high. On the other hand, the target term of a metaphor may be familiar or unfamiliar to the subjects in a particular study" (Sopory & Dillard, 2002, p. 390). Further subjective research allows us to explore more deeply how familiarity affects viewer's responses and attitudes.

Adding headlines to a visual metaphor can also increase comprehension and reduce complexity, but as Phillips (2000) explained, "adding a headline that completely explains the image [results] in decreased ad liking by giving away the ad's message and decreasing subjects' enjoyment of interpreting the ad by themselves" (p. 21). Therefore, while the ability of the consumer to process is enhanced, elaboration may be cut short because the puzzle is too easy. The consumer will have fewer thoughts in response to the ad, because fewer thoughts are required of him or her to grasp the message. Perhaps this is why over time, "verbal anchoring of

rhetorical images, or the use of literal words to explain a rhetorical figure,” has decreased (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002, p. 5). Advertisers have relied more frequently on viewers to connect the dots in the metaphor on their own. This means that the advertiser is also relying on viewers’ understanding of context, which can be a risk, but one that more and more advertisers seem willing to take, since the enjoyment of solving a puzzle without help is stronger than doing so with anchoring. This method elicits a greater emotional response (the pleasure of the “a-ha” moment), which is what advertisers want.

Along with anchoring trends, Phillips and McQuarrie (2002) discovered a trend of *layering*, which is the act of employing multiple tropes in the same ad. This is yet another component that might affect a consumer’s ability to process. The authors found it especially interesting that layering has increased over time while anchoring has decreased, making the ads more complex on both accounts. Since metaphors in advertising have become more common, it seems that advertisers have to make the ads more and more involved in order to convey originality. But again, if the viewing of an ad takes too much mental effort, the advertiser might lose the consumer. This is why some advertisers might resort to conventional metaphors. Conventional metaphors are those that have been used so repetitively and pervasively that their meaning is already stored in a recipient’s mind (Burgers, Konijn, Steen & Iepsma, 2015). Burgers, Konijn, Steen and Iepsma (2015) found that conventional metaphors are still persuasive, even though they are not novel. This is because a conventional image reduces the complexity of the ad and increases creativity and ad appreciation (in comparison to non-figurative ads). However, conventional metaphors, though more persuasive than non-metaphorical ads, are not more persuasive than novel metaphors (Van Mulken, Van Hooft, & Nederstigt, 2014).

The last concept related to the ability to process is need for cognition (NFC). Mohanty and Ratneshwar (2015) found that individuals with a higher NFC comprehend visual metaphor ads better. “High-NFC consumers are likely to consume media, participate in events, and buy products that are cognitively complex or challenging. Hence, advertisers can use NFC as a means of segmenting consumers and choose to place visual figures in events, media, and products that may attract high-NFC consumers” (Mohanty & Ratneshwar, 2015, p. 240). The current study sought to provide similar practical implications for advertisers by distinguishing types of visual metaphor consumers, allowing them to advertise in places that attract the certain types, and to discover how high-NFC viewers might factor into those types.

**The peripheral route.** In the peripheral route of the ELM, attitude change does not require as much mental effort. When motivation and ability to process are low, cues that elicit simpler, heuristic evaluations may also be persuasive (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009). So, when it comes to product advertising, it is important for brands to develop messages that either encourage the viewer to process or use simple cues to evoke immediate, favorable evaluations. These simple cues include things like a familiar or well-liked communicator (such as a celebrity), the use of pleasurable elements (i.e., the ad is visually alluring), or the use of humor (Gass & Seiter, 2015).

Some would argue that the peripheral route concerns anything affective rather than cognitive. Metaphors are not only powerful because they provoke mental elaborations, but affective responses (Sopory, 2005). Affect can be generally conceptualized as positive and negative valence (Sopory, 2005). Slightly different than emotion, though the terms are often used interchangeably, affect is a “non-conscious experience of intensity... a moment of unformed and unstructured potential” (Munero, Montero, Sutinen & Pajunen, 2014, p. 102). Emotions, on the

other hand, can usually be described and identified by the one feeling them; they are discrete concepts with labels, such as happiness, frustration, or sadness (Dillard & Seo, 2013). Thus, affect usually precedes emotion. Visual metaphors, like other images, have the ability to emit an intense positive or negative valence that the viewer experiences before recognizing what he or she is feeling. For example, some metaphors display parts of a human body in an unpleasant way, a concept called body distortion (Grancea, 2012). These displays may cause a strong affective response: the viewer will be repulsed by the image, in which case he or she will not mentally elaborate, but make an immediate, subconscious evaluation of dislike (a peripheral phenomenon).

Emotions, then, may be either peripheral or central, because they are more conscious feelings than affective experiences, but are not solely cognitive (Dillard & Seo, 2013). For the present, since they are related to affect, emotions will be discussed as a peripheral experience, though they can bring about changes in cognition (Dillard & Seo, 2013). As previously explained, people enjoy viewing metaphors because they enjoy the feeling of reconciling an incongruity. Therefore, “pleasure is the most commonly anticipated emotional response from rhetorical figures” (Kim, Baek, & Choi, 2012, p. 80). However, rhetorical figures may cease to be pleasurable if the viewer cannot relieve the tension caused by the incongruity (Kim, Baek, & Choi, 2012). The resulting emotion instead might be irritation or dissatisfaction.

Kim, Baek, and Choi (2012) did a study on the difference between the effects of metaphor-elicited cognitive elaboration and metaphor-elicited affective elaboration (affect, in their case, including emotion). The first had a significant effect on attitude toward the advertiser, whereas the second had a stronger effect on ad perceptions and ad credibility. More importantly, affective elaborations had a greater overall impact than cognitive elaborations. For these reasons,

the current study sought to determine what kind of affect and emotions consumers experience when viewing metaphors in advertising, and how they play into their individual attitudes.

By completing the entire elaboration process as the ELM suggests, a consumer may experience an attitude change, which leads to successful persuasion. Attitudes are made up of values and beliefs, which then affect behavior (Kramer, Callahan, & Zuckerman, 2013). Values are rules that people live by according to what they internally judge as “right” or “wrong,” and beliefs are facts that people assume to be true about the world. Therefore, it holds that people are susceptible to persuasion when disbelief is suspended (Katz, 1960). The power of visual metaphors to suspend beliefs and entertain new ones lies in their ability to suggest associations between two entities that the consumer has not thought of before (Sopory & Dillard, 2002).

### **Research Questions**

To conclude the review of literature and theoretical basis, visual metaphors have a strong presence in advertising because of their persuasive abilities. The unique way that metaphors violate culturally established norms captures consumers’ attention, motivating them to process or mentally elaborate. Upon processing a metaphor and experiencing the joy of reconciling its incongruity, consumers are less likely to be skeptical and more likely to like the ad, remember the ad, and have a positive attitude toward the brand itself. This paper has reviewed the most prominent studies on this topic, which has been heavily investigated by R-methodological research. Because of this research, we know that visual metaphors are effective, but we do not fully understand why they are effective from the perspective of the consumer.

To date, the author is unaware of any Q-method studies published on visual metaphors in advertising. Q-method is unique in that it can reveal the process of interpretation among advertisement consumers via its combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. This

study will not only benefit brands seeking to create effective product advertisements, but increase our understanding of persuasion theory by explaining more fully the “why” behind consumer attitudes, adding to the scholarly conversation from an angle that has thus far been left untapped.

RQ1: What are the types of people that like visual metaphor advertisements?

RQ2: Why do they like them?

### **Method**

The study involved the use of a research tool called a Q sort, which requires an individual to rank-order a group of statements or images that represent the domain of subjectivity called a *concourse*. The *concourse* in this study was made up of 37 metaphorical images found in actual advertisements on the internet and in magazines, gathered by the researcher with the help of the communications faculty and other students. The researcher ensured that the *concourse* of metaphors included an array of the three types of visual structures (juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement) as described by Phillips and McQuarrie (2004). The images were also varied in their valence, distributing organization or corporation, and advertisement purpose (i.e., endorsing a product, cause, or behavior). After sorting the images, the participants were interviewed about the reasons behind their rank-ordering. The Q sorts were then factor analyzed, and groups of individuals who sorted the images in nearly the same way were clustered together into factors. Each factor represented a specific group of people with common attitudes toward metaphorical ads. Upon formation of the factors, the researcher interpreted and described them, using the information from the interviews to add breadth and depth to the explanation of each one.

The subjects for this project consisted of 36 adults. Q-method uses a small number of subjects because in Q technique, subjects are treated as variables rather than a sample of the

population. Brown (1980) explained that when selecting respondents, “all that is required is enough subjects to establish the existence of a factor for the purposes of comparing one factor with another” (p. 192). He goes on to say:

It is rarely necessary in work of this kind to obtain large numbers of each type; five or six persons loaded significantly on a factor are normally sufficient to produce highly reliable factor scores, and it is in terms of the relationships among the factor scores that general statements about an attitude are made. Increasing the number of persons on a factor merely fills up factor space, but has very little impact on the scores. (p. 67)

Because any member of the general population represents a typical advertising consumer, the only requirement for persons to participate was that they be at least 18 years old. The gender count was 19 females and 17 males. Instructions were given to the participants to evaluate each image based on how the metaphor was presented in the ad, and not on the product or brand that was being advertised (to avoid product bias). Next, subjects conducted their Q sorts by examining each of the 37 images and ranking them on a 9-point scale ranging from “Like the most” (+4) to “Like the least” (-4). After the Q sorts were completed, the researcher conducted individual interviews with each of the participants to probe further into the subjects’ decision-making process, to allow the subjects to express their thoughts and feelings about why they ranked some images high and other images low, and to let them express their thoughts and feelings about metaphorical advertisements in general. The interviews followed a structured questionnaire with the following five questions: (1) Why did you select these two images as what you like most? (2) Why did you select these two images as what you like least? (3) What do you like most (in general) about ads with metaphors? (4) Is there anything you dislike about ads with metaphors? (5) What emotions do you experience when viewing metaphorical advertisements?

The investigator then tabulated the results of the Q sorts using the PQMethod computer software program. The researcher used a principal components analysis to generate an unrotated factor matrix, which was then subjected to a varimax rotation. To qualify as a reportable factor, the criterion was at least two significant participant factor loadings at the 0.01 significance level. Once the factors were determined, the investigator compared the significant positive and negative z-scores for the advertisements that accompanied each factor. Those with a z-score greater than +/-1.0 were considered significant, and represented the “most persuasive” and “least persuasive” images for each factor. To determine which images are significantly different in each factor, the investigator used factor Q sort values. A factor Q sort value is the average of the rank scores participants provide for a particular image on a particular factor.

Labels and interpretations were determined by the investigator for the resulting factors, predicated on the z-scores calculated and the factor Q sort values provided by the participants in the study. They were also supplemented by the responses recorded from the interviews conducted with the participants.

## **Results**

Analysis of the 36 Q sorts collected for this study yielded four factor types. These four factors accounted for 36% of explained variance in the factor solution. Factor 1 accounted for 10%; Factor 2, 9%; Factor 3, 10%; and Factor 4, 7%.

### **Factor 1: The Highbrows**

Participants in Factor 1 had 13 images (both likes and dislikes) in common (see Table 1). They were labeled the “Highbrows,” because they enjoy visual metaphors that reflect a sense of refinement, high-culture, and knowledge acquisition. These themes are exemplified in the 8 positively rated images listed in Table 1, which are representations of art, world travel, a concern

for the environment, expensive food, and the value of reading. This suggests that subconsciously, these people focus on the content of the metaphors, and if the objects employed represent the high-culture things they think and care about. The following quotes from participants in this factor confirm their high-culture preferences:

“I like this one because it appeals to my historical side, because it’s historical art.”

“I did a photography series in plants and hair and trees and bark, and the connections between all of them, so the image is really powerful to me personally, and the message is also good.”

“I like the ones that are aesthetically pleasing.”

Two more quotes illustrate their educated minds and appreciation for learning:

“I think [this image] is poignant. It melds different issues together, and effectively helps people visualize the significance of what they could be doing to themselves if they don’t take [the issue] seriously.”

“I like it because it makes me think of things from a different perspective.”

Table 1

*Factor 1 - Significant Positive and Negative Images*

Image Number	Image Description	z-Score
36	A woman in a Renaissance era painting putting Vaseline on her face. The portion of the painting with the Vaseline has no cracks.	1.518
21	A tree whose trunk and branches are a human arm and hand, captioned, "Humanity and nature are one."	1.470
4	Rolls of sushi made out of trash, captioned, "What goes in the ocean goes in you."	1.362
10	A poster of a whale that is wrinkled and distorted because it is too small to fit in the advertisement frame, captioned, "No aquarium is big enough."	*1.343
34	Two Legos connected perpendicularly casting a shadow of an airplane underneath them.	1.252
24	Two people transferring a FedEx package through their respective apartment windows—the building is painted to be the Earth, the two windows situated on different continents.	1.206
26	Two sticks of a Kit Kat bar situated to look like a pause sign.	*1.136
14	A book laying open on a reflective surface, its reflection forming the bottom half of human lips, and the book itself, the top half.	1.073
7	A woman sitting on a public bus holding a "strap" above her head—the bus straps have been replaced with human hands, captioned, "Whose hand are you holding?"	*-1.134
32	Two men juxtaposed, one with a cat for a beard, the other a clean shaven Nivea user, captioned, "Enough drama, enough irritation."	-1.337
2	A fist holding a miniature bottle of goody hot sauce, the thumb situated above the cap of the bottle (as if to "light" it).	-1.447
16	Numbers coming off the screen of an electronic device to form a human arm flexing its bicep, captioned, "With so much ahead of you, you need strong numbers behind you."	-1.734
22	An open human mouth fused onto a clove of garlic, captioned, "Don't let what you eat speak for you."	-2.150

\*denotes a distinguishing image for the factor

Conversely, the negatively rated images in this factor are low-culture images that violate the Highbrows' refined taste, because every single one contains part of a human body, most of which have been distorted. The emotion of disgust pushes people away when they process human disfigurement, and the Highbrows in particular are readily pushed away because they do not want to engage with messages that disturb them, that are too lowbrow and weird. To illustrate, participants said things like:

“Flesh colored things that are not originally flesh colored are all gross. And putting mouths on things that don't have mouths is gross. I get the point, that it's implying bad breath, and the goal is to cause a visceral reaction, but I hate and would not buy this product out of spite because of how gross it is.”

“This grosses me out. I don't like the hair, I don't like his mouth, I also hate when people make really weird mouth movements. It makes me uncomfortable.”

One quote in response to a positively rated image explained why it was likeable in comparison to body part metaphors:

“I think the image is provocative, and it makes you have a gut reaction, but it's not *so* uncomfortable that you don't want to know what it's saying, it just promotes you to think. They didn't go *too* far with it, but far enough to promote thought.”

This is perhaps why image 21, which also contains a body part, was rated positively: the image did not distort the body in an unpleasant way, but was very subtle. Therefore, the Highbrows were able to look past it and focus on the message instead, which had to do with valuing the environment. Perhaps, in fact, their appreciation for the message overpowered the presence of body distortion, because they support the moral.

Interestingly, the body distortion picture that was a distinguishing negative image for this factor (meaning that it did not rank significantly in any other factor) was the image of a woman holding a bus strap that had been replaced by another human hand. This takes the Highbrow label to an even deeper level: not only is this a jolting image that the refined shy away from, but the use of public transportation is a seemingly low-culture practice. No wonder that in contrast to the metaphors that evoke class and sophistication, this metaphor was rated so uniquely negative.

Yet another common feature of the significant images for this factor was concision. The images the Highbrows liked were simple, yet powerful; they did not contain many components or much text, but still portrayed an idea in an impressive way. This speaks of the literate minds of these consumers: like professors who prefer writing that is concise and compelling, the people in this factor appreciate advertisers who can pack a strong message using the least amount of elements. Three quotes that confirm this finding include:

“I like, as you can see, simple ads that get their point across, don’t have a ton of words, but are very witty and creative.”

“I don’t like it when they’re overly complicated. Or like, really busy.”

“I like the metaphors to be creative, but not so much that you can’t really tell what’s going on or what the point is.”

In a similar vein, many Factor 1 participants spoke of simplicity in relation to the time it takes to get a message. They feel that their time and attention are valuable—another highbrow quality—and if it takes too long to unpack the message, the ad is ineffective. They said things like:

“Sometimes it takes a while to get what they’re trying to tell you, and I think that can hurt the brand sometimes... if people don’t get it, they’re not gonna buy the product or service. So I think it can go badly if you don’t understand it, like instantly.”

“I think they’ll lose attention and revenue if people don’t have the time it takes to understand what’s being said.”

“The amount of time it takes you to get the metaphor should be equal to how clever the metaphor is. If I have to think about an ad for more than 30 seconds, and it’s a dumb metaphor, then I don’t think it’s good.”

Lastly, these consumers were likely to make comments on the intelligence and abilities of the advertiser if they felt that the product was or was not well represented via the metaphor, or if the metaphor was overly common. This type of thinking, like that of elite critics, also fits the highbrow persona. Quotes include:

“I like the simple idea behind it, but that it makes sense, and that it portrays what their product is doing.”

“It’s trying to be funny, but it’s not funny. And I don’t smoke, so I didn’t think of a lighter until I thought about it for a long time, and I don’t want to put something on fire in my mouth. So it’s trying too hard, missed the mark, and it’s dumb.”

“I just think it looks kind of dumb. Putting these two things together doesn’t really make sense to me, it feels kind of forced.”

“It did make me uncomfortable, which I think is what they want so that you might realize you want to use the product, but it was in a way that didn’t make sense to me. I know what they were trying to say, but I just didn’t understand why they were using the cat.”

“I dislike if they’re done multiple times... it’s just annoying after a while.”

## **Factor 2: The Connectors**

Participants in Factor 2 were labeled the “Connectors.” This group had 15 images in common (see Table 2). “Connection” was a common theme in this group on multiple levels: a)

positively rated images had themes of interpersonal relationships, emotional involvement, and deep meaning, and b) participants focused highly on the relevance of the message to the metaphor. The following paragraphs examine these two findings in turn.

The Connectors are people who care about others, feel deep emotion, are detail oriented, and feel that it is important to get involved and engaged. This is clearly seen in the images listed in Table 2: two people showing love by sending packages, a child traumatized by relational damage and hurt, a person reaching out and hugging another through a letter, a person connecting with an artist's music, a human heart that thrives with physical care, and so on. Some examples of associated comments include:

“I love words, and I believe in the power of words, so it kind of touches me on a personal level. And I started reading the letter: ‘I know it’s difficult to see each other as much as we both like...’ and it goes on for a while, and so it grabbed my attention because it’s got this detail, and I just want to sit and read the whole letter. I love the idea that words can connect people on a meaningful level.”

“I relate to the experience of having a relationship with what I read. That’s pretty much why I chose [this image].”

“One of the ones I chose was the kid looking down with the fighting parents in his brain, I think that that is a very good emotional image of why people should not do that, and to teach your kids to cope with stress.”

“I just like that it’s a heart and it’s capturing being healthy.”

“It grabs your attention immediately and draws you into the bigger picture... [it] causes you to think deeper about the issue. It gives you a simple image but causes a lot more thought and meaning behind it.”

Table 2  
*Factor 2 - Significant Positive and Negative Images*

Image Number	Image Description	z-Score
17	A pair of New Balance running shoes and other equipment grouped in the shape of a human heart, captioned “Run with your heart.”	*1.733
23	A child with his brain exposed, an image of a man hitting a woman imprinted on his brain, captioned, “Some injuries never heal.”	1.709
15	A woman hugging a person whose body is coming out of a page of writing, captioned, “If you really want to touch someone, send them a letter.”	1.665
6	A person’s ear with a Samsung headphone, a miniscule Elvis replacing the headphone and singing into the person’s ear.	1.507
24	Two people transferring a FedEx package through their respective apartment windows—the building is painted to be the Earth, the two windows situated on different continents.	1.491
19	An hourglass with a melting iceberg in the top whose water is leaking into the city scene in the bottom, captioned “Act now before it’s too late.”	*1.251
14	A book laying open on a reflective surface, its reflection forming the bottom half of human lips, and the book itself, the top half.	1.007
10	A poster of a whale that is wrinkled and distorted because it is too small to fit in the advertisement frame, captioned, “No aquarium is big enough.”	-1.039
1	Toy blocks of various shapes with a base into which they fit—the base has a space for a car shaped block. Captioned, “Audi parking system, easy park.”	-1.139
28	A Dove shampoo bottle, labeled “Dove, this is care” juxtaposed to a generic bottle wrapped in barbed wire, labeled “Harsher.”	-1.358
16	Numbers coming off the screen of an electronic device to form a human arm flexing its bicep, captioned, “With so much ahead of you, you need strong numbers behind you.”	-1.405
32	Two men juxtaposed, one with a cat for a beard, the other a clean shaven Nivea user, captioned, “Enough drama, enough irritation.”	-1.419
2	A fist holding a miniature bottle of Goody hot sauce, the thumb poised above the cap of the bottle (as if to “light” it).	-1.563
22	An open human mouth fused onto a clove of garlic, captioned, “Don’t let what you eat speak for you.”	-1.600
5	A close up of a human nose whose nostrils have been plugged with tin can sealed lids, captioned, “Want to free your nose?”	*-1.816

\*denotes a distinguishing image for the factor

Based on these quotes and the higher complexity of images they chose, it is clear that these people like to think longer and deeper on metaphorical ads than those in Factor 1. They like ads to be meaningful, and to engage with the content. Perhaps this also why they chose ads with elements of action: they provide the viewer with something to *do*, a way to create meaning in life, such as running, sending letters and packages, reading, and taking care of the earth.

One might wonder, then, why the “save the whales” ad (number 10) scored negatively for this group. But one quote from a connector explains where the line is drawn:

“There’s some that made me feel, like, guilty, like I should do something. Like the hourglass or whale one, I was like, I should be a better person. But at the same time I don’t know what they want me to do about it. Donate so they get a bigger tank? I don’t know.”

To the people in this group, there is a connection missing in this image: the link between the message and the action to take. In addition, the image itself is a violation of schema, which leads to the second common theme for this factor: relevance.

The Connectors like images that fit their expectations. They expect the metaphor, and the components of the metaphor, to be congruous with the product or message being advertised. If that connection is violated, they do not appreciate the ad. For example, images in their set of dislikes include an automobile ad with no vehicle pictured, a skin care ad with a cat, a shampoo ad with barbed wire, and more. These do not set well with the schema, because the concepts do not match. For the Connectors especially, these ads are unsettling. The following quotes from Connectors substantiate this finding:

“Maybe I just don’t get it? But it just seems kind of dumb to me. Are they trying to say that the competitor’s shampoo is like barbed wire? And will make my hair like barbed wire? I just don’t believe that, and I think it’s dumb.”

“Not very aesthetically pleasing for something you’re supposed to ingest, I’m assuming. It looks like something natural, like a fruit, is being morphed into something unnatural, like gum, and I don’t like it.”

“Some just frustrate you because the ad doesn’t relate to what’s being advertised, the image they produce just doesn’t fit all the time. And so they feel stretched and forced, probably because they have a lack of creative authors or something.”

“When I am drawn in to view an ad, I immediately look for the meaning or connection to the advertised product or service or cause... And then after I make the connection, I begin to think of the meaning a little deeper... I assess whether I think that the ad is relevant with the advertised material and then decide if it’s creative.”

“I don’t relate to a cat on my face, I actually hate cats. I would never have got the implication that it was dryness or irritation out of that picture, maybe if I read it all... and it’s just weird. If that showed up on my TV screen I would turn it off, or change the screen on my computer.”

These are images that require a lot of effort on the part of the viewer to see the relevance. Even if they do puzzle it out and eventually grasp what the advertiser is trying to say, the metaphor still leaves the Connectors dissatisfied because of the chasm between the objects being compared.

Another quote exemplifies this:

“I just think that it’s not relevant to whatever they’re advertising. It doesn’t strike me as creative. If there was some point to get, it takes the viewer too long to think about it to be interested in looking even further at it.”

A seeming exception to the violation of schema commonality for this factor is the domestic violence ad. With the child’s brain being exposed, the image would presumably disturb the Connectors, and they would presumably rate it negatively instead of positively. On the contrary, this is exactly why it fits so well among their “likes”: domestic abuse is disturbing. Therefore, the metaphor is congruent with the message. It confirms the schema rather than violating it. One Connector said this:

“Some [ads] I had a big reaction to, like the [letter] one was really touching... The brain one with the kid was really powerful—it was more than clever, it was a very powerful representation of the effects of domestic violence.”

### **Factor 3: The Executionists**

Participants in Factor 3 were labeled the “Executionists.” This group also had 15 images in common (see Table 3). “Execution” was an apparent theme in this group because these participants tended to focus on how well the message or idea was delivered by the metaphor. People in this factor like metaphors that are clever and creative; in fact, “creative” was a word used frequently in the qualitative data of all participants in this factor.

Table 3

*Factor 3 - Significant Positive and Negative Images*

Image Number	Image Description	z-Score
8	A pill package whose pills have been replaced by bullets, captioned, "Can you treat yourself better than your doctor?"	1.697
6	A person's ear with a Samsung headphone, a miniscule Elvis replacing the headphone and singing into the person's ear.	1.690
11	A hedgehog situated in a line of goldfish bags, captioned, "Precision parking, Park Assist by Volkswagen."	*1.651
15	A woman hugging a person whose body is coming out of a page of writing, captioned, "If you really want to touch someone, send them a letter."	1.282
23	A child with his brain exposed, an image of a man hitting a woman imprinted on his brain, captioned, "Some injuries never heal."	1.123
33	A Pepsi can with a straw juxtaposed to an implied Coke can whose straw is resisting entrance to the Coke.	1.016
34	Two Legos connected perpendicularly casting a shadow of an airplane underneath them.	1.001
36	A woman in a Renaissance era painting putting Vaseline on her face. The portion of the painting with the Vaseline has no cracks.	1.001
27	A tug-of-war rope with multiple hands on one end and a single hand pinching the rope on the other, captioned, "All the strength you need."	-1.111
30	A magnifying glass juxtaposed to a microscope, captioned, "You can read the news, or read Newsweek."	-1.286
25	Half of a missile fused with half of a microphone, captioned, "Words kill wars."	*-1.480
13	An orange being "pulled apart" as if it is really chewing gum, captioned "Pure fruit gum."	*-1.605
16	Numbers coming off the screen of an electronic device to form a human arm flexing its bicep, captioned, "With so much ahead of you, you need strong numbers behind you."	-1.651
19	An hourglass with a melting iceberg in the top whose water is leaking into the city scene in the bottom, captioned "Act now before it's too late."	*-1.827
29	Two sides of a non-inflated balloon juxtaposed, one printed with the words "The Economist" and the other printed with an image of a brain.	-1.907

\*denotes a distinguishing image for the factor

The positively rated images in Table 3 exemplify the creativity that captured the Executionists' interest, such as the image of the hedgehog whose spikes will pop the goldfish bags if he gets too close, a witty metaphor for parallel parking. Quotes from participants that show their focus on execution and cleverness include:

“I like that they're creative, because I think that there's a [general] lack creativity, and usually with a metaphor like these, it's a concept that sticks with you versus having to remember catchy text or something like that. So when properly done, the whole idea sticks in your mind and doesn't need words to support it. I think it takes more skill to create this type of ad rather than staying it straight out.”

“I love it. I don't love Pepsi, but I just laugh how they portrayed the [straw's] screeching halt to the other product, like, 'not gonna do it, not gonna do it!' I think it's fun, it's a good advertisement.”

“I like that the concept is displayed without words, and like you instantly look at it and get it. Good contrast, good use of space... Similarly with this one, the concept is easily conveyed without having to explain anything.”

“I like the ones more that have an element of comedy to them, something that makes me happy or makes me laugh. How people can be creative.”

“I think it gets the point across pretty well, like you look at this picture, and you know exactly what it's saying, like 'these are really good quality headphones.’”

“It really tells the story well. You look at this and know what's trying to be portrayed, even though I like Coca Cola better than Pepsi, I *get* it. Message received.”

In contrast, the negatively rated images in this factor are fails in execution. For example, the Economist image perplexes viewers by displaying two sides of the same balloon (easily

confused with two separate balloons). The Newsweek image inadvertently implies that you read the news with a microscope, which is not the message it means to send. The following quotes support participants' dislike for execution fails:

“So I don't feel like this is properly conveyed, like I see how the top part is showing that this is all gonna melt, but... like what's the negative effect? It's not conveyed properly that something bad is gonna happen to the world. The concept is there but not properly conveyed.”

“I disliked this one because I didn't even get the concept! That's why.”

“I think sometimes they don't get the message across clear enough that it just gets overlooked, so it has to be well done or not done at all. Anything mediocre or not well done is kind of just annoying.”

“There was a couple in there that didn't make much sense, like I didn't get it. From a marketing standpoint, I don't think they got their point across.”

Additionally, a crucial aspect of cleverness and creativity for these consumers is originality. One of the Executionists' disliked images is a beer ad whose theme is old and tired (i.e., the “Redbull gives you wings” idea). Image 16, as well, lacks imagination, and makes the viewer think, “This has been done before.” Thus, poor execution for this factor can mean both a badly conveyed idea and a lack of novelty.

#### **Factor 4: The Logical Agitators**

The last factor had 13 images in common. They were labeled the “Logical Agitators” because of their appreciation for ads that were disturbing, irreverent, or edgy. Whereas most other participants (especially those in Factor 1) could not appreciate an ad's message if the content was off-putting, these participants looked past disturbing content and any associated

emotion. Logical Agitators are disengaged, cognitive viewers of ads, who do not allow feelings to get in the way of their evaluative process (thus the “logical” in their title). One participant said this:

“The way that I think of metaphor is the ability to compare ideas through otherwise unthought-of mediums, so it’s either something that’s logical or thought provoking, ways to link different ideas to provoke new or interesting thoughts, and that process isn’t one I would call emotional. If intrigue is an emotion... that would be the extent of what I would call my emotional involvement.”

If anything, the agitation they feel from a visceral reaction is actually something this factor likes. As seen in Table 4, disturbing images were not the only ads they appreciated, because many of the images they liked (such as the Lego or Vaseline ad) were liked by other factors too. But their uniquely positive ratings of the garlic ad (number 22) and the bus ad (number 7) are what set them apart. They do not mind absurdity. Additionally, there is a humorous element to the disturbance ads they liked. For example, the image of the child with his brain exposed, though it is a body distortion image, is not among their likes. So, they find it entertaining to be unsettled, but only if the advertisement is intended to be funny, and it works. They said things like:

“I dislike when they’re trying to be too smart, or I just think they’re being stupid. Like they’re conveying an idea but I think the idea is stupid, or the way they’re conveying it is stupid.”

“It’s cheesy. Reminds me of 7th grade and bad Tumblr ideas.”

Table 4

*Factor 4 - Significant Positive and Negative Images*

Image Number	Image Description	z-Score
34	Two Legos connected perpendicularly casting a shadow of an airplane underneath them.	2.181
36	A woman in a Renaissance era painting putting Vaseline on her face. The portion of the painting with the Vaseline has no cracks.	1.635
7	A woman sitting on a public bus holding a “strap” above her head—the bus straps have been replaced with human hands, captioned, “Whose hand are you holding?”	1.566
24	Two people transferring a FedEx package through their respective apartment windows—the building is painted to be the Earth, the two windows situated on different continents.	1.467
33	A Pepsi can with a straw juxtaposed to an implied Coke can whose straw is resisting entrance to the Coke.	1.398
6	A person’s ear with a Samsung headphone, a miniscule Elvis replacing the headphone and singing into the person’s ear.	1.328
22	An open human mouth fused onto a clove of garlic, captioned, “Don’t let what you eat speak for you.”	*1.328
4	Rolls of sushi made out of trash, captioned, “What goes in the ocean goes in you.”	1.160
32	Two men juxtaposed, one with a cat for a beard, the other a clean shaven Nivea user, captioned, “Enough drama, enough irritation.”	-1.021
2	A fist holding a miniature bottle of Goody hot sauce, the thumb poised above the cap of the bottle (as if to “light” it).	-1.160
20	A road whose yellow lines have been made to look like the lines on denim jeans, captioned, “The new Beetle Denim has arrived.”	-1.229
16	Numbers coming off the screen of an electronic device to form a human arm flexing its bicep, captioned, “With so much ahead of you, you need strong numbers behind you.”	-1.328
29	Two sides of a non-inflated balloon juxtaposed, one printed with the words “The Economist” and the other printed with an image of a brain.	-1.705

\* denotes a distinguishing image for the factor

To prove this point further, a humorous image that would seemingly fit with the others is the man with a cat for a beard. However, it takes too long for the viewer to see the cat, and to understand the message. Therefore, the agitation and the logic were lost to these participants, and they gave the image a negative rating.

Lastly, Logical Agitators do not like to work too hard. They want to “get it” quickly, have a little chuckle and move on. Again, they do not put a lot of mental or emotional effort into this experience, a characteristic they share with Factor 1, and one that contrasts starkly with Factor 2. A comment supporting this claim reads:

“I think what’s viable about metaphors is the ability to convey complicated ideas very quickly through relatable means, and to me that’s what an ad is, we’re bombarded by ads and each one only gets a second of our time, and I just want to be able to see it and get it very quickly, I don’t want a seminar.”

Though they share this characteristic with the Highbrows, the images the Logical Agitators like suggest that they are otherwise quite opposite groups. Whereas the Highbrows focus on elitist imagery, the Logical Agitators appreciate lowbrow humor and culture, absurdity, and irreverence. Therefore, their inclination toward quick-to-comprehend ads is more likely to stem from indolence than an attraction to intelligent concision, like Factor 1.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to determine why individuals are attracted to visual metaphors in advertising and, more specifically, what types of people like metaphors and what characteristics are associated with each type. By using Q methodology, the factor analysis of the images identified four sets of opinions (Highbrows, Connectors, Executionists, and Logical Agitators). In addition to the discoveries already related, the results of this study require a) the

discussion of particular findings of interest, and b) the comparison and contrast of the four factors. These are addressed in turn, and each result is examined according to how it supports or contradicts past research. Important implications for advertisers and associated scholars are found throughout.

### **Findings of Interest**

**Content versus execution.** Of great interest to the researcher was the discovery of a focus on content for some consumers versus a focus on execution for others. While the commonalities between images of Factor 1 and Factor 2 were heavily content based (i.e., high-culture and relationships, respectively), Factor 3's images had no consistent theme. Rather, the commonality was how well the messages were executed, and the cause or issue was secondary. Factor 4's focus was a mix of both content and execution. This shows that when advertising to Highbrows or Connectors, the objects employed in the metaphor are paramount to effectiveness. Executionists, on the other hand, care little about what objects are being used, but rather *how* they are being used. No previous literature has addressed this discrepancy, nor considered that the likability and effectiveness of a metaphor might hinge on these elements. Q-method has brought the occurrence of this phenomenon to light, an important development in metaphor research.

**Appropriateness of the metaphor.** Another significant finding was viewers' expectation of the metaphor to "fit" or "match" the entity it represents. This study found that crucial to effectiveness (for Connectors especially) is that the objects employed in the metaphor are relevant to the product or cause being advertised, a principle unrevealed in previous studies. Scott (1994) explained that there are "cultural processes and assumptions that underpin notions of appropriateness in advertising imagery"; for example, fragrance advertising often employs

images of flowers, birds, and jewels, because these objects have been associated with fragrance for thousands of years (p. 271). Likewise, the current study shows that consumers expect advertising metaphors to appropriately match the product. When consumers find something “out of place,” “stretched,” or “forced,” they disengage and have difficulty mapping the desired characteristics from the base to the target as Sopory and Dillard (2002) proposed.

In addition, Sopory and Dillard (2002) explained that communicator credibility is increased with the use of metaphors because of their superior organization to non-figurative communication. The Highbrows, particularly, often made comments referring to the people behind the making of the ads, talking about their marketing strategies and the like. If they felt that metaphors were well-crafted, they were likely to say positive things about the creators, which confirms Sopory and Dillard’s (2002) proposition. However, this study contradicts the general claim that all metaphors are superior to non-figurative language by showing that poorly constructed metaphors are worse than no metaphor at all. According to Factors 1 and 4, bad metaphors make the brand look stupid. Therefore, when poorly done, they have a reverse effect on communicator credibility, and negative brand image is likely intensified because of the way consumers are more fully, cognitively engaged with metaphorical ads. Advertisers should take note that if their creators are struggling to make a metaphor work, it would be better to avoid the use of metaphor altogether.

**Affect and emotion.** Factor 2 was the most emotionally involved, whereas Factors 1, 3, and 4 had a more logical, cognitive experience with the images. Therefore, we can infer that the peripheral processing route plays a stronger role for Connectors. As discussed in the literature, there are multiple types of affect and emotion associated with visual metaphors, the most common being the pleasure of solving the puzzle and finding the mechanism clever (Kim, Baek,

& Choi, 2012). While this occurred for most every participant, as well as the negative emotions (irritation or frustration) that resulted when they could not reconcile the incongruity, the Connectors felt things beyond that. Their “likes” were important metaphors, ones with more meaning and deeper emotion attached, such as sadness, love, desperation, and calls to action. Their comments revealed that they truly felt those emotions, which were likely brought about by the intense affect these images created. It is fitting, then, that as Kim, Baek, and Choi (2012) found in their research, affective elaborators like those in this factor focused on the ads themselves, whereas cognitive elaborators like those in the other three factors made comments about advertiser credibility.

Affect also played a slightly less deep role in Factor 4. Agitation, a subconscious discomfort often brought on by a visceral reaction, is an affective experience. Interestingly, for the Logical Agitators, this is an encounter with negative valence that they rather enjoy. Body distortion was amusing to them once they found the humor in the disturbing image. As will be discussed momentarily, this is an important addition to the research on affect and metaphor (Sopory, 2005; Kim, Baek, & Choi, 2012).

### **Comparison and Contrast of Factors**

Overlap is very apparent between the four factors. There are some characteristics that people across most factors share, such as the desire for metaphors to make sense, a dislike for metaphors that lack creativity, and an aversion to things that are “gross.” Each of these characteristics verify the findings of research mentioned previously. In general, consumers prefer metaphors of moderate complexity (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Van Mulken, Van Hooft, & Nederstigt, 2014), because ads of greater complexity, as the current participants complained, take too long to understand, and by the time they do figure out the puzzle, they are past the point of

appreciation. (Participants in Factor 2 were more willing to spend time evaluating each ad and made less comments on the time it took to grasp the message than on the relevance of the base to the target.) In respect to creativity, most participants preferred metaphors that they found creative, original, or clever (especially those in Factor 3), which confirms the literature on novel metaphors and their superiority to conventional metaphors (Van Mulken, Van Hooft, & Nederstigt, 2014). Lastly, as proposed earlier by Grancea (2012), consumers in general do not enjoy human disfigurement, because it is troubling to look at. With the exception of Factor 4, the current study confirmed this finding with the high occurrence of negatively rated body distortion images. However, it is important to note that there is a group of consumers out there for whom body distortion images are effective *if* they are humorous. This caveat is one unaddressed by the literature, making this factor a significant finding.

Creators of advertisements might also want to focus on simplifying the metaphorical images they proliferate. Factors 1 and 3 were very impressed by ads that could convey a message without a headline or text, aligning with Phillips's (2000) and Phillips and McQuarrie's (2002) discoveries on anchoring. Factor 1 also liked ads with a solid background and few other components—pictures that were not “busy.” Interestingly, we would almost expect the opposite: since the Highbrows are the cultured and educated, they would seem to fit the high-need-for-cognition bill (Mohanty & Ratneshwar, 2015), and high NFC consumers tend to like things that present more of a challenge. However, participants (whether Highbrows or not) scarcely spoke of the desire to be pushed or challenged, nor did they give high ratings to the most challenging images. They almost always preferred metaphorical ads that could be grasped within a few seconds. Perhaps a distinct NFC group was not discovered because the metaphorical ads were

not being contrasted to non-metaphorical ads; metaphorical ads naturally require higher cognition and elaboration.

Other elements of visual metaphor research that were discussed in the literature include recall and purchase intent (Peterson et al., 2017; Jeong, 2008). Because the structure of Q targets only one domain at a time—in this case, attitude toward visual metaphors—the method did not allow for further direct research on these points (the future research section will address this). Regardless, these issues still surfaced in comments from participants in multiple factors. They talked of liking images that “stuck with you”—in fact, one participant, after the conclusion of her interview, made the observation that she could not even remember which images she had chosen as the ones she liked least. Likeable metaphors are memorable ones. Others talked of “not buying a product out of spite for the image,” or images causing “a loss of revenue.” Therefore, we see that recall and purchase intent are, as previous research suggests, factors that are intertwined with the visual metaphor viewing experience.

This study has provided verification of many previous analyses of visual metaphors, but has also provided additions that inform the literature further. It has proved that that the viewing of metaphors is a subjective experience and that those subjective experiences can cause divergent views as well as consensus. There are always substantial exceptions to the common attitude; in other words, surveys and statistics give us answers that can vaguely be extrapolated to the population, but people are not one-size-fits-all (such as the niche of the population that actually enjoys body distortion if it is humorous). By getting specific about types of viewers, this discussion has revealed details, truths, and insights about consumers of metaphors that were heretofore hidden.

## Limitations

By constructing metaphors that appeal specifically to one or multiple of the four types, advertisers may increase their effectiveness. Unfortunately, the nature of Q method limits its contributions to what the types are, and not where those types can be found. Since Q is a more qualitative approach, its strength lies in revealing insights about subjectivity; it yields a starting point rather than an end point. Therefore, this study does not have the ability to make predictive conclusions about the viewers themselves.

This study is also naturally limited by its metaphor pool. When a Q sort is conducted using various statements about a domain of subjectivity, they generally cover every possible opinion that one may have toward that domain. Visual metaphor images, on the other hand, are individual pieces of art, and the metaphors that can be created are endless. While the researcher did her best to ensure that a variety of types of metaphors and advertisements were included in the experiment, other images may have produced completely different results, especially seeing that multiple factors were focused on the actual content of the metaphor.

On a related topic, this study did not address the two types of visual arrangement that occur in metaphorical ads: explicit and implicit metaphors. Explicit metaphors incorporate the product into the metaphorical image, and the viewer can clearly see how the product plays a part in the figure. In contrast, implicit metaphors depict the product separately from the metaphor, for example, in the bottom corner, but stimulate the viewer to draw inferences between the metaphor and the product (Chang & Yen, 2013). These types were not given attention when gathering images and may have had an influence on participants' appreciation of a metaphor.

One last, small limitation is the fact that most people do not view visual metaphor ads in mass amounts. In other words, some of the participants' positive and negative ratings may have

been the result of comparing the metaphors to each other, rather than judging each metaphor on its own; participants' opinions were likely influenced by the metaphors' multiplicity, whereas in a real-world setting, an ad might be more impactful because it is not being rank-ordered or competing with a better metaphor.

### **Future Research**

Future research should address the limitations just mentioned. Scholars should investigate the four types more thoroughly, to determine who belongs in each one, what demographics they share, and where they can be found. The high-culture and low-culture groups (Factors 1 and 4) are a little more self-evident as to who might belong within them. The demographics of Connectors and Executionists, however, are more difficult to isolate without the help of additional research. Once established, advertisers will be wiser about whom to send their emotional metaphors and whom to send their clever ones.

Future research might also determine if and how certain groups are persuaded further along the commitment path than "liking." In other words, the attitude that one has toward an ad does not determine whether or not they will remember, support, or purchase the product. This study focused solely on the attitudes consumers had toward the ad (since attitude is the first step toward persuasion) and the reasons behind those attitudes. Perhaps certain reasons for liking metaphorical ads, certain characteristics possessed by the four Factors, are correlated with recall or further action, such as product purchase or some other kind of commitment.

Lastly, the results of this study might be verified with another Q sort study that uses a different set of visual metaphors. As established, two of the four factors in this study were heavily content-focused groups. If the content of the metaphors were to change (i.e., if the metaphors included a new variety of objects), perhaps new factors would emerge. Or, if the same

factors emerge, advertisers will be more strongly convinced of the power of knowing which factor, or multiple factors, are associated with their target audience, and what traits those factors possess.

### **Conclusion**

While it has been known for some time that visual metaphors are a persuasive form of advertising, little research has been done to examine why they are persuasive in the consumer's eyes, and none in the form of Q-method. Of utmost importance to the communications field is recognizing that subjectivity can alter the way metaphors are interpreted and appreciated. While the sample cannot be generalized to the entire population, this study has shown that there are four significantly different kinds of viewers of metaphors.

Any skilled advertiser knows that the key to their job is knowing their audience. This study has shown that the content of metaphors truly matters to some people. If an advertiser's audience is high-cultured, their visual metaphors should be carefully constructed with target and base objects that reflect refinement and knowledge. If their audience is emotional people who base their lives in connection, that content should represent the sentiment of personal relationships and concern for humanity. If their audience is low-cultured—and this is groundbreaking—humorous body distortion is actually an effective source of content, contrary to the popular attitude. And then there is an audience for which content does not have an influence: if the objects employed create a clever message that is well-executed, the advertiser is successful.

This has given us a start on how to make metaphorical advertising a more personalized experience. Q brings the subconscious to the surface; though they do not realize it, consumers have latent motivations that separate them from each other. Unlike scale or survey research, Q helps those latent qualities emerge, educating researchers on groups of people with common

attitudes, opinions, and dispositions. While much of the current study supports past findings, clear differences and new findings have been presented that substantiate the value of knowing about Highbrows, Connectors, Executionists, and Logical Agitators—the four enjoyers of visual metaphors.

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