

# **RECOGNIZING VISUAL PERSUASION: MEANING-MAKING STRATEGIES IN MAGAZINE FOOD ADVERTISEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study argues to the use of mass media genres in the business communication classroom, to explore the interplay of textual and visual persuasion strategies in modern communication. Thirty magazine food advertisements were coded according to Bhatia's (2004) moves for promotional genres and analyzed by focal point (Jones, 2007), visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and rhetorical resonance (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). The findings suggest that while most advertisements relied on linguistic means to fulfill these promotional moves, images serve specific rhetorical purposes. The extent to which visuals contribute to the move structure of this type of promotional genre strengthens the argument for business and professional communication instructors to include analysis of mass media genres, to build students' rhetorical awareness of the interplay of text and visuals.

**Key Words:** Business Communication, Pedagogy, Genre, Visual Persuasion

## **INTRODUCTION**

As communication continues to evolve with technological advances, it becomes increasingly important to prepare students for the dynamic landscape of business and professional communication in the digital age. Specifically, as meaning-making strategies become more visual in nature, the value of preparing students to encounter and analyze multimodal genres in professional communication cannot be overestimated (Arduser, 2016; Hyland, 2011; Toth, 2013). Raising awareness and fostering students' understanding of the meanings behind visuals, particularly those used for advertising in magazines, newspapers, and other forms of media teaches students how to critically evaluate technical discourse (Kitalong, 2000). This study explores the potential of introducing mass media genres in the business communication classroom in order to expose students to the interplay of textual and visual persuasion strategies in communication. By employing genre analysis strategies to analyze communication artifacts, instructors can build

students' critical thinking skills for evaluating communication strategies and rhetorical awareness to understand the intention and strategy behind communication genres in the digital age.

Genre researchers tend to view genres as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes” (Swales, 1990, p. 56). Calling upon the work of Swales (1990), genre scholars analyze a genre's schematic structure and lexicogrammatical features in order to understand how those elements work towards achieving an overarching communicative purpose. This analytical approach, with its attention to both textual and contextual considerations, has formed the foundation for genre analysis-based research. Genre analysis-based research has largely focused on academic genres, including research articles (Bhatia, 2004; Brett, 1994; Holmes, 1997; Peacock, 2002, 2011; Samraj, 2005, 2008; Swales, 1990), abstracts (Cross & Oppenheim, 2005), faculty homepages (Hyland, 2011), statements of purpose (Samraj & Monk, 2008), and book reviews (Hyland, 2000). However, other research has explored professional and workplace genres such as audit reports (Flowerdew & Wan, 2010), environmental reports (Mason & Mason, 2012), corporate homepages (Jones, 2007), and optometric records (Varpio, Spafford, Schryer, & Lingard, 2007), among others. These studies have informed and inspired research and practice aimed at building students' rhetorical awareness and understanding of the relationship between text and context.

Genre-based pedagogy centers on developing students' ability to communicate effectively in workplace contexts, leading to vast scholarship on pedagogical practices aimed at professional communication development (for examples, see Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Cheng, 2006a, 2006b, 2007b, 2008a, 2011; Devitt, Reiff, & Bawarshi, 2004; Johns, 2008; Tardy, 2009). These studies have enriched pedagogical approaches to teaching genres in ways that focus on building students' rhetorical awareness in preparation for discursive communication contexts. However, genre-based instructional strategies have received criticism for privileging textual features, with some arguing that this approach results in students' naivety towards the discursive nature of professional communication genres (Bhatia, 2008, pp. 161-162). Therefore, recent studies have sought to develop ways to scaffold students' understanding of “interdiscursivity,” or the “appropriation of semiotic resources across genres, professional practices and disciplinary cultures” (Bhatia, 2008, p. 162) by extending classroom analyses to genres from less explored, “real world” contexts, such as advertising, media, and fundraising.

According to Bhatia (2004), the uniqueness of genres outside academic and workplace domains is the dynamic use of persuasive strategies. In his analysis of the generic framework of the sales promotion letter genre (Bhatia, 1993), Bhatia identified nine recurring advertising *moves*, or “bounded communicative act[s] ... designed to achieve one main communicative objective” (Swales & Feak, 1994, as cited in Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Bhatia's research suggests that multimodality affects the way generic structures are achieved, as technological innovations in mass media have enabled writers to communicate through visual means. Thus, traditional identification of generic features is complicated by a digital culture that affects the production of popular genres, offering opportunities for business communication instructors to engage students' critical thinking about persuasive strategies. However, few genre-based studies have explored the pedagogical potential of visual communication in contexts outside of academic and workplace settings.

## **Visual Analysis Research**

Early research on images includes the seminal works of Berger (1972) and Barthes (1977) on visual representation and identification strategies, with recent research exploring ways that advertising images create meaning and identification in viewers (Blair, 2004; Engdahl & Gelang,

2019; Garner, 2015; Hope, 2004). Advertising research has historically focused on linguistic messages, either written or spoken, transmitted through print, radio, and television advertising. These studies often focused on specific types of advertisements (cars, medication, food), discussing the linguistic features in relation to larger social and cultural issues (Parkin, 2006), such as gender stereotypes, cultural values, and identity (Artz, Purdy, & Warren, 1999; Goffman, 1979; Hovland, McMahan, Lee, Hwang, & Kim, 2005; Langstraat, 1995). Research on magazine advertisements specifically has examined the themes of specific types (comedy, fashion, sports, news); however, most studies focus on content analyses (Barr, 1989; Peirce, 1997) or comparative content analyses (Pratt & Pratt, 1995) and discuss those themes in relation to race, age, or gender.

One prevalent and highly visual type of magazine advertisement is food product advertisements, the subject of the present study. Research on food advertisements emerging from social science and medical fields has focused on the effects of food advertising messages on eating behaviors and health (Bailey, 2015; Castonguay, McKinley, & Kunkel, 2013; Halford, Boyland, Hughes, Oliveira & Dovey, 2007; Halford, Boyland, Hughes, Stacey, McKean, & Dovey, 2008; Liu & Bailey, 2015). Studies on food advertisements appearing in magazines specifically have either reported the results of content analyses on the categories of foods advertised (Basch, Hammond, Ethan, & Samuel, 2014; Manganello, Smith, Sudakow, & Summers, 2013; Pitts, Burke, & Adams, 2014) or have explored the types of claims advertisers make about health and nutrition (Choi, Yoo, Baek, Reid, & Macias, 2013; Cooper & Kuszczak, 2014; Nan, Briones, Shen, Jiang, & Zhang, 2013; Rosenberg, 1955; Zwiier, 2009). Though these studies contribute to the understanding of advertising language and images from cultural and scientific perspectives, additional research on the rhetorical devices at work in these advertisements is needed, particularly on the role images play for fulfilling communicative strategies.

Recent studies in advertising and marketing have revealed ways that advertisements affect the behavior of target audiences, studying the connection between consumer experience and visual strategies used in advertisements (DeRosia & McQuarrie, 2019; Myers & Jung, 2019; Stathakopoulos, Therodorakis, & Mastoridou, 2008). Myers and Jung's (2019) study demonstrated that visual metaphor strategies in advertising increase persuasiveness, generating both positive feedback towards the message and the brand. DeRosia and McQuarrie's (2019) statistical analysis explored the correlation between viewer propensity and visual persuasion. While previous studies had suggested that processing style (either verbal or visual) would predict consumer behavior, their research suggested that verbal processing and visual processing are independent systems. These studies not only empirically demonstrate the persuasive power of visual communication, but also concretize the role of visuals as meaningful additions to professional and business communication artifacts.

### **Visual and Textual Interplay**

In recent years, scholars in professional and business communication have explored this interplay of text and visuals, identifying valued features and expanding a traditional generic analytical framework to include issues of multimodality. Jones' (2007) longitudinal study of corporate homepages demonstrates how technology has evolved to privilege visual elements and applications, such as clickable images, search bars, and navigation tools to view text and visuals online. Additionally, Hyland's study on faculty homepages speaks to the importance of visuals in relation to text and visual literacy as part of the professional writing pedagogy. He claimed that texts produced in the digital age are never exclusively text-based and involve "different semiotic

resources, which, in combination, create new meanings” (2011, p. 292). His analysis revealed that visuals do not serve to merely embellish texts but rather play important semiotic roles in relation to linguistic messages.

When textual and visual elements work to support a persuasive claim, an advertisement is described as possessing *rhetorical resonance* (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). Stathakopoulos et al. describe *resonance* as “an echoing of meaning among advertising stimulus elements” and they correlate resonance with consumer behavior (2008, p. 631). This notion is also evident in the analysis conducted by Varpio et al. (2007), which focuses on how textual and visual elements work together on optometric records to enable communication within that discourse community. To examine visuals as messages of a community’s values and ideology and to explore the relationship between text and visuals, Varpio et al. called upon Kress and van Leeuwen’s notion of *visual grammar*— a framework for systematically analyzing visuals by identifying and exploring “regularities”—that is, those features that seem to be recurring and deliberate. The authors argue that the way linguistic and nonlinguistic features work together in predominately text-based genres is an unexplored yet worthwhile endeavor for professional and business communication studies (2007, p. 346). Similarly, Toth (2013) echoes the importance of bringing multimodal genres into the class, namely infographics, to raise students’ awareness about the interplay of text and visuals. The important role of visuals in organizational communication is demonstrated by Greenwood, Jack, and Haylock (2019), who offer an analytical framework for evaluating visuals in corporate reports. They posit that visuals may “enhance readers’ recall and perception of accompanying written text and emphasize or divert attention from particular aspects of text” (Greenwood et al., 2019, p. 799), indicating the rhetorical nature of visual communication.

According to Garner, mass media genres “communicate symbolically and can be analyzed from a rhetorical point of view” (2015, p. 115). His study references Perelman’s (1982) notion of *rhetorical presence*, commonly attributed to important parts of a speech, and applies the term to visual communication. Garner’s study demonstrates how photographs of products create rhetorical presence, by referencing “works, places, scenes, or feelings” persuasive to a viewer (2015, p. 116). These works emphasize the importance of introducing visual communication strategies to students as meaningful, professional tools.

This study seeks to understand the role of visuals as rhetorical devices in one type of promotional genre, magazine advertisements for food, by analyzing the linguistic and visual structures in 30 samples. Using Bhatia’s (2004) generic move structure for advertisements and theories of design and visual analysis, I explore the following questions:

- How do images function as part of the generic move structure of advertisements, particularly in relation to text?
- To what extent do visuals supplement, contradict, or transform the meanings created by the textual resources in these advertisements?

The discursive nature of genres outside academic and workplace domains provides rich sites to investigate the role of visuals in business communication. While multiple genres may be at work within a context that shares an overall communicative goal, each genre within the system is not bound by disciplinary or professional values in the same way as academic and workplace genres (Bhatia, 2004). Leading students in a close analysis of these dynamic genres may reveal meaningful nuances in the way rhetorical devices are employed to achieve communicative purposes in professional communities and organizations.

## METHODS AND PROCEDURES

To investigate the way traditional moves, occur in one prevalent type of promotional genre, a sample of 30 food advertisements were collected and coded from 14 issues of *Self* magazine over a fifteen-month period (Appendix A). Described on the magazine’s press release webpage as a “total well-being magazine that incorporates health and beauty, fitness and nutrition, happiness and personal style,” *Self* identifies as a publication that is “wellness you can trust” (“About Self”).

As a subscriber of *Self*, I became interested in the rhetorical workings of their advertisements. Compared to the other food and fitness magazines I received, *Self* seemed to communicate predominately through visuals. In particular, I noticed an abundance of food advertisements in each issue that were rhetorical in nature, i.e. tailored for a female readership. Though *Self* magazine draws a predominantly female audience, issues related to gender will not be discussed in depth in this study. Instead, I focus on the persuasive work and credibility of these advertisements as a way to explore the rhetorical function of images in persuasive messages.

Not only are magazines highly visual by nature, but the content within is largely influenced by cultural trends and values, making Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) approach to analyzing the structural “grammar” of visuals appropriate. The authors focused their analysis on Western images only, explaining that *visual grammar* is a not a universal language but instead a culturally informed, “social resource” for specific groups (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 3). The advertisements analyzed for this study appeared in a magazine distributed only in the United States. Additionally, only advertisements featuring food products were collected, as it was hypothesized the rhetorical strategies used to market food products would too be culturally informed.

The advertisements were first coded for the presence of Bhatia’s (2004) generic move structure for advertisements, presented in Figure 1:

**Figure 1**

<i>Move and function</i>	<i>Parameters for study</i>
<b>1. Headlines</b> —attracts readers to engage with the text	Textual headlines, often larger, boldfaced lines that appear at the top of the page and catch readers’ eyes
<b>2. Targeting the market</b> —explicitly states the audience to whom advertisement is directed	Statement that identifies potential needs of a specific audience (mothers, children, healthy eating)
<b>3. Justifying the product or service</b> —indicates the importance or need of the product	Explanation of how the product or service is important in terms of health and well-being; identifies a niche that the particular product stands to address
<b>4. Detailing the product or service</b> — fulfilled in three different ways: identifying, describing, or demonstrating product value	Detailing specific features or ingredients in particular product; often the lengthiest part of the advertisement
<b>5. Establishing credentials</b> —builds credibility by demonstrating that thoughtful consideration of audience needs was given	Explicit reference to the needs of a customer, as acknowledgement that the company is aware of and sensitive to those needs
<b>6. Celebrity or user endorsement</b> —well-known individual or a supposed user,	Quote or testimonial from a celebrity or user created by company to create identification with readership

supporting, recommending, or testifying to a product

7. <b>Offering incentives</b> —featuring a promotion to persuade readers to buy a product	Messages describing the terms or conditions of special offers for discounted rates or free gifts
8. <b>Using pressure tactics</b> —facilitating response from reader by emphasizing urgency	Deadlines on special price rates or rules and conditions for vouchers and coupons
9. <b>Soliciting a response</b> —initiating further contact with reader	Encouraging readers to call the company or visit the website for more information or to purchase the product

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Source: *Bhatia's (2004) generic advertising moves and parameters for study*

The frequency of each move was recorded to determine the extent to which Bhatia's move structure was still representative of the rhetorical work in this type of promotional genre. Bhatia (2004) noted in his analysis that some images in his samples seemed to be supporting the linguistic messages rather than replacing them entirely. To explore that possibility in this promotional genre, each move was identified and further analyzed by whether it was realized through textual means, visual features, or a combination.

According to Varpio et al., images are central to communication in advertisements, as “heightened sensory appeal is the accepted visual truth” (2007, p. 350). However, preliminary analysis revealed that every advertisement in the corpus contained text. While I assumed that no move would be realized exclusively through visual means, I allowed for the possibility that specific moves might be exclusively visual. Moves achieved through visual means were analyzed using the notion of *focal point* (Jones, 2007) and aspects of *visual grammar* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that the structures of the English language, particularly the focus on actors and actions, provide a model for understanding the language of images, offering a framework for understanding how language is translated into visual representations.

To determine whether the food advertisements contain a visual *Headlines* move, I referenced Jones' (2007) longitudinal study: his use of focal point analysis to evaluate corporate homepages was especially helpful when analyzing multimodal genres such as advertisements. The notion of a focal point, defined by Williams (2003) as “the dominating element of a page,” is determined by contrast in size and color (cited in Jones, p. 245). I also considered the position of any images in the advertisements, particularly if they appeared at the top of the page—the traditional placement of headlines.

Locating the focal point in the advertisement may also reveal a visual representation of the *Targeting the market* move, which appeared in Bhatia's corpus as explicit textual reference to a specific audience. A visual reference to the target audience could be the dominant individual pictured the page; however, that focal point, while it may be an individual, may not be the target audience, functioning instead as an appeal to the audience (i.e. a picture of a child, to appeal to a mother as the target audience). To identify visual instances of the *Targeting the market* move, I considered depictions of individuals who might indicate the target reader for the particular advertisement or who might elicit an emotional response from the target reader, bearing in mind the predominately female readership of the magazine. Visuals not portraying individuals that

seemed symbolic or persuasive in terms of eliciting an emotional response from the audience were considered appeals for *Justifying the product or service*, including visual representations of the product as new, noteworthy, or unique. Advertisers have a unique opportunity to use visual elements to quickly relay information to readers about a product’s appearance and value, so the *Detailing the product or service* move was identified by illustrations that highlight or feature ingredients in the products.

Visual depictions of the *Establishing credentials* move could include logos or name-branding, but since those are ubiquitous features in advertising, I also recorded the presence of nonstandard credibility markers, such as official seals or stamps of approval. Because magazines often feature celebrities on covers and in featured articles, the *Celebrity or user endorsement* move is expected to manifest visually and contain a picture of an individual using or consuming the product. Visual depictions of the *Offering incentives* move could include pictures of free gifts or other opportunities. Any visuals suggesting urgency or immediate attention were categorized as implementing the *Using pressure tactics* move. Finally, visual icons for social networking sites encouraging the reader to join a community or to seek more information were coded as containing the *Soliciting a response* move.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The corpus samples were coded based on Bhatia’s (2004) nine-move structure for the advertisement genre. Analysis of 30 magazine food advertisements from *Self* magazine revealed that some generic advertising moves occurred more frequently than others. The moves analysis revealed that three of Bhatia’s (2004) advertising moves occurred in every advertisement of the corpus: *Headlines*, characterized by a dominant feature that catches the eye through size or contrast; *Justifying the product*, through featured information about the product’s benefits and uniqueness; and *Detailing the product*, most commonly achieved through description of the product’s ingredients or attributes (see Table 1).

While those three moves were present in all advertisements, two additional categories were present in the majority of the samples: the *Establishing credentials* move was present in 27 advertisements, and the *Soliciting a response* move was present in 23 advertisements. As seen in Table 1, fewer than half of the advertisements explicitly targeted an audience (12 advertisements), and even fewer (eight advertisements) offered incentives such as special offers:

Table 1

*Frequency of moves in corpus of magazine food advertisements*

#	Headlines	Targeting the market	Justifying the Product	Detailing the product	Establishing credentials	Celebrity/ user endorsement	Offering incentives	Using pressure tactics	Soliciting a response
1	X	X	X	X	X				X
2	X	X	X	X	X				X
3	X	X	X	X	X				X
4	X		X	X	X			X	X
5	X	X	X	X	X				X
6	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
7	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
8	X		X	X	X				X
9	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
10	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X

11	X		X	X	X		X	X	X
12	X		X	X	X				X
13	X	X	X	X	X				X
14	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
15	X		X	X	X		X		X
16	X		X	X	X				X
17	X		X	X	X				X
18	X		X	X	X		X		
19	X	X	X	X	X				
20	X		X	X	X				
21	X		X	X	X				
22	X	X	X	X	X				X
23	X		X	X	X				
24	X		X	X					
25	X		X	X	X		X		X
26	X		X	X	X			X	X
27	X		X	X					
28	X	X	X	X					X
29	X		X	X	X				X
30	X		X	X	X				X
=	30	12	30	30	27	4	8	4	23

Surprisingly, though advertisements often picture celebrities to publicize and promote products and services, only four advertisements in the corpus contained the *Celebrity/user endorsement* move, including testimonials from typical product users or fictional characters created by the company to promote the product. Bhatia noted in his study of written promotional advertisements that this move was commonly achieved through statements or endorsements by celebrities. Though endorsements are more common in television and print advertisements, no celebrity endorsement appeared in this corpus.

### Analysis of Recurring Moves

In addition to conducting an analysis of common moves in the 30 magazine food advertisements, each advertisement was analyzed again, categorizing the moves as “Text only,” “Visual only,” or “Both” to reveal any regularity in the ways specific moves occur in the advertisements. For example, Figure 2 presents an advertisement for Eggland’s Best eggs which employs both textual and visual elements:





Figure 2: *Justifying the product move*

In this particular advertisement (Figure 2), three of the nine moves were not present, three were realized textually, and the other three were realized through a combination of textual and visual elements, shown in the coding schema in Table 2:

Table 2.

*Coding results of Egglan’s Best eggs advertisement*

Move	Text	Visual	Both	Notes
1			X	Focal scene and “EB”
2			X	Mothers; “In my kitchen”
3	X			“Compared to” checklist
4			X	EB in red; product
5	X			eggs branded
6				none
7				none
8				none
9	X			includes website

When categorizing the way each move was realized in the 30 advertisements, only moves that were present in the advertisements were coded and counted, shown in Table 3:

Table 3.

*Instances of textual and visual moves in magazine food advertisements*

Bhatia's (2004) advertising moves	Text only	Visual only	Both
1. Headlines	4	7	19
2. Targeting the market	6	4	2
3. Justifying the product or service	22	0	8
4. Detailing the product or service	2	3	25
5. Establishing credentials	24	0	3
6. Celebrity or user endorsement	1	3	0
7. Offering incentives	3	0	5
8. Using pressure tactics	3	0	1
9. Soliciting response	18	2	3
Totals	83	19	66

The findings show that text only move realizations occurred most often in the corpus (83 instances), with very few moves achieved exclusively through imagery (19 instances). However, the frequency with which communicative purposes were achieved through a combination of linguistic and visual representation suggests a semiotic relationship between text and images in this genre.

The analysis also revealed trends in the resources used to achieve the five most frequently occurring moves in the corpus, suggesting that particular rhetorical strategies may be valued for achieving the communicative purpose of particular moves. Specifically, three of the five moves were achieved through textual resources in the majority of the advertisements: for example, 22 out of 30 advertisements fulfilled the *Justifying the product* move by providing a written description about the importance or newness of the item. For example, the advertisement in Figure 2 for Eggland's Best features a checklist, comparing this brand of eggs to "ordinary eggs," highlighting differences including "25% less saturated fat" and "10 times more Vitamin E" (Figure 2). Bhatia (2004) would characterize this step as "establishing a niche" in order to justify the importance of the product. The language of the *Justifying the product* move often included a list of features to make comparisons to "regular" or "ordinary" types of the product.

The *Establishing credentials* move was also realized through textual descriptions in 24 of the food advertisements. In Figure 3, an advertisement for Smart Ones frozen meal package reads: "Experts say you should eat more veggies... Smart Ones knows that whole grains and veggies keep you fuller longer":



Figure 3: *Establishing credentials* move

These two lines serve to build the company's credibility by suggesting they have conducted research to understand healthy ingredients and considered what their customers want to feel after eating; however, in the majority of the advertisements, no citations or references to any studies were included. The use of rhetorical appeals is quite common in advertising, with the majority of the advertisements in this sample persuading audiences through logical assessment of their products through comparisons (*Justifying the product*) and articulating consideration of the readership's wants and needs (*Establishing credentials*). The frequency with which these moves occurred textually in the corpus suggests that textual resources are the valued means for communicating these appeals to readers.

Though the linguistic messages attempt to persuade audiences through logical reasoning and appeals to healthy eating, another noted rhetorical appeal at work textually in the advertisements is empathy, making an emotional connection with the audience. This type of appeal was predominately used to fulfill the *Soliciting a response* move, which appeared textually in 18 advertisements. Bhatia (2004) explained this move as a company's request for the audience to make contact for more information or to encourage them to purchase the product. Bhatia found that the *Soliciting a response* move was often realized through visual means; however, in this corpus, this move was fulfilled exclusively through textual devices, strengthening his proposition that types of genres within a larger community may differ in rhetorical strategies.

While some advertisements included a website URL asking readers to visit for more information, the majority of advertisements seemed to persuade readers to purchase the product by connecting use of the product to personal benefits. For example, Figure 4 pictures an advertisement for Truvia sweetener that asks readers to "Try some honest sweetness instead":



Figure 4: *Soliciting a response* move

This type of appeal to the individual’s well-being and satisfaction appeared frequently in the advertisements: “Start off the new year with a smile” and “Split from the ordinary.” While this strategy is widely used in television and radio advertisements, its occurrence in this particular advertising genre and context could be in response to the predominately female readership of the *Self* magazine. For example, the berries could refer to a woman’s association with nature as a fertile producer, while the deep red colors to exude warmth and comfort suggest the nurturing presence of a mother figure (Blair, 2004, p. 43). The gendered nature of these messages, appealing to the stereotypical female concern for relationships, suggests audience awareness and deliberate integration of elements aimed at persuading the target audience.

As mentioned previously, I assumed that no single move would appear exclusively through visual means across all samples. Rather, the text and images in each advertisement appear to serve important roles towards the overall message. Kress and van Leeuwen argued that the “dominant visual language is now controlled by the global cultural/ technological empires of mass media” (2006, p. 3), and while perhaps more accurate for television and social media advertising, the mass media messages in the corpus contain valuable linguistic elements. The rhetorical function of linguistic features in promotional genres was discussed extensively by Bhatia (2004), who suggested that one key feature of promotional discourse is consistent use of evaluative adjectives, to cast a product or service in a positive light.

One recurring linguistic feature that emerged consistently across the corpus of advertisements was the frequent use of adjectives. For example, an advertisement for California Almonds uses both positive and negative adjectives to promote the product: “a simple snack with no guilty aftertaste” that is “deliciously heart-smart” (see Figure 5). In fact, the majority of advertisements in the corpus use descriptive adjectives to explain their products. An advertisement for Kashi frozen meals includes the messages “tender, grilled chicken ... still-crisp broccoli ...

sweet, sun-ripe tomatoes” to accompany a picture of a bowl of pasta: the text (ingredients) and visual (picture of ingredients) work together to echo similar messages about the product quality. Though advertisements in popular media sources are assumed to be highly visual, the findings suggest that textual resources are valued and used deliberately in the genre to communicate product superiority and company credibility, while also encouraging continued contact with the reader.

### Moves Achieved through Text and Image

An additional interesting characteristic that emerged from the data strengthens the argument that a combination of text and image can perform important rhetorical moves in a message. Of the 30 advertisements analyzed, 20 contained logos or product pictures in the bottom right corner of the page comprised of linguistic and visual features. This consistent positioning of the company logo or a picture of the actual product is shown in Figure 5:



Figure 5: Logo placements

These visual credibility-building strategies are not positioned as focal points in the advertisement; additionally, the placement defies Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) notion of “given-new structures,” which argues that given, or recognized features, should appear on the left of a page, while new information should be presented on the right of the page. The opposite pattern of placement on the samples in Figure 5 suggests an interesting rhetorical choice by the advertisers, and the frequency with which this placement was observed in the corpus suggests an established trend in this genre not explainable through visual grammar.

Additionally, two of the five most frequently occurring moves were also achieved through a combination of both linguistic and visual features: *Headlines* (19 advertisements) and *Detailing the product or service* (25 advertisements). Bhatia describes the traditional first move of *Headlines* as a way to attract readers’ attention. Because Bhatia’s framework mainly analyzes lexicogrammatical steps used to achieve each move, I turn to Jones’ (2007) explanation of focal point and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) framework for analyzing the generic structures of visuals, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the rhetorical motivations behind images included in the advertisements. The focal point of a document is described in Jones’ (2007) study as the dominant feature on the page. In Figure 6, the advertisement for California Almonds contains both visual

and textual focal points: the enlarged picture of the cup filled with almonds and the use of contrastive properties such as size and boldfacing in the line “A handful of no regrets”:



Figure 6: *Visual and textual headlines*

Of the 30 samples, 19 contained both attention-grabbing text and visuals that function as headlines. For additional examples of advertisements that used either visual or textual headlines, see Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively.

The *Detailing the product or service* move was also realized both textually and visually in 25 of the 30 advertisements. In Figure 7, an advertisement for Nature Sweet Tomatoes introduces a new way of packaging the product that maintains the freshness of the tomatoes for a longer period of time. To convince readers the new packaging is superior, the advertisement contains a lengthy paragraph describing the product; however, the text is not the most prominent feature on the page. While design considerations provide useful guidelines for evaluating the features of a visual, analysis of an image’s visual structure may enable a deeper understanding of the functions visuals serve in communication. Kress and van Leeuwen claim that textual and visual structures can be examined similarly, explaining that while linguistic structures rely on audience recognition and identification, visual structures aim to connect with readers through “particular interpretations and experiences” (2006, p. 2).

Applying Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework reveals the visual argument inherent in the representation of this particular product. To entice readers to purchase tomatoes with this new packaging, the advertisement shows multiple packages, with a character, Mother NatureSweet, offering the audience a closer look at the container:



Figure 7: *Detailing the product move*

Kress and van Leeuwen categorize this type of visual structure as an action-oriented, narrative process, characterized by the presence of a singular actor completing an action for an unseen participant (2006, p. 59). This type of visual representation of action encourages recognition and engagement by viewers, an assessment echoed by Goffman, who believed that identification devices in advertising images create “displays [that] have dialogic character of a statement-reply kind” (1979, p. 6). Mother NatureSweet, a focal point in the advertisement, was likely developed by the company to connect with a female audience, particularly mothers, encouraging acceptance or acknowledgement of the product. In all three of the previous advertisements, both textual and visual elements interacted meaningfully to support a claim about the product.

The recurring textual and visual features in these magazine food advertisements not only demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of audience but also reveal established communicative strategies in this genre. In particular, the images in the corpus served specific rhetorical functions as part of Bhatia’s (2004) textual move structure for advertisements. Overwhelmingly, textual headlines and product descriptions were supplemented by images, often brightly colored, prominent imagery, to capture the reader’s attention and emphasize particular aspects of the product. Working in conjunction with textual headlines, images persuade the audience to continue reading the text on the advertisement. Once the reader is enticed to further consider the advertisement, visuals are used again to quickly communicate specific aspects of a product. Aware of how advertisements will be read in this particular genre, the creators of these advertisements seem to place images at specific points to communicate specific information, suggesting thoughtful understanding of how to engage and persuade readers to buy particular food products.

## IMPLICATIONS

To explore the role of visuals in the generic structure of magazine food advertisements, 30 samples were analyzed using Bhatia's (2004) textual move structure and theories of design and visual grammar (Jones, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The preliminary frequency analysis revealed that only five of Bhatia's (2004) nine moves were recurring in the corpus. Those recurring moves were further analyzed to determine if each move was realized more often through textual resources, visual imagery, or from a combination of both. Visual theories such as focal point and aspects of *visual grammar* including narrative processes and given-new information structures were applied to identify visual manifestations of Bhatia's generic move structure.

The analysis revealed regularities in the ways frequent generic moves were realized: three moves were achieved predominately through text and employed sophisticated rhetorical appeals to facilitate identification, trust, and empathy with the target audience (*Justifying the product*, *Establishing credentials*, and *Soliciting a response*). Other traditionally textual moves were communicated through a combination of text and image, suggesting that visuals supplement text to fulfill specific rhetorical purposes in this genre (*Headlines* and *Detailing the product or service*). As mentioned previously, DeRosia and McQuarrie (2019) determined that consumers' verbal and visual processing systems are in fact independent, suggesting that though a viewer may possess a propensity towards visual advertisements, that same viewer may not necessarily feel an aversion or disengagement towards verbal advertising strategies. Therefore, the supplemental relationship between textual and visual strategies revealed in the present study might clarify advertiser intention: in order to reach a wider audience, advertisers create material to appeal to both independent processing systems.

These findings could offer relevant insight for business professionals who develop highly visual persuasive messages. This *rhetorical resonance* between the visual and the verbal component is determined by the extent to which the elements are expected and relevant to the viewer. According to Stathakopoulos et al., a correlation exists between the resonance of text and visuals and a consumer's persuasive reaction to an advertisement (2008, p. 646). For example, in the above advertisement (Figure 7) for Nature Sweet Tomatoes, the visual representation of Mother NatureSweet could be considered unexpected to the viewer; however, because this visual is engaged with the product and supports the message, it is still relevant to the overall theme of the advertisement. This combination of unexpected and relevant features is known as *incongruent stimuli* and is surprising to viewers (Stathakopoulos et al., 2008, p. 645). The authors explain that while this combination can still be persuasive, advertisement features that are too unrelated or juxtaposed would garner negative reactions or simply be ineffective in their purposes. This type of critical examination of textual and visual elements could offer professionals a different approach for considering audience and rhetorical purpose.

This study also has implications for business communication pedagogical practice. Recent research exploring the opportunities of implementing more multimodal analysis into pedagogical practice suggests that communication instructors are aware of students' needs to understand, produce, include, and analyze ubiquitous genres in modern communication. Not only are advertisements the most common type of promotional genres, but they are also dynamic in terms of how rhetorical strategies are implemented to fulfill their purpose (Bhatia, 2004, p. 63), lending themselves well to discussions of business communication. Examples such as these advertisements enable instructors to offer a reminder to students about the importance of language use in business communication. When I ask students to evaluate persuasive messages they encounter online, I have noticed students' privilege the visual elements in their analyses; not



surprisingly, visual elements capture their attention. However, when I challenge students to consider the language used alongside these visuals, students often are surprised at how their initial interpretations of the message are challenged or complicated. Moreover, the multitude of rhetorical interpretations of modern advertisements could encourage rich classroom discussion of communication strategies. For example, the intentions behind a non-standard logo placement might be related to the presence of visual headlines, as to not distract or detract from the primary visual “hook.” Or perhaps the advertisers assume that the logo will be the last item the viewer sees, encouraging brand recognition. Incorporating these dynamic genres into classroom discussions would engage students in evaluating and recognizing nuanced communication strategies and could enrich discussions on persuasion, intercultural communication, ethics, and design.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Though based on a small corpus, the findings of this study suggest that authors of this specific promotional genre engage in rhetorical decision-making when employing visual resources. The regularities with which images appeared to serve particular functions in the genre affirm the conclusion made by Varpio et al. that visuals are deliberate rhetorical devices, not “external dress” (2007, p. 348). Though elements such as sizing, placement, and illustration are used to capture readers’ attention, the images in these samples are not “creative embellishments” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 113) but deliberate communicative devices included at certain points for particular purposes. Therefore, the magazine food advertisement genre may be defined as “‘multimodally’ conceived text” that relies on a “semiotic interplay in which each mode, the verbal and the visual, is given a defined and equal role to play” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 113).

While the impact of using these advertisements in a business communication course was not evaluated in this study, research on students’ perceptions and reactions to mass media genres could inform classroom practice focused on building students’ rhetorical awareness. As technology continues to influence modern communication, it becomes even more important for students to be able to “think visually” when making rhetorical decisions about how to communicate (Brumberger, 2007, p. 381). Though additional research has been conducted on visual representation in academic writing, few studies explore the use of visuals as valued generic features in non-academic genres. Additional research on these types of messages could offer new avenues for developing pedagogical instruction focused on teaching emerging business professionals about the discursive nature of modern genres.

Analyzing genre exemplars from mass media organizations offers a unique site for students to explore the discursive nature of real-world genres produced outside classroom contexts. By exposing students to the ways that text and images work in tandem to communicate, instructors can offer a meaningful contribution to business communication pedagogy, by suggesting another avenue for preparing students to effectively communicate in specific rhetorical contexts. Additional research on the rhetorical functions of images could contribute to instructors’ understanding of how to integrate visual analysis and production into writing courses, preparing students to communicate effectively in professional settings. Continued research on promotional genres, as well as multimodal genres including websites, blogs, social networks, among others, could provide meaningful tools for developing business communication curricula for the digital age.

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**Appendix A**  
**Corpus Samples: Food Advertisements in SELF Magazine**

<b>Issue Date</b>	<b>Number and Description of Advertisement</b>
Sept 2011	1. Truvia sweetener: "Who hasn't had a date with a handsome double-fudge brownie that turned out to be a bad idea? Try some honest sweetness instead."
	2. Eggland's Best Eggs: "In my kitchen, only the best nutrition."
Oct 2011	3. California almonds: "A handful of no regrets."
	4. Neuro Drinks: "You aren't perfect. Yet."
Dec 2011	5. California almonds: "A handful of chocolate-covered permission."
	6. Mother Naturesweet: "I made the perfect Cherry tomato..."
Jan 2012	7. Jolly Time: "She never would have guessed popcorn this good could be 94% fat free."
Feb 2012	8. Kashi: "As much protein as an egg, now found in a bowl."
	9. Oroweat bread: "Start off the new year with a smile."
Mar 2012	10. California almonds: "A handful of your heart's desire."
	11. Tyson Chicken: "So the whole lunchtime workout routine never happened."
Apr 2012	12. Dole blueberry cups: "Fresh from the frozen section."
	13. Sunchips: "...fit into my strict diet of only eating things that taste awesome."
May 2012	14. Slimfast Shakes: "Your swimsuit is ready. You'll be too."
	15. Edey's Fruit Bars: "Real Fruit."
June 2012	16. Kashi Steam Meals: "The tastiest flavors stay that way..."
	17. Barilla Plus Pasta: "A healthy balance of nutrients PLUS taste."
July 2012	18. Newman's Own Pizza: "We're in it for the dough."
	19. Oscar Meyer Selects: "Grabbing a few with the girls."
Sept 2012	20. Hellmann's Mayo: "Amore."
	21. Lightlife Veggie Burgers: "A new breed of veggie burger."
	22. Sunchips: "Deliciousness for all."
Oct 2012	23. Belvita Biscuits: "Grab morning by the biscuits." "Go and go and go."
	24. Fage Yogurt: "Split from the ordinary."
	25. Smart Ones Frozen Entrée: "Experts say you should eat more veggies..."
Nov 2012	26. Special K Protein Cereal: "Willpower."
	27. Planters Nut-rition Peanut Butter: "The most daring peanut butter ever attempted."
	28. Crystal Light drink mix: "The cop at the bar wants to cuff you. He's off duty."
Dec 2012	29. Nectresse Sweetener: "Made from fruit."
	30. Safest Choice Eggs: "Your nutrition powerhouse."

**Appendix B**  
**Example of Advertisement Employing Visual *Headline***



**Appendix C**  
**Example of Advertisement Employing Textual *Headline***

So the whole  
lunchtime workout  
routine never  
happened.

Well, at least a  
healthy dinner can.

With Tyson® Grilled & Ready® Chicken Breast Strips and Chunks, you can make eating right a promise to yourself that you actually keep. No preservatives, 100% fat free and fully cooked. So you'll be eating right in no time. Just like you promised.



Scan this code for recipe inspiration  
on our GrilledAndReady.com

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