Standing on the Shoulders of Ancients: Consumer Research, Persuasion, and Figurative Language

WILLIAM J. MCGUIRE*

Ours is an age of consumerism, and the study of persuasion is a central topic of consumer research. Over time our knowledge of most persuasive topics has grown, but on a few topics knowledge has been lost. One lost topic is the persuasion effect of using figurative language (tropes, rhetorical figures) in communications, which had been a popular issue in earlier ages of persuasion but in our own era has been largely ignored. This neglect can be corrected by our "standing on the shoulders of ancients" and exploiting the progress made during earlier rhetorical ages in identifying and classifying tropes and hypothesizing how inclusion of such rhetorical figures affects perceptions and impacts of communications. A program of research on the effects of figurative language is described as an example of how giving greater consideration to ancient wisdom can enhance our understanding of persuasive communication and consumer behavior, especially in the creative hypothesis-generating phase of research.

C onsumer researchers might consider standing on the shoulders of ancient rhetoricians by doing research on figurative language. This suggestion comes from arguing that consumer behavior is central to current society, that persuasive communication (social influence, attitude change) is central to consumer research, and that figurative language (often called rhetorical tropes or figures of rhetoric) is a neglected topic in persuasion. After arguing these three contentions, an illustrative program of research is described on how and why adding rhetorical tropes to persuasive communications affects how they are perceived and what impact they have on consumers' thoughts, feelings, and actions.

FROM CONSUMER RESEARCH TO RHETORICAL TROPES

How central is consumer behavior to the way we live now, how central is the persuasion process to consumer

research, and how central are rhetorical tropes to the persuasion process? I shall give answers to these three questions.

The Centrality of Consumer Behavior in Current Society

Somewhat arbitrarily, the calendar depicts us as in transition between two centuries, indeed, between two millennia, which inevitably evokes hefty volumes reviewing the significance of the century now ending (Wills 1999). Most such volumes (e.g., Bulliet 1998; Howard and Louis 1998) provide an inclusive tour of the horizon, evenhandedly describing advances in each of a dozen areas as if none were of preeminent importance. I know of only one of these centennial volumes, one by Zunz (1998), that dares to single out one area of progress and argue that it underlies all the other trends. Zunz identifies consumerism as the fundamental transformation that distinguishes the twentieth century, including the inculcation of a consumer ethos in the American population, the acquisition of enough income to live by it, and the spreading of this pattern to other developed countries. I have argued similarly (McGuire 1985) that our moment in history has been given many names— just to start at the top of the alphabet: the American age, aspirin age, atomic age, Atlantic age, automobile age, age of alienation, age of anxiety, age of affluence, and, most aptly, the age of advertising, an essential institution for consumerism.

*William J. McGuire is professor emeritus of psychology in the Department of Psychology, Yale University, Box 208205, New Haven, CT 06520-8205; e-mail: william.mcguire@yale.edu. His research has focused on attitude change, the self-concept, and operations of thought systems. He has edited the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and published many journal articles. His most recent book is *Constructing Social Psychology: Creative and Critical Processes* (1999). The author has received the annual awards for Distinguished Scientific Contribution from the American Psychology Association (1988), from the Society for Experimental Social Psychology (1992), and from the International Society of Political Psychology (1999). Publication of this article was much facilitated by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.

The cacophony of advertising and other social influence pressures that assault our senses in twentieth-century affluent countries can cause us to make the overgeneralization that this condition obtains at all times and places, but in fact such persuasion eras are rare. I (McGuire 1985) argue that in the several millennia of European/Mediterranean civilization there were only four such centuries when persuasion flourished locally not only as an art, but also as a craft, and occasionally as a science: (1) the Hellenic century, 427–338 B.C.E., dating from Gorgias' bringing sophistry to Athens to Demosthenes' death by poison at the Macedonian takeover; (2) the Roman Republic century, 133–43 B.C.E., dating from the plebes' election of the brothers Gracchi as tribunes to the murder of Cicero by the Triumvirate; (3) the Renaissance rhetorical century, 1470–1572, dating from the printing of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratorio* (just after the Bible) to the death in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of Peter Ramus, formalizer of rhetoric and criticism. Our own consumer/advertising century dates from 1925 to 2025, from the spread of the electronic media (radio from 1925; television from1950) to 2025, my guesstimate of our own era's end date, when once again forces of repression will squelch the contradictions of our contentious society under state authoritarianism, religious orthodoxy, or village morality, and so inaugurate another long age of conformity. Then only a few young who see visions and old who dream dreams will recognize that the contentiousness characterizing these four scattered persuasion centuries is the worst mode of social mobilization and conflict resolution except for all the alternatives.

One peculiarity of the current century of persuasion that distinguishes it from the earlier three is that only in ours has the interest in persuasion gone well beyond art and craft to become a science with broad theories from which hypotheses are deduced for testing. Another peculiarity, not major in itself but important in the present discussion, is that the three previous persuasion centuries paid serious attention to the role of figurative language in persuasion, whereas current persuasive research, including that on consumer behavior, has largely ignored these rhetorical tropes. But all is not lost; above I conjecture that we still have 25 years to make up for this past neglect.

Centrality of Persuasion in Consumer Research

My peripherality to consumer research (I last published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* a quarter century ago [McGuire 1976]) gives me poor credentials for pontificating on what has been and should be going on in the field, but I think that knowledgeable scholars will agree that a major topic in consumer research is the issue of how persuasive messages change people's thoughts, feelings, and actions, especially as regards the purchase of goods and services.

Persuasive communication has been a focus of my research, although not my only focus (see McGuire 1999). As a basic researcher I have studied persuasion on a content-free level of abstraction in that the relations found are intended to be equally applicable to consumer behavior, health

behavior, political behavior, and so forth (McGuire 1984). This research aims at producing hypotheses, theory-derived and empirically tested, specifying relations between persuasive-communication inputs and behavioral-change outputs. The information in these hypotheses can be organized into a communication/persuasion matrix (McGuire 1985) for efficient storage, retrieval, and provocation of creative insights. The column headings of this matrix are the input communication variables, falling into five broad categories of source, message, channel, receiver, and target (who says it, what is said, via which medium, to whom, aimed at changing what), each of the five being divided into subcategories down several levels. The row headings of this matrix are the successive output steps that constitute being persuaded by the communication inputs (e.g., being exposed to the communication campaign, paying attention to it, comprehending it, cognitive elaboration of it, accepting its position, behaving appropriately by purchasing the promoted goods or services, proselytizing others, etc.). In each cell of this communication/persuasion matrix one records how the column input variable is related to the row output variable, as determined by empirical investigation or deduced from well-supported theory.

Centrality of Figurative Language (Tropes) in Persuasion

This communication/persuasion matrix shows where tropes (figurative language, rhetorical figures, etc.) fit into the persuasion process. The various rhetorical tropes are input variables that can be studied by presenting standard persuasive messages, manipulating the rhetorical figures they contain, and then testing how varying these tropes affects the perception and persuasive impact of the message. As regards the five broad categories of input variables (source, message, etc.) that serve as column headings in the communication/persuasion matrix, rhetorical figures fall in the message category that contains many subcategories such as type of argument, inclusions and omissions, ordering, extremity, style, and so forth. The style subcategory in turn breaks down further into intensity, complexity, humor, literalness, and so on, with trope manipulations falling under the literal-versus-figurative subsubcategory. Hence, by focusing on how and why various rhetorical tropes affect the perception and persuasive impact of communication, I shall be confining the discussion to a narrow band of the broad spectrum of input variables. However, figurative language is an important and widely neglected topic in the persuasion literature, both in consumer research and in other areas.

RHETORICAL TROPES: THEIR EFFECTS ON COMMUNICATION IMPACT

Persuasion as Art, Craft, and Science

Studies of preliterate societies suggest that, at least since the neolithic revolution (and probably earlier), persuasive communication has been a powerful tool in human society,

heavily used for personal advantage and for social purposes such as mobilizing effort and resolving conflict. Like other skills, persuasion tends to evolve through stages as an art, a craft, and a science. Persuasion is a ubiquitous art, one that has been practiced effectively by intuitive geniuses since prehistory. However, as asserted above, only in four scattered centuries in narrow localities did persuasion become a process so central to society that it evolved to the status of a craft whose master practitioners could abstract rules of thumb and convey them to apprentices by demonstration and description. In three of the four previous persuasive centuries (the Hellenic, Roman Republic, and Renaissance) persuasion evolved to craft level. Only in the fourth era, our own 1925–2025 century, has persuasion evolved still further to a science, with general theories to organize the specific relations observed and to suggest further ones, and with empirical methods for testing the hypothesized relations between variables. When a field like persuasion evolves through stages of art, craft, and science, it does not lose something but rather adds to the earlier stages. In preliterate times persuasion was simply art with little craft and less science; currently it has become a science but still retains substantial art and craft components.

Standing on the Shoulders of Ancients

In each of the three earlier centuries, the practice of persuasion evolved from art to craft. Skilled theorists and practitioners of persuasion (rheticians and orators like Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Ramus) developed it into a recognized field of study and wrote treatises inventorying useful rules of thumb for improving its practice. Their rules are still useful: as Newton reminded Hooke, if we see further than the ancients it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants. Those of us so modern that we cannot regard an ancient (even of Aristotle's stature) as a giant should remember that Coleridge pointed out that we see further by standing on the shoulders even of pygmies. Merton (1993) says more about such standings on shoulders than most are interested in hearing.

Persuasion mavens of the three earlier persuasive centuries left treatises providing rich insights into the process (e.g., Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Cicero's *De Oratore*, Quintilian's *Institutio Oratorio*). Many of the principles they listed were wrong, but this is faint condemnation. That the ancient giants excelled in creating hypotheses but were nonstarters on testing them clarifies their legacy. They asked interesting questions and suggested some interesting answers but left unexamined whether their answers were correct. Thus, we can mine their suggested hypotheses as ore from which hypothetical gems might emerge as our critical experiments expunge the dross. To our loss, we twentieth-century scientific students of persuasion tend to ignore rather than exploit the ancients' to-be-tested hypotheses.

This unfortunate ignoring can be illustrated by three important persuasion topics heavily discussed by the humanistic ancients but almost wholly neglected by current scientific researchers. One such topic is humor, used in half the consumer ads but largely ignored in consumer research and other disciplines studying persuasion. Also neglected is the relative persuasive impact of different types of arguments, a promising topic that attracted the creative attention of ancients (e.g., Aristotle's 28 valid and 10 invalid types of arguments, Cicero's 16 types of arguments, etc.) but that receives little theoretical or empirical attention in the current scientific literature. A third example of neglect is figurative language, the topic on which I focus here, heavily discussed in all three prior persuasive centuries but largely ignored in the current scientific era in consumer research and other disciplines focused on persuasion. Neglect is a movable feast. Two decades ago I would have added nonverbal communication as a neglected topic, but recent recognition of its practical and theoretical relevance has provoked much more empirical research on the persuasive impact of nonverbal behavior.

A PROGRAM OF RESEARCH ON EFFECTS OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In the current persuasion century few experimental studies focusing on tropes have been published, and these few often have been done by people in speech rather than in the consumer behavior or psychology disciplines and done almost exclusively on metaphors, to the neglect of the hundreds of other tropes. Persuasion researchers, if asked why they are not working on tropes, may say because no one else is (which I regard as a good reason for working on them) or because tropes lack theoretical relevance.

General Plan for a Research Program on Tropes

One of my own research programs is designed to test the implications of four theories that could explain how adding various rhetorical figures affects the perceptions and persuasive impacts of argumentative messages. Currently I am in the midst of three preliminary tasks. The first is assembling a long and heterogeneous list of classical rhetorical figures and classifying them into psychologically meaningful types and subtypes. Secondly, I am composing basic persuasive communications about a variety of issues, each communication modifiable into variants, one literal and the others adorned by alternative types of rhetorical figures of theoretical interest. Thirdly, I am identifying an economical theory-relevant set of 36 characteristics on which persuasive communications are perceived to differ as a function of which types of rhetorical tropes they contain. These characteristics will serve as theoretical mediators of the tropes' relation to the persuasive impact of the communication. So far, the 36 characteristics studied tend to reduce to five orthogonal factors (source valence, message insistence, message clarity, emotional arousal, and literary quality).

After these preliminaries, the experiments per se present participants with persuasive messages on diverse topics, each message ornamented by a different type of theory-relevant rhetorical figure, with figures and order rotated around topics among participants, who then rate each mes-

sage on the five factors underlying the 36 characteristics. Finally, participants give their postmessage desirability and likelihood judgments on the issues argued in the message that supply a measure of one of the dependent variables: persuasive impact. It can then be tested whether the different types of rhetorical figures have the theorized main and interaction effects, and whether these effects are mediated by the predicted message characteristics.

Varieties of Rhetorical Figures

Most consumer researchers and other students of persuasion can recognize five or ten commonly discussed tropes (e.g., metaphors, similes, rhetorical questions, hyperboles, synecdoche, metonymy, irony, etc.), but only the rare connoisseur will be familiar with the hundreds of others. A few students of rhetorical eloquence have published handlists (Dupriez 1991; Espy 1983; Lanham 1991; Quinn 1982) describing a plethora of such figures, often organized only by alphabetization (for a rare sophisticated organization, see McQuarrie and Mick [1996]). As an initial step in my program, I have organized over a hundred rhetorical tropes into those psychologically meaningful categories and subcategories particularly relevant to persuasion (and useful in research on other topics as well). Underlying this classification is the popular information-processing model of persuasion on which are based the communication/persuasion matrix, the health belief model, and the standard marketing approaches. Tropes are divided into three functional types: attention provoking, comprehension enhancing, and agreement-evoking. The Appendix lists some rhetorical figures that fall in the short first category: attention-provoking tropes.

Theories Accounting for the Effects of Figurative Language

Classical rhetorical theoreticians and practitioners such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian were agreed that adding rhetorical figures to an oration generally enhances its persuasive impact, a conviction that has received some experimental confirmation in our own era (Johnson and Taylor 1981). They were in less agreement on why tropes had such effects. I shall describe here four theories regarding how rhetorical figures, or at least certain types of them, affect the perception and impact of persuasive communications.

Attention Explanations.   A first type of explanatory theory argues that rhetorical tropes are eye-catching, making the message more interesting and thus enhancing attention to, and effective encoding of, the arguments. This explanation implies that the tropes' persuasive effects will be mediated by variables such as the message's judged inherent interest, comprehension, and recall. It implies also that adding rhetorical figures to a persuasive message increases the likelihood of its being centrally, rather than peripherally, processed, in the sense of Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) "elaboration likelihood model" or the Chaiken, Liberman,

and Eagly (1989) "heuristic processing" formulation. Interaction implications follow, such as that adding interest-enhancing rhetorical figures will increase the role of argument strength and decrease the role of source credibility in affecting persuasion.

An interesting complication of this explanation is that the attention-catching quality of rhetorical figures could either enhance or diminish encoding of arguments, and thus persuasive impact, in interaction with audience sophistication (McQuarrie and Mick 1999). Some rhetorical tropes (e.g., metanoia, prodiorthosis, hypophora; see Lanham [1991] for definitions) may attract attention to the arguments and so enhance persuasion; but other tropes (e.g., hyperbaton, irony, metalepsis) may attract attention to themselves, away from the arguments, and so reduce persuasion. Rhetorical tropes can also be distractions, depending on their strength, and distractions can either increase persuasive impact by interfering with counterarguing or decrease impact by interfering with argument reception (Petty, Wells, and Brock 1976). My proposed studies will test these mediational and interaction predictions of attention/distraction explanations.

Source-Perception Explanations.   A second class of theoretical explanations is that rhetorical figures operate by affecting how the audience perceives the source. Some credibilizing tropes may enhance source believability and so enhance persuasive impact (e.g., antanagoge, epanorthosis, litotes), while other rhetorical figures may make sources seem ill-mannered, reducing the source's attractiveness and thus the message's persuasive impact (e.g., aischrologia, hypocrisis, tapinosis).

Research suggests that figures that make the source seem inept (e.g., acyrologia, anthimeria, antiptosis) may reduce persuasive impact by lowering perceived source expertise or, conversely, may have a humanizing "pratfall" effect that enhances persuasive impact via perceived source similarity, especially with challenged audiences. The source explanation's rich implications can be tested in terms of (a) the direction of the main effect of the relevant rhetorical figures, (b) the theorized critical mediators (e.g., source expertise vs. liking) of these effects, and (c) interacting variables (e.g., topic controversiality, audience sophistication).

Meaningfulness Explanations.   A third type of theory is that at least some rhetorical tropes (e.g., metaphor, metonymy, epiphonema) work by intensifying the encoding penetration of the persuasive message, for example, by making contact with basic values or by resonating with deep archetypes of the audience that a literal message would not have touched. Martin, Cummings, and Hallberg (1992) find that therapists' systematically increasing their use of metaphors during a session enhances patients' recall of and rated helpfulness of the session. Conversely, other rhetorical figures (e.g., antiphrasis, enthymeme, irony, synecdoches) might by their subtlety obscure the argument, decreasing penetration depth and thus persuasive impact, at least in interaction with specifiable audience, medium, or issue variables (McQuarrie and Mick 1992).

Mood Explanation. A fourth type of explanation attributes persuasive impacts of rhetorical figures to the affective states they induce in the audience. Such mood explanations by classical rhetoricians like Aristotle and Quintilian have received empirical support (DeBono 1992), as when incidental mood-affecting, topic-irrelevant conditions (such as sipping a soft drink while listening) enhance the impact of a persuasive message. Mood theories imply that specifiable types of rhetorical figures can affect moods in ways that influence persuasive impact. Some figures are so elegant (e.g., antithesis, isocolon, mycterismus) that they may put the reader into an aesthetically pleasurable state that makes him or her more accepting of arguments. Other rhetorical figures evoke a sympathetic mood (e.g., pareuresis, humor, paeanismus) that enhances acceptance of arguments. Still others arouse anger or other negative feelings (e.g., tapinosis, donysis, exacerbatio) tending to detract from persuasive impact.

A more complex "congruence" variant of mood theory asserts that what matters is not just the direction (valence) of the rhetorically induced mood (e.g., sympathy vs. anger) but also the congruence between valence of the rhetorically induced mood and valence of the message argument. Thus, rhetorical figures that put the reader in a positive mood (amusement, joy) might increase the persuasive impact of messages arguing in a benevolent direction but reduce the impact of arguments for a punitive position; in contrast, rhetorical figures inducing negative moods (e.g., anger, fear) would have the opposite interaction effect.

An Illustrative Initial Experiment

An illustrative experiment guided by mood theorizing will use contrasting sets of rhetorical tropes, one set inducing affectively pleasant moods (e.g., comprobatio, humor, eulogia) and the other set inducing unpleasant moods (e.g., cataplexis, protrope, epiplexis). By using such contrasting figures of rhetoric we can test between two alternative mood theories: mood-valence versus mood-congruence. Mood-valence theory predicts a monotonic main effect: that the greatest persuasion will be produced by rhetorical tropes that put the audience in a pleasant mood, that the least persuasion will be produced by messages with unpleasant-mood tropes, and that an intermediate impact will be produced by literal, plain messages. Mood-congruence theory, on the other hand, predicts an interaction between directions of valence of mood and valence of trope as regards pleasantness, such that the positive-mood tropes will enhance persuasive impact when the message argues for a benevolent position and will decrease impact when it argues for a punitive position.

Also predicted is a multiplicative interaction effect such that trope-induced mood effects are stronger in conditions requiring more inferential processing (Forgas 1992). Also testable within this design is whether for mood-congruence it suffices that the valence be in the same direction, or whether the qualitative feeling tone within that valence must

also be congruent. For example, different tropes may induce three qualitatively different negative moods: anger (produced by use of the epiplexis trope), fear (produced by use of the cataplexis trope), and sorrow (by the eidolopoeia trope)—the three moods all being negative but qualitatively different in feeling tone (Watson and Clark 1992). This allows us to separate out the effects, say, of an anger-inducing trope's being directionally congruent but qualitatively incongruent with a fear-inducing message position. The design also allows testing for positive-negative affective asymmetries.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The narrow answer to this question is that students of persuasion, including those in consumer research, should give more attention to the neglected topic of how the message style variable of figurative language affects the perception and persuasive impact of a communication. I argue that the issue is an intrinsically interesting one, is convenient to study, has considerable relevance to theory and practice, and yet now receives only modest research attention. Admittedly, across the whole spectrum of input variables that constitute the column headings of the communication/persuasion matrix, figurative language occupies only a narrow band as a subdivision under the message style category. Still, it is my judgment that tropes are more deserving of research attention than many other topics that are currently much more heavily investigated.

A broader answer to What is to be done? reveals my hidden agenda, namely, that social scientists, including consumer researchers studying persuasion, can cost-effectively enrich the field by exploiting the insights of the ancients, even though these insights were humanistic and therefore weak as regards theoretical derivations and especially as regards empirical testing—two refinements that current social scientists demand.

Most social scientists recognize that their task is to generate and test hypotheses. What tends to be in shortest supply in our discipline is creative hypothesis generating. I have long pointed out (McGuire 1973, 1997) the oddity that while we all recognize that our methods involve both creative hypothesis generating and critical hypothesis testing, our methodology discussions, courses, and textbooks focus almost entirely on the latter, ignoring how to creatively generate hypotheses. Even methods that originated as discovery methods, such as factor analysis and structural-equation causal models, tend to end up as testing methods.

Most methodologists will probably acknowledge this paradox and ascribe our neglect of creative processes to their being hard to describe, much less to teach. However, I have recently (McGuire 1997) described dozens of teachable heuristics that the researcher can use for creative hypothesis generation. I am arguing here that still another creative heuristic is to exploit the wisdom of the ancients, even if this wisdom has been left in the form of untested hypotheses, many probably wrong. Standing on the shoulders of ancients, be they giants or pygmies, can generate new hypotheses, open up new questions, and suggest new answers

whose testing will enrich an area of inquiry such as understanding persuasion processes in consumer behavior and other disciplines.

APPENDIX

A PERSUASION-RELEVANT CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR ILLUSTRATIVE RHETORICAL TROPES

I. Attention-provoking tropes (which promote reception of the arguments)

   A. Strikingness

     1. Vividness

       a. Dramatization (e.g., hypophora)

       b. Imaginability (blazon)

       c. Oddity (hyperbaton)

       d. Emphasis (commoratio)

       e. Novelty (anastrophe)

     2. Paradox (oxymoron)

     3. Epitomizing (chreia)

     4. Encapsulation (anacephalaeosis)

   B. Abruptness, discontinuity

     1. Dropping (apaetesis)

     2. Switching (epitrochasmus)

II. Comprehension-enhancing tropes (which promote encoding the arguments)

III. Agreement-evoking tropes (which promote accepting the arguments)

Note: In our full classification system, captegories II and III are divided into three further levels of subordination.

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