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Visual Rhetoric in Outdoor Advertising

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Abstract

The paper presents a research, the aim of which is to find out how graphic expressions and visual language can be used for persuasion. The research material consists of outdoor advertisements photographed in their actual exhibition places in a city environment. Outdoor advertising media, which are used to communicate visual messages from a sender to several addressees, participate in building the visual city culture and open manifold solutions in design. The visual language used in the research material is analyzed in order to find out how advertising messages, their denotations and connotations, are constructed and how arguments used for persuasion are visualized.

The first analysis is based on the knowledge and methods used in graphic design practice, which has been defined to be the process of making, choosing and arranging marks in order to convey a message. The analysis shows that different modes, techniques and visual elements are applied to attract the attention of spectators and arouse interest towards the message of an artefact. The second analysis is based on communication studies and semiotics, especially on Roman Jakobson's theory about the functions of communication. The method of combining two analyses reveals different ways of using visual language and syntaxes to announce the excellence of an advertised product, service or subject. It also shows various types of visual arguments used in advertisements. Three types of visual rhetoric emerge from the research material. They are called brand rhetoric, personalized rhetoric and poetic rhetoric.

The taxonomy of visual rhetoric exemplifies how visual language can be constructed and used for persuasion. It shows that the decisions in design influence the messages and meanings created. The research calls for further studies as regards the reception of visual rhetoric and suggests that the taxonomy of visual rhetoric could be applied in visual communication design and in the analysis of advertising messages.

Keywords

The topic of my research is the concept of visual communication, a subject which is also of great professional interest to me as a graphic designer. The task to create an artefact, the purpose of which is to communicate a message from a sender to several addressees, opens manifold solutions in design.

Graphic design can be defined as the business of making and choosing marks and arranging them on a surface in order to convey an idea (Hollis, 2001, p.7).

Regardless of the techniques and media used, this definition emphasizes conveying ideas and making thoughts visible, but it does not specify how the marks should be made, chosen and arranged in order to achieve efficient and accurate visual communication. For example, a person visualizing a verbal message in order to design a poster has unlimited options for illustrating and using signs, colours and typography. The decisions made during the design process might have an influence on the meanings created by the artefact. Therefore it is necessary to compare and study alternative design solutions and their reflections on the messages created.

The aims and research questions

The aim of my research is to gather fresh knowledge about visual communication design and to find out how the decisions made by a graphic designer influence the messages conveyed by an artefact. According to semiotics, a sign combines an expression (signifier) and contents (signified) and carries meanings. The question arises as to how the graphic expression chosen to visualize the content influences the connotations created by an artefact.

In addition to drawing on my practical knowledge as a graphic designer, I studied semiotics, visual culture and communication. The study of these theories revealed to me the complexity of my research problem and made me aware of the multiple disciplines that had to be taken into consideration. It became obvious to me that I had to further restrict my research topic. In order to keep the main focus on design, I decided to select one specific area of graphic design and explore the research problem through it. I chose outdoor advertisements because of 1) their public visibility and large audience, 2) the long history of outdoor advertising and poster design and 3) the fact that outdoor media combine various production techniques.

After defining the target, the research problem was divided into four research questions:

1) What are the current outdoor media and their position in building visual city culture?
2) What kind of graphic expression and design is used in outdoor advertisements?
3) How is visual language used for persuasion and what is visual rhetoric in outdoor advertisements?
4) What kinds of meanings might be created by visual rhetoric in advertisements and do they reflect societal values?

Figure 1 (at end) illustrates the position of a graphic designer, who is giving form to a message from a sender to several addressees. In a public place the artefact becomes part of the visual culture of its environment and may stimulate various interpretations among the spectators. Through the analysis of the designs and the visual language used for persuasion, I discuss how the intentions of the sender are expressed and what kinds of meanings they might create.

The research material and its analysis

The first question presumes that posters in public places are part of the visual culture of their environment. Therefore, the research material was gathered by photographing current outdoor advertisements in their actual exhibition places, which are here referred to as street galleries. The four street galleries in Helsinki were selected to represent places of importance for the cultural heritage of the capital as well as places where many people commute daily. The research material consisting of 241 advertising campaigns was collected by photographing 20 different advertising stands once a month from July 2004 to June 2005.

Outdoor media contributing to visual city culture

The research showed that the development of digital techniques has changed the production and distribution systems of outdoor advertising. A locally exhibited poster might belong to a worldwide advertising campaign. Although most of the advertisements included in the research material were designed in Finland, there were some international campaigns, especially by global brands and advertisements promoting films. By sending a digitalized artwork to various countries, a film premier can be launched on every continent simultaneously. Other implications of technical development were video-screens and huge-sized posters, produced by ink-jet printing. Tarpaulins, which cover houses during repair works, are often used for advertising purposes.

Some radical changes and reorganizations in the outdoor advertising business occurred in Finland at the end of the 20th century. The City of Helsinki is now using subcontractors, who upkeep street furniture and stands and rent them to advertisers. In 2004 the city had long-term contracts with three international companies – Viacom, Clear Channel and JCDecaux. In fact, these three companies managed the outdoor advertising business all over the country. Nowadays there are only two companies left, since JCDecaux has bought Viacom's business share in Finland.

Although people's attitude towards advertising is positive in Finland, there have also been confrontations. The Council of Ethics in Advertising deals with requests from consumers and issues statements on whether an advertisement is ethically acceptable. In 2005 statements concerning outdoors advertisements amounted to 23% of all statements issued by the Council of Ethics. Consumers complained especially about gender representation in advertisements. Another problem was caused by the strict rules against graffiti paintings and stickers in Helsinki. These regulations were violated by a group of youngsters in order to demonstrate a more versatile use of public space. Posters placed without permission in public places caused legal actions and discussion in the Finnish media. The present system of renting advertising stands is too expensive for small companies and organizations.

Photographing posters in their actual exhibition places revealed the physical appearance of outdoor advertising. The pictures showed that the surroundings of a poster and the existing climate and lighting conditions influence how outstanding a poster appears. However, the ability of an advertisement to raise interest in spectators is not caused by its prominent

appearance alone. Regardless of the clarity in graphic expression, an addressee might interpret the message of an advertisement differently than the sender intended. On the other hand, various surveys about consumer behaviour attempt to foresee such receptions. Research projects measuring current societal values and attitudes precede many advertising campaigns and influence the decisions made in design. Thus, it can be presumed that outdoor advertising reflects to some extent the attitudes and values of society.

Graphic design in outdoor advertisements

After collecting the research material, I analyzed each of the 241 campaigns in order to find out whether there was a connection between the graphic design applied and the arguments used to convince the spectators about the message of an artefact. To answer the second and third research question, a distinction was drawn between the graphic expression and the visual language of outdoor advertising. The former includes shapes, colours and illustration techniques, whereas the latter refers to the meaning created by content and expression.

Figure 2 (at end) illustrates the method used to find an answer to the second research question about the graphic expression and design. The material was divided into four categories according to the street furniture or the advertising stand used. The campaigns were exhibited on 1) lampposts, 2) advertisement pillars, 3) tram and bus stops, or 4) on the sides of wastebaskets. The advertising stand determines the size of a single poster and also the average distance it is looked at. Advertisements based on text were analyzed from the point of view of typography, whereas pictures were classified according to the illustration technique. Visual elements considered in the analysis included colours, composition, contrasts etc.

Each campaign was analysed separately, assessing which features in the design attracted attention and awakened interest towards the advertisement. The most outstanding campaigns were analyzed according to their denotative and connotative level. The analysis showed that contrasting colours, simple layout and bold lettering were used to assure that the message was seen and understood. However, most interesting to look at and also best remembered afterwards were campaigns, whose design was not plain and straightforward, but rather manifold. Usually such campaigns included a picture. The posters exhibited on bus stops appeared more versatile in their design than the posters on pillars or lampposts.

Collecting and coding the research material was done systematically in order to guarantee that it covers various cases of visualizing advertising messages. Statistical evidence or frequencies were not investigated, as this is a qualitative research. When analyzing the material, I used my expertise in graphic design drawing on the knowledge and methods I have learned to apply in day-to-day design practice. The findings were examined and compared with studies about effectiveness in advertising and poster design techniques found in graphic design and advertising literature. There are many historical studies written about poster art and based on their examples, there are guidelines on how to design outstanding posters and outdoor advertising. The so-called "poster rules" (Bernstein, 1997, p.73) emphasize simple design and clarity, but also fresh ideas and imagination. Advertising researchers have

indicated that novelty in a campaign increases sales more than excessive repetition of an old message (Tellis, 2004, p.229). Especially novelty in creative contents, a new slogan or a visual idea, is the key to effective advertising. "Good ads surprise though not all surprising ads are good," writes David Bernstein and differentiates two kinds of surprises: 1) the astonishment or wonder at a new thought, and 2) the realization of the connection and its obviousness, when once pointed out (Bernstein, 1997, pp.86–87).

The advertisements that were rated most interesting as regards graphic design were surprising for various reasons. Sometimes it was the combination of colours or visual elements, but most often the surprise was caused by an illustration. There were pictures that seemed to strengthen the advertising message indirectly by applying visual metaphors or puns. Some of them had intertextual indications, which carried the spectator's thoughts to new topics or memories. Pictures that captured the imagination did not have much in common when it comes to illustration techniques or subject areas. Similar photographs, drawings and collages were used to advertise travels or food. Regardless of the expression or contents, the pictures seemed to convince spectators about the advertising message and thus served a certain function in communication. When examining these functions, theories of communication and semiotics were applied, especially the theory of functions in communication by Roman Jakobson.

Visual language used for persuasion

The research material was analyzed once more so as to answer the third research question about visual language and to define what visual rhetoric in outdoor advertisements is. According to Roman Jakobson (1958), in every act of verbal communication there are six constitutive factors. When an *addresser* sends a *message* to an *addressee*, there needs to be a *context* which is referred to. For the message to be understood, at least partially, there needs to be a *code*, which is common to the addresser and the addressee, and also a *contact*, a physical channel or psychological connection. Each of these six factors determines a different function in language (Jakobson, 1958, p.353).

Although Jakobson wrote his theory for verbal language, he gives examples how it can be applied to pictorial communication. Krystana Pomorska in her dialogues with Jakobson (1980) points out the vast knowledge of visual arts that the famous linguistic scholar had. For example, when discussing about metonymy and metaphor, Pomorska leads the conversation to cinema and writes down Jakobson's thoughts about similarity and contiguity in movies (Jakobson & Pomorska 1983, pp.125–135).

Jakobson calls the first function referential or denotative function: "- - an orientation toward the context - - is the leading task of numerous messages." (Jakobson, 1958, p.353). In this research, when applied to the visual language of outdoor advertisements, the referential function is assessed to be the leading function if the picture of the product or service advertised dominates the design of the ad. For example, when a package or a trademark is enlarged to cover the available space in a poster, the referential function is dominant.

The second, so-called emotive or expressive function, refers to the addresser and his or her emotions. Jakobson describes how information carried in utterances cannot be restricted to the cognitive aspect. "A man, using expressive features in communication can indicate his angry or ironic attitude - -" (Jakobson, 1958, p.354). In outdoor advertisements the emotive function is considered superior if the corporate style of the advertiser, for example colours and typography, are dominating the appearance of the poster.

The third, the conative function, orientates towards the addressee and "- - finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and imperative - - " (Jakobson, 1958, p.355). In ads, actors representing the users of a product refer to the addressee and thus build the conative function. In interpersonal communication emotions are expressed through body language, mimic and poses, and this can be used as a method of persuasion in advertising. Also the combination of colours, typography and picture compositions can be used to constitute the conative function.

The fourth, the phatic function of language consists of "messages primarily serving to establish or to prolong communication - - to check whether the channel works" (Jakobson, 1958, p.355). The example given by Jakobson: "Hello, do you hear me?" is meant to attract and confirm the attention of the interlocutor. Correspondingly, excessively repeated campaigns aim to confirm the continued attention of spectators. The phatic function is prominent in such outdoor advertisements which include hardly any new information and are meant to keep the brand name visible and in consumers' minds.

The fifth, the metalingual function refers to metalanguage, which "is not only a necessary scientific tool - - it plays also an important role in our everyday language" (Jakobson, 1958, p.356). Whenever an addresser and addressee need to check whether they use the same code, the communication is focused on the metalingual function. During a conversation the question "Do you follow me?" corresponds in visual language to the question "Do you understand these signs?" The metalingual function is taken into account when the graphic style of an outdoor advertisement is over-simplified as regards typography, colours or layout.

The sixth, the poetic function, focuses on the message itself. According to Roman Jakobson the poetic function cannot be limited to poetry alone, although it is the dominant function in verbal art. He exemplifies the poetic function with slogans such as "I like Ike" and "Veni, vidi, vici" and states that it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent in all verbal actions (Jakobson, 1958, p.356). In other words, he is saying that a message can be expressed in a poetic way even though it contains everyday information. As regards visual communication and outdoor advertising, the question arises as to whether the poetic function corresponds to an excellent artistic expression or design of an artefact. When analyzing the graphic expression of the research material, was the poetic function dominant in the posters which were rated most interesting and caused surprise?

To answer these questions, I continued reading Jakobson's scrutiny of language and its poetic function. When explaining the empirical linguistic criterion of the poetic function, Jakobson recalls the two basic modes of arrangement used in verbal behaviour, *selection* and *combination.* "The

selection is produced on the base of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, - - while the combination, the build up of a sequence, is based on contiguity. *The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."* (Jakobson, 1958, p.358). There is an analogy to graphic design, which has been defined to be the choosing and arranging of marks to convey a message – in other words, selecting and combining signs to create a meaning. Jakobson exemplifies how using metaphors, metonymy and synecdoche create a poetic expression in language. When analyzing the functions of communication in the research material, I noticed equivalent modes in visual language. I consider that the poetic function has a leading position in communication when an advertising message is visualized by using metaphors or substituted expressions. Pictures creating continuation to old myths, beliefs or topical issues also serve the poetic function in communication.

When describing the six functions in communication, Jakobson points out that we could hardly find a message that would fulfil only one of these functions (Jakobson, 1958, p.353). However, the diversity of communication lies in the hierarchical order of these functions. This statement turned out to be true also in my research material. I assessed each of the 241 campaigns and coded two functions which I considered to be most prominent. The decision to code two functions was based on the observation that in most campaigns two functions were equally dominant in the visual communication, whereas the third and fourth function were in a subordinate or assisting position.

The second analysis indicated that the prominent functions showed which arguments were used for persuasion, and these arguments also determined the visual language of a poster. For example, in an advertisement showing a package of yoghurt the referential function was dominant. When there were no other visual elements in the poster, the communication fulfilled the requirements of the phatic and the metalingual function as well, by saying: "Buy yoghurt X, because it is a good brand." When the product was depicted against a green birch forest, the referential function was still dominant, but the argument used for persuasion was: "Buy yoghurt X, because it is a natural product." In the third poster, a person was included in the illustration and the conative function became equally important as the referential function. The argument used for persuasion was: "Buy yoghurt X, because it is good for your health." The fourth possibility to depict the message could have been a fairytale illustration, which would include just the logo of the yoghurt. The connection of the illustration to the product would be arbitrary and open to the imagination and interpretation of the addressees. In such a case, the poetic and emotional functions would be leading the communication.

According to Roland Barthes (1963), an advertisement text consists of two messages. The first message includes the level of expression and the level of content. It shows the syntactic relation of signifiers and is called the message of denotation. The second message "- - is a total message and derives this totality from the singular character of its signified: *this signified is unique and it is always the same, in all advertising messages:* it is, in a word, the excellence of the product announced." (Barthes, 1963, p.174). In the same way, in this research the signified of every campaign was the announcement of the excellence of a product, a service or a subject. The signifier of this message

was the entirety of the arguments used and their visualization, that is to say the design of a poster.

Through the second analysis of the research material (figure 3 at end), three main categories emerged of how persuasion in an advertising message was visualized. These categories make up visual rhetoric and are called brand rhetoric, personalized rhetoric and poetic rhetoric.

The taxonomy of visual rhetoric in outdoor advertising

The taxonomy of visual rhetoric answers the third research question and it is the key result of my research. The analysis of current outdoor advertising and its graphic design revealed how visual language is used for persuasion and exemplified how visual rhetoric is constructed in outdoor advertisements.

When brand rhetoric is used for persuasion, the visualization is based on the brand and its qualities or it promotes the addresser. The illustrations depict the origin or the contents of the product, the company's history or reliability. When personalized rhetoric is used in an advertising campaign, the visualization is focused towards the consumer. Actors may be used to show the feelings of happiness or other emotions promised to the consumer. A price tag can indicate material profits connected to the purchase and a certain colour combination can be used to appeal to people's patriotic responsibility. The third category, poetic rhetoric, uses narratives and visualization without a direct connection to the product or the addressees. The image can refer to fiction or real life, for example when reportage photographs are used.

The visual language used in the posters did not depend on the type of product advertised. Similar illustrations were used to advertise goods and services. The phatic and the metalingual functions focused on the visibility and clarity of the message and served as subsidiary functions in most campaigns. They highlighted the graphic expression but did not argue or give reasons about the excellence of the product.

One of my presumptions was that the visual language used in outdoor advertisements reflects the attitudes and values in society. The scrutiny of the visual rhetoric showed that certain types of illustrations occurred in various campaigns. For example, pictures of sports activities were included in ads of soft drinks, mobile phones and travels. Photographs of exotic landscapes reminded of tourism, although they depicted origins of wines and food products. The brand rhetoric did not inform about the contents of the product, but connected it to leisure time through poetic rhetoric. When examining the personalized rhetoric, the mimic and gestures of female actors showed self-confidence and determination and thus differed from earlier research of gender advertisements (Goffman, 1979; Niskanen, 1996). Prominent themes, which rose from the illustrations of the research material, were distinctiveness, individual choice, personal style and search for enjoyment and experiences.

Although the visual rhetoric of the outdoor advertisements in question depicted some current issues and consumer attitudes existing in Finnish society at the time, I consider my research material too limited to draw conclusions about the correlation between societal values and the visual rhetoric of outdoor advertisements. However, the research produced a model of how persuasion in advertisements can be analyzed. It also showed how, by

selecting and combining signs in graphic design, visual arguments and
meanings can be included into an advertisement.

Discussion

The aim of my research was to gather fresh knowledge about visual
communication design and to find out how the decisions made in design
influence the advertising message and its meanings. The methodology was
chosen in order to deconstruct graphic design (Lupton and Miller, 1993, pp.3–
23), and it was not meant to measure the effects of advertising. However, it
would be interesting to continue using reception research methods and
compare interpretations of different people to various types of visual rhetoric.

As regards the aims of this research, one may question, was it necessary to
apply Roman Jakobson's linguistic theory in order to find out how visual
language is used for persuasion. Rhetoric, argumentation and persuasion
have been connected since antiquity. So why did I not apply the concept of
rhetoric in the analysis straight away?

The reason why I selected such a multiform methodology is that visual
communication design and visual rhetoric are not recognised as scientific
disciplines. Although images have been used for persuasion already in
ancient times, many rhetoric scholars restrict rhetoric to the use of language
to persuade (Blair, 2004, p.42). The terms *cross-disciplinary* and *indiscipline* are
mentioned when defining visual rhetoric (Hill & Helmers, 2004, p.18). In order to
get rigour into my research, I had to proceed step-by-step using theories and
methodology from disciplines connected to art and design research. I applied
semiotics because it has been used earlier in design research, communication
and visual culture studies.

The study of rhetoric concerns with the modes of persuasion and it is often
connected with oratory, the art of speaking in public eloquently. In antiquity
Aristotle gave practical advice to speakers on how to convince the audience
by reasoning logically. A speaker has to know his or her subject matter, but
effective persuasion also requires understanding of the human character and
different emotions. (Aristoteles, 1997, pp.119–123). Aristotle advises of how to
use metaphors, parables and epithets to make a speech sound poetic and
arouse interest in the public. Although his advice is for orators, an analogy to
visual rhetoric can be build. Knowing the subject matter corresponds to the
versatile use of brand rhetoric in visual communication. Understanding human
emotions is needed when applying personalized rhetoric in advertisements.
Poetic rhetoric is constituted by topical illustrations and visual metaphors.

During the 20th century changes in communication technology widened the
scope of rhetoric to cover different media and methods to affect people.
Within the new rhetoric, Chaïm Perelman (1996) processes the rhetoric of
antiquity and particularly the theory of argumentation. He and other rhetoric
scholars write about the logic and philosophy of argumentation in connection
to verbal language, but do not specify visual rhetoric or visual argumentation.
In recent studies, however, it is called visual rhetoric or persuasion when visual
images are used to shape people's attitudes or change their behaviour.
According to Anthony Blair (2004), in order to communicate arguments
visually, we need to attend particularly to the situation of the audience and

draw the viewers to participate with their own arguments and interpretations to the visual communication (Blair, 2004, p.59).

With regard to my research, the taxonomy of visual rhetoric exemplifies how visual language can be used for persuasion. Selecting and combining signs and images in an advertisement can visualize an argument. However, further research is required in order to understand the reception of visual rhetoric. Visual language using iconic signs is sometimes considered "universal", although it arouses manifold interpretations. Digital techniques, integration of media contents and the globalization of markets bring forth new challenges for designers. In addition to the artistic skills, he or she needs to understand the cultural modes of the audience. The taxonomy of visual rhetoric presented here could be a useful tool when designing or analyzing advertising messages. This research of outdoor advertising reveals one area of graphic design in an urban environment and aims to pave the way for further research topics in the field of visual communication design.

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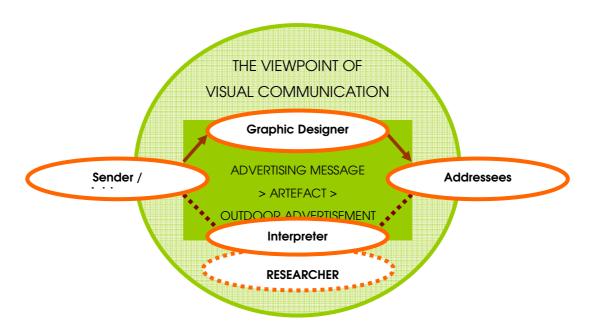
THE VIEWPOINT OF
VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Graphic Designer

ADVERTISING MESSAGE
> ARTEFACT >
OUTDOOR ADVERTISEMENT

Sender /

Addressees

Interpreter

RESEARCHER

FIGURE 1.

*An addresser sends a message to a group of addressees. He commissions the
work from a graphic designer, who converts the message into an outdoor
advertisement. The designer takes into consideration the intentions of the
addresser and the expectations of the addressees. In a public place the
artefact is seen by several passers-by, who interpret its meanings.*

*The viewpoint of visual communication design means that outdoor
advertisements are studied as graphic design artefacts in their actual
exhibition places. The primary function of an outdoor advertisement is to
communicate a certain message, but simultaneously it participates in building
the visual culture of its environment.*

POSTERS ON LAMPPOSTS 49 campaigns	POSTERS ON ADVERTISEMENT PILLARS 57 campaigns	POSTERS ON TRAM AND BUS STOPS 124 campaigns	POSTERS ON SIDES OF WASTEBASKETS 11 campaigns

1. MODES, SIGNS	2. SUB-MODES, TECHNIQUES	3. VISUAL ELEMENTS, SYNTAX	4. EXPRESSIONS	5. SUBJECTS ADVERTISED
IMAGE • ICONS • INDEXES • SYMBOLS **LANGUAGE**	**DRAWINGS** styles, techniques **COMPUTER GRAPHICS** digitally produced images, photomontages, collages **PHOTOGRAPHS** studio or reportage photos **TEXT** slogans, explanations, logotypes, names	**COLOURS** amount and type of colours **COMPOSITION** **LAYOUT** empty space, comparisons, juxtapositions **TOPIC** packages of products, brands, persons, animals, pictograms, landscapes **TYPOGRAPHY** fonts, weights, sizes, spacing, effects	**contrasts** harmony, attention, colour codes **symmetry** asymmetry, centred, use of grids, focal point **movement** horizontal, vertical, diagonal, **body language** mimic, gestures, poses, camera angle **rhythm** power, repetition	**products** clothes, cosmetics, electronics **food products** beverages sweets **services** banks, telephone operators, education **free-time activities** culture, entertainment, films, hobbies, travel agencies **society** ideological organizations, charity, nature protection, politics

Rating scale: ★ = A = attention; ★★= I = interest; ★★★= D = **desire**

FIGURE 2.

The graphic design of each campaign was analyzed and rated with one, two or three stars. The rating of campaigns is based on the hierarchical model of effectiveness of advertising, which is known also as the AIDA model. The acronym comes from the words: attention, interest, desire and action.
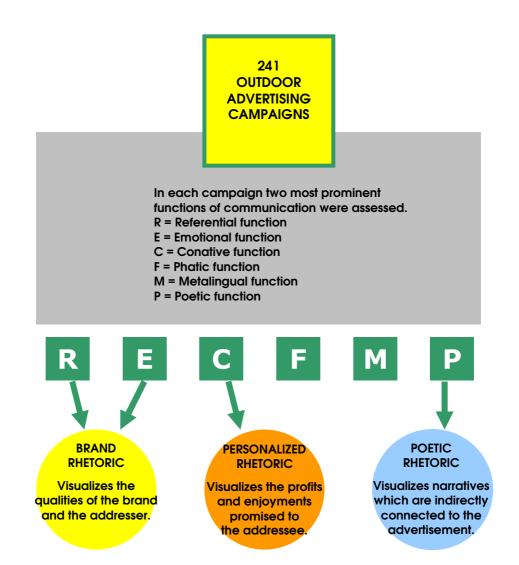
FIGURE 3.

Two most prominent functions of communication were assessed and coded in each campaign to find out what kind of visual language was used to announce the excellence of the subject advertised. The analysis showed that when the conative function was leading the visual communication, the outlook and visual syntax of the campaign appeared different than when the emotive or referential function were dominant. Similarly, when the poetic function led the communication, this differentiated an advertisement from others. The phatic and metalingual functions were in a subordinate position in many outdoor advertisements and increased their attention power.

Three different categories of visual communication emerged from the analysis. They are called brand rhetoric, personalized rhetoric and poetic rhetoric.