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Reframing Emotional Arguments in Ads in the Culture of Informal Logic

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines, in studies utilizing Gilbert’s Multi-Modal Argumentation Model, processing of emotional arguments in ads which, due to Western Society’s bias, has tended toward logical analysis, even though they are emotional arguments. It explores reframing the analysis in the culture of Informal Logic, with particular reference to issues of the alethic status of premises, the ethics of claims, the context of assumptions, and the question of what constitutes truth in the context of emotions.

KEYWORDS: argument, emotion, Gilbert, informal logic, logic, manifest rationality, multi-modal argumentation

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Aristotle and Plato, there has been a tendency to judge arguments by their logical structure, with some attention to truth of the premises but with the main focus on structure. This works well for arguments based on logic, but not for those based on emotion, which includes the arguments in most advertisements. This paper will examine some previous work that utilized Gilbert’s Multi-Modal Argumentation model to analyze ads, demonstrating how emotional arguments were evaluated using the structures of Formal Deductive Logic (FDL). It will show that emotional arguments can be better analyzed using the culture of Informal Logic, with particular reference to the alethic status of premises, the ethics of claims, the context of assumptions, and the question of what constitutes truth in the context of emotions.

When evaluating a logical argument, in reference to the traditional first figure syllogism whose symbolic expression is:

\[
\begin{align*}
All M & \text{ are } P. \\
All S & \text{ are } M. \\
Therefore, & \text{ all } S \text{ are } P.
\end{align*}
\]

we decide that this is a valid mood. If the premises are true, or at least generally accepted, we state that we have a sound argument whose conclusion is considered true, or generally...
accepted. Structure is important so that we can be clear about the reasons offered for and against the claims made, and so we can display the reasoning clearly (Fisher 1992). Many arguments are logical, and this structure works for them, but not all are and the structure of FDL does not work well for other kinds. Gilbert emphasized that in the Western hemisphere, we tend to see argument as synonymous with logic, as evidenced in phrases like, “I’m not going to argue with you if you can’t be logical.” In Gilbert (1994), he introduced his theory of Multi-Modal Argumentation, maintaining that while argumentation traditionally is associated with logic and reasoning (Balthorp 1980, O’Keefe 1982, Willard 1983 and 1989, Van Emeren and Grootendorst 1989), we also must consider three other modes: emotional, visceral, and kisceral or intuitive. Gilbert furthermore highlights the frequent erroneous perception that logical means right and emotional means wrong, and suggests, following Plato, that logic and emotion should never have been separated (Gilbert 1995).

It is rare to find an ad built entirely on logic, although most ads will have a logical structure. Given the purpose of advertising—attracting readers, there almost always will be emotion in an ad’s argument. In fact, most ads contain all four modes of argumentation, but each ad will usually be predominantly of one kind. My focus in this paper is on logical and emotional arguments in ads.

2. PREVIOUS WORK WITH GILBERT’S MODEL

In one of my earliest examples (Ripley 1998a) of how Gilbert’s Multi-Modal Argumentation model can be useful in analyzing arguments in advertisements, I began with the simplest example, an almost entirely logical business-to-business ad for Duo-Pro containment piping. The ad shows white pipe fittings against a blue background, with small bulleted paragraphs of print filling the lower two thirds of the page. All four forms of argumentation are present. The first paragraph evokes a hint of emotion with its greeting-card like claim that the piping is made for people “who care enough about quality, safety and reliability…” The pipes shown provide a physical argument for the smoothness and perfection of the product. With the colour blue, the colour of water, the ad makes a kisceral or intuitive argument for their affinity for water and hence for their suitability for the job. I rated the ad’s primary argument, however, as logical and fitting into a first figure triple A mood syllogism:

Pipes that meet safety standards are worth buying.
Duo Pro pipes meet safety standards.
Therefore, Duo Pro pipes are worth buying.

I looked briefly at other aspects of the ad’s argument. The ad speaks directly to the qualities of the product, as opposed to comparing it to something it is not, and it makes no claims that cannot be verified. I determined that we can most likely conclude that these pipes are worth buying. The analysis was made easier by the fact that the ad’s argument was mainly logical.
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It becomes more difficult with emotional arguments, largely because we have no strict rules about analyzing them. Too often, we end up analyzing emotional arguments with the structures of FDL, and the question arises whether it is right to do this. Indeed, Elkyam (2003) questioned whether it is fair to “analyze” emotional arguments at all, as he argued, with a silent visual presentation of pictures taken during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the incompetence of the American government’s handling of that disaster. Nevertheless, an example of analyzing the emotional argument in an ad using the structures of FDL, follows. It uses this ad for Artistic Tiles, published in the Sunday New York Times Magazine, March 2006. The full-page colour ad shows a sultry woman from the hips up, wearing only large gold hoop earrings and a bustier made of small gold mirrored tiles. She stands before a deep red velvet curtain, a light shining on her, breasts overflowing the top of the bustier. The copy to the right of her bustier reads, “Check out our overflowing selection of alluring styles.” On the bottom of the page is printed the name of the company and the phrase, “You Won’t Believe Our Body of Work.” I constructed this syllogism and wrote the following explanation:

All things that are alluring and overflowing are things that make an unbelievable body of work.
Artistic Tiles are things that are alluring and overflowing.
Artistic Tiles are things that make an unbelievable body of work.

Here we encounter words like alluring and find the outcome of assembling tiles in a construction project labelled, “an unbelievable body of work.” In both cases, the ad uses phrases that appeal more to emotion than reason. Something that is ‘alluring’ is more than just stylish; it touches us in a special way. An “unbelievable body of work” indicates more than just a project well done; it will be a part of our home to which we can feel deeply attached (Ripley 2008, p. 513).

Although I have discussed how emotion is encountered in the ad’s phraseology I am still validating the argument mainly by fitting it into a syllogism. My claim that this is an emotional argument rests on only a tenuous illative core.

Another ad I have used in applying Gilbert’s work (Ripley 1998b) is one for Jordache clothing at the May Company. In it we see a full-page picture of a man shaking his finger at a woman wearing a skimpy dress who is grasping his coat, thrusting her body toward him. There are no words in the ad but we can construct a syllogism for the logical argument we can find in it. The syllogism I constructed was:

All dresses that are pretty are good for attracting men.
Jordache dresses are pretty.
Therefore Jordache dresses are good for attracting men.

I used the principle of charity to which I always try to adhere, finding for the advertiser a first figure triple A mood syllogism with premises that are, if not true at least most likely acceptable. Unfortunately, this leads to a kind of circular reasoning in that, given that I am constructing the syllogisms and the advertiser has no say, it would be unfair if I were
to construct a syllogism which set up a bad argument. It also would be unfair if I were to write a syllogism that automatically had as its conclusion something negative about the company because the advertiser would never have that as its conclusion. An argument exemplifying both these faults might look like this:

- All women who wear skimpy dresses are asking for trouble.
- Men prefer women who are submissive.
- Therefore if you buy a Jordache dress you will be endangering yourself.

Hence in analyzing ads, I am usually working with syllogisms which, by the rules of their construction are valid and sound. To counter this problem, I then try to construct a syllogism that incorporates the hidden message I am trying to unearth, but without overemphasizing it, such as this:

- A dress that attracts powerful men is a good dress to buy
- Jordache dresses are dresses that attract powerful men
- Therefore Jordache dresses are good dresses to buy.

The premises will be true to some, not to others; decisions such as these are not made with a simple statement of fact. We will return to this issue of the truth of premises. The problem we need to confront first is that even when examining underlying unethical emotional aspects of an ad, we are still using the structure of the logical syllogism. If we looked only at a logical syllogism to analyze this ad, we would have to say it was acceptable. The premises appear at least acceptable, the structure is correct (All M are P, All S are M, therefore All S are P), and therefore we have a valid and sound argument. One might question, however, if I have done enough. Is it a fair argument? Is it a decent ad to put in a magazine that young impressionable girls will see? To answer questions like these, which flirt with asking, “Is it ethical?,” we need to look at the emotional arguments made by the ad. Faced with not much in methods for analyzing emotional arguments, I went on to argue limply about this ad that if we considered the argument in the emotional mode, we would “find emotions appealed to and expressed which will be offensive to anyone concerned about relations between men and women” (Ripley 1998a) and I therefore labelled it unethical. A critic could claim that is a rather sweeping condemnation of an ad, providing little argument from someone who is professing to be examining argument.

3. ANALYZING EMOTIONAL ARGUMENTS: GILBERT AND ASSUMPTIONS

The FDL model provides for this purpose little different from how we analyze a logical argument. Gilbert (e.g. 1995, 2004) indicates a path when he suggests we need to move to Informal Logic in order to find ways to analyze emotional arguments. I begin this move with some definitions and assumptions. I agree with Gilbert who contends that “there are emotional arguments (Gilbert 1995, p. 5) and that “the utilization of emotion in arguments […] is perfectly rational” (Gilbert 2004, p. 2). I accept his definition of argument as “a communicative interaction centred on a disagreement” (Gilbert 1995, p. 5). The concept of disagreement in an advertisement is between the advertiser who
believes the reader should buy the product and the reader who does not at first so believe. I accept Gilbert’s definition of emotional argument as “one in which the words used are less important than the feelings being expressed” (Gilbert 1995, p. 8), because in advertisements we are usually looking at covert messages as well as overt ones.

Gilbert identifies rules for emotional arguments as including “such factors as veracity, non-exaggeration, justification of evidence, avoidance of bias, consideration of alternatives, and so on” (Gilbert 2004, p. 16), in other words, the same kind of rules as used in Informal Logic.

4. INFORMAL LOGIC: DEFINITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

It will be in the field of Informal Logic that we find ways to analyze emotional advertisements that address some differences between logical and emotional arguments. Ralph Johnson, notable among scholars in the field of Informal Logic, says there has to be more than the illative core.

An argument is a type of discourse or text […] in which the arguer seeks to persuade the Other(s) of the truth of a thesis by producing the reasons that support it. In addition to this illative core, an argument possesses a dialectical tier in which the arguer discharges his dialectical obligations (Johnson 2000, p. 168).

What I have produced previously in analyzing arguments in ads have been, in Johnson’s terms, arguments with an illative core, but no dialectical tier. Johnson questions whether such are even arguments (Johnson 2000 p. 172). Before we examine the ad for Artistic Tiles and try to frame its arguments in the spirit of Informal Logic, we need to consider what constitutes a dialectical tier, what Johnson says exists as a place where we can deal with objections and criticisms.

An exchange is dialectical when, as a result of the intervention of the Other, one’s own logos (discourse, reasoning, or thinking) has the potential of being affected in some way (Johnson 2000, p. 161).

We tread on less certain ground when we intimate that an advertisement could be a dialectical argument. I first suggested this at the 2006 ISSA conference (Ripley 2006) and later in an article in Argumentation (Ripley 2008). The full argument for the existence of the dialectical tier in ads and how it unfolds is for another paper, but I note that in his discourse on objections and criticisms in his 2000 work, Johnson never says that handing them must be done in a particular way, such as verbally between two people. I also note that Johnson suggests that “it may be the case that the same individual plays the role of both arguer and critic” (Johnson 2000, p. 151). I assume there is at least enough of a dialectical argument in an ad, and particularly in the ad for Artistic Tile to enable us to use Johnson’s manifest rationality to analyze the arguments within it.\(^1\)

I ask the readers’ indulgence as I conjure up a vision of an adjustment in the ad’s argument (the advertising copy) resulting from an intelligent copywriter’s working

\(^1\) Note that in my use of a dialectical tier, I do not follow the narrower more stringent rules of pragma-dialectics as established by van Eemeren and Grootendorst.
through imagined objections and criticisms from his target market. Suppose his original copy, something he dreamed up at 3:00 a.m., read,

“Picture this set in your washroom.”

In the sober light of 10:00 a.m. in the office, the copywriter gives careful consideration to the feelings of women who make up a large part of the market that chooses decorative tiles. He pictures their reaction,

“Joe! How could you create such a sexist ad?”

In his mind he formulates a reply to them, something like,

“Would it be okay to keep her, with that beautiful bustier, if I were to use a less offensive tag line?”

Then, imagining his somewhat liberal-minded clientele agreeing, he changes the line to read,

“Check out our overflowing selection of alluring styles.”

He even pictures getting a chuckle out of some of his readers at the pun involved. All this also could be accomplished through consumer focus groups or other advertising advance testing to hear what customers think about proposed wording. I maintain that, although an ad can be monolectical, there is in most ads some level of dialectical exchange going on.

5. INFORMAL LOGIC AND EMOTIONAL ARGUMENTS: JOHNSON AND THE DIALECTICAL TIER

Johnson (2007, p. 208) claims that three things must be addressed in the dialectical tier: [D1] How well is the arguer able to deal with the standard objections and criticism? Taking the single line of copy, “Check out our overflowing selection of alluring styles” and its implied first premise, “All things that are alluring and overflowing are things that make an unbelievable body of work,” we can imagine further the copywriter figuring out in his mind the objections and criticisms he might hear from readers regarding that line, and how the ad itself will help deal with those objections and criticism by its very construction. Here, it might be:

Reader: “But that’s such a sexist image!”
Ad: as reader looks at it and it further makes it clear that this is meant to be humorous
Reader: “Oh, wait; I get it.”

There is always the risk, of course, that the reader will not look further, will just turn the page, but a good ad, with a well-constructed argument, will help avoid this.
[D2] How well does the argument address itself to alternative positions? Almost any ad is positioned to address itself to its competition. Here, use of phrases like, “Check out *our* selection” and “*our* body of work” (emphasis mine) hint that there are other selections, other bodies of work but that *ours* is best.

[D3] How well does the arguer deal with consequences/implications? This involves in Johnson’s words, “untenable consequences” or “unacceptable implications” (2000 p. 208. We saw above how a male copywriter who first constructed a line with an inappropriately sexist hoot worthy of a pre-1960s city construction site, thought through the consequences and changed his argument.

In this short paper, it is not possible to address all issues. There will be some examples from Informal Logic and particularly from manifest rationality where advertising cannot fit the mold. For example, regarding sufficiency, we ask on Johnson’s two dimensions:

Whether there is enough of the type of evidence that has been produced […] [and]
Whether the range of evidence is adequate (Johnson 2000, p. 204).

For both questions, the answer will be “no.” No ad purports to produce the kind of evidence that would hold up in a courtroom. In fact, it is quite the opposite, as advertising copywriters pride themselves on, and often win prizes for their succinct use of words.

6. TRUTH AND ASSUMPTIONS IN PREMISES

Johnson (2000, p. 149) says of truth: “preeminent among [the purposes of argument] is the function of persuading someone […] of the truth of something […]” He further states that a good argument must not only be rational, but must appear to be rational, and hence the title of his book, *Manifest Rationality*. This is perhaps even more important with the arguments and assumptions in ads because the advertiser only gets the one chance, as the reader sees (and the advertisers hopes reads) the ad for the first time. If the reader is turned off by what appears to be an irrational ad, or by assumptions clearly made by the advertiser that are out of line, the advertiser loses the chance to make the argument for the wisdom of purchasing the product. This is why it is necessary for the arguer to respond “even to criticisms known (or believed) to be misguided” (Johnson 2000, p. 164). It is why the copywriter must take care in reviewing assumptions behind the writing, why s/he must consider all potential objections and criticisms likely to be made against the ad, and respond by adjusting the content of the ad.

A major debate that runs through Johnson’s *Manifest Rationality* is whether premises must be true or can be just acceptable. We frequently hear the question of *truth* of premises in FDL, but it is in the discussion of Informal Logic that we find the debate extended to reach beyond the word *truth*. Johnson maintains that criticizing a premise as *not true* is dealing with the substance of the statement rather than of the logic. When analyzing emotions, it works well to agree with Johnson that “[t]ruth is neither necessary nor sufficient criterion for the goodness of the premises of an argument,” because it is difficult to tell when emotions are true. What makes an emotion *true*? Who decides when what one feels is *true*? This is especially the case with advertising. What is *truth* in the

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2 Unless the goal of the ad is to attract readers by its very appearance of irrationality, which some ads do.
feelings invoked by an ad? How much is an advertiser required to reveal of the truth about a product? How much is an advertiser allowed to exaggerate and still fall within the industry’s self-imposed standards? The ad for Artistic Tiles shows a woman wearing a bustier made of their tiles. Must we assume that people do wear these tiles in order to avoid calling the Better Business Bureau? Interestingly along these lines for analyzing advertisements, Johnson cites his work with Blair (1987) that “The premises need not be true in order for the argument to be a good one” (Johnson 2000, p. 196). We have only to think of ads based on false statistics but using them to make a good argument to understand their point.

As soon as we question truth, we are into questions of ethics. Ethics also arises with the question of Conflict of Interest, something Johnson would have us avoid in argument. In the ad for Artistic Tiles, I find no covert Conflict of Interest, but there often may be one in an ad, because the advertiser is never a disinterested party. It may occur when an advertiser hides a more sinister message beneath the overt one, as often occurs in marketing to youth (Ripley 1999).

Specific ethical questions arise. Johnson asks, “Is it rational on my part to expect the Other to be rationally moved by an assertion that I believe to be false?” (Johnson 2000, p. 193). We can ask, is it ethical to use such an assertion? Johnson addresses the issue of Character and how it relates to the product. If the advertiser uses a spokesperson for a product, can the reader rationally assume that person to be a customer who would use that product? The famous example of violation of this was the ads for pantyhose done in the 1970s by American football hero Joe Namath. In the case of Artistic Tiles, the advertiser is relying on the reader’s sense of humour to overcome any possible charge of lack of ethics. Obviously the tiles were not meant for wearing in the manner shown in the ad but no one is likely to charge Artistic Tiles with a breach of ethics.

The most difficult question is what constitutes truth in the context of emotions. It is difficult enough to describe even what is true about one’s own emotional feelings, much less those of others. It will be difficult to conjecture correctly the emotions of a projected potential buyer who will be reading the arguments one is making while hoping to capture that reader’s interest through emotions and convince the reader to buy one’s product. In advertising, however, one does not have to conjecture correctly the truth that every reader will feel when reading one’s ad. One has only to make a good enough approximation of what most readers in one’s target market will experience. That is what advertising copywriters are paid good money to do, and it is the purpose of advertising pre-testing.

8. CONCLUSION

Formal Deductive Logic provides a succinct and organized way to analyze arguments. When analyzing emotional arguments, however, we need more, and that additional substance is supplied by Informal Logic, especially by the approach taken in Ralph Johnson’s Manifest Rationality. The addition of a dialectical tier to the illative core of FDL provides the much-needed space in which to explore answers to questions that will help determine if we have fairly analyzed the emotional argument in an advertisement. I have only scratched the surface here of what Informal Logic and manifest rationality have to offer with respect to analyzing emotional arguments in advertisements. Future research
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should examine, among other issues, the wrongful separation of logic and emotion, and the concept of projected objections by the Other producing limitations and how the Other can help compensate for these in the context of the creation of advertisements.

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