

Visual Rhetoric and International Advertising

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Introduction

Theories of advertising rhetoric are concerned with *how* a message is delivered – its style – rather than the content of the message itself. In terms of modern advertising style, pictures dominate. Over the last hundred years, the number of pictures in ads has increased (Pollay, 1985), the number of complex pictures in ads has increased (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002), and picture-heavy ads have become more effective than copy-heavy ads (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008a). The dominance of pictures is especially notable in the international marketplace. As marketers focus on developing unified global brands, brand images are increasingly standardized across countries, leading to the use of similar advertising executions in different markets. To facilitate such standardization, advertisers have turned to pictures as their primary advertising communication tool because they are worried that verbal copy will not translate well across the language barriers between countries (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006). Nonetheless, although advertising pictures are of great importance in international advertising practice, theories of how such pictures work have not been prominent in international advertising scholarship.

Taylor (2005), in his treatise on moving international advertising research forward, identifies a pressing need for stronger theoretical models of the factors that impact advertisers' ability to effectively standardize advertising executions and to develop a unified global brand. To heed Taylor's (2005) call, this chapter first examines theories of visual rhetoric that have been developed to explain the use and effectiveness of pictures in advertising. These theories have been created and tested in North America and Western Europe for the most part. Therefore, we examine the issue of whether an international context will force a change in or require new explanations of consumer response to pictures in advertising. Next, we explore to what extent visual rhetorical

theories provide support for the idea that global advertisers will be able to reach cross-market segments in different countries using the same ad pictures. Finally, we conclude with implications of the work on rhetoric for unified global brands. Throughout the chapter, we offer ideas for future research to answer Taylor's call for improved international advertising theory based on empirical testing.

Theories of Visual Rhetoric

A rhetorical figure is an artful deviation from audience expectation that occurs at the level of style, not content, and is not judged as an error by the audience (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). For example, a Kingfisher toothpaste ad deviates from expectations by arranging the strands of a pearl necklace into curved rows that look like a smiling mouth. Ads containing rhetorical figures cannot be read literally; instead consumers have to use the ad's obvious strangeness to start thinking of figurative ways to understand the ad's message (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Scott, 1994a). The consumer encountering such an ad has to solve a little puzzle in the ad to make sense of it; 92% of the consumers asked about the Kingfisher ad said it meant that Kingfisher toothpaste would make one's teeth "pearly white" (Phillips, 1997). A majority of consumers agreed on the ad's message because consumers have experience with these types of visual puzzles in ads and, over time, have learned how to think figuratively in order to comprehend the ad.

Given that a visual figure provides an implicit set of messages that rely on the interpretation of consumers, different interpretations will be possible. Such ads are said to be "open" (Ketelaar, Van Gisbergen, Bosman, & Beentjes, 2008; Lagerwerf & Meijers, 2008) because they are open to different interpretations. Previous research into rhetorical advertising images suggests that consumers can converge on one strong meaning for the ad, called *strong implicature* (Phillips, 1997; Sperber & Wilson, 1986) – for example, "pearly white teeth." For other ads, several different meanings may be inferred, called *weak implicatures* because they are only weakly implied. Research has documented that 33% of respondents said that the Kingfisher ad meant this toothpaste was "for rich people" (Phillips, 1997). If consumers cannot complete any interpretation of the rhetorical figure in the ad, they will dislike it and stop trying to understand it (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). Openness, like many other properties of ad stimuli, has an upside-down U-shaped effect on consumer response: openness, and the corresponding multiple interpretations, is useful up to a point for an advertiser; but too much openness is baffling and leads to negative responses.

The cognitive effort expended in self-generating an inference from a visual figure improves accessibility of the inference in memory; in addition, if consumers are expending cognitive effort on forming inferences, they have fewer cognitive resources to expend counter-arguing the ad's claims, thus increasing acceptance of the ad's message (Kardes, 1993; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005). Much research has supported the idea that ads with rhetorical figures produce deeper elaboration than ads without such figures (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, & Franke, 2002; Toncar & Munch, 2001). This elaboration effect may be especially strong for visual

figures, which are open because they (a) are implicit pictures instead of explicit words and (b) contain figurative instead of straightforward messages. McQuarrie and Mick (2003) measured recall of print ads containing visual or verbal figures under normal, nondirected viewing conditions of everyday magazine reading. They found that visual rhetoric is better recalled than verbal rhetoric, suggesting that the deviation and openness in these ads spurs greater consumer elaboration. This finding is consistent with what Ketelaar *et al.* (2008) reported: They used eye-tracking measures to discover that open ads are not viewed for a longer period of time than more closed ads, but that open ads had longer fixation durations, indicating deeper levels of elaboration.

Deeper elaboration may lead to better comprehension of visual figures in ads. Morgan and Reichert (1999) measured consumers' comprehension of ads that contained visual or verbal metaphors. They found that consumers comprehended the advertisers' intended meanings more often for visual figures than for verbal figures. The authors speculate that verbal figures may be translated into a mental image by consumers during ad interpretation; with a visual figure, such translation has already been performed by the advertiser, simplifying the processing task and boosting comprehension. Further benefits for visual over verbal rhetorical figures were found by McQuarrie and Phillips (2005). They noted that consumers exposed to visual rhetorical figures spontaneously generated multiple inferences at the time of ad exposure, while consumers exposed to verbal rhetorical figures generated these inferences only on reflection when prompted. Thus, visual figures have pronounced advantages in the real world, where consumers are not likely to reflect deeply on most advertising. Visual figures can lead to deeper elaboration, spontaneous inference generation, and better comprehension than verbal figures.

Consumers expend cognitive effort on ad elaboration because they get a sense of pleasure from solving the puzzle in a rhetorical ad (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1994). Such pleasure in the rhetorical figure can lead to positive attitudes toward the ad and attitudes toward the brand. Visual figures are most pleasurable if they are perceived as apt – clever, appropriate, and insightful (Ward & Gaidis, 1990); in addition, ads that are more “open” to interpretation are liked more than closed ads (Lagerwerf & Meijers, 2008). Recent research indicates that if advertisers want to impact consumers' beliefs, it is best to opt for rhetorical figures that are artfully deviant – incongruous and novel (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009). The problem with apt, open, and deviant visual figures is that because they are new and unexpected, they are less likely to be comprehended as the advertiser intended than more closed or expected figures. The difficulty for advertisers who wish to employ visual rhetorical figures is to make them apt, open, and deviant enough to be pleasurable, while still ensuring comprehension. One way to resolve this trade-off between pleasure and comprehension is to anchor the visual figure with verbal copy (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002).

Words can anchor, or fix in place, the implicit meanings of complex images (Barthes, 1977). Verbal anchoring can make visual figures easier to comprehend because the explicit verbal cues provide a link to stored knowledge in memory and reduce the amount of elaboration required to complete the inference. Thus, verbal anchoring increases comprehension and increases pleasure in the visual figure and the ad.

However, too much verbal anchoring, when it is not needed to comprehend the figure, decreases pleasure in the figure and the ad, because consumers are not allowed to solve the rhetorical puzzle on their own (Phillips, 2000). In addition, verbal anchoring may decrease spontaneous inference generation, as the verbal copy "tells" consumers the main message of the ad (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005). These negative aspects of verbal anchoring may be why, over time, North American advertisers have included less and less verbal anchoring in their visual rhetorical ads (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002). We suggest that as consumers have become more and more able to read and comprehend visual figures through experience, less verbal anchoring should be needed.

Beyond these overarching effects of visual rhetoric, advertising scholars have devised typologies of visual rhetoric. Different types of rhetoric are thought to cause somewhat different consumer responses, enhancing or dampening the inherent outcomes of processing any rhetorical figure. Two of the more popular frameworks classify all advertising rhetoric in general (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996) and visual rhetoric in particular (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004), allowing scholars to examine differences in the effects of different types of visual figures such as visual metaphor on the one hand (Phillips, 2003) or personification on the other (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). Such classifications provide a strong framework for developing future research questions. Interested readers can develop still other research questions in the area of visual rhetoric from the many hypotheses proposed in the volume *Go Figure* (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008b).

Applying Visual Rhetoric Theory in an International Advertising Context

Because theories of visual rhetoric have been developed in a Western context, we do not know if they are applicable around the world to all global consumers. However, we can use recent research on both international advertising and rhetorical theory to speculate whether ads with visual rhetorical figures can be globally standardized. We know that consumers the world over, as humans, draw on their stored knowledge, memories, and experiences to create inferences about the meaning of ads containing visual rhetoric (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Such knowledge may include product, advertising, and cultural information (Phillips, 1997).

Consider a visual rhetorical ad for Dawn dishwashing liquid. The left-hand picture in the ad shows a kitchen sink with a competitor's dishwashing liquid, clean dishes, and a large stack of thick books such as *War and Peace* and the *Annotated Shakespeare* open on the kitchen window sill. The right-hand picture shows the same kitchen sink, the same clean dishes, and Dawn dishwashing liquid. In the right-hand picture, the books are gone. The ad's copy reads, "Spending too much time doing the dishes? Get Dawn and get done."

Consumers rely on knowledge of typical product attributes and benefits to provide information about which inferences are relevant to a product category and thus help

to comprehend the ad. Therefore, to understand the Dawn ad, consumers are required to understand that doing dishes is an unpleasant and boring task that most individuals want to complete quickly; dishwashing liquid that takes the grease from dishes shortens the chore. Interpretation is based on knowledge of dishwashing liquid and its benefits; consumers who rely solely on servants or automatic dishwashers to clean may not comprehend the ad.

Advertising knowledge may enable consumers to understand the genre and expectations of specific ad styles (Scott, 1994a); for example, consumers know that ads are meant to persuade, so they tend to look for positive, rather than negative meanings in ads (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). Consumers in a Western context, who read from left to right, quickly comprehend the Dawn ad as a "before and after" type of picture, and they search for the differences between the two images. Advertising knowledge comes from experience; Millan and Mittal (2010) discovered such experience was lacking for consumers in the Czech Republic, which has had free market advertising only since 1989. Although they uncovered a wide range of attitudes toward advertising in the Czech Republic, from severe criticism to enthusiastic acceptance, they also found that consumers lacked a cognitive framework regarding advertising knowledge, which led to processing difficulties when ads contained complex messages (Millan & Mittal, 2010).

Finally, cultural knowledge enables consumers to comprehend the meanings of symbols and cultural sayings, such as "pearly white teeth" from the Kingfisher toothpaste ad. The Dawn ad, although seemingly simple, also relies on much cultural knowledge. First, consumers have to understand the deviation in the ad image – one usually does not read books while cleaning the dishes. It is this deviation that leads to the "before and after" figurative interpretation of the ad. Second, consumers have to understand that volumes like *War and Peace* and the complete works of Shakespeare are extremely lengthy books that take a long time to read. Third, consumers have to be familiar with the practice, common in the developed world, of passing "dead time" by means of reading. Likewise, consumers have to understand the cultural ideal that time is a valuable resource that should not be wasted on household chores; if any of these concepts is not fully comprehended, the ad's puzzle may not be solved. McQuarrie and Mick (1999) found that non-Western participants in their research study (international students attending an American university) did not have the cultural knowledge to resolve the deviance in visual rhetorical ads, which led to negative attitudes toward these ads. Difficulty in comprehending the cultural meanings of ads has sometimes led marketers to remove figures from ads destined for non-Western countries (Smith, 2006), leaving the ad with the same message (e.g., "cuts grease fast") but without the persuasive benefits that rhetorical figures elicit.

Advertising research is needed to better understand the cross-cultural factors that impact consumer response to visual rhetoric. International advertising researchers often use Hofstede's five distinguishing cultural dimensions to compare advertising between countries. De Mooij and Hofstede (2010) provide a summary of these five dimensions, and discuss their continued usefulness to advertising scholarship. Based on the few preliminary studies we could find, two of the five dimensions seem particularly relevant to theories of visual rhetoric: (a) individualism/collectivism, and (b) uncertainty avoidance. According to de Mooij and Hofstede (2010), countries

high in individualism feel individuals are responsible for looking after only themselves and their immediate families; countries high in collectivism value when individuals belong to in-groups that look after them in return for group loyalty. Countries high in collectivism also are called "high-context" cultures, because they assume a great deal of shared knowledge and prefer less direct and more implicit communication. Zhou, Zhou, and Xue (2005) compared television ads in China, a collectivist and high-context culture, with commercials in the United States, an individualist and low-context culture. They found that Chinese ads had more open visual storylines, had more indirect visual comparisons, and showed the brand later than American ads. Thus, the cultural dimension of collectivism impacted the type of visuals used in advertising.

Research Question 1: Do cultures high in collectivism respond more favorably to ads that contain visual rhetorical figures because they prefer indirect and implicit communications?

The cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance is defined as the extent to which individuals feel threatened by uncertainty and try to avoid ambiguous situations (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Research has identified Poland as a country with high uncertainty avoidance; Lepkowska-White, Brashear, and Weinberger (2003) suggest that such uncertainty avoidance leads to skepticism of fanciful or non-utilitarian advertising by Polish consumers. Thus, it is conceivable that individuals in high uncertainty avoidance cultures may not receive pleasure from solving the puzzle in a visual rhetorical ad, but may prefer more closed advertising messages.

Research Question 2: Do cultures high in uncertainty avoidance respond less favorably to ads that contain visual rhetorical figures because they prefer less ambiguous communications?

Beyond Hofstede's (2010) cultural factors, another key impact on the pictures that appear in advertising is a country's regulatory environment, and the strict or lax enforcement of those regulations. Such regulations dictate what is appropriate to be shown in advertising pictures, and how it is allowed to be shown. In the only study in this area, Venger and Wolberg (2008) examined tobacco ads in the Ukraine and the United States. They demonstrated that the images in ads are affected by different regulatory environments across countries. With regard to visual rhetorical figures, one might expect that countries with strict, well-enforced advertising rules may discourage visual rhetoric advertising in favor of factual, utilitarian advertising. However, the opposite may be true instead, as strict regulations may force advertisers to focus on pictures that imply certain messages instead of stating them outright (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002).

Research Question 3: On which dimensions does the regulatory environment systematically influence the use of visual rhetoric in advertising?

Advertising scholars have often relied on content analysis as a tool to compare the ads from different countries; such analysis is certainly appropriate to answer the above research questions. However, Zhou *et al.* (2005) caution that content analysis must go beyond simple counts of elements to a more holistic understanding of the ad's message. For example, Zhou *et al.* (2005) indicate that Chinese ads do not show more groups than individuals in ads compared to the United States, even though China is a much more collectivist culture. However, Chinese ads show individuals *fitting into* groups, while American ads show individuals *standing out* from groups; that is the underlying difference. Thus, a superficial application of content analysis to easily countable visual features may not produce insights in cross-cultural comparisons.

Similarly, Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006) suggest that advertisers often miss connecting with the values of a culture: advertisers change the visual image of an ad to be more aligned with the culture in terms of color meanings or modesty, but do not change the underlying symbolic norms and values of an ad. For example, the Dawn dishwashing ad can be modified to include long books written in another language, but cannot be modified to be relevant for a culture that values dishwashing as a sign of service and caring for one's family. We suggest that content analysis comparisons of visual ad styles across countries be paired with reader-response studies (Scott, 1994b) to determine the strong and weak implicatures identified by consumers immersed in their own cultural values. Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2006) found large differences in the interpretations of three open ads based on home culture.

Cross-Market Segments and Polysemy

The research questions posed above suggest *differences* between cultures that may impact the successful global use of visual rhetoric in advertising. In contrast, the copywriters and art directors responsible for the visual rhetorical ads examined in Phillips (1997) stated that visual rhetoric worked well across different countries because the ads were targeting a *similar* type of consumer in each country – knowledgeable target consumers who were young, intelligent, and who find visual rhetoric enjoyable. Koslow and Costley (2010) suggest that international advertising researchers are focusing too much on national differences and not enough on the heterogeneity within countries. They suggest that each country holds a mosaic of groups, some of which may be the same across cultures. Zhang and Shavitt (2003) concur; they examined youth aged 18 to 35 in China who were educated and lived in cities. They describe these youth as cosmopolitan in nature, with extensive exposure to mass-media advertising. They suggest that China is not a single market with shared values, but that Chinese youth value modernity and individualism, as do youth in other less collectivistic cultures. Thus, age may be a key factor in cross-market segmentation.

Recently, Zhang (2010) reported that even older Chinese consumers prefer appeals to individualism (instead of collectivism) for personal-use products, suggesting that product category may be another factor in cross-market segmentation. An example of a product category that might speak to the same type of consumer in each country is

high-end, luxury fashion products, such as designer clothing, shoes, and handbags. We (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011) reported that one third of all fashion ads in women's fashion magazines were open in a particular respect that we labeled as "grotesque" (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). These ads are unusual, unexpected, and even bizarre. Consider a Dolce & Gabbana fashion ad in *Vogue* magazine; two beautiful models are used to sell an expensive handbag. That is conventional and expected. However, the models are dressed in French period costumes and one is stabbing the other; the grotesque image renders the ad open to interpretation and conjecture. Recent research (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010) identifies systematic differences in ways that women who love fashion brands and purchase designer clothing engage with grotesque ads. Although our interviews were conducted in a North American context, similar grotesque fashion ads exist in different countries. For example, a Japanese fashion ad shows a beautiful model "throwing up" shoes and handbags. Consequently, high-end open fashion ads may speak to fashionista women, regardless of the country in which they live, suggesting product category may be an important determinant of success in cross-market segmentation.

Finally, need for cognition has been identified as a variable that might help identify cross-market segments, especially with respect to the types of pictures used in advertising. Need for cognition (NFC) is a personality trait related to motivation to process information. Those with a high NFC have an inherent tendency to engage in elaboration and enjoy solving complex problems (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Martin, Lang, and Wong (2003/4) report that individuals high in NFC provide more favorable evaluations of ads that offer implicit over explicit conclusions; this positive attitude toward the ad leads to more positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Although Martin *et al.* (2003/4) examined verbal conclusions, it is possible that these findings apply to visual rhetorical ads as well, which elicit only implicit and self-generated conclusions. This is good news for international researchers, as Polyorat and Alden (2005) demonstrated that NFC influenced a consumer's response to comparison ads similarly regardless if the consumer was located in Thailand or the United States. Thus, NFC could be another key factor in cross-market segmentation with regard to the use of visual rhetorical figures.

Research Question 4: Are there cross-market consumer segments who respond to visual rhetorical advertising in the same way? Are these segments similar in terms of demographic factors, product use, or need for cognition?

Some researchers contend that cross-market segments do not need to be identified at all in order to use the same open advertisement across cultures. Tanaka (1994) states that advertisers can use rhetoric with multiple weak implicatures to appeal to a heterogeneous audience; each consumer can interpret the figure to suit him- or herself. This deliberate use of open messages with many different meanings is called purposeful polysemy. Several researchers suggest that it is possible to craft a message that is strategically ambiguous so that it can speak to different audiences about their different concerns, even across countries and cultures (Kates & Goh, 2003; Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson, 2010). However, this proposition has not been tested, and

examples are scarce. Given the differences in product, advertising, and cultural knowledge between countries, it would take clever manipulation of visual symbols to achieve purposeful polysemy across cultures. However, such cleverness and creativity is precisely what is expected of advertising agencies across diverse contexts.

Research Question 5: Is it possible to create a visual rhetorical ad that is purposefully polysemic – open enough to use in different cultures but that still provides a positive, intended outcome for the brand?

Unified Global Brand Identity through Visual Rhetoric

Advertisers attempt to elicit an immediate, positive result to each specific ad execution, but advertisers' ultimate goal is to build a long-term, positive identity for their brands over time. A brand's identity is said to be the unique set of associations that an organization aspires to create and maintain; these associations are the essential characteristics and attributes of the brand. In the modern marketplace, brands communicate primarily through images (Salzer-Morling & Strannegard, 2004) and the visual has surpassed the verbal in the conveyance of brand meaning. Unfortunately, advertising scholars know very little about how visual images convey brand associations and meanings. When research has been conducted on visual images in brand identity, several elements are typically studied, including the brand typeface, logo, color, and package shape. These elements usually have been studied in isolation from each other, although researchers admit that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a single visual element and particular outcomes (Brakus, Schmidt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Prior studies also have had a narrow focus on effects such as arousal, priming, congruity, or other unconscious outcomes. This focus on lower-order effects limits our understanding of higher-order outcomes such as brand identity, brand personality, and brand equity. Consider once again the visual rhetorical ads described in this chapter; a focus on the color, logo, or font style of these ads misses the big picture in terms of consumer response to the ad, and ultimately, to the brand.

There is evidence to suggest that the rhetorical style of pictures in an ad influences the brand's identity beyond attitude toward the immediate ad execution. For example, Dahlén (2005) showed consumers visual rhetoric in novel but relevant media – for example, ads for cup-of-soup on steaming man-hole covers and ads for insurance companies on egg cartons. The brands sponsoring such deviant executions were judged to be more interesting and creative than brands that used regular media advertising with the same messages (e.g., “hot and ready-to-go,” and “protective”). However, in later work, Dahlén (2009) noted that the effects of such visually deviant advertising depend on the prior reputation of the brand in the consumer's country; similarly, Kim, Han, and Yoon (2010) reported that what is considered “creative” advertising differs by country. Consequently, differences in culture may impact whether or not visually deviant ads achieve positive brand identity effects.

Visual rhetoric also may engender negative brand identity effects. In a study of visual and verbal metaphors, Ang and Lim (2006) noted that artfully deviant ads lead

to consumer perceptions of the brand as more sophisticated and exciting. However, these same ads also lead to perceptions that the brand is less sincere and competent. This finding again suggests that the outcomes of visual rhetoric for brand identity may be influenced by the cultural values of consumers: that is, are consumers seeking sophistication, sincerity, or something else?

Finally, there is evidence that consumers are much more expert at decoding brand identity for visually open ads than scholarly research can yet explain. During the fashion ad interviews we conducted (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010), women discussed their responses to the Dolce & Gabbana "stabbing" ad by referencing the brand's visual identity:

I understand their concept, Dolce & Gabbana. I understand their style of ads. But I don't love it. The stabbing. But it is their style; it's not shocking. I know how their style is.

These responses are intriguing, as Dolce & Gabbana does not always use ads with murderous historical figures. For example, a previous Dolce & Gabbana campaign portrayed women with large hats lying in hay. Although these ads are quite different, the fashionista women in our research studies perceived that they shared the same visual brand identity, perhaps because of their rhetorical openness, or purposeful polysemy. The scholarship on brand management has virtually ignored such visual aspects of brands. These Dolce & Gabbana ads indicate that advertising researchers need better frameworks and tools if understanding of visual brand identity, both within and between cultures, is to advance.

Research Question 6: How do consumers identify, comprehend, and process visual brand identity? Do systematic differences exist across cultures?

Summary and Conclusion

The ability to interpret figurative speech would appear to be a human universal (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Whether the ability to read a two-dimensional pictorial representation as a figure and interpret it as expected is likewise universal, is rather less clear (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Scott, 1994a). In any case, it is clear that to interpret any particular figurative picture requires a great deal of cultural knowledge, knowledge which may not be present among consumers who are culturally distant from the ad creator. When that cultural knowledge is present, rhetorically crafted ad pictures can be powerfully effective. The result is that advertisers have to consider the possibility that ad pictures, particularly open and rhetorical pictures, can solve knotty problems in cross-cultural brand messaging; but advertisers can never be confident that any particular pictorial solution will be as broadly effective as hoped. Hence, further research on how commercially crafted pictures are used and interpreted across cultural boundaries is imperative. In this chapter, we provide some guidelines and specific directions for future research in this area.