Contemporary scholars of rhetoric note that all language seeks to persuade—even when it appears on the surface to seek only to inform. (DerKatch and Segal, “Realms of Rhetoric in Health and Medicine,” 138)

In contemporary capitalism [the] production of culture involves large-scale, systematic relations of the creation of image, significance, sensuousness, and tactility, with many actors involved. (Goggins, Cell Phone Culture, 41)

EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC—THE RHETORIC OF “PRAISE AND BLAME”—grounds itself in a culture’s mainstream values. People or things (in this study, lifestyles and products) that purport to demonstrate or embody currently favored values are praised and thus reinforced in epideictic rhetoric, and those out of favor and perceived as nonmainstream in common culture are criticized. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, who brought attention to epideictic rhetoric’s function in many genres in the twentieth century (it is not just for funeral oratory anymore), identify epideictic’s strongly ideological function as strengthening the “intensity of adherence to values held in common by the audience of the speaker” (52). Because those values are implicit—“undisputed though not formulated” (52)—Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note that in epideictic discourse “the speaker readily converts into universal values, if not eternal truths, that which has acquired a certain standing through social unanimity” (Perelman and...
Olbrechts-Tyteca 51). In contemporary capitalism, advertisers play a significant role as epideictic rhetors, promulgating “discourses that socially and culturally construct a world . . . that promote a normative vision of our world and our relationships . . . that reflect the logic of capital . . . [and that] construct socially necessary illusions . . .” (Goldman and Papson 95, 96). It is these values advanced in popular culture—and their window onto a way of life accepted without analysis—that critical pedagogical work with visual images can uncover. This article reports on a classroom study that analyzes print ads for pharmaceuticals and technology products as examples of epideictic rhetoric that encourage us to forget we are looking at advertising by presenting messages that accord with commonly accepted cultural values. Furthermore, the effect of the ads’ epideictic rhetoric is intensified by the high degree of identification people demonstrate for magazines in which ads of this nature appear.

Why is such attention important in the twenty-first century? There are two primary reasons: one technological, and one cultural and political. The first reason for the importance of critical pedagogical attention to the epideictic role of advertising lies in what Giroux calls the “sea change” in the ways in which information comes to us: “audio, visual, and electronically mediated forms of knowledge [have] prompt[ed] a radical shift in the . . . ways in which knowledge is produced, received, and consumed” (Giroux 45, 51). Because of this, we need a broader approach to pedagogy, one that conceives and enacts “pedagogy as a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices that seek to engage the processes through which people understand themselves . . . expanding the possibilities for democratic life” (Giroux 52, emphasis added). Visual texts are potent cultural texts precisely because they are received and interpreted by the uncritical popular media consumer as unmediated views of reality (Hill; Mitchell): they function so powerfully because of this “veil of familiarity and self-evidence” through which we view them (Mitchell 166). Therefore, helping “students . . . learn the ‘distanced’ process of how to critique the saturated visual and technological landscape that surrounds them as something structured and written in a set of deliberate rhetorical moves” (Hocks 645, emphasis added) becomes central to our work as critical rhetorical educators in the twenty-first century.

The second reason for undertaking critical pedagogical work with advertising texts lies in scholars’ warning about the inherent tension
between the ubiquitous corporate-driven media and a democratic imperative that individuals intellectually and behaviorally separate consumerism and citizenship (e.g., Gandy; Herman and Chomsky; Kilbourne; McChesney and Miller; Miller; Schor). Miller refers to the “inordinate influence of commercial logic and the commercial imperative overall” on democracy, the effects of which Schor describes more explicitly: “In today’s world, public goods and collective consumption, public engagement and civic participation, all increasingly cede place to more self-centered and irresponsible forms of consumer behavior” (qtd. in Soron).

Advertising and Ideology: Rhetorical Representation of a Common Culture

One tremendously influential source of the visual in our culture is advertising, characterized by cultural theorists as the primary storyteller in American culture—so influential and ubiquitous as to “constitute a world constantly experienced as real” (Williamson 11). Cultural theorists elevate advertising to one of the most influential ideological forms in contemporary capitalist societies, saying that its power is precisely that it “creates structures of meaning,” a “common culture” (Williamson 12, 13, emphasis added). However, advertising may be easily overlooked or de-emphasized as ideological text; indeed, advertisers themselves insist they are educating and empowering us (an interesting if not surprising co-optation of those terms to a discourse more accurately seen as pure, profit-driven persuasion)—simply providing us information to help us make informed choices. However, relative to advertising, common sense tells us that when the primary message being delivered consists of (1) a brand name, (2) a reason to use the product, and (3) a favorable impression of the product, we are not getting education, but persuasion (Rados), regardless of how difficult it may be to detect that persuasion through the “veil of familiarity.”

Advertising for technology and pharmaceuticals taps into a very strong cultural narrative promoting a particular version of a better life based on progress, convenience, efficiency, and more often in technology ads, what we might call the “cool factor”—something that is desirable because it is new and fashionable. Culture-and-technology scholars Slack and Wise call our desire for the “cool” and the “neat” our
culture's new “mini-sublime,” due to the “almost religious-like reverence paid to [these developments]” (Culture and Technology 17) and because the things themselves have come to mean progress, thus conflating a means with an end (12–13). Slack and Wise say that this conflation has come about because it is easier to count tangibles (amount of material items owned by a household) rather than the “qualitative moral dimensions of progress,” which have traditionally included happiness, harmony, and spirituality (11)—attributes that might more traditionally be the focus of epideictic rhetoric. For instance, our culture places a very high premium on convenience variously defined, as this article will describe, but almost always having to do with the “wish to leave body, time, and place behind” (Brook and Boal ix; Slack and Wise, “Cultural Studies and Technology” Tierney). Lawrence Rubin describes this phenomenon in “Merchandising Madness”: the commodification of common experiences to create a market based on “discomforts” that can be “equally and efficiently remedied through mass-produced products” (369).

For these reasons—e.g., ads as ideological texts; the promotion of simplistic and unquestioned cultural values like coolness, convenience, and comfort behind a façade of supposedly objective, educational information—scholars in consumer and medical research emphasize the importance of taking advertising’s inherent rhetorical nature seriously. Proceeding from this groundwork that asserts ads are ideology that reinforce common values through epideictic rhetoric, but that our engagement of advertising images in general is arhetorical and noncritical (Scott 252), the questions that guided this study of the rhetoric of print advertising for pharmaceutical and technological products are these:

- What are the specific culturally embedded and approved values associated with pharmaceutical and technological products in print advertising?
- What role does epideictic rhetoric play in the conferring and celebration of these values relative to these products?
- How, based on the first and second questions, do viewers perceive these ads: as persuasive or as objectively informative messages? (Using the terminology of this study, adapted from that used by advertisers of these kinds of products, as “promotional” or as “educational and empowering.”)
Epideictic Rhetoric in Advertising: Reinforcing Preferred Social Meanings

This study’s premise is that ads for pharmaceutical and technological products not only hail us differently than do other ads, but we approach these ads with a different degree of receptivity. We are not, after all, buying paper towels or breath mints; we are considering buying iPods, cell phones, laptops, allergy medicine, and Viagra. Therefore, we expect, albeit naively, what David Russell has called “transparent recording” of objective information and are blinded to the important presence of “visible rhetoric” that is making use of popularly accepted and celebrated values to sell products (10). This expectation of a transparent recording arises not only from the nature of the products themselves—products that very directly and potentially profoundly affect our daily lives in terms of our work, health, communication, and information-accessing capability—but also from the rhetorical stance assumed by the marketers themselves: we expect to receive objective information, to be educated, to be empowered. Indeed, this is the direct claim, made in material promoting and defending DTC (direct-to-consumer) pharmaceutical advertising (e.g., Avorn; Huang; Wilkes, Bell, and Kravitz). When asked why we so willingly attribute this altruistic motive to promoters of pharmaceutical and technology products, one of my students suggested that it is because these products are “science-related.” Their association with “science” seems to suggest not only are representations of the products and their benefits inherently objective, but that, following the familiar “progress narrative” of science and technology heavily subscribed to by our culture, these products are created and marketed for no reason other than to improve our lives.

How do these ads make the rhetorical move from advertising/promotion to presenting themselves, and being accepted by consumers as, educational messages, interested primarily in empowering the consumer and not in selling a particular product? Advertising works by seeming to “invite us ‘freely’ to create ourselves in accordance with the way in which they have already created us” (Williamson 42). As my study’s data reveal, print ads for these products accomplish this rather remarkable move by using epideictic rhetoric to position medical and technological products in relation to shared values, values that are surprisingly similar for these two different types of products. Thus one can, in the world of medical and technology advertising, theoretically
receive an identical culturally praiseworthy value from an Ortho Nova birth control patch, a cordless mouse, an iPod, and a drug for genital herpes!

An important compounding factor in these ads’ effectiveness is the influence of people’s intense identification with the magazines they read regularly. In this relationship, the forces of trust, identity, and authority form such a strong nexus that the advertising placed within the pages of a familiar and regularly read magazine receives little critical processing and is in fact generally presented and perceived as a seamless extension of the magazine’s editorial content. Because the audience of any given magazine can be presumed to share interests and values, however general or specific depending on the type of magazine and its readership demographic, epideictic rhetoric can flourish in this medium in the manner described by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca: through a “sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience . . .” (51).

The force of the epideictic rhetoric of the magazine itself (its praise and blame of values held in common by its audience and presented as education rather than persuasion) must be reckoned with. Mediarmark Research Inc. tells us that 85% of adults eighteen and older read magazines, over 80% of households buy one or more magazines a year (The Magazine Handbook 13), and there exists a “high level of trust among committed magazine readers toward their chosen media” (Singer qtd. in Terazono 4). Indeed, in language that seems to describe a committed relationship between human partners, The Magazine Handbook tells us that “[r]eading a magazine is an intimate, involving experience that fulfills the personal needs and reflects the values of the reader. . . . A magazine is a friend, a tangible and enduring companion . . .” (5, emphasis added). Readers’ comments about what they get from reading such a magazine reflect this relationship analogy as well as epideictic rhetoric’s ideological function to reinforce certain favored values: the magazine is seen as a trusted source of information, a teacher. Included in reader responses are, “It makes me smarter,” “I learn things there,” “I trust it,” “I look at the magazine as something educational. I am gaining something,” “It is important to remember later what I have read in this magazine,” and “It updates me on things I try to keep up with” (39–40).

Advertisers obviously want to take advantage of these ready-made, shared values/identities among readers of a magazine, combined with
readers’ trust in both its editorial and advertising pages. On its list of “Top Ten Reasons to Advertise in Magazines,” The Magazine Handbook notes that magazines “enhance advertising impact [and] . . . supply credibility” (19). Stating outright that “consumers trust and believe magazine advertising more than advertising in other media” (19, emphasis added), advertisers are eager to take advantage of this medium and its powerful ability to blur promotion with education. The Magazine Handbook refers unabashedly to this blurring in what it calls the “consumer connection sweet spot,” indicating that advertisers and magazine publishers are adept at creating seemingly natural integrations between a magazine’s editorial content and its advertising. Since advertising pages account for nearly 48% of most magazines’ content, and editorial pages for 52%, it is no surprise that magazine editors work to be sure that both types of content “contribute to the reader experience” (Magazine Handbook 9), an experience demonstrated most tangibly when those readers go out and purchase products they saw advertised in the pages of their magazine and the advertisers therefore purchase space again in the next issue.

Description of the Study

This study asked university students to examine print ads for pharmaceutical and technological products in two popular and very widely read magazines to discover how visual and verbal techniques are used as epideictic rhetoric, and the resulting extent to which these techniques blur the line between education and promotion in this material. My position in the study is the critical literacy researcher, one who uses the “lenses and methods that help illuminate the production and distribution of ideology as it works to naturalize the interests of certain groups and not others” (Selber 82). The study took place in Popular Culture Analysis, a class offered in my English Department. Very popular with a wide range of majors from across campus, the course’s objective is “[a]nalysis of how information and entertainment forms persuade and manipulate audiences . . . [with s]pecial attention to verbal and visual devices” (ISU Course Catalog 207). The class allows students the opportunity to examine a range of “texts” from American culture by studying how these texts function and what they can tell us about our lives, our culture, and the forces that shape our experiences.
Students are challenged to think about how popular culture (e.g., television, film, advertising, music) is constructed and constructs us; to identify cultural narratives and their attendant values in popular culture; and to examine how race, class, gender, and other identities are expressed as cultural narratives and appear in popular culture.

In the fall semester of 2005, twenty-nine students were enrolled in the class, comprising a mix of undergraduate levels and majors; two-thirds of the class were juniors and seniors (three were first-year students, five were sophomores, nine were juniors, and eleven were seniors). The most heavily represented major was animal ecology with ten students (taking the class to fulfill a requirement for an advanced writing class). The remaining eighteen students represented advertising, finance, journalism, meteorology, philosophy, political science, pre-med, speech communication, and technical communication. Required texts for the course were Lardner and Lundberg's *Exchanges: Reading and Writing about Consumer Culture*, Maasik and Solomon's *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, as well as pieces from Richard Robbins' *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*. The course plan also included the viewing of several videos, the most relevant for this study being The Media Education Foundation's videos *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (with Robert McChesney and Mark Crispin Miller) and *Representation and the Media* (with Stuart Hall), as well as the PBS Frontline documentaries *The Persuaders* and *Merchants of Cool*.

**Two Magazines: *Parade* and *USA Weekend***

To carry out this study, I selected two magazines that have an extremely broad audience, large circulation, and which always carry ads for technology and pharmaceuticals: *Parade* and *USA Weekend*. A main reason for analyzing very general-audience magazines was to level out features of the advertising that might be highly audience-specific (a Canon camera ad in *National Geographic* or a cosmetics ad in *Glamour*, for instance). I wanted students’ perceptions of how advertisers of medical and technological products rely on epideictic rhetoric, blurring the boundary between education and persuasion, when they appeal to a general audience—an audience constructed as the most mainstream possible in contemporary American society. I collected a complete set of both weekly magazines for one full year: April 2005 to April 2006.
At the time of this study, fall 2005, students had approximately eight months of this set to choose from (April through November 2005); the issues of Parade and USA Weekend published since the study ended (December 2005—April 2006) show no meaningful differences in the visual and verbal rhetorical features of the pharmaceutical and technological ads from the ones my students used in the study.

That these two magazines are very broad in their projected readership is reflected in my students’ attempts to describe an audience for either Parade or USA Today. Although they tended to settle on middle-class families as the target audience, many students felt the audience might be more heavily women than men and that these women might be as young as in their twenties, given the emphasis on health, beauty, and celebrity news. On the other hand, some students believed the magazines targeted an older audience, given the number and type of medical ads in the magazines. Indeed, these two magazines are hard to pin down demographically, and that seems to be not only their raison d’être, but their strong appeal to advertisers. Parade and USA Weekend reach a massive, and massively diverse, audience every single week, an audience whose single common characteristic is that they have disposable income and are inclined to spend it in pursuit of the values that are identified as mainstream American. Each magazine talks about this goal directly in their online promotional material in language that also reflects their self-assigned role as companion and educator. For instance, in 2006, when this study was conducted, Parade says that it:

\[
\text{. . . bring[s] affluent consumers and quality brands together. . . .}
\]

Parade is more than a magazine. It is a weekly conversation about the ideals that bind us together as a nation: freedom, opportunity and the ability to fulfill our dreams and transform our lives. In the areas that matter to our readers—health, technology, food, lifestyle, politics and entertainment—Parade’s world-renowned contributors provide expert advice and insight.

(http://mediakit.parade.com/homepage.html, emphasis added)

In 2006, for the benefit of prospective advertisers, Parade trumpets its circulation as “unparalleled,” stating that it “reaches 36 million households each week through more than 340 of the nation’s leading newspapers”; its effective delivery date (“delivered on Sunday . . . primetime for reaching consumers in-home, where they are receptive and making purchasing decisions for themselves, their families and their homes”);
and its “involved, passionate and responsive [readers]—88% have taken action based on reading Parade” (http://mediakit.parade.com/homepage.html).

In 2011, Parade still claims to be “America’s most widely read magazine,” with a circulation of 69 million readers and “590 of the nation’s finest newspapers.” Its readers are, again, described as “educated and affluent,” and the magazine’s strength, for advertisers and readers, is that it “emotionally connects” with its readers (http://mediakit.parade.com/parade/aboutparade.html). Again, the tactical importance (from a marketing perspective) of reaching readers on Sunday is mentioned: “Parade engages readers at home on their favorite day of the week, Sunday” (http://mediakit.parade.com/parade/mediasolutions.html).

In 2006, USA Weekend made the same claims, Parade’s assertion that it is unparalleled notwithstanding, describing itself as:

- “proven to accumulate mass reach and build response, quickly and reliably . . .”
- “distributed in 600 newspaper markets . . . seen by more than 47 million readers every weekend . . .”
- “a blend of entertainment and lifestyle content [that] captures the interest and involvement of readers in 1 in 5 households across America.” (http://business.usaweekend.com/)

In 2011, USA Weekend also makes similar claims on its page called “About USA Weekend”: Driving Sales. Building Brands. Delivering Response. USA Weekend is a leading national newspaper magazine proven to accumulate mass reach and build response, quickly and reliably. It is distributed in more than 800 newspapers and seen by 47 million readers every weekend. The magazine’s appealing blend of entertainment and lifestyle content captures the interest and involvement of readers in one in every five households across America.

USA Weekend is a leader in providing marketers enormous ad response and rapid return-on-investment (RapidROISM). Through marketing, research and regional capabilities, USA Weekend offers outstanding programs to enhance the value of your advertising. (http://business.usaweekend.com/)

Both of these magazines continue to tap into strong cultural narratives and the values of a large, consistent group of readers who trust and identify with the magazine; they also state that this “relationship” allows them to enjoy a benefit in terms of selling
products to their readers. Thus, we have ideal conditions for blurring of the line between advertising and education via epideictic rhetoric.

Uncovering Values in Print Ads for Pharmaceuticals and Technology

In two separate data collections, students were asked first, simply to recall two ads—one for a pharmaceutical product and one for a technological product—that they had seen recently on TV, in print, or on the Internet, and then to choose and directly analyze two ads—one for a pharmaceutical and one for a technology product—from Parade and USA Weekend. Asking students initially to recall two such ads revealed how they tended to perceive and remember them—without a close, simultaneous analysis of them—providing insight into the extent to which their processing of these ads was more emotional and less critical, as scholars say happens with visual material (e.g., Barry; Hill). Students were asked to describe their recalled ads, comment on whether each ad’s primary thrust seemed to be persuasive or educational, and identify visual and verbal elements in each ad that led them to that decision. Interestingly, at this point in the study, even though I had not explicitly asked yet for students to identify underlying cultural values each ad evoked, these were obvious in student responses, suggesting, I believe, the extent to which the ads’ effectiveness relies on their resonance with a common cultural narrative and attendant values.

A subsequent data collection asked students to directly analyze ads from one of the very general circulation magazines described above: Parade or USA Weekend. In this second data collection, each student chose a copy of either Parade or USA Weekend dated between April and November 2005 and were asked to find two ads: one for a pharmaceutical and one for a technological product. They were asked to analyze and compare the two ads’ use of visual and verbal epideictic rhetoric to promote underlying values with which the reader is supposed to identify.

Both student recollection of ads and their direct analysis of them (the two phases of data collection) revealed that the ad makers were implicitly praising common if simplistically conceived values, regardless of whether a student judged a particular ad to be promotional
or educational. Specifically, this study shows that advertising for pharmaceuticals and technology aligns itself most often with the culturally promoted values of happiness (vaguely defined as an easy, care-free life free of time, space, and bodily limitations); efficiency, speed, and control; copious free time/leisure (yet paradoxically the use of technology and pharmaceuticals to accomplish more in that time); and technology-and-pharmaceuticals-as-progress, represented in the ads by the implicit value we invest in “authorities” who have answers and our best interests at heart. This is represented in the following student responses about ad messages (and the accompanying products):

- **Enjoyment of Life with no Limits:** “Get back to enjoying life”; “having fun” and “not missing out on the fun” (iPod, Aleve, Singulair, Cialis).

- **Happy, Carefree, a type of Freedom, Doing what you Want/Being Yourself:** “Having the BEST time of their entire lives”; “excited and happy”; feeling “young and active” (iPod, Ortho-Evra, Logitech Mediaplay Cordless Mouse, Singulair, cell phone with iTunes).

- **Efficiency, Connectedness, Control, and Speed:** “being able to do more than one thing at a time”; “brings the world to your fingertips”; “small, but lots of memory”; “get information, while anywhere, anytime”; “easy, fast”; “listen to the music makes you happy”; (Sprint cell phone, Verizon cell phone, hpPhotosmart digital camera and Photosmart printer, cell phone with iTunes, Intel Centrino, iPod nano, Ortho-Evra birth control, Panasonic announcer caller ID).

Leaving aside the interesting notion that, when viewed through the lens of epideictic rhetoric, one finds the same cultural value in one’s birth control patch as in one’s iPod, it is more surprising that students identified none of the technology ads they were able to recall or which they directly analyzed as primarily educational. I assumed they would follow the cultural tendency to perceive advertisers of technological products as offering us factual, objective information to empower us to make purchase decisions that benefit us. My students did not see it this way, however, saying instead that the technology ads they both recalled and directly analyzed offered little usable, substantive information. Recalled and directly analyzed technology ads were judged overwhelmingly to be...
purely promotional and out of the three values praised epideictically, the main one was “Happy and Carefree,” as student comments show:

The advertisers did not talk much about the product; they simply showed young people having fun while using the product.

(iPod)

The ad gives very little actual information about the product itself, instead focusing on how cool it can make you. The product is shown to allow you to combine the work and fun aspects of your life, all while being a trend setter.

(iPod-capable cell phone)

The ad is not presenting any information. All it does is shows that if you, the consumer, purchase this electronic device, you can listen to whatever kind of music makes you happy.

(iPod)

It doesn’t say too much about the product, why you need it, how much it costs and so forth; it is just trying to convince you that this product will make you . . . happy and carefree as the girl in the picture.

(Cordless mouse)

Very little is actually done to inform you of the product other than the fact that it exists, and you would be EVER SO MUCH HAPPIER if you owned it.

(iPod)

On the other hand, students perceived some of the pharmaceutical ads they both recalled and analyzed from the pages of Parade and USA Weekend as being primarily educational, even though, as seen above, the wording used to describe implicit values in both pharmaceutical and technology ads overlapped significantly. Students judged either a recalled or directly analyzed ad from Parade or USA Weekend) to be primarily educational if it

- used “medical words” in a way the student found significant (for instance, a Singulair ad says that it “blocks leukotrienes”; the student recalling this ad felt that the mere presence of the word leukotrienes made the ad educational);
- compared itself with another product (a Flonase ad used a non-scientific, pictorial bar graph to compare itself with other similar
products, leading the student recalling this ad to judge it as educational);

- advised the audience to go to a Web site, call an 800-number, or talk to a health care professional (students sometimes felt that this disclaimer or admonition alone made the ad educational, even though in itself this feature of the ad provided no actual information);

- used “real-people” testimonials (Why would “real people” try to persuade us? They are simply telling us honestly of their experiences with the product);

- or if the recalled or directly analyzed ad directly stated it is telling us something we “need to know” (a student noted that a recalled Tylenol ad actually stated, “You need to know this,” and to her, that statement alone signaled an educational purpose, not persuasion).

Interestingly, none of the students who judged a recalled pharmaceutical ad to be educational mentioned as their reason the presence of the FDA-required listing of indications, risks, and side effects. They believed that material was present because it is required and did not perceive it to be an integral part of the communication to the consumer. In any event, students commented that this material was not likely to be read by most consumers and so they discounted any educational weight it might carry.

A similar number of students judged their recalled pharmaceutical ads to be promotional, not educational. Students judged as promotional a recalled pharmaceutical ad:

- if it provided little substantive information, mainly giving an impression of well-being and happiness (the Aleve, Cialis, and Valtrex ads are examples of this, telling what they “can do for you in an abstract, lifestyle sense,” as one of my students characterized it);

- if the factual information that was given (e.g., the FDA-required list) was “quickly rattled off at the end” or presented in a way that was not easy or inviting to read, compared with the bright, interesting, positive visual messages that dominate the ad (the Prilosec ads, with their bright colors were mentioned, as were the Ortho-Evra ads with flowers and dancing nymphs);

- if the ad’s primary message was that this product is different and therefore better (the Yasmin birth control ad is an example, even
though it too contained an unexplained “medical” reference to the hormone drsp); or

- if it contrasted itself to another product (students mentioned this in relation to both Allegra-D and Yasmin); interestingly, this reason is also why some students found pharmaceutical ads to be educational).

Discussion

Aside from the ubiquitous ad for Dell computers that appeared in every issue of both Parade and USA Weekend, with the only obvious changes from one issue’s ad to the next being the scene depicted on the computer screen (e.g., Christmas tree for winter; pumpkins and football for fall), the technology ad most frequently found in these two magazines was for one or another kind of cell phone. Students also used cell phone ads as their recalled technology ad more frequently than any other kind of technology. This should not be surprising inasmuch as the cell phone is a technology with “considerable social and cultural significance.” Sociologist Jim McGuigan notes that its:

> sign value . . . might actually exceed its use value, functioning as a magical fetish, which is certainly the message of much advertising. The mobile is a symbol in itself, an obscure object of desire, and a sign of the times. (46–47)

Epideictic rhetoric is easily identified in public discourse about the mobile phone:

> Mobile phones are praised, on the one hand, as devices that will liberate individuals from the constraints of their settings. Individuals who master these devices are shown as people who control their destiny. Stories circulate that focus on how people manage the contemporary demand to be in multiple places at one time or to simultaneously serve multiple roles and present multiple faces. These stories heap “praise and honor” on those who pull off such an elegant performance through the use of technology.

(Katz and Aakhus 7–8).

The ideal user, in the praise narrative is thus able to maintain both control over his/her life and his/her availability. In the blame narrative, cell phones are the perceived cause of “loss of control over life,”
specifically over one’s accessibility (8). In this narrative, the mobile is seen as creating an increasingly fuzzy line between public and private spheres and for reducing leisure time: “Rather than creating more time or better use of available time, the phone is seen to usher in an ever more quickened and hectic pace to life” (8). Dawn Nafus and Katrina Tracey make the important point that “[e]fficiency and the constructions of time that accompany capitalist societies” are ideas specific to western capitalism. In this context then the cell phone:

is a tool that enables one to be efficient by working through a (capitalist) conceptualization of time as malleable—spendable, wasteable, stretchable and contractible. (215)

Katz and Aakhus, who note that the cell phone affects people’s lives and relationships in ways that have not yet been fully explored by scholars, agree that this increased pace and perceived professional and personal efficiency is one effect of cell phones. Say Katz and Aakhus, “they are a boon for people who think they are not accomplishing enough” (2). The down side of this, of course, is that those who do not want the frenetic efficiency and “perpetual contact” Katz and Aakhus describe, “find themselves pressured to replace otherwise excusable isolation with productive tasks” (2).

Insofar as the students in this study are just out of their teens, it is not surprising that they focus more on the fashion-accessory and fun aspects of the technology ads, recognizing these as promotional but persuasive. A Rutgers University study found that over half the students polled believed their phone should “look cool” and half of those said they take note of how fashionable their friends’ phones are (Katz and Sugiyama 74). My students seem to easily accept what has been noted of Nokia, for instance: “Nokia is selling an image, not technology. . . . They’re very good at technology, but image is the key” (Katz and Sugiyama 68, emphasis added). McGuigan notes that the cell phone is marketed heavily to teens as a “cool, miniature, and mystified gadget, no longer considered a luxury but felt to be a necessity by many” (55). Still other researchers have found that, to young people, the cell phone is “as much a status symbol as a communications device” (Katz and Sugiyama 72).

Epideictic rhetoric of praise is relied on heavily in a commercial product’s marketing to the public, and resonates with socially agreed-upon values. In the case of the cell phone, studies have shown that it is
explicitly represented in advertising as “an embodiment of youth, modernism, and futurism,” as well as “freedom” and “revolution,” all western values, note Katz and Sugiyama (67). Interestingly, these are the same values praised epideictically in pharmaceutical advertising. Pharmaceuticals are also seen as freeing us from the limitations of our bodies, extending our abilities, and making our lives easier and more “fun.” Like technology, pharmaceuticals are seen as giving us control and allowing us to do more, faster, and with less dis-ease. While these are certainly not, in themselves, bad objectives, such thinking can lead to an over-reliance on the superficial and the easy, with underlying issues left unaddressed: misusing social space with our cell phones and the accompanying phenomenon of “absent presence” (Gergen), or medicalizing every ailment with pharmaceuticals we demand of our physicians (Rubin). In advertising’s use of epideictic rhetoric, true empowerment becomes conflated with what is merely temporarily “cool” and new (education is conflated with persuasion), leaving us with at best a trivial and nearly meaningless control over our lives and forever at the mercy of the marketers and the next innovation or formulation that comes along. It also imposes a set of values on us that may not be best for each individual.

By analyzing advertising’s visual material in a more deliberate and systematic way, students can become aware of the influence of epideictic rhetoric and its highly problematic blurring of education and persuasion. By encouraging our students to look through the veil of familiarity shrouding visual texts to the normative assumptions on which their effectiveness depends, students can begin to develop true empowerment in response to a media environment that is dominated by interests that have a stake in presenting their view of the world as if it is utterly noncontroversial. At a minimum, such analysis calls into question the myths of communicative/visual transparency and beneficent advertiser seeking to empower the hapless consumer, and lays bare instead the force of epideictic rhetoric and the questionable social values it perpetuates in advertising.

Works Cited


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