**Why it is High Time for a Renewed Focus on Rhetoric in Marketing**

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Biography: Chris Hackley is Professor and Chair in Marketing at Royal Holloway University of London. Research interests focus on communication in marketing and advertising. Recent books and book chapters include Advertising and Promotion (4th Edition) with R.A. Hackley (published by Sage), ‘Advertising, Marketing and PR: deepening mutuality amidst a convergent media landscape’ (2018) in Hardy, J., MacRury, I. and Powell, H. (Eds) The Advertising Handbook (Routledge), ‘Advertising Practice and Critical Marketing’ (2019) in Tadajewski, M., Higgins, M.m Denegri-Knott, J. and Varman, R. (Eds) The Routledge Companion to Critical Marketing Studies, and ‘Marketing Texts’ (2016) in Mautner, G., Discourse and Management, (published by Palgrave MacMillan).

In this short, somewhat polemical, opinion piece I will suggest that the renewed research focus on the rhetoric of and in marketing signalled by this special issue is both timely and necessary, for two reasons. One is that a greater understanding of rhetorically oriented research in marketing can help to render marketing studies more relevant to current marketing, advertising and branding practices in the age of social media. The other reason, connected to the first, is that marketing research and education serve wider constituencies, and the propagation of a greater understanding of rhetoric can serve the critical education of consumers and citizens.

We seem to be living in an age of pathos in public communication. In both marketing and politics, communication that does not elicit an emotional response is quickly forgotten. Mark Thompson (2016), currently CEO of the New York Times and former Director General of the BBC, argues that advertising and marketing have had a role in the decline of political communication, and that part of the answer is to teach our children rhetoric to re-awaken the critical understanding of techniques such as parataxis, used by politicians such as Donald Trump. Contemporary marketing, of course, uses visual cues far more than oratory, yet the classical rhetorical concepts remain relevant not only to visual communication but also to the ways in which mediated text and speech are understood.

Of course, it is unrealistic to expect that marketing research and education suddenly adopt classical rhetoric as an informing discipline, and perhaps it is not necessary. The ways in which ethos, pathos, logos and kairos play out in marketing communication may, in any case, require conceptual translation for a mediated age. There have been many studies that examine the techniques of persuasion in marketing, which broadly can be conceived as rhetorical studies, although from many different disciplinary perspectives. If the commonalities of these as rhetorical studies can be acknowledged then perhaps this would constitute a move toward greater recognition not only of the importance and relevance of studies in marketing as rhetoric, but also toward greater understanding of the varieties of rhetoric that manifest in marketing and beyond.

The study of marketing rhetoric, then, would benefit from a stronger sense of thematic unity but it is also timely because of the reach of marketing techniques, values and norms into everyday life. Rhetorical studies can then play an important part in the project of critical marketing (Tadajewski & Cluley, 2013). Marketing has played a central role in the perpetuation and legitimation of ideologies of managerialism and corporatism (Marion, 2006) and rhetorically oriented investigation can reveal the techniques, practices and modes of circulation that characterise the spread of ideological communication.

The study of rhetoric has been a marginal pursuit in marketing but it is by no means peripheral to the main business of social science. McCloskey (1983) famously drew attention to the distinction between economic method, and the methods of economic argument, that is, the rhetoric of economics. The manifest shortcomings of economic method, especially in predictive validity, continue to be confounded by the rhetorical force of economic discourse. One might make a similar point about marketing. It has enjoyed immense success as an academic discipline reflecting its enormous presence in contemporary life, in spite of less than universal respect for the scientific validity of its research, or its managerial techniques (Saren, 2000; Wensley, 1995; Willmott, 1999). McCloskey’s (1983) points remain equally salient today for economics but the challenge she set for the social sciences more broadly has been taken up unevenly. Discursive psychology has been one important exception (Billig, 1987, 1991; Potter, 1996, 2001) since it addresses the insight that human communication is inherently rhetorical in the broad sense that our utterances, thoughts and conversation have a performative element (Austin, 1962) both to external audiences, and to ourselves as our own audience. Words do things as well as saying things, and we face a need to justify ourselves to ourselves as well as justifying ourselves to others. Indeed, as noted earlier, in some areas of contemporary life, such as political discourse, it often seems that the tone, style and presentation of argument carry greater weight than the content in swaying opinion. The performance of communication, magnified by mediation, exerts such a rhetorical force that the moving parts behind that performance can be obscured. As Mark Thompson points out, the quality of argument in contemporary political discourse seems poor in comparison to earlier times, partly, perhaps, because public sensitivity to rhetorical strategies has been blunted by the flood of marketing and advertising since the 1950s.

Marketing has not escaped critical scrutiny of its rhetorical strategies (e.g., Brownlie & Saren, 1992; Hackley, 2001; Miles, 2014a; Tonks, 2002). However, much of the attention to rhetoric in marketing has been diffused across a number of disciplinary foci, including critical discourse studies in marketing (Hackley, 2016; Moufahim, Humphreys, Mitussis, & Fitchett, 2007; Skålén, Fougere, & Fellesson, 2008) postmodernist/poststructuralist approaches to marketing (Brown, 1995) literary analyses of the linguistic tropes, metaphors and rhetorical strategies of marketing (Brown, 2002, 2005; Hackley, 2003; Miles, 2014b) critical analyses of the rhetoric of marketing practice (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Fischer & Britor, 1994; Nilsson, 2015; Svensson, 2007) studies of propagandistic marketing (O’Shaughnessy, 2016) and of the psychology of persuasion (O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy, 2004), and, especially, studies of rhetorical aspects of advertising (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Moeran, 1985; Scott, 1990, 1994; Stern, 1988, 1990).

This is but a small selection of the rhetorically informed research in marketing, although few of these pieces refer explicitly to classical rhetoric. There seems little doubt that rhetoric is, and indeed should be, a major theme of research in marketing. But there is an opportunity, reflected in this special issue, for much more work. Amongst the issues to be addressed could be how to categorise the scope of rhetorical research in marketing. The few categories above, critical discourse studies, postmodernist/poststructuralist studies, literary analyses, studies of the rhetorical constitution of marketing practice, political marketing and propaganda, and the rhetorical techniques of advertising communication, might be a crude starting point for a retrospective account of the trajectories of influence of rhetorical studies in the field. A second major question might be how and under what conditions to connect the concepts of classical rhetoric with more contemporary frames of research in marketing. Marketing is closely associated with persuasion, and is inherently rhetorical in its communication aspects. A higher profile for the role of rhetoric in marketing can foster better understanding of the rhetorical character of marketing itself, and a better understanding of the foundational concepts of rhetoric and their role in contemporary public discourse in the commercial and other spheres.

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