

# Answering Questions about Questions: A Persuasion Knowledge Perspective for Understanding the Effects of Rhetorical Questions

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Past research is not clear on the process by which rhetorical questions influence persuasion (i.e., increased focus on message arguments vs. on the persuasion agent). Based on recent theories of persuasion knowledge and rhetorical figures in advertising, our model delineates conditions under which rhetorical questions are likely to enhance argument elaboration (low salience of the rhetorical) and those under which they are likely to direct attention on the message source (high salience of the rhetorical format). Two experiments support the model and suggest that salience of rhetorical figures has the potential to influence not only the direction of message processing but also the effectiveness of various ad executions.

Questions where the answer is implicit within the question are termed rhetorical. Their use in persuasion settings dates back to at least the 1800s, when they were regarded as a tactic of successful debating (Schopenhauer [1864] 1963; cf. Zillmann 1972). Since then, their effectiveness has been examined in various persuasion settings ranging from closing arguments of a defense attorney (Zillmann 1972) to editorials (Petty, Cacioppo, and Heesacker 1981) to advertising (Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, and Franke 2002).

The dominant explanation for the persuasive effects of rhetorical questions is the message elaboration view, which suggests that questions focus the recipient's attention on message arguments and thereby enhance persuasion when argument quality is strong (e.g., Petty et al. 1981). Earlier research considered the effects of rhetorical questions on perceptions of delivery style (i.e., Zillmann 1972) and source pressure (i.e., Zillmann and Cantor 1974). However, this latter line of inquiry was dropped fairly quickly primarily because of a lack of source-related theories to account for these effects (Petty et al. 1981) and the paucity of consistent support for

source elaboration with rhetorical questions (e.g., Swasy and Munch 1985). Thirty years later, newer and richer theoretical frameworks focusing on the source of the message (e.g., the Persuasion Knowledge Model [PKM]; Friestad and Wright 1994) as well as its style (Rhetorical Figures in Advertising; McQuarrie and Mick 1996) have emerged. They provide interesting possibilities for understanding the effects of rhetorical questions.

In this article we propose and test an integrative framework of the persuasion effects of rhetorical questions, based on recent theories of persuasion knowledge and rhetorical figures in advertising. We examine these effects in the context of advertising messages, in contrast to past research, which has typically utilized non-marketing based stimuli (e.g., editorials; see Howard 1990 and Mothersbaugh et al. 2002 for exceptions). Past research suggests that findings obtained in such settings may not be generalizable to consumer environments (Friestad and Wright 1994).

Our framework delineates conditions under which rhetorical questions are likely to lead to message-based elaboration and those under which they are likely to enhance the recipient's focus on the source of the message. The framework enhances current understanding of rhetorical questions and also provides new insights for advertising. It indicates that stylistic elements not only influence the extent to which ad content is processed; they can also direct the message recipient's attention to the persuasion agent and determine the effectiveness of various ad executions.

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## BACKGROUND

### Message Processing according to the PKM

According to the PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994) when individuals are exposed to a persuasive message (e.g., ad, sales presentation, editorial) they can potentially elaborate on the three elements of the message: the topic or arguments, termed message content; the persuasion agent or source of the message; and the persuasion tactics used in the message. Our research will examine elaborations of the first two elements in response to rhetorical questions. According to the PKM, agent-related elaboration not only includes accessing prior knowledge and evaluations related to the source but also refers to inferences generated regarding the motives of the agent. For instance, recipients may generate inferences relating to “why” the message was designed, constructed, and delivered in this particular fashion by the source.

### Message Elaboration versus Source Perceptions Elicited by Rhetoricals

The dominant explanation underlying the persuasive effects of rhetorical questions, the cognitive response approach (e.g., Burnkrant and Howard 1984; Petty et al. 1981), proposes that the inclusion of rhetorical questions in a message enhances elaboration of message content. That is, when confronted with a rhetorical question, the message recipient thinks about it and responds to it covertly. In doing so, s/he is likely to elaborate extensively on the arguments contained in the message. Consistent with this prediction, the inclusion of rhetorical questions in messages containing strong arguments has been shown to enhance persuasion while their inclusion in messages of weak quality has been shown to reduce persuasion (e.g., Burnkrant and Howard 1984; Petty et al. 1981). This pattern of interaction between grammatical form and argument quality with persuasion as well as favorable and unfavorable thoughts has been cited as evidence for the message elaboration view. It is important to note that these effects have been observed in persuasion settings where recipients were not naturally devoting much effort to thinking about the message. Our research will also focus on these conditions.

There are findings in the literature, however, that are inconsistent with the elaboration explanation. For example, a replication of research that supported the elaboration view (i.e., Petty et al. 1981) found some evidence of source-oriented elaboration elicited by rhetorical questions (Swasy and Munch 1985). The Swasy and Munch replication differed from the Petty et al. (1981) research in two major ways. First, in addition to coding the cognitive responses in terms of their favorability, they coded them with respect to their target: source versus message arguments. Second, measures of source perceptions (e.g., speaker pressure) were examined. Swasy and Munch (1985) found that rhetorical questions did not influence message oriented cognitive responses but instead provoked greater source-oriented elaboration. Additionally, rhetorical questions influenced perceptions of speaker pres-

sure with weak arguments. However, source effects were unable to explain the pattern of data obtained with rhetorical questions, especially with the strong arguments messages. Further, no attempt was made to link the source effects to the attitude results. That is, although their research is suggestive of source effects with rhetorical questions, it is unable to provide a clear and consistent account for these effects.

Swasy and Munch (1985), however, were not the first to explore the idea of source attributions with the inclusion of rhetorical questions. Zillmann and Cantor (1974) suggested source pressure as one possible explanation for the persuasion effects of rhetorical questions, although the main effect that they obtained with this variable could not account for their persuasion effects. Additionally, Zillmann (1972), in explaining the enhanced persuasion obtained with rhetorical questions in a strong message, suggested that this finding could be attributed to the impression of “minimal intent to persuade” or decreased source pressure created by the rhetorical questions. However, his study did not include process measures that could help test this explanation. In sum, although the possibility of rhetorical questions influencing source perceptions has been raised in the past literature, there is little conclusive evidence regarding the direction of this effect (increased vs. decreased source pressure), and source variables have not been able to account for the pattern of persuasion effects obtained by rhetorical questions.

## A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF RHETORICAL QUESTION EFFECTS

### Rhetorical Question as an Artful Deviation in Style

Fortunately, theoretical frameworks have been introduced in recent years that have the potential to advance our understanding of the role played by source and style variables in persuasion. It has been proposed that communicators use rhetorical figures (e.g., rhetorical questions, puns, metaphors) with the intent to convey a certain meaning about themselves as well as the communication (Grice 1989; Roberts and Kreuz 1994; Scott 1994) and that different rhetorical figures may be used in communication to achieve particular discourse goals (Roberts and Kreuz 1994).

Research on rhetorical figures in advertising language, proposed by McQuarrie and Mick (1996) holds that inclusion of rhetorical figures in a message represents an artful deviation in its style or form. This deviation represents a violation of expectations. When such a violation occurs, the reader will search for a way to address it.

From this perspective, the inclusion of a rhetorical question in a message invites elaboration by the reader with the goal of interpreting that deviation. However, this deviation may be interpreted in different ways. One response would be an interpretation within the context of the message by simply responding to the question, consistent with the message elaboration view. A broader interpretation, however, would entail the message recipient attempting to understand “why” the speaker used such a deviation in the message. In

other words, this alternative calls for an interpretation of the deviation in the light of the motives of the persuasion agent (Friestad and Wright 1994; Wiener, LaForge, and Goolsby 1990).

The important issue, however, is what will determine whether respondents engage in the simpler versus broader interpretation of the deviation. In this regard, Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue that readers are likely to search for relevance, performing only those interpretations that are most relevant to understanding the communication. Past research also suggests that generating thoughts relating to the motives of the persuasion agent is likely to be more effortful than those relating to the message arguments (e.g., Shiv, Edell, and Payne 1997). Therefore, the broader interpretation, which deals with inferences relating to “why” the rhetorical was used, is likely to be more effortful and expected to be invoked only when it is perceived as the most relevant response to the communication. This is likely to occur when the deviation is highly salient to the respondent (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Sperber and Wilson 1995), and therefore, the recipient’s motivation to interpret it and understand the reason for its occurrence is high. In other words, the salience of the deviation is expected to moderate the path message recipients adopt to resolve it. Under low salience levels, they are likely to elicit the simpler response of elaborating on the text to answer the question; it is the most relevant response under these conditions. Under high salience conditions, they are likely to generate the broader contextual inferences relating to “why” the persuasion agent used the rhetorical format. This reasoning leads to the following propositions:

- P1:** When the deviation presented by rhetorical is low in salience, message-arguments-focused elaboration is likely.
- P2:** When the deviation presented by rhetorical is high in salience, elaboration will be targeted at the persuasion agent and the agent’s tactics.

### Inferences Related to Persuasion Agent

When the salience of the deviation is high, shifting the focus of elaboration to the persuasion agent, the reader is likely to interpret the deviation in the light of motivation of the agent. While there is a certain level of agreement in the literature that rhetorical influence perceptions of source pressure, there are conflicting positions on whether the implication is increased or decreased pressure (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Newcombe and Arnkoff 1979; Swasy and Munch 1985; Zillmann 1972). Specifically, it is possible that the use of rhetorical questions creates the impression of minimal intent to persuade. By asking questions, the communicator “leaves it to the people to decide” instead of simply stating assertions in the form of statements. This may lead the reader to infer that the communicator is very confident and expert and does not need to pressure the reader

by making assertions (Newcombe and Arnkoff 1979; Zillmann 1972). In other words, the agent may be perceived as less pressuring and, therefore, less threatening. As a consequence the rhetorical may lower the reader’s defenses and make him/her more susceptible to persuasion.

Alternatively, the use of rhetorical in the persuasive communication might make the communicator’s persuasive attempt more apparent and respondents might protect themselves against his “rhetorical virtuosity” by discounting his arguments (Swasy and Munch 1985; Zillmann 1972). This line of reasoning implies that rhetorical result in negative agent perceptions (e.g., aggressive and pushy). The process is akin to Brehm’s notion of reactance (Brehm 1966). Consequently, the evaluation of the message and its advocated position may be attenuated.

These opposing possibilities suggest that a rhetorical question is an ambiguous trope, likely to derive its interpretation from the context in which it is used. Since the inference is expected to focus on the perception of the agent, it is reasonable to expect that the reader’s prior evaluation of the agent is likely to influence how the rhetorical are interpreted. If the reader has a negative evaluation of the source then the use of questions will be likely to enhance perceptions of pressure and undermine persuasion. However, if the source perception is positive then the rhetorical are likely to decrease perceptions of pressure and enhance persuasion.

These source evaluations could be based on the reader’s prior persuasion knowledge (e.g., past knowledge of salespersons) or may have been formed on the basis of the message content (e.g., perceived message quality; Friestad and Wright 1994).

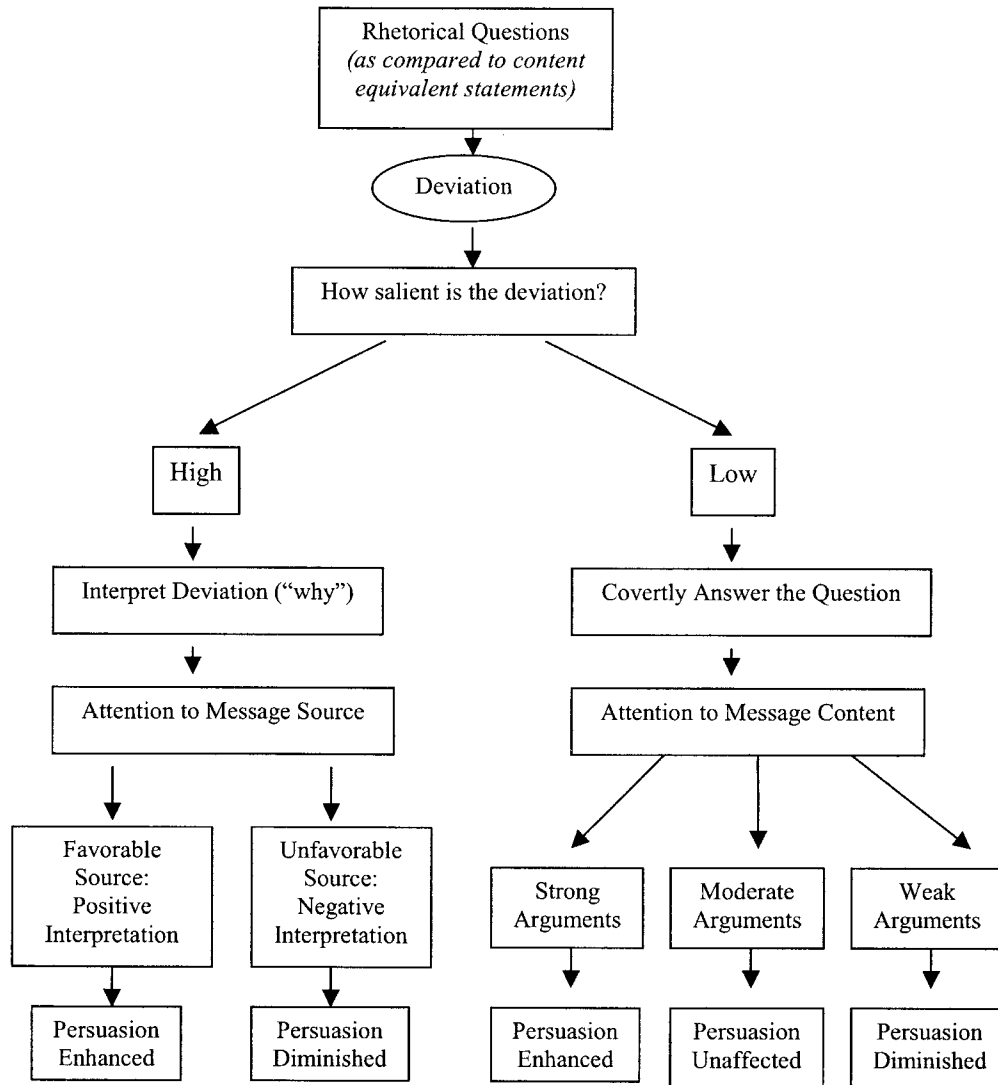
It is important to note that a focus on the source of the message for resolving the deviation does not imply that no message elaboration will follow. The readers may process the ad content; however, the nature of their elaboration is likely to be determined by the level of source pressure inferred (e.g., greater resistance to arguments delivered by a pressuring source). In other words, the persuasion outcome is expected to be a function of the source pressure perceptions generated when the reader is resolving the deviation presented by rhetorical. Thus, our next set of propositions is as follows:

- P3:** When the rhetorical format is salient and message recipients have positive agent attitudes, message persuasion will be enhanced.
- P4:** When the rhetorical format is salient and message recipients have negative agent attitudes, message persuasion will be diminished.

### Summary of the Framework

In sum, our model adopts the view that rhetorical represent an artful deviation in the style or form of the message (McQuarrie and Mick 1996) and, therefore, symbolize a

**FIGURE 1**  
MODEL OF RHETORICAL QUESTION EFFECTS



violation of expectations. If the deviation itself (rhetorical format) is not highly salient, then the violation will be addressed by the reader covertly responding to the question. In this case, message persuasion will be determined by strength of the message: enhancement with strong arguments, attenuation with a weak message, and no expected change with moderate quality arguments.<sup>1</sup>

However, when this deviation is highly salient, the recipient is motivated to infer “why” the rhetorical questions were included in the message. This process represents a more effortful

method of addressing the deviation and focuses attention on the persuasion agent. Under these circumstances, the prior evaluation of the message source is likely to determine the direction of the interpretation. When the evaluation is favorable, the agent is likely to be perceived as open and persuasion is enhanced; when it is unfavorable, the agent is likely to be perceived as pressuring and persuasion is undermined.

This view of the effects of rhetorical questions is portrayed in figure 1. Although the figure identifies different paths of resolving the deviation under the two levels of salience (attention to message source vs. message content), it does not imply that high levels of salience completely preclude message-oriented elaboration and low levels rule

<sup>1</sup>By moderate quality arguments we do not mean ambiguous arguments; we are referring to the strength of claims, not openness to interpretation. The lack of attitude change under these conditions is explained in the hypotheses development section of experiment 1.

out source-oriented elaboration of the ad. It simply suggests that the incremental processing that rhetoricals invite with a view to interpreting the deviation (as compared to a baseline nonrhetoricals ad) is likely to be focused on either the source or the message content. As explained earlier, this focus and the resultant interpretation are likely to determine any subsequent message processing and persuasion.

We test the proposed model using a series of two experiments, each using different manipulations of the key independent variables (source favorability and salience of rhetoricals). The first experiment manipulates source evaluations via favorability of the corporation and salience of rhetoricals is assessed via an individual difference variable: persuasion knowledge of the recipient. The second experiment attempts a conceptual replication using ad execution factors. Source favorability is manipulated via the advertising execution used (comparative vs. noncomparative advertising) and salience via the number of rhetorical questions in the ad (light vs. heavy usage).

## EXPERIMENT 1

### Overview and Hypotheses

In this experiment, evaluation of the source was varied by manipulating subjects' attitude toward the company sponsoring the ad, and the salience of the deviation was assessed via a dispositional variable—persuasion knowledge (Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001), which is expected to reflect the consumer's knowledge of and sensitivity to persuasion tactics and thereby indicates his/her ability to perceive such elements in a persuasion setting. Consumers high in persuasion knowledge (PK) are likely to possess the ability to notice and interpret the meaning of style elements used in advertising. Therefore, we expect the deviation generated by a rhetorical format to be highly salient for them, motivating them to infer "why" the rhetoricals are included in the message. The direction of this interpretation is likely to be determined by the favorability of the message source. Specifically, when the source evaluation is positive, rhetoricals are likely to convey a more open style, thereby, enhancing message persuasion. However, when this evaluation is negative, they are likely to signal a more aggressive tone, attenuating persuasion.

Consistent with past tradition in this research area, all contrasts in the hypotheses are specified as planned comparisons with the baseline "statements" condition (rhetoricals replaced with content equivalent statements).

**H1:** High PK consumers exposed to an ad for a favorably (unfavorably) evaluated corporation will demonstrate more positive (negative) attitudes toward the target brand when the ad contains rhetoricals as compared to content equivalent statements.

In contrast, consumers low in PK are not only less likely to notice the advertising tactics and format elements (e.g., rhetoricals), but also less likely to interpret them in terms

of the intentions of the persuasion agent (Bearden et al. 2001). That is, the deviation presented by rhetoricals is expected to be less salient for them, leading them to address the violation presented by rhetoricals in a simple fashion. This process corresponds to message elaboration with the goal of covertly responding to the questions and is likely to focus the reader's attention on the message arguments.

Past research (Petty, Haugtvedt, and Smith 1996; Tesser, Martin, and Mendolia 1996) suggests that enhanced message elaboration is likely to result in attitude polarization when the message is of very strong or weak argument quality (i.e., generates predominantly favorable or unfavorable thoughts); however, polarization effects are not expected with moderate argument quality (i.e., messages that do not generate predominantly favorable and/or unfavorable thoughts).

We held the argument quality constant at a moderate level in both our experiments for the following reasons. First, the inclusion of very strong or very weak arguments could potentially confound the source manipulation: when consumers are less familiar with a brand (as in our experiments), they are likely to base their source perceptions partly on the argument quality, especially if it is extreme (Friestad and Wright 1994; Ratneshwar and Chaiken 1991). Second, stronger support for the model would be obtained by testing it in contexts where the persuasion predictions made by one method of resolving the deviation (source elaboration) contradict those made by the alternative process (i.e., message elaboration). Only moderate quality arguments allow for different predictions under these conditions.

Therefore, in the context of a moderate quality ad, the increased argument elaboration resulting for low PK respondents would imply no attitude enhancement (attenuation) with the positive (negative) source. In sum,

**H2:** Low PK consumers exposed to an ad for a favorably or unfavorably evaluated corporation will demonstrate no significant difference in attitudes toward the target brand when the ad contains rhetoricals as compared to content equivalent statements.

### Design and Procedure

A 2 (source favorability: positive, negative)  $\times$  2 (grammatical form: rhetorical, statement) factorial design was run. Salience of deviation was a measured variable. Subjects were divided into high and low salience groups by conducting a median split on their persuasion knowledge scores. The statement conditions served as the baseline comparison groups.

Subjects ( $n = 135$ ) were informed that they were participating in a joint study conducted by the School of Business and College of Journalism. Their task was to evaluate four items of media disseminated information, randomly assigned to them from a database containing newspaper articles, editorials, and ads. They were told that these items had been collected from different parts of the world. They were alerted

to the possibility of seeing two or more items dealing with the same corporation, given the large nature of this database and the random method of assignment. To induce low involvement, subjects were informed that their responses were anonymous, and they were one of many students who would be evaluating these materials.

The first item for each subject was a newspaper article about Avanti Corporation. This article portrayed the corporation in either a favorable or an unfavorable light and served as the manipulation of source favorability. Items two and three were fillers. The last item was the target ad for Avanti shoes (either the question or statement version). Subjects were asked to provide their evaluation of each item, immediately after reading it. The scales and questions following each item were different. After responding to the major questions relating to the target ad, they were probed for potential hypotheses guessing. Seven subjects (four rhetorical and three baseline, similar distribution across source valence) speculated that the experimenters were attempting to test whether the newspaper article about Avanti shoes influenced how they processed the ad. However, none of them guessed the possibility of a relationship between source favorability and ad format (or rhetorical) or even speculated about the use of rhetorical. We conducted the data analysis with and without these subjects; no significant differences emerged. Therefore, we included them in the analyses.

### Target Message

The message was developed in the form of an ad for a fictitious brand of athletic shoes. The target attribute was shock absorption of the shoe. The ad cited results of a study, which revealed that high levels of shock absorption in the target brand reduced impact on knees and ankles, reducing incidence of arthritis over the long term. An appeal was made to use the target brand for health and safety. The ad also included a picture of the shoes, a company logo, and a figure illustrating how the shock absorption technology worked. It was specified that the target brand is one of two brands (out of 15 tested) that had been shown to reduce the risk of arthritis in consumers. Results of a pretest ( $n = 31$ ) revealed that the ad was clear with respect to its implications ( $M = 6.68$ /nine-point scale, "not at all clear/very clear") but of moderate quality ( $M = 5.04$ /nine-point scale, "weak/strong"). See the appendix for the body copy of the ad.

Two rhetorical questions were included in the ad: one in the heading (Did you know that wearing Avanti shoes can reduce your risk of arthritis?) and one after the first major paragraph (e.g., Avanti shoes are beneficial for you, aren't they?). We chose this number since our review of recent magazine ads revealed that it is the most representative of multiple rhetorical questions used in real ads (e.g., Toyota Matrix ads). In the baseline statements condition, the two rhetorical questions were replaced with content equivalent statements (e.g., Wearing Avanti shoes can reduce your risk of arthritis; Avanti shoes are beneficial for you).

### Independent Variables

*Source Favorability Manipulation.* We manipulated source favorability via the social responsibility of the corporation because past research indicates that although social responsibility can enhance the consumer's liking of a corporation, it provides little diagnostic information about the quality of its products and may not be used in evaluating them (e.g., Brown and Dacin 1997). In other words, manipulating source favorability via corporate social responsibility ensures that subjects will not consider the source favorability (given its low diagnosticity) as an input for product evaluation unless some element of the ad (e.g., rhetorical) specifically directs their attention to it. Further, as reported later in the experimental results, it allows for equivalent attitudes toward Avanti shoes (based on attributes contained in the ad) in the baseline favorable and unfavorable source conditions.

The favorable version of the newspaper article reported that Avanti had received an award for its social responsibility and was identified as a world leader in this area. It was described as contributing to many local and global causes as well as concerned about environmental issues and employee working conditions. The unfavorable version claimed that Avanti had been identified as a "laggard" in social responsibility because of its general lack of concern for the community and environment, as reflected by its unwillingness to enhance the environmental friendliness of its production operations, problems with working conditions and noticeable lack of charitable contributions. A pretest ( $n = 41$ ) revealed that subjects rated the Avanti Corporation as significantly more negative after viewing the unfavorable (as compared to favorable) version of the article ( $M = 3.32$  vs.  $5.75$ ,  $F(1, 39) = 45.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, both articles were equally strong ( $M = 5.42$  vs.  $5.40$ ) and believable ( $M = 5.47$  vs.  $5.52$ ), nine-point scales. They were also equated on their length.

*Dependent Variables.* All the dependent measures were assessed on nine-point scales, unless mentioned otherwise. Subjects' attitude toward the target brand was assessed via three scales (Bad/Good, Unfavorable/Favorable, Awful/Nice),  $\alpha = .80$ . Two seven-point scales were used to measure the perception of source pressure (Not pushy/Pushy, Not aggressive/Aggressive),  $r = .77$ . Perception of advertising tactics was assessed via asking the subjects to state their level of agreement with the statement that the ad used appropriate tactics in presenting its arguments. Subjects were asked to list all the thoughts they had while reading the target ad. Two judges, blind to the conditions and hypotheses, coded thoughts into the following categories: message-arguments-related thoughts, style- and source-related thoughts, and other thoughts. The style- and source-related category contained thoughts relating to style elements, such as the use of questions or assertions, tone of the ad, and so on, as well as cognitions focusing on the corporation. There was 92% agreement between the judges. Disagreements were resolved via discussion. Subjects were also asked how

**TABLE 1**  
EXPERIMENT 1 CELL MEANS (STANDARD DEVIATIONS)

Variable	Low persuasion knowledge			High persuasion knowledge		
	Positive source: Rhetoricals ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Negative source: Rhetoricals ( <i>n</i> = 26)	Baseline: Statements ( <i>n</i> = 23)	Positive source: Rhetoricals ( <i>n</i> = 21)	Negative source: Rhetoricals ( <i>n</i> = 19)	Baseline: Statements ( <i>n</i> = 21)
Mean attitude	5.95 (.96)	5.43 (1.32)	5.46 (1.31)	6.70 (1.00)	5.00 (1.17)	5.90 (1.18)
Source pressure	5.34 (1.20)	4.67 (1.39)	4.63 (1.44)	3.93 (1.33)	6.39 (1.40)	4.69 (1.10)
Appropriateness of tactics	5.60 (1.29)	5.08 (1.74)	5.17 (1.46)	6.43 (1.57)	4.16 (1.74)	5.10 (1.30)

much attention (No attention at all/A lot of attention) they paid to the writing style of the ad as well as arguments contained in it. The six-item scale of persuasion knowledge, based on Bearden et al. (2001) was included.

## Results

Subjects' scores on the persuasion knowledge scale were used to perform a median split. The average score of the high PK group was 4.48 (five-point scale) and of the low PK group was 3.78. As expected (Bearden et al. 2001), the low (vs. high) PK respondents reported less attention to the arguments ( $M = 5.96$  vs.  $6.90$ ,  $F(1, 133) = 6.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as well as to the style of ad ( $M = 3.65$  vs.  $4.86$ ,  $F(1, 133) = 5.93$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

All the hypotheses were specified as contrasts between the experimental and baseline conditions. Because we did not have any reason to expect the baseline subjects to respond differently to the target ad in the unfavorable- versus favorable-source condition (given the low diagnosticity of source information), and did not find any such differences in the data (all  $p$ 's  $> .50$ ), we pooled the data across these source conditions to form two baseline comparison groups: low PK and high PK.<sup>2</sup> The results will be discussed in terms of the hypothesized contrasts. Please refer to table 1 for cell means.

**High Persuasion Knowledge.** These respondents were expected to focus attention on the message source to interpret the deviation presented by rhetoricals. Thus, compared to the baseline subjects, they were expected to exhibit attitude attenuation with the unfavorable and attitude enhancement with the favorable source (hypothesis 1).

The planned contrasts reveal that consistent with expectations, inclusion of rhetoricals (vs. statements) reduced persuasion with the unfavorable source ( $M = 5.00$  vs.  $5.90$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but enhanced it with the favorable source ( $M = 6.70$  vs.  $5.90$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Analysis of the number of cognitive responses and attention measures supported the process expectations. Within

each ad condition (rhetoricals or baseline) there was no difference between the favorable- and unfavorable-source conditions on the number of cognitive responses or self-reported attention. Comparisons were, therefore, made between the rhetorical and baseline conditions. The data revealed that while subjects in the rhetoricals (vs. statements) condition exhibited significantly more source- and style-related thoughts ( $M = 2.69$  vs.  $1.92$ ,  $F(1, 59) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ), such differences did not emerge with message-arguments-related thoughts ( $M = 2.75$  vs.  $3.01$ ). Consistent with the thoughts data, subjects in the rhetoricals condition reported paying significantly more attention to message style than subjects in the statements condition ( $M = 5.88$  vs.  $4.86$ ,  $F(1, 59) = 4.46$ ,  $p < .05$ ); however, such a difference was not reported in attention to message arguments ( $M = 6.97$  vs.  $6.90$ ). These results indicate that inclusion of rhetoricals directed the attention of high PK subjects to the source and style elements of the message to resolve the deviation and not towards the arguments contained in it.

Consistent with the hypothesis, when the source was unfavorable, subjects exposed to the rhetoricals version of the ad perceived speaker pressure to be significantly higher ( $M = 6.39$  vs.  $4.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the advertising tactics to be less appropriate ( $M = 4.16$  vs.  $5.10$ ,  $p < .06$ ) than the subjects who saw the same ad without rhetoricals. In contrast, when the source was favorable, rhetoricals (vs. statements) lowered the perception of speaker pressure ( $M = 3.93$  vs.  $4.69$ ,  $p < .06$ ) and enhanced the appropriateness of advertising tactics ( $M = 6.43$  vs.  $5.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Low Persuasion Knowledge.** The deviation presented by rhetoricals was expected to be less salient for these subjects, prompting them to elaborate on the message content. Given the low diagnosticity of the source information and the moderate quality of arguments, no differences were expected in their attitudes (vs. the baseline subjects) for the two source favorability conditions (hypothesis 2).

Consistent with expectations, there was no significant difference in their attitude toward Avanti shoes, when they were exposed to the rhetorical as compared to the statement ad, in the favorable ( $M = 5.95$  vs.  $5.46$ ,  $p > .17$ ) as well as unfavorable ( $M = 5.43$  vs.  $5.46$ ) source condition.

Cognitive responses data reveal that while there was no difference between the rhetoricals and statements conditions

<sup>2</sup>In the interest of economy of subjects, fewer participants were allocated to the statements or baseline condition. It was expected that pooling data across the favorable and unfavorable cells would result in comparable cell sizes in the baseline and rhetorical conditions.

in terms of source- and style-related thoughts ( $M = 1.58$  vs.  $1.21$ ); rhetorical questions prompted these subjects to elicit more message-arguments-related thoughts ( $M = 2.76$  vs.  $2.00$ ,  $F(1, 71) = 3.98$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Self-report measures of attention confirm that in the rhetorical questions (vs. statements) condition, low PK subjects were likely to pay more attention to message arguments ( $M = 6.84$  vs.  $5.96$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 7.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but not to message style ( $M = 4.31$  vs.  $3.65$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 2.13$ ,  $p > .15$ ). The mean level of attention reported to message style was lower than the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 5) for these subjects.

Although speaker pressure was marginally higher than baseline condition with the favorable source ( $M = 5.34$  vs.  $4.63$ ,  $p < .10$ ) no difference emerged when the source was unfavorable ( $M = 4.67$  vs.  $4.63$ ). Additionally, there was no difference between the rhetorical and statement conditions in terms of perceived appropriateness of persuasion tactics with the favorable source ( $M = 5.60$  vs.  $5.17$ ) as well as the unfavorable source ( $M = 5.08$  vs.  $5.17$ ), both  $p > .30$ .

*Mediation Analyses.* Our model predicts that rhetorical questions lead message recipients to direct their attention to either the source or the content of the message, depending on whether they are salient or not. When they are salient (as for high PK respondents) their impact on brand attitudes is moderated by the favorability of the source—more persuasion with the favorable and less with the unfavorable source, as compared to the statements condition. Source favorability, however, is not expected to be a moderator of persuasion in the low salience condition. That is, we expect the interaction between source favorability (SF) and grammatical form (GF) to emerge as a significant predictor of persuasion for the high PK but not in the low PK respondents. Additionally, for the high salience subjects, the effect of this interaction (GF  $\times$  SF) on persuasion is likely to be mediated by inferences relating to source perceptions. That is, when the source is unfavorable, subjects are likely to infer more speaker pressure and use of less appropriate tactics by the source; however, when the source is favorable rhetorical questions are likely to be interpreted as indicating less pressure and a more open communication style. These relationships fit the pattern of the moderated mediation analyses described by Baron and Kenny (1986). Given the different set of predictions in the high and low salience (PK) conditions, we conducted a separate moderated mediation analysis for each of these conditions. Please refer to figure 2.

Grammatical Form and Source Favorability were coded as dummy variables, and an interaction term (GF  $\times$  SF) was computed. The source perceptions variable was the composite of source pressure and appropriateness of tactics measures. The upper panel of the figure reveals that as expected, when rhetorical questions were salient, the effect of GF on brand attitude was moderated by SF ( $\beta = .53$ ,  $t = 4.84$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This relationship, however, was mediated by source perceptions. Specifically, GF  $\times$  SF emerged as a significant predictor of source perceptions ( $\beta = .62$ ,  $t = 6.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and when both GF  $\times$  SF and source perceptions are used in the same regression equation to predict brand atti-

tudes the effect of GF  $\times$  SF is reduced to nonsignificance ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $t = 1.50$ ,  $p > .14$ ). This pattern of data supports our assertion that high PK participants are likely to focus attention on source perceptions. No effects relating to the message source, either moderation or mediation, were obtained for the Low PK subjects.

Together, the pattern of data reveal that rhetorical questions focused the attention of low PK respondents on message arguments, but they directed the high PK subjects to interpret the deviation presented by rhetorical questions in the light of source perceptions.

## Discussion

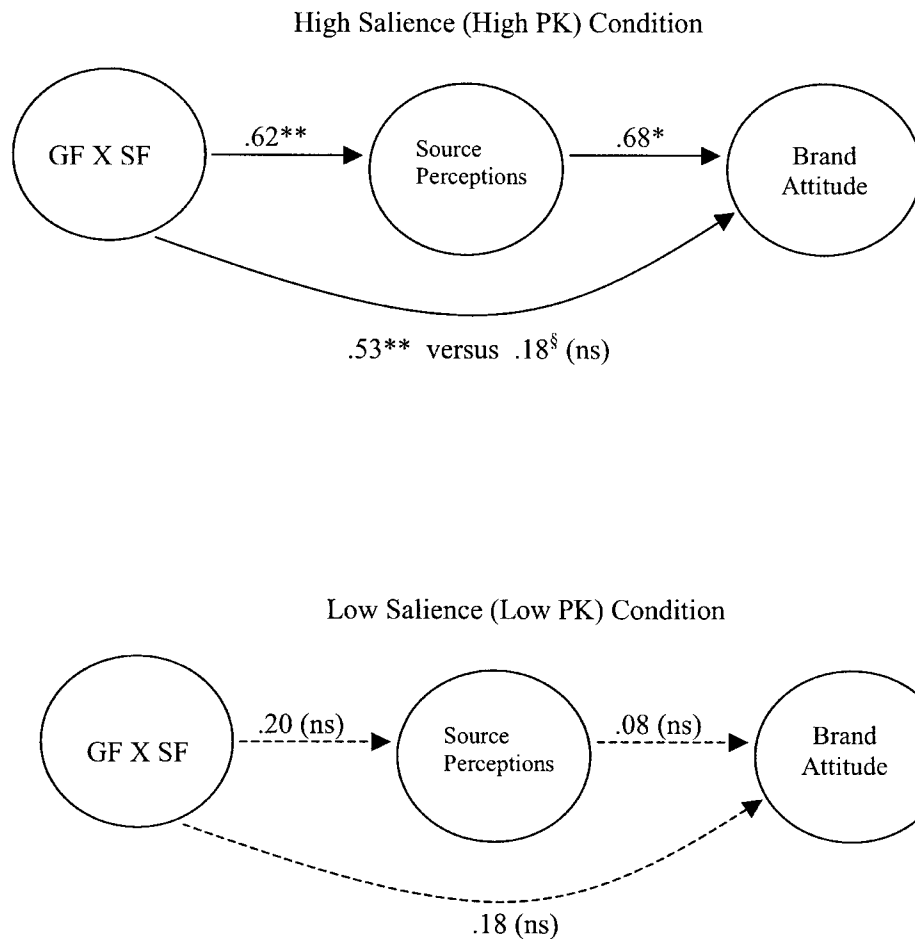
The results of experiment 1 supported our model of rhetorical question effects. Specifically, when the deviation presented by the rhetorical format was salient (high PK), subjects attempted to interpret it by focusing their attention on the message source, as indicated by their cognitive responses and self-report measures of attention. The direction of this interpretation was influenced by their prior evaluation of the source. When it was positive (socially responsible corporation), they perceived the rhetorical (vs. statement) version of the ad to be more open and less pressuring and were more persuaded by it. However, when it was negative (socially laggard corporation), the rhetorical (vs. statement) version of the ad was perceived as more pressuring and led to more negative evaluation of the message arguments and less positive brand attitudes. In contrast, subjects for whom the deviation presented by rhetorical questions was not very salient (Low PK respondents) tended to focus their attention on the message content to respond to the questions. Given the moderate quality of arguments, this enhanced message elaboration did not polarize their brand evaluations, wiping out the advantage the rhetorical questions enjoyed with the positive source and the handicap they suffered with the negative source (compared to baseline statements) for the high PK respondents.

In this experiment all subjects in the rhetorical questions condition viewed the same ad, which had two embedded questions. However, rhetorical questions can and have been used to varying degrees in ads—ranging from their inclusion in solely the heading to their repeated use in the body of the ad (ranging from one to five rhetorical questions in the body, in addition to a rhetorical heading). It is possible that this varied use of rhetorical questions results in different levels of salience and thereby influences the nature of response to the deviation. Experiment 2 was run to examine this possibility.

Further, past advertising research suggests that ad executions that are perceived as more pressuring (e.g., comparative advertising, fear appeals) typically lead to negative source evaluations (e.g., Grewal et al. 1997). Therefore, it is possible that the perceived favorability of the advertising tactics used in the execution (e.g., comparative advertising, humor) can potentially influence the interpretation of the deviation presented by rhetorical questions, much in the same way as the prior evaluation of the source. In other words, it is possible that under high salience conditions, the execution



**FIGURE 2**  
MEDIATIONAL ANALYSES (EXPERIMENT 1)



NOTE.—GF = Grammatical Form (dummy variable: question = 1, statement = 0); SF = Source Favorability (dummy variable: favorable = 1, unfavorable = -1); \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \* =  $p < .05$ ; § = both source perceptions and GF × SF included in the regression.

of the ad interacts with the grammatical form used in it. This issue was also addressed in experiment 2.

Our theorizing suggests that under high salience conditions, the inferred source perceptions are likely to bias the direction of subsequent message arguments processing. We included a measure of message quality perceptions in experiment 2 to examine this possibility. In sum, experiment 2 was conducted to test the generalizability of our model to ad execution decisions (especially with regards to the level of rhetorical usage and the advertising tactic used in the ad) and to examine the potential of biased message processing in the high salience condition.

## EXPERIMENT 2

### Overview and Hypotheses

Inclusion of rhetorical questions in advertising can vary from light usage (heading only) to heavy usage (two or more,

in addition to heading). Recent research (Mothersbaugh et al. 2002) reveals that rhetorical headings do not seem to represent a high level of deviation. Instead, they imply meaning openness, enhancing the consumer's desire to read the message. However, we expect that the more often rhetorical questions are used in a message, the more salient the rhetorical format is likely to be (Higgins 1996; Sperber and Wilson 1995). In other words, we predict that when this format is sparingly used in a message (e.g., heading alone), the salience of the deviation will be low and a simple response of message elaboration will be likely. High levels of rhetorical usage, on the other hand, should lead to their higher salience and motivate the audience to engage in the broader response as they ponder the rationale for the inclusion of rhetorical questions. This process is expected to focus the recipients' attention on the source, with the favorability of source determining the interpretation of the deviation.

Favorability of source evaluation was manipulated in this experiment by varying the ad execution (comparative vs. noncomparative). Consumers have been known to derogate the source of comparative claims but not the source of noncomparative claims (e.g., Belch 1981; Grewal et al. 1997), and comparative ads have been seen as more aggressive than noncomparative ads (Droge 1989; Grewal et al. 1997). We expect that when a negative comparative advertising execution is employed in this research, the source will be negatively evaluated, but when a noncomparative ad is used, the source will be positively evaluated (Belch 1981; Droge 1989; Grewal et al. 1997).

The previous discussion indicated that heavy usage of rhetorical questions should lead to high salience of the deviation, and, as a result, persuasion should depend on the evaluation of the source. If the ad is comparative, the source evaluation is expected to be negative (Belch 1981; Grewal et al. 1997). As such, focusing on the source of a negative or comparative ad is known to result in source derogations or a backlash effect (Droge 1989; Grewal et al. 1997; Shiv et al. 1997) and, therefore, expected to lead to a less favorable interpretation of the rhetorical questions and lowered persuasion.

In contrast, source evaluations are expected to be favorable with a noncomparative ad. This is likely to encourage a more favorable interpretation of the deviation symbolized by the rhetorical questions. This line of reasoning is consistent with past research that suggests that the persuasiveness of positive or noncomparative frames is often enhanced when the focus is on the message source (e.g., Block and Anand-Keller 1995; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990). Therefore, it is expected that

**H3:** Subjects exposed to a comparative (noncomparative) execution of the ad will demonstrate more negative (positive) attitudes toward the target brand when they view the heavy rhetorical questions as compared to the statements version of the same execution.

It was also indicated earlier that light usage of rhetorical questions should result in low salience of the deviation and that under these circumstances persuasion should be based on argument processing. Due to the use of arguments of moderate strength in our ads (as discussed earlier) it is expected that

**H4:** Subjects exposed to both comparative and noncomparative executions of the ad will demonstrate equivalent attitudes toward the target brand when they view the light rhetorical questions as compared to the statements version of the same execution.

## Experimental Design and Procedure

The between subjects factorial design included two variables: favorability of message source (manipulated via the ad execution: comparative vs. noncomparative) and salience

of rhetorical questions (manipulated via level of rhetorical usage: light vs. heavy). A baseline statements condition was also run for each ad execution.

Subjects ( $n = 121$ ) were informed that they were participating in a study of advertising effectiveness in which they would be exposed to ads from different parts of the world and asked to evaluate them. To induce low involvement, subjects were informed that their responses were anonymous and would be averaged with those obtained from other students across the country (e.g., Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). After reading the ad booklet, they responded to the dependent measures questionnaire and were debriefed.

## Independent Variables

*Ad Execution: Comparative versus Noncomparative.* Target ads were adapted from experiment 1. The brand name was changed to Mizuno: a real brand, well known in foreign markets, but not with American consumers. A comparative version of the ad was developed. It included the same information, however, it was framed as a comparison to Avanti (a fictitious) brand of shoes. Specifically, it stated that the study found Avanti transferred the shock up to the knees and increased likelihood of arthritis, while the target brand reduced it and had beneficial health effects. In other words, both ads (comparative and noncomparative) contained the same information about the target brand.

In a pretest, subjects ( $n = 30$ ) were exposed to one of the two executions of the ad (comparative or noncomparative) and asked to examine the ad carefully and rate it on its informativeness (Not at all informative/Very informative) and argument quality (Very weak/Very strong, Very inferior/Very superior). They were also asked to evaluate the source (Good/Bad), source pressure and appropriateness of tactics. Two seven-point scales were used to measure the perception of source pressure (Not pushy/Pushy, Not aggressive/Aggressive). Perception of appropriateness of advertising format was assessed via asking the subjects to state their level of agreement with the statement that the ad used appropriate tactics in presenting its arguments. Except the source evaluation and source pressure scales, which were seven-point, all others were nine-point scales. The results revealed that the two ads were equivalent in their perceived informativeness ( $M = 6.33$  vs.  $6.09$ ) and argument quality ( $M = 5.46$  vs.  $5.17$ ), both  $p > .50$ .<sup>3</sup> However, consistent with expectations based on past research (e.g., Grewal et al. 1997) the comparative ad was perceived as using less appropriate tactics ( $M = 3.12$  vs.  $5.58$ ), its source was evaluated less positively ( $M = 3.96$  vs.  $5.55$ ) and perceived as more pressuring ( $M = 4.67$  vs.  $3.93$ ), all  $F(1, 28) > 4.50$ ,  $p < .05$ .

*Level of Rhetorical Usage.* In the heavy-usage condition three rhetorical questions were inserted in each ad: the heading and one after each of the two major paragraphs. In the light-

<sup>3</sup>These levels correspond to moderate levels of perceived diagnosticity as reported in past research (e.g., Ahluwalia 2002).

TABLE 2  
EXPERIMENT 2 CELL MEANS (STANDARD DEVIATIONS)

Variable	Baseline statements		Rhetorical heading		Multiple rhetorical	
	Noncomparative ( <i>n</i> = 19)	Comparative ( <i>n</i> = 19)	Noncomparative ( <i>n</i> = 22)	Comparative ( <i>n</i> = 22)	Noncomparative ( <i>n</i> = 19)	Comparative ( <i>n</i> = 20)
Mean attitude (nine-point)	5.33 (1.64)	6.19 (1.39)	5.81 (1.15)	6.48 (.98)	6.54 (1.46)	5.25 (.90)
Message quality (nine-point)	4.58 (1.27)	4.95 (1.15)	4.72 (1.16)	5.39 (.87)	5.29 (1.13)	3.98 (1.45)
Source pressure (nine-point)	4.50 (1.56)	4.26 (1.58)	4.02 (1.11)	5.02 (1.18)	3.55 (1.42)	4.20 (1.20)
Appropriateness of tactics (nine-point)	5.00 (1.67)	4.47 (1.90)	5.00 (2.24)	4.86 (2.18)	5.84 (1.71)	3.25 (2.09)
Content recall	1.39 (.78)	1.53 (1.02)	2.05 (1.00)	1.95 (.90)	1.56 (.62)	1.40 (.68)
Style recall	.94 (.64)	.74 (.87)	.64 (.72)	.86 (.94)	1.44 (1.10)	1.45 (1.05)

usage condition, only the headline was a rhetorical; the other two rhetorical were replaced with content equivalent statements. In the baseline condition, all rhetorical were replaced with content equivalent statements.

Another pretest (*n* = 63) was run to provide additional evidence in support of the equivalence of the ads employed in this research. Three conditions were run: noncomparative statements, comparative heavy rhetorical, and noncomparative heavy rhetorical. Subjects rated the ads on affect generated (Sad, Frustrated, Cheerful, Bad Mood, Happy, Good Mood; nine-point scales anchored by Not at all/Extremely,  $\alpha = .87$ ), clarity (Clear/Ambiguous, seven-point scale) and expectedness of the writing style (Expected/Unexpected, Consistent/Inconsistent, seven-point scales). Content equivalence of the ads was also assessed following a procedure derived from McQuarrie and Mick (1999). Subjects were asked whether the ad attempted to convey the message that wearing Mizuno shoes can reduce your risk of arthritis and wearing Mizuno shoes is good for you (central points of the ads). They were also asked two questions that were not in the ads (i.e., Did the ad try to convey the message that millions of people from around the world use Mizuno shoes, and, Did the ad try to convey the message that Mizuno shoes are inexpensive?).

The three-level single-factor analysis of variance on the affect as well as message ambiguity did not even approach significance. Subjects perceived the messages to be relatively clear ( $M = 5.70$ ). Further, although there was no difference in the expectancy of the comparative versus the noncomparative ad, subjects were more likely to perceive the statements version ( $M = 2.70$ ) as more consistent with their expectations than the rhetorical ads ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $t = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The analysis of content equivalence followed McQuarrie and Mick (1999). Results revealed that 95.5% of the subjects were able to identify the correct questions, and a chi square analysis showed that the percentage of yes responses did not differ across conditions. It was concluded that the messages were equally clear and conveyed equivalent information, although the rhetorical version was more unexpected or deviant than the statements version.

## Dependent Variables

Subjects' attitude toward the target brand, perception of source pressure, and perception of advertising tactics were assessed as in experiment 1. However, recall was used as a measure of elaboration since it has frequently been employed in this regard (e.g., Anderson and Reder 1979), but more importantly because it has been linked to question effects in previous research (i.e., Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). The recalled information was coded into two categories: argument recall and style recall. The former dealt with recall of the main arguments contained in the message while the latter assessed recall of any style elements, such as the use of questions or assertions, tone of the ad, pictures, and so on. Two judges, blind to the hypotheses, coded the recall data (interjudge agreement was 89%; disagreements were resolved via discussion). Additionally, a two-item measure of message quality perceptions was included (Very weak/Very strong, Very inferior/Very superior),  $r = .85$ .

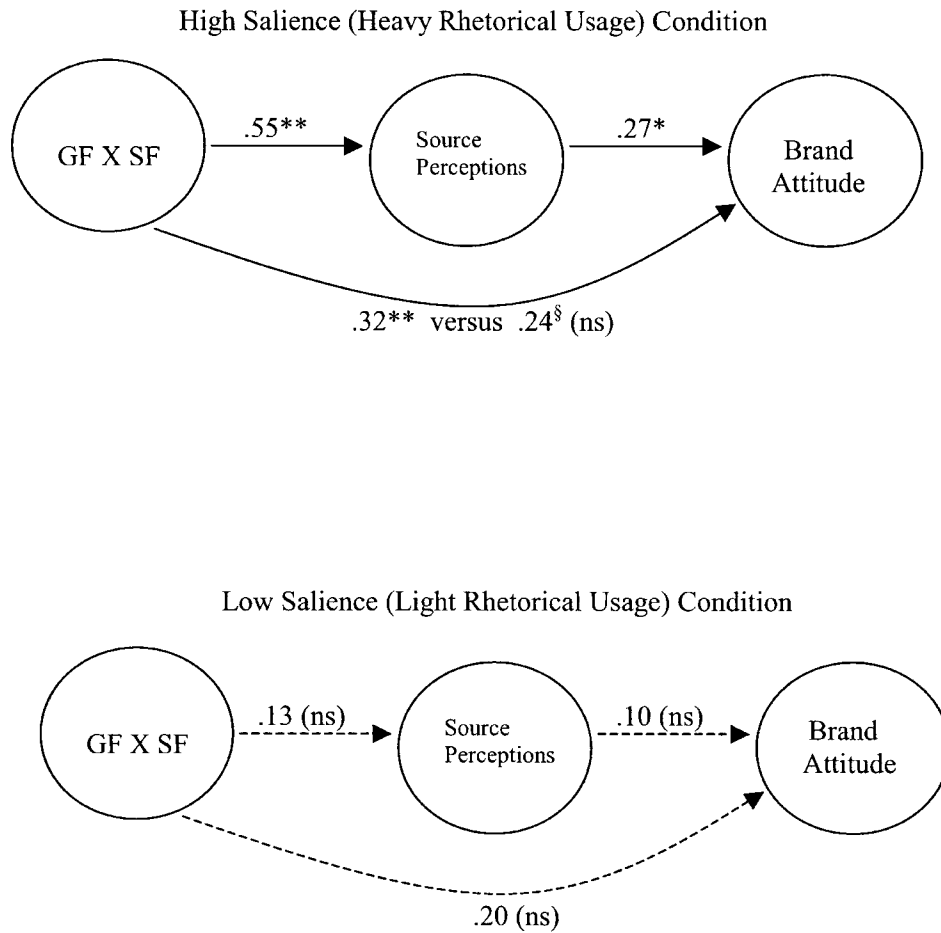
## Results

The hypotheses were stated as planned contrasts between the experimental and the baseline statements condition. The discussion of the hypotheses tests and corresponding process measures is followed by the regression analyses to test the mediational relationships implied in our model. Please refer to table 2 for the cell means and figure 3 for the regression analyses.

*Heavy Rhetorical Usage.* According to our model, heavy usage of rhetorical is likely to make the deviation more salient and hence encourage its interpretation in the light of the agent's motives. That is, compared to the baseline ad, the version with heavy rhetorical usage it is expected to lower brand attitudes when the execution is comparative but enhance them in the context of a noncomparative execution (hypothesis 3).

The planned contrasts reveal that consistent with hypothesis 3, the heavy rhetorical version reduced persuasion as com-

**FIGURE 3**  
MEDIATIONAL ANALYSES (EXPERIMENT 2)



NOTE.—GF = Grammatical Form (dummy variable: question = 1, statement = 0); SF = Source Favorability (dummy variable: noncomparative = 1, comparative = -1); \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \* =  $p < .05$ ; § = both source perceptions and GF × SF included in the regression.

pared to the baseline condition when the execution was comparative ( $M = 5.25$  vs.  $6.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, it enhanced brand attitudes when the execution was noncomparative ( $M = 6.54$  vs.  $5.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Interestingly, the advantage of the comparative execution over its noncomparative counterpart, evident in the baseline condition, was reversed when there was a heavy use of rhetoricals in the ads.

The process measures supported these conclusions. Within each grammatical form condition (rhetoricals or baseline), there was no significant difference in recall between the comparative and noncomparative ad. Therefore, comparisons were made between grammatical form conditions. Specifically, while subjects in the heavy rhetoricals conditions did not recall more message arguments than subjects in the baseline condition ( $M = 1.47$  vs.  $1.46$ ), they demonstrated a significantly higher recall of style elements ( $M = 1.45$  vs.  $.84$ ,  $F(1, 73) = 8.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The data suggest that heavy usage of rhetoricals directed the attention of subjects to the style

elements (e.g., rhetoricals), motivating their interpretation, instead of enhancing message elaboration.

Consistent with this conclusion, subjects who were exposed to the comparative execution with heavy rhetorical usage, perceived speaker pressure to be significantly higher ( $M = 5.20$  vs.  $4.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the advertising tactics to be significantly less appropriate ( $M = 3.25$  vs.  $4.47$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than the subjects who saw the same ad without rhetoricals. In contrast, subjects who saw the noncomparative execution with rhetoricals, perceived speaker pressure to be significantly lower ( $M = 3.55$  vs.  $4.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and advertising tactics to be more appropriate ( $M = 5.84$  vs.  $5.00$ ,  $p < .10$ ) than subjects exposed to the same ad with statements.

The source perceptions appeared to have influenced the subjects' subsequent processing of the ad arguments, as is indicated in the message quality perceptions. Subjects who saw the comparative ad with rhetoricals rated its message

quality as lower than those who saw the same ad with statements ( $M = 3.98$  vs.  $4.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ); while those who viewed the noncomparative ad with rhetoricals rated its quality as higher than those exposed to its statement version ( $M = 5.29$  vs.  $4.58$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

*Light Rhetorical Usage.* We hypothesized that inclusion of a rhetorical heading is likely to generate the simpler resolution of the deviation presented by the question by focusing attention on the message arguments. In the context of ads with moderate quality arguments, increased message elaboration is not anticipated to enhance brand attitudes with either of the ad executions (hypothesis 4).

Planned contrasts reveal that brand attitudes in the rhetorical heading condition were not significantly different from the baseline condition with either the comparative ( $M = 6.48$  vs.  $6.19$ ) or the noncomparative execution ( $M = 5.81$  vs.  $5.33$ ,  $p > .30$ ). It is noteworthy that the brand attitudes with the comparative execution were significantly more positive when a rhetorical heading was used than when a heavy usage of rhetoricals was employed in the ad. Next, we examine the pattern of results obtained with the process variables.

Within each grammatical form condition (rhetorical heading or baseline), there was no significant difference in recall between the comparative and noncomparative execution. The level of arguments recall was significantly higher in the rhetorical heading as compared to the baseline condition ( $M = 2.00$  vs.  $1.46$ ,  $F(1, 79) = 6.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ); however, such a difference was not obtained with style recall ( $M = .75$  vs.  $.84$ ,  $F(1, 79) = .24$ ,  $p > .60$ ). These data suggest that inclusion of rhetorical headings directed the attention of the subjects to the message arguments instead of toward style elements (e.g., rhetoricals) and are consistent with the predictions of our model.

Interestingly, however, subjects who were exposed to the comparative execution with rhetorical heading, perceived speaker pressure to be marginally higher ( $M = 5.02$  vs.  $4.26$ ,  $p < .10$ ) and the persuasion tactics to be marginally less appropriate ( $M = 4.86$  vs.  $4.47$ ,  $p < .10$ ) than the subjects who saw the same ad without a rhetorical. Such differences were not found with the noncomparative execution, where perceived speaker pressure and persuasion tactics were not significantly different in the rhetorical heading and the baseline conditions ( $p > .25$ ). Consistent with the attitude results, no significant differences emerged in perceived message quality in the comparative as well as noncomparative ad conditions (all  $p$ 's  $> .25$ ).

*Moderated Mediation Analyses.* This was conducted following experiment 1. Please refer to figure 3. The pattern of data was very consistent with the results obtained in experiment 1 and supportive of our model. Specifically, source favorability (ad execution) moderated the effect of grammatical form on the brand attitudes. The upper panel of the figure reveals that as expected, when rhetoricals were salient (heavy usage), the effect of GF on brand attitudes was moderated by SF or ad execution ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $t = 2.97$ ,

$p < .01$ ). This relationship, however, was mediated by source perceptions. Specifically, GF  $\times$  SF emerged as a significant predictor of source perceptions ( $\beta = .55$ ,  $t = 5.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and when both GF  $\times$  SF and source perceptions are used in the same regression equation to predict brand attitudes the effect of GF  $\times$  SF is no longer significant at conventional levels ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $t = 1.87$ ,  $p > .07$ ). This pattern of data supports our assertion that heavy usage of rhetoricals is likely to focus attention on source perceptions.

The lower panel of the figure reveals that such a moderated mediation is not likely when the rhetorical is utilized as a heading only (or is low in salience). Specifically, neither the moderating relationship nor the mediating relationship is significant. This supports the conclusion that under these circumstances, subjects are not likely to focus their attention on the message source. Instead, as our recall data suggest, they are likely to direct their attention to the message arguments to resolve the deviation. The results of the mediation analysis also suggest that the source-related differences found in the comparative execution with a rhetorical heading were likely based on post hoc inferences generated by these subjects.

*Additional Data Collection.* We collected additional data to validate the underlying processes in the rhetorical heading (low salience) condition. Specifically, we wanted to confirm that arguments focused elaboration of our target (moderate quality) ad was not likely to enhance or attenuate persuasion. Additional data ( $n = 22$ ) was collected from the same subject pool, although at a later time in the semester. Subjects were exposed to the comparative ad without any rhetoricals and given overt processing directions aimed at enhancing their focus on message arguments. That is, these subjects were provided with clear processing directions to induce the type of processing that we anticipated a rhetorical heading to trigger. Subjects were informed that their evaluations would play a very important role in understanding effectiveness of these ads because they were one of very few students who had been asked to provide input on them (e.g., Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). They were also instructed to read the arguments contained in the ad very carefully. Except for the change in the processing instructions, the rest of the procedure mirrored the main experiment.

The results were very consistent with those obtained in the rhetorical heading condition. Specifically, the attitudes were in the same range as those obtained in the rhetorical heading and the baseline statements conditions ( $M = 6.51$  vs.  $6.48$  vs.  $6.19$ ) and lend support to the argument that message elaboration is not likely to enhance attitudes with this message. More important, the magnitude of the arguments recall was similar to the rhetorical heading condition but higher than the baseline condition ( $M = 2.14$  vs.  $1.95$  vs.  $1.53$ ) while the style recall was similar to that obtained in these two conditions ( $M = 1.00$  vs.  $.86$  vs.  $.74$ ). This finding lends further support to the validity of argument-based processes hypothesized in the rhetorical heading condition.

## Discussion

The results of experiment 2 supported our model of rhetorical question effects and confirmed its generalizability to advertising execution decisions. We manipulated source favorability via the ad execution employed. The comparative and noncomparative executions used in our study had equivalent, although moderate message quality, but differed in their perceptions of the source. Our data reveal that consistent with expectations from past literature (e.g., Grewal et al. 1997), the comparative ad was more persuasive than the noncomparative ad, under low involvement conditions.

Heavy usage of rhetorical questions in the ads reversed this advantage of the comparative execution. Specifically, it enhanced the persuasiveness of the noncomparative ad while reducing the persuasion obtained with the comparative ad. This pattern of data is consistent with source-oriented elaboration for addressing the deviation. Additionally, the pattern of results obtained with the process measures (e.g., recall, source pressure, and appropriateness of tactics), as well as the regression analyses, supports this conclusion.

However, a light usage of rhetorical questions (i.e., a rhetorical heading) did not induce such differences in persuasion. The persuasion obtained with the comparative and noncomparative ads was similar to their baseline conditions. The process measures revealed that the underlying processes were very different with rhetorical headings: they directed the subjects' attention to message arguments for addressing the deviation. This conclusion was supported by the process measures and further validated by the additional data obtained in the high involvement comparison condition.

In contrast to our conclusions, some of the past research, which has employed heavy use of rhetorical questions in the context of student editorials, has supported the message elaboration view (e.g., Burnkrant and Howard 1984; Petty et al. 1981). It is important to note that in these studies, extent of message elaboration is inferred from the grammatical form by argument quality interaction effect on persuasion and valence of thoughts. Our research offers an interesting alternative explanation for the persuasion effects obtained in these studies. Specifically, the PK model suggests that when subjects are motivated to form an impression of the source (as we postulate with heavy usage of rhetorical questions) but do not have explicit information relating to it (in these studies, the source is typically an unknown student), they may generate source-related inferences based on the information that is available, for example, content of the message (Friestad and Wright 1994; Ratneshwar and Chaiken 1991). In other words, subjects in these studies would be expected to form opinions relating to the source or agent, based on the quality of the message arguments. Specifically, subjects exposed to the strong message would be expected to form positive-source perceptions, while those exposed to the weak message would be likely to have a negative impression of the source. Therefore, the persuasion effects with the "simpler" as well as the "broader" interpretation of rhetorical questions are expected to be the same in this context.

We conducted an additional experiment with the com-

prehensive exam messages that had been used by Swasy and Munch (1985) and Petty et al. (1981) to determine if some support for the above-stated rationale could be obtained. Consistent with the earlier research that used the comprehensive exam message, each of the six major arguments contained in the strong message was followed by a rhetorical question in the rhetorical condition and replaced with a content equivalent statement in statements condition. Thirty-four subjects were given the low involvement induction that had been employed in prior research (i.e., evaluate the quality of the editorial written by a student at a distant university). After reading the editorials, subjects were given a booklet, which included the following dependent measures assessed on nine-point scales: attitude (Very bad/Very good, Very unfavorable/Very favorable, Very undesirable/Very desirable,  $\alpha = .88$ ); attention paid to message style (Never/Frequently and No attention at all/A lot of attention,  $r = .93$ ); attention paid to message arguments (Very little attention/A lot of attention). Consistent with the findings of past research, there was a significant main effect of grammatical form (rhetorical vs. statement) on attitude ( $F(1, 32) = 8.97, p < .01$ ) with subjects being more positive in the rhetorical as compared to the statement condition ( $M = 4.56$  vs.  $2.96$ ). The attention measures revealed that rhetorical questions did not increase the level of attention directed to the message arguments ( $M = 6.28$  vs.  $5.69, F(1, 32) = .94, p = .34$ ). However, rhetorical questions did increase the level of attention directed to message style ( $M = 5.83$  vs.  $3.31, F(1, 32) = 15.25, p < .01$ ). Hence, the results obtained from this replication are consistent with those obtained in the two experiments reported in this article, and enhance the level of confidence in our model.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Rhetorical questions are used often in persuasion settings; however, past consumer research is somewhat inconclusive regarding the processes by which they influence persuasion, especially in consumer environments. Despite the inconsistent evidence, the message elaboration view has continued to dominate the literature as the accepted explanation for their effects, primarily because of the paucity of theories focusing on the message source and message style in the consumer behavior literature. The recent introduction of two such theories (the PKM and the Rhetorical Figures in Advertising Language) provides us the opportunity to examine the effects of rhetorical questions more closely and to propose an integrative model for explaining them.

Consistent with McQuarrie and Mick (1996) our model adopts the view that rhetorical questions represent an artful deviation in the style or form of the message and, therefore, symbolize a violation of expectations. When the rhetorical format is not very salient, the violation is addressed in a simple fashion with the recipient processing the message content to covertly answer the question. However, when its salience is high, the recipient attempts to infer "why" the rhetorical was included in the message, focusing attention on the persuasion agent to interpret this violation. Therefore,

the prior evaluation of the message source is expected to determine the direction of this interpretation. For instance, when this evaluation is negative, inclusion of rhetorical leads to perceptions of source pressure, conveying a less open style. This negative perception is expected to increase resistance to the message, undermining persuasion.

We tested the proposed framework using two experiments. The goal of the first experiment was to test our theoretical model in a straightforward way, manipulating the key variables independent of the ad properties. Experiment 2, on the other hand, attempted to test the model in an advertising execution context where the critical independent variables were manipulated within the context of the ad. That is, the two experiments utilized very different manipulations of the critical variables (salience and source favorability) and attempted to demonstrate support across these varied contexts, enhancing confidence in our model. Both experiments were designed to ensure that the persuasion implications of source versus message elaboration differed.

The results provided support for the postulated model. When rhetorical were not highly salient (i.e., low persuasion knowledge in experiment 1 and rhetorical heading in experiment 2), rhetorical did not lead to more persuasion than statements. However, when they were highly salient (i.e., high persuasion knowledge in experiment 1 and heavy rhetorical usage in experiment 2), rhetorical led to more unfavorable brand attitudes than statements in the unfavorable-source condition and more positive attitudes than statements in the favorable-source condition. As compared to baseline condition, this persuasion effect was accompanied by increased attention to message style (and not message content) and more source- and style-oriented cognitive responses in experiment 1 and higher recall of message style elements (but not message content) in experiment 2.

This increased source-oriented elaboration under high salience conditions also appears to have influenced the direction of subsequent message processing. Specifically, experiment 2 revealed greater resistance to the message arguments in the negative-source condition (lowered message quality perceptions) and greater willingness to accept the arguments at face value in the positive-source condition (enhanced message quality perceptions).

It is important to note that our research is the first to demonstrate source- and tactics-focused elaboration in response to heavy rhetorical usage in advertising messages. More important, it makes a contribution to the literature by proposing an integrative framework that delineates distinctly different persuasion outcomes as well as underlying processes for the various rhetorical formats: light versus heavy usage. Past literature implies that these differences in format do not matter.

Past research on rhetorical figures in advertising language (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Mothersbaugh et al. 2002) has focused primarily on the effect of headlines. In contrast, past research in the psychology literature (e.g., Burnkrant and Howard 1984; Petty et al. 1981) has used the context of editorials and essays (see Howard 1990 for exception)

and, therefore, focused on multiple inclusions of the rhetorical figure in the message. Most rhetorical figures, however, could be used both in the body as well as the headlines of the ad. Our findings urge researchers to pay attention to these differences in usage and to exercise caution in generalizing the findings obtained with one format to the other. In this regard, we note that McQuarrie and Mick (1996) classify rhetorical as simple tropes, suggesting their deviation may be comparatively lower than other complex tropes such as puns and metaphors. Therefore, one may expect that enhanced salience of the complex tropes would be more likely to shift the attention focus to its "broader" interpretation in terms of the motives of the persuasion agent, making the role of source favorability even more critical. This possibility should be examined in future research.

As such, many of the ad executions used in advertising are known to influence source perceptions, some favorably (e.g., humor, two-sided appeals) and others unfavorably (e.g., comparative advertising, fear appeal). At a general level, our research suggests that whether these negative- (positive-) source evaluations will attenuate (enhance) brand attitudes can be influenced by the salience of the rhetorical figures (e.g., questions, puns) used in the ad. Negative-source executions such as fear appeals may lose their persuasion advantage if rhetorical figures are too salient and direct attention to source perceptions, while positive-source executions may enhance their persuasive impact by increasing the salience of their rhetorical figures.

Rhetorical figures also hold the potential to direct consumers' attention to the arguments contained in the ad (under low salience). This is an especially beneficial aspect of rhetorical figures when argument quality is strong and elaborating on the message content is likely to enhance persuasion. In sum, our research suggests that by manipulating the rhetorical figures and their salience, an advertiser may be able to shift the focus of the perceiver's attention from the content to the source and vice versa, whichever is more desirable given the execution and the argument quality of the ad. Our research provides support for this framework in the context of one rhetorical figure (questions) and one ad execution (comparative vs. noncomparative). Future research should attempt to examine the generalizability of this advertising framework with different executions and rhetorical figures.

At this point it is important to mention an alternative view used to explain the effects of multiple rhetorical, namely, the judgment model (Howard 1990). According to this model, inclusion of rhetorical prompts the subjects to form judgments implied in the question; therefore, providing rhetorical after arguments will result in greater processing of message arguments than either presenting them before the arguments or both before and after the arguments. In accordance with this prediction, Howard (1990) found that multiple rhetorical only resulted in incremental processing relative to statements when they followed message arguments but not when they either preceded those arguments or both preceded and followed them. Although there are

some consistencies in the pattern of results between our studies and Howard's research, the underlying mechanisms differ substantially, as do the specifics of the stimuli used in these studies. Specifically, our results in the heavy-usage or multiple-rhetoricals condition (which included one pre- and one or two postquestions) are consistent with Howard's findings. However, it should be kept in mind that, as Howard (1990) points out, his research applies specifically to the condition in which identical questions both precede and follow message arguments. Our research did not employ identical questions. It might also be argued that our experiment two, rhetorical heading condition is similar to Howard's prequestion condition because in both studies the question preceded the argument. Although attitude enhancement was not obtained in this condition by both studies, our finding of greater recall of message arguments with questions than statements and the effects that approached significance on perceived speaker pressure are difficult to reconcile with the judgment model. We had evidence for these processes in both experiments. Importantly, while our preposition used only one rhetorical and demonstrated results consistent with past research that has examined rhetorical headings (e.g., Mothersbaugh et al. 2002), Howard's preposition utilized multiple rhetoricals. These differences suggest that future research should attempt to examine the role of other format issues that could potentially moderate the effect of rhetoricals on persuasion.

One such issue is the type or format of rhetorical. All of the rhetoricals used in our experiments correspond to the "agreement" format (e.g., Did you know that Mizuno shoes can reduce your incidence of arthritis?); none corresponded to the "doubt" format (e.g., Can Mizuno shoes reduce your incidence of arthritis?). Although, past research indicates (e.g., Howard 1990) that both forms of questions imply a given response and lead to similar persuasion outcomes, it is possible that one may be more likely to generate a covert response than the other. Future research should address this possibility.

Further, both our experiments were conducted in the print medium whereas some of the prior research on question effects (including Howard's) has made use of audio presentations. Hence, generalization to other media requires further research.

Finally, we would like to point out that the processing conditions in our experiments are likely to correspond to moderate as compared to really low involvement levels. Recent research by McQuarrie and Mick (2003) demonstrates that under really low involvement conditions, the persuasive advantage of verbal rhetorical figures such as questions may be attenuated. Additionally, the persuasion effects of rhetoricals under high involvement conditions are debatable (e.g., see Swasy and Munch 1985; Petty et al. 1981). Hence, generalization of our framework to other involvement levels requires further research.

## APPENDIX

### BODY COPY OF THE TARGET AD (EXPERIMENT 1: RHETORICALS VERSION)

#### DID YOU KNOW THAT WEARING AVANTI SHOES CAN DECREASE YOUR RISK OF ARTHRITIS?

A recent study by the Consumer Association for Shoes found that consumers can *reduce their risk of arthritis* by wearing certain shoes. Only *two* (of the 15 major brands tested in this study) tested positive for reducing arthritis risk. Avanti is one of them! That is, consumers who wear Avanti shoes today are less likely to get arthritis tomorrow.

According to experts, the high levels of shock absorption in Avanti shoes, reduce the impact on knees and ankles, lowering arthritis risk.

Avanti shoes are beneficial for you, aren't they?

For your safety and health use *Avanti Shoes*.

Our shoes have proven health benefits.

[David Glen Mick served as editor and Merrie Brucks served as associate editor for this article.]

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