Words of empowerment: (pseudo-)scientific discourse in magazine advertisements

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ABSTRACT: It is the purpose of this essay to undertake a reflection on the different strategies used in magazine advertisements in order to acquire discursive credibility, which is something advertising discourse, in general, is normally denied. After a theoretical incursion on the practice of discourse borrowing in advertising, we will concentrate on the analysis of advertising strategies which draw on (a) medicine and medical speech, (b) mathematics and mathematical jargon, and (c) environmentally-friendly discourse to enhance and substantiate their claims. In order to analyze these three different strategic options, we will be focusing on a corpus constituted by magazine ads. Although we are using a limited corpus for the present work, it would be possible to point out, in a tentative manner, to the existence of an increasing trend towards the use of science (and scientifically-grounded arguments) to confer further credibility to ads, something which can also be advantageously used as differentiation factor in a highly cluttered market, even if, very often, what is being used is merely a mimicking of the most easily recognizable discursive characteristics of such discourse, and not scientific discourse *in toto*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising, as a discursive practice, does not usually foster goodwill or credibility. The fact that it obviously intends to sell us something or is trying to make us alter a behavior of some kind is usually harmful to its credibility:

> The presence of a substantial financial investment at the sender's end of the process induces the extra motivation element in this specific communicative circuit, and, very often, this perceived premeditation taints it with a social connotation of intrusion, insincerity and undesirability amidst a world made up of other more clearly defined discourses and narratives. (Freitas, 2010: 259)

By definition, ads display asymmetrical power practices. They convey their messages by assuming an authority they do not intrinsically possess. If we look closely at their message content, we will notice that they are often outspoken, intrusive and annoying, in their attempts to make us, potential consumers, alter our behaviours. The proverbial 'visitor from Mars' would possibly find it surprising that audiences do not rebel against such discursive practices, or that advertising messages still manage to be conveyed, against all odds. As we will see, one of the ways of guaranteeing that the message is, in fact, transmitted and understood, is by using diversion strategies, i.e. by making the audience concentrate on whimsical and amusing visual and textual characteristics (in which case the message gets through edgeways); or, as in the situation we are going to discuss in more detail, to plan the message so that it presents a superficial resemblance to other - more creditable - discourses, so that some of that credibility might rub off onto the ad and its contents.

2. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

It is the purpose of this paper to identify instances of empowerment in ads by means of borrowing from discourses that are traditionally seen as authoritative by the layman. In all the examples discussed, we will notice that, regardless of the fact that they are trying to establish

a scientific ground for their claims, these ads do not let go of the seductive approach they are traditionally associated with: an ad for a facial cream will try to appeal to reason with a display of statistics and measurements; however, it will also address your emotions by showing a celebrity in her late forties or early fifties whose skin still looks perfect.

It is possible to find instances of these approaches in television and print. For the category of products we will discuss (mainly cosmetics and cars), the moving image is an added resource to maximize message conveyance. Also, on TV, the soft-spoken and self-assured voice-over effectively reinforces the authority of the sender (whoever that may be). Very often, for this kind of product, there will be a multimedia campaign, with television ads and print ads working together at different levels, in order to achieve a global effect. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will be focusing on print ads, since the immobility of all elements on the page makes it easier to identify and analyze them in detail, as well as to reproduce. Special attention will be given to elements normally present in print ads, i.e. illustration and copy. These elements will be closely scanned, using discourse analysis methods, so as to detect the specific forms these occurrences may assume.

3. DISCOURSE BORROWING PRACTICES IN ADVERTISING

Ads are borrowers. To put it more strongly, they are clever thieves. They will trespass on virtually every other discourse type, regardless of their nature, in order to lift from them any desirable characteristic they can possibly have and re-use those features for their own purposes: 'The best ads are successful bandits, raiding the borders of their accompanying discourse, but with the sense not to stay too long'. (Cook, 1992: 37). Unlike what happens with the majority of discourses, ads hide their true discursive identity, assuming (whether in earnest or mockingly) the nature of others. This happens mainly because advertising as a discourse, as we have seen, does not command much credibility or respect on the part of its intended audiences: it is often seen as a 'voice for hire' which will say anything, no matter what, to convince us to buy

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something we do not want and do not need. Therefore, instead of highlighting its discursive presence – which is often felt as intrusive and/or annoying – it is better for ads to downplay their existence in a self-effacing manner, blending in with other, more socially valued, discursive voices.

4.CREDIBLE, 'PSEUDO' SCIENTIFIC CLAIMS IN ADVERTISING

The persuading purpose inherent to advertising discourse requires a constant craving for credibility and validity devices in the building of advertising messages:

> Advertisers need, then, to somehow construct messages that 'break through' consumers' scepticism, or at least perhaps to construct scenarios in which consumers are motivated to 'take control', constituted in products they can buy. So these texts need to use strategies which allow or encourage consumers to identify with their messages, or at least to find some personal relevance in the discourses they use. (Coupland, 2007: 41)

It is only expectable that a discourse that raises suspicion concerning the truthfulness of its claims and that is laudatory by nature would require some strategies that may help promote good will towards its messages or, at least, some involvement. Frequently, thus, advertising discourse will draw on scientific discourse to ensure credibility or to make up for the audience's skepticism towards advertising, as scientific discourse, unlike advertising, seems to enjoy a reputable indisputable status in today's world.

Discourse borrowing, in addition to accounting for discursive variety, is often used as a means of validating claims. Thus, appropriating discourses that hold consensual (and ideological) perceptions in society is a shortcut for creating acceptance towards an advertising claim. As we will see from the analysis of the selected corpus, such discourses are incorporated in advertising messages and the underlying claims that the audience is expected to uphold or to go along with. The array of discourses advertising draws on is certainly vast and diversified, but an examination of adverts reveals some consistency in the use of certain discourses, which

seem to enjoy marked credibility in today's society, namely scientific discourse speech, connected with different areas, such as mathematics, medicine, among others, and the up-to-date trend of environmental discourse, often connected with positive images of nature, urging to its protection.

The cosmetic world appears to be particularly interested in validating its advertising claims by cloning scientific discourse in a rather persistent manner. The fact that beauty care products normally present themselves as solutions for healthy skin rather than being simply connected with beauty dispositions makes this argumentative strategy almost natural or unavoidable. However, other cosmetic products, which are aimed mostly at improving appearance, make use of identical discourse features, relying significantly on pseudo-scientific messages.

As far as environmentally-friendly claims are concerned, the range of products that draw on these referents for validation is astonishingly vast and diversified. The prevalent concern for the damage caused to nature, on the one hand, and the widespread belief in nature's benefits for have made this domain quite attractive for advertisers.

Advertisers soon realized the advantages of borrowing from science, and adverts on different goods, especially in the area of cosmetics have long been using technical and scientific jargon, as well as visuals, to validate their promises and claims (Myers, 1994:22). 'Scientific claims' assume different forms; according to the products involved and to the argumentative strategy; and they resort to different branches of science; from medicine to technology and the environment: they will get hold of prevailing ideological artifacts to empower advertising messages.

The claims and connotations provided by such scientific expressions and imagery are somehow alike: authority, precision, certainty, validity, among others (Evans et al, 2013), but their scientific content is rather questionable, as it is often void of scientificity. Such scientific domains are rather referent systems, in the sense adopted by Williamson (1978), as meaning conveyors in the semiotic transfer that occurs in advertising. It is rather the form than the content that mathematical formulae in advertising provide:

> In terms of the discourse of mathematics constructed, we showed that advertisements use mathematics as a referent system to associate with the product, and transfer to it, valued characteristics of mathematics like precision, rationality, and authority, rather than employing such characteristics to construct reasoned argument. (Evans et al, 2013: 23)

This holds true for the majority of claims that resort to this referent system, and even environment-friendly claims, notwithstanding possible genuine concern for ecology, comprehend subtle but complex constructs on nature and science that serve commercial and promotional intents rather than environmental causes. As argued by Chen (2016) in a thorough analysis of environmental cues in car adverts, nature and the environment are mostly symbolic systems used to support advertising strategies

> In the era of cultural branding, products are not merely sold for their utility values: rather they are increasingly represented as embodiments of positive attributes such as love, friendship, youth and so on. Driven by this trend, natural images become increasingly generic so that they are more easily associated with a variety of attributes. (Chen, 2016: 15)

This has been a recurrent strategy in products particularly amenable to this discursive strategy, such as medicines, financial products, cosmetics, among others, but has certainly extrapolated to a variety of amenities and goods that seem to benefit of a more 'scientific' approach. As claimed by Hatt and Otto (2011), these discourses underpin ideological tenets that sustain the importance of being 'smart' and making 'smart choices. Through a combination of reason-tickle argumentation, advertisers use socially credible discourses to validate their claims, making choices seem cleverly devised:

> The commodification of smartness has become possible, in part, through the creation of images and marketing copy in advertising. People are now encouraged via media to purchase products such as technology, biopharmaceuticals, and baby formula and services such as wealth management to identify with and cl The commodification of smartness has become possible, in part, through the creation of images and marketing copy in advertising. People are now encouraged via media to purchase products such as technology, biopharmaceuticals, and baby formula and

services such as wealth management to identify with and claim their own smartness
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(Hart and Otto, 2011: 522)

5. ANALYSIS OF THE *CORPUS*

In this paper, we will highlight instances where ads resort to the use of more or less overt hints of (a) medicine and medical speech, (b) mathematics and mathematical jargon and (c) environmentally-friendly forms of address, in an effort to better convince audiences of the underlying scientific basis of the arguments presented. This closeness to scientific discourse therefore corresponds to the rational part of a balanced approach which, as we have seen, never lets go of emotional seduction appeals, as if these ads were telling us that we are getting the best of both worlds.

5.1. MEDICINE AND MEDICAL SPEECH

As mentioned above, using medical terms in adverts for products connected with health is hardly surprising, though such advertising has long been questioned both on ethical grounds (see, for example, William et al, 1977, Cătoiu et al., 2013) – a debate that raises the issue of using advertising at all – and on the content value, as it is arguable whether such medical terms are actually a part of rational approaches or whether their denotational meaning content is actually irrelevant or meaningless. The extent to which medical terms are even intelligible to the average consumer is often a concern emerging from ethical approaches to this topic.

As part of a dominant scientific discourse, medical discourse has invaded advertising messages in various areas, for different products and services. Boasting indisputable authority, it has become part of advertising of certain products such as cosmetics, validating claims of scientific testing, accurate intervention, guarantee of results and curative properties. Medical and health-related terms have colonized the promotional discourse on cosmetics from the more initial

stages of marketing, in the naming of brands/lines of products and products (Clinique Even Better Clinical Dark Spot Corrector, Shiseido Ultimune Power Infusing Concentrate), to the statements used in advertising messages. Such argumentative strategy is also present in visuals, which often allude to medical staff, instruments/equipment and sceneries peculiar to the world of healthcare, and to less obvious but relevant aspects, such as white backgrounds and sceneries, evoking laboratories and the seriousness and sobriety required to validate the advertising claim (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996).

Ads for facial cosmetics have been betting for a long time on the synecdoche that a 'perfect face' equals 'beauty' and 'perfection' (Johnson, 2008: 111). These ads seem to take for granted that the concept of 'beauty' (or even 'perfection', for that matter) can be consensually defined and is consensually coveted. These concepts are gender-related and reinforced in each of us by means of successive socially-enforced layers of messages and readings. As Johnson points out:

> We do not – each of us – discover through every successive interpersonal engagement that clear skin is preferred or that wrinkles are disdained. Rather, those successive interpersonal engagements draw from multiple repetition of the same cultural message and also then contribute by repeating those established codes. (Johnson, 2008: 111)

From the moment ageing is regarded as a health problem, it has become even more justifiable for beauty care advertising to take hold of medical terms, arguments and structures. After all, such products claim to resolve and combat this 'health problem':

> Marketed products, particularly those targeting women, are largely scientized: the products are represented as pharmaceutical rather than cosmetic, with claims made about empirical verifiability, often (exclusively for the female market) making 'precise' claims about how much younger such products can make skin appear to be. Readers are persuaded that skin care is a serious business in which highly technologized products can, with care and conviction, make significant and capital-enhancing changes to facial appearance, similar to those associated with surgical intervention.(Coupland, 2007:56)

Figure 1

The advertisement for Estée Lauder's Advanced Night Repair is representative of such an approach. In addition to lexical options, such as 'DNA research', and the argumentative resource in 'New Clinical Study Proves', foreground the role of medical discourse in advertising messages. This argumentative structure completely relies on the (pseudo) scientific entourage, as it invites the reader to check what is meant by 'Proven effective all ethnicities' in 'See the results' and claiming additionally that this is 'DNA Science in Depth'. The copy strategy is combined with visual options, by using a bottle with a dropper, resembling a medicine bottle (with a pipette). In addition, the model depicted and smaller pictures at the bottom serve as evidence of the claim that it works for all ethnicities. The scientific method is thus replicated through the furnishing of evidence and testing.

Figure 2

L'Oreal's Revitalift advert expands this kind of strategy and clearly assumes ageing as a medical condition, for which L'Oreal provides the cure. From the outset – the name of the product itself – the argumentative setting lays on cosmetic surgery settings. The concept of lifting processes is taken up in the name, then, the argumentative strategy is built around this axis: 'you will see clinical results', a promise that is repeated throughout the advert, a promise to repair the consequences and symptoms of a supposed illness which ageing seems to have become. To make sure textual coherence is maintained, the remaining arguments resort to the medical lexicon, so the copy goes on referring to the composition of the product – 'Pro-Retinol A', 'Fiber restoring complex'. In this case, we witness a perfect example of targeted action against a problem, as would be expected in a medical intervention against a serious disease. Medical intervention can be seen as metaphorical for the action of the product that is being advertised or could even be directly mentioned, as several of these ads will refer to 'laser', 'botox' or 'lifting' –sometimes positioning the product as a replacement for all these procedures. As Johnson points out:

> The ads call to mind heavy construction crews, special subcontractors and an array of artisans each practicing a special trade […] The face-fixing products for this age cohort [40 +] call directly on the discourse surrounding injections and surgical face-lifts by referencing these procedures either directly and metaphorically.[…] In this way, the discourse creates a direct competition with the barrage of ads for cosmetic surgeries and injections. (Johnson, 2008: 130).

As to the illustration, it offers cohesion within the overall strategy, displaying the lines commonly used in plastic surgery to mark near-surgical procedures to validate the promise of a 'real clinical' intervention. Naturally, this apparently rational message is counterbalanced by depiction of a glamorous actress who seems to have overcome the plight of ageing signs, as the smaller pictures of a 'before and after' may demonstrate.

This approach is highly recurrent in advertising for skincare products, and some brands, such as Clinique, epitomize such a strategy by assuming from the very band name – Clinique

– pointing to the idea of a true healthcare service, an image associated with medical intervention. Indeed, Clinique presents its products as forms of treatment against the medical condition of ageing. The tripartite structure of cosmetic and skincare products' names (brand name + product range name + product name), together with its common descriptive nature, offer a possibility for a true immersion into the healthcare lexicon, ingeniously intermingled with softer appeals: Clinique Anti-Blemish Solutions All-Over Clearing Treatment, Clinique Anti--Blemish Solutions Clinical Clearing Gel, Clinique Repairwear Laser Focus Smooths, Restores, Corrects.

The advertising claim for its product Clinique Repairwear Sculpting Night cream demonstrates this argumentative route: science – treatment – medicine – medical plastic intervention – an itinerary that is markedly present from the product name to the copy.

Age defence team.

Our daily defence team help to shield skin against the visible

signs of emotional and environmental stress.

Age is thus associated with a condition, provoked by harmful (natural) agents such as gravity, thus, the brand present themselves as a 'defense team', not only protecting, but also perfecting – 'sculpting' – an underlying allusion to more invasive interventions. The picture reinforces the outcomes, by displaying a partial model face – absolutely flawless, in a white, lab-like background, and with a silver product flask, thus providing the white and silvery (from the instruments and tools) atmosphere of laboratories and surgery theatres.

Figure 3

This strategy is openly assumed by this brand, which found a formula to lure consumers into buying cleverly, but also emotionally. Therefore, it built a circular concept around which nature, science, wellbeing and beauty gravitate, thus reassuring consumers that their skin's health and appearance will be well (scientifically) taken care of:

24-hour hydration for thirsty skins.

Bursting with humectants and hyaluronic acid—nature's perfect moisture magnet.

Moisture Surge specialists keep skin plumped, dewy, glowing for a full 24 hours

This line of argumentation is likewise present in makeup advertising, where the concern for perfecting the appearance is expectedly more prominent, but where the concern for boasting a (pseudo)scientific method is maintained. The reference to 'dermatolgists' o 'Smart Colour Correcting Technology', implying an appeal to reason, blends with a tickle strategy, appealing to more emotional and aesthetical principles – such as the search for perfection. In the end, as the text shows, it is all about wellbeing – 'you look like the picture of health'.

> One day, your skin looks 'different.' Too red, sallow, dull or ashy. Our guiding dermatologists know why. Skin's undertones change. Now, Smart Colour Correcting Technology helps change them back. In seconds, you look like the picture of health. Lasting, oil-free hydration and a sunscreen mean a more flawless look tomorrow, too.

5.2. MATHEMATICS AND MATHEMATICAL JARGON

What referent system could convey more authority than mathematics? It would be difficult to think of a referent that epitomizes precision, certainty and science better that maths. In addition, it is generally accepted as a universal language, which provides it with even more appealing properties – a true resourceful source for advertisers: equations, figures, graphs, mathematical

signs provide an array of argumentative opportunities. Regardless of the consumers' awareness or understanding of all symbols and devices, and regardless of their visibility as mathematical language, they provide a shortcut to accuracy, hence, credibility. The graphic properties of mathematical signs makes them useful in advertising copy and illustration, as both codes provide adverts with 'irrefutable' scientific evidence, with an objective point of view: 'Its [mathematical discourse] objectivity derives from the fact that it does not stop at appearances, but probes beyond the surface, to deeper, more hidden levels" (Kress and van Leeuwen ,1996: 150).

Figure 4

The line graphs of the Estée Lauder ad are an example of this strategy. As noted by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 149), 'scientific and technical pictures, such as diagrams, maps and charts, usually encode an objective attitude'. Such objectivity may in turn contribute to an image of rationality and, as a result, lend credibility to the advertisement. More than expecting the consumer to decipher and analyse the information contained in the graphs about skin improvement, they support the advertising promise. Percentage figures are emphasized, thus granting authority and accuracy so that the reader is convinced of the scientifically proven properties of the product. The subject positions are well-defined: 'we' – the advertisers – the holders of knowledge, provide 'you' – the reader – with the scientific evidence that what we are claiming is true, by means of scientific jargon that 'we' – the advertisers – are aware of and master: 'The

function of mathematics, recruited for its rationality, certainty and authority, is to induce the reader to follow the advert's injunction' (Evans et al., p. 17).

Figure 5

The tables depicted in the Mitsubishi advert play an identical role. It is rather unlikely that the reader will engage in a thorough analysis of the comparative figures provided in these tables, but they do play a corroborative role anyway: transparency and accuracy are achieved. They are further maximized by the figures on other features, also provided in graph form: scientific and technical pictures, such as diagrams, maps and charts, usually encode an objective attitude ' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 149). We, the readers, are just expected to go along:

> the way readers are positioned by discourses in mathematics, the overwhelmingly simplistic representations of mathematics used, and the tendency to empty mathematical signifiers of meaningful mathematical content suggest a generally low level of mathematical demand made on readers by these adverts (Evans et al, 2014: 24)

5.3. ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY DISCOURSE

Advertisers, quick as they are in tapping into the latest trends, have long realized that environmental discourse provided a worthwhile sales pitch (Myers, 1994). In fact, green claims in ads match many people's concerns about air pollution, soil and water contamination or fear of artificially manipulated foods. As demonstrated in a study carried out by Murin et al. (2015: 261), environmental argumentation has become a crucial tool in marketing approaches:

> The objective of environmental marketing is to promote and popularize science knowledge in a way that they would result into responsible behavior (…) The environmental and ecological issues, connected with provision of services, apply qualitative criteria by commercial communication with customers.

Ads that appeal to 'green attitude' when it comes to choosing a car (ironically, one of the major polluting agents in the world – the greenest attitude would be to have no car at all!) are, effectively, playing on (a) people's fears about the environment, as well as (b) prompting them to believe that their choice, as informed individuals will make a difference in the bigger picture, i.e. these ads are empowering consumers by resorting to a Romantic metaphor where Mother Nature, with all its healing and nurturing properties, is opposed to technology which is endangering the world we live in:

> In this mythic formulation, nature is mythologized as an Edenic paradise where all living organisms exist in a state of harmony. Conversely, science and technology represent the forbidden knowledge that has cast humanity out of paradise, severed our organic connection with nature, and led to spiritual and physical distress. (Thompson, 2004: 164)
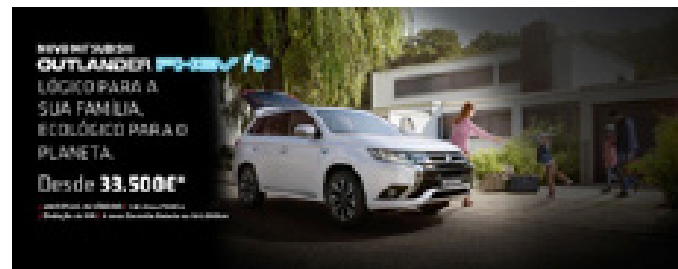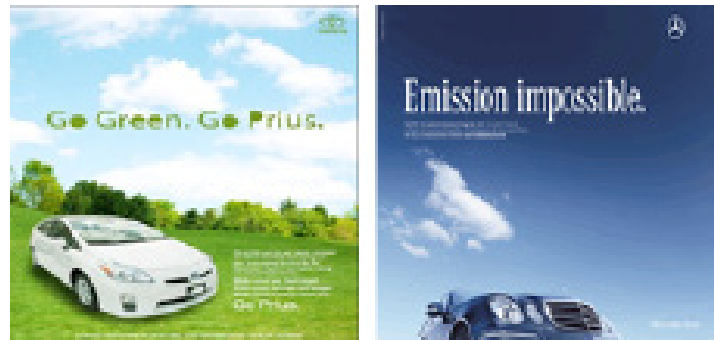

Figure 6

This Mitsubishi Outlander ad (even the name of the model is meaningful within this referent system) shows us a car that, apparently manages to reconcile opposites: it is the best your family can have, as well as the best choice for the planet. Visually, this juxtaposition is achieved with pristine, 'natural' colours, where the white of the car blends in with the green of trees and the harmonious movements of the humans depicted. Textually, this is reinforced by the word play: logical for your planet / ecological for the planet'. Clearly, this is a strategy for empowering customers that often feel helpless as to the growing destruction of the planet: whatever they do within the family sphere will be mirrored at a wider, planetary scale.

Figures 7 & 8

The 'marketing of nature' (Thompson, 2004: 164) can be a very effective tool when it comes to leading consumers to action. In ads like the ones for Prius and Mercedes, nature is portrayed as the natural setting for these cars, as if character (CAR) and scenery (NATURE) were one and the same. This identification of the two becomes effortless and is made almost obvious in visual terms: the colours are harmonic, the curves of the cars are flowing and organic. Textually, the sense of belonging is reinforced by the clever, staccato copy, which flows rhythmically as well. Therefore, what these ads are telling us is that going green is our choice; the way to go 'greener' is, clearly, to go on consuming, paradoxical as that may seem (Myers, 1994: 168).

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, we have come across a number of examples that can point out to the existence of a trend that seems to become more and more recurrent in current advertising. It is undeniable that science (or its outward characteristics) has become a powerful system affecting structures and discourses in general. Advertising, as a natural discourse borrower would necessarily come to identify such a credible-inducing source and mirror such a discursive trend. It thus borrows from science and scientific discourse its connotations: accuracy, precision, transparency and logic – all of them strong validation devices. Above all, it borrows authority, and perhaps even more importantly, power. By doing so, it defines what it is to be credible and true, but even more importantly, it determines subject positions: advertising shows up as the knowledgeable entity that assumes the position of adviser, holding the power to tell us, the consumers, what we should purchase. Therefore, we can advance the possibility that, by doing so, advertising as a discourse manages to strengthen the imbalance that it already presented: it still assumes the position of expert giving advice on a not-so-knowledgeable audience. However, by assuming the robes of science, it acquires some authority and legitimacy for assuming such a role. The fact that these three strands of scientific discourse are nowadays major staples in terms of scientificity is also very telling about the way society sees itself and where credibility lies. In a discourse where the global persuasive effect comes from a clever mix of rational and emotional arguments, there are undoubtedly advantages to be had that come from being associated with the so-called 'hard-sciences'.

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