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Renske van Enschoot, Cyrella Beckers and Margot van Mulken

Rhetorical figures in TV commercials

The occurrence of schemes and tropes and their effects on commercial likeability¹

Keywords: rhetorical figures, TV commercials, likeability, comprehensibility, content analysis, consumer response data

Studies on print advertising have demonstrated that the use of rhetorical devices enhances ad likeability (e.g., Van Enschoot, Hoeken, & Van Mulken, 2008). In this study, content analysis data are mapped to real consumer response data obtained from a sample of 199 real-life TV commercials. The content analysis showed that schemes and tropes occur in almost all TV commercials, in the verbal, visual and verbopictorial mode. Tropes occur most often. Above this, commercials with tropes are liked better than commercials with schemes and commercials with scheme-trope combinations. Perceived comprehensibility does not influence the effect of commercials with tropes and scheme-trope combinations on commercial likeability.

Introduction

A woman is blowing a bubble with her chewing gum, which then surprisingly transforms itself into an apple (see Figure 1). This is an example of a rhetorical figure, more specifically a trope. The apple is a metaphor for the chewing gum, and makes it clear that the chewing gum contains vitamin C. Other examples are phrases such as ‘Have a break, have a KitKat’, ‘Live your life to the Max’

[Pepsi Max], and ‘Every day, low pricing, high service’ [BCC electronics].

We speak of a rhetorical figure when an ad’s core message is presented in a way that artfully diverges from a straightforward manner of communicating this message (e.g., ‘Our chewing gum contains vitamin C’). Several studies indicate that the use of rhetorical figures enhances ad likeability (e.g. McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, 1999, 2003b; Van Enschoot, 2006; Van Enschoot, Hoeken, & Van Mulken, 2008). However, all of these studies are experiments, based on a limited number of carefully selected and constructed ads. Moreover, the focus of these studies is

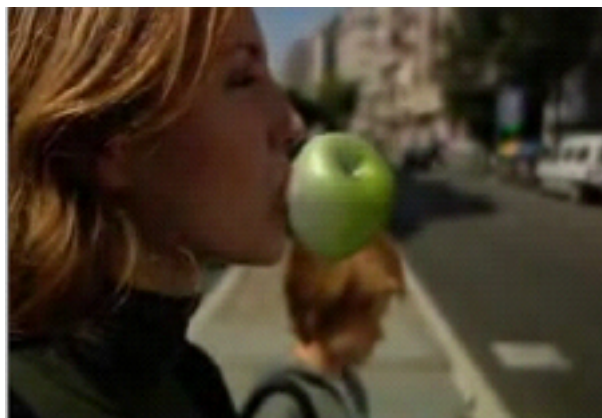


Figure 1. Screenshot Davitamon TV commercial

limited to print advertising. TV advertising has a greater impact and involves higher advertising budgets than print advertising (e.g. Advertising Association, 2007; Brand Republic, 2009). In the present study, content analysis data are mapped to real consumer response data obtained from a large sample of real-life TV commercials. Differences in commercial likeability between different types of rhetorical figures are examined.

Rhetorical figures in TV commercials

Rhetorical figures are often divided into schemes and tropes (e.g. McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, 2003a; Van Enschoot, 2006). Schemes are stylistic decorations at surface level (e.g. alliteration, rhyme, antithesis). Schemes are explicit, and need no re-interpretation. A phrase such as 'Have a break, have a KitKat' is an example, just as 'Every day, low pricing, high service' [BCC electronics]. Tropes do more than decorate an utterance. They involve a deviation from the ordinary and principal signification. Tropes function at the level of meaning. They need to be re-interpreted, as opposed to schemes. The chewing gum bubble transforming into an apple is an example of a trope. One has to infer that the chewing gum bubble can be compared to an apple, as they both contain vitamin C. The ambiguity of 'Max' ('maximum' versus 'Pepsi Max') in 'Live your life to the Max' [Pepsi Max] is another example of a trope.

Although rhetorical figures have their origin in spoken and written language (Corbett & Connors, 1999; Leech, 1966; Leigh, 1994; McQuarrie & Mick, 1996), they are not necessarily linguistic in nature. They also occur in the visual mode, as is demonstrated by studies on visual puns (Abed, 1994), visual metaphors (Forceville, 1996; Kennedy, 1982; Phillips, 2000; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004), and visual grouping, simile and oxymoron (Teng & Sun, 2002). Van Enschoot et al. (2008) have extended the analytical framework by adding verbopictorial

rhetorical figures; these figures consist of a combination of text and image (see also Forceville, 1996; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). Without either text or image, the verbopictorial rhetorical figure ceases to exist. An example can be seen in a Dutch commercial for the Monsterboard job vacancy website. The visual part shows a bank robber who first leaves the bank with a thin man as a shield against the police, but then changes his mind and returns with a very fat man. The verbal part consists of a voice-over saying: 'And this applies to jobs as well'. The visual and the verbal part together create a metaphor, communicating that Monsterboard offers you a better job (cf. the fat man) than the one you are in now (cf. the thin man). Removing either the visual or verbal part would remove the metaphor as well.

In this study, we take rhetorical figures to the next level, namely that of the moving images of TV commercials. Studies have demonstrated the occurrence of metaphors in movies (Whittock, 1990) and animations (Wells, 1998), and more specifically of schemes and tropes (Crompton & McAlea, 2000) and metaphors (Forceville, 2008) in TV commercials. An example of this is the chewing gum bubble transforming into an apple. In our typology, we also regard artfully divergent camera work (for example by using a particular camera shot or angle (see, e.g., Katz, 1991; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1992; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1994; Wang & Peracchio, 2008) as a rhetorical figure (a visual scheme). Someone can be pictured in extreme close-up, simply to capture the viewer's attention.

Up until now, the typology of schemes and tropes has only been tested in print advertising (Leigh, 1994; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002; Van Enschoot, 2006; Van Mulken, 2003). Previous content analyses of TV commercials are all qualitative, based on carefully selected examples (e.g. Crompton & McAlea, 2000; Forceville, 2008). They tell us that rhetorical figures occur, but not how often. Perhaps the multimodal nature of TV commercials

(containing not just text and image, but also visuals, written and spoken language, music, nonverbal sound, et cetera), the more extensive stylistic possibilities (in terms of montage of shots, camera angle, camera movement, et cetera), and the narrative opportunities require an adaptation of the typology.

Our first research question, therefore, is:

RQ1: To what extent do verbal, visual and verbopictorial schemes and tropes occur in TV commercials?

Effects of rhetorical figures in TV commercials

The use of rhetorical figures has been shown to be fruitful, both for the consumer and the advertiser. Rhetorical figures ensure longer retention (McQuarrie & Mick, 2003b; Tom & Eves, 1999; Toncar & Munch, 2001), and are often found more likeable than nonfiguration (e.g., McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, 1999, 2003b; Toncar & Munch, 2001; Van Enschoot, 2006). Rhetorical figures are assumed to yield pleasure of processing, resulting in a more positive attitude towards the ad (cf. Tanaka, 1992; Yus, 2003). Just like works of art, rhetorical figures can be seen as aesthetic elements (cf. Barthes, 1973) that decorate an ad (cf. Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 377). It can be pleasurable to experience an aesthetic deviation or to “solve the puzzle” (cf. Berlyne, 1971, p. 136). The advertiser has the benefit of coming across as creative and clever, which could have all kinds of positive effects, such as the realization of a more positive brand image (Brown & Stayman, 1992).

Compared to the effects of tropes, the effects of schemes are assumed to be rather straightforward. Schemes are processed more or less automatically, and do not need to be re-interpreted. The artful deviation of schemes yields pleasure of processing, resulting in a more favorable attitude towards the ad. The artful deviation of tropes yields pleasure of processing as well (cf. Tanaka, 1992; Yus, 2003), but this may be reduced by the relatively low comprehensibility of tropes. Tropes are assumed to

be more difficult to understand than schemes. Tropes demand a reinterpretation of the advertising message and knowledge of the receiver to be processed successfully (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999, 2003a). In the Davitamon commercial, the receiver has to infer that the chewing gum does not really transform itself into an apple, but that it can be compared to an apple because they both contain vitamin C. Studies by Ketelaar and Van Gisbergen (2006) and Van Mulken, Van Enschoot and Hoeken (2005) show that attitudes towards more complex ads are less favorable than towards less complex ads. This may stem from people’s lack of motivation to put energy into processing cognitively challenging ads, given that attitudes towards advertising in general tend to be relatively negative (Van den Berg, Duijnisveld, & Smit, 2004, pp. 9-11).

In this study, combinations of schemes and tropes are included as well. A study by Mothersbaugh, Huhmann and Franke (2002) has shown that the effects of ads with a combination of schemes and tropes are incremental compared to ads with schemes or tropes only.

Research questions 2 and 3 are formulated as follows:

RQ2: To what extent do TV commercials without rhetorical figures and commercials with schemes, tropes and scheme-trope combinations differ in likeability?

RQ3: To what extent does perceived comprehensibility influence the effect of tropes and scheme-trope combinations on commercial likeability?

Occurrence of schemes and tropes in TV commercials

Method

Sampling commercials

A sample of 100 Dutch and 99 British TV commercials was randomly selected from a large set of commercials

for which consumer response data had been gathered. Many different kinds of commercials were included in the corpus to reflect the commercial population as much as possible, and TV commercials for brands from various large sectors of industry were selected, including fast moving consumer goods, telecom, finance, electronics, energy, and automotive. Half of the commercials promoted products; the other half promoted services. The commercials had all been broadcasted on Dutch or British national TV from 2006 to 2009.

Procedure

The content analysis was performed by the first and second author of this article. Both raters had ample knowledge of rhetorical figures and experience in analyzing rhetorical figures in advertising. To clarify possible lack of clarities, the raters analyzed 10 British and 10 Dutch TV commercials before performing the actual content analysis. These commercials were randomly selected and differed from the commercials of the actual content analysis. After categorizing the 20 commercials, the raters discussed their categorizations, consulting with the third author if necessary. The raters examined the commercials carefully and several times before assigning a code. They paused frequently and spread the analysis over several days to keep having a fresh look at the commercials. Each coding was explained in a separate column, to clarify which specific element was meant.

The analysis was aimed at the scheme-trope distinction discussed in the previous section (for the verbal, visual and verbopictorial mode separately). A comprehensive checklist was used, accompanied by the core messages of all the commercials. These core messages were determined by the second author and agreed upon by the first and third author. The messages were needed to decide whether a commercial contained a rhetorical figure, which is defined as an artful deviation from the straightforward

way of communicating the commercial's core message. The variables in the content analysis were: verbal mode (spoken or written), visual mode, and verbopictorial mode (the codings for each variable were: 0 = no rhetorical figure present, 1 = scheme present, 2 = trope present, 99 = no [verbal/visual/verbopictorial mode] present).

As is to be expected with interpretive data, the average Cohen's Kappa scores started off relatively low. After a first rating procedure, the Cohen's Kappa scores varied from 0.23 (verbal mode) to 0.26 (verbopictorial mode) to 0.40 (visual mode) (i.e., fair agreement). In a second rating procedure, both raters were confronted with each other's interpretations, and were asked to rate to what extent they were able to agree with the other. The raters were considered to agree when they had either coded the commercial in the same way, or had indicated that they found the other rater's coding equally plausible. This resulted in a Cohen's Kappa score varying from 0.77 (verbal mode) to 0.79 (verbopictorial mode) to 0.81 (visual mode) (i.e. from substantial to almost perfect agreement). Collapsing over the verbal, visual and verbopictorial mode resulted in Cohen's Kappa scores from 0.30 in round 1 (i.e. fair agreement) to 0.78 in round 2 (i.e. substantial agreement). Further discrepancies were resolved in discussion.

Results

Table 1 shows the occurrence of schemes, tropes and combinations of schemes and tropes collapsing over the verbal, visual and verbopictorial mode.

Table 1. Occurrence of schemes and tropes collapsing over the verbal, visual and verbopictorial mode

	% (n=199)
Scheme(s) only	12.6%
Trope(s) only	59.3%
Scheme(s) and trope(s)	23.1%
Total	95.0%

On average, 95.0% of the TV commercials contained at least one rhetorical figure in the verbal, visual or verbopictorial mode. More than half of the TV commercials contained one or more tropes (and no schemes) (59.3%). 12.6% made use of one or more schemes (and no tropes), and 23.1% of the commercials used a combination of schemes and tropes, for example, a scheme in the verbal mode and a trope in the visual mode.

Table 2 shows the occurrence of rhetorical figures in the visual, verbal and verbopictorial mode of TV commercials.

Table 2. Occurrence of rhetorical figures, as a function of mode (verbal vs. visual vs. verbopictorial)

	Verbal	Visual	Verbopictorial	Total
Total (n=199)				
Scheme	17.1%	17.1%	9.5%	35.7%
Trope	22.6%	51.8%	22.1%	82.4%
Total	39.7%	68.9%	31.6%	95.0%

Visual rhetorical figures occurred most often (68.9%), especially visual tropes (51.8%). Verbal rhetorical figures occurred in 39.7% of the commercials, followed by verbopictorial rhetorical figures (31.6%). 35.7% of the commercials contained one or more schemes (whether or not in combination with a trope). 82.4% contained one or more tropes (whether or not in combination with a scheme). In all modes, and particularly in the visual mode, more tropes than schemes were found.²

Effects of rhetorical figures on commercial likeability

Method

Data collection

The data of the content analysis were linked to consumer response data. These data had been collected in various online surveys amongst approximately 100 respondents

per survey. The respondents were randomly selected from the MetrixLab large multisource recruited internet panel. They were paid for their participation. The female-male ratio was approximately 50-50% and the age was over 16. In all surveys, each commercial was placed between other commercials, to mimic a natural setting as much as possible. Respondents were given the possibility to zap the commercials if they wished. The following consumer responses were used in the present study: commercial likeability (like vs. dislike) and perceived comprehensibility of the commercial (easy vs. difficult to understand). Both types of responses were measured on 5-point semantic differential scales.

To be able to combine these consumer response data with the content analysis data, the consumers' scores were aggregated (average) scores per commercial. This is consistent with the fact that managers' decisions about commercials are based on aggregated response scores (Stewart & Furse, 2000, p. 85).

Differences in likeability between rhetorical figures categories

Univariate ANOVA's were performed over commercials, with rhetorical figure category (nonfiguration, scheme(s) only, trope(s) only, and scheme-trope combinations) as a fixed factor. Pairwise comparisons were made using a two-tailed Bonferroni test. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Commercial likeability (average scores; 1 = like; 5 = dislike), as a function of rhetorical figure category (with SDs).

	Commercial likeability
Nonfiguration	3.02 (0.48) ^{1,2}
Scheme(s) only	3.15 (0.48) ¹
Trope(s) only	2.67 (0.48) ²
Scheme(s) and trope(s)	2.92 (0.45) ¹

Note: Different superscripts indicate that the scores differ significantly from one another; equal superscripts indicate that the scores do not differ significantly from one another.

As expected, rhetorical figure category had an effect on commercial likeability ($F(3,198) = 9.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$). Commercials with tropes only were liked better ($M = 2.67$) than commercials with schemes only ($M = 3.15$) and commercials with schemes and tropes ($M = 2.92$), but they were not liked better than commercials without rhetorical figures ($M = 3.02$). The apparent difference between commercials in the nonfiguration category and the tropes category (3.02 vs. 2.67) may have failed to reach significance because of the relatively small number of stimuli in the category of nonfiguration (NF: 10 commercials vs. T: 118 commercials). Furthermore, schemes did not yield higher likeability scores than nonfiguration, despite their assumed artful deviation and accompanying pleasure of processing. The pattern even suggests that, although not significant, schemes are liked *less* than nonfiguration, and tend to be disliked instead of liked. Commercials with scheme-trope combinations do not show the expected incremental effect compared to commercials with schemes or tropes only. Instead, they were liked as much as commercials with schemes, and even less than commercials with tropes.³

Mediating role of perceived comprehensibility

The effect of tropes on commercial likeability may be influenced by the comprehensibility of the tropes. By means of suppression analysis (which is closely related to mediation analysis), we checked whether perceived comprehensibility suppresses (reduces) the effect of tropes and scheme-trope combinations on commercial likeability. We used linear regression analyses, the causal steps strategy, more specifically (Baron & Kenny (1986), adjusted by Kenny, Kashy & Bolger (1998) and Shrout & Bolger (2002)), combined with Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping method (see also Burgers (2010)).⁴

Our results showed that perceived comprehensibility did not affect the effect of tropes (and scheme-trope

combinations) on commercial likeability. Perceived comprehensibility did correlate positively with likeability (unstandardized $B = 0.46, p < .001$). Each point decrease (increase) in the comprehensibility of a commercial with a trope (or scheme-trope combination) led to a decrease (increase) in the likeability of this commercial of 0.46. However, commercials with tropes ($M = 1.99$) (and scheme-trope combinations: $M = 1.97$) were not perceived as more difficult to understand than commercials with schemes ($M = 2.04$) and commercials without rhetorical figures ($M = 1.83$) ($F(3,198) < 1$). As a matter of fact, commercials in all rhetorical figure categories were perceived as rather easy to understand.

Conclusion and discussion

Previous studies on the effects of rhetorical figures on ad likeability have all used experimental designs, based on a limited amount of carefully constructed or selected ads. Moreover, they all focused on print advertising. In this study, content analysis data were linked to consumer response data to be able to examine a large number of professionally created TV commercials, as well as a large number of viewers.

A content analysis of 199 British and Dutch TV commercials addressed our first research question about the occurrence of verbal, visual and verbopictorial schemes and tropes. Up until now, the typology of schemes and tropes has not been quantitatively tested with TV commercials. The results resemble those obtained for print advertising (Leigh, 1994; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002; Van Enschoot, 2006; Van Mulken, 2003). The TV commercials contain schemes as well as tropes, in the verbal, visual and verbopictorial mode. By far, most TV commercials contain one or more rhetorical figures. Visual tropes occur most often. Approximately half of the commercials contain a visual trope. Schemes occur less often than tropes, especially in the visual mode.

The scheme-trope distinction seems to be applicable for analyzing TV commercials. A related question was whether schemes and tropes have different effects, as is the case in print advertising. We registered possible differences in likeability between TV commercials without rhetorical figures, commercials with schemes, tropes and scheme-trope combinations (research question 2). We also examined the mediating role of perceived comprehensibility on the likeability of commercials with tropes and scheme-trope combinations (research question 3).

Tropes are not only used most often, but commercials with tropes are also liked better than commercials with schemes and commercials with scheme-trope combinations. Commercials with schemes as well as commercials with scheme-trope combinations are given relatively low likeability scores. This is in contrast with the findings of Mothersbaugh et al. (2002), who found an incremental effect of scheme-trope combinations relative to schemes and tropes only. Schemes seem to do no good to a TV commercial. Although not significant, commercials with schemes tend to be disliked rather than liked. It may be the case that the schemes in the commercials with scheme-trope combinations reduce the positive effect of the tropes.

Perceived comprehensibility was assumed to reduce the effect of tropes (and scheme-trope combinations) on commercial likeability. Tropes (and scheme-trope combinations) would be perceived as more difficult to understand than nonfiguration and schemes (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999, 2003a). Subsequently, less understandable commercials would be liked less than more understandable commercials (cf. Ketelaar & Van Gisbergen, 2006; Van Mulken et al., 2005). The results show that perceived comprehensibility did not function as a mediator, because commercials with tropes (and scheme-trope combinations) were as easy to understand as commercials with nonfiguration and commercials with schemes. On average, the commercials in all rhetorical figure

categories were easy to understand. However, likeability of commercials with tropes (and scheme-trope combinations) did increase (decrease) as comprehensibility increased (decreased). This means that understandable commercials with tropes are preferred. Tropes that are difficult to understand will probably be liked less than tropes that are easy to understand.

Limitations and future research

In this study, non-experimental market research data were used to examine a large number of professionally created commercials together with a large number of viewers. Obviously, the commercials differed in many respects. The distinctions between product and service commercials and British and Dutch commercials were covered by including them in the analyses. However, we cannot guarantee that other variables did not interfere with the outcomes of this study. Experimental studies are needed to replicate these findings, and to further investigate the assumed influence of comprehensibility on the effect of (easy versus difficult to understand) tropes on likeability.

The findings presented constitute only a fraction of the insights that can be retrieved from this rich consumer response data set. Questions concerning, for example, the retention of ads with rhetorical figures (e.g., Tom & Eves, 1999; Toncar & Munch, 2001) still need answering. The typology used may also be extended. This study shows that the scheme-trope distinction is applicable to TV commercials, but this distinction is, of course, rather general, and leaves many interesting aspects of the specific structure of TV commercials aside. The multimodal nature of TV commercials invites an extension. Elements such as music or manner of speech could, for example, be included. A commercial may be artfully deviant just because of the striking music used, or because the voice-over is whispering instead of

speaking aloud. Furthermore, the temporal organization of TV commercials can be explored more, as well as their narrative structure. The effect of a rhetorical figure may, for example, differ depending on the moment at which it is presented (cf. Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, & Hoyer, 2004). Moreover, a rhetorical figure can be interwoven in the commercial, or can be found just at the beginning or end of the commercial. A rhetorical figure that is fully integrated in a commercial is more prominent and is likely to differ in effect from a rhetorical figure that is presented at one specific moment in the commercial. These kinds of elements are ignored in the current typology. More generally, the results regarding comprehensibility indicate that a more insightful classification of the trope category is desirable. Which characteristics of a trope make it more or less cognitively challenging? The level of certainty about the solution of the trope may, for example, play a role. The solution may or may not be strongly implicated or mentioned in the utterance (cf. Phillips, 2000; Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]). Note, of course, that extending this typology one way or another would also lead to more complications in applying this typology to these interpretive data.

To conclude, this study has taken research on rhetorical figures in advertising up to the next level, namely that of the moving images of TV commercials. Analyses of real-life commercials and responses of real-life people have demonstrated how different rhetorical figures affect commercial likeability.

Notes

1. We thank market research agency MetrixLab for supplying the TV commercials and consumer response data. The first author participated in developing the survey used to gather the data. Furthermore, we thank two anonymous reviewers, Christian Burgers, Hans Hoeken and Peter Jan Schellens for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this article.

2. There was no difference in the use of rhetorical figures between product and service commercials (visual mode: $X^2(2) = 2.80, p = .25$, verbal mode: $X^2(2) = 0.61, p = .74$, verbopictorial mode: $X^2(2) = 3.12, p = .21$, modes combined (as in Table 1): $X^2(3) = 3.06, p = .38$) nor between the British and Dutch commercials (visual mode: $X^2(2) = 3.12, p = .21$, verbal mode: $X^2(2) = 1.69, p = .43$, verbopictorial mode: $X^2(2) = 0.82, p = .66$, modes combined: $X^2(3) = 1.94, p = .59$).

3. No interaction effects were found of rhetorical figure category with type of commercial ($F(3,198) = 1.98, p = .12$) and of rhetorical figure category with country ($F(3,198) < 1$).

4. Further details about the suppression analyses can be obtained from the first author.

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About the authors

Renske van Enschoot is an assistant professor in the department of Dutch Language and Culture at the Radboud University, Nijmegen. Her research focuses on rhetorical figures in advertising and health communication. She also published on the role of argument quality in the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Email: r.vanenschoot@let.ru.nl



Cyrella Beckers is an account manager at Ambaum Media and Communication. In this company, she works on strategical, tactical and operational communication issues of organizations. Her Master's thesis focused on rhetorical figures in TV commercials.

Email: cyrellabeckers@hotmail.com



Margot van Mulken is a professor in the department of Business Communication Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Her principal interests lie within the field of intercultural communication, rhetoric, and advertising.

Email: m.v.mulken@let.ru.nl

Margot van Mulken's photo by Gerard Verschooten



Contact

Renske van Enschoot
Radboud University
PO BOX 9103
6500 HD NIJMEGEN
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 24 3612898

Cyrella Beckers
Ambaum Media & Communicatie
Waterloostraat 16
5935 BG STEYL
The NETHERLANDS
Tel. +31 77 3260520

Margot van Mulken
Radboud University
PO BOX 9103
6500 HD NIJMEGEN
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 24 3612923