

Applying metaphor theory to social advertising: A real world case study

Samantha, Ford
University of Birmingham
sxf484@student.bham.ac.uk

Jeannette, Littlemore
University of Birmingham
j.m.littlemore@bham.ac.uk

Paula, Pérez-Sobrino
University of La Rioja
paula.perez@unirioja.es

Despite the interest in metaphor in advertising (e.g. Forceville, 1996; Pérez-Sobrino, 2017; Pérez-Sobrino, Littlemore, & Houghton, 2018), there has been little mention of metaphor studies that involve collaboration between academics and practitioners in this creative field. Indeed, many studies in this area ask advertising professionals their opinions of the results post-hoc. In this presentation, we report a study testing metaphor use in a sexual health campaign advertising an STI home-testing kit for Umbrella Health (an NHS trust), co-created by Big Cat Agency and the EMMA project (Exploring Multimodal Metaphor in Advertising). The study aimed to investigate the effectiveness (e.g. consumer understanding, appeal, and reported engagement) of the campaign when metaphor was used as an innuendo for places in Birmingham, United Kingdom (e.g. *Popping in his Mailbox? Exploring her Botanical Gardens?*).

With a regional Qualtrics survey, we examined whether participant responses varied according to: (a) participant age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, and (b) the figurative nature of twelve campaign adverts, in order to establish which figurative factors shape the extent to which consumers report that they find the adverts funny, appealing, and say they would engage with the campaign's call to action (i.e. to order an STI kit) or its presence on social media. The figurative nature of the adverts varied three-way: (1) the level of conceptual work required to decode the adverts' meaning; (2) the progression of the sexual conquest narrative (i.e. where in the progression of the sexual act from dating to sexual intercourse was referred to via metaphor); (3) the level of creativity (conventional to novel) in the adverts.

The results showed that participants aged 51 or more years were less likely to find the campaign appealing, and engage on social media than younger age groups (18-35 years). This may be due to the generational taboo of talking about sexual health. Participants' gender, sexuality, and ethnicity did not affect their responses to the adverts but produced different interpretations of its messages. Overall, adverts that required higher levels of conceptual work, used a metaphor for the middle or 'active part' of the sexual conquest narrative, and had creative rather than conventional metaphors were perceived as more humorous and appealing. Moreover, adverts that contained a metaphor referring to the 'active' part of the sexual conquest narrative, and involved creative metaphor, were more likely to provoke a call to action and increased social media engagement.

These findings are in line with previous studies showing that metaphors most likely to evoke sensorimotor responses tend to be those that are novel for the reader (Cacciari et al., 2011; Desai et al., 2011; Cardillo et al., 2012), aesthetically pleasing (Citron & Zervos, 2018), presented from the reader's perspective (Blomberg & Zlatev, 2015), used in emotionally-charged contexts (Samur et al., 2015), and metaphors that express motion (Huette et al, 2014; Woodin et al., under review; see Littlemore, 2019).

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