

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

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. Studies often ask advertising professionals their opinions of the results post-hoc. In this presentation, we report a study testing metaphor use in a sexual health awareness campaign advertising an STI home-testing kit for Umbrella Health (an NHS trust). The campaign was co-created by Big Cat Advertising Agency and the authors in association with the EMMA project (Exploring Multimodal Metaphor in Advertising). The study aimed to investigate the effectiveness (e.g. consumer understanding, appeal, and intentional engagement) of the campaign when metaphors were used as an innuendo for places in Birmingham, United Kingdom (e.g. *Popping in his Mailbox? Exploring her Botanical Gardens?*).

A regional survey examined participant response variation according to: participant age, gender, and education, and the figurative nature of 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 on social media and its call to action (i.e. to order an STI kit). The figurative nature of the adverts varied three-way: (1) the grammatical formulation of the metaphor; (2) the position of the metaphor in a sexual scenario (from dating to sexual intercourse to having the symptoms of an STI); and (3) the level of creativity (conventional to novel) in the adverts.

The results showed that older participants (51+ years) were less likely to find the campaign appealing and engaging online than younger age groups (18-35 years). This may be due to the generational taboo of talking about sexual health. Males were more likely to find the middle of the sexual scenario humorous than females, in line with studies that have shown males appreciate sexual content in advertising more so than females (Prendergast & Hwa, 2003; Pope et al., 2004; Wirtz et al., 2017). Participants' education did not affect their responses to the adverts but produced different interpretations of its messages. Overall, adverts that used metaphor in a formulaic grammatical pattern, in the middle, 'active part' of the sexual scenario, and were creative rather than conventional were perceived as more humorous and appealing and elicited more social media engagement. Moreover, adverts with the 'active' part of the sexual scenario were more likely to provoke participant intention to fulfil the call to action.

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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