

Figurative Language in Social Media Captions for Clothing Advertisements

Kamonthip Pho-Klang

Center for International Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand
Email: Kamonthipp@g.swu.ac.th

Received September 20, 2020 / Revised October 15, 2020 / Accepted October 22, 2020 /
Publish Online November 3, 2020

Abstract

Social media advertising is a means of online communication to inform prospect customers about products in a verbally and visually persuasive way. Since language has a powerful influence over people and their behavior, social media captions play an important role in the world of digital marketing. This study aimed to explore types of figurative language most frequently employed in social media captions for clothing advertisements. Lexical and syntactic analysis were also conducted to investigate how the figurative language was applied in captions of clothing advertisements and for what functions. The sample group included 100 captions from Instagram and Facebook sites of five fashion brands: H&M, UNIQLO, Forever 21, Topshop, and Mango, out of which 20 were taken from each brand. Results revealed that alliteration was the most frequently used, followed by imagery, and assonance. As for its functions, the figurative device was employed in advertising captions mainly for describing product features, illustrating the model's look, action or feeling, and emphasizing product quality.

Keywords: *figurative language, social media captions, clothing advertisements*

1. Introduction

In this highly competitive world, marketers and advertisers strive to make their products or services different from competitors and persuade consumers that their items are worth buying. For advertisers, several channels are available to place their advertisements and catch the eyes of potential customers. Now that the focus on mobile and digital advertising is growing at a rapid rate, social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram have become essential tools since they can establish a connection between marketers and consumers, and offer interactivity to the users.

Inspired by the power of social media to connect people in virtual relationships, advertisers have sought ways to get involved in online communities and to leverage the “likes”, “shares”, and “comments” for the highest profits and reputation of their brands (Andriole, 2010). In order to influence consumers' perception of the brand and get people to recognize the products, advertisements rely almost entirely on the use of impactful language. Positive adjectives, euphonious and rhythmical structures, as well as figurative language are consequently applied to make the language persuasive and emotionally appealing.

Employing figurative language in advertisements is widely accepted among advertisers as it has the power to illustrate images and arouse consumers' interest in the products. As defined by several scholars (e.g. Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Supasamout, 2006), figurative language means the use of words or phrases to imply another meaning which is beyond the literal interpretation. This rhetorical device can make an advertisement memorable at a glance, and clarify its concept by explaining what it does not include.

With catchy lexical and linguistic structures, figurative speech is said to be a language of imagination that produces a pleasurable degree of arousal and helps to convey meaning in an artistic manner. It may violate grammatical rules or imaginatively create new words to fulfill emotional needs and emphasize the uniqueness of the products. (Gibbs & Turner, 1997; Stern, 1987)

As for social media advertising especially in the fashion industry, pictures seem to be the simplest way to grab viewers' interest. However, creative captions are also required to make products stand out from the crowd and keep consumers' attention. This supports Nualpoh's (2017) idea that the language used in clothing advertisements can influence customers to make a purchase decision, especially the employment of

descriptive words or adjectives which helps to convey stylish function and attractive designs. Captions are not only explanations for the posts, but also opportunities to describe a story, shine a light on the best qualities of products, and show the brand identity. Effective advertising captions will lead to more engagement, enhance the brand image, and compel people to take action. The use of figurative speech in social media advertising language, as a consequence, is worth studying for the benefits of advertisers to see how this rhetorical device is used in a marketing context and for English language learners to see how this linguistic component is applied for professional purposes in this digital world.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Advertisement

Advertisement is an impersonal way of communication through various paid media. Usually supported by identified sponsors, it persuades audience to buy products and makes the items stand out in consumers' mind (Bovee, Thill & Dovel, 1995; Moriarty, 1997).

Kotler (2003) explained main functions of advertising in four aspects as follows;

1) Economic function

Advertising creates the need for a product or service and arouses consumers' interest. It provides consumers with information about products or services, and thus helps them to make the best purchase decision.

2) Social function

Advertising content contributes to the formation of consciousness and certain standards of thinking and social behavior of the people in a society. When the advertisement is addressed to consumers, besides the promotion of an item advertised, it helps to form ideological values of the society and has an effect on the character of social relations.

3) Marketing function

Advertising is a key element in the promotion of products or services with a major aim for customer satisfaction. It creates a demand for the products, stimulates sales, and increases the volume of profits for a certain period of time.

4) Communicating function

Advertising is one of the specific forms of communication designed to connect advertisers and consumers. It not only informs customers about products or services, but at the same time transforms the content in a certain way that becomes associated in customers' mind with factual information about the qualities of the items advertised.

By taking into account the forms and mediums of advertising, Cook (2001) and Hermerén (1999) classified advertisements into print, broadcast, outdoor, and digital advertising. As for the digital advertising which is the main focus of this study, it is a method of delivering persuasive content to customers through online and digital channels. One major benefit of the digital advertising is its unlimited coverage of time and geographical areas. It can help advertisers to spend less investment on advertising but reach global audience in a very short time frame.

2.2 Figurative Language

Figurative language is a non-literal and creative statement applied to arouse readers' imagination and visualization towards the things described (Laosrirattanachai, 2017). It is employed to enhance the persuasive quality of advertising, grasp people's attention, and increase memorization.

Phillips and McQuarrie (2002) classified figurative language in advertising into schemes and tropes. Schemes emphasize the use of words differing from typical language structures in terms of phonological and syntactic features, while tropes focus on the deviation of text meaning or semantic features. Some examples of schematic figurative language are alliteration, rhyme and assonance while those of tropic figures are hyperbole, simile, imagery, and personification.

Though categories of figurative language have been discussed differently in several studies, some certain types are frequently mentioned. The researcher will focus on commonly found types of figurative language which will be discussed in the next sections as relevant research and results of this study.

Table 1 Types of figurative language and definition

Types of Figurative Language	Definition	Examples
Schemes		
Alliteration	The repetition of initial consonant sounds in a phrase or sentence	<i>Girly grunge</i> <i>Puffy and peachy to perfection</i>
Rhyme	The repetition of vowels and final consonants, typically at the ends of words, with different beginning consonants	<i>Crazy Daisy</i> <i>Fun in the sun</i>
Assonance	The repetition of vowel sounds followed by different consonants in a phrase or sentence	<i>Soaking up all that glow</i> <i>Walk along the seashore</i>
Repetition	The repetition of words	<i>Very special pieces for every special occasion</i> <i>A banana dress for when you're baking banana bread</i>
Parison	The parallelism between successive phrases which often involves the use of one or more embedded repeated words	<i>You never had it so easy. Your tires never had it so good.</i> <i>The quality you need. The price you want.</i>
Anaphora	The repetition of words at the beginning of phrases	<i>Stay healthy, Stay comfy</i>
Epistrophe	The repetition of words at the end of phrases	<i>Look good, feel good</i>
Tropes		
Metaphor	An implied or hidden comparison between two unrelated things that share some common characteristics	<i>Spread your wings in our most-loved butterfly sweatshirt.</i> <i>The ultimate trench coat has landed.</i> <i>Get yours quick.</i>
Simile	A comparison between two different things with linking words such as "like" or "as"	<i>As beautiful as a painting</i> <i>A little outfit that looks like sunshine</i>
Imagery	The representation of something in a way that appeals to physical senses (visual imagery, auditory imagery, olfactory imagery, gustatory imagery, and tactile imagery)	<i>When the evening turns to night – dress up to dazzle in our new limited occasionwear! (visual imagery)</i> <i>Make great strides in your wellness routine in supportive, stretchy styles that move with you. (textile imagery)</i>
Hyperbole	Exaggerated speech beyond reality to emphasize or magnify the meaning	<i>An accessory can level up your look in the blink of an eye</i>
Personification	To give an inanimate object human characteristics	<i>The sun is calling.</i> <i>When your keys are playing hide and seek</i>
Allusion	An implied or indirect reference to an outside source	<i>Mirror, mirror on the wall... can you tell we love flowers?</i> (Similar to a quote from "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" - "Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?")
Metonymy	To replace the name of one thing with the name of something else closely associated with it	<i>The pen is mightier than the sword.</i>
Rhetorical Question	A question which requires no answer, but is intended to make a point or persuade readers	<i>Which color is calling you today?</i>
Pun	a play on words with similar or identical sounds but different meanings	<i>Happy Fry-Day</i> <i>Haier and higher</i>

2.3 Related research

Several scholars have conducted studies to explore the use of figurative language in advertisements. Their findings are to be discussed as follows:

Laosrirattanachai (2017) analyzed the use of figurative language in print accommodation advertising from three travel magazines in the American edition: *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Luxury Travel Advisor*, and *Travel + Leisure*. Results demonstrated that the most frequently found genres in advertising headlines were alliteration, repetition and parallelism whereas in the body copy, alliteration, assonance and hyperbole were intensively applied. Another research focusing on the use of figurative language in magazine advertisements was conducted by Pathumratanathan and Tapinta (2012), which investigated the employment of figurative language in *Sawasdee* and *Fah Thai* in-flight magazines and revealed that alliteration, metaphor, parison, personification, and rhetorical questions were five common types. When comparing among these five types of figurative language, the most popular ones for writing advertising headlines and body texts were alliteration and metaphor, whereas alliteration and parison seemed to be fashionable for creating slogans.

Pathumratanathan and Tapinta (2012) also concluded that figurative language in headlines could gain more attention from readers, while in body texts it could make readers know, understand, and imagine about the selling points of products and stimulate purchasing decisions. As for advertising slogans, the figurative language was mentioned as making slogans more memorable.

Alliteration was also mentioned as the most frequently applied figurative speech in the study of Zakiyah (2015) who explored figurative language in advertising taglines of *Indonesia Tatler magazines* (August 2013 edition). Other than alliteration, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, and climax were reported as the most preferred to create interesting meaning and reflect characteristics of human beings.

As for cosmetics advertisements, Supasamout (2006) explored the employment of figurative language in lipstick advertisements of two leading English women's magazines in Thailand named *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan*. Findings showed that alliteration was employed at the highest number, followed by rhyme, metaphor and imagery respectively. It was also demonstrated that alliteration and rhyme were used mostly to describe lipstick colors, while metaphor was employed to illustrate lipstick characteristics and imagery to reflect the lipstick shine.

Not only in magazine advertisements, but figurative language was also applied in newspaper advertisements and according to Fitratunnas (2017), alliteration, metonymy, metaphor, simile and hyperbole were found as the most frequently used figurative speech in *Jakarta Post* newspaper with their major function being to attract readers' attention.

From all of the research findings above, some certain types of figurative language were considered as the most preferred among advertisers to arouse readers' attention and make the advertisements more memorable. However, an inadequate number of studies was noticed regarding the employment of figurative speech in social media, especially advertising captions.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to investigate types of figurative language frequently used in social media advertising captions for clothing brands and examine functions of figurative language in social media captions.

4. Research Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, sampled advertising captions were purposively selected from the Instagram and Facebook sites of five fashion brands: H&M, Uniqlo, Mango, Forever 21, and Topshop, under the criteria that the captions must contain figurative language and be published from January - May 2020. The entire sample group was 100 captions, 20 of which were from each of the five selected brands (10 Instagram posts and 10 Facebook posts). Obtained data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics in terms of numbers and percentages. Lexical and syntactic analysis approaches were also adopted as well as the identification of figurative language functions in the advertising captions.

5. Results

Out of 100 advertising captions from Instagram and Facebook sites of five selected fashion brands, 213 patterns of figurative speech were found and could be categorized into 14 types, some of which were analyzed as belonging to more than one type. The most frequently applied type of figurative language was alliteration (24.88 %), followed by imagery (22.06%) and assonance (10.33%). The fourth and fifth ranks were personification (9.39%) and simile (7.04%) respectively. Other types of figurative language employed were shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Types of figurative language frequently-applied in advertising captions

	Types of Figurative Language	Number	Percentage
1	Alliteration	53	24.88
2	Imagery	47	22.06
3	Assonance	22	10.33
4	Personification	20	9.39
5	Simile	15	7.04
6	Rhyme	14	6.57
7	Rhetorical Question	10	4.69
8	Hyperbole	9	4.23
9	Repetition	8	3.75
10	Metaphor	8	3.75
11	Anaphora	3	1.41
12	Pun	2	0.94
13	Allusion	1	0.47
14	Epistrophe	1	0.47
	Total	213	100

With respect to functions of figurative language in advertising captions, according to the findings, the figurative speech was applied mostly for describing product features such as types of clothes, patterns, colors, and materials, followed by demonstrating models' look, action, or feeling under presented outfits, and product quality as shown in Table 3. Clothing styles and environmental surroundings were also illustrated in captions through the use of figurative language.

Table 3 Functions of figurative language in advertising captions

Functions		Describing clothing features	Describing models in presented outfits	Describing quality of clothes	Describing styles of clothes	Describing surroundings	Others (call to action, introducing clothes)
Types of Figurative Language							
1	Alliteration	12	11	11	10	5	3
2	Imagery	25	4	10	3	4	
3	Assonance	7	5	4	5	-	1
4	Personification	8	1	3	1	6	1
5	Simile	5	3	2	5	-	
6	Rhyme	3	7	2	3	-	
7	Rhetorical Question	4	1	2	1	1	1
8	Hyperbole	4	1	1	2	1	
9	Repetition	3	1	1		1	2
10	Metaphor	7	1	-			
11	Anaphora	-	2	1			
12	Pun	1	1	-			
13	Allusion	1		-			
14	Epistrophe	-	1	-			
	Total	80	39	37	30	18	8

6. Discussion

Figurative language is a rhetorical device commonly applied in a wide variety of product advertisements including in the fashion industry as it helps to make the brands memorable and highlights the advertised products in a positive way. This study explored types of figurative speech applied in social media captions for clothing advertisements. Alliteration, imagery, and assonance were found as being employed the most.

As for alliteration, according to the results, it was the most frequently used type of figurative language in captions which was consistent with several studies (Laosrirattanachai, 2017; Pathumratanathan & Tapinta, 2012; Zakiyah, 2015; Supasamout, 2006). With this rhetorical device, initial consonants of words are repeated to make captions attractive and memorable such as *"Much-missed summery feelings"*, *"Swing into spring style"*, and *"Keep it casual"*. In terms of syntactic features, most alliterative patterns found in the obtained data were phrases comprising adjectives and nouns, such as *"The pop of purple"*, *"Pretty in pleats"*, *"Simple, stress-free Sunday style"*, and *"Puffy and peachy to perfection"*, or the repetition of the first consonant sounds of two adjectives, such as *"Free and flowy"*, *"Gorgeous gray"*, and *"Snug and stylish"*.

Another type of figurative language found as the second most widely used was imagery. Results showed that visual and tactile imagery were mainly used to describe clothing features, surroundings, and the model's look in the presented outfits, which supported Supasamout's (2006) finding that imagery was the fourth most preferred type of figurative language in lipstick advertisements and mainly employed to reflect the lipstick shine. Some examples of visual imagery in the obtained data were *"A burst of light and colors arises now"* or *"Sunny skies, floral prints and denim shorts are my kinda days"* and those of tactile imagery reflecting sensory feeling of touch and texture included *"Relax your mood and spend good time in softness and comfort"* or *"Go for loose and relaxed silhouettes and comfort will be guaranteed"*.

Interestingly, many imagerial phrases were found as being employed in combination with other types of figurative language to increase eye-catching effects and enhance emotional appeals. Some phrases reflected imagery with the repetition of consonant or vowel sounds such as *"Soaking all that glow"* (imagery and assonance) or *"Stay warm and comfy every cozy Sunday"* (imagery, assonance, and rhyme). Some captions with imagerial effects were also stated through personification such as *"This animal flippy dress is speaking to our wild side"* and *"Supportive, stretchy styles that move with you"*.

The third most common type of figurative language was assonance which was in concord with Laosrirattanachai's (2017) finding that assonance was intensively applied in the body copy part of travel magazine advertisements. As for this study, many captions were written with the repetition of vowel sounds in order to make the conveyed information attractive to readers. This vowel harmony was seen in content words such as nouns, verbs, or adjectives to create a euphonious effect; for example, *"Denim never fails"*, *"Stay warm and comfy"* or *"Today's theme is green"*.

As demonstrated by the results that alliteration and assonance were revealed as the most and the third most preferred types of figurative language in social media captions, it can be said that phonological characteristics through the repetition of consonant or vowel sounds are preferred in advertising language. The finding supported Phillips and McQuarrie's (2002) claim that advertisements should be euphonious, rhythmical and alliterative. To shed light on this, Vasiloaia (2009) explained that advertising language can be compared to poetic texts in the way that mnemonic devices (alliteration, rhyme, assonance, etc.) are constantly applied to make readers remember and later recall the texts. These sound techniques resonate in customers' minds, contributing to the attraction of texts and enhancing better memorization.

With respect to lexical and syntactical analysis, most captions with figurative language contain short and simple words of one or two syllables in combination with hashtags and emoticons to briefly present the products in an attractive and eye-catching way. In support of this, Supasamout (2006) explained that the language of advertising should be simple and informal with oral language to make the advertisements memorable and easy to understand. Little space and limited number of characters are important factors underlying this; as shown in the findings some contractions are used to cut short the length of captions such as *"vacay"* for *"vacation"* and *"co-ords"* for *"coordinates"*. Also, most Instagram and Facebook users prefer shorter texts on their feeds since they are on the visual platform of pictures and

videos, not endless posts. Primarily based upon photos and well-crafted captions, a simple but appealing message is possibly the only way to make a significant impact on this platform of social media advertising.

In terms of the pronoun use, first and second person pronouns were commonly employed to create a feeling of casual acquaintances like a conversation between friends, not sellers and customers. Call to action was mainly seen with the use of “you” and “your” to persuade readers to do as suggested.

<i>Summer's on the horizon – make sure your wardrobe is ready for warmer weather.</i>	(imagery, alliteration)
<i>Get the best from your wardrobe with these timeless garments you'll never get tired of.</i>	(assonance / hyperbole)
<i>Choose your pattern to change your mood every day</i>	(alliteration)

When taking into consideration the two main categories of figurative language as described by Phillips and McQuarrie (2002), schematic figurative language was shown in this study as more frequently employed than the tropic ones. Phonological features under schematic patterns of figurative speech such as alliteration and assonance tend to be preferred to attract people's interest and enhance their memorization, as supplementary to the tropic figurative speech such as imagery, personification, and simile which creates mental images and persuade readers to buy the products.

Apart from the study of most frequently used types of figurative speech, content analysis was also applied to explore functions of figurative speech in advertising captions. Results revealed that figurative language was employed mostly for describing product features, illustrating the model's look, action or feeling, and emphasizing product quality. Clothing styles and environmental surroundings were also described in captions through the use of figurative language.

As for the description of product features, figurative speech was mainly used for providing details about types of clothes, patterns, colors, and materials. Sample phrases and sentences included “*A tee to match your taste*” (alliteration describing clothing type), “*Candy color co-ords*” (alliteration describing clothing type and color), “*Denim, Then & Now*” (assonance describing clothing material), and “*Utility meets graphic print: a love story*” (personification describing clothing pattern).

Since a main function of social media captions was to illustrate photos, figurative language was also employed to help describing the model's look or action while wearing the outfits advertised. Present participial phrases and imperatives were highly used for this function such as “*Waving hello to the weekend*” (alliteration), “*Skating on sunshine*” (alliteration), “*Rise & shine*” (assonance and imagery), and “*Stay hydrated*” (assonance). As for the imperatives, this type of sentence can generate a sense of demanding and influence the readers' behavior; for example, “*Dress up to dazzle*”, and “*Choose your pattern to change your mood every day*”.

Another function of figurative language in captions was to describe the quality of clothes. Action verbs are commonly used to demonstrate what the outfit can contribute to; for example, “*New knit to beat the cold*” (alliteration), “*AIRism fabric that wicks away sweat while maintaining a lightweight and soft feel*” (alliteration), and “*Quality that moves with you*” (personification). The figurative language was also applied to present clothing styles which was ranked as the fourth most common function in the captions. Some examples included “*Girly grunge*” (alliteration), “*Effortless femininity perfect*” (alliteration), and “*Swing into spring style*” (alliteration). Surroundings were also described in advertising captions through the employment of figurative language to add more feelings to the posts such as “*Sunny skies*” (alliteration and imagery), “*Warmer weather*” (alliteration and imagery), and “*The sun is calling*” (personification).

7. Conclusion

Captions play an important role in social media fashion advertisements since they can attract customers to focus on not only models in the pictures but also clothing products they are wearing. In order to arouse social media users' interest, the language in captions should be persuasive and memorable. Figurative language seems to be another suggested component of advertising captions, since it can create emotional appeals and describe how impressive models and presented outfits. Schematic and tropic types of

figurative speech should be applied in complement with each other in order to create not only persuasive but also impressive language patterns for the highest effectiveness of fashion advertisements.

8. Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The emergence of social media has provided a new dimension to advertising and created new opportunities for increasing the brand awareness. This study indicates significant implications for companies especially clothing brands that use social media advertising as a part of their advertising strategy to observe current trends in social media language. It is highly recommended for advertising specialists to gain more comprehensive understanding of consumers' psychological characteristics and design well-crafted advertisements that suit their preferences.

The research findings may also be productive for English language learners who are interested in features of advertising and social media language. Lexical and syntactic characteristics of social media advertising captions which contain figurative speech provide an interesting perspective of the specific use of English language.

Future research can be developed by exploring the impact of social media captions in customers' purchase decision or investigating consumer responses to the discussed figures of speech in advertisements. In-depth interviews with targeted audience of advertising can also be conducted, and the investigation of cultural differences in the comprehension of figurative language in social media advertisements is recommended.

9. References

- Andriole, S. J. (2010). Business impact of Web 2.0 technologies. *Communications of the ACM*, 53(12), 67-79.
- Bovee, L. C., Thill, V. J., & Dovel, P. G. (1995). *Advertising Excellence*. New York, US: McGraw-Hill.
- Cook, G. (2001). *The discourse of advertising interface* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge.
- Fitratunnas. (2017). *Figurative Language Analysis on Advertisement of the Jakarta Post Newspaper* (Undergraduate thesis). Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang.
- Gibbs, S., & Turner, M. (1997). *Figurative Language and Thought*. New York, US: Oxford University Press.
- Hermerén, L. (1999). *English for sale: A study of the language of advertising*. Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press.
- Kotler, P. (2003). *Marketing Management*. (11th ed.). New Jersey, US: Prentice-Hall.
- Laosrirattanachai, P. (2017). *An Analysis of Figurative Language in Accommodation Advertising: A Study on Three American Travel Magazines* (Master's Thesis). Language Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok.
- McQuarrie, E. F., & Mick, D. G. (1992). Figures of Rhetoric in Advertising Language. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19(5), 12-25.
- Moriarty, E. S. (1997). *Creative Advertising*. New Jersey, US: University of Colorado.
- Nualpoh, N. (2017). An Analysis of Language in Clothes Advertising. *Liberal Arts Review*, 12(23), 1-10.
- Pathumratanathan, P., & Tapinta, P. (2012). An Investigation on Figurative Language Employed in English Advertisements in In-flight Magazines. *Humanities Journal*, 19(1), 215-232.
- Phillips, B. J., & McQuarrie, E. F. (2002). The Development, Change, and Transformation of Figurative Style in Magazine Advertisements 1954-1999. *Journal of Advertising*, 31(26), 1-13.
- Stern, B. (1987). Figurative Language in Service Advertising: The Nature and Usages of Imagery. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 15(7), 90-112.
- Supasamout, P. (2006). *A Classification of Figurative Language Used in Lipstick Advertisements in Women Magazines* (Master's Thesis). Business English for International Communication, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok.
- Vasiloia, M. (2009). *Linguistic features of the language of advertising*. *Economy Transdisciplinarity Cognition*, 1, 294-298. Retrieved from <https://silo.tips/download/linguistic-features-of-the-language-of-advertising>
- Zakiah, Z. (2015). *Analysis of Figurative Language in the Advertisement Taglines in Indonesia Tatler Magazine* (Master's Thesis). Faculty of Cultural Studies, University of Brawijaya, Malang.