Metaphors in Advertising: Cognitive Flexibility Matching Perspective

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Prior research suggests that a metaphor in advertising can have a positive effect on evaluations of the target product mostly when it is easy to interpret. Five experiments showed that a difficult metaphor, compared to its easier version or a literal counterpart, led to more favorable product evaluations when people took a distant-future perspective in considering the target, but less favorable evaluations when taking a near-future perspective.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16155/volumes/v38/NA-38

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that a metaphor in advertising can have a positive effect on evaluations of the target product (McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; Moreau, Markman, and Lehmann 2001). However, the effect tends to be restricted to the metaphors which are easy to interpret (Gregan-Paxton and John 1997; Roehm and SterntHAL 2001). Yet, it is common that companies employ complicated, idiosyncratic, and difficult metaphors in their advertising. This discrepancy can be resolved, however, if we consider both the level of cognitive flexibility required to process the metaphor and the level of individuals' actual cognitive flexibility at the time of metaphor processing as determinants of the effectiveness of a metaphor.

The present research proposes a cognitive flexibility matching hypothesis that the match between the required and actual level of cognitive flexibility is a key determinant of the metaphor’s effectiveness. That is, when the level of cognitive flexibility necessary to comprehend a metaphor matches the level of individuals’ actual cognitive flexibility at the time of metaphor processing, using the metaphor in an ad could be beneficial for evaluations of the target product. When the individuals’ actual cognitive flexibility is either below or above the required level to process a metaphor, however, using the metaphor could be detrimental.

To test this proposition, we borrow from research based on temporal construal theory that a distant-future perspective (vs. a near-future perspective) increases individuals’ cognitive flexibility momentarily (Forster et al. 2004; Trope and Liberman 2003). Based on this, we hypothesize that a difficult metaphor, compared to its easier version or a literal message counterpart, can lead to more favorable product evaluations when people consider the target product for a distant-future purchase, but would produce less favorable evaluations when they consider it for a near-future purchase. To put it differently, an increase in temporal distance is expected to increase the effectiveness of a difficult metaphor, but to decrease the effectiveness of an easy metaphor.

These hypothesized (diametrically opposite) effects were confirmed in five experiments in which participants evaluated a target product described by either a difficult metaphor, an easier version of the metaphor, or its literal message counterpart, while considering the message for a possible purchase of an advertised product either next day (near-future condition) or next year (distant-future condition). Moreover, the effects generalized over different products and metaphors and were evident regardless of whether the level of difficulty of a metaphor was manipulated by employing different versions of a metaphor, by varying individuals’ knowledge to process a metaphor, or by varying their mood state.

Experiment 1 demonstrated that a difficult metaphor, compared to a literal message that has a same implication of the metaphor, led to a more favorable evaluation of the target product in the distant future condition, whereas this difference was reversed in the near future condition. Experiment 2 replicated these results and in addition showed that a difficult metaphor was more effective than an easy metaphor as well in the distant future condition, whereas this difference was reversed in the near future condition. Experiments 3a, 3b, and 3c investigated the role of individuals’ knowledge to process the metaphor and found that a difficult metaphor was more effective for low-knowledge individuals than for high-knowledge individuals when the product decision was made for a distant future, whereas the difference was reversed when the decision was made for a near-future. Similarly, Experiment 4a and 4b demonstrated that a (difficult) metaphor was more effective for individuals in the positive mood condition than for those in the negative mood condition when the product was evaluated for purchase in the distant future, whereas the difference was reversed when the product was considered for a near-future purchase. Finally, experiment 5 assessed the level of comprehension about the metaphor based on participants’ thought protocols. A mediation test confirmed that the effect of temporal distance on the effectiveness of a difficult metaphor was mediated by its influence on the extent to which participant actually comprehended the meaning of the metaphor.

Thus, collectively, results from five experiments provide consistent evidence for our cognitive flexibility matching hypothesis. At the same time, the research identifies moderators (product knowledge and mood state) for the diametrically opposite effects observed in the experiments. Theoretical and managerial implications of these findings are discussed.

REFERENCES

Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (1980), Metaphor We Live By, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


