

Metaphor and metonymy in sports advertising, and their controversial role in tackling social issues of equality and public health

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Keywords: metaphor, metonymy, advertising, equality, health

Metaphor and metonymy are often used in sports advertising to position the brand in relation to social issues, such as racial and gender equality. When done critically and sensitively, these tropes have the potential to help lead positive change; however, when it is done uncritically and insensitively, there may result damaging effects both on the target groups and on the brand itself.

I combine the Filmic Metaphor Identification Procedure (Bort-Mir 2019) with approaches to metonymy identification (Littlemore 2015; Littlemore & Pérez Sobrino 2017) to identify metaphors and metonymies (and interactions between them) in sports commercials released between 2015 and 2022 sampled from adforum.com. I argue that the identification of these tropes cannot be separated from their interpretation as previous identification procedures have suggested; I propose an integrated approach. I also explore ways in which meaning is shaped by the forms metaphor and metonymy take, using Phillips and McQuarrie's visual metaphor typology (2004).

Preliminary analysis of 33 sports commercials shows that while important social issues are often highlighted, some sports advertising uses figurative tropes in a way that negatively frames minority groups by perpetuating stereotypes and stigma. A total 23 commercials featured metaphor and/or metonymy, framing sport in terms of domains such as art (N commercials=6), battle (N=5), magic (N=4), journey (N=3), among others.

For example, Adidas and Nike commercials use figurative tropes to frame controversial messages. Adidas' *Never Walk Away* commercial involves female athletes talking about their experience with gender equality in sport. While these women are presented as strong and resilient, the language they use constructs a battle metaphor. The metaphor highlights that female athletes are fighting a battle they should not have to fight in the first place, "I always felt like I was just fighting to even have a chance to make it", and glamorises this 'fight' as something that female athletes have to do, suggesting that the more they suffer the better their reward will be, "The harder the struggle, the more glorious the triumph". This commercial attempts to empower women to fight for equal rights in sport by perpetuating the metaphorical battle experience instead of suggesting solutions that challenge the systems and attitudes that allow inequality to exist in the first place.

Nike's *Dream Crazy* commercial encourages sportspeople to push against prejudice and adversity to pursue their dreams. The commercial constitutes shots of diverse people doing sport, and finishes with Colin Kaepernick, an American footballer who knelt in protest of racial injustice in America during the national anthem prior to a match in 2016. In the commercial, Kaepernick is framed as a metonym for American civil rights activism and anti-racism. In showing Kaepernick, Nike assimilate their position in support and help to raise awareness of this cause.

Sports brands can raise awareness and inspire positive change to improve sport and public health, but how they communicate to their audience is sensitive and requires a stronger understanding of figurative tropes and the potential damage that may be incurred when they are used insensitively.

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