Burn Fat and Build Muscle: How Conceptual Metaphor Shapes Consumer Belief

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Conceptual metaphor comprises a family of systematically related metaphorical comparisons. We contend that conceptual metaphor is a persuasive rhetorical tool that has the potential to make salient certain aspects of a concept while masking others. Interestingly, the influence of this rhetorical figure on the attitudes and behaviors of consumers is, for the most part, unexamined, both by consumers themselves and by consumer behavior researchers. We use two exploratory methods—content assessment and multidimensional scaling (MDS)—to (a) introduce conceptual metaphor and explain why it is important to consumer behavior research, (b) provide an extended example of conceptual metaphor within the consumer behavior domain of exercise, and (c) develop research questions for future work in this area.

What is conceptual metaphor and why is it important?

Conceptual metaphor can be defined as a family of metaphors organized around a common implicit theme (Ritchie 2003). For example, exercise is construction is a conceptual metaphor which organizes the ad statements, “build muscle,” “‘give your body the building blocks for muscle mass,’” and “‘lay the foundation for lasting fitness.’” Conceptual metaphor allows us to understand vague, abstract domains of knowledge (e.g., exercise and fitness) in terms of more specific, concrete, and familiar domains (e.g., building a house) (Gibbs 1998). Conceptual metaphors also are often used to help individuals understand and explain their emotional states (Cacciari 1998). Thus, conceptual metaphors are useful wherever we seek to understand abstract, intangible, or multivalent ideas that might otherwise be difficult to capture in a straightforward declaration.

Conceptual metaphors are frequently found in cultural discourse; researchers estimate that 6 individual metaphors are used per minute of ordinary conversation (Gibbs 1994, p. 121). This ubiquity makes metaphorical language almost invisible; people process it without noticing (Gentner et al. 2001). Although metaphors often go unnoticed, this does not rob them of their power. On the contrary, because we are hardly conscious of the underlying system of relations, a regularly proffered conceptual metaphor gets internalized as normal (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Consequently, the relationships underlying the conceptual metaphor come to define and structure the way we think and reason about a situation. Because the essence of a metaphor is that one domain is like another, the relationships that allows the two domains to be joined also functions to highlight the similarities between the two concepts and mask the differences.

The potential of conceptual metaphor to highlight and mask has a powerful impact in shaping consumers’ knowledge (Kokinov and Petrov 2001), beliefs (Holyoak and Thagard 1995), and behaviors (Markman and Moreau 2001). In addition, the ubiquity and subtlety of conceptual metaphor suggests it may be processed with less effort and conscious awareness than other types of analogous thinking. If this proposition holds, then conceptual metaphor may be particularly suited for directing and even misdirecting the thoughts of consumers to a desired conclusion. Based on the above discussion, the purpose of our empirical research is: (1) to provide an extended example of complex conceptual metaphor in the consumer behavior domain of exercise, and (2) to show that multiple conceptual metaphors exist and compete in this consumer behavior domain with the potential to influence how consumers think and act in that domain.

Study 1: Content Assessment Method and Results

A content assessment of the conceptual metaphors commonly used in North American culture to describe exercise was conducted. Two current issues of the two most popular men’s and women’s exercise magazines were selected for examination. The researcher examined every ad and article in the magazines looking for metaphorical statements in both the pictures and the words; these individual metaphors were collected as examples of metaphors of exercise disseminated by cultural intermediaries (Coulter et al. 2003). Each magazine also had a Web site where consumers could post messages regarding exercise; the individual metaphors taken from the Web sites were collected as examples of metaphors of exercise disseminated by consumers themselves. Based on the advice by Low (2003), individual metaphors were grouped into conceptual metaphors by the researchers.

The six conceptual metaphors identified through the content assessment include: exercise is a journey, exercise is work for pay, exercise is construction, exercise is sculpting, exercise is combat, and exercise is heat. These complex conceptual metaphors comprise the most common ways that individual consumers and cultural intermediaries think about and express their thoughts about exercise. Next, we identified the underlying systematic relations that grouped or differentiated these metaphors.

Study 2: MDS Method and Results

Six metaphor statements, derived from the individual metaphors collected during the content assessment, were selected for each of the six conceptual metaphors. The 36 statements generated allow for (n^2 – n)/2 = 630 unique pairwise comparisons; we created 6 unique subsets (each n = 105) using a partially balanced incomplete block design and randomly assigned 76 subjects to receive one of these subsets. The ALSCAL procedure in SPSS 11.5 was used to conduct a nonmetric MDS analysis using a model of Euclidean distances. A three-dimensional solution was computed, with Kruskal’s stress = 0.215 and an RSQ value of 0.631. The insights gained from the content assessment were pressed into service in interpreting the dimensions of the MDS analysis.

The first dimension of the three-dimensional MDS model is interpreted as degree of control over the exercise process. It suggests a continuum ranging from ‘contingent’ to ‘predictable’; that is, whether exercise and its outcomes are contingent upon the actions of someone or something else or whether they are under the control of an individual. The first dimension separates metaphors that highlight individual control of exercise—journey, work, sculpting and construction—from those in which exercise is viewed as a process that is not under the direct control of one individual—combat (competing force) and heat (force of nature).

The second dimension can be interpreted as process duration, along the continuum of ‘short-term’ to ‘long-term.’ This dimension separates journey (long-term) from heat, combat, and sculpting (short-term). That is, a journey typically represents a long-term process that may take months or years to reach a desired goal, if a definitive goal even exists. In contrast, heat (e.g., “fire up,” “burn”),
combat (e.g., “attack,” “destroy”), and sculpting (e.g., “whittle,” “chisel”) are viewed as short-term processes that achieve a definitive end, often quickly.

The third dimension can be interpreted as type of procedure, varying along a continuum from ‘variable’ to ‘routine.’ This dimension separates work for pay from all other conceptual metaphors. Unforeseen obstacles may be encountered during a journey, and sculpture relies on creative thinking, but only work is characterized by its habitual routine.

Discussion
The content analysis supports the idea that different conceptual metaphors are presented by cultural intermediaries in order to highlight and mask aspects of the topic under discussion. Specifically, the conceptual metaphors exercise is a journey and exercise is work for pay are commonly found in the articles in fitness magazines, but less often in the ads. As demonstrated through the MDS analysis, these conceptual metaphors make salient the idea that exercise is both a long-term process (journey) and a routine procedure (work), ideas that are attractive to magazine publishers who want consumers to subscribe to their magazine regularly month after month. In contrast, exercise is combat and exercise is sculpting appear more often in ads for exercise products directed at men and women, respectively. Advertisers, as opposed to publishers, might favor these metaphors because they focus on processes that are shorter and more variable than journeys or jobs; the salience of achieving desired results in the shorter term may spur consumers to buy the brand offered.

In summary, the content assessment supports the idea that a small number of complex conceptual metaphors are likely to structure the discourse in any particular consumer behavior domain. In addition, the MDS analysis provides a sense that these conceptual metaphors are distinct from each other on several dimensions of importance to the domain. By using both methods to assign meaning to the dimensions underlying the conceptual metaphors of exercise, the ideas that those metaphors highlight or mask become clear. Finally, the content assessment suggests that these distinctions between metaphors are, in fact, used systematically by marketers to focus consumers’ attention on some aspects of exercise behavior and consumption and mask other, non-compatible, aspects.

References


