"Get fit!" – The use of imperatives in Australian English gym advertisements on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements aim to persuade individuals to purchase a product or service over the claims of competitors. With advances in technology in recent years, more advertisers are incorporating web advertising into their marketing strategies, often combining elements of both online and traditional modes of advertising to achieve their aim. As web advertising is a relatively new mode of communication, the present paper aims to explore the use of language in web advertising, using a collection of advertisements taken from the official Facebook pages of three gyms in Australia. Our focus is on imperatives which have been identified as a typical feature of advertising discourse. We provide a multi-modal analysis of Facebook advertisements by focusing on the role of imperatives in text and the interplay between text and image. Imperatives are often considered to be threatening to an individual's negative face as they express the directive force associated with commands and requests. Therefore, the present study aims to identify the dominant discourse function of imperatives in Facebook gym advertisements. Adopting the theoretical frameworks on politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Locher and Watts, 2006; Park, 2008a, 2008b) and impoliteness (Haugh, 2010a; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012), we argue that while imperatives may occasion linguistic manifestation of impoliteness in their surface value, imperatives in web advertising are rather a strategy used by advertisers to create a sense of familiarity between the advertiser and receiver which is further emphasised through the advertiser's use of visual elements (such as image and video). The data is first categorised into two groups based on whether or not the advertisements contain imperative verbs. Using the discourse classification of imperatives by Pennock-Speck and Fuster-Márquez (2014), the advertisements containing imperative verbs are then categorised based on their discourse functions. Our findings suggest that imperatives in Facebook gym advertisements are used instead to capture the attention of Facebook users and inform them about the product or service. Furthermore, imperatives in Facebook advertisements typically occur in onset position and are accompanied by visual elements such as still images or videos. Thus, it can be argued that rather than threatening the addressee's negative face, Facebook advertisers focus more on appealing to their audience so as to increase the number of potential customers that are interested in what their business has to offer. The findings provide a basis for future studies on imperatives in web advertising and contribute to the understanding of im/politeness in online communication.

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to explore the use of language in web advertising and social media communication, with a focus on the social networking service Facebook. By analysing a collection of advertisements taken from the official Facebook pages of three popular gyms in Australia, this paper intends to answer the following research questions: 1) are there any patterns in the imperative forms used in gym Facebook advertisements, which consist of multi-modal texts? and 2) what is the dominant discourse function of imperatives used in gym Facebook advertisements? Adopting the theoretical frameworks on politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Locher and Watts, 2006; Park, 2008a, 2008b) and impoliteness (Haugh, 2010a; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012), we argue that while imperatives may occasion linguistic manifestation of impoliteness in their surface value, imperatives in web

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advertising are rather a strategy used by advertisers to create a sense of familiarity between the advertiser and receiver.

2. Web advertising

Advertisements are primarily used to promote a product, service or event over the claims of competitors (Cook, 1996). Their aim is to inform, persuade or influence individuals to purchase or try a product or service (Cook, 1996; Fortanet, et al., 1999; Ren, 2011; Pennock-Speck and Fuster-Márquez, 2014; Simon and Dejica-Cartis, 2015). Both traditional and web advertising share the same principles. They are both forms of mass communication (i.e. information is directed from a single source to a wider audience; Hanna, et al., 2011). Advertisements in both forms usually include written information describing the product or service, along with instructions on how the consumer will be able to purchase or try that product or service. Apart from written text, advertisements often incorporate images and sounds to create consumer interest (Janoschka, 2004). With advances in technology in recent years, more advertisers are incorporating online advertising into their marketing strategies to achieve their aim at lower costs and higher levels of efficiency compared to traditional modes of advertising such as television and radio (Calisir, 2003; Hanna, et al., 2011; Chu, 2011; Berthon, et al., 2012).

With respect to the differences between traditional and web advertising, traditional advertising does not allow for communicative exchanges between the advertiser and receiver, while online advertising does. Janoschka (2004) describes web advertising as an 'interaction-orientated' mode of communication. These communicative exchanges take form of direct advertiser-consumer contact through written text (e.g. social networking services such as Facebook). In Janoschka's (2004) research on web advertisements, she refers to these communicative exchanges as the receiver's ability to directly activate the web advertisement by either clicking on it, in which the consumer would usually be redirected to the advertiser's website, or by closing it if the consumer was not interested in the advertised product or service. While traditional advertising is considered to be non-personal, meaning the advertisement is targeted to a wider audience as opposed to a single individual, online advertising can be non-personal (e.g. an advertisement on a public website) as well as personal (e.g. an advertisement sent to a single e-mail).

A social networking service that is a popular platform for web advertising is Facebook, founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, that enables individuals to create personal profiles and then create, share and discuss user-generated content using those profiles (Chu, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Khang, et al., 2012). Facebook users are able to develop and maintain relationships with advertisers and other Facebook users through direct communicative exchanges in the form of 'liking', 'tagging', 'sharing' and commenting on posts (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Furthermore, Facebook profiles aid the creation of brand communities as businesses are able to connect with potential customers and increase awareness of their product/service by posting advertisements on their official Facebook page (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Khang, et al., 2012). These Facebook pages are public and are easily accessible through the Facebook search engine. Once a Facebook user has 'liked' a page, they instantly receive notifications and updates on their personal news feed each time the advertiser posts an advertisement (Chu, 2011), suggesting that Facebook is a more efficient way of transferring information between advertisers and consumers than traditional modes of advertising.

According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), using Facebook as an advertising platform can benefit businesses in the following domains: Relationships, Reputation and Conversations. In regards to relationships, Facebook allows advertisers to connect with potential customers online via an official Facebook page. Potential consumers can 'like' these pages in order to receive updates or notifications on the products or services offered. Facebook users are able to assist businesses in promoting their products and services by 'sharing' advertisements so that the advertisement appears on their personal profile for their friends list to see Chu (2011). With respect to reputation, Facebook grants feedback possibilities to Facebook users in the forms of 'liking', 'sharing' and commenting on posts. Advertisers are able to use this customer feedback to re-evaluate their business objectives and in doing so, improve their reputation. This is important as Facebook users are easily influenced by observing what other users have previously said about the particular product or service (Chu, 2011). Furthermore, Facebook promotes direct conversation between advertisers and consumers through the instant messaging option or by commenting on the advertisement.

3. Multi-modal discourse and advertising

Facebook "offers many possibilities for composing multi-modal texts" (Eisenlauer, 2014, p. 309). Research on multi-modal discourse is relatively new and focuses on the notion that discourse is not limited to language but also includes design, image and an array of other factors that convey meaning in a given context (LeVine and Scollon, 2004; Iedema, 2007; Harrison, 2008). A 'discourse' is considered to be a contextually specific knowledge regarding a social practice or practices; with a set of values and purposes that has a specific social distribution (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Previous research on human communication suggests that discourse is organised in a number of ways that embody different intentions and principles (e.g. visualisation and architecture) (Iedema, 2007). In the context of advertising, multi-modal strategies are often incorporated in the form of both verbal and visual channels which perform different functions. For example, texts act as an exchange between the speaker and audience which can be achieved using different moods, while images engage the viewer through different features such as gaze and social distance (Harrison, 2008). The interplay between these channels has been argued to form a single multi-modal communicative act as various elements (e.g. image, text, typography) combine to determine the communicative intent (Van Leeuwen, 2004). The interpretation and meaning of a text is realised by the individual's engagement with the medium (i.e. the way in which the information is presented, e.g. computer application, printed in a book) as well as the modes used to convey the message (e.g. image, speech) (Jewitt, 2004). Newer technologies (e.g. the computer) are believed to stand out compared to older technologies (e.g. pen and paper) when it comes to conveying meaning through the use of multi-modal strategies, as they incorporate a far greater number of images which drastically increases the visualisation of the text (Jewitt, 2004).

Using different multi-modal discourse analysis approaches, researchers have been able to investigate the interplay between image and text in advertisements. For example, Machin and Thornborrow (2003) analysis of a women's fashion magazine and Lirola and Chovanec's (2012) analysis of cosmetic surgery leaflets found that the visual elements in advertisements would often be directly linked to the target audience or the brands' core values.