

An Analysis of Ambiguity and Conceptual Metaphor Study in The American Eagle Campaign Featuring Sydney Sweeney

Desy Kharisma Putri Utami¹, Malikatul Laila², Mujazin³

^{1,2,3} Faculty of Education Sciences, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

Purpose: Ambiguity is a phenomenon that is inevitable in the process of constructing meaning, while metaphors are attempts to comprehend and perceive something through connecting it to something else. This research aims to explore the ambiguity and conceptual metaphor in the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney.

Methodology: The method applied in this study is qualitative research with textual analysis approach toward campaign narration including slogans, campaign titles, advertising dialogue, video narratives, and product descriptions.

Results: The findings show that in the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney contain lexical and structural ambiguity in the form of phonetic similarity, semantic broadening, and lack of clarity in syntax.

Applications/Originality/Value: This research also found that there is a metaphor a concept existed in in the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney.

Keywords: *Lexical Ambiguity, Structural Ambiguity, Conceptual Metaphor, Campaign*

Introduction Section

In general, the term ‘text’ means any discourse, either spoken or written. It means that ‘text’ points out the main ideas that are straight out of the discourse itself, without requiring any additional info or assumptions from the outside. However, every word in ‘text’ has some ambiguity in terms of both its literal and metaphorical meanings (Lane, 2024). Chomsky (2011) contends that if the objective of language is to reduce misconceptions, then language has already failed because it contains ambiguities. Likewise, if the intention is to render our words always concise and understandable, language also misses out on that point. In other words, the existence of ambiguities indicates that the essential structure of language is not molded by any functional pressure for optimal communication. At the same time, Sampedro Mella (2024) believes that ambiguity is triggered by the “give and take” between the speaker's and the hearer's perceived ease. Hence, it happens because the speakers are willing to put in a little effort. Despite this, Macagno (2025) thinks that ambiguity could be reduced if the hearers made a serious effort to comprehend.

In semantic terms, ambiguity divided by two aspects, which are lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity (Lyons, 1995). Lexical ambiguity is the concept of a single word carrying several meanings, which is typical practice in all languages. Many studies indicate that there is no language in the world whose words are unaffected by this phenomenon (Al Lily et al., 2023; Beekhuizen et al., 2021). Thus, structural ambiguity is a state of affairs in which the structure of a sentence lends itself to multiple interpretations of the meaning of a phrase or clause within it. Where this leads to ambiguity as a phenomenon that is inevitable in the process of constructing meaning. The unpredictability of form and meaning requires that a single linguistic expression led to more than one interpretation. Hence, the hearer needs to consider the context, the relationship between the elements of the sentence, and the choice of words that are applied.

As part of discourse, the ambiguity in ads is sometimes use on goal to create certain effects on the audience (Mzoughi et al., 2018). It can take the form of joy, humor, or emotional appeal that is constructed through its vagueness of meaning. Advertisements are regarded as a medium that conveys information about specific products and also builds interpretive experiences for the audiences (Nguyen, 2025). Their choice of language, visual imagery, and presentation style are driven by the need to spark a specific response. So, that the message receives more than just informational but also emotional impact. Yet, metaphorical concepts also contribute to enlarging their scope of interpretation. The reason is because the relationship between the concrete and abstract ideas can lead to a variety of interpretations (Dehay & Landwehr, 2019). When a product makes ads message, it usually brings together several ideas that are not always connected in a

* Corresponding author : mal201@ums.ac.id

straightforward way. Thus, it encourages their audience to interpret the meaning through their experiences, cultural associations, and past knowledge.

According to Lakoff & Johnson (2003), metaphors are attempts to comprehend and perceive something through connecting it to something else. They introduce the conceptual metaphor to describe their perspective on metaphor, where it can build the way human perceive and act. Lakoff & Johnson (2003) theory classifies these conceptual metaphors into three kinds of metaphors: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. Based on Lakoff & Johnson (2003) structural metaphors employ the usage of one concept to frame or conceive another concept in a structured manner. Hence, it forming a set of metaphors with interrelated meanings for evaluative functions. Whereas, orientational metaphors organize a system of concepts not according to similarity, but based on spatial orientation such as up-down and front-back. Instead, ontological metaphors are concerned with how humans embody abstract matters, through rendering emotions, ideas, or activities as concrete entities, objects, or even persons.

One of ads campaign that depicts this process is the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney. Where they launched their ads campaign on July 23, 2025. This campaign is intriguing to observe considering the amount of criticism that appeared immediately after the video was uploaded. The criticism grew in two principal orientations: the accusation that the play on words genes–jeans bring up connections to eugenics, and the rejection of how Sweeney’s body is the subject of attention in a narrative that is believed to be concerned with the issue of domestic violence (Restrepo et al., 2025). However, it leads to ambiguity at the level of meaning, both semantically and pragmatically. These ad campaigns also employ metaphors that pair the concept of innate traits with the visual identity of the product. Where this can steer the audience to reinterpret jeans as something that carries a symbolic value attached to the wearer.

In this case, to analyze this phenomenon, the researcher uses two main theoretical foundations, which are semantic theory of ambiguity by Lyons (1995) and conceptual metaphors by (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Although many studies discuss the use of text in advertising, there are few that specifically examine how ambiguity and metaphor operate in terms of linguistics in specific celebrity campaigns. Most of the research focuses more on the psychological aspects of the customers or visual branding elements (Ford, 2023; Radhi, 2023). This research attempts to bridge that gap through empirical and theoretical analysis of the linguistic structure and semantic effects in the American Eagle campaigns. The focus is not only on what the text conveys, but also on how and why the message is able to construct the audiences’ complex interpretative responses.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative design to examine how ambiguity and conceptual metaphor appear in the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney. This qualitative design is used because it allows the researchers to conduct a careful examination of meaning through systematic observation and interpretive reading. Qualitative research is an approach to understand a phenomenon through data collection, with an emphasis on the data observation process to be identified and analyzed with the aim of finding meaning through the logic of discovery (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Another opinion is proposed by Creswell (2009) who states that this type of inquiry is suitable for exploring processes and meaning-making in verbal or visual material. Thus, this research adopts a textual analysis approach.

This research uses a textual analysis approach to explore how meaning is constructed within the selected texts. Arya (2020) explains that textual analysis is widely used to examine cultural products that circulate through advertising, digital campaigns, and other visual communication platforms. In this case, it allows the researcher to analyze how messages are constructed and interpreted in media texts. In this research, the researchers are the instrument themselves. Thus, the primary data consist of promotional materials released in the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney, including video clips, still images, and accompanying taglines that were distributed across the brand’s official platforms. The materials are collected by accessing publicly available campaign content on American Eagle’s website and social media channels. As part of the data collection process, each text is reviewed by the researchers to identify linguistic and visual cues that signal ambiguity and metaphor.

Thus, in this research, the analysis proceeds in several stages. First, the texts are categorized according to type (video, image, or caption). Second, each category is analyzed in detail to identify patterns of ambiguous wording and metaphorical framing. Third, the findings are interpreted to explain how these features contribute to meaning-making within the campaign. All of these stages can strengthen the reliability of the interpretation and clarify how the campaign constructs meaning in the broader context of contemporary fashion advertising.

Findings and Discussion

Research Findings

The following table is the data display obtained from the American Eagle Campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney. This data served as the primary data to analyze the ambiguity and conceptual metaphor in this research.

Table 1. Data Display

No	Sources	Text Campaigns
1.	American Eagle Campaign Headline on the Official Website	“Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans”
2.	Campaign Narrative Video Spoken by Sydney Sweeney	“My jeans are blue.”
3.	Extended Ads	“Genes are passed down...My jeans are blue.”
4.	Promotional Tagline on Digital Banners.	“Trendsetting denim that leads, never follows.”
5.	American Eagle Tagline	“Live Your Life.”
6.	Slogan on American Eagle Website and TikTok.	“Own Your Fit.”
7.	Name of the 2025 Limited-Edition Product.	“The Sydney Jean”

According to the table above, there are seven data that would be analyzed. This data originally from American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney including headline, ads, slogan, tagline, and name of product. All the data provided play a important role to examine how ambiguity and metaphor depicted in a campaign.

Lexical and Structural Ambiguity in the American Eagle Campaign Featuring Sydney Sweeney

Lyons (1995) describes lexical ambiguity as a type of ambiguity that happen when a word has two or more meaning. A word can be ambiguous if its lexical form allows for several different interpretations, making the meaning of a sentence containing the word uncertain until the context is clarified (Tarigan, 2022). For example, a word can have more than one unrelated meaning, so that the understanding of a sentence depends heavily on which meaning is being activated. This type of ambiguity differs from structural ambiguity, which arises not because a word has multiple meanings, but because the grammatical structure allows for more than one way of grouping sentence elements (Lyons, 1995). Also, as mentioned by Dong & Shao (2016), differences in interpretation of a structure can led to various forms of ambiguity which basically arise due to the unclearness of the modified word.

Table 2. Data Display of Ambiguity

No	Type of Ambiguity	Total
1	Lexical Ambiguity	5
2	Structural Ambiguity	1

Based on the data in Table 2, there are five data classified as lexical ambiguity and one data classified as structural ambiguity. These results indicate that lexical ambiguity appears more frequently in campaign texts, while structural ambiguity appears less frequently.

Lexical Ambiguity

Lyons (1995) stated that lexical ambiguity is the concept of a single word carrying several meanings. This phenomenon emerges because certain words in a language have multiple semantic interpretations. Lexical ambiguity relates to the multiple interpretations of a word, influenced by two different variables which are polysemy and homonymy. Ullmann (1972) defines polysemy as a term or phrase that possesses multiple meanings, while maintaining relationships and connections among each of its meanings. While homonymy is described as two or more words that share similar phonological forms and pronunciations but have distinct meanings. Furthermore, Sastaparamitha & Martarini (2020) state that in ambiguity in a campaign or advertising often use on the same word or a word with spelling and pronunciation that is almost similar but still contain different meanings.

Table 3. List of Lexical Ambiguity

No	List of Lexical Ambiguity
1.	“Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans”
2.	“My jeans are blue.”
3.	“Genes are passed down... My jeans are blue.”
4.	“Own Your Fit.”
5.	“The Sydney Jean”

As it is seen on the data above lexical ambiguity appears frequently. The following subsection analyzes the first example of lexical ambiguity found in the data.

“Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans” and “My Jeans are Blue”

The slogan “Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans” appears as the main headline of the American Eagle campaign published on July 23, 2025, on the brand’s official website and social media accounts. The slogan “My Jeans are blue” appears in the video advertisement of the American Eagle. Both of the examples portray lexical ambiguity through word jeans. Literally, jeans refer to the denim product worn by Sydney Sweeney in the campaign. However, the sentence becomes ambiguous because the word jeans is homophonous with genes.

In English phonology, jeans and genes share the same pronunciation, both transcribed as /dʒi:nz/. This phonetic similarity allows the audience to momentarily interpret the slogan in two distinct ways:

1. Jeans : The denim clothing item promoted in the advertisement.
2. Genes : Hereditary traits, implying that Sydney Sweeney has “good genetics” or naturally appealing physical features.

“Genes are passed down... My jeans are blue.”

In the text “Genes are passed down... My jeans are blue”, ambiguity arises through the play of meanings in two words that phonetically sound the same, which are genes and jeans. In the first part, the word genes are used in its literal meaning as DNA or traits that are passed down from one generation to the next. Meanwhile, in the second part, the word jeans refer to American Eagle denim products which are symbolically associated with identity and self-expression. In these two sentences, the homophony between genes and jeans creates a play of meanings that is deliberately explored to strengthen the campaign message. American Eagle gives the impression that their denim is not just clothing, but part of an identity that can be “passed down” or passed on as part of a lifestyle.

“Own Your Fit”

American Eagle uses the slogan “Own Your Fit” on its official website and TikTok account. The lexical ambiguity in this slogan arises from the word “fit.” In this case, “fit” refers to the size or cut of clothing that fits a person’s body. However, the same word can also be understood more abstractly as a “lifestyle” or “identity” that suits and aligns with an individual’s self.

Table 4. Slogan Meaning

Word	Interpretation of Meaning 1	Interpretation of Meaning 2
Fit	Appropriate clothing size.	Identity or lifestyle that suits someone.

As it is seen in the table above, the word “fit” from the sentence “Own Your Fit” can be interpreted as two different meaning. The first meaning can refer to an appropriate clotting size and the second meaning can refer to identity or lifestyle that suits someone. In this case, American Eagle perhaps uses the phrase to convey that their product not only provide clothing with perfect size and look for somebody, but also to implicitly express the idea that highlights the role of American Eagle’s products as a medium for expressing one’s identity. American Eagle wants to present a product that offer comfort for the customer. Also, it is creating the perception that wearing American Eagle products reflects the wearer's identity, preferences, and personal style.

"The Sydney Jean"

The ambiguity lies in the word "Sidney". Literally, the word can be interpreted as the official name for the type of jeans introduced by American Eagle with Sydney Sweeney as its main model. The word Sydney becomes a promoted product variant. However, when analyzed figuratively, the phrase builds a broader association because it means that these jeans are Sydney's jeans or jeans that reflect the personal style, body image, and attractiveness that are identical to Sydney Sweeney as a public figure. This figurative meaning places the product as if it is covered with characteristics inherent to Sydney so that consumers can feel that by wearing these jeans, they can achieve a similar appearance or aura.

Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity is a state of affairs in which the structure of a sentence lends itself to multiple interpretations of the meaning of a phrase or clause within it (Lyons, 1995). Where this leads to ambiguity as a phenomenon that is inevitable in the process of constructing meaning. Based on nine data collected from the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney, there are two data that portray structural ambiguity.

"Trendsetting denim that leads, never follows"

The phrase "Trendsetting denim that leads, never follows" indicates structural ambiguity due to the lack of syntactic cues that indicate whether the verb "leads" and "follow" attach to denim as a product or to the wearer. This lack of clarity in the placement of the subject and its referent procedure led to more than one possible clause structure.

1. First Interpretation
The word "trendsetting denim" is positioned as the subject, with "leads never follows" functioning as the predicate. This conveys the denim as itself as a product that sets fashion trends rather than following existing ones.
2. Second Interpretation
The wearer is treated as an implied subject, and trendsetting denim is interpreted as an attribute describing the user's style. In this reading, the verb "leads" and "never follows" refer to the characteristics of the wearer also shifting the meaning into a claim that the individual who wears the denim is someone who leads trends rather than merely following them.

Conceptual Metaphor in the American Eagle Campaign Featuring Sydney Sweeney

According to Lakoff & Johnson (2003) metaphor is understood as a way to capture and interpret a concept by linking it to another concept. They put forward the idea of conceptual metaphor as the basis for their view, namely that metaphor plays a role in shaping patterns of human understanding and behavior. Additionally, conceptual metaphors is divided into three main category which are structural, ontological, and orientational. Structural metaphors work by utilizing one organized concept to explain another, while ontological metaphors depict abstract experiences as if they have form or tangibility. Orientational metaphors, on the other hand, relate to direction or spatial position, typically stemming from bodily experiences or specific cultures. These three types of metaphors demonstrate how metaphors work as cognitive tools that help humans understand various experiences and ideas (Yani et al., 2025).

Based on the data that collected from American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney, the following is the text that portrait conceptual metaphor.

"Trendsetting denim that leads, never follows"

In this tagline, the metaphor emerges through the use of the verbs "leads" and "follows" attached to the noun "denim." Denim, as an inanimate fashion product, does not literally lead or follow in the way a person or a group might. The choice to pair the product with human actions creates a metaphorical mapping in which American Eagle positions its denim as a leader rather than a follower in the fashion world.

According to Lakoff & Johnson (2003), metaphors allow people to understand one domain of experience in terms of another. In this case, the brand uses the conceptual metaphor as the brand is a person that allows the product to take on human characteristics such as leadership, initiative, and independence. Through the phrase "denim that lead, never follows" shows how American Eagle positioning itself as trend-setter which never imitates another brand. This metaphor strengthens the campaign's persuasive power since American Eagle brand will make anybody who wear the product believe that their product not only style, but also a trend setter who has own autonomy and originality.

"Live Your Life."

Another metaphor exists in the phrase "live your life" from American Eagle Tagline. This tagline not only an idea of someone's live but also an expression for someone to shape own path and identity through the style from American Eagle who will help them to more expressive and connected to themselves. Thus, "live your life" reflects the metaphor of someone building their identity through American Eagle jeans products which will bring them a more alive sensation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney contains the form of lexical and structural ambiguity. Tagline such as “Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans”, “My jeans are blue”, and “Genes are passed down... My jeans are blue” demonstrate ambiguity through the phonetic similarity that can lead to multiple interpretation. Not only through phonetic similarity the word choice such as the word “fit” in the phrase “own your fit” and the word “sydney” in the phrase “the sydney jeans” show that campaign language for advertising not deliver information but also shapes identity association and self-image for the consumer. Implicitly, it proves that word choice can be serve as a mechanism to expand meaning while strengthening American Eagle’s brand positioning. Furthermore, structural ambiguity also portrays the lack of syntactic cues that led to more than one possible clause structure. Structural ambiguity is a state of affairs in which the structure of a sentence lends itself to multiple interpretations of the meaning of a phrase or clause within it. In American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney, the structural ambiguity portrait through the phrase “Trendsetting denim that leads, never follows” with the ambiguity whether the verb “leads” and “follow” attach to denim as a product or to the wearer.

In addition to ambiguity, the campaign also relies on conceptual metaphors to broaden product representation and encourage audiences to build symbolic connections with the brand. Taglines like “Trendsetting denim that leads, never follows” depict denim as a figure of leadership, while “Live Your Life” conveys the idea of a life journey that can be guided through style choices. These metaphors position denim as self-expression that transcends mere clothing. Thus, this study provides an illustration that ambiguity and metaphor play an important role in shaping the public’s meaning and interpretive response to the American Eagle campaign.

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