

A Small-scale Study of Conceptual Metaphors in Casino Advertising

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to traditional linguistics, which views metaphor primarily as a rhetorical device, cognitive linguistics sees it as a fundamental cognitive process inherent to human thoughts. The conceptual metaphor theory, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, continues to be a subject of intense scholarly debate. Numerous studies have examined conceptual metaphor from various perspectives, but research specifically focusing on advertising discourse is still limited. Advertising is constantly present in our lives, whether we are conscious of it or not. It holds a significant influence in our daily lives and communication. As we know that advertisers tend to make use of metaphors, and an analysis of their usages can provide valuable insights into their role in advertising discourse. The purpose of this paper is to extend the application of conceptual metaphor theory to the unique context of Macau's casino advertising. Through a small-scale study, the author aims to identify types of metaphors used in casino advertising and gain an understanding of how they are strategically employed to attract customers.

1. Introduction

When walking on the streets of Macau, one cannot help but notice the abundance of casino advertisements. Have you ever taken note of the language used in these advertisements or considered how they manage to stand out in such a competitive environment? This is indeed an intriguing topic. Metaphor is a common phenomenon in our life. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.3) putted, "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature"^[4]. In advertising, advertisers inevitably and unconsciously employ plenty of metaphors. Therefore, conducting a study on conceptual metaphors in casino advertisements can enhance our understanding of types of conceptual metaphors used in these advertisements.

1.1 Previous Studies on Conceptual Metaphor in Advertising

A number of scholars abroad have conducted research on advertising, producing significant findings. The earliest study on advertisement could be traced back to 1966 when Leech published his book *English in Advertising*^[6]. This work drew the attention of scholars to the discourse of advertising. However, it was not until the publication of *Metaphors We Live by* by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 that metaphor was no longer considered a simple rhetorical device, but rather as a mechanism for conveying metaphorical concepts^[4]. As a result, many scholars began to focus on metaphors from a cognitive perspective and applied them to advertising discourse. For example, Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990) explored social communication through metaphor in advertising and concluded that met-

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aphors are a powerful and common strategy utilized by advertisers, serving as the foundation for basic communication forms^[7]. Other scholars have focused on the effects of using metaphors in advertising; Zaltman and Coulter (1995) explained how metaphors in advertising promote and influence consumers' behavior^[12]. Robin Coulter, Gerald Zaltman, and Leith Coulter (2001) examined consumer perceptions of advertising through the lens of metaphor and cross-case analysis, revealing that metaphors in advertising hold a positive value^[2]. Ang and Lim (2006) investigated whether metaphors in advertising have a synergistic or compensatory effect on brand personality perceptions of utilitarian and symbolic products. Their study showed that metaphors could be strategically used to influence brand personality perceptions, particularly for utilitarian products^[1].

In China, Wang Baoling (2011) carried out a comparative study of conceptual metaphors in English and Chinese public service advertisements, exploring the social-cultural factors of conceptual metaphors between Chinese and English^[10]. Yang Zhishang (2017) demonstrated the effectiveness of conceptual integration theory in analyzing metaphorical elements within English advertisements. This essay contributed to the field by proposing a new visual metaphor category and expanding our understanding of conceptual integration in advertising communication^[11]. In her research, Liu Yixuan (2024) explored the cognitive phenomenon of metaphor in the context of English cosmetics advertising. The research analyzed the use of structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors in cosmetics advertisements from European and American brands. The findings revealed that structural metaphor was the most commonly used type, particularly in mapping concrete concepts such as war and journey onto abstract concepts like "repair", "anti-aging" and "whitening"^[8].

1.2 Aim of Study

Although there are a number of articles regarding conceptual metaphors in advertising discourse, there is limited attention given to casino advertising, which remains underexplored. Metaphorical language in advertising is particularly persuasive in conveying the advertisers' sales concepts. Through this small-scale study, the author aims to identify the types of metaphors used in casino advertising and explore how these metaphors convey the message of attracting customers. This will enable customers to gain a better understanding of casino advertisements and develop an informed attitude towards them. Additionally, it may serve as an inspiration and reference for advertising planners, helping them to come up with more creative advertisements in accordance with consumer psychology.

1.3 Research Methodology and Data

As metaphors are commonly utilized in language, the author takes a qualitative approach. This essay assumes that the process of metaphorical thinking involves mappings from the source domain to the target domain. All the examples used in this study have been sourced from two magazines, namely *Macau Essential* and *Macau Business*, as well as from the official websites of the casinos related.

2. Theory of Conceptual Metaphor

2.1 Definition of Conceptual Metaphor

Metaphors are commonly used in our daily lives, such as the saying "knowledge is power" or "customer is king", and even in popular songs like Taylor Swift's lyrics in the song *Cardigan* where she sings "and I feel like when I was an old cardigan". According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is conceptualized as a strictly directional phenomenon that involves thinking of one concept in terms of another. And we tend to comprehend a more abstract and illusive concept in terms of a less abstract and more concrete concept^[4].

2.2 Working Mechanism of Conceptual Metaphor

Semantic conflict serves as the fundamental prerequisite for metaphor. This conflict arises from the juxtaposition of two conceptually distinct domains, creating a tension that is resolved through the comprehension of the metaphor. In other words, the understanding of metaphor involves a cognitive process that reconciles this semantic conflict. In the context of conceptual metaphor theory, mappings refer to the systematic correspondences between the source domain and the target domain. The source domain, rich in structure and associated features, is mapped onto the target domain, thereby imparting new meanings and interpretations. This mapping process is central to the working of metaphor, as it allows us to view the target domain through the lens of the source domain. In simpler terms, mappings serve as bridges that connect a more concrete concept (source domain) to a more abstract concept (target domain). For example, in the metaphor "customer is king", there are mappings from the attributes of a king (authority, privilege, respect, power) to those of a customer. This suggests that customers should be treated with utmost respect and importance.

On the other hand, constraints in mappings refer to the limitations and rules that govern how these mappings are constructed and interpreted. Not all attributes of the source domain can or should be mapped onto the target domain. Constraints ensure that the mappings remain coherent

and meaningful. For instance, while a king has many attributes, only those relevant to understanding “customer” metaphorically are mapped. Attributes like “wearing a crown” or “living in a castle” might not be relevant in this context. Let’s use a conceptual metaphor— “Here, you are royalty” in our data as an example, to analyze the precise mappings between customers and royals.

Table 1. Mappings between You (Customer) and Royalty

Royalty	You
Royals	Customers
Palace	Ordinary Hotel
Supreme Power	Little Power
VIP Service	Common Service
Luxury	Economy
Abandon the Palace	Give up Your Abode

Galaxy Macau (opened in May 2011) is portrayed as a lavish royal palace where customers are treated like royals. They are provided with premium services and luxurious experiences that go beyond mere gambling activities. In the conceptual metaphor “you are royalty,” the idea is to elevate the status of customers by comparing them to royalty, thereby implying a certain level of importance, privilege, respect and power. The mapping between “customer” and “royalty” operates by projecting certain aspects of royalty onto the concept of customers.

Royals to Customers: This analogy puts customers as the central focus, emphasizing that customers should be regarded as the most important figures in the business transaction.

Palace to Ordinary Hotel: This mapping contrasts the luxurious and exclusive atmosphere of a palace with that of an ordinary hotel.

Supreme Power to Little Power: Royals have absolute power. This mapping highlights the asymmetry in power but also emphasizes the need to respect and cater to the customer’s wishes, even if their actual power is limited.

VIP Service to Common Service: This comparison implies that all customers should receive service equivalent to VIP treatment.

Luxury to Economy: The royal lifestyle is often associated with luxury. And this comparison serves as a reminder that even customers on a budget deserve to be treated like royalty.

Abandon the Palace to Give up Your Abode: In a more metaphorical sense, this analogy suggests that when a customer leaves or switches brands/services, it’s comparable to a royal abandoning their palace—a significant and noteworthy event. It emphasizes the importance of entertaining customers and ensuring their satisfaction. As

customers play a crucial role in business activities, they are the ones who support the continuous operation of the business by paying the bill.

Therefore, attracting potential customers and satisfying their needs are essential for the prosperity of businesses.

3. Analysis of Metaphor in Casino Advertising

3.1 Journey Metaphor

Journey metaphors are used frequently in the data collected. The journey metaphor can be seen as a purposeful activity which travels along a path towards a destination, according to Lakoff (1993)^[5]. As the aim of Casino advertisements is to attract potential customers, the advertising itself is a highly goal-oriented activity. Arousing people’s interests in coming to the casino for gambling or for fun is the ultimate goal. Therefore, some certain elements of journey, such as the starting point, destination, traveling speed are quite salient in the following examples.

Table 2. Metaphorical Expressions of Journey Metaphor

METAPHORS OF JOURNEY	
Metaphorical Expressions	journey, start, destination, embark on, discovery, quest, expressway

A. The Starting Point and Destination

When we begin a journey, it is necessary to be clear that where we are heading to. As mentioned before, journey is a goal-oriented activity. Each advertiser sets its target and takes all kinds of ways to appeal to people to leave for the casino. It is clear that, “gamble activity is a journey” and “gamblers are travelers”. For example,

(1) Embark on an alluring journey of fascination that transcends time. (MGM)

In this example, the verb “embark” suggests beginning a trip or a journey. The journey is described as “alluring” and “fascinating”, which are adjectives that evoke a sense of excitement and adventure, encouraging potential gamblers to start this journey. The metaphor implies that going to the casino is like starting a thrilling and captivating journey, where the gambler is the traveler.

(2) Embark on the enthralling journey of discovery that goes beyond time. (MGM)

Similar to the first example, this sentence also uses “embark on a journey” to mean that a journey is about to begin. The journey is described as “enthralling” and a “journey of discovery”, which suggests that going to the casino is not just about gambling but also about exploring and finding something new and exciting. The metaphor implies that the casino offers a journey of exploration and discovery, where the gambler is the explorer or traveler seeking new experiences.

(3) Start on a shining star journey to win. Make your move in the glittering Star World “\$5-million Quest” for fun and prizes. (Star World)

The journey is described as a “shining star journey to win”, which creates an image of a glamorous and rewarding journey. The phrase “5-million Quest” also contributes to the journey metaphor by using the word “quest”, which implies a purposeful journey or expedition in search of something, in this case, the “5-million” prize. The metaphor implies that going to the casino is like embarking on a glittering and rewarding quest or journey, where the gambler is the traveler seeking to win prizes and have fun.

B. Means of Transportation or the Traveling Speed

On the way to the destination, the speed of travelers varies from person to person. Generally speaking, travelers not only desire to arrive at the destination as fast as they can, but also they are in hope of saving strengths and efforts. Based on that, some advertisers promote their speedy service for customers. Such is the case of the advertisement of Grand Lisboa.

(4) Your expressway to the real Macau. (Grand Lisboa)

In this example, the phrase “your expressway” uses the word “expressway”, which is a type of highway designed for fast and efficient travel. By using this term, the advertiser is suggesting that going to the casino (the destination) is like taking an expressway, implying a quick and efficient journey. The metaphor implies that the casino (Grand Lisboa) offers speedy and efficient shuttle buses to reach the destination (the real Macau experience). The use of “expressway” also creates an image of a smooth and effortless journey, which appeals to potential gamblers who may want to enjoy the casino experience without any delays or obstacles.

3.2 Container Metaphor

Table 3. Metaphorical Expressions of Container Metaphor

METAPHORS OF CONTAINER	
Metaphorical Expressions	open, in the details, immerse in, to the heart’s content

People often use metaphors to conceptualize abstract ideas, emotions, and states by associating them with concrete entities, substances, and containers (Mohammed & Jawad, 2023) ^[9]. This cognitive mapping process helps individuals better understand and communicate complex concepts. Ontologically, we humans are independent of the outside world. The body itself is a container which has inside, outside and a boundary. Therefore, we often project this concept into other objects that have in-out

orientation and bounded surfaces, such as houses, palace, and resorts. Even some abstract things like wish, action, romance or beauty are applicable. For instance,

(1) Make all your wishes come true, at the world’s most fantastic destination resort—Galaxy Macau. Now open. (Galaxy Macau)

This advertisement uses the term “open” to describe the casino, which suggests that it is a container that can be opened or accessed. The phrase “now open” emphasizes the idea that the container is available for customers to enter and experience.

(2) Here, you are royalty. Dine to your heart’s content. Savor a stunning selection of pan-Asian and international cuisine. (Galaxy Macau)

This advertisement suggests that the casino is a container that offers no mere dining experiences. The phrase “to your heart’s content” implies that customers can dine within the container of the casino until they are satisfied or content.

(3) Perfection is in the details. Romance is in the details. (MGM)

This advertisement skillfully uses the phrase “in the details” to convey a sense of meticulous attention to every aspect of the casino experience. By presenting perfection and romance offered by MGM, the advertisement invites customers to imagine an environment where even the smallest details have been carefully designed to enhance their enjoyment and satisfaction. The use of “in” not only indicates that these details are a component of the casino experience but also implies a sense of depth and complexity, suggesting that there is much to discover and appreciate beyond the initial impression. Customers are encouraged to seek out its hidden gems and immerse themselves in a truly perfect and romantic experience.

(4) The mirage of Gold. Immerse in the beauty of a legacy. (MGM)

The phrase “immerse in” suggests that the customer is entering or being fully engaged in golden vibe of the casino. Similarly, the term “beauty of a legacy” conveys that the casino offers a captivating and perhaps historically unforgettable experience for customers to completely involve themselves in.

3.3 Human Metaphor

Table 4. Metaphorical Expressions of Human Metaphor

METAPHORS OF HUMAN	
Metaphorical Expressions	embrace, touch, enchant, take...breath away, embolden, performance

Humans are intelligent beings capable of thinking and acting. Our understanding of the world around us is de-

rived from our physical bodies, which serve as tools for perceiving and comprehending the surrounding environment. As Kovecses (2002, p.157) puts, “abstract complex systems are conceptualized metaphorically as persons”^[3]. Therefore, products or services in advertisements could be portrayed as human beings. Human beings serve as the source domain, while products or services represent the target domain. The use of human metaphors allows us to attribute human characteristics to non-animated products or services, making it easier for us to comprehend them. The data collected suggest that there are a number of examples of human metaphors present in advertising. Here are two of the most typical ones.

(1) An opera for your eyes. A drama of colors to embrace your soul and petals to touch your heart. (MGM)

This advertisement uses the phrases “embrace your soul” and “touch your heart” to suggest that the product or service is like a human being that can provide emotional comfort or connection. The verbs “embrace” and “touch” imply physical contact or intimacy, which is typically associated with human relationships.

(2) The glory of gold. Spectacle to take your breath away. Colors to enchant you. Drama to embolden your spirit. (MGM)

This advertisement uses the phrases “take your breath away”, “enchant you”, and “embolden your spirit” to convey the idea that the product or service has a human-like ability to evoke strong emotions and inspire confidence. The terms “take your breath away” and “enchant” suggest a feeling of wonder or fascination, while “embolden” implies a sense of courage or bravery.

3.4 War Metaphor

Table 5. Metaphorical Expressions of War Metaphor

METAPHORS OF WAR	
Metaphorical Expressions	escape, irresistible, win, prize

Although the majority of individuals in today’s society have not directly experienced the harsh war, exposure to television programs, movies, and news coverage has made us familiar with the concept of warfare. It is therefore not surprising that certain metaphorical expressions of war are strategically employed by advertising planners as a means to achieve success. Through advertising tactics, various casinos use distinct marketing strategies in order to attract customers and outshine their competitors. By doing so, they aim to establish themselves as the preferred choice for consumers. This parallel between war and advertising activities becomes evident when considering that a war necessitates at least two opposing parties. In this case, dif-

ferent casino advertisers represent the different parties involved in a “battle” of advertising tactics; and each striving to outperform their opponents using strategic methods similar to those employed during war.

A. Strategies of War

Strategies play a crucial role in achieving victory in war. Similarly, advertisers must carry out appropriate strategies to accomplish their advertising goals. In today’s market, consumers are more discerning and careful when selecting products or services, which compels advertisers to make every effort to meet the needs and demands of customers.

(1) Escape to Asia’s newest and most spectacular resort... With three world class hotels, over 50 irresistible dining venues... (Galaxy Macau)

This advertisement uses the phrase “escape to Asia’s newest and most spectacular resort” to suggest that the resort is a place where customers can escape from their daily routine and enjoy a peaceful moment. The verb “escape” implies a sense of fleeing or avoiding something undesirable, which is a common strategy in war. The phrase “irresistible dining venues” implies that the resort has an advantage over its competitors, which is similar to having a strategic advantage in war.

(2) More than just a company that makes casino machines, KONAMI creates escape, joy and delight. (KONAMI)

Similar to the first example, it uses the phrase “creates escape, joy and delight” to suggest that KONAMI’s products provide customers with a sense of relief or escape from their daily chores. The advertising process is conceptualized as a war in which the advertiser must use strategies to defeat competitors and capture the attention and loyalty of customers. Sometimes escape can be a good strategy to defeat rivals, as the thirty-sixth stratagem in *Sun Tzu’s Art of War*—“decamping being the best; running away as the best choice”. Advertisers rely on persuasive language and appealing imagery to differentiate themselves from competitors to gain the upper hand, similar to the way a military commander uses strategies to gain an advantage over enemy forces.

B. Results of War

As in a war, it is certain that there will be winners and losers. It is also true for gambling activities: the winner takes all. In ancient time, spoils of war are the trophies of victory; while in gambling activity, prizes or rewards are awarded to those who achieve the best results. The following examples would serve to show that:

(3) Start on a shining star journey to win. Make your

move in the glittering Star World “\$5-million Quest” for fun and prizes. (Star World)

This advertisement uses the phrase “start on a shining star journey” to suggest that the competition or gambling activity is an exciting quest in which participants have the opportunity to win prizes. The term “win” conveys a sense of triumph and achievement, which is a common outcome in warfare. As mentioned earlier, the phrase “\$5-million Quest” implies that the competition or gambling activity is a historic event with a valuable prize, similar to a war with valuable treasures or spoils.

(4) Spending of Mop 500 or above to play instant draw, and have a chance to win 5 nights free stay at Sofitel Bangkok, Shanghai & Macau. (Pontel6 Resort Macau)

Like the previous example, this advertisement uses “have a chance to win” to indicate a prize for the winner. “Win” suggests victory or success and the “5 nights free stay” prize signifies a valuable reward.

3.5 Star Metaphor

Stars always appear in the dark clear sky, lighting up the night sky and providing guidance for human beings. In advertising, the metaphorical use of “star” represents something that can bring luck, hope, and direction to customers. This metaphor is rooted in the cultural association of stars with positive qualities such as luck, brightness and beauty. For instance, a lottery advertisement might utilize the phrase “your lucky star is shining” to imply that playing the lottery can lead to good fortune.

Table 6. Metaphorical Expressions of Star Metaphor

METAPHORS OF STAR	
Metaphorical Expressions	star, shine, shining, glittering

(1) Star World, my shining star. When I step into the Star World, I shine like a star. (Star World)

This example uses the metaphorical expression “shining star” to suggest that the “Star World” is a place where people can feel special, important, and successful, just like a shining star in the sky. The phrase “I shine like a star” implies that being in the Star World gives the attendee a sense of confidence, self-worth, and recognition, just like a star or celebrity that is visible and admired by many. This example uses the conceptual metaphor of a star to convey the idea of success, recognition, and personal fulfillment.

(2) Make your move in the glittering Star World “\$5-million Quest” for fun and prizes. (Star World)

In this example, the metaphorical expression “glittering Star World” is used to convey the idea that the “Star World” is a place filled with excitement, glamour, and

wealth, much like a bright and sparkling star. The phrase “\$5-million Quest” suggests that there is a precious reward or prize to be obtained in the Star World, similar to how a star representing a valuable and desirable goal.

3.6 Nature Metaphor

Table 7. Metaphorical Expressions of Nature Metaphor

METAPHORS OF NATURE	
Metaphorical Expressions	tropical oasis, smell

With the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature gaining attention, there is an increasing awareness of the significance of nature. A tranquil place with stunning scenery and picturesque surroundings is preferable to other places. In the following examples, the image of “tropical oasis” is used.

(1) Escape to Asia’s newest and most spectacular resort and experience the unforgettable pleasures of a tropical oasis. (Galaxy Macau)

It is known that Macau is located in a tropical area, and the weather can be burning hot in summer. In this example, the metaphorical expression “tropical oasis” is used to suggest that Galaxy Macau is a place for relaxation, coolness, and escape from the daily stresses of life, just like a tropical oasis in the desert. The image of a tropical oasis is associated with pleasant weather, lush greenery, and a sense of relaxation, which is what Galaxy Macau is striving to provide for its guests.

(2) Asia’s biggest slot jackpot. Starting at HK\$50,000,000. Life-changing jackpots. I love the smell of money. (Megabucks)

This example uses the metaphorical expression “money is a plant/flower” to suggest that money has a certain fragrance or scent that is desirable and alluring, just like a fragrant plant or flower. The sentence “I love the smell of money” implies that the speaker finds money to be beautiful and desirable, just like a pleasant scent that is enjoyable to breathe in.

3.7 Family Metaphor

Table 8. Metaphorical Expressions of Family Metaphor

METAPHORS OF FAMILY	
Metaphorical Expressions	home

As the age-old saying goes, “there’s no place like home.” Home is where the heart finds peace, a place that holds a piece of heart, a sanctuary where each person can find coziness amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life. The example below would serve to show that:

Come home with us to Macau. (Grand Lisboa)

This example uses the metaphorical expression “home” to convey the idea that Macau Grand Lisboa is a place of comfort, warmth, and familiarity, much like one’s own home. It seems to stand as a beacon of hospitality, inviting travelers from near and far to for a homey sleepover. The phrase “come home with us” convey the idea that Macau Grand Lisboa is more than a common hotel—it is a place where customers can feel connected and part of a community, like being with their own family. This metaphorical expression helps to create a sense of emotional connection between the hotel and its customers, making it more appealing and inviting to potential customers.

4. Conclusion

After a thorough examination and analysis of conceptual metaphors in casino advertising, this study reveals that metaphors are widely used in this genre of advertising. The majority of advertisements feature at least one conceptual metaphor, with some even containing multiple metaphors. These metaphors are strategically employed in various contexts to effectively communicate complex ideas and emotions in an engaging manner. The analysis emphasizes the effectiveness of conceptual metaphors as a means of establishing emotional connections between speakers and their audience, as well as between products or services and potential customers. Prominent conceptual metaphors employed by casino advertisers include the journey metaphor, container metaphor, war metaphor, human metaphor, star metaphor, nature metaphor, and family metaphor. It is noteworthy that the first three metaphors constitute a significant portion of those metaphors used. Additionally, the study highlights the utility of mappings in cultivating positive perceptions of casinos. Advertisers apply these inherent mappings to our cognition during the interpretation of advertisements to attract potential customers to casinos. However, it is reasonable to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the quantity and diversity of the data collected were not extensive enough, as all advertisements were sourced either from magazines or the official websites of the studied casinos. Secondly, there may have been a small amount of subjectivity involved in data analysis. Furthermore, this study solely relied on Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory. However, adopting a four-space blending model instead of two-domain mappings in the conceptual blending theory might offer a deeper insight into the audience’s cognitive

processing of casino advertisements. Future research could explore a combination of these two theories for a more comprehensive analysis. Despite these limitations, it is hoped that this study provides valuable insights into casino advertising and may stimulate further scholars’ interest in this specific discourse.

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