Figurative Language between Transparency and Persuasion

A Multimodal Analysis of Transport for London Instagram Posts

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Keywords	Abstract
Figurative language Metaphor Metonymy Social media Transparency	This paper examines the use of figurative language, specifically metaphors and metonymies, in Transport for London (TfL)'s Instagram profile. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and Radden and Kövecses' (1999) taxonomy, the study investigates how figurative language possibly contributes to transparent communication and engagement in the TfL's Instagram posts. The advent of social media platforms has transformed the way public bodies, such as TfL, engage with citizens, stakeholders, and the wider public. This research aims to provide insights into how public bodies use figurative language on social media platforms, focusing on verbal and visual modes of communication. Results reveal that TfL strategically employs metaphors and metonymies to promote services and shape brand image. Metaphorical imagery, such as tube stop symbols representing locations, serves to showcase TfL's extensive network and to encourage user interaction. Therefore, figurative language seems to be primarily used for promotional purposes, rather than to provide information about the services. The study emphasises the importance of integrating figurative language with factual information to enhance transparent communication.

1. Introduction[1]

Modern governance has been characterised by a symbiotic relationship between social media and governmental bodies, favouring transparency and accountability. Adopting social media as a new communication strategy has resulted in increased trust and engagement with citizens, thereby shaping a more interactive and responsive governance model (Song and Lee 2016; Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2013). Based on these assumptions, the paper explores the role of figurative language, particularly metaphors and metonymies, in the social media communication of public bodies. To provide a deeper understanding into the complex

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[1] Individual contributions in writing the article are identified as follows: Ilaria Iori was responsible for Sections 3.2 and 4. Mariasophia Falcone was responsible for Sections 2, and 3.1. Sections 1 and 5 were written by the two authors together.

intersection between figurative language, multimodality and social media, the study specifically focuses on Transport for London's (TfL) Instagram profile, as this is a public transportation provider that is particularly active on social media platforms. Through an analysis of both verbal and visual content, this study aims to uncover how figurative language may possibly contribute to transparent communication and engagement through a qualitative analysis of TfL's Instagram profile. More specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How does TfL use figurative language to promote their services and external image?
2. How does the use of figurative language contribute to transparent communication in the social media posts by TfL?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Transparency in Public Bodies Social Media Communication

Public transportation providers, such as TfL, by granting services to a larger number of users every day, are of key cultural significance. In particular, public transportation, at the centre of the debate about social and environmental sustainability (e.g., Mattioli 2016), has been shown to enhance people's sense of belonging and social cohesion in larger metropolitan areas (e.g., Alborzi 2021; Makhubu 2016). This is particularly true for London, where the cultural and social role of the Tube has been extensively studied (see Ashford 2013), making TfL one of the hallmarks of London and British culture.

A growing emphasis on accountability and openness has been a central trend in modern governance (I. Ball 2012; Alshehri and Drew 2010; Centeno, van Bavel and Burgelman 2005; Fang 2002). This has led public bodies and governmental organisations to turn to social media platforms as a means for more transparent communication. As a result, social media have now become essential tools for the public sector to engage with the public (Gunawong 2015).

By leveraging the capability of social media to distribute information to citizens (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes 2010), public bodies are fostering the idea of a government that promotes transparency, participation, and collaboration (Song and Lee 2016). Moreover, the integration of social media platforms into government practices has produced an enhanced perception of transparency due to the delivery of real-time information and the possibility of direct interaction with citizens (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2013). Consequently, turning to social media platforms has resulted in a positive synergy between governmental bodies and the perception of transparency (Song and Lee 2016).

Transparency in communicative terms can be intended as the extent to which information is openly communicated with the purpose of making information easily accessible to the public, in order to build trust and enhance public participation (C. Ball 2009). In this sense, the use of social media by government bodies, which involves showcasing services among other things, can be interpreted as a strategy to increase transparent communication practices. Government use of social media, by increasing the perception of transparency, can also positively impact trust towards the government (Song and Lee 2016; Gunawong 2015). Given that trust and transparency are inextricably linked, as transparency is seen as a precondition for trust (Koskela and Crawford Camiciottoli 2020), social media can be strategic mediators in increasing citizens' trust and improving their perceptions of government transparency (Song and Lee 2016). This positive correlation between citizens' perception of social media use by the government and transparency mainly relies on citizens' ability to easily access information. For this reason, fostering increased interactions between citizens and public bodies on social media can be essential to improve perceptions of transparency and trust in the government itself (Song and Lee 2016).

From this perspective, the rise of digital and mobile technologies, facilitating constant connectivity and instant communication, can be considered particularly suited for such purpose, as they emphasise real-time interaction, and frequent blending of personal and public spaces (Herring 2019). Indeed, transparency strategies can significantly benefit from the features of Web 2.0, such as participatory information sharing, user-generated content, collaboration, and the use of the web as a social platform (O'Reilly 2005). In particular, Web 2.0 and the emergence of social media have opened up new channels for participation, both horizontally among peers and vertically by challenging traditional institutions and hierarchies, eventually reducing gatekeeping (Demata, Heaney, and Herring 2018). This has transformed the public sphere, fostering new forms of collaboration and engagement (Jenkins 2006). Consequently, individuals can directly access and engage with content as well as actively participate in public discourse in a more democratic and transparent flow of information (Demata, Heaney and Herring 2018), which can be strategically leveraged for transparency aims.

2.2 Figurative language in Digital Discourse: Persuasion in Web 2.0

In Web 2.0 individuals and organisations alike adapt their strategies for meaning-making and self-presentation to fit the norms and expectations of the digital environment (Petroni 2019), in which interactions are shaped by patterns of community practice, including alignment, affiliation, and even loyalty (Zappavigna 2012). These processes often involve appreciation from the community, through liking or sharing systems (Petroni 2019). By pursuing shareability, users often aim to create content that can resonate with others, making it engaging, relatable,

and likely to be shared across different users' own networks (Chouliaraki and Morsing 2009). To receive this positive appreciation, therefore, users often have to resort to persuasive and promotional discursive strategies (Cook 2011). Influenced by the unique features of digital platforms, users tend to employ these strategies while interacting online, seeking to align themselves with community norms and gain positive feedback. As a result, digital discourse is inherently promotional because of the nature of Web 2.0 and the practices it encompasses (Petroni 2019), making promotion one of the key functions in the meaning-making processes of digital discourse (Petroni 2011).

Moreover, digital artifacts can be considered inherently persuasive because they leverage the affordances of digital technologies to influence users' behaviour and attitudes. In fact, most digital artifacts are designed with a persuasive purpose in mind and content creators aim to influence user attitudes through well-established algorithmic frameworks, prompting users to consume digital products or engage in specific actions (Petroni 2016). As noted by Ferrari (2018), persuasion consists of a dynamic and intersubjective process involving a persuader and a persuadee. The goal of this process is to influence or to prompt a change in beliefs or behaviour through interaction. This definition resonates strongly with the dynamics often observed in social media and Web 2.0, making persuasive, evaluative, and promotional elements key in web-based meaning-making processes (Petroni 2019).

In this regard, metaphor and figurative language stand out as key tools for understanding persuasion (Ferrari 2007). This is because metaphor facilitates talking about one thing in terms of another: by using metaphorical language, certain aspects of a topic are highlighted while others are downplayed, influencing how the audience perceives it (Semino 2008). Similarly, metonymy is used to replace one term with another, closely linked to it, that can influence perceptions and attitudes by highlighting certain aspects of a concept while de-emphasising others (Littlemore 2015). Moreover, metaphorical expressions play a significant role in representation because they involve interpreting one (source) domain of meaning in terms of another (target domain), projecting ideas from one area onto another (Chilton 2004). Therefore, metaphor is recognised for its capacity to organise, transform, and create new knowledge, while it can also evoke emotional responses and impact evaluations (Lakoff and Turner 2009, among others). This has made metaphor a widely used device for persuasion in a variety of communicative contexts (Sopory and Dillard 2002). This includes the digital environment, whose persuasive characteristics constitute fertile ground for metaphor use. Most importantly, the relation between metaphor and the Internet has been instrumental since the early days of the web, contributing to making sense of what digital discourse is and its possible future developments (see Wyatt 2021).

3. The Study

3.1 Data

For this study, the TfL_IG corpus was compiled. TfL, serving the entire greater London area and a population of 8,797 million people, maintains only a single official Instagram account. The corpus comprises Instagram posts in their entirety, including both images and the accompanying text, collected from the start of the account in 2013 to September 2023. Data collection was executed through an automated process using a cloud-based web scraping platform.[2] In this case, a pre-built scraper task was run on the cloud to retrieve and download all posts from TfL's Instagram profile. Eventually, the TfL_IG amounted to a total of 122,912 tokens and 4,914 posts.

TfL's Instagram profile has a significant following, specifically 257,000 followers. This substantial follower base underscores the platform's importance as a key means of communication and engagement with the TfL's diverse audience, including residents, commuters, and tourists. In selecting TfL for analysis, several factors were considered. In particular, public transit systems, such as TfL, play a pivotal role in the ongoing discourse surrounding social and environmental sustainability (Mattioli 2015). As highlighted by Miller et al. (2016), these systems are instrumental in reducing auto dependence and mitigating the adverse impacts of transportation networks on society and the environment. Moreover, TfL's operations are situated within a city known for its diversity and cultural vibrancy, making it a representative example of how public transit can be a cultural facilitator aiding the movement of people from diverse backgrounds.

3.2 Methodology

Given the persuasive power of figurative language, we analysed metaphors and metonymies in their visual and verbal modes. Metaphors and metonymies were considered in the investigation since several studies showed how visual metaphors are closely related to metonymical meanings, especially in promotional discourse (Bolognesi and Strik Lievers 2020; Bolognesi and Vernillo 2019). Metaphors and metonymies can perform various functions in communication. In scientific texts, metaphors often simplify complex concepts, making them more relatable and understandable (e.g., Deignan, Semino and Paul 2019). In business communication, metaphors and metonymies can be vague since they communicate concepts indirectly. However, they can also serve as effective attention-grabbing devices to promote or better explain specific products

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[2] Data from TfL's Instagram profile was collected using Apify (apify.com). The platform allows users to run pre-built or custom scripts to collect and process data from any website.

or services (see Littlemore 2015; Semino 2008).

In the specific context of public transportation and social media, our initial hypothesis was that figurative language could either be used to clarify services and products, thereby enhancing communication with users, or could serve commercial purposes by creating a brand identity or generating engagement on the platform (see Koller 2009; Keller 1993). To explore this hypothesis, we qualitatively examined metaphors and metonymies realised by means of verbal and visual modes of communication. Specifically, drawing on a semiotic approach (e.g., Diani and Iori 2024; Poppi 2021) – which focuses on how signs convey meaning through different modes (e.g., verbal and visual) – we investigated the functions that verbal and visual figurative language performed in TfL's communication strategy on Instagram.

In particular, metaphor, as the cognitive process of understanding something in terms of something else (Semino 2008), was analysed by referring to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Accordingly, a linguistic expression such as *she's <u>high</u> in spirit* was considered a lexical realisation of a conceptual metaphor HAPPY IS UP, in which the most abstract concept, HAPPY (the target domain) is understood in terms of a more concrete one, UP (the source domain).

In this study, metonymy was considered the process whereby we use one entity to refer to another related concept within the same domain (Littlemore 2015). Unlike metaphors – which involve a comparison between two unrelated entities belonging to different conceptual domains – metonymy is usually realised within the same conceptual domain or Idealised Cognitive Model (ICM) (Bolognesi and Vernillo 2019; see Radden and Kövecses 1999). ICMs are defined as encyclopedic networks of interconnected knowledge (Littlemore 2015). For instance, Littlemore (2015, 10-11) suggests that within the ICM for 'cars' different areas of knowledge related to cars can be identified (e.g., car parts such as wheels and pedals, and types of roads such as motorways). In this perspective, metonymy allows us to use one part of this ICM (the vehicle) to refer to another part (the target). Consequently, in our analysis, metonymic relations were explored by referring to ICM and Radden and Kövecses' (1999) taxonomy. This framework identifies and rationalises the conceptual relationships within an ICM, summarising metonymy-producing relationships (Radden and Kövecses 1999, 7). These relations can be used to understand the type of conceptual link between the vehicle and target concepts in a metonymy. For instance, according to the framework, the expression *a <u>glass</u> of wine* – used to refer to the liquid inside a glass – is a PART FOR PART metonymy (CONTAINER FOR CONTENT), where 'glass' is the vehicle and 'wine' is the target. In summary, throughout the article, metaphors were interpreted as A-as-B and metonymies as B-for-A (Forceville 2009).

Drawing on these definitions, we examined the posts in all their parts[3] to search for verbal and visual figurative content. Only posts with static images were analysed, excluding reels, as they would have involved a different audiovisual approach. To identify verbal metaphors, we followed an adapted version of the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) (Steen et al. 2010). Accordingly, we identified lexical units in the caption and determined their contextual and basic meanings by consulting Wordnet.[4] This step deviates from the original MIPVU, which typically uses different dictionaries (e.g., the Longman dictionary[5]). However, for consistency with the Visual Metaphor Identification Procedure (Šorm and Steen 2018), we decided to use WordNet. If the contextual meaning of a lexical unit contrasted with the basic meaning and could be understood in comparison with it, the unit was marked as metaphorical. To identify potential metonymies, the procedure proposed by Biernacka (2013) was followed. In this case, if basic and contextual meanings contrasted, we determined if the primary meaning of a word was linked to its contextual or basic meanings through contiguity. Contiguity was regarded as a relationship involving adjacency and closeness, encompassing spatial and temporal proximity, causal connections, and part-whole relationships (Biernacka 2013, 117).

For the visual content, we employed an adapted version of the Visual Metaphor Identification Procedure (VISMIP), introduced by Šorm and Steen (2018). This procedure offered a structured approach for identifying visual metaphors, aiming to mitigate the subjectivity often associated with visual metaphor identification (see e.g., Refaie 2003). The method involved several sequential steps (for a full detailed list of the steps, see Šorm and Steen 2018, 82). Firstly, we comprehensively examined the image to grasp its overarching meaning and then, we provided a detailed description of the image. Subsequently, we considered whether the image carried abstract meanings, taking into account contextual factors, and we analysed the visual context (image) in relation to its verbal description (caption). Thus, we identified possible abstract messages of the image and its broad topic. Then the initial description of the picture was deconstructed into units composing the image. In line with the VISMIP, to deconstruct the units, we referred to the natural-language descriptions suggested by Tam and Leung's (2001) framework. Units labelled as 'Agent' denoted entities responsible for an action within a semantic context (Tam and Leung 2001, 933). 'Action' pertained to the verbs describing the activities undertaken by the Agent. An 'Action' could involve none, one, or multiple direct 'Objects,' as well as none or multiple indirect objects, indicated as 'Recipients.' Finally, the term 'Setting'

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[3] Posts typically consist of different parts: the caption and the image or video.
[4] Wordnet is a large lexical database of English grouped into sets of cognitive synonyms and was used to keep the results consistent, as is traditionally used in the VISMIP (Šorm and Steen 2018). Retrieved from http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn. Last visited 28/03/2024.
[5] Retrieved from https://www.ldoceonline.com/. Last visited 23/06/2024.

encompassed the specific time and place within a given context. Each of these elements was then examined for any incongruity with the established topic or typical properties associated with them. Then, we explored whether possible incongruous elements could be integrated into the overall topic of the image through a form comparison, involving cross-domain relations. In this case, the unit was marked as metaphorical. If the incongruous unit did not include comparison, it could be understood within a single-domain mapping and involved contiguity, then the unit was marked as potentially metonymical.

4. Findings

The analysis reveals that both monomodal and multimodal metaphors and metonymies are central to TfL's communication. Monomodal metaphors and metonymies are realised through one mode of communication (e.g., verbal or visual), while multimodal ones combine different modes (e.g., verbal *and* visual; see Forceville 2002). These metaphors and metonymies perform different functions and fulfil various purposes. On the one hand, metaphors and metonymies are used to enhance engagement with the followers. On the other hand, certain metaphors are used to promote TfL's services or to enhance its brand image, which is defined as the external perceptions, opinions and ideas that the users and society have on a brand (see Low and Lamb 2000; Keller 1993). Fostering brand image can be a powerful tool to strengthen the reliability and trust of the brand (see Koller 2009). From a semiotic perspective, TfL appears to be focused on establishing itself as a multicultural brand that values principles of diversity and inclusion and this image is often constructed through the use of figurative language. Figure 1 shows an example of this usage.

Fig. 1: Instagram post published by TfL on 04/06/2023

Figure 1 depicts a post with an image portraying a scene inside the tube carriages alongside a caption describing the picture. The image, originally posted by the artist Aashita Relan on her Instagram profile showcases modified paintings resembling passengers within the tube. In the picture, these subjects from various paintings, visually diverse from each other, are shown sitting or standing, engaging in different activities that have been altered from the original paintings. Some are shown wearing headphones, reading, holding a skateboard, or kissing other subjects. The overarching topic of the image is inferred to be *taking the tube* or *using TfL services*.

The verbal caption conveys a possible abstract message, that of comparing Transport for London's users to *masterpieces* and positively evaluating the collage made by Aashita Relan. Nonetheless, the final question of the caption "Which one of these passengers is you and why?" prompts the followers to identify with the famous subjects depicted in the tube carriages. This question reinforces the idea of the intended message behind the posting of the image and caption, namely, to portray *TfL's passengers as diverse masterpieces.*

Considering the entire post, a referential description for this image could be *sections of paintings are taking the tube.* The description can be divided into the following units: Agent (section of paintings) Action (are taking) Object (the tube). While these units align with the general topic of the image, the Action (are taking) the tube, meaning "travelling by means of transportation" (sense #9 on Wordnet), is incongruous with the properties of the Agent (section of paintings), as this is an action that sections of painting cannot perform. Thus, the Agent (section of paintings) is considered property incongruous. Moreover, replacing sections of paintings with actual passengers suggests a metaphorical comparison which can be mapped through the conceptual metaphor PASSENGERS ARE MASTERPIECES.

The characters in the picture appear to come from different historical periods, which might make them unfamiliar to some passengers. However, the post seems designed to make passengers feel represented and recognised as part of the TfL's community. It aims to celebrate cultural diversity among TfL passengers, thereby creating engagement with the post. TfL seems to use this metaphorical image to engage users and promote cultural diversity and inclusion. This aligns with TfL's goals of inclusivity,[6] fostering trust and perceived transparent communication with its followers (see Koskela and Crawford Camiciottoli 2020).

Despite TfL's commitment to becoming a more disability-inclusive organisation (see footnote 6), the picture does not represent other types of diversity, such as disability itself. Therefore, the metaphor is not entirely successful in conveying intersectional diversity. However, TfL's profile does include several posts that raise awareness of disabilities (both visible and invisible),

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[6] See https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/about-tfl/diversity-and-inclusion. Last visited 29/03/2024.

but they do not employ figurative language. This may indicate TfL's preference for clear and direct language when addressing crucial topics such as disability.

Additionally, several posts conveying figurative meanings employ modified versions of TfL's logo, based on the 'roundel' symbol. The 'roundel design' first appeared at Underground stations in the early 1900s.[7] The roundel is a simple yet distinctive design, consisting of a solid blue circle and a blue bar, whose colours are modified to a red circle and blue bar when the symbol is used for signalling the tube stops with the station name inside the bar. Modified versions of the roundel logo are consistently used across TfL's Instagram profile to promote services and build familiarity with users. These adaptations serve various purposes, including improving engagement, showcasing services, and contributing to a transparent and inclusive representation of TfL. The logo is often modified or adapted to promote various services or enhance trust with the users of the transportation network. Let us consider an example of the first case scenario shown in Figure 2.

Fig. 2: Instagram post published by TfL on 28/08/2022

Figure 2 shows a post published by TfL on 28 August 2022, comprising visual and verbal content. As regards the visual content, the image displays the sea and the shore in a presumably warm seaside area. In the sand, there is an impression of TfL's logo, likely made with a finger or stick. The image itself does not convey a specific abstract message, as it only shows a representation of the logo in the sand. However, considering the verbal content, the caption reads "Thinking of home even when on holiday." This likely adds an abstract meaning to the

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[7]   Retrieved   from   https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/suppliers-and-contractors/logo-requests.   Last   visited 29/03/2024.

post by likening TfL's logo to the concept of home. Thus, TfL's logo is being metaphorically compared to *home*. Accordingly, the broad topic of the image refers to *holidays*, and a basic description for the image could be: *Transport for London's logo is written in the sand at the seaside*, where Agent (Transport for London's logo) Action (is written) Setting (in the sand at the seaside). While most visual units seem to align with both the topic and properties of the items described, the Setting emerged as atypical for the properties of the logo. TfL's logo is not usually to be found written in the sand and hence, the Setting can be considered an unexpected situational property. Despite this, the Setting cannot be considered fully incongruous, as it aligns with the context of a beach environment where creative activities like drawing in the sand are common.

Considering the verbal content, the caption makes explicit reference to home, indirectly comparing the TfL's logo, which represents the governmental body, to home. Specifically, in this case, the TfL's logo is being compared to home through the conceptual metaphor GOVERNMENTAL BODY IS HOME. However, the conceptual metaphor seems to be realised through two different modes: the source domain, HOME, is conveyed verbally, while the target domain, GOVERNMENTAL BODY, is understood visually through the TfL's logo, which is metonymically used to represent the transport provider as a whole (Radden and Kövecses 1999). This makes the metaphor a multimodal one, according to Forceville's (2002) definition of multimodal metaphors, as the source domain is realised through the verbal mode, while the target domain is represented visually.

This metaphor evokes the idea of TfL's users missing the metropolitan transportation network while on holiday, indirectly comparing the governmental body to a familiar place. This branding strategy emphasises the closeness of the service to their users, by portraying it as something as familiar as home. The metaphor may foster a sense of belonging typically associated with the London 'Tube,' thereby enhancing user engagement and loyalty. The iconic status of London's public transport contributes to this expected emotional effect, making the service appear endearing, thereby reinforcing TfL's connection with its community. For instance, governmental bodies such as TfL often seek to create a sense of community and trust through their branding and communication strategies, aligning themselves with the everyday lives and emotional experiences of their users (see Zappavigna 2012). This metaphor, which compares the transportation service to home, underlines this approach by presenting the service as an essential, familiar part of users' lives. However, this post can be interpreted as humorous or ironic, since not all passengers may identify with the implied experience of missing the tube while on holiday.

As already mentioned at the beginning of the Findings section, metaphors and metonymies involving a modified TfL's logo are also used to explain or showcase services provided by TfL.

Hence, figurative language is also used to clarify a service by adding indirect information.

An example of this is shown in Figure 3:
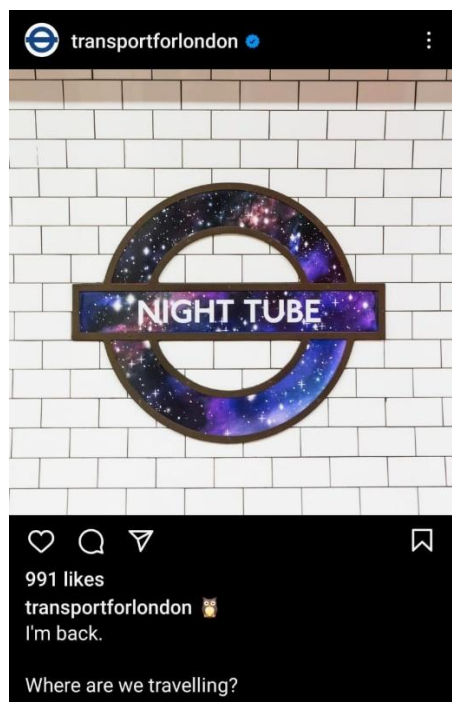
Fig. 3: Instagram post published by TfL on 30/07/2022

Figure 3 displays TfL's logo with a starry pattern, featuring the inscription "night tube" in the bar of the roundel. Accompanying this visual is a caption supplemented with an owl emoji and the text "I'm back. Where are we travelling?" Furthermore, the caption uses figurative language to describe TfL's night service, metaphorically represented by the owl emoji, which symbolises the Tube and London Overground Services running at night. This metaphor highlights the nocturnal nature of the service. Additionally, the expression "I'm back" suggests a personification of the logo, indicating that the service has resumed.

As regards the image, the aesthetic of TfL's roundel deviates from convention, resembling a starry sky encapsulated within TfL's logo. The topic of the image is *the tube* and the image can be described as *a starry sky is shown within Transport for London' s logo.* Deconstructing the visual description, we discern the constituent elements as follows: Agent (a starry sky) Action (is shown) Setting (within Transport for London' s logo). The Agent (a starry sky) can be considered slightly incongruent with the topic and properties of the Agent, as usually starry nights are not related to the topic of *the tube* and cannot be found in the TfL's logo or anywhere inside the tube's network. However, this incongruence does not involve comparison, as in the case of visual metaphors but seems to involve contiguity, making it a visual content with a possibly metonymical base. In fact, the concept of starry skies is within the same Idealised Cognitive Model of the verbal description inside the logo, namely "night," as it describes a

characteristic of skies at night. The starry night pattern seems to serve as a metonymical representation of the night tube service's nocturnal operation. The starry sky stands for the night, which is the time when the service is taking place. Hence, the Agent can be considered a SALIENT PROPERTY FOR CATEGORY metonymy (Radden and Kövecses 1999), as the starry sky is a salient property of the night.

This metonymic association aids in transparently conveying the temporal aspect of the service, fostering comprehension of its operational schedule. Although it is a 'shortcut' piece of knowledge, it likely enhances the comprehension of the service by visually representing an aspect of it. The employment of this kind of metonymical imagery contributes to the clarity and efficacy of communication regarding the service's availability and operational context. In this case, figurative language is used to make the characteristics of the services more relatable and intuitive, by drawing direct connections to familiar objects or using shortcuts of meaning, such as the metonymical reference to the sky. However, to ensure full transparency and clarity, figurative language should be complemented by factual information about the service provided.

This usage of figurative language aims to showcase TfL's services in a more engaging manner. A further example of how TfL uses figurative language to showcase its services can be observed in Figure 4.

Fig. 4: Instagram post published by TfL on 27/01/2023

Figure 4 shows a post published in January 2023 that includes several tube stop symbols which have the same shape as the TfL's logo and symbolise each station. These images were reposted by TfL from another private Instagram account. Station and stop symbols present TfL's roundel with a red circle and a blue bar in the middle of the circle with the name of the station. The

entire post comprises several images which have the same composition as the one shown in Figure 4. For instance, they display the hand of a person holding a pin very close to a different station symbol in each image. This composition seems to recall the action of pinning a specific destination and marking it as already visited. In the background, an arrow indicating the way out is also visible.

The verbal content of the post is shown in Figure 4 and prompts TfL's followers to share in the comment section what they love about the locations in the images, taking for granted that most followers know those tube stops. At the beginning of the caption, the emoji of a pin is also presented. In this case, the verbal content does not seem to convey any figurative meaning and just signals the aim of the post which is that of engaging with the followers about specific locations that they may have already explored, or they might be curious to visit. The arrow indicating the way out in the background adds a subtle layer of meaning to the image, as it suggests movement or direction, reinforcing the theme of travel and exploration. However, its primary function appears to be a contextual element of the station environment. While it does not significantly alter the main message of the post, it fosters the overall composition by adding a recognisable feature of the London Underground, thereby strengthening the connection to TfL's branding and the idea of travel and discovery.

Considering the verbal content, the abstract meaning of the image is that of *visiting or having already visited those locations* and the broad topic is *the tube and its stations*. The image can be described as *a passenger holding a large pin is pinning the symbol and name of a tube's stop on a tile wall*, where Agent (a passenger holding a large pin) Verb (is pinning) Object (the symbol and name of a tube's stop) Setting (on a tile wall). The visual units composing the image seem to be in line with the topic and properties of the image. Nonetheless, the Action (is pinning) seems atypical for the properties of the image with Wordnet sense #3, meaning to "pierce with a pin," since a tile wall is very unlikely to be pierced by a pin. In addition, the size of the pin is atypical for the properties of a pin which is defined as a "small marker" on Wordnet. The tile wall could be substituted with a pinboard made of other materials. Hence, the symbol of the stop represents the location itself, while the act of visiting the location is compared to the action of pinning the symbol of the stop with a pin. Based on this description, a conceptual metaphor can be recognised which is that of VISITING A LOCATION IS PINNING A SYMBOL. In this metaphor, the source domain is the action of PINNING A SYMBOL, and the target domain is the act of VISITING A LOCATION, both concepts visually rendered in the post. The symbol and the name of the station metonymically represent the station and hence, the location itself.

The reposting of these images can have a dual purpose. Firstly, it showcases TfL's services by highlighting some of the locations accessible through its network. Secondly, the act of pinning specific destinations may be interpreted as an invitation for TfL's followers to visit those places

and use TfL's services. By transforming the act of visiting locations into a visually appealing and interactive metaphor, the post encourages users to engage with the content, prompting them to share their experiences and feelings about the locations and fostering a sense of community among followers. This metaphor effectively emphasises the services provided by TfL, particularly the extensive range of destinations it covers. By featuring different tube stops, it indirectly promotes TfL's extensive network. The service is visually represented, and the figurative component makes the information easily understandable and engaging to the audience. However, it should be noticed that the post primarily serves a promotional function rather than providing detailed service information. Its figurative components aim to persuade viewers to use TfL's services rather than to inform them about specific service details. In fact, TfL makes large use of figurative language to promote a brand image and appeal to travellers and service users, as seen in previous examples (e.g., Figure 2). This is achieved through the various modified versions of TfL's logo, which foster an iconic image of the brand. This is even more clearly achieved in other posts as can be noticed in Figure 5.

Fig. 5: Instagram post published by TfL on 06/04/2022

Figure 5 shows a post published in April 2022 by TfL. The image features a hand holding a card displaying both verbal and visual representations of a specific Pantone shade of red (199).[8] This card is held close to a passing red bus, which is part of the TfL Overground service. The colours of both the bus and the card closely resemble each other. Additionally, the bus is captured passing by the iconic Big Ben, a renowned cultural landmark of London, partially visible in the

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[8] Retrieved from https://www.pantone.com/uk/en/. Last visited 23/06/2024.

background. Hence, the topic of the image is *London* and *its cultural landmarks.*

As regards the verbal content, the caption of the post writes "The colours of London" together with two emojis, one with a heart and one with a smiling face with two hearts instead of eyes. Hence, the caption is aimed at describing the image presented in the post and labels the colours of TfL's buses as the colours typical of London.

Considering the verbal caption, the image seems to convey a more abstract meaning, which is that *the colour of TfL's buses*, mirroring that of the card, *is a cultural landmark of London.* Thus, the image can be described as a *hand is holding a red card close to a red bus passing by* which can be deconstructed as follows: Agent (a hand) Action (is holding) Object (a red card) Setting (close to a red bus passing by). All the units in the image are in line with the topic and properties of the image, as it depicts a person walking by and holding a card close to the bus. Nonetheless, the verbal content emphasises the association of TfL's red buses with the colour of London itself. This juxtaposition creates a contiguous incongruity, as the red colour of the buses is symbolically extended to represent the entire city. This use implies a SALIENT PROPERTY FOR CATEGORY metonymy, as the image shows a salient characteristic of London – TfL's red bus –to refer to the colours of the entire city, as indicated by the verbal caption. Furthermore, the TfL bus is portrayed as passing by Big Ben, another famous London's cultural landmark, adding another layer of meaning and suggesting that the bus is as much a part of London as the Big Ben.

By associating TfL's red buses with London's cultural identity, the post effectively communicates TfL's significance beyond mere transportation services, fostering TfL's brand image. Furthermore, the post conveys the message that TfL is not just a transportation service but an integral part of the city's identity. This could foster trust among the followers, as it shows that TfL understands and values the culture and identity of London. By associating TfL with popular cultural landmarks and activities in London, the post could also be seen as promoting tourism in the city, encouraging people to use TfL services to explore London.

5. Conclusions

As already mentioned in the Introduction, the evolution of modern governance has underscored a growing emphasis on accountability and openness, compelling public bodies and governmental organisations to embrace social media platforms as tools for transparent communication (see Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2013). Consequently, social media have become indispensable for the public sector to engage with citizens as a strategy to increase transparent communication practices (see Song and Lee 2016).

As for the findings of this study, it is important to situate the use of figurative language within the broader communicative affordances of the digital environment. Web 2.0 features, such as participatory information sharing and user-generated content, have opened new channels for participation, challenging traditional institutions and promoting collaboration. However, the affordances of the digital environment have been characterised by their ability to foster persuasive communication. In this sense, the relationship between figurative language and the internet has been significant, contributing to the understanding of digital discourse and emerging as a crucial tool for persuasion, recognised for its capacity to highlight or downplay given information, thereby influencing audience perception.

The case study presented in this paper showed how metaphors and metonymies served as persuasive devices in TfL's communication strategy on Instagram, especially in its visual content. As regards the first research question on how TfL uses figurative language, TfL used it to showcase its services and strengthen its brand image. Metaphorical imagery, such as tube stop symbols representing visited locations, was used to promote TfL's extensive network, fostering user engagement and perceived transparent communication of the services provided. However, the analysis did not take an audience-oriented perspective as understanding the impact of the analysed posts on the social media audience would necessitate an *ad hoc* analysis. Social media audiences are influenced by echo chambers, algorithms, and the intended audience envisioned by content creators during the drafting of posts. Consequently, the audience's perspective in the analysis has been considered as far as the available data allowed, by taking into account the objectives of TfL's Instagram users, i.e. staying connected with the transport provider and receiving information quickly.

Concerning the second research question on the role of figurative language in shaping perceptions of transparency, metaphors and metonymies were primarily used to make the content more engaging and relatable (e.g., Figures 2, 4 and 5) and occasionally to clarify certain aspects of the promoted service (e.g., Figure 3). While figurative language in these instances helped clarify some aspects of the service, enhancing the audience's understanding and potentially promoting clearer communication, the posts still lacked detailed information about TfL's services, which could lead to vague or less transparent communication (see Schnackenberg and Tomlinson 2016). Furthermore, verbal content complemented visual elements by often encouraging interaction or presenting engaging information instead of providing additional details about the services. To enhance clarity and transparency, figurative communication could be supplemented with factual information about the promoted services. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that figurative language also served to foster participation and collaboration, factors which, according to Song and Lee (2016), can increase the perception of transparency.

In some cases, figurative language was used to promote Transport for London's image and indirectly conveyed part of TfL's values, such as cultural diversity (see Example 1). Yet, other types of diversity (e.g., disability) were not represented through figurative language. Promoting TfL's values through figurative language might have enhanced user trust and engagement, an essential step for raising a sense of transparency (Koskela and Crawford Camiciottoli 2020). However, it should be noticed that a 'sense' of transparency does not necessarily equate to actual transparency. Rather, it suggests that the company can cultivate an image of transparency without fully disclosing all information.

Overall, the study has attempted to provide insights into TfL communication strategies on Instagram. However, the scope of the analysis is limited to one social media, namely Instagram, while leaving out other potential communication channels used by TfL, including different social media platforms. Consequently, the findings have not been considered as fully representative of TfL's communication practices. Moreover, the primary aim of this study was to explore the use of figurative language. Therefore, it does not assess TfL's other possible strategies for transparent communication on Instagram, which remains a topic for future research. Lastly, being the interpretation of figurative language, inherently subjective, potential interpretative variation has been taken into account. Nonetheless, in order to deal with this potential pitfall, a further quantitative assessment of user engagement metrics could offer additional perspectives on the effectiveness of the use of figurative language in TfL's communication.

The methodological approach integrating semiotic principles to analyse both verbal and visual modes of communication has proven to be particularly fruitful. The study has been able to validate the interconnectedness between visual metaphors and metonymical meanings, along with recognising the key relationship between verbal and visual elements. Indeed, by deconstructing the images and examining the congruity of elements within the established topic, the study has identified both metaphorical and metonymical representations that contribute to the overall message conveyed on TfL's Instagram. Consequently, adopting this methodological approach could provide a possible framework for analysing figurative language on social media platforms which integrate multiple modes of communication like Instagram.

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Bionotes

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