

Are humorous ads more efficient in crises times?

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Abstract

There exist several studies in marketing and psychology demonstrating the role of humour in modulating the receiver's reactions. This study aims at investigating how humour influences consumer's responses to advertising within dually inducing media in a real-life passive context. We've conducted a between-subject study using a folder test procedure. Confined participants were invited to read an online magazine page on COVID-19 to induce a passive mood. The advertisement humour was manipulated across treatment (neutral or humorous text). Results revealed two key contributions. First, we found that ad memorization and attitude toward ads (Aad) were positively influenced by the humour. Second, compared to neutral ads, humorous ads showed hardly any difference in terms of attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions. Thus, confirming the results of previous researches proved the same, compared to others illustrated else.

Keywords: humour, advertising, memorization, attitude

Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications

1. Introduction

Humor is a common executional tactic used by marketers to boost marketing performance and to define an efficacious advertising campaign. Eisinger (2009) reported that approximately one out of five television ads contain humorous appeals. To define humour, Weinberger & Gulas (2019) “recognize jokes, comedy, wit, puns, cleverness, satire, parody, irony, sarcasm, incongruity, absurdity, ribaldry, pratfalls, repartee, whimsy, teasing, slapstick, limericks, and more, as all being related to the production of humour, yet we also recognize them as different from each other”. Marketing literature shows evidences of the positive effects of using humour in advertising (Furnham et al., 1998, Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). However, it is well established that the mood induced by the broadcasted programs where we insert an advertisement influences its effectiveness (Karrin et al. (2013). Few researches have studied whether ads memorization and evaluation were affected by humour in advertising within a negative context of broadcast programs. In this study, a folder test procedure was used to investigate the effectiveness of humour in ads (neutral vs. humorous) within a passive context (web page in an online magazine about COVID-19, during the confinement) on advertising memorization and evaluation.

2. Theoretical framework and research hypothesis

Humour in advertising and program mood

As stated in the introduction, humor in ads is not newly investigated. Numerous researches have revealed the effects of humor on the dimensions of advertisements. Several things may influence the effectiveness of the humorous ad. For example, cultural acceptance of the humor in the ad, the level of the humor in the ad and whether it is a distraction of the information, etc. (Eisinger & Tarrahi, 2016).

Likewise, moods; a consumer’s mood may hinder the effectiveness of advertising. Mood swings is susceptible to internal and external factors over and above the consumer. For example, Golberg & Gorn (1987) found a correlation between tv programs and consumers’ moods, and consequently the ads these consumers see within the tv program. Exposing subjects to advertisements embedded within either a happy or a sad TV program; Golberg & Gorn found that compared to happy program, subjects exposed to the sad program made less favorable cognitive and affective responses to the ads. It is well established that advertisement effectiveness is influenced by the environment which it is inserted. Norris & Colman (1994) reported a positive relationship between ad recall and the positive mood of the program where the ad was inserted in.

Furthermore, Perry et al. (1997) examined advertising humour in the context of serious vs. humorous radio programs. They found that ad humor enhances product perception and recall in both humorous and non-humorous programs. However, this is not exclusive only for tv or broadcasted media. For instance, Mathur & Ghattopadhyay (1991) suggest that for both print and television ads the viewer’s mood at the time of exposure to an advertisement influences the processing of the advertisement. Furnham et al. (1998) Found that unaided recall for advertisements was affected by the tv program on display (neutral better than funny).

In contrast, Murphy et al.(1979) found limited context effects on television. For aided recall, humorous ads are recalled better in a non-humorous context, but for unaided recall, no context effects were found.

Humour and advertising performance

Humour is an important advertising lever. The use of humour in award-winning advertising increased in the last century (Weinberger *et al.*, 2015). Successful advertising campaigns are measured with the effectiveness of the advertisement. Advertising helps to improve ad content memorization (Richardson-Klavehn & Bjork, 1988, Duke & Carlson, 1993), the attitude towards the ad (Holbrook *et al.*, 1987), attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions (Spears *et al.*, 2004).

Humour influence on consumer's attitude towards advertising is stronger than that of most other persuasion tools (Eisend & Tarrahi 2016). Some research states the positive effect of humour on receiver's emotions and attitudes showing a weaker impact on memory and behavioural responses (Eisend 2009; Weinberger & Gulas 1992). Eisend (2009) reported that humor in advertising grabs attention and improve the attitude towards the ad. However, he underlined that its effects on attitude towards the brand and purchase intention remain unclear. (Strick *et al.* 2013) examined humorous ad's influence on brand recognition. They found that humour orients attention to the message deviating the receiver's attention from the brand.

Several researches demonstrated that commercial type influences ad context effect, emotional advertisement takes the lead of more positive responses from subjects than informational advertisement (Goldberg & Gorn, 1987). The emotional arousal while watching an advertisement is an important indicator of its effectiveness. Han *et al.* (2017) highlighted the link between emotion and memorization explaining that emotional arousal involvement in attentional processes.

In a study on a sample of adolescents, Furnham *et al.* (1998) found that memorizing humorous ads was better than that for non-humorous ones. Additionally, they have also found that different contexts appeal for different performances. For example, the proved that humorous ads perform better in a non-humorous context. Furthermore, humorous ads perform better when receivers have a prior positive attitude towards the brand (Chang, 2014).

The vast majority of studies conducted in both advertising and education bear this out. However, this is not the case for persuasion. As humor does not appear to offer an advantage over non-humor at increasing persuasion (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Weinberger & Gulas (2019) affirmed that an advertisement perceived as humorous ensure its success but not the success of marketing objective behind the ad.

Previous study showed that both the mood induced by the TV programme and the advertisement influence the responses to the ad (Goldberg and Gorn (1987). Whereas Furnham *et al.* 1998 claimed that the program mood itself impacts on the effectiveness of the humorous advertisement. On the other hand, Karmins *et al.* (2013) affirmed that ads are less performant in a contrasting context of programs. Thus, the aim of this research paper was triggered by the generated media mood on receiver's perception/interaction with the advertisement. While some researchers stated that humorous ads perform better in non-humorous situations. No other researches explored humorous ads' effectiveness within dually inducing media in a real-life passive situation. With the help of the tedious, depressive and risky context created by the used example of COVID-19; the examination is then found applicable. A secondary objective deemed necessary is to reexamine

the effectiveness of humorous ads, since it appears from the literature review that it changes over time due to the consumer's ever-changing palates. (Eisend, 2009)

Hence there is no work have been performed under the same conditions on the influence of humour in ads embedded within a web page magazine inducing a passive mood, in a passive real-life situation; on ads memorization and evaluation; reproduced in natural exposure conditions (the folder test procedure was used to avoid forced exposure effects). Based on previous research findings in psychology and marketing, we tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Product memorization is better in humorous ad condition compared to neutral ad condition.

H2: Brand memorization is better in humorous ad condition compared to neutral ad condition.

H3: Attitude towards the advertisement (Aad) is better in humorous ad condition compared to neutral ad condition.

H3: Attitude towards the brand (Ab) is better in humorous ad condition compared to neutral ad condition.

H4: Purchase intentions (PI) are better in humorous ad condition compared to neutral ad condition.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and experimental design

A sample size of 719 adult participants aged 18 to 50 years old were surveyed, in which men made 271 of it (M=21.73, SD=7.05). Participants were divided into two groups, assigning each to one condition; condition 1: Neutral text (N1=357; 140 men; M=22.25; SD= 4.97), or condition 2: Humorous text (N2=362; 131 men; M=21.11; SD=2.07). The participants, who were recruited from initial and lifelong learning programs, volunteered to take part in this online study without any incentive.

3.2. Stimuli

We designed a between subject design experiment with two conditions: 1) neutral text on the package 2) humorous text on the package. The humorous text was based on a wordplay technic about the lockdown caused by the crisis. To avoid biasing of forced exposure to the stimuli, the advertisements were inserted in fictitious editorial content, a web page on covid-19 to induce a passive emotion (Siedlecka & Denson, 2019). The target advertisements were inserted in the same position each time on the web page. We selected food products that might be purchased and consumed by both men and women (salmon & bread) of a well-known private-label retail brand, Monoprix, in the country hosting the test. The other ad contents remain the same (see figure 1).

3.3. Procedure

Participants were divided into two groups, each assigned to a condition. Condition 1: neutral text or condition 2: humorous text. During the confinement, participants were asked to read a web page about Covid-19. They filled a (self-assessment mannequin) SAM scale before and after this task to assess their emotional states. After the participants consulted the web page, a surprise memory test was offered. Then participants were again exposed to the target advertisements to complete their attitude towards the advertisement, the brand, and purchase intention scales.

4. Results

Emotions measures

Before the test, the Pleasure and Arousal levels were similar among participants assigned in both conditions ($p>0.05$).

After the exposure to the web page, the Pleasure and Arousal levels decreased in both conditions ($p<0.05$). We observed no difference in terms of pleasure level between neutral and humorous conditions after the exposure to the web page ($M_N= 3.45$, $M_H=3.52$; $p>0.05$). However, we observed a difference in arousal level, participants exposed to humorous text were more excited than those exposed to the neutral one ($M_N= 2.50$, $M_H=2.74$; $p=0.00$).

	neutral	humorous	<i>p</i>
Happy before	3.71 (0.86)	3.81 (0.86)	0.12
Excited before	2.63 (0.98)	2.77 (1.01)	0.06
Happy after	3.45 (0.87)	3.53 (0.92)	0.23
Excited after	2.50 (0.95)	2,74 (0.99)	0.00

Recall of advertising content

Participants better recalled the product in the humorous ad condition compared the neutral ad condition ($M_N=0.41$, $M_H=0.65$; $p= 0.00$). No significant difference observed in brand recall, product recognition and brand recognition were observed between humorous and neutral ad conditions (see table 1).

Attitude toward advertising (Aad) and brand (Ab)

Participants expressed a better attitude towards the ad (Aad) in humorous condition compared to the neutral one ($M_N=11,03$, $M_H=13,66$; $p= 0.00$).

There was no significant difference between the expressed attitude towards the brand in both neutral and humorous ad conditions ($p>0.05$)

Purchase Intentions

Subjects expressed similar purchase intentions while exposed to either neutral or humorous ads ($M_N=58.40$ and $M_H=60.33$, $p>0.05$).

	Neutral ad M(SD)	Humorous ad M(SD)	<i>p</i>
Product recall	0.41 (0.49)	0.65 (0.47)	0.00
Brand recall	0.75 (0.43)	0.77 (0.41)	0.44
Product recognition	0.89 (0.31)	0.93 (0.24)	0.41
Brand recognition	0.84 (0.36)	0.84 (0.36)	0.97
Aad	11.03 (3.71)	13.66 (4.21)	0.00
Ab	16.76 (5.10)	17.16 (4.98)	0.29
PI	58.40 (27.75)	60.33(29.78)	0.37

5. Discussion

Goldberg & Gorn (1987) found that audience responses to the advertisements were moderated by the levels of excitement and happiness induced by the context of exposure. In the context of confinement, participants exposed to a passive content on a web page expressed a lower happiness level in both conditions (neutral vs. Humorous ads), whereas participants who were exposed to the humorous ad manifested more excitement than those exposed to the neutral one.

We found limited humour effect on ad content memorization. Product unaided recall was higher in humorous ad compared to the neutral ad. This result was particularly interesting because it was not obtained under forced exposure conditions, but rather under a folder test method. Thus, the participant's attention was not directed towards any advertisement by the experimenter or by the used experimental procedure. For product and brand aided recall, no humour effect was found. The brand memorization performance (recall and recognition) may be explained by the brand's awareness in the country hosting the test, France. This result corroborates with Strick et al. (2013) finding on humour effect on brand memorization. Weinberger & Gulas (2019) explained that humour distracts attention from the brand, while developing more positive emotional response to the humour.

Nevertheless, we have found that exposure to humorous ad condition improved the attitude towards the ad compared to neutral ad condition. We didn't find any difference in terms of attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions between the two conditions. Weinberger &Gulas (2019) reported from Eisend studies (Eisend 2007, 2009, 2011) that the use of humour has about twice as much impact on attitude towards the ad than on attitudes towards the brand. However, this can also be explained by the use of a well-known brand in the country hosting the test.

Pelsmacker et al, (2013) showed that ads in a highly appreciated media context resulted in a more positive attitude toward the ad. In a passive crisis context where the media content would negatively affect ad performance. Our results show that this passive content has a more negative impact on neutral ads than humorous ads. This result was obis in line with previous research highlighting the performance of humorous ad in non-humorous context (Furnham et al. 1998). Thus, humour can be a lever to

optimize ads effectiveness in a crisis context where the context content (broadcast/print/online) may induce a passive mood (Covid-19 and confinement).

6. Conclusion

Advertisers are continually searching for conditions that increase attention value of their messages. It is well established in marketing to use humour to increase ads performance. We found that humorous ads, even when embedded within a passive context, enhance product memorization and attitude towards the ad. Eisend (2011) explained that the affective responses induced by humour increase positive cognition related to the advertisement but decrease the ones related to the brand. Thus, humour could be used in advertising to fulfill some specific communication objectives like facing a negatively affected brand image or poor brand statements.

Alike, in general crises negatively affecting consumers' mental status and moods as in the used case of COVID-19, the results suggest successful advertising campaigns for companies utilizing the humorous ads compared to other neutral ads.

Within societal implications, companies can use the findings in Ethical Marketing campaigns to put receivers in a better excitement mood. The use of humorous ads shows the companies empathy with its customers.

The limitations of this study offer opportunities for further researches. First, our experiment was conducted using food products; it would be interesting to replicate it with other types of products. In this study we have as well used a well-known brand, future researches can use fictitious or unknown ones. As claimed by Han et al. (2017), the nature of the humour used in the current study (French humour) could influence the findings. Thus, future studies can examine other styles of humour on the advertisement image and text.

Appendix:

Figure 1 - Illustrative example of “neutral condition” and “humorous condition”



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