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A Meta-Analysis of Humor Effects in Advertising

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Based on assumptions derived from qualitative reviews and cognitive and affective models that explain the effect of humor in advertising, a meta-analysis is conducted that tries to substantiate previous findings and to resolve heterogeneity of previous results. While the results give evidence that humor rather impacts variables as suggested by affective models, humor does not lead to distraction as suggested by cognitive models. However, attention and memory is enhanced. The results show that we should question the idea, that humor impact is either based on mere affective reactions or mere reasoning, rather it seems that both processes play an important role and can interfere to some extent.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although the pace of humor research in advertising has quickened over the past decades, the body of empirical evidence regarding humor effects in advertising remains equivocal. Previous qualitative reviews barely provide generalizable conclusions on the question *if* humor is effective or *when* humor in advertising is effective. Both issues, the search for generalizable results and for factors that moderate the impact of humor in advertising are specific tasks to be addressed by application of a meta-analysis. Assumptions for the analysis are based on theoretical models and on previous qualitative reviews.

Theoretical Models and Previous Qualitative Reviews

Two types of models, cognitive and affective, have been used to explain the impact of humor in advertising. The models suggest a positive impact of humor on attitude towards the ad (A_{AD}), attitude towards the brand (A_{BR}), purchase intention and behavior. Effects on attention, comprehension, recall, and recognition may be positive in case humor impact follows an information processing perspective. However, if humor causes distraction, humor decreases elaborate processing and reduces cognitive responses (CR); it harms comprehension and probably also memory effects. The overall conclusions reached by the authors of previous qualitative reviews are fairly consistent with respect to some of the outcome variables. They infer that humor attracts attention and awareness, enhances source liking (A_{ADV}), ad liking, and brand liking, but is not very effective in bringing about actions/sales. However, it is not clear if humor detrimentally affects comprehension and recall or not, if it enhances or decreases source credibility, and if it is more persuasive than serious messages or not.

Previous studies vary with respect to several characteristics related to product, placement, humor, and method that have been discussed as possible moderating variables in the literature. Advertisers believe that humor is best suited for low involvement products, particularly for hedonic/feeling products compared to functional/thinking products. Humorous ads are said to be more successful for existing than for new products. Furthermore, ad executives believe humor to be most suited in radio and TV-advertising compared to print advertising. Humor seems to work best for younger and well-educated consumers, particularly males. Two method factors may be important that allow for more control and should hence lead to increased effects: the way the control ad is chosen and if humor research is field research or performed as laboratory study. The crucial moderating factor, however, is apparently the humorous stimulus. Advertisers seem to conceive humor as the degree of personal recognition and appreciation of humor. Humor ads that vary in the level of humor they evoke in the target audience lead to variations in advertising effect variables as well. The relationship between humor intensity and ad effectiveness can be conceived as either linear or curvilinear.

Method

The literature search for the meta-analysis revealed 64 studies investigating the impact of humor in advertising; 47 studies provided enough data to calculate relevant effect sizes. The effect size metric selected for the analysis is the correlation coefficient between humor and dependent variables. Since most papers reported multiple measures, also multiple effect sizes from single studies for particular relationships were included. Altogether, 443 effect sizes were available for the purpose of the meta-analysis. Integration of

effect sizes is performed based on sample size weighted and attenuation corrected correlations. In order to consider multiple measures per study, correlations between the same constructs from a single study were averaged for integration purposes. If the integration of effect sizes yielded heterogeneity, a WLS regression analysis applying moderator variables was performed. Moderator variables were coded by two coders based on information given in the studies.

Results

The integration results show that humor significantly enhances A_{AD} , A_{BR} , attention, comprehension, cognitive responses, positive emotions, purchase intention, recall and recognition. Humor reduces credibility and negative emotions. Humor has no impact on A_{ADV} , distraction, and purchase behavior.

The results of the moderator analysis come up with rather consistent findings. Contrary to expectations, humor works better in influencing attitudes for high involvement products and thinking products than for low involvement or feeling products. No effects were found for established vs. new brands. Also media have an effect that contradicts previous assumptions: humor effects are stronger for print media than for broadcast media for A_{AD} . Ads are also more liked when the program context is rather humor incongruent than congruent. Repeated exposure enhances A_{BR} , but shows no effect on other dependent variables. Finally, reception in social group leads to less attention compared to reception of humorous ads alone. No difference was found for different demographic groups. Also culture does not influence attitudes and memory, but attention: humorous ads do enhance attention particularly for US consumers compared to other countries. Methodological factors impact only the attention measure such that more controlled ads and laboratory studies enhance the effects on attention.

Results of nonlinear regressions of humor intensity on ad effectiveness show that perceived humor does not affect A_{AD} or attention, but brand attitudes and memory. While A_{BR} increases with perceived humor which is in line with the idea of conditioning theory, memory effects rather follow a curvilinear relationship for humor intensity; particularly, they increase with strong levels of humor intensity.

Discussion

The results go against some previous assumptions of advertisers who believed that humor is mostly appropriate for low involvement products presented in broadcast media. The managerial implications of those generalized results seem quite obvious.

The results give first evidence that humor rather impacts variables as suggested by affective models; humor does not lead to distraction, but shows an effect on attention and memory. The results let us also question the idea that humor effects are either based on mere affective reactions or mere reasoning, rather it seems that both processes play an important role for humor effects and can interfere to some extent. Particularly, memory effects seem to be related to affective reactions as well. Further conceptual developments should allow for bringing together reason and affect in order to explain the impact of humor in advertising more thoroughly.

The considerations have tentative character and need further proof, preferably by applying causal models to the data against the background of different conditions of the studies, e.g. high involvement vs. low involvement conditions.

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(*asterisks denote studies used in the meta-analysis)

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