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## **Why Humor Breaks Resistance to Influence: Implicit Effects of Distraction and Positive Affect**

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Humor both distracts attention and evokes positive emotions. Both aspects may explain why humor can overcome resistance to influence. In three experiments, novel products were unobtrusively associated with unrelated humor in an evaluative conditioning paradigm. Association with humor on the one hand distracted attention away from (i.e. reduced recognition of), and on the other hand enhanced implicit and explicit attitudes and behavioral choice towards products. Experiment 2 showed that this dissociation is typical for humor and does not occur for other positive cues. Results of Experiment 3 indicate that the distraction, not the affective aspect, of humor breaks resistance.

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Humor in advertising has been identified as a peripheral cue that can enhance the effectiveness of advertisements without conveying any information about the quality or function of the brand. Furthermore, it has often been suggested that humor has the unique quality to overcome resistance to persuasion (e.g. Sternthal and Craig 1973; Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Byrne 2007). How does humor do this?

To approach this topic it is very useful to have a clear definition of humor. Researchers have decomposed the experience of humor into two phases: (1) a cognitive phase needed for incongruity-resolution, which poses cognitive demands, and (2) an affective phase, in which positive emotions are experienced (Deckers and Devine 1981; Suls 1972; Watson, Matthews, and Allman 2007). Given the relation between cognitive distraction and yielding to persuasive messages (e.g. Festinger and Maccoby 1964; Keating and Brock 1976) and the general beneficial effects of positive affect on advertising effectiveness (e.g., Stuart, Shimp, and Engle 1987), both the cognitive and the affective phase may be responsible for breaking resistance. We present three experiments that disentangle these two components of humor and examine their influence on product memory, attitudes, behavior and resistance to influence.

Nowadays, implicit associative processes play an important role in shaping our views of products and brands. Therefore, in the present research we used an evaluative conditioning paradigm to unobtrusively associate products with humor (see De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001 for a review). To rule out confounding mood effects, humor was manipulated within subjects.

In Experiment 1, novel energy drink brands were unobtrusively associated with either humorous or control (i.e. non-humorous) cartoons. In line with the conceptualization of humor as a distracter, humor impaired the recognition of associated products. Yet, an evaluative priming task (Fazio 2001) showed that the automatic evaluations of these products were enhanced due to association with unrelated humor. These memory and implicit liking effects were not correlated. Finally, these enhanced evaluations mediated the relation between association with humor and overt product choice. These findings indicate that humor dissociates product memory from implicit product liking and choice.

In Experiment 2, novel energy drink brands were consistently paired with humorous (i.e. cognitively demanding and positive) sentences, whereas other products were paired with sentences that were either (1) equally demanding but neutral (2) equally positive but undemanding (3) undemanding and neutral. Afterwards, product recognition and explicit product liking were assessed. Furthermore, behavioral consequences were assessed by giving participants the opportunity to spend discount coupons on the beverages. The results showed that cognitively demanding sentences reduced product recognition, whereas the positivity of the sentences had no effect on product recognition. These findings suggest that the cognitive demands of humor, not the positive affect it evokes, underlie the distraction effect. Furthermore, positive sentences enhanced attitudes and behavioral preferences towards products, irrespective of cognitive demands. Overall, these findings indicate that the dissociating effect of humor on product memory and liking are unique to humor. Other positive cues also enhanced product liking, but they did not distract attention.

In Experiment 3, attitudes toward novel peppermint brands were conditioned using the same experimental conditions and stimulus material as Experiment 2. For half of the participants, the conditioning phase was preceded by a written instruction that provoked resistance to influence. In this resistance condition, it was explained to participants that the experiment was conducted in collaboration with an untrustworthy advertising agency that would use the research results to spam them with E-mail and SMS text messages. Participants in the control condition read a neutral control instruction instead. Next, all participants were exposed to the same conditioning procedure. Afterwards, brand recognition and implicit brand liking (using the evaluative priming task) were employed. The memory and liking effects of Experiment 1 and 2 were replicated. In addition, the results of the implicit attitude measure indicated that humorous information enhanced implicit brand attitudes in both the resistance and control condition. Other (i.e. less-distracting) positive cues, however, only enhanced implicit brand attitudes in the control condition. Furthermore, we found a significant positive correlation between distraction (i.e. brand recognition impairment) and implicit product liking in the resistance condition. These results indicate that humor overcomes resistance due to its quality to distract attention from products, not by evoking positive affect.

These three experiments show a robust pattern of results that extend our knowledge of implicit effects of humor in advertising in several ways. First, as far as we know, we are the first to show conditioning effects of humor on implicit attitudes, which in turn predict overt product choice. Interestingly, association of a product with unrelated humor enhances its attractiveness in a way that is dissociated from the accessibility of the product in memory. This finding suggests that humor can affect responses to brands even if consumers do not explicitly infer and/or memorize them. Furthermore, unlike previous research, we directly compared humor with other positive, non-humorous, emotions and show that the distraction effect is unique to humor. These findings fit very well with theories of humor processing that focus on incongruity-resolution (Deckers and Devine 1981; Suls 1972; Watson, et al. 2007).

Finally, we have found clear evidence that humor overcomes resistance to influence by distracting attention. Participants that were motivated to offer resistance were able to discount the influence of positive cues when these cues were undistracting. They were unable, however, to resist the positive influence of humor. The positive correlation between distraction and implicit brand attitudes indicates that the distraction of humor is responsible for this effect. The conceptualization of humor as both a distracter and a motivator of liking and approach behavior has interesting implications for various research domains in consumer psychology that involve self-regulation.