

## Humor in Advertising

**Prof. Dr. Ljiljana Koneska**

Faculty of Economics, European University-Republic of Macedonia, Skopje,

**Prof. Dr. Jasna Teofilovska**

State University-Tetovo, Macedonia,

**Prof. Dr. Savica Dimitrieska**

Faculty of Economics, European University-Republic of Macedonia, Skopje,

### Abstract

Creating good advertising message is very important segment in the promotion of a company. Companies use different advertising appeals to encourage consumers to buy products and services. Humor is one of those advertising appeals. The first task of humor is to attract the consumers' attention through an interesting, entertaining, provocative, unexpected, sudden and memorable message. Humor aims to help consumers in decision-buying process. However, humor can cause negative side effects if it insults, is used in inappropriate manner or is too excessive. Recent studies show that companies are successful if they use "intelligent" humor that is related to the products' nature and function. The purpose of this paper is to present the attitude of consumers towards the humorous advertisements and to explore the concept and usage of humor in advertising to find out its impact on consumer's purchase decision.

**Keywords:** humor, advertisement, appeals, promotion

"People do not buy from clowns." Claude Hopkins 1923

"I have reason to believe that... humor can now sell." David Ogilvy 1982

### Introduction

Everyone loves to laugh. Everyone wants to be happy. There is no one in the Earth who doesn't like humor. In our lives, full of problems, risks, uncertainties and constant race for career, money, health, a warm housing, everyone wants to feel relaxed and happy. Companies use this natural human characteristic in their favor, to sell more of their products and services. As Pavlovian model claims, companies use unconditioned and conditioned (neutral) stimulus (humor paired with company's products) to sell their products and services.

Companies are trying in various ways, including humor, to sell their products and make profit. They do not do anything for altruistic reasons, but for high profits. Since there are many companies, and even more products and services, it is very difficult to approach consumers. There are a number of companies, products and services that people do not notice. This is mainly due to the limited mental capacity of consumers.

The real struggle among companies is to attract the attention of consumers. This is the most difficult task of any company. Today companies are faced with so-called "attention deficit" of consumers. Attention deficit means that consumers notice less and less information, products, services, companies, promotions, campaigns. They are overwhelmed with information coming from different sources: TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, billboards, friends, brochures, leaflets, word-of-mouth, social networks, supermarkets, etc. The overall level of advertising is very high. Shimp (2010) claims that people in general are exposed to over 6,000 advertisements on an average day and over 25.000 new products in any given year. Advertisements are all around us.

In the jungle of information, every company asks the same question: "How customers to pay attention to my message?" According to marketing experts (Sekulovska, 2007), "paying attention" depends on the type of product, type of promotional message, advertising appeal (rational or emotional), ambience where the consumer receives the message, the mood of the consumer, etc. Some companies use humor, as emotional appeal, to attract consumers' attention and create brand awareness. There is estimation that humor is used in around 30% of the advertisements. (Beard, 2008). However, there are companies that avoid using humor in advertising due to the nature of the product or their policy according to which their main objective is selling products, not entertaining consumers. According to Hopkins (1923): "People do not buy from clowns. Ads are not written to interest, please or amuse customers."

According to Sekulovska (2007) there are some guidelines on how to use humor successfully and effectively:

- Humor must be in function of the product. It has to describe the product, its way of usage, its features, benefits, ingredients. Humor must not make jokes of the product or its user. Humor has to enhance liking of both, the advertisement and the advertised product. (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). Companies must be very careful when using humorous advertising, in order not to damage or neglect the product. At the end of the day, the ultimate goal of humor is to sell the product. Humor must be understood as an incentive for consumers to buy the product.
- Humor must be acceptable to the target audience. Something that is humorous to one individual may be offensive to another. Humor is dependent on a shared experience. As such, it is affected by demographic, psychographic, cultural, and sub cultural factors.
- Companies must avoid offensive humor. They can not make fun of sick people, elderly persons, socially vulnerable categories of persons, ethnic groups, religious groups, etc. Humor must not hurt the human dignity.
- Some products allow the use of humor and some do not. Some products are better suited to humorous strategies than others. In general, recognizable and positively accepted brands and companies can afford humorous advertising. Consumers are inclined to forgive and forget the mistakes of well-known brands. Humorous messages should be avoided for new products. It is more appropriate for products that are more feeling oriented (experiential) and that are not very involving (inexpensive consumer packaged goods).

Humor has hazard character. Although a company can have a good idea and good intention to promote its products through humor, still at the end it can fail due to misunderstanding, resentment, annoyance, hurt of consumers. Hence it is important for companies to use humor in advertisements carefully, and only after making an extensive and detailed marketing research.

### Literature Review

Humor as an advertisement appeal is used to sell products. Society nowadays simply shops for pleasure, enjoyment and fun, where in most case humor is the suitable choice of appeal. Many of the most memorable advertisement campaigns tend to be funny.

A dictionary definition of humor is the quality of being amusing or comic, the ability to express humor or amuse other people, a mood or state of mind (Oxford dictionary). Still, humor appears in various forms that such a standard definition cannot cover. Weinberger and Gulas (1992) pointed out in their work that "an all-encompassing, generally accepted definition of humor does not exist". Humor is the word which is the hardest to define yet familiar to people across all languages. (Weinberger and Gulas, 1992).

While it is used frequently, humor in advertising remains controversial. On the one hand, humor has been credited with attracting attention to an advertisement, increasing comprehension of the advertisement, contributing to the positive attitude toward the advertisement and enhancing the positive attitude toward the advertised product. On the other hand, the use of humor may not be suitable for certain products or services, is thought to lead to faster advertising "wear out", may offend some members of the audience and may result in the so-called "vampire effect," where the humor sucks attention away from the advertised product/message.

Kotler (2004) believes that humorous advertisements can be divided depending on what kind of humor advertisements include: puns, satire, jokes, slapstick, irony, and incongruities. Catanescu and Tom (2001) provide the following categorization of humor:

- Comparison: putting two or more elements together to produce a humorous situation;
- Personification: attributes human characteristics to animals, plants and objects;
- Exaggeration: overstating and magnifying something out of proportion;
- Pun: using elements of language to create new meanings, which result in humor;
- Sarcasm: blatant ironic responses or situations;
- Silliness: ranges from making funny faces to ludicrous situations;
- Surprise: all advertisements where humor arises from unexpected situations;
- Black humor is what happens by canceling out the serious side of socially taboo subjects like death, illness, morality or sex and approached playfully. There is also a possibility of audience feeling offended;
- Blue humor: humor that deals with sexuality and bodily functions.

Catanescu and Tom's (2001) research shows that humor is used more in television advertisements than in print advertisement. Television is a more effective channel to use humor. Sarcasm is the most popular form of humor used in magazines, while silliness predominates in television. Humor tends to relax the audience, break the ice and create a connection between the communicator and the audience (Tellis, 1998).

### Research Methodology

In order to find out the effectiveness of humor as a persuasive technique in consumer's purchase behavior, two types of data were used: primary data and secondary data.

At first, secondary data were examined gathered from articles, books, online data sources and previous researches.

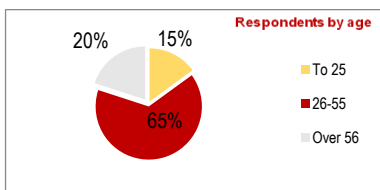
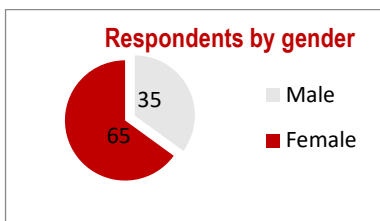
Primary data were obtained from the empirical research conducted through a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of open and closed questions, divided into two groups: demographic data and data related to humor in advertisements. The questionnaire was distributed to 100 respondents via e-mail, using a systematic random sampling technique. Respondents were from Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. The survey was conducted in March 2017.

### Results and Discussion

In this part of the paper, processed are data obtained from the empirical research conducted through a questionnaire. First, the questionnaire contains two questions on the respondents' demographic characteristics, gender and age. Out of total 100 respondents, 65 were women and 35 were men. In terms of age the most covered population is the one between 26 and 55 years old. These questions are presented graphically below.

#### Question 1: What is your gender?

Figure 1: Respondents by gender



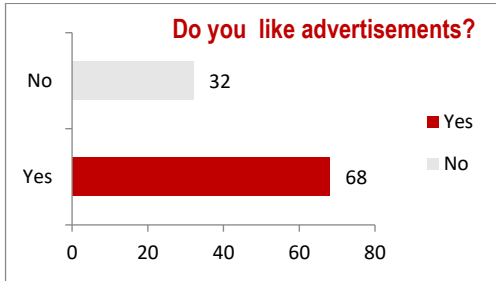
**Question 2: What is your age?**

**Figure 2: Respondents by age**

The following questions relate to consumer attitudes to humor in advertisements.

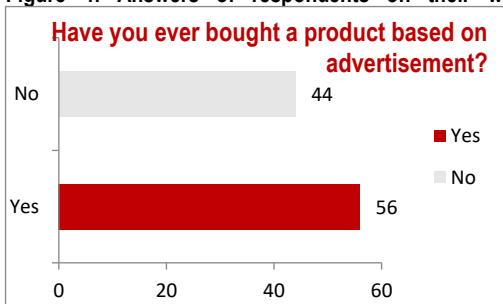
**Question 3: Do you like advertisements?**

**Figure 3: Answers of respondents on whether they like advertisements**



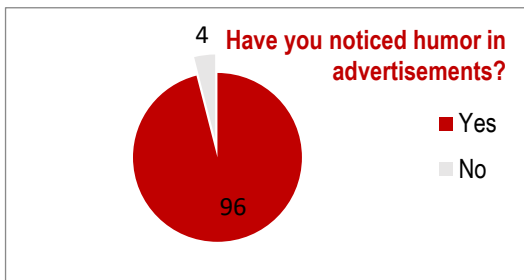
**Question 4: Have you ever bought a product based on advertisement?**

**Figure 4: Answers of respondents on their willingness to buy a product based on advertisement**



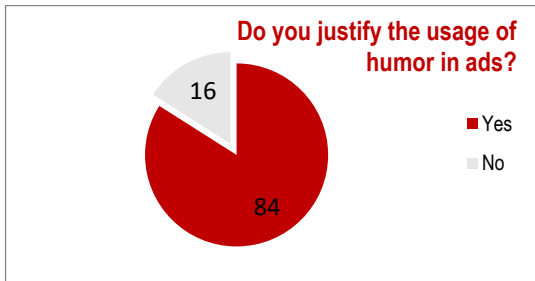
**Question 5: Have you noticed humor in advertisements?**

**Figure 5: Answers of respondents on noticing humor in advertisements**



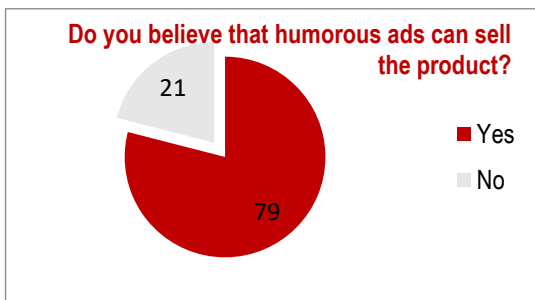
**Question 6: Do you justify the usage of humor in advertisements?**

**Figure 6: Respondents' attitude toward humor in advertisements**



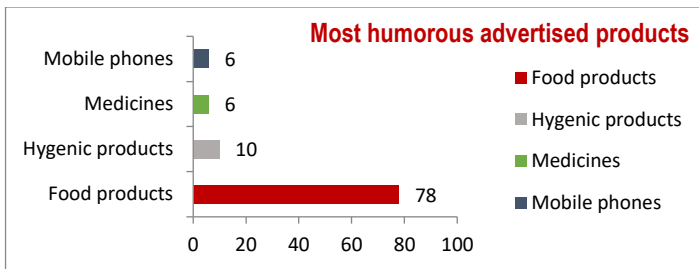
**Question 7: Do you believe that humorous advertisements can sell the product?**

**Figure 7: Respondents' belief that humor can sell the product**



**Question 8: Please write down one/more humorous advertisement(s) that you can recall.**

**Figure 8: Respondents most humorous advertised products**



The survey shows that people like advertisements. They even are willing to purchase products they noticed in the ads. Almost all respondents have noticed advertisements with humorous content. The most interesting fact is that over 80% of respondents justify the usage of humor in advertising. Humor works! Almost the same percentage of respondents (79%) believes that humorous advertisements can sell the product. Most people remember the humorous advertisements made for food products (78%). Mainly, these advertisements are for chocolates, soft drinks and alcoholic beverages, water, energy drinks, flour, chewing gum. A smaller percentage is placed on advertisements for hygiene products (deodorants, soaps, detergents and disinfectants), medicines and mobile phones. This data are in favor to companies. Namely, data encourage companies to use humor more often in advertising.

Although the questionnaire has four humorous print advertisements, this paper analyzes the following two:

**Figure 8: Humorous print advertisement, No.1**



**Figure 9: Humorous print advertisement, No.2**



For both advertisements, the same questions were asked that together with respondents' answers are given below:

**Question 9: How did these advertisements describe the product?**

**Figure 10: Description of product via humorous ads, Likert scale**

	I ad (in %)	II ad (in %)
Very bad	0	30
Bad	5	40
Average	10	10
Well	20	15
Very well	65	5

**Question 10: Do you find these advertisements amusing/funny?**

**Figure 12: Respondents' answers on advertisements appeal**

	I ad (in %)	II ad (in %)
Yes	90	15
No	10	85

**Question 11: Based on these advertisements, will you consider buying a product?**

**Figure 13: Respondents' answers on willingness to buy a product**

	I ad (in %)	II ad (in %)
Yes	75	25
No	25	75

**Question 12: Will you find information about the product based on these advertisements?**

**Figure 14: Respondents' answers on motivation to find out more about the product**

	I ad (in %)	II ad (in %)
Yes	80	30
No	20	70

This paper analyzes two humorous advertisements for which people have very different opinions. 85% of respondents find the first advertisement clear, understandable and it represents the company's product in a very well manner. A large percentage (90%) of respondents believes that this advertisement is really funny, attractive, amusing. It is particularly important to note that this advertisement encourages people to purchase the product and arouses their interest to find more information about the product.

Participants believe that the second advertisement is very inappropriate and does not describe the product. It is unclear and incomprehensible. According to a number of respondents, this second advertisement is not funny at all. Respondents, on the basis of this advertisement, will never purchase the product nor are they sufficiently interested to explore more about the product.

This means that not every product can be advertised in a humorous manner. Also, what is funny to one person is not for other. Only favorite companies and favorite, well-known and well-accepted brands can afford humorous advertising. Other companies are exposed to higher risk when using humor in advertising. People easily forgive and forget mistakes of favorite brands. Also, humor is used successfully only if it is tied to product's quality, ingredients, its functionality and value. Humor is determined to fail if it mocks both, the product or the user.

**Conclusion**

The empirical research conducted in this paper shows that people like humor. People enjoy in the humorous advertisements. Based only on humorous advertisements people are ready to purchase products. Humor attracts attention. Humor enhance liking. Humor influences on consumers buying decision. Humor that is related to products and their functionality is superior to unrelated humor. Humor is more successful with existing and famous rather than new products. Humor is more appropriate for low involvement products and feeling-oriented products.

All these facts motivate companies to create humorous advertisements. Yet humor is a two side's sword. Humor, if not appropriate, if aggressive, offensive, can cause dissatisfaction and harm to consumers. In short, any company that uses humor must be very careful. In this context, a saying of Winston Churchill- "A joke is a very serious thing!" is very accurate and applicable.

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