Investigating the Effectiveness of Humour in Cross-Cultural Advertising

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Abstract

Existing research into the use of humour in advertising fails to adequately address a number of central concerns. These issues include (i) definition of humour and types, (ii) the effect humorous advertising appeals have on an individual, (iii) how the effects of humour in advertising are moderated by culture and, (iv) establishment of a link between intended and perceived humour in advertising.

Propositions are developed for a series of research studies to construct a framework that will assist in determining what adaptation of humorous appeals is necessary to optimise their effectiveness in cross-cultural advertising.

Introduction

Humour is frequently used in advertising, but its effects and effectiveness are not well understood. With over US$167 billion globally being spent annually on ads with humorous appeals (ZenithOptimedia 2007), it is critical that advertisers gain the highest possible effectiveness. In particular, with organisations standardising their products and promotion globally, the use of humour in cross-cultural advertising demands examination.

The debate over standardisation or localisation of marketing strategies and in particular advertising strategies has been ongoing for decades (Agrawal 1995). Proponents of standardisation believe that there is a growing convergence amongst cultures, typified by the global consumers in certain product segments (Dawar and Parker 1994). The competing pressures - to gain the benefits of standardisation while retaining the customer focus of localisation - lead to the need for evidence delineating a point on the continuum between purely standardised and complete adaptation at which an organisation can develop effective advertising strategies.

This paper attempts to synthesise the literature on humour in cross-cultural advertising and conceptualise the link between culture and the effectiveness of humorous appeals in advertising. From this synthesis a framework will be developed, enabling researchers to determine what level of adaptation of humorous appeals is necessary to optimise effectiveness of cross-cultural advertising. A critical section of this framework will also address the gap between intended and perceived humour, and its impact on measures of effectiveness.

Culture

As a basis for cross-cultural research into humour in advertising, it is useful to examine the literature on the elements and dimensions of culture. The concept of culture is difficult to define accurately and comprehensively. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1978; 1952) cite over 164 definitions of culture. Fletcher (1979:17) opined that "culture is the total way of life in a society"; and Hofstede (1988:6) expressed his view that culture is "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from

those of another." These statements are descriptive rather than definitive and there is no consensus on a definition of culture. For the purpose of this paper, a composite of these earlier definitions describes culture as 'that collection of learned values, beliefs and actions that are shared within a society'.

It might be expected that culture is a critical element in the study of humour in cross-cultural advertising, despite equivocal results from earlier studies, as it appears that "appeals in advertisements and cultural values often relate in a non-random way" (Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996:67).

Humour and Culture

In order to determine the appropriate level of standardisation in humorous advertising across cultures, it is necessary to clarify the link between humour and culture. Henry Bowman, an anthropologist (1939: cited in Alford and Alford 1981:150), concluded that humour is "a more or less elemental human reaction, and that the fundamental elements of humorous situations remain the same across cultures." He determined that the content of humorous situations, however, varies from culture to culture.

In a classic 1945 compendium, the American anthropologist George P. Murdock listed the universals of culture, which he assembled from the social behaviours and institutions recorded in the Human Relations Area file for every one of the hundreds of societies studied to that time. There are sixty-seven universals in the list including 'joking' (Wilson 1998). Another anthropologist, Donald Brown, expanded the list of 'human universals' to over 300 items that include 'jokes' and 'play' (Brown 1991). The question arises, however, as to whether Murdock's and Brown's concepts of 'jokes' or 'joking' are synonymous with humour.

Alford and Alford (1981) worked with Murdock and White's (1969) Standard Cross-cultural sample and expanded the data set with updated materials to gain a probabilistic sample of world cultures, focussed specifically on the concept of humour. They determined that "no society was reported to be without humour" (Alford and Alford 1981:162). Further, they discovered no instances of humour that "defied analysis with our Western conceptions of humour" (Alford and Alford 1981:162)

Thus, humour is a universal or etic dimension of culture. However, the diversity of appropriate expression of humour in its content (subject or theme of the humour); objects (who or what is the butt of the humour); forms (humour type); and humour specialists within a culture, is well documented (Alford and Alford 1981). For example, political correctness has changed the acceptable content of humour in the United States and Australia and has made it socially inappropriate to laugh at people with disabilities. However, such concerns are much less prominent in Japan with subjects such as wars, death and Alzheimer's disease included in humorous appeals (di Benedetto et al. 1992). The execution of humour is therefore an emic dimension of culture, which will affect the level of possible standardisation of humorous appeals in cross-cultural advertising. Thus, research propositions include:

P_1 - There will be no differences among cultures on the frequency of use of humour as an advertising appeal because of the etic nature of 'joking' and 'humour';

P_2 - The impact of culture on expression of humour (i.e., forms, objects, content) will be significant because it is an emic element of a culture.

Humour in Advertising

One of the key issues in research on humour in advertising is a lack of consensus on a definition of humour and humour types, and in particular, definitions that are equally valid in a cross-cultural research setting. A number of typologies have been developed and used in English-speaking markets, (Freud 1905; Kelly and Solomon 1975; Speck 1990) but their reliability in a cross-cultural study can be questioned. A selection of humour typologies examined in an advertising context is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Selected Humour Typologies

Author	Humour types
(Freud 1905)	Tendentious (sexual or aggressive) wit, non-tendentious wit
(Goldstein and McGhee 1972)	Aggressive, sexual, incongruous (nonsense)
(Kelly and Solomon 1975)	Pun, understatement, joke, ludicrous, satire, irony
(Brooker 1981)	Puns, limericks, jokes, one-liners
(Madden and Weinberger 1982)	Aggressive, sexual, nonsense
(Speck 1990)	Comic wit, sentimental humour, satire, sentimental wit, full comedy
(Alden et al. 1993)	Incongruity, incongruity-resolution
(McCullough and Taylor 1993)	Aggressive, sexual, nonsense, warm, pun
(Murphy et al. 1993)	Nonsense, eccentric characters, word play, sarcasm, satire, parody, stereotype, human relationships, repetition, frustration
(Catanescu and Tom 2001)	Comparison, exaggeration, personification, pun, sarcasm, silliness, surprise

Although these categorisations of humour are all approaching the concept in different fashions, there are some similarities between them. Kelly and Solomon (1975) and Brooker (1981) both explicitly use the 'joke' type, which is most similar to the incongruity/resolution type in Alden et al. (1993). Other authors have highlighted incongruity forms of humour, through the use of 'ludicrous', 'nonsense' and 'silliness'.

Possibly the most accepted definition of humour is the audience's perceptual response i.e. if the audience finds the stimulus funny, then it is classified as humorous (Unger 1996). This broad definition highlights the need to investigate the impact of the humour on the audience.

Humour in Cross-Cultural Advertising

In contrast to the plethora of studies conducted on humour and on its use in advertising, the relative paucity of the body of work published on cross-cultural application of humour in advertising illustrates not only the difficulties in undertaking such work, but also the increased understanding of the complexity of the area (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). It also demonstrates the near impossibility of designing, and completing in a timely fashion, a project that can measure or control for all the possible variables. Differences in audience factors, product categories, humorous message types, and medium or context are all compounded by cultural dimensions and national characteristics such as economic status,

literacy and education, political and regulatory framework, and levels of technological development (Unger 1996).

As with national studies on humour in advertising, cross-cultural and international studies to date have each investigated a different combination of dependent and independent variables influencing the effectiveness of humour in advertising (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). Only once has a study been replicated, that of Weinberger and Spotts (1989) comparing humour in U.S. versus U.K. TV commercials. Toncar (2001) repeated their survey of advertising practitioners and content analysis of television ads and found their results reliable.

Despite this overall lack of confirmed evidence for theories on the use of humour in cross-cultural advertising, some interesting results have emerged. In one cross-cultural study, Alden, Hoyer and Lee (1993) conducted content analysis of television ads from Korea, USA, Germany and Thailand. Their results indicate that in all four countries, a majority of the humorous TV ads contained one or more forms of incongruity/resolution humour. The researchers categorised the forms of humour using a set of incongruity/resolution contrasts classified by Raskin (1985) and found that the proportions of the different contrasts were relatively consistent across cultures. Their conclusions were that incongruity/resolution style humour is global, although execution may need adaptation (Alden et al. 1993:72).

Research into humour in advertising must not only investigate the preference of advertisers for these appeals, it must also determine the effect of the humorous appeals on the audience.

Impact of Humour on Audiences

One major element in the research into humour in advertising is the process by which humour has an effect on an individual. Research into the persuasiveness of humour in advertising utilises both cognitive and affective theories to attempt to explain the conative effects (Vakratsas and Ambler 1999).

Cognitive-based humour research posits that humour is persuasive because it presents a distraction, thereby reducing counterargumentation (Duncan and Nelson 1985; Lammers et al. 1983). Despite the equivocal support for this theory, it has been frequently used in advertising serious or sensitive products (Unger 1996). One group of researchers argues that the key to cognitive processing of humour is based on incongruity while a second group hypothesises that incongruity alone is insufficient to produce humour, requiring resolution to produce the response (Alden and Hoyer 1993).

Within the cognitive school and working from a linguistics viewpoint, Raskin (1985) theorised a script-based semantic model of incongruity which suggests that a joke contains two distinct scripts that are opposites, and the third element, the punch line, "switches the listener from one script to another creating the joke" (1985:34). Raskin defines three categories of these contrasts in scripts as between actual/existing and nonactual/nonexisting, normal/expected and abnormal/unexpected, possible/plausible and fully/partially impossible or much less plausible. These contrasts have been identified by Alden and colleagues to be present in advertising globally (Alden et al. 1993; Alden and Martin 1995; Alden et al. 2000), with similar proportions of each contrast seen in each market tested.

P_{3a} – Frequency of use of incongruity-resolution humour appeals based on the Raskin contrasts, will be constant across different cultural contexts.

P_{3b} – Frequency of use of each of the three Raskin contrasts will be constant across different cultural contexts.

Part of the investigation into the impact of humorous advertising appeals should include determination of whether what the advertisers intend is what is perceived by the audience.

Intended and Perceived Humour

Intended humour in advertising is when advertisers design the message and copy in a form that they believe to be humorous, or assume that the audience will find humorous. However, this is not always perceived as humorous by the audience, sometimes to the point of being deemed offensive (Prendergast et al. 2002). There are also situations where the audience finds humour in ads that were not designed to have a humorous appeal. This unintended humour is not included in the present study, but does present possibilities for further research.

The gap between intended humour by advertisers and perceived humour on the part of the audience has either been ignored in the literature, or researchers have looked at only one side of the equation (Kelly and Solomon 1975:32). This has significant consequences on measures of effectiveness of advertising. If researchers measure the effectives of ads with intended humour, without testing perception of that humour, then they may not be accurately measuring the impact of humour. Rather, they may be gaining effectiveness from other elements of the ad, including the executional factors. Thus:

P_{4a} – The relationship of the gap (between intended and perceived humour appeals) to advertising effectiveness is inverse, assuming confounding factors are controlled.

P_{4b} – The gap between intended and perceived humour will be invariant across cultural contexts.

In order to test these propositions, it is proposed to develop a series of studies, using varied contexts, audiences and methodologies.
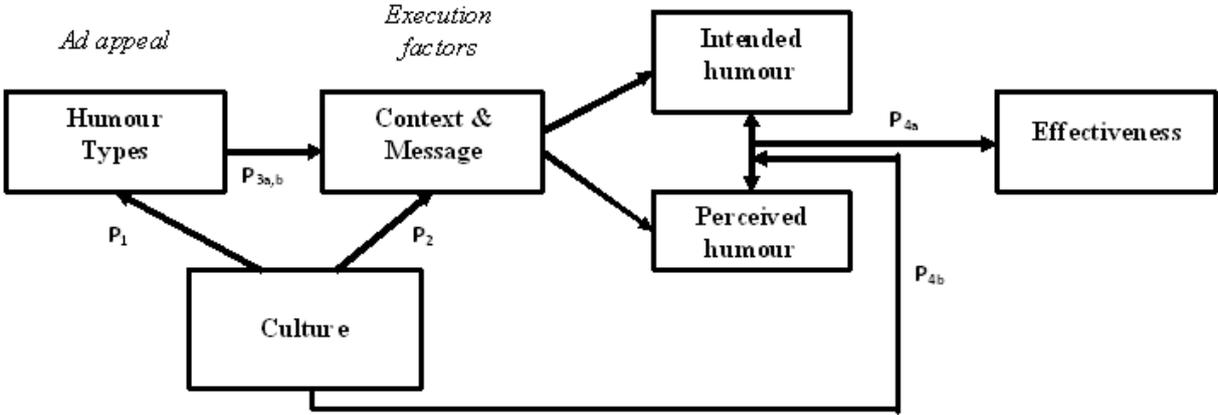

Figure 1: Considerations for Humour in Cross-Cultural Advertising

Future Research

It is proposed to investigate the propositions stated above, in the contexts of Australia, the United States, and the People's Republic of China. These countries have been chosen to demonstrate the propositions in conditions of minimal and maximal cultural difference (Fletcher and Brown 2005). The sample population is young, educated, urban dwellers. This cohort has been chosen as it is most likely to be exposed to significant amounts of television

advertising, and be able to perceive and respond to humorous stimuli (Weinberger and Spotts 1989).

External validity of the suggested research is limited to the target population in the three countries under investigation. Those outside the target population may have less cultural convergence, particularly in China due to lower access to global media. Further research would be necessary to determine whether results were valid in other cultures.

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