

ADVERTISING BETWEEN PERSUASION AND HUMOR

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Abstract: Humor has a huge impact on advertising communication, especially regarding the situations which are associated by consumers to the promoted product or service. A number of studies show that most people who work in advertising consider humor as one of the most efficient methods of drawing the consumers' attention (humor exerting a positive effect on it). The type of humor, its style, intensity and polarity vary depending on the ad, the audience, the individual consumer, and even the moment in time when the ad is received.

Keywords: persuasion, message, communication, humor, advertising culture

Advertising is an applicative activity which has taken over a series of methods and techniques meant to fulfil its main purpose: selling goods, services, ideas, etc. Advertising was first a set of concrete techniques and practical methods. Though, at first sight, commercials seem to pertain to the domain of marketing rather than to that of sociology or psychology, more and more experts¹ consider this field should define itself as a branch of communication sciences (sociology of communication and applied psychology).

Generally accepted operational definitions of the term *humor* (to be also found in advertising culture) cannot match the large number of communication studies² approaching this topic. Maybe humor should be seen as an artifact of human civilization. The era of global communication offers multiple possibilities for studying humor within an anthropological frame. The type of humor and the jokes favored by a certain society at a given moment reflect its preoccupations, interests and problems. For instance, the western societies of the '60s were dominated by the consume of vodevils, a fact reflected by the commercials of the time. The '70s were dominated by pessimistic brief humor, such as Murphy's laws (and their derivatives). The '80s meant organizational, anti-management and anti-bureaucracy humor. The '90s brought "ecological" humor, the criticism of pollution and of nuclear accidents. Therefore, humor is defined as the most comprehensive form of dramatic manifestation within an informal setting. To define it one can also use the differentiating elements of some dramatic genres: comedy, tragedy, melodrama. Though each of these types contains the same basic constitutive elements, they are each time different. In case of comedy (and of comical manifestations) we can say we are dealing with the phenomenon of a plot imagined mainly to get the audience/public interested, involved and amused.

¹ Cf. Dimitrie Todoran, *Psihologia reclamei*, București, Editura Tritonic, 2005.

² Cf. Richard J. Alexander, *Aspects of Verbal Humor in English*, Gunter Verlag Tubingen, 1997; Daniela Frumușani, "Context și conversație în producerea/receptarea glumei", în SCL, XXXVII, 6/1986; Elliot Oring, *Engaging Humor*, Chicago, 2003; Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, *Stratageme comunicaționale și manipularea*, Iași, 2000; T.J. Madden, M.G. Weinberger, "The Effects of Humor in Magazine Advertising", in *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 11, No. 3/1982, p. 8-14; Rodica Zafiu, "Evaluarea umorului verbal", in Gabriela Pană Dindelegan (coord.), *Limba română. Stadiul actual al cercetării*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2007, p. 497-505, etc.

Another characteristic is that the characters involve the receiver psychologically rather by appealing to their interested attention than to their deep concern. Also, the audience is convinced that there won't happen extremely negative events and, in most cases, the action proves to be beneficial for the main characters³. Obviously, this definition is rooted in literary theory, but has also been acknowledged in some prestigious studies belonging to the domains of advertising communication and marketing⁴. It is considered adequate for the concept of humor as used in advertising. The definition provides the connection among the phenomenological explanations associated to humor and its effects on the audience, as long as it places emphasis on increased attention, deceptive affective and cognitive reactions or pleasant dramatic experiences, which all meet the expectations of the receivers (regarding a happy ending of the plot).

The essential attributes of humoristic forms of manifestation contain a plot ending positively (what happens and why), characters (presented through speech and facts, theirs or somebody else's) and language (what characters say or think). A humoristic manifestation can be defined as either verbal or physical, function of the predominance of words or facts; it can also be characterised as being romantic, or, on the contrary, satirical, depending on the degree of pleasure or discomfort, predominating the characters' reactions.

When humoristic accents are placed on the action, humor is considered physical. Physical humor appears when the plot illustrates the character's inflexibility. Humor addressing a mature audience is called a farce – a form of dramatic manifestation based on humor centered on physical activities and which often presupposes intricate misunderstandings.

Physical humor, as used in advertising, is best represented by TV commercials, and gags or tricks (implied by this type of humor), more difficult to be represented by those forms of media which cannot render movement. Physical humor is the standard form in televised humor. One of the reasons for which physical humor is full of action, dense and rarely encountered in real life is the fact that its manifestations have nothing to do with the realistic mimesis of life. An additional feature of a non-mimetic plot, which is typical to physical humor, is that characters are not real, but represent caricatured stereotypes⁵. These characters show a simplified behaviour, manifested in most cases within an intricate and halucinating plot (for instance, the series *Familia Bundy/Married... with Children*). Physical humor does not require from the audience any intellectual epiphany or linguistic finesse in finding nuances of meanings, and not even perceiving or becoming aware of, the satirised social norm. The purpose is to cause the instantaneous burst into laughter of a large and indiscriminated audience. In point of its psychological effects on this audience, physical humor is obviously advantaged. It is generated through an intense, exaggerated and repetitive action. Even if the consumers' attention is less focused when we talk about advertising reception compared to other forms of televised stimuli (sport events, news etc) or maybe precisely for that reason, one of the immediate objectives of the commercial spot is to capture the audience's full attention. A message such as that proposed by physical humor stimulates the consumer to pay attention to the advertising stimulus, which promises a joyful experience and a reward that includes entertainment, without a significant effort

³Cf. Abrams, M. H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston Ed., 1988.

⁴ See Zinkhan, G. M., Gelb, B. D., "Humor Repetition and Advertising Effectiveness", in Goldberg, M. E., Gorn, G., Pollay, R. W. (Eds), *Advanced in Consumer Research*, Vol. 17, Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT, 1990 p. 438-441.

⁵Cf. Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1973.

investment (no intellectual or time resource allotting on the part of the receiver is necessary). The “anchors” used to generate this promise are quick movements, vivid colors, entertaining music (at a high volume), clear-cut characters and the alert plot. The main purpose of physical humor is to present the audience with those stimuli which can generate maximal efficiency in communication and guarantee laughter as a reaction. The actions illustrate mechanical and repetitive behavioral structures, to be found in real life, though maybe not so emphasized. To this purpose, physical humor used in expressing the advertising message attempts at causing laughter without requiring the receiver to perform an extensive processing. The action focuses more on the categories of *to do* than on those of *to be* or *to say*.

Unlike physical humor, verbal humor is focused on language⁶, which becomes its defining element. Verbal humor owes its success to sentence structure or to the choice of words; it is the opposite of physical humor (and its forms rely exclusively on language), the most frequent sources of this humoristic effect being irony and double meaning. In the case of repetition as a technical means of generating verbal humor, the characters repeat fixed formulas and try to exhibit a stereotypical verbal reaction in inappropriate contexts. The humoristic connotation is obtained by expressing an idea in a form consecrated for another meaning. The transposition of words is often based on language vitality and “flexibility”, which allows replacing an expression full of meaning by another full of humor; this type of substitution implies coincidences. Misunderstandings and entanglements generated by the situation are clear for the audience, not for the characters/actors. Verbal humor requires of the consumer to understand the situation; in doing that, it appeals more to cognitive processing resources than physical humor.

Another form of verbal humor is represented by slogans (some rhyming) launched by different brands: *Ciuc: Încă una și mă duc; Pepsi Cola: Nea Nicu – la litru*. Also repetitions or wordplays have the same effect, for instance, the dialogues in the commercial advertising for the *Antrefrig pork liver paté*; the dialogue is based on accidental word similarities in Romanian, many unrelated words containing the syllables *-fi + -cat*, which together can make up the Romanian lexeme meaning “liver”: During an interview: Interlocutor 1:– *Draga mea, arăți superb. Cum reușești să îți menții corpul tonificat?*(the Antrefrig blue pig: – **FICAT?!)**Interlocutor 2: – *La începutul anului mi-am planificat* (the Antrefrig blue pig:– **FICAT! FICAT!)***să merg la sală... Evident, am ținut și un regim diversificat* (the Antrefrig blue pig: –**FICAT! FICAT!**). *Antrefrig. Acum cu și mai mult ficat, pentru un gust enervant de bun*⁷. The comic effect of the situation is related to the character of the blue pig, whose behaviour is rather exaggerated (his attitude is probably motivated by the color blue, symbolizing upset, vexation, extreme irritation, as in the idiom *blue in the face*. It’s comic that the noun *ficat/liver* resembles phonetically the last part of the words: *pietrificat, intensificat, nejustificat*: At the Opera: Interlocutor 1:– *Ce voce. E superbă. Sunt pur și simplu pietrificat!* (the Antrefrig blue pig: – **FICAT!**)Interlocutor 2: – *Și modul în care a intensificat...* (porcul albastru Antrefrig:– **FICAT!**) *ultima arie e...*Interlocutor 1:– *Acum știu sigur că au criticat-o nejustificat*(the Antrefrig blue pig: –**FICAT! FICAT!**). *Antrefrig. Acum cu și mai mult ficat, cu un gust enervant de bun*⁸.

Romantic humor tries to persuade by creating a bridge between the receiver/addressee and a series of pleasant characters. Satiric humor criticizes disorder

⁶ See *Speech Acts*, in Mariana Neagu, Claudia Pisoschi, *Fundamentals of Semantics and Pragmatics*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2015, p. 161-180.

⁷<http://hgp.ro/reclama-antrefrig-2013-corp-tonificat/01.10.2018>

⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwVAKzCbdng/01.10.2018>.

and social imperfection (the most frequently used mechanism for this purpose is the ridicule). Satiric images are generated according to some traditional conflicts (the battle of the sexes, generation gap)⁹.

Initially, advertising treated humor suspiciously and that is why it took some time before it was accepted as an important „ingredient” of a commercial. Various studies¹⁰ show that 94% of those who work in advertising consider humor as one of the most efficient ways of capturing consumers’ attention. It seems that the commercials which contain humor are superior to those lacking it from the perspective mentioned before. In Romania, too, many of the clients of advertising agencies consider that those commercials which contain or are created around some humoristic idea are superior to those lacking humour or exploiting other creative directions. Humour linked to the advertised product/brand is more successful than unrelated humour.

The distraction effect that humor can exert on somebody’s attention can lead to persuasion (the persuasive effect of humor is, at best, as powerful as that of reason-based arguments). The power of persuasion of a stimulus is linked to its capacity of functioning (in advertising) as a very strong aggressivity mitigator.

Commercials begin to acquire an entertaining value, which causes the public to not avoid commercial breaks interrupting the programmes watched on TV. The ability to perceive the subtleties and symbolism of the humoristic elements depends both on the experience of the individuals perceived separately by the society and on that society’s cultural elements. Within the Romanian public space, expressions such as *umorul e frate cu românul/humor is Romanians’ brother*, *românului îi place să râdă/Romanians love to laugh* or *gena umorului este scrisă în ADN-ul românului/the gene of humor is part of the Romanians’ DNA* prove Romanians’ availability to humoristic phenomena.

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⁹ Political satire developed at the beginning of the 20-th century, when the cabaret was created. It was a public house where spirits were served, there was dancing and entertainment. Within the German cultural space, the word was used to designate the theatre stage where satires were played. During the shows, the actors interpreted sketches which criticized the political or social issues of the time. Cabaret became a method of criticizing flaws. Great Britain and Germany are said to possess a dry, cryptic and cynical type of humor, the former being the only country which is considered to take the phenomenon seriously. English humor abounds in ironies, sharp replies, full of implicit meanings, for the English people humor being a natural way of interhuman relations manifestation.

¹⁰ Cf. M. G. Weinberger, C. S. Gulas, “The Impact of Humour in Advertising: A Review”, in *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 21/1992, p. 35-60.

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