Humour in British Print Advertisements

GWENAËLLE ANNE GAËLLE ROUX*

Abstract

This study explores a research model concerning humour in British print advertisements. The findings of this study suggest that humour is a relevant means used by industries to achieve commercial effectiveness. It is argued that humour can be depicted as a challenge framework, specific to a particular culture. The paper also tries to demonstrate the importance and outcomes of humour response in the British audience. To do so, the paper reviews different types of humour mechanisms and the enabling factors used to decode the humour mirth. The aim of this study is to comprehend to which extent mechanisms are used to trigger the humorous challenge in British print advertisements. Finally, the paper analyses the primary type of humour that is recurrent in British print advertisements. It is hoped that this study will draw further attention to the importance of the British audience’s judgment as well as provide a contrasting analysis between British citizens and other citizens from the Commonwealth.

1. Introduction

Advertising strategies account for an important part of the marketing activity of an industry. Humour is a relevant element frequently used by companies to sell products (Spotts, Weinberg and Parsons 1997: 18; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). Nevertheless, humour is not used in direct combination with the products themselves but rather is related to specific clients (Newman 2004: 88; Weiner 2006). In spite of the ongoing process of globalisation which has led to an increasing homogenization of advertising practices, it seems undeniable that the advertising process of a country entails specific inferences in regards to its national characteristics (Tungate 2007). Thus it is important to appreciate that different countries, like different people, find different things funny, which explains why national campaigns are usually better at humour than global campaigns (Newman 2004: 85; Lee and Johnson 2005: 29–30). Tungate (2007), for instance, argues that “a clever sense of humor is a typically British characteristic”. He claims that the United Kingdom is regarded as one of the most audacious markets in terms of advertisements (Tungate 2007). This study analyses the ways in which British print advertisements achieve humour. It also provides an understanding of the importance and the outcomes of humour response in the British audience.

At this point, it is crucial to mention that although research has been conducted for the past few years, no proper theory of humour has emerged yet (Spotts et al.
humour can broadly be identified as a form of communication in which a created stimulus may act to provide pleasure for an audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 95). Generally, humour is suggested as being a term applied to all literature and to all informal speech or writing in which the object is to amuse or arouse laughter in the reader or hearer (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 21–22).

Humour is a phenomenon that always requires a high level of motivation from the viewer, who is then more likely to remember it (Newman 2004: 88; Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 57). Indeed, if the intended audience does not understand the wit or is annoyed by it or is even offended in some ways, the advertisers will not have reached their primarily goal: “It is hard enough to raise people’s attention as regards advertising; if you annoy them, you are making a hard task even more difficult” (Viveiros 2003, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 63). This statement highlights that humour is efficient only when the advertiser knows the target audience and its response to humour. Humour is subjective and is particular to a societal culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Integrating humour: a challenge framework

We can analyse humour within the challenge framework, specific to a particular culture, as outlined in Gulas and Weinberg (2006). In this model, the challenge is triggered by one or more of three humour mechanisms, namely incongruity, arousal/safety, and superiority. It is put into action through the use of different enabling factors, including play signals, familiarity receptivity, surprise, and arousal, which in turn help the reader in decoding the humour response (mirth). These phenomena have a major impact on the viewer’s state of mind, resulting in both cognitive and affective reactions (Gulas and Weinberg 2006: 137).

2.2 Humour mechanisms: What exactly is it about a situation that makes it laughable?

Although there is no general acceptance in classifying humour, a conceptual starting point can be established by asserting that humour is triggered by particular mechanisms (Spotts 1987). These can be grouped into three main categories; namely the cognitive theory, the superiority theory, and the relief theory (Spotts et al. 1997: 20; Norrick 2003: 1333).

First of all, cognitive mechanisms are related to the structure of the message (Spotts et al. 1997: 20–21). According to Stern (1990, cited in Spotts et al. 1997: 19), incongruity is the most prevalent characteristic in cognitive devices. Based on the
work conducted by the pioneers in the field, Kant and Schopenhauer, Morreal (1983, cited in Spotts et al. 1997: 19) claims that humour can be achieved by mere surprise or incongruity. Indeed, research has revealed that the pleasure derived from incongruity is the divergence between the conceptions that listeners or viewers hold in their minds, and what happens to upset their expectations in a playful context of confusion and contrasts (Newman 2004: 91; Norrick 2004: 1334–1335). However, incongruity becomes stronger only when it follows a resolution process and is understood and accepted by its audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 23-26). Through the use of incongruity, jokes produce a mirthful response based on structural contrasts (Raskin 1985).

Originated by Plato, the superiority theory – also called the disparagement theory – concentrates on the social function of humour (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 26; Spotts et al. 1997: 19). Hobbes (1840: 1909, cited in Norrick 2003: 1333) defines humour as “the sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others”. This illustration can be explained by Gruner (1997, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006:26), who suggests that the superiority theory can be clarified in terms of superiority, aggression, hostility, ridicule or even degradation. Superiority seems to be present even in humour that appears to be harmless.

Last but not least, the arousal (relief/psychodynamic) theory implies that there is a psychological release in that humour helps vent tension. It is suggested that people joke about things that make them feel unsure and/or uncomfortable as a way of releasing feelings of tensions (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 28). According to Freud (1905: 1960, cited in Spotts et al. 1997:19), humour is a safety value which allows the relief of forbidden feelings.

2.3 Types of Humour

It is interesting to note that Freud (cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 98–99) believed that the pleasure obtained from wit comes about either tendentiously or non-tendentiously. Tendentious wit refers to the execution of a message through the use of aggression or sexual forces. On the other hand, non-tendentious wit relies on a more playful means using absurdity and nonsense.

Kelly and Salomon (1975, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 100) propose five main categories of enabling factors which help to achieve humour: “(1) puns – the humorous use of a word or phrase in a way that suggest two interpretations, (2) an understatement representing something as less than the case, (3) joke-speaking or action without seriousness, (4) something ludicrous – that which is laughable or ridiculous, (5) satire-sarcasm used to expose vice or folly”. Audrieth (1998), drawing
from the literature, proposes a more extended list of the ludicrous type of humour which is required, in this research study, to analyse more carefully the collected British advertisements.

3. Method

In this research project, only British advertisements that were judged as making an attempt at humour were selected to form the core corpus for analysis (Sinclair 2004: 4). The advertisements were selected from two published books: Saunders (1997) and Cronin (2004).

A corpus of forty-six British print advertisements was analysed in this study. To simplify the analysis, the advertisements were classified into six main categories (Appendix 1). For each category, one or more advertisements were evaluated, representing the characteristics of British humour for each type. Related theories introduced in the literature review were applied to in analyzing the corpus, to understand the challenge process that follows British print advertisements.

The aim of this study was to comprehend what mechanisms are used to trigger the humorous challenge in British print advertisements. Furthermore, it is relevant to analyse the enabling factors used to achieve the humorous process and the extent to which the humour is developed by tendentious or non-tendentious wit. The research concludes by analysing the influence of humour perception in British print advertisements (which is achieved by humour resolution).

4. Results: Enabling elements used in British advertisements

One of the “Law of Humour principles” in advertising mentions that when an advertiser is searching for the shortest and sharpest way to express a thought, the solution is often found in the use of different factors, which in turn elicit humour (Newman 2004: 86). The stimuli analysed, based on the proposed corpus, are not claimed to be universal however, as they refer strictly to the use and perception of humour in British English.

4.1 Category 1: “Funny ha ha”

Advertisement 1
First of all, humour is triggered in this advertisement by the use of the incongruity mechanism. Viewers finds themselves in a contrasting context where their expectations on how to illustrate the message about this campaign category are disturbed by what is portrayed in the print advertisement. Additionally, the
advertising campaign uses irony as it touches a sensitive problem by not referring to the actual issue. In that case, the arousal theory is also applied and humour becomes a healthy way of adaptive behaviour (Spotts et al. 1997: 19). People laugh about things that make them feel uncomfortable as a means of releasing feelings of tension. Superiority theory can also be used to analyse this advertisement, as it induces the ‘proper behaviour’ for the audience to adopt. Mirth is then the result of the sudden conception of some eminency in the viewer who already adopts the proper behavior, by comparison with the infirmity of others. This advertisement uses a particular measure of persuasion where a humorous appeal seems to be more persuasive than a fear appeal. The advertisement does not use any explicit adviser but draws a relationship between the overall implicit message and the image, such as the missing piece of the puzzle which corresponds to the inappropriate behavior to adapt. A non tendentious method is applied to deal with a sensitive issue and strongly rely on the cognitive performance of its viewer.

Advertisement 2
This advertisement mostly displays a playful context of confusion and contrast which is resolved through the acknowledgement of mirth. Sarcasm is important in this advertisement as it is straightforwardly mocking its viewer. This is done through a non-tendentious comparison between the monkey and the human being, as well as by the ability of the play on the word ‘scratching’. The text beside the illustration takes the form of an adviser and develops humour by creating an opposition between the text and the reader. Humour is then achieved through the use of an overall epigram on the hedge of black humour: “The Mandrill has a good nose for scratching records, which led to a big contrast in the music business. As you are not similarly equipped, you’d better sign up for a training course”. Finally, this advertising campaign plays on the ludicrous and uses non-tendentious wit.

4.2 Category 2: Explicit sexual insinuations

Advertisement 3
Humour is mainly triggered through incongruity and relies on confusion until the viewer reads the text at the bottom. The message is achieved through the use of irony which enables the promotion of the beer without making any explicit reference to it (this is also related to advertising regulations about alcohol in the United Kingdom; see category 6). Nevertheless, by specifically targeting the male audience and leaving aside the female audience, humour can be seen as triggered by the use of black humour as the advertisement may be offensive to some viewers. There is also a play on words which emphasises opposition in the headline. It seems
undeniable that the advertiser uses exaggeration in the adviser “Give up Sex for Life”, putting forward the potential characteristics of this particular beer. Humour is also created by the epigram factor which deals with the “follies” of mankind through the caricature of the Church principles. Thus, the pleasure obtained from wit in this advertisement is achieved by tendentious means.

4.3 Category 3: Branding

Advertisement 4
As beer promotion has to follow strict regulations, advertisers need to find different ways to advertise their brands. In this advertisement, humour is generated by the incongruity mechanism where the viewer is exposed to a contrast in the situational advertisement. Humour is created through a situational/practical joke which puts forward exaggeration regarding the “Gold of the beer and its creamy feature”. Humour comes here from non-tendentious wit.

Advertisement 5
In this advertisement, humour is achieved by the use of the incongruity as well as the superiority mechanism. The irony of the pictorial situation makes the viewer feel some superiority and comfort regarding the product. It is obviously based on exaggeration (hyperbole), putting forward features of a product that are likely not to be true but that will attract the viewers’ attention. The wisecrack ‘Aphreadisiac’ takes the form of an implicit adviser in regards to the quality of the product. So the epigram makes a special reference to the product and triggers the humour mechanism. This is particular to the British population, where seductive references value tendentious wit.

4.4 Category 4: Puns and games

Advertisement 6
In this advertisement, arousal theory primarily triggers the challenge leading to a humorous situation. Humour is achieved through an anecdote which intends to portray an adviser under the shape of relief: “Life begins at 40D”. This epigram entails a bonehead in the linguistic form. The play on word “40D” draws a parallel between women’s age and breast size. The advertisers use irony to focus on an issue that probably makes its target market feel uncomfortable. Humour is achieved by non-tendentious wit.
Advertisement 7
Humour in this advertisement primarily arises through the anecdote “Eugene inherited his Uncle Clancy’s estate, but like the Murphy’s he wasn’t bitter”. The wordplay on “bitter” creates ambiguity as it can have two meanings: (1) pretense due to money (2) taste of the beer. This is a situational joke where bitter means unpleasant, sharp and disagreeable, the complete opposite of the Murphy’s. Humour is also achieved by the use of exaggeration in the caricatured graphic proportions, the man’s head and beer which underlies the context in which the joke occurs. This beer leaves a taste of superiority, and incongruity is important in the eccentricity of the contrasts. Non-tendentious humour is displayed in this advertisement.

Advertisement 8
Incongruity triggers the humour challenge through surprise. Nevertheless, it can be argued that humour is also triggered by the disparagement theory in terms of ridicule and superiority. Moreover, the humour applied in this advertisement is also a way to vent tension. A combination of these three mechanisms is used to appeal to a specific British target market. The advertisement starts off with an anecdote which underlies a specific situation with an illustrative point. In addition to this, it plays on the resemblance of the name of an astrology sign, Virgo, to the sign’s root word – virgin – in its text: “So he said are you a virgin? And I said no, a Scorpio”. The play on word is also enabled, thanks to the use of antonyms. Black humour is based on irony aroused from a fool’s query which adds nonsense to the situation, in turn creating a humorous situation. This slogan is using a relevant wisecrack which creates humour through tendentious wit.

4.5 Category 5: Cruel humour

Advertisement 9
This advertisement is clearly built on incongruity as there is a perfect contrast between the product advertised and the way it is promoted. Although the incongruity is resolved, the advertisement still relies on confusion and contrasts which make the print material even funnier. Humour seems to be based upon eccentricity as it refers to an unusual behaviour. It is also linked with the exaggeration of the situation, close to the hyperbole process as we assist to an extreme exaggeration: would you really feed your partner with dog food? This particular humour is also achieved through nonsense as it includes some level of absurdity. Here is an illustration of some degree of cruel humor. Last but not least, humour is attained through the linguistic content: “The Micra. Ask before you
borrow it”. It is a witticism shaped by a kind of humorous adviser. Based on this, humour can also be depicted through the use of epigram, which puts forward a clever and short saying about a general group. It can be translated as a satire of mankind, expanding on situational humour based on previous experience.

4.6 Category 6: The unexpected

Some of the advertisements under this rubric are promoting tobacco. It is crucial to know that the first restriction for the advertising of tobacco in the United Kingdom came in 1962, as the Royal College of Physicians highlighted the health problems caused by tobacco (Cronin 2004: 39). Following on from this, an agreement was signed in 1971 between the British government and the tobacco industry for the inclusion of health warning on packages and also on printed advertisements (Cronin 2004: 39). In addition, advertisers were prevented from creating campaigns showing any individuals smoking. Thus, the tobacco advertisement campaign industry saw an increase in more indirect and abstract campaigns, as we can see in the corpus and, more particularly, in the two advertisements analysed below.

Advertisement 10
Incongruity is found in the display of this advertisement. The contrastive situational wit focuses on making a reference to the prestige of the brand, and to its long-time history and loyalty in providing the best tobacco. Exaggeration is certainly used to encourage humour and attract the target market. Humour arose from non-tendentious means.

Advertisement 11
This advertisement mainly draws upon inconsistency and puts forward a contrastive situation as well as ambiguity and intrigue to generate humour. Indeed, the body part of the chameleon on the pack of cigarettes is yellow while the rest is dark green/brown. Yellow reflects the colour of the pack, and is in reference to the cigarettes but also the “enlightenment” one feels when smoking this specific kind of cigarettes. Humour is also portrayed by the arousal theory, where irony is used to bypass the regulations on advertising tobacco. Once again, this campaign uses non-tendentious wit through ludicrous humour.

Advertisement 12
Advertisers in the United Kingdom must respect regulations imposed by the Advertising Standards Authority. One such regulation is that campaigns should not link the consumption of alcohol with social or sexual success, or with the perception
of physical attractiveness (Cronin 2004: 40–41). From that we understand the context in which advertisers need to create non-tendentious advertisements to promote alcoholic drinks. In the case of this Smirnoff advertisement, humour is depicted through the use of incongruity as well as the relief mechanism. Incongruity obviously plays a major part in this advertisement as a contrast is created because of regulations. Humour is also created through the use of the personification and parody of emblematic figures, leading to contradiction (angel versus bikie gang member). In addition to this, relief triggers the humour as it implies that Smirnoff can free its target market from all the social regulations and duties, enabling the other personality side constrained by social status to show. Smirnoff transforms and revitalises. This is underlined by the wisecrack, “Smirnoff – The other side”. It can also be supposed that superiority is played with, as this ad aims at activating psychological challenge.

Exaggeration is an important enabling factor in this ad in overstating the features of the product. It can be seen as a kind of practical joke, in that wit is put into action: a viewer sees the printed ad and feels the practical joke. The trick is played on another person and the humour comes from what happens in switching. Non-tendentious wit is applied to create humour.

5. Discussion

As can be seen from this analysis of a corpus of British print advertisements, British advertising agencies seem to encourage soft sell through the ludicrous so as to attract their customers’ attention as well as influence their state of mind. Although hard sell technique is used to give information about the product advertised, soft sell techniques seem to reoccur throughout the advertising corpus, and so relies mainly on emotional appeal (Lee and Johnson 2005: 175). This technique is supported by humorous appeals which help create a favourable customer response, historically of high ratings to humorous advertising campaigns.

Spotts et al. (1997: 20) claim humour is related to the message type. They categorise it in two main types: (1) humour dominance or (2) message dominance. Accordingly, it can be shown that the British advertisements analysed are mainly humour dominant. This means that the product messages are presented within a humorous context that shapes the overall experience of the ad. If the humour is removed, the advertisement no longer makes sense. Nevertheless, a few advertisements can be categorised as message dominant where humour is semantic – mainly the wordplay advertisements. Last but not least, whether the ad is humour dominant or message dominant, it seems that image-focused humour is of great importance in understanding the advertisements (Spotts et al. 1997).
In short, the challenge framework that represents humour in British print advertisements is mainly triggered by a combination of the three mechanisms. Additionally, enabling factors (usually more than one) are used to create humour. Most importantly, an advertisement in the British community is perceived as humorous through the use of combinations and relationships among incongruity, surprise, perceived humour and attitude toward the ad (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 120). The humorous challenge is then achieved.

Undeniably, humour is very subjective on both a national and an international level and endangers a promotional campaign if it is not well interpreted by its audience (Newman 2004: 87). The primary aim of an advertiser, in using humour, is to build a bridge between customers and a specific brand (Newman 2004: 88). Indeed the recognition of humour in an advertisement is a “physical responding to the message” (Newman 2004: 86; Lee and Johnson 2005: 217–218). As a result, the impact that humour has on advertisement effectiveness is of major importance, as British surveys have revealed that humour in British advertisement stimulates four main factors (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 112–113). Firstly, it has been shown that the British population, having already consumed a product, is more likely to be sensitive to humour which alters or reinforces associations and recollections of the specific product experience. In that sense, humour has a cognitive function, as it serves as a means of affective reaction – helps the customers to decide whether or not the ad is worthy of further processing. Additionally, a boring advertisement is likely to lead to failure 76% of the time (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 107). Thus, humour has been found to be an effective way to gain customers’ attention. In turn, humour is potentially efficient in enhancing comprehension and recognition of a brand (Newman 2004: 89; Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 113). These phenomena, resulting from the distraction effect of humour, will finally have a successful influence on persuasion (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 115).

6. Conclusion

Understanding humour in a given target market – in this project, the British audience – is of great relevance, as while it is apparent that numerous advertisements are offensive, the intention of promoting a product or service through humorous techniques is commonly used as a defense for their offensiveness. The “weapons of mass distraction” advertisement for Easyjet is a good illustration of this phenomenon (see advertisement 13, Appendix 2). Indeed, ranked as the second most complained about poster in the United Kingdom in 2002, the advertisement has been defended by a spokesperson of the company as “the latest in a series designed to be ‘topical, humorous and irrelevant’” (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 113, Appendix 2).
Weinberger 2006:187–188). The ‘humour defense’ is interesting, given that it is likely that many of those offended by a given ad recognise that the message exposed is an attempt at humour, even though an offensive one.

To sum up, British advertisement culture encourages intimacy with the targeted audience achieved through humour. British humour in print advertisement has three characteristics being ironic, laid-back and despite few regulations, liberated to sexual inferences. Understanding an advertisement is not only a matter of understanding the wit played out in the ad, but also being familiar with broader British culture. Thus, it is important to understand the regulations surrounding this area, to see the subtle forces shaping the work of advertising agencies.

Nevertheless, one limitation of this study arose from the established generalisations that stem from a limited corpus of advertisements. For further research, it would be necessary to focus on a wider corpus and also to emphasise the importance of the views that British customers have on the humour depicted in British print advertisements. Moreover, it might be relevant to contrast opinions and analysis between British viewers and people from other cultural backgrounds.

* **Author notes**
Gwenaëlle Anne Gaëlle Roux is an undergraduate student of Griffith University, currently studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Languages and Applied Linguistics, with International Business as an option.
Contact email: gwenaelle.roux@student.griffith.edu.au

**References**


Appendix 1: Corpus of British print advertisements

Category 1: “Funny ha ha” advertisements

Advertisement 1:
Mates Condoms (A) Knight Leach Delaney, London (AD) Andy Wray (CW) Paul Delaney (P) John Wallace (Model-maker) Kent and Shaw.

Advertisement 2:
Central Office of Information (A) GGT, London (AD) Erik Kessies (CW) Joham Kramer (P) Simon Larbalestier
Category 2: Explicit sexual insinuation

Advertisement 3:
*Abbot Ale* (A) Dlaney Fletcher Bozell, London (AD) David Adamson (CW) Richard Prentice (P) Mark Polyblank

Category 3: Branding

Advertisement 4:
*Whitbread/Boddingtons* (A) Bartle Bogle Hegarty, London (CD) John Hegarty (AD) Graham Watson (CW) Bruce Crouch (P) Tif Hunter
Advertisement 5:
Perrier Vittel UK (A) Publicis, London (AD) Rick Ward (CW) Noel Sharman (P) Adrian Burke.

Category 4: Puns and games
Advertisement 6:
Triumph International (A) Delaney Fletcher Bozell, London (CDs) Greg Delaney/Brian Stewart (AD) Brian Stewart (CW) Greg Delaney (P) Pamela Hanson, represented by Fiona Cowan/ Hamiltons Photographers Ltd
Advertisement 7:
Whitbread/Murphy’s (A) Bartle Bogle Hegarty, London (CD) John Hegarty (AD)
Graham Watson (CW) Bruce Crouch (P) Mike Parsons (Illustrator) Sara Hodge

Advertisement 8:
Lambrini, London.
Category 5: Cruel humour

Advertisement 9:
Nissan Micra (A) TBWA, London (AD) Chris Hodgkiss (CW) Pip Bishop (P) John Claridge

Category 6: The unexpected

Advertisement 10:
Gallaher/Benson & Hedges (A) Collett Dickenson Pearce, London (AD) Tina Morgan (P) John Hammond.
Advertisement 11:
Gallaher/Benson & Hedges (A) Colett Dickinson Pearce, London (AD) Nigel Rose (P) Max Forsythe

Advertisement 12:
Smirnoff (A) Lowe Howard-Spink, London (AD) David Christensen (CW) Simon Carbery (P) David Scheinman

Advertisement 13:
Easyjet “weapons of mass destruction” ad, viewed 7 October 2007 at <http://www.brandrepublic.com/login/News/186573/>