

Full Length Research Paper

Is laughter, as the best medicine, the remedy for crisis' pain? Use of humor in marketing communications

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Surrounded by staggering world-wide economic crisis and country specific financial burden, Turkish consumers feel pinched and marketers face the challenge to find a way to attract their attention to make them buy what they provide. In tough times, is humor the remedy for marketers? This paper aims to find an answer to this question and it examines the impact of humor in advertising. Alongside its advantages, humor also carries certain risks: will the viewer be bored after a few exposures; will it create an unexpected offense on the viewer? The paper investigates the views of various marketing experts on use of humor in marketing communication as to understand if such an approach will work with special focus given to the “psyche” of the population during a period of economic uncertainty and value consciousness. With the aims stated, the researchers conducted a series of expert interviews with marketing professionals, academicians and psychologists. Additionally, a focus group with senior year PR and marketing students was carried out. Findings confirm that humor is in fact an effective way to create awareness, stand out from the crowd, and form emotional bonds with the brand. It also has the potential to create buzz marketing, especially among younger consumers. Informants also mentioned risks of using humor such a shorter copy life spans; overshadowing the brand message; appealing to narrower target groups while offending larger ones. Regarding the use of humor in economic crisis; findings do not support any further positive impact than the general benefits stated. The findings of this exploratory study will be used to develop a questionnaire for a follow-up quantitative phase.

Key words: Humor, marketing communications, economic crisis.

INTRODUCTION

“Across history from Aristotle to Freud... thoughtful and sensitive people have always sought an understanding of the problem of humor. Humor is an inherently mysterious and interesting phenomenon which pervades human life” (Veatch, 1998). Humor is a medium that serves for many purposes in social interactions in our everyday lives: it either represents friendliness and politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) or reduces threat and criticism (Holmes, 1998). It is a shortcut to reach an individual in a positive manner or it can be used to give the individual a bad or offensive message in a constructive manner.

Humor is studied by many researchers in sociology, psychology, literary, art and medicine.

Humor is widely used by advertisers all around the world. For example, a quarter of all prime time television advertisements in US use humor appeal (Weinberger and Spotts, 1995; 1997). There are many cultural and cross-cultural studies about the use of humor appeal in advertisements.

“Humorous advertisements in crisis times” is the specific interest of the present study. Through the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods, the use of humor appeal in advertisements in crisis times is investigated and its effectiveness, prevalence and consequences are studied.

Objective of the study

The study seeks to understand the role and impact of

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humor in brand communication with special focus given to the “psyche” of the population during a period of economic uncertainty and value consciousness. The research questions are presented thus:

- i. How is humor used in marketing communications?
- ii. How does humor affect brand perceptions and preferences?
- iii. What “genre” of humor is appreciated more by Turkish consumers?
- iv. Is humor appreciated more or less in times of economic difficulty?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Humor defined

Sully refers to humor in his book *“Essays on Laughter”* (1902) as: “... hardly a word in the (English) language ... would be harder to define with scientific precision than this familiar one.” Defining humor has not been an easy task: many authors made varying definitions. Veatch (1998) describes humor as *“Humor, that certain psychological state which tends to produce laughter”*. In an earlier review of humor in advertising, Sternthal and Craig (1973) offer three different approaches to define humor:

- i. In terms of stimulus properties: Presence of humor is characterized by jokes, understatements, turns of phrases, puns, double entendres, satire, irony, slapstick or incongruity, (Kelly and Solomon; 1975)
- ii. In terms of observed responses from an identifiable stimulus: Heightened arousal, laughs, smiles...
- iii. In terms of perceptual responses of the audience: Special tests measuring the extent to which a message is perceived to be humorous by the audience

Goldstein and McGhee (1972) define humor according to its content: humor can either be aggressive or sexual or non-sense (absurd). Alden and Hoyer (1993) define the presence of incongruent contrasts as a condition that creates humor. Incongruity can be defined as a deviation from expectations. They also suggest that incongruent contrasts are prevalent cross-culturally. With its various dimensions, humor is a common tool used by advertisers with the hope of attracting attention and to produce an effect. Although many other types of appeal can be used to attract attention, humor seems to be a preferred one as humorous advertisements calls upon its audience from the same level (Sternthal and Craig, 1973).

Theories of humor

Raskin (1985) claims in his “theory of humor” that jokes exert cheerful responses when they include structural

and cognitive contrasts between a series of expected and unexpected situations. He categorizes humorous contrasts as:

- a. Actual/existing vs. non-actual/non-existing
- b. Normal-expected vs. abnormal/unexpected
- c. Possible/plausible vs. fully/partially impossible or much less plausible.

Stern (1996) studies human taxonomy and proposes a two dimensional model. In his model, physical comedy, verbal comedy, romantic comedy and satiric comedy respectively forms the two ends of the horizontal and vertical dimensions. Physical comedy and verbal comedy together comprise the two ends of the vertical dimension. Physical comedy can be defined as situations and acts that are humorous and verbal comedy is the humorous usage of language. The two types serve different aims: physical comedy aims to grab audience attention and verbal comedy aims to wind up comprehension of the audience. The horizontal dimension of this model is formed of romantic and satiric comedy. Romantic comedy can be defined as laughing with the characters of the comedy and satiric comedy is defined as laughing at the characters of the comedy. Romantic comedy aims to create pleasure and enjoyment whereas satiric comedy is aimed to make the audience laugh at the foolishness in order to correct or break loyalty.

Speck (1991) in his taxonomy of humor provides five categories: comic wit, sentimental humor, satire, sentimental comedy and full comedy. Catanescu and Tom (2001) provide a more complete model regarding different types of humor on advertisement, and define seven types of humor used in ads. Tosun and Yüksel (2009) observe the prevalence of similar typology in Turkish advertising scene:

1. Comparison: creating a situation where two or more elements produce a humorous situation.
2. Personification: creating a situation in which human characteristics are attributed to animals, plants and other objects.
3. Exaggeration: overstating a situation so that the meaning involved is lessened.
4. Pun: creating new meanings with the use of language that results in humor.
5. Sarcasm: use of silliness and ironic responses/situations.
6. Silliness: situations ranging from making funny face to ludicrous situations.
7. Surprise: situations where humor arises from unexpected situations.

Flaherty et al. (2004) claim that there are two relevant types of humor which are incongruity and incongruity-resolution. Both incongruity of objects/characters and in contrast, resolution of incongruity is used to create humor

appeal. In advertisements, both types are used simultaneously and solely.

Impacts of humor

Various studies point out that advertising need not be informative or verbal to be effective; its emotional and visual elements are enough to enhance customer preference (Aaker and Norris, 1982; Gorn, 1982; Healy and Kassarijan, 1983; Weinberger et al., 1997; Zajonc, 1980). Emotions are among the basis of brand attributes which supports the above stated ideas (Aaker et al., 1986; Smith, 1993). Both advertising researchers and practitioners believe that through humor, attention and awareness are successfully achieved (Beard, 2005; Madden and Weinberger, 1982; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992). Perceived humor is positively associated with liking both for advertisements and brands as well as preference (Alden et al., 2000; Beard, 2005; Belch and Belch, 1984; Gelb and Pickett, 1983; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992; Biel, 1990).

Sternthal and Craig (1973) argue that humor leads to persuasion as it distracts audience attention from product details. Distracted attention prevents the viewer from developing adversary and counter arguments to the message leading to a desirable outcome. About attracting audience attention, Madden and Weinberger (1982) argue as the result of their study on industry data that, humorous magazine ads outperformed non-humorous advertisements in generating and holding audience attention. Fugate (1998) also argues that humor enhances the persuasiveness for some unsought and controversial services by its distracting effect and by reducing perceptual defenses of the audience. Humor also increases memorability of the advertisement and makes it more likeable (Rossiter and Percy 1997).

Studies on persuasiveness of humor are not unanimous. It creates both positive (Duncan and Nelson, 1985) and mixed effects (Chattopadhyay and Basu, 1990), and sometimes, no effect at all (Stewart and Furse, 1986; Wu et al., 1989).

Research indicates that some other factors moderate the effects of humor on persuasion. Lammers et al. (1983) point out the differences in gender about effects of humor on persuasion. Chattopadhyay and Basu (1990) report on the moderating effect of prior brand attitudes on the effects of humor on persuasion.

Their study shows that subjects with prior positive attitudes towards the brand are more persuaded by the humorous ads than subjects with prior negative attitudes. Brooker (1981) states that neither humor nor fear seems to be more persuasive than a straight forward appeal; according to Cline et al. (2003) and Zhang and Zinkhan (2006), humor is not directly persuasive, but it has the ability to increase positive thoughts towards the ad and makes it memorable.

Measuring effects of humor in advertising

As the characteristics like level and intensity of humor is impossible to express in numbers, effects of humor is extremely hard to measure (Sternthal and Craig, 1973). Consistent with former studies stating that humor is not a one-dimensional construct (Thorsen and Powell, 1991), Fugate (1998) offers six dimensions to humor: humor production, a sense of playfulness, the ability to use humor to achieve social goals, personal recognition of humor, appreciation of humor, use of humor as an adaptive mechanism. These dimensions provide a clearer stance for the measurement of the effects of humor and what actually humor is. The primary aim of humor use in advertisements is to create positive response on audiences (Stern 1996). On the other side, practitioners believe that creating humorous advertising is much more difficult and carries a potential risk of negative outcomes before the audience (Beard, 2005; Madden and Weinberger, 1982). Directing the humor to the potential user may be risky, it is deemed more effective when the humor is directed to the product rather than the user (Phillips, 1968; Hoppe, 1969; Monica, 1971).

Studies show that related humor is much more effective compared to unrelated uses (Kaplan and Pascoe, 1977; Madden and Weinberger, 1982). Humor is named as related if the product is used to create the humor or if humor is associated with the product; humor is called unrelated when humor in the advertisement can exist without the presence of the product. Related humor ensures the following positive effects: secured audience attention, increased memorability, less sales resistance, and enhanced message persuasiveness. Unrelated humor performs either the same or even worse in persuading the audience than no humor. Related humor is found to be more persuasive than no humor about low involvement products, it is found to be less persuasive about high involvement-products (Scott et al., 1990; Krishnan and Chakravarti, 1990; Weinberger and Campbell, 1991).

Hepner (1963) argue that humor should be used as a means, not as an end in itself. Phillips (1968) state that humorous ads are effective only when the humor is understood. When it does not come off, it may become a failure. Flaherty et al. (2004) conclude that when humor is not understood, it becomes annoying and causes negative perceptions about the brand.

Humor and crisis

Fugate states that humor usage in advertisements increases in crisis periods in USA (Fugate, 1998). This fact seems to prevail to other countries. In Turkey, humor has long been used in advertisements. Humor usage in Turkey involves sensitive subjects such as gender issues, religion, and nationalization. Humorous appeal is

also utilized for entertainment and for removing sensitive taboos. In conservative societies, humor is the best way of disturbing the taboos. Tosun and Yüksel (2009) state that in crisis times, as people become more attentive about their budgets and expenditures, humor is used by advertisers to enhance attention and purchase intentions.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach. The data was collected through a series of expert interviews and a focus group. The expert interviews were conducted with academicians from marketing, communication and psychology fields and professionals in marketing communication and brand management. The focus group was conducted with senior year advertising and public relation students. The field work was conducted between April and June, 2010. All of the interviews were voice recorded and decoding and evaluation process was done collectively by the researchers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Use of humor in marketing communications

It has been observed both by the researchers and the informants that there is a rising trend of humorous advertising in the Turkish marketing landscape, as a frequently quoted example for using humor in the Turkish media is the telecommunication sector in general. The telecommunication sector constitutes a high share of advertising spending and all of the major companies are adopting a humorous approach in their brand communications. Common to all campaigns, there is an anti-hero acted by a star comedian, who portrays the "foolishness" of using the competing companies' services. A notable number of respondents have pointed out this trend. Initiating from a desire to stand out from the advertising clutter, telecom companies have begun using humor according to our informants. However, when this approach was immediately adopted by the rest of the industry, the differentiating affect diminished.

"There is a real clutter in the media, you have to choose the media and the message really well to differentiate yourself and be perceived by the masses. Humor is the best way to meet this challenge" (M., 45, advertising agency owner)

"The key objective of advertising is not only to give the message, but also to be heard and seen among the crowds. If you can achieve this through humor why not use it as a tool?" (F., 45, brand consultant)

"Agencies prefer to adopt an easy way out from the challenge of cutting the clutter through humor, however when every advertiser in a specific industry does this, by adopting a me-too approach how can you really differentiate yourself?" (C., 23, advertising and PR student)

The execution styles of the humorous ads require special attention. Informants pointed out to several key points in developing an advertising campaign. As given, the message needs to be clearly communicated, relevant to the product benefit sought, and in line with the brand personality. Moreover, the humorous message needs to be cleverly stated, funny, culturally sensitive and not ridiculing or humiliating specific groups of consumers.

"This is not just about message transmission, it is also about being funny and witty at the same time" (MK., 32 marketing professor)

Using humor in advertising may not work for every product category according to some of the respondents. In product categories where the functional benefit suppresses hedonistic or emotional benefits, then humor may not be appropriate. Accordingly, sectors such as finance, automotive, pharmaceuticals and detergents are deemed inappropriate. However, some service sectors where the real brand performance is harder to perceive, and the competition is based on price promotions then humor can work better.

"You cannot use humor in every product category, for example detergents are "serious" products, where the marketer needs to communicate the functional performance well. This is why one cannot use humor that easily in every sector." (F., 45, brand consultant)

Affect of humor on brand perceptions and preferences

The informants mentioned both positive and negative aspects of using humor in marketing communications. On the positive side, easier recognition, recall, likability and being an agent for buzz marketing were mentioned as possible affects by the majority of informants.

Spokespersons or even the company owners may shape the attitude of customers towards a specific brand. If the character in the humorous ad is liked by the viewer, then the overall image of the brand advertised may change according to an interviewed expert.

"I used to have a negative attitude towards Brand (V), but ever since the new humorous campaign with the Comedian (S.S) has started I began feeling differently towards the brand. I used to dislike it because of the image of its former owners, but now I have a completely different attitude." (M., 45, advertising agency owner)

Humor can reach to wider spans of audiences if characters and scenario is carefully developed. Paying attention to the cultural sensitivities of the targeted groups and not offending them is of critical importance. If this condition is not met, the humor may have a backlash effect.

"Humor can address to all levels of social strata, however

you need to consider social sensitivities; something found funny for one group may be very upsetting for another.” (O., 39, psychologist)

It was also stated that grasping the attention and affection of the younger target groups is easier through humor, especially by the popular celebrity comedians of the time. Another factor contributing to the positive impact of humor is the capability of generating buzz among the targeted audiences. This is especially true for younger generations considering their wide use of social media tools.

“When a pun is cool it becomes an immediate topic of conversation among friends” (A., 23, advertising and PR student)

“We do not only talk about it, we even share the ad in Facebook when we find it cool and interesting.” (AY., 24, advertising and PR student)

If an ad is found likable, it has the potential of being repetitively watched over time. This, according to some informants, is a positive aspect, whereas some others argue that viewers', especially younger ones, may grow tired of humorous messages. This may imply that a campaign needs to be developed using several copies of relatively short life spans.

“I don't grow tired of watching a good humorous ad for over and over again if it is executed well” (F., 45, brand consultant)

“The impact of humor goes down if it is repeated too much. You laugh at the first few times, but then get bored and begin zapping. So, an ad copy using humor should not be aired for too long I personally grow tired after two or three weeks.” (MK., 32 marketing professor)

In terms of the possible negative impacts of humorous ads, respondents cited a number of issues including: difficulties in understanding word games or puns, the mismatch between the brand and characters in the ad, the overshadowing of the brand by the humor or the celebrity comedian, the perceived offensiveness of the message, weakness in the informative side of the ad, confusions stemming from the celebrities' appearances in several ads.

Informants stressed the critical role of the choice of the brand spokespersons. If these people do not match with the perceived image of the brand, the user personality or even the self-perceptions of the user, then there is the risk of alienating the target audiences. If the brand spokesperson is chosen from popular comedians, then there is the risk of seeing this person in prior campaigns for other brands. That creates confusion and mistrust both for the person and brand according to some

informants.

“The choice of the character in the ad is very important. As a consumer, I want to associate myself with the character in the ad to establish a mental relationship with the brand. For example, I can relate to an educated urban female character more easily than a male, rural, not so educated one.” (S. 22, advertising and PR student)

“If the character does not match with my image of the brand, I may even start disliking the brand.” (I. 23, advertising and PR student)

“The same man appears in ads for different brand, this confuses me and I lose my trust both for him and the product. Aren't there any other funny man in Turkey?” (MK., 32 marketing professor)

However, if the humorous character, usually a celebrity, is much liked and well received, then he or she may overshadow the brand and its message. The message may get lost in the way.

“Sometimes I laugh so much at the ad, I miss out the commercial message. I then ask myself what was this all about.” (A., 23, advertising and PR student)

Informants pointed out to risks of not delivering enough information if too much emphasis is given on being funny. Also, the choice of words, puns, even the pronunciation or intonation of the words needs to be done clearly. Some respondents stated that they miss out the joke because it was not clearly stated.

“I sometimes, do not get the word game in the ad, then I miss the message completely.” (FC., 23, advertising and PR student)

Genre of humor is appreciated more by Turkish consumers

Anholt (2000) argues that on a global scale, creativity and humor are rewards for attracting viewer attention for advertising. However, use of humor needs to be in tune with cultural nuances and sensitivities.

Humor had been an integral part of cultures. Turkish culture is no exception to this rule. The society's humor perspectives has been reflected in works of literature as well as popular humor magazines at an increasing rate and popularity starting from the second half of the 19th century. Magazines such as *Diyojen*, *Akbaba*, *Marko Paşa*, *Girgir*, and *Limon*, had been considerably effective in shaping and translating public perceptions especially in the political domain. Current humor magazines such as *Leman*, *Uykusuz* and *Penguen* continue this tradition. An observable common characteristic on the style of humor

in these magazines is the dominance of verbal humor even in caricatures. This can be interpreted as the inclination of Turkish humorists as well as the general public on verbal humor.

When our informants were probed about the defining characteristics of Turkish humor in general, and in the marketing communications context, the general agreement was that daily life itself in Turkey, embodies many different elements of humor and sometimes humor is the only cope mechanism with complications of life. However, when humor is used in marketing communications, a level of simplicity and clarity needs to be maintained if the objective is to be understood by larger segments of the society.

“Average Turkish man on the street is a minimum wage earner with five different credits cards and a state of the art cellular phone in his pocket. This is a joke on its own. We are a typical Mediterranean culture, emotional appeals in marketing communication works better. That is why humor is a good way to reach the target audience.” (M., 45, advertising agency owner)

“We are a talkative society, maybe that’s why plays on words generally appeal more than situational humor. However, impact of humor can be stronger when verbal and visual elements are used together. Sometimes, just the sight of a famous comedian makes people laugh even when the message is not that funny.” (AY., 24, advertising and PR student)

“European humor to me is more intellectual; maybe that is because the average level of education is higher in Europe. You need to be more explicit in your humorous message in Turkey otherwise; you may not be understood at all.” (MK., 32 marketing professor)

Is humor appreciated more or less in times of economic difficulty?

When questioned about the relevance of humorous messages during economic crisis, the general agreement was that humor does not necessarily induce purchasing behavior.

Consumers become more value conscious during hard times therefore, rational appeal messages on price reductions or promotions are more effective in leading to actual sales. However, if these rational messages were combined with humor, it may lead to a more favorable brand image.

“We never run out of crisis in Turkey. There is always an economic difficulty in one sector or the other. In a period when people are so economically concerned; building brand equity is even a tougher job. In this gloomy marketing environment, we need to cheer up the consumer in some way. Comedians in the ads facilitate this task, by making the brand more amicable.” (M., 45, advertising

agency owner)

“The economic crisis is actually a relative phenomenon; the impact is aligned with the severity it is perceived not necessarily how serious it really is. Therefore, a direct impact of humor on general consumption patterns is not so easy to conclude. Individual sensitivities to crisis are more relevant in shaping consumption patterns than an overall perception of marketing communications.” (F., 45, brand consultant)

“Personal receptivity to humor is more relevant in measuring the effectiveness of it than contextually questioning its impact in crisis times.” (H., 59, advertising professor)

“In crisis times, I am more concerned with price and utility balance. Humor does not impact my actual purchase decision but it affects my brand awareness and affinity.” (C., 23, advertising and PR student)

Conclusion

In conclusion, humor was found to be an effective marketing communication tool in attracting attention, cut through the advertising clutter, building emotional bonds and thus, brand equity and creating buzz. Although humor is perceived as an easy way to reach larger audiences, it is a tool to be used with caution. Cultural sensitivity is of utmost importance as well as tuning into the intellectual competence of the target audiences. Messages may offend cultural subgroups or overshadow the brand advertised.

Another key consideration is the relevance of humor with the product category and brand personality. Use of humor may not be appropriate for all product types and brands especially for products where functionality, security, trustworthiness or price-value- balance are main evaluation criteria.

Our study explores the relationship of Turkish consumers with humor as a marketing communication tool.

According to our informants, Turkish ad viewers like being communicated through humor, especially verbally and via well known comedians. In economic crisis times, use of humor contribute more to creating brand awareness and affinity as well as enhancing the brand personality than being a direct tool for creating immediate sales. However, humor may not be a strong determinant of brand preference than pricing or other value promising offers.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This exploratory study is composed of experts’ opinions, collected through semi-structured interviews. Further research could be conducted with actual consumers with specific ad-copies from selected sectors to serve a confirmatory purpose. A cross-cultural study can enhance

the generalizability of the presented findings.

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