
The Impact of Humor in Advertising: A Review

Marc G. Weinberger and Charles S. Gulas

The use of humor has become common practice in advertising; yet our knowledge about its impact has not been updated since the last major review almost twenty years ago. In the interim, a great deal of humor research has been conducted. The outcome of this research only partially supports earlier conclusions and highlights the need to apply humor with care. Humor is by no means a guarantee of better ads, but its effect can be enhanced with careful consideration of the objectives one seeks to achieve as well as the audience, situation, and type of humor.

Marc G. Weinberger (Ph. D., Arizona State University) is Professor of Marketing, Department of Marketing, School of Management, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Charles S. Gulas (M.B.A. Youngstown State University) is a Doctoral Student, Department of Marketing, School of Management, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Amherst, Massachusetts.

"People do not buy from clowns."

Claude Hopkins 1923

"Good copywriters have always resisted the temptation to entertain."

David Ogilvy 1963

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

David Ogilvy 1982

Introduction

Estimates of the use of humor in advertising suggest that as much as 24.4% of prime time television advertising in the U.S. is intended to be humorous (Weinberger and Spotts 1989). Research conducted by others has also indicated similar high (or even higher) levels of usage of humor in television ads (Kelly and Solomon 1975; Markiewicz 1972; Speck 1987) and in radio (Weinberger and Campbell 1991). While the use of humor is high, the efficacy of humor as a communications device remains uncertain. In attempts to delineate its impact, humor has proven to be very elusive. This lack of knowledge has led advertising copywriters and researchers alike to both praise and decry the effectiveness of humor in advertising as evidenced in the opening quotes.

The fact is that humor is a complex topic that has been experimentally studied by advertisers in several dozen studies over the past twenty-five years. Humor is a multifarious concept that is affected by a wide variety of factors. As a result of the many contingencies imposed by desired goal, type of humor, medium, placement and audience (see Figure), generalizations about the effect of humor are fraught with pitfalls (Stewart-Hunter 1985). Though the broad question of humor's effectiveness in advertising is unanswerable, we can compile the accounts of humor research in the context of proper constraints to gain insights about its effects. Therefore, the more appropriate questions to ask are: 1) What communications goals are most likely to be achieved through the use of humor?; 2) What executional or message factors are likely to affect the outcome?; 3) For what audience is humor most appropriate?; and 4) What product factors suggest the use or non-use of a humorous approach? The purpose of this paper then is to systematically examine the research that has been conducted to gain insight into the effects of humor with regard to these questions.

Humor Research

The widespread use of humor, coupled with the unresolved questions regarding it, has drawn the attention of numerous communication researchers. In a frequently cited review of the early literature in the field, Sternthal and Craig (1973) drew some tentative conclusions about the use of humor on a number of communications goals. These conclusions must be viewed as tentative because, although based on a thorough review of the extant literature in 1973, this literature base was somewhat small and consisted almost exclusively of non-advertising studies as there was simply little prior work in advertising to review.

In the years since the Sternthal and Craig work, humor has received extensive further investigation in over 30 studies that have appeared in the marketing literature, and a great many more studies that have appeared in the literature streams of education, communication and psychology. This paper synthesizes the relevant aspects of this literature in order to update and expand on the Sternthal and Craig work. Thus, the format to be followed will be to examine the effect of humor as it applies to various communications goals and then to expand on this work by including execution, placement, audience, and product factors that have come to light in the past twenty years.

Communications Goals

As alluded to earlier, the nature of the communication goal plays a major role in the appropriateness of the use of humor. Sternthal and Craig (1973) listed advertising goals and the impact of humor on each of these goals. Revisited after twenty years of intervening research some of these conclusions remain cogent, while others appear to be in need of revision.

Humor and Attention

Studies have shown that 94% of advertising practitioners see humor as an effective way to gain attention. Furthermore, 55% of advertising research executives believe humor to be superior to non-humor in gaining attention (Madden and Weinberger 1984). While the personal views of advertising executives should not be equated with rigorous hypothesis testing, these views do reflect a knowledge base built on years of day to day experience with proprietary research results. And in the case of attention, these practitioner views appear to be well supported by the available empirical evidence. In studies of actual

magazine ads (Madden and Weinberger 1982), television ads (Stewart and Furse 1986), and radio ads (Weinberger and Campbell 1991) in standard industry ad testing situations, humor has been found to have a positive effect on attention (see Table 1). Similarly, this attention effect has also been demonstrated in the laboratory. In a thorough test of attention effects in the advertising arena, Speck (1987) compared humorous ads with non-humorous controls on four attention measures: initial attention, sustained attention, projected attention and overall attention. He found humorous ads to outperform non-humorous ads on each of the attention measures.

The attention-attracting ability of humor has also been demonstrated in education research (Powell and Andresen 1985; Zillmann et al. 1980). In a review of the education literature, Bryant and Zillmann (1989) conclude that humor has a positive effect on attention; however, they caution that "unqualified direct evidence for the effects of using humor in non-mediated classroom instruction is still wanting" (p. 59). The cautionary stance taken by Bryant and Zillmann is appropriate for all the humor-attention studies. While the results seem to indicate a positive impact on attention, and in general the past twenty years of research largely supports the conclusion drawn by Sternthal and Craig (1973) (see Table 1), future researchers should be aware that all humor is not created equal. Related humor, that is, humor directly connected to the product or issue being promoted, appears to be more successful than unrelated humor (Duncan 1979; Lull 1940; Madden 1982). In fact, controlling for the relatedness factor makes the findings of the experimental studies in advertising unanimous in their support for a positive effect of humor on attention. This indicates that the mere insertion of "canned" humor into a given ad is unlikely to have the same impact on attention as the use of a more integrated humor treatment.

Humor and Comprehension

The literature is mixed on the effect that humor has on comprehension. In a study of 1000 broadcast commercials, Stewart and Furse (1986) found humorous content to *increase* the comprehension of an ad. Other studies have found similar positive results (Duncan, Nelson and Frontczak 1984; Weinberger and Campbell 1991; Zhang and Zinkhan 1991). However, these studies contrast sharply with the results of other advertising researchers who have found a negative relationship between humor and compre-

Table 1
The Impact of Humor on Attention

Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Sternthal & Craig (1973)	literature review	N/A	+	
Duncan (1979)	literature review	N/A	mixed	
McCollum/Spielman (1982)	study of 500 commercials from data base, target audiences	TV	+	
Madden (1982)	lab experiment, 326 undergraduates	radio	mixed	only related humor effective
Madden & Weinberger (1982)	data-based study of 148 liquor ads from Starch	print	+	humorous ads outperformed non-humorous ads on "noted," "seen-associated," and "read most" recall measures
Madden & Weinberger (1984)	survey of 140 U.S. ad executives	N/A	+	
Duncan & Nelson (1985)	lab experiment, 157 male undergraduates	radio	+	
Stewart & Furse (1986)	data-based, study of 1000 pre-tested ads	TV	+	
Speck (1987)	lab experiment, 182 undergraduates	TV	+	humor outperforms non-humor on 4 attention measures
Weinberger & Spotts (1989)	survey of advertising executives, 132 U.S. agencies, 29 U.K. agencies	N/A	+	
Wu, Crocker & Rogers (1989)	lab experiment 360 undergraduates	print	+	
Non-Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Lull (1940)	experiment, 1016 undergraduates	public speech	o	interestingness of speech, no advantage over non-humor, topic state medicine
Gruner (1970)	communication experiment	taped public speech	+ -	when topic interesting when topic uninteresting
Zillmann et al. (1980)	lab experiment, 70 children ages 5-7 years	TV	+	studied children's attention to educational TV
Powell & Andresen (1985)	literature review	N/A	+	children's attention to classroom instruction
Bryant & Zillmann (1989)	literature review	N/A	+	conclusion drawn from review of education research

hension (Cantor and Venus 1980; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986; Lammers et al. 1983; Sutherland and Middleton 1983). This negative view of the effect of humor on comprehension is shared by the majority of research executives (64%) at U.S. ad agencies. In sum, of the advertising experiments that attempted to measure the effects of humor on comprehension, six indicate humor may enhance comprehension, five produce neutral or mixed findings, and six indicate that humor may harm comprehension (see Table 2). While these findings certainly fail to resolve the true effect of humor on comprehension, they do call into question the existence of a global negative effect hypothesized by Sternthal and Craig (1973).

With a literature as discrepant as this, it is important to look for factors that may disentangle these findings. To this end, it appears that three factors seem to explain much of the lack of agreement in the studies. First, there is a lack of a consistent definition of comprehension among studies. Depending on the specific measure used, recall may be an indication of comprehension or it may merely indicate attention. More importantly, the measures employed may have an impact on the results found. Those studies that employ multiple or summated measures of comprehension (Speck 1987; Weinberger and Campbell 1991) are more likely to find positive or mixed positive effects on comprehension than those studies that employ single measures (Cantor and Venus 1980; Lammers et al. 1983), indicating that a positive comprehension effect may be missed by relatively narrow measures. Further evidence of the importance of measures is found in the work of Murphy and his colleagues (Murphy, Cunningham and Wilcox 1979). Their study of context effects demonstrates that different measures of recall may produce different recall results.

Secondly, humor type may be an important determinant in comprehension effects. In one study which directly compared the effects of various humor types on comprehension, Speck (1987) found significant differences due to type. His findings indicate that some humorous ads do better, and some do worse than non-humorous ads on descriptive and message comprehension and that this differential performance was attributable to humor type. "Comic wit" was found to under-perform non-humorous treatments while all other humor types (i.e., satire, full comedy, sentimental humor and sentimental comedy) out performed the non-humor treatment.

Finally, the type of product advertised appears to play an important role in the impact of humor on comprehension. This product factor is composed of

two dichotomies, actual vs. fictional products, and high involvement vs. low involvement products. Those studies employing actual products (Speck 1987; Stewart and Furse 1986; Weinberger and Campbell 1991; Zhang and Zinkhan 1991) in general indicate a positive effect of humor on comprehension. On the other hand, studies employing fictional products (Cantor and Venus 1980; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986) have found a negative effect of humor on comprehension. However, two studies depart from this general pattern. The first is an advertising experiment which used a real industrial product (Lammers et al. 1983). However, since this study used a student sample, none of the subjects was familiar with the product or even the product category; thus, for all practical purposes, this product can be viewed as fictional. Therefore, the negative findings in this study fall in line with the actual product - fictional product dichotomy presented above. The second study that finds a negative comprehension effect for actual products used high involvement products (luggage and 35mm cameras) infrequently purchased by the student sample employed (Sutherland and Middleton 1983). This finding points up the other important product dichotomy, high involvement - low involvement, that will be discussed later in the product section.

Given the equivocal findings of the advertising research, and the lack of clarity regarding the measurement of comprehension, we might do well to turn to non-advertising research to help clarify the issue. In education research, the effect of humor on comprehension is typically measured via a written test. While this clearly cannot be claimed to be analogous to the conditions under which advertising is presented or tested, we believe that these studies do provide a rigorous test of the relationship between humor and comprehension that can provide insight into the impact that humor may have on advertising comprehension. An analysis of the relevant non-advertising studies shows eight studies that report a positive effect of humor on comprehension and eleven studies that indicate a null or mixed effect. None of the non-advertising studies reports a negative effect of humor on comprehension, which again challenges the conclusion drawn in 1973 by Sternthal and Craig.

Of the education literature, perhaps the strongest support for a positive relationship between humor and comprehension appears in work conducted by Ziv (1988). This study indicates that humor can significantly improve learning. The Ziv experiments compared an introductory statistics course that was presented without humor with a course that included

relevant humor. Both teacher and lecture materials were held constant. The level of learning was measured at the end of the semester by a standard objective departmental final exam. The average score of the humor treatment class on this exam was over ten percentage points higher than the average score in the non-humor class. Ziv replicated this experiment with two psychology classes and found very similar results. The work conducted by Ziv is supported by other non-advertising researchers (e.g., Chapman and Crompton 1978; Davies and Apter 1980; Gorham and Christophel 1990; Kaplan and Pascoe 1977; Vance 1987; Zillmann et al. 1980). This non-advertising literature also supports the hypothesis stated above that humor type may moderate the impact of humor on comprehension. Work conducted by Vance (1987) in the education arena parallels that conducted by Speck (1987) in advertising. Both of these researchers have found significant effects for humor type. The education literature also points out that relatedness of the humor to the message appears to be very important with regard to comprehension. Studies using related humor were more likely to find that humor enhanced comprehension than those employing unrelated humor.

Overall, the inconclusive nature of the results suggests that the effect of humor on comprehension is an area where additional research can be especially helpful, and future researchers should be particularly cognizant of humor type, and relatedness. Advertising researchers might also be well advised to use actual, rather than fictional, products in manipulations and employ several measures of comprehension.

Humor and Persuasion

Sternthal and Craig (1973) concluded that the distraction effect of humor may lead to persuasion. However, they note that the persuasive effect of humor is at best no greater than that of serious appeals. These conclusions seem to agree with the opinions of U.S. ad executives. Madden and Weinberger (1984) found that only 26% of these practitioners agreed with a statement proclaiming humor to be more persuasive than non-humor. While U.S. advertising executives largely agree with the conclusion of Sternthal and Craig (1973), this opinion is in sharp contrast to that of their British counterparts, 62% of whom viewed humor as more persuasive than non-humor and only 7% of whom were found to disagree with this assertion (Weinberger and Spotts 1989).

The literature in marketing and communication has

addressed this issue directly, and the evidence for a persuasive effect of humor is mixed at best. Speck (1987) found three out of five humor treatments increased two measures of persuasion: intent to use the product and change in perceived product quality. Similarly, in an experimental study, Brooker (1981) found a humorous appeal to be more persuasive than a fear appeal. However, neither humor nor fear appeals were more persuasive than a straight forward approach. An examination of commercials, published by McCollum/Spielman (1982), found that 31% of humorous commercials exhibited above average scores on persuasiveness. This figure represents about average performance when compared to other executional tactics examined by McCollum/Spielman (1982). Stewart and Furse (1986) found no effect of humor on persuasion. Finally, in their study of radio ads, Weinberger and Campbell (1991) found unrelated humor to perform the same or worse on a persuasion measure than no humor. Additionally, while related humor was more persuasive than no humor for low involvement-feeling products, it was found to be less persuasive on high involvement-thinking products.

Other advertising research also indicates that, much like comprehension, other factors may intervene to moderate the effect of humor on persuasion. For example, while Lammers and his colleagues (Lammers et al. 1983) found a positive effect for humor on persuasion, this effect was present only for males. Similarly, Chattopadhyay and Basu (1989) found a moderated positive persuasive effect for humor. In their study, subjects with a prior positive brand attitude were more persuaded by humorous treatments while subjects with pre-existing negative brand attitudes were not.

Perhaps the strongest case for a persuasive effect of humor is presented in a study by Scott, Klein and Bryant (1990), who employed a behavioral measure of persuasion quite different from the measures of persuasion used in other studies. They found that attendance at social events (e.g., town picnics) was greater among subjects who received the humorous treatment of an ad than among those who received one of two other types of promotions. The humor treatment was not found to increase attendance in comparison to the other type of promotions at business events (e.g., town council meetings). The support for a persuasive effect shown in the Scott, Klein and Bryant study must, however, be viewed with caution in the light of the studies which find no added persuasive effect of humor (Belch and Belch 1984; Bryant et al. 1981; Duncan and Nelson 1985; Kennedy 1972;

Table 2
The Impact of Humor on Comprehension

Advertising Studies Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Sternthal & Craig (1973)	literature review	N/A	-	
Duncan (1979)	literature review	N/A	0	
Murphy, Cunningham & Wilcox (1979)	lab experiment, 115 undergraduates	TV	mixed	unaided & aided recall of commercial and content
Cantor & Venus (1980)	lab experiment, 117 undergraduates	radio	-	fictional products
Madden (1982)	lab experiment, 326 undergraduates	radio	mixed	only related humor effective, one familiar & one unfamiliar product
Lammers, Liebowitz, Seymour & Hennessey (1983)	lab experiment, 64 undergraduates target audiences	radio	-	product uses and benefit recall unfamiliar industrial products
Sutherland & Middleton (1983)	lab experiment, 107 undergraduates	print ads	-	recall, high involvement, infrequently purchased products
Belch & Belch (1984)	lab experiment, 184 undergraduates	TV	0	unaided recall
Madden & Weinberger (1984)	survey of U.S. advertising executives, 68 research executives, 72 creative executives	N/A	-	mixed but generally negative views
Duncan, Nelson, Frontczak (1984)	lab experiment, 157 male undergraduates	radio	+	even "failed" (unfunny) humor, better than a serious ad
Stewart & Furse (1986)	data-based, study of 1000 pre-tested ads	TV	+	
Gelb & Zinkhan (1986)	lab experiment, 120 employed adult part-time students	radio	-	summed measure of brand and copy recall, fictional product
Nelson (1987)	re-examination of Gelb & Zinkhan (1986)	N/A	N/A	claims Gelb and Zinkhan's measure of recall is not valid
Zinkhan & Gelb (1987)	reply to Nelson (1987)	N/A	N/A	defends use of Cloze proce- dure as recall measure
Speck (1987)	lab experiment, 182 undergraduates	TV	+	global effect of humor is positive but some humor ads weaker than some non- humorous ads
Wu, Crocker & Rogers (1989)	lab experiment, 360 undergraduates	print	mixed	with high involvement product humor improved unaided recall

Continued . . .

Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Weinberger & Spotts (1989)	survey of advertising executives, 132 U.S. agencies, 29 U.K. agencies	N/A	+	more negative view of humor on comprehension held by U.S. executives
Zhang & Zinkhan (1991)	lab experiment, 216 undergraduates	TV	+	recall measure, 10 questions about information in ad
Weinberger & Campbell (1991)	data based, pre-tested ads	radio	+	study of over 1600 radio ads, positive effect not found with unrelated humor (combined recall index)

Non-Advertising Studies

Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Gruner (1967)	communication experiment, 128 male undergraduates	public speech	0	
Gruner (1970)	communication experiment, 144 undergraduates	public speech	mixed	humor enhanced a "dull" speech but did not enhance an "interesting" speech
Kennedy (1972)	communication experiment, 200 undergraduates	TV, audio tape, live speech	0	
Markiewicz (1972)	55 7th grade students	written essays	0	topic of high personal relevance
Markiewicz (1972)	86 undergraduates	written essays	0	
Markiewicz (1974)	literature review	N/A	0	
Gruner (1976)	literature review	N/A	0	
Kaplan & Pascoe (1977)	education quasi-experiment, 508 undergraduates	TV instruction	mixed	immediate comprehension not enhanced but recall after 3 months superior to non-humor for related points
Chapman & Crompton (1978)	education experiment, children subjects ages 5 & 6 yrs	slides	+	
Davies & Apter (1980)	education experiment, 285 children ages 8-11	slide-tape	+	
Zillmann et al. (1980)	education experiment, 70 children ages 5-7	TV	+	children's learning from educational TV
Bryant, Brown, Silberberg & Elliott (1981)	lab experiment, 180 undergraduates	textbook illustrations	mixed	recall enhanced only for items related to humor
Powell & Andresen (1985)	literature review	N/A	+	concludes that humor has positive effect on comprehension and retention
Vance (1987)	education experiment, 58 first grade children	audio-tape	+	effect moderated by type of humor

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Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Weaver, Zillman & Bryant (1988)	86 4th and 8th grade students	TV	0	
Ziv (1988)	education experiment, 161 undergraduates in first experiment male and female - 132 undergraduates in replication all female	classroom instruction	+	semester-long experiment and semester-long replication
Bryant & Zillmann (1989)	literature review	N/A	+	
Gorham & Christophel (1990)	correlational study, 206 undergraduates observing 150 male and 54 female college teachers	classroom instruction	+	correlates use of humor with teaching effectiveness

Markiewicz 1972, 1974). Overall, the advertising literature has produced five studies that indicate a positive effect of humor on persuasion, eight studies which indicate a neutral or mixed effect, and one which produced a negative effect. Among non-advertising studies, no positive results have been reported; seven neutral or mixed effects were found and one negative effect (see Table 3). Some portion of the equivocal nature of these results appears to be attributable to an underlying factor that might be broadly termed intensity of the message. Two studies that directly compared levels of intensity (Bryant et al. 1981; Markiewicz 1972) found a significant effect of message intensity on the persuasiveness of a humorous message. This intensity factor has two dimensions: the intensity of the humor and the intensity of the surrounding message. Bryant and his colleagues (1981) examined differences in levels of humor and found that the use of low levels of humor provided essentially the same level of persuasion as no humor use, while extensive use of humor was detrimental to persuasion. The intensity of the surrounding message was examined by Markiewicz (1972). Her study revealed that the addition of humor to a low intensity soft sell approach aided the level of persuasion while the addition of humor to a hard sell approach actually harmed persuasion. This level of intensity factor appears to impact the level of persuasion garnered by humorous messages. However, since little work has been done in this area, conclusions cannot be drawn. In summary, our synthesis can be interpreted as support for Sternthal and Craig's (1973) conclusion that humor may be persuasive but probably no more so than non-humor.

Humor and Source Credibility

The results of studies examining the effect of humor on source credibility can best be described as mixed. The advertising studies exploring source credibility have produced a smooth distribution of results with three advertising studies reporting enhanced source credibility in humor conditions, four indicating neutral or mixed effects, and three indicating a negative relationship. The non-advertising studies parallel these results.

These mixed results appear to be due to a number of factors such as the nature of the source or nature of the humor. Bryant and his colleagues found the effect of humor on credibility to be moderated by gender of source. Studying the effectiveness of humor in the college classroom, they found that any positive relationship between humor and credibility is slight and only applicable to male professors (Bryant et al. 1980). Speck's (1987) work indicates that type of humor used may also influence humor's impact on credibility. Speck (1987) measured two aspects of source credibility, "knowledgeableness," [sic] and "trustworthiness." He found that, while all sources in the experiment were viewed as moderately knowledgeable, the sources of non-humorous ads were viewed as more knowledgeable than the humorous sources. However, trustworthiness of a source was demonstrated to be enhanced through the use of one specific humor type. "Sentimental humor," a type of humor defined by Speck as a combination of two humor processes, arousal-safety and incongruity-resolution, in which the process of empathy-anxiety-relief occurs, was found to outperform other humor treatments and non-

Table 3
The Impact of Humor on Persuasion

Advertising Studies Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Sternthal & Craig (1973)	literature review	N/A	0	
Duncan (1979)	literature review	N/A	mixed	
Brooker (1981)	lab experiment, 240 adults	print	0	mild humor outperformed mild fear but did not outperform straight- forward ad
McCullum/Spielman (1982)	study of 500 commer- cials, data-based target audiences	TV	+	study of over 500 TV commercials
Madden (1982)	lab experiment, 326 undergraduates	radio	+	
Lammers, Leibowitz, Seymour & Hennessey (1983)	lab experiment, 64 undergraduates	radio	+ -	for males for females
Belch & Belch (1984)	lab experiment, 184 undergraduates	TV	0	
Hadden & Weinberger (1984)	survey of U.S. ad- vertising executives, 68 research executives, 72 creative executives	N/A	0	mixed opinion
Duncan & Nelson (1985)	lab experiment, 157 male undergraduates	radio	0	
Stewart & Furse (1986)	study of 1000 pre- tested ads	TV	0	
Speck (1987)	lab experiment, 182 undergraduates	TV	+	Speck found 3 of 5 hu- mor treatments to increase both perceived product quality and intent to use product.
Chattopadhyay & Basu (1989)	lab experiment, 80 subjects (undergraduates)	TV	+	when subject had favor- able prior brand attitude
Weinberger & Spotts (1989)	survey of advertising executives, 132 U.S. agencies, 29 U.K. agencies	N/A	mixed	mixed opinion U.K. ex- ecutives view humor as more persuasive than U.S. executives
Scott, Kline & Bryant (1990)	field experiment, total N=73 respondents N=513	direct mail	mixed	humorous ad increased attendance at social events but not at business events

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Non-Advertising Studies

Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Lull (1940)	experiment, 1016 undergraduates	public speech	0	convincingness and attitude change, no advantage over non-humor, topic state medicine
Kennedy (1972)	communication experiment, 200 undergraduates	TV, audio tape, live speech	0	no persuasion effect found immediately after speech nor 4 weeks later
Markiewicz (1972)	18 undergraduates	TV	mixed	more persuasive effect for subjects initially opposed
Markiewicz (1972)	200 undergraduates	direct mail	mixed	humor increased persuasiveness of a "soft sell" approach but not of a "hard sell" approach
Markiewicz (1972)	86 undergraduates	written essay	0	
Markiewicz (1974)	literature review	N/A	0	
Gruner (1976)	literature review	N/A	0	
Bryant, Brown, Silberberg & Elliott (1981)	education experiment, 180 undergraduates	textbook illustrations	-	no humor rated higher in persuasiveness than moderate humor, extensive humor rated least persuasive

humor treatments on measures of trustworthiness.

In summary, the overall indication of the research, both in advertising and non-advertising studies, indicates that it is unlikely that source credibility is consistently enhanced through the use of humor. This result is consistent with the opinions stated by U.S. and U.K. advertising practitioners (Madden and Weinberger 1984; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). And these studies cast doubt on the tentative conclusion drawn by Sternthal and Craig (1973) that humor enhances source credibility (see Table 4).

Humor and Liking

Where source credibility examines cognitive aspects such as trust and expertise, source-liking deals with non-cognitive affect. Sternthal and Craig (1973) concluded that humor enhanced the liking of the source. In the years since their work, strong support has been found for this conclusion in both advertising and non-advertising research (see Table 5). Studies of teacher effectiveness have demonstrated that teachers who incorporate humor into the classroom rate

significantly higher on character scales (Gruner 1967) and are seen as more likable than average (Bryant et al. 1980). Humor has been viewed as a key aspect in teacher effectiveness, and the use of humor by teachers was demonstrated to positively influence student attitudes toward educational programs (Bryant and Zillmann 1989). Humor has also been demonstrated to increase the liking of educational materials such as textbooks (Bryant et al. 1981) and educational television (Zillmann et al. 1980).

The marketing literature gives similar strong support for enhanced liking through the use of humor, which has been shown to increase both liking of the ad (Belch and Belch 1984; Gelb and Pickett 1983; Duncan and Nelson 1985; Speck 1987) and liking of the brand (Gelb and Pickett 1983; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986; Duncan and Nelson 1985). Overall, ten advertising studies and seven non-advertising studies report a positive effect of humor on liking while only two advertising and three non-advertising studies report neutral or mixed findings. No studies in either group report a negative impact of humor on liking. It therefore seems appropriate to conclude that humor does

Table 4
The Impact of Humor on Source Credibility

Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Sternthal & Craig (1973)	literature review	N/A	+	
Madden (1982)	lab experiment, 326 undergraduate	radio	0	humorous commercials perceived as less trustworthy than non- humorous commercials
Sutherland & Middleton (1983)	lab experiment, 107 undergraduates	print	- 0	with luggage ad with camera ad
Belch & Belch (1984)	lab experiment, 184 undergraduates	TV	+	
Madden & Weinberger (1984)	survey of U.S. ad- vertising executives, 68 research executives and 72 creative executives	N/A	-	
Speck (1987)	lab experiment, 182 undergraduates	TV	- +	for knowledgeableness for trustworthiness - for certain types of humor
Wu, Crocker & Rogers (1989)	lab experiment, 360 undergraduates	print	0	
Weinberger & Spotts (1989)	survey of advertising executives, 132 U.S. agencies 29 U.K agencies	N/A	mixed	more positive vlew held by U.K. executives
Non-Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Gruner (1970)	lab experiment, 144 undergraduates	public speech	mixed	humor enhances a "dull" speech but did not en- hance an "interesting" speech
Markiewicz (1972)	36 undergraduates	TV	+	
Markiewicz (1972)	86 undergraduates	written essays	0	
Bryant, Comisky Crane & Zillman (1980)	correlaton, obser- vation, 49 male and 21 female college instructors	classroom instruction	+ & -	only slight positive effect for male in- structors - some nega- tive effects
Bryant, Brown, Silberberg & Elliott (1981)	education experi- ment, 180 under- graduates	text- book illustratons	-	

Table 5
The Impact of Humor on Liking of Source

Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Leavitt (1970)	data-based, target audience	TV	+	factor analysis, humor part of amusing factor
Sternthal & Craig (1973)	literature review	N/A	+	tentative conclusion
Brooker (1981)	lab experiment, 240 adults	print	+	weak effect
Gelb & Pickett (1983)	mall survey, 20% response rate total of 383 respondents from target audiences	direct mail ad	+	subjects asked to evaluate either a humorous or non-humorous ad
Lammers, Leibowitz, Seymour & Hennessey (1983)	lab experiment, 64 undergraduates	radio	+	for males
Belch & Belch (1984)	lab experiment, 184 undergraduates	TV	+	
Duncan & Nelson (1985)	lab experiment, 157 male undergraduates	radio	+	
Gelb & Zinkhan (1986)	lab experiment, 120 employed adults and part-time students	radio	+	
Speck (1987)	lab experiment, 182 undergraduates	TV	+	four of five humor types increased likability significantly more than non-humor
Chattopadhyay & Basu (1989)	lab experiment, 80 undergraduates	TV	mixed	liking increased by humorous ad when subject presented with prior positive information
Wu, Crocker, & Rogers (1989)	lab experiment, 360 undergraduates	print	0	
Zhang & Zinkhan (1991)	lab experiment, 216 undergraduates	TV	+	
Non-Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of study & subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Lull (1940)	communication experiment, 1016 undergraduates	public speech	0	humorous and non-humorous speech rated as equally interesting
Gruner (1967)	communication experiment, 128 male undergraduates	public speech	+	measured character of speaker
Gruner (1970)	communication experiment, 144 undergraduates	public speech	mixed	humor more effective in enhancing liking of dull speech than interesting speech

continued . . .

Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Kennedy (1972)	communication experiment, 200 undergraduates	TV, audio tape, live speech	+	measured 3 ethos dimensions, dynamism, qualification, and safety humor increased dynamism immediately after speech; 4 weeks later all 3 measures superior to non-humor
Markiewicz (1972)	55 7th grade students	written essays	+	
Markiewicz (1972)	36 undergraduates	TV	+	
Gruner (1976)	literature review	N/A	+	speaker image enhanced with apt humor
Zillmann et al. (1980)	education experiment 70 children aged 5-7 years	TV		fast paced humor enhanced program liking
Davies & Apter (1980)	education experiment 285 children aged 8 to 11	slide-tape	+	
Bryant, Comisky, Crane & Zillman (1980)	correlational, observation of 49 male and 21 female college instructors	classroom instruction	+ mixed	for male instructors for female instructors, only hostile humor enhanced appeal
Bryant, Brown, Silberberg & Elliott (1981)	education experiment 180 undergraduates	textbook illustrations	+	

indeed have a positive influence on liking.

This strong liking response has significant implications. Recent research indicates that liking may be a very important variable in the effectiveness of an ad (Biel and Bridgwater 1990; Haley and Baldinger 1991). In Haley and Baldinger's (1991) comprehensive study for the Advertising Research Foundation, six copy testing methods were employed to study five matched pairs of commercials with 400-500 respondents per cell; thus, a total of nearly 15,000 interviews were conducted for the study. This research shows that two liking measures are the strongest indicators of a commercial's sales success, out-performing all other measures. The overall reaction to the commercial, in terms of liking, was demonstrated to predict which of a paired set of commercials would be the sales winner 87% of the time, with an index level indicating an association three times stronger than random chance. A related dichotomous liking measure had a successful prediction rate of 93%, albeit with a lower index level. These recent liking findings provide strong support for the importance of this factor in the effectiveness of an ad. In concert with the Haley and

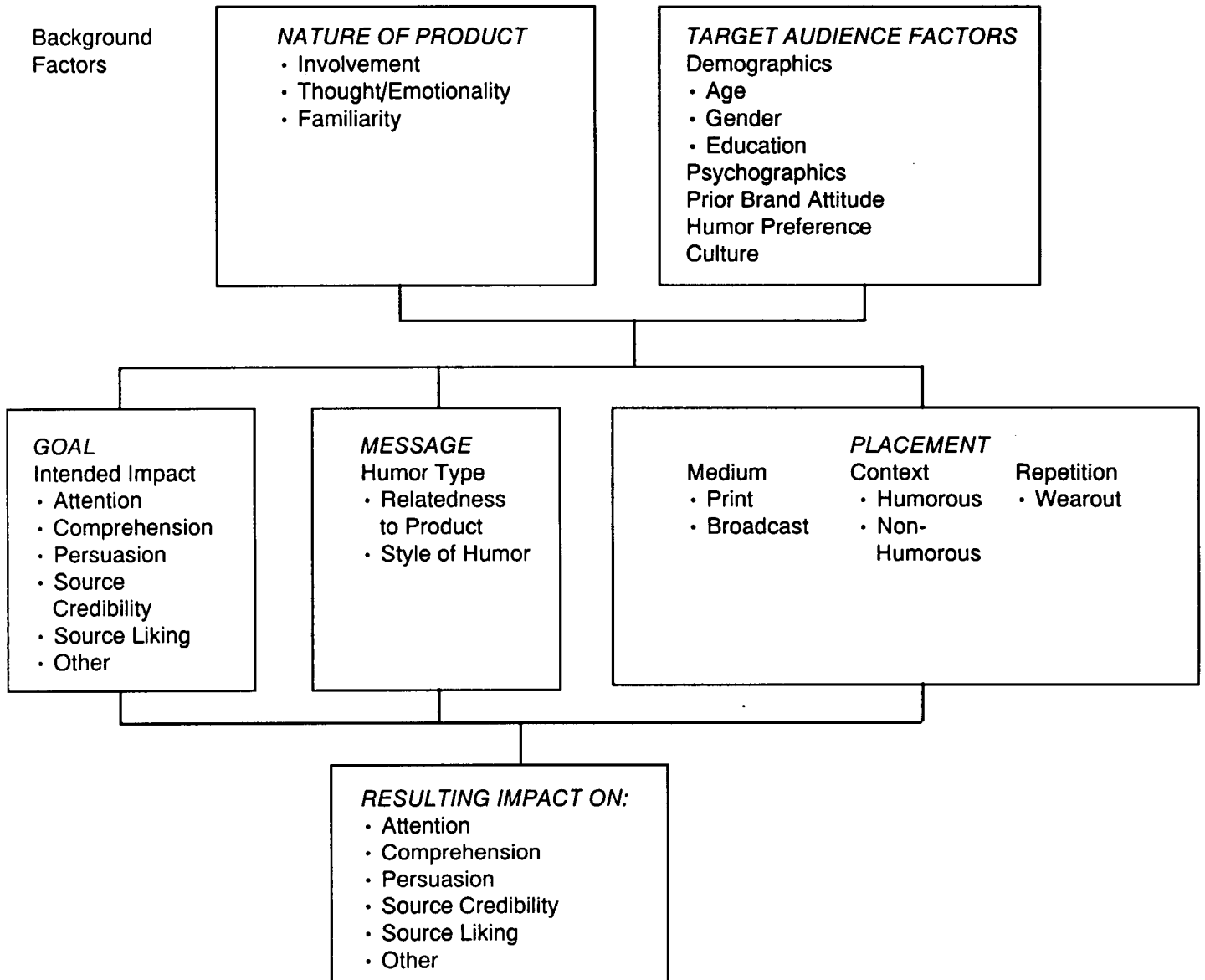
Baldinger finding, Biel and Bridgwater (1990) concluded that individuals "who liked a commercial 'a lot' were twice as likely to be persuaded by it than people who felt neutral toward the advertising" (p. 38). Although in the Biel and Bridgwater (1990) work liking was not confined to entertainment value and included such factors as personal relevance, a finding by Haley and Baldinger (1991) is directly tied to humor. Their study indicates that a positive response to the statement, "This advertising is funny or clever," predicts the success of an ad 53% of the time, whereas agreement with the statement, "This advertising is boring," predicts failure 73% of the time (Haley and Baldinger 1991).

Executorial Factors

Humor Type

In previous sections we have made reference to some executorial factors regarding the nature of the humor that may play a role in determining the efficacy of a given humor treatment. These executorial factors can be subdivided into two groups, the first

Figure 1
Tactical Considerations for Humor in Advertising



being the relationship between the humor treatment and the product or message. In other words, is the "joke" in some way dependent on the situation or would it be equally funny in some other context. In further refining the concept of relatedness, Speck (1991) states that there are three types of relatedness: 1) intentional - the relationship of humor to message type and message processing, 2) semantic - the relationship of humor to product-related themes, and 3) structural - the syntactical function of humor, referring to the integration of the humor and the product claims. While little work regarding the role that relatedness may play in the effect of humor has been conducted, most of the studies in advertising employed humor that has some degree of relatedness. Studies that have directly compared related humor to unrelated humor (Kaplan and Pascoe 1977; Madden 1982; Weinberger and Campbell 1991) have generally found related humor to be superior to unrelated humor.

The second executional factor of interest is humor type. Unfortunately, an all-encompassing, generally accepted definition of humor does not exist. However, several taxonomies have been proposed to operationalize the construct of humor. Humor can be categorized on at least two different dimensions, "content" and/or "technique." A commonly used content typology places all humor into one of three classifications: aggressive, sexual, or nonsense (Goldstein and McGhee 1972). Technique typologies have also been employed; Kelly and Solomon (1975) defined humorous ads as containing one of the following: 1) a pun, 2) an understatement, 3) a joke, 4) something ludicrous, 5) satire, 6) irony, or 7) humorous intent.

Alden, Hoyer and Lee (1993) have introduced another approach to the understanding of humor into the advertising literature. This work focuses on the underlying process that creates humor. Their literature review, as well as their empirical data, suggests that much of what is seen as humorous is some form of incongruent contrast. This work further suggests that the prevalence of incongruity holds cross-culturally. In each of the four countries examined by Alden and his colleagues, the majority of humorous television ads contained one or more incongruent contrasts. This data indicates that 69% of humorous TV ads in the U.S. employ incongruity (Alden, Hoyer and Lee 1993).

A broader based method of categorizing humor is proposed by Speck (1991). He states that humor is composed of distinct basic processes: arousal-safety, incongruity-resolution, and humorous disparagement. These processes may act alone or in combination to

form five humor types: HT1) comic wit (incongruity-resolution), HT2) sentimental humor (arousal-safety), HT3) satire (incongruity-resolution and humorous disparagement, HT4) sentimental comedy (arousal-safety and incongruity-resolution, and HT5) full comedy (arousal-safety, incongruity-resolution, and humorous disparagement).

Disappointingly, little work has directly compared humor types. However, one study that attempts to do this (Speck 1987) indicates that significant differences exist in humor effect between types. For example, in measuring the effect of humor on overall attention (an average of the five attention measures he employs), Speck (1987) found effects ranging from strongly positive for full comedy to an essentially null effect for sentimental humor. This result is intuitively appealing in that one might expect full comedy with all three humor processes operating to draw the attention of the viewer. It should also be noted that all of the humor types outperformed non-humor on attention. Intuitively, appealing results are also found in Speck's analysis of source liking which indicates that sentimental humor is associated with liking while the more aggressive satire is not (see Table 6).

The findings reported by Speck (1987) provide a good beginning as an exploration of humor type. They indicate that there is no one type of humor that has a universally positive or negative impact. However, we must caution against drawing any sweeping conclusions from this work. Speck's (1987) study analyzed only five ads from each humor type. Lacking corroborating studies concerning humor types, we must therefore regard these results as tentative. It is far too early to draw any general conclusions regarding the appropriateness or inappropriateness of any given type of humor in achieving a certain communications goal.

Placement

The type of medium, the context in which an ad appears, and the degree of repetition for humorous ads are all topics that have been explored over the past twenty years. In their survey, Madden and Weinberger (1984) found U.S. ad executives generally believed that radio and TV were the media best suited to the use of humor, while print media were considered not well suited to using humor. These survey results are corroborated to some degree in research that shows that in the U.S., 30.6% of radio ads are intended to be humorous (Weinberger and Campbell 1991), while 24.4% of TV ads and just 9.9% of print

Table 6
Differential Effects of Humor Type on Communications Goals*

	Comic Wit	Sentimental Humor	Satire	Sentimental Comedy	Full Comedy	No Humor Control
Overall** attention	.06	-.02	.07	.06	.27	-.45
Message comprehension	-.15	-	.23	-.01	-.11	-.11
Descriptive comprehension	-.18	-	.21	-.13	.13	-.04
Perceived source trust	-.1	.00	-.26	.27	-.10	.11
Perceived source knowledge	-.09	-.21	-.05	.23	-.21	.16
Source liking	-.01	.31	-.23	.23	.15	-.19

* adapted from Speck (1987).

** a summed scale of five attention measures.

ads have humorous intent (Weinberger and Spotts 1992). What is clear from this data is that the use of humor is consistent with the views of the ad executives surveyed. What is unclear from any of the research is whether humor in the broadcast media is more effective than humor used in print.

At a more micro level, within media, the context in which a humorous ad appears may also affect the impact of the ad. Studies have indicated that an interaction effect may exist between program environment and commercials (Goldberg and Gorn 1987; Kamins, Marks, and Skinner 1991; Mathur and Chattopadhyay 1991). However, work conducted directly in the humor area in general does not support a strong context interaction (Cantor and Venus 1980; Madden 1982; Markiewicz 1972). Some evidence of a context effect is found in the work of Murphy and his colleagues (Murphy, Cunningham and Wilcox 1979). Their study finds a program interaction, but it affects only some measures, they find no context effect for unaided product recall. Therefore, while the general advertising literature indicates context interactions, the humor literature does not support this view. However, with so little evidence for or against context effects, no conclusive statement about these effects can be made (see Table 7).

Finally, also at the micro level is the issue of how often to run a humorous ad. Some evidence indicates

that humorous ads may wear out faster than non-humorous treatments over repeated exposures (Gelb and Zinkhan 1985). This finding has intuitive appeal since the surprise element often present in humor is likely to decay after the first exposure. Other researchers (Belch and Belch 1984) have, however, found evidence that humorous ads decay at the same rate as non-humorous counterparts. More recently, Zinkhan and Gelb (1990) conclude, "not all humorous commercials (or comedy acts) 'wear out' with repetition; some seem to get better, as anticipation of what will be presented evokes an anticipatory humorous response" (p.440). They also posit that the social setting in which the humor is received may affect the humor response. Humor is perceived as funnier when received as a member of a group. This finding is also supported by Zhang and Zinkhan (1991), and this interaction with group members may help postpone the wear-out of humorous ads.

Audience Factors

The majority of practitioners believe that humorous ads are best suited to a target audience composed of better educated younger males (Madden and Weinberger 1984). The advertising literature generally supports this belief. Several studies have indicated an interaction between gender and humor ef-

**Table 7
Placement of Ad**

Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Media				
Madden & Weinberger (1984)	survey of 140 U.S. ad executives	N/A	+	broadcast best and print least suited for humor
Weinberger & Campbell (1991)	data based, pre-tested ads	radio	N/A	humor use high in radio
Weinberger & Spotts (1992)	content analysis, U.S. and U.K.	TV, magazines	N/A	humor use high in TV, low in magazines
Context				
Murphy, Cunningham & Wilcox (1979)	lab experiment, 115 undergraduates	TV	humorous ads recalled in non-humor context, unaided product recall same in all contexts	
Canton & Venus (1980)	lab experiment, 117 undergraduates	radio	no significant context effects	
Madden (1982)	lab experiment, 326 undergraduates	radio	no effect of serious or humorous context	
Kamins, Marks, & Skinner (1991)	lab experiment, 124 undergraduates	TV	"happy" ads better in happy contexts	happy ads not necessarily humorous, results of study may be affected by health care product chosen for manipulation
Repetition				
Belch and Belch (1984)	lab experiment, 184 undergraduates	TV	no significant difference in wearout between humorous and non-humorous ads	
Gelb & Zinkhan (1985)	lab experiment, 120 adults	radio	rating of humorousness of ad declined over multiple exposures	
Zinkhan & Gelb (1990)	conceptual	N/A		wearout delayed by anticipation of liked humor and viewing in group setting

fectiveness (Gorham and Christophel 1990; Lammers et al. 1983; Madden and Weinberger 1982; Stewart-Hunter 1985; Whipple and Courtney 1980, 1981), and race and humor effectiveness (Madden and Weinberger 1982) (see Table 8).

The effect of gender may be partially explained by apparent differences in humor appreciation. In a review of the literature, Whipple and Courtney (1981) conclude that men appear to enjoy aggressive and sexual humor more than women do, and women appear to have a greater appreciation for nonsensical humor. However, they caution that the results are not conclusive and that these preferences may be changing as society changes. Further, the perspective of the creator of the humor may be an important moderator, as will be discussed.

Contrary to the preponderance of the findings in marketing, research in education generally has not found significant gender effects on humor response. Both in an extensive educational experiment discussed earlier (Ziv 1988), and in other experiments (Davies and Apter 1980; Weaver, Zillmann and Bryant 1988; Zillmann et al. 1980), the positive effect of humor on learning was not found to differ by gender.

The dichotomy of results of gender effects on humor raises some interesting issues. Humor is very closely tied into the culture, experiences, and points of reference that are shared between the humor originator and the humor receiver. For example, research has suggested that the gender response to sexual humor is reversed when the creator of the humor is female (Gallivan 1991), and the characteristics of the butt of the joke may influence which audiences find the joke funny (Gruner 1991). If this is indeed the case, then much of the variation based on gender, and perhaps race and age as well, may be explained by divergent perspectives of the creator of the humorous manipulation and the receiver of that manipulation. Thus, the "shared point of view" between the creator of a humorous ad and the target of the ad is a potentially important intervening variable in humor effectiveness. This issue has been largely overlooked by researchers.

In addition to gender, race, and age, other audience factors may impact the effectiveness of humor and are worthy of consideration. Of particular interest is how the crossing of national boundaries affects humor appreciation and effectiveness. Humor is a universal human process exhibited by people of all cultures and throughout all of recorded history (Alden, Hoyer and Lee 1993). However, the research that has examined humor in advertising cross-culturally indicates differential use of humor among countries, both in hu-

mor types employed and in absolute levels of humor used (e.g. Alden, Hoyer and Lee 1993; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that people of different cultural backgrounds respond to humor differently. In an experiment that compared Israeli Jews of Eastern and Western descent, Weller and his colleagues found significant differences in the appreciation for absurd jokes between the two groups (Weller, Amitsour, and Pazzi 1976). They posit that these differences are due to "habits of thought and mental attitudes rooted in cultural backgrounds" (p. 163). These findings imply that even when language differences are removed, jokes may not be easily "translatable" between cultures.

Other audience factors may also affect humor appreciation. For example, conservatism has been shown to be a predictor of response to humor; subjects rated high on measures of conservatism have been demonstrated to judge incongruity-resolution humor to be funnier than their liberal counterparts (Hehl and Ruch 1990; Ruch and Hehl 1986). Another audience factor of note includes audience and product interactions such as prior brand attitude. Chattopadhyay and Basu (1989) indicate that humor has greater positive effect, with regard to persuasion, for those audience members with a prior positive brand attitude. These and other audience factors should be kept in mind in the design of humorous ads and future humor research.

Product Factors

Another potentially important situational factor is the nature of the product. Advertising executives surveyed believed that low involvement products such as consumer non-durables are best suited for humorous ad treatments (Madden and Weinberger 1984). The usage of humor bears evidence of this belief. In an analysis of over 1600 radio ads, Weinberger and Campbell (1991) found significant variation in humor application across different cells of the FCB product grid. In the lowest use cell, high involvement-feeling products (fashion clothes, perfume, etc.), only 10.0% of all commercials were humorous in nature. This is contrasted with the low involvement-feeling products (snack foods, beer, wine, etc.) cell where 39.6% of the ads were humorous. More importantly, the impact of humor also appears to differ across the cells of the FCB matrix. Weinberger and Campbell (1991) found that related humor, when used with high involvement feeling products (cell 2), resulted in significantly higher recall scores than either unrelated humor or no humor. Conversely, no humor appeared to be the most

Table 8
Audience Factors

Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Shama & Coughlin (1979)	lab experiment 403 undergraduates	radio & TV	no gender effect, race effect found	humor more effective for white subjects
Whipple & Courtney (1980)	lab experiment, 284 graduates & undergraduates	print	gender effect	male graduate students rate ad with female literature review
(1981)	literature review		gender effect	butt of joke significantly higher than females. Hostile and aggressive humor more effective for males.
Madden (1982)	lab experiment, 326 undergraduates	radio	no gender effect	
Madden & Weinberger (1982)	data-based study of 148 print ads, Starch	print	race & gender difference	humor most effective for white males
Lammers, Leibowitz, Seymour & Hennessey	lab experiment, 64 undergraduates	radio	gender differences	humor increases male liking, decreased female liking
Sutherland & Middleton (1983)	lab experiment, 107 undergraduates	print	no gender effect found	
Madden & Weinberger (1984)	survey of U.S. advertising executives, 68 research executives and 72 creative executives	N/A	age, gender & education difference	thought as more effective for younger, well-educated males
Weinberger & Spotts (1989)	survey of advertising executives, 132 U.S. agencies, 29 U.K. agencies and 182 undergraduates	N/A	less age gender & education differences in the opinion of U.K. executives	
Alden, Hoyer & Lee (1993)	content analysis, cross-cultural	TV	high use of incongruity across countries	
Zhang & Zinkhan (1991)	lab experiment, 216 undergraduates	TV	humor more effective when presented to groups of subjects	
Non-Advertising Studies				
Smlth et al. (1971)	lab experiment, 215 undergraduates	written test	no gender differences found	
Weller, Amitsour & Pazzi (1976)	70 adults	oral jokes	laughter response to absurd humor lower for Israeli subjects of Eastern origin	

continued . . .

Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
Chapman & Crompton (1978)	education experiment, children subjects ages 5 & 6 years target audiences	slides	humor more effective for males	
Davles & Apter (1980)	education experiment, 285 children subjects ages 8-11 132 U.S. agencies 29 U.K agencies	slide-tape	no gender effect	
Zillman & Bryant (1980)	lab experiment, 90 undergraduates	N/A	no gender effect found for "mirth"	
Zillman et al. (1980)	education experiment, 70 children ages 5-7 years	TV	no gender effect	
Weaver, Zillman & Bryant (1988)	education experiment, 86 children, 10 & 14 years	TV	no gender effect	
Ziv (1988)	education experiment, 161 undergraduates in first experiment male & female, 132 undergraduates in replication all female	class-room instruction	no gender effect	a semester long experiment and a semester long replication
Gorham & Christophel (1990)	correlational study, 206 undergraduates observing 150 male and 54 female college instructors	class-room instruction	male students more positively affected by humor	

effective executional tactic for high involvement thinking products (cell 1). These results are largely in concert with those of other researchers (Bauerly 1990; Scott, Klein and Bryant 1990; Stewart and Furse 1986).

Furthermore, studies have shown humorous ads to be more successful for existing products than for new products (McCollum/Spielman 1982; Stewart and Furse 1986). This factor raises an important methodological issue. While the use of fictional products in experimental studies eliminates pre-existing product attitudes that may confound the results of experiments, a fictional product is a "new product" that may diminish the effectiveness of the humor treatment. This may mean that weak effects of advertising humor found in some lab studies may arise from tests using unfamiliar products.

Other Questions For Another Time

While we have provided what we believe to be the current state of knowledge regarding humor in advertising, it is clear that this knowledge is incomplete and additional research must be conducted before we can clarify the remaining gray areas. Specifically, we believe that the following areas require additional research:

- Relatedness of the humor to the product appears to be a strong predictor of the success of a given ad. However, it has been studied in surprisingly few papers. Future work should consider this factor. In particular, Speck's (1991) typology of relatedness could be used as a basis to examine the issue.

Table 9
Nature of Product or Topic

Advertising Studies				
Author(s) & Date	Type of Study & Subjects	Medium	Finding	Comment
McCullum/Spielman (1982)	data based study of 500 commercials, target audiences	TV	humor better for established products and is better suited to certain product categories	
Madden & Weinberger (1984)	survey of U.S. advertising executives, 68 research executives, 72 creative executives	N/A	consumer non-durables best suited to humor treatment	
Weinberger & Spotts (1989)	content analysis study, 450 U.S. and 247 U.S. commercials	TV	humor most commonly used for low involvement products	
Bauerly (1990)	mall intercept survey, 226 respondents	N/A	soft drinks and snack foods best suited to humor	
Scott, Klein & Bryant (1990)	field experiment, 513 respondents	direct mail	humorous ad increased attendance at social events, but not to business events	
Weinberger & Campbell (1991)	data-based study of over 1600 pre-tested ads	radio	most common use for low involvement products, most effective for high involvement/feeling and low involvement/feeling situations	

- The context in which a humorous ad is placed has been largely overlooked in the research. Mood established by adjacent programs or even by ads within a pod might be examined.
- Audience factors appear to be vitally important factors in the success or failure of a humorous ad. Researchers should pay particular attention to the nature of the audience with regard to age, gender, education, culture and prior brand attitude and should also investigate how these factors relate to the object of the humor (i.e., the butt of the joke).
- Humor types may affect humor response. Differences in humor types have largely been ignored by advertising researchers, but early work in this area by Speck (1987) indicates that different communications goals might

best be addressed using different types of humor. However, since only one study has systematically investigated humor types, this is an area in need of much future research.

- Researchers should consider message intensity, particularly its effect on persuasion. Some work indicates the intensity of the message incorporating humor may have a significant effect on the persuasiveness of the message (Bryant et al. 1981; Markiewicz 1972).

While calling for research in a number of areas we do not wish to leave the impression that researchers to date have been remiss. We recognize the difficulties in conducting research in the humor area, and, therefore, we are not disappointed with the extant work. However, we believe that much additional insight can be gained through further research.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The preceding discussion makes it clear that much work remains to be done to fully understand the impact of humor in advertising. However, our synthesis of the current literature leads us to several conclusions. Before stating these conclusions, it is necessary to add a cautionary note. Humor research is plagued by many complexities, as mentioned throughout the text. In schematic format, many of these factors are noted in Figure 1. Each of these variables can intervene in the relationship between a given humorous ad and its outcome, thereby creating dozens of contingent relationships with possibly divergent effects. The factors shown in Figure 1 thus show that broad generalizations about the effect of humor in advertising are inappropriate.

It is also important to note that the complex relationships described above are further complicated by methodological problems that make them difficult to study. In many ways these complexities parallel those found in attempting to study other message characteristics such as music or warmth. In the study of any of these message factors, the development of a control ad that is equivalent to the test ad in every way, save for the tactic being tested, is a difficult task. The factor being studied must not be present in the control ad yet this ad must seem plausible as a stand-alone ad, and must be equivalent in length to the test ad while not adding anything that might confound results. In the case of humor this becomes particularly problematic since we have argued that humor performs best when it is related to the product being promoted. To remove related humor removes an essential part of the message. The problem of finding adequate controls is a vexing problem indeed, and we applaud the valiant efforts made in this regard but include this particular methodological problem in our conclusions because not only is it a problem all humor researchers face, but it is also a problem interpreters of this research must face. Each study included in this review is affected to one degree or another by this non-equivalence problem. While we do not consider this a fatal flaw, it is important to bear it in mind when reviewing humor literature. It is our belief, however, that this problem, as well as other problems that may seriously damage a given study, are somewhat ameliorated when studies are combined.

Also problematic in the area of humor research is the idiosyncratic response by members of the audi-

ence to the humor treatment and perhaps to the type of humor employed. While other message characteristics like warmth also elicit different results in different individuals, these results are likely to be matters of degree rather than type. Humor, on the other hand, is truly idiosyncratic. Some forms of humor, such as satire, sexual humor, and other forms of aggressive humor, may generate strong positive feelings in some audience members while eliciting strong negative feelings in others. In this respect, humor is perhaps a riskier tactic than many other approaches. Further complicating the study of humor is that humor may create warmth (Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty 1986) and other emotional responses, in addition to the laughter or smile that is usually associated with a humor response. This generation of a warmth response to humor confounds the effects, making it unclear if other humor treatments would have generated similar effects or if alternatively other warmth treatments may have generated similar results. We reiterate that perhaps the best way to resolve these complexities in the study of humor is to examine humor effects across numerous studies so that the strengths of one study can balance the weaknesses of another. Therefore, conclusions drawn for a synthesis such as this are somewhat insulated from the eccentricities of individual studies.

Conclusions

- Humor attracts attention. The vast majority of studies conducted in both advertising and education bear this out.
- Humor does not harm comprehension. While some studies indicate that a harmful effect may occur, it is more likely for humor to have no effect. In fact, some evidence exists that it may even *aid* comprehension. This more optimistic view of humor is strongly supported in the educational research and in the views of British advertising executives.
- Humor does not appear to offer an advantage over non-humor at increasing persuasion. Though some examples of increased persuasion do exist, they tend to be qualified by gender, prior attitude and the nature of product or the event promoted. Despite strong support by British agency executives for humor and persuasion, the current conclusion from the overall literature concurs with the view that humor does not offer significant

advantage over non-humor when persuasion is the goal.

- Humor does not enhance source credibility. It appears that in general humor has no differential effect and a number of studies actually suggest that there are cases when humor harms source credibility.
- Humor enhances liking. In fact, the link between humor and liking is stronger than for any of the other factors. In light of an increased emphasis in advertising on affect, this finding should not be underestimated.
- Related humor is superior to unrelated humor. In studies that have directly compared the two forms, a differential advantage has been shown for related humor. However, to date, there has not been sufficient research conducted to determine if specific forms of relatedness have a differential advantage.
- Audience factors affect humor response. Though variations do exist with regard to audience preference and audience reaction to humor, this is a shifting sand that needs close scrutiny. What is funny to a certain gender, ethnic, or age group needs to be assessed in relation to the group's perspective and who is the butt of the humor. For example, in the past, researchers have concluded men enjoy sexual humor and women do not. This finding would perhaps be reversed when examining sexual humor written for a women's audience with males as the butt of the joke. This suggests that perhaps more than other forms of advertising, humor needs pretesting.
- The nature of the product affects the appropriateness of a humor treatment. Though humor is used with many types of products, its use is more successful with existing rather than new products. Humor also appears to be more appropriate for low involvement products and feeling-oriented products.

In conclusion, evidence from twenty years of research conducted since Sternthal and Craig's landmark review has caused us to reassess the role of humor. Humor is not, and never has been, a magic wand that assures more successful advertising, however success is defined. In spite of the wave of increasing numbers of humorous ads that may lead one into overstating the case for humor in advertising, it is important to understand that humor can be appropriate and effective in some situations and not in others. This review attempted to remove some of the

uncertainty about the use of humor in advertising by identifying the contingencies that define humor's effectiveness. As is often the case, a great deal has been learned but far more needs to be studied in future research.

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