



Half a Century of Super Bowl Commercials: A Content Analysis of Humorous Advertising Styles

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1 Introduction

Humor is an integral part of our everyday reality. It is a source of strength to compete with and face personal and social challenges as well as political disruptions (Berger 2008). Humor is imbedded in every culture (Berger 1987) and an individual's sense of humor reveals not only aspects of their personality but also their mode of social interaction (Lynch 2002).

As such, humor has been extensively researched and discussed in terms of its types, effectiveness, and outcomes (Weinberger and Gulas 1992, 2013; Eisend 2009). The present study discusses the evolution of humorous commercials and humor styles (types of humor) between 1969 and 2015 under the prism of the social change that shaped American society. Based on the logic and structure of Weinberger et al. (2015) study of humorous outdoor advertisements, a content analysis of actual Super Bowl advertisements and a review of both the social and micro-industry factors in the USA over a 45-year period provide the empirical

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underpinnings of the study. This is the first longitudinal, content analysis of TV commercials extending over half a century.

2 Background

Humor is one of the most effective communication tools that not only evokes pleasant feelings but is also associated with increased persuasion (Meyer 2000). Ever since the early '70s humor was established as a popular advertising appeal accounting between 15% (Kelly and Solomon 1975) and 42% of all existing ads (Markiewicz 1974).

The first literature review on humor focused on its effectiveness on specific communication factors that it was found to influence (Sternthal and Craig 1973). Madden and Weinberger (1984) were the first to apply the findings of prior humorous research in the field of advertising to identify the level of agreement and congruence between advertising practitioners and the existing literature, thus setting the precedent for many humorous advertising studies to follow. Updating Sternthal and Craig's (1973) original literature review, Weinberger and Gulas (1992) examined some executional and/or situational factors that significantly influence the outcome of humorous messages. In the many studies to follow emphasis was given on the moderators of humorous ad appreciation (e.g. Swani et al. 2013) and the magnitude of the humorous advertising outcomes (Eisend 2009).

Advertising messages reflect the values, aesthetics and images of an existing culture (Pollay 1985), while at the same time they shape the prevailing culture through the images they portray (Pollay 1986). There seems to be a reciprocal relationship between advertising and culture expressed through the "mirror" vs. "mold" argument (Eisend 2009). The widespread belief that advertising is linked to societal changes (Phillips and McQuarrie 2002) has led historians to start reviewing and analyzing advertisements to comment on societal evolution (Pollay 1985).

Popular advertising appeals are further influenced by the prevailing advertising tactics and trends. A content analysis of over 2000 print ads illustrated in popular magazines between 1900 and 1980 (Pollay 1985) indicated an interaction between changing times and advertising strategies. This was further reinforced by Beard (2005) in a longitudinal analysis of humorous advertising based on past century marketing and advertising academic journals. Culture affects the use (Martin 2007) and appreciation (Speck 1991) of humor. Advertising humor in particular, is vastly influenced by societal changes both at a micro (advertising)

and a macro (society) level (Weinberger et al. 2015). In the first ever content analysis of outdoor humorous advertisements extending over a period of 100 years, Weinberger et al. (2015) incorporated a historical and cultural analysis of the American society during the same period to investigate the acceptance of humor and the evolution of humor styles. They claim that the evolving social and cultural milieu, along with the cultural knowledge of audiences and the context in which executives create advertisements, are closely related to the level, styles, and elements of the humor employed. It is thus the objective of the present study to spread the theoretical and methodological foundations of Weinberger et al. (2015) study in TV commercials.

3 Super Bowl

Super Bowl is one of the most important American television shows (Schimmel 2011), in terms of anticipation and deliberation. Its fame and magnitude have surpassed the geographical boundaries of the American territory. By 1999, Super Bowl was broadcasted in 188 countries (Tomkovick et al. 2001). Due to the significance of Super Bowl, particular attention is given by the NFL to social responsibility issues (Babiak and Wolfe 2006). The commercial campaigns aired in Super Bowl have an impact both time and media wise (Kim et al. 2005). The commercial breaks during the game are a “must watch” (Kelley and Turley 2004) and often end up overshadowing the actual game (McAllister 1999). In 2003, 14% of the Super Bowl viewers claimed to have watched the game only for the commercials (Horovitz 2006), while in 2010, more than half the viewers (51%) stated to have enjoyed the commercials more than the actual game. With all this continuously rising attention, it becomes a priority for advertisers to invest in Super Bowl commercials (Siefert et al. 2009).

4 Sampling Frame and Method

Replicating the modus operandi of Weinberger et al. (2015) the present study employs secondary sources (see Batchelor and Scott 2007) to address the historical analysis of the American society over the 45-year period under study. Super Bowl’s humorous advertisements were retrieved from Adland (Adland 2015) and grouped and content-analyzed in five distinct time periods; 1969–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, 2000–2009 and 2010–2015. Out of the 2453 ads retrieved from Adland, 1675 ads that were broadcasted on a national level were content analyzed.

Table 1 Humor types and message element coding guidelines (adopted by Weinberger et al. 2015)

Humor type	Explanation	Message element	Explanation
Word play, puns, playful language	This form of humor uses wit and skillful use of language. It often includes double entendre. It is possible that the double word meaning is sexual and, if it is, the ad would be coded as a word play as well as sexual. Audience response to puns and word play is more often a groan than laughter. Sometimes the double meaning of a word may be a spelling that implies a possible different meaning.	<i>Vulgar</i>	Crude indecent, or obscene, particularly with regard to sex or bodily functions, showing a lack of taste or reasonable moderation.
Warmth or sentiment	Gentle humor based in love, friendship and positive emotion. This type of humor often revolves around children, families, and/or pets. It may be the result of kids doing saying or doing something very adult which is unusual for kids to be doing.	<i>Cartoon/comic</i>	A drawing, sketch, or computer animation with humorous intent.

(continued)

Sixteen coders were trained on the task. They were all provided an explanatory table, along with sources and educational material on the different humor styles (Table 1). Written instructions for the classification of the ads into the humor-style categories were also provided. Each coder was coached on a sample of 200 non-Super Bowl commercials to ensure the reliability of the coding process.

Table 1 (continued)

Humor type	Explanation	Message element	Explanation
Sex, sexual innuendo, sexual allusion	This form of humor includes humor that is overtly sexual in nature, using nudity and/or direct sexual references. It also includes less overt suggestive sexual references. It often makes use of double entendre where one interpretation of the words or images in an ad is innocent and the other is sexual	<i>Children or animals</i>	A humorous ad where children or animals are a central focus of the ad. These ads generally capitalize on the ‘cute’ nature of kids and animals. E-Trade ads feature a talking baby

(continued)

In the main analysis, each of the coders analyzed approximately 210 commercials. All coders worked independently to determine the level of humorousness and classify the commercial in the predetermined (Weinberger et al. 2015) humor-style categories (Table 1). The coders watched every commercial twice. Inter-coder reliability coefficients ranged between 80 and 89%. Discrepancies amongst the coders were discussed and resolved.

Table 1 (continued)

Humor type	Explanation	Message element	Explanation
Nonsense	Silliness. This type of humor includes ridiculous pictures. Many of the children's books written by Dr. Seuss make use of nonsense humor as does Alice in Wonderland. Unusual, peculiar, absurd, silly, clownish, or odd situations, clumsiness, ignorance, grotesque, eccentric behavior, or characters, or exaggeration	<i>Stereotyping or racist</i>	Is this ad racist or stereotyped toward a group? Bald jokes, fat jokes, blond jokes, etc. are all forms of aggressive humor
Verbal or physical aggression	Physical, social psychological putdown of one's self, another person, or some other group of people or public figure, institutions using satire, sarcasm, ridicule, parody, or taking malicious pleasure in a person's situation or appearance. Slapstick humor in the style of the Three Stooges and pratfalls fit into the classification of aggressive humor. If the target is the joke teller, then this style of humor is self-deprecating		

5 Results

Tables 2 and 3 depict the percentage attributed to each category, while Fig. 1

Table 2 Humor and humor styles

Time-Period	Overall Humor N (%)	Word play N (%)	Warm N (%)	Nonsense N (%)	Sexual N (%)	Aggression N (%)
(I) 1969–1979	67 (37.6)	30 (44.8)	6 (9)	41 (61.2)	1 (1.5)	8 (11.9)
(II) 1980–1989	111 (48.9)	63 (56.8)	11 (9.9)	72 (64.9)	0 (0)	12 (10.8)
(III) 1990–1999	214 (53.1)	104 (48.6)	22 (10.3)	161 (75.2)	7 (3.3)	28 (13.1)
(IV) 2000–2009	280 (56.6)	93 (33.2)	18 (6.5)	232 (82.9)	18 (6.4)	54 (19.3)
(V) 2010–2015	210 (61)	62 (29.5)	18 (8.6)	170 (81)	15 (7.1)	38 (18.1)
Sheffe’s Test	I < III, IV, V; II < V	II, III > IV, V		I, II < IV, V	II < V	

Table 3 Number and percentage of humor and humor elements

Time Period	Vulgarity N (%)	Stereotyping N (%)	Comic/ Cartoon Characters N (%)	Children N (%)	Animals N (%)
(I) 1969–1979	0 (0)	4 (6)	5 (7.5)	5 (7.5)	3 (4.5)
(II) 1980–1989	6 (5.4)	2 (1.8)	7 (6.3)	9 (8.1)	9 (8.1)
(III) 1990–1999	8 (3.7)	1 (0.5)	39 (18.2)	30 (14)	34 (15.9)
(IV) 2000–2009	25 (8.9)	8 (2.9)	20 (7.1)	16 (5.7)	62 (22.1)
(V) 2010–2015	9 (4.3)	9 (4.3)	18 (8.6)	37 (17.6)	49 (23.3)
Sheffe’s Test	I < IV		II < III; III > IV, V	IV < III, V	I, II < IV, V

illustrates the evolution of category use over time. Chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant effect of the time period (decade) on all variables under

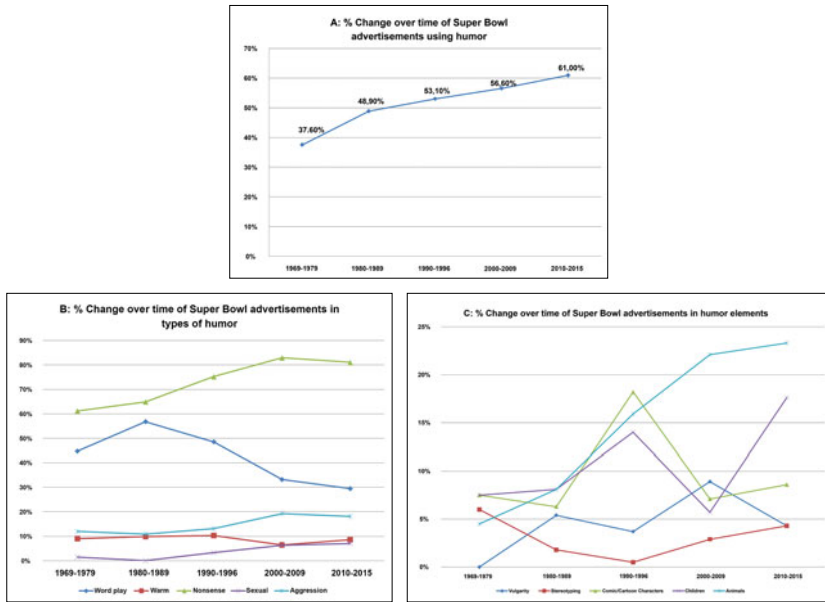


Fig. 1 Time-series graph of percentages

study; use of humor ($\chi^2(4) = 29.702, p < 0.001$), word play ($\chi^2(4) = 35.214, p < 0.001$), nonsense ($\chi^2(4) = 25.991, p < 0.001$), sexual ($\chi^2(4) = 12.782, p = 0.012$), vulgarity ($\chi^2(4) = 12.223, p = 0.016$), comic/cartoon characters ($\chi^2(4) = 21.083, p < 0.001$), children ($\chi^2(4) = 21.189, p < 0.001$), animals ($\chi^2(4) = 23.791, p < 0.001$). In addition, the analysis of variance revealed a statistically insignificant effect of the time period on the use of warm/sentimental humor ($\chi^2(4) = 2.676, p = 0.613$) and aggression ($\chi^2(4) = 7.371, p = 0.118$), and a marginally statistically significant effect on the use of stereotypes ($\chi^2(4) = 9.095, p = 0.059$). Sheffe's test further revealed statistically significant variations in all categories over time.

6 Discussion

Based on Weinberger et al.'s (2015) study, the present paper addresses the issues associated with the evolution of humor and humor styles in advertising within the American societal context. The results indicate an increasing trend in the use

of humor in Super Bowl advertising over the 45-year period examined, ranging from 38% during the '70 s to 61% by 2015 (see Table 2). The findings complement Weinberger et al. (2015) study that indicates an upward trend in the use of humor in billboard advertising over the past century.

The rising number of humorous advertisements could be mainly attributed to the wider acceptance of humor as an effective advertising strategy. Even though in the '70 s many advertising practitioners doubted the effectiveness of humorous advertising (Beard 2005), the '80 s saw a significant change in the adoption of emotional advertising (Batchelor and Stoddart 2007). The media spread further contributed to the rise of humor use (Beard 2005) resulting in the highest increase of humorous advertising in Super Bowl between the '70 s and '80 s, from 38 to 49% (Table 2). The increasing trend continued in the '90 s and the '00 s when the advertising sector widely accepted the use and recognized the significance of humor in advertising. During these decades both longitudinal Super Bowl advertising studies (e.g. Tomkovick et al. 2001) and advertising practitioners (Horovitz 2006) underline humor as the most successful advertising technique for Super Bowl commercials. This rising trend was further sustained in subsequent longitudinal studies (Kelley and Turley 2004).

Nonsense and word-play (puns) were the most frequently employed types of humor in Super Bowl humorous commercials throughout the entire 45-year period under study, compared to the other humor types (see Table 3). The frequent use of nonsense and puns was further addressed by other studies (e.g. McCullough and Taylor 1993; Weinberger et al. 2015), attributing the widespread use and appreciation to different cultures (McCullough and Taylor 1993).

Word-play is a low-risk type of humor (McCullough and Taylor 1993), hence a safe marketing choice. Word-play includes the resolution of a word-puzzle, thus originating from the incongruity (incongruity-resolution) theory (Shabbir and Thwaites 2007), the most common theory in humorous advertising (Speck 1991). Non-sense humor and word play were also the two most employed types of humor in billboard advertising over the same period (Weinberger et al. 2015). Throughout the whole period (1969 to 2015), non-sense humor was the prevailing type of humorous commercials in Super Bowl advertising (see Table 2), while word-play was found to be the prevailing type of humorous advertisements in outdoor advertising (Weinberger et al. 2015). This deviation in the use of humor types can be attributed to differences in media type advertising messages.

Warm/sentimental is a positive and mild type of humor, that involves arousal (Aaker et al. 1986) based either on arousal/safety (relief) or a combination of arousal-safety and incongruity theory (Speck 1991). According to the study's findings, warm/sentimental humor was, quiet, frequently employed during the '70 s

and the '80 s, reaching its highest percentage (10%), during the nostalgic '80 s (see Table 3). However, during the twenties sexual humor emerged with aggressive humor significantly surpassing the use of warm/sentimental humor thus indicating important societal changes (see Table 3).

As warm/sentimental humor advertising illustrates images of pleasant and loving relationships (Aaker et al. 1986), it often involves elements significantly related to affection such as children and animals (Kelley and Turley 2004). Using children in Super Bowl advertising has been quite popular (Kelley and Turley 2004), while the use of animals was considered a very successful approach (Tomkovick et al. 2001; Kelley and Turley 2004). The present study highlights an increasing use of children and animals between the '70 s and '90 s, however, during the 2000s the use of children significantly dropped (6%) while the use of animals increased to an unprecedented level (22%) (see Table 3).

As both elements serve similar advertising strategies, it could be assumed that demographic changes and family structure transformations had a negative influence in the use of children in advertising. In fact, the percentage of unmarried adults increased by 21% between the '60 s and 2000s (Cohn et al. 2011), while the percentage of childless women doubled from the '70 s to the '00 s (Livingston and Cohn 2010). On the other hand, animals, as time passes, are not only companions and friends (Spears et al. 1996), but also, members of the family (Kennedy and McGarvey 2008), contributing to interpersonal affection. Animals in advertising have been found to transfer qualities to the products (Phillips 1996) and the brands (Lloyd and Woodside 2013). The comic/cartoon element has been highly used during the '90 s though with no particular pattern. Its use could be attributed to the emergence and wide viewership of adult animation series (see Table 3).

Aggressive and sexual humor falls under Freud's category of tendentious wit (McCullough and Taylor 1993). These types of humor have the ability to disguise the sensible moral subjects of violence (Speck 1991) and sex (Shabbir and Thwaites 2007), under the mantle of humor, while still addressing certain messages to society. Super Bowl advertising saw a slight increase in aggressive humor (almost 20% in '00 s), and a significant increase in sexual humor from 1990 to 2015 (see Table 2). In the last decade of the century sexual humor doubled, and aggressive humor more than doubled in Super Bowl ads (see Table 2) compared to the previous decade. These findings were similar to the ones recorded for outdoor advertising (Weinberger et al. 2015), suggesting a change in societies' ethics and moral values. The element of vulgarity, related to aggressive and sexual humor also more than doubled between the '90 s and '00 s (see Table 3).

Sexual humor, although found in a very small percentage of humorous Super Bowl advertisements during the '70 s, saw a significant increase in the '90 s and an

even higher increase during the beginning of the new millennium (see Table 2). The low percentage of sexual humor in the '70 s was, possibly, the outcome of women's movements and the actions of organizations such as NOW, promoting women rights (Angley 2015). Nevertheless, during all previous decades, women being portrayed as sexual objects remained a core advertising technique (Zotos and Tschla 2014). Its use is continuously increasing (see Table 2).

Stereotyping is yet, another concept of high societal significance. Stereotyping in Super Bowl humorous advertisements, followed a decreasing trend during the '80 s and the '90 s, but the millennium saw a significant increase reaching its prior percentage (6%) (see Table 3). Gender stereotyping was quite common during the '70 s, with advertisement portraying women in traditional roles; not, yet, reflecting the changes of women's roles in society (Plakoyiannaki and Zotos 2009). In the new millennium, though, traditional stereotyping was found to be decreasing both for males and females (Hatzithomas et al. 2016). The non-traditional stereotyping element that increased in the '00 s is, also, a more effective technique, especially when applied to humorous advertising (Eisend et al. 2014). The increase in stereotyping for Super Bowl humorous commercials, during the twenty-first century, reflects mainly the increase of a specific male non-traditional stereotype; that of men as losers (Hatzithomas et al. 2016). Such images are, also, related to humorous aggressive advertising targeting males (Gulas et al. 2010). Advertisers should be cautious, as stereotyping, concerning either males or females, ethnicities or minority groups, is a risky advertising technique.

7 Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study are subject to specific limitations. Although the content-analysis was conducted and manipulated effectively in order to avoid issues concerning the objectivity and reliability of the analysis, known as the most vulnerable parts in the content-analysis methodology (Kolbe and Burnett 1991), the possibility of subjective judgments on behalf of the coders cannot be fully excluded.

Super Bowl advertising is, undoubtedly, a powerful sample for measuring the dominant advertising strategies, while gaining information about the prevailing culture of the American society. Nonetheless, in order to, further, confirm the results of the developments in humor and humor styles, longitudinal studies based on different samples should be conducted. For instance, a longitudinal analysis of print (magazine) advertisements for the same period or a similar analysis of the Clio award nominated and winning advertisements would be of interest.

The present study's results refer solemnly to the American society. Recognition of the method combining advertisements' content-analysis with historical and cultural analysis can lead to similar studies for other societies, worldwide.

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