

Is Humor a Countercyclical Advertising Strategy?

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Abstract

Based on a longitudinal content analysis of commercials appearing in Super Bowl between 1969 and 2009, the present paper aims to investigate the use and the impact of humor oriented and information oriented advertisements on advertising effectiveness in recessionary and expansionary periods. The findings challenge the long-standing belief among practitioners that humor is a countercyclical advertising strategy. Indeed, it seems that humor oriented commercials are more pervasive in economic hardship, while information oriented advertisements are more common in times of affluence and wealth. However, humorous commercials tend to be effective at generating positive attitudes toward the ad both in recessions and expansions. On the contrary, information oriented commercials lead to less favorable attitudes toward the ad over the different economic periods. These findings may imply that advertisers have expanded their understanding of advertising effectiveness, encompassing a broader vision to improve the general mood of the times.

Keywords: Humor oriented Advertisements, Information oriented Advertisements, Economic Cycles, Super Bowl Commercials, Longitudinal Analysis, Content Analysis

Introduction

Today, the global economy is undergoing a deep recession that affects every aspect of business and social life (Krugman 2009). In times of recession, firms confront significant waste of capital and revenues declines. According to the most prevalent definition, “*a recession is two successive quarters of negative growth in gross domestic product (GDP)*” (Tellis and Tellis 2009, 304). On the other hand, economic growth is defined as the “*sustained increase in real per capita incomes*” (Gould, 1972, 2). A plethora of prior studies has investigated the effects of economic cycles on advertising expenditures, proposing that there is a positive correlation between them (Deleersnyder et al. 2009; Lamey et al. 2008; Srinivasan and Lilien 2009). More concretely, it is suggested that during recessions the advertising budget is reduced, while during expansions it is increased (Picard 2001). In addition, it seems that increasing advertising expenditures leads to increasing sales and market share, especially during recessions (Biel and King 1991; McGraw-Hill Research 1986; Meldrum and Fewsmith 1979; Vaile, 1927).

However, the aforementioned studies did not shed light on the advertising creative strategies used during recessionary and/or expansionary periods. The purpose of the present study is to fill this research gap through a longitudinal content analysis of 1.516 Super Bowl commercials that cover the period between 1969 and 2009. Particularly, this study tests some relevant hypotheses regarding the effects of economic cycles on the use of humor (incongruity resolution, arousal safety and humorous disparagement) and information content in advertising.

There is an intuitive belief among advertising practitioners that humor is a countercyclical creative strategy (Beard 2005). According to the president of the W.B. Doner & Co. agency “*Humor is what we took in 1929, during two world wars, Korea, Vietnam and the recession of the 70’s. And it’s what we will take today. We in the business of selling will employ humor or we’ll run the risk of driving consumers to dejection and depression, and away from our products and our stores*” (Fried 1991, 26). Moreover, some advertisers appear to believe that humor can change “*the mood of the times and the economy in general*” (Devaney 2002, 36) and that’s why it was used in Super Bowl commercials after 9/11 (Devaney 2002).

To date the usage of humor in advertising across different economic periods has not been explored. The results of the present study aim to contribute to the deeper understanding of the creative strategies adopted by

advertisers during recessions and expansions. In an attempt to validate these findings, a second study was conducted in order to examine the effect of humor on the attitude towards the ad, using USA Today Ad Meter scores (for ad likeability) from 2000 to 2009, as a dependent variable. The second study reveals that humor improves significantly the attitude towards the ad regardless of economic cycles.

Theoretical Background

Humor in Advertising

Humor, “*at its most basic level, is an intended or unintended message interpreted as funny*” (Lynch 2002, 423). In psychological literature, there are three theories concerning the creation and the appreciation of humorous stimuli; namely incongruity theory, relief theory and superiority theory (Meyer 2000). Incongruity theory describes the cognitive process of humor production. It proposes that humor is created when a person conceives the humorous connection of different incongruous events, pictures and/ or texts (Alden, Mukherjee and Hoyer 2000; Raskin 1995). In the relief theory “*laughter occurs when a person has experienced heightened arousal but at the same time (or soon after the arousal) evaluates the stimulus (usually another person) as safe or inconsequential*” (Rothbart 1973, 249). According to superiority theory, people laugh at others and laughter is an expression of sudden triumph that indicates their perceived superiority (Hobbes 1651).

Speck (1991) formulated a message taxonomy for the categorization of funny creative executions in advertising, taking into consideration the three classical humor theories. In line with his typology, three humor processes can explain the different aspects of individual motivations that lead to the generation and comprehension of humor. Incongruity resolution, arousal safety and humorous disparagement processes interpret the cognitive, affective and interpersonal individual motivations in humor, respectively (Speck 1987). Few studies (Beard 2008; Hatzithomas, Boutsouki and Zotos 2009; Lee and Lim 2008; Shabbir and Thwaites 2007; Speck 1991; Spotts et al. 1997) have investigated the use of these processes in humorous advertising around the world. None of these research papers has investigated the effect of economic cycles on the use of humor processes in advertisements.

Information Content of Advertisements

Researchers (Abernethy and Franke 1996; Al-Olayan and Karande 2000; Choi, Lee and Kim 2005; Ji and McNeal 2001; Jones and Smythe 2003) have examined the information content of advertisements using primarily Resnik and Stern’s coding scheme (1977). Resnik and Stern (1977) identified a number of cues that fall into fourteen main categories of product information with respect to their focus; price or value, quality, performance, components or contents, availability, special offers, taste, nutrition, packaging, warranties, safety, independent research, company research and new ideas. Resnik-Stern cue classification system provides an objective methodology for content analyzing the level of advertising informativeness.

However, the main interest of the present study is to investigate the use of humor-oriented and information-oriented Super Bowl commercials during recessionary and expansionary periods and not the amount of information in advertising during these economic phases. The categorization between “soft sell” and “hard sell” message strategies or in other words between emotional and rational techniques is rather common in advertising literature and seems appropriate for the purposes of this paper (Alden, Steenkamp and Batra 1999; Wells, Burnett and Moriarty 2003, 310). Humor is one of the primary types of emotional approaches, since it is quite popular among advertising professionals (Beard 2005). On the other hand, information-dominant advertisements reflect the real expression of hard sell appeals.

The analysis of the two aforementioned advertising formats (humor and information oriented ads) can reveal the advertisers intentions to amuse or to inform the target audience (Speck 1991). It is believed that the use of this classification can provide evidence for the association between economic cycles and advertisers’ intentions to amuse or to inform consumers. Thus, in this study, the Resnik-Stern method is used only as an effective process for identifying which non-emotional commercials are information-oriented (Janssens and De Pelsmacker 2005).

Hypotheses

The Effect of Economic Cycles on the use of Humor-oriented Advertisements

Severe recessions as well as slowdowns of economic growth exert intense psychological and economic pressure on entrepreneurs and citizens (Solantaus, Leinonen and Punamäke 2004). Economic stress induces feelings of uncertainty, hopelessness, loneliness and depression (Ostamo, Lahelma and Lonnqvist 2001), deteriorating, at

the same time, family life (Solantaus, Leinonenb and Punamäkic 2004). Particularly, it causes emotional distress, depression and demoralization for parents, creating problems in their relationship that can affect children's mental health (Conger et al. 2002; Conger et al. 1994). In periods of intense stress, some people drink alcohol (Cooper et al. 1992) or smoke cigarettes (Parrott 1999) in an attempt to forget painful feelings and experience relief from tension. Gowgiel and McIntosh (2010), also, believe that media preferences may reflect people's reactions to hard economic times, and thus the analysis of media consumption may reveal alternative coping mechanisms (related with media content) used by people during these phases.

Indeed, several researchers from multiple disciplines have studied the effect of economic conditions on the preferences of citizens for entertainment products and media characters (Drass and Kiser 1988; Gowgiel and McIntosh 2010; Kiser and Drass 1987; Langrish 1982; Pettijohn and Jungeberg 2004; Pettijohn 2003). The central hypothesis of these research papers was that during social and economic hard times, entertainment products and media stars that foster feelings of safety and security are more appealing to people, because they help them to cope with negative and depressive feelings (Pettijohn and Tesser 1999). Pettijohn and Sacco (2009) found that when societal and economic conditions are rough, songs that are longer in duration, more meaningful in content, more comforting, more romantic, and slower are most popular. Furthermore, during these hard times, people show a preference for music performers with more mature facial features, such as smaller eyes, thinner faces, and larger chins. In the same vein, Pettijohn and his colleagues (Pettijohn and Tesser 2005; Pettijohn and Jungeberg 2004; Pettijohn and Tesser 2003; Pettijohn and Tesser 1999) revealed that when economic conditions are threatening and uncertain, people prefer older, heavier, taller actresses and models with larger waists and smaller eyes (more mature) to younger, shorter actresses and models with smaller waists and wider eyes (baby faces). Neotenous female faces (look babyish) that are considered more submissive and weak than mature female faces (Keating et al. 2003) generate increasing levels of uncertainty. On the contrary, mature features (smaller eyes and larger waists) breathe confidence, independence and security into the audience.

Interestingly, economic cycles appear, also, to play decisive role in the number of utopian novels published every year. Kiser and Drass (1987) using a time series analysis of utopian novels published in the Great Britain and the United States of America from 1883 to 1975 indicated that changes in the publication of utopian novels is associated with economic cycles. Utopian literature flourished during recessionary periods, while declined during expansionary periods. Drass and Kiser (1988), also, validated the positive relationship between economic contractions and the rate of publication of eutopias in the USA According to these researchers, during economic crises, utopian novels can provide a new point of view for the reconstruction of the collapsing economic system. In this fashion, eutopias offer a remedy for disappointed people who look for alternative social arrangements (Kiser and Drass 1987).

Moreover, economic cycles affect the use and the overall popularity of comedies. Pettijohn (2003), through a longitudinal analysis of motion pictures, confirmed a long-standing suspicion, indicating that during hard economic times, comedies are very popular to Americans. Similarly, many entertainment and advertising professionals have proposed that humor can be a very effective creative approach in periods of economic predicament (Andreeva 2009; Anonymous 2008; Reinhard 2001). For instance, Joel Goodman, founder of "The Humor Project Inc." claimed; "*it was no accident that during the Great Depression, a comedy heyday emerged with the likes of the Marx Brothers and Jack Benny*" (Anonymous 2008, p. 14). In line with Goodman, Andreeva (2009) alleged that dramas, shows and socially relevant comedies, which took a satirical look at the financial crisis, prevailed in US television during the recession of 1970s. Also, Keith Reinhard the chairman of DDB expressed this belief as follows: "*Given the current mood*" (he referred to 2001 recession) "*now is the time to prove as never before that advertising that sells can also celebrate humanity and mutual affirmation. And that humor, the great sales tool of the ages, does not have to be coarse. It just has to be funny. Lifting sales and lifting spirits*". More recently, in 2009, amidst the recession, ABC voiced the general feeling and ordered a sitcom with Kelsey Grammer, a popular comedian, in the cast (Andreeva 2009).

Humor is a coping mechanism (Führ, 2002; Henman 2001; Martin et al 1993; Nezlek and Derks 2001) that permits people to deal with everyday anxieties, depression and hopelessness, achieving psychological and physical well being (Freiheit et al. 1998; Kuiper and Martin 1993; Kuiper et al. 1992; Kuiper et al. 1998; Martin et al. 2003). The Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Victor Frankl had argued, describing his experiences as an Auschwitz concentration camp inmate "*Humor, more than anything else in the human makeup, affords an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds*" (McGhee 1999). Indeed, Vilaythong et al. (2003) found that individuals with a greater sense of humor experience increased levels of hopefulness. Particularly, their subjects achieved higher levels of hopefulness when exposed to a humorous video than when exposed to a neutral video (Vilaythong et al. 2003). Besides, De Pelsmacker and Geuens (1998)

found that humorous appeals lead to more positive advertisement-evoked feelings, such as cheerfulness and carefreeness (see also De Pelsmacker and Geuens 1999 and Geuens and De Pelsmacker 1998).

Based in the aforementioned analysis, it can be assumed that during recessionary periods, advertisers spend more money on humorous commercials, in an attempt to change the mood of society. On the other hand, during economic contractions, it is believed that consumers have a preference for humorous executions, because humor helps them to diminish perceived stress intensity and to achieve high levels of hopefulness. The following hypotheses are advanced:

H1: There is a countercyclical trend in the use of humorous oriented Super Bowl commercials.

H2: During economic contractions, humor oriented Super Bowl commercials create more positive attitudes.

The Effect of Economic Cycles on the use of Information-oriented Advertisements

The amount of information present in advertisements has been of particular interest to researchers (Abernethy and Franke 1996; Akan 2007; Al-Olayan and Karande 2000; Dowling 1980; Hong et al. 1986; Ji and McNeal 2001; Johnstone et al. 1987; Lin 1993; Madden et al. 1986; Nevett 1992; Rice and Lu 1988; So 2004; Taylor et al. 1997; Weinberger and Spotts 1989; Whitelock and Rey 1998). One perspective on information usage is that it depends on the economic development of the countries. It seems that the higher educated, literate customers of developed societies are seeking for more accurate information (Abernethy and Franke 1996). For instance, in the USA, magazine advertisements contain more information cues than in Arab World (e.g. in Bahrain, Iraq and Saudi Arabia) and in African Countries (e.g. in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia) (Al-Olayan and Karande 2000). An additional interpretation to the various levels of informativeness observed in the advertisements of different cultural environments is the political climate. Print ads in China are more informative compared to US advertisements as a result of the Chinese government's philosophy of encouraging hard-sell techniques (Ji and McNeal 2001; Rice and Lu 1988).

Regarding the longitudinal changes in advertising information levels, a number of studies has stressed the role of US Federal Trade Commission regulatory activity (Abernethy and Franke 1998; Chou, Franke and Wilcox 1987; Healey and Kassarian 1983; Kassarian and Kassarian 1988; Pollay, Zaichkowsky and Fryer 1980). Abernethy and Franke (1998) indicated that the strict advertising regulation adopted by the Federal Trade Commission from 1971 to 1981, resulted in fewer objective information claims, compared to the less stringent regulation that was used by Federal Trade Commission from 1982 to 1992. On the other hand, Kassarian and Kassarian (1988) revealed that the endeavors of FTC, consumer groups and activists to produce ads with more objective advertising claims failed during 1980's.

Moreover, Weinberger and Spotts (1989) as well as Healey, Fisher and Healer (1986/1987) showed that the levels of information included in typical TV ads fluctuate over time. However, these studies have given rise to some contradictory results. Weinberger and Spotts (1989) reported a statistical significant increase in the levels of informational claims both in the USA and the UK between the years 1977 and 1985, while Healey and his colleagues (1986/1987) found that the informativeness of US TV commercials decreased in 1985 compared with 1981. In line with Healey, Fisher and Healer (1986/1987), De Pelsmacker and Geuens (1997) observed a sharp decline in the number of information cues in Belgian print advertisements, the period between 1975 and 1995.

The aforementioned studies shed some light on the changes in the level of advertising informativeness over the years, but they did not elucidate the role of economic cycles in these changes. Given that many researchers measure "soft sell" and "hard sell" appeals on a single dichotomous dimension (Alden, Steenkamp and Batra 1999; Bradley, Hitchon, and Thorson 1994; Mueller 1996; see also Okazaki, Mueller and Taylor 2010), it can be assumed that increases in the use of humor oriented advertisements will lead to decreases in the use of information oriented advertisements. In other words, it is believed that during expansionary periods advertisers use more information oriented Super Bowl commercials. However, we cannot hypothesize that information oriented commercials create more positive attitudes, during economic expansions. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: There is a cyclical trend in the use of information oriented Super Bowl commercials.

Methodology

Sample of Super Bowl Commercials

A content analysis approach was adopted as the most appropriate and suitable method for the scientific analysis of advertising messages ([Berelson 1952](#); [Kassarjian 1977](#); [Samiee and Jeong 1994](#)). A sample of 1516 Super Bowl commercials (174 commercials for the decade 1969-1979, 468 ads for the decade 1980-1989, 427 ads for the decade 1990-1999 and 447 commercials for the decade 2000-2009) was content analyzed by two independent coders from the USA. The sample frame used was supplied by Adland, an independent organization that hosts Super Bowl commercials. Super Bowl is not only a universally appeal sports event, but also it has turned out to be a commercial celebration that receives a great percentage of viewers globally ([Yelkur et al. 2004](#)). Many multinational enterprises spend millions of dollars in advertising during Super Bowl due to the effectiveness and the prestige that it offers ([MacAllister 1999](#)). The demographic characteristics of Super Bowl viewers tend to be more balanced than in any other event. However, the sex ratio is slightly weighted toward males ([MacAllister 1999](#)). Super Bowl is considered one of the largest social gathering events in the world. For, instance in 1999, over seventy-five percent of Americans watched the Super Bowl in the company of at least one other person ([Freeman 1999](#)).

Procedure

The coders were trained through a sample of 200 examples on the details of the task and the dimensions of the constructs being measured, the methodology of the Resnik and Stern's (1977) classification system of information cues and the "humorous message taxonomy" ([Speck 1991](#)). The dependent variables examined were the use of humor, the use of humor processes and the use of information in Super Bowl commercials. Two researchers watched each advertisement at least 4 times in order to determine if it contained a certain type of humor. Each advertisement with a content that reflected one of the three humor processes (incongruity resolution, arousal safety and humorous disparagement) was coded as humorous. After the initial phase of the research, the two coders identified which of the non-humorous commercials were information oriented. An advertisement was coded as information oriented when it contained one or more of the following information cues about the product or service: price or value, quality, performance, components or contents, availability, special offers, taste, nutrition, packaging, warranties, safety, independent research, company research and new ideas ([Elpers, Wedel and Pieters 2003](#); [Resnik and Stern 1977](#)). The coders found that a small percentage of humorous advertisements had high levels of information. These commercials were coded as information oriented humorous advertisements. Inter-coder agreement was estimated based on Cohen's conditional Kappa (1960). The values range between 0.0 (no reliability) and 1.0 (perfectly reliable). The reliability coefficients were $K = 0.90$ for humorousness, $K = 0.82$ for the humor processes, and $K = 0.92$ for information.

For the last decade (2000) the attitude towards the ad was measured, using USA Today Ad Meter scores as a dependent variable. Every year the research team of USA Today measures the likeability of commercials, using approximately 100 typically representative viewers of Super Bowl as sample ([Tomkovick et al. 2001](#)).

Independent Variable

The economic cycle was used as the single independent variable of this study. We divided the period from 1969 to 2009 into recessionary and expansionary phases of the cycle, based on press reports of recessions indexed in the "New York Times Index" and "Business Periodicals Index" (see also [Picard 2001](#)). In this manner, it was revealed that the United States has experienced five recessions in 1969, 1973-1975, 1990-1991, 2001 and 2007-2009, a double dip recession in the early eighties (1980-1982) and four near miss-recessions in 1985, 1995, 1998 and 2003. On the contrary the following years were classified as expansionary or stable years: 1972, 1976, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005 and 2006. At this point, it should be noted that we did not content analyze Super Bowl commercials from the years 1970, 1971, 1974, 1977, 1978, 1988, 1989 and 1997, because they were not available in the database of Adland. The following section briefly examines the recessionary periods.

Recessionary Years

The first severe economic contraction in this period was the **1969-1970** recession. This economic downturn was characterized by an increase in the actual budget deficit that was the result of the growing American military involvement in the Vietnam War ([Labonte and Makinen 2002](#)). The **1973-1975** recession was one of the deepest recessions in US history provoked by the 1973 oil shock that made the oil prices rose unexpectedly. This recession was primarily characterized by simultaneous rise in both inflation and unemployment rates ([Labonte](#)

and Makinen 2002). The double-dip recession of **1980** through **1982**, was the deepest and the longer one during the post-war period that followed an oil price shock. The short recession of January-July 1980 was followed by a quite short period of expansion (1981) and the deep recession of 1982 (Harris 2009; Labonte and Makinen 2002; Rosenblum and Atkinson 2010; Zarnowitz and Moore 1991). In **1985**, Singapore entered its first recession after the end of the construction boom and after a cyclical downturn in electronics, while at the same time Malaysia and Indonesia recorded negative GDP growth (Parrado 2004; Shireen 1998). Saudi Arabia withdrew from the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) cartel in late 1985 and both the organization and the oil market collapsed (Barsky and Kilian 2004; Kilian 2006). In spite of the oil shock, American economy experienced a significant economic slowdown without recession (Ferrara 2003; Rosenblum and Atkinson 2010).

In **1990-1991** U.S. economy suffered a recession after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait that led to a major oil price shock. Nevertheless, the recession was brief and ended in March 1991. The bomb attack on the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995 tragically killed 168 people but did not greatly disrupt economic activity outside of Oklahoma City (Garner 2002). However, the anemic GDP expansion of less than 2 percent during **1995** signaled an imminent recession but finally the economic slowdown did not lead to a real recession (Ferrara 2003; Rosenblum and Atkinson 2010). In **1998**, many economists believed that the East Asian economic crisis could expand quickly into a broader financial and economic crisis, affecting the USA. Russia had bankrupted, Brazil was under depression and Japanese economy was sliding again into recession. Although US economy experienced a slight slowdown, the recession was finally avoided (Brenner 2003).

A year after the dot-com bubble burst, the USA fell again into a mild recession in **2001**. The tragic events of September 11, Enron scandal and the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan worsened the economic climate and deepened the crisis (Barsky and Kilian 2004; Enders and Sandler 2006; Ito and Lee 2004). The **2003** invasion of Iraq and concerns over the price of oil led many analysts to believe that the economy would go into a double-dip recession in the first quarter of this year, but it finally experienced a slowdown without recession (Arestis and Karakitsos 2003). In **2007** US economy plunged into the biggest crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. The United States housing bubble burst and the financial crisis spread from the housing market sector to financial institutions, the banking sector and the automobile industry (Mian and Sufi 2009).

Results

Chi-square analysis was used for the examination of hypotheses 1 and 3 (Table 1). The results indicate that the use of humor-oriented commercials increased during recessionary periods ($M=22.1$) and decreased during expansionary years ($M=15.8$) ($X^2=10.06$, $p<.002$). This negative trend is observed, especially, for those advertisements incorporating humorous disparagement ($X^2=5.31$, $p<.021$) and incongruity resolution process ($X^2=-3.61$, $p<.05$). Hence, hypothesis 1 is supported. As far as the effect of economic cycles on the use of information oriented commercials is concerned, it appears to be significant at the .06 level and explains a marginally significant variation ($X^2=3.55$, $p<.06$). Thus, hypothesis 3 is partially supported. Moreover, it is worth noting that over time, humor-oriented advertisements have increased ($X^2=99.72$, $p<.00$) while information-oriented commercials have reduced ($X^2=82.15$, $p<.00$). Besides, the humorous commercials that are based on humorous disparagement ($X^2=84.69$, $p<.00$) or on incongruity resolution ($X^2=22.43$, $p<.00$) have increased significantly over the last four decades. This further supports the evidence in the literature (Beard 2005; De Pelsmacker and Geuens 1997) that humorous advertisements are more pervasive nowadays.

Table 1: The Use of Humor-oriented and Information-oriented Ads during Recessions and Expansions

Use of	Economic Cycles		Total	Chi Square	
	Amidst Expansions* (%)	Amidst Recessions** (%)		X ²	Sig.
Humor-Oriented Ads	15.7	22.1	18,3	10.06	.002
Incongruity Resolution Process	5.8	8.3	6,8	3.61	.05
Arousal Safety Process	0.9	1.3	1,1	.588	.443
Humorous Disparagement Process	9.1	12.8	10.6	5.31	.021
Information-Oriented Humorous Ads	4.3	4.5	4.4	.039	.844
Information-Oriented Ads	36.0	31.3	34.1	3.55	0.60

* Expansions of 1972, 1976, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005 and 2006

** Recessions of 1969, 1973-1975, 1980, 1982, 1990-1991, 2001, 2007-2009 and near miss-recessions of 1985, 1995, 1998, 2003

Hypothesis 2 suggested that humor oriented Super Bowl commercials generate more positive attitudes toward the ad in recessionary years than in expansionary years. To test this hypothesis a factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with humor and economic cycle as the independent variables and attitude toward the ad as the dependent one. Hypothesis 2 would be supported if and only if the interaction between the independent variable (humor) and the moderator (economic cycle) is significant. However, the ANOVA indicated that there is no interaction between humorousness and economic cycle and hence no effect on attitude toward the ad ($F=1.41$, $p<.00$). Consumers have a great preference for humor oriented commercials ($M=7.30$) regardless of the economic cycles ($F=76.57$, $p<.00$). Hence, hypothesis 2 is rejected. Moreover, a second factorial analysis of variance with information and economic cycle as independent variables revealed that information oriented commercials (5.71) lead to less positive attitudes toward the ad regardless of economic cycles ($F=45.95$, $p<.00$).

Table 2: Attitude toward the Ad: Humor * Economic Cycle

Independent Variables	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F value	Significance
Main Effects					
Humor	74.02	1	74.02	76.57	.00
Economic cycle	1.67	1	1.67	1.73	.19
Two-way Interactions					
Humor * Economic cycle	1.37	1	1.37	1.41	.23
Model	74.48	3	24.83	25.68	.00
Residual	313.19	324	.97		
Total	387.67	327			

Conclusions and Discussion

At the time of writing (31 January 2011) many western developed economies are going through a recession and fundamental structural changes. The present study indicated that humor oriented commercials appear more frequently in Super Bowl during such hard economic times than in times of affluence and economic well-being. In contrast, the use of information oriented advertisements follows the opposite pattern, being higher during expansionary periods. These findings give an empirical evidence of a growing belief among professionals that humor is a countercyclical advertising strategy (Andreeva 2009; Anonymous 2008; Lawler 2002; Reinhard 2001). In addition, this study is consistent with other results reported in psychology literature, regarding the high number of comedies produced during periods of economic hardship (Pettijohn 2003). This implies that advertising and entertainment industry professionals adopt similar strategies during recessionary and expansionary periods.

This paper, also, found that economic cycle did not have any moderating effect on the positive relationship between humorous advertisements and attitude toward the ad. In the same vein, the slightly “negative” relation between informative advertisements and consumers’ attitudes did not affected by economic cycles. In other words, it seems that humorous advertisements were very effective, while informative commercials quite boring both in recessionary and expansionary periods. This indicates that advertising professionals can confidently use humorous creative illustrations to improve attitude toward the ad, regardless of the economic conditions of the moment (Duncan and Nelson 1985; Gelb and Pickett 1983; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986; Speck 1987; Sternthal and Craig 1973; Weinberger and Gulas 1992). However, it does not provide support for the hypothesis that humorous Super Bowl commercials are more effective during economic contractions and it does not confirmed Pettijohn’s (2003) findings that comedies are more popular during economic hard times.

These results might have been attributed to the actual nature of advertising, which is a paid nonpersonal communication from a sponsor (Wells, Burnett and Moriarty 2003, p. 567). This characteristic makes much more difficult for the viewers to identify with the emotional advertising mood. On the other hand, it is possible that consumers may experience high anxiety levels in other periods than those advertisers believe. Hence, humorous advertisements may be more effective when consumers work through their personal family or financial problems, regardless of general economic conditions. Furthermore, the traditional measures of advertising effectiveness (change in attitude toward the ad) may be unable to evaluate much broader advertising objectives and much more ambitious advertising strategies. Advertising campaigns strive to enhance the sense of well being, create a feeling of ease, generate excitement and rekindle the passion through the “*creation and manipulation of affect*” (Hardt and Negri 2000). Practitioners believe that can change the general mood of society with humorous advertising messages, which are abound with a sense of optimism and hope (Andreeva 2009; Anonymous 2008; Beard 2005; Lawler 2002; Reinhard 2001). So, academicians may have to adopt new instruments for the measurement of advertising effectiveness such as the “scale of perceived well-being” or the “state hope scale” (see [Vilaythong et al. 2003](#)).

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