

# **Postmodern Advertising: A Longitudinal Study of Super Bowl Commercials**

## **Abstract**

The present study examines the impact of postmodernism on advertising content, through a longitudinal analysis of 1,516 Super Bowl commercials that shown during the last 40 years (1969-2009). Moreover, for the Super Bowl commercials screened during the last decade (2000), the attitude towards the ad was measured, using USA Today Ad Meter scores as a dependent variable. The findings reveal that the use of “postmodern advertising devices” (such as surreal visuals, symbolic associations and humorous juxtapositions) has been increased during the last four decades. On the contrary, “modern advertising approaches” (such as realistic visuals, the use of experts and high levels of information content) have been reduced. Besides, it seems that “postmodern advertising approaches” lead to significantly more positive attitudes toward the ad, during the last decade.

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Super Bowl Commercials, Attitude toward the Ad*

**Track:** *Advertising, Promotion and Marketing Communications*

## 1. Introduction

Our era has been called the age of “post-everything” (Venkatesh, Sherry, & Firat, 1993), since it is highly influenced by a general philosophical and cultural movement, the postmodernism. “*Postmodernism is best understood not just as a style but as a general orientation, as a way of apprehending and experiencing the world and our place, or placelessness, in it*” (Gitlin, 1989, p.101). Its effects are evident everywhere in our everyday life, ranging from architecture and art to marketing and more precisely advertising. The term “postmodernism”, deals with the collision of “*generally established truths (metanarratives), the liberation from all conformity and the freedom to experience as many ways of being as desired*” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993, p.229). Postmodern marketing practices propel the need for different ways of experiencing a product or a service and motivate consumers to recognize and to express their multiple selves through the consumption of commodities (Belk & Bryce, 1991). “*It is generally said that reality has collapsed and has become exclusively image, illusion, or simulation*” (Cova, 1996, p.16). In that sense, postmodernism emphasizes hyperreality, fragmentation, symbolism (Venkatesh et al., 1993; Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1993; Scott, 1992), juxtapositions (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993), and feminism (Elliott, Eccles, & Hodgson, 1992). The present paper examines how these postmodern conditions affect the content of TV commercials in western cultures.

Some researchers propose that postmodernism is the age of marketing, since marketing may be the new metanarrative of this era (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Innis, 1980). However, though many theoretical articles have been written about the effects of postmodernism in marketing theory and practice, there is a lack of empirical studies. Only a few research papers have indicated that postmodernism can be the basis for analyzing the advertising content (Power & Stern, 1998; Stern, 1996; Goldman & Papsen, 1994; Scott, 1994). These approaches were theoretical, based on in-depth readings of advertisements by individual scholars (Brown, Stevens, & Maclaran, 1999). The purpose of the present study is to fill this research gap through a longitudinal content analysis of 1.516 Super Bowl commercials from 1969 to 2009. Given that postmodernism is a new perspective that dominates especially in western countries (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993), Super Bowl was chosen as the most representative advertising source, since it is ingrained in US culture (Tomkovick, Yelkur, & Christians, 2001).

The present study indicates that the use of some “postmodern advertising techniques” (such as surreal visuals, symbolic associations and humorous juxtapositions) has increased during the last forty years. In an attempt to validate these findings a second study was conducted, using USA Today Ad Meter scores (for ad likeability) from 2000 to 2009 as a dependent variable. The second study reveals that “postmodern advertising techniques” improve significantly the attitude toward the ad, indicating the impact of postmodernism in advertising effectiveness as well.

## 2. Theoretical background

Super Bowl has turned into a sporting event with universal appeal, preferred on the one hand by the greatest multinational enterprises and on the other hand by the majority of American viewers and by a great percentage of the global population (Yelkur, Tomkovick, & Traczyk, 2004). Its advertising time in 1990 was bought five months earlier (Farrell, 1999). Also, it is indicated that viewers were becoming more involved with Super Bowl than with any other TV show (Jensen, 1998; Buck, 1992). Super Bowl advertising is ingrained in US culture and expresses the important social changes that have taken place in one of the most or the most representative western society, the American (Tomkovick et al., 2001).

In general, advertisements are the reflection of each culture, producing and maintaining social stereotypes (De Mooij, 1998; Hong, Muderrisoglu, & Zinkhan, 1987). A number of

advertising scholars have proposed that postmodernism affects the content of advertisements (Brown et al., 1999; Power & Stern, 1998; Stern, 1996; Goldman & Papson, 1994; Scott, 1994) and Jameson (1984) has mentioned that postmodernism is reflected in images and icons of our contemporary society.

In line with the aforementioned researchers, the present study proposes that postmodernism may be reflected on the content of Super Bowl commercials. In the following section, some relevant hypotheses are formulated, regarding the content of Super Bowl advertisements during the last four decades, in light of some of postmodernism principles: hyperreality, symbolism, fragmentation, juxtapositions and feminism (Firat et al., 1993).

### ***Research Hypotheses***

Postmodern era is called the era of spectacle, where the real becomes imaginary and imaginary becomes real (Venkatesh et al., 1993). Reality has collapsed and its place is taken by illusion or image (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Scott, 1992). According to Brown et al. (1999) in this “hallucination of reality” (Baudrillard, 1983) advertisements tend to be affected by the concept of **hyperreality**. The following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1a:** The fantasy or surreal visuals and story formats will tend to increase in the Super Bowl advertisements over time.

**H1b:** The realistic visuals and slice of life formats will tend to decrease in the Super Bowl advertisements over time.

Postmodernism emphasizes **symbols**, images and myths, focusing on the visual excitement rather than on the veracity offered by truth claims (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). The consumer is a producer of experiences and no longer merely consumes products but their symbolic meaning, which is nothing less than the image itself (Cova, 1996; Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Baudrillard, 1983). Besides, postmodernism leads to **the rise of visual at expense of verbal** in the advertising content (Scott, 1992). The following hypotheses emerge:

**H2a:** Symbolic associations will tend to increase in the Super Bowl advertisements over time.

**H2b:** The amount of information and that of arguments in the Super Bowl advertisements will tend to decrease over time.

Nowadays, in the contemporary world there is no need for grand meanings or themes. **The reality is fragmented**, composed of disjoint moments of emotional experience, while the unified subjects have been eclipsed (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). The self is fragmented into multiple selves and multiple roles with a lack of coherent meaning, such as those of careerist, housewife, mother and sex object (for women) (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Scott, 1992; Belk & Bryce, 1991). There is no need for global truths, because every individual constructs their personal truth that can be both accepted and refused (Venkatesh, 1992; Baudrillard, 1983). All these characteristics compose an unstable and fluid reality, which at the very end tends to be extremely negotiable (Firat & Venkatesh, 1991). As there is no need for established truths and proofs, it is expected that American advertisers avoid of commercials that concentrate on experts, because they express the formal knowledge. Besides, it is believed that disparaging humorous executions that criticize metanarratives and humiliate elites as well as authoritarian behaviors have been increased the last forty years. The following hypotheses emerge:

**H3a:** The use of an expert as presenter will tend to decrease in the Super Bowl advertisements over time.

**H3b:** The use of humorous disparagement, as a humorous process, will tend to increase in the Super Bowl advertisements over time.

One of the most important characteristics of the postmodern world is the **juxtapositions** of “contradictory emotions”, regarding ideas, senses and commitments of everyday life (Cova, 1996). This paradoxical and contradictory tendency permits all kinds of juxtapositions, in all aspects of everyday life, including advertising (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). Hence, considering that according to Bergson (1900) humor is a juxtaposition of two unlike things within a situation the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H4:** The use of humor will tend to increase in the Super Bowl advertisements over time.

Apart from all these characteristics, it should be taken into consideration that postmodernism is dominated by **feminism** (Venkatesh et al., 1993). The term feminism refers to every reaction against phallogentrism and all notions of male superiority and domination (Venkatesh, 1992). In the postmodern world women resist and disturb the male ideology, giving rise to a female perspective. Hence, the following hypothesis emerges:

**H5:** The presence of female will tend to increase in the Super Bowl advertisements over time.

Based on the above reasoning, it is believed that contemporary consumers will prefer “postmodern advertising devices” to “modern advertising techniques”. The following hypothesis is advanced:

**H6:** In the 2000s, “postmodern advertising executions” will result in higher attitude toward the ad than “modern advertising executions”.

### 3. Methodology

Hypotheses testing was based on a content analysis approach, a method suitable for the scientific analysis of communication messages (Samiee & Jeong, 1994; Kassarian, 1977; Berelson, 1952). A sample of 1516 Super Bowl commercials of the last 40 years was content analyzed by two independent coders. The sample frame used was supplied by Adland, an independent organization that records Super Bowl commercials. For each decade from 1970s to 2000s a representative sample of commercials was content analyzed. Particularly, 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. Also, for the last decade (2000) the attitude towards the ad was measured, using USA Today Ad Meter scores as a dependent variable. The research team of USA Today measures the likeability of commercials, using approximately 100 typically representative viewers of Super Bowl as sample, every year (Tomkovick et al., 2001).

Two coders from the USA content analyzed the 1516 commercials. They were trained through 200 examples on the details of the task and the dimensions of the constructs being measured, the methodology of the “executional format typology” (Schmalensee, 1983), the “Simon’s typology for creative strategies” (Simon, 1971) and the “humorous message taxonomy” (Speck, 1991). 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  $K = 0.81$  for the advertising format,  $K = 0.71$  for the presenters,  $K = 0.86$  for visuals,  $K = 0.90$  for humorousness, 0.82 for the humor processes, 0.79 for the presence of women and 0.75 for the creative strategies.

### 4. Results

The key findings of the present study are shown in table 1. Initially, it seems that the use of surreal visuals in Super Bowl commercials has increased in recent years ( $X^2=75.221$ ,  $p<.000$ ), while at the same time the use of realistic images has decreased, especially after 1970s ( $X^2=60.501$ ,  $p<.000$ ). Moreover, though slice of life was the most popular advertising format of the 1990s, it was used less in the 2000s ( $X^2=58.740$ ,  $p<.000$ ). On the contrary, in the last

decade US advertisers have emphasized the story formats ( $X^2=47.275$ ,  $p<.000$ ). These findings provide support for the predictions of hypotheses 1a and 1b.

**Table 1: Main Results**

Dimensions	1970	1980	1990	2000	Total	Chi Square		Ad Meter <sup>†</sup>	ANOVA (only for 2000)	
	(174) %(Count)	(468) %(Count)	(427) %(Count)	(447) %(Count)		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.		F	Sig.
<b>Format</b>										
1. <i>Story</i>	29 (50)	20.5 (96)	13 (56)	32 (141)	23	47.275	.000	7.26 <sup>a</sup>	14.773	.000
2. Drama	3 (6)	2.4 (11)	0.5 (2)	0.9 (4)	02	10.820	.013	5.68 <sup>a,b</sup>		
3. <i>Slice of life</i>	.54 (94)	65 (304)	79 (339)	58 (258)	66	58.740	.000	6.38 <sup>b</sup>		
4. Problem Solution	7.5 (13)	6 (28)	2 (8)	3 (12)	05	17.194	.001	6.43 <sup>a,b</sup>		
5. Analogy	6 (11)	8 (37)	5 (22)	7 (32)	08	2.902	.407	6.48 <sup>b</sup>		
<b>Presenter</b>										
1. Celebrity	15 (26)	9 (42)	10 (43)	12 (52)	11	5.294	.152	6.47 <sup>a</sup>	7.028	.000
2. Ordinary people	58 (101)	62 (290)	61 (262)	60 (268)	61	1.008	.799	6.63 <sup>a</sup>		
3. Number of presenters	13 (22)	7 (32)	6 (25)	3 (15)	6	19.054	.000	6.95 <sup>a,b</sup>		
4. Child	1 (2)	3 (16)	7 (31)	5 (24)	5	12.960	.000	6.50 <sup>a</sup>		
5. Animal	2 (3)	3 (12)	8 (33)	11 (49)	6	34.641	.000	7.60 <sup>b</sup>		
6. Puppet	4 (7)	2 (10)	6 (27)	7 (32)	5	14.350	.002	6.32 <sup>a</sup>		
7. <b>Experts</b>	7.5 (13)	14 (66)	1 (6)	2 (7)	6	85.781	.000	5.96 <sup>a,b</sup>		
<b>Visuals</b>										
1. <i>Realistic</i>	79 (138)	82 (386)	74 (318)	61 (271)	74	60.501	.000	6.58 <sup>a</sup>	8.040	.000
2. <i>Fantasy or surreal visuals</i>	8 (14)	10 (47)	16 (68)	30 (132)	18	75.221	.000	7.09 <sup>b</sup>		
3. Scenic beauty	11 (20)	7 (33)	4 (18)	3 (15)	6	18.862	.000	6.47 <sup>a,b</sup>		
4. Cartoons or animation	1 (2)	2 (5)	4 (23)	6 (29)	4	24.076	.000	6.11 <sup>a</sup>		
<b>Humor</b>	15 (26)	10 (49)	22 (93)	39 (176)	23	116.918	.000	7.20	66.525	.000
<b>Humor Process</b>										
1. Incongruity resolution	10 (17)	4 (17)	8 (34)	13 (56)	8	24.751	.000	7.12 <sup>a</sup>	22.975	.000
2. Arousal safety	0.6 (1)	1 (4)	1.4 (6)	2 (9)	1	3.195	.362	6.80 <sup>a,b</sup>		
3. <i>Humorous disparagement</i>	5 (8)	6 (28)	13 (54)	25 (113)	13	88.428	.000	7.27 <sup>a</sup>		
4. <i>Non-humorous ads</i>								6.23 <sup>b</sup>		
<b>Presence of women</b>										
1. Relationship	5 (8)	1 (7)	4 (16)	9 (40)	5	29.710	.000	7.25 <sup>a</sup>	2.414	.049
2. Attraction	2 (3)	1 (6)	0.5 (2)	1 (5)	1	2.401	.493	6.43 <sup>a,b</sup>		
3. Personal Beauty	9 (16)	6 (30)	3 (14)	7 (32)	6	9.843	.020	6.84 <sup>a,b</sup>		
4. Nudity	0.6 (1)	0.4 (2)	1.2 (5)	3 (12)	1	10.073	.018	6.42 <sup>a,b</sup>		
5. <b>Not used</b>	84 (146)	90 (423)	91 (390)	80 (358)	87	31.894	.000	6.65 <sup>b</sup>		
<b>Creative strategies</b>										
1. <i>Information</i>	22 (39)	19 (88)	16 (67)	11 (48)	16	17.332	.001	5.90 <sup>a</sup>	14.008	.000
2. <i>Argument</i>	24 (42)	30 (142)	21 (89)	15 (69)	23	30.176	.000	6.15 <sup>a,c</sup>		
3. Brand familiarization	26 (45)	32 (149)	44 (190)	44 (198)	38	33.364	.000	7.09 <sup>b</sup>		
4. Command	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0.2 (1)	0	2.391	.495	0		
5. Obligation	1 (2)	0.6 (3)	0.9 (4)	0.4 (2)	1	1.225	.747	0		
6. Motivation	10 (17)	4 (21)	1 (3)	4 (18)	4	28.151	.000	6.10 <sup>a,c</sup>		
7. <i>Symbolic association</i>	17 (29)	14 (65)	17 (74)	25 (111)	18	19.331	.000	6.60 <sup>c</sup>		

<sup>†</sup> a, b, c, d Means and percentages with same letter within a column are not significantly different from one another (ANOVA with a post-hoc Bonferroni test)

Moreover, hypotheses 2a and 2b, which argue that symbolic associations have increased in the Super Bowl commercials ( $X^2=19.331$ ,  $p<.000$ ), while the amount of information ( $X^2=17.332$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and that of arguments ( $X^2=30.176$ ,  $p<.000$ ) have reduced over time, are supported. Besides, in the last decade, US advertisers seem to adopt the anti-elitist values of postmodern philosophy, since they avoid of experts ( $X^2=85.781$ ,  $p<.000$ ) and simultaneously

they concentrate on parodies of social stereotypes (humorous disparagement) ( $X^2=88.428$ ,  $p<.000$ ). Hence, hypotheses 3a and 3b are supported. Similarly, it appears that humorous juxtapositions have dominated the commercials of the past two decades ( $X^2=116.918$ ,  $p<.000$ ). Regarding the presence of females on the Super Bowl commercials, in the 2000s, more nude or semi-nude women ( $X^2=10.073$ ,  $p<.018$ ) and more women in a relationship have been featured in the commercials ( $X^2=29.710$ ,  $p<.000$ ). In general, during the last decade more women have been participated in the Super Bowl ads ( $X^2=31.894$ ,  $p<.000$ ). These findings support the fifth hypothesis. Finally, as far as the likeability of the Super Bowl ads is concerned, an ANOVA with a post-hoc Bonferroni test was conducted. The results reveal that contemporary consumers prefer “postmodern advertising techniques” to “modern advertising techniques” (Table 1). However, only the commercials that present a woman in a relationship outperform those that do not use women at all, on ad meter scores. Thus, hypothesis 6 is partially supported.

### **5. Conclusions & managerial implications**

The present study indicated that postmodernism, which has been woven in the fabric of contemporary society, has affected the content of Super Bowl commercials. Nowadays, postmodernism has erased the boundaries between the real and the unreal, rendering commercials a simulation of real life rather than just a means of promoting brand awareness. Postmodernism seems to be a cultural variable that affects advertising content independently from the other cultural dimensions, such as those described by high context/ low context theory (Hall & Hall, 1990). According to Hall and Hall (1990), in low context cultures (such as US culture) advertising audience seeks for relevant information and for direct advertising creative executions (Taylor, Miracle, & Wilson, 1998), while in high context cultures symbols can more effectively express the product promises (Lin, 1993). Thus, it could be assumed that US advertisers would tend to use more information and arguments over time. However, the findings of the present study indicated that during the 2000's, US practitioners emphasized symbolic associations, reducing the information amount of the commercials. These findings can be attributed to postmodernism effects on advertising content. Indeed, “postmodern advertising techniques” not only have increased over the last four decades, but also lead to more positive attitudes towards the ad. International advertisers should take into consideration the findings of this paper, before planning of advertising campaigns. It is advisable to use more surreal visuals, symbolic associations and humorous juxtapositions, especially when they target young consumers. The young audience is more susceptible to changes and it imitates more easily the new perspectives (Wilska, 2004). The above conclusions may imply that we should transit from the traditional promotional mix to a new “PoMotional mix”, developing new communication strategies with respect to postmodernism.

### **6. Directions for future research and limitations**

From a theoretical standpoint, the results provide support for using postmodernism in attempting to understand cultural impact on the use of visuals and humor, and in general on the use of transformational creative strategies in contemporary advertising. However, to date there is no systematic taxonomy for analyzing postmodern and modern advertising techniques. This constitutes a limitation of this study, since the authors employed three well-known taxonomies of advertising strategies and not a systematic typology of postmodern and modern creative devices. Moreover, the present study concerns only a single western country (the U.S.A.). Thus, another direction for future research would be to analyze the use of “post-modern advertising techniques” in other cultures that have not adopted postmodern values, ideas and perspectives.

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