

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HUMOR IN ADVERTISING: ANALYSIS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL SCOPE

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## ABSTRACT

*In advertising, as in marketing, different advertising techniques are used to achieve the objectives proposed by companies, among them, to reach a large number of consumers who remember both the brand, the product as well as the advertising campaign used, that is, the effectiveness. The use of humor as an advertising technique is very recurrent among brands when looking for this effectiveness to the point of having a globalization of it at the intercultural level, coming to be used by the best companies in the five continents and getting to be one of the most used techniques in the most effective advertising campaigns of recent years.*

**Key words:** Advertising, Humor, Culture, Effectiveness, Management, Agencies, International.

## INTRODUCTION

Advertisers use a variety of tools in an attempt to improve statistics, attract more consumers as well as capture the customer's attention, their attitude towards the advertisement, and above all, their attitude towards the brand. Among these tools is the use of humor as a recurring basis from mid-twentieth century. The effectiveness of humor has been examined cautiously over the past century by many researches as Weinberger & Spotts (1989), Weinberger & Gulas (1992), Eisend (2006) among others, as well as the standardization of its usage across national borders (Weinberger & Spotts 1989, Cheng & Duo, 2003). Coming to the conclusion that cultural differences influence the quantity of humor usage (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989) due to believe that culture has a strong influence on the perception of humor. Even though national differences among individuals may have a strong impact on attitude towards the ad (AAD), attitude towards the brand (ABR), brand recall, purchase intention and persuasiveness (Eisend, 2009), the standardization versus adaptation cannot be applied to all advertisements equally due to the fact that humor type (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992) as well as individual characteristics have a direct impact over the consequences of humor impact on the consumers (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989; Cline & Kellaris 2007; Eisend 2009).

Through this paper, we will examine what are the outcomes of using humor in advertising in a general perspective to then deepen the possibility of generalizing these to the cultural differences of the globalized world in which we live, and solve the doubts raised and not answered yet by other authors.

## Conceptual Framework

The main objective of advertisement campaign is to appreciate their customers in order to find adequate advertising appeals which suit them and provide the right hook. Companies examine carefully their markets and target audience for building creative advertising strategies and use various types of appeal to influence consumer's attitude and purchasing decisions. Appeals can be divided in either emotional or rational (Stafford & Day, 1995) and one of the most used over the last decades include humor, music, scarcity, rational, sexual and fear, among others (Santesmases, 2012).

Humor can be effective in many occasions given the easy acceptance of its use in different media and its ability to entertain the public (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Even so, if at the time of creating an ad we find ourselves in a situation in which we do not have solid arguments to convince our audience or there is negative information of two-sided messages (Cline & Kellaris, 1999), humor has demonstrated to help to overcome those weaknesses in advertising messages (Eisend 2009).

Finally, the last characteristic of humor is the nature of it, that is, how the humor is presented in the advertisement for the consumer to identify it or not, or the classification of the type of humor used and the acceptance or not of it, among others.

According to the studies carried out by Scott et al. (1995), the best way to reach the consumers is when the use of humor is directly related and integrated with the messages that the advertisement raises as well as having previously screened the product. The message will have to be intentionally, thematically or in a structural way related to the product in order to create positive effects (Weinberger & Spotts, 1995). If we look at results of experimentation, they show us that ads are more memorable when humor is both strong and related to the message, and this interaction is mediated by attention and mood (Cline & Kellaris, 2007).

Additionally, in order to capture and maintain attention, humor should not be dominant during the announcement but rather the message that is to be transmitted (Spott et al., 1997) since otherwise there is a risk of diverting attention from the message and that the result is the memory of a funny announcement but not the brand or the product that is being announced, which is the essence of the creation of the ad. Once these assertions are known, Eisend (2009) investigated the stimuli presented in the ads, concluding that in order to create a better relationship between ad (AAD) and brand cognitions it is necessary to use real stimuli, versus fictitious ones, since it is possible to held brand cognitions with greater confidence due to prior experience of the costumers (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989).

As, the use of endorsers to see their possible consequences among consumers (Limbu et al., 2012). In addition to using humor, it is combined with a celebrity endorser, we will be able to increase attitude towards the ad ( $A_{AD}$ ), the brand ( $A_{BR}$ ) as well as brand recall and copy point recall.

## Advertising Outcomes

The effectiveness of humor can be measured through the outcomes that it evokes in consumers' behavior. The most used ones are attention, persuasion, recall, memorability, attitude towards the ad ( $A_{AD}$ ) and attitude towards the brand ( $A_{BR}$ ) Eisend (2009). Humor has the ability to enhance attention, name registration and mood (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989), additionally; it has a positive effect over  $A_{AD}$ , which directly influences a positive effect over  $A_{BR}$ , and purchase intention (Zhang, 1996; Eisend, 2009; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Mood and attention are

mediators of humor strength, that is, the influence the recall of the ad. Those positive effects are explained with the fact that humor is an anticipation of enjoyment, therefore, there is a higher likelihood of attendance of the ad (Scott et al., 1990) and a change in attitude when visualizing the ad (Núñez-Barriopedro, 2017). It also distracts the consumers from creating erroneous thoughts and reducing the resistance to be persuaded (Duncan, 1979).

Combined with the other relationships described so far, as the  $A_{AD}$  increases, so will the  $A_{BR}$  whenever the mood is incongruity-based or hostile-based, with repetition being a factor that will further increase the attitude towards the brand and the recall (Cifuentes & Sánchez, 2005).

Although humor is not universal, nor is it more persuasive than other types of appeals (Núñez-Barriopedro & Álvarez Suárez, 2018), there are mediators that help its effectiveness and allow us to segment the audience. The first of these is the “*Need For Cognition*” (NFC) described in the elaboration likelihood model, in which two types of individuals are distinguished; those who use their peripheral route when processing information since their motivation for the message is low resulting in a superficial processing of information focused on surface features, that is, a low NFC. While the other group uses the central route, with a high motivation to think about the message that is intended to be transmitted and a processing of the deeper information focused on the quality of the message arguments, that is, a high NFC (Petty, & Cacioppo, 1986).

Following this reasoning, it has been proven that those who have low levels of NFC, are easier to persuade with humor (Zhang, 1996), while those with high levels of NFC may not be affected by it or need very strong arguments. Strong to be persuaded (Crawford and Gregory, 2014). In addition to the NFC, need for humor (NFH) also influences the effect of perceived mood on the effectiveness of the ad, being directly proportional, that is, that the higher the NFH, the greater the recall (Cline & Kellaris, 2007; Cline & Kellaris, 2003).

It is worth mentioning the different ways in which humor can work, summarized in three. First, as a distraction since the threat information provides substantive value to the message receiver. Second, as a buffer, the plot is being considered a cognitive challenge and third, as an intriguing element when the ad's arguments lack substantiative value (Núñez-Barriopedro & González del Valle Brena, 2016).

## Internationalization

Humor is universal but the effects of it are not (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992), even so throughout the years, in all countries has resorted to the use of humor in their media. For marketing management purposes, it is decisive to recognize the differences that exist between cultures in diverse markets, in order to strengthen advertising campaigns. In this way, we can discriminate nations taking advantage of weak and strong points.

Culture influences the evaluation and perception of humor as well as preferences on the type of humor used in each market, having consequences on  $A_{AD}$  and  $A_{BR}$  (Cifuentes & Sánchez, 2005). It not only varies on evaluations and preferences, but also there is a strong influence over the perception of itself (Gelb and Pickett, 1983; Waller, et al., 2005), the humor type and frequency (Shabbir & Thwaites, 2007) and the quantities of humor used (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989).

Given these, we must focus on cultural values instead of national differences (Schwarz et al., 2015) as we are given that differences between the countries are evident, and can be measured with different indices, among them, Hofstede's dimensions. Therefore, specific content

associated with certain dimensions should vary depending on the cultural audience we want to reach (Romani, 2006; Goodrich et al., 2015), for example, (Pieters et al., 2002) examined the difference of aggressive humor between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, concluding that the former supports relatively higher levels in the proportions in which it is accepted among consumers the use of this type of humor.

Despite finding the points of difference across cultures, there are common points that reduce many expenses when creating advertising campaigns. Since universalizing a campaign is much easier for companies, but adapting to the national market and target costumers has a much greater impact on the attention, brand, recall and attitudes created.

As they say, “*Think globally, act locally*”. Diverse national cultures share certain universal cognitive structures underlying messages (Barry & Graça, 2018) and TV ads from diverse national markets share in common, that when humor is intended, it is based on incongruent contrasts (Beard, 2005). Additionally, on studies from Catanescu & Tom (2001) there are three types of contrasts mostly used, which are, actual vs. non-actual, expected vs. unexpected and possible vs impossible. Being these similarities when standardizing, we adapt locally to markets with widely differing values and Norms (Lammers et al., 1983; Djambaska et al., 2015). So, when transferring humorous ads from one country to another, ad should contain values related to the quality and positivity appeal which are perceived as friendly, stimulating and inspiring (Weinberger et al., 1995; Waller, et al., 2005; Strick et al., 2013).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The selected database is the warc 100, which is an annual ranking of the world’s best marketing campaigns and companies, based on performance in over 70 effectiveness and strategy competitions (Warc, 2018).

To accumulate the warc 100, warc and Gunn Report track diverse advertising competitions around the globe – every one of them expect participants to demonstrate the effects and impact of a campaign. Campaigns (and the brands and agencies behind them) are granted focuses in light of the prizes they win in those competitions. Every competition is weighted in view of how rigorous and prestigious it is. The methodology of selecting competitions is based on:

- Effectiveness award, where entries are judged primarily on the impact of a campaign.
- Strategy award, where entries are judged on the strategic response to a client’s business problem.
- General marketing excellence award, where a significant proportion of the scoring is based on effectiveness.

For the latest raking of 2018, only 78 competitions met these criteria, which include both single-market competitions as well as international, regional and global, shows. No more than three single market competitions have been tracked for any one country, in a few instances where more than three competitions were identified for a market and Warc has selected three based on the results of its survey of planners or strategists.

The assignation method of the award points follows a strategic methodology as most of the awards schemes under consideration have a single Best in Show, also known as Grand Prix, winner per category, as well as a broader group of Gold, Silver and Bronze winners. The points are assigned from 10-2 as in the following Table 1.

<b>Table 1</b>	
<b>POINTS ASSIGNED TO EACH COMPETITION</b>	
Grand Prix	10
Gold	5
Silver	4
Bronze	2

Source: Warc (2018)

For those which do not run the pre-selected scheme, the points are adapted to reflect their structure. It is important to note that awards schemes taken into consideration vary greatly in terms of size. In order not to over-reward campaigns that have won many awards at a single scheme over those winning awards in multiple schemes, they have capped the number of Award Points a single campaign can win at a single awards scheme at 10. No single campaign, therefore, can gain any more points than that awards scheme's Best in Show winner, regardless of how many individual prizes it won.

Every competition included in the ranking is appointed a score (the Competition Weighting) between 1 and 5. This is an evaluation of how 'hard' the competitions is to win, and how esteemed the honor is.

The calculation includes the *“Industry perception”* and *“The level of potential competition”*.

- Industry perception. It is generally held inside the business that a few competitions are harder or more prestigious than others. To mirror this, Gunn Report has conducted a survey of more than 100 senior office organizers and strategists. The consequences of this overview feed into the Competition Weighting.
- The level of potential competition. In principle, competitions or categories that are available to a more extensive 'pool' of campaigns will be harder to win than competitions that utmost the size of the pool. Thus, for instance, a worldwide competition will for the most part be harder to win than a single-market rivalry. Or on the other hand, a category that is available to a wide range of promoting action will be harder to win than a category that is just open to, say, digital marketing campaigns.

To reflect this, Warc consider the amount of the worldwide marketing market every competition represents. It is able to do this utilizing Warc's extensive ad spend data assets, which incorporate analysis by geography.

Once each campaign has assigned its Award Points and Competition weighting, a score is build be multiplying both of them. If more than one award is won for some campaign, the final score of it would be the sum of all score it has achieved in different competitions.

When the scores for campaigns have been ascertained, it is conceivable to assign points to the organizations behind them – both on the customer and agency side.

The scores that have been created for each campaign in the database are appointed to both an organization and a brand. This data depends on openly discharged information, for example, the winners' lists announced by awards organizers. This permits to manufacture rankings of individual agencies, agency networks, agency holding companies, brands and advertisers

Similarly, as with campaigns scores, there is a top of 10 Award Points that a brand or agency can win from a single campaign in a single competition.

Moreover, the overall Award Points a single brand or agency can win from a single awards scheme at 20. This is because a few competitions in the database grant a substantial number of prizes, making it workable for organizations or brands qualified for those competitions to get a great deal of points from a single award scheme. This is out of line for

organizations or brands ineligible to enter those competitions. It means, if the competitions are in a nearby market and not open to sections from outside that market.

As a general rule, it is hard to achieve 20 Award Points from a single show. It is what might as well be called winning a Grand Prix, Gold and Silver for numerous competitions. Accordingly, the 20-point top influences few organizations in the database. Likewise, with campaign scores, all Award Points are multiplied by the significant Competition Weighting to create the scores for organizations and brands.

Ultimately, it is noteworthy to highlight that agencies that are listed as “contributing agencies” for a campaign in the database are awarded half the Award Points assigned to “primary agencies” for the same campaign (Warc, 2018).

## RESULTS

All of the campaigns listed in the Warc index are cautiously examined in order to verify in which of them humor is used as an advertising tool, making the campaign more effective, and in case of being used, if this helped the agency to move to a higher position or not. Warc 2017 is analyzed over the previous year, 2016, and Warc 2018 over 2017, so therefore the evolution of the data, position of agencies and humor can be easy to follow.

The agencies involved in the Warc lists are being examined in order to see if they have acquired a higher position with the use of humor, with respect of the previous year, or a lower one. New agencies can be found from year to year so the only data that can be examined from them are the usage or not usage of humor and the position that have acquired in the ranking.

During the last three years, 22 countries were participating in the Warc list in 2016 and 20 countries in 2017 and 2018, making all the continents present in the prestigious index. Although it is relevant to mention that not all of them have the same representativeness in the advertising world, competitions as well as in the ranking. Africa and South America have the less number of ads in the index, none and two in 2016, one and three in 2017 and one and six respectively in 2018. Therefore, even if they are the have the lowest participation in the ranking, their presence is increase overtime although it is still slow and quite low in number. North America, which includes Canada and US, is the leading continent with a total number of 24 ads in 2016 and 38 in the following years of 2017 and 2018.

The results can be seen in the following Table 2, making remarkable that in all continents humor has been used almost 50% of its ads except of Asia in which there is just a 36% in 2017 and 25% in 2018. This number is not that representative because the number of Asian countries involved in the index are not that high or they just produce one single advertising campaign per country, making a total number of just 11 campaigns being included in the list in 2017 and 12 in 2018, even so, it is going to be taken into account in the study because the importance of the internationalization of humor that is being examined as well as it is usual that given the small number of advertisements within the total index, the percentage that will use humor is already expected to be lower compared to the rest of the continents.

In average, humor has been used worldwide in 44% of the advertising campaigns in 2016, 47% of the ads of 2017 and 56% in 2018, which shows a tendency of growth from year to year.

In the next tables, the information is divided by continents for the easier understanding of the data. The number of advertising campaigns, advertising campaign with the usage of humor, percentage of humor by continent and the representativeness of each continent are the data reflected subtracted from the research (Tables 3 and 4).

<b>Table 2</b> <b>NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF ADS WITH AND WITHOUT HUMOR IN EACH CONTINENT IN 2016</b>				
<b>Country</b>	<b>Campaigns</b>	<b>Campaign with humor</b>	<b>Percentage of humor</b>	<b>Representativeness</b>
Europe	35	20	57%	39%
Asia	24	10	42%	20%
North America	24	13	54%	25%
South America	2	1	50%	2%
Oceania	12	5	42%	10%
Africa	0	0	0%	0%
Global	3	2	67%	4%
Total	100	51	44%	

Source: Own elaboration from the statistical data extracted from the Warc (2016)

<b>Table 3</b> <b>NUMBER &amp; PERCENTAGE OF ADS WITH AND WITHOUT HUMOR IN EACH CONTINENT IN 2017</b>				
<b>Country</b>	<b>Campaigns</b>	<b>Campaign with humor</b>	<b>Percentage of humor</b>	<b>Representativeness</b>
Europe	29	15	52%	30%
Asia	11	4	36%	8%
North America	38	20	53%	40%
South America	3	1	33%	2%
Oceania	16	9	56%	18%
Africa	1	1	100%	2%
Global	1	0	0%	0%
Total	100	50	47%	100%

Source: Own elaboration from the statistical data extracted from the Warc (2017)

<b>Table 4</b> <b>NUMBER &amp; PERCENTAGE OF ADS WITH AND WITHOUT HUMOR IN EACH CONTINENT IN 2018</b>				
<b>Country</b>	<b>Campaigns</b>	<b>Campaigns with humor</b>	<b>Percentage of humor</b>	<b>Representativeness</b>
Europe	25	10	40%	21%
Asia	12	3	25%	6%
North America	38	20	53%	43%
South America	6	4	67%	9%
Oceania	18	9	50%	19%
Africa	1	1	100%	2%
Total	100	47	47%	100%

Source: Own elaboration from the statistical data extracted from the Warc (2018)

The last column is giving us the information of how representative is each of the continents, so from lower to higher representativeness in 2016 are Africa, South America, Oceania, Asia, North America and Europe, in 2017 the position changes a little bit with the following order Africa, South America, Asia, Oceania, Europe and North America.

The most significant change has been the increase of Oceania, increasing its usage of humor in eight points. In 2018 the order is Africa, Asia, South America, Oceania, Europe and North America, being this year very representative as we can see a clear evolution of the continents.

Almost all data remain in the same position in the last two years, the only ones which exchange position between each other are South America and Asia and its due to the fact the South America has increased its number of ads in the index, by doubling them and using humor in 67% of them while Asia although it has increased with one more add in the index, it continues to use the same amount of humor.

Once seen the use of humor distributed by continents, the products involved in the analysis have been analyzed and therefore, among them, seen if there has been used the style of humor, to further consolidate the data and check whether the statements mentioned before by Spotts Weinberger and Limbu, among others, remain in force or the current situation tends towards other types of products in terms of the use of humor in advertising.

Finally, the agencies who designed those advertising campaign have been examined in order to look for a possible pattern or discover any possibility of improvement. Every year, there are new agencies in the ranking, already awarded agencies which got a higher position in the index, already awarded agencies which got a lower position in the index and those whose data were not available, which are described as others (Tables 5 and 6).

<b>Table 5</b>			
<b>AGENCIES INVOLVED IN 2017 AND THEIR POSITION WITH RESPECT TO 2016</b>			
<b>New Agencies</b>	<b>Higher position</b>	<b>Lower position</b>	<b>Other</b>
33	54	12	1

Source: Own elaboration from the statistical data extracted from the WARC (2016)

<b>Table 6</b>			
<b>AGENCIES INVOLVED IN 2018 AND THEIR POSITION WITH RESPECT TO 2017</b>			
<b>New agencies</b>	<b>Higher position</b>	<b>Lower position</b>	<b>Other</b>
34	33	25	8

Source: Own elaboration from the statistical data extracted from the Warc (2017)

The high number of new agencies represents the great competitiveness that exists between advertising agencies year after year. Consequently, it is difficult to maintain the position or raise it thanks to the achievement of more prizes in different competitions, it is why there are many agencies that fall positions even staying among the hundred bests in effectiveness in the world.

<b>Table 7</b>	
<b>CORRELATION BETWEEN THE USAGE OF HUMOR &amp; THE POSITION IN THE RANKING IN 2017</b>	
Agencies that have humor and higher position	17
Agencies that have no humor and higher position	14
Agencies that have humor and lower position	12
Agencies that have no humor and lower position	11
New agencies with humor	15
New agencies without humor	15
Others	16

Source: Own elaboration from the statistical data extracted from the Warc (2017)

<b>Table 8</b>	
<b>CORRELATION BETWEEN THE USAGE OF HUMOR &amp; THE POSITION IN THE RANKING IN 2018</b>	
Agencies that have humor and higher position	29
Agencias that have no humor and higher position	23
Agencias that have humor and lower position	7
Agencies that have no humor and a lower position	5
New agencies with humor	14
New agencies without humor	17
Others	5

Source: Own elaboration from the statistical data extracted from the Warc (2018)



Therefore, many agencies may not be included in the list of most effective due to the figures they have achieved, but they are in the other mentioned due to the high creative quality involved in their campaigns.

It's important to look not only at the simple numbers of each agencies but to deep inside the data in order to know more details. There is a correlation between the agencies that have acquired a higher or lower position due to the fact that they have used humor or not (Tables 7 and 8).

## DISCUSSION

This study has been conducted based on the Warc index of the 100 most effective ads in 2017 and 2018, we can say that the most used advertising outcomes to measure effectiveness such as attention, persuasion, recall, memorability, attitude towards ad and attitude towards the brand, they are assumed as positives, that is, they are variables that should not be studied since the analyzed campaigns have already been proven valid and effective with respect to these variables.

With respect to the internationalization and globalization of the project, the study conducted involved around 20 countries representing all continents around the globe, making the research an international one to offer the possibility to compare different countries and the internationalization of the usage of humor among them. As extracted from the data above, in 2016 all continents used at least 40% of humorous ads, being Europe and North America the leading ones with a 57% and 54% of humorous ads. In the next year of 2017, the same countries were the leading ones with percentages of 52% and 53% respectively, although other countries differ in their percentages in those years, it is due to the increase or decrease in the number of campaigns involved in the index during those years, as they are not that stable as Europe and North America. In 2018, the average of humor used is almost the same as in the 2017 and 2016, having a 47% of humorous ads, maintaining North America a 53% and Europe a 40%. This is due to the fact that, as already mentioned, those regions allocate a greater number of money to ad spending, and therefore, they maintain a more stable ad growth because they are more developed countries, with similar cultures in which advertisements can be standardized more easily.

While areas such as Asia and South America experience very high growth rates in advertisements, and therefore the use of humor is still being done experimentally and the values of these cultures are more difficult to standardize, therefore, the use of adapting advertising campaigns in these areas is more natural, although over the years we are facing a formalization in the use of humor, in the sense that each time it has a more similar meaning the use of certain tools of humor same the region in which we are. However, we must not forget that the cultural difference will always be present due to the customs, values and norms of each country and that adaptation will always be a recurring outlet among advertising agencies.

## CONCLUSION

There is a clear tendency in which the developing countries are increasing their participation during the last years, making the percentage of participation per continent more equal. The high participation of North America in the index as well as Europe can be explained due to many factors as the higher development of the countries in those continents, a better understanding of the market since they have been involved through more years than the others, higher GPD and marketing rates, among others. Among the total number of advertising

campaigns, each of them has been examined in order to see if the use of humor has been used as a style of advertisement or a combination of humor and others.

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