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Title: Is it funny or just offensive: an examination of the relationship between humour and offence in UK advertising

Creators: Mortimer, K., Pascoe, K. and Ogilvie-Johns, G.

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Is it funny or just offensive? An examination of the relationship between humour and offence in UK advertising

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between offence and humour in advertising. One only needs to watch a stand up comic to appreciate that these two emotions are often closely linked. The relationship is also becoming increasingly evident in advertising as brands compete to create a modern, entertaining and witty personality. But when and why does an advertisement move from being funny to being offensive? This study firstly looks at the literature on both humour and offense in advertising and brings them together to establish areas of commonality. This knowledge is then used to analyse advertisements that were complained about to the ASA in 2009 which contained both humour and offense. These cases are examined to find out how offence is created and the type of humour that is creating this offence. The implications of the findings for practitioners and regulatory bodies are then discussed.

Offensive advertising

Offensive advertising has been described as being “provocative images, words or situations that utilise or refer to taboo subjects or that violate societal norms or values” (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson, 2008). Mainstream research on offensive advertising defines the cause of the offense in two ways. Firstly the product itself can be deemed controversial or socially sensitive (Waller, 1999) and considered by some to be “not suitable for public display or open discussion” (Chan et al, 2007:608). Secondly, the advertisement itself can be perceived as offensive, even when promoting an uncontroversial product such as a soft drink. This execution based controversy appears to be growing in order to cut through the ‘clutter’, gain attention and achieve brand awareness (Brown 2001; Pope, Voges, and Brown 2004; Mortimer 2007). Waller (1999) researched what causes people to be offended and identified six reasons namely: racism, anti-social behaviour, sexism, subject too personal, indecent language and nudity. The use of racism and anti-social behavior were considered the most offensive with nudity considered to be the least.

Advertisements can be perceived to be offensive by some people and quite acceptable by others. This is because perception of offence is influenced by the audience demography, type of product, and medium, (Christy and Haley, 2008). Research has shown that males and younger people have a greater level of acceptance for controversial campaigns, which has resulted in advertisers overtly using sexual or violent images to attract younger people (Reichert 2003; Waller and Fam 2003; Waller 2005). Conversely females are found to be more offended in general than males and also offended by ‘sexist advertisements’ and advertisements using ‘indecent language’ (Waller,1999). In a study across four different countries Ford et al (1997) found that females responded to advertisements that contained offensive female role portrayals by forming a critical perception of the ‘sponsoring company’ and in some cases this led to a greater propensity by the respondents to exercise their ‘economic power’ and boycott the purchase of the product. Waller (2004) reinforced this finding by establishing that controversial advertising can result in negative

publicity, complaints, lower sales and the worst scenario of consumers boycotting the product. Therefore, Waller (2004) advises that adverts that plan to use controversial appeals need to tread carefully, as the consequence could be consumers being personally offended. Waller concludes that where adverts use controversial tactics, then extra care should be taken not to use 'racist', 'sexist' or 'violent images', especially when targeting women. Ultimately advertisements that cause offense can 'reflect poorly on the brand and the agency behind the brand' Waller (2004:7).

The relationship between humour and offence

Humour is a message strategy that is widely used across all media types and product categories. Weinberger and Gulas (1992), from a review of over fifty articles, concluded that humour is able to increase attention and enhance liking for the advertisement which has been found to create a more positive and emotional bond to the brand itself (Batra and Ray, 1986). In a similar way to offence, humour is a personal perception which can vary considerably from person to person and again, it is successful in reaching younger people and males (Weinberger and Spots, 1989). This may be one of the reasons why humour and offence are linked. An interesting study by Van Zanten (2005) provides some evidence of this. The study examined beer advertisements that had been complained about in Australia. Here the target audience is mainly young males and the advertisements contained aggressive and sexual humour to reach them which caused offence to other people. A person's perception of whether an advertisement is amusing or not can also be influenced by the type of programming that it is slotted between, the media that it is utilising and the product that is being advertised (Fugate, 1998). Studies also indicate that it is more effective for low involvement products (Chung and Zhao, 2003).

The recognition that humour may be perceived by some as offensive is not a new phenomenon. Beard (2008) suggests that such concerns were aired during the late 1920s when humour started to be recognized as a possible way to communicate a message. However, since the 1980's it has been noted that the type of humour being used in advertising is becoming more aggressive and consequently the possibility of creating offense is increasing (Beard, 2008). Aggressive humour is one of the various types of humour that have been identified. Indeed, aggressive humour is evident in one of the first attempts to classify humour, undertaken by Freud (as cited in Van Zanten, 2005) who proposed that humour could be placed in three categories, Nonsense, which is innocent humour, Aggressive and Sexual. Table 1 presents the main taxonomies in the literature and attempts to identify the links between them.

The first category can loosely be described in terms of silliness or nonsense. It is light-hearted and generally harmless e.g. funny faces and slap-stick humour. This may also include a play on words (i.e. pun) and contain an element of surprise. Humour then moves into a more aggressive category containing such forms as satire, put-down, and sarcasm. In the Raskin taxonomy it is referred to as Disparagement and based on "hostility, superiority, malice aggression, derision or disparagement with a social or interpersonal content" (Shebbir and Thwaites, 2007). Freud also has a sexual category which can be linked to Raskin's negative arousal-safety where social

norms and acceptability are being challenged. The two categories of Aggressive and Sexual are those areas that are more likely to cause offense.

Table 1: Types of Humour

Freud (1905)	Toncar (2001)	Catanescu and Tom (2001)	Raskin (1985)
Nonsense	Pun	Pun	Positive Arousal-safety
	Ludicrous	Silliness	
	Joke		
		Surprise	Incongruity-resolution
Aggressive	Satire	Put-down	Disparagement
	Irony	Sarcasm	
Sexual			Negative Arousal-safety

There is very little written on these different sorts of humour and their impact in advertising and none of them have been based on the UK.. Catanescu and Tom (2001) found that the type of humour used in the US depended on the media choice with Sarcasm being the most popular form in magazines and Silliness in television.

The study by Van Zanten (2005) on consumer complaints of alcohol advertisements in Australia found that 87% of the advertisements contained humour. Within that 87%, 51% were classified as Aggressive and 23% contained Sexual content, leaving 21% being considered nonsense or innocent humour. The study concluded that using humour was a risky strategy and needed to be used with caution due to the idiosyncratic response by viewers.

The most relevant research to this study is that of Beard (2008) who undertook the first empirical study into the link between humour and offence in advertising. He achieved this by examining consumer complaint adjudication reports from New Zealand and utilised the Raskin taxonomy of humour types to analyse the reports. He found that 40% of the advertisement that were complained about for being offensive contained humour. In terms of type of humour, 86% of the advertisement that contained offense and humour were using resonant wit (combination of arousal-safety and incongruity-resolution). Unfortunately he does not provide a clear explanation of example of this type of humour

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between offence and humour in UK advertising which, to the authors' knowledge has not previously been explored. This was achieved by examining adjudications from the UK Advertising Standards Authority. The study builds on the findings of Beard (2008), whose work was based in New Zealand. However it adopted a more interpretisim approach due to the lack of research in this area with the objective of establishing some hypothesis that could be tested in a later study. Our source of information was the reports available on the ASA website (ASA, 2002) for advertisements that received complains of offence during 2009 and utilised humour as a defence.

Our search revealed that seventeen humorous advertisements in 2009 were complained about and eleven of these were found to be offensive (the others were considered to be irresponsible or misleading). These advertisements were examined with reference to the type of product, media type and humour, using the Reick's taxonomy. The results of the analysis can be seen in Table 2.

Results

The table shows that the eleven advertisements were being used to promote a range of goods and services, from oven cleaner to a dating agency. It is interesting to note that all the products being promoted are of low involvement, as the literature would suggest. Seven of the products could be identified as mainly aimed at men and younger people which would also support previous findings on the most receptive target audience. In this selection of advertisements there are examples of racism, sexism as well as homophobia and humour at the expense of mentally challenged people and people struggling to conceive a child. Three advertisements contained sexual innuendos and one contained indecent language.

Out of the eleven advertisements, there are two types of humour being used. Seven of the advertisements contained examples of Disparagement humour. This type of humour is at the expense of something or someone. There is normally a victim and the attack can be in the form of satire, a put-down or sarcasm (Beard, 2008). One example from our sample is the advertisement for Uncle Ben stir fry advertisement. The "dad" in the kitchen is pretending to be Chinese and is waving his hands around and adopting a Chinese accent. Complaints stated that the advertisement portrayed a negatively stereotype of Chinese people.

The second type of humour being found offensive was Negative Arousal-safety humour which Beard (2008) defines as "a violation of social standards, conventions, norms and taboos". In our examples all the advertisements contained shocking sexual innuendos. One example is the Mattesons smoked sausages advertisement which received 21 complaints. This radio commercial included lines such as "Tell me where you'd like to stick it". Although the ASA agreed that the advertisement should be scheduled away from times where children listen it was not deemed to be offensive.

Table 2: Eleven offensive advertisements where humour was used as a defence

	Product/ service	Type of offence	ASA Decision	Media Type	Type of humour
Gaydar	Dating agency	Homophobic	N	Internet	Disparagement
Boffer	IT software	Refers fertility problems	N	Internet	Disparagement
Endon Ford Garage	Garage	Racist to Irish people	N	Radio	Disparagement
Paramount pictures	Film	Indecent language	Y	TV	Arousal-safety
Home Pride	Oven cleaner	Sexism	N	TV	Disparagement
Britvic/Tango	Soft drink	Sexual innuendos	N	Posters	Arousal-safety
Mattesons	Sausages	Sexual innuendos	PY	Radio	Arousal-safety
Bognor Motors	Garage	Refers to being “mental”	Y	Radio	Disparagement
Lynx Bullet	Body spray	Sexual innuendos	N	TV/cinema/posters	Arousal-safety
Uncle Bens	Stir fry	Racist to Chinese people	N	TV	Disparagement
Ulster Trader	Car magazine	Sexism	Y	Poster	Disparagement

Conclusion

This research examined the relationship between offence and humour in UK advertising for the first time. It was found that during 2009 eleven “humorous” advertisements were complained about to the ASA for causing offence. A closer look revealed that all of these advertisements contained humour classified as Disparagement or Negative Arousal-safety. This finding supports the literature in that these types of humour have been identified as “risky” due to them being based on breaking social norms and laughing at the expense of others. The majority of the advertisements were aimed at men who have been identified as a receptive target group for this approach. However the choice of media would suggest that these advertisements are also being seen by others, presumably including older people and females. As only three of the complaints were upheld by the ASA it would seem that these advertisers have succeeded in creating “risky” advertisements that appeal to their audience and, in the views of the ASA, do not cause offence. As one advertiser put it “The brand is known for its cheeky and unconventional sense of humour which appeals to the target audience”. But does it have to be done at the expense of others? The answer to that question seems to be yes. The ASA must ensure that all views are given equal weighting and preserve social standards that are acceptable by all.

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