HUMOR AS A MEANS TO EMPHASIZE THE LOCAL FEATURES OF ROMANIAN ADVERTISING[1]

Abstract: *This study aims to demonstrate the way humor appeals to consumers in order to make them more receptive to brand image and product benefits they are interested of. This research focuses on the Romanian market, due to a matter that really deserves further consideration: the necessity of discovering the specific and original features of local commercials. At first sight, advertising is mostly seen as a creative field; however, the most important question this study is trying to address is the way local brands reflect the Romanian spirit. Globalization is based on preserving the same pattern and creative tools regardless of the space the consumer belongs to. Hybridization consists in weaving global with local features in order to better attract the target audience. For this reason, international brands get closer to customers by borrowing their way to live and to enjoy life.*

This research intends to outline humor types and to bring to light a few profiles of commercial heroes who help consumers identify with them and associate products with a relaxed mood. We aim to make a connection between humor types, product categories, advertising formats, commercials topics, and protagonist portrayals. The research method we are going to use is content analysis, applied in qualitative and quantitative manner. The study is carried out by the previous criteria (humor types, product categories, advertising formats, commercials topics, and protagonist portrayals), which lead us to reveal humor features and its role in local advertising. The sample consists in 50 TV commercials broadcast on Romanian channels in the national language, belonging to global or local brands. We chose to analyze TV spots because visual language enriches verbal communication and, obviously, diversifies humor approach.

The classification of humor relies on two perspectives: first, on the cognitive processes that generate humor, which are incongruity-resolution, confusion, humorous disparagement, and, second, the taxonomy of these types based on humor devices such as parody, sarcasm, irony, satire, wordplay, stereotype, or casual jokes. Our main hypothesis is that each cultural space is represented by some specific humor types that describe local consumer's profile, their lifestyle and society values shared by Romanian commercials. We also think that humor helps global brands become more familiar to local customers, and that this strategy reflects the way the glocalization phenomenon works.

Keywords: *humor, advertising, consumer.*

Humor effects on consumers and brands in advertising

Our first aim is to reveal the role of humor in communicating an advertising message from the points of view of the consumer, commercial success, brand retention. Synthetically, we are interested to observe the way humor touches the consumers and improves brand image.

According to Sternthal and Craig, humor has an essential impact on message comprehension, persuasion, communication source and audience characteristics (Sternthal, Craig, 1973:12-18). Message comprehension regards the way a commercial message may be understood by consumers depending on humor types. Persuasion deals with the influence different arguments have on buying behaviour. The communication source deals with improving the message by alluring consumers due to the attractive

[1] Mădălina Moraru (Buga), University of Bucharest, morarumadalina@hotmail.com.

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features of ads. The audience characteristics provide the necessary information to find a suitable "sense of humor" more touching for consumers.

Other researchers focus on thinking about the cognitive and psychological processes and associations good commercials develop in consumers' minds. For example, Strick mentioned the incongruity-resolution theory of humor that illustrates the mechanism of conveying the message in a funny way: "According to this theory, two phases are characteristic to humor processing; a cognitive and an affective one. In the cognitive phase, a schema incongruity has to be resolved in order to *get the joke*. After the" incongruency resolution", the joke is perceived as funny, which represents the affective phase." (Strick et alli 2009:1) Obviously, humor relevance depends on product qualities and consumer insight.

The most important aspect is analysing the relationship between humor resources and consumer cultural insight, given that each market has its own features and audience segmentation. Humor perception, as well as the sense of humor differs due to educational levels, age, gender, culture, ethnicity, subculture. Some jokes are local and some are adapted to a specific area. Therefore, even if a creative strategy is globally homogenous, different cultures react differently to humor.

Our research is based on a Gulas and Weinberger's statement: "Humor is a paradox. It's universal and it is individualized. It's found in every culture throughout history, and yet it is specific to time and place" (Gulas, Weinberger, 2006: 54). A hilarious commercial message targets mass average consumers but the audience responds to it individually. Romanian cultural background, the Communism fingerprint, history and popular culture features personalize local consumers, whose sense of humor tends to be sarcastic, sometimes self-deprecating or irreverent. Mentalities and lifestyles demand a particular approach of using humor according to the consumers' country of origin.

Weinberger and Spotts made a comparison between U.S. and U.K. humor, focusing on TV commercials, concluding that "in both countries, humor is a device to deliver serious product messages" and "differences in the style of humor used by the two countries were subtle with greater use of the pun and satire in British commercials". (Weinberger, Spotts, 1989: 43) They investigated this problem by using the FCB Planning model that helps classify product decision making according to two dimensions: high/low involvement and thinking/feeling.

Research Method:

The main corpus of our research consists of 50 TV commercials broadcast on the Romanian market and they were selected according to a couple of very precise reasons. First, all commercials built their message in a humorous manner by using different attention-getting techniques. Second, the selected ads equally belong to local and global brands that advertise in Romanian media. We decided to pay attention to audio-video ads, instead of other commercial format due to their richness that relies on visual synaesthesia and suggestion. Humor varies from simple smiling or a touch of irony to extreme hilarity. This research has been driven by quantitative and qualitative analysis, according to the following variables that will provide us with the main information by answering the questions below. We are interested in finding out the quantitative results, first, and, second, to explain them according to the relationship between brand-consumer-product. Next, we will reveal and discuss quantitative results.

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The main assumption of our research is that humor is often related to either product or consumer, and supported by brain teasers and wordplay.

Which product category does most often use humor to express the brand message?

This study contains a corpus of ads that regards the following range of products:

Nr. crt.	Product categories	Brands	Number of ads
1.	Alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks	Cavadoro, Unirea, Stejar, Zaraza, Romulus, Crai, Bergenbier, Bucegi, Ciuc, Neumarkt, Giusto.	16 ads
2.	Phones and Communication	Romtelecom, Germanos, Orange, Vodafone, Cosmote.	9 ads
3.	Banks and insurances	Banca Transilvania, CEC, BCR, Millenium Bank, Astra.	5 ads
4.	Coffee, chocolate	Jakobs, Rom, Oreo, Milka.	4 ads
	Diary	Tnuva (Fabrica Măriucăi, Zuzu, Danone	4 ads
5.	Electric appliances	Altex.	2 ads
	Meat treats	Campofrio, Salam săsesc.	2 ads
	Media	Antena 1	2 ads
	Corns	Nutline	2 ads
	Building materials and paints	Savana, Dedeman.	2 ads
6.	Hygiene products	Pampers	1 ad
	Cars	Dacia	1 ad

In the previous chart we compared products with abstract benefits (drinks, phones, insurances) and concrete benefits like food, cars and appliances. In the first category humor is crucial for expressing brands values. Many drinks, such as vine, beer, cognac, brandy, rum and juice encourage a friendly and humorous attitude. The commercial tone does not vary according to the educational or social level of the consumers, but gets a similar effect by using direct or indirect humor sources. The other half of our corpus focuses on consumers during their daily routine (driving, eating a sandwich, drinking a coffee).

What kind of format do the audio-video ads develop?

Investigating the format of the chosen commercials, our research aims to find a connection between humor types and message context. Parody is the best represented structure (in 13 ads), very closely followed by dialogue, with 12 commercials. Allegory, another form of humor, has been identified in 6 ads, while satire and slice- of- life (5 ads for each of them) focus on the narrative and dynamic aspects. Simple jokes (in 4 ads), stories (3 ads), comedies and animations (are only briefly represented in 2 ads). A situation becomes a parody when a mundane aspect of life is unusually perceived as a ridiculous or inappropriate reaction of a character. Feelings and relationships are

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parodied most of the time, make characters play stupidly or childish. Instead of looking for the best explanation, it is more desirable to give a self-spoken example. For example, in a Millenium Bank commercial, nephew tries everything possible and impossible to make his aunt happy in order to inherit her house, because he cannot afford a bank loan. While the old woman is riding a bike indoors, he even tries to make her feel she is enjoying fresh air and everything she wishes for. Where is the parody effect? The relationship between nephew and aunt is motivated by pure financial interest, not by real feelings. Beside familial and emotional implication, this parody reflects the fact that in Romanian society, owning a house is almost impossible for the young generation.

Who/what is the humor object in the analyzed ads?

Having fun implies finding the appropriate way to be listened and understood by someone, and to discover what the audience may be interested in. According to Gulas and Weinberger "the humor process typically includes an agent, an object, and an audience" (Gulas, Weinberger, *op. cit.:* 38). Obviously, the agent tells the joke to an audience and the object is the topic. The relationship between agent and object varies according to context and joke purpose. Advertising aims to overlay the people who get the wit of the spot with the consumers, and the humor object is either the product, the consumer, or the joke-teller himself. In the last case, it is a self-deprecating humor, and the ad is a monologue.

To answer the previous question, we looked for what makes commercial audience laugh. The quantitative results help us understand the different types of humor, and the balance between all factors involved in conveying an amusing message. In most ads, the consumer is the laughing-stock and represents 64% of the entire corpus, (preciously 32 ads) closely followed by possible consumers (10% of the corpus-5 ads). Obviously, this analysis emphasizes the distinction between consumer, non-consumer and buyer, but also suggests that making the right decision and choice is a complex process. Product as well as services could be a good reason to laugh, because of the context they are presented in 10% of our corpus (5 ads)

In 8% of the selected ads (4 ads) characters, which are not connected to the product or service, become hilarious even if they are not visibly connected with it. In such ads, the product or service make the beginning of a special atmosphere or a funny situation. Non-consumers are invited from two points of view: as an invitation to consume the product by joining others consumers (the Millenium Bank aunt ad or to highlight their style and class in the Zaraza ad). Zaraza is a middle-priced cognac, positioned as a drink for cultivated consumers who are aware that Kafka is not a Czech football player, and who do not mistake the blue print of a bill for shopping malls: *Zaraza greets those who don't believe 5 Lei banknote pictures the new shopping-mall is, and who appreciate our greatest historian* (Nicolae Iorga*) even when on a 1 Leu bill. From Zaraza, for the authentic Romanian gentlemen, respect only.*

With 4% each (in 2 ads for each of them), buyer and politics are equally represented in our research as a good reason to start laughing. Politics is used by Bucegi beer as a favourite topic, in spite of an atypical approach of humor and the unusual values promoted by it. For example, in an ad, family celebrates a grandfather's anniversary and someone tells the guest to be quiet, to avoid surcharge according to the new taxes requested by the Romanian integration into EU. Humor arises from the political situation as well as the grandfather's deafness. Everyone is laughing around the

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table, considering the Romanian integration into EU as a funny event: *Don't worry, we can say that your grandpa spoke on the phone because he is a war veteran, so he doesn't pay any taxes.*

Who is the author of funny moments in commercials?

According to our research, there is a real gender discrepancy amongst the characters that trigger humorous situations, with males being responsible for most funny situations (in 23 commercials), and female heroes only in 8 ads, regardless of product category. Madden and Weinberger considered that "humor seems to work best for younger and well-educated consumers, particularly for males" (apud Eisend, 2009:193). In some spots, a group of people interacts humorously either to the entire family (7 commercials), or friends and other member of community members (6 ads). Children take the mickey out much rarely (in only 4 commercials), at least in our corpus, usually humoring grown-ups. In an Oreo commercial a boy teaches his father the ritual of eating these cookies, and steals his father's cookie before he can eat it, having a lot of fun seeing his reaction. In only 2 ads, nature and environment are funny; for instance, in a Milka commercial a bear and a marmot play pretend Santa. Just before giving the presents, the bear sneezes and he provokes a snow slip from the roof. Both animals are buried under snow, and when children hear the noise, get out and see two statues holding in their paws a chocolate Santa.

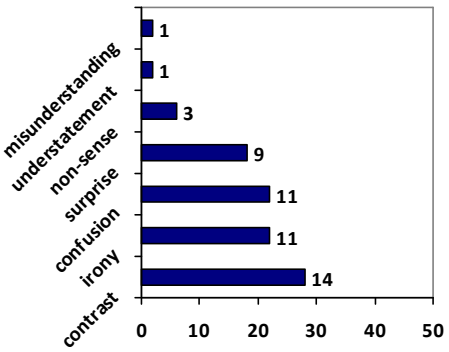
What are the semantic aspects of humor in the selected corpus?

Studying what makes people laugh, Viktor Raskin elaborated the semantic script theory that humor works like a psychological incongruity-resolution theory. In his view, most messages perceived by human mind contain oppositions. For example, a funny story has a real or unreal situation, meaning non-fictional and fictional, and very well anchored into a specific context. According to this theory, this antinomy is classified as: (1) actual situation versus non-actual, no existing situations; (2) normal, expected situations versus non-normal, unexpected situations; and (3), possible situations versus fully or partially impossible situations. (apud Beard, 2008: 42). To detail the concept of *incongruity-based humor*, our research aims to discover a few semantic types that help people reveal the funny things and getting the meaning of a spot. This research focuses on the following seven categories: irony, contrast, confusion, surprise, nonsense, understatement, and misunderstanding. The chart below emphasizes the role of using contrast in conveying a commercial message by giving the watcher the chance to compare two different situations, so that s/he is able to get the meaning as an explosive revelation. Contrast origins vary from social, ethnic, economic, financial, educational to gender issues. In one of our commercials for the brand Altex, entitled *Apgreidin* (the Romanian pronunciation for the English "Upgrading"), a gypsy-woman collects old electronic appliances like computers, instead of empty bottles and jars, walking on a Bucharest street. The contrasts are pretty obvious: although she asks for broken laptops, she cannot pronounce the object name also, she uses English words (upgrade), but drives a horse cart. Even her son's name proves the "upgrade", because he is called "Mouse".

Irony and confusion represent almost a half of the entire corpus, either encountered implicitly (in case of irony), or explicitly (for confusion). To be clearer, confusion is based on complicated situations, while irony on wordplay or connotation

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and other abstract means. Next surprise in this hierarchy consists in creating unexpected situations. For example, in a Bergenbier commercial, a young man cannot find a Christmas present for his girlfriend, because it was too late for shopping anything, so he gets her nothing less than a stray dog. Other aspects identified at this point of the research regard the partial understanding of the message given incomplete or incoherent data provided by the commercials that make people laugh either because of the characters, atmosphere or ridiculous situations. Everything seems to be part of an exotic cocktail of impressions, feelings, paradoxes and silly happenings.



What is the role of visual and linguistic elements in conveying a funny commercial message?

Choosing TV commercials as a research sample, we aim to discover how the funny message is achieved visually and verbally through visual stories which work in tight synergy, as shown by some types such as: comic of situation, of language, comic of character, of name. According to our research, visual and linguistic tools dominate (in 34 ads), and the rest of the sample is equally distributed between exclusively visual and verbal elements, (in 16 ads). This percentage is very well sustained, given to the commercials format that appeals to interesting tools like synaesthesia and suggestion.
Further, we are interested in discovering which of the linguistic tools are used to make people laugh or give them a feeling of familiarity. Many techniques (words play, exaggeration, repetition, words deformation, negation, diminutives) either deform the way characters speak or show their spontaneous reactions to changes and unexpected events.

The quantitative data reveals that wordplay is the most widely used and efficient tactic (in 22 ads). For example, in the well-known Unirea cognac ad series the main character, Dorel (who is the youngest worker) becomes the mockery of his colleagues. He manually tries to discharge a tip lorry with sand, and, at the end, the driver activates the automatic system so the bulk is down in a couple a seconds which makes all his efforts completely useless. Dorel lies on the sand and his colleagues laugh at him: *What's up, Dorel? Have you swallowed all the sand from the seashore?*

The second linguistic technique, hyperbole (indentified in8 ads) is characterized by using superlatives or depicting things in an unrealistic way. Repetition is another way to emphasize the funny message underlined by the annoying insistence of one of the character, as you can see in 5 ads of our sample. For example, the father

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verbally repeats the entire ritual of eating a cookie Changing the age role and listening to his cunning son, the father is quite funny.

Similarly, protagonistes misspronounce English words such as "Bluetooth" (*Germanos*), "mouse", "up-grade", "laptop" (Altex-*Apgreidin*) or create unusual words such as "ciocoflender" in Astra ad. Even if this word does not mean anything, people associate it with the actor Florin Piersic who often played in comedies and his celebrity still impressed his funny schetkes. This linguistic characteristic/issue is provided by 4 commercials of the selected sample. Negation (only in 2 ads) emphasizes the opposite meaning, the positive aspect, by creating a stronger effect. For example, negation dominates in Zaraza commercials as you can see from the first words: *Zaraza says hello to everyone who doesn't show up on magazines covers, who doesn't own expensive cars, young fancy women or political and spectacular careers*. Diminutives are also funny, but they are provided by one single ad of the sample, no matter how old someone talking like that is, either children, or grew-ups.

Conclusions

To conclude, Romanian advertising often touches consumers by lightening the mood (alcoholic or non-alcoholic drinks, mobile phones, communications tools, banks and insurances). The joke teller is the man, most of the time, and the humor object is usually represented by consumers or potential consumers. Humor is often used to present product benefits. Obviously, there is a dynamic process from the cognitive to the affective phase of humor and the result consists in getting the joke and including the product in the consumer's life.

The final revelation of meaning depends on semantic and linguistic strategies, whose role is to build comic situations and characters around product stories. Contrast becomes the main semantic tactic that shows people the alternatives in a funny way and persuades them to make the right choice. Humor types and strategies reflect local mentalities, life-styles and views on ordinary life, and the success of such commercials relies on how authentic the characters and their stories are. Therefore, humor brings global brands close to local consumers by adapting universal values to the Romanian mentality and perspective.

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