

Introduction

The magic of humor has done wonders in interpersonal communication. Its light, fun nature may characterize an interesting communication exchange. The delivery of a joke or an unexpected remark could trigger a humorous situation, eliciting a smile, a chuckle or a boisterous laughter as feedback. An icebreaker is ideal to create a good impression or an escape from an awkward situation. A private joke does not fail to crack up a group of friends whom are never tired to hear it over and over again. Humor opens new communication lines and maintains established ones. Known as a form of entertainment and a medium of socialization, humor is perceived to be an expression of optimism or otherwise, for it could also be deemed offensive based on personal tastes and social norms. Fields of sociology, anthropology and most especially, psychology have studied humor in relation to the society, its members and institutions and their culture. Laughter from humor could be the best medicine, as the cliché suggests, but aside from humor's ability to release happy human hormones called endorphins and its cathartic ability to moderate and relieve stress, humor has also worked its magic in another area: marketing communication.

Marketing manages different areas such as product conceptualization, pricing strategy, modes of entry, market research and communication strategies. Such strategies are well-thought of and carefully crafted to reach target consumers with the right messages at the right time. Advertising has a vital role in the marketing communications mix because even if it is regarded as a one-way form of communication, it is a cost-effective tool with a wide reach of audience that can inform and influence their perceptions about the brand, its core values and the people's level of awareness of such (Belch and Belch, 2007). However, with the brands fighting for the consumers' attention through their screaming taglines, massive advertising spaces and vivid visual images, the consumers demand and seek more than these obvious elements. Advertising campaigns with creative concepts, fascinating 30-second plots and witty punch lines step out of the advertising clutter and receive their desired edge among the competition. In comes the magic of humor.

Humor gives an extra flavor to the conventional nature of advertisements that provide

direct yet relevant information about the products they sell. Humor's natural twists of surprise and variety fulfill the ad's general marketing communication objectives: to entertain and most importantly, to sell.

Nevertheless, due to factors such as globalization, where competition intensifies and the consumers are empowered by the free flow of information, there is indeed a strong challenge to stand out above the rest, not only with the aims to become a global leader and get ahead in the domestic level, but also to be an instant and seemingly natural choice of the consumers in making their purchasing decisions. Nowadays, when brands could cross over and transcend geographical distances, the use of humor in advertisements recognizes cultural differences as a factor in attempting to conceptualize and execute a campaign. In a larger picture, such differences across cultures are a major consideration in the standardization of advertising campaigns, which concerns global brands such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola and the like.

In reference to the cliché, "Laughter is the best medicine", this thesis now views laughter, or humor in general, as the best marketing pitch to sell to the consumers. As a non-rational appeal, humor joins with fear, drama and sex in the use of emotions to build a media-simulated relationship with their audience and then convince them to patronize their products. Certainly, fear coerces people to remove the threat; drama touches the heart, and sex sells; but humor makes the audience put their guards down. Disarming them from cynicism or even from the split second urge to change the channel during commercial breaks is important to pave the way for possible communication. Anholt (2000, p.145), "as advertising messages proliferate, it becomes even more necessary to win over consumers before lethargy or resistance set in."

Therefore, this research posed these questions:

How do television advertisements that are shown in the United States and the Philippines present humor as a tool to deliver their main marketing messages?

Are there any similarities and differences between the advertisements from both countries?

Numerous researches about humor and its role in advertising in American ads were done through the years, as the literature review would show later on. In fact, comparative quantitative studies between United States and other countries such as United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, etc. were conducted to provide a cross-cultural perspective that explained hypotheses in relation to Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Qualitative researches dwelled on focus interviews of industry insiders and audiences. This research combined quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the message structure of advertising messages through the creative use of humor. The content analysis aimed to identify the prevalent kinds of humor in the television advertisements. Upon identification, further description of the creative elements such as audio, verbal language, images and written texts in the ads were then discussed. Lastly, the comparison between the advertisements in the United States and the Philippines was based on the textual analysis of the ads in juxtaposition to the cultural contexts of both countries. This was also an answer to the need for a research about the humor content of Filipino advertisements; thus, the Philippines was chosen to be included in this study.

Aside from being an attempt to fill the aforementioned research gaps, another rationale behind this thesis is the current issue of standardization of international advertising campaigns. Faced with concerns in conceptualization, costs and execution, advertisers should remember the influence of culture if they want to target a particular group. The universality of humor may not hold true at all times due to cultural differences, not to mention that humor also relies on personal tastes. Therefore, an ideal, international, standardized advertising campaign would require more than providing a mold for all countries to follow, but instead, a deeper understanding of the ever-dynamic nature of culture, the ways on how it is shared and all things that are related to it, such as humor, is needed.