

MASTER'S THESIS

Selling through entertaining: the effect of humor in television advertising in Hong Kong

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**Selling Through Entertaining: The Effect of Humor
in Television Advertising in Hong Kong**

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Abstract

The use of humor in advertising has been well researched in Western countries. However, the study of it in Chinese societies is in its infancy. In addition, previous studies generated inconsistent findings about the effect of humor on persuasion in advertising. This study aimed to fill the gap by investigating both the utilization of humor in Hong Kong television advertising and people's responses toward humorous commercials. A total of 356 television commercials shown between February and May 2004 was content analyzed. Using Sternthal and Craig's (1973) classification of humor advertising, it was found that about twenty percent of the sample utilized humorous devices to some extent. Two hundred fifty-four university students were recruited to watch five television commercials extracted from the analyzed sample (2 humorous, 1 filler and 2 non-humorous). They were then requested to respond to a structured questionnaire incorporating the following dimensions: perceived humor, level of "prior exposure," level of "need for cognition" (NFC), and degree of attention, disruption and persuasion. Results showed that humor secures attention getting while at the same time disrupts message processing. Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model was applied to examine the effect of humor in persuasion. It was found, as predicted, humor enhances message persuasiveness when the moderating variable NFC was controlled. Participants with low NFC were easier to be persuaded by humorous commercials than did participants with high NFC. It was also found that repeated exposure to the same humorous commercial did not affect its persuasive effect. Finally, male audiences regarded humorous commercials as more persuasive than non-humorous one. However, female audiences were in the opposite. The study provides guidelines for advertisers/advertising practitioners who would like to employ humor in their communication. Meanwhile, it also draws ethical concerns toward the increased application of entertainment-coated persuasion.

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