

Effectiveness of Violent Humour in Viral Marketing – The Gender Dimension

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to evaluate the impact that violent humor has on sharing probability, Attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand, and ad message involvement in viral ads and how can this help decision makers in advertising to improve the effectiveness of their viral content. An experimental study was designed to measure the impact of violent humor and gender of the protagonists in viral ads on ad message involvement, sharing probability of the ad, attitude towards the ad and attitude towards the brand. Results suggest that an ad's violent humour retains its good taste and can be effective for ad message involvement, sharing probability, and attitude towards the ad if opposite genders are used in ads. The same was not noted for attitude towards the brand for low level of involvement.

Keywords: violent humor, viral marketing, advertising, gender, ad message involvement, attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand, sharing probability.

Introduction

Since 1950, the Television (TV) network has been the apple of the eye for many advertisers. But with the pervasiveness of the internet and personal computing the number of people watching television programs has been declined. Many argue that this decline is mainly because of the delayed viewing using digital video recorders or features such as video on demand and there is no major shift in the trend from broadcast viewership to the internet. It is too early to jump to a conclusion, but the pervasiveness of the internet and social networking coupled with a growing individualistic society makes a strong case for such a shift in viewership trends. As a result, marketers are resorting to novel yet extremely effective and efficient ways of promotion, such as Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and viral marketing, to approach the social connected customers. In this regard our research focuses on humorous depiction of violence as the stimulus for viral marketing and studies the

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impact of gender in this respect. In doing so, eight ads with similar theme are required. Only the variable of interest (gender and intensity of violence) will be manipulated in each version of the ad. A professional ad maker with experience in making viral videos will prepare these ads. The research will study the impact of these manipulations on effectiveness of viral ad. Respondents will watch a single ad and will respond to the questionnaire.

Literature review

The word 'humor' has been explained by many scientists using three theories, namely *superiority theory*, *relief theory*, and *incongruity*. Buijzen and Valkenberg (2004) believe that given a situation, all these theories may interact and may create humour. Meyer (2000) explains the theory of *superiority* as people laugh because they feel more powerful and in control than others. Berlyne (1972) explains *relief theory* as people laugh because they need to relief, psychological stress. Berger (1998) states people laugh due to the *incongruity* whereby they find something surprising.

There is also availability of abundant literature using violence in TV programs and advertisements. Media violence is defined, as the "*visual portrayals of acts of physical aggression by one human against another*" (by Huesmann and Taylor, 2006) or "*overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings.*" (by Kunkle et al., 1995). Using violence in TV programs has been thoroughly researched in previous decades to study its effects on children and adults (see Wilson et al., 1997; Wilson, 2002; Glascock, 2008; Gunter, 2008; Kirsh, 2006). Furnham and Gunter (1987) found that violent content is more memorable than non-violent content. Research by La Tour, Snipes, and Bliss (1996) suggest that advertising content that depict violence and aggressive behavior is more effective in gaining the audience's attention than ordinary ads. Similar findings were reported by Lang, Newhagen, and Reeves (1996).

One novel aspect of a good advertisement is its potential to be shared or forwarded by the audience using online medium called viral marketing. According to Porter and Golan (2005) viral advertising is "*unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the internet to persuade or influence an audience to forward the content to others*". In order to study this aspect,

Teixeira (2012) used infrared eye-tracking scanners to determine what respondents look at while watching viral advertisements and facial expression recognition software to reveal their feelings. He found that viral advertisements should immediately generate surprise or joy to hook viewers in the opening seconds. This finding runs in contrast to ordinary TV advertisements where ordinary narratives are escalated into dramatic (surprising) endings. His research also found that these emotions should not be delivered at a constant/stable pace rather consumers should experience an “emotional roller coaster” throughout the advertisement so the feeling of surprise or joy is suspended for a moment and then reactivated. Similar results were supported by a study of consumers’ emotional responses conducted by Doble et al. (2007). According to them an advertisement needs to connect emotionally with consumers to achieve viral status. They examined the impact of six primary emotions such as disgust, joy, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear, embedded in advertisements on the consumer message forwarding behavior and found that surprise and joy were most common in successful viral campaign. Despite of In a remarkable study by Mark R. Brown, Roop K. Bhadury, & Nigel K. Ll. Pope 2013 on viral ads in the context of violent humour, it is suggested that a palatable or light degree of violence can provoke and surprise the audience and can produce positive result for viral ad campaigns, however, if violence is significantly high, it may offend the audience and may lose its efficacy. Thales Teixeira (2012) found that if an ad crosses a certain threshold in surprising/provoking its audience, then people may “feel inhibited about sharing the ads with friends and family”.

Conceptual Framework

Ferguson (2008); Kalyanam, McIntyre and Masonis (2007) established the fact that despite the increasing awareness and use of viral marketing in industry, how it takes place and what causes it, is extremely under-researched area which required extensive investigation. One such stimuli in area of viral advertisement, that to our knowledge has still paucity of literature is understanding the effect of incongruent roles of gender depicted in the ads. As explained earlier the theory of incongruity states that people laugh because they experience something unexpected (Berger, 1998).

Most of the research concerning the role of gender in marketing is dedicated to using females in advertisements and its implications on society in general (Courtney and Whipple, 1983). Consumer’s perceived

incongruity to gender role portrayals in advertisements is discussed by Orth, U.R and Holancova, D. (2003/4). They posit that consumers across gender have reported a higher perceived incongruity of roles when females were portrayed as superior to males. Study by Alden, Mukherjee, Hoyer (2000); Meyers-Levy and Tybout (1989) states that if the information received by the audience is incongruent compared to their expectations then it significantly effects their attitudes. Similarly, Kirmani and Shiv (1998) demonstrated that incongruity between information and expectation effects processing of information. Recently, researchers have emphasized that the emotional aspect of the content has a positive effect on consumers' forwarding behavior. Jonah & Katherine (2011) examined a pool of New York Times articles to examine the influence of emotions on virality of print advertisements. They reported that virality is caused partly by the valence of content, i.e., positive content being more viral than negative content and partly by the intensity of physiological arousal i.e., high intensity arousal either positive or negative is more viral than otherwise. It is for this reason that we have hypothesized different gender portrayals in ads may have varying impact on the forwarding behavior of consumers. They further reported a significant impact of the incongruity of roles in advertisements on attitude toward ads and attitude towards the brand. Furthermore, as an attack on opposite gender is perceived as highly provocative, we assume that the combination of opposite gender under high level of violence will increase ad involvement. It is safe to assume that the consequences could be exacerbated if gender role incongruity is added with high intensity of violence. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis for investigation under this research: -

H1a: The combination of gender will have a significant effect on sharing probability of the ad.

H1b: The combination of gender will have a significant effect on ad message involvement (AMI).

H1c: The combination of gender will have a significant effect on attitudes towards the ad.

H1d: The combination of gender will have a significant effect on attitudes towards the brand.

H2a: The use of opposite gender will have a negative effect on sharing probability under high level of violence.

Methodology

A total of 199 responses were useable of which 57 were filled by females (29%) and 142 were filled by males (71%) with a modal age of 21. Furthermore, 97% of the respondents had a 12-year college degree (42%) or a 16-year graduate degree (55%). Employment status was divided as 68% and 22% of unemployed and employed respondents, respectively; in addition, 10% of the respondents were self-employed.

Data Analysis

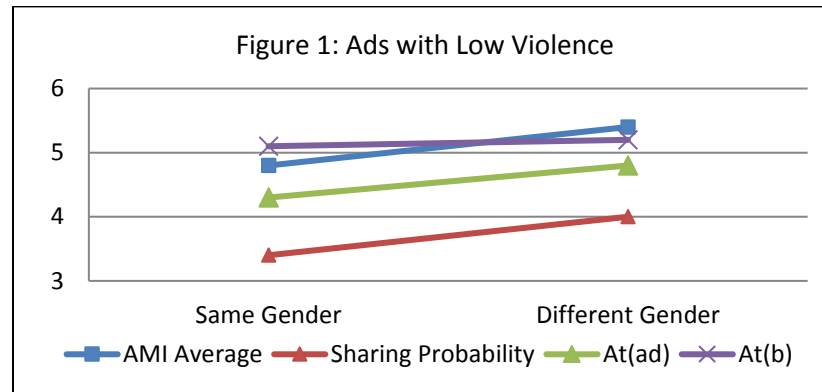
In preliminary analysis the product involvement across all groups was assessed. No significant relationship was found on the **confounding** variable of product involvement ($F= 1.058$, $df=7, 191$; $p > 0.05$).

The research was divided into two separate studies; first study deals with manipulations on protagonists' gender under low levels of violence while the second study has same manipulations under high level of violence. The manipulations on level of violence were checked and confirmed that the ad with the aggressor pushing the victim in front of a cruising car was perceived as more violent ($M=3.5$) than the one with the victim being hit with the product package on the head ($M=2.8$). Respondents also reported a higher level of surprise and disgust with high level of violence ($M=3.4$ and $M=3.2$ respectively) than with low level of violence ($M= 3.2$ and $M=2.9$ respectively). However, perceived humour experienced by the respondents was approximately the same for both high and low levels of violence ($M=3.5$).

Study I

Study I deal with the gender of the protagonists under a low level of violence. A total of 115 respondents participated in this study of which 23 (20%) were female and 92 (80%) were male. Most of the participants had undergraduate and graduate degrees (45% and 53 % respectively). Approximately, 71% of the participants were unemployed while 16% were employed and 13% were self-employed.

Main dependent variables in this study were ad message involvement, sharing probability, attitude towards the ad and attitude towards the brand. The effect of the combination of genders of protagonists in ads on the dependent variables was determined by one-way ANOVA.



H1a stated that the effect of combination of gender for the protagonist will have a significant effect on ad message involvement. The model indicates significant effects for ad message involvement ($F = 4.531$, $df = 1, 111$; $p < 0.05$). Figure 1 shows that message involvement was high when the genders of protagonists were different (i.e., a male aggressor vs. a female victim and vice versa) with $M = 5.4$ while it was low when the genders were similar (i.e., a female aggressor vs a female victim & a male aggressor vs male victim) with $M = 4.8$. Therefore, H1a is accepted.

H1b stated that the effect of combination of gender for the protagonist will have a significant effect on sharing probability of the ad. The model also indicated a significant effect for sharing probability of the ad ($F = 4.432$, $df = 1, 114$; $p < 0.05$). Figure 1 shows that the probability of sharing an ad increases when the genders of the protagonists are different ($M = 4.0$) while it is low when the genders for the aggressor and victim are the same ($M = 3.4$). Therefore, H1b is accepted.

H1c stated that the combination of gender will have a significant effect on attitudes towards the ad. The result was also significant for this variable ($F = 3.991$, $df = 1, 112$; $p < 0.05$). Figure 1 shows that the attitude towards the ad increases when the

The genders of the protagonists are different ($M = 4.8$) while it is low when the genders for the aggressor and victim are the same ($M = 4.3$). Therefore, H1c is accepted.

H1d stated that the combination of genders will have a significant effect on attitudes towards the brand. No significant effect was found for

the aforementioned dependent variables with $p > 0.05$. Therefore, H1d was rejected.

Low Violence One-Way Anova						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig
AMI	Between Groups	8.479	1	8.479	4.531	0.036
	Within Groups	205.86	110	1.879		
	Total	214.339	111			
Sharing Probability	Between Groups	11.546	1	11.564	4.432	0.037
	Within Groups	294.836	113	2.609		
	Total	306.4	114			
Attitude Towards the ad	Between Groups	6.291	1	6.291	3.991	0.048
	Within Groups	174.69	111	1.576		
	Total	181.26	112			
Attitude Towards the Brand	Between Groups	0.182	1	0.182	0.119	0.731
	Within Groups	168.381	110	1.531		
	Total	168.562	111			

Mean of Dependent Variables			
		Same Gender	Different Gender
Low Violence	AMI	4.8	5.3
	Sharing Probability	3.4	4.0
	Attitude towards the ad	4.3	4.8
	Attitude Towards the brand	5.1	5.3
High Violence	AMI	4.2	3.9
	Sharing Probability	3.3	2.6
	Attitude towards the ad	3.2	2.6
	Attitude Towards the brand	5.2	5.5

Discussion

It seems that the combination of gender of the protagonists portraying as an aggressor/victim in the context of violent humour affects ad message involvement, ad sharing probability, and attitude towards the ad. Also, for each aforementioned significant variable, combination of opposite gender highly stimulates the audiences to listen and watch the ad carefully, share it with other parties, and form a positive attitude towards it.

We believe that ads with protagonists of opposite gender in context of violence do not comply with the social norms that are expected

of a person in the society and thus are more provocative than ads depicting the protagonists with similar gender. These provocations make these ads different and somewhat unique from the usual ads (Dobele et al 2007) and thus they become

Eligible for higher and favorable cognitive attention and sharing with other people.

Study II

The second study tests the effects of a combination of protagonists' gender in violent humour ads under high level of violence. A total of 84 respondents participated in this study of which 34 (40%) were female and 50 (60%) were male. Most of the participants had undergraduate and graduate degrees (38% and 58 % respectively). Approximately, 65% of the participants were unemployed (students) while 30% were employed and 5% were self-employed. The same stimulus was adopted in this study; four ads were made with similar manipulations, i.e., i) male aggressor vs male victim, II) male aggressor vs. female victim, iii) female aggressor vs. male victim, and iv) female victim vs. female victim The storyline was same except instead of hitting the other person on the head with the product package, the victim was pushed in front of a cruising car by the aggressor. The brand was also the same and other creative aspects of the ad were not altered.

High Violence One-Way Anova						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig
AMI	Between Groups	2.492	1	2.492	1.013	0.317
	Within Groups	199.304	81	2.461		
	Total	201.795	82			
Sharing Probability	Between Groups	9.502	1	9.502	5.437	0.022
	Within Groups	143.21	82	1.748		
	Total	152.812	83			
Attitude Towards the ad	Between Groups	7.185	1	7.185	4.197	0.044
	Within Groups	140.366	82	1.712		
	Total	147.551	83			
Attitude Towards the Brand	Between Groups	2.08	1	2.08	1.084	0.301
	Within Groups	155.452	81	1.919		
	Total	157.532	82			

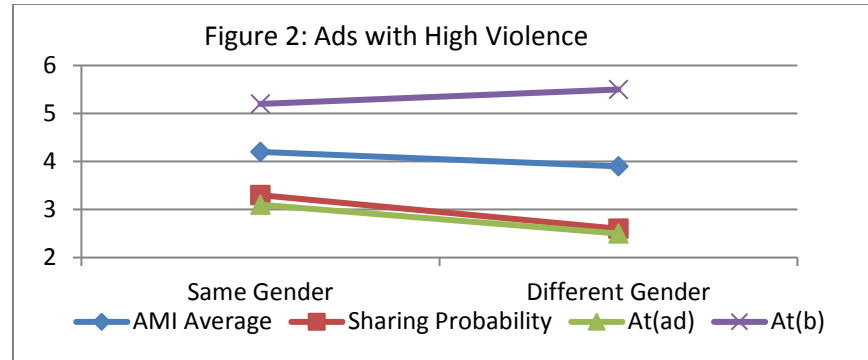


Figure 1

H2a stated that the effect of combination of gender for the protagonist will have a significant effect on the ad message involvement under high level of violence. No significant effect of the manipulations was found for the ad message involvement. Therefore, H2a was rejected. H2b stated that the effect of combination of gender for the protagonist will have a significant effect on sharing probability and attitude towards the ad under high level of violence. The model indicates significant effects for sharing probability ($F= 5.437$, $df=1, 83$; $p < 0.05$). Figure 2 shows sharing probability was high when the genders of protagonists were same (i.e., a male aggressor vs. a male victim and a female aggressor vs. a female victim) with $M = 3.3$ while it was low when the genders were different (i.e., a male aggressor vs a female victim & a female aggressor vs male victim) with $M=2.6$. This provides some interesting results. Not only are the differences in means significant under high level of violence their relationship to the independent variable has been reversed compared when the level of violence was low as shown in figure 3. It is also notable that the mean is below the average of the Likert scale used to measure this construct which shows a further reluctance of the audience forward the message. Therefore, H2b is accepted.

Discussion

It appears that the gender of the protagonists in the ads could be used as a stimulus for forwarding an ad on social networks, creating a positive attitude towards the ad, and getting audiences' attention towards the ad. As evident from the results in a study I, breaking a social norm can provoke the audience and may provide auspicious results. However, study II also indicates the perils of violating social norms beyond an acceptable

threshold. There were two important lessons in study II; first, the relationship between IV (combination of genders) and the dependent variable viz., forwarding probability and attitude towards the ad were reversed, i.e., the mean of sharing probability and favorability of the ad were higher with similar genders instead of different genders as was indicated by study I. Furthermore, the means of aforementioned variables were below average of the scale used to indicate respondent's discontent with high level of violence. Such violence may be perceived as shocking (a negative emotion) instead of surprising (a positive emotion) which can weaken the effectiveness of the ad.

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