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The effects of humour in online recruitment advertising

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ABSTRACT

This study explores humour in recruitment advertising by examining the effects on job seekers of humour in online job advertisements. The results from an experimental study in which the humour content in job ads was manipulated indicate that humour negatively affected job seekers' attitudes towards the job ad, the company, and the job. However, humour content had no effect on job seekers' attitudes towards the managers depicted in the ads and no impact on intentions to apply for the job. Yet humour content enhanced intentions to share job ads, which is an important marketing response given the increased importance of social media. The study contributes to the growing literature on humour in advertising and to the literature on recruitment advertising by investigating the use of humour in the hitherto unexplored job advertising context.

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1. Introduction

Using humour is a common practice in advertising (Eisend, 2009; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992), and it is acknowledged as one of the most widely studied advertising appeals (Voss, 2009). Many scholars report positive consumer reactions to humour in advertisements, such as more attention to the ad (Duncan, 1979; Eisend, 2009; Madden and Weinberger, 1984; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992), more positive attitudes towards the ad (Eisend, 2009; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992), more positive attitudes towards the advertiser (Eisend, 2009; Sternhal and Craig, 1973; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992), and better ad recall (Walliser, 1997). So far, however, most research on humour in ads has addressed ads targeted to consumers. Yet many ads have other target groups, and this study examines one of them: job seekers.

Although the number of studies on recruitment issues has increased dramatically over the last thirty years (Breugh and Starke, 2000), research on recruitment advertising is still in short supply (Van Hoye and Lievens, 2005). Moreover, recent technological developments have led both employers and job seekers to use online environments such as web sites and job-listing boards (Cober et al., 2000). In fact, the Internet has become a leading tool for selecting

and recruiting employees (Backhaus, 2004; Cappelli, 2001), and the new digital advertising media have encouraged companies with less well-established positions to seek out unconventional forms of advertising and low-budget media to support their brand-building efforts (Dahlén et al., 2009).

So far, however, few firms appear to have used humour in their online job ads. Consequently, there are few studies in this area. Yet evidence of actual use of humour in online ads does exist. For example, in 2012, Robit Rocktools, a Finnish company in the mining industry, published a humorous online job ad to recruit an export manager. The main theme was to describe the person for this managerial position in terms opposite to what was really desired (e.g., "a lazy, good-for-nothing bum"). The specific humour type in this case, which we come back to below, is self-deprecating humour (Gulas and Weinberger, 2006). This ad created over 12,000 clicks (the number of clicks for the average online job is 1000 clicks), it increased the number of visitors to the firm's website from 600 to 3000, and it generated more than 100 applications. Another example is an online recruitment campaign by Fantastec, a firm developing educational games for kids. In this case, humour was of the irony type (Kelly and Solomon, 1975); the firm described itself as "a tired company" and claimed that its business was "leaking." The campaign generated more than 1000 applications.

Despite some apparently successful cases of using humour in online recruitment ads, it should be underscored that there are not many examples of firms using humour in such ads. For the coming years, however, we expect an increase of the humour content in online recruitment ads. One reason is that humour in consumer-targeted ads appears to be on the rise (Weinberger et al., 2015), and we expect that this will spill over to online recruitment ads

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(particularly if these two types of ads are created by the same agencies). Moreover, humour is the most common advertising appeal for viral advertisements outside the recruitment context (Golan and Zaidner, 2008; Porter and Golan, 2006), and given that advertisers want their ads to become viral (Swanepoel et al., 2009) it is expected that recruiters are influenced by humour as a general means for ads to become viral. In addition, humour has become more relevant in the modern workplace, particularly for younger workers who seem to value fun at work (Lamm and Meeks, 2009; Romero and Pescosolido, 2008). Given this, and in the coming years, we expect an increasing number of firms to believe that humour in recruitment ads would serve to signal the work environment desired by new job seekers.

Perhaps more importantly, even if our expectations regarding an increasing use of humour in online recruitment ads do not become confirmed, we still believe that it is imperative to assess the impact of such ads. More specifically, when we examine what we believe is an activity with low prevalence today, we do so because we are interested in the discovery of conceptual patterns that nevertheless are capable of existing because this will allow us to better understand how theoretical constructs are related to each other (cf. Mook, 1983). In addition, as we intend to show in this study, the apparently successful cases of using humour above may actually be misleading because we have conceptual and empirical reasons to believe that humour in online recruitment ads does not yield the same positive outcomes as when humour is used in ads for consumers. Indeed, given that humour often serves communicative goals in multifaceted and subtle ways (Ritchie, 2005), humour may not always have the positive consequences on receiver reactions typically desired by advertisers.

The purpose of this study, then, is to explore the effects of humour in the context of online job ads. Thus, the study focuses on job seekers as the ad receivers. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first attempt to explore the impact of humour in this particular context. Moreover, the type of humour used in consumer-targeted ads has evolved over time, from gentle and playful forms towards less playful forms comprising more aggressive and less warm elements (Weinberger et al., 2015), and it is the latter and thus the contemporary humour form we focus on here. The intended contribution of the study is to extend advertising theory on humour into a hitherto unexplored recruitment advertising context and to provide the recruitment literature with a more detailed understanding of job seekers' reactions to one specific advertising appeal (humour) used in job ads.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. What is humour in advertising?

Several researchers have stressed the ambiguous nature of humour. On the one hand, it is perceived as universal in the sense that it exists in every culture; on the other hand, it is considered as a time- and place-specific phenomenon (Gulas and Weinberger, 2006). Those who stress the specific aspects of humour have observed, for example, that people differ in the types of jokes that they appreciate and that men and women laugh at different jokes (Hassett and Houlihan, 1979). This tension between the universal and the specific is also expressed in discussions of humour in advertising because both global and culture-specific features of humour are discussed (Alden and Martin, 1995; Alden et al., 1993; Fugate, 1998; Laroche et al., 2014; McCullough and Taylor, 1993). Some authors have explicitly claimed that ads with humour content used in one country could not be used in other countries because the same type of humour will have different effects on audiences in different countries (Biswas et al., 1992; Eisend, 2009).

Nevertheless, in this study, we adopt the view that there is indeed a universal theme in humour in the sense that the immediate effect of humour (i.e., the perception that something is funny) can be observed as a result of a deviation from what is expected (Alden and Hoyer, 1993; Alden et al., 1993; Ritchie, 2005). Deviations from what is expected, however, can occur in many ways and this has been noticed in attempts to create humour typologies (Catanescu and Tom, 2001; Spotts et al., 1997; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). Thus humour can manifest itself in many different ways (Speck, 1990). All of them cannot be examined in the same study, and here we focus on three specific humour types. Because the study is a first attempt to examine the impact of humour in job ads, we view those specific humour types as a sample of humour types from a population of general humour types.

2.2. Different types of humour

Humour types can be categorised as combinations of different mechanisms for what is needed to perceive something as humorous (Speck, 1990). In this study, we focus on humour in terms of three general mechanisms – incongruity resolution, nonsense, and irony – in a job advertising context.

Our first humour type is based on *incongruity resolution*; its main characteristic is that it contains surprise or inconsistency that demands processing by the receiver to come to terms with the interpretation of the message (Spotts et al., 1997). Humour that demands a resolution in this way can be of different types. Here, however, our main concern is with one of these types: the personification type of humour, which is defined in terms of attributing human characteristics to non-human objects, such as animals and plants, and non-living objects (Catanescu and Tom, 2001). The human tendency of anthropomorphising inanimate objects is visible when products or brands can be animated or humanised (Fournier, 1998), even though most of us know that inanimate objects *are* not human beings. Presumably, it is the contrast between having a distinct and evolution-based mental category for human beings (Lee, 2004) and the obvious non-membership of other objects in this category that serves to create a humour effect. An example of this type of humour in a job advertising context, which we used in our study, is “HealthVision is a furry ICT company in the wellness sector, currently employing five people whose bark is fortunately worse than their bite.”

Second, *nonsense* humour is defined in terms of incongruities that are only partly resolvable, not resolvable, or in which the apparent resolution adds yet another incongruity (Ruch et al., 1990). It is closely related to Kelly and Solomon's (1975) view of humour as “something ludicrous – that which is laughable and ridiculous.” It also shares conceptual content with silliness, which is defined by Catanescu and Tom (2001) as a visual form of humour by “making funny faces to ludicrous situations.” In any event, nonsense as a humour device has been identified as favoured by advertisers in earlier studies (Gulas and Weinberger, 2006, pp. 99–101; Madden and Weinberger, 1982; McCullough and Taylor, 1993). Nonsense can be created in several ways, and here we focus on the self-deprecating type, which means that the joke teller is the object of nonsense (Gulas and Weinberger, 2006, p. 38). A specific example of this type of humour in a job advertising context, which we used in the present study, is “HealthVision is an innovative and cuckoo! growing ICT company in the wellness sector, currently employing five ex-Berts.”

Third, *irony* is defined as any statement that conveys a meaning different from the one it professes to give, thus a discrepancy exists between what the words say and what they mean (Kelly and Solomon, 1975; Stern, 1990). Its main effect is that it can provide pleasure in an intellectual way; people exposed to humour with irony are expected to feel special when they have solved the puzzle

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