

Research Article

Consumer responses to parodic ads

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Abstract

We analyze parodic ads, which are humorous commercial messages that parody extant advertising. The effects of three dimensions are examined: mockery, perceived truth and playful humor. Consequences are considered for attitudes toward the parodic ad, its sponsor brand, the parodied advertising (which the parodic ad mimics) and the parodied advertising's sponsor brand. Results of three studies indicate that parodic ads can produce positive as well as negative outcomes across these attitudinal variables. These results suggest caution in the use of parody as a messaging device.

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Introduction

Several years ago, Lenovo produced an ad that mocked a commercial for Apple's MacBook Air. The centerpiece of the original MacBook ad was a demonstration of product compactness, which was achieved by showing that the notebook fit inside a manila envelope. In the parody, the opening frames were reminiscent of the MacBook ad: A hand dramatically unfastened the tie on an envelope, removed a MacBook Air and showed off its slim profile, all while a bouncy Applesque musical score played in lieu of a voice over. After establishing these parallels with the MacBook ad, Lenovo inserted a droll coda with several unexpected twists. In it, the hand attempted to clumsily shove the MacBook Air back into the envelope, but only after connecting a sizable bundle of peripheral equipment (USB hub, external DVD drive, etc.). The envelope became humorously torn to shreds as a gnarl of cords and attachments overwhelmed the opening. The ad closed by showing that one of Lenovo's own computers was thin

enough to fit in a similar manila envelope, even with all of the added components built into the base unit.

We use the term "parodic ad" to refer to this sort of messaging approach, which engages in parody of other, extant advertising (Vanden Bergh, Lee, Quilliam, & Hove, 2011). Empirical investigation of parodic ads has been quite scarce. The purpose of this paper is to examine the rich, multilayered consumer responses that may be evoked by this advertising tactic.²

Characterizing parody and parodic ads

A parody is a mocking imitation of a work or its conspicuous features (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993; Stern, 1991). Parody is a form of burlesque, and as such, it is a member of the satire family of devices that employ wit to make pointed observations (Johnson & Spilger, 2000; Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994). A parody often leverages elements of irony in that multiple interpretations are possible (Is this work to be literally interpreted? Or is it a spoof?). An audience member must engage in a complex interpretive act—using cues such as comic intonations or the use of verbal or visual

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² Abbreviations in this article include CWALAC (Concerned Women for America Legislative Action Committee) and CLA (Consumer Learning by Analogy model).

hyperbole—to understand the properly facetious meaning (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993; McQuarrie & Mick, 1996; Scott, 1994a,b).

Several characteristics are prominent across scholarly analyses of parody. First, it is often noted that a parody strives for humor in its distorted imitation of original material (Rossen-Knill & Henry, 1997; Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994). As we subsequently discuss in greater detail, this may arise from mockery, which may produce humor through disparagement, or from incongruities between a parody and original material, which are resolved to beget playful humor.

Another main characteristic of parody draws upon its heritage as a means of exposing folly: Ideally, a parody will be revelatory, meaning that it will bare or amplify insights, or so-called “truths,” in relation to a parodied entity (Johnson & Spilger, 2000; Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). Often, these truths are critical in nature (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993; Rossen-Knill & Henry, 1997), even when the overall tone of the parody is lighthearted. In the context of parodic advertising, these perceived truths often relate to the marketing techniques that were used in the parodied work (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). To wit, while making a literal point about the MacBook Air’s real size in operation, the Lenovo parody also offers an underlying insight that Apple’s advertising may engage in excessive propaganda. As is customary with parody, this rather contemptuous observation is wrapped in a cloak of humor.

Recent research confirms the centrality of these characteristics of parody—that is, its elements of disparaging and/or playful humor and perceived truth. Vanden Bergh et al. (2011) dissected consumers’ perceptions of noncommercial parodies and found ready discernment of dimensions of mockery or disparagement, playful humor,³ and perceived truth. One goal of the present research is to retest these factors within the context of parodic ads, or commercial messages that mimic other advertising. In addition, we expand on the Vanden Bergh model by investigating the relationships between the parody dimensions and multiple attitudinal outcomes. These include attitudes toward 1) the parodic (new, parody-delivering) ad, 2) the parodic ad’s sponsor, 3) the parodied (original, source) advertising, 4) the parodied advertising’s sponsor. Finally, we also probe previously unexamined mediation of the observed relationships.

To preview the organization of foundational discussions that are to follow, we will first explore how three elements of ad parodies—mockery, truth and playful humor—are expected to impact evaluations of the both the parodic and parodied ads and brands. Next, we will turn to discussing their combined effects. We wish to note that there are similarities in several of the dependent variable effects that will be predicted for these elements (mockery, truth and playful humor). However, the processes by which these effects occur are theorized to differ. Thus, delving deeply into each of these sources of influence is important and useful.

Mockery

Parodies may generate humor through mockery of source material (Johnson & Spilger, 2000; Stern, 1991; Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994). In parodic ads, the mockery might be focused on anything from a specific brand and its ad approach (e.g., Lenovo’s parody of the MacBook Air ad) to a broad class of advertising and its sponsors. A recent commercial by a political watchdog group offers an instance of the latter. In this parodic ad, conventions of pharmaceutical commercials are wackily mimicked, with a claim, for example, that government spending can be a “miracle drug” that offers relief from the “chronic pain” of rising gas prices and a lagging economy. As with Lenovo’s parody, this one ridicules the hallmarks of the parodied advertising via exaggeration (e.g., hyperbolic reference to a “miracle drug”) and tongue-in-cheek violations of advertising conventions (Johnson & Spilger, 2000; Stern, 1991; Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994), such as absurdly characterizing governmental debt as a medicinal side effect.

To understand the impact of a parodic ad’s mockery on attitudes, it must be recognized that mockery is a form of disparaging humor, which elicits amusement through mimicry with denigration or belittlement. When executed well, mockery of other parties is thought to create humor, because the act of demeaning them conjures mild feelings of gleeful superiority (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). As Wicker and colleagues have noted, people feel a “sudden glory...from favorable comparison of ourselves with the inadequacies of others” (Wicker, Baron, & Willis 1980, p. 702). Thus, for example, when an audience member experiences Lenovo’s parody of the MacBook Air ad, s/he may feel a small bit of condescending merriment in seeing the focal parties (Apple, MacBook Air) being teased for something.

To the extent that a parodic ad’s mockery is found to be amusing in this way, enjoyment of the ad may be enhanced. Thus, we propose that mockery will generally have a positive relationship to attitudes toward a parodic ad. The stronger the perceived tone of mockery or teasing, the more amusing disparagement that it may generate, and thus the more favorable may be the attitudes toward the parodic ad. Parenthetically, these assertions assume that the mockery falls reasonably within the bounds of consumers’ notions of taste and decorum; indeed, these are the types of stimuli that typically inhabit mainstream media and thus will be represented in our studies.

The proposition regarding attitudes toward the parodic ad begs a follow-on question about the effects of disparaging humor on attitudes toward the sponsor of the parodic ad. Might successful disparaging humor cultivate admiration for the disparager? While this position may seem viable at first blush, its veracity is called into question in at least two respects.

First, research on comparative advertising indicates that, rather than admiring a brand that takes on another, consumers may actually perceive a brand-to-brand juxtaposition as being unsportsmanlike conduct, and as such, may derogate the source (Belch, 1981; Grewal, Kavanoor, Fern, Costley, & Barnes, 1997). In the context of parodic ads, this may imply that although a consumer may appreciate the humor generated by

³ Vanden Bergh and colleagues use the general term “humor” to label the dimension we have named “playful humor.” We adopt the more specific wording in order to distinguish from disparaging humor.

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