VIOLANCE DRESSED IN HUMOR: COMEDIC VIOLENCE IN ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the concepts of humor and violence and their complex relationships contextualized in the advertising domain. Thus, the main theories of humor and the most important elements from media violence paradigms are critically pointed out. The effects of comedic violence in advertising may be positive (great involvement with the ad message, retention of brand information, higher pass-along probability), and also negative (offending the audience, desensitization, damaging the reputation and the brand equity). A lot of factors change the perception of comedic violent ads (such as gender or social norm beliefs), so that a multidimensional analysis of consumer perceptions is needed if we want to draw a more accurate picture of this phenomenon. The analysis of the specific ad that I developed in the second part of this paper showed clearly the interplay between perceived humor and perceived violence and also the relevance of the cultural background in its interpretation.

Keywords: Comedic violence, humor, advertising, effectiveness, audience, brand awareness

INTRODUCTION

Humor is a complex phenomenon that has been analyzed from many different perspectives (linguistic, philosophical, psychological, sociological, aesthetic or ethical). The field of humor is truly an interdisciplinary one and, besides all, it has a special relevance to our everyday lives, illuminating a part of our nature as human beings. Despite the number of theories and the growing literature, scholars have detected a dichotomy between approaches coming from East and West. Hence, in the Western tradition of thinking we can witness a neglect of this subject: “most Western thinkers have not written much about humor, and their comments on it are often found in writings on other topics” (Morreall 1989: 243). Because the nature of humor was seen as a kind of pleasure that can destabilize the individual reason and the social interactions, the Western philosophers treated it carefully and sometimes critically. The theories of humor are often classified into three main categories: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory. The superiority theory has its

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roots in ancient times; as its name already indicates, humor is the expression of feeling superior to other people. Plato considered that self-ignorance can make a person laughable; thus, folly and human evil are the proper objects of laughter. In his Republic, Plato (2000) is worried about the risks of laughing; it may lead to moral damages, confusion of the mind or weakness of the human character. Consequently, Socrate explains us in Philebus the following:

“When we laugh, therefore, at our friends’ ridiculous condition, logic declares we mix Pleasure with Envy, and blend, therefore, Pleasure and Pain” (Plato 1860: 63).

Thus, humor implies a conglomerate of feelings and attitudes, present both in the case of the joke teller and of his audience. The humor can be beneficial but in some situations it can be truly harmful. According to Aristotle, “recreation and amusement are necessary for active life” (1869: 135) and humor can be also useful as a mechanism of correction. Nevertheless, the positive effects of humor should not be overestimated – otherwise we can become “vulgar buffoons” when we try to provoke laughter by any means, forgetting about the pain of those we mock at (Aristotle 1869: 133).

The superiority theory came to a climax with Thomas Hobbes’s approaches, for which laughter is determined by a passion named “sudden glory”. For Hobbes, humor is a sign of superiority because, while laughing, one overestimates oneself by highlighting the defects of the others. So, the comparison constitutes the base of this phenomenon. The search for the imperfections of the other makes us win the social struggle. In the same time, this win helps us increase our self-esteem. However, Hobbes pointed out that the excess can reveal some problems, because

“much laughter at the defects of others is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds one of the proper works is to help and free others from scorn, and compare themselves only with the most able” (2011: 75).

Albert Rapp (1951) also understands humor back to its hostile origins, considering that even when we laugh at ourselves the superiority is at work. Even if the superiority model paints in black the forms of derisive or cruel humor, there is a number of theorists who have identified some profits of its use. Thus, John Meyer interprets superiority humor as a brick of the edifice of group unity and of the construct of belonging (2000: 315). Also, Charles Gruner (1978) thinks that superiority humor may decrease the aggressive behaviour by giving a frame to express emotional feelings.

The incongruity theory switches the attention from the affective to the conceptual and cognitive side. From this perspective, humor occurs when there is a disparity between what someone thinks (the common state of things) and what is really happening. The trigger is now the surprise, the absurd, the ambiguity, the incoherent, and the unexpected:

“We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn’t fit into these patterns” (Morreall 1983: 16).
Immanuel Kant is often cited for this second theory, because he emphasized the presence of absurdity in humorous situations, also describing an inner mechanism through which an expectation is transformed into “nothing” (1987: 203). Arthur Schopenhauer is another representative figure that used the vocabulary of incongruity when he wrote about laughter. Thus,

“In every case, laughter arises from nothing other than the sudden perception of an incongruity between a concept and the real objects that are, in some respect, thought through the concept; in fact, laughter itself is simply the expression of this incongruity” (2010: 84).

In the same manner, Henri Bergson argued that incongruity presupposes a logic of double meaning within a given situation. If a situation may be interpreted in two different ways at the same time, then it will be a comic situation (Bergson 1956: 123).

The relief theory posits that humor has to be conceived in close relation to the nervous system; it focuses on the physical aspect of laughter. There are two main versions of this paradigm, one elaborated by Spencer, and another by Freud. The inappropriate emotions or the unnecessary nervous energy are discharged through laughter, contributing to the healing or therapeutic strategies. Freud acknowledged Spencer’s ideas and he decided to modify them in Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious (1960: 180). He analyzed many forms and styles of jokes and the mechanism through which they are related to the unconscious. Freud emphasized the importance of the third person in the joking process, “everything in jokes that is aimed at gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye to the third person” (Freud 1960: 190). In the physical process of joking, the factor of relief replaces the economy in expenditure, the energy that has been used for cathexis being discharged. For Freud,

“There are only two purposes that it [a joke] may serve. It is either a hostile joke (serving the purposes of aggressiveness, satire or defense), or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure)” (1960: 102).

The expression of a hidden aggression is safely made through humor, because the aggression will not be recognized or, if it is, it will not be taken seriously (Oring 1992: 16). As in the superiority theory, we can notice once again the close relation between humor and malice, aggressiveness, and hostility. What is important to point out is the distinctions among “joke”, “comic”, and “humor” that Freud made. Joking releases the energy of the repressed feeling, the comic decontrols the energy of thinking, and the humor sets free the energy of emotions. John Lippitt (1995) discussed some of the problems that Freud’s perspective has raised; his presupposition that innocent jokes offer less pleasure than tendentious jokes, the speculative nature of the mechanism of pleasure or the limited purposes admitted for jokes.

John Morreall (1989) investigated three basic critical approaches to humor in Western thought that correspond to each theory presented above: hostility, irrationality and irresponsibility. The classifications are fragile constructions that tend to oversimplify the facts and maybe, as Chapman and Foot (1976) noted, humor
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literature is not able to offer a “general theory”. Patricia Keith-Spiegel (1972) refines the varieties of early humor theories (biological, superiority, incongruity, surprise, ambivalence, release and relief, configurational and psychoanalytic theories), and investigates as well some important issues that arise from these perspectives. Elliott Oring reclaimed that “humor, first and foremost, appears to be a subspecies of the play” (1992: 28), where play is considered a primary impulse. Play theories of humor often take into discussion ethological approaches and are not unitary (for instance, Max Eastman thinks that humor is a form of play, while Huizinga criticizes the identification of them). Owen H. Lynch (2002) advanced a communicative model that can connect the two main categories of humor literature: motivational/psychological studies (that try to respond to the question why individuals use humor) and sociological studies (that try to investigate the function of humor in society). Lynch emphasizes the dialectical and paradoxical nature of humor, as well as the importance of its longitudinal effects. Two major types of communication studies of humor are discussed: rhetorical studies and the analysis of the social functions of message. The rhetorical perspective portrays humor as a fruitful strategy that can increase persuasiveness. Gruner’s texts (1965, 1967) are a good example for the modalities through which a speaker’s ethos may be enhanced, witty humor being here at work. Communication research on the social functions of humor focuses on the functions that humor plays in everyday conversations and illustrates how “communication research expands upon the motivation of superiority, relief, and incongruity resolution by illustrating the result of these motives as they are enacted in conversation” (Lynch 2002: 432). The studies of humor instances in organizations (Linstead 1985) or in virtual communities (Baym 1995) are only a few examples of linking the use of humor (at both individual and group levels) to a sociological context.

This overview of the humor literature gives us some key ideas that will constitute the framework of our paper. Thus, the strategic potential of humor still needs to be developed or explained in different areas. Instead of creating more and complex typologies that try to be extensive, maybe the effort of comprehending humor at work in various situations can illuminate better this subject. Also, humor is a very intricate and paradoxical construct that may produce pleasure and pain, laughter and tears. The object of humor may be anything, even ourselves; the public and the context remain essential elements of its reception. As our paper seeks to show, advertising is a privileged domain in which humor is heavily used, with both innocent and aggressive forms. Moreover, violent content may be embedded in humorous situations, so the perceived humor and the perceived violence will depend on other important factors.

HUMOR AND VIOLENCE IN ADVERTISING

The use of violent images in media constitutes a constant subject of reflection for researchers. Generally, the violence is seen as “the overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force indented to physically harm an animate being or groups of beings” (Kunkel et al. 1995: 286). Of course, this definition is incomplete, because violence may appear in many forms and using various means (images, language, nonverbal cues, etc.); for instance, psychological violence is more nuanced and sometimes more aggressive than the physical one. Mark Brown and his collaborators noticed that disparagement is under-studied in the advertising literature (2010: 50). Media violence remains hard to measure or even define; it can be “masked
in humor or simply implied through gestures or innuendo” (Fernandez and Richards 2015: 241). Anyhow, three issues are admitted as critical to viewer’s reactions to media violence (Brown et al. 2010: 50). First, the intensity of violent content has a big influence on audience response and studies made by Atkin (1983) and Lometti (1995) showed this correspondence. Second, the seriousness with which the audience perceives the respective act of violence is correlated with its response and consequences (Gunter 1985). Third, if the violence appears as being unjustified, then the viewer will treat it seriously (Zillman and Cantor 1976). Anyhow, the media violence is getting the attention of the public. The public will remember more information about violent than about non-violent content (Lang, Newhagen, and Reeves 1996; LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss 1996). In the same manner, the use of humor increases the attention and the likeability (Weinberger and Campbell 1991).

Comedic violence is often defined as the description of violence in ways that are humorous. Nicole Cunningham and Mattheus S. Eastin retraced the history of comedic violence back to slapstick humor and noticed that it is now a subtype of aggressive humor,

“defined by Hetherington and Wray (1996) as the hostile intent to ridicule, deprecate, or injure. However, the explicit or implied presence of violence is not required in order for humor to be considered aggressive. Rather, comedic violence is a type of aggressive humor that depends primarily on actual or threatened physical harm for its humorous properties” (2013: 81).

Comedic violence has a significant importance in cartoons, and depends on the “secret pleasure” that the receiver feels when he or she witnesses the misfortune of the performer (Cunningham and Eastin 2013: 81). Gruner synthesized the causes of humor in a “combination of a loser, a victim of derision or ridicule, and the suddenness of loss” (1978: 31). Ford et al. (2004) interpret the act of laughing at someone’s misfortune as an indirect expression of aggression, a subtype that is more socially accepted than pure acts of violence. The victimization of someone or something provokes humor through misattribution and social derogation.

The pervasive use of humor in advertising has already a rich history (Beard 2008; Gulas and Weinberger 2006). Its presence can enhance attention, produce recognition and recall brand awareness. The number of ads that come into notice through novelty and shock is growing (Smith, Chen, and Yang 2008). The combination between violence and humor seemed a successful path to follow in media and advertisement. As we have seen before, the humor may contain malice, irony or aggressiveness, in other words, it can be violent. If the violent content is packed in humor, the expected result is not a certain one. The effects of comedic violence in advertising may be positive in terms of great involvement with the ad message, retention of brand information, higher pass-along probability, as Brown, Bhadury, and Pope revealed in 2010. In the same time, this is not a guaranteed recipe, because the consequences of using comedic violence are still unknown. Thus, comedic violence may offend the audience (Chan et al. 2007), may damage the reputation of a corporation and the brand equity, so that good targeting is a necessary condition for using this strategy.
Not every violent ad is a good ad just because it will generate buzz for the brand. As Zillman and Cantor (1976) remarked, the perception of the public in relation to the legitimacy of violence is a key factor in interpreting the humor. The intensity of violence, but also “the representation of consequences has a significant impact on an audience’s response to comedic violence” (Brown, Bhadury, and Pope 2010: 62). To understand how consumers respond to violent advertising represents an actual demand. Leonard and Ashley (2012) believe that there is an important gap in the literature; research merely simplified the subject, using dichotomies as violent/nonviolent, shocking/not shocking, including death or not, etc. In this manner, the general picture is truncated because “a more complex, multifaceted view of consumer perceptions of violence in advertising is lacking” (Leonard and Ashley 2012: 77). A multilayered analysis is recommended because the consumers discern among the points of view through which the violence is presented (the perpetrator and the victim) and the deservingness of the latter.

Also, comedic violence can conduct to “desensitization”, when humor really makes the difference between the perception of humorous violent media content and a similarly violent content depicted without humor (Gunter 1985; Sander 1997). When they are presented in a humorous context, violence depictions may be more acceptable and likable (Blackford et al. 2011), so the relation between visualization of comedic violent ads and behavior turns into a subject for investigation. According to Potter, “desensitization is enhanced when people believe that action viewed is fantasy and when they believe that everything will work out all right in the end” (1999: 117). Thus, when the violence appears humorous or it is labelled as fantasy, “it loses its status as violence” (Potter 1999: 4), and the viewers manifest a lack of arousal and emotional response. In their article from 1998, Potter and Warren portrayed humor as the “camouflage” of television violence. Media effects studies have shown that exposure to humor in violent representations can facilitate aggression (Berkowitz, 1970; Mueller & Donnerstein, 1977). Used as a “desensitization” tool, comedic violence can lead to the decrease of helpful behaviour and to the increased attitudinal callousness regarding the victims of violence, etc. (Gunter 2008: 1103). This theory is opposite to the catharsis model, for which only the exposure to media violence is able to reduce the aggressiveness. If humor trivializes the violence and even may create a trend of imitation of violent acts (Potter and Warren 1988), then the consequences of exposure will be important to be stressed in both immediate and long-term contexts (Anderson et al. 2003). Observational learning and desensitization to violence are strongly related to the normalization of violence in the media. Hye Jin Yoon investigated the role of normative beliefs about violence in advertising and he conducted two experiments in order to find whether individuals with higher norm beliefs will respond more positively to comedic violence ads than people with lower norm beliefs. Thus, his study revealed that

“norm beliefs had a positive influence on comedic violence ad responses. In addition, when violence intensities of the ads were varied, individuals with lower norm beliefs responded more positively to low violence ads than high violence ads, whereas individual with higher norm beliefs did not exhibit different responses to the two violence intensities” (Yoon 2015: 2).
The application of Social Norms Theory in advertising is relevant because findings such as of Yoon's may shape the targeting and the design strategies. The violation of social norms can enhance attention and recognition of the brand. Dahl, Franckenberger, and Manchanda studied the role of communication that overrides norms, observing that shocking ads violate norms deliberately with the purpose of expressing social values or personal ideals:

“It is the norm violation aspect of the shock appeal that is assumed to underlie its ability to break through advertising clutter and capture the attention of a target audience who then listens and acts on the related message” (2003: 269).

Infringement of the “shared expectations” that people have at a certain moment is a technique that may be included in the incongruity model presented above. The violation of social taboos in advertising is often accompanied with humor, because the latter can mitigate the perception of tabooness of highly tabooed ads (Sabri 2012). K. Swani et al. (2013) developed a study having as a starting point McGraw's and Warren's ideas (2010) about the importance of normative boundaries that influence the labelling of perceived humor as being benign or negative. Thus, the perceived humor and perceived violations of social norms depend also on gender. Highly violent humorous ads were perceived by women as greater violations of social norms than by men. The gender perspective nuanced the effectiveness of comedic violence and emphasized again the importance of targeting. As Swani et al. (2013: 309) pointed out, perceived humor is not identical with attempted humor and a wrong correlation may conduct to “failed humor” that will affect the brand image. Their study confirms humor theories that assert a male preference for violence, although the reaction to comedic violence in advertising has proved to be much more nuanced: the highly violent humor worked better for men than for women, while the lower-intensity violent humor had similar effects for both genders. Similar findings were reported by Yoon and Kim (2014), who highlighted the moderating role of gender identity in responses to comedic violence advertising. Gulas, Swani, and Weinberger (2015) found that violence between gender groups (female-male or male-female) resulted in lower levels of perceived humor. Violence coupled with stereotypes also represents “a chronic feature of advertisement” (Fernandez and Richards 2015: 243), gender stereotypes prevailing here. In this vein, an interesting contribution is done by Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger (2010) who deconstructed the portrayal of men in advertising (the ads broadcasted during the Super Bowl in 1989, 1999, 2009, and the television advertising of the five most advertised brands in 2008 were analyzed). Thus, their investigation revealed two ways through which violence against males appears in comedic violence ads: explicit physical violence and denigration (psychological violence), both of them described as justified, as a reasonable response under the large umbrella of “it’s just a joke” formula. “The deconstruction of advertising imagery” (Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010: 117) is an important tool in order to identify and interpret the representations of gender, status, role that are transmitted to the audiences. In this context, violent content can be used to raise public awareness on some important issues (such as in social campaigns) or may perpetuate stereotypes and discriminations.
In their study about the presence of aggression in commercial content embedded in programs directed to a prime-time (general audience), Scharrer et al. (2006) found that half of the aggressive commercial messages had a humorous element. Moreover, slapstick, surprise, and irony were at the top of the most frequent types of humor. Accordingly, the authors “suggested that each of these types relates to the three grand theories of humor. Thus, the centrality of incongruity, superiority, and psychoanalytic theories in commercials is supported” (Scharrer et al. 2006: 620). This conclusion matches with other analyses of advertisements that contained surprise as the key element (the incongruity model of humor) and who proved to be effective in obtaining positive responses (Woltman, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). In their study about the combination of humor and violence in Super Bowl Commercials, Blackford and all noted the presence of all three types of models in these ads. So,

“viewers may ‘like’ violence depicted in a humorous context because the presentation is unexpected (incongruity theory), enables viewers to feel better than a hapless victim (superiority theory), or provides viewers with the means to reduce the psychological tension that could arise when actors in a commercial are engaged in violent acts unaccompanied by humor (relief theory)” (2011: 131).

Lance Porter and Guy J. Golan investigated the differences between television and viral advertising; more viral ads use violent or provocative content presented in a humorous context than TV ads do. Moreover, humor is “the universal appeal for making content viral” (2006: 31). Brown, Bhadury, and Pope report that “humorous ads high in violence and consequence severity are more likely to be passed on to third-party viewers in a viral manner” (2010: 61), provoking a greater involvement with the ad message.

In the end of this overview on comedic violence, I briefly remind two questions related to our subject. First: the aestheticizing violence may be another subject of inquiry? The excessive use of violence in various forms of art (literature and film being the most familiar) refines the fragile line among humor, violence, pleasure, harm, recalling the major problems invoked earlier in this paper. Moreover, it opens a larger socio-cultural context when comedic violence ads may be integrated and interpreted. Thus, the second question is strongly consequential: is the use of humor (even in the form of comedic violence) ethically objectionable? Or, paraphrasing de Sousa (1987), “when is wrong to laugh”? As John Morreall noted in his The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor, the ethics of humor is “an area of the greatest practical concern” (1989: ix), with many fine points. For instance, Aaron Smuts (2010) made such an investigation by extracting three main approaches to the ethical criticism of humor: attitude-based theories, merited-responses theories and emotional responsibility theories. He argues for the effects-mediated responsibility model, believing that

“Telling jokes, encouraging jokes, and laughing at jokes are actions with clear ethical significance - they are all capable of producing harms. However, at this point we are standing on shaky ground if we say that merely finding any given joke funny is itself reprehensible” (Smuts 2010: 346).
“SAY NO TO GNOMES”: A three layer analysis

I selected the ad for Ikea “Say No to Gnomes” (2013) as an example for some important issues that a comedic violence ad can produce. The ad presents a couple who wants to redecorate their garden, but they must face the sabotage of the gnomes. The situation worsens with every gesture and ends up in a real battle. I will use the paradigmatic analysis, the investigation of press articles and the qualitative analysis of comments to YouTube video. Thus I will show the presence of all theories of humor at work in this specific ad, and also the levels of perceived violence and of perceived humor. Moreover, I will try to culturally contextualize this ad for a better perspective of comedic violence.

Method 1

Paradigmatic analysis (Berger 2005: 24) helps us to find the meaning through searching the oppositions; thus, latent meanings are revealed and they complete the manifest meanings of the ad. The ad includes major polar oppositions: change – stagnation; innovation – traditionalism; new – old; freedom – control; different – the same; relegation – abode; approval – denial; ordinary – symbol; primary colours – nuanced colours; energetic – tired; fashionable – out of fashion; inspired – uninspired.

Findings

The dichotomic perspective perpetrator versus victim appears clearly in the ad, even if the victim is not a living being, but an object, a thing, a garden embellishment. The underlying battle is between a traditional order with its prevalent symbols and standards and a new order that places one’s stake on change, mobility, modernity. Using this method we can identify a latent meaning that can be against the brand objectives: the opposition between a society based on “perennial” objects and a consumer society based on “ephemeral” objects. In a traditional society, people preserved objects for many generations and these objects constituted a relative stable frame where persons from the same family lived. Thus, gnomes illustrate a kind of traditional society when objects were loved, appreciated, cared and lasted for a long period of time. The new furniture presented in the ad for Ikea represents a sign of hyper-consumerism, where objects are changed quickly, in tune with the vogue, with no emotional connectedness whatsoever. The hedonist ethics seems to dislocate the utilitarian approaches. According to Lipovetsky (2006), homo consumericus is an avid searcher for emotional experiences; he tries constantly to improve his livelihood, changing brands and styles. The exaltation of novelty becomes a pressure for the consumer, who is in a perpetual quest for new brands, for something “more”. As Baudrillard affirmed, the consumption presupposes exchange and differentiation, imposing a powerful obligation of consuming (1998). Consumption is a system, a mode of communication, an ideological configuration that transforms the society into “spectacle” (Debord 1995). The sabotage of the gnomes may be interpreted as a contestation of this contemporary way of living and consuming. Attacking a known symbol is a tool that brings to the audience’s attention the message of the ad but in the same time it raises many questions and contradictions. Thus, if we place the entire discussion in the larger context of cultural debates, the analysis will reveal even more profound tensions in the ad.
Also, beside the struggle between the two orders described before, there is another one, more obvious: the struggle between human beings and objects. Here, the paradigmatic analysis shows another paradox: the power of objects on human beings. According to reverse thinking, the gnomes prefigure the future of their substitutes—they also will end by being replaced with other things and so on, into an endless circuit. The riposte of the gnomes constitutes the surprise that curdles the entire ad; in the same time, this represents an echo of Baudrillard’s theories (1990) about the supremacy of objects and of their control on the modern individual.

**Method 2**

The analysis of press is another tool that can show us the distribution between perceived humor and perceived violence in the large categories of audiences. I have chosen articles from The Independent, The Huffington Post UK, The Daily Express, and also the position expressed by the Advertising Standards Authority. In the British newspapers, the effects of the ad split the public, creating a real debate in 2013.

**Findings**

On the one hand, we witness the vocabulary of violence and its refutation: “garden gnomes massacre”, “war”, “hurling”, “violent”, “offensive”, “anti-social behaviour”, “frightening”, “to kill”, “to upset”, “traumatic”, “broken friend”, “angry”, “prejudicial assault”, “unsuitable for children”, “smashing”, “kicking”, “negative reaction”, “tears”. On the other hand, we found the use of the vocabulary of humor: “fanciful”, “light-hearted”, “fun”, “clever”, “brave”, “comical”, “to chill”. The newspapers also presented the complaints from viewers in parallel with the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)’s statement, Ikea representatives’ declaration, and garden home fans’ positions. For instance, The Independent notes the following: “An Ikea advert showing a couple using increasingly violent methods to kill off garden gnomes has drawn dozens of complaints from viewers” (Clarke 2013). From the point of view of the viewers, the ad was labelled as “frightening”, while from the point of view of the Ikea’s UK Marketing Manager, Peter Wright, this ad was compliant with the advertising standard code. Also, he states the following:

“We believe the advert takes a light-hearted approach to demonstrating to consumers how easy and affordable it is to treat their outdoor spaces just like any other room in the home. [...] We can confirm that no gnomes were harmed in the making of the advert, thanks to the brave stunt doubles and some clever post production. The gnomes are currently helping us in our office and most of them will be finding new homes with our customers”. (Clarke 2013)

This response was characterized by The Huffington Post UK (2013) as “both comical and dismissive”.

The Advertising Standards Authority said it received nearly 50 complaints for this ad, described by viewers as violent, frightening, improper for children and propitious for antisocial behaviours. On the contrary, ASA did not take any action, considering that
“while we appreciated that the ad would not be everyone’s taste we thought it was clearly fanciful and light-hearted. We also didn’t share the view that it would encourage or condone violence or anti-social behaviour and was unlikely to upset children. Of all the things that advertising does, or is designed to achieve - from promoting brand awareness, generating sales, informing, entertaining and even educated consumers - one thing is indisputable, it gets people talking. Here at the ASA we get drawn into these fascinating and often unexpectedly passionate debates about where the line should be drawn”. (ASA 2013)

The violation of social norms also appeared in the discussions and some newspapers invited a garden historian to talk about Ikeal’s ad (Meredith 2013). Gnomes are generally seen as a symbol for happy life and lucky charm, so the normal attitude towards them is one of acceptance and holding dear. The British are considered a nation of gnome lovers, so to cause uproar by overriding the stereotypes is a known strategy in advertising that we can observe here.

Method 3
For a more comprising view about the perception of this ad by a more diverse, heterogenic audience from the entire world, I appealed to the qualitative analysis of the comments posted on YouTube. From 875 comments posted from April 2013 to November 2015, I coded 812 valid comments, the rest of them referring to other things (how they reached the ad, responses to other users, punctuation signs, etc.).

Findings
161 users affirmed that they liked the ad, many of them considering it as “awesome”, “the most extraordinary advert I have ever watched”, “best advert ever”, “best ad of 2013”. 9 of these comments characterized it as “the most emotional ad” whose effect was crying. 5 persons do not explicitly say whether they like the ad or not, but they commented on the dual structure of the ad, where gnomes stand for the old and Ikeal symbolises the innovation. 73 people affirmed that they don't like the ad for several reasons: internal problems of the ad or even “racism” (29 comments), the “anti-advertising” that Ikeal self-created through this ad (30 comments), “de-gnoming” the garden is a bad strategy that drives the audience to negative attitudes towards the brand (9 comments), and “trying too hard” with this ad (5 comments). 22 persons that commented the ad said that they do not understand a thing, while 94 respondents affirmed that the ad is simply “weird” and 21 thought about it in terms of a “creative” ad. Moreover, the ad generated 114 jokes and intertextual references to games and videos. A big buzz has been generated by the music of the ad that was much appreciated, people trying to find more information about it (name, musician, where it can be downloaded, etc.). In total, 85 persons discussed about the song. The comments were divided also in terms of reactions towards gnomes: 17 individuals talked about “gnomophobia” and thought that “gnomes are evil”, while 49 individuals stated their “love” for gnomes, sustaining the “gnome power” or feeling bad about them. This situation confirms that the perspective from which the violence is presented (the victim or the perpetrator) changes its perception (and in the case of this ad, the interchange of the roles can explain the dichotomy of perception). The gender issue
provoked a small reaction, only 3 comments taking into account the woman’s role at the end of the ad and the hilarious position of the man.

Regarding the perceived violence versus the perceived humor, the analysis revealed that 72 persons said that the ad was really hilarious, funny or humorous, and three of them bluntly acknowledged that the ad is very humorous, but they will not buy anything from Ikea (the reception of the ad as a cultural discourse is dissociated from the effectiveness of the brand). 9 comments state that Ikea is “OK” as quality, and also appreciated the brand response to the consumers’ complaints. Also, 61 comments affirmed that the ad is violent, “creepy”, “horror”, and only 4 comments described directly the ad as “scarily funny”, comic and violent in the same time. Thus, 24 persons asserted that the ad is not at all violent or offending (and some of these ran a saw on British sensitivity).

**DISCUSSION**

This analysis showed a multilayered perspective in the understanding and interpretation of an ad; the people spontaneously discussed very distinctive traits and correlations, revealing the hard task of measuring the perception of the ad or of the brand. The close results (humor versus violence) may indicate that this advert is an example of comedic violence. Moreover, the big number of jokes that the video generated can also be interpreted in the large code of humor (they found the ad comic and they react by continuing the comic situation). The analysis of newspapers also indicates the presence of humor and violence, with a bias towards the comedic key of the ad. The paradigmatic analysis that opened this section of the paper emphasized on the latent meanings of the ad and on the cultural context of interpreting it.

If we examine the three types of humor depicted in this paper’s introduction (superiority, incongruity and relief theories), we can remark that all of them are present in the Ikea ad. The surprise – constitutive for the incongruity theory of humor – appears in many moments: the couple’s behaviour concerning the gnomes, their battle, the coming, out of the blue, of a gnome in the end of the ad, when we might think that the new order of things has already been instituted. All the oppositions presented above contribute to the incongruity structure that underlines the plot. The surprising disproportion between what we expect (a young family arranging their garden, a secure atmosphere) and what we see (violent reactions, an entire scene of fighting) may induce the laugh. The story developed a path that does not fit with the ordinary expectations, being almost absurd. The absurdity or even the irrationality comprised in the ad are essential for the incongruity model of humor. Thus, the hostility and the malice constitute, in this particular case, a proof for the superiority theory of humor. The feeling of superiority passes from the couple to the gnomes, changing the poles of power. The sudden moments of glory are interchanged and the tension is maintained. The momentary epic end that could produce relief by the recovery of peace and the end of aggression is rehashed. The play with the end prolongs the “real” relief and makes visible the presence of the relief theory of humor. The ad finishes with the tagline “Make more of your garden. Say no to gnomes.”, inviting the public to a personal sequel of this change.
Another pole of humor is in the gender distribution of charges and solutions during the entire fight. If in the most part the woman and man worked together, the final belongs to the woman, who takes into her own hands the resolution of the situation, putting the man into a blurry light. She finally took a jet of hose water at the mob of gnomes, smashing them into pieces, while the man stays hidden behind the bench.

The results presented in this paper have, as in any study, their limitations. I focused only on one ad, so the findings are representative rather than generalizable. For instance, in spite of the fact that I did an exhaustive analysis of the online comments, the results are group-specific. Further research may investigate how the perceptions of this ad vary across other demographics and different cultures.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This paper explored the concepts of humor and violence and contextualized them in the area of advertising. The vast literature on these notions is not enough to respond to the many questions that occur in studying very specific situations. Moreover, demographic, personality, message-perception factors are only a few elements that can change the attitude towards comedic violence. The desensitization or the transfer of violence in the real world remain just two examples of the complexity of this subject. The legitimacy of comedic violence represents a key issue in labelling an ad as enjoyable or offending. Also, a careful targeting is a decisive factor in the appreciation of the humor and it can reduce the nuanced reactions to comedic violence in advertising. Humor is an aesthetic experience too and, in this respect, the cultural background of audience also constitutes a factor in perceiving it in a way or another. Thus, the ethics of humor introduces other elements in the complex equation of understanding the comedic violence. To put this in other words, one can maintain that the oversimplification of the consumers’ reactions to comedic violent ads became obsolescent. A multidimensional analysis of consumer perceptions is needed if we want to lay forward a more complex picture of this domain.
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