

THE USE OF HUMOR TO MASK DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING

It's No Laughing Matter

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ABSTRACT: The primary aim of this study was to investigate the use of humor as a masking device for deceptive advertising claims. Content analysis on a total of 238 ads assessed whether humor was used to mask any deceptive claims. Deceptive claims were found in 73.5% of humorous ads, and 74.5% of these were masked by humor. The relationship between various forms of deceptive claims and humor types used was also assessed to determine whether specific humor types masked particular types of deceptive claims. It appears that all types of humor are used to mask the various types of deceptive claims investigated. Furthermore, specific types of humor are used to mask particular types of deceptive claims.

Advertising has almost become synonymous with ethics in marketing, reflected characteristically by its having attracted the most public criticism of any aspect of marketing (Calfee 1997; Smith and Quelch 1993). Such is the extent of the concern regarding ethics in advertising that Beltramini (2003) raises the interesting question of whether ethics in advertising is itself the ultimate oxymoron. However, at the heart of this concern is the public's fear of advertising (Calfee 1997; Lacznak and Murphy 1992; Schlegelmilch 1998). Indeed, Shimp (2003) summarizes some of the key criticisms levied against advertising: "untruthful and deceptive, manipulative, often offensive and in bad taste, often creates and perpetuates stereotypes, causes people to buy things they do not really need," and finally, the charge that "advertising plays on people's fears and insecurities" (pp. 605–606).

From a wider societal perspective, Pollay (1986) asserts that the unintended consequence of advertising is its infringement on social and psychological ecology. Others have noted its negative effect on consumer autonomy (Lippke 1989), on the cultivation of virtues (Waide 1987), or on the development of a false sense of well-being and happiness (Jhally 1998). Clearly, it appears that the unintended consequences of advertising are not limited to the dyadic relationship between advertiser and consumer, but extend to the wider sociocultural world (Fry and Polonsky 2004).

Although ethics has long been considered a mainstream topic in the advertising literature (Hyman, Tansey, and Clark 1994), many questions remain unresolved (Drumwright and Murphy 2004). Key issues in advertising ethics appear to have evaded societal attention, despite well-grounded at-

tempts to capture the numerous unethical consequences and characteristics of advertising in general. However, Hyman, Tansey, and Clark's (1994) classic review of the literature on ethics in advertising still provides researchers with the most rigorous and pragmatic agenda for exploring ethics in advertising. From a list of "prime topics," these authors gleaned the most important areas for ethical enquiry, summarizing them as (1) use of deception in ads, (2) advertising to children, (3) tobacco advertising, (4) alcoholic beverage ads, (5) negative political advertising, (6) racial stereotyping, and (7) sexual stereotyping. In summary, Hyman, Tansey, and Clark concluded, "only a handful of topics dominate . . . recent research [in advertising ethics]" (1994, p. 6), and these are concentrated in two areas: advertising deception and advertising content. Indeed, the use of deception in ads ranked first in importance across all the prime areas. Consequently, this study seeks to contribute to the developing literature on both deception and advertising content by exploring the use of humor to mask deceptive claims.

Humor remains one of the most poorly understood (Sutherland and Sylvester 2000), and yet at the same time, one of the most prevalent of communications strategies employed in advertising (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000). This is the case despite a growing body of literature within advertising on the use and application of humor (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). The role of humor in masking deceptive claims should come as no surprise. It reflects the very essence of persuasive advertising as being able to influence its audience in the same way as the "artist and the priest . . . by creating symbols that promise more than what is observable" (van de Ven 2001, p. 221).

The case for focusing on humor appeals is further strengthened by the fact that unlike other ethically contested appeal

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forms such as sexual appeals, humor has traditionally evaded ethical enquiry. In line with sexuality in ads, however, which has been described as a “soft issue” by Boddewyn (1991), humor is also rooted in a series of complex subjective and socially or culturally constructed values and beliefs. In general, the use of such appeals reduces the risk of unethical perception or offense, but as a result, may lead to less stringent control. Consequently, there is greater opportunity for advertisers to misuse legitimate appeals forms such as humor (Boddewyn 1991). The primary aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate the use of humor as a masking device for deceptive advertising claims. Since the masking of deceptive claims remains unexplored within the extant literature, exploring such practices has important implications for resolving any unintended consequences of advertising (Fry and Polonsky 2004).

Masking “occurs when the processing of a stimulus is interrupted by the subsequent immediate presentation of a second, different stimulus. The second stimulus acts retroactively to obscure the former one” (Moore 1988, p. 302). In effect, the second “masking” stimulus reduces the visibility or perception of the primary or target stimulus (Breitmeyer 1980; Breitmeyer and Ogmen 2000; Kahneman 1968). Such forms of masking can serve to generate a positive perception of a negative or neutrally perceived target stimulus; alternatively, they can also generate a negative perception of a positive or neutrally perceived stimulus. For instance, Way and Masters (1996) demonstrated how images of politicians could be improved if they were linked to positive emotional appeals.

Within an advertising context, visual masking assumes that an appeal form is being used to conceal the manner in which the message is perceived. This perception may be subliminal and operate at an unconscious level. Alternatively, and perhaps as occurs more frequently within advertising, is when the conscious processing of the target stimulus may be reduced such that if the masking appeal were removed, the perception of the target stimulus would become clearer. This study investigates the latter form of visual masking, using content analysis to determine the extent to which humor is used to mask deceptive claims within advertising.

Furthermore, visual masking within advertising is a classic example of manipulation and can be considered a covert mechanism for subliminal persuasion. This is based on Phillips’s definition of manipulative ads as “those that attempt to either (1) nonrationally change consumers’ desire or tastes or (2) associate the product or service with the satisfaction of conscious or unconscious desires that it is unlikely, in fact, to satisfy” (1997, p. 19). Masking, therefore, represents a special form of manipulation that could fulfill both of Phillips’s criteria by altering the rational evaluation of the product or service through the creation of illusionary associations.

Deceptive claims masked by such positive appeals could also operate at a subconscious level and remain latent during

ad viewing. Alternatively, a mediated version of the deceptive claim could be processed consciously. In either case, the humor would serve to obscure the underlying deception within the ad. The masking function of humor can potentially have a priming effect on the deceptive content (Grazioli 2004; Hausman 2000; Miller 1983), that is, it can alter the perception of the associated deceptive claim—for instance, by mediating its perceived severity through the illusionary association with the positive aspects of humor. Nevertheless, it is not the purpose of this study to explore the level of perceived severity of deception. Rather, this study serves as an initial exploration of the role of humor as a mask for deceptive claims. It also identifies relationships between various types of humor used to mask specific types of deceptive claims. A summary of relevant sections of the extant literature on humor and deception in advertising comprise the following section.

DECEPTION IN ADVERTISING

Most of the studies exploring deception in marketing involve an examination of advertising claims (see, for example, Braun and Loftus 1998; Carlson, Grove, and Kangun 1993; Gardner and Leonard 1990), although other contexts have also been explored, such as marketing research (Axelrod 1992). Olson and Dover defined a deceptive ad as “one that creates a false or incorrect belief about the product” (1978, p. 30). It has also been defined as the “message distortion resulting from deliberate falsification or omission of information by a communicator with the intent of stimulating in another, or others, a belief that the communicator himself or herself does not believe” (Miller 1983). Clearly, as Olson and Dover (1978) pointed out, the basic problem here is identifying whether a particular belief is incorrect or false. According to Gardner (1975), deception occurs when an ad leaves the consumer with an impression or belief different from what could be expected of the consumer with reasonable knowledge, and that belief or impression is factually untrue or potentially misleading.

Based on these earlier definitions, a societal marketing-oriented definition of deceptive advertising was conceptualized by Aditya as being “any act, claim, or message that (a) causes at least some consumers acting reasonably to make decisions that they would not otherwise make; (b) leads at least some consumers acting reasonably to believe something about the product, brand, or manufacturer that is not verifiably true; or (c) has the potential to foster distrust of any kind, general or specific, or in other ways cause an erosion of ethical values deemed desirable in society” (2001, p. 738). Unlike some of the earlier definitions that focus on economic erosion, Aditya’s definition reclaims consumer sovereignty by introducing a potentially long-term effect of the deception, namely, psychosocial undesirability. This definition considers the perspective of the most important stakeholder within the delivery of advertising—the viewing public,

or the prospective consumer. Aditya's (2001) definition focuses on what are described as "reasonable consumers."

However, Hyman (1990) proposes that consumers with any level of reasoning ability should be protected, and therefore conceptualized within any definition of deception in advertising. Hyman's multifaceted conceptualization also includes all decision makers who are potentially susceptible to harm from the processing of the deception. Hyman's (1990) consumer-oriented approach, integrated with Aditya's (2001) societal-oriented approach, therefore serves as a more useful benchmark for identifying deceptive claims within advertising.

HUMOR AND ETHICS

Given the lack of consistent humor definitions, various terminologies exist to describe humor. However, Raskin's (1985) typology has been popular among marketing scholars because his incongruity, arousal-safety, and disparagement categories encapsulate the most commonly recognized mechanisms for understanding the various humor types (Cho 1995). A number of extensive reviews of contemporary humor theories have been carried out (e.g., Speck 1991 and Cho 1995) and suggest that Raskin's categories of humor have practical relevance for understanding humor in advertising.

Incongruity has long been recognized as a source, if not the source, of laughter (Schultz 1972; Suls 1972). Kant, for instance, emphasized that "laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (1951, p. 177). It is the bringing together, or the juxtaposition (Williamson 1994), of two or more incongruous parts or circumstances, which leads to the stimulation of humor or laughter (Ritchie 1999). The basic premise behind the arousal-safety theory of humor is that humor provides an escape or relief from a form of constraint (Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons 1997). This escape, or relief, may either be from social norms set by society (Mindess 1971) or from sexual and/or aggressive inhibitions (Freud 1960). While Freud's ([1905] 1960) work is largely psychoanalytical, several physiological theories also describe arousal safety-based humor as an escape of some form. Tension release theory (Eastman 1936) suggests that a deviation from physiological norms results in a drive to return to normal homeostasis, whereas arousal theory (Berlyne 1969) suggests that a physiological drive to an equilibrium level of arousal is the driving force behind humor generation.

The third category of humor theory is based on hostility, superiority, malice, aggression, derision, or disparagement within a social or interpersonal context (Raskin 1985). This typically is the source of much of the moral philosophical discourse surrounding humor itself, that is, the deontological perspective. Often grouped together as "disparagement" theories, Suls explains this umbrella categorization as "those theories of humor based

on the observation that we laugh at other people's infirmities, particularly those of our enemies" (1977, p. 41).

Clearly, from the overview of the various humor theories, what becomes clear is that humor itself, albeit arguably with the exception of disparagement-based humor, is not inherently unethical. Given the various processes that might induce recipients of humor toward a positive state of well-being, however, there is huge potential to misuse humor as a strategy in advertising manipulation. Indeed, recent research has unequivocally demonstrated the positive physiological benefits of humor and its effect on, for instance, the reduction of tension and anxiety levels, and the generation of more positive mood states (Szabo 2003). Phillips (1997) holds that these feelings of well-being associated with humorous advertising claims are open to unethical association and prone to manipulation.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

Content analysis has been the tool of choice for analyzing communications for many years and is a standard analytical tool in advertising research (Kassarjian 1977; Kolbe and Burnett 1991). It is useful for both establishing patterns that support existing theories and for establishing new patterns to assist in formulating new theories (Kolbe and Burnett 1991). Furthermore, it is the most appropriate tool for providing "a scientific, quantitative, and generalizable description of communications content" (Kassarjian 1977, p. 10).

Content analysis involves the study of the message itself and not the communicator or audience (Kelley 1956). According to Kolbe and Burnett (1991), the benefits of content analysis comprise: (1) the unobtrusiveness of the communication evaluation, (2) the assessment of the environmental variables of the communication/message content, (3) the empirical onset or starting point of new research evidence on the nature of the communication, and (4) the ability to provide statistical information for multimethod studies. Furthermore, this approach has proved effective in previous research into deceptive advertising claims (Carlson, Grove, and Kangun 1993).

The sample of U.K. television advertisements used in the current study was collected from two major U.K. television networks over six days spread through four consecutive weeks of July and August 2004. This was done to make the current sample of U.K. television advertisements more likely to be representative of all U.K. television advertisements.

Typology Development

At the outset, it was necessary to categorize the types of deceptive claims used in the ads and also to identify the type of humor being used. The process by which this was undertaken is briefly outlined in the following sections. Examples are provided from the data set accumulated during the study.

Types of Deceptive Claim

The identification of types of deceptive claims in several earlier studies (Aaker and Myers 1987; Gardner and Leonard 1990) and their validation in Carlson, Grove, and Kangun (1993) provided a sound basis for the typology. Consistent with Carlson, Grove, and Kangun (1993), deception was seen to occur through three mechanisms:

1. *Vague/ambiguous*: The claim is overly vague or ambiguous; it contains a phrase or statement that is too broad to have a clear meaning.
Example: Ad for a building society—have a future that never ends by becoming a customer (too vague to have a specific meaning).
2. *Omission*: The claim omits important information necessary to evaluate its truthfulness or reasonableness.
Example: Ad for an insurance company—The company promises to give an “attractive quote” (but does not state that giving the quote is conditional on meeting certain requirements that would disqualify some potential customers).
3. *False/outright lie*: The claim is inaccurate or a fabrication.
Example: Ad for hair spray—Claims that viewers can get *anything* they want. This suggests that users can get anything they want *in life* by using this hair spray. This very broad generalization makes the assertion false.

A fourth category was subsequently added to capture ads that did not contain elements of deception. Where an ad was shown to contain elements of more than one type of deception, the case was allocated to the predominant type. The pilot study identified very few such cases, however, and was in line with similar findings by Carlson, Grove, and Kangun (1993). Note that the coders did not use the criteria of perceived deception, but rather the identification of the deceptive claims only, because ascertaining whether an ad is deceptive is different from determining whether it contains deceptive claims (Hyman 1990).

Types of Humor

The overall classifications for humor processes correspond to those identified by Speck (1991). Separate identification procedures and codes were therefore developed for:

1. *Arousal-safety*: Heightened emotional content of any kind with or without resolution.
Example: Ad for a deodorant—Man applies deodorant and women in the street all rush in his direction.
2. *Incongruity*: Any joke or pun that requires minimal effort by the viewer to “solve.”

Example: Ad for washing powder—Man interrupts wedding ceremony. Bride leaves proposed groom for this man who is wearing a whiter shirt than the proposed groom. (The viewer is left to make a connection between the correct choice of husband and choice of washing powder brand.)

3. *Disparagement*: Any display of an effort to derive humor from disparagement contexts.

Example: Ad for a deodorant—Man playing golf raises his arms in celebration and the odor kills the crowd.

Where more than one type of humor appeared within an ad, the most prevalent type of humor was accepted, consistent with Speck (1991) and Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons (1997). In the context of masking, an ad was seen as masked if the deceptive claim became more easily identifiable once the humor was removed.

The Coding Process and Dimensional Qualitative Research (DQR)

Two coders were extensively trained to categorize the data. Training began with an explanation of the content analysis method. Then the terms humor, deception, and masking were defined and ads containing examples of each were presented to illustrate appropriate classifications. Next, the specific coding process was explained, each category was defined, and examples were shown. Each coder was trained in the dimensional qualitative research (DQR) approach. Although this approach has been used successfully in advertising contexts, little reference to it has appeared in the mainstream advertising literature (Cohen 1999). This is surprising, because it is perhaps the only framework that is able to fully encapsulate all of the intrinsic and extrinsic psychological dimensions that most accurately demonstrate the processes used to mask deceptive claims.

Cohen (1999) adapted the multimodal approach developed by Lazarus (1973, 1989), which was specifically designed for the purpose of affecting adaptive behavioral change in psychotherapy. Lazarus's (1973, 1989) original “basic id” framework comprised seven modalities: *behavior*, *affect*, *sensation*, *imagery*, *cognition*, *interpersonal relations*, and *drugs* (or health-related aspects). Cohen extended this framework to include *sociocultural aspects*, and proposed the acronym “basic ids” to reflect this additional eighth modality. This approach has seldom been applied to content analysis within advertising, but its systematic and comprehensive nature (Cohen 1999) aids accurate classification and brings objectivity to the coding process. An example of the operation of the technique is provided later.

The coders were trained in assessing each ad according to the basic ids criteria and then classifying the ads according to

the study variables. A codebook was designed to categorize all the variables under consideration. The DQR approach allows coders to determine how the humor element is framed within the ad, and consequently to identify evidence of masking following its removal. Both coders agreed that assessing the ads using the basic ids criteria added an element of consistency and reliability to their approach and aided the identification of masking.

Following suitable training, the coders classified a practice set of ads that were not included in the pilot sample ($n = 54$), and any issues that arose were addressed by the authors of the study. In the few cases in which the coders disagreed, they examined the ad together, discussed the basis of their disagreement, and made a final decision. This procedure was followed to achieve as much objectivity as possible (Kassarjian 1977). The initial classification exercise also confirmed that the procedure allowed masking to be identified. Each ad was viewed independently, and the coders subsequently evaluated the ads independently during both the pilot and the full study. It was deemed vital to keep ad viewing independent due to the nature of the ads and to minimize the introduction of observer bias if coders displayed visual non-verbal or verbal (such as laughing, smirking, dismay, shock, surprise, etc.) behavior when viewing the ads. Consistent with the procedure adopted by Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons (1997), the ads were only viewed subsequent to this initial viewing and evaluation phase if there was disagreement among coders.

The pilot test of 54 ads revealed high intercoder reliability and was assessed using Perreault and Leigh's (1989) reliability estimate since this measure has received strong support in the literature and is, for instance, considered more accurate than Cohen's κ (Kolbe and Burnett 1991; Rust and Cooil 1994). Reliability estimates ranged from .89 to .94 across all categories. The pilot test allowed any operational issues to be corrected at an early stage and is considered crucial in evaluating any new theoretical operationalization in which alternative manipulations of the constructs under investigation can be checked to avoid design bias (Laczniak and Muehling 1993).

Subsequently, 436 ads were available for the main study, but this was reduced to 238 due to the removal of duplicated ads and nonhumorous ads. The overall coefficient of reliability was .90, and ranged from .92 for masked categorization to .87 for vague/ambiguous deceptive claim types. In all cases, however, the reliability indexes exceeded the critical value of .80, as suggested by Perreault and Leigh (1989) in the context of exploratory research. The following example illustrates how elements of the basic ids criteria, type of humor, and type of deceptive claim (shown in brackets) are used in the construction of a simplified narrative that can assist the process of analysis.

Example Ad for an Alcoholic Drink

Humor type: Arousal-safety. *Deceptive claim type:* False/outright lie category

Two men [interpersonal] are drinking [behavioral] brand X at a bar [sociocultural] and A says [behavioral] to B he wishes he were a blue whale [imagery]. The next shot shows both men projected onto the tongue of a blue whale [arousal-safety] [imagery]. A is explaining the reason for his wish [cognitive], which relates to the taste buds of the blue whale [sensory] and its ability to enjoy brand X, since it has the largest tongue in the world [health-related]. The next shot shows both men back at the bar with a smiling A [affective] removing seaweed from a wet and bemused [affective] looking B [disparagement]. The final shot shows brand X with the claim "Bitter Sweet Brand X; it's what your taste buds would order" [false/outright lie].

This claim that taste buds would order bitter sweet Brand X clearly falls into the false/outright lie category. The narrative, contrasted using the basic ids criteria, allows coders to identify the framing of the humor within the ad. For this example, the arousal safety-based humor is framed within the sensory- and imagery-based modalities of the two men on the blue whale's tongue. By visualizing the ad without these modalities, coders can make a more objective reassessment concerning the validity of the claim that taste buds would order the product. It is evident on reassessment that this claim is less valid with the removal of the arousal safety-based humor. However, a second source of humor is also present within this ad: the disparagement-based shot of the two men at the bar. Removing the disparagement-based humor does not affect the validity of the claim; therefore, this source of humor is not masking the false claim. This example typifies all ads with multiple sources of humor in that the most prevalent source of humor was also found to have the masking effect on the deceptive claim.

RESULTS

Following content analysis using the typologies identified earlier, statistically significant differences were identified using the nonparametric χ^2 analysis. At the outset, it was observed that 73.5% of all ads were found to contain deceptive content. Furthermore, individual-level analysis for different types of humor ads shows that ads are more deceptive than acceptable for each humor type. For arousal-safety ads, 80% of ads were deceptive; for disparagement-based ads, 64% were deceptive; and for incongruity-based ads, 78.5% were deceptive. The χ^2 analysis is shown in Table 1.

Analysis of the 175 humorous ads that contained deceptive content found that humor was used to mask deceptive content in 132 cases (74.5%). This was also the case for each type of

TABLE 1
Levels of Deceptive and Acceptable Claims Within Humorous Ads

	Deceptive	Acceptable	χ^2	Significance
Total humor	175	63	49.3	<.01
Arousal-safety	56	14	28.47	<.01
Disparagement	57	32	11.91	<.05
Incongruity	62	17	28.68	<.01

TABLE 2
Levels of Masking Within Humorous and Deceptive Claim Ads

	Masked	Nonmasked	χ^2	Significance
Arousal-safety	43	13	16.071	<.001
Disparagement	44	13	10.796	<.05
Incongruity	45	17	12.645	<.05
Total	132	43	45.26	<.01
False/outright lie	43	14	6.211	<.05
Omission	35	11	36.00	<.05
Vague/ambiguous	49	18	6.211	<.05
Total	132	43	45.26	<.001

humor and each type of deceptive content. Indeed, 76.8% of all arousal-safety ads, 77.2% of all disparagement ads, and 72.6% of all incongruity-based ads used humor to mask the deceptive content.

A similar picture was evident when different types of deception were considered. Of all ads falling in the false/outright lie category, 75.4% showed evidence of masking through the use of humor, as did 76.1% of omission-based ads and 73.1% of vague/ambiguous-based ads. These results show that humor is used to mask deceptive claims irrespective of type of humor used within ads and type of deceptive claim within the ad. Table 2 shows the levels of masking for each type of humor and deceptive claim.

The second objective of the study focused on determining relationships between the types of humor used and types of deceptive claim. Individual analysis was undertaken of each type of deceptive claim to show whether specific relationships existed between types of humor and types of deceptive claims. A modified version of the matrix method approach (Carlson, Grove, and Kangun 1993) to assessing the results is developed to highlight classifications across each typology. As indicated in Table 3, false claims are more prevalent in arousal safety-based types than both the other two forms combined (vague/ambiguous- and omission-based humor) ($\chi^2 = 5.786$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 56$). However, arousal safety-based humor also appears to have more false claims than both disparagement- and incongruity-based humor combined ($\chi^2 = 5.070$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 57$). Clearly, in our sample, arousal safety-based

humor is heavily associated with false claims. Ads classified as predominantly arousal safety-based humor types possessed more false deceptive claims than both vague/ambiguous and omission claims combined for masked cases ($\chi^2 = 5.769$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 38$).

Vague/ambiguous types of deceptive claims are found in greater frequency than both false and omission types in incongruity-based humor ($\chi^2 = 7.8$, $df = 1$, $p = .05$, $n = 62$). It also appears that incongruity-based humor type is more prevalent for vague/ambiguous claims than both arousal-safety and disparagement-based humor types combined ($\chi^2 = 4.313$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 67$). It is evident from our sample that the incongruity type of humor is being associated with vague/ambiguous claims. Furthermore, for masked ads only, incongruity-based ads contain more vague deceptive claims than omission and false claims combined ($\chi^2 = 5.000$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 49$). Similarly, masked vague/ambiguous-based ads possess more incongruity-based humor than disparagement humor ($\chi^2 = 5.818$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 44$) or arousal safety-based humor ($\chi^2 = 17.853$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, $n = 35$). There is also evidence that an association between the omission type of deceptive claim and disparagement-based humor exists. Omission-based claims, for instance, possess more disparagement type humor than arousal safety-based humor ($\chi^2 = 4.900$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 40$) or incongruity-based humor ($\chi^2 = 6.737$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 38$). Masked omission-based ads also contain more disparagement-based humor than incongruity-based humor ($\chi^2 = 5.828$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $n = 29$).

TABLE 3
Humor Type and Deceptive Claim Frequencies

	False/outright lie	Omission	Vague/ambiguous	Total
<i>Arousal-safety</i>				
Total	37	13	6	56
Masked	27	11	5	43
Nonmasked	10	2	1	13
<i>Disparagement</i>				
Total	11	27	19	57
Masked	9	21	14	44
Nonmasked	2	6	5	13
<i>Incongruity</i>				
Total	9	11	42	62
Masked	7	8	30	45
Nonmasked	2	3	12	17

DISCUSSION

The objectives of this study were twofold. First, we wanted to determine the extent to which humor is used to mask deceptive claims. Second, we wanted to cross-classify various claims by both the deceptive and humor typologies to determine which types of humor are being used to mask which types of deceptive claim.

The first objective demanded that a technique could be employed within the limitations of content analysis to determine or isolate incidences of masking. Generally, researchers are aware of an element of subjectivity in content analysis because it requires the classification of information by judges. Nevertheless, if the technique is applied systematically and with proper controls, it can yield appropriate levels of validity and reliability (Kolbe and Burnett 1991). Given the complexity of classifying deception and the benefits of integrating multimethod approaches to understanding deception in advertising (Hyman 1990), classifying masking became more pertinent, and therefore the coders used the DQR procedure as a framework to enhance the validity and reliability of their judgments. The coders felt that the intercoder reliability of .92 for the masking classification reflected the portability of the DQR approach in adding objectivity to coder evaluation. According to Perreault and Leigh (1989), interjudge correlation coefficients exceeding .80 may be adequate for exploratory research.

The ability of the typologies used to represent deception and humor accurately was not an issue. Carlson, Grove, and Kangun (1993) had validated the deceptive claims typology in advertising and within a content analysis format. Furthermore, the humor typology had also been validated by numerous authors within an advertising and content analysis context (e.g., Speck 1991; Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons 1997).

In total, 73.5% of all humorous ads were found to contain deceptive claims, and 74.5% of these were masked by humor-

ous content. It was consistently found that humor was used to mask deceptive claims in a majority of ads, irrespective of the type of deceptive claim or the type of humor used within the ad. However, it is important to stress that only inferences based on the results can be derived; the root motivations leading to the process of masking, whether intentional or inadvertent, cannot be inferred from this study. One encouraging finding is the identification of the number of acceptable humorous ads (26%; $n = 63$). This indicates that humor is not always used for manipulative purposes in terms of its masking deceptive claims.

The first objective of the study was to determine the extent to which humor is used to mask deceptive claims. This study found that humor is a popular masking device for concealing the conscious identification of underlying deceptive claims within ads. In each type of deceptive- or humor-based classification, over 70% of ads were found to be masked. Clearly, the high levels of deceptive claims found across the entire sample and across individual humor categories reflect a serious teleological concern in terms of the potential prevalence of deception within humor advertising. What is more disconcerting about our results, however, is the high degree of masking that is taking place across all types of deceptive claims and across all types of humor. This suggests that advertisers may be using humor to manipulate viewers through mediation of their perception of the deceptive claims.

The masking stimulus may operate by concealing or mediating the identification of the primary or "target stimuli." In either case, this form of covert association amounts to subliminal advertising (Phillips 1997). The degree of subliminal persuasion is clearly dependent on the level of consumers' conscious processing of the covert association between the humor and the deceptive claims. However, visual masking is probably more frequently seen within advertising when the conscious processing of the masked stimulus is mediated or "reduced" (Breitmeyer and Ogmen 2000) and, therefore,

not completely concealed from the consumer. Although this study did not measure the degree of perceived masking or perceived severity of deception, largely due to the limitations of measurements allowed by the content analysis method, the authors contend that the degree of masking is directly related to the degree of perceived deception. The greater the degree of deception within advertising, the greater the need to conceal it, and therefore, the greater the degree of masking that will take place.

Our findings could be interpreted in the context of Tanaka (1994) and Phillips's (1997) assertion that advertisers continue to use problematic elements in their ads, such as sexual and deceptive appeals, which often conceal and operate through a process of complex subliminal persuasion. Masking is therefore presented within this study as a possible mechanism through which subliminal association between an appeal form and the message may take place. It is possible, for instance, that the association of the product or ad with a covert stimuli to which the human mind is innately susceptible, such as the feelings of well-being associated with sex and humor, should be able to trigger or "prime" the subject toward desired behavioral consequences. The framing of humor with deceptive claims allows an association between the two such that if consumers do consciously process the deceptive claim, they are more likely to prime this potential deceptiveness with the humor. Therefore, even if the consumer did acknowledge the deceptive claims, he or she would be less critical, given the "feeling of well-being" generated by the humorous content of the ad. Humor serves to mediate the severity of the deceptive claims by concealing it through masking. These findings therefore also raise the question of whether humor is consciously perceived by consumers as a priming technique to mask underlying deceptive claims or not, and to what extent consumers process the severity of the deceptive claims in the presence of the humorous content.

The second objective of the study concerned determining whether specific types of humor were used to mask particular types of deceptive claims. False claims were found more with arousal safety-based humor, vague/ambiguous claims were found more with incongruity-based humor, and omission claims were found more with disparagement-based humor. The assimilation theory of priming associations (Stafford, Leigh, and Martin 1995; Yi 1993) appears to hold for humor and deceptive claims within advertising. Those forms of humor are used in association with deceptive claims that are congruent, and therefore, assimilate each other. The results also provided some evidence to suggest that this was also the case for the masked advertisements.

The congruence between the vague/ambiguous type of deceptive claim and incongruity-based humor is justified from Williamson's (1994) seminal work on decoding advertisements, which explained how humorous ads, especially incongruity-based ads, work through a process of holding the

viewer in a momentary "suspension of disbelief." Incongruity-based humor relies on the viewer deciphering the joke presented within the ad (Williamson 1994). This type of humor therefore already possesses an element of vagueness and ambiguity. Consequently, if a deceptive claim based on vagueness or ambiguity is associated with incongruity-based humor, it provides the viewer with an additional or double layer of "suspension of disbelief."

The vagueness and ambiguity that often characterizes incongruity-based humor therefore serves to replace the vagueness and ambiguity of the deceptive claim. Consequently, the humor is more readily able to mask the deceptive claim from conscious processing, given its similarity with the deceptive claim. This congruence between the type of humor used and the underlying deceptive claim facilitates the illusionary relationship between the deceptive claim and the humor.

The process by which arousal-safety and disparagement-based humor might operate with false and omission-based ads could also work on the basis of congruency effects between type of humor and the deceptive claim being masked. For instance, the pleasant mood, reduced anxiety, and feelings of well-being consequent to arousal-safety and disparagement-based humor types (Szabo 2003) are able to divert the viewer from assessing the validity of false and omission-based claims. The arousal safety-based humor type will often involve the arousal of feelings and images of sexuality, fear, fantasy, freedom, and magic, and at some point, often the resolution of these feelings or images. This false imagery complements the false type of claim being masked by arousal safety-based humor appeals. Linking the product to such arousal-based feelings of pleasure and well-being is considered manipulative (Phillips 1997).

Disparagement-based humor also coupled with omission type deceptive claims may operate along a similar mechanism. Disparagement is the only type of humor that is arguably inherently unethical (Raskin 1985). This is because it usually involves complete detachment from social morality, for it is usually characterized by the "observation that we laugh at other people's infirmities" (Suls 1977, p. 41). Hence, to engage in disparagement is to engage in the momentary suspension of morality (Rapp 1951). This disparagement-based "moral" suspension may therefore replace the omission of the deceptive claim, thereby masking it. If the omission-based claim is identified, then the disparagement-based humor may simply prime it and mediate its salience or perceived severity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Although a complete review on the implications for policymakers is beyond the scope of this study, the results that reveal a high level of covert advertising have important implications for policymakers charged with consumer protection. Indeed,

ultimately, the unintended consequences of masking in advertising are the responsibility of the national watchdogs that serve to act as the protectors of consumer sovereignty, specifically the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the United Kingdom. This is because conceptualizations of advertising deception and implications of these conceptualizations developed within the academic realm have either been ignored, disagreed on, or simply misunderstood by regulatory bodies at the expense of consumer rights (Hyman 1990). Furthermore, there has been apathy, reticence, or generally a very slow pace in undertaking academic research on deceptive advertising by the FTC (Aditya 2001) and the ASA, which has arguably resulted in the weak enforcement of antideception guidelines, and has subsequently offered license for deceptive advertising. For instance, the ASA does not have coherent baseline definitions, frameworks, or action-oriented measures to detect or facilitate the policing of deceptive advertising, let alone could it consider a practice such as masking as a form of manipulation. For example, under *The Control of Misleading Advertisements Act* (1988) in the United Kingdom, an ad is defined as misleading based on its effect on economic behavior; similarly, the FTC's statements on deception also focus on "economic perspectives to the neglect of psychosocial variables" (Aditya 2001, p. 8). If we accept the ASA's very restrictive perspective of a misleading or deceptive claim as one that "must not imply attributes, capabilities or performance, beyond those that can be achieved in normal use" (ASA 2005, p. 18), then a large number of ads could be classified as deceptive. A complete review of deceptive advertising, together with investigation of all the possible mechanisms that may contribute to the operation of subliminal persuasion, is advocated to redress the balance between the advertiser and the consumer.

CONCLUSION

The coders used a rigorous advertising analysis tool—the DQR approach—to ascertain whether deceptive claims existed within the ads. However, if viewers are unable to consciously perceive the deceptive claims and can only process the humor and the product information, then this could amount to subliminal persuasion. This study opens the way for further research to determine levels of consumer processing of deceptive claims in relation to their perception of associative appeal forms within the ad. Olson and Dover (1978) point out that it is not the mere presence of deceptive advertising but rather the seriousness of the deception that warrants attention and consideration for ethical advertisers. To this effect, this study has explored the role of humor as a mask for deceptive claims. It should be noted that the issue here is not only the high prevalence of masked claims identified in our study, but also whether this masking of deceptive claims now represents the norm in the

context of persuasive advertising strategy, and to what extent and in what contexts it influences consumer decision making. It would be interesting to determine whether consumers who identify the masking role of humor are influenced less by the deceptive claims than those who do not associate the humor with the deceptive claims. Clearly, the careful organization and framing of the humorous content within the structure of the ad and its subsequent effect on the degree of masking and priming, as well as on eventual consumer evaluations of the message, warrants further research.

A limitation of the study is that content analysis measures only manifest content and not the underlying latent structures or relationships. Although our study provides considerable information about the actual prevalence of masking and the relationships between various forms of humor-based masks with deceptive claims, this method does not permit measurement of the underlying consumer responses to deceptive claims, and therefore to deception itself. This precludes a more detailed explanatory analysis such as exploring the severity of perceived deception and its relationship to perceived masking. Exploring the severity of deception would only be possible through consumer-based research, for instance, or integrating the values pertinent to policymakers (Hyman 1990). Also, this study focuses only on humor appeals, but various other sorts of appeals such as sexual, testimonial, or fear appeals could also have a masking effect on deceptive claims and are worthy of further investigation.

The most important research avenue for the future, however, will be to move toward addressing the underlying relationships between humor and the deceptive claims identified in this study from a consumer perspective. Future inquiry could focus on consumer perceptions, exploring the relationships between the degree of severity of perceived deception and the degree of perceived masking. We therefore advocate experimental studies that assess consumer reactions to various forms of masking appeals and deceptive claims to clarify the relationship between the two and formulate a framework for understanding masked priming within the visual advertising context.

We also acknowledge the need for qualitative studies that probe more deeply into the underlying latent meanings conveyed by individual advertisements. The use of semiotic analysis, facilitated by the DQR approach, would be beneficial. This would, at the level of the individual ad, allow for the delineation of subcomponents of deception into "deceptive cues" that consumers might use as forms of heuristics in evaluating the degree of deception. Each deceptive claim should also be explored individually, given the unique contextual and situational applications of individual ads.

We urge researchers to continue the study of visual masking within advertising and to explore the prevalence and nature of other appeal forms as masks for underlying, deceptive claims. The need for an integrated framework or research agenda for under-

standing the development of masking in the context of deception, and within advertising generally, has never been greater.

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