

Humor, Violence, and Memory: Effects of Television Content on Recall

Juliane Da Silva • Sarah Gary • Bruce Bainum

Various affective states influence the recall of material learned while in an emotional state. For example, many recall details related to where they were and who they were with when they learned about the attacks on 9/11. Subsequently, while experiencing a similar emotion these memories are more easily retrieved (Brown & Kulik, 1977). Research suggests that recall of advertised products could also be influenced by the emotional state of the person during exposure to the advertisement.



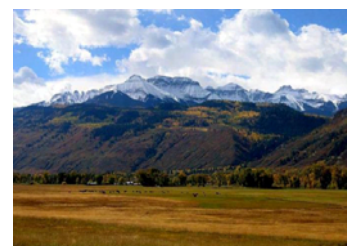
Violent Media and Recall of Advertisements

- Both violent and sexual programming decrease memory of advertisements (Bushman and Bonaccia, 2002).
- Violent advertisements are recalled less than other types of advertisements (Bushman, 2007).
- Violent media increased recall of violent advertisements, but non-violent media decreased recall for violent advertisements (Gunter, Furnham, and Pappa, 2005).



Humorous Media and Recall of Advertisements

- Moderately humorous advertisements are recalled and recognized better than non-humorous advertisements (Furnham, Gunter, & Walsh, 1998; Krishnan & Chakravati, 2003).
- Participants who viewed humorous television programs had better recall of advertisements than those who viewed a news program (Furnham and Mori, 2003).
- Participants who viewed a news program had better recall for advertised products compared to those who watched a comedy (Furnham et al., 1998).



Purpose and Hypothesis

The current study sought to compare the effect that violent and humorous television content would have on the recall of advertised product names. It was hypothesized that participants in the neutral condition would be more likely to recall product names compared to those in the humorous and

violent conditions, and that participants in the violent condition would be less likely to recall product names compared to those in the humorous condition.

Method

- One hundred ten college students from psychology classes were randomly assigned to one of three conditions.
- In the violent condition participants viewed an episode of *24* which contained 72 instances of violence and no instances of humor. In the humorous condition participants viewed an episode of *Will and Grace* that had 106 instances of humor and no instances of violence. In the control condition participants viewed a travel program which contained no instances of humor or violence.
- Participants viewed the same eight advertisements in each condition. There were four breaks for advertisements and each break included two 30-second advertisements (see Figure 1).
- Immediately after viewing the program, participants were given a surprise recall test. The following day, they were again asked to recall the eight brands portrayed in the

| Program | Minutes | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | |
|------------------|---------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|--|
| Violent Program | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Humorous Program | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

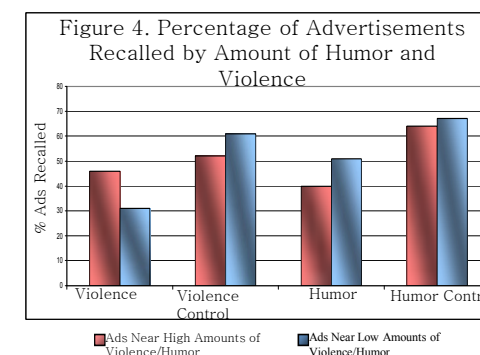
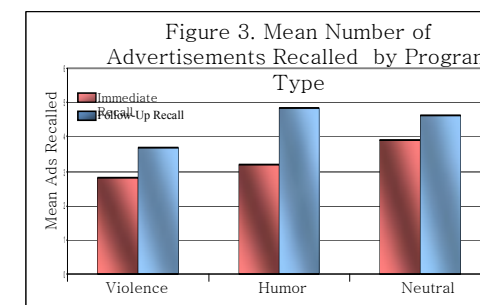
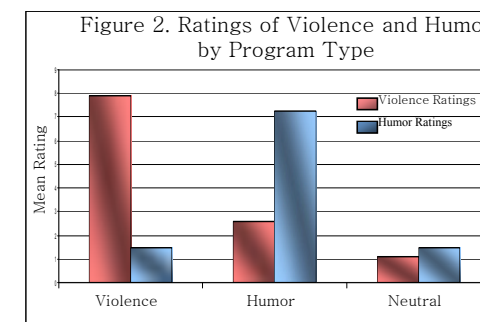
Results

Participants rated the humorous program more humorous than the neutral and violent programs, $F(2, 114) = 92.89, p < .001$, and the violent program more violent than the neutral and humorous programs, $F(2, 114) = 169.72, p < .001$ (see Figure 2).

Participants in the violent condition had lower immediate recall scores than those in the neutral condition, $F(2, 111) = 3.17, p = .046$. Recall one day later was lower for those in the violent condition compared to those in the humorous condition, $F(2, 87) = 6.74, p = .002$ (see Figure 3).

Abstract

This study compared the effects of both violent and humorous television content on recall of product names. It was hypothesized that participants exposed to violent media would be less likely to recall advertised product names compared to those exposed to humorous or neutral media. Participants viewed either a humorous, violent, or neutral television program which included eight advertisements. Participants in the violent condition had lower immediate recall scores than those in the neutral condition. Recall one day later was higher for those in the humorous condition compared to those in the violent condition. These findings suggest that advertisers may want to strategically place their advertisements cognizant of violent and humorous content.



In the violent condition, advertisements viewed during the most violent portion of the program were recalled better than advertisements viewed during the least violent portion, $t(49) = 3.66, p = .001$. Whereas, in the humorous condition, advertisements viewed during the most humorous portion of the program were recalled more poorly than advertisements viewed during the least humorous portion of the program, $t(51) = 2.45, p = .018$ (see Figure 4).

Summary

The hypothesis that participants in the violent condition would be least likely to recall product names compared to those in the humorous and neutral conditions was partially supported. The immediate recall data supported the hypothesis, whereas, recall one day later was best for those in the humorous condition, followed by those in the neutral and violent conditions, respectively.

Discussion

- In the violent condition, participants recalled product names significantly better when they were presented during the most violent portion of the program compared to the least violent portion.
- Participants in the humorous condition were significantly less likely to recall advertisements during the most humorous portion of the program compared to the advertisements in the least humorous portion.
- The results suggest that overall recall is best in programs without violence, and paradoxically also very good in programs depicting high levels of violence, but is the worst in programs depicting lower levels of violence.
- These findings suggest that in order to enhance the impact of an advertisement in a program with violent content, advertisers should place their commercial breaks closer in time to very violent scenes and further in time from less violent scenes.
- Conversely for humor, advertisers may want to place their ads closer to moderate amounts of humor and further from extremely humorous scenes.