

Effect of Humorous Political Advertisements on Candidate Likeability

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Abstract

Humor in politics can be divisive or positive in producing warm feelings toward the candidate. This study hypothesized that participants viewing a humorous political commercial would show greater liking for the candidate than those watching a non-humorous one. Participants ($n = 100$; 42 men, 58 women, $M_{age} = 19.43$) were randomly assigned to watch and rate a candidate in either a humorous or non-humorous political advertisement. The humorous advertisement group showed higher candidate ratings on likeable, cheerful and dynamic. Ratings did not predict voter behavior.



Research has consistently shown that humor in advertising increases consumers' attention and recall of the product and produces positive feelings toward a particular brand. For instance, Kellaris and Cline (2007) showed that incorporating humor in advertising improved positive feelings about a brand, and that this effect was increased when weak arguments were presented alongside the humor. Thus the positive effects tended to diminish once a strong argument was utilized. In an evaluation of the relationship between humor and product selection, Strick, Holland, van Baaren, and van Knippenberg (2012) demonstrated that resistance towards a particular brand was broken once humor was incorporated.

In order to better understand how humor in advertising works, Eisend (2011) in a meta-analytic study fused cognitive and affective models into one. Humor appeared to maintain a positive affect by reducing cognitive efforts regarding brand-related cognitions, thus distracting the consumers from responses particular to the brand. This was evidenced by the cognitive model that states humor can improve cognitions (where positive cognitions offset negative ones), distract and reduce negative cognition, increase attitudes toward the advertisement, and decrease brand-related cognitions.

Additionally, Shabbir and Thwaites (2007) found that deceptive claims are masked by humor in many advertisements. Exactly why misleading advertisements are effective was tested by Fennis, Das, and Pruyn (2004) who demonstrated that the proper use of the DTR method could guide the audience's preference in a desired direction. It was theorized that the introduction of humor served to disrupt potential cognitive arguments against the message, leaving one susceptible to being manipulated.

But can political strategists assume that the positive use of humor in advertising carries over to politics and people? Tsakona and Popa (2011) examined how politicians use humor both as a way of stating their positions and to poke fun at their opponents in a socially acceptable manner. Baumgartner (2007) took it a step further by examining the connection between humor and college students' attitude towards candidates and found that humor impacts the assessments of trust and evaluation of politicians. On the other hand, Marshall (1996) found that injecting humor into political campaign advertising only pays off if the viewers consider the advertisement funny.

This study sought to test whether humor in political advertising serves to improve one's feelings about the politician. It was hypothesized that participants viewing a humorous political advertisement would show greater liking for the candidate than those watching the same candidate in a non-humorous political advertisement.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 100 undergraduate students (42 men, 58 women) aged 17 through 29 ($M_{age} = 19.43$) drawn from a small, private college in northern California. The ethnic composition of the students was: 25% Caucasian, 7% African American, 30% Asian, 1% Middle-Eastern 1% Pacific Islander, 20% Hispanic, and 16% mixed ethnicity. Students who signed up for the experiment were given class credit for participation.

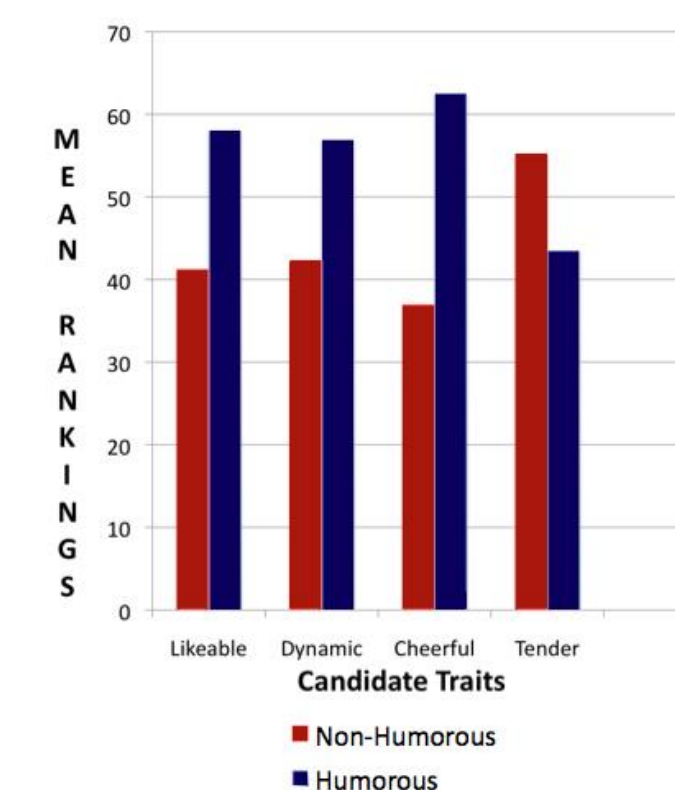
Materials

Two 30-second YouTube video clips were used in this experiment. The non-humorous clip was "Start Now – Mike Huckabee Iowa Ad" (explorehuckabee, 2007), and the humorous clip was "Mike Huckabee Ad: Chuck Norris Approved" (Veracifier, 2007). A survey distributed after the video measured responses and attitudes towards the candidate. Additional information collected in the survey included: gender, age, ethnicity, class standing, major course of study, political affiliation and voting history.

Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned into the control (non-humorous) group or experimental (humorous) group. According to their assigned group, the participants were led into their respective rooms. The control group watched the non-humorous advertisement while the experimental group watched the humorous advertisement. Participants rated their perception of the candidate on a number of personality traits and filled out their demographic information. Additionally, to validate that the humorous video was actually perceived as humorous, participants were asked to rate how funny they thought the video was. Participant names were not recorded in order to maintain anonymity. The students were thanked for their participation and debriefed after the experiment had ended.

Figure 1. Ratings of Candidate Traits by Condition



Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1 illustrates the mean rank differences on the personality traits in which there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. These traits were: dynamic, likeable, cheerful, and tender.

Primary Analysis

Using the Mann-Whitney U to examine mean rank differences on the traits, the humorous advertisement group showed higher candidate ratings on likeable ($U = 787.00, Z = -2.98, p = .00, d = .28$), cheerful ($U = 573.00, Z = -4.54, p = .00, d = .71$) and dynamic ($U = 841.50, Z = -2.59, p = .01, d = .40$). In contrast, the non-humorous group gave higher candidate ratings on tender ($U = 913.00, Z = -2.107, p = .04$). Additionally, the humorous advertisement group rated the video as funnier than the non-humorous group ($U = 269.00, Z = -6.617, p = .00$).

Discussion

As predicted, participants rated the politician higher in likeability when he appeared in the humorous advertisement compared with the non-humorous advertisement. Research by Strick et al. (2012) suggests that humor increased positive feelings toward the candidate which translated into higher ratings of likeability for the politician. This contrasts with results by Marshall (1996) who found lower candidate ratings in the humor advertisement condition. It may be that his "humor" condition was not considered humorous enough, because for those participants that considered the advertisement humorous, the candidates received higher ratings, too. With respect to our study, the participants in the humor condition rated the advertisement much higher on the adjective funny.

As previously noted by Kellaris and Cline (2007), advertisements use humor to create positive affect towards a product. In this same way, future political candidates might consider showing their humorous side since it is clear that humor attracts and increases the candidate's likeability. But not just any kind of humor will do. When humor is used to ridicule a candidate's opponents or when politicians use humor in taboo topics and make ethnic or sexist jokes, the inappropriate use can lead to their downfall (Marshall, 1996). The judicious balancing of humor in a socially acceptable manner can prevent negative, unintended consequences. One thing is clear; humor is a powerful social tool that can be utilized in the political sphere for positive advantage.

