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Humor in Slogans: Van Helsing Effect in Second Language Learning

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Abstract

The present paper further extends the studies of Eisend (2009), Takahashi and Inoue (2009), and Kohn, et al. (2011), and applies Krishnan & Chakravarti's (2003) experiment design to examine: 1) whether humor in slogans enhances L2 learners' memory of the promoted items in advertisements; 2) will Vampire Effect occur in humorous slogans and distract L2 learners' focus so much that they cannot pay attention to the importance of the promoted item itself? And, 3) is gender a distinguishing feature in terms of the acceptance and sensitivity to the humor in slogans? One pretest, two experiments and one post-test were conducted in this study. In the experiments, the participants' immediate responses to the questions and their memory of the promoted products and candidates were vital. A follow up face-to-face interview was then conducted. It was found that L2 learners' familiarity with the promoted items was more important than the level of humor in the slogans. That is, instead of the Vampire Effect, in which the degree of funniness is so high that it overwhelms the significance of the item promoted, the Van Helsing Effect, in which L2 learners' previous experience is more influential in the process of recognizing the slogans and the promoted items, appears.

Key words: Humor; Slogan; Memory; Vampire Effect; Van Helsing Effect; L2 learners

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INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that the use of humor in advertisements enhances the audience's positive impression and memory of the promotion (Eisend, 2009; Takahashi, & Inoue, 2009; Madden, & Weinberger, 1982; Cline, & Kellaris, 2007). As van Mulken (2005, p.708) specified, "The consumer may associate the pleasure they experienced in processing the ad with the product that is being advertised, which in turn may lead to a more positive attitude towards the product." Kohn et al. (2011) indicated that women seem to be more sensitive to humor in advertisements and thus are more likely to be affected by the use of humor in slogans. Other than memory enhancement, Eisend (2009) suggested that the Vampire Effect can occur in humorous slogans. The Vampire Effect refers to the phenomenon where the level of humor in an advertisement is so high that the audience lose their focus on what is actually being promoted. That is, the audience can only remember what is funny about the slogan, but are not able to recall what was advertised.

To ascertain whether the hypotheses from previous studies can also be applied to second language learners (L2 learners), the present study aimed to determine: 1) does the use of humor in slogans enhance L2 learners' memory of the promotion? 2) does the Vampire Effect also play a vital role in L2 learners' perception of humorous advertisements? and, 3) is there a significant difference in sensitivity and acceptance of humorous slogans between female and male L2 learners?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section two presents the literature review, where previous studies about humor in advertisements are presented. Section three offers the methodology and introduces the experiment design of the present paper, while section four lists the findings and data. Section five displays the analysis and discussion of the results collected, and lastly is the conclusion of the current research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, efforts in marketing have been made to determine what can best facilitate the memory of customers. Many researchers have found a similar conclusion—humor (Martin, 2002; Hsieh et al., 2012; Madden, & Weinberger, 1982; Cline, & Kellaris, 2007). Evidence has shown that high humor quality increases customers' impression of both the product and the nature of humor in the slogan itself (Kohn et al., 2011; Martin, 2002). However, some studies have indicated that the Vampire Effect may result when the degree of funniness in the slogan is too high (Eisend, 2011). Further, some research has suggested that the sensitivity and acceptance of humorous slogans vary between males and females (Kohn et al., 2011). In the following, a brief introduction of previous studies that have focused on the relation between humor and memory, the Vampire Effect, and the gender difference in terms of the sensitivity and the acceptance of humor in slogans will be presented.

Takahashi and Inoue (2009) indicated that participants recall more doodles with high humor quality than doodles with low humor quality. Doodle is the blended word of doodle, drawing, and riddle, and is an abstract and nonsense cartoon giving humorous explanation to the theme of a picture. Their findings suggest that images or sentences with higher degrees of humor remain in people's mind longer and are more easily recalled. Therefore, it is inferred that slogans with high degrees of funniness may also impact people's memories more than those with less humor features. However, only few studies have considered the relation between humor and memory among L2 learners, which is one of the aims of the present research.

In MediaAnalyzer Software & Research GmbH's survey (2005), the term "Vampire Effect" first appeared in marketing, which refers to "something with a too-strong visual sucking up a lot of the attention that would have otherwise been spent on an ad's actual communication" (MediaAnalyzer Software & Research GmbH, 2012). In the present research, whether the Vampire Effect takes place and distracts L2 learners' attention from the promotion when the funniness in a slogan is too attractive is studied (Eisend, 2011).

Studies have suggested that women's sensitivity and acceptance of humor in slogans are higher than those of men (Azim et al., 2005; Kohn et al., 2011). That is to say, women perceive the funniness and humor in advertisements or slogans with less effort compared to men. Therefore, it is likely that females have a greater tendency of being influenced by the humorous features or techniques used in the slogans during the decision making process. On the contrary, men seem to be less impressionable when purchasing a product with *funny slogans*. While more and more scholars have attributed their work as research pertaining to humor, most studies

have focused on brain activation, and less effort has been made based on the participants' real reactions and responses toward products with humorous slogans. Therefore, whether gender difference contributes to the cognition of humorous slogans in L2 learners will also be examined in the present study.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present paper adopts Krishnan and Chakravarti's (2003) research framework, and applies both images and texts in the two experiments. However, differing from Krishnan and Chakravarti's (2003) design, one pretest and post-test are added to the present research. In the experiments, the participants' immediate responses to the questions and their memory of the promoted products and people were vital; therefore, additional data were collected in face-to-face interviews. It should be noted that all slogans used in the experiments were in English; consequently, the participants' competence of English played a vital role and was strongly taken into consideration when recruiting the participants. The pretest was applied to identify participants who had already seen the slogans, and to determine those whose English ability was insufficient for these experiments.

In experiment one, whether humorous slogans enhance the L2 learners' impression toward the image of the promoted product was analyzed. The second experiment aimed to explore whether the quality of humor in slogans enhanced the connections between the names of the promoted products and the slogans themselves. Lastly, the assignment of either humorous or non-humorous slogans by the participants was collected in the post-test. All instructions in the interviews were given in Mandarin Chinese, the participants' native language. Also, the participants were tested individually, and each interview was completed within twenty minutes.

3. PARTICIPANTS

The participants comprised twenty students (F:M=1:1; aged from 19 to 24) studying at the department of Foreign Languages and Literature at National Cheng Kung University in Taiwan. All participants, whose native language is Taiwan Mandarin, are Taiwanese natives, with only few having ever been to western countries or experienced constant exposure to western cultures. Moreover, all of them are L2 learners of English, who have studied English for ten to nineteen years, and have no difficulty interpreting the English slogans used in this research.

4. MATERIALS

The experiments simultaneously combined both the photos and slogans of the promoted items in the experiments.

The stimuli, collected from the websites *Funny Slogans* and *Buzzle.com*, comprised fourteen humorous slogans corresponding to the products and people they are matched to promote. For instance, a campaign slogan from *Funny Slogans* which tactfully blends sexual issues and canvassing stated, “Sex!!! Now That I’ve Got Your Attention, Vote for Me” and was matched with a politically active politician in the U.S., Bill Clinton. All the promotions in the present research are either well-known in the political world or rather popular in the entertainment field in American society. Examples include famous companies (e.g. Morgan Stanley), American presidents such as George W. Bush, and two actresses in the show *Glee*, Lea Michele and Dianna Agron. The content of the fourteen humorous slogans and the matched products and people applied in this study are presented in table 1.

All fourteen slogans were paired with companies or people sharing some similar characteristics with the advertisements. For instance, slogan number 1, “What’s bugging you?” is matched to the AntiVirus firm Avira because “bug” can be interpreted as an error in a computer program or system. Whereas both the slogan and the company were related to computers, they are paired as a match. Further, “Wii” is one of the most successful products of the Japanese multinational consumer electronics company, Nintendo. Therefore, “Wii would like to play.” and Nintendo were matched together.

5. PROCEDURES

The process for the pretest, the two experiments, and the post-test are outlined in the following sub-sections.

5.1 Pretest

In the pretest, the participants were given the fourteen humorous slogans that would be used in the following two experiments. Each participant had one minute to read

Table 1
Slogans and the Matched Company/Celebrity Used in the Experiments

No.	Content of slogans	The matched
1	What’s bugging you?	Avira AntiVir
2	Wii would like to play.	Nintendo
3	Game on. And on. And on.	Apple iPod Touch
4	We make money the old-fashioned way....We earn it.	Morgan Stanley
5	You can trust us for a good lay!	Exodus Moving
6	FCUK Advertising.	French Connection United Kingdom
7	It’s for Yoo-hoo.	British Telecom
8	Vote for me. I’m Good at Looking Busy.	Barack Obama
9	If You Must Waste Your Vote on Someone, Waste it on ME.	Hilary Clinton
10	Sex!!! Now That I’ve Got Your Attention, Vote for Me.	Bill Clinton
11	Victoria’s Real Secret. She Votes for me!	John F. Kennedy
12	Vote for me. We’ve All Done Something Stupid.	George W. Bush, Jr.
13	Please Vote For Me...I Already Told My Mom I Won!	Lea Michele
14	I know where you live. Vote for Me!	Dianna Agron

through all slogans before the experiments started. During this time, no explanation related to the slogans or the promotion was given to the participants. If the participants had difficulty understanding the words used in the slogans, they were excluded from the test immediately. Also, those who had seen or heard of the slogans were ineligible for this research.

5.2 Experiment 1

The goal of this experiment was to examine whether humor enhances the connection between the images and the promoted items during the participant’s process of cognition. At the beginning of the test, participants were shown the name of each product or person promoted in the humorous slogans in succession, for ten seconds each. Afterwards, participants had to find the picture of the promoted item from the randomized fourteen pictures to match the slogan that was shown.

Each participant had two minutes to finish the whole task, and notes were taken when a slogan was matched with an incorrect picture.

5.3 Experiment 2

In the second experiment, whether the humor in the slogans can enhance positive impressions of the promotion and thus help them to be remembered was examined. In this experiment, no picture or names of the promoted items were provided, and the participants had to match the slogans with the promoted items by speaking the names of the promoted ones on seeing the slogans.

5.4 Post-test Interview

To ensure that the participants’ results remained unbiased, information related to the participants’ personal thoughts and experiences were collected in the post-test, the last part of the experiments. In this section, participants were asked to provide information related to how long they have studied English, whether they have been to other countries, and the level of funniness they evaluated the

slogans (e.g. I do not find this slogan funny at all.) The acceptance and sensitivity toward the humorous slogans were gathered in this test. Subsequently, the participants had to choose three slogans that they considered the most humorous and three they considered the least humorous. From this categorization, whether the participants' memory was associated with the level of humor in the slogans could be examined.

6. FINDINGS

According to the data collected from the participants, there are in total one hundred and twenty votes for both humorous and non-humorous slogans, split sixty votes for each. Among the fourteen slogans, numbers 6 (17%), 10 (20%) and 12 (20%) were considered to be the most humorous, while numbers 4 (20%), 9 (13%) and 14 (17%) were ranked as the least humorous, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2
Distribution of the Participants' Grouping of Humorous and Non-Humorous Slogans

Number and percentage of participants' responses		
Slogan number	Humorous	Not humorous
1	6 (11%)	1 (2%)
2	4 (7%)	2 (3%)
3	2 (3%)	4 (7%)
4	2 (3%)	12 (20%)
5	0 (0%)	4 (7%)
6	10 (17%)	0 (0%)
7	2 (3%)	4 (7%)
8	8 (13%)	2 (3%)
9	2 (3%)	8 (13%)
10	12 (20%)	2 (3%)
11	0 (0%)	5 (8%)
12	12 (20%)	2 (3%)
13	0 (0%)	4 (7%)
14	0 (0%)	10 (17%)
Sum	60 (100%)	60 (100%)

Table 3
Distribution of Incorrectness in the Two Experiments

Number and percentage of the participants' responses				
Slogan number	Experiment one	Experiment two	Total Number of false matching	Total percentage (%)
1	1	2	3	6
2	0	1	1	2
3	1	1	2	4
4	2	3	5	9
5	2	5	7	13
6	0	1	1	2
7	2	4	6	10
8	2	1	3	6
9	1	1	2	4
10	1	2	3	6
11	2	4	6	10
12	1	1	2	4
13	2	3	5	9
14	3	5	8	15
Sum	20	34	54	100

From the responses of the twenty participants, there

were 20 false matchings collected in experiment one, while the other 34 were gathered in experiment two. A total of fifty-four false matchings are recorded and displayed in Table 3.

As displayed in Table 3, in experiment one, the test for the relation between images and slogans, the percentage of incorrectness of slogan number 14 (15%) is the highest, while in experiment two, the test related to the connection between the name and the slogan, number 5 (14%) and 14 (14%) were the most likely to be mistaken. Moreover, compared to the results in experiment one (20 false matchings), there was a higher number of incorrectness in experiment two (34 false matchings).

When comparing the results in experiment one and two, the highest number of false matchings lies in slogan number 14 (15%), followed by number 5 (13%), 7 (10%) and 11 (10%), while the lowest are numbers 2 (2%) and 6 (2%). Implications of this will be further discussed in the next section.

Table 4
Incorrectness Rates of Male and Female Participants in the Two Experiments

	Experiment one	Experiment two
Male % (n = 40)	85 (n = 17)	68 (n = 23)
Female % (n = 14)	15 (n = 3)	32 (n = 11)

From Table 4, it can be seen that compared to the female participants, males had a higher number of false matchings in both experiment 1 and 2 (male 40, female 14). The ratio of incorrectness of male to female is 17 (85%) to 3 (15%) in experiment 1, while in experiment 2 the ratio is 23 (68%) to 11 (32%). In the next section, the unequal proportion of incorrectness between genders is examined.

DISCUSSION

The above findings show that in general, participants performed better in experiment one than two. This suggests that for L2 learners, humor may better reinforce

the connection between the images and the slogans of the promoted items rather than that between the name of the promoted items and the slogans. Eisend (2011) proposed that the Vampire Effect takes place in humorous slogans when the degree of funniness in the slogan is too high; however, the result of the two experiments contradicts Eisend's (2011) findings. In this study, no significant distinction between slogans that were considered most and least humorous in terms of the participants' performance was found. Nonetheless, participants who often travel to foreign countries displayed better recall of slogans they considered more humorous. This may indicate that cultural awareness impacts L2 learners' cognitive process. To be more specific, if L2 learners do not possess adequate knowledge toward the promotion items or lack exposure to American culture, as in the present study, it is likely that they will not understand the humor in the slogans. Therefore, although humor plays an important role in the process of associating the promotion and its slogan, the participants' familiarity with the promotion's cultural origin may have a greater influence on whether they can remember the slogan and details of the promoted items. In other words, L2 learners' previous experience toward the promotion is more influential than the slogans' funniness. Therefore, the stronger the relation between the slogans and the characteristics of the promoted items, the better the recall the L2 learners will have.

A Van Helsing Effect appears to have taken place in the present study, whereby the L2 learners' recall of the promoted items whose cultural aspects are more familiar to the L2 learners creates a stronger effect than those with more humorous slogans do. In other words, different from the Vampire Effect in Eisend's (2011) research, an opposite result, Van Helsing Effect, was shown in the present research.

Kohn, et al. (2011, p.894) indicated that compared to males, females are more sensitive to humor. In accordance with Kohn, et al.'s results, in the present research the female participants had a lower number of false matchings in both the first and second experiments, with only fourteen mistakes in total among all ten female participants. By contrast, the number of false matchings among male participants was three times higher than that among female participants.

Moreover, from the feedback in the post-test, female participants also responded more positively to the slogans used in the experiments—8 female participants found all slogans to be funny, while only 3 male participants did so. Therefore, it appears that gender does affect acceptance and sensitivity toward humorous slogans.

From the above findings, one can assume that if humor is applied well in marketing, it is likely that the positive impression of the products or people promoted in the slogan will rise considerably, especially among females.

CONCLUSION

The present research examined the significance of humor in slogans for L2 learners of English and whether the Vampire Effect plays a role in the cognition of L2 learners. Also, the difference between genders in terms of the acceptance and sensitivity to humorous slogans was investigated.

From the findings above, it is clear that the L2 learners' impressions and recall toward advertisements with humorous slogans was much improved when they were displayed with the photograph rather than just the name of the promoted items. Further, despite the L2 learners' sufficient language competence in English, the Vampire Effect appeared not to take place with the participants in this study. Instead, the Van Helsing Effect seemed to occur, in which the L2 learners' knowledge and experience toward the western culture played a more important role. Moreover, in agreement with Kohn, et al.'s (2011) findings, gender is another influential feature in terms of the recognition of humor in slogans. That is, the female participants tended to have a higher acceptance and sensitivity toward slogans which contained funniness; by contrast, the male participants were relatively less sensitive and more critical when it came to humorous slogans.

From the results of this study, it can be inferred that although humor plays an important role in promotions and marketing, it may not be the most crucial element for consumers who are non-native speakers of the language in which the slogans are written. However, different from the results of other researchers (Lammers et al., 1983; Perry et al., 1997; Crawford and Gressley, 1991), humor does seem elevate the positive impression of female consumers, as reported in the study of Kohn et al. (2011). From the findings of the present paper, humor may even bring about pleasant responses among non-native female consumers, and may thus boost business if it is applied well. Nevertheless, instead of humor, experience and pre-knowledge of cultural mores appear to have a greater impact on L2 learners' recall and impressions toward the promoted items in advertisements.

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