

## APPLICATION OF HUMOROUS METAPHORS IN COPYWRITING

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper introduces a new Call-To-Action (CTA) method and explains how to apply humorous metaphors in copywriting. In the development of this method a Design Science Research (DSR) methodology was applied. The main problem represents a lack of CTA methods that can enhance the implementation of humor in copywriting. Authors find a solution in the development of the HAHA method that enhances implementation of humor in a wide range of industries and activities. To describe how this method works, authors have designed a model that effectively explains the basic steps in devising humorous metaphors. These guidelines were applied in the creation of a humorous video commercial which showed that humorous metaphors can be used not only to relax customers but also to raise their awareness about different expectations, emotions, conflicts and complex ideas. Humor is a multidimensional construct which means that it cannot be copied from one place into another without being adapted to the specific context. Optimal results are achieved when the connection between the source idea and the target idea is ambiguous and when activities lead to an unexpected benign violation.*

**KEYWORDS:** marketing, copywriting, humor, metaphor, call to action

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Market success of every business organization is closely related with its ability to influence customers' opinions and behaviors. Metaphor represents a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy (e.g. Drowning in money) [Lakoff and Johnson, 2017]. Its usefulness stems from the fact that it allows the creation of new frameworks for thinking (e.g. Life is a box of chocolates). By their type they metaphors can be implied, visual or extended. An implied metaphor compares two things without naming one (e.g. License to Chill). Visual metaphors are subtle, yet strong ways to visually compare things and deliver an original message, while extended metaphors apply more words and different information sources to compare, describe or symbolize some phenomenon. Given that people think, feel, and behave in metaphorical terms, metaphors are a crucial ingredient of

communication [Lakoff and Johnson, 2017]. A humorous metaphor is a figurative construct in which one idea [target domain] is understood in terms of another [source domain] in a funny way. Application of humor in copywriting can humanize organizational brands, catch attention and help organizations to gain more likes, comments, and shares on social networks [Velnicuic, 2022]. Copywriting is the process of writing words intended to prompt a specific sales activity. These are activities that try to convince potential customers to buy a product, rate the product, recommend it to their friends, subscribe to the mailing list, suggest creative improvements, etc. The importance of humor in copywriting is reflected in the fact that 60% of social media users are focused on finding funny content [Tama – Rutigliano, 2018]. Another good example that shows how much people like funny content can be found in the popularity of websites that are specialized in providing funny content. Similarweb [2022] provides a ranking list of top humor websites in the world on which fanfiction.net holds the first place with average visit duration from 18 minutes and 54 per user. These days more and more companies are beginning to exploit this viral market by using entertaining memes as an advertising tool [Holland, 2020]. For example, to grab customer attention with the label, a vintner in France has found unlikely success with a new wine crudely called “Le Vin de Merde”, which loosely translates as "crap wine" [CBC News, 2008]. However, applying humor in copywriting is by no means easy. The root of complexity lies in the fact that humor is a multidimensional construct which means that it cannot be simply copied from one place and applied on the other. An additional problem lies in the fact that there are still no CTA methods that enhance copywriters in application of humor. All this leads to the situation that quality copywriting products and services enriched with humor are often unavailable. Although their services are highly needed, these days there is still a lack of professionals who are skilful in differentiating the target audience, identifying their problems and writing an original copy [Delgado-Ballester and Fernández-Sabiote, 2016]. Last but not the least important problem associated with humor in copywriting can be found in the fact that such activities may lead to unethical practices and socially irresponsible consequences [Danciu, 2014]. The profit pressures produced by market relations often put copywriters in an unenviable position where they have to choose between higher profit (e.g. the number of clicks on a link) and ethics (e.g. incomplete information) [Irving, 2022]. A main problem of this research is the lack of CTA methods that can enhance the implementation of humor in copywriting. The main contribution of this paper is reflected in the creation of the HAHA method that shows how to apply humorous metaphors that provoke customer’s engagement.

In accordance with the highlighted research problems, it was necessary to look for answers to the following questions: 1) Why are humorous metaphors so useful in copywriting?; and 2) How to define a model that enhances application of humor in copywriting? The main hypothesis of this research is that humorous metaphors represent an efficient way to raise awareness about complex ideas. This paper is aimed at copywriters, promotional content writers, sellers, entrepreneurs, sales managers, marketing managers, marketing professionals, professors and students who are interested in copywriting. This research paper consists of 5 sections. The first section, named introduction, identifies the basic problems connected with copywriting. The second section brings a short literature review. The third section explains the methodology. The fourth section presents the main results, while the fifth section brings final remarks about application of humorous metaphors in copywriting.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Albrington [2013], copywriting is the optimum use of language to promote or persuade. Given that people in the audience tend to reject messages that disrupt their attention,

a good communicator needs to know how to detect and tune in with feelings and emotions of the audience [Morin and Renvoisé, 2018]. Qualitative literature review has shown that it is possible to identify at least 14 different CTA methods, but that among them there is no CTA method which is focused on the application of humorous metaphors [McCaffrey, 2021; Zheng, 2021; Lynch, 2021; Lecinski, 2017; Lysik, Kutera and Machura, 2014]. Although humor is not a novelty in marketing [Beard, 2005], there are not many copywriters who know how to use it, and for this reason the invention of the CTA method for application of humorous metaphors could be quite useful. To define what humor is, McGraw and Warner [2015] apply the Benign Violation Theory which states that humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: 1) a situation is a violation, 2) the situation is benign, and 3) both perceptions occur simultaneously. Kyratzis [2003] claims that the two necessary ingredients for humor are duality and tension. According to Velniciuc [2022], funny content helps people to feel good and relaxed. Courtman [2022] identifies different types of humor that can be used in brand development, while Stoyanova [2021] finds that the relationship of metaphor and humor is manifested in the comparison of the contradictory and the combination of the disproportionate. In their research Olsson and Larsson [2005] find out that humor attracts attention and makes people remember advertisements for a longer period of time, as well as that simple products which do not represent status symbols are most suitable for humor in advertising. However, Lima-Matthews [2016] emphasizes that using humor in copywriting can be a risky strategy, especially if jokes are offensive. Moreover, the literature review shows that humor is not an omnipotent solution to trigger emotions. After conducting empirical research on humor and emotions Mathews [2016] finds that humor affects emotions, but that its influence on emotions is not significantly different from influence other forms of distraction, and that there is not a significant difference between the influence of adapted and maladapted humor on emotions. Empirical research conducted by Barry and Graca [2018] showed that content enriched with humor is more favorably received than content in which humor is subordinated, but they also find that humor should be mixed with other types of content that encourage more interactive conversations. Metonymy and metaphors are usually combined and represent necessary cognitive tools for making complex concepts more accessible to the general public [Yan and Longfeng, 2020]. When using metonymy copywriters are referring to one source or internal domain such as cooking (e.g. changing a term „smelly kitchen“ into „funky kitchen“), while with metaphors they are transposing elements and similarities of one source domain (e.g. cooking) into a new target or external domain (e.g. politics - kitchen cabinet or political kitchen). Although different authors, such as Gabin [1987], Attardo [2015] and others mentioned in this chapter, bring useful remarks and insights about humor and metaphors, the literature on CTA methods that facilitate the implementation of humor is still insufficient.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on the Design Science Research (DSR) methodology. The creation and evaluation of artifacts represents an essential part in the DSR process [Hevner et al., 2004] in which everything revolves around the "build and evaluate" approach [March and Storey, 2008]. DSR artifacts can broadly include: models, methods, constructs, instantiations and design theories [Gregor and Hevner, 2013], social innovations, new or previously unknown properties of technical/social/informational resources [March and Storey, 2008], new explanatory theories, new design and developments models and implementation processes or methods [Ellis and Levy, 2010]. The presented project is currently in the fourth phase of the DSR methodology [Hevner and Chatterjee, 2010].

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As briefly as possible the results can be described as follows:

1. Problem identification and motivation: the main challenge for a copywriter is to apply appropriate combinations of CTA methods that will enhance user engagement in sales activities. The main problem represents the lack of CTA methods that enhance implementation of humor in copywriting;
2. Definition of the objectives for the solution: authors find a solution in development of a new HAHA method that enhances implementation of humor in a wide range of copywriting activities;
3. Design and development: authors have designed a model of the HAHA method and provided guidelines that effectively explains its basic functions, goals and information exchange;
4. Demonstration: the presented model and guidelines were applied in creation of a prototype in the form of a humorous video commercial.

## **4. RESULTS**

After detailed qualitative analysis of the available literature and internet sources authors have developed a model that helps copywriters to implement humorous metaphors in their copies and applied this model to a case study. As it is shown in Fig. 1, this model is named the HAHA method and it has 4 basic steps: Humorous metaphor + Attention + Humorous response + Action. Demonstration of the HAHA method is conducted on the example of the short humoristic video used to advertise ERP software (Fig. 2).

### **4.1. THE MODEL FOR APPLICATION OF HUMOROUS METAPHORS**

The next few paragraphs explain how to devise a humorous metaphor which is the first step in the HAHA method. Once such a metaphor is devised, with minor variations it can be reused over and over again through the AHA steps in the model. Everything starts with preparation and research that should provide answers on the following questions: 1) What are the campaign goals?; 2) Which metaphors can be connected with a brand?; 3) How do different types of users and stakeholders feel?; 4) What problems do users and other stakeholders face?; 5) Which metaphors describe these problems?; and 6) Which type of humor is appropriate? To find answers on these qualitative questions copywriters usually conduct their own market research, make user profiling, create user stories, and actively listen to their audience in order to detect their feelings and aspirations. Moreover, finding answers to these questions helps copywriters to identify so-called pain points. Pain points represent problems that annoy current and prospective customers. Although this list may include completely personalized customer problems, in practice it is usually possible to identify the 4 most common pain points. When customers feel their current solution costs too much they have financial pain. When they are spending too much time using their current solution, customers feel a productivity pain. When customers feel they need a new technology they feel a process pain which is very popular in B2B sales. When there is no appropriate support and communication during the sales process customers feel support pain. Of course there are many other types of pain. If the product is not popular enough, customers may feel low-popularity pain. If the product is not delivered on time and in good condition, customers may feel delivery pain. If the products and services are not good enough, customers feel quality pain, etc. Once the pain points are defined, it is necessary to choose the type of humor that would be appropriate to use in referring to these problems. Although it may produce a lot of attention and strong humorous reactions, in copywriting an offensive type of humor is better to completely avoid. The invisible line between provocative and offensive is very thin and imprecisely defined, which means that copywriters must be very

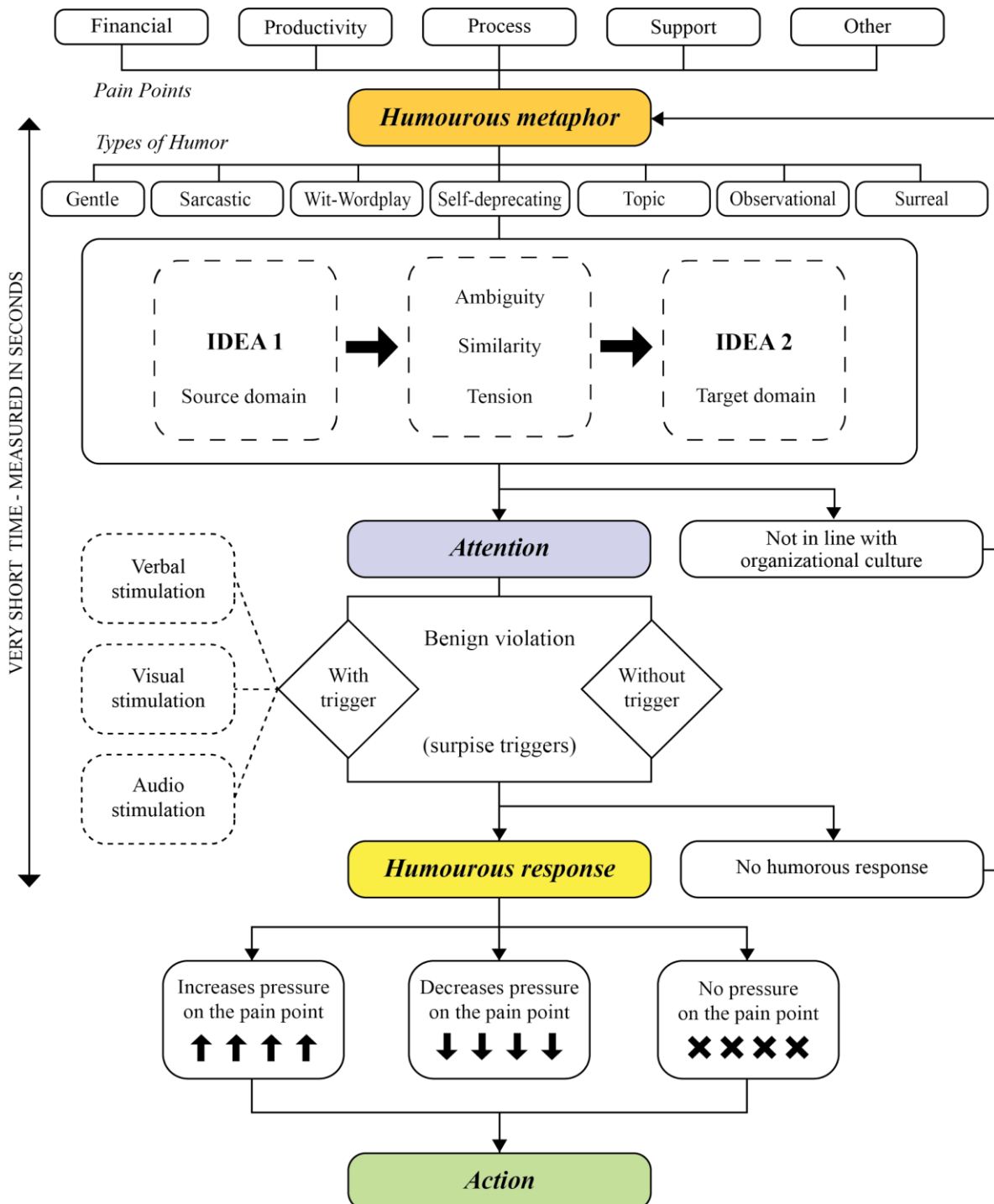
careful. No matter how funny some metaphors may be, if they are not in line with organizational values, they should not be considered. On the other hand, all other types of humor in line with organizational culture are absolutely welcome.

A gentle humor is a fantastic way to relax the audience and to redirect their attention. A little-known fact or a short story with funny elements can produce wandering and highlight information that becomes easily memorable. There is no better way to create a gentle type of humor than to devise funny content in which the organization itself is in the center of attention. In self-deprecating humor an organization is ready to make fun of itself in order to amuse others (e.g. A picture of the team at the beginning and after the job is done, or a short list of mistakes that showed the way toward success). Sarcastic humor, sometimes called a deadpan, witty or dry humor, represents a form of deliberate emotional neutrality or irony [Holm, 2021]. By not showing emotions, this type of humor is usually in contrast with the ridiculousness or absurdity of the subject matter (e.g. Thank you for being patient even if you are not our patient). When it refers to some trend, condition or event, observational humor may improve understanding and emotional connection. Observational humor is very suitable for raising awareness of environmental sustainability and environmental protection in a fun way (e.g. If you meet a woman, start talking about global warming. It's a real icebreaker.) [Locke, 2020]. The last type of humor, in which everything is possible and where even a bird can steer a ship or fly with a plane, is a surreal humor. Deliberate violations of causal reasoning represent extremely funny and creative ways to get attention (e.g. Balloon ship). To devise metaphors that describe customer problems or pain points in a humorous way, copywriters usually apply different creative techniques such as brainstorming, mind mapping, SCAMPER, six hats, etc. The final result is a humorous metaphor that connects the source domain (IDEA 1) with the target domain (IDEA 2). When similarities and ambiguous elements of these two ideas are identified, the next step is to think about a tension. Tension is a special ingredient of humorous metaphor that makes things unclear at first and leaves room for unexpected outcomes. The harder it is to grasp the connection between idea 1 and idea 2, the greater the tension, but this is true only to one optimal point. If a relative number of people that can fathom the connection between idea 1 and idea 2 is too small then the tension does not exist.

The second step of the HAHA method refers to attention. While in some cases attention is achieved through the tension of humorous metaphor itself, in most cases attention is enhanced with different verbal, visual and audio triggers that help to create unexpected outcomes. Verbal stimuli may include a short story or simply a question. Visual stimuli may include video animation, image or a fast movement, while audio stimuli include music and sounds that create the atmosphere. When customer attention is at its highest point, a benign violation should follow. As it is shown in Fig. 1, when there is no humorous response, it is necessary to get back on the start in order to find a new metaphor or a new type of benign violation and surprise related with the same metaphor that will create a humorous response. Surprise can be most easily achieved through an abrupt change that brings an unexpected outcome. The third step of the HAHA method refers to humorous responses. The total time between metaphor introduction and humorous response should be as short as possible and it is usually measured in seconds. As it is shown in Fig. 1, it is possible to distinguish the three types of humorous responses. Jokes about our problems are just as funny as jokes about other people's problems. For example, the message in the hotel closet - Cleaned and Checked. There are no monsters inside! - simultaneously decreases pressure on purity pain for some customers and produces no special impact on the pain points of others. The great thing with humor is that it doesn't have to be personal to be interesting enough for laughing and sharing. On the other hand, a funny fashion editorial with forgotten and abandoned clothes in hotels could increase the process pain and

reduce the amount of clothing left and the costs associated with it. Although jokes that the organization tells at its own expense, may not affect the pain points of the final users, this type of humorous content can also provoke different types of customer actions (e.g. These closets are so good that the director uses them in his own house as well). The HAHA model shows that the humorous reaction and the related sales action directly depend on the metaphor itself and the way it is used.

Figure 1. The haha model for application of humorous metaphors in copywriting



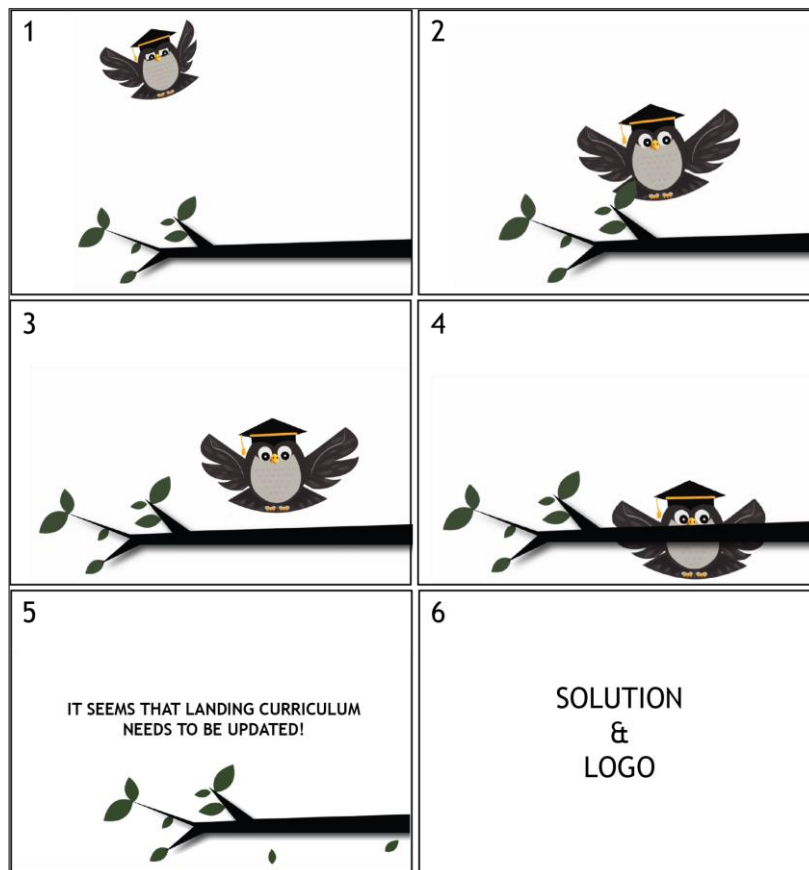
Source: Authors

The fourth step of the HAHA method refers to the customer action. This means that after reading, listening or seeing humorous metaphors, customers may buy a product, rate a product, recommend it to their friends, subscribe to the mailing list, share the content on social networks, suggest creative improvements, etc. While in some cases the action after a humorous response can be instantaneous, sometimes it takes weeks before the user decides to act. For this reason it is advisable to measure frequency and impact of different actions conducted after humorous responses of different metaphors. The magic of metaphor is hidden in the fact that it can be applied in many different situations and contexts. This is best seen on the example of a catchy slogan - Red Bull gives you wings - which was used by the same company to build a whole series of related humorous content.

#### 4.2. DEMONSTRATION OF THE HAHA METHOD IN PRACTICE

During the marketing campaign for the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system in the higher education industry one of the authors was in position to apply the HAHA model in practice to test its robustness. The goal of the marketing campaign was to increase awareness of the new product. The owl has been identified as a symbol of higher education, but also as a symbol of software that sees what others do not see, and performs tasks in complete silence just like an owl. The research showed that the main users of this specific ERP system are faculty management, administrators, teachers, students, internship mentors, employers and alumni (e.g. graduate students). Authors have created a table (not shown in paper due to length restrictions) with the following columns: user type, emotions, pain points, humor type and metaphor. Within this process different pain points were identified.

Figure 2. Six scenes of humorous video



Source: Authors

The most important pain point for both faculty management and employers was that the curriculum is not in line with the competencies required in the labor market. Brainstorming revealed that lack of competencies in flying an owl (Source idea) can be connected with competencies of graduate students (Target idea). The fall of a bird is ambiguous given that in one case it can mean a lack of competencies, and in another a fall on the test of knowledge. The similarity lies in the fact that both birds and graduate students need appropriate competencies to successfully perform different activities. The tension stems from the fact that this message is not clearly understood until the very end of the video. Attention is achieved through an animated depiction of an owl landing on a branch accompanied with relaxing music. The aim of this video is to increase pressure on the process pain point of the faculty management. By combining a surreal and observational humour this video connects incompetence of a bird with incompetences of alumni. Benign violation is shown in the form of the owl's inability to successfully land on a branch. Additional visual and audio triggers were used to enhance the surprise effect. The landing is accentuated by a dull sound, as well as with leaves rising from the ground. After that comes scene 5 with a message that subtly explains what this video is about. The last scene 6 offers a solution by showing the name of the product and brand. The total duration of the presented video is 8 seconds, while the benign violation starts around the half of the video. By following this methodology several other short and funny videos were created. One video tries to decrease pressure on teachers to take care of their students, by showing an owl teacher that opens an umbrella above her/his student when it becomes stormy. Another video decreases pressure on alumni problems in finding suitable employment by showing an owl that chooses a professional career in ski jumping, and so on.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Usefulness of humorous metaphors arises from the fact that they ensure a relaxed context in which even the most complex ideas can be presented in a funny way. In devising humorous content copywriters have influence over how the message will be interpreted. Humorous content helps users to rethink their actions and value systems. This is why the HAHA method can be applied not only in sales activities but also in raising awareness about different expectations, emotions, conflicts and complex ideas, such as education in sustainable behavior. Humor is useful in building and humanizing communication between an organization and its users. This is especially true for communication that takes place via the web and mobile applications. In using humorous metaphors, it is recommended to avoid offensive humor and align humorous content with the organizational culture.

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