

# The Impact of Allusion between Words and Image on the Observer's Perception in Hyperadvertising

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## Abstract

Humor in house advertising and hyperadvertising published by French advertising agencies includes more linguistic phenomena than business to business advertising, but only a few works in the literature have looked at the business to consumer context. This paper concentrates on wordplay and analyzes which specific linguistic elements are used in humorous agency advertising, how they strengthen brand value in comparison to nonhumorous advertising, and how more effective advertising can be designed. Major results are that the allusion between words and images is the most common kind of wordplay and that humor is employed in a test-in-process manner which leads to more choices of linguistic phenomena.

**JEL Classification:** M37

**Keywords:** hyperadvertising, humor, wordplay, advertising, allusion between words and image

## 1. Introduction

In order to make people buy a product or a service, advertising is used. However, house advertising is used to make entrepreneurs buy a complete concept. Adding complexity, agencies also sell their product—advertising—through advertising. Hence, the offered product itself is the instrument of communication. Here, professional journals concerning advertising, public relations, and overall communications have appeared. They give an overview of agencies and their services, and they report on innovation and changes in a particular segment. Agencies place their advertisements in these journals in order to be seen by entrepreneurs interested in advertising. Some of these

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professional journals have special editions. In these editions, the best agency advertisements are collected.

With the aid of language, advertising aims to persuade behavior. But persuasion can only happen if advertising is seen. With the increase in volume of advertisements these days, it is not evident one will be seen and looked at by the user, because in today's social media world, advertising is available at any time and in any place. Anderson, Foros, Kind, and Peitz (2012) stated for example, "When Fox television entered the US market, advertising levels on NBC, CBS, and ABC rose from 7 minutes per hour in 1989 to around 9 minutes in 1998."

Simola, Kiwigangas, Kuisma, and Krause (2013) propose that the average duration of looking at an advertisement is one to three seconds. For this, they recorded viewers' eye movements as an indicator of attention. However, they stated as well that "in print media, the readers have control over the speed and selection of information that is being processed at a given time" (Simola *et al.*, 2013). So as the analyzed data is taken from print magazines, the reader decides on his or her own how long he or she wants to look at an advertisement.

With play of colors, unexpected combinations, and pictures that seem to stand out of social standards, images are one of several components that help to gain the consumer's attention. Because the user is addressed by emotionality, images are intuitively understandable, simple to reach one's mind, and often self-explanatory. Thus images create attention. And this is the important step according to the well-known and classic *AIDA* formula: After having created *attention*, the user becomes *interested*, develops a *desire* to get the product or service, which leads him to the *action* of finally buying the product or service. Farooq, Shafique, Khurshid, and Ahmad (2015) stated there were not four, but "six basic principles on which advertisement movement works: to raise interest; to develop and sustain that interest; creating desire; to incite action and to create good will." Hence, the important step in advertising is to get the user's attention so that his interest is addressed and he desires the product or service, in order to have him finally buy it. Though images are very often used in advertising, they limit the ability to use words creatively (e.g., foreign words, colloquialisms, and wordplay). In order to make everyday advertising more accessible, wordplay is a common feature (but it is not always suitable), and is more commonly used to support memorization within advertising of, for example, a slogan.

That is why the hyperadvertisements that have been analyzed in this study were selected: they create attention through the allusion of images and words.

Aside from the interdependence between images and words, humorous elements are basic components of advertisements. But what is humor, and when is a hyperadvertisement considered to be funny? According to Kaszniak (1998), who analyzed the perception of humor, the fact that something is funny is "quite a distinct quality in the flowing stream of consciousness." He stated that normally, people live experiences which share the common denominator, so one thinks the information that he or she receives is serious, and accordingly, will "prepare and carry out appropriate reactions" (Kaszniak, 1998). Normally, people have no doubt that the information they get is true (though there are a few exceptions, e.g., when one thinks someone is lying or something is unlikely to be true). This means people normally trust the sender of the message and what he is saying. If someone hears new information, he or she wants to "store it permanently for further use," because the new information might be important. Now, if individuals perceive humor, this process is different; he or she knows the information perceived is playing with ideas. The information now only has an as-if truth. People do not need to store this permanently unless they are a joke teller or want to adopt the technique of the sender. One separates the information that humor contains from other important information. Thus, here one is not "required to perform;" one can just be "passively amused" or interact with the sender by "continuing the humorous interaction" (Kaszniak, 1998).

If eye-catching colors and unexpected combinations are not enough, hyperadvertising is a

supercharged form of general advertising. This means that agency advertising goes one step further by trying to overcome average advertising. Agencies use this form of communication more than other companies because this has an effect on incoming projects, and thereby the success of an advertising agency, and because their work needs to be distinguished from competition (they want to demonstrate they can do a better job). Janoschka (2004) has been analyzing linguistics in hyperadvertising as used in web advertising. Her work contains an overview of linguistic phenomena, but does not focus on wordplay or humor in general. However, her work does raise the subject of interactive hyperadvertising as a topic for future analysis. Hence, as seen from these two examples, the existing literature gives an overview of linguistic phenomena in advertising and hyperadvertising, and it explains the effects of humor in general advertising. Nevertheless, it does not focus on *wordplay in hyperadvertising* and does not clarify the reasons why wordplay as linguistic phenomena is often employed.

Finally, this study creates a connection between marketing and linguistics. Examining the use of wordplay in agency advertisements on one hand, and working with these advertisements in the entrepreneur's everyday business on the other hand, marketing research is combined with a linguistically deep analysis.

## 2. Theory: Definition and Hypothesis

There are a wide variety of understandings of humor. According to Lipps (2013), humor is one's own way of thinking and consciousness. It is thus a way of thinking and a frame of mind of one's own. But as Lipps stated further, it depends as well on the situation and on the individual. By following Lipps within this study, humor is understood in the sense of humoristic behavior. This paper looks at the individual case in which humor is used.

There are different ways humor can be expressed. In addition to irony, parody, sarcasm, or cynicism, humor is also expressed in the form of jokes. Looking closer at jokes, a subtype that can be distinguished is wordplay. Wordplay can be expressed through different forms, for example, oral, written, pictorial, or ethnic form. British humor, for example, can be assigned to the latter, ethnic form. This study focuses on wordplay in a pictorial form.

Irrespective of the form, humor provokes in most cases laughter and smiles. These are the "best behavioral metrics" available to researchers studying humor, and they generally result in amusement (Mireault, 2015). Although several studies found that smiling and laughing "appear very early during the first year of life," laughter and smiles may not be the only metrics for measuring humor.

Looking at the definition of wordplay, Tanaka (1994) states wordplay is, "The general name indicating the various textual phenomena (i.e., on the level of performance or parole) in which certain features inherent in the structure of the language used (level of competence or language) are exploited in such a way as to establish a communicatively significant, (near-) simultaneous confrontation of at least two linguistic structures with more or less dissimilar meanings (signifies) and more or less similar forms (signifiers)." So in wordplay, there are two components, the "signified," which is the meaning, or concept, of the word, and the "signifier," which is the sound-image of the word.

The hypothesis of this work is that humorous advertising using the allusion of images and words strengthens brand value to a greater extent than nonhumorous advertising.

## 3. Methods

In the intensive research of existing literature, the focus of work was put on general procedures in

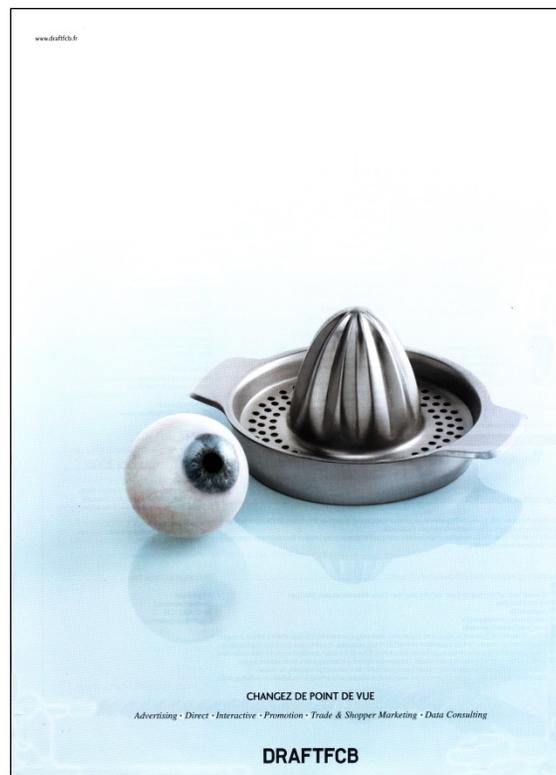
order to make the results suitable for a larger variety of potential clients. Eisend (2011) stated that humor in general advertising raises attention and increases positive values. Obviously, this characteristic of humor is the reason for agencies to employ it in their work.

The data collected originates from offline magazines in an international agency in France (Megalos, 2009). More precisely, 101 advertisements were analyzed. The advertisements were taken from five well-known French magazines (a good cross-section of magazines, the agency looked at): *Stratégies, Marketing – Communication – Médias* (2008), *Stratégies Marketing services le guide 2009* (2009), *Stratégies le guide Agences tome II* (2009), *Marketing Magazine. Le guide du Directeur Marketing 2009* (2009), *CB News Web, cahier de tendance* (2008).

The number of substantives, verbs, or adjectives, for example, was counted, and a comparison has been drawn in each advertisement. This method is appropriate because the data was drawn directly from an agency. The agency, Megalos, is one of the most famous agencies in France (see [www.megalo.fr](http://www.megalo.fr)), and the advertisements are taken from a cross-section of common international journals and magazines. Within these advertisements, the study concentrates on wordplay (“jeux de mots”).

Looking closer at an advertisement containing an allusion between image and words, it is seen here that images often do not work without words, and words often do not work without an image. In order to create wordplay, two components are needed (see as well the definitions of signified and signifier on page 5)—in this case, a word and image that are related to each other (the word could here be the sound-image, whereas the image could be the meaning/concept).

As an example, the following advertisement from the agency Draftfcb is incomprehensible without the image or without the words (see figure 1).



**Figure 1.**

First seen, this ad seems easy to understand. There is an image, an inserted text at the top left, a headline followed by small text indicating the sectors the agency works in (e.g., advertising or data consulting), and the logo DRAFTFCB. The headline, “Changez de point de vue” (“Change your point of view”) seems easy to understand, it is an appeal to change one’s point of view. Nevertheless, without the image showing a lemon squeezer and an eye, the advertisement would not be understood in the way it is intended. The image consists of two components: the lemon squeezer and the eye. The words consist as well of two components: the appeal to change something (“Changez”) and the expression “point of vue” (“point de vue”). Here, the image does not fortify the words, but does lead them to another evoked image in the reader. The image of an eye stands for the expression “Point of view;” this seems easy and comprehensible. The image of the lemon squeezer goes along with the word “Change.” Here, a terrifying image comes up: A lemon squeezer is known to alter a lemon in order to get the best of the fruit—the juice. The word “change” is therefore connected to the action of turning a lemon squeezer. But instead of putting a lemon, an eye is placed directly next to the lemon squeezer. This creates a displeasing image for the reader.

This thought represents the opposite of what an advertisement should deliver. But once the reader has moved past this sarcasm, he discovers the aim of the advertisement—by replacing the lemon with the eye, the best point of view, the best solution, should be found with the agency DRAFTFCB.

The problem here is the attention duration. Not every reader would look at the advertisement that long. So the ad might not be understood, and therefore a negative attitude can stay in the reader’s mind. But it stays in mind because it is a very shocking image.

Although it takes a little time to understand, in this example, we see that the advertisement would not work without the image and the advertisement also would not work without its words. The combination of words and image here is considered to be funny. This advertisement contains wordplay with an allusion between words and image, which is why it is categorized as “Allusion image-words” in the following table.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The table 1 shows the frequency of wordplay in hyperadvertising.

From the findings, it becomes clear that eighteen advertisements out of 101 contain wordplay. From these 18% of hyperadvertisements, there were six advertisements being homophony and five being homography. One of the ads that was classified as a homophone can also be classified as a homograph—in these wordplays there is a similar sonority, so a homophone; but the words share as well the same written form, so a homograph (Delabastita, 1993).

Eight advertisements out of eighteen contain an allusion between the image and the words.

In comparison to this, there were only two advertisements out of eighteen containing a combination of contexts. Appropriately, Simola *et al.* (2013) stated, “In addition to the characteristics of an advertisement itself, the effectiveness of an ad depends on the information context in which it is embedded.”

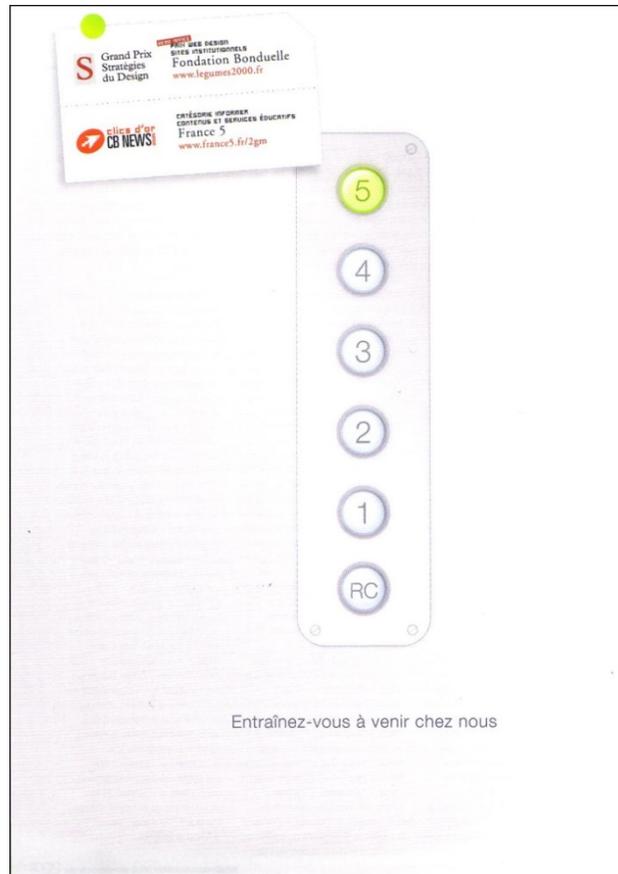
These two kinds of wordplay—allusion between image and words, and combination of contexts—are subcategories from the wordplays of reference.

**Table 1.** Wordplay in analyzed data

Frequency of wordplay					
Advertisemen t	Wordpla y	Homophon y	Homograph y	Allusions image- words	Combination of context
2	x	x	x		
3	x	x	x		
4	x	x	x		
11	x			x	
17	x				x
20	x			x	
28	x			x	
35	x	x	x		
44	x			x	
54	x			x	x
56	x			x	
58	x	x			
77	x				x
93	x			x	
96	x			x	
97	x	x	x		
<b>Total</b>	18	6	5	8	2

An illustrative example for an allusion between words and image can be found in the hyperadvertisement (see figure 2).

This advertisement simply consists of a headline (“*Entrenez-vous à venir chez nous,*” which means “Train yourself to come to us”), an image showing numbers and letters, and another image (appearing like a business card) showing the logo of different competitors (e.g., an S belonging to Grand Prix Stratégies du Design, which is a well-known competition for agencies in France). The bigger image, which is placed very centrally, catches the attention of the reader, reminds one of a lift (knowing that “RC” stands for “Rez-de-chaussée,” which means ground floor). Hence, the central image helps to provoke this imagery of a lift. Above the RC, the numbers 1 to 5 suggest the different floors. Here, the number 5 is highlighted with the color green, which implies getting out of the lift at floor 5. Also, the reader’s attention is led to the left side text, or rather to the (again) *green* point shown above the small text. By reading the small text then, the reader gets the suggestion to get off his old agency maybe and change to the better one, the one that has won different very meaningful competitions. The reader’s eye may then search for the name of the agency, which is not shown within the advertisement. This seems to be irritating. Already here, the image would not work without the text. The appeal “*Entrenez-vous*” (“Train yourself”) seems to be funny because of the image proposing a lift. Normally, one would train oneself by taking the stairs (here, the image of climbing a ladder may also be provoked), but not the lift. Moreover, the image of a lift proposes to come to someone; a lift is often used in big buildings, which implies the agency is a big agency that won meaningful prizes and that this agency can “lift,” or be very successful with, their clients’ projects.



**Figure 2.**

Now, the name of the agency is still missing. But looking further in the journal, there are more advertisements from this agency. The advertisement depends thus on the context. As Simola *et al.* (2013) stated as well, the same ad can have “different effects depending upon the context in which the ad appears.” The agency’s name is Siemegauche, which means “the fifth *floor* on the left” (in the French version, the word *floor* doesn’t occur). Knowing the name (and there is another wordplay with the name and the form in which the competitions are shown; because the form of a business card is where the reader normally would expect to read the name of the agency), the intention of the wordplay becomes clear and humor is created. Again, words and images are related; one would not work without the other.

But why is this advertisement funny? The advantage of wordplay with an allusion between words and image is that it can be quickly understood even if the user doesn’t have any particular knowledge about the content. As stated in Korčák (2012), “There is no need for sectoral knowledge in order to understand the wordplay used within the analyzed house advertising.”

Tanaka (1994) noted that “Puns attract attention because they frustrate initial expectations of relevance and create a sense of surprise.” He also stated that solving a pun can produce “a pleasant feeling, springing from a kind of intellectual satisfaction.” According to Weinberger and Gulas (1992), wordplay creates happiness, and once understood, makes the user feel included. Hence, the reader will link the product to a positive feeling. As a conclusion, wordplay in hyperadvertising helps to raise attention for overcoming possible initial lack of interest in the advertisement and the product.

Coming back to the hypothesis, it was stated that humorous advertising including an allusion of

words and images strengthens brand value to a greater extent than nonhumorous advertising. For this research case, it means that the reader of a certain ad remembers it and connects it to the placing agency. Even if he or she does not understand the whole wordplay, the advertisement is funny or at least creates attention, and this is what is required in order to be interested, to desire the product, and to in the end take action and buy the product. This is according to the definition of the AIDA formula, which is essential for strengthening the brand value to a greater extent than nonhumorous advertising would. This is in good consensus with the work of Díaz-Pérez (2012), who stated that although the addressee needs to put more effort into understanding the advertisement, “puns reveal themselves as an economical way of producing additional positive cognitive effects.”

In practice, humor is generally used because it gives the user a positive and agreeable feeling through laughing or smiling. This gives a lot of information about what kind of humor (like the allusion between words and image) could be integrated into advertising. If feelings are caused, this means emotions are evoked in the user. And if the users’ emotions are provoked, the advertisement stays longer in his or her mind than other types of communication. That’s why the key is to catch viewers’ attention through positive emotion, through humor, smiling, and laughing, because of the wordplay using the allusion between words and image. Given the number of advertisements, this effect is hard to create. Referring to the advertisement seen in figure 2, viewers may find that the lift and the words “Train yourself to come to us” stay in mind, maybe with a smile. However, the result achieved depends on viewer characteristics as well, so there is no guarantee a given wordplay will evoke the same thoughts or emotions within every target group.

Although the subject of humor, and especially humor in advertising, has been investigated extensively, for example in Eisend (2011), house advertising is lacking research. Hence, the innovative approach of this analysis is in the combinatorial study of house advertising. According to Eisend (2011), humor has a positive effect and reduces negative impressions. He stated that humor can help overcome the weaknesses of a brand. In agency advertising, this might be the case as well. However, since the agency does not sell a product but rather a service, there are people involved who need to work with each other to at some stage discover the weaknesses of competitive companies or brands. And while humor can overcome this weakness of competitive companies or brands, it nevertheless does not take it away. There are differences between agencies selling a service and companies selling a product. The service of an agency is not tangible; an advantage for a product is that it can more easily be imagined and is concrete.

Nevertheless, humor is often used in agency advertising. A possible reason might be that agencies want to implant a positive suggestion in the viewer’s mind; that because of their disadvantage compared to a product, humor is used more often as a tool to divert from that weakness inherent in advertising a service. At this point, the question arises if wordplay is therefore a dangerous linguistic game to play.

## **5. Conclusion and Outlook**

Wordplay does create humor, but not in every situation and very often not without an accompanying image. When agencies use wordplay by playing with words *and* images in their advertisement, they create humor. But humor using an allusion of words and image is the main element used in hyperadvertising because it creates contentedness, and the services of an agency can have a positive reputation through its use. Humor with the allusion of words and image can also have a positive effect on a company’s brand. People are persuaded by their positive feelings and emotions. Agency advertising can use language in a completely new way; they can use wordplay with the allusion of words and image more often and in different ways than in general advertising. Further, agencies can use not only wordplay, but also more innovative words and images and more

creative arrangements of the two. They may also change rules and conventions. They play with their clients, and in doing so, they become a mystery and seem to have a secret for advertising.

Hence, the findings can help to redefine humor, and by that, the design of future advertising. Nevertheless, more research in this field is necessary because the use of humor in hyperadvertising still is not fully understood. However, agencies can use results to make their advertisements better, to gain competitive advantages, win customers, and boost their reputation. New markets and target groups could be discovered. For example, by employing a certain kind of humor, like the allusion between words and image, a special target group can be addressed, or a market which might have seemed irrelevant in the past can be approached.

The findings can as well help agencies to strengthen their brand value through humor and wordplay, and more specifically, through wordplay including the element of allusion between words and image.

Because the data, or rather these hyperadvertisements, were collected in 2009, a next step is to analyze hyperadvertisements from current day (2016) in order to evaluate time-dependent changes. Moreover, a look to other nationalities than French should be taken for identifying cultural aspects. For example, comparing British and Spanish advertisements, Díaz-Pérez (2012) stated that “the tendency to use wordplay is higher in the British advertisements than in the Spanish ones, which can be explained by a long tradition of punning in the English-speaking countries...” This would be an interesting hypothesis to review. However, a comparison of French hyperadvertising with another country would also be an interesting aspect to analyze.

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