

# Effect Of Absurdity In Advertising On Brand Recall

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## INTRODUCTION

Print and Broadcast media is dominated these days by advertisements which show a cow teaching us how we too could get white teeth by chewing gum, a boxer trying to kiss another after he has Polo Mint; a candy with a hole in it, a matchstick character does wonders after consuming a soft drink, children drumming for a certain eatables, a man who goes fishing in the lake and gets soaked by the Turbo car, an actor jumping like Tarzan over cars for a cold drink, a candy eating crocodile. What is it in these advertisements that motivate a busy viewer to stop in his/her tracks and chuckle?

Advertisers have always tried to target that "*eye appeal*" to earn a recall. For decades, ad makers have been plagued by the problem of "*advertising clutter*" and "*decreasing consumer recall*" (**Kansal 2008**). The need to attract attention has led these advertisers away from fact-filled "*reason-why*" copy and toward the halting, uncertain adoption of modernist strategies (**Jackson 1987**). These absurd scenarios are the recent most in the list of tactics adopted by advertisers to distinguish itself from the clutter. Absurdity in advertisements was recognized in 1988 with works of **Stern**, who related absurdity construct to literature, poetry and drama. Stern started his work by relating the traditional allegorical fiction- and human effort to express it in metaphorical form as something concrete, visible, and easy to see-a human (or animal or vegetable) personification, an invented figure, engaged in moral battle (**Stern 1988**). Though the tactic is widely used by the practitioners, the concept has received little attention from the academic world (**Arias-Bolzmann et al. 2000**). Therefore, the current study aims at studying the role of absurdity in advertisements attractiveness. The study tests if absurdity in advertisements leads to better recall and hence, whether this recall augments likeability, trustability, believability and purchasability of the product.

## ABSURDITY: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term "*absurdism*" was coined to define a type of modern drama in which characters behave irrationally, where causal sequences of events were illogical, and where incongruous juxtapositions of people and things occur (**Arias-Bolzmann et al. 2000**). Absurdity is a dramatic framework consisting of theme, action, characters, language, setting, and tone. This drama literature is the common link with marketing literature (**Stern 1992**). An author (the firm) communicates a text (the advertisement) to a reader (the consumer). Absurdity in advertisements is using basic appeals which are dear to the viewer's heart. It capitalizes fear, disgust, wonder, and uses the eye-catching, bewildering devices to attract the viewer (**Eggeneer 1993**). It is a literary tactic that dissociates language from meaning and, therefore, encourages perceivers to fill in whatever meaning they like. When subjects produce deep-level, positive meanings, they judge the advertisements more positively (**Mick 1992**). In this sense, it is a structure well suited to subjective claims that are based on consumers' perceptions and hence, likely to be less liable (**Ford and Calfee 1986**).

Our review of literature suggests that absurd advertisements (ones using humor, abstracts, poetry, drama, trick photography, innovative print layouts etc.) are more likely to be noticed (**Arias-Bolzmann 1992; Eggeneer 1993; Madden and Weinberger 1982; Thomas 2003**). Research shows that bizarre images increase the distinctiveness of items and hence, influences their recall (**Nicodemus 2002; Rossiter 1978; Slade 2004; Tu 1988; Witkoski 2003**).

✳ **Proposition: Presence of Absurd content (humor, trick photography, and innovative print layouts) increases the noticeability of the advertisements.**

Absurd advertisements create most change in intentions to follow the advice of the advertisement (**Homer and Kahle 1986**). The way a message is conveyed (pictorially or verbally) (**Arias-Bolzmann 1992**), and the type of claim made

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(objective, subjective, or characterization) (Rao 1991) have a significant effect on the processing of the advertisements and purchase intentions (Slade 2004; Staelin 1983). These studies highlight that processing is enhanced in the presence of incongruent pictorial information.

✱ **Proposition: Absurdity influences the likeability, believability, and trustability of the advertisements among the viewers.**

The current study was undertaken to test the two propositions in the Indian context.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was undertaken with an objective to test if absurdity in advertisements makes them more noticeable to the viewer and if this recall influenced likeability, trustability and believability. The Hypothesis to be tested was framed on basis of the propositions i.e :

**Hypothesis 1: Absurdity in advertisements influences the noticeability of the brand and Brand recall.**

**Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between absurdity in advertisements with (a) likeability, (b) believability, (c) trustability and (d) purchasability.**

For the study, students in the age group of 18-25 were chosen. This category was chosen on basis of pilot testing, which showed that first, the average time for which television was watched by the age group above 25 was less and secondly, absurdity existed more for consumables than durables (Stern 1992). Target audience for these was primarily in the age group of 18-25. Questionnaires were distributed to 150 students from various departments of Panjab University. A list of departments was obtained from Panjab University website and the departments were chosen on basis of random tables. Chairmen of the chosen departments were contacted and permission was acquired to collect data from the respective departments. Out of 150 questionnaires distributed, 120 usable responses were collected for further analysis, giving us a response rate of 80 percent.

Data was collected using a research instrument which was divided into various sections. Using earlier research (John 1996) as base, Section I was a pod of advertisements, with some form of absurdity. The respondents then were asked to recall the brand with a specific incident. The advertisements for the pod were chosen on basis of expert opinion. First, with help of an advertising expert and using Sterns definition of absurdity, a list of 20 advertisements was prepared. This list was shown to these 8 experts and they were asked to rank 10 absurd advertisements in their opinion. Averaging the score, top 8 were chosen for this section. These were Alpenliebe, Orbit white, Eveready, 7-up, Happy Dent white, Hero Honda hunk, Idea cellular and Mortein Coils.

Section II of the questionnaire contained statements which gathered consumer response regarding likeability, believability and trustability. The components were quantified using 5-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). For this section, the questionnaire was made after referring to Viewer Response Profile: VRP (Strasheim et al. 2007), Skepticism towards Advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998), and Informational and Transformational Ad Content (Puto and Wells 1984). As per previous research (Kostova 1997), the analysis of the psychometric properties of the customized instrument included analysis of its content and face validity, reliability, and factor structure (Bagozzi et al. 1991). Face validity and content validity of the instrument and its items was assessed by multiple researchers with experience in conducting survey research via the pretests of the survey. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess convergent and discriminant validity of the instrument. The researchers relied on Crobach

**Table 1: Crobach Alphas for Different Scales**

Scale	Crobach Alpha	Number of Items
Entertaining	0.796	5
Confusing	0.863	4
Real Info	0.756	4
Believability	0.856	5
Trustability	0.77	3
Purchasability	0.834	4

Alpha statistics (Table 1) to establish reliability of different scales.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Various statistical analyses were performed to test the different hypothesis. The results of the study are presented in this section.

✿ **Section I: Brand Recall of Absurd Advertisements** : In order to test the recall of the absurd advertisements, the respondents were shown 8 advertisements in the form of a print pod. The respondents were then asked to recall the brand with a specific incident. Table 2 shows that recall for all the absurd advertisements was very high. Respondents remembered the absurd figures and in majority of the cases, the incidents as well. Scoring was used to further categorize this recall into 3 categories i.e. High recall, Moderate and low Recall. As shown in Table 3, respondents showed high or moderate recall for the absurd advertisements. As expected, Low recall was not found. Presence of low recall would have indicated no relationship between absurdity and recall. Table 3 highlights that absurdity helps the brand to make its way to the evoked set of the customers. 22 percent had moderate recall, while 98 percent of the respondents had high recall. These results indicate that absurdity helps the brand to get noticed and be in the evoked set of the customers. This indicates that absurdity, by increasing noticeability of the brand, helps organizations break through the advertising clutter.

**Table 2: Recall Of Advertisement Stimuli And Brand**

	Right		Wrong		No Recall	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Alpenliebe	93	77.5	17	14.2	10	8.3
Orbit White	77	64.2	36	30	7	5.8
Eveready	84	70	12	10	24	20
7-up	120	100	-	-	-	-
HappyDent White	99	82.5	21	17.5	-	-
Hero Honda Hunk	97	80.8	7	5.8	16	13.3
Idea Cellular	114	95	4	3.3	2	1.7
Mortein Coil	118	98.3	1	0.8	1	0.8

**Table 3: Brand Recall of Absurd Advertisements**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Moderate Recall	22	18.2	18.3	18.3
	High Recall	98	81	81.7	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>99.2</b>	<b>100</b>	
Missing	System	1	0.8		
<b>Total</b>		<b>121</b>	<b>100</b>		

To understand this noticeability of absurd advertisements, the dimensions of likeability, believability, trustability and purchasability were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. The dimension of Likeability was sub scaled into 3 dimensions i.e. entertaining, confusing and real information (realinfo). This was done in reference with Schlinger's Viewer Response Profile (Strasheim et al. 2007). VRP was chosen for this purpose as it allows quantification of the viewer's subjective feelings, rather than the knowledge and absurdity is more about feelings. Table 4 shows the perception of the respondents for the dimension of Likeability across three sub-scales i.e. entertaining, confusing and realinfo. 64.2 percent of the respondents found absurd advertisements to be fun to watch and 62.5 percent found them clever and entertaining. Overall, mean of the entertainment dimension was 3.50. Therefore, respondents agreed that absurd advertisements were more entertaining. A small percentage of respondents did find these advertisements confusing. Total average of the dimension was 2.11. The statistics of this dimension show that most of the respondents could understand the advertisement. However, majority of them were neutral to the real information part of the

dimension. They were not sure if there was any real information about the product in the advertisement.

**Table 4: Perception Of Respondents For Dimensions Of Likeability For Absurd Advertisements**

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>Entertaining</b>	The commercial was lots of fun to watch and listen to.	1.7	4.2	13.3	64.2	16.7
	I thought it was clever and entertaining.	0	3.3	23.3	62.5	10.8
	The enthusiasm of the commercial is catching-it picks you up.	2.5	10	38.3	43.3	5.8
	The characters (or persons) in the commercial capture your attention.	0	10.8	30	55.8	3.3
	It is the kind of commercial that keeps running through your mind after you have seen it.	9.2	24.2	35.8	30	0.8
<b>Confusing</b>	It was distracting-trying to watch the screen and listen to the words at the same time.	30	42.5	20.8	6.7	0
	It required a lot of effort to follow the commercial.	27.5	45.8	20	5.8	0.8
	I was so busy watching the screen-I didn't listen to the words.	24.2	50	20	5.8	0
	It was too complex. I was not sure what was going on.	20	47.5	19.2	13.3	0
<b>Real Information</b>	The commercial reminded me that I'm dissatisfied with what I am using now and I'm looking for something better.	3.3	24.2	51.7	19.2	1.7
	I learned something from the commercial that I didn't know before.	5	25	45	24.2	0.8
	During the commercial, I thought how that product might be useful to me.	1.7	15.8	46.7	35.8	0
	The commercial told me about a new product and I think I'd like to try it.	8.3	33.3	55.8	2.5	0

An analysis of the believability dimensions (Table 5) agreed with our earlier results of the realinfo subscale of likeability. It was found that most of the respondents (40.8 percent) believed that the advertisements were not informative and did not present a true picture of the product. An analysis of the Trustability dimension (Table 6) highlighted a lack of trust in these advertisements. 50.8 percent of the respondents were neutral in trusting the brand after watching the advertisements. This indicates that the response to other two statements of this construct was influenced by prior perception of the brand, rather than the advertisements concerned. An analysis also showed that 48.3 percent of the respondents searched for the product after seeing the ad because it stuck to their mind (Table 3). Further analysis into the purchasability dimension showed that though 33.3 percent said that they did not buy the product after seeing the ad, 48.3 percent said that they went and searched for the product out of curiosity and because the ad kept playing in their mind (Table 3). Therefore, Absurd advertisements scored high on entertainment construct but were low on information, believability and trustability construct. **Thus hypothesis 1 is accepted.**

**Table 5 : Perception Of Respondents For Dimensions Of Believability For Absurd Advertisements**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe I could depend on getting the truth from this advertisement.	15	33.3	40.8	10.8	0
I believe this ad was informative.	12.5	40.8	34.2	12.5	0
I believe the ad presented a true picture of the product.	23.3	33.3	31.7	10	1.7
I believe that I have been accurately informed .	12.5	41.7	35	10.8	0
I believe I would feel good about using this brand .	0.8	11.7	37.5	50	0

**Table 6: Perception of Respondents For Dimensions Of Trustability For Absurd Advertisements**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
I trusted the brand after watching the advertisement.	2.5	20.8	50.8	25	0.8
After seeing this ad, I will not hesitate to buy this product	1.7	14.2	41.7	41.7	0.8
After seeing this ad I want to buy the product.	-	17.5	41.7	40	0.8

**Table 7: Perception of Respondents For Dimensions Of Purchasability For Absurd Advertisements**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
I searched for information about the product in the market after seeing this ad.	3.3	26.7	35	32.5	2.5
I searched the product in the market after seeing this ad.	2.5	25.8	23.3	48.3	-
I purchased this product after seeing this ad.	0.8	33.3	30	35.8	-
I would recommend this product to others.	0	22.5	43.3	33.3	-

✱**Section II: Correlation Analysis of Recall of Absurd Advertisements with Likeability, Believability, Trustability and Purchasability** : Table 8 shows that the relationship between recall of absurd advertisements and likeability, believability, trustability and purchasability dimensions. A moderately significant and positive relationship (0.549) was found between brand recall of absurd advertisements and entertaining dimension. This indicates that with increase in absurdity, the entertaining value of the advertisements increases. Table 8 also indicates that there was a weak correlation between recall of absurd advertisements and Purchasability. Interestingly, recall of the brand was not correlated to confusing, realinfo, believability or trustability Dimensions. However, entertaining dimension was positively correlated with realinfo, believability, and trustability and purchasability dimensions. This indicates that entertainment value of the advertisements influences the believability, trustability and purchasability of the consumer. Therefore, as absurdity influences the entertainment value, it indirectly influenced the other constructs as well.

**Table 8: Correlation Between Brand Recall for Absurd Advertisements and Likeability, Believability and Trustability**

	Brand Recall of Absurd Advertisements	Entertaining	Confusing	Realinfo	Believability	Trustability	Purchasability
Brand Recall of Absurd Advertisements	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Entertaining	.549**	1	-	-	-	-	-
Confusing	0.034	-0.085	1	-	-	-	-
Realinfo	0.169	.423**	0.126	1	-	-	-
Believability	0.073	.422**	0.154	.416**	1	-	-
Trustability	0.08	.419**	0.091	.436**	.482**	1	-
Purchasability	.200*	.393**	-0.084	.548**	.217*	.228*	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Realinfo was very strongly correlated with believability (0.416), trustability (0.436) and purchasability (0.548) dimensions. Which means, more is the information content, more would be the believability, trustability and purchasability. Similarly, believability was correlated to trust and purchasability. Therefore, the hypothesis 2 is partially accepted and partially rejected. Recall of absurd advertisements affects the likeability dimension by being entertaining. However, no direct correlation was found between recall of absurd advertisements and confusing, realinfo, believability, trustability and purchasability.



## CONCLUSION

**The study accepts hypothesis 1 fully and partially accepts the hypothesis 2.**

The study concludes that absurdity increases noticeability and brand recall of the consumer. There was a strong correlation between brand recall of absurd advertisements and entertainment scale of the Likeability dimension, but this was not the same between confusion and real info. The study also concludes that there is a strong relationship between real info and believability, trustability and purchasability. Also, correlation was found between believability and trustability and purchasability and also between trustability and purchasability. This indicates that in order to motivate the consumer to purchase the product, real information is required in the advertisements, but at the same time, to cut through the clutter entertainment i.e. absurdity is required. Therefore, stress on absurdity is a problematic trend in modern advertising. Results indicate that the advertisers should stress on a balance between absurdity (i.e. entertainment value of the advertisement) and information.

Future researches should concentrate on further expanding on the interesting issues of correlation using general linear models and path diagrams. Also, there is need to study types of absurdity and their relation to likeability, believability, trustability and purchasability. Number of interesting issues for future analysis might be pursued, including medium effects, product category effects, role of involvement, optimal level of repetition, functions of novelty, and individual differences.

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