

Did I Hear That Right?: Overt Suggestiveness, Sexuality, and Cultural Values in Modern Commercials

Introduction

Of the thousands of commercials that the average viewer encounters in just one year of watching television, there's probably a few that stick out in one's memory. Studies show that the average child views nearly 16,000 30-second commercials in one year, an incredibly high number considering these are the rates of adolescent viewing -- not the general consumer-driven adult audience. So what makes one commercial out of thousands more memorable than another? Perhaps it's the humor found in an unanticipated interaction, the tension-building suspense of an upcoming sale, a highly anticipated episode of a popular television show, or a deeply touching plea to viewers for support and action of an established charity. While these commercials may work to draw attention to different venues or ideas, they can only function if they are able to gain something from their audience: a reaction.

So what makes a commercial successful? Whether through dialogue, imagery, or audio, advertisements aim to bring in new customers, maintain returning consumers, and ultimately create a revenue. Some argue that a successful commercial makes a statement -- it attracts its viewer in a way that creates engagement and interest in their product or business. One strategy that our culture has increasingly seen employed by advertising executives and creators, which takes advantage of a more captivated audience, has been challenging societal norms and using overt sexual and taboo phenomena as their subject matter. Over the past twenty to thirty years, commercial advertising has seen a large increase in the number of overt implications of crude and crass language, and sexualization of people and objects as a way to reach a broad range of consumers. The linguistic cues that play into these ads can provide much insight into our culture, and also tie into our cultural cues of what is acceptable and not -- beginning to blur the line between what can be seen as appropriate or inappropriate to viewers.

This paper will focus on eight popular commercials, spanning from the mid-1990s to present day, and will examine the ways in which implicit sexualization and allusions to conventionally taboo language play a role in the making of an attention-grabbing commercial in the relation to expectations and indexicality within these advertisements. I am hypothesizing that these advertisements, using multiple references to crude language and gender-biased

assumptions of humor and perception, cater not only to different consumer demographics, but also complicate conventional expectations of advertisements and their purposes. This ultimately causes one to question the effectiveness of these strategies and what they may imply about our cultural values and expectations in their attempts to garner an audience's attention and acceptance.

Literature Review

While it seems that advertisements have become increasingly dependent on overt sexual and unconventional appeals (Severn, Belch & Belch, 1989), many studies conducted throughout the past thirty to forty years have found that sex in advertising does not necessarily correlate to effectiveness. In a more recent study, psychologists Parker and Furnham examined the results of sexual program content and the recall of sexual and non-sexual advertisements on a group of participants. Controlling the independent variables of sexual versus non-sexual television shows as well as sexual versus non-sexual commercials viewed throughout the thirty minute shows, it was shown that it made no significant difference to brand recall whether the advertisement was sexual or non-sexual (Parker & Furnham, 2007). Very similarly, sexual language and linguistic markers such as "breathy language" and indicators of sexual arousal and suggestive context were shown to be much more influential in creating a memorable and effective commercial (Reichert, 2002). In terms of reaching an audience through unconventional measures, these studies conclude that it isn't necessarily true that "sex sells" in advertisements, but more so that the context of a surprising feature can dictate consumer interest more accurately.

Previous literature has also examined numerous ways in which advertisements use language and more specific features such as gender dynamics and humor to convey their messages. Linguistically, research on speech play provides a large insight into the ways that these concepts function in relation to commercials and cultural context. Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin defines speech play as "the manipulation of elements and components of language in relation to one another, in relation to the social and cultural contexts of language use, and against the backdrop of other verbal possibilities in which it is not foregrounded," (Sherzer, 2002). In general, these linguistic "plays" or performances are very prominent in language surrounding puns, jokes, and other verbal attempts at humor. In his studies on speech play, he argues that the cultural and societal cues and references that make up the way that social identities (such as gender, age, and race) and power

dynamics influence perception and felicity contribute to further “verbal art” found in the way that the language between participants interacts with each other (Sherzer, 2002). Humor as a form of language provides a broad range of audience demographics needing to be met, which can lend itself to a wider realm of circulation and linguistic implications (Jones & Schieffelin, 2009). Through analyzing the ways in which computer-mediated-communication, advertisements, and the hyper-circulation of slang versus standard language hierarchies has emerged as a level of complex sociolinguistic component of our increasingly technology-based society, Jones and Schieffelin find that an attentiveness to language style and verbal play have become evident parts of dialogue and communication of today (Jones & Schieffelin, 2002).

In my research, I will argue that these contexts of overly-sexualized, suggestive, and humorous approaches do indeed succeed in engaging an audience -- however, expanding on this idea, I am arguing that the increase in these types of commercials and the divides that they linguistically create based on gender and subsequent ideas of humor and suggestiveness, can be used to offer more insight into the consumer-driven culture of today. By examining the taboo nature of multiple popular commercials from these different angles, the concept of Sherzer’s speech play and its underlying assumptions made about gender and effectiveness expose another layer to the idea that “sex sells,” and relies on cultural ideals and the vague distinction of “acceptable-ness” of language to understand the success and implications of these advertisements.

Methodology

To further assess and evaluate the way that traditionally taboo or suggestive language functions in advertisements, I watched and analyzed the mode of meaning and frequency with which this sort of language functioned within eight different commercials. The commercials were chosen based on their overt sexual and suggestive content, and it is important to note that the findings of this research may be influenced by researcher bias in terms of the decision of choosing which commercials to use. In choosing these ads, I attempted to provide a sample that spanned the past ten to twenty years, presenting a wider range of products and temporal data. The commercials were also chosen based on the controversial or suggestive matter that they encompassed, based on reviews and audience reactions to their air-time when found on television. Ultimately, the eight commercials were split up into two groups for linguistic analysis. These two groups included Group A -- commercials dealing with overt sexual content

involving language, and Group B -- commercials involving television advertisements that use the mishearing of words and phrases to imply suggestive content and subsequently, as I will argue, add humor to their ads. The following commercials from each group were analyzed:

Group A: Group A was made up of five commercials total. The first two ads highlighted GoDaddy.com, an online website manager and domain registered network, and used overt sexual matter as a means of attracting audience attention. In “Exposure” from 2007, the advertisement comments on the cultural phenomenon of arriving on the red carpet without wearing underwear by using a furry beaver as a symbol of female genitalia. However, the overt matter of the commercial is not as obviously explicit because of this conceptual stand-in. Likewise, the 2013 GoDaddy commercial “Perfect Match” exhibits strong sexual undertones, using two characters aggressively kissing and breathing for a total of 28 seconds to sell the audience on the premise that the website is both “smart” and “sexy.” Group A also included three other commercials which dealt with overtly suggestive content -- Liquid Pluim’s “Quickie,” (2013), Schick Quattro Razor’s “Mow the Lawn,” (2009), and Herbal Essences’ “Fruit Fusions,” (1995). In Liquid Pluim’s “Quickie,” speech play is employed as a middle-aged woman uses hidden meanings in her language with an attractive man in a fantasy -- providing audiences with knowledge of the context of the conversation with a humorous and interesting dialogue. Similarly, “Mow the Lawn” playfully makes “mow the lawn” stand in for personal feminine grooming practices -- effectively avoiding the concern of overstepping boundaries or limits. Finally, “Fruit Fusions” uses linguistic markers such as “breathy language” discussed in Reichert’s article to recreate the experience of pleasure and orgasm related to their hair product. The audience is aware that the actress is not actually experiencing an orgasm, however by simulating the context that is needed to seem real and believable, Herbal Essences succeeds in creating that thought and appeal.

Group B: Two advertising campaigns for the popular corporation K-Mart, as well as one other for the online website Booking.com, a part of the Priceline.com company specializing in hotel and accommodations reservations. All three of these commercials employ similar tactics in their most popular 2013 commercials through their signature catchphrases. K-Mart capitalizes on the use of clever language when using “Ship my pants” [in place of “Shit my pants”] and “Big-Gas Savings” [re: “Big-Ass Savings”] to trick the audience’s ears into hearing language that they might not expect to hear on television; thus, eliciting an attention-grabbing response from the audience. These calculated mondegreens, or the intentional mishearing of words or

phrases created by the commercial writers, make it necessary to employ other indexical meanings to understand and interpret the humor of these two advertisements. Likewise, Booking.com uses the term “booking” as an adjective indexically pointing to “fucking” as a way to challenge viewers’ expected, “standard” language normally found in professional commercials. In watching these three commercials through a linguistically-centered lens, interesting points can be examined through the ways in which these examples of non-standard language entice and ultimately work to win over their audiences.

In order to evaluate the ways that these examples of speech play were used as advertising devices, I watched all eight commercials and transcribed the linguistic features of each keeping in mind the way that words were pronounced, tonal features of speech, and the general context of allusions and wording or phrases providing multiple meanings or interpretations.

Results and Findings

After completing my research and transcriptions from the eight suggestive commercials that were chosen, I found interesting patterns of features that occurred in both groups of advertisements. In both groups, I observed the use of double entendre, or a figure of speech that can be understood in more than one way, as the main strategy for engaging their audiences. This covert use of language in an unconventional way stands out in a commercial setting against language that normally might be found to reach and persuade consumers.

In terms of Group A, numerous linguistic cues provided the context for the sexually suggestive language at play. For example, In Liquid Plumr’s “Quickie” much of the language, breathing, and diction, contribute the double meaning of the commercial. Below is a small section of the advertisement’s transcription: (1912)

Man: I heard you need it now.

Woman: I only have ten minutes...

Man: *chuckles* I only need seven.

Woman: *smiles embarrassingly* Okay!

Voice-Over: (deep, sensual male voice) Liquid Plumr *urgent* clear, penetrates the toughest clogs with two fast acting gels to leave you satisfied in only *seven* minutes baby.

Woman: *breaths deeply*, ahhhhh.

Notice the use of external signs indicating sexual arousal and excitement in the woman's deep breathing, as well as the tonal and semantic features of the advertisement's voiceover actor. These sexualized vocalics provide insight into the double meaning of sex and "cleaning the drain" at play for Liquid Plumr. Also, the use of seemingly suggestive language such as "penetrates," "satisfied," and the vague descriptor "it" hints at a much more complex and taboo meaning. What is interesting about this ad is the way in which this sexual suggestive content lends itself more along the lines of humor rather than more traditionally "sexy" commercials such as GoDaddy's "Perfect Match" or "Exposure." In "Perfect Match," similar strategies of engagement are at play -- lead male and female roles, as well as a voiceover actor. However, gender dynamics seem to play a larger role in the creation of a "sexual" commercial versus a "humorous" commercial. By inverting the structure of power dynamics and having an outwardly sexual female actress (in this case, Bar Refaeli) kiss a male actor, instead of the conventionally sexual male role offering to "clean a drain," GoDaddy interestingly takes away the power of speech from its sexual characters. Even more interesting, the power is given back to the voice over actress and only speaker during the commercial -- spokeswoman Danica Patrick -- who is presented in a sexualized way through her clothing and word-choice overlooking the intimate scene next to her. "Exposure" also functions with a strategy of creating sexual situations through linguistic cues, invoking a sexual overtone while being covert about the taboo topic of sex.

Also concerning Group A, I found the use of double meaning to avoid sexual suggestiveness a common theme among commercials mainly catered towards women. Schick Quattro razors and Herbal Essences serve a demographic of mainly female consumers and thusly the use of double entendre to stand in for terms that might normally be seen as taboo to talk about is used more overtly. "Mow the Lawn" combines visual stimuli of women and bushes with commanding statements such as "Mow it! Do it! Cut it! Trim it!" and using other metaphors to gardens and flowers to represent female genitalia. Herbal Essences also simulates sensations of pleasure and female orgasm in their sexually-charged shower scene, using deep breathing, moans, and energetic exclamations of "YES!" as a way to use gender ideals and sex as a way to sell their product.

Similarly for Group B, much of the suggestive nature of the commercials centered around using language in roundabout ways and mainly the use of mondegreens to elicit an unconventional response from the audience. In my research, I found that these commercials

played much more into aspects of humor rather than covertly sexual material. Overall, the terms “ship my pants” and “big-gas” are used a total of 12 and 13 times, respectively, in each commercial -- occurring in almost every line of dialogue. By changing inflection and style based on the voices of numerous actors in the ads, the phrases continue to be misheard by viewers and challenge the perception of what is being said versus what is being heard. Booking.com uses a very similar technique by replacing the intensifier “fucking” with “booking.” Examples of this include the lines “It doesn’t get any... *booking* better than this,” and “Look at the view. Look at the *booking* view.” Unlike its K-Mart comparisons, Booking.com uses this strategy only 5 times in its signature commercial. Interestingly, I’ve found that K-Mart and Booking.com both use mondegreens as a way to encourage the use of covert suggestiveness and imply humor into their advertisements in contrast to using sexual language to broach more taboo subject matter.

Analysis

From the research and findings based on these eight covertly and overtly suggestive commercials, it can be easier to see the cultural distinctions that are made surrounding audience and linguistic variation around unconventional language. In thinking about all of the commercials and their use of double entendre as a means of portraying sexual messages and situations in a different light, humor seems to be at the root of every advertisement. Further, I am arguing that humor manifests itself into two distinct positions: Intentional gender-based humor, and humor dependent on audience-mediated expectations. Both can provide insight into the cultural values and ideals that we hold in place.

The first use of humor, or gender-based humor is a concept derived from the ways in which language is used in the context of male-female relationships. Group A provides many examples of the ways in which the humor derived from commercials such as GoDaddy.com, Herbal Essences, Schick Quattro, and Liquid Plumr function on a highly gendered level. By first making the distinction between products normally aimed towards a female demographics (Herbal Essences and Schick Quattro), and male audiences (GoDaddy.com and Liquid Plumr), the ways in which sexually suggestive language influences covert linguistic shifts is important to note. Linguistic indicators normally associated with specific genders are frequently used to distinguish between the two audiences at play. For example, in 1995’s “Fruit Fusion” Herbal Essences’ commercial, a young woman’s voice is heard from the shower talking to her shampoo. Her voice is soft and sensual as she states “I’ve found something new... and more exciting. And

it satisfies me in a way I never thought possible.” Playing into gender stereotypes of women being found in the home (Stern & Mastro, 2004), and sexualizing this situation plays into our cultural obsession with women being objects of desire (Reichert, 2002). Contributing to the flirty and seductive behavior that women are often seen as portraying in advertisements, Schick Quattro also places the women of their commercial in and around the home. The humor of the ads is derived from the few challenges that these commercials make against the sexual nature of females. For example, the use of simulating a woman experiencing an orgasm from using shampoo, as well as the act of having women actually mow an actual lawn and trim bushes, normally seen as male-dominated chores, in the Schick commercial. However, by emphasizing the ideals of female perfection and sexuality, these commercials are simply reinforcing the gendered stereotypes that our culture continues to perpetuate outside of the mass media.

At the same time, products traditionally aimed towards male audiences seem to emphasize sex appeal and utilize non-linguistic markers of suggestiveness such as breathy tone, appearance, and content, to reach their consumers. GoDaddy.com provides much evidence for this phenomenon. For example, in “Exposure,” as Danica Patrick arrives on the Red Carpet and receives a lukewarm welcome due to her lack of her “beaver” (using the double meaning her private area), she takes control of the situation and uses even more sexually-charged language to plug GoDaddy, saying: “The domain and a website from GoDaddy.com give me *all* the exposure I need... So I can keep my beaver safe *zips up jacket*... and out of sight.” For a viewer lacking the context of the double meaning to “beaver,” the commercial might not make sense. However, the message is clear -- Danica is using her sex appeal to attract and engage men with the GoDaddy platform. Continuing to enforce gendered stereotypes of women as objects of sexual suggestiveness, the humor of the commercial is not found in the overt language of the piece, but in the sexual undertones and cues based on body language and pausing. It seems that overall, ads aimed towards men are enabled with the ability to engage with sexually suggestive matter more efficiently than the humor based approaches on female consumers. This concept of men having a right to view suggestive material contributes to the dynamics of male power and female subordination in our media and cultural values.

Secondly, humor based on audience expectations plays a large role in the determination of our current cultural perceptions. For example, in both of the K-Mart commercials (“Ship My Pants” and “Big Gas Savings”), the first lines of the advertisements immediately catch a viewer

off guard because the phrase that is stated contrasts with what one expects to hear. “Ship My Pants” begins with a man saying incredulously, “Ship my pants? Right here?” while “Big Gas Savings” starts off with a frustrated woman stating “Ugh, I hate these big gas prices.” The context of both situations would normally promote the expectation of a different reaction from the commercial’s characters, creating the divide and mishearing of language in each clip. Interestingly, this mistake can be made very easily based on linguistic practices. Many consumers are not aware that Standard American English pronunciation actually undergoes a phenomenon of dropping /p/ and /t/ sounds from the ends of words (Merchant & Simpson, 2012). So in the case of “Ship My Pants,” the mistake of confusing “ship” with “shit” is actually an easy one to make based on the common expectations of not hearing either letter at the end of the word. Based on our cultural assumptions of hearing a suggestive or explicit word used in similar situations, our perceptions change to fit those expectations. When this doesn’t happen, a sense of confusions and ultimately humor is created. In the same way, Booking.com’s use of the unconventional intensifier “booking” in place of “fucking” does not fit the cultural expectations that our society has put in place in regards to suggestive or taboo language. Because one would normally expect to hear the intensifier “fucking” working to add emphasis as a precursor to an idea, it is normal to become confused by the shift in language. These unintentional mistakes create the tension needed for humor to be drawn from these three commercials -- they become so humorous because of the way they challenge the conventional standards and acceptable values of our society.

Conclusion:

Advertisements must aim to reach a broad range of consumers and audiences with each commercial they create, making the need for a successful and effective commercial crucial to economic and professional success. Their goal: to make an impact on their audience and elicit a response from them, a way to create a meaningful memory and message to be revisited multiple times. In my research, I have analyzed eight commercials whose aim is to do just this, but from a narrower angle: through the use of sexual and suggestive language and features. In these eight ads, distinctions between gender and consumerism, as well as cultural expectations created a point of interest in regards to the way that humor functions in commercials dealing with taboo language or topics. My goal was to examine these commercials and analyze the way in which the humor found in these ads can comment on the societal values that we hold today. I have

found that the continuation of perpetuating gender stereotypes and a movement towards the expectation of crude language seem to drive the commercials and products we see in commercials in present day. By examining suggestive material, the line of appropriateness is continually changing and becoming blurred. This leads us to conclude that commercials and advertisements associated with sex and taboo situations still maintain a strong sense of appeal to audiences for interesting and humorous reasons, and should continue to be examined to further understand the linguistic implications and purposes of a consumer-driven society.

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