

CLICKING INTO THE ABSURD:
ANALYZING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ABSURDITY IN
ADVERTISING

by

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Advertisements are everywhere. Bold words and flashy imagery pop off billboards, lamp posts, storefronts, and even bathroom stalls. Since the introduction of digital media, advertisements have no longer stopped in public spaces. Today, messaging appears the moment one clicks open their phone in the morning. It bombards every binge-watch, every scroll, and every internet rabbit hole. The result of so much clutter is a magical little “X” at the corner of a screen. For those who regularly use a device, this is a relief. Advertisers, however, are now faced with a huge problem: how do brands make content that people want to engage with? This thesis is set on finding an answer, and it starts with absurdity.

Some of the most popular brands on social media, as of now, are Duolingo, Old Spice, and Scrub Daddy. While these brands all focus on content creation, there's another theme that holds them together: absurd messaging. Their viral posts feature unusual imagery, unexpected storytelling, and ridiculous takes on brands. Strangely enough, it's effective. This paper will therefore focus on picking apart elements of absurdity found in advertising to determine its effectiveness on 18–26-year-old audiences. Findings will be used to execute three separate

campaigns for a fake beverage brand which will be tested amongst the target audience via survey.

There was once a point where advertising influenced culture by mirroring society in unique and refreshing ways, but now it appears to be the reverse. With millions of voices influencing social media, it's now the devices that create culture. It's important to understand where advertising might effectively fall on this web and how it might become more meaningful. Absurdity offers room for brands to communicate human truths in a way that is comparable to blunt honesty. A more honest and authentic representation of brands is key to preventing the societal harm that advertising has contributed to for ages. In a world of digital pollution, absurdist advertising may also pave the way for more entertaining and welcomed marketing. In any case, that little "X" button isn't going anywhere.

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Hey Mom, Dad, Grandma, and Grandpa– I made it! And I did it doing something I love. This giant story is for you.

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Introduction

Commercialism has wiggled its way into every evolution of technology. Like a living organism, it has adapted to survive in mediums that range from newspapers to television sets. As we continue to navigate the digital age of social media and Virtual Reality (VR) headsets, advertising is facing yet another push to mold itself to these strange new environments. Unfortunately, these spaces are equipped with “Skip Ad” options and giant “X” buttons. So, in a world where we’re in such a rush for content– how is advertising supposed to stand out? Spoiler alert: it has to do with a little something called absurdity.

This thesis seeks to argue that a creative strategy known as “absurdist advertising” will be central to standing out from social media clutter. By analyzing the history of advertising, we will highlight early methods of persuasion and discuss how it has evolved over each medium. For the purposes of this paper, “advertising” will be defined as creative messaging, while “marketing” will be used as an overarching term for the processes in which brands communicate with their audiences. As we venture into the realm of digital media, we’ll begin to unpack why advertisements are failing to capture attention. The idea of “successful” advertising will be defined over the course of the paper. Finally, we will lay out the foundation for what makes an ad “absurd” so that we may test a series of three creative campaigns among 45 respondents. Results from the creative testing survey will be analyzed to understand whether elements of absurdity may be employed to successfully capture a target audience’s attention.

We have a long journey ahead of ourselves. So, let’s strap on some imaginary VR goggles and understand how we arrived here in the first place. Ready? Set. Click.

How Did We Get Here? The History of Advertising

Advertising has been around for as long as communication has. In the very early days, advertising occurred through songs with men strumming tunes and announcing who was selling what and where.¹ Early carvings even depicted imagery of vases and tools for sale. As time moved forward, so did technology, and it wasn't until the invention of the printing press that advertising as we know it began to come alive.

The Newspaper

In 1436 a German goldsmith named Johannes Gutenberg gave birth to the printing press—sparking a revolutionary information age in Europe.² Newspapers found themselves in the hands of many. Ideas could travel faster than ever before, and so could messaging about goods. Soon, the medium began to dominate London with plenty of ads squashed into the fine print. It wasn't until 1704 that newspapers made their way into the Americas where the first advertisement of the New World appeared in *The Boston Newsletter*.³ It didn't take long before newspapers started to fill up with ads accompanied by illustrations to capture the attention of readers. Some printers began to rely on money from advertisements, but not everyone wanted to have the content of their papers mixed with so much commercialism. Ads were therefore limited to small blocks of text with repetitive copywriting that stated what a merchant was selling. As more and more businesses pushed to have their ads circulated, a new problem arose surrounding space.

Volney Palmer was the answer to this issue. He worked for a newspaper in Philadelphia where he began to realize there was a market for purchasing and reselling space for

¹ Blumenstein, Rob, Sean P Geary, and Gary Grossman. *Sell & Spin: A History of Advertising*. History Channel, 1999.

² Roos, Dave. "7 Ways the Printing Press Changed the World." History.com. A&E Television Networks, 2019.

³ Blumenstein, et al..

advertisements. Palmer would recruit ads and be paid to commission them by newspapers. In developing this process, he ended up creating the very first advertising agency.⁴ Soon, agencies were everywhere, but they didn't function as they do today. These companies were only responsible for finding spaces to place ads rather than writing and developing them. All of this changed with the introduction of the magazine.

The Magazine

Magazines allowed creativity to shine through in terms of advertising. Gone were the cluttered boxes of text and inky illustrations that overcrowded newspapers. Instead, ads took on more color and offered a wider range of freedom for copywriting. Some of the first magazines were marketed toward women⁵—showcasing products related to feminine hygiene and cleaning. This requires one to step back and realize the issues that advertising began to contribute to. The norms of the time were often reflected at society—much like a warped mirror—through advertising.⁶ This reinforced sexist and racist ideologies which have contributed to the harmful stereotypes poisoning mass media today. However, none of this is to say that advertising is merely a reflection. It can shape culture, and it impacts how individuals see and interact with themselves and others.⁷ These first magazines, directed specifically toward women, didn't just sell products but also ideas of what a woman's place was in the world.

⁴ Richards, Jef, Terry Daugherty, and Kelty Logan. "Advertising History." *Encyclopedia of Journalism Sage Publications*, 2009.

⁵ Blumenstein, et al.

⁶ Zotos, Yorgos C., and Eirini Tsihla. "Female Stereotypes in Print Advertising: A Retrospective Analysis." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 148 (2014): 446–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.064>.

⁷ Zotos, et al.

The Brand

With so many products vying for attention on and off the page, the question came about as to how one product might stand apart from the others. Enter the brand. Products began to, quite literally, brand themselves with a business name. Soaps began to have distinguishing names carved into them, elixirs sported labels, and even biscuits and cookies came with some sort of logo. Take the Oreo for instance.⁸ Branding allowed buyers to become more selective about their purchasing. This perked the ears of several advertising agencies. It became clear that they couldn't just continue placing ads. They also had to create them.

There are several faces behind the steady progression of creativity in advertising. In 1869 Francis Ayer started the first full-service advertising agency by applying a formula of sorts to branding. Ayer would employ memorable names, humanizing icons, and a slogan for brands and it proved to be successful.⁹ Later, other advertising "strategies" were applied such as "reason why" advertising. This type of messaging pinpointed unique selling points that might help consumers distinguish similar products from one another. Unfortunately, many of these early ads were based solely on manipulation.

In the first episode of the hit television show *Mad Men*, creative director Don Draper is faced with getting Rachel Menken back as a client at his Ad Agency. The two characters sit at a table and chat over drinks before Draper asks Menken why she isn't married. Menken, obviously annoyed, asks if Draper is simply asking what's wrong with her. However, after further conversation, she admits that it's because she's never been in love. Draper sighs, leans forward,

⁸ Blumenstein, et al.

⁹ Meyers, Cynthia B. *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014.

and replies, “The reason you haven't felt it is because it doesn't exist. What you call love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons.”¹⁰ Such is the story of the manipulation of advertising.

During the days of magazines and flyers, brands looked to agencies for creative ways to sell their products. To attract attention to perfumes and deodorizers, body odor was introduced to the public among a variety of other things like love in the form of a wedding ring.¹¹ The best way to attract buyers was to solve problems while also creating new ones. The goal was ultimately to showcase how one absolutely needed a product or else risk being ostracized. Dr. James Twitchell, the author of *Ad Cult USA*, describes this push in an interview:

What these companies are doing is the exact same thing that religions did. They are moving a series of images through a culture. Promising, very much like religion, a kind of pleasure and acceptance in this world. And there is nothing more powerful.¹²

This movement eventually found itself plastered all over larger-than-life billboards and airplanes. Just as written words and imagery began communicating an entire lifestyle to the American people, a new medium came around. And it was remarkably chatty.

The Radio

When radio was first introduced, its goal was mainly to sell itself to the American people. After World War I, veterans were responsible for spreading radio messaging to individuals who were either curious or apprehensive about the new medium.¹³ In the 20s and 30s, as more and more institutions drove their messaging over the radio, it became a matter of who had control over the airwaves. It was decided that the preferred frequencies would go to stations with

¹⁰ Weiner, Matthew. “Mad Men/ Smoke Gets in Your Eyes .” Episode. 1, no. 1, 2007.

¹¹ Friedman, Uri. “We Buy Engagement Rings Because a Diamond Company Wanted Us To.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, August 2, 2021.

¹² Blumenstein, et al.

¹³ Meyers, et al.

commercial interest. This was due, in part, because broadcasters needed to produce programming that engaged listeners and had little money to do so.¹⁴ Advertising agencies were at first reluctant to hop into the medium but saw an opportunity in being some of the first to use the space for commercialism. Soon, advertisers were not only responsible for sponsoring programs but also for selling radio itself to the public.¹⁵ Networks gave an entirely new dimension to advertising because sound could reach consumers in a way that static words and imagery couldn't.

Some of the most popular programs that aired were closely tied with certain brands. One of the most unique contributions of advertising to the world of radio came from Soap Operas. Soap Operas were named after their sponsors who, you guessed it, pushed products that catered to personal hygiene. These programs often played dramas or comedies that cleverly reached the target audiences for soaps.¹⁶ Listeners would associate products with a show they already held in positive regard. This paved the way for jingles and phrases that stuck with the public until advertising became a part of the shared culture. Media and advertising historian Cynthia Meyers explains why that was:

Having struggled to communicate sincerity in print copy, some admen embraced the radio voice as a better means to this end. This voice, whether authoritative or coaxing, knowledgeable or questioning, brought a human presence to the advertising message that print could not.¹⁷

If the presence of sound has the capacity to appeal to emotion in such a profound way, then both sound and imagery together were bound to be a powerhouse. Fast forwarding to the 1950s, television became dominated by advertising.

¹⁴ Blumenstein, et al.

¹⁵ Meyers, et al.

¹⁶ Johnson, Allison. "Why Are Soap Operas Called 'Soap Operas'?" Wide Open Eats, July 5, 2020.

¹⁷ Meyers, et al.

The Television

When television first started out, it functioned much like radio did in terms of sponsorships. Advertisers controlled much of the programming— embedding brands into quiz shows and creating telenovelas that aimed at influencing specific subsets of viewers. However, advertising via television changed after some colorful scandals. Quiz shows were among some of the most popular programs during the 1950s due to the thrill of potentially winning large sums of money. Since advertisers were in control of these contests, they often manipulated the results to favor whatever figures best represented the brand. These actions didn't go unnoticed and became known as the quiz show scandals.¹⁸ They resulted in a new method of advertising where agencies bought out 60-second spaces between programs— making up the kind of advertising we see today.

Like radio, the advertisements on TV utilized something called the “hard sell” and the “soft sell.” Hard selling strategies were like “reason-why” marketing in that they relied on facts about a product to differentiate it from other goods on the market. Advertisements that used hard selling would flash direct and repetitive phrases onscreen to persuade target audiences.¹⁹ The result was an earworm or two that viewers found difficult to forget. One iconic hard-sell advertisement was the 1957 Ipana Toothpaste Commercial. The ad featured a cartoon character named Bucky Beaver who sang a tune that went a little like this: “Brusha, brusha, brusha! Here's the new Ipana. With the brand-new flavor. It's dandy for your teeth!”²⁰ Later, in the 1978 film *Grease*, the character Jan sings along to the exact same advertisement²¹— which goes to show just how significant these commercials were to American culture.

¹⁸ Blumenstein, et al.

¹⁹ Meyers, et al.

²⁰ Bristol-Myers Company. “Ipana Toothpaste,” 1901.

²¹ *Grease*, 1978.

Soft sells, on the other hand, used a more emotional argument. These types of ads often focused on tying a product together with a sense of belonging or even love.²² Advertisements ranged from sensual to humorous and tended to entertain viewers. Both hard and soft sells reflected the culture of the time in that creativity was merely an afterthought. But as TV continued to grow, so did audiences and their appetite for more sophisticated and entertaining media.

During the 1960s, ad agencies had more control over brands than their businesses.²³ Creativity wafted through the air as big names like Bill Bernbach, David Ogilvy, and Mary Wells strutted toward their creative chairs. Before long, advertisements were employing funky copywriting, surprising uses of color, and carefully planned strategies to sell entire identities to consumers. Buying a product was no longer about what it did, but what it resembled. Ads became stories, and brands became identities. And one of the first successful identities carried a simple, yet effective message: Think different.

The Computer

If you've ever taken an advertising class, you're bound to see the Macintosh ad²⁴ at least five times. The commercial was inspired by the book *1984* and features a woman throwing a hammer at a screen. As the glass shatters, the Macintosh is introduced, and communication as we know it is changed forever.

In 1984, people were given access to the mouse and a graphical user interface all thanks to the Mac.²⁵ Before, computers were operated by lines of code, and not every individual had the

²² Meyers, et al.

²³ Blumenstein, et al.

²⁴ Chiat/Day. "Macintosh 1984." 1984.

²⁵ Gallagher, W. (2023, January 24). *Macintosh launched on Jan 24, 1984 and changed the world - eventually*. AppleInsider. <https://appleinsider.com/articles/19/01/24/apple-launched-macintosh-on-january-24-1984-and-changed-the-world---eventually>

skillset to run them. The ability to click, navigate, and network through the Mac made computers more accessible than ever before. It not only changed the way people interact with technology, but it also changed the way agencies made ads. Thanks to a simple user interface, creatives were given access to graphic design tools that amplified the copy and visuals associated with brands.

In 1989, that computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web (WWW) to try and help scientists communicate their results more efficiently.²⁶ It wasn't until 1993, however, that the WWW started to become globalized. Today, thanks to improved user interfaces and a vast web of information, computers present unique issues to the world of advertising. The people who own computers are not viewers but users. Users have control over what they see and do on their devices from the sites they scroll on, to the features they download. In navigating this new medium, ads first showed up as banners at the top of web pages. These are the kinds of promotions we still see today, only they're a bit more colorful and slightly more annoying considering that they now occupy any instance of blank space. They also employ strategies based on consumer data gathered via cookies.²⁷ With more information about purchasing habits and further opportunities to capture attention, one might think that the Internet is perfect for advertising. This isn't the case, however, for a variety of reasons.

As this paper will later demonstrate, advertising via digital media is becoming increasingly difficult. Users have the option to scroll past ads, exit out of them, and even go as far as paying to block them. The reason for these behaviors has to do with the content of today's advertisements as well as the level of sophistication exhibited by today's audience. Therefore, the big question is: how does something like an ad stand out in a digital space full of endless

²⁶ Greenemeier, L. (2009, March 12). Remembering the day the World Wide Web was born. Scientific American. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/day-the-web-was-born/>

²⁷ Blumenstein, et al.

clutter? And not only that— but how can ads stand out in a way that is meaningful and progressive to today’s culture? All these answers point toward a form of advertising that focuses on the absurdity of brands. It comes in the form of a killer bilingual owl, a gecko, and some incredibly manly deodorant which all thrive in a digital landscape.

Now is the perfect time to peel off those VR goggles and turn toward the device patiently sitting next to you. To understand absurdity, we must first understand where absurdity thrives. See you on the other side.

Straight From the Source’s Mouth

It’s no secret that the mediums through which users communicate have changed dramatically since the introduction of the newspaper. With every new piece of technology comes a shift in advertising strategy. The hard sell started with repetitive phrasing that gradually turned into flashy billboards and jingles. Meanwhile, the soft sell employed emotional messages that took the form of personable illustrations and storytelling. This eventually shifted into entire brand identities that buyers could resonate with. Now, we’re faced with a medium that connects people, their ideas, and their identities together. So far, advertising has yet to crack the code that allows brands to prevail over social media. And, as this landscape continues to progress, it’s important to understand what tools it may provide to make campaigns more effective.

Nowadays, it’s what people *do* on social media that matters. Our devices have become a “technology-centric ecosystem”²⁸ that allows any ideas to exist in a network. Because of this, advertising must close in on how users connect and over what ideas they connect. People all around the world use social media to link with those they know, meet new individuals who share their interests, and contribute to a massive pool of user-generated material.²⁹ In the world behind the screen, this is known as digital word of mouth (WOM), and it might as well be gold for advertisers.

Digital WOM is what spreads ideas and generates more digital content. Think of it as a loose formula for how information goes viral. When it comes to assessing brands and choosing what to buy, consumers often turn to digital WOM for more information.³⁰ Digital WOM may

²⁸ Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., & Stephen, A. T. (2019). The future of social media in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48(1), 79–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-006951>

²⁹ Appel et al.

³⁰ Bartschat, Maria, Gerrit Cziehso, and Thorsten Hennig-Thurau. “Searching for Word of Mouth in the Digital Age: Determinants of Consumers’ Uses of Face-to-Face Information, Internet Opinion Sites, and Social Media.” *Journal of Business Research* 141 (2022): 393–409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.11.035>.

take one of two forms: internet opinion site WOM (IOS WOM) or social media WOM (SM WOM).³¹ IOS WOM occurs over sites like Amazon and Yelp where users are invited to rate and review products or services. SM WOM, on the other hand, thrives on social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter where certain types of content focus specifically on product reviews or recommendations³². While content creation is important, SM WOM also lives inside comment sections where users chat with one another to gain more information about a brand. This paper would also like to add that digital WOM can show up naturally. Sometimes, social media content will simply showcase a product offhandedly and generate a following. Digital WOM plays a crucial part in getting a brand to stand out over social media— driving 6 trillion dollars in annual global spending.³³ Generating conversation, therefore, is a big deal when it comes to advertising over digital media. The good news is these platforms offer several ways to get people talking.

We're rapidly shifting into a commercial landscape focused on influencers and an Omni-social presence. Some of the largest sources of WOM come from influencers, live streams, and virtual experiences. Before, an influencer might have looked like Jennifer Lopez or Beyoncé. But now, thanks to platforms like TikTok and YouTube, an influencer can be a part-time student who reviews canned meats in her dorm room. The small communities created by social platforms allow curated voices to take the lead in influencing buying behavior. Advertising can lean on these micro-influencers to authentically support certain brands. For example, the canned meat girl known as Mara Fulton now acts as a brand ambassador for SPAM.

³¹ Bartschat, et al.

³² Bartschat et al.

³³ Todorov, Georgi. "Word of Mouth Marketing: 49 Statistics to Help You Boost Your Bottom Line." Semrush Blog, 2021. <https://www.semrush.com/blog/word-of-mouth-stats/>.

Social media used to be limited to just a few platforms, but now it's built into more than just handheld devices. Apps like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter can live on laptops and television sets thanks to social media integration systems.³⁴ Likewise, social platforms are beginning to do more than just connect people— they also act as navigation systems, marketplaces, and tour guides. Bearing these details in mind, it may be wise for advertisers to look beyond what ads say and into what services a brand can actively provide over social platforms.

So far, we've covered a few tools that are readily available for brands to utilize. But with technology such as VR and artificial intelligence (AI) on the rise, what else might be in store? Ten years from now, there may be an opportunity in combatting loneliness through social media by bringing users together in person through creative calls to action.³⁵ New immersive technology also opens the doors to sensory-rich experiences that brands can use to bring their image to life. This doesn't just stop at AR and VR though— the future may also tap into auditory and “touch” experiences. With so many tools at our fingertips, advertising should be a creative breeze... right?

³⁴ Appel, et al.

³⁵ Appel, et al.

The Problem with Digital Advertising

How do people feel about digital advertising nowadays, and more importantly, where can creatives improve the experience? To answer these questions, we will look at three studies surrounding ad placement and driving factors behind digital WOM.

According to “You Don’t Fool Me! Consumer Perceptions of Digital Native Advertising and Banner Advertising,” today’s ads tend to trigger negative responses that lead to avoidance behaviors.³⁶ In an effort to understand which types of ads yield more positive reactions, this study tested whether audiences respond better to native advertising or banner ads—two common placements that live on social media. Native and banner ads are vehicles that deliver a brand message over digital platforms—much like how a physical ad can appear on a bus or billboard. While the content of digital advertising is important, we can’t leave out how the delivery of such assets impacts audiences and their perceptions of advertising.

Native advertising is a more subtle form of marketing where messages appear within articles or videos. Oftentimes, it’s hard to notice when one might be viewing native advertising due to how it blends with the organic content.³⁷ An ad might appear as an infographic within an online article or may insert itself right next to the related content of a blog. Native ads tend to yield negative responses because they use deception. Readers often feel misled when they click on native placements, and this fosters a sense of distrust.³⁸ There’s an interesting conflict here, however, because today’s audiences also react negatively to more overt advertising. It feels like a lose-lose situation. Whether an ad is “hidden” or openly looking to sell a product, people will

³⁶ Harms, Bianca, Tammo H.A. Bijmolt, and Janny C. Hoekstra. “You Don’t Fool Me! Consumer Perceptions of Digital Native Advertising and Banner Advertising.” *Journal of Media Business Studies* 16, no. 4 (2019): 275–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2019.1640517>.

³⁷ Shewan, Dan. “Native Advertising Examples: 5 of the Best (and Worst).” WordStream, November 22, 2021. <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2014/07/07/native-advertising-examples>.

³⁸ Shewan, et al.

still see the media as a persuasive attempt and act defensively.³⁹ This response is rooted in persuasion knowledge theory, and it explains how subtle and explicit ads might offer a new meaning to media once they're recognized as a strategy to influence one's spending habits.⁴⁰ However, this theory grows over time. As advertisements become so well-known that they become part of the culture, consumer defense mechanisms aren't as strong. This explains why explicit ads promoting GEICO and Coca-Cola aren't met with as much hostility or annoyance.

When it comes to more explicit advertising over digital media, banner ads tend to top the list. Banner ads are much more “extravagant” forms of marketing such as social media posts and commercials. Banners are slightly better received by audiences because they offer a more straightforward form of messaging.⁴¹ Compared to native ads, banners strike consumers with a clear idea of their intent and stand out more. It's no secret that today's consumers are becoming more aware of ads and what might qualify as a persuasive attempt. So, in examining that lose-lose situation from before, it's likely more effective to stand out as an ad instead of concealing the message. There are other elements surrounding successful social media campaigns, however, and they have to do with emotional appeals and uniqueness.

In another study titled “Social Advertising Effectiveness in Driving Action: A Study of Positive, Negative, and Coactive Appeals on Social Media,” researchers found that digital engagement, or WOM, is driven by emotional appeals.⁴² The study tested positive, negative, and coactive messaging—concluding that negative appeals work best to drive action among viewers. Negative messaging, when applied to social campaigns, causes an emotional imbalance which

³⁹ Harms, et al.

⁴⁰ Harms, et al.

⁴¹ Harms et al.

⁴² Yousef, Murooj, Timo Dietrich, and Sharyn Rundle-Thiele. “Social Advertising Effectiveness in Driving Action: A Study of Positive, Negative and Coactive Appeals on Social Media.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 11 (2021): 5954. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18115954>.

prompts a stronger behavioral change.⁴³ While this study focused on public relations campaigns, it can be theoretically applied to other forms of marketing. Brands might not use negative messaging for obvious reasons, but they may be more inclined to take an emotional angle in their marketing. Digital assets that tell a story and draw emotion from a viewer are more likely to promote behavioral changes. This is important to note because such insights help advertisers understand how their content affects viewers beyond a simple like, share, or comment. Interestingly, the most outrageous or dramatic appeals are most effective for inspiring emotion and driving audience behavior.⁴⁴ This is likely because outrageous themes tend to be more memorable and strengthen a key component to successful advertising: brand recall.

Brand recall refers to a consumer's ability to remember a brand when in the presence of a buying opportunity.⁴⁵ For example, when you walk around a grocery store and see a shelf of various snacks, you might be able to remember some of the brands sitting there. Let's say you saw an ad for all-natural fruit snacks a couple of weeks ago. You might have not thought about the ad constantly, but it was enough for you to see those same fruit snacks and have a level of familiarity with them. Brand recall falls under a larger umbrella known as brand awareness. If we stroll back over to that shelf of snacks, you might already be envisioning Cheetos, Goldfish, or Doritos. Brand awareness refers to a consumer's ability to remember a brand's logo and design cues spontaneously.⁴⁶ Both recall and awareness, among other strategies such as consumer interaction, partnerships, and brand perception, help drive digital WOM.

⁴³ Yousef, et al.

⁴⁴ Yousef, et al.

⁴⁵ Pahwa, Aashish, Aashish PahwaA startup consultant, and Kumar Singh. "What Is Brand Recall? - Importance, Measurement, & Strategy." Feedough, February 23, 2023. <https://www.feedough.com/brand-recall/>.

⁴⁶ Pahwa, et al.

Social media campaigns thrive off consumers acting through digital WOM. As previously discussed, WOM generates those viral trends and challenges the internet knows and loves. Most brands try to make content just to inspire viral trends. And, while there's no set formula for it, we've learned that messaging stands a higher chance of becoming viral when it inspires emotion in users.⁴⁷ This paper is concerned with arguing that outrageous— or absurd— messaging will elicit emotions strong enough to make the ad memorable and thus drive purchasing behavior.

In “Measuring the Role of Uniqueness and Consistency to Develop Effective Advertising,” researchers look at the uniqueness and consistency of campaigns to determine what might generate more brand buzz or WOM. In this study, uniqueness is the degree to which an ad deviates from that of other ads.⁴⁸ Consistency is then the degree to which a brand's advertising reflects consumers' expectations of the brand.⁴⁹ Looking at advertising this way helps brands understand which types of emotional messaging will resonate with consumers. Findings concluded that uniqueness only does well as a single ad since consumers need time to process new information. This is due to a lack of consistency which may be confusing to first-time viewers. And, speaking of consistency, its presence enhances digital WOM by easing consumers into the overall messaging of campaigns. In the grand scheme of things, being creative but consistent with a brand's past advertising is crucial to generating buzz about a brand. But this brings up another issue. While such ads are more effective and positively received, then why do so many consumers still pay to block them?

⁴⁷ Yousef, et al.

⁴⁸ Mafael, Alexander, Sascha Raithel, Charles R. Taylor, and David W. Stewart. “Measuring the Role of Uniqueness and Consistency to Develop Effective Advertising.” *Journal of Advertising* 50, no. 4 (2021): 494–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1883488>.

⁴⁹ Malafel et al.

Whether it's waiting for the black rectangle to appear on a YouTube ad or paying extra for that premium subscription, we're constantly searching for ways to avoid advertising. While it's not as though people enjoyed advertising in the past, it still hadn't been treated as a huge nuisance till now. Advertising is often ignored in today's digital age, no matter where or how it appears. And, according to media scholars, advertising's problem has to do with the agencies themselves.⁵⁰ Despite all the information companies rack up on their consumers, they still adopt outdated models of marketing and opt to pay less to push out more meaningless content. With channels like TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook making up the average person's social toolkit, it can be overwhelming for brands to keep up.⁵¹ Likewise, younger audiences don't have the same viewing behaviors as other demographics— and pinpointing what works takes time that agencies often don't have. With all these platforms plastering ads on every scroll, brand presence can become exhausting over social media. Therefore, the biggest issue advertisers are facing today has to do with answering one question: how do we stand out from the clutter?

In an interview, media scholar Tiffany Hsu comments that today's advertising is either “ridiculous or stupid.” In pumping out so many ads in so little time, agencies have exhausted viewers with banners, pop-ups, gifs, and so many other forms of content. But, shifting over to the central theme of this paper, isn't absurdity all about being silly and stupid? This poses an interesting conflict. Some of the most well-known brands to produce absurdist ads include GEICO, Duo Lingo, and Old Spice. However, these talking lizards and diabolical owls differ from other ads on social media thanks to one thing: storytelling. Storytelling marks absurdist fiction as different from straight-up meaningless advertising. Absurd narratives don't just stand

⁵⁰Hsu, Tiffany. “The Advertising Industry Has a Problem: People Hate Ads.” The New York Times. The New York Times, October 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/28/business/media/advertising-industry-research.html>.

⁵¹ Hsu et al.

out from the pool of digital pollution, rather, they demand to be memorable. There was once a point when advertising influenced culture for better and for worse. Perhaps the future of marketing can be changed to push *against* the norm and advertise more *authentically* through absurd strategies. Our most dire problem might just need a good story. Preferably one filled with a healthy dose of “What the hell just happened?”

Clicking Into the Absurd

Finally! After so much talk about newspapers, digital WOM, and banner ads– we’ve arrived at the very title of this paper. (It’s almost like we’re telling a story–save your gasps). So, what is absurd advertising if not disturbing visuals of puppet-like animals forcing kids into a virtual world of art (Meta Quest’s ad for their new VR headset)? To better define “absurdity” in the context of creative marketing, we will refer to two studies that share similar, contemporary breakdowns of the definition.

In “Effectiveness of Absurdity in Advertising Across Cultures,” absurd ads are defined as media that “combine incongruously juxtaposing pictorial images that are perceived as irrational, bizarre, illogical, and disordered.”⁵² Originally employed in dramatic theatre, absurdity is essentially a literary form that advertising has adopted, and it’s no secret why. Some of the earliest ads to ever employ elements of bizarre imagery were cigarette brands like Camel. Camel’s use of anthropomorphic characters helped the brand become an iconic part of the culture. Even today, Camel merchandise is still being worn as a nod to the cult characters.⁵³ This instance of absurd advertising from the past hints that it isn’t exactly a new idea. In fact, if you were to do a quick scroll through 2000’s YouTube ads, you might just find an assortment of commercials that may as well have come from a fever dream. Absurdity is not a groundbreaking discovery in the world of marketing but pinpointing it as a creative element and studying its implementation is. Therefore, we will also define absurdity based on its contemporary meaning in the world of creative media.

⁵² Gelbrich, Katja, Daniel Gäthke, and Stanford A. Westjohn. “Effectiveness of Absurdity in Advertising across Cultures.” *Journal of Promotion Management* 18, no. 4 (2012): 393–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2012.693058>.

⁵³ Arias-Bolzmann, Leopoldo Gabriel, Goutam Chakraborty and John C. Mowen. “Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses.” *Journal of Advertising* 29 (2000): 35 - 49.

In “Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses,” absurdity is described as a “dramatic framework” that creates interesting contrasts and illogical relationships.⁵⁴ This framework, as described in both studies, is made up of four subcategories: surrealism, anthropomorphism, allegory, and hyperbole.⁵⁵ Together, these creative elements make up the essence of absurdist advertising.

Surrealism

Surrealism is an element that occurs when images are combined in “surprising ways.” This means that the rules of photography, typography, and design are often thrown out the window to present the viewer with something unexpected.⁵⁶ Culinary advertisements often employ surrealism to make food stand out in bizarre ways. One restaurant chain notorious for its use of surrealism is McDonald’s. Several McDonald’s ads will portray French fries as a variety of odd objects like party whistles or paint swatches.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism occurs when one applies human characteristics to non-human creatures or objects.⁵⁷ This is relatively common in the field of advertising. Many of the well-known characters observed in popular ad campaigns come from anthropomorphism. Just look at Joe Camel, Tony the Tiger, and the ever-so-famous Duolingo bird. Characters were first introduced in the 1930s (with creative director Leo Burnett being one of the more famous early advocates for mascots) to spark humor in campaigns.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Arias-Bolzmann, et al.

⁵⁵Arias-Bolzmann, et al.

⁵⁶Arias-Bolzmann, et al.

⁵⁷ Gelbrich, et al.

⁵⁸ Blumenstein, et al.

Allegory

Allegory is all about hidden messages. A story, image, or object is shown in a way that has more meaning beyond what it obviously communicated.⁵⁹ Usually, audiences are surprised when an allegory's hidden or double meaning is revealed. It begs viewers to do a double take that often results in a lightbulb moment. An example of allegory comes from the Midea air fryer print ads. The series shows various farm animals sitting in a sauna (only, if you look closer, it's the inside of an air fryer). The campaign's tagline is short and sweet: get the fat out. Interestingly, allegory is the most useful element of absurdity when it comes to building global ad campaigns.⁶⁰

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is often associated with an over-exaggeration of elements. It's one of the main tools used by advertisers to generate "little lies" about products. For example, sipping some Coca-Cola won't make you dance and go "Aha!" Likewise, one bite of a Snickers won't transform you from a grumpy old woman into a star football player. Hyperbole is usually used in advertising to generate humor. However, it's important to note that humor can be present in advertising thanks to absurdity. Not every ad that comes off as humorous is necessarily absurd and vice versa.⁶¹ Absurdity can be used in many ways to communicate a wide variety of emotions to audiences. Sometimes, it's creepy. In an ad by Trolli, the candy company depicted its beloved sour worms screaming in pain as a child bites their heads off.⁶² Not everyone found the ad enjoyable. But it sure was memorable.

⁵⁹ Gelbrich, et al.

⁶⁰ Gelbrich, et al.

⁶¹ Arias-Bolzmann, et al.

⁶² Trolli. "Hiding Place," 2020.

Absurd ads are more likely to be noticed by consumers, and their imagery has the potential to create positive associations with brands where there were none before. Moving forward, we will be referring to absurd advertising as any execution in which all four of these elements are working together.

Why Absurdity?

Advertising is suffering over digital media due to an oversaturation of content. Users are constantly bombarded by ads and other forms of unnecessary digital stimuli. The result of so much clutter is an increasingly negative response toward persuasive messaging. Today, we avoid ads by clicking out, scrolling past, and paying to block them. This leaves agencies scrambling to capture attention by going for quantity over quality— thus contributing to a never-ending cycle of digital pollution.⁶³ Our goal is to “crack the code” on how to stand out over digital landscapes while also generating meaningful discourse about brands. We are entering an age where the old methods of creative marketing are in dire need of change, and absurdity offers a way to capture attention while also bending advertising standards.

Capturing Attention

Absurdity works to mobilize individual buying habits as well as increase positivity during times of extreme stress (take COVID for example).⁶⁴ The humor that derives from absurdity works especially well over social media because it helps find common ground between users.⁶⁵ Just take memes for example, they connect individuals based on shared interests and are reshared, discussed, and embedded in culture thanks to how their absurdity resonates with users.⁶⁶ Thanks to a combination of comic relief and bizarre messaging, absurd ads have a higher chance of standing out from digital clutter in meaningful ways. This compels the valued spread of messages via digital WOM.⁶⁷ Absurdity makes persuasive media more deliverable and allows

⁶³ Hsu, et al.

⁶⁴ Korkut, Umut, Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, and Olu Jenzen. “Looking for Truth in Absurdity: Humour as Community-Building and Dissidence against Authoritarianism.” *Inter*

⁶⁵ Korkut, et al.

⁶⁶ Malodia, Suresh, Amandeep Dhir, Anil Bilgihan, Pranao Sinha, and Tanishka Tikoo. “Meme Marketing: How Can Marketers Drive Better Engagement Using Viral Memes?” *Psychology & Marketing* 39, no. 9 (2022): 1775–1801. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21702>.

⁶⁷ Yousef, et al.

users to successfully recall information. It's also wildly useful for connecting consumers, creating meaning in the mess that is digital litter, and transforming images into cultural information.⁶⁸ Here is where the power resides in this type of messaging. Absurdist advertising doesn't just capture attention. It also has the potential to bend the rules of advertising to become more authentic and honest about brand goals.

Bending Advertising Norms

In the grand scheme of things, advertising has done more harm than good. Consumers are fed messages every second of the day about what their bodies should look like, what a “normal” home must feel like, and how many goods one must have to be deemed successful. As audiences have sophisticated over the years to pinpoint persuasive advances, many consumers no longer want an ad that follows the rules. Enter the infamous Duolingo Bird.

In case you don't know, Duolingo is the most popular language-learning platform there is. The company has exploded over TikTok and Twitter, and it's all thanks to absurdity. Most of Duolingo's marketing is communicated through an owl mascot named Duo. Over the app, Duo sends alerts and reminders throughout the day, and several users noticed how the tone of some of these pop-ups felt a little... menacing. With reminders stating, “Looks like you forgot your Spanish lessons again. You know what happens now!” it became a running joke that the bird had more to it than meets the eye. The company quickly picked up on the tone, and instead of ignoring it, they played into the idea. Much of their current advertising depicts a giant, green owl chasing Duolingo employees around the office for using google translate. Likewise, their banner ads show the character staring menacingly into a room with a cheeky reminder not to miss language practice again (see Figure 1).

⁶⁸ Malodia, et al.

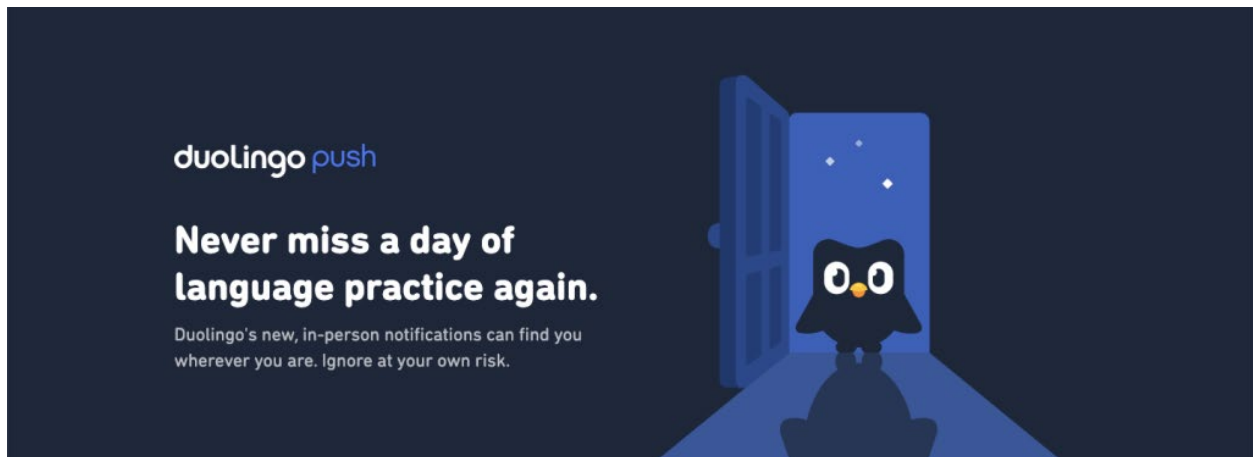


Figure 1: Duolingo Push Advertisement

Duolingo's Push advertisement by D&AD relies heavily on absurd messaging to relay brand truths surrounding language learning platforms.

Duolingo's use of absurd messaging works because of its honesty and alignment with "human truths." The reality is that the app only profits if users attend language practice. So, by humorously communicating the app would go to drastic lengths to get people to continue learning, the company is being incredibly transparent with its consumers. This also resonates with language learners in general. One of the main issues with learning a new language is staying consistent. For a brand to come right out and insinuate that users will face dire consequences if they don't practice is noticeable, if not refreshing. This stance is so memorable that users contribute to the ongoing joke about the "murderous" bird. Digital WOM not only occurs in the comment sections but also on Twitter and Reddit.

Duolingo is a major example of brand-authenticity-turned-brand-absurdism. Anyone who does marketing for younger audiences has heard about "brand authenticity." It's one of those words that's crammed into every creative's head until their ears bleed. But there is a reason for it. Many of the younger demographics who influence household spending (Gen Z holds over

\$143 billion in spending power) have been raised on technology.⁶⁹ They have the background and knowledge that allows them to pinpoint whether a brand is trustworthy or not. Because of this, honesty and authenticity have become central to today's advertising, and absurdity is one of the only creative elements that communicate this in an impactful way. In her article about the effectiveness of absurdity among Gen Z, creative strategist Emily Gorey captures the difference between supposed authenticity and brand absurdism:⁷⁰

Brand authenticity can look like a silly dance when an influencer attempts to conceal a business deal (despite it being clearly labeled #Ad) with a wholehearted reading of a brand-provided script. It looks like an ad, smells like an ad, yet the goal is still to camouflage said ad. Doing something because you were paid to do it doesn't exactly scream authenticity.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that our trusty BS detectors, Gen Z, has pushed brands towards absurdism. There is a delight in forcing brands outside their carefully constructed guidelines. The absurdity acknowledges the absurdity of advertising (meta).

Absurdist messaging will not solve every problem associated with commercialism, but it is a starting point for breaking down the harmful norms it has imposed. In fact, ad agencies have already begun to employ absurdity to help inspire change. In their most recent campaign, Mother LA released a series of children's books lovingly titled *Get Your Sh*t Together Baby* (see Figure 2). The books sarcastically tell infants to pay the bills, feed themselves, and contribute around the house. The books are absurd enough to capture attention and generate movement toward paid leave for all in America. Elements of absurdity are born from ideas and humor already existing in society. Instead of using ads to influence and direct culture, absurdity allows audiences to create their own culture, thus placing their wants at the forefront of persuasive media.

⁶⁹ Mullen, Caitlin. "Why Gen Z Kids Play a Bigger Role in Family Buying Decisions." Bizjournals.com, 2019. <https://www.bizjournals.com/bizwomen/news/latest-news/2019/10/why-gen-z-kids-play-a-bigger-role-in-family-buying.html?page=all>.

⁷⁰ Gorey, Emily. "Gen Z Demands Absurdity from Their Ads." The Drum, January 14, 2022. <https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2022/01/14/gen-z-demands-absurdity-their-ads>.



Mother

127,368 followers

20h · 🌐



From Mother in Los Angeles...

The fact that America is only one of six nations on the Earth without paid leave is beyond absurd. So our intention was to point that out by treating it with absurdity.

<https://lnkd.in/gMxKmgAt>

cc: [Glamour](#) & [Paid Leave for All](#)



Figure 2: Get Your Sh*t Together Baby by Mother LA

A post by Mother LA showcases an absurdist ad centered around inspiring social change for women and caretakers in America.

Introducing Bubble Pop

To understand whether absurdity captures attention or not, we had to test it. Using an experimental design, we created a total of three advertising campaigns to be tested among a pool of 45 survey respondents. The survey displayed a stand-alone campaign, a hyperbolic campaign, and an absurdist campaign. You may refer to the survey by accessing the link [here](#). In this study, a “campaign” is defined as a series of three ads (in this case, any single ad is referred to as an execution) that complement one another in terms of design and tone. Of course, one can’t have an advertising campaign without having some sort of product to market. Enter Bubble Pop.

For the purposes of this study, we created a hypothetical brand of sparkling water called Bubble Pop. Bubble Pop was designed to appeal to a Gen Z audience due to their influence on household buying habits and level of sophistication with digital media. The decision to create a fake beverage brand instead of another product came from research on Gen Z spending habits. Consumer reports indicate that 18-26-year-olds are more conservative economically, but when it comes to food and beverages, they throw in around 23% of their budget on quality, plant-based items.⁷¹ Likewise, Gen Z is more receptive to brands that are adventurous with flavors, have calming or relaxing properties, and operate as functional superfoods.⁷² Bubble Pop, therefore, boasts three flavors: lavender, mint, and jasmine— all of which come with their own properties as advertised by the tagline “fuel your mood.” Lavender is meant to support relaxation, mint boosts energy, and jasmine promotes sleep. These details helped minimize bias throughout the study.

⁷¹ IBM, Institute. “Gen Z Brand Relationships - National Retail Federation.” Executive Consumer Report Institute for Business Value, 2018. https://cdn.nrf.com/sites/default/files/2018-10/NRF_GenZ%20Brand%20Relationships%20Exec%20Report.pdf.

⁷² Nguyen, Lillian. “Top 5 Gen Z Food and Beverage Trends: What Businesses Need to Know.” Tan Do, October 5, 2022. <https://tandobeverage.com/top-5-gen-z-food-and-beverage-trends-what-businesses-need-to-know/>.

By making a product that Gen Z may already be receptive to, we can reduce the likelihood that negative reactions are toward the product itself instead of the advertisements created.

When it came to building out each campaign, a basic creative strategy was needed. In all creative briefings, a strategy is essentially the single most compelling idea (SMCI) about a brand. The SMCI guides the creative work and acts as a tool to test whether ideas are communicating the right message. In this case, the SMCI was “Bubble Pop soda has the flavor everyone needs to get the most out of their day.” By sticking to a single creative strategy for all three campaigns, we can ensure there are no differences in the underlying message of each execution. Both the fake brand and the SMCI act to increase the validity of the study by singling out the creative elements themselves for testing.

The Stand-Alone Campaign

Each Bubble Pop campaign features all three flavors of the brand. The standalone campaign acts as this study’s control group with each execution focusing on the product itself. The design of each execution deliberately omits any element of absurdity. The standalone campaign emphasizes the products by blowing them up to fill the frame. The curved text also clearly communicates the brand’s tagline in a simple, yet effective way (see Figure 3). Consistency was an important factor in this campaign. However, as you’ll see, it became increasingly difficult to maintain certain design similarities due to differing headlines and/or visuals used to communicate specific creative elements.



Figure 3: Standalone Campaign

The stand-alone campaign showcases the lavender, mint, and jasmine flavors respectively. Each can has been blown up to fill the frame— showcasing the product’s look and feel. This campaign is somewhat like a “hard sell.” The product is clearly displayed while showcasing the main selling point: it fuels your mood.

The Hyperbolic Campaign

The second campaign type focuses on one element of absurdity known as hyperbole. We chose to close in on hyperbole because of how often it’s employed throughout every medium of today’s advertising. Hyperbole involves an exaggeration of qualities, and this can manifest both visually and verbally.⁷³ Colgate ads display sparkling teeth, Dove waves around lush hair, and Jack in the Box boasts super speed. With hyperbole dominating the creative landscape in marketing, it only made sense to include a hyperbolic campaign against which absurdity could be tested.

The Bubble Pop hyperbolic campaign was focused on overemphasizing the mood-enhancing qualities of each flavor (see Figure 4). For the sake of consistency, the same details were added and manipulated for each execution. The product is kept at the center of the ad with a

⁷³ Contributor, Chron. “Examples of Hyperbole in Advertising.” Small Business - Chron.com, September 8, 2020. <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/examples-hyperbole-advertising-66083.html>.

visual element highlighting its calming, energizing, or relaxing quality. Above each can is a headline that serves the same purpose.



Figure 4: Hyperbolic Campaign

The hyperbolic campaign showcases the lavender, mint, and jasmine flavors respectively. Each execution features elements like bubbles, lightning, and clouds to emphasize the mood enhanced by each product. The headline above each can serves to amplify the visual details.

The Absurdist Campaign

The third campaign type aims to showcase absurdity as defined earlier in this paper. To fully qualify as an absurd ad, each execution was carefully designed to account for all four elements of absurdity: surrealism, anthropomorphism, allegory, and hyperbole. Again, the same design choices were tweaked to maintain consistency throughout the campaign. Each ad was evaluated to discern whether each element was present in the execution or not.

In the absurdist campaign (see Figure 5), surrealism is exhibited by using lavender sprigs, mint leaves, and jasmine flowers in unexpected ways. The mint execution portrays mint leaves as drops of sweat flying off the can. Meanwhile, the lavender and jasmine executions use flower buds as elements of décor on a towel and bunny slippers. Anthropomorphism is communicated via scene. Each soda can is set in a familiar environment such as a yoga studio, bathroom, or

bedroom. The product is also given human-like attributes by wearing a sweatband, towel wrap, or slippers. Allegory is mainly communicated through the headlines of each execution.

Copywriting, in this case, aims at delivering a double meaning. In the lavender execution, the headline “Open a can of ahhhhhh” refers to that first sip feeling as well as what we say when we feel relaxed. The mint execution uses the headline “Let’s get sweaty together” to communicate the idea of energy. With enough energy to power someone through their daily workouts, a cold can of Bubble Pop won’t be the only one sweating at yoga class. Finally, the headline “Take a refreshing snooze” is meant to showcase how the beverage’s calming properties allow one to hit “refresh” on their day. The element of hyperbole steps in to drive home how each beverage affects mood. It’s communicated through the actions of each product – whether it be working out on a yoga mat, getting ready for a bubble bath, or curling up in bed. Together, these design choices tell a small story about the products and are meant to communicate absurdity through that process.



Figure 5: Absurd Campaign

The absurdist campaign showcases the lavender, mint, and jasmine flavors respectively.

As previously mentioned, consistency was harder to maintain as each campaign progressed. If this design process could be repeated, we would adhere to a set of brand

guidelines. Each flavor would follow a specific color palette, and the texture of the design would remain consistent throughout each ad. In the survey, respondents were presented with the individual executions for each flavor as well as the stand-alone, hyperbolic, and absurdist campaigns.

When it came to building the survey, there was the matter of pinpointing what “success” looks like. The importance of absurdity depends on one’s definition of successful advertising. Success is usually defined by the clients paying ad agencies for their services, and it can take on several forms based on a company’s specific key performance indicators (KPIs).⁷⁴ Sometimes, a client may only be focused on KPIs relating to the number of sales or return on investment. Other times, a client may be interested in the convergence rates of a particular ad or the number of clicks an ad generates. This means that no one form of marketing can reasonably cover all aspects of “success” because it varies based on a brand’s goals. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, success will be defined as how often an advertisement is able to stand out and whether an advertisement is memorable enough to be recalled by a viewer. Brand recall is a major contributor to digital WOM. If consumers are left with a lasting impression of a brand, then they’re more likely to engage in digital conversations about it. These conversations help familiarize target audiences with brands. This level of familiarity makes a product more likely to stand out during a buying opportunity.

⁷⁴ Luenendonk, Martin. “What Is a KPI? Definition, Best-Practices, and Examples.” FounderJar, December 6, 2022. <https://www.founderjar.com/key-performance-indicator-kpi/>.

Interpretation of Results

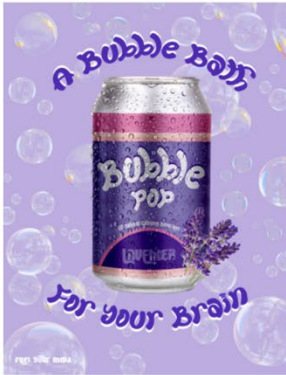
To test each execution and campaign, the advertisements were loaded into a 30-minute online survey via Sona Systems. The survey was made available to the University of Oregon's Human Subjects Pool where a total of 45 participant responses were recorded. While there were no exclusions from the survey, we did ask participants to indicate whether they were 18-26 years old. This was to ensure that the hypothetical beverage would appeal to participants—reducing the likelihood that responses are based on a dislike for the product itself rather than the creative elements of the advertisements.

Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about Bubble Pop as exhibited by stand-alone, hyperbolic, and absurdist campaign types. The survey did not change from one respondent to the next, rather it stayed the same for all 45 individuals. Finally, each participant received 0.5 credits (a requirement for some students taking psychology classes) for their time spent taking the survey to maintain a healthy Human Subjects Pool.

The survey started by asking respondents to select which execution stood out to them the most. Questions 2-4 showcased the stand-alone, hyperbolic, and absurdist executions of each flavor in a series as shown on the next page in Figure 6.

Please review the following advertisements:

Advertisement 1:



Advertisement 2:



Advertisement 3:



Which Advertisement stands out the most to you?

Advertisement 1
Advertisement 2
Advertisement 3

Please review the following advertisements:

Advertisement 1:



Advertisement 2:



Advertisement 3:



Which advertisement stands out the most to you?

Advertisement 1
Advertisement 2
Advertisement 3

Please review the following Advertisements:

Advertisement 1:



Advertisement 2:



Advertisement 3:



Which advertisement stands out the most to you?

Advertisement 1
Advertisement 2
Advertisement 3

Figure 6: Survey Questions 2-4

The first set of survey questions asks participants to choose the execution that stands out the most to them. Each flavor is shown in a stand-alone, hyperbolic, and absurdist style.

In the first series of questions, participants were asked, for the mint, jasmine, and lavender series, which product within the series stood out to them the most. As you can see in Figure 7, for two of the three series the absurdist products received a higher number of standout judgments than either the hyperbolic or stand-alone product. In both these cases, the standout judgments of the absurdist campaign were a statistically significant effect based on the chi-square goodness of fit test, $\chi^2 > 18.53$ $p = .000$.

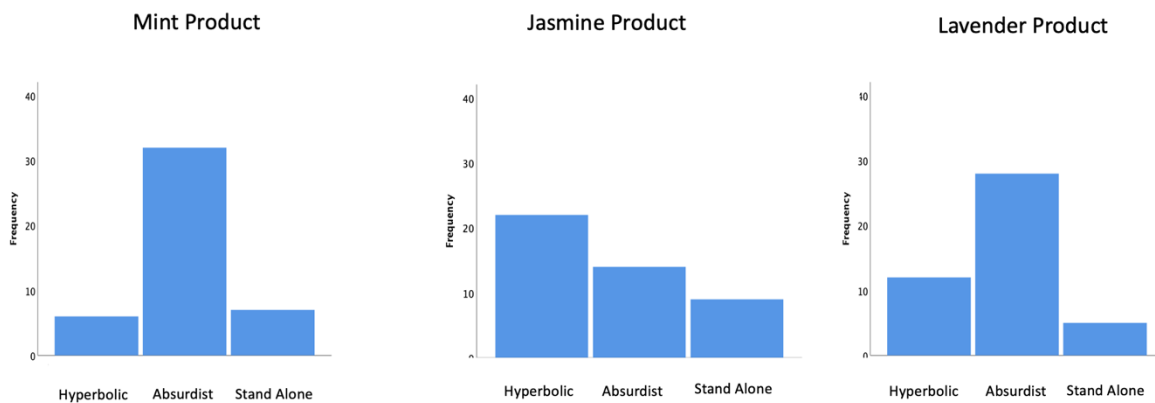


Figure 7: Standout Frequency of Advertising Types

For the Jasmine series, participants tended to judge the hyperbolic product as standing out more than the other two products, but this was not a statistically significant effect based on the chi-square goodness of fit test.

For Question 5 we showed participants the complete stand-alone, hyperbolic, and absurdist series (see Figure 8) and asked them to select the campaign that stood out the most to them. Results showed that participants were more likely to select the absurdist campaign as standing out over either product associated with the hyperbolic or stand-alone campaigns. These responses appear in Figure 9.

Please review the following campaigns (a set of advertisements):

Campaign 1:



Campaign 2:



Campaign 3:



Which campaign stands out the most to you?

Campaign 1
Campaign 2
Campaign 3

Figure 8: Survey Question 5

The fifth survey question asks respondents to select which campaign stood out to them the most. From top to bottom, the campaigns reflect absurdist, hyperbolic, and stand-alone elements.

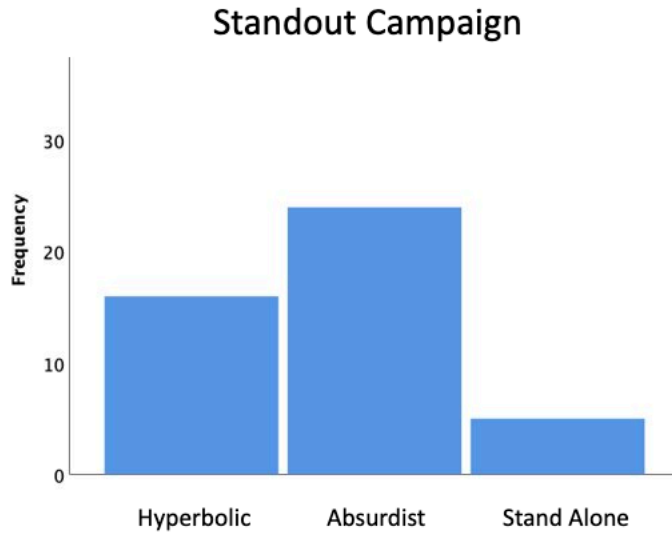


Figure 9: Standout Frequency for Overall Campaign Type

Once again, participants' judgments clearly favored the absurdist campaign, and this was a statistically significant effect as proven by the chi-square goodness of fit test, $\chi^2 = 12.13$ $p = .002$.

Questions 6-8 (see Figure 10 for an example of the layout) asked two questions based on each campaign type. First, respondents were asked to rate their likelihood of purchasing Bubble Pop after viewing one of the campaigns. Then, respondents were asked to select whether they liked the campaign. These questions were formatted to match current market research methodologies for multiple ad testing.

Please review the following campaign:



How likely are you to purchase this beverage?

Extremely likely

Very likely

Somewhat likely

Not likely

Not likely at all

Do you like this campaign?

Yes

No

Figure 10: Survey Question 6

An example of the layout used for Questions 6-8. The stand-alone, hyperbolic, and absurd campaigns each had their own set of questions about the likelihood of purchase and endorsement.

Results showed that participants provided significantly higher ratings regarding the likelihood to purchase for hyperbolic than either absurdist or stand-alone campaigns (see Figure 11). We conducted a paired T-test which showed a statistical significance for the likelihood of purchase in favor of the hyperbolic campaign $t(45)= 3.369, p= .002$. Likewise, participants provided a significantly higher endorsement of liking for hyperbolic than either absurdist or stand-alone campaigns (see Figure 12). We found that the higher endorsement of liking for the hyperbolic campaign was a statistically significant effect based on another paired T-test, $t(45)=2.146, p=.037$.

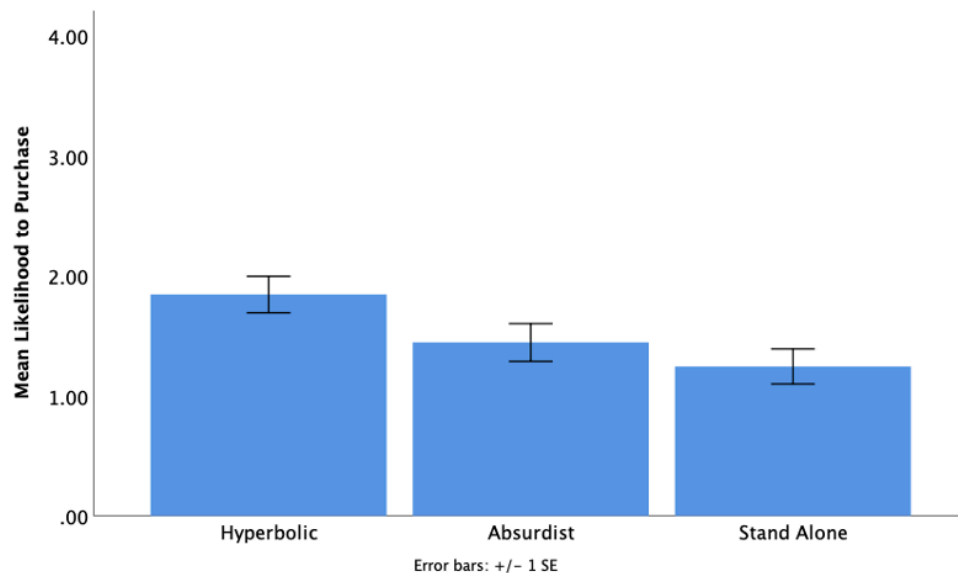


Figure 11: Mean Likelihood to Purchase

When it came to rating how likely they were to purchase Bubble Pop based on the three campaign types, participants favored the hyperbolic style over the absurd and stand-alone styles.

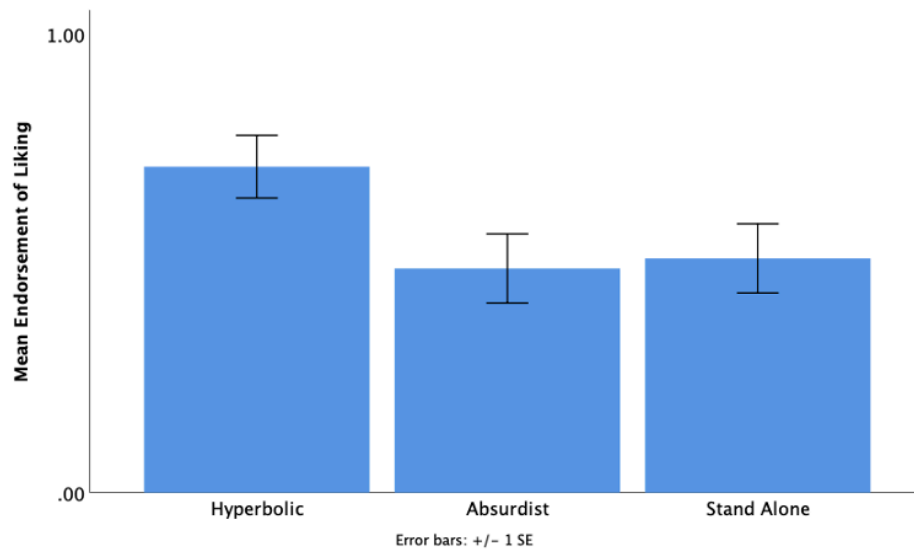


Figure 12: Mean Endorsement of Liking

Participants favored the hyperbolic campaign far more than they did the absurdist and stand-alone campaigns.

At the end of the survey, participants were presented with a free-response question. They were asked to describe one advertisement they remembered most in one to two sentences. According to our results, the participants' free responses featured a higher recollection of design components, objects, and phrases associated with the absurdist campaign type. These mentions occurred at a higher rate than either the hyperbolic or stand-alone campaigns (see Figure 13). It must be noted that— of the 45 free responses— seven of those results were omitted from the data due to answers that were either unrelated to the question at hand or too vague to pinpoint a single execution. The higher rate of mention for absurdist executions had a statistically significant effect as proven by the chi-square goodness of fit test.

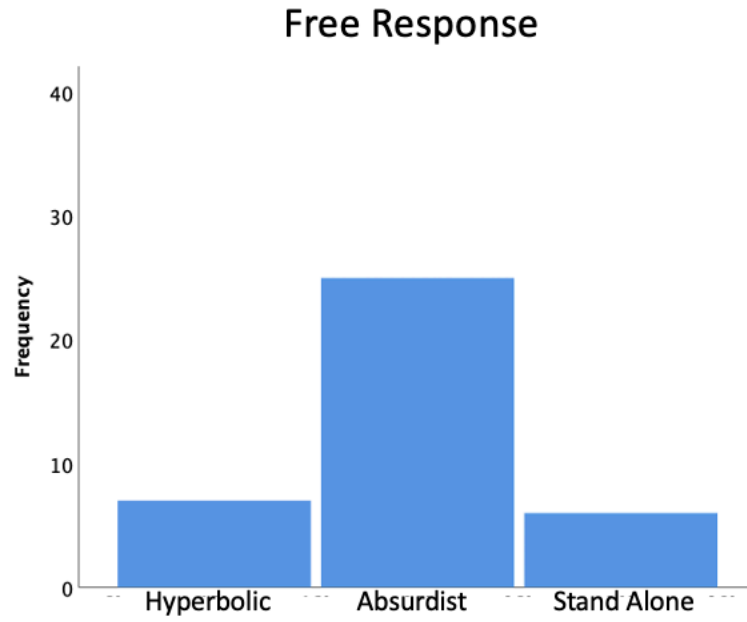


Figure 13: Survey Free Response Results

An overwhelming majority of respondents were able to recall the absurdist ad executions when prompted to describe one ad they remembered most from the survey.

Conclusions

According to our results, absurdity proved to be a reliable creative element in helping advertisements stand out over other creative media types. When asked about which campaign grasped their attention the most, respondents chose absurdity over hyperbole and no creative elements. The fact that the absurdist executions tended to stick out helps us understand which types of creative strategies cut through the digital media clutter. This may be due to absurdity's use of unexpected elements and nontraditional messaging. However, while the absurdist ads stood out to viewers, this did not necessarily mean that they were favored in terms of liking and willingness to purchase the product.

When it came to rating how likely one was to purchase a Bubble Pop product, the hyperbolic executions scored significantly higher. This may be due to how the hyperbolic ads emphasized flavor and mood in a more direct way. As previously discussed, according to persuasion knowledge theory, ads that don't conceal their persuasive messaging hold more positive regard among viewers.⁷⁵ This transferred over to an overall liking of the hyperbolic ads. However, the free responses lent a few hints as to why the absurdist ads tended to yield lower favorability. Two respondents commented about the imagery and phrasing of the absurdist executions being either ostentatious or confusing. One participant commented, "Pink yoga mat stood out, the brighter color was a good grab of attention, and the bunny slippers were so cheap and tacky for an ad." Meanwhile, another responded, "I remember the one mentioning getting sweaty. Why sweat?" The absurdist executions seemed to have lacked the subtlety and clarity that this audience craves from persuasive media.

⁷⁵ Harms, et al.

While the absurdist executions scored lower in terms of likelihood of purchase and favorability, they did have a significantly higher recall in the free response portion of the survey. Several of the free responses pointed out how the phrasing of the absurd ads felt unusual but interesting. In answering which advertisement stood out to them the most, one participant stated, “The advertisement containing the slogan ‘a bubble bath for your brain.’ This phrase is clever and makes me interested in trying the product.” Likewise, for the jasmine campaign, another participant commented, “I remember the advertisement with the can lying in bed with the bunny slippers on. I thought it was a funny ad, but an enticing ad to promote a product.” It appeared that, while the absurdist advertisements scored lower in favorability, respondents were still impacted by their imagery and phrasing enough to recall them.

One reason for absurdity’s failure to yield a higher likelihood of purchase and favorability comes from the design choices employed in this experiment. Perhaps the elements of absurdity exhibited in this set of advertisements did not meet Gen Z’s expectations as an overall audience. The absurd ads came across as “cheesy” and confusing according to the pool of free responses. If this study could be conducted again, we would take the time to build a stronger strategy that targets Gen Z. Part of absurdity’s appeal to this demographic is self-referential (meta) authenticity, and our set of absurdist advertisements could have done more to reinforce that element. One of the largest limitations of this study had to do with the use of hyperbole as an element of absurdity as well as a major variable to test the absurd campaign against. A second iteration of this experiment would likely replace hyperbole with self-reference as the fourth element of absurdity.

The aspect of recall, we’d like to argue, is of high importance when it comes to gauging purchasing behavior. The ability to remember a new product because it stuck out in a unique

way, increases the likelihood of brand recall. Absurdity not only helps ads stand out but also allows them to be memorable— perhaps even memorable enough to engage viewers in digital WOM. Further research might investigate how accurately a consumer’s indication of their likelihood to buy a product meets their actual purchasing habits. In a larger study, we would also like to track instances of digital WOM after consumers are presented with an absurdist campaign compared to other campaigns.

Positive regard and the likelihood of purchase will always be factors of success when it comes to advertising. However, this study was not concerned with finding out what makes an ad more positively received. Instead, we were concerned with understanding how advertising might cut through digital pollution in a meaningful and memorable way.

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