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The Prevalence and Influence of the Combination of Humor and Violence in Super Bowl Commercials

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Abstract

The growing concern over violence in the media has led to vast amounts of research examining the effects of violent media on viewers. An important subset of this research looks at how humor affects this relationship. While research has considered this subset in television programming, almost no research has explored this in the context of advertising. This paper builds on the little research that exists by examining the effects of combining humor and violence, as well as the theoretical approaches that underlie these effects. A content analysis is conducted to identify the prevalence of violence, humor, and the combination of these elements in a longitudinal sample of Super Bowl commercials (2005, 2007, and 2009). Further, we investigate the relationship between the joint occurrence of humor and violence in ads and ad popularity. We conclude that violent acts are rampant in these commercials and that many acts are camouflaged by the simultaneous presence of humor, especially in the most popular ads.

A bowling ball falls on a man's head to advertise a soft drink. Employees hurl a coworker out a window because of the mere suggestion that a specific beer should no longer be provided at meetings in order to reduce expenses. In another office setting, coworkers use a snow globe to break into a snack machine in pursuit of a certain snack food and to injure a supervisor. This is but a snapshot of the television commercials being aired that use humor in combination with violent acts to promote various products. How common is media content such as this in commercials? What effect does it have on the audience's reaction to the ad?

The effects of viewing violent media are the subject of a large body of research across a number of disciplines including psychology, sociology, public policy, law, and marketing. Initial research in this area began to appear in the mid-1950s with a variety of studies (Anderson et al. 2003). For example, Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963) found that children who viewed live violent acts or televised violent acts tended to imitate these actions and engage in more violent actions themselves. A recent review article by Murray (2008) identified 1,945 research articles in the last 50 years examining the effects of television. Of these articles, approximately 600 focused on the issue of violence (Murray 2008).

A related topic that has received limited attention in the literature is the use of humor in combination with the portrayal

of violence. Such studies have generally found that the use of humor in conjunction with violence lessens the perception of violence. King (2000) suggests one reason for using humor in combination with violence is to relieve or reduce audience stress from dramatic scenes. Humor may also serve to suggest to the audience that the events are not to be taken seriously. If the audience is affected by this cue, humor may trivialize the violence that is occurring, as suggested by Potter and Warren (1998). Potter and Warren raise a concern, based on work by Bandura (1994), that the trivialization of violence leads to a greater likelihood of such acts being imitated. In fact, Potter and Warren (1998) use the term "camouflage" to refer to the consumer's reaction to violence in the presence of humor, whereas Scharrer et al. (2006) use the term "desensitize." If this is the case, it becomes important to identify how often humor is combined with violence in various forms of media, as this combination may have an influence as large as or larger than the display of violent acts in isolation.

Given the potential adverse consequences attributable to combining these factors, this research seeks to provide further insight into the prevalence of the use of humor in combination with violence and their joint influence on ad popularity. Prior content analyses have approached this issue in a variety of ways, including analysis of violence in commercials during sporting events (Tamburro et al. 2004), as

well as examinations of combinations of violence and humor occurring during nightly television programming (Potter and Warren 1998) and prime-time television commercials (Scharrer et al. 2006). Our study combines the approach of several of those just mentioned, as we examine violence and humor as depicted in television commercials occurring during a sporting event for three nonconsecutive years over a period of five years.

Our research also investigates the likability of these commercials by integrating results from two ratings systems of commercial popularity. As such, three primary research questions were identified for this study: (1) How often are violence and humor combined in commercials aired during the Super Bowl? (2) How has this changed since 2005? and (3) Is there an association between the combination of humor and violence and the likability of ads?

Background

Prevalence of Violence in Media

The most extensive study of violence in U.S. television was the National Television Violence Study (NTVS), conducted from 1994 to 1998 (Wilson et al. 1997, overviewed by Wilson et al. 2002). The NTVS collected 2,700 hours of television programming per year for three years, sampling from 23 television channels randomly over a 20-week period. In the report, five elements were identified that, in concert, would result in a high-risk portrayal: the violence is realistic to the viewer, the victim faces at least minimal consequences, the violence is unpunished, the violence seems justified, and the individual undertaking the violent act is attractive. Wilson et al. (2002) found that a higher percentage of children's programming contained violence (69% versus 57% for adult programs), as well as almost three times as many violent acts when compared with programming not targeted to children. They also found that a greater percentage of children's programming showed rewards for violence when compared with programming not aimed at children (32% versus 21%) and that 81% of violent acts went unpunished in children's programming. Moreover, 76% of the violent acts in children's programming took place in a humorous context, whereas only 24% of the violent acts in other programming involved a humorous context.

More recent research has continued to find high levels of violence in television programming. Smith, Nathanson, and Wilson (2002) found that 61% of all programs contained violence, with 32% including nine or more violent acts, and an average of 6.63 violent acts per hour in prime-time programs. Glascock (2008) found an average of 9.5 aggressive acts per hour. More extensive reviews of this literature can be found in Gunter (2008), Kirsh (2006), and in the *Journal of Advertising* special issue on violence in advertising (2011).

While the presence of violence in television programming is well documented, there is less evidence concerning the presence of violent content in television advertising (Scharrer et al. 2006). As noted by Scharrer et al., the issue of violence and humor in commercials is a special case because it is more difficult for viewers to identify commercial content beforehand when compared with program content, which may lead to unintended viewer exposure. Anderson (2000) found that during the 1998 Major League Baseball Playoffs, 8.8% of the commercials contained violence. Of these 137 commercials, 76.6% were promotions for television programs and 16.8% were advertisements for movies. Tamburro et al. (2004), whose study also involved sports programming, found that 6% of the 1,185 commercials sampled contained violence. Contrary to Anderson (2000), Tamburro et al. found that movie advertisements accounted for 65% of violent ads, whereas television program ads accounted for 15%. Gentry and Harrison (2010) found that nearly 10% of the commercials during sports programming showed men in violent roles. Thus, while violence appears to be less prominent in advertising than it is in programming, it is still quite evident.

Processes of Media Effects

Several explanations for the possible linkage between viewers seeing violence on television and then engaging in violent acts have been offered. Huesmann (1986) suggested that violent behavior is learned through modeling behaviors (observational learning) and through positive reinforcement (only the aggressive seem to receive reinforcement). Anderson et al. (2003) noted two other underlying processes: (1) arousal-transfer, and (2) desensitization. Arousal-transfer is based on the excitement that may result from viewing violence. Such arousal can make it more likely that an individual will pursue the dominant activity at that time. Desensitization occurs when violent acts are viewed repeatedly, thus reducing the emotional reaction to being exposed to violent acts (Gunter 2008). We explore these notions by investigating the prevalence of acts of violence that are associated with humor in television advertising. The study of this phenomenon within the context of television advertising is particularly important because commercials may reappear frequently, thereby strengthening their effects, whereas television programs may, at best, be repeated only once during the broadcast off-season.

Humor in Advertising

In the current advertising landscape, humor is frequently used in television commercials, with approximately one out of five television ads containing humorous appeals (Beard 2005). Moreover, for over one hundred years, scholars have searched for a theoretical understanding of humor (Bui-

zen and Valkenburg 2004) and pondered its place in advertising (Beard 2005). Of the multiple theories and perspectives, three major approaches have emerged: relief theory, whereby people laugh because they need to reduce physiological tension from time to time (Berlyne 1972); superiority theory, whereby people laugh because they feel triumph over others (Meyer 2000); and incongruity theory, whereby people laugh at things that are unexpected or surprising (Berger 1998a, 1998b). Modern humor theorists believe that these three theories are complementary and that many instances of humor can be explained by more than one theory (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004).

Research on humor has also resulted in typologies such as that by Speck (1990), which was specific to advertising and related closely to these three humor theories, and Martin et al. (2003), which outlined the four dimensions utilized in this study related to the differences in functional uses or types of humor. Their approach distinguishes between humor that can enhance or be detrimental to relationships, the individual, or others. Most applicable to this study is their inclusion of aggressive humor that enhances the individual while being detrimental to others. The remaining dimensions from Martin et al. include self-enhancing, affiliative, and self-defeating humor, and are determined by intent and target. A 2 × 2 matrix adapted from Martin et al. (2003) including these dimensions is presented in Figure 1.

The Humor and Violence Interface

As noted earlier, there is only limited literature investigating the role of the desensitization of violence through the use of humorous contexts. Potter and Warren (1998) investigated the humor/violence interface in the context of television programming and found that comedy programs contained more violent acts per hour than other programming. More specifically, they observed 5,970 violent acts during 168 hours of programming, with 31% of these acts involving humorous content. Based on their results, Potter and Warren state that humor is not being used to reduce aggression in viewers by providing a break from violent content, but rather to trivialize the violence. This is of special concern because trivialized violence is the most likely to be imitated. Research has also found humor to have a significant negative correlation with the perceived violence in a program (Sander 1997). Similarly, Bandura (1990) found that perpetrators of violent acts in television programs use humor to dehumanize victims to undermine the emotional responses from viewers.

Scharrer et al. (2006) specifically considered combinations of humor and violence in advertising. Their sample included 536 commercials containing aggressive behavior during a week of prime-time programming on six major broadcast networks. These commercials represented 12.3% of the total commercials during that time. Once again, advertisements for movie and television programs were the most

		Enhances	
		Self	Relationships
Intent	Benevolent	Self-enhancing	Affiliative
	Detrimental	Aggressive	Self-defeating

Figure 1. Humor Styles Adapted from Martin et al. (2003)

likely to contain violent actions. Over half (53.5%) of the commercials included humorous elements. If the movie and television program ads were not considered, 87.7% of the violent commercials included humor.

We expand on this prior work in a number of ways. First, we analyze longitudinally the occurrence of humor and violence in advertising in a different media context (during a highly watched sporting event, i.e., the Super Bowl) and through the inclusion of a richer set of humor and violence variables. In addition, in our study, we do not analyze duplicate commercials, as was the case in Scharrer et al., which we believe provides a more conservative assessment of the incidence of commercials that combined humor and violence. Also, we incorporated consumer judges to identify the humorous/violent acts in the commercials, rather than the researchers themselves or graduate assistants as in prior research. This provides insight into how the “average” consumer views violence and humor in advertisements. Finally, we also include currently available assessments of commercial popularity to gauge consumer opinion of commercials that combine acts of humor and violence. While prior research has addressed some of these areas (e.g., Tamburro et al. considered violence in commercials during sporting events, but not humor), there has been no study to our knowledge that has taken all the above approaches into account. Further, we investigate the relationship between humor, violence, and their combination in terms of ad popularity, which has not been done heretofore.

Goals of the Study

One of our goals was to ascertain the level of violence in commercials by identifying the percentage of commercials that included violent acts and the number of violent acts within each commercial. Another goal was to identify the number of humorous acts in each commercial and the number of commercials with at least one humorous act. The third goal was to determine the prevalence of the humor/violence interface by identifying the percentage of commercials in which humor and violence were combined and to determine the number of such acts in each commercial. The final goal was to investigate the relationships between the combination of humor and violence and ad popularity.

Method

To provide a longitudinal analysis, Super Bowl commercials were examined from three different years over a five-year time span. These commercials were provided to three consumer raters who identified the number of violent and humorous acts within the commercial. The first rater was a 30-year-old male customer service representative. The second rater was a 29-year-old female social worker. A 63-year-old female former academic administrator at a small Southern college was the final rater. The data collected from the raters was then compared with audience likability ratings from two different sources. The methodology is discussed in detail in the following section.

Sample

The television broadcasts selected for our content analysis were the Super Bowl telecasts for 2005, 2007, and 2009, allowing the examination of violence and humor occurring in commercials on a longitudinal basis. Because of ratings and share of audience data, the Super Bowl is considered to be a major event and advertisers dedicate massive resources to take full advantage of this unique opportunity. Consequently, telecasts of the Super Bowl provide an interesting opportunity for longitudinal analyses examining how the content of Super Bowl advertising may have changed across years. Technological advances, such as the zapping and zipping of commercials and the drop in network ratings due to cable television and advertising clutter, combine to make network television advertising exposure much less than in previous decades (McAllister 1999). The Super Bowl may be an exception, however, because its audience may prefer to watch commercials occurring during the broadcast rather than zap them (McAllister 1999).

The 2009 Super Bowl was the second most-watched television event of all time, with an average viewership of 98.7 million. Nielsen reports 151.6 million different people watched at least six minutes of the broadcast, the largest number ever for a television event (Lewis 2009). Furthermore, the 2008 Super Bowl was viewed by approximately 14 million children (Lewis 2009), and parents may be less able to prevent children from being exposed to this programming and its accompanying commercials (Anderson 2000). In addition, the Super Bowl is the only venue where a vast majority of consumers will view new ads for the first time. These ads are often used in the long run by advertisers, being shown over and over, long after the Super Bowl has ended. Another factor contributing to the importance of Super Bowl commercials as a sample is the newsworthiness of the ads. For example, Kim and Morris (2003) investigated the influence of advertising during the Super Bowl on stock price; commercials shown in other types of programming typically do not receive similar attention.

All paid commercials, except promos for networks or non-profits during the three Super Bowls (2005, 2007, and 2009), were obtained via listings and video files from nielsenmedia.com, which resulted in a sample of 180 commercials. Three consumer judges were asked to assess all Super Bowl commercials for the three years considered in the sample, coding all commercials for the number of violent acts, the number of humorous acts, and the number of simultaneous occurrences. Average pairwise percentage agreement between the raters was 82%. The ratings of the three judges were averaged to obtain the final rating for each commercial in all categories. Ratings for commercial popularity came from *USA Today*, which are available to the public, and AdBowl ratings, which were obtained from the company sponsors.

Conceptual Definitions

Potter (1999) discussed the complexity of defining violence in research, noting that the number of violent acts that will be identified depends on how violence is defined. Given the nature of our research, development of our definitions must include special consideration for violent acts within a humorous context. When Potter and Warren (1998) considered violence and humor in their study of television programs, they noted that this necessitated expanding the definition of violence to include the less serious forms that may be associated with humor. We drew on the definitions of violence from a number of previous studies, noting common themes to develop the definition of violence used for this study. Some of these common themes included the use of, or the credible threat of, force (Anderson 2000); actions that can harm physically or psychologically (Mustonen and Pulkkinen 1997); and targets that include animals and inanimate objects (Mustonen and Pulkkinen 1997). Based on this work, violence is defined here as “an overt depiction or credible threat of force or other actions, including implicit threats or nonverbal behaviors, intended (or conveying the intention) to physically or psychologically harm oneself, another person, other living things, or inanimate objects.”

Scharrer et al. (2006) considered any aspect that was designed to be funny to the viewer as a presentation of humor. Our research expands on this by integrating the four dimensions of humor developed by Martin et al. (2003) discussed in the literature review. The dimensions are outlined in Figure 1. The matrix is also based on what is enhanced or detrimentally impacted by the humor.

The three raters were provided descriptions of Martin's four dimensions of humor, as well as the above definition of violence, for reference while coding. Actual examples of these dimensions from our commercial sample included an individual making light of forgetting their sword while preparing for battle (self-defeating) and a koala being punched repeatedly in a dream by a person who doesn't like his or her job (aggressive).

Table 1. Summary for Occurrence of Acts of Interest

Type of act	Total actions	Acts per minute	Unaccompanied acts (not in association with other acts)	Percentage of acts tied to other variable of interest
Violence	234	2.13	89	61.3
Humor	520	4.73	377	27.5

This approach was different from that often taken in the literature, in that we examined the intent of the humor rather than the type of humor or the underlying mechanism. In line with work by Potter and Warren (1998), the commercials were also coded for a number of characteristics with regard to the violent act. These included whether the perpetrator of the violence showed remorse, whether the act was presented as harming the victim, whether the perpetrator was punished, and whether the violent act was rewarded. Commercials were also coded for whether the target viewer was likely to identify with the perpetrator.

Results

As was mentioned previously, the combination of humor and violence has the potential to desensitize viewers to violent acts and add to the likability of advertisements. Thus, this research was guided by three primary research questions that guide our understanding of the frequency and likability of the phenomenon and how it has changed over time. The discussion of the results addresses each research question in the order in which they were presented in the study.

How Often Are Violence and Humor Combined in Commercials Aired During the Super Bowl?

Several interesting findings, summarized in Table 1, emerge from the results addressing the first research question. The content analysis identified 234 total acts of violence (humorous and nonhumorous) in the approximately one hour and 50 minutes of commercials, a rate of 2.13 violent acts per minute. Out of all the commercials, 86, or 47.8%, were identified by at least one rater as containing a violent act. Of the 234 violent acts, 89 occurred outside of a humorous context. Only seven of the commercials containing violence were completely lacking in humor. There were 377 humorous incidents that did not include violence. Out of 180 commercials, 86 contained humor with no reference to violence by any rater. A total of 9 commercials (5%) contained no acts of violence, humor, or the combination coded by any of the raters.

Humor and violence were combined in 143 acts, representing 61.3% of all violent acts. In addition, 27.5% of all humorous acts were tied to a violent act. Just under 40% of all commercials aired were identified by at least one rater as containing an act combining violence and humor. Eight additional commercials contained acts of both violence and humor, but no acts that combined both. It comes as no surprise that 71 of these acts combining humor and violence were in conjunction with the “aggressive” dimension of humor (Martin et al. 2003), more than twice the number of acts for the next category, self-defeating (34).

How Has This Changed Since 2005?

The second research question concerned how humor and violence in Super Bowl commercials has changed since 2005. An overview of the findings for each of the years analyzed is presented in Table 2. It is interesting to note that instances of humor, violence, and the combination thereof all increased year to year, with the greatest increase occurring between 2007 and 2009. The 2009 Super Bowl commercials contained on average almost three times as many violent acts and acts combining humor and violence when compared to 2005, which represents a substantial increase given that it occurred over a time span of only five years. There was also an increase of almost 50% between 2005 and 2009 in the number of humorous acts identified.

Is There an Association Between the Combination of Humor and Violence and the Likability of the Ads?

The final research question asked how humor and violence influence the audience. To answer this question, two different independent rankings (the USA Today AdMeter and the adbowl.com ballot) of consumers’ reactions to Super Bowl commercials in terms of popularity were obtained for the three years sampled. Table 3 provides the top 10 and bottom 10 ads from each ranking. For each ad, the number of acts identified by the raters as humorous only, violent only, and humorous and violent at the same time are provided. In addition, scores for popularity with consumers were calculated for the linear combination of the USA Today AdMeter and AdBowl ratings.

Table 2. Summary Comparing Sampled Years (2005, 2007, and 2009)

	No. of commercials	Time	Acts including violence	Acts including humor	Acts including both
2005	60	0:35:25	51	154	29
2007	58	0:37:43	64	156	46
2009	62	0:37:50	119	210	68
Totals	180	1:50:58	234	520	143

Total elapsed time is approximate.

Table 4 provides the correlations among the variables in the study. It is interesting to note that the number of acts combining humor and violence is correlated to our ad popularity measure ($r = .344, p < .01$). A between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) examined the number of the various acts observed by the raters compared across our two groups of ads (Top 10 versus Bottom 10). There was a significant difference between the Top 10 (mean = 1.26 acts) and Bottom 10 (mean = .33 acts) in terms of the number of observed acts that combined humor and violence, with the Top 10 having more combined acts, $F(1, 58) = 7.00, p < .01$. There was no difference for acts of only humor, $F(1, 58) = 1.34, p > .05$, or only violence, $F(1, 58) = 3.62, p > .05$.

To further examine the relationships, a multiple regression analysis was performed, the results of which are presented in Table 5. To do so, the popularity values obtained from a linear combination of the *USA Today* and AdBowl ratings were entered as the dependent variable. Humorous acts, violent acts, acts combining both, and the year of the ad were entered as the independent variables. Results indicated a positive relationship between the combination of violence/humor acts and commercial popularity ($p < .001$). The influence of humorous or violent acts in isolation on commercial popularity was not significant ($ps > .05$). A correlation analysis was performed to determine whether violence in combination with certain specific types of humor contributed to the popularity score. In this analysis examining the four types of humor and the popularity score, aggressive humor/violence was the only form correlated with popularity ($r = .34, p < .01$). The other three humor/violence combinations from Martin et al. (2003) were not correlated with popularity. A χ^2 analysis was also undertaken to identify whether a significantly different number of ads in the Top 10 most popular commercials contained acts of violence, humor, or both when compared to the Bottom 10. This analysis was not significant for humor and violence separately; however, there was a significant difference ($p < .003$) in the relationship for ads that combined humor and violent acts, that is, commercials with acts combining both humor and violence were more likely to be in the Top 10 ads than the Bottom 10 ads. Twenty-four of the 30 Bottom 10 ads contained no combined acts, whereas only 13 of the 30 ads identified in the Top 10 contained no such acts.

Regarding additional characteristics of the violent acts and perpetrators, only 11 commercials were identified by any rater as containing a violent act for which the perpetrator showed any remorse. It is interesting to note that out of 180 commercials, only 15 total displays of remorse were identified by the raters. At the same time, 52 of the 86 commercials (60%) containing violence were coded as having perpetrators with whom the target audience was likely to identify. Moreover, many of the commercials did not provide a realistic depiction of the harm suffered by the victim. Of the 86 commercials with violent acts, half of them were not identified by even one rater as displaying harm to the victim. When considering the possible outcomes of the violence, neither punishments nor rewards were identified by raters in 44.2% of the commercials. Only 15 of the commercials showed any form of punishment for committing a violent act. Thirty-three of the commercials actually showed the violent acts being rewarded according to at least one of the raters. One example of this was a Doritos commercial from 2009 in which an act of violence is rewarded with free snacks. Moreover, this commercial was also ranked first overall in the annual *USA Today* Ad Meter ratings of best-liked Super Bowl commercials. This is an issue of concern because of the possibility that the most-liked ads may be more likely to be rerun and imitated by other advertisers.

Discussion

Overall, our findings suggest that the most popular commercials during a Super Bowl will be those that include acts combining humor and violence. Correlations, a regression analysis, and a χ^2 analysis all support this assertion. We also note an upward trend in these acts over the years included in this study. Acts of violence and acts combining humor and violence have both increased greatly, in both cases more than doubling when 2005 and 2009 are compared.

Implications

That the number of acts including violence and violence and humor in Super Bowl commercials has increased by approximately 133% and 135%, respectively, over the five-year

Table 3. Comparison with Composite Factor from Two Rating Systems (USA Today and AdBowI)

Advertiser	Ad description	Acts observed by raters					Ad rating*
		Only violence	Only humor	Combined	Only violence	Only humor	
2009							
Top 10							
Doritos	Crystal ball sees free Doritos	0	.33	3			2.04499
Bridgestone	Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head take a drive	.33	2.33	1			2.03949
Bridgestone	Space travelers visit Saturn	0	2.33	1			1.56632
Anheuser-Busch	A Clydesdale can fetch	0	1.67	0			1.55211
Anheuser-Busch	Clydesdale's romance with circus horse	0	1.67	.67			1.34719
Coca-Cola	Bugs make off with a guy's Coke	0	3.67	0			1.28564
Doritos	Superpowers of Doritos' crunch	0	1.33	4			1.27200
Pedigree	Dog is better pet than an ostrich or rhino	0	2.67	2			1.24265
Anheuser-Busch	Corporate bean counter proposes no Bud Light at meetings to cut budget	0	.67	2.67			1.11505
Pepsi Max	"I'm good," say battered guys	0	0	6.33			.97959
2009							
Bottom 10							
Coca-Cola	Coke transforms monster avatar into a pretty girl	0	5.67000	0			-60778
Pepsi	Saturday Night Live's MacGruber changes name to PepSuber	1.33	3.00000	3.33			-64912
Cash4Gold	Ed McMahon and MC Hammer trade gold mementoes for needed cash	0	9.00000	0			-69605
Hyundai	Rivals unhappy Genesis sedan named Car of the Year	1	2.00000	.67			-75096
Gatorade	Tiger Woods and others talk about G	0	.33000	0			-94221
GoDaddy.com	Shower scene	0	1	1			-95616
GoDaddy.com	Danica Patrick says she "enhanced"	0	3.67	0			-1.20038
Hyundai Hyundai	Assurance Program	0	0	0			-1.45012
Toyota	Diversity of new Venza's appeal	0	0	0			-1.45842
Vizio	Flat-panel televisions	0	1.33	0			-2.05080
2007							
Top 10							
Anheuser-Busch	Rock, Paper, Scissors game for beer	0	.67	1.33			2.13746
Anheuser-Busch	Stray dog and the Clydesdales	0	2	0			1.72230
Blockbuster	Using mouse to rent movies	0	.33	3.67			1.60346
Anheuser-Busch	Immigrants learn to ask for Bud Light	0	5	0			1.53148
Doritos	Guy in car, girl show Dorito's qualities	0	1	1.67			1.52682
Anheuser-Busch	Wedding shortened by auctioneer	0	2.67	0			1.45944
Anheuser-Busch	Scary hitcher gets ride for Bud Light	.33	1.33	1			1.43785
Anheuser-Busch	Crabs worship Bud Light	0	3.33	0			1.37604
Anheuser-Busch	Ape loses out on beer while posing	0	2	0			1.00607
Snickers	Mechanics enjoy candy bar	0	2	.67			.97337

(continues)

TABLE 3 (continued)

Advertiser	Ad description	Acts observed by raters					Ad rating*
		Only violence	Only humor	Combined	Only violence	Only humor	
2007	Bottom 10						
GoDaddy.com	GoDaddy marketing department parties	0	1.67000	0			-86314
Toyota	Tundra tows load on see-saw ramp	0	.67000	0			-91827
Pride Movie	Movie trailer for Pride	0	1.00000	0			-1.00291
Honda	Fuel efficiency of Hondas	0	.33000	0			-1.09879
Honda	Elvis' Burning Love for new CR-V	0	.33000	0			-1.12563
Van Heusen	Man dressed for any occasion	0	1.67	0			-1.21907
Garmin	GPS navigator versus paper map monster 1 1 3 -1.48872						
Revlon	Colorist Sheryl Crow sings new song	0	2.33	0			-1.92510
Flomax	Prostate drug lets men bike, kayak	0	.33	0			-1.99490
Salesgenie.com	Salesgenie.com helps sales success	0	1	0			-2.16159
2005	Top 10						
Anheuser-Busch	Pilot jumps out of plane for six-pack of Bud Light after skydiver refuses	0	2	1			2.12446
Anheuser-Busch	American troops get standing ovation thank you at airport	0	.33	0			1.96964
Ameriquet	Store customer's cell phone chat misunderstood to be robbery	1	0	5.5			1.48412
Ameriquet	Romantic dinner goes awry after cat knocks over spaghetti sauce	0	1	1.5			1.47290
Careerbuilder.com	Guy sits on whoopee cushion as prankster monkey colleagues laugh	0	4.33	0			1.04161
Diet Pepsi	Cindy Crawford, other women eye handsome Diet Pepsi drinker	0	4.67	0			1.01365
Anheuser-Busch	Ostrich, giraffe, kangaroo, and cute pig audition to join the Clydesdales	0	2.67	0			.97542
Careerbuilder.com	Guy in boardroom won't kiss-up to monkey boss—but one monkey does	0	2.33	0			.88465
Anheuser-Busch	Cedric is designated driver who gets clubgoers doing his driving dance	0	4.67	0			.58857
Emerald Nuts	Nut-loving dad takes grief from unicorn, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny	0	2.67	.67			.54491
2005	Bottom 10						
Sahara movie	Studio promotes upcoming film Sahara	3	.00000	0			-1.15151
Batman Begins movie	Studio promotes upcoming film Batman Begins	4.33	.67	0			-1.17278
Honda	New Honda pickup drives on mountain ridge	0	0	0			-1.24488
McDonald's	Couple hold Web auction for french fry that looks like Abraham Lincoln	0	3	0			-1.29967
Anheuser-Busch	Introduction of Budweiser Select low-carb beer with no aftertaste	0	.33	0			-1.36304
MBNA	Gladys Knight tears up the field as rugby star in Affinity credit card ad	1.67	1	1.67			-1.56193
Volvo	Rocket launches with "My Other Vehicle is a Volvo XC90" bumper sticker	0	.33	.33			-1.60862
Cialis	Couples in romantic settings ogle to classic song "Be My Baby"	0	2	0			-1.77939
Napster	Feline at game holds up sign comparing price of new Napster service	0	1.33	0			-1.83544
Novartis	People float in bubbles for O2OPTIX silicone hydrogen contact lenses	0	1.67	0			-2.20482

* Ad rating is a linear combination computed from ratings by USA Today and Ad Bowl.

Table 4. Correlations of Observed Acts

	Violence	Humor	Both	Popularity	Rankings	Year
Violence	—					
Humor	-.171	—				
Both	.096	-.271*	—			
Popularity	-.192	.155	.344**	—		
Rankings	-.243	.15	.328*	.952**	—	
Year	-.204	.094	.218	.098	0	—

* Significant at the .05 level.

** Significant at the .01 level.

Table 5. Results of the Regression Analysis

	B	Standard error	β	t	Significance
Constant	111.059	220.252		.504	.616
Acts of violence only	-.397	.239	-.205	-1.661	.102
Humorous acts only	.21	.108	.246	1.955	.056
Acts of humor and violence combined	.448	.13	.444	3.461	.001
Year	-.056	.11	-.064	-.507	.614

time span should be of concern to members of the academic community. Furthermore, we find that the portrayal of violence is unrealistic for several reasons. Some violent acts (10%) are shown to reward the perpetrator for their actions. The vast majority also depict no harm to the victim (90%) and no punishment for the perpetrator (98%). Perhaps even more troubling is that at least some of these violent but humorous commercials were well liked by viewers. Our analyses indicated that positively rated ads had significantly more acts that combined violence and humor than did those rated in the bottom 10 by consumers. Clearly, the combination of humor and violence seems to appeal to consumers. Research is needed to investigate the effects of viewers (especially children) seeing such acts in a positive context.

We agree with previous researchers who assert that this combination of humor and violence desensitizes viewers in terms of reacting negatively to the violence, thus subtly resulting in the conclusion that violence is acceptable if presented in a humorous context (Potter and Warren 1998). The desensitization to violent portrayals that may arise when violence is combined with humor appears to be an appealing mix to some viewers, at least based on our popularity analyses. Perhaps the result (i.e., liking/popularity) of this juxtaposition can be explained by the approaches to understanding humor and its effects that were previously noted. For example, viewers may “like” violence depicted in a humorous context because the presentation is unexpected (incongruity theory), enables viewers to feel bet-

ter than a hapless victim (superiority theory), or provides viewers with the means to reduce the psychological tension that could arise when actors in a commercial are engaged in violent acts unaccompanied by humor (relief theory). In sum, it seems that combining violence and humor provides a number of potential recourses for viewers to find more acceptable what on the surface seems to be an odd mix of execution strategies, that is, combining violence with humor in commercials.

Perhaps most significant is that our Ad Meter and Ad-Bowl information indicates viewers find these commercials more than merely acceptable; they also like at least some of them. Thus, combining humor with violence appears to not only lessen the impact of violent portrayals but, more important, may also result in increased liking of violent depictions when they are shown in a humorous context. This would indeed be an unfortunate outcome of these commercial formats if viewers actually find violence more acceptable and likable when portrayed with humorous overtones. The next logical step in this transition would be to investigate whether these combinations affect actual behavior. These concerns represent viable issues and questions for additional academic research, but they also pose considerations for public policy. For example, should commercial portrayals that lead consumers to not only discount the impact of violence but also to increase their liking of the violent acts being shown continue to qualify as protected free speech as is the case now with most commercial content?

In addition, we believe that the viability of parental gatekeeping may be somewhat compromised in contexts such as those that could occur during the viewing of a Super Bowl. As noted previously by Scharrer et al. (2006), exposure to commercials is more difficult for viewers to control because viewers are less likely to know the content of a commercial prior to actually seeing it, and unintended viewer exposure may be the result. Consequently, parents' ability to act as television gatekeepers during the viewing of commercials embedded within programs may be less than what they might exert regarding decisions concerning which programs to watch. The high level of violence found in Super Bowl ads, coupled with watching relaxed adults laugh at violent acts, may suggest to children who are also present during the telecast that violence inflicted on others isn't as bad when cast as being "funny." We, of course, do not know whether this possibility actually exists and, consequently, the above discussions present an important avenue for future research, that is, the behavioral influence on viewers from being exposed to violence and humor in commercials.

Limitations

The Super Bowl was chosen due to its acknowledged high viewership and reach. However, the factors that make it a unique broadcast may mean the results do not generalize completely to normal prime-time viewing. The distinctive nature of the Super Bowl may draw viewers more inclined to watch commercials during the Super Bowl than during regular prime-time programming. Another limitation is that NFL football may be viewed as a violent sport and the violence witnessed in the game may make the inordinate display of violence in the commercials more acceptable to viewers. We must be careful not to draw conclusions that are not justified by the methodology used or the results that were found (Carlson 2008), though our results do allow us to state that the record number of viewers for Super Bowl XLIII and the viewers of other Super Bowl broadcasts could be exposed to many acts of violence, humor, and combinations thereof. There were 2.13 violent acts per minute of commercials and 143 acts combining humor and violence. Thus, while the results of our content analysis do not allow for any conclusions regarding the effects of viewing this content on subsequent behavior, we can state that viewers are regularly being exposed to such acts during Super Bowl commercials.

Conclusion

Overall, if future research does identify negative outcomes resulting from viewing violence in a humorous context within commercials, we can say that there is no shortage of exposure to these formats based on the commercials aired

during recent Super Bowl broadcasts. In addition, commercials that combine humor and violence are better liked by viewers, which could mean that these commercials will become more prevalent as advertisers identify and perhaps attempt to capitalize on this relationship. Both of these findings add to prior work in the literature and provide important reasons for research in the area to continue. From a public policy standpoint, additional consideration should be provided to the prevalence of violence combined with humor in commercials. While such content is identified and limited to certain time frames in television programming, parents attempting to limit their children's exposure in commercials are not provided the tools needed to effectively address these concerns. It appears that public policy has overlooked an important avenue through which viewers are being exposed to violence, especially that which is trivialized by its association with humor.

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