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## **Warning Young Adults Against Tobacco Consumption Through Ad Parodies: its Effects on Cigarette Brands Attitude**

### **Abstract**

This paper compares the effects of anti-tobacco ad parodies and visual cigarette package warnings on emotional and cognitive responses of young adults. The findings indicate that graphic-only ad parodies can compete with warnings in their attempt to damage consumers' attitude toward tobacco brands through the health beliefs they lead consumers to associate to the brand. On the contrary, text-only ad parodies prove counterproductive and lead to a boomerang effect characterized by an increase in consumers' tobacco brand attitude.

*Keywords: ad parodies, tobacco consumption, emotions, cognitive, Ab*

*Track: Social Responsibility, Ethics and Consumer Protection*

In the attempt to reduce the number of smokers, anti-tobacco nonprofit groups use creative methods to voice their message, by creating ad parodies they spread throughout web-sites (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). However, studies mainly focus on consumer-created ad parodies undertaken by brand loyalists on behalf of the brand and left anti-brand ad parodies effects on persuasion largely unexplored (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008). Clearly, research is lacking on whether anti-brand ad parodies could be a means of influencing the attitudes, perceptions and resulting behaviors. In the case of tobacco, it is now important for both anti-brand activists who create and spread anti-tobacco brand ad parodies, and the researchers who study them, to gain a better understanding of their relative efficiency compared to more classical anti-tobacco warnings, such as cigarette package warnings.

We thus study whether ad parodies can really impact consumer's attitude toward tobacco brands, and, if so, the mechanisms by which such an effect occurs. Such a focus on cigarette brands attitude as the dependent variable appears highly relevant since cigarette brands attitude has largely been shown to influence tobacco consumption behaviors as a means of self-expression and peers acceptance among young adults (Pechmann and Knight, 2002). Also, focusing on consumers' attitude toward specific cigarette brands and not toward smoking in general finds support in that anti-tobacco warnings appear relatively ineffective in influencing attitude toward smoking among young adults who already hold strong preconceptions on smoking's adverse health effects (Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1994). However, they can clearly influence a more changing variable such as cigarette brands attitude. Thus, we focus more precisely on the following questions:

1. What is the influence of anti-tobacco brand ad parodies compared with cigarette package warnings on consumers' attitude about cigarette brands?
2. Do the effects of anti-tobacco brand ad parodies that parody only the ad text differ from those that parody both the ad text and graphics?

## **1. Anti-Brand Ad Parodies: An Overview**

Anti-brand ad parodies refer to hijack actions on official brand ads, mixing part of those official ads' materials with new ones in a sarcastic way to make the original ad ridiculous. In this paper, we distinguish between "text-only ad parodies", only parodying the official ad text, and "graphic-only ad parodies", only parodying the official graphics. While ad parodies were previously the prerogatives of professionals, today, anyone with a computer and a statement to make can craft a professional looking ad parody (Berthon et al., 2008). Spoofing cigarette brands ads on line, activists question cigarette brands advertising impact and legitimacy. In the long term, their objective is to counter the effects of official cigarette brands advertising and to warn people against their hazards. To do so, they target specific brands, such as Marlboro or Camel, because they symbolize the tobacco industry. Still, we do not know much on their precise effects in the short term on cigarette brands attitude. Vanden Bergh et al. (2011) suggest the brand may be harmed if the denunciation effect predominates and the original brand is its target. However, if the humorous effect predominates, humor might reinforce pleasant emotional associations with the brand, preventing it from being harmed. Alternatively, one would expect that the brand may not be harmed if people understand that the parody's purpose is to use the brand's meanings to attack something more general and not the targeted brand in particular. Our goal is thus to ensure that activists are right in targeting specific brands through humoristic ad parodies to warn people against hazards of smoking and to damage consumer's attitude toward the brand. The question remains how – that is through what specific route - ad parodies exert their persuasive effects.

## 2. Conceptual Background

### 2.1. *The emotional route to persuasion*

As warnings, anti-tobacco brand ad parodies and cigarette package warnings are likely to induce negative emotional reactions. However, the extent to which they do so may differ. Following the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981) which suggests that peripheral elements have their main influence through the emotional route while central elements have their main influence through the cognitive route, the influence of ad parodies might more depend on the image they parody than on the text they parody. As text-only parodies display the positive official ad graphics, when graphic-only ad parodies display new striking materials, we expect graphic-only ad parodies to elicit more negative emotional reactions than text-only ad parodies. As cigarette package warnings feature shocking pictures while graphic-only ad parodies take their inspiration in official ads materials and therefore depict the dangers of tobacco use in a less concrete manner, we predict that cigarette package warnings will elicit more negative emotional reactions than graphic-only ad parodies. Thus:

*H1: Graphic-only ad parodies elicit more negative emotional reactions than text-only ad parodies (a) but less than cigarette package warnings (b).*

Anti-tobacco brand ad parodies are consumer-created ad parodies designed to make laugh (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). Therefore, ad parodies are likely to elicit more positive emotional reactions compared with cigarette package warnings. As caricatures, they have to create a disparity between the image and the reality of the object of caricature to make laugh. They surprise the viewer when they create confusion by incorporating elements that do not fit with his expectations (Speck 1991). Then, the viewer understands that the parody is indicating how the original ad might not have been telling the whole truth and experiences positive emotions such as release and humor. Text-only ad parodies display a strong discrepancy, mixing graphic elements favorable to cigarette brands and familiar to the viewer with an unfavorable text, while graphic-only ad parodies do not provide such gap. Therefore, text-only ad parodies might elicit more positive emotional reactions. Thus:

*H2: Graphic-only ad parodies elicit less positive emotional reactions than text-only ad parodies (a), but more than cigarette package warnings (b).*

### 2.2 *The cognitive route to persuasion*

The cognitive route represents the product of a consumers' elaboration of the information presented in a persuasive message. Brand associations are crucial in the process of elaboration. We focus on the two strongest cigarette brands associations, namely their perceived risk and their symbolic image. Regarding perceived risk, visual warnings are more noticeable and easier to understand and thus more efficient in communicating health hazards (Gallopel-Morvan et al., 2011). The same reasoning should play to compare text-only ad parodies with graphic-only ad parodies. The former communicate health hazards in an ambivalent way as it contains non-convergent elements when the latter depicts them in a clearer way. Therefore, the risks associated with cigarette brands are easier to understand in graphic-only ad parodies compared with text-only ad parodies. When comparing graphic-only ad parodies versus cigarette package warnings, cigarette packages are poorly branded, exhibiting only cigarette brands name and warnings. They thus could be perceived as boring and unattractive, making therefore health warning more noticeable. Thus:

*H3: Subjects exposed to graphic-only ad parodies perceive cigarette brands as more risky than subjects exposed to text-only ad parodies (a), but less risky than subjects exposed to cigarette package warnings (b).*

Cigarette brands official ads are crafted to address young adults' need for independence, self reliance, and freedom (Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1994). When creating ad parodies, consumers create a viral object that might help in spreading the original ad's themes and imagery (Vanden Bergh et al. 2011). If anti-tobacco brand ad parodies present smokers as physically attractive, engaged in exciting activities, then they could run counter to messages that smoking is dangerous to one's health and reinforce perceptions that smoking is a normative consumption product (Pechmann and Knight, 2002; Devlin et al., 2007). Anti-tobacco activists might thus reactivate cigarette brands positive symbolic beliefs in consumers' mind and obtain the same results as official ads. As text-only ad parodies appropriate the graphic elements of official ads, they are more likely to enhance brands positive symbolic beliefs compared with other forms of anti-tobacco warnings. Thus:

*H4: Subjects exposed to graphic-only ad parodies associate less positive symbolic beliefs to cigarette brands than subjects exposed to text-only ad parodies (a) and cigarette package warnings (b).*

### *2.3. The change in cigarette brands attitude*

On the emotional route, negative emotions result in an increase in persuasiveness of (Hammond, 2011). Besides, negative emotions are supposed to transfer to the object to which they are associated by mere association (Mitchell and Olson, 1981). Following the same argument, anti-tobacco brand ad parodies that generate upbeat feelings might enhance cigarette brands attitude. The cognitive route provides an alternative explanation for the process of change in cigarette brands attitude. First, the Protection Motivation Model (Rogers, 1975) and the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974) posit that consumers' persuasion depends on the appraisal of the severity of the risks, such risk being likely to lead to brand avoidance. Second, the positive symbolic meanings associated with cigarette brands are likely to transfer to cigarette brands attitude (Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1994; Pechmann and Knight, 2002). It may thus be expected that the effect of anti-tobacco warnings (representing both ad parodies and cigarette package warnings) on *Ab* is mediated by the emotional reactions experienced by the subjects, and by their brand beliefs:

*H5: The effects of anti-tobacco warnings and ad parodies on *Ab* are mediated by emotional and cognitive reactions. Graphic-only ad parodies will lead to lower *Ab* because of their positive effect on negative emotions (fear and disgust) (H5a and H5b) and health beliefs (H5c). On the contrary, text-only ad parodies will lead to higher *Ab* because of their effect on positive emotions (upbeat feelings) (H5d) and on symbolic beliefs (H5e).*

### **3. Method: Research Design, Stimulus Selection, Sample and Measures**

We carried an experiment considering a text-only ad parody, a graphic-only ad parody and a cigarette package warning, all these stimuli being real materials. To control for familiarity, Marlboro was chosen as the brand in the experiment (Hemdev, 2005). The text-only ad parody was the Marlboro picture presenting two cowboys riding into the sunset. The only single change from the original ad which had been made by the ad parody developers resulted from the humoristic text warning "I miss my lung Bob". The graphic-only ad parody used the original sentence "Welcome to Marlboro Country", the graphic change made by the

ad parody developers consisting in depicting a graveyard in the background. The cigarette package warning condition included a graphic warning showing one healthy lung and one damaged, and a verbal warning “Smoking causes fatal lung cancer”.

Participants were 139 university students (mean age = 22, 35% being men and 65% being women, 43% being smokers). The respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions. Chi-Square tests and a t-tests revealed that respondents in the three experimental conditions were similar in terms of gender ( $\chi^2_{\text{Gender}} = .868, df = 2, p > .05$ ) and tobacco consumption habits ( $\chi^2_{\text{Smoker}} = 1.345, df = 2, p > .05$ ).

Measures of upbeat feelings (Mooradian, 1996), fear (Laroche et al., 2001), disgust (Izard, 1977), health and symbolic beliefs associated to the brand (Hemdev, 2005), and Ab were adopted from previous research. Reliabilities ranged from 0.82 to 0.91. Ab was measured through “the extent to which they liked the Marlboro Brand”. Each item was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very Strongly).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Effects of ad parodies exposure on emotional responses

Findings indicate that the ad parodies versus cigarette package warning exposure manipulation had a significant effect on fear ( $F(4, 136) = 7.54; p < .05$ ). Graphic-only ad parody exposure condition resulted in a significant increase in fear only when compared with text-only ad parody exposure condition ( $M_{\text{Graphic}} = 4.06$  vs.  $M_{\text{Text}} = 2.72, p < .001$ ). No significant difference between graphic-only ad parody exposure condition and cigarette package warning exposure condition was found ( $M_{\text{Warning}} = 3.80, p > .05$ ). Regarding disgust, the highest level is obtained in the cigarette package warning condition ( $M_{\text{Warning}} = 4.84$ ). Disgust in the graphic-only ad parody exposure condition is significantly higher than the ones obtained in the text-only ad parody exposure condition ( $M_{\text{Graphic}} = 4.06$  vs.  $M_{\text{Text}} = 2.75, p < .001$ ) but lower than in the cigarette package warning exposure condition ( $M_{\text{Warning}} = 4.84, p < .05$ ). These results offer support for H1(a) and partial support for H1(b).

Regarding positive emotions, our findings indicate that the ad parodies versus cigarette package warning exposure manipulation had a significant effect on upbeat feelings ( $F(2, 136) = 6.62; p < .01$ ). Specifically, graphic-only ad parody exposure condition resulted in a significant decrease in upbeat feelings when compared with text-only ad parody exposure condition ( $M_{\text{Graphic}} = 1.46$  vs.  $M_{\text{Text}} = 2.25, p < .01$ ). However, the graphic-only ad parody exposure did not induce more upbeat feelings than the cigarette package warning exposure ( $M_{\text{Warning}} = 1.55, p > .05$ ). Thus, H2(a) is supported but not H2 (b).

### 4.2. Effects of ad parodies exposure on cognitive responses

Results indicate that the ad parodies and warning exposure manipulation has a marginally significant effect on health beliefs ( $F(2, 136) = 2.65; p < .10$ ), and a significant effect on symbolic beliefs ( $F(2, 136) = 4.99; p < .01$ ). Results revealed a marginally significant difference between graphic-only and text-only ad parodies exposure conditions ( $M_{\text{Graphic}} = 5.49$  vs.  $M_{\text{Text}} = 4.96, p < .10$ ), and a more significant difference when comparing the effect of graphic-only ad parody to the one of cigarette package warning ( $M_{\text{Graphic}} = 5.49$  vs.  $M_{\text{Warning}} = 4.79, p < .05$ ). Thus, these results offer support for H3(a), but not for H3(b).

Results regarding the effects of ad parodies and warnings on symbolic beliefs revealed that the highest level of symbolic beliefs text-only ad parodies ( $M_{\text{Text}} = 3.64$ ) is significantly higher than the one of individuals exposed to graphic-only ad parodies ( $M_{\text{Text}} = 3.64$  vs.

$M_{\text{Graphic}} = 2.82, p < .05$ ). Symbolic beliefs induced by exposure to graphic-only ad parodies did not differ to the ones elicited by exposure to cigarette package warnings ( $M_{\text{Graphic}} = 2.82$  vs.  $M_{\text{Warning}} = 2.72, p > .05$ ). These results offer support for H4(a) but not H4(b).

### 4.3. Tests of the mediating roles of emotions and cognitions

We tested emotions and cognitions as potential mediators of the ad parodies exposure effects on Ab following Zhao, Lynch and Chen's (2010) procedure. We compared the effects of graphic-only ad parodies to respectively the ones of text-only ad parodies, and then the ones of cigarette package warnings. The graphic-only ad parody condition was coded 1, so that a positive effect can be interpreted as the effect of the graphic-only ad parody exposure and a negative effect as the one caused by the other kind of warning. Smoking status was included in the analyses as a control variable.

When comparing the mechanism by which being exposed to graphic-only ad parodies versus text-only ad parodies lead to changes in Ab, the most striking result lies in the absence of mediating effects of emotions. Indeed, all indirect effects of fear, disgust and upbeat feelings are not significant, providing no support to H5 (a), H5(b) and H5 (c). On the contrary, results highlight that the only mediating variables is symbolic beliefs ( $a \times b = -.12$ , the confidence interval excluding 0). The negative sign of the mediating effect reveals that increases in Ab may be due to increases in symbolic beliefs induced by text-only ad parodies. This result thus supports H5 (e). No mediating effect of health beliefs was found out.

When comparing the mechanism underlying the effects of being exposed to graphic-only ad parodies versus cigarette package warnings, the only indirect effect that was significant is the one of health beliefs ( $a \times b = -.18$ , the confidence interval excluding 0). Thus, here again, emotions do not play any mediating role in the influence of ad parodies versus warnings exposure on attitude, leaving the influence of ad parodies and warnings on Ab being explained by cognitions. Since graphic-only ad parodies exposure condition was coded 1, the negative sign of the mediating effect reveals that increases in Ab may be due to health beliefs induced by the graphic-only ad parodies exposure. This result supports H5 (b).

## 5. General Discussion

This research aimed at demonstrating that ad parodies may be a new way to take part in the public fight against smoking behavior by leading young adults to develop negative attitudes toward tobacco brands. Overall, our study contributes to a better understanding of the effects of ad parodies by first showing that cognitions mediate the comparative effects of ad parodies and warnings. Second, results show that graphic-only ad parodies can compete with warnings in their attempt to damage consumers' attitude toward tobacco brands through the health beliefs they lead consumers to associate to the brand, which decreases attitude. Furthermore and of much importance, due to the symbolic beliefs they induce, text-only ad parodies may prove counterproductive and lead to a boomerang effect characterized by an increase in consumers' tobacco brand attitude.

Since our main result relates to the mediating role of health beliefs, it may be suggested that directly showing how through graphic ad parodies the hazards related to tobacco consumption, public officers can lead consumers to develop negative attitude toward tobacco brands. For activists who create ad parodies to hurt tobacco brands, graphic-only ad parodies may represent creative ways of decreasing such attitude indirectly through health beliefs. Meanwhile, our results also suggest avoiding text-only spoof ads prime symbolic

beliefs which in turn positively affect consumers' attitude toward the tobacco brand, the exact opposite reaction of the one that ad parodies developers aim at generating.

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