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I Know That You Know That I Know: Meta-Parody Ads and Brand Credibility

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**I Know That You Know That I Know:
Meta-Parody Ads and Brand Credibility**

by

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Abstract

In recent years, advertisers have been turning to a new form of humorous advertising to reach wary consumers. This study refers to this new form of advertising appeal as ‘meta-parody’ advertising, defined as humorous advertisements that parody advertising tropes for the sake of building credibility with the consumer. These ads are aimed at overcoming persuasion knowledge, which is what consumers use to cope with attempts to influence them. Despite the prevalence of meta-parody in contemporary advertising, there is no existing research on meta-parody ads, let alone their relationship with brand credibility. Previous research into humorous advertising has produced mixed views on whether humor helps or harms brand credibility. However, meta-parody ads could benefit from the improved brand credibility that arises with two-sided messaging and the ‘truth dimension’ consumers perceive in ad parodies. This study used quantitative data collected from online survey participants, who were randomly assigned to the control (non-parody humorous fake ad) or the treatment condition (meta-parody humorous fake ad). Participants rated the ad’s funniness and brand credibility, which were then analyzed using ANOVA techniques. Results showed a statistically significant difference in brand credibility between the two ads, with participants perceiving the meta-parody ad (vs. control) as more credible. Funniness was ruled out as a confounding variable, as there was no statistically significant difference in humor ratings between conditions. These findings indicate that meta-parody is related to higher brand credibility; although it justifies advertisers’ use of meta-parody appeals, further research is needed to understand this relationship.

Keywords: meta-parody advertising; brand credibility; humorous advertising;
two-sided messaging; persuasion knowledge

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	4
Conceptual Background.....	5
Persuasion Knowledge.....	5
Two-Sided Messaging	5
Humorous Advertising and Parody.....	6
Parodic Advertising	7
Hypothesis Development and Research Objectives	7
Study	9
Method.....	9
Results.....	12
General discussion	13
Theoretical and Practical Implications.....	13
Limitations and Future Directions	14
Acknowledgements	15
References	15

Introduction

The use of humor in advertising has been widely studied in advertising research. Recent scholarship has proposed seven humor types, one of which is parody—mimicking a “style or genre of literature or other media” (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 154). Advertisements that invoke parody are called parodic ads (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). Although scholars have acknowledged parody as a type of advertising humor, research into parodic ads is scarce. The few advertising-related articles that study parodic ads are on ads that attack a specific advertisement from a rival company rather than parodies of media or advertising tropes in general (Roehm & Roehm Jr., 2014; Jean, 2011).

This void in the literature is only becoming more pronounced as a new type of parodic ad is gaining popularity among advertisers (Stern, 2022). For instance, a recent Super Bowl ad depicts brand representatives for Miller Lite, Coors Light, and Blue Moon battling over whose commercial it is (Miller Lite, 2023). Yet, the literature does not provide an official term or analysis for this phenomenon, nor will one find it mentioned on the internet apart from one exception in *The Atlantic* (Stern, 2022). This new type of parodic ad—labeled a ‘meta-parody ad’ in this research—is an advertisement that parodies advertising tropes. A meta-parody ad explicitly acknowledges that it is an ad, suggesting to viewers that the advertised message is authentic (Stern, 2022). Advertisers have long relied on the same tactics to persuade consumers, such as extreme hyperbole. As a result, modern consumers immediately recognize advertisements as the persuasion attempts and therefore put up their guard (Stern, 2022). By subverting these tropes via meta-parody, advertisers hope to bypass the consumer’s persuasion knowledge—their understanding of marketing tactics as persuasion attempts and attempts to cope with them through skepticism (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In doing so, the advertiser can establish credibility with the consumer. This research compares consumer reactions to meta-parody ads against non-parody humorous ads to test this prediction empirically and to better understand the impact of meta-parody in advertising on consumers’ perceptions of brand credibility.

Conceptual Background

Persuasion Knowledge

The persuasion knowledge model was developed by Friestad and Wright (1994), who wanted to understand how consumers deal with persuasion attempts by marketers. This model depicts the interaction between the target (consumer) and the agent (advertiser), resulting in a persuasion episode. Both the target and agent use their own topic knowledge, persuasion knowledge, and knowledge about each other to either attempt to persuade (in the agent's case) or cope with persuasion attempts (in the consumer's case). Consumers' persuasion knowledge "enables them to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and remember persuasion attempts and to select and execute coping tactics believed to be effective and appropriate" (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 3).

Since the creation of the persuasion knowledge model, researchers have been trying to understand what role persuasion knowledge plays in consumers' responses to persuasion attempts. Friestad and Wright (1994) argue that persuasion knowledge helps consumers navigate persuasion attempts rather than resist them. That is, it gives them the tools to discern between credible and deceptive persuasion attempts. The work of Hernandez et al. (2022) supports this view, as they found that more transparent appeals persuaded consumers who were more skeptical of advertisements. However, research into persuasion knowledge has been mixed overall, with a recent meta-analysis finding that persuasion knowledge leads to more negative responses to persuasion attempts (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). Because of this, many advertisers have to contend with the issue of appealing to consumers with high persuasion knowledge.

Two-sided Messaging

To reach those with high persuasion knowledge, many advertisers have turned to two-sided messaging. Two-sided messaging is when advertisers "disclaim particular characteristics of their products in conjunction with asserting positive claims," to come across as more transparent (Eisend, 2006, p. 187). This is often used when the brand faces bad publicity, attacks from competitors, or consumers with negative attitudes towards them (Eisend, 2006).

Research shows that these messages improve perceived credibility and brand attitudes (Eisend, 2006; Eisend, 2007). This is particularly helpful for building trust with highly skeptical consumers, such as those who possess a high degree of persuasion knowledge. Hernandez et al. (2022) found that two-sided messaging was more effective at increasing highly skeptical consumers' purchase intentions than traditional one-sided messaging because of increased perceptions of credibility. Although two-sided messages did not increase effectiveness for less skeptical consumers, they did not harm their purchase intentions (Hernandez et al., 2022). This makes two-sided messaging an attractive option for advertisers.

Humorous Advertising and Parody

The use of humor has been widely studied in the advertising research community. Speck (1990) developed the Humorous Message Taxonomy, categorizing three humor processes—arousal safety, incongruity-resolution, and humorous disparagement—which combine in different ways to create the five humor types: comic wit, sentimental humor, satire, sentimental comedy, and full comedy. Humorous messaging categories were further developed by communications researchers Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004), who analyzed hundreds of humorous TV commercials. One of their seven humor categories was parody, which they defined as “imitating a style or genre of literature or other media,” noting that it was a “complex” form of humor as it requires knowledge of the content being parodied (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 162).

Despite categorizing parody as a type of advertising humor, parody in advertising has garnered relatively little attention from researchers. Indeed, Vanden Bergh et al (2011) lament a “lack of research in the advertising-related journals on ad parodies” and that “almost all of the work on parodies resided in the humanities literature” (p. 105). Their study attempted to remedy this disparity by examining how consumer-made ad parodies impacted attitudes toward the brand being made fun of. Vanden Bergh et al. (2011) determined that one dimension of advertising parodies is the “truth dimension,” which emerges when the parody draws attention to advertising puffery—the use of extreme hyperbole in advertisements.

Although there has been much more research into advertising humor in general, there is still no consensus among scholars about humor's impact on brand credibility. Existing literature shows that

humor's impact on perceived credibility is mixed or can even be harmful (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006). Research also suggests that humor has little-to-no effect on attitudes toward the brand (Eisend, 2009; Walter et al., 2018).

Parodic Advertising

Vanden Bergh et al.'s (2011) study also established the term 'parodic ad,' defining it as "advertisements first and foremost," which "use the conventions of parody to serve an overarching commercial purpose" (p. 109). Jean (2011) studied parodic ads, specifically an ad created by the brand SanDisk, which parodied an ad by its competitor, Apple. This study found that while consumers were critical of the company for making fun of its competitor, they still found the parody amusing (Jean, 2011).

Further research into parodic ads (Roehm & Roehm Jr., 2014) has found that "empirical investigation into parodic ads has been quite scarce" (p. 18). This study concluded that brands who create ads parodying their competitors may not benefit from positive brand attitudes, despite consumers liking the ad (Roehm & Roehm Jr., 2014). Additionally, they warned that it is "an oversimplification to portray the outcomes of parodic ads as being primarily positive or negative" (Roehm & Roehm Jr., 2014, p. 30). Although these studies into parodies of specific ads serve as a useful foundation, there is no research into the real phenomenon of parodic ads that make fun of the act of advertising itself. It is important that there is literature on the topic of meta-parody advertising so that advertisers learn whether meta-parody can build brand credibility, which they currently assume—without evidence—that it does. If meta-parody is indeed effective, then research can uncover why this is the case, allowing advertisers and consumers alike to gain a greater understanding of what people perceive as credible.

Hypothesis Development and Research Objectives

This research aims to investigate meta-parody advertising's influence on perceptions of credibility, which advertisers are anecdotally purporting as positive (Stern, 2022) without any evidence. More specifically, this research asks the question: How does the use of meta-parody in advertising impact consumers' perceptions of brand credibility?

Using a Qualtrics survey, this study collected quantitative data from paid participants via the online survey platform Prolific. The survey's main focus was to measure each participant's perception of brand credibility after viewing either a meta-parody or non-parody humorous advertisement to see if there was a difference in perceived brand credibility between the two. In addition, to identify whether or not humor level was a confounding variable, the survey measured how funny participants found the ad.

By conducting this research, we hope to establish meta-parody as a legitimate topic of study in the advertising field and lay the groundwork for future research. As mentioned before, there does not seem to be any existing research on meta-parody, which means that this study is based on literature in adjacent topics, such as persuasion knowledge, humor, parodic advertising, and two-sided messaging.

Research into humorous advertising from Gulas & Weinberger (2006), Eisend (2009), and Walter et al. (2018) suggest that humor does not help—and can even harm—brand credibility. However, given that both the ads presented in this study are humorous, the potential impact should be even for both. Therefore, the main hypothesis of this research is that the meta-parody ad will lead to increased brand credibility perceptions compared to the non-parody humorous ad because of meta-parody's two-sided messaging and truth dimension.

Meta-parody advertising aligns with Eisend's (2006) description of two-sided messaging. Instead of the negative message focusing on product characteristics or brand attitudes, meta-parody ads highlight the negative characteristics of advertising in general (e.g., obvious attempts to manipulate) and negative attitudes a consumer might hold towards advertisements (e.g., distrust of advertising). Therefore, meta-parody ads should enhance perceptions of brand credibility because of their two-sidedness. Furthermore, meta-parody advertising can benefit from Vanden Bergh et al.'s (2011) aforementioned "truth dimension." Although Vanden Bergh et al.'s (2011) study was on user-generated ad parodies, it is possible that meta-parody ads could activate this truth dimension because they parody advertising tropes. Because of this, participants in this study are expected to perceive the meta-parody ad as more credible than the non-parody humorous ad, which does not benefit from two-sided messaging or a truth dimension.

Study

To test the influence of meta-parody ads on consumer perceptions of brand credibility, study participants were recruited from the online panel Prolific to complete a brief Qualtrics survey in exchange for a nominal payment of \$0.40. A total of 200 Prolific participants responded to the survey, but 23 were excluded from data analysis for failing an attention check question, resulting in a final sample of 177 participants ($M_{\text{Age}} = 39.47$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 13.35$, 60% female, 37% male, 3% non-binary/third gender). Additionally, the participant pool was restricted to people from the US or UK to decrease the likelihood of language barrier issues that might occur with non-native English speakers.

The participants were randomly assigned to either a meta-parody or non-parody humorous ad. Both ads, created by the author, were for a fictitious smoothie brand named Callisto. By using a fictitious brand, extraneous differences between the two ad conditions could be minimized such that any observed differences in brand credibility perceptions could be attributed to the difference in the type of appeal (meta-parody vs. humorous non-parody). This also prevented participants from bringing pre-existing brand perceptions into the survey, which could happen if the survey used real ads for real brands.

Method

The two fake smoothie ads feature the same essential elements: a picture of a red smoothie on a mint green background, a headline, a brand name, and a tagline (“Stop and drink a smoothie”). Everything about the two ads is visually identical except for the headline text, which has a different message in each but is written in the same font, size, and formatting. Out of the 177 respondents who passed the attention check, 88 of them viewed the control ad, which used a non-parody humorous appeal (see Figure 1). The headline text, “Red means stop,” invokes Speck’s (1990) basic humor process of incongruity resolution because the headline and the smoothie image do not seem to go together. However, once the participant reads the “Stop and drink a smoothie” tagline, the incongruity of the pairing is resolved. This falls into the “comic wit” humor type (Speck, 1990). The other 89 participants viewed the meta-parody ad with the headline, “Read this ad” (see Figure 2). This is meta-parody because the ad

pokes fun at the advertiser's goals while acknowledging that it is an ad, explicitly telling the consumer what they are trying to get them to do.

Figure 1. Non-parody humorous appeal ad.



Figure 2. Meta-parody humorous appeal ad.



To determine the influence of humor level as a confounding variable, participants were asked to rate how funny they found the ad across two survey items placed on 7-point bipolar scales: “this ad is...” (1 = *Not at all funny/Not at all humorous*; 7 = *Extremely funny/Extremely humorous*). The two items were combined into a composite score reflecting funniness perceptions ($r = .91$).

Participants then responded to a series of five statements placed on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 4 = *Neither agree nor disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*) and designed to measure their perceptions of brand credibility (see Table 1 below). These five statements drew from questions included in a study on brand trustworthiness conducted by Erdem & Swait (2004) and a literature review on brand credibility by Hussain et al. (2020). These five survey items were averaged into a brand credibility composite ($\alpha = .87$). In addition to these questions, survey takers were also asked an attention check question and demographic questions pertaining to age and gender identity.

Table 1. Survey statements designed to measure the respondents’ perceived brand credibility, on a scale from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (7).

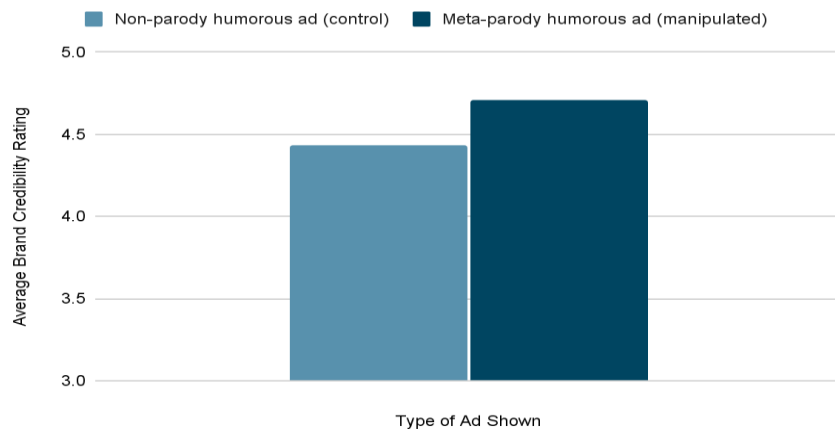
Statements	Reference
This brand is honest.	(Hussain et. al, 2020)
This brand is reliable.	(Hussain et. al, 2020)
This brand delivers what it promises.	(Erdem & Swait, 2004)
This brand’s product claims are believable.	(Erdem & Swait, 2004)
This brand doesn’t pretend to be something it isn’t.	(Erdem & Swait, 2004)

The numerical coding of answers for the humor and brand credibility questions allowed for the use of quantitative data analysis methods. In addition, the ad manipulation was coded numerically (0 = non-parody condition; 1 = meta-parody condition). As described above, after data were collected, a funniness score and a credibility score were calculated for each participant by averaging individual item ratings on the two respective scales. All data were then inputted into SPSS software, and univariate analyses were performed on funniness and brand credibility to test the main hypothesis.

Results

An ANOVA was conducted to see if there was a difference in perceived brand credibility between the meta-parody and non-parody humorous ads. In this univariate analysis, the type of ad the participant saw (meta-parody vs. non-parody) was the grouping variable, and the brand credibility score was the dependent variable. The results show that the mean credibility score for the meta-parody condition ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.87$) was higher than for the non-parody humorous condition ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.87$); see Figure 3 below. With a p-value of 0.039, this is a statistically significant difference at the .05 level. That is, with at least 95% confidence, the data suggest that use of meta-parody ads (vs. humorous non-parody ad) leads to higher perceived brand credibility.

Figure 3. Average perceived brand credibility for each ad condition, ranging from 1 (not credible) to 7 (credible).



A second ANOVA was conducted to rule out funniness as a confounding variable. This was the same test as before but with the funniness score as the dependent variable. The results of this ANOVA show that the mean funniness score for the meta-parody ad ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.33$) was similar to the non-parody humorous ad ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.58$). Additionally, the p-value was 0.775, which means that the difference in means was not statistically significant. These values show that participants did not find either ad particularly funny, but funniness level was not a confounding variable because it did not differ between conditions. In other words, differences in the funniness of the ads cannot explain the difference in perceived brand credibility.

General Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that the meta-parody ad would have higher perceived brand credibility than the non-parody humorous ad. The statistical significance of the difference in brand credibility ratings combined with eliminating funniness as a confounding variable illustrates the positive effect of meta-parody and consumer perceptions of brand credibility.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study provides evidence that meta-parody may be perceived differently from non-parody humor appeals. The higher ratings of brand credibility for meta-parody suggest that the “truth dimension” that emerges when user-generated ad parodies draw attention to advertising puffery may also apply to meta-parody ads (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). These results could also reflect the effectiveness of using two-sided messaging to build credibility (Hernandez et al., 2022). However, it is impossible to know precisely why participants in this study perceived the ads the way they did. Regardless, the statistically significant difference between perceptions of brand credibility is enough to warrant more research into the relationship between meta-parody ads and perceived credibility. This also extends the persuasion knowledge model by showing how and why persuasion attempts may be effective even amongst skeptical consumers.

The practical implication of this research study is that it guides advertisers in building credibility. Although the topic of meta-parody ads needs further study, this current research provides preliminary

support for advertisers' use of meta-parody ads to enhance brand credibility. This means that advertisers looking to increase credibility for their brand can use these results as reasoning to create meta-parody advertisements rather than more traditional, non-parody ads.

Limitations and Future Directions

The major limitation of this study is that it did not replicate how people experience ads in the real world. The survey used fake ads for fake brands so that the respondents were exposed to the brand for the first time. In reality, most people encounter ads with prior exposure to the brand and have already formulated their opinion of the brand. This means that this study's results might not apply when someone already has perceptions about the brand, whether that be positive or negative. Furthermore, the survey does not mimic the context in which people usually encounter ads. Whereas this study's participants were compensated to note their reactions to the ad, most people encounter ads as frustrating interruptions to their daily lives. The difference in context or consumer mindset could mean that this study's findings are not applicable to real-life advertising.

Additionally, although this study suggests causation, it is not possible from these data to know a deeper reason as to why the meta-parody ad caused an increase in perceived credibility. Although funniness was ruled out, there could have been other confounding variables that contributed to this difference in credibility, such as word choice.

The final limitation is that the sample was relatively narrow and may not have been representative of the population. Participants were recruited on Prolific, an online site that pays participants for surveys. This type of job likely attracts those with similar traits or socioeconomic status, meaning that the sample does not represent the general population. We also narrowed the participant pool to only those from the US or UK, thus narrowing the scope of the research even more.

Since meta-parody advertising has not been studied before, future researchers may want to replicate this study to confirm its results. The limitations of this current study could be addressed through more extensive and more diverse samples and the study of meta-parody ads in a more realistic context. Future directions for research could involve comparing meta-parody ads to non-parody ads that

emphasize brand credibility or investigating meta-parody's relationship with other brand attitudes. Despite its popularity, much is to be known, and little has been proven about meta-parody advertising. It is imperative that advertising scholars work to change that.

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