Ironic Branding? The concept of Ironic Selling Propositions in Danish TV-ads.


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Abstract

One often heard remark against postmodern advertising is that it is too complicated or confusing and therefore has to brand poorly. In order to conceptualize ‘postmodern advertising’ the pragmatic concept of Ironic Selling Propositions (ISP) is defined and described as well as a series of sub strategies. Two samples of recent Danish television advertising are compared: one with ISP and one without it. The finding is that on average the ads with ironic strategies brands just as well as the non-ironic ads.
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It is now been almost fifty years of rumors of postmodernism\(^1\). It has been declared dead several times (Featherstone, 1991) but it refuses to go quietly, and according to Stephen Brown the monster of postmodernism hit the mainstream of marketing research in the summer of 1993 (Brown, 1994). During the mid 1990ies several conceptual papers and books were published to explain the postmodern condition, consumer and text ((Brown, 1995a), (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), (Firat and Dholakia, 1995) (O'Donohoe, 1997)). So-called postmodern methods of interpretive marketing research\(^2\) (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992) opened the polysemic perspectives of what consumers do when confronted with advertising, and are now considered to be conventional methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Although much has now been published on the concept of postmodernism, most papers do not look beyond a single interesting case of for example Benetton (*the* case of postmodern marketing?) or egg.com (Proctor et al., 2002).

The paper is trying to look at television ads with the concept of Ironic Selling Propositions, a concept that is proposed and explained in the following. It applies a quantitative effects measure to investigate problems of postmodern communication, thus trying to measure a particular genre of postmodern advertising in a modern perspective. But the most important contribution in the following is probably the attempt at widening the understanding of *irony* as a central concept in the advertising strategies of the last ten years.

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\(^1\) Admittedly the first uses of the word were very promodern and differs somewhat from the later constructions of the concept (Featherstone, 1991).

\(^2\) As Brown (Brown, 1995b) points out, this methodology presupposes the autonomous subject thus contrasting the postmodern idea of the decentered subject, and cannot therefore be wholly postmodern.
Ironic modernism or postmodernism?

It seems that almost all papers that is set on researching some aspect of what is termed ‘postmodern’ needs a section where postmodernism is defined in a dichotomy as ‘anti-modernism’, more or less. It may be an example of postmodern irony that this is then followed by a disclaimer: this dichotomy is dismissed as simply not possible or the least adequate (Brown, 1995a) (Stronach, 1996). Brown follows this disclaimer with an interesting positive definition:

“There is more to the postmodern, of course, than its repudiation of the perceived rigidity, objectivity and authoritarianism that characterizes the western scientific worldview. Postmodernism is predicated on profusion, pastiche, parody, playfulness, paradox, profanity, prevarication, profligacy, plurivalence and, not least, phantasmagoria.” (Brown, 1997)

Nonetheless, it seems that the term ‘postmodernism’ is inevitably bound to ‘modernism’ as the unfortunate term in itself implies:

“…postmodernism is what happens when someone points out that the modernist monarch actually has no clothes.” (Hall, 2000)

What this paper suggests is that the concept of polysemic irony is one important aspect of the postmodern condition. Maybe not the only one, but an important one, one that connects beautifully to all of Browns ‘p-words of postmodernism’:

- Irony, particularly in its unstable form, destabilizes meaning (Booth, 1974) thus creating *paradox*, *profusion* and *plurivalence*.

- Irony is in many definitions inherently echoic in nature (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) thus also a part of the postmodern *pastiche* and *parody*.

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3 Stephen Brown has other interesting compilations of postmodern themes in (Brown, 1995a) but space allows no treatment of these.
Postmodern irony echoes modernism by implicitly criticizing modern rigidity and authoritarianism, for example through self-conscious ironic use of *profanity* (Brown and Schau, 2001).

The irony is employed in marketing in order to make advertising a *playful* experience, consumed with *pleasure* (Stern, 1990).

The Ironic Selling Proposition is then turning marketing into a *profligate prevarication* of pleasure and *phantasmagoria* rather than information about products.

It does seem that irony connects well to the postmodern condition and aesthetics. So do we really need all the French philosophy when we have irony? In the discourse of marketing practitioners, irony is sometimes even seen as more or less synonymous to postmodernism (Hall, 2000) which admittedly is stretching the ubiquity of irony beyond the limits of the concepts. Irony, however is part of the aesthetic of postmodernism connecting to the experiences and feelings of the human conditions of late modernity, postmodernism or what we choose to call it.

**Irony – where?**

The concept of irony is very elusive and difficult to define in simple terms. The literature on irony is very extensive and the concept of irony is very complex and deserves a much deeper discussion than is possible within this paper. Most of the scientific papers within psycholinguistics and marketing focus on verbal irony alone, as does most of the literature within the Arts and Humanities. In this paper the concept may refer to all levels of the audio/visual artifacts of TV-advertising, which means that it is possible to speak of irony in a completely nonverbal ad execution. The first problem of irony is to explain how we recognize the subtle disjunction of meanings in ironies. How do we distinguish the ironic from the non-ironic? Nonetheless, it seems most humans in real contexts with real artifacts intuitively agree on the occurrence of irony.
However, it is likely that the contextual cues are very important in recognizing irony, and therefore any empirical research must be very careful when designing experiments on irony. The claims of potential ‘innocent victims’ (persons not discovering the irony) are often exaggerated in discussions on irony (Booth, 1974). In this paper, the concept of irony builds on Wayne C. Booth (Booth, 1974). Booth compares the initial experience of irony to that of ‘cognitive dissonance’; the experience of incongruent ‘clues’ forces the receiver into a mode of ironic interpretation when dissonance of the ‘straight’ interpretation becomes too great (Booth, 1974)). This experience of incongruity may be within the ad itself, the ad and some knowledge or belief or between the ad and some aspect of the context.

Booth (1974) formulates this as five types of ‘clues’:

1. Straightforward warnings in the author’s own voice.
2. Known error proclaimed
3. Conflicts of facts within the work
4. Clashes of style
5. Conflicts of belief

The formulations of the five types are clearly reminiscent of Booths orientation towards literature, and even though the first may be uncommon in advertising, they are applicable to advertising. In relation to advertising the ‘clashes of style’ and ‘conflicts of beliefs’ is often confined within the discourse of advertising. As TV-advertising normally has to address mass audiences it must tap into shared knowledge, no – not the bible: other advertising, TV or other mass culture phenomenon and genres. Thus advertising is forced into echoing advertising (Christensen, 2001). These intertextual

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4 Booth is especially relevant in a pragmatic context such as this, because he is primarily interested in the communicational aspects of irony.
references need not be ironic, so how do we discover whether an element of irony is really irony? It is ultimately a question of interpretation, but the interpretation may be discussed in relation to the incongruity and relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Many interpretations may be put forth and experienced by real consumers or researchers, but if it is possible to point to Booth’s clues (and the more pragmatic ad-heuristics of ISP below) in the texts (ads) then it may be inferred that the most relevant interpretation is one of irony. Simply put: the interpretation then infers that no sender could mean this in simple, straight, literal sense.

One last distinction needs to be mentioned: irony is not metaphor. Theoretically it may be claimed that it is also a non-literal communication, but it is rarely a practical problem to distinguish the two, as the experience of metaphor in advertising is often one of straight non-critical self-appraisal. This is not irony but hyperbole (or amplificatio), but theoretically it may be used in combination with irony (which then would contain a degree of self-criticism).

**Polysemic irony**

Irony, according to Booth, is not simply a negation of literal meaning. Booth makes a distinction between stable and unstable irony. Stable irony is a meaning that is initially recognized as ‘unstable’; something not to be taken at face value, but the meaning does stabilize once this is interpreted. It is possible to express this ‘new’ more stable meaning to a reasonably satisfactory degree (or rather: a finite set of possible meanings). The irony of simple negation belongs to this category, but the possibilities are much wider. Irony is unstable when it seems impossible to arrive at a new more stable interpretation of the ironic expression; the possible meanings seem infinite and the only certain thing is the need to reject the face value of the expression. These two types of irony are to be understood as belonging to a continuum, not as exclusive categories. It is important to stress that this definition of irony puts more emphasis on a polysemic interpretation, which clears the way for a better understanding of the unstable qualities of irony, than the commonly held simple
idea of irony as a negation or exaggeration of the literal meaning. It could be hypothesized that this latter simple irony is more often used as a humor technique (Stern, 1990) widening the appeal of the ad, whereas the more unstable irony is probably best suited as a lifestyle strategy addressing more narrow subcultures with a very selective adherence to advertising. It may be questioned whether television is really the right media choice for this, but a word of mouth, ‘trickle down’ effect could sometimes be desired.

**Ironic Selling Propositions**

The meaning of the term stretches in two directions: a selling proposition pretending not really to be a selling proposition and/or by being a selling proposition that refers to selling propositions in ironic or sarcastic way (using genres of advertising, ad-clichés etc.). This is not the same as using humor or comedy, although combinations are possible. Any occurrence of irony is not necessarily an ISP. The ISP is a strategy involving the author (sender) of the ad and the receiver in a communicative
relation involving the intentional use of irony as a (meta) communicative strategy to be recognized and interpreted as some degree of irony (and not necessarily by simple negation).

It is possible to perceive the ISP as criticizing and ridiculing the institutions and conventions of advertising. If so, the irony is manifold: The advertising regains adherence and persuasive potential by ridiculing conventional persuasive techniques, thus apparently transcending trite impersonal commercialism of ‘selling propositions’. In a truly postmodern mindset this is beside the point, what matters is whether the experience ‘feels true’ (Firat, 2001).

What sub-strategies or elements may be used in constructing Ironic Selling Propositions?

The following is an attempt at identifying sub-strategies of the ISP. It is not a classification system with exclusive categories, but an attempt at describing what ISP strategies is evident in a sample of Danish TV ads. The strategies may be combined. As the theory of echoic irony predicts, the strategies are echoing genres and strategies well established in marketing.

As irony is probably one of the most difficult forms of latent content one may wish to classify, it is clear that a simple coding scheme has to be developed. The simple categories of genre (type/format), protagonists and scenarios were chosen because they are simple and evident across the literature for example: (Rossiter and Percy, 1996) (Laskey et al., 1989) (Laskey et al., 1995) (Steward and Furse, 1986).

**Ironic use of genre**

The ironic use of genre has already been mentioned above, but deserves some elaboration. It differs somewhat from the strategies below, in that the irony is often constructed through many subtle or overt references to the genres of advertising, to the genre format as a whole. This is often referred to as a *pastiche* (Brown, 2001). In the early ISP of 1998, these references are quite overt and stable in their irony. In the Mobilix pre-paid mobile phone ads of 1998, for example, the clearly absurd use of problem/solution format (dog gets caught in bicycle wheel/dog gets cut in two with scissors),
all presented very authoritatively by an ‘airhostess’ look-alike in heavy make-up. Recent ironic use of genre is more complex and subtle, using only fragments or combining genres etc. This often means a more unstable form of irony; i.e. how much is ironic, where does irony end?

The ironic use of genre often contains one or more of the strategies below, for example an ironic protagonist.

**Ironic nostalgia**

Nostalgia is a traditional element with great ESP potential, but in ISP it is more ambiguous. The reference to things gone past is not ‘straight’, not to be taken literally as a portrayal of golden days gone past. It can be slightly humorous in a pastiche of the 1950s USP-style, or more difficult to place historically as styles blend into briccolage. The ironic nostalgia is comparable to the ‘retro’ trends that were particularly in vogue in the late ‘90s (Brown, 2001), but the ironic nostalgia is a wider concept compared to the more consistent and often stylishly rounded ‘retro’. As Brown puts it: Postmodernism is often more concerned with the past than the present, and the irony inherent in this sub-strategy could be seen as an attempt at legitimizing the emotional involvement in the ad for the more self-reflexive audiences. A strategy of “I-know-you-know that this is a bit silly but let’s enjoy it anyway”.

**Ironic negative scenario**

The use of negative scenarios means situations depicting ‘the problem’ or the absence of the product or service. Traditional marketing literature (Rossiter and Percy, 1996) often warns against a single focus on this, in although it is not that uncommon as it holds creative rewards in the freedom of presentation. Admittedly, it is problematic to differentiate between general exaggeration in
advertising and an exaggerated negative scenario that is ironic.\textsuperscript{5} In the case of irony, it should be apparent that more is at stake than ‘normal exaggeration’.\textsuperscript{6} That the exaggeration is not at all to be taken seriously is too absurd, or subtle cues make the depiction of the negative scenario polysemic and unstable. Examples could be the young man going berserk in a croquet game with the in-laws in an ad for Danica (2001) or the violently naughty boys of the 1998 McDonald campaign trying to bully parents into having their children’s birthday celebrations at MacDonald’s.\textsuperscript{7}

**Ironic positive scenario**

The ironic positive scenario is a natural extension of the negative scenario and in combination; they make up an ironic problem/solution. Ironic positive scenarios seem to be less frequent in isolation. Maybe the reason for this is that showing only the positive effects tend to make the cause of the scenario (the product or service) less clear, with disastrous results for the desired branding effect. Also, in these positive scenarios, it is somewhat difficult to separate ‘straight’ but exaggerated visualizations of effects of products from what might be termed ironic. One good example of this is the Interflora campaign of 2001\textsuperscript{8}, where the effect of giving flowers is visually communicated by showing situations of, for example, a male couch potato who is continuously served beer by his wife or when the sports trophy gets a prime spot on the shelf (the ironic cues are underlined from the completely nonverbal executions, with tension building on the use of sound or music with strong pathos).

\textsuperscript{5} One may argue that exaggeration is simply a genre feature of all advertising that is to be expected, and that negative or positive scenarios are never to be taken literally. In this sense, advertising has always been ‘generically ironic’. Albeit interesting, this view seems in itself exaggerated.

\textsuperscript{6} In rhetorical theory, this ‘normal exaggeration’ may be referred to in the terms of ‘hyperbole’ or ‘amplificatio’.

\textsuperscript{7} The McDonald’s ad was subsequently banned because of the extreme behaviour.

\textsuperscript{8} This campaign was awarded an Arnold prize for its creativity.
Ironic protagonist or antagonist

An ironic protagonist or antagonist is a spokesperson or main character who appears in a seemingly incongruous or self-contradictory way. This must transcend the conventional use of heroes or anti-heroes in problem/solution formats or the silly stock-characters of comedy. Admittedly, this is again a problem of interpretation.

One such example could be the spot for Diesel Jeans from 1997 “Little Rock, 1873”; utilizing references to the western genre: The ‘successful’ clean-cut hero (wearing Diesel jeans) gets shot in a showdown on the street by a disgusting villain. So, who is the hero?

In a very Danish context, the kitsch spokesperson “Harske Hubbi” (means something like “Stale Hubbi”) is recommending new CD releases in a series of ads for Universal Music under the slogan “quite all right music taste”. This campaign really explores the limits of advertising world self-referentiality: “Harske Hubbi” is actually a spin-off character from another series of TV-spots from the telecom company Sonofon that also uses an ironic protagonist, “Polle”, though this character borders on the clichés of folk-comedy (‘the town fool’).

The antagonist is usually ‘the villain’ of a drama, and in classic advertising a natural place for her/him is the negative scenario. An ironic antagonist is a somewhat oxymoronic concept, because the ironic antagonist can easily be confused with an ironic protagonist; the antagonist being ‘ironic’ i.e. ‘not anta-’ may seem to equal ‘pro-’. However, following the definition of irony above (polysemic rather than just negation), the ironic antagonist becomes ‘much more than antagonist’. An IKEA ad from 2001 extends the idea of an ironic antagonist all the way to an ironic sender. A fictional society, the JetSetSociety, is leading a campaign against IKEAs ‘Democratic Design’. It is a kind of ‘civil rights movement of the rich’, in which spokesperson Benedicte de Reinsing protests

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9 The full connotations of this slogan cannot really be translated from the Danish dialect of Fyn.
against ‘cheap designer furniture’. In the 2002 IKEA fan club campaign, the focus changes to another ironic society: the IKEA fan club.

**Ironic Branding?**

The big question about ISP is whether these ironic tendencies of postmodern advertising is really a counter productive fad of creatives trying to outdo each other in absurdity in order to win awards. Often heard cries of postmodern doom claim that it not only harms the individual brand to use these strategies, but it may harm the whole institution of marketing as it corrupts the credibility of advertising and makes it impossible to distinguish the brands as they no longer mean anything (Clancy and Trout, 2002).

“…its very imagery may further confuse an already confused consumer.”(Proctor et al., 2002)

Branding in the more qualitative sense is building and reinforcing the attitudes and emotions held by a consumer towards a given ‘brand’ (symbol of product, service or product) at a given time. The nature and quality of these attitudes and emotions are of course crucial. But as a basic measure the ‘branding-potential’ of an ad is the capacity to make the consumer recognize what brand is advertised, and thus connects the ads information and experience to the brand. Much emphasis is laid on this capacity as advertisers often consider the money wasted if the ad-brand connection is not reasonably high by comparative standards.

The common preconceptions of ironic advertising is that the branding effect is seriously impaired as it is confusing the consumers, even though the possible creativity and ‘odd-ness’ in the execution may lead to better ad-recall.

In other words the hypothesized effects are *worse branding* but possibly better *ad-recall*.

In order to test this hypothesis data from two Danish Business papers were classified using the ISP categories above, and the sample split in two: one with ISP and one without.
The sample

The sample is taken from the weekly post-tests of TV-ads published by the Danish business papers *Børsen* and *Markedsføring*. In the sample are 77 ad tests from *Børsen* and 58 ad tests from *Markedsføring*, most are from the year 2001 but a few are from early in 2002. The sampling of the ads were not done by specific criteria, but in *Markedsføring* it is stated that ‘the ads are not the best or most popular’ rather it is suggested that ‘a full scope’ of variety of ads is sought in the sampling (Graversen, 2001). Total sample is 135 ad tests.

Data collection

The data were collected as telephone surveys where the respondents were read a short description of the ad to be tested. If the respondent is then able to identify the featured brand this is noted as ‘branding score’. Subsequently it is asked whether the respondent remembers the ad, if so – this is noted as ad-recall. The surveys were done for each ad at different time for each campaign. In the *Børsen* sample the number of respondents for each ad ranges from 465 to 1024, and for *Markedsføring* the number of respondents for each ad are fixed at 1015. From the surveys were computed an average score in percentages of respondents recalling the brand from the ad or just the ad.

Coding strategy

As irony is a latent content that is very difficult to code, the whole sample was double coded by two coders. The ads were coded along the ISP strategies described above and then collapsed into to categories of either no ISP or containing one or more of the ISP strategies, resulting in two categories of non-ironic or ironic. Coding the ads resulted in an 83% agreement between the coders, and the remaining ads were coded after discussion and agreement between the coders. This
percentage should be considered in relation to the complexity of the content coded (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Branding</th>
<th>Ad-recall</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ISP</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-ISP</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1

**Results**

It is clear from table1 that the hypothesis of worse branding scores of ads with ISP strategies has to be rejected. The mean percentage of consumers connecting the brand to the ad is actually slightly higher for ISP ads, though this is not significant. Several tests of significance were made, ranging from basic t-test to more advanced tests taking the great variance in the data into account. The second part of the hypothesis, that ironic ads are better remembered, must also be rejected according to these data.

The conclusion from these results must be that there could not be measured any difference in the two samples along the measured variables.

**Conclusion and discussion**

There are many more complicated problems related to the use of ISP strategies. In the surveys above it cannot be determined qualitatively what these strategies actually do to a consumers feelings or attitudes to a brand.

It is likely that as anything else ISP may be executed poorly or with skilful creativity. However, in the study above, this should even out. It seems then, that for what it is worth, this study shows that ironic advertising brands just as well as traditional non-ironic advertising.
Further content analyses of the traditional elements such as pack shots etc. in the ads would be interesting to investigate whether longer exposure of logos and brands are actually what is the relevant parameter through both samples. It could be very relevant that the way some of the ads utilize ISP, advertisers makes it possible to have consumers adhere to chocolate bars talking intricate puns for 30 seconds, which is in fact 30 seconds of pack shot.

It should be also considered whether simplistic effects variables such as the ones used in the surveys above actually makes much sense in relation to TV-advertising, postmodern or not. Nonetheless these reductionistic survey methods (pre-)occupy many practitioners, understandably as they are caught up in the everyday race to justify marketing practices. But as Hall points out, we should probably test brand experiences, not the ads that may work fine even if consumer cannot recall ads, brands or attitudes on cue in telephone surveys (Hall, 2002).

Reference List


Ref Type: Newspaper


