Self-Mocking Marketers

Can Irony in Commercials Influence Brand Evaluations?

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Abstract

Irony is used extensively in advertising, but its effects have been rarely examined experimentally. The present study consists of two parts and evaluates effects of the presence (absence) of irony in otherwise identical commercials. Part 1 of the experiment examines the effect of irony on implicit and explicit measures of attitudes. Part 2 examines effects on explicit and implicit measures of the brand attribute “masculine”. The commercials strengthened the implicit associations between advertised brand and relevant product attributes in Part 1 and marginally in Part 2. However, the increase in associative strength was not dependent on the presence (absence) of irony. There were no differences between conditions on explicit measures of attitudes and product associations. As the ironic elements used in the present study are seemingly neutral in this respect, implications are that skepticism to use irony as a communicative device for other means is unwarranted. Alternative reasons for employing irony in commercials, as well as further directions for studying the use of irony and other forms of figurative language in marketing, are discussed.
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Introduction

Although frequently appearing in print, radio and television advertisement, the use of rhetorical figures has rarely been studied within consumer and persuasion research. In contrast to literal speech, figurative language refers to rhetorical use of language that departs from customary construction, order, or significance (Lanham, 1991). The use of figurative language can produce several social and emotional effects that could be interesting in an advertisement context, as well as for more general research on persuasion and social influence.

In the present experiment, the aim was to investigate potential effects of the use of one kind of rhetorical figure: irony. The interest was in whether persuasion in general, and marketing messages specifically, could benefit from including an ironic element. Positive contexts (beauty, music) and positive product attributes (“cool”, “masculine”) are often present in both traditional and ironic ads, however, the significance of such elements vary between the two approaches. Traditional commercials embrace the attributes, whereas ironic commercials make a mockery of these elements.

Both through the manipulation of existing commercials and the creation of new commercials I was able to experimentally investigate the difference between traditional ads and ads that were satirical towards the devices used in commercials. Because the associative context in the commercials was similar, but the meaning of these element differed, both implicit and explicit measurement data was of interest. The effects of dissent from classic marketing devices could have a different effect on “associative” and “rule-based” systems of reasoning (e.g. Deutsch & Strack, 2004; Sloman, 1996).

Artful deviations in communication

Interpretation of text is done through the use of learned textual conventions (Iser, 1978); the reader of text or viewer of advertisements understands these messages by use of schemas for interpretation. All rhetorical figures are somehow deviations from such conventions; they play with expectations as “means for making the familiar strange” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, p.426). By breaking with learned conventions the deviation creates an incongruity to be solved by the respondent. Two general categories of figurative language can be derived from a focus on deviance or incongruity; figures can either be in a schematic or a tropic mode (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). Figures in the schematic mode are deviant due to excessive order or regularity, such as in rhyme, anaphora or alliteration, whereas figures in the tropic mode are deviant by irregularities or deficiency of order, as for
example in metaphors, hyperbole or irony. Both schematic and tropic modes of deviance are frequently used in advertisement. There are ample examples of rhyme (e.g. “don’t book it, Thomas Cook it”), alliteration (e.g. Esso’s “Put a tiger in your tank” or “Top People take the Times”), and metaphors (e.g. “Red Bull gives you wings”). Likewise, hyperboles often figure in commercials; Brilliant Brunette shampoo claims to provide its users’ hair with “infinite, mirror-like shine”, while other products offer a chance to cheat death (http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/pom_cheat_death) and gain superhuman strength (http://adsoftheworld.com/media/ambient/formula_toothcare_bite).

The current study examined the effects of irony, examples of deviance in the tropic mode, in advertisement. In a narrow sense, irony is utterances that convey an intended meaning that is opposite to their literal meaning. Still, there are some instances that may not conform to such a narrow definition but will still fall under the broader umbrella of ironic utterances. The ironic meaning will actually seldom be derived by simply assuming the opposite of literal meaning (Colston & Gibbs, 2007). The plethora of verbal irony includes some forms of understatements and hyperbole, sarcasm, satire, rhetorical questions, and some statements implying false presuppositions. The operationalizations of irony in the present experiment do not meet the narrowest definition of irony (defined by contradiction), but still fall under the broader umbrella of irony. The ironic elements used in this experiment can be said to be satirical; they represent “incongruities in the social field” as deviance are used to make fun of a social praxis (Vandaele, 2002).

Irony is an often used form of language. Dews & Winner (1999) identifies it four times per hour in popular TV shows, one study finds ironic language to be part of 8 % of all conversational turns (Gibbs, 2000), and readers of contemporary American literature can expect to be exposed to irony once every four pages (Kreuz et al. 1996). The introduction of irony in advertisement is often attributed to the 1960s and the advertisement agency DDB’s “Lemon” ad for Volkswagen (Curtis, 2002). In contrast to the colorful and panegyric nature of their competitors these ads were in black-and-white; as other commercials were exaggerating wildly to make their sale the “Lemon” ad did the opposite with understated imagery and a deprecatory tone (http://www.writingfordesigners.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/volkswagen_lemon_hires1.jpg). Two years later DDB went even further with their “anti-commercials” in the “Think Small” ad, also this for Volkswagen (http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2/2b/Think_Small.jpg). This new type of commercial surprised its audience and became part of a series of successful ads for the DDB company (Curtis, 2002). Irony in numerous forms has since been a popular device for
advertisers over the past decades, as exemplified by the Old Spice-campaign by Wieden+Kennedy or the Solo-commercials produced by Norwegian JBR for "the only soda that does not help against more than thirst" ("Solo – den eneste brusen som ikke hjelper mot annet enn tørsten").

**Irony: Pragmatics and persuasion**

According to the cooperative principle of pragmatics we seek to communicate with each other without being misleading (Grice, 1975). Then why do we use irony, a form of language that seems to invite misinterpretation? There must be some pragmatic goals that are achieved through this indirectness. Several aspects of irony have been studied within anthropology, literature studies, linguistics, psychology and philosophy, and initially much effort was dedicated to explaining comprehension and context. More recently, issues regarding social functions of irony have been illuminated by theory and experimentation. Different ways to deviate from direct language have been found to elicit different emotional effects in the addressee, and influence perceptions of speakers’ emotions and intentions.

McGuire (2000) identifies four theories regarding possible effects of figurative language on persuasive communications. Firstly, figures could make the message more interesting. The increased interest may provoke enhanced attention, comprehension and recall. Ad copies can be made more interesting and draw more attention with the use of rhetorical figures, and for example alliteration and rhymes can function as mnemonic devices. Secondly, figurative language may have an impact by affecting the mood of the recipients. The use of humor and otherwise pleasurable texts could induce different mood states in the receiver. A third possibility is that figurative language can affect how the addressees perceive the source. The use of different figures can make the source seem more credible, funny, vicious, etc. Finally, some figures can allow the communicator to allude to basic values or deep archetypes in the audience to a degree a literal message would not be able to. Put differently, some communicative messages can benefit from being implied rather than uttered directly as this may link product and positive attributes in a less blatant manner or because of normative or legal limitations to the arguments’ expression.

One can achieve several social and communicative goals by speaking ironically, such as being humorous, acting aggressively, expressing attitudes, mocking others, muting or amplify the force of one’s meaning or to reduce the personal investment in an utterance. Several experiments illustrate how people react to different forms of irony, and how they are taken as evidence of the communicator’s mood and intentions (e.g. Kreuz, Long & Church,
1991; Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995; Colston, 1997; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). It is claimed that ironic utterances can be preferred to their literal counterparts as they help the communicator “to be funny, to soften the edge of an insult, to show themselves to be in control of their emotions, and to avoid damaging their relationship with the addressee” (Dews, Kaplan, & Winner 1995, p. 297).

**Humor, attention and mood.** One can broadly divide humor theories into three groups: affective, cognitive and interpersonal approaches (Cho, 1995). Affective theories (e.g. tension-release, psychodynamic) emphasize physiological arousal and thematic content, as humorous material is assumed to evoke some ideal arousal level or allow for a temporary liberation from social norms. Cognitive theories (e.g. cognitive mastery, incongruity-resolution) focus on elements of unexpectedness and cognitive capacities. Incongruity-resolution theory (Suls, 1972) holds that an individual perceives something as humorous when he/she appreciates the incoming stimuli as incongruous and is able to solve the incongruity. Interpersonal approaches (e.g. superiority, disparagement) explain humor as dependent on the social context within which the humor is situated. Superiority theory (LaFave, 1972) holds that people perceiving something as humorous do so because it tickles their ego-defensive needs by a biased comparison of themselves with others, while disparagement theory (Cantor & Zillmann, 1973) assumes humor to be a form of socially justified hostility toward some individual or group that otherwise does not feel guilt for their wrong-doings.

All these approaches can be useful in explaining potential humorous effects of irony in advertisement. In accordance to the affective theories, advertisers may use irony, or other forms of humor, to circumvent social norms or legal restraints regarding nudity, unrealistic associations or other undue influences in their commercials. The ironic commercial allows for the use of such possibly arousing stimuli, without condoning such use. Although in some cases relevant, affective theories are perhaps generally the least illuminating regarding the humorous effects of irony. The use of irony necessitates incongruity solution as it presents the recipient with utterances with deviance between literal and intended meaning. Readers are believed to feel satisfaction when they are able to solve puzzles (Durgee, 1988) and to get intellectual pleasure from the “reconstruction” of ironic meanings (Booth, 1974). In a study by Cho (1995) participants viewed 27 humorous ads and rated them on scales intended to measure mechanisms of humor. The results showed that participants found ironic ads to be characterized by incongruity-resolution processing, while elements of ridicule and attack characterized disparagement processing.
Vandaele (2002) describes satire as a subgroup of ironic humor, based on incongruities located in the social field. Social groups or traditions, in our case social praxes of traditional marketing, are made recognizable by stereotyped representations and these are in turn ridiculed at incongruous moments. A central feature of satire is the violation of cognitive schemas (Vandaele, 2002). In satirical advertisements a transformation of the original persuasion devices or elements is a source of laughter. Bergson (1900 ref. in Stern, 1996) holds that satire is humorous by pointing out inflexibility in human activity or social conventions, in our case the “glossiness” of traditional advertising. The satirical commercial thus uses disparagement, as an individual, group or praxis is being attacked, “to reinforce the humor dimension” (Jean, 2011, p.21). It can also be approached by a superiority theory of humor as the viewer may feel superior relative to those who do not “get it”, the “inflexible” advertisers or those still swayed by classical marketing devices.

There is evidence that ironic speakers more often than users of literal language are assumed to have humor as a communicative goal (Kreuz, Long, & Church, 1991) and that ironic remarks are generally rated to be funnier than their literal counterparts (Dews, Kaplan, & Winner 1995). Although humor seems to be a central aspect of most forms of irony, satire is especially taken as both humorous and as coming from a “good place” as users of satire are perceived to be amused, gleeful and merry (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). In a study of emotional reactions to several forms of ironic language the participants found speakers of satire to come across as more humorous and less angry than users of other forms of language (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000, study 2). Participants in a subsequent study perceived criticism using this form of irony to come from a more warmhearted, joyful and elated place than some other forms of language such as sarcasm, rhetorical questions and non-ironic statements (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000, study 3). The advertiser might thus benefit from using satire as it may create a positive persona and entertain the receivers.

Humor is frequently used by the advertisement industry; Beard (2005) found a humor element present in every fifth television commercial. The humor in satirical commercials could have implications for both attention and mood. As poignantly pointed out by the advertisement mogul Howard Gossage (cited by Fernando, n.d.): “People don’t read ads. They read what interests them, and sometimes it is an ad.” The more humorous ad will probably get more attention, as it could both be passed on by word of mouth or social media, and it will perhaps get more direct attention as people tend to dedicate more time to that which they find amusing and rewarding. One illustrating example is the success of the aforementioned Old Spice-campaign and the subsequent internet phenomenon of “Old Spice
Guy”. Per 27.03.2012 the exact search phrase “Old Spice Guy” resulted in 3 820 000 hits on Google, and the commercials have in sum resulted in more than 100 million views on YouTube (Neff, 2010).

Although humor can secure attention, it may also disrupt processing of the message (Chan, 2011). An amusing commercial can elicit cognitive effort, but this may be used to process the humor aspect and not the brand or product information. This “vampire effect” (Evans, 1988) may result from positive affective responses and a subsequent search for congruent information which is more easy to find in the humorous elements than the brand-related information of the ad (Eisend, 2011).

The relationship between humor and persuasive effect is often regarded as less clear than that between humor and attention (Chan, 2011; Stern, 1996). Viewers’ mood is likely to be increased by an amusing ad relatively to the effect a non-amusing ad will have. There are several ways in which positive affect can influence object evaluation, as affective states could serve both informational and directive functions, as well as increasing mood-congruent cognition (Schwartz & Clore, 1983). Good mood, or incidental affect, has been linked to more positive evaluation of objects through a plethora of studies (see Cohen, Pham, & Andrade, 2008), and product liking can increase by ads merely being in the proximity of humorous content (Strick et al., 2009).

The effects of incidental affect elicited by ads are more often found to influence consumers’ evaluation of the ad itself, and to a lesser extent to influence evaluations of the advertised brand (Cohen et al. 2008). Several researchers have found humor to increase memory of, and positive attitudes toward, the ad (see Galloway, 2009). But recent meta-analyses (Eisend, 2009; Eisend, 2011) also find humor in commercials to increase positive brand attitudes, and hold positive affect to be the principal route in which humor has such effects. There is some evidence that humor can be a source of distraction that reduces the production of counter arguments (e.g. Arias-Bolzmann, Chakraborty, & Mowen, 2000; Gardner, 1970;) and that humor can compensate for weak arguments (Cline & Kellaris, 1999).

Still, there are several boundary conditions that determine whether humor is effective in a marketing context. One example is individual differences in need for humor (NFH), a trait referring to a person's tendency to generate and seek out humor, that has been shown to moderate the effects of humor in ads as higher-NFH subjects seem to be more influenced by humorous content (Cline, Altsech, & Kellaris, 2003). There is also evidence that the humor needs to be perceived as related to the message of the ad (Cline & Kellaris 2007).
**Source credibility.** The use of rhetorical figures can also affect how the addressees perceive the source. In most communication the sender of a message intends to make the receiver think or act just by getting the receiver to recognize that the sender is trying to cause this thought or action (Grice, 1957 ref. in Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). The reason behind adding an ironic or self-referential component in commercials could come from the idea that simply telling the consumers what the advertiser wants them to do could backfire as some might be very unwilling to be guided by commercial messages. The ironic commercial attempts to be upfront about this problem by discussing the fact that any commercial message has an ulterior motive. In return the communicator might be hoping for increased source credibility as the commercial is perhaps seen as less manipulative. Perceptions of the source have strong influence on persuasion (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993), and people are generally more easily persuaded if the message is not perceived as deliberately intended to manipulate them (Walster & Festinger, 1962). Some theorists also claim that the modern consumer has become somewhat immune to standard commercials and that a new form of advertisement is needed if one is to convince these expert viewers (e.g. Curtis, 2002).

Criticism or the implication of contempt is a central feature of irony; the speaker is critical due to an awareness of some offence or mistake. Criticism can both elevate the speakers’ status and diminish the status of the criticized part (Dews et al. 1995), which can be advantageous for the communicator. Irony is often used to criticize when something is incongruent with how one expected or desired them to be; in ironic or satirical humor laughter functions as a corrective, exposing social standards or misdoings (Bergson, 1900, ref in Stern, 1996). The ironic statement illustrates the gulf between how things are and how they are expected or wanted to be. Irony also allows for criticism without conflicting with Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principle which states:

“Minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs … Maximize (all things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs” (p.81).

The following Irony Principle states that “if you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn’t overtly conflict with the PP [Politeness Principle]” (p.82). As irony allows for a more indirect critique the speaker is both relatively free from responsibility and pays “lip service” to the Politeness Principle. This may be the reason why some experiments find people to perceive critical speakers that use irony as less angry and more in control of their emotions than literal critics (e.g. Dews et al. 1995). Irony in verbal communication may serve a face-saving function for the speaker, and can add to the credibility of the communicator who
is seen as less driven by impulse and emotions. The advertiser could thus accomplish to
discredit its competitors by mocking traditional commercials and at the same time be
perceived as entertaining and in control.

**Belonging, superiority, and status.** The satirical commercials presented claim to be
product-oriented by emphasizing that they do not need to use “shallow” persuasion devices,
but can focus on being effective (e.g. SebaMed: “keeps the skin healthy”). But the gestalt of
these apparent product-oriented commercials may be a user-oriented selling proposition as
they aim to profit from a superiority feeling in the viewer. Irony may be used to emphasize
shared knowledge and common attitudes as it depends on the audience to recognize the social
group, marketing devices, or situations that are to be the target of its satire or parody. As
previously mentioned, the ironic speaker tends to be critical due to an awareness of some
mistake or offence. Classic marketing’s underestimation of the recipient’s intellect can be
considered such a mistake or offence; the ironic commercial is attempting to be on “the
recipient’s side”. The ironic commercial lets the viewer be “in on the joke”; it congratulates
the viewer on transcending “the Masses” as they are clever enough to see through the standard
tools of advertisement. As speakers who criticize are generally seen as having higher status
(Dews et al. 1995), this both adds to source credibility and offers the consumer an opportunity
to be part of a more sophisticated and high-status group.

Given that consumers see themselves and the implied author of the advertisement
message as belonging to the same group (“those who get it“), the transference of the message
could benefit as people tend to be more easily persuaded by people that are similar to
themselves, especially when dealing with matters of taste or judgment (Petty & Cacioppo,
1981). A body of research suggests that marketing brands around some identity that a group
of consumers possesses or wants to possess can elicit positive judgments (e.g. Escalas &
Bettman, 2005; Reed, 2004), and that consumers are attracted to brands reflecting desirable
identities (e.g. Forehand, Deshpandé, & Reed, 2002). The non-naïve and down-to-earth focus
of the self-referential commercial might create a brand persona that constitutes such a positive
identity.

**Attitude measurements**

Initially, attitude research was based on the assumption that one would get to a
person’s attitudes by simply asking for their evaluations. This would typically be done
through the use of rating scales (Thurstone, 1928) or semantic differential scales (Osgood,
1952). Attitude researchers have long accepted that these measures are abstractions with a limited scope and that it is “commonplace in measurement that all indices do not agree exactly” (Thurstone, 1928, p.530). Still, traditional models of attitudes assumed that attitudes were open to conscious inspection, albeit somewhat thwarted by self-representation issues (Karpanski & Hilton, 2001).

Two groups of problems emerge from measuring attitudes by self-report, namely self-representational biases and lack of conscious access. The former refers to the fact that respondents are prone to be affected by demand characteristics (Orne, 1962) and will often answer according to what is socially acceptable (Fisher, 2000). Self-representational concerns may even have effects on an unconscious level as they are relevant also for whom we tell ourselves that we are (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Furthermore, respondents may not even have a clear conception of their own attitudes, as there are indications that the social thinker lacks introspective access to higher order cognitive processes (e.g. Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Attitudes may exist outside of conscious awareness and control (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), leaving respondents incapable to truthfully present them.

A line of different measurements have been created to make amends to these problems. Some of these are the “objective measures”, such as pupillometry or measures of skin conduction, but a large portion are so-called “implicit measures”. These measures are designed to make controlled responses difficult (Neely, 1977), and there is some evidence to suggest that they achieve this goal (Kim, 2003). Implicit measures are generally based on reaction times in response compatibility tasks (De Houwer, 2003), and are designed to estimate the strength of relatively automatic mental associations in a more direct way than explicit self-report measures. These techniques can not only circumvent the constraints to interpretation due to social desirability biases, but can also potentially assess components of attitude that are inaccessible for conscious awareness (Banaji, 2001, ref. in Cunningham, Preacher, & Banaji, 2001). Although divergence between attitude strength and direction as measured with explicit and implicit measurements is especially common when dealing with socially sensitive issues (e.g. racial attitudes and stereotypes), there are also differences in areas where one would suppose that self-presentation issues are not as important (for examples see Hofmann et al. 2005).

**The Implicit Association Test and the Brief Implicit Association Test.** The most frequently used implicit attitude measure is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) presented by Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz (1998). The IAT procedure is an attempt to measure
underlying automatic evaluations through examining automatic associations between attitude objects and evaluative attributes. Interpretations of the IAT are based on the assumption that a stronger association will result in faster reactions when the two associated concepts are put together, as one expects “that it is easier to give the same response to items in two categories when those categories are associated than when they are not“(Maison, Greenwald, & Bruin, 2004 p. 406). As the participant does not need to be aware of the existence or strength of the association being measured, this constitutes an implicit measure (Maison, Greenwald, & Bruin, 2004).

The IAT is a double discrimination task; participants are instructed to assign stimuli (e.g. words, pictures) to one of two target categories as fast as possible. Associative strength between two concepts is measured by combining a pair of target categories (e.g. Coca Cola vs. Pepsi Cola) with a pair of attributes (e.g. positive vs. negative). Only two response keys are used, so that the measuring trials place one target category (e.g. Coca Cola) together with the attribute of interest (e.g. positive) on the same response key. In the following trial these are switched so that the second target category is paired with the attribute of interest. The assumption is that it is easier to give the same response (press the same button) for items in two categories when these are associated than when they are not. The differences between the mean response latencies for different pairing assignments are thus interpreted as an indicator of relative association strength.

The present experiment used a short-version of the IAT, the Brief Implicit Association Test (BIAT), developed by Sriram & Greenwald (2009). There are several potential benefits to this shorter version as it has fewer trials and takes shorter time, but is psychometrically rather similar to the standard IAT when measuring the same constructs (Sriram & Greenwald, 2009). In contrast to the standard IAT where the participants are instructed to consider four categories and allocate these to two different responses, the BIAT instructs the participants to focus on two categories (one target category, sometimes referred to as the focal category, and one attribute category). As a result, the BIAT may also reduce spontaneous variation in cognitive strategies by forcing respondents to focus on just two categories, although this potentially increased validity has been debated (see Rothermund & Wentura, 2010; Greenwald & Sriram, 2010). The BIAT has become a rather popular alternative to the original IAT, despite a slight loss of reliability (Krause et al., 2010; Sriram & Greenwald, 2009).

**Validity and reliability of the IAT.** The IAT has been used in a great amount of research and in more or less every psychological discipline including consumer psychology.
The clearest support for the validity of the measurement comes from a “known groups” validity approach, referring to studies in which the IAT are able to confirm assumed preferences. Through the use of IAT, people are for instance found to have favorable attitudes toward flowers compared to insects (Greenwald et al., 1998) and vegetarians show inclinations toward disliking pictures of meat more, relative to carnivorous participants (Barnes-Holmes, Murtagh, Barnes-Holmes, & Stewart, 2010).

When it comes to predictive validity of the IAT reviewers argue over whether results are best described as generally impressive or more mixed (e.g., Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009; Maison, Greenwald, & Bruin, 2004; Fazio & Olson, 2003). Predictive validity is generally shown to be higher for self-report measures, while the IAT are more predictive than self-reports when research topics are socially sensitive (Greenwald et al., 2009). Furthermore, the IAT measure shows incremental predictive validity beyond self-report measures (Greenwald et al., 2009).

IAT scores have been predictive of behavior ranging from the choice of political candidates among both decided and undecided voters (Arcuri et al., 2008) and choice of holiday destination (Yang, He, & Gu, 2012) to the relapse risk of heroin abusers (Geng & Qian, 2011) and sexual risk behavior among young adults (Broccoli & Sanchez, 2009). The IAT thus emerges as both the most frequently used and the most carefully tested technique for measuring automatic, or implicit, evaluations.

Several of the implicit attitudes measures have been criticized for having rather low levels of reliability (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; LeBel & Paunonen, 2010). The IAT is not only among the most valid of the implicit attitude measures, but also produces rather high levels of reliability (Cunningham, Preacher, & Banaji, 2001; Hofmann et al. 2005; Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007).

The IAT in marketing research. The use of implicit measures in consumer psychology can be fruitful as consumption behavior can be influenced strongly by factors outside of people’s conscious awareness (Fitzsimons et al. 2001; Chartrand & Fitzsimons, 2011). Implicit measures have been found as especially predictive when dealing with behaviors that are not monitored closely, as perhaps small purchases or quick choices between relatively similar products.

Maison, Greenwald, & Bruin (2004, p. 413) conclude in their review of the use of the IAT in consumer research that “the IAT can … be especially useful for research in consumer behavior domains in which socially desirable responding can be expected … Examples of such attitudes are those toward controversial ads (e.g. containing sex, nudity, or homosexual
elements).” It could also be somewhat undesirable to admit being influenced by shallow, “simplistic” advertisement methods. According to the third person effect hypothesis (Davidson, 1983), people have a tendency to believe that they themselves are somehow less influenced by advertisement messages than the common consumer. In a related vein, people may be unwilling to report, or unable to acknowledge, that they are affected by the commercials, at least the traditional ones. To be swayed by traditional adverts may be associated with being easily persuaded and shallow. It may thus be undesirable to report positive attitudes when the commercials appear to be manipulative and depend on superficial devices, resulting in an explicit contrast effect. One incentive for conducting this experiment was thus to find out whether such an unwillingness to say that one is influenced by commercials could be modified by irony, a more cognitively demanding argument than implied associations between context and product.

**Irony and consumer skepticism**

Research on priming has disclosed a tendency for people to assimilate stimuli into accessible categories (e.g. Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998; Murphy, Monahan, & Zajonc, 1995). Priming is either done *subliminally*, outside of consciousness, or *postconscious*, where the person has a conscious perception of the prime but is unaware of its effects on subsequent reactions (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). Related to the latter, a classic marketing tool has been to link a product to a positively evaluated celebrity, model or context, in the hope of an assimilation of this positive evaluation into the evaluation of the product. But it is unsure whether such assimilation will always happen. What has been seen in priming research is that to blatant a prime will produce the opposite, a contrast effect (e.g. Kubovy, 1977). Consumers draw on a wide array of different information upon which they make their evaluation of an attitude object, and this information includes accessible features and affective states, but also metacognitive experiences (Weaver & Schwartz, 2008). The metacognitive experiences might include conceptualizing aspects of the communication as relevant/irrelevant, and concomitantly assimilation/contrast-effects.

Consumers in contact with advertisement are often portrayed as suspended between two motivations; they are seen to be *accuracy motivated* and *defense motivated* (Koslow, 2000). When accuracy motivated, the consumer is motivated to encode information in an appropriate manner and process this information in a systematic way. On the other hand, the defense motivated consumer will use heuristics to protect vested interests or prior attitudes. Defense motivation can evoke a *schemer schema* (Wright, 1985), making thoughts about
being taken advantage of by advertisers more salient, resulting in counter-thoughts or -
actions. Consumer skepticism and suspicion of potential fraud can be important for how
people protect themselves from dishonest marketing practices (Friedman, 1998) and cope
with potentially misleading environmental claims (Mohr, Eroglu, & Ellen, 1998).

According to the “theory of psychological reactance” a sense of threat to a person’s
freedom will result in a motivational state directed toward the reestablishment of the
threatened freedom (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Sensenig, 1966). When free to choose between
alternatives, people may see attempts of others to influence their choice as a threat to their
freedom. Therefore, persuasion attempts may lead either to compliance or to opposition to
compliance and attempts of reestablishing freedom. The activation of the schemer schema and
increased skepticism is one example of psychological reactance that can function as resistance
to persuasion attempts (Eiser, 1990 ref. in Koslow, 2000). Given that the people’s thought
processes are characterized by “motivated reasoning” (Kunda, 1990), people may react to
such a feeling of threatened freedom by wanting to disbelieve a claim and hence scrutinize it
more closely. Taking an ironic approach when conveying a message of persuasion might have
implications for how threatening to the receiver’s freedom it is perceived to be, and thereby
the motivational influences on subsequent decision making.

A large portion of consumers are at least to some extent defensive toward
advertisement in general (Mittal, 1994). An idea behind irony or other “indirect” forms of
advertisement could be that the modern consumer has seen through traditional commercials to
such an extent that they will have a reduced persuasive potential. Or worse yet; traditional
marketing might in instances meet rebuttal as the consumer could become critical towards the
product as a result of what is seen as undue attempts of influence. As this new consumer
supposedly can see through the common tools of marketing, such as using context (beauty,
fame, etc.) for associative/evaluative effect, the advertisers need to add another dimension.
The use of irony, or other rhetorical figures, in advertisement could be a way to manipulate
the viewer’s level of skepticism and coping strategies toward arguments or influence from
contextual elements.

Friestad and Wright’s (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) emphasizes the
interactive nature of persuasion as it includes the targets’ and the persuasion agents’
knowledge, thoughts and actions in the analysis of a persuasion situation. Persuasion
knowledge is any theory or belief people may hold about the processes for influence through
marketing, and persuasion knowledge are used by targets of persuasion attempts to cope with
such situations. In addition to persuasion knowledge, PKM holds that agent knowledge
(beliefs about the persuasion agent) and topic knowledge (beliefs about the topic of the message, e.g. a product) is important for determining the outcomes of persuasion attempts. Central to PKM is the “change-of-meaning”-principle: the awareness of the use of advertisement tactics alters the meaning of the persuasion content and the relationship between target and persuader. PKM holds that the awareness that one is the target of a persuasion attempt, and hence that the communicator has ulterior persuasion motives, will change the response of the target. Using irony seems like an attempt of a reversal of the “change-of-meaning” as the marketer are trying to make the target believe that they are not trying to manipulate them as traditional commercials do. Friestad and Wright (1994) further point out that people have belief about what types of persuasion tactics that should be considered appropriate (e.g. fair, non-manipulative). If the ironic commercials are being perceived as more or less “appropriate” than the standard commercial, this is expected to influence the consumer’s response.

One interesting example of contrast/assimilation effects comes from a study by Forehand and Perkins (2005). Their experiment shows that the effect of a frequently used advertisement device is moderated by the receivers’ awareness of that device. Forehand and Perkins (2005) found that celebrity voice-overs had a diametrically opposed effect on explicit measures of attitudes depending on whether the receivers were aware or unaware of the voice being that of a celebrity. Although explicit measures of brand attitudes showed an assimilation effect when the celebrity was unidentified, a contrast effect occurred when the celebrity used for voice-over in the commercial was identified by the viewer.

**Dissociation between implicit and explicit evaluations**

As previously mentioned, there are often discrepancies between the results of explicit and implicit measures of attitude even on evaluations of non-sensitive attitude objects. One possibility is that implicit and explicit attitude measures are different ways of getting to the same construct. Attitudes would then be explained by the previous theorists that treated attitudes as valence summaries of elements in one’s environment and the divergence between the measures is due to explicit attitudes being “muddied in the editing for public report” (Payne et al 2008). Then a lack of correlation between explicit and implicit measures should be explained by self-presentational issues and lack of insight.

An alternative is that implicit and explicit attitude measures tap into different constructs. More recent perspectives hypothesize that a person may have “more than one evaluation of the same attitude object” (Wilson, Lindsey & Schooler, 2000 p. 101). Wilson et
al.’s (2000) Model of Dual Attitudes claims that people can hold two evaluations of the same attitude object; one which is more accessible for verbal accounts (explicit), and one that is more automatic (implicit). This implicates that one can have two different, and in theory opposing, attitudes towards the same attitude object.

Further, they hold implicit attitudes to be automatically activated, whereas explicit attitudes require more motivation and capacity. Wilson et al. (2000) suppose that the attitude (implicit or explicit) that a person endorses at any given time is dependent on availability of the cognitive capacity to retrieve the explicit attitude and on whether the explicit attitude overrides the implicit attitude. In light of Wilson et al.’s Model of Dual Attitudes, divergence between results obtained from explicit and implicit measures of attitudes is thus attributed to the implicit tests’ ability to deny the subject a condition in which cognitive capacity is available to retrieve the explicit attitude. Alternatively, the conditions are such that the explicit attitudes are unable to override the implicit ones. The implicit measure is thus not merely an explicit measure corrected for measuring errors (demand characteristics, social desirability, etc.), but a measure of a different underlying construct.

Several lines of research support the plausibility of a dual attitude model. Given that people can have dual attitudes toward objects the correlations between implicit and explicit attitudes should be low to non-existent (Karpinski and Hilton, 2001). Evidence for low correlations with explicit measures are abundant, and even in such instances implicit attitudes can still reliably predict behavior (Hofmann et al. 2005). The different measurements seem to have somewhat different predictive power, as behaviors that people do not monitor consciously are better predicted by implicit measures, whereas explicit measures are better predictors for more closely monitored behavior (Wilson et al. 2000). Furthermore, implicit attitudes (as measured by the IAT) and explicit attitudes are better accounted for by a two-factor-per-attitude model, than when collapsed into a single attitude factor (Nosek & Smyth, 2007, see also Cunningham et al. 2001 for a discussion of convergent validity of different implicit attitude measures).

Both the associative-propositional evaluation (APE) model and the Meta-Cognitive Model (MCM) holds that attitudes consist of stored associations and accompanying validity evaluations of these associations (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Petty, Briñol, & DeMarree, 2007). These models further indicate that these stored associations can be detected by implicit attitude measures, and that evaluations of the associations’ validity are done in a more deliberative, reflective manner. The explicit measures of attitude thus reveal the result of the associations and their belonging validity evaluations. This opens for the possibility of
The present study

The present study was instigated by an interest in whether persuasion in general, and marketing messages specifically, could benefit from including an ironic element. This was investigated both by manipulation of existing commercials and by creation of new commercials that were satirical toward common tools used in commercials, as well as exposing other participants for “traditional” counterparts of these commercials. This produced data that allowed for consideration of whether one could affect brand evaluations and associations differently through such “self-referential” commercials than their more traditional counterparts. The primary goal of the present study was to find out whether adding an element of irony in commercials could induce more positive evaluations toward brands and products. A positive effect on explicit brand attitudes due to an element of irony was also indicated in a quasi-experimental pretest. A hypothesis was thus:

*Hypothesis 1. Attitudes toward the advertised brand will be more positive in the group exposed to the ironic commercials than in the group exposed to the traditional commercials.*

The present study used two different forms of irony or satire. In the first part the participants were presented with video commercials where the ironic component was represented by overstatements aimed to be satirical towards standard commercials of competing brands. The second set of commercials consisted of posters formed as classical deodorant commercials which contained a sentence that made fun of the common tools of such commercials (see appendix 1-4). Although far from ironic in its most narrow sense, these latter commercials transgress a rule of decorum in classical marketing by providing information we all know about advertisement, yet do not expect to be blatantly presented with. This is a part of longstanding tradition in modern marketing with one early example being “Joe Isuzu”, a slick car-seller in the 1980s who presented unlikely car deals (e.g. “Buy this Isuzu and you’ll get a free house”) while a caption told us that he was lying. Thus, both blocks of commercials fall within a category I will interchangeably refer to as ironic, satirical or self-referential commercials.

In the second part of the experiment, the participants are exposed to commercials that suggest an association between the advertised brand and masculinity. As such an element of
brand evaluation seems to be to a lesser extent linked to humor and mood, and perhaps can be negatively influenced by the ambiguity and “intellectualization” from ironic elements, it is less clear whether the irony would help strengthen such associations. But, it is still possible that the ironic elements increase source credibility and humorous content has a potential to camouflage otherwise weak arguments. Thus, no concrete hypothesis was formed regarding the effect of irony on the brand/masculinity association. This could in fact go either way, as the denial of the ironic elements might even prove to weaken the suggested association.

As mentioned, other researchers have shown that the blatancy and awareness of advertisement devices can influence implicit and explicit attitudes differently (e.g. Forehand & Perkins, 2005). As mentioned, Forehand and Perkins (2005) found awareness of the use of a celebrity voice in commercials to moderate the ads’ effects on explicit attitudes. But, the same study found no such effect on implicit measures. The present experiment produced data that allow us to consider how this affects both explicit and implicit attitude measures, as well as purchase intentions for the products and brands. Both explicit and implicit attitudes were measured as we suspected that the type of measurement could moderate the effect of the ironic elements in the commercials. This would allow for analyzing whether attitudes on explicit measures would be more “tainted” by metacognitive aspects and concomitant reactance or skepticism from the viewer, relative to the attitudes measured implicitly. The positive context presented by the ads (beautiful people, voice-overs/ad copies conveying a “pretty” or “cool” message, music, etc.) would be the same in both the traditional and ironic conditions. To what extent the context will be incorporated in an evaluation of the advertised brand or object is hypothesized to be dependent on metacognitive processes. Although the ironic element of the commercials presented in the present study does not mask or hide the devices used, but rather illuminates the “shallow” marketing devices that are operating, it is possible that joking about this eliminates potential “boomerang effects” (Clee & Wicklund, 1980). One possibility was that this could lead to relatively similar evaluations on an associational level, while on a more reflective level the contextual elements would have very different meaning depending on whether the commercials condone or distance themselves from such persuasion devices. A hypothesis was thus:

_Hypothesis 2. Adding an ironic element to the commercials would increase positive evaluations of the advertised brand as measured by explicit measures, but will do little or nothing to the commercials effect on implicit attitudes._
It would also be interesting to consider potential disassociations between explicit and implicit measures of associations between advertised brand and masculinity (in Part 2), but no concrete hypothesis regarding this was formed.
Method

Pretest

A quasi-experimental pilot study was conducted with 171 participants recruited from Oslo School of Management. The pilot presented the participants for the commercials described in Part 1, and they responded to an explicit attitude scale similar to the one described. The data showed a significant difference between the presence \((M = 4.6)\) and absence \((M = 3.6)\) of irony conditions, \(F (1, 171) = 15.39, p=.00\).

Main Experiment

Participants. 43 female and 50 male participants were recruited from campus at the University of Oslo and Oslo School of Management or by e-mail. Mean age was 25.4 years. Participation was voluntary and the participants were told they could quit at any time without giving any reason. The completion of the session took about 20 minutes, and no reward was given for participation.

Procedure. Participants were either tested in a laboratory setting, on computers in reading rooms at UiO campus, or were instructed to complete the experiment at home in a setting where they would not be disturbed.

The experiment consisted of two parts. The first part measured the effect of traditional vs. self-referential commercials on explicit and implicit attitudes toward the advertised cosmetics brand relative to a competing brand. The second part considered effects of traditional vs. self-referential commercials on explicit and implicit measures of association between masculinity and the advertised deodorant brand relative to a competing brand.

The participants were first exposed to learning trials for IAT. In the learning trials participants were made familiar with the Brief IAT by completing the Coke-Pepsi/pleasant-(unpleasant) BIAT described in Sriram & Greenwald (2009).

Part 1. In Part 1 the participants were introduced to two brands of cosmetic products (SebaMed and Biotherm). They were instructed to look carefully at, and “get to know”, three pictures of products representing each of the two brands. These pictures, together with the brand logos were used in the following BIATs. After the presentation of products the respondents indicated on a Likert scale how familiar they were with the products of SebaMed and Biotherm and the brands SebaMed and Biotherm.

Part 1 featured two conditions, absence and presence of irony. In both conditions the
participants were presented with three video commercials for a line of cosmetic products of the brand SebaMed. In the first condition (absence) all these commercials followed a traditional commercial narrative, while in the second condition (presence) participants saw only the ironic videos. Directly following each video the participant indicated whether they had previously seen the commercial.

BIATs were conducted both pre- and post-commercial stimuli. Prior to the pre-BIAT the participants had seen pictures of the brands (SebaMed and Biotherm) and of the brands’ products. The target concept discrimination was these pictures of SebaMed products and its’ brand logo contra Biotherm products and its’ brand logo, which was tested for association with valance as the evaluative attribute. The BIATs were counterbalanced, and analyses are based on a mean over different conditions.

Explicit attitude were measured, after the participants had watched the commercials and completed the BIATs, by asking participants to indicate their attitude on a semantic differential scale. Finally, participants indicated their intentions to buy a product of these brands. The explicit/implicit measurements were not counterbalanced, as previous research has failed to find consistent evidence for any order-effects when using these two types of measurement (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2005).

**Part 2.** The layout of Part 2 was similar to that of Part 1, but with changes in the advertisement material, the target concepts and evaluative attributes of the BIATs, and the addition of some measures.

There were two conditions (absence and presence of irony), but in Part 2 the commercials were two posters in each condition and they marketed an unknown product (*Black Suede*). In contrast to Part 1, Part 2 tested implicit and explicit associations between masculinity and two brands of deodorants (*Sterilan* and *Black Suede*). In addition to this a manipulation check was conducted in which the participants reported whether they found the commercials to use beauty ideals and irony as persuasion devices.

**Materials.** The entire experiment – the BIATs, videos, posters, questions and answers – was scripted in Inquisit 3 by Millisecond Software.

**Learning IAT.** The learning IAT comprised two blocks of trials, where both Pepsi and Coca Cola were paired with positive valence words over 14 trials in each block.
Part 1; SebaMed and positive valence.

Commercials. In Part 1 of the experiment the participants saw three video commercials for a cosmetics brand (SebaMed). These commercials are part of a campaign of satirical or self-referential commercials. In their original form these commercials follow an exaggerated “traditional” commercial pattern, but break with this toward the end as the voice-over ironizes over this glossy presentation claiming that this is not how “they” (SebaMed) really are. In one condition (self-referential) the three videos were in their original form, in which the commercial ends with a voice-over that ridicules the content of the commercial and simply states that it keeps the skin healthy. In the remaining condition (traditional) the commercials had been manipulated so that the voice-over never made this break with traditional commercial narrative, but simply states that it keeps the skin healthy.

BIATs. Both the pre- and post-BIATs were both composed of 2 blocks of 24 trials. In accordance with the BIATs presented by Sriram & Greenwald (2009) the only blocks used were the combined-tasks blocks. In Part 1 the positive valance category was a focal category through all blocks and the concept categories (SebaMed/Biotherm) were switched over the two blocks. The stimuli that represented the concept categories were pictures of products and the brand logos (see Appendix 5). The words used for valence were presented in Norwegian. The positive words comprised (Norwegian in parentheses): nice (fint), happiness (lykke), fantastic (fantastisk), and gladness/gaiety (glede). The contrast words were comprised of: damage/injury (skade), painful/distasteful (vond), frightful (fryktelig), and awful (fæl). Response errors were indicated to the participant with a red “X”. Upon making initial response errors to stimuli the participant had to give a second response. Latency was recorded to the occurrence of a correct response. Counterbalancing was done to ensure that potential effects were not artifacts of the order of the categorization tasks.

A reliability analysis on the BIAT measures used in Part 1 revealed a reasonable level of internal consistency. Spearman-Brown split-half reliability for the BIATs were \( r = .67 \) and \( r = .64 \), for the pre- and post-BIAT respectively. As internal consistency estimates (split-half correlations or alphas) for the IAT typically range from .7 to .9 (Greenwald & Nosek, 2001), the split-half correlations achieved here were rather low compared to those obtained by the standard IAT. The reliability obtained here is also somewhat low compared to results from experiments using the BIAT (e.g. Krause et al., 2010; Sriram & Greenwald, 2009), but comparable to estimates obtained by alternative IATs such as Single Category Implicit
Association Test (Karpinski & Steinman, 2006) and higher than that of most other implicit measures (see Bosson et al., 2000; Olson & Fazio, 2003).

**Explicit measures.** Familiarity of products and brands were indicated on a Likert scale. Familiarity of the commercial material was measured by yes/no questions asking whether the participant had previously seen the commercial.

The explicit attitudes toward the brands are summated rating scales that consisted of three questions for each brand. The participants indicated their attitude on semantic differential scales with different anchors on the scale each of the three times (bad/good, favorable/unfavorable, negative/positive). The Cronbach’s alpha for the explicit measure of attitudes toward the advertised brand (SebaMed) was .96.

Intention to buy the product was measured by asking the participants how likely it would be that they bought a product from this brand the next time they bought this kind of product. The participants responded on a 7-point rating scale anchored in both ends (“very unlikely”, “very likely”).

**Part 2: Black Suede and masculinity.**

**Commercials.** In Part 2 the commercials were posters that presented a product (Black Suede deodorant) together with muscular, good looking men (see appendix 1-4). Black Suede is not sold or advertised in Norway, and was assumed to be a new attitude object to most Norwegian consumers. These commercials were produced in Photoshop for this experiment, and were thus not previously seen by the participants. The commercials tried to present Black Suede as a particularly masculine product, both through the use of text (“Masculinity has a new name”) and through the use of muscular men as a semiotic device. As in Part 1, there were two conditions, presence and absence of irony. The only difference between the two sets of commercials was that the ironic versions each contained one sentence that was not included in the non-ironic version. These ironic or self-referential sentences were slightly different in the two commercials to ensure that the participants would “get the joke” and thus be sensitive to the fact that irony was used.

**BIATs.** The BIATs in Part 2 were identical to the ones in Part 1 except for changes in the categories. Masculinity operated as focal category through all blocks, and the concept categories were in Part 2 two deodorant brands (Black Suede/Sterilan). The stimuli that represented the concept categories were pictures of products and the brand logos (see Appendix 6). The “masculinity” words comprised (Norwegian in parentheses); man (mann),
manly (mandig), masculine (maskulin), and macho (macho). The contrast words comprised: woman (kvinne), feminine (feminin), aunt (tante), and girl (jente). Counterbalancing was done to ensure that potential effects were not artifacts of the order of the categorization tasks. Spearman-Brown split half reliability for the BIATs were 0.59 and 0.62, for the pre- and post-BIAT respectively.

*Explicit measures.* Familiarity of products, brands and commercial material, intention to buy the products, and explicit attitudes toward the brands were measured in a similar manner as in Part 1. The explicit measure of association between the brands and masculinity are summated rating scales that consisted of three questions for each brand. The participants indicated their attitude on semantic differential scales with different anchors on the scale each of the three times (not at all masculine/very masculine, not at all macho/very macho, and not at all manly/very manly). The Cronbach’s alpha for the explicit measure of attitude toward the advertised brand was .97, and the Cronbach’s alpha for explicit association between the advertised brand and masculinity was .90.

In the manipulation check the participants responded to questions regarding to what extent they experienced that the Black Suede commercials used beauty ideals and irony as communicative tools. This was indicated on a 7-point rating scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much so”.
Results

Part 1: Implicit and explicit attitudes

To consider whether there was a difference in implicit attitudes before and after the exposure to the commercials, and to see whether this effect differed depending on the presence (absence) of irony, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with pre-/post-IAT as a within-subjects factor and presence of irony in the commercials as a between-subjects factor.

There was a main effect of exposure to the commercials across irony conditions. The IAT results showed a strengthening of the association between positive valence and the advertised brand from pre-exposure IAT ($M = -.157, SD = .383$) to post-exposure IAT ($M = .023, SD = .439$), $F(1, 91) = 11.123, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .109$.

An interaction between pre- and post-scores in implicit attitudes and the between-subjects condition, presence (absence) of irony, would indicate that the different types of commercials had different effects on the relative evaluation of the brands. However, there were no significant interaction between the change in the presence of irony condition (from $M = -.208, SD = .374$ to $M = -.057, SD = .394$) and the change in the absence of irony condition (from $M = -.113, SD = .389$ to $M = .092, SD = .467$), $F(1, 91) = .255, p = .615, \eta^2_p = .003$. This indicated that the two commercials (ironic vs. traditional) did not differ in their effect on implicit attitudes towards the brands.

An ANCOVA analysis was also conducted to consider differences in change from pre-to post-IAT in the group exposed to ironical commercials and the group exposed to traditional commercials. In contrast to the repeated measures ANOVA which controls for actual baseline values and thus tests differences in change, the ANCOVA tests differences in residuals by controlling for modeled differences based on correlations between the pre- and post-IATs. This makes the ANCOVA a more sensitive test of difference in effect from the ironic contra traditional commercials (Van Breukelen, 2006). Regardless of this increased sensitivity, the difference between the absence ($M = .09, SD = .47$) and presence of irony condition ($M = -.06, SD = .39$) remained non-significant, $F(1, 90) = 1.96, p = .165, \eta^2_p = .021$.

In order to assess potential differences in explicit attitudes, an independent-samples t-test was performed for the effects of presence (absence) of irony. Those exposed to the ironic commercials ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.08$) were not significantly more positive toward the brand than those exposed to the non-ironic commercials ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.28$), $t(91) = .249, p = .804$, Cohen’s $d = 0.052$. This indicates that the ironic element in the commercials had no effect on
explicit attitudes. Nor did an analysis of purchase intentions reveal any significant difference between the two groups on intentions to buy the advertised products, \( t(91) = .176, p = .581 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.118 \).

Some of the stimuli presented in Part 1 of the experiment had previously been shown on television. Since previous exposure could have affected the results, a test was conducted to see whether prior knowledge of the commercials influenced the effects of the presence (absence) of irony condition. Two separate ANOVAs indicated no two- or three-way interactions between prior knowledge and the factors presented above. This suggests that previous exposure did not influence the relations between presence (absence) of irony and IAT-change or the impact of presence (absence) of irony on explicit measures of attitude (\( ps > .30 \)). Conducting an ANCOVA analysis did not alter the results.

Based on a suspicion that women and men differ in their knowledge of and/or interest in cosmetic products and that this could affect the results, further analysis was performed. Gender was treated as a between-subjects factor, and no effects on IAT change or significant interaction effects of gender and presence of irony on IAT change were found (all \( ps > .50 \)). This indicates that gender did not moderate the results. Conducting an ANCOVA analysis did not alter the results.

The results did not support the hypothesis that the ironic elements would increase positive attitudes toward the advertised brand (hypothesis 1). Nor was the hypothesis that irony would have a different effect on explicit and implicit evaluations supported (hypothesis 2).

**Part 2: Implicit and explicit product associations**

As the ironic elements in Part 2 were more subtle than the clear disruptions in the video commercials of Part 1, a manipulation check was conducted to see whether the commercials containing an element of irony were perceived as ironic. An independent samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the presence (absence) of irony conditions in the participants impression of whether the commercials used irony, \( M_{\text{presence}} = 4.4, SD_{\text{presence}} = 1.7, M_{\text{absence}} = 2.9, SD_{\text{absence}} = 1.8, t(91) = 3.865, p = .000 \). Although these differences were significant, the relation between presence (absence) of irony and participants response of to what extent they perceived the commercials to employ irony corresponds to a correlation of only \( r = .38 \).

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to see whether the commercials had an effect on implicit associations between the advertised deodorant brand (Black Suede) and
masculinity, and whether this effect was moderated by the application of an ironic element in the adverts.

The commercials in Part 2 did not lead to significant change in IAT-scores. There was a non-significant main effect of commercial exposure on implicit masculinity associations. The repeated measures ANOVA revealed a marginal increase in implicit masculinity for the advertised brand from before ad exposure ($M = .223, SD = .398$) to after ad exposure, $F(1, 91) = 3.63, p = .06, \eta^2_p = .038$.

Of more direct interest to the hypothesis of effects of irony was the potential interaction between the change in implicit association towards the advertised brand, and presence (absence) of irony. An interaction would indicate that the different types of commercials would have different effects on the relative association between masculinity and the advertised brand. The IAT score for the group exposed to the presence of irony condition changed from $M = .255, SD = .451$ to $M = .326, SD = .379$, while the IAT score for the group exposed to the absence of irony condition changed from $M = .196, SD = .349$ to $M = .296, SD = .418$. There was no significant interaction effect between the time of IAT administration (pre- or post-ads) and the presence (absence) of irony, $F(1, 91) = .107, p = .744, \eta^2_p = .001$, indicating that the different conditions did not differ in their effect on implicit association between masculinity and the deodorant brands. An ANCOVA with pre-IAT scores as a covariate gave similar results, as the difference between presence ($M = .33, SD = .38$) and absence of irony condition ($M = -.03, SD = .42$) remained non-significant, $F(1, 90) = .005, p = .94, \eta^2_p = .000$. This indicates that change in implicit masculinity associations from pre- to post-test did not depend on the presence (absence) of irony.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to test whether the different commercials differed in their effect on explicit associations between the advertised brand (Black Suede) and masculinity. Associations between Black Suede and masculinity were similar in the two conditions; the group in the presence of irony condition did not associate the brand more strongly with masculinity ($M = 5.024, SD = 1.242$) than those in the absence of irony condition ($M = 5.109, SD = 1.072$). This meant that there were no significant difference between these conditions in producing explicitly measured associations between the advertised brand and masculinity, $t(89) = .466, p = .727, \text{Cohen's } d = .074$.

The groups in the two conditions did not differ significantly on explicit attitudes toward the advertised brand, $M = 3.98, SD = 1.46$ and $M = 3.97, SD = 1.10$, for presence and absence of irony conditions respectively, $t(91) = 2.382, p = .97, \text{Cohen's } d = .007$. Nor did intentions to buy products of the advertised brand differ significantly between the two
conditions, M = 3.16, SD = 1.79 and M = 3.10, SD = 1.95, for presence and absence of irony conditions respectively, t (91) = .164, p = .872, Cohen’s d = .032. In other words, the analyses did not reveal differences on explicit attitudes or purchase intentions after exposure to ironic or traditional commercials.
Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine effects on brand evaluation from the use of irony in commercials. The experiment was designed to examine effects on implicit and explicit attitudes, as well as implicit and explicit associations to a product attribute. The experiment consisted of two parts that both presented the participants with sets of commercials that either followed a traditional advertisement narrative or contained elements that were ironic toward persuasion and attention devices used in the ads. A hypothesis was that irony would enhance attitudes toward the advertised brands. And that such an enhancement would be expressed primarily on explicit attitude measures. The data suggest otherwise: Although the participants’ implicit associations between advertised brand and relevant attribute increased after ad exposure, the impact of the commercials was not dependent on the presence (absence) of irony.

The lack of positive or negative effects from the ironic elements is theoretically interesting and can also have managerial implications. In the following, the results will be discussed in relation to prior marketing research on persuasion knowledge, source credibility and humor. There is also a possibility that the data are expressions of methodological problems. Thus, methodological issues such as strength of manipulation, operationalization issues, sample characteristics and problems with ecological validity are discussed. Implications for marketers are also discussed as the lack of difference on attitude measures does not warrant skepticism toward using irony to achieve other marketing goals. Finally, some future directions for further illumination of communicative and persuasive effect of ironic language are suggested.

The effect of irony

The present data show no effect on explicit attitudes toward advertised brands due to the use of irony in the commercials, nor did the presence (absence) of irony result in differences in change of implicit associations from pre- to post-commercial exposure. This was somewhat surprising as a quasi-experimental pre-test, conducted with the same material that were used in Part 1, indicated a greater explicit liking for the advertised brand in the group that saw the ironic version relative to a group exposed to the traditional version. The data do not support the theoretical assumptions that humor, source credibility or feelings of superiority would be produced by the inclusion of an ironic element and result in greater association between advertised brands and relevant attributes. The proposed hypotheses
suggesting an increase in associations between advertised brands and positive attitudes are thus not supported by the data (Hypothesis 1).

The lack of difference for the two conditions is interesting as the commercials are in fact intended to convey quite opposite messages. The traditional versions convey the message that the advertised brand can be associated with the contextual elements and arguments of the ad, while the ironical versions are telling its audience that these are not elements relevant to the advertised brand but merely devices worthy of mockery.

The ironic versions did not seem to insult or in other way “put off” the viewers to such an extent that this had a negative influence on the brand evaluation. This is in accordance with previous research on the social functions of satire which indicates that speakers of satire are perceived as humorous and as less angry than users of several other forms of ironic and non-ironic language (e.g. Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). On the other hand, the data indicate that despite the traditional commercials being rather blatant and excessively using traditional contextual allurement, the attempt to distance the ads from such methods through ironic remarks did not increase brand evaluation. This could of course indicate several things.

One possibility is that these traditional, non-subtle commercials did not produce the previously discussed reactance or boomerang-effects. Such standard persuasion attempts might be what the consumer has come to expect and find appropriate. A potential benefit for running more traditional ad-campaigns could be that these commercials will be processed more fluently. More fluent processing is likely to result in easier acceptance and better liking of the ads and potentially also the brands. Fluency of processing has been found to mediate the increased liking resulting from mere exposure to an attitude object (Mantonakis, Whittlesea, & Yoon, 2008). This also corresponds with the present data that, regardless of presence (absence) of irony, show an increase in associations between positive valence and advertised brand in Part 1.

The literature on consumer skepticism was part of the background for the hypothesis of attitudinal effects from the inclusion of an ironic element. The idea was that being upfront about the manipulative nature of advertisements would decrease the consumer’s skepticism and reactance responses. There is evidence indicating that many people are skeptical about advertisement in general (Mittal, 1994) and that such defensively motivated consumers are likely to challenge advertisement claims even in the absence of rational reasons to do so (e.g. Koslow, 2000). The present study advertised products that most of the participants probably were not actively searching for at the time. When not actively searching for a product or product information, consumers’ processing of ads will often be governed by what Chaiken
(1987) refers to as a “defense motivation” (ref. in Koslow, 2000). On the other hand, Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) assumes that when people are not particularly involved in the subject of a persuasion message they are likely to use a less thorough route of processing. Given the latter, the traditional commercials may have been processed in a less critical manner, resulting perhaps in few counterarguments and strengthening of the associative links suggested by the commercials.

A second possibility is that the commercials activated persuasion knowledge and increased skepticism, but that the irony element did not mend the accompanying skepticism. The ironic ads emphasized the advertisers’ unwillingness to condone the legitimacy of traditional marketing devices, something that may have increased source credibility. But it is unclear whether this actually happens, as the viewer might just regard it as yet another “marketing trick” intended for undue influence of their attitudes or choice behavior. As pointed out by Paul de Man (1983 ref. in Herman et al. 1989, p.223) in his treatment of irony: “to know inauthenticity is not the same as being authentic”. The ironic stance of the advertiser may, at least for some consumers, merely illuminate that the advertisement is attempting to persuade them and not convey any intention of sincerity.

In a related vein, it may also be that the idea that the irony would make the viewers relate or identify more strongly with the source or message of the commercial does not correspond with reality. Being ironic may not be enough for the advertiser to be considered to “be on their side” by the viewers. One may speculate that this had such an effect decades ago and that it is in its passing. Persuasion knowledge may in fact be culturally contingent as discussed by Friestad & Wright (1994), and as ironic ads have been rather common in the past decade, the consumer of our time should perhaps expose these ads as nothing more than another persuasion attempt. The self-mocking ironist is always engaging in “sincerity, with a motive” (Hyde, 1987, cited in Wallace, 1998), and the viewer may already have discovered this.

Thirdly, the relationship between humor, mood and ad efficiency are by no means straightforward. Several difficulties arise in regard to whether humor in a commercial, as in the ironic versions in this experiment, will have effect on brand evaluation. First of all, the humor must be appreciated by the viewer; it must be found to be funny. Although ironic ads are usually intended to be humorous, the viewer may feel otherwise. Given that the viewer appreciates the humor, it is no necessary consequence that this will affect evaluations of the advertised brand. It is not unlikely that the consumer in many instances will be able to weed out undue influence from mood. Even though the ads’ humor could have a positive impact on
mood, the attempt might have been too blatant for the consumer to incorporate this in their brand evaluation. In a recent review on incidental affect’s influence of ad efficiency, Pham (2004) argues that previous theories have had a simplified view on the impact of mood states and that consumers are more flexible in how much they rely on their feeling than previously thought. This could explain how mood is more reliably linked to “ad liking” than evaluation of brand or product (see Cohen et al. 2008), and furthermore explain the lack of effect of a potentially humorous element in the commercials of the present experiment. A “vampire effect” (Evans, 1988) could also limit potential effects from humor as humorous ads might result in that more attention is allocated to humor elements in the ad, than to product or brand.

The processes discussed above may work in different directions or interact with each other. The elements of irony may increase activation of persuasion knowledge and greater skepticism thus eliminating the potential effects of humor, a “vampire effect” could eliminate potential increases in source credibility, etc. It may also be that the ironic and traditional commercials resulted in different types of processing, but that the sum of different processes resulted in similar evaluations. One possibility is for instance that the irony could have evoked more elaborative processing in contrast to more fluent or peripheral processing of the traditional ads.

**Increase in implicit associations to relevant attributes**

The data show that there was a main effect of commercial exposure on implicit associations, resulting in a greater association between advertised products and relevant attributes. Viewings of the commercials in Part 1 resulted in increased associations between the advertised brand and positive valence. The ads containing both text and imagery intended as markers for masculinity in Part 2 tended to increase brand/masculinity-associations, but the increase from pre- to post-commercial IAT did not reach a conventional level of statistical significance.

There are at least two possible explanations for the main effect on the IAT measure in Part 1. The commercials could have increased associations between positive valence and the advertised brand. The advertised brand was presented in a positive context which could have induced greater liking for the product. Some arguments for positive qualities of the brand’s products were also presented in both versions of the commercials (e.g. “SebaMed keeps the skin healthy”), which could have been central to attitude formation. Mere exposure to an attitude object may also enhance liking for that attitude object (Zajonc, 1968). It is quite interesting that even though the ironic elements disagreed with the message of the
commercials, it did not significantly hinder adoption of the same message. The data from these implicit measures are in accordance with Gawronski and Bodenhausen’s (2006) associative–propositional evaluation (APE) model or Petty et al.’s (2007) Metacognitive Model (MCM) which hold that associative processes depend on mere activation of associative networks independently of validity evaluations of these connections. In Part 1, the ironic elements might be involved in producing association between positive valence and the advertised brand as it may have entertained the audience, increased credibility, etc. The results of Part 2 are perhaps more surprising as it is difficult to see (at least for this author) how the ironic elements would lead to an increase in association between advertised brand and masculinity. It thus seems that the IAT measured associations did not depend on whether the communicator condoned or disagreed with the suggested associations. As these effects are rather small and over two conditions, it is unsure whether the ironic commercials actually produced an increase in association between advertised brand and positive valence (Part 1) and masculinity (Part 2).

Alternatively, the difference in pre- and post-commercial IAT scores can be explained by salience asymmetry. Rothermund & Wentura (2004) illustrate that IAT effects can reflect figure-ground asymmetries between categories. It is easier to respond if the most salient category of both the target categories and attribute categories demands the same response (Greenwald, Nosek, Banaji, & Klauer, 2005; Houben & Wiers, 2006; Kinoshita & Peek-O’Leary, 2006; Rothermund & Wentura, 2004).

Salience asymmetry may have several sources such as linguistic markers or perceptual qualities. According to Rothermund and Wentura (2004) the most important source for explaining IAT-effects would be valence or familiarity. Negative categories, possibly because they are more relevant for behavioral regulation, have repeatedly been demonstrated to attract more attention (e.g. Öhman, Flykt, & Esteves, 2001). The phenomenon of novel pop-out indicates that familiarity of objects can lead to salience asymmetries as the unfamiliar targets tend to “pop out” among familiar distractors (e.g. Wang, Cavanagh, & Green, 1994). Kinoshita and Peek-O’Leary (2006) show experimentally that familiarity to the stimuli can be a source of IAT-effects. In the present experiment, watching commercials for a brand would thus decrease salience for that brand, resulting in an increased salience congruity between the advertised (competing) brand and positive (negative) valence.

As previously mentioned, the data indicating an absence of difference in change from pre- to post-commercial IATs were in accordance with the associative-propositional evaluation (APE) model and the Metacognitive Model (MCM) as they predict that implicit
measures will only include associations and not subjective truth or falsity claims of associations. APE and MCM further assume that explicit measures are based on propositional reasoning which is also concerned with the validation of these associations. But the data do not indicate that the explicit measures were affected by the addition of an ironic element. Consequently, the present data do not support the hypothesis that irony would affect associative and rule-based systems of reasoning differently and that this would result in dissociation between implicitly and explicitly measured evaluations and associations (Hypothesis 2). Given the validity of the APE model and MCM, the ironic elements did not alter the validity of the associations presented by the advertisements.

Methodological issues

Strength of manipulations. The participants were subjected to limited viewings of the ad material. Normally an ad campaign will seek to reach its target population several times with the same or similar message. More counterarguments are produced for the first viewings of ads and several exposures are usually needed for “consumers’ guard to drop” (Koslow, 2000). Further exposure might have changed the relative effect of the ironic and traditional commercials. On the other hand, the amount of exposure was enough to create significant pre- to post-IAT changes in Part 1. Furthermore, there were no different effects when controlling for prior knowledge of the commercials presented in Part 1.

The effect of the manipulation also depends on whether the irony was clear enough, surprising enough or funny enough. One of these concerns is in part answered by the data. The participants responded to a question of to what extent they felt the commercials in Part 2 contained irony. The results of this manipulation check were ambiguous as the presence (absence) of irony and the participants’ perception of whether irony was used were only weakly correlated. The failure to produce ironic elements clearly perceived by all participants in the presence of irony condition may be part of the reason why the ironic and traditional commercials did not have different effects. Still, it does not explain the lack of effects of presence (absence) of irony in Part 1, where the ironic element were made very clear by interruptions in music and picture, and a voice-over that changed from English to Norwegian and distinctly distanced the brand from elements previously seen in the commercial.

A rhetorical figure is only a rhetorical figure as long as it to some extent creates incongruity. If the deviance created drops below a certain threshold it no longer functions as a figure (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). As rhetorical structures reside within constantly fluctuating webs of significance, the deviation created by a specific use of language is temporally
situated. Figures may become “frozen” or conventional (e.g. metaphors such as “Time is running out” or “Violence breeds violence”), and thereby not surprising the receiver or demanding any incongruity solution of the message. Similarly, parts of ironic language may have become such an ingrained part of everyday speech that it no longer creates feelings of incongruity, solution and superiority. The present study does not allow for a consideration of the extent incongruity was created.

In a related vein, the present study did not have a measure of whether the ironic commercials are in fact taken to be more humorous than their traditional counterparts. If humor is a pathway through which irony could enhance or decrease message adoption/persuasion this would be a relevant manipulation check. The present study uses two different forms of irony in two sets of commercials. It may be that other forms of irony will have different effects than those indicated by the present data. Furthermore, the use of irony could have different impact when advertising a different type of product. In the present experiment, the advertised products in both sets of commercials were personal hygiene/cosmetics products. The effectiveness of certain marketing devices often depends on what type of product is advertised (e.g. Armstrong, 2010)

**Characteristics of the sample and potential moderators.** It is possible that the lack of effect of presence (absence) of irony was related to characteristics of the study population. The pretest that indicated effect from presence (absence) of irony was conducted with participants recruited at Oslo School of Management (Markedhøyskolen i Oslo) and the actual study was conducted with participants mainly recruited from the University of Oslo. Friestad and Wright (1994) proposes that persuasion knowledge can be occupationally and developmentally contingent. It is possible that commercials that make fun of advertisement devices are dependent on analytic interest in or knowledge of advertisement.

Several individual difference variables can be very relevant when it comes to the fit between consumer and type of advertisement. Differences in need for cognition, tolerance for ambiguity, desired stimulation level, level of knowledge and product involvement, and perhaps some specific inclination toward figurative language are just some variables that could be important in defining the effect of rhetorical use of deviance in persuasion. Stern (1992) suggests that irony would only fit an “upscale audience” as it offers intellectual rewards only to the viewers who “get” the meaning. Galloway (2009) found that ads characterized by incongruity-resolution humor were better liked compared to non-humorous
ads, but only among people scoring low on “sensation seeking”. For “sensation seekers” there was no significant difference in liking ratings of the two kinds of ads.

**Ecological validity.** The participants were aware that this was an experimental scenario. This may have had implications for level of processing, positivity toward the stimuli, etc. The participants of an experiment may be more reflective over the material than a consumer exposed to commercials in a natural context. Normally, commercials are encountered in the context of some other material that the viewer is more interested in seeing (e.g. TV-shows, magazine articles). The commercials in the present study were presented in sets of three ads in Part 1 and two ads in Part 2, and there were no stimuli between the commercials of each set. Furthermore, the participants were aware that the influence of this material would in some way be measured which may alter their level of processing. Perhaps different results would be obtained in field studies or by incorporating the commercial material in a more naturalistic context.

**Limitations of the design.** In hindsight, the interpretation of the data would perhaps have been easier if two aspects of the commercial stimuli were controlled for. First, it might have been beneficial to have a control group that either did not see any commercial content or simply looked at the brand for the same amount of time that the commercials took. I deemed it to be unfavorable to have explicit measures of attitudes or associations both pre- and post-commercial stimuli, as the previous answers most probably would have a strong “anchoring effect” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) on those given after ad exposure. The lack of control group thus makes it impossible to consider whether the similar levels on explicit measures were due to similar effects or non-effects of the commercials.

Secondly, exposing all or a group of participants for commercials for the competing brand (“other”-stimuli in the IATs), as well as the commercial stimuli presented in this design, could have helped answer questions regarding the observed increase in implicit associations between brand and relevant attribute. The present data do not separate effects from ad message adoption and salience asymmetry.

In addition, it would be interesting to know more about the metacognitive processes activated by these different commercials. An attempt to measure metacognitive processes and available persuasion knowledge for coping with ironic elements could have informed the interpretation further: What processes does the viewer believe the advertiser is trying to influence through? Or questions regarding “agent knowledge” (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and
credibility: how does the ironic element influence the evaluation of the advertiser? Is the irony perceived as an attempt to be genuine or merely an attempt at seeming genuine?

Managerial implications

The addition of an ironic element in the commercials did not have a positive effect on attitudes or associations toward the advertised brands. But it did not have a negative effect either as positive associations increased after ad exposure regardless of condition. As the ironic elements were seemingly neutral in this respect, advertisers might find it beneficial for other reasons.

As this experiment was a forced exposure study it is not a test for whether the ironic commercials will get more attention. The attention grabbing effect that one might get in naturalistic contexts was eliminated as the participants were placed in front of computers and asked to pay attention for a relatively limited time period. It is therefore likely that the group exposed to ironic commercials did not differ from those who saw traditional commercials in how much attention they paid to the stimuli. If the irony could make people watch or discuss the ads more frequently, or even forward the ads through social media, this could have great benefits for an advertiser. It may even be that the self-referential commercial may benefit from a “pop-out” effect, making it draw more attention from the viewers as it stands out among competitors. Most commercials must perform in contexts where the consumer is free not to process them at all, and rhetorical figures could then “function as a useful adaption to field condition” (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, p. 435). One prominent example is the previously mentioned Old Spice campaign that has resulted in more than 100 million views on YouTube (Neff, 2010). If the use of irony, or other forms of producing the “pleasure of the text” (Barthes, 1985), could result in that a commercial is seen more times or discussed more frequently it could through effects of repetition of arguments, personal involvement and mere exposure effects induce greater message adoption.

In a related vein, the ironic commercials may also be better remembered. As it demands an incongruity solution, the ironic commercial might be processed less fluently, thus resulting in more thorough encoding. The ironic commercial may also stand out among more standard ads which could make it more memorable. Kreuz, Long, & Church (1991) report that presence of irony predicted recall of scenarios the participants had read 24 hours ago.

It may be that other measures than attitudes and the product associations included here would be as interesting for considering effects of ironic advertisement. Marketers may have several goals when producing and running an ad campaign. They may be trying to manage
long-term consumer-marketer relationships, form beliefs about traits of products, and influence the consumer’s impressions of some third party (e.g. competitors). The marketer may also be trying to manage the self-images of the marketer or the consumer, or perhaps satisfy personal or creative needs of the marketer. One might suspect that these self-referential commercials are primarily serving the latter goal, but it could be interesting to investigate if other goals are met by adding an ironic element.

Aspects regarding differentiation would perhaps be closer to the function of irony than what was measured in the present study. Irony could create an ambiance or a brand personality distinct from that created by presenting the same arguments or message in a literal fashion. A brand personality refers to “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997). Following a factor-analysis, a five factor brand personality structure is proposed by Aaker (1997). It seems plausible that irony in commercials can have impact on several of these dimensions, e.g. Sincerity (with facets such as down-to-earth, honest, genuine, cheerful), or Excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date), or Competence (intelligent, successful).

**Conclusion and future directions**

The present study is an attempt to illuminate potential persuasion effects of the use of irony, a form of figurative language. The data suggest no effect of the particular ironic elements included in the advertisements, but it could still be interesting to conduct further studies to investigate how rhetorical devices can influence persuasion attempts.

Changes in the design might disclose effects that are not seen in the present data. The experimental setting and the rather artificial presentation of commercials can have led to a different level of processing than would naturally dominate ads processing. Ecological validity is in itself valuable, and it may also be that presenting the commercials within a more naturalistic context would demonstrate different effects of the ironic elements.

The effects may also prove different within other populations. As previously mentioned, several individual differences could serve as moderator variables. The six-item measure of persuasion knowledge developed by Bearden, Hardesty & Rose (2001) could be useful for such inquires. Alternatively, Austin et al. (2005) developed an anti-commercial consumer rebellion (ACR) scale, designed to differentiate people on the level of skepticism toward marketers and advertising. It is plausible that individual differences on the ACR scale could be a moderator for the relationship between irony and attitude as perhaps high ACR scorers are more susceptible to a form of advertisement that claim not to condone traditional
advertisement devices.

Similarly, modern reactance research often assumes a stable disposition toward reactance, and Merz (1983) developed the Questionnaire for the Measurement of Psychological Reactance (QMPR) which measures reactance as a personality trait. Although the QMPR as currently written is by one group of researchers deemed “psychometrically unsatisfactory” (Donell, Thomas, & Buboltz, 2001) and may need revision, such differences in “trait-reactance” can potentially be a moderator for effect of advertisement critical ads.

Finally, adding an ironic element in ads could be a useful device to discredit other brands or products. Counterculture movements (e.g. Adbusters; Casseurs de pub) often use parody in their projects to tarnish the brands of successful companies (Jean, 2011). Although not direct brand parodies, the satirical commercials might have similar effects. Satirical commercials might awaken a greater skepticism towards more classical commercials. The consumer is often presented with a cluster of commercials within relatively short time periods (e.g. commercial breaks on television, magazines with ads on several pages in close proximity). An increased awareness of devices of persuasion could thus have effects on whether the preceding ads, which will often include a competitor, would achieve their message adoption goals. An ironic commercial might direct attention toward devices intended for undue influence, thus resulting in differences in the activation of persuasion knowledge when processing subsequent commercials. This may in turn result in these commercials being less influential. Williams, Fitzsimons & Block (2004) reveal that reading about the potential power of rhetorical questions can increase resistance to a subsequent persuasive message using this device. The same may hold for illuminating the use of contextual allurement. Studies of this nature would have implications for marketers, but would perhaps be even more interesting for those engaged in health promotion and are interested in the decimation of the impact from cigarette or alcohol commercials.

The commercials in the present experiment strengthened the associations between the advertised brands and relevant attributes regardless of the presence (absence) of irony. Although the ironic versions of the ads were mocking the content of these commercials and indicating that that the content was irrelevant or wrong, this did not seem to effect evaluations of the brands as the ironic content did not alter the commercials’ effect. Marketers may thus choose to use irony for several other reasons as the present data indicate that such content do not necessarily invalidate or negate the rest of the communication.
References


