

THE IMPACT OF COMEDIC VIOLENCE ON VIRAL ADVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS

Mark R. Brown, Roop K. Bhadury, and Nigel K. Ll. Pope

ABSTRACT: The use of comedic violence in viral advertising is becoming widespread, but as yet no examination of what influence it may have on consumer response has been undertaken. Two experimental studies using a commercial panel sample investigate the effects of this executional cue on ad message involvement, brand memorability, likelihood of being passed on to third parties, and attitude formation. Results suggest that humorous ads that combine higher levels of violence intensity with more severe consequences appear to elicit greater involvement with the ad message, better retention of brand information, higher pass-along probability, and greater ad likability. Attitudes toward the brand remain unaffected. Furthermore, justification for the violence and relatedness to the product brand appear to be important considerations when using high intensity–severe consequence comedic violence. The paper specifies conditions under which advertisers can expect to gain maximum impact when using violent humor in viral advertising campaigns.

The use of humor in advertising can enhance attention and increase likability, recognition, and recall (Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons 1997; Stewart and Furse 1986; Weinberger and Gulas 1992; Weinberger et al. 1995). Some estimates suggest that one in five television ads attempts to elicit a humorous response (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). Though not as common, violence has also been used as an advertising appeal, with studies suggesting that it can enhance attention and memory but risks creating a negative evaluation of the advertisement (Andersson et al. 2004; Gunter, Tohala, and Furnham 2001). Much of the violent content in advertising is itself embedded in humor, which may explain why so few studies of violent appeals have been conducted—they generally fall under the rubric of humorous advertising. For example, 12 of the 2007 Super Bowl ads contained violence portrayed in a humorous manner.

Comedic violence, or the depiction of violence in ways that are humorous, is common in media programming (McIntosh et al. 2003). It is a subtype of aggressive humor, defined as the hostile intent to ridicule, deprecate, or injure (Hetherington and Wray 1966). Aggressive humor does not require the explicit or even implied presence of violence to be aggressive. However, comedic violence is a form of aggressive humor that relies on actual or threatened physical harm for its humorous

properties. One medium that is often used for transmitting ads containing comedic violence—often of a more extreme nature than in traditional media—is viral advertising via the Internet (Stone 2006). Viral advertising is “unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others” (Porter and Golan 2005). Porter and Golan (2005) report that significantly more viral ads use violence as an appeal than do television ads. Although many viral ads are deemed successful due to the sheer volume of recipients who view them, the unique nature of this type of advertising is relatively unexplored (Phelps et al. 2004).

Unsurprisingly, the use of violence as an executional cue in advertising has resulted in considerable controversy. Many of the complaints received by advertising standards bodies stem from concerns over ads that explicitly or implicitly contain violence. For example, viral ads for the Ford SportKa (wherein a pigeon is violently dispatched), the Dodge Nitro (wherein a dog gets maliciously electrocuted by the car), and the video game *Mortal Kombat* have resulted in formal objections. Although such standards bodies may request advertisers to remove a particular ad from circulation, the nature of the Internet is such that a campaign can be difficult to pull and may even result in more attention being directed to the advertisement.

In this paper, we investigate the impact of comedic violence on the effectiveness of viral advertising campaigns conducted via digital media. We do this by pairing humor with violence in order to understand how violent advertising content might result in positive cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal outcomes. Specifically, we discuss the intensity of violence and the severity of consequences depicted in a humorous ad. We also address the role of legitimacy or justification of the

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violence. Finally, we conduct and report on two experiments to test relationships between these variables and viewers' advertising message involvement (AMI), attitudes, memory, and behavior with regard to viral ads that use comedic violence. In the second of these studies, we also investigate the effects of relatedness between the product advertised and the use of violent humor in order to improve generalizability. In doing this, we contribute to the debate over the effectiveness of comedic violence and also specify conditions regarding when it is most effective.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Three competing theories explain why individuals are motivated to use humor: superiority, incongruity, and relief (Morreall 1983). They are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. Superiority humor theory contends that all humor springs from the longing to feel superior or exert control over others (Duncan 1985). It is usually associated with disparaging others or laughing at their inadequacies. Gruner argues that what ultimately causes humor is a "combination of a loser, a victim of derision or ridicule, and the suddenness of loss" (1978, p. 31). Although he does not specifically refer to violence, there is a strong conceptual link between aggression and the humor of superiority (Martin 1998). Incongruity humor theory suggests that humor derives from the recognition that something is irrational or improper. Incongruity humor comes from a deliberate violation of rational expectations. In other words, people laugh at that which "is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some . . . way" (Morreall 1983, p. 15). Relief humor is associated with tension relief (Freud 1960) and has little bearing on the research outlined here.

In the present study, we investigate the impact of comedic violence in advertising via viral advertisements. The violence inflicted on a victim in such ads may be thought of as disparaging, yet it also occurs in a context that could be considered unexpected or inappropriate—an advertisement for a brand. Therefore, a combination of disparagement and incongruity is implied. Although disparagement paired with incongruity was studied by Speck (1987), disparagement may come in many forms and studies that specifically investigate the impact of disparagement in the form of comedic violence are notably lacking in the advertising literature

The definition of media violence we adopt is that put forward by Kunkel et al. (1995, p. 286). They propose that violence is the "overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings." Three key issues are believed to be critical to viewer reactions to media violence. First, researchers have noted that the severity or intensity of violent content has a strong influence on audience response

(Atkin 1983; Gray, Berry, and Donnerstein 1995; Lometti 1995). Second, the seriousness with which a viewer perceives an act of violence is believed to be related to the portrayal of consequences (Gunter 1985). Hence, if a victim is shown to be suffering or in pain following a violent act, then that violence is likely to be taken more seriously. If the consequences are minimal or nil, then it is easier to regard the violence as trivial. Third, if the violence is portrayed as being inappropriate or unjustified, then an audience will be more likely to treat it seriously (Zillman and Cantor 1976).

There is substantial evidence suggesting that the use of humor in advertising results in increased attention to ads (Madden and Weinberger 1982; Stewart and Furse 1986; Weinberger and Campbell 1991). Surprise, or unexpectedness, is thought to be a crucial element as it appears to transform into humor, given appropriate circumstances (Alden and Hoyer 1993; Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000; Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). Furthermore, the attention-getting properties of violence in the media are well documented. For example, research has shown that individuals remember more information about violent than about non-violent news clips, suggesting that viewers are paying more attention to the violent clips (Furnham and Gunter 1987; Lang, Newhagen, and Reeves 1996). More specifically, the use of violent content in advertising has been found to be effective in stimulating attention and processing the messages in an ad (LaTour, Snipes, and Bliss 1996).

It's important to note that it has been argued that if violence is couched in a comedic cloak, an audience may be less likely to notice lower level violence than more extreme kinds of violence (Potter et al. 1997). We would therefore expect that humorous viral ads containing higher intensity violence would generate greater audience involvement with the ad message than those with lower intensity violence.

In studies of violence, it has also been noted that the depiction of consequences has an impact on the manner in which a violent act is perceived (Gunter 1985). Consequences that manifest as pain or suffering will engender more serious thoughts than consequences that are minimal or absent (Smith, Nathanson, and Wilson 2002). The high attentional value of severe consequences has been documented by Klijn (2003) in a cross-cultural study of television news violence. We therefore propose that severe consequences are likely to result in more elaborative cognitive appraisal, even if presented in a humorous context. This view is supported by Signorelli, Gerbner, and Morgan (1995), who argue that "sugarcoating" violence in humor does not necessarily discount violence that occurs in a comic context. As a result, the presence of severe or moderate consequences is likely to modify the effect of violence intensity on a consumer's involvement with an ad. We propose that:

H1: The effect of comedic violence intensity on ad message involvement will be stronger when consequences are severe than when they are moderate.

Since advertising message involvement is essentially the motivational state inducing ad message processing (Laczniak and Muehling 1993), we would also expect a better retention of presented brand information. The degree to which commercials are memorable is of considerable importance to advertisers and humor has been shown to play an important role. For example, Stewart and Furse (1986) claim that humor has an overall positive effect on recall. Cline and Kellaris (2007) demonstrate that attention moderates the extent to which brand information is recalled in humorous advertising.

Comedic violence may provoke an audience and this is frequently reflected in complaints to advertising regulatory bodies. Advertisers create provocative ads in a deliberate attempt to gain attention by startling or offending viewers (Gustafson and Yssel 1994; Venkat and Abi-Hanna 1995). Provocative advertising has been shown to positively influence memory for a brand (Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda 2003; De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996). Two key factors are suggested to contribute to the degree to which a message appeal is perceived as provocative: (1) the extent to which the viewer is surprised, and (2) the perception that a transgression of societal norms has occurred (Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda 2003). It has been noted that recall is damaged when humor is expected, especially when expected humor is conceptually related to the message (Kellaris and Cline 2007); therefore, humorous provocative advertising should have the reverse effect.

In the case of high intensity comedic violence, where the execution may potentially be considered provocative (i.e., a combination of both surprise and perceived transgression of norms), we would anticipate that recall of brand information will be higher. Support for this view comes from Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda (2003), who found that provocative ads facilitate higher recall and recognition. De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh (1996) also suggest that recognition is higher for provocative ads. In a study of violent advertising, Gunter, Furnham, and Pappa (2004) showed that ads containing violence are better remembered than nonviolent ads when placed within violent program content. Moreover, Speck (1987) found that disparagement humor paired with incongruity resulted in improved recall. If attention and cognitive processing are increased by humorous and provocative material, superior memory outcomes might be expected. Furthermore, the depiction of severe consequences of a violent act, something not typically portrayed in media violence (Osborn 1993), is likely to enhance the degree of unexpectedness and norm violation, and therefore result in even greater memorability. Hence:

H2: The effect of comedic violence intensity on brand recall will be stronger when consequences are severe than when they are moderate.

A measure of viral advertising effectiveness that is of particular concern to advertisers, and ultimately the *raison d'être* of viral campaigns, is the extent to which an ad is passed from one person to another. Researchers have begun to investigate why ads are passed on. Phelps et al. (2004) found that messages that spark emotion are more likely to be forwarded. A qualitative study by Dobeles et al. (2007) provides additional support of this view, suggesting that for a viral ad to be passed on, it must elicit both the emotion of surprise and at least one other emotional response such as joy. They argue that although such combinations of emotions may be prerequisite, they may be insufficient to motivate an individual to pass on a viral ad. A message must also capture a viewer's attention "in a unique or unforgettable way." Although high intensity comedic violence may elicit both surprise and a humorous emotional response, when coupled with severe consequences it is more likely to be perceived as transgressing social norms. We suggest that such a transgression will ensure the ad differs substantially from alternative executions. Hence:

H3: The effect of comedic violence intensity on pass-along probability will be stronger when consequences are severe than when they are moderate.

Although intense comedic violence may generate greater audience attention, improve recall, and facilitate pass-on activity, a key issue of interest to advertisers is whether viewers will evaluate the ad and the brand negatively. Speck (1987) suggested that disparagement humor paired with incongruity results in a negative influence on ad attractiveness and ad enjoyment. Other researchers have argued that strong provocation negatively affects A_{ad} (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996; Vezina and Paul 1997), but that it may not have a negative influence on A_b (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh 1996). We propose that because of the humorous nature of comedic violence, it is possible that any potentially unfavorable attitudes toward the ad may be mitigated. This is consistent with literature suggesting that humor may ameliorate negative evaluations (Batra and Stayman 1990; Lee and Mason 1999). We offer no formal hypotheses regarding affective responses to ads that use comedic violence, but we do anticipate some minimization of adverse effects from the use of violence on evaluative responses to A_{ad} and A_b as a result of the humorous context. However, we view the initial examination of such effects in the current study as exploratory.

To test our hypotheses regarding violence intensity and consequence severity, we now move to the first of our two studies.

STUDY 1

Method

Design and Stimuli

Our first study tests the hypotheses that violence intensity interacts with consequence severity to influence AMI, memory, and pass-on probability. We also test for effects on attitude toward the ad and the brand. The study therefore crosses violence intensity and consequences in a 2 (high/low intensity) \times 2 (severe/moderate consequences) experimental design. Stimuli were created in the form of a viral advertising message. Four versions of the ad were created and presented to participants in a between-subjects, full-factorial design. The quality of the production was equivalent to that of many viral electronic advertisements. They were produced by a trained filmmaker and edited to a standard that was adjudged by two independent advertising creatives, blind to the purpose of the study, to be of an acceptable level for online distribution.

The high intensity–severe consequence (HiSev) violent humor ad begins with a man working on his notebook computer. A second man approaches him from behind and staples him in the back of the head with a large office stapler. The man crumples to the ground clutching his head and screaming in pain. The perpetrator then removes a bottle of cola (brand not visible) from the victim’s desk and walks away. In the final few frames, the copy “How far would you go?” appears at the bottom of the screen along with the name and logo of a well-known brand of cola (Coke Zero). The quirky background music playing throughout provides an additional signal that the ad is playful in nature. We note that studies of humor in advertising should use real as opposed to fictional products, as humor tends to work better for real brands (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). Therefore, in our experiments we use real brand names, with the same brand name and tag line appearing on all stimuli in the present study.

The high intensity–moderate consequence (HiMod) condition was exactly the same except that the victim reacts by simply putting his hand to his head and saying “ouch” in an irritated voice. For the low intensity–moderate consequence (LoMod) condition, the assailant approaches the victim in the same manner and drops a wastepaper bin over his head, with the victim responding in a similar manner as the previous condition. Low intensity–severe consequence (LoSev) was achieved by using the wastepaper bin incident followed by the victim falling to the floor and screaming in pain, as for the first stimulus.

Tests on a separate pool of postgraduate university students ($n = 131$) were conducted to assess the intensity of the violent act and the severity of the consequences. Four groups of participants were recruited from two separate classes with final cell numbers as follows: Group 1 = 33, Group 2 = 31, Group

3 = 34, Group 4 = 33. They were shown the HiSev, HiMod, LoSev, and LoMod clips, respectively.

Upon viewing the clip, they were subsequently asked to complete univariate scale items measuring violence intensity (1 = not at all intense; 7 = extremely intense) and consequence severity (1 = not at all severe; 7 = extremely severe) and a five-item scale sourced from Zhang (1996) measuring perceived humor. As expected, between-subjects results indicated that the high-intensity violence was perceived as more violent than the low-intensity act (high intensity $M = 5.98$; low intensity $M = 3.73$, $t = 22.05$, $df = 1, 129$, $p < .01$). The severe consequences were perceived as significantly more severe than the moderate consequences (severe $M = 5.93$; moderate $M = 1.97$, $t = 34.77$, $df = 1, 129$, $p < .01$). None of the ads differed significantly in terms of perceived humor, yet all were evaluated as moderately humorous (HiSev $M = 4.88$, HiMod $M = 4.84$, LoSev $M = 4.79$, LoMod $M = 4.64$; $F = 1.21$, $df = 1, 129$, $p > .05$).

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from respondents that were part of a consumer panel owned by an online market research firm. The panel was comprised of approximately 300,000 individuals and was broadly representative of the general population. Participants were randomly selected and sent an e-mail containing a Web link to a page that contained one of the four versions of the advertisement and two other viral type ads for unrelated (distractor) brands not containing violence. They were requested to view each ad and then complete an online questionnaire containing first the dependent variables, followed by demographic measures and a number of potentially confounding variables. Respondents were electronically restricted to one submission and no questionnaire took longer than 15 minutes to complete.

The first part of the questionnaire asked respondents to check the e-mail account in which they had received the invitation to participate, count the total number of e-mails they had received in the past 24 hours, and record the figure in the space provided (a distractor task). They were then informed that in order to save time, they would be required to evaluate only one of the ads that would be randomly selected by the database program used to power the questionnaire. In fact, the ad that everyone evaluated was the target ad. A total of 165 respondents viewed the ads and completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 40.5%. Being an online instrument, there were no missing data as respondents were compelled to complete each item.

A demand check was included by asking respondents to indicate what they thought the purpose of the experiment was. A total of three participants included mention of the word “violence” and were subsequently removed from the study. Final cells were as follows: high intensity–severe consequence

($n = 40$), high intensity–moderate consequence ($n = 41$), low intensity–moderate consequence ($n = 41$), and low intensity–severe consequence ($n = 40$). An unexpected follow-up e-mail was sent two weeks later directing respondents to a Web page with delayed recall and recognition tasks. One hundred and forty-five respondents (89.6%) completed the follow-up, with 26.9% of those ($n = 39$) requiring a second reminder e-mail and 12.4% ($n = 18$) requiring a third. All follow-up responses were obtained within three weeks of the original questionnaire. After completion, they were provided with a debriefing statement and encouraged to e-mail or call the researchers to discuss any aspect of the study.

Measures

The survey instrument first measured the degree of advertising message involvement (AMI) experienced by participants using a four-item scale developed by Ha (1996). We believed that involvement with the message once it had been opened was, in this instance, a more relevant measure of effectiveness than attention to the e-mail containing it, which is more analogous to traditional clutter cut-through. The scale has demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .97$).

Unaided recall was assessed by having respondents type the name of the brand appearing in the ad. Recognition was tested on the next screen by displaying 15 different logos and having participants select the one they thought was featured in the ad. Behavioral intention was assessed using a modified version of Juster's (1966) 11-point purchase probability scale used to estimate purchase rates. The item was adjusted to reflect the probability that the viewer would pass along the viral advertisement to someone they knew (1 = no chance: 0 in 100; 11 = certain: 99 in 100). Delayed recall and recognition were measured between two and three weeks later in the same manner as the initial measures. Attitude toward the ad was measured using Kamp and MacInnis's (1995) four-item scale ($\alpha = .90$). Attitude toward the brand featured in the ad was obtained using a six-item scale ($\alpha = .92$) developed by LaTour and Rotfeld (1997).

Perceived provocation was assessed using two items—the first measuring surprise and the second measuring the degree to which respondents felt the ad violated social norms. These were summated to form a provocation index. Given that the degree to which the ad was perceived to be humorous might be expected to influence results, we included perceived humor as a covariate in our main analyses, again measured using the Zhang (1996) scale. All questionnaire items were measured using seven-point semantic differential or Likert-type scales, with 1 indicating a negative response and 7 indicating a positive response.

Manipulation check measures of violence intensity and consequence severity were also taken using the same seven-point scales as in the pretest. These questions were placed at the

end of the questionnaire among a battery of items (in essence disguised) used to capture a range of potentially confounding variables that we took into consideration. These included perceived realism of the footage, brand familiarity, and attitudes toward viral advertising in general. Berkowitz and Alioto (1973) demonstrated that viewers' responses changed depending on whether they were told that a piece of violent film footage was a documentary or a Hollywood production. Responses to violent acts are therefore likely to be affected by beliefs regarding their authenticity. We measured perceptions of the realism of the ad content using the following single item: "I was always aware that the ad was only a dramatization" (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

It has been suggested that brand familiarity may also influence ad memorability (Kent and Allen 1994; Pope, Voges, and Brown 2004); hence, we used a univariate item (1 = not at all familiar; 7 = very familiar) to capture this construct. Differences in attitudes toward viral advertising in general might also account for differences in results; therefore, a three-item scale modified from Muehling's (1987) attitude toward the institution of advertising to reflect viral advertising attitudes was employed.

Findings

Preliminary Analyses

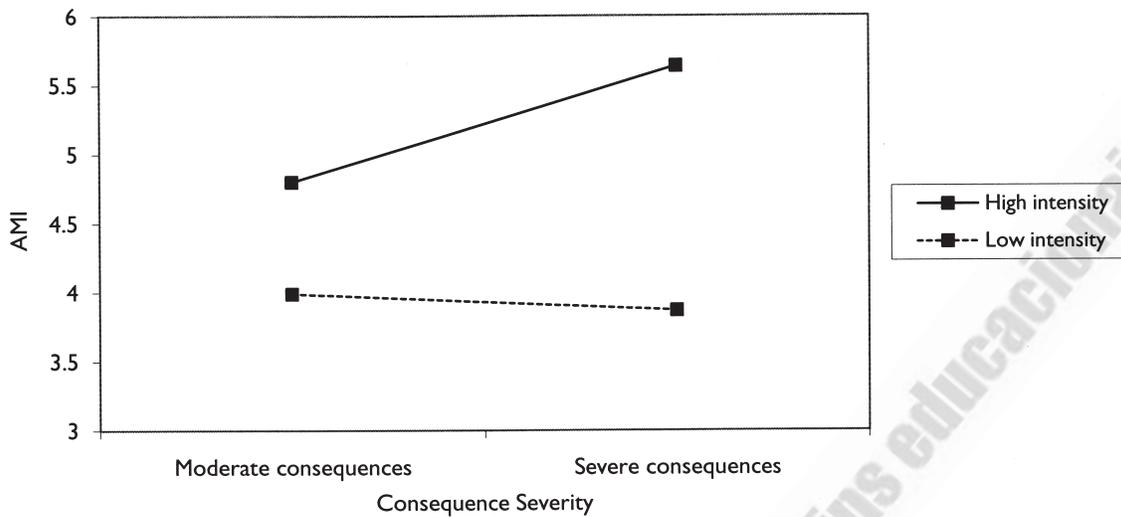
Of the 162 usable responses, 86 were from females and 76 were from males. Ages ranged from 19 to 41 years with a modal age of 26. No significant differences were observed between any of the groups on the potentially confounding dimensions of perceived realism ($F = .707$; $df = 3, 158$; $p > .05$), brand familiarity ($F = .81$; $df = 3, 158$; $p > .05$), and attitude toward advertising in general ($F = .71$; $df = 3, 158$; $p > .05$). In addition, a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were run with each of these as dependent variables and violence intensity and ad/brand relatedness as factors. Results indicate that they were not confounded with the manipulations or their interaction, with all p values exceeding .22. The variables were subsequently removed from further analyses.

Results of the manipulation checks confirmed that the ads featuring the stapler stimulus were perceived as significantly more violent ($M = 5.7$) than the ads featuring the wastepaper bin stimulus ($M = 3.6$); $t = 21.51$, $df = 1, 160$, $p < .01$. The screaming consequences were rated as significantly more severe ($M = 5.64$) than the groaning consequences ($M = 2.41$); $t = 27.12$, $df = 1, 160$, $p < .01$.

Main Analyses

The primary dependent measures used in this study were ad message involvement (AMI), pass-along probability, brand

FIGURE 1
Study 1: Ad Message Involvement (AMI)



recall, brand recognition, A_{ad} , and A_b . Our main analyses therefore focus on the effect of our manipulations on these constructs. Effects on AMI, pass-along probability, A_{ad} , and A_b were determined by multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with perceived humor run as a covariate. The overall model indicates significant main effects for violence intensity ($F = 46.43$; $df = 4, 157$; $p < .01$) and consequences ($F = 37.08$; $df = 4, 157$; $p < .01$), and a significant intensity \times consequences interaction ($F = 25.8$; $df = 4, 157$; $p < .01$). No covariance effect of perceived humor was found.

H1 stated that the effect of violence intensity on AMI would be stronger when consequences are severe rather than moderate. A main effect of violence intensity was observed ($F = 43.14$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .01$), with higher levels of violence generating greater AMI ($M = 5.21$) than lower levels ($M = 3.93$). Furthermore, a significant interaction of intensity \times consequences ($F = 6.25$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .05$) was noted. As can be seen in Figure 1, when violence intensity is higher (versus lower), people exhibit greater AMI under exposure to severe ($M = 5.64$) versus moderate consequences ($M = 4.8$). We therefore accept H1.

Logistic regression was used to determine the effects of violence intensity and consequences on immediate and delayed recall and recognition. In the present study, no significant differences between groups were found for either the immediate recall (87.5% to 90.2% accuracy) or recognition measures (100% accuracy), with most respondents accurately identifying the brand featured in the ads. Delayed measures taken between two and three weeks later revealed a different story. At first glance, the regression analysis appears to indicate that violence intensity significantly predicts brand recall (Wald = 4.93, $\beta = .36$, $p < .05$) but not recognition.

In contrast, consequence severity predicts brand recognition but not recall (Wald = 4.94, $\beta = .76$, $p < .05$). No covarying effect of perceived humor was found. To better clarify these findings, we conducted separate χ^2 analyses to examine effects on recall and recognition for each cell. Table 1 results indicate that participants in the HiSev condition were significantly more likely to correctly recall and recognize the brand than all other groups (Recall—HiSev, 55.6%; HiMod, 29.4%; LoSev, 26.3%; LoMod, 24.3%; Recognition—HiSev, 75%; HiMod, 47.1%; LoSev, 52.6%; LoMod, 43.2%). No significant differences were observed among the three remaining groups. It appears that when violence intensity is higher (but not lower), individuals demonstrate superior memory for brand information in the longer term when exposed to severe versus moderate consequences. H2 is supported.

Main effects of intensity ($F = 66.69$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .01$) and consequences ($F = 71.16$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .01$) and an interaction effect ($F = 54.47$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .01$) were also found for pass-along probability. Figure 2 shows that the probability of those in the high violence intensity condition passing along the viral ad to others ($M = 3.36$) was significantly greater than for the low-intensity condition ($M = 2.03$). It is also evident that when violence intensity is higher (versus lower), people demonstrate greater pass-along probability under exposure to severe ($M = 4.65$) versus moderate consequences ($M = 2.07$). We accept H3.

Though not formally hypothesized, we investigated the effects of violence intensity and consequence severity on the attitudinal variables of A_{ad} and A_b . In the case of A_{ad} , main effects of intensity ($F = 21.61$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .01$) and consequences ($F = 18.72$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .01$) and an interaction effect ($F = 7.5$; $df = 1, 160$; $p < .01$) were found. Higher vio-

TABLE I
Correct Recall and Correct Recognition of the Advertised Brand for Different Levels of Violence and Consequence Severity

	HiSev	HiMod	LoSev	LoMod	n
Delayed recall					
<i>Incorrect</i>					
n	16	24	28	28	96
%	44.4	70.6	73.7	75.7	
<i>Correct</i>					
n	20	10	10	9	49
%	55.6	29.4	26.3	24.3	
<i>Total</i>					
n	36	34	38	37	145
%	100	100	100	100	
Pearson $\chi^2 = 22.01, p < .01$					
Delayed recognition					
<i>Incorrect</i>					
n	9	18	18	21	66
%	25.0	52.9	47.4	56.8	
<i>Correct</i>					
n	27	16	20	16	79
%	75.0	47.1	52.6	43.2	
<i>Total</i>					
n	36	34	38	37	145
%	100	100	100	100	
Notes: HiSev = high intensity–severe consequences; HiMod = high intensity–moderate consequence; LoSev = low intensity–severe consequence; LoMod = low intensity–moderate consequence. Pearson $\chi^2 = 15.99, p < .05$.					

lence intensity resulted in a more favorable evaluation of the ad ($M = 4.33$) than lower-level violence ($M = 3.61$). In addition, those exposed to high-intensity violence (versus low) were more likely to evaluate the ad favorably under severe ($M = 4.88$) than moderate consequence conditions ($M = 3.78$). No significant effects were observed for A_b ($F = .97; df = 3, 158; p > .05$). Results of the analyses are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

We also tested for any possible gender effect on the dependent variables, but none was found (AMI, $F = .58, df = 1, 160, p > .05$; pass-on, $F = .93, df = 1, 160, p > .05$; A_{ad} , $F = .71, df = 1, 160, p > .05$; A_b , $F = .45, df = 1, 160, p > .05$).

Provocation Effects

Although violence intensity and consequences were found to be significant predictors of AMI, delayed recall and recognition, pass-along probability, and A_{ad} on their own, neither of these variables particularly explains why viral ads high in both would be passed on or viewed more favorably. Though not formally specified, we suggested that ads high in violence intensity and consequence severity would be more likely to be perceived as provocative by an audience. A two-factor ANOVA revealed this to be the case with main effects of intensity ($F = 39.65;$

$df = 1, 160; p < .01$) and consequences ($F = 5.08; df = 1, 160; p < .05$) and an intensity \times consequences interaction ($F = 7.19; df = 1, 160; p < .01$) observed. Specifically, the HiSev ad was rated as significantly more provocative than all other ads. Indeed, the low intensity violence ads are clearly nonprovocative (HiSev $M = 5.55$; HiMod $M = 4.12$; LoSev $M = 2.95$; LoMod $M = 3.08$).

On further inspection of the means of both pass-on and A_{ad} across treatment groups, it is clear that the HiSev ad is significantly better liked and more likely to be passed on than all other combinations. Given that we observed no significant humor differences among the groups, we conclude that provocation plays a role in driving such a response. By regressing the dependent variables against perceived provocation, this was confirmed (AMI $R^2 = .55, b = .74, p < .01$; $A_{ad} R^2 = .07, b = .22, p < .01$; pass-on $R^2 = .10, b = .32, p < .01$).

Discussion

It appears that violence intensity and consequence severity communicated within a humorous context may be powerful stimuli for gaining attention and enhancing memory for brand information. It also seems that the degree of provocation

FIGURE 2
Study 1: Pass-Along Probability

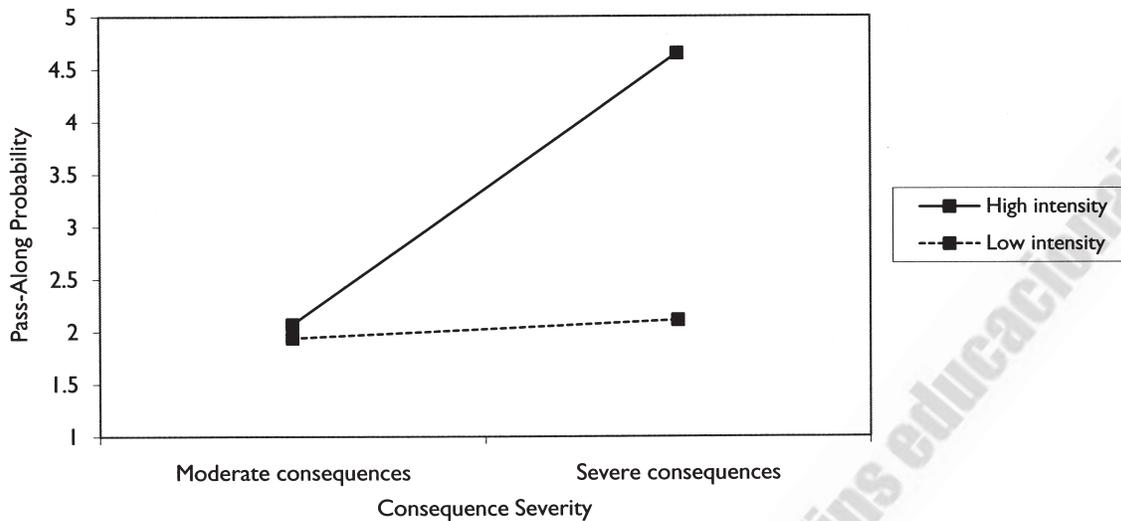


TABLE 2
Study 1: Mean Scores for AMI, Pass-On Probability, A_{ad} , A_b , and Humor Across Ad Stimulus Types

Stimulus type	Mean AMI	Mean pass-on	Mean A_{ad}	Mean A_b	Mean humor	<i>n</i>
<i>High-intensity violence</i>						
Severe consequences	5.64	4.65	4.88	4.95	5.02	40
Moderate consequences	4.80	2.07	3.78	4.82	4.97	41
<i>Low-intensity violence</i>						
Severe consequences	3.87	2.11	3.74	4.76	5.05	41
Moderate consequences	3.99	1.94	3.46	4.82	4.81	40

Notes: AMI = advertising message involvement; A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad; A_b = attitude toward the brand. Zhang (1996) humor scale reverse coded.

engendered by a viral ad has some influence in determining affective and behavioral response. If the ad is perceived as breaking social rules or being somewhat provocative, it may increase the favorability with which a viral ad is viewed. This may be due to the fact that individuals expect something different from viral advertising (Dobele et al. 2007). It may also be the trigger that encourages an individual to send it to third-party viewers as the requisite “uniqueness” threshold has been attained. Although the potential of comedically violent stimuli has been demonstrated by our results, we qualify our findings by suggesting that if the provocation were to reach substantially higher levels, a negative effect may be found, where the ad may no longer be perceived as humorous. While a bit of taboo violation may be well received, too much may simply be considered bad taste. In the present study, however, we did not test to such extremes.

We believe our findings with regard to attitudes are particularly notable. Attitude toward the ad may be enhanced

with violent humor, but it is important to note that attitude toward the brand appears to be neither adversely affected nor enhanced. Since advertisers are very concerned about affective responses to their ads, we therefore extend our investigation with a second study. Given what is known about the role of legitimacy in media portrayals of violence, we proceed to an investigation of whether violence that is perceived as justifiable is received better by an audience when viewing an ad that uses comedic violence. To improve the generalizability of our findings, we also test the possibility that comedic violence effects will vary depending on the perceived relatedness between the brand featured in the ad and the ad theme. We now expand on these issues.

Violence Legitimacy

Research into violent humor suggests that the perceived legitimacy of a violent act influences an audience’s response to

TABLE 3
MANCOVA for AMI, Pass-on Probability, A_{ad} , and A_b : Intensity x Consequences

	Dependent variable	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
<i>Main effects</i>						
Violence intensity	A_{ad}	21.34	1	21.34	22.03	.00
	Pass-on	71.81	1	71.81	66.15	.00
	AMI	66.55	1	66.55	43.18	.00
	A_b	.34	1	.34	1.50	.22
Consequences	A_{ad}	18.84	1	18.84	19.46	.00
	Pass-on	76.26	1	76.26	70.25	.00
	AMI	5.41	1	5.41	3.51	.06
	A_b	.06	1	.06	.27	.60
<i>Two-way interaction</i>						
Violence intensity × consequences	A_{ad}	6.99	1	6.99	7.22	.01
	Pass-on	58.77	1	58.77	54.14	.00
	AMI	9.37	1	9.37	6.08	.02
	A_b	.35	1	.35	1.53	.22
<i>Covariance</i>						
Perceived humor	A_{ad}	1.64	1	1.64	1.70	.20
	Pass-on	.03	1	.03	.02	.88
	AMI	.63	1	.63	.41	.53
	A_b	2.41	1	2.41	2.74	.10
<i>Model</i>						
	A_{ad}	47.67	4	11.92	12.31	.00
	Pass-on	205.71	4	51.43	47.37	.00
	AMI	81.19	4	20.30	13.17	.00
	A_b	13.30	4	3.32	14.55	.00
<i>Residual</i>						
	A_{ad}	152.02	157	.97		
	Pass-on	170.44	157	1.09		
	AMI	241.95	157	1.54		
	A_b	35.87	157	.23		
<i>Total</i>						
	A_{ad}	199.69	161			
	Pass-on	376.15	161			
	AMI	323.14	161			
	A_b	49.17	161			

Notes: MANCOVA = multivariate analysis of covariance; AMI = advertising message involvement; A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad; A_b = attitude toward the brand.

it (Bandura 2001; Raney 2003; Wicker, Barron, and Willis 1980; Zillman 1983). In discussing social cognitive theory, Bandura (2001) argues that violence that is justified is more attractive to viewers and more likely to influence their response. Research has also shown that retaliation that is too severe or too mild may arouse perceptions of injustice, and by doing so, impair the ability to appreciate aggressive humor (Zillman 1983), a view supported by Wicker, Barron, and Willis (1980), who also found inverse relationships between humor and excessive retaliation.

Zillman and Cantor (1976) suggest that an audience's perception of the legitimacy of a violent act is a key factor in its appreciation of the humor, a conclusion also reached by Raney (2003), who argued that justifiable violence is perceived

as more enjoyable. Mustonen and Pulkkinen (1997) provides additional support for this view, claiming that if an aggressor has a legitimate reason for violence, viewers are likely to give violent behavior the benefit of the doubt. The rationale is that a correspondence between deserving and receiving retaliatory treatment leaves viewers' sense of justice undisturbed and frees them to enjoy the depiction of such a situation.

The findings from Study 1 suggest that when paired with severe consequences, high intensity comedic violence in viral ads has a positive effect on A_{ad} . No empirical evidence is available that demonstrates a positive effect of justified violence on A_{ad} , but we propose that if legitimized violence is viewed more favorably than violence that is unjustified, such an effect may, in fact, occur.

Violent Humor Relatedness

It has been argued that viral advertising containing comedic violence is more likely to be used by certain industries than others, indicating a possible congruence effect (Porter and Golan 2006). The importance of humor relatedness to the product or message in an ad has been suggested by many researchers (Cline and Kellaris 2007; Madden 1982; Weinberger and Campbell 1991; Weinberger and Gulas 1992). It is believed that relatedness is a strong predictor of the success of an ad (Madden 1982; Weinberger and Campbell 1991).

Relatedness refers to the degree to which an ad component contributes to the communication of the main message. Related information is believed to support the ad theme, whereas unrelated information does not (Lee and Mason 1999). In a review of extant literature, Muehling and McCann (1993) found that attitudes toward ads are more favorable when an ad contains useful information. Lee and Mason (1999) demonstrate that relatedness has a positive effect on attitudes toward both the ad and the brand. Furthermore, Cline and Kellaris (2007) provide evidence that humor relatedness has a positive influence on mood. An individual's mood, in turn, influences how individuals process an ad (Smith 1993). We therefore propose that the use of brands that are perceptually related to the ad theme of a comedically violent viral ad will further enhance the positive attitudinal effects of legitimacy:

H4: The effect of legitimacy of comedic violence on A_{ad} will be stronger when thematic ad relatedness is higher than when it is lower.

STUDY 2

Method

Design and Stimuli

Study 2 tests effects of the legitimacy of violence and the relatedness of the ad and the product being advertised. Again, stimuli were created in the form of a viral advertising message. Four versions of the ad were created and presented to participants. They were the same as the high intensity–severe consequence and low intensity–moderate consequence ads in the previous study with an added difference. To vary the perceived legitimacy of the comedic violence, each scenario was preceded by a sequence showing the original victim provoking the original aggressor with a violent act of moderate intensity—pushing him off a chair and taking a cola drink from his desk. The context was therefore altered to a situation where the original violent acts could be viewed as retaliation, with one being a possibly justifiable response and the other being excessive and less justifiable.

For the more related brand condition, the same brand (Coke Zero), creative, and copy were used as in the first study. To create a less related match between product and creative content, a second brand was introduced, in this instance a high profile online job search brand (Seek). The tag line “How far would you go?” remained the same and appeared on screen in the same manner. The tag line was specifically chosen for its applicability in both studies and for both brands. However, the semantic distance between the copy and brand was planned to be greater for the job search brand. Furthermore, the violent acts in the ads involved a bottle of cola, which could be construed as a type of instrumental fit.

We checked the manipulations for Study 2 during the same test as for Study 1, with the same separate pool of respondents ($n = 131$). The first group ($n = 33$) was shown the HiSev Seek ad, while the second group ($n = 31$) viewed the HiSev Coke Zero ad. The third group ($n = 34$) was shown the LoMod Seek ad and the fourth group ($n = 31$) viewed the LoMod Coke Zero ad. After viewing each clip, participants were asked to complete two univariate scale items to assess whether the violent response to the provocation was justifiable (1 = extremely unjustified; 7 = extremely justified) and whether the product was relevant to the ad theme (1 = extremely irrelevant; 7 = extremely relevant). Between-subjects results show that the response using high-intensity violence was perceived as significantly less justifiable ($M = 2.39$) than the low-intensity act ($M = 6.03$); $t = 27.17$, $df = 1, 129$, $p < .01$. They also indicate that the cola brand was more related to the ad content ($M = 4.17$) than the job search brand ($M = 2.00$); $t = 21.03$, $df = 1, 129$, $p < .01$, although the cola brand was in fact only moderately related.

Participants and Procedure

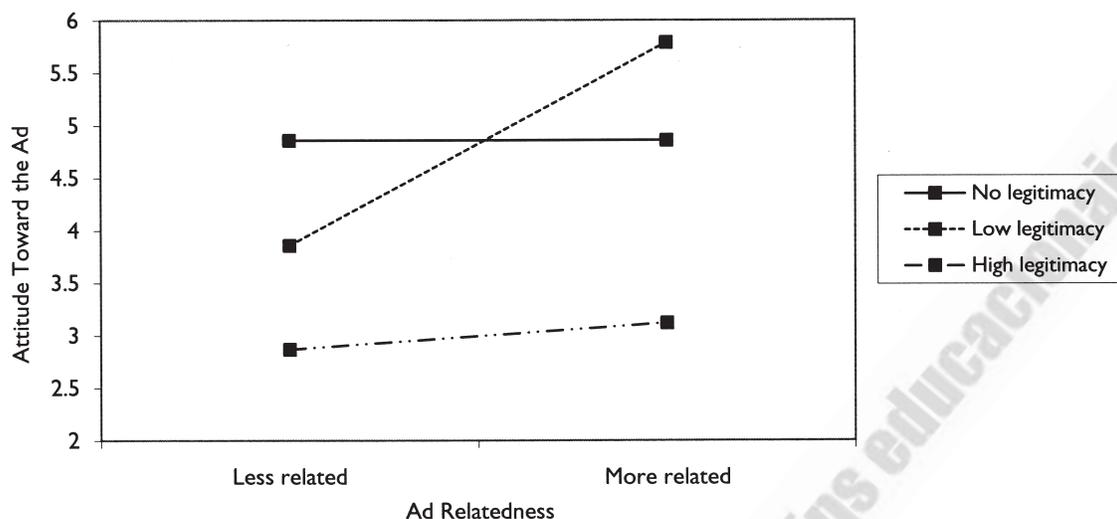
The procedure was identical to that of Study 1. A total of 159 respondents viewed the ads and completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 35.2%. Two participants mentioned the word “violence” when guessing the purpose of the study and were removed from the analysis. Final cells were as follows: high intensity–severe consequence, Coke Zero ($n = 39$); low intensity–moderate consequence, Coke Zero ($n = 41$); high intensity–severe consequence, Seek ($n = 38$); and low intensity–moderate consequence, Seek ($n = 39$).

Findings

Preliminary Analyses

Of the 157 usable responses, 78 were from females and 79 were from males. Ages ranged from 18 to 47 years, with a modal age of 31. Again, no significant differences were observed between any of the groups on the potentially confounding dimensions of

FIGURE 3
Study 2: Attitude Toward the Ad



Note: There was no less related–no legitimacy cell.

perceived realism ($F = 1.37$; $df = 3, 153$; $p > .05$), brand familiarity ($F = 1.15$; $df = 3, 153$; $p > .05$), and attitude toward viral advertising in general ($F = .08$; $df = 3, 153$; $p > .05$). Again, these variables were withdrawn from further analyses.

Manipulation checks of legitimacy and relatedness were performed using the same seven-point scales mentioned previously. Again, the questions were placed at the end of the questionnaire among the potentially confounding variables we tested. Results confirm that the ads featuring a moderate aggravating stimulus that was matched with a moderate response were perceived as significantly more legitimate ($M = 6.16$) than the ads where there was a severe response ($M = 2.54$); $t = 35.27$, $df = 1, 155$, $p < .01$. The ads featuring the cola brand were rated as significantly more related ($M = 5.46$) to the ad theme than the job search brand ($M = 3.68$); $t = 12.04$, $df = 1, 155$, $p < .01$.

Main Analyses

We proposed in H4 that the effect of legitimacy on A_{ad} would be stronger when relatedness is higher than when it is lower. Though not hypothesized, we also tested for effects on A_p . MANCOVA, again with perceived humor as a covariate, was the method of analysis. To test whether differences exist between ads that employ a preemptive aggravation stimulus and those that do not, we also included two cells from Study 1—the HiSev and LoMod conditions with Coke Zero as the target brand. They were collapsed and together represented a no-legitimacy condition. Essentially, this resulted in a de facto 3 (high/low/no legitimacy) \times 2 (more related/less related) mixed factorial design with five cells,

as we did not test a less related–no legitimacy condition. Main effects of legitimacy ($F = 62.27$; $df = 2, 154$; $p < .01$) and relatedness ($F = 48.01$; $df = 2, 154$; $p < .01$) and a legitimacy \times relatedness interaction ($F = 27.77$; $df = 1, 155$; $p < .01$) were found for A_{ad} . No covariance effect of perceived humor was found.

As depicted in Figure 3, A_{ad} for those in the low-legitimacy ($M = 4.81$) and no-legitimacy conditions ($M = 4.86$) was significantly greater than the high-legitimacy condition ($M = 3.01$), with no difference between low and no legitimacy observed. In other words, the HiSev conditions scored more favorably than the LoMod condition—findings that mirror those of Study 1. A_{ad} for those in the more related condition ($M = 4.59$) was significantly greater than the less related condition ($M = 3.36$). It was also evident that when perceived legitimacy was lower, A_{ad} was more favorable for the more related ($M = 5.79$) versus the less related brand condition ($M = 3.86$). The effect disappeared under conditions of high legitimacy. Notably, A_{ad} was also significantly more favorable for the low legitimacy–more related condition ($M = 5.79$) than the no legitimacy–more related condition ($M = 4.86$). Hypothesis 4 is partially supported, as brand/ad relatedness does appear to influence attitudes. However, the direction of the relationship between legitimacy and A_{ad} is a negative one. Results of the analyses are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

Also of interest is a main effect of relatedness ($F = 58.27$; $df = 1, 155$; $p < .01$) and a legitimacy \times relatedness interaction ($F = 10.62$; $df = 1, 155$; $p < .01$) found for A_p . In Figure 4, we can see that brands that are perceived as more related to the comedic violence appeal are evaluated significantly more favorably ($M = 4.86$) than brands perceived as less related

TABLE 4
Study 2: Mean Scores for A_{ad} , A_b , and Humor Across Ad Stimulus Types

Stimulus type	Mean A_{ad}	Mean A_b	Mean humor	<i>n</i>
<i>No legitimacy</i>				
More related	4.86	4.96	5.02	41
Less related	—	—	—	—
<i>Low legitimacy</i>				
More related	5.79	4.89	5.05	41
Less related	3.86	3.81	4.53	39
<i>High legitimacy</i>				
More related	3.12	4.73	4.64	39
Less related	2.87	4.31	4.51	38

Notes: A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad; A_b = attitude toward the brand. Zhang (1996) humor scale reverse coded.

TABLE 5
MANCOVA for A_{ad} and A_b : Legitimacy x Relatedness

	Dependent variable	Sum of squares	<i>df</i>	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Main effects</i>						
Legitimacy	A_{ad}	121.18	2	60.59	62.27	.00
	A_b	1.48	2	.72	1.92	.15
Congruence	A_{ad}	46.71	1	46.71	48.01	.00
	A_b	21.94	1	21.94	58.27	.00
<i>Two-way interaction</i>						
Legitimacy × relatedness	A_{ad}	27.02	1	27.02	27.77	.00
	A_b	3.99	1	3.99	10.62	.00
<i>Covariance</i>						
Perceived humor	A_{ad}	.10	1	.10	.11	.75
	A_b	.01	1	.01	.02	.89
<i>Model</i>						
	A_{ad}	235.15	5	47.03	48.33	.00
	A_b	36.23	5	7.25	19.24	.00
<i>Residual</i>						
	A_{ad}	185.86	191	.97		
	A_b	71.92	191	.38		
<i>Total</i>						
	A_{ad}	421.01	196			
	A_b	108.15	196			

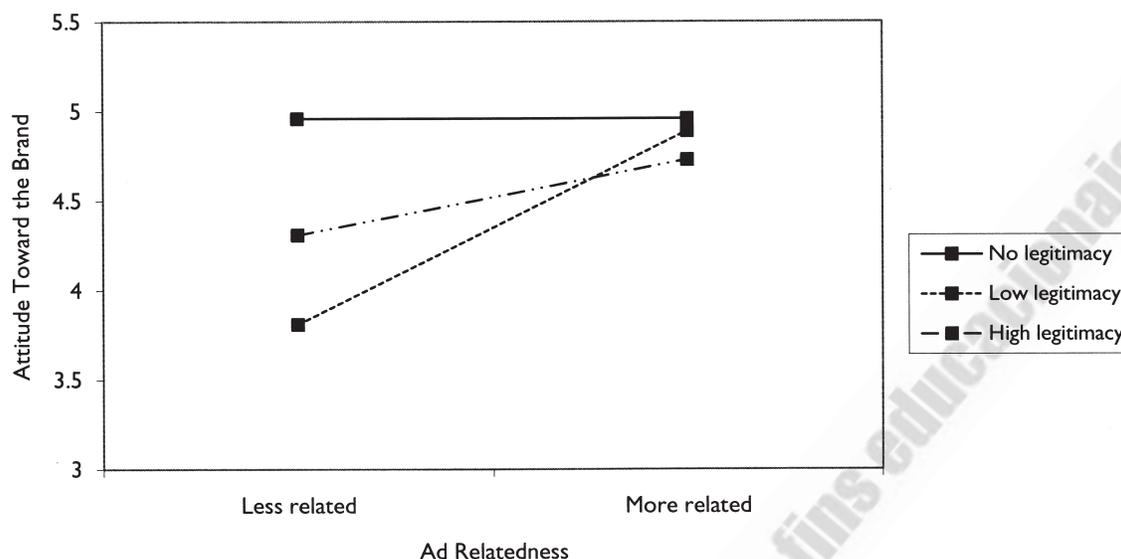
Notes: MANCOVA = multivariate analysis of covariance; A_{ad} = attitude toward the ad; A_b = attitude toward the brand.

($M = 4.06$). Furthermore, it appears that when legitimacy is low (versus high), comedic violence that is perceived as more related to the brand results in more favorable attitudes toward the brand ($M = 4.89$) than less related brands ($M = 3.81$). Although we did not hypothesize this relationship, it appears that high level comedic violence that is perceived as unjustified may impair evaluations of brands that are deemed as not relevant to the ad execution. The difference disappears when the violence is low level and perceived as legitimate. It may be a case of viewers reacting negatively to perceptions of irrelevant and perhaps gratuitous violence.

Discussion

Study 2 provides some unexpected but important findings. On the issue of whether comedic violence should include both a preemptive aggravation stimulus and subsequent response rather than an isolated, unprovoked violent act (no matter how humorous), our findings suggest that more extreme forms of comedic violence can benefit from the inclusion of the aggravation stimulus, yet only in terms of A_{ad} . A_b remains unaffected. In lower-level violence scenarios, including such a stimulus seems to be unnecessary.

FIGURE 4
Study 2: Attitude Toward the Brand



Note: There was no less related-no legitimacy cell.

Attempts to appropriately match the initial aggravation with a legitimate retaliation, although suggested by the literature, also appear to be unnecessary. The preference strength for high level comedic violence appears to far outweigh any influence that response matching might have. Such a result indicates that advertisers may be able to strive for maximum impact without having to justify an aggressor's actions. It would seem that under conditions of high level comedic violence, however, use of an initial aggravation stimulus may help to increase A_{ad} better than no such stimulus at all.

We also confirmed our expectations that both ads and brands using comedic violence perceived as less related to the brand tend to be evaluated less favorably than brands that are thought of as more related, but this occurred in the low legitimacy condition only. There appears to be a noticeable effect suggesting that if an advertiser wishes to employ the attention-getting executional element of high level comedic violence, for which we provide considerable support, the context should be in some manner relevant to the brand appearing in the ad. If it is not, the advertiser runs the risk of eliciting a smaller impact on both ad and brand attitudes.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Our research tested the effect of different permutations of comedic violence on key measures of effectiveness in the context of viral advertising. In doing so, we make the following contributions. First, across two studies, our findings

provide support for the conceptualization of comedic violence as comprising distinct intensity and consequence severity components and that the manner in which these are portrayed affects associated attitudes, behavior, and memory for ads and brands. Specifically, humorous ads that combine higher levels of violence intensity and more severe consequences appear to elicit greater involvement with the ad message. This finding is consistent with research into provocative advertising that has demonstrated the attention-getting properties of ads that surprise viewers while simultaneously violating expected norms (Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda 2003).

The presence of humor appears to contribute to effects beyond mere attention/AMI, however. Most provocative advertising studies have implied that A_{ad} is likely to be negatively affected, although this may not necessarily harm overall attitudes toward the brand. In our study, increased violence intensity and consequence severity couched in a humorous context appear to actually enhance A_{ad} , with A_b remaining unaffected. This is a noteworthy finding and demonstrates conditions under which provocative content may be used more constructively and with potentially less risk. The finding is also consistent with the literature on mood and feelings suggesting that humor may ameliorate negative evaluations (Batra and Stayman 1990; Lee and Mason 1999).

The results also indicate that humorous ads high in violence and consequence severity are more likely to be passed on to third-party viewers in a viral manner. The provocative nature of such ads appears to be the key driver of this finding. We also found that brands appearing in such ads are more memorable over the longer term (two to three weeks). Both unaided brand

recall and recognition were significantly higher, suggesting that the high-intensity violence and humor combination produces relatively stronger memory traces.

Our second contribution is in demonstrating that the representation of consequences has a significant impact on an audience's response to comedic violence. Although the majority of media programming does not emphasize the consequences of violence (Osborn 1993), we find that a show of severe consequences, especially when paired with an appropriately high intensity comedic violent act, can result in greater message involvement, greater retention of brand information, greater pass-along probability, and more favorable A_{ad} among the target audience than if moderate consequences are depicted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that advertisers favor minimizing consequences when employing comedic violence, yet such efforts may be misguided and unnecessary if the target audience is likely to be less receptive to the message, particularly in the viral advertising context.

Third, we have demonstrated that the use of a preemptive aggravation stimulus in ads that employ comedic violence may be warranted, but only in limited circumstances. We found evidence that violence that is perceived as somewhat legitimate appears to be more favorably received than violence that is completely unprovoked. This effect is only observed for A_{ad} under HiSev conditions, however. An explanation may be that when we witness maltreatment, we enjoy it more if we have preexisting negative sentiments toward the victim. This may occur as a result of that individual's previous actions (Raney 2003). Our results suggest that HiSev comedic violence that is to some degree justified tends to be viewed more favorably than unprovoked HiSev violence.

Contrary to our expectations that ads using low-intensity violence with moderate consequences when paired with a moderate and appropriate level of initial aggravation would be received more favorably than ads using a more excessive response, our findings suggest that ads employing high-intensity violence with severe consequences are perceived more favorably regardless of the aggravation–response matchup. We therefore conclude that it is better to include a preemptive aggravation stimulus in viral ads that involve higher level comedic violence but is unnecessary for ads containing lower level violence.

Fourth, we have confirmed previous research suggesting that brands that are perceived as more related to the message theme of the ad receive more favorable responses. It is important to note that this benefit particularly accrues under high intensity–severe consequence conditions, where the legitimacy for the violent act is perceived as low. Some research has shown that humorous ads that incorporate a less relevant matchup between the brand and the ad message may receive less favorable impressions (Lee and Mason 1999). In the case of the Coke Zero brand, overall perceived relevance was in fact moderate, but still comparatively more relevant than that of the Seek

brand. Future research might investigate brands that are highly relevant to the ad message and compare their findings with ours. However, our chosen brands reflected common practice in which provocative content is often low in focal integration with the brand (MacInnis and Stayman 1993).

Managerial Implications

For managers and advertising practitioners, our findings indicate that extreme comedic violence is an effective tool in generating interest, positive attitudes toward an ad, increased pass-along activity, and greater brand memorability. Stronger attitudinal effects are observed when the product featured in the ad is perceived as more related to the ad theme. Brands perceived as highly unrelated to the ad content suffer in comparison under conditions of high level comedic violence, with A_b being particularly susceptible. However, A_{ad} is still superior to that observed in lower level comedic violence ads.

It would seem that the use of high intensity comedic violence may be a useful strategy for enhancing viral advertising effectiveness through greater audience reach, higher levels of message involvement, increased ad liking, and better memorability for the brand. However, the findings of Study 2 suggest that the strategy is most effectively employed under HiSev conditions when the product is perceived as more related to the violent humor scenario. Furthermore, if advertising creatives choose to use a high-intensity form of violence with severe consequences, it is best to preempt such a scenario with an initial aggravation stimulus to balance perceptions of justice.

Limitations and Future Research

There are three limitations to our research that merit discussion. First, our sample, though randomly selected, may not be entirely representative of those likely to view viral ads in an Internet-enabled environment. We do not claim the results to be generalizable to people of all ages, nor indeed to other mainstream media. However, our sample, though tending toward being younger, nevertheless included numerous individuals over the age of thirty, so that the sample was not top-heavy with very young adults. Still, further research on a broader demographic sample may be warranted.

Second, the fact that our findings were derived from a random sample may itself be a limitation. Further research might be performed using a respondent-driven sampling approach to test for effects on a target audience that more closely resembles that reached in the viral advertising process. Both methods have weaknesses. Respondent-driven results may not be generalizable to the wider population, but results based on true random samples may not necessarily reflect the views of the population of interest—in this instance, individuals who are likely to receive such viral e-mail ads. Research has suggested

that individuals will generally pass along viral information to someone they think might enjoy it (Phelps et al. 2004) and advertisers would be unlikely to send a potentially provocative ad to their entire client base. It may be that viewers who particularly dislike this type of advertising may commence a viral campaign of their own to punish the advertiser. The strength of such reactions might be tested in further studies. However, the choice before us was to either use a random sampling procedure—which would allow statistical inference—or a targeted, respondent-driven procedure with the possibility of drawing conclusions about viewers who might receive this kind of advertising. Ultimately, we determined that greater generalizability would contribute more to our understanding of advertising theory and practice.

Third, a study such as this is necessarily complex, as it involves creating executions that are humorous, possess varying combinations of comedic violence, and are either more or less relevant to the product being advertised. We were able to achieve the required manipulations while accounting for possible confounds, but establishing product relevance was always going to be a challenge. The products and brands we chose to use were selected based on anticipated levels of familiarity and relatedness with the ad theme. Further empirical research with other kinds of products, perhaps highly related to the ad theme, would provide greater generalizability. In addition, researchers might examine stimulus effects at extremely high levels of provocation, to determine whether there are limits to the benefits of this executional format.

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