Coping with Crises: A Study of Humor Appeal in Moroccan Advertising during the COVID-19

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The emergence of COVID-19 prompted diverse advertising strategies globally, with humor appeal being one of the notable approaches. *Method.* Thus, the aim of this research is to examine and analyze the utilization of humor appeal in Moroccan advertising during the pandemic, employing a semiotic perspective. *Analysis.* The study adopts a qualitative approach and employs Barthes' model of denotative and connotative meanings for analysis. *Results.* The findings indicate that when humor is employed contextually, it significantly enhances the impact of the advertisements. The study reveals the creativity and adaptability of Moroccan advertising agencies in utilizing humor appeal to engage audiences during the crisis. *Conclusion.* This research highlights the effectiveness of humor appeal in advertising during unprecedented times, providing insights into adaptive advertising strategies through a semiotic analysis of the Moroccan context.

Keywords: advertising; denotative meaning; connotative meaning; COVID-19; humor appeal; semiotic analysis

Krizių įveikimas: humoro taikymo reklamose per COVID-19 Maroke tyrimas

Santrauka. *Įvadas.* COVID-19 pandemija paskatino įvairias reklamos strategijas visame pasaulyje, o humoro taikymas buvo vienas iš dažniau taikytų metodų. *Tyrimo metodas.* Šio tyrimo tikslas – ištirti humoro panaudojimą reklamose Maroke pandemijos metu taikant semiotinę perspektyvą. *Analizė.* Tyrime taikomas kokybinis metodas, o analizei pasitelkiamas Barthes'o denotacinių ir konotacinių reikšmių modelis. *Rezultatai.* Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad, kai humoras naudojamas kontekstualiai, jis gerokai sustiprina reklamos poveikį. Tyrimas atskleidžia Maroko reklamos agentūrų kūrybiškumą ir gebėjimą prisitaikyti naudojant humorą, kad pritrauktų auditoriją krizės metu. *Išvados.* Šis tyrimas išryškina humoro taikymo veiksmingumą reklamoje precedento neturinčiais laikais ir, atlikus semiotinę Maroko konteksto analizę, pateikia įžvalgų apie adaptyvias reklamos strategijas.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: COVID-19; denotacinė reikšmė; konotacinė reikšmė; humoro apeliacija; semiotinė analizė; reklama

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the events that seriously affected human life around the globe, while at the same time creating challenges and opportunities for advertising agencies. In times of struggle, many turned to appeal strategies such as humor appeal, seeking its ability to provide a respite and foster connection.

The pandemic has worsened the national economy but has created some urgent adjustments when it comes to advertising strategies. Humor appeal was one of the most effective strategies used by emotional advertisers. Sternthal and Craig claim that "the presence of humor in an advertising appeal might be determined on the basis of whether puns, jokes, understatements, turns of phrases, double entendres, satire, irony, slapstick, or incongruity were used" (1973, p.13). Moreover, it is defined at the level of positive arousal and laughter displayed by consumers; nonetheless, we should take into consideration that "not all humor provides pleasure to all recipients" (Madden & Weinberger, 1984, p. 23). Consumers are more easily engaged and persuaded when humor appeal is employed effectively. It can help the company stand out from the crowd, even in a saturated market, and it can help build trust and rapport with the target audience (Yousef et al., 2021); however, while using humor appeal in advertising, attention must be paid to avoid offending customers. In other words, a certain type of humor can bring about joy to one group but can lead to anger to another group. All in all, humor appeal is an efficient tool in several cases, since consumers accept it as unique media because it is a source of amusement (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Scott et al. (1990), hence, believe that the smartest way to reach out to the audience is when humor appeal is used in every respect with the goals and messages that the advertisement delivers.

Research Aim

This study aims to examine the humor appeal in Moroccan advertisements during the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing Barthes' semiotic approaches. It seeks to provide insight into how advertising agencies capitalized on the quarantine period to foster a connection with their target audience through subtle messages. The study's primary objective is to analyze, interpret, and decode the humorous messages used in Moroccan advertisements during the COVID-19 pandemic. By evaluating the efficacy of advertisers in concealing the promotion of their products while driving sales, the study explores the effectiveness of humor appeal in advertising. It provides preliminary evidence of the methods used by advertising agencies to engage with customers during a challenging period. The findings are intended to inform advertising professionals and scholars about the role of humor in advertising during times of crisis. With these objectives in mind, the subsequent research questions were formulated:

a) In what way is humor used in Moroccan advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic?
b) To what extent is the semiotic approach effective in decoding the use of humor in Moroccan advertising?

Literature review

Humor in the Moroccan context

In Moroccan popular culture, humor is essential and is expressed through various performances, physical comedy, and storytelling. It brings people together, whether from the same neighborhood or across the country (Elkhayma, 2021). While other forms of humor such as singing, acting, masquerade parties, and joke-telling exist in Morocco, this study focuses on visual humor in advertising posters.

Moroccans dealt with the pandemic in their own unique way, using humor based on their culture, beliefs, history, and needs. Initially, humor served as a coping mechanism, but as the situation worsened, it developed harsher and more critical tones, often self-critical. This evolution reflected shifting social mores and persistent hardships, changing humor's original intent of promoting optimism and empathy to a more critical posture towards established standards.

Humor is deeply intertwined with culture, as illustrated by the varying humor attributes in Morocco and Britain. In the Moroccan context, humor reflects the country's unique cultural nuances, emphasizing the importance of understanding the local culture to fully appreciate its humorous content (Elkhayma, 2021). These cultural nuances are crucial in a semiotic analysis, as they help decode the symbols and signs present in humorous content. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Moroccan Facebook pages used humor through memes, serving as a coping mechanism and conveying critical views on governance, social control, and resistance (Mifdal, 2022). This use of humor in the local culture highlights the interaction between societal issues and humor, which is essential for a comprehensive semiotic analysis. Analysis of gender representations in Moroccan print advertising reveals persistent stereotypical gender roles. This suggests that while humor is used as a persuasive tool, it often operates within the constraints of established societal norms, reflecting the broader cultural context (Yamani, 2020). In contexts like Pakistan, humor appeal in advertising is leveraged extensively to engage consumers, suggesting a potential parallel in Moroccan advertising. The role of humor appeal in breaking monotony and attracting consumer interest highlights its strategic importance in advertisement design and its cultural adaptability (Baig et al., 2020).

Humor typology

Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) categorize humor into seven types: slapstick, clownish humor, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody. This typology helps understand the use of humor in media, including advertising, by activating various cognitive and emotional responses within the audience. This framework is particularly useful in studying advertising during pandemic times.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a major reshuffle in global advertising strategies. Moroccan advertisers used humor appeal to motivate people under stress and uncertainty, providing relief and fostering a sense of community and resilience. Firstly, slapstick and

clownish humor in Moroccan advertisements created light-hearted, relatable content that offered an escape from the grim reality of the pandemic. By exaggerating everyday situations under lockdown, advertisers resonated with audiences through shared experiences. Secondly, elements of surprise or humorous misunderstandings in advertising captured the audience's attention, providing unexpected relief or laughter and breaking the monotony of pandemic life. Thirdly, irony, satire, and parody were used to critique or comment on the pandemic response, societal behaviors, or the advertising industry itself. This strategy engaged audiences in deeper, reflective laughter, provoking thought while entertaining. The pandemic, with its complex emotions, transformed humor into forms of absurdist or surrealist irony tinged with bitterness, or satire that critiques social or political issues (Mifdal, 2022).

Humor during crises

During times of crisis, individuals often seek ways to alleviate their pain and sorrows. Humor, recognized as "one of the healthiest and most powerful methods in providing perspective on life's difficult experiences" (Suntanoff, 1995, as cited in Torres et al., 2020, p. 2), provides an escape from the tragedy and unbearable reality of events like the pandemic. It helps alleviate emotional tensions (S. Booth-Butterfield & M. Booth-Butterfield, 1991) and fosters the feeling of empathy and interconnectedness, which is crucial for enduring predicaments (Gimbel & Palacios, 2020).

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of humor in various contexts, including advertising. Humor diverts people's attention, increases their adaptation levels (Jäger & Eisend, 2013), and expands the range of positive emotions they can interact with (Gimbel & Palacios, 2020). Humor appeal increases advertising effectiveness by enhancing attention, liking, and recall (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992; Eisend, 2009). It also positively impacts brand attitude and purchase intention (Shabbir & Thwaites, 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, advertising agencies utilized humor appeal to connect with customers and promote their products. Studies found that humor in advertisements and social media memes was used as a coping mechanism and to promote healthy behaviors and social distancing measures (Torres et al., 2020; Gimbel & Palacios, 2020).

Advertisements with a humorous touch perform better during crises, with audiences more likely to see the brand favorably and make a purchase. Humor appeal helps advertisers connect with their customers and promote healthy behaviors during the pandemic.

Humor in advertising

Humor appeal. The long-lasting competitiveness among advertising agencies invariably pushes an ongoing impact on consumers' psyche by making use of the emotional side. Emotions are influential in promoting products (Cho, 2021), and humor, as a key emotional tool, significantly affects consumers' emotional impact more powerfully than other advertising tools (Eisend 2009; Eisend & Tarrahi, 2016). However, the theoretical background on the uses of humor in advertising remains underdeveloped (Eisend, 2017),

as "the how, why and when humor works, or does not work, is still a topic of concern for scholars and advertising practitioners" (Weinberger & Gulas, 2019, p.2). Humor is generally accepted by audiences in various media contexts because it entertains them (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Studies show that humor enhances memory retention when it is both convincing and relevant to the message, mediated by the consumer's interest and state of mind (Cline & Kellaries, 2007). However, the message itself should remain the focus to maintain credibility; otherwise, the advertisement risks becoming merely a funny distraction (Spott et al., 1997). Humor improves attention (Madden & Weinberger, 1982), fosters acceptance of the advertised product (Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990; Lee & Mason, 1999), and increases engagement (Zhang & Zinkhan, 2006). Nevertheless, it can sometimes harm a brand's status by diverting attention away from the product (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003). Research also indicates that humor has little effect on behavioral persuasion variables such as compliance, purchase intentions, or brand choice (Strick et al., 2013, p. 33). Weinberger and Gulas (1992) note that humor appeal in advertisements does not necessarily outperform nonhumorous advertisements in encouraging purchases. However, advertisements that leverage emotional appeal, including humor, are more effective than those that do not incorporate emotions (Geuens et al., 2011).

Humor and persuasion. Persuasion is described as a deliberate attempt to impact someone else's mindset through communication, with the understanding that the individual being persuaded retains a degree of autonomy (O'Keefe, 1990).Top of Form Humor can aid in persuasion by fostering a positive mood (Kuiper, McKenzie, & Belanger, 1995). Persuasion theory suggests that individuals in a positive emotional state are more inclined to accept a persuasive argument, as they are less likely to resist or counter the message (Freedman, Sears, & Carlsmith, 1978).

Humor could also enhance persuasion during the COVID-19 pandemic by boosting the audience's affinity towards the message's source. Specifically, employing humor may reveal a common sense of humor, suggesting shared values, which is crucial during times of crisis (Meyer, 1997). Additionally, the mood elicited by a persuasive message amidst the pandemic could be associated with the message's originator, influencing how the message is received (Sinclair, Mark, & Clore, 1994). This mechanism suggests that humor, by fostering a connection and positive feelings towards the source, might be particularly effective in communicating important messages during the challenging times of COVID-19.Top of Form

Although humor is prevalent in advertising, research contradicts a one-sided bias toward humor's effectiveness in persuasion. While humor can enhance persuasion, not all studies show significant, or positive or consistently positive effects of humor on persuasion (Weinberger and Gulas 2006). Moreover, Chattopadhyay and Basu (1990) state that humor's effectiveness is contingent on various factors, such as the advertisement's intensity and the audience's preexisting attitudes towards the product. Specifically, humor may bolster the appeal of a low-key, "soft-sell" ad, whereas it might undermine a more aggressive, "hard-sell" approach. Similarly, humor appears more effective for those

already inclined positively towards the product, contrasting with its ineffectiveness for those with prior negative attitudes.

A semiotic approach

Since advertisements are made up of signs (whether they are visual or auditory), semiotics has always been a useful method for deciphering their hidden meanings. Semiotics seeks to explain the wide variety of sign systems in use throughout society and examines the contexts in which humans attribute meanings to signs other than the intended ones, or perceive alternative signs in accordance with a predetermined purpose (Zakia & Nadin, 1987). In the analysis of advertising, the goal of semiotics is to reveal the layers of hidden messages that create signification systems, as advertising profoundly affects people's emotions (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). By and large, the semiotics of advertising clarifies what a sign stands for, the way it is demonstrated, and why it carries a certain significance (Danesi, 2002).

Word-image relationship. Barthes' analysis on text and image interaction introduces "anchorage" and "relay" as key concepts (Leeuwen, 2005). "Anchorage" is where text clarifies an image, directing the viewer to a specific interpretation, similar to specifying details within a broader context. "Relay" describes a collaborative relationship between text and image, each providing unique, related information to enhance overall understanding, akin to expanding on a topic with both verbal and visual elements.

Denotative and connotative meanings model in advertising. According to Barthes, a semiotic analysis relies on two levels of signification: denotative and connotative meaning. The first refers to the literal or evident meaning of the sign, excluding any subjective judgments (Barthes, 1977). It is the initial level of signification, representing what we all see, regardless of our backgrounds, beliefs, or social structures. The second is "a message by eviction, constituted by what is left in the image when the signs of connotation are mentally deleted" (Barthes, 1977, p. 42). Within the signification system, the denotative message is important to the connotation because of its analogical features. Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the cultural or symbolic message and "comprises signifiers, signifieds, and the process which unites the former to the latter (signification)" (Barthes, 1967, p. 91). According to Fisk (2011), signs function through connotation, interacting with the feelings, emotions, and cultural values of people. Barthes proposed that connotative meaning includes signifiers and signifieds, and the process that binds them together (Barthes, 1967). Connotation cannot exist without denotation; it always operates on the borrowed territory of the denotative meaning (Jamieson, 2007). In other words, denotative image refers to what you literally see, while connotative image encompasses the associations and feelings it evokes. In advertising, designers often play with these two aspects to create messages that go beyond mere description, seeking to influence the public's perceptions and emotions.

Methodology

To address the research question, we primarily applied a qualitative approach to data analysis. We focused on visual materials, such as advertising posters on social media related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and reviewed relevant articles, books, and other sources. We employed Barthes' model of denotative and connotative meanings, along with his concepts of anchorage and relay, to analyze and deconstruct the advertisements.

The reason why we have chosen Barthes' approach is that it offers distinct insights that make it especially compelling for the analysis of cultural texts and media. First of all, the semiotic model is clear and gives a good holistic framework for the analysis of signs. This allows for a very sophisticated, textured understanding of texts, which is necessary for the kind of in-depth analysis of media. Barthes' model can also uncover cultural and ideological texts. By focusing on the connotative meaning, it leaves analysts with the tools to dig out the layers of culture and ideology with which texts are burdened. In fact, it is this context that has the utmost relevance for areas like media and the advertising domain, in that they are areas which do require the extraction of cultural meaning and ideological position presented in images and texts. For example, in a study by Hajjaj (2018), Barthes' model is used in an analysis of Jordanian cartoons, establishing how body language can be used to connote and hence manifest power of the model in cultural analysis. Generally speaking, in contrast to Barthes, Peirce's semiotic model categorizes signs into icons, indices, and symbols, focusing on the logical relationships between the signifier and the signified (Liszka, 1996). While Peirce's triadic model delves into the foundational aspects of semiosis, Barthes' dyadic approach (denotative and connotative meaning) offers a more user-friendly framework for dissecting the cultural and societal implications of signs. Moreover, Barthes' model, with its emphasis on practical analysis tools, is particularly apt for applied media studies. Peirce's more abstract theory, though profound, tends to be less directly applicable to the analysis of specific media texts.

As concerns data analysis, we followed a detailed methodological approach. We selected advertising posters related to the COVID-19 pandemic shared on social media. We described the literal, explicit content of the advertisements and provided translations of any textual elements. We interpreted the implied, suggested meanings and emotional responses that the advertisements aim to evoke. We analyzed the social, cultural, and historical context in which the advertisements were created and circulated. We analyzed the relationship between text and image in the advertisements, explaining how the text anchors the meaning of the image and how the text and image work together to convey the overall message. We analyzed how humor is constructed and its role in advertisements by describing how the personification of some products and their human-like features create humor. We also discussed whether the humor appeal in these products was efficient in engaging the audience and conveying the intended message. We evaluated the overall effectiveness of the advertisements in achieving their persuasive goals, considering how well the advertisements use visual and textual elements to communicate their messages

and discussing any potential drawbacks, such as unintended negative connotations or cultural differences in humor reception.

The analysis also discussed how incongruity plays a significant role in humor appeal in advertising. Presenting unexpected or out-of-place elements can create humorous outcomes that enhance advertisements' effectiveness. According to incongruity theory, the element of surprise or the jarring aspect of a situation is what makes it funny. Humor occurs when reality differs from one's expectations, and the realization of this shift leads to amusement. Such theories emphasize the importance of surprise as a comedic trigger (Beard, 2014). In this view, humor lies in the resolution of incongruity. Some products refer to how much the message of an advertisement runs against the norms of consumer culture (Alden et al., 2000).

There is no doubt that semiotic analysis at the level of the connotative image is fraught with complications and can have countless interpretations, because people will have different readings for the same lexia (image) based on their practical, national, cultural, and artistic knowledge (Barthes, 1977).

Results and discussion

Denotative and connotative image (Figure 1)

Figure 1. **Illustration of *MARRAKECH* orange juice brand, depicting an orange fruit peeking through a half-open door**

Figure 1 depicts a cartoon character (*MARRAKECH* orange juice product) anthropomorphized as an orange fruit peering through a half-open door. The look on his face conveys confusion and skepticism as he doubts the veracity of breaking such a long curfew. At the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Moroccan government ordered citizens to stay indoors. The expression "*Is it true that we can go out now? Are you attempting to fool me?*" is the literal translation of the Arabic text in the speech bubble, signaling the end of the lockdown.

The *MARRAKECH* advertising poster uses humor to persuade the audience to take action (Stevens, 2018). Advertisers invest in humor because it positively affects com-

munication, suggesting that humor may act as a reward for the audience's attention (Sternthal & Craig, 1973). When people are in a good mood, they are more susceptible to persuasion (Herold, 1963).

Paradoxically, inappropriate use of humor can damage a product's image and create barriers to effective communication (McCollum & Spielman, 1982). For example, orange juice, which contains vitamin C and aids in immune defense (Carr & Maggini, 2017), is represented by a cartoon character indirectly propagating fear of COVID-19. This may lead to unintended consequences due to differences in taste and context (Gulas, 2006).

Anchorage and relay (Figure 1)

As regards anchorage, the text in the speech bubble is anchoring the meaning of the image. The character, a personified orange juice bottle, expresses doubt and skepticism about the end of the curfew through its question, "Is it true that we can go out now? Are you attempting to fool me?". Then, the text in the speech bubble works in relay with the image of the orange juice character peering out of a door. The character's expression and posture suggest caution and the text relays this by putting into words the character's skepticism.

The humor here stems from anthropomorphism, which is a common technique in humor theory. By attributing human emotions and behaviors to an inanimate object like an orange juice bottle, the advertisement generates a humorous effect. This humor can also enhance the persuasive effect by making the message more engaging and memorable (Eisend, 2009).

Figure 2. **Illustration of a *HALLS* hard candy product showing a man with a frozen mask**

Denotative and connotative image (Figure 2)

Figure 2 denotes a middle-aged man wearing a mask that appears to be icy. The eyebrows, eyelashes and some frontal hairs are covered in ice. The letter *'H'* is stamped on the center of the mask and is an indication of the hard candy product *HALLS*. The latter is highly visible and is positioned in the bottom right of the poster. As regards the man, his countenance, specifically his eyes, delineates a sense of excitement and chill.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, people commonly wore masks to protect themselves

from infection. Wearing masks hides facial expressions, impacting communication and understanding among humans (Nestor et al., 2020). A sense of humor is the first reaction the audience receives from this poster, thanks to the wide eyes.

During the peak of the infection, many people began to remove masks due to resistance to airflow and pain related to the accumulation of facial heat, especially in hot conditions, which resulted in a lack of compliance with safety rules (Scarano et al., 2020). Nevertheless, this poster uses humor as a clever marketing strategy, suggesting that people can continue wearing the mask while feeling refreshed by the cooling effect of *HALLS* candy.

Anchorage and relay (Figure 2)

The poster serves as a metaphor for the product's cooling sensation, with the 'H' stamped on the mask directly tying the visual metaphor to the *HALLS* brand and reinforcing its identity. The visual connection between the icy mask and the *HALLS* logo anchors the viewer's interpretation, ensuring they associate the cooling effect with the brand. The concept of relay is evident in the relationship between the image of the man and the product packaging at the bottom right of the poster.

While there's no textual narrative, the relay implies that consuming *HALLS* will give you a chilling sensation, as indicated by the man's icy appearance. His excited and surprised eyes convey the intense sensation of the candy, and the ice suggests the specific quality of that sensation – a chill. This exaggerated reaction is humorous, playing on the idea that *HALLS* provides such a powerful cooling effect that it could turn your breath, and even your mask, icy. Moreover, the humor relies on the incongruity of the image (Veatch, 1998), where masks are usually associated with warmth and protection, not ice and cold.

Denotative and connotative image (Figure 3)

The first general remark from Figure 3 is that the four fingers are shaped like a humanoid family, with the parents and their two children smiling while posing for a photograph. The caption at the top of the poster, written in Moroccan dialect, translates to "*Do not touch your face with us until we have been cleaned with water and soap.*" The product webpage is on the left, and the *ONI* brand is prominently displayed on the bottom right. Overall, the photo presents a bright and clear scene.

The poster, intended to be humorous, actually conveys a range of feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic. The four fingers, personified as a happy family, evoke feelings of comfort and a wide range of positive emotions such as love, protection, admiration, empathy, reassurance, and cooperation (Fisher, 1950). Advertisers use this sentimental appeal to create Emotionally Competent Stimuli (ECS), evoking profound feelings that convince consumers their family-friendly purchases are as meaningful as other aspects of their lives (Heath, 2012).

During the outbreak, frequent face-touching with hands contributed to the rapid spread of the virus. The poster subtly alerts customers to the seriousness of the pandemic by humorously personifying the fingers as family members. Although the product is a clean-

ing solution, the logo plays a crucial role in persuading consumers to purchase *ONI*, as it associates the act of touching one's face with feelings of family and comfort, thus driving higher sales. Finally, the caption "Do not touch your face with us until we have been cleaned with water and soap" humorously suggests that everyone has a family they must protect from contamination by using the *ONI* soap solution before touching their face.

Figure 3. **Illustration of the *ONI* cleaning brand depicting each of the four fingers as lifelike family members.**

Anchorage and relay (Figure 3)

The text in Moroccan dialect anchors the image of the fingers portraying a family to the importance of hand hygiene. Without this text, the image could be open to various interpretations, but with the anchorage, the meaning is directed towards a message about health and cleanliness, specifically in the context of preventing the spread of germs by touching one's face with unclean hands. Moreover, the text and the image work together in relay to tell a story and send a message. The humanized fingers form a family portrait, which creates a narrative about togetherness and care, and the caption complements this by suggesting that to take care of each other (like a family does), one must practice good hygiene. The visual metaphor of the fingers as a family suggests symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and implies that all parts of the body should be cared for and that cleanliness is a collective responsibility.

Denotative and connotative image (Figure 4)

Figure 4 is a poster from *MARRAKECH* juice product featuring a personified orange in the form of a cartoon superhero combing its hair. The facial expression reveals self-confidence, arrogance, and power. The character has a big "C" for "vitamin C" emblazoned on the chest, from which beams of light emanate. The poster's background features Moroccan Zellij mosaic tile work. The caption, displayed in the upper right corner on a yellow background, translates to "*vitamin C promotes immunity.*"

Figure 4. **Illustration of the *MARRAKECH* orange juice brand presenting an orange as a cartoon superhero.**

Figure 4 immediately evokes the image of a superhero, a fictional character embodying the hero archetype with extraordinary powers used for the greater good (Brown et al., 2016). Superheroes are role models for qualities like courage, power, and intellect, and their positive attributes can be associated with the advertised product. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world needed a superhero to save people. The Orange superhero, humorously chosen, represents vitamin C, which is part of nutritional care and may improve immunity (Abobaker et al., 2020). The beams of light symbolize the superhero's strength in defending against the virus. The use of Moroccan Zellij hints at the superhero's origin, associating the juice brand with Morocco.

Anchorage and relay (Figure 4)

The text "*vitamin C promotes immunity*" anchors the superhero imagery to the health benefits of vitamin C. Without the text, the orange superhero image could represent various ideas, but the anchorage narrows it down to the immune-boosting quality of vitamin C in *MARRAKECH* juice. The confident superhero character with its 'C' emblem and beams of light conveys strength and protection. The caption relays this by attributing these qualities to vitamin C and the juice itself. The character's action of combing its hair suggests that consuming *MARRAKECH* juice (and vitamin C) imbues one with pride and vitality. The humor arises from the personification of the orange as a self-assured superhero, comically exaggerating the benefits of vitamin C. The character's arrogance and the act of combing its hair add whimsy and memorability.

Denotative and connotative image (Figure 5)

Figure 5 is an advertising poster for *Trident*, a popular brand of chewing gum known for its long-lasting flavor. The poster features personified cartoon fruits (lime and passion fruit) lounging on beach beds, wearing sunglasses, and appearing content. A portable, inflatable recreational pool for children is placed next to the fruits as a substitute for the

beach. At the lower right, a hand holds a *Trident* chewing gum product. The dominant colors are green and purple, representing the fruits. The poster is set on a rooftop, raising interesting questions that will be addressed in the following section.

Figure 5. **Illustration of *Trident* sugar-free chewing gum, depicting two cartoon fruits (a lime and a passion fruit) relaxing on a beach bed**

Before analyzing the denotative image of Figure 5, it is important to mention that to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Moroccan government instituted measures such as gathering and travel restrictions. The entire population was ordered to stay indoors, with exceptions for essential activities like going to the doctor or grocery store, making beach excursions strictly prohibited.

The personified fruits appear to be enjoying themselves, reflecting an overall sense of well-being, which is important for social and economic success (White, 2010). Well-being reflects the quality of life people experience or the degree to which they feel satisfied with their environment (Knight & McNaught, 2011). Psychological well-being is the ability to control emotional and behavioral reactions to life's adversities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Keyes et al., 2002). During tough times, the company aimed to spread cheer while promoting its chewing gum product through the poster.

Figure 5 demonstrates the incongruity of going for a swim or basking on a rooftop, intended to pique the viewer's interest and elicit a laugh. Here, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) (Ruch et al., 1993) provides a framework to analyze humor in various texts, including verbal, written, and visual forms. It identifies six knowledge resources (KRs) used to understand and produce humor. Using the GTVH, we can analyze the Trident chewing gum advertisement poster for its humor content:

1. *Script opposition (SO): The opposition lies in the incongruity of fruits (which do not have human characteristics) being personified and engaging in very human activities – lounging and sunbathing. Additionally, there is an opposition between a typical beach scene and the makeshift rooftop setting, which replaces the expected ocean setting.*
2. *Logical mechanism (LM): The mechanism here is anthropomorphism combined with a situation replacement – fruits on a rooftop instead of humans on a beach, which are humo-*

rous because they subvert our expectations. The portable pool stands in for the sea, which adds to the absurdity.

3. *Situation (SI): The setting is a rooftop during what appears to be a sunny day, which suggests leisure and relaxation. During COVID-19 times, when people may have been restricted from traveling to beaches, the scene cleverly reflects how people had to adapt their leisure activities.*
4. *Target (TA): The target of the humor could be the lifestyle changes people had to undergo during the pandemic – resorting to leisure at home rather than traveling.*
5. *Narrative strategy (NS): The narrative suggests escapism and making the best of a situation. By depicting the fruits as if they are on vacation, the advertisement playfully implies that Trident gum can transport you to a more relaxed, enjoyable state no matter where you are.*
6. *Language (LA): The visual 'language' includes the use of vibrant colors associated with the fruits (green and purple) and the playful setup with sunglasses and a pool. Brand placement and this kind of imagery provide an air of carefree joy.*

There are positive connotative meanings attached to the colors naturally associated with both fruits. Green color connotes renewal, hope, youth, peace, coolness, and tranquility, while purple symbolizes passion, creativity, inspiration, and royalty (Morton, 1997). The use of blue in the inflatable pool is linked to nature, associating it with the sky, fish, and the ocean (Morton, 1997). The scene under the advertising poster subtly hints at a beach atmosphere, which was unavailable to people during the lockdown. In addition, a depiction of a rooftop can convey various meanings. In the context of the pandemic, it symbolizes a lookout post, providing a panoramic view and an opportunity to step back and gain perspective. It may also represent a place to unwind, offering excitement and enjoyment in exploring new areas.

Anchorage and relay (Figure 5)

The anchorage here is subtle but evident; there is no explicit text directing the interpretation of the image. The recognizable brand of *Trident* chewing gum, along with the visual metaphor of fruits relaxing as people would, suggests the pleasure and relaxation associated with enjoying the gum. The gum in the lower right corner serves as the anchoring element; without it, the scene might simply be a quirky depiction of fruit. With it, the scene suggests that the flavors of the gum are as enjoyable and refreshing as a day of leisure. The relationship between the image of the personified fruits and the product (*Trident* gum) operates in relay. The fruits on the loungers convey relaxation and enjoyment, while the presence of the gum implies that these feelings can be experienced by consuming the product. The sunglasses and recreational pool play into the narrative of taking a break and enjoying the moment, much like one would savor the taste of the gum.

The humorous depiction of fruits enhances engagement and memorability, facilitating persuasion (Nabi et al., 2007). The persuasive power of this advertisement is further reinforced by its visual rhetoric. The calm, inviting scene encourages viewers to associate the product with positive emotions and experiences, a strategy that goes hand in hand with the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Conclusion

Applying the principles of Barthes' semiotic analysis at the level of the connotative image has demonstrated that humor appeal in advertising is a potent tool for engaging consumers' sentiments, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of anchorage and relay highlights how textual and visual elements cooperate to guide interpretations and deliver coherent, humorous narratives in advertisements. This research highlights the importance of contextually relevant humor to enhance advertisement impact, encouraging community engagement and helping people cope during difficult times. Using various humor types provided a welcome diversion from overwhelming sadness, facilitated coping with social changes brought on by the pandemic, and illuminated the psychology of emotional advertising.

The findings indicate that most figures in this study successfully used humor appeal and comic characters to advance their agendas. However, not all attempts were successful. For instance, the humor appeal in Figure 1 appeared weak and illogical, which is unsuitable during a health crisis. Instead of being engaging, the humor felt forced, resulting in the advertisement's failure to communicate the intended message effectively. This highlights the necessity for advertisers to ensure that their humor appeals align with the audience's emotional state and the broader social context to avoid negative impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for advertising to use humor as a means of emotional appeal, reaching a broad audience. Most figures here successfully and consciously used humor appeal and comic characters to advance their agendas, bringing us to our second point: some of the connotative images made are likely deliberate. Signs are interconnected and challenging to understand in isolation; the COVID-19 pandemic provided the necessary framework for these semiotic investigations in the present study. Consequently, the study's interpretations and implications offer some insights into how visual advertising data can be interpreted semiotically. Although various meanings can be derived from a single advertisement poster, this research provides a partial comprehension of how emotional advertising works.

We recognize that our research has some limitations, including the complexity of using a semiotic method. According to Fuller (2021), it is difficult to place Barthes within the standard classification scheme due to his extensive body of work and complex language. Thus, it is challenging to comprehend Barthes' semiotic approach because his claims are complex. Future research should consider evaluating advertising from other prominent semiotic figures' perspectives to gain a broader understanding.

Practically speaking, for advertisers, the study highlights the need to carefully consider the cultural and emotional context when employing humor appeal in advertising. Humor that resonates well with one group may alienate another, emphasizing the importance of targeted and culturally sensitive advertising strategies. For researchers, this study demonstrates the utility of Barthes' semiotic analysis in uncovering the deeper meanings and societal implications embedded in advertisements. Further research can build on these findings to explore new dimensions of humor appeal and its effectiveness across different media and cultural contexts.

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