Anna Stwora
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

The Intricacies of (Debatable) Humour in Advertising: A Cross-Cultural Standpoint

Abstract

Given the marked presence of humour in many areas of thought and language, as well as in people's social, emotional, and aesthetic experiences, it comes as no surprise that humour studies are considered an interesting interdiscipline worth studying. This paper is, therefore, an attempt at joining three academic fields, namely advertising discourse, Cultural Linguistics, and humour studies. The author will enquire into the operation of (debatable) humour applied in multimodal advertising discourse. She will make the cultural aspect the focus of attention in order to highlight the role of cross-cultural differences in the perception of humour. Based on her previous studies (Stwora 2020a, 2020b) on attitudinal responses to controversial humorous ads in English, she will join in an exploratory discussion with a view to showing the ways in which ad reception may be influenced by the culture-specific force of humour. Working towards a more comprehensive outlook on humour in use in the context of advertising discourse, the present paper will start with a few words on humour in general and on debatable humour in ads. Then, the cultural side of humour will be discussed. Finally, the author will discuss her research from the cultural standpoint.

Keywords: humour studies, Cultural Linguistics, advertising discourse, cross-cultural studies

1. Introduction

There is certain ambivalence about humour, for it has this unique power to connect or divide people, to amuse or hurt them (Borysławski *et al.* 2016: 7), depending on individual and cultural differences alike, which "may make it impossible for some people to laugh at the same time" (Lewis 2006: 15). This ambivalence should also be taken into account when weaving humour into advertising since it may result in the creation of controversial humorous ads. Funny as they may be, such ads may often be seen as offensive or distasteful too, especially when perceived by people coming from different cultural backgrounds because cultural conceptualisations heavily influence responses to humorous content. That

is why this paper is an attempt at joining three academic fields, namely advertising discourse, Cultural Linguistics, and humour studies. The author will enquire into the operation of (debatable) humour applied in multimodal advertising discourse. She will make the cultural aspect the focus of attention to stress the role of cross-cultural differences in the perception of humour. Based on her previous studies (Stwora 2020a, 2020b) on attitudinal responses to selected controversial humorous ads in English, she will join in an exploratory discussion with a view to showing the ways in which ad reception may be influenced by the culture-specific force of humour.

Drawing on Huizinga [1938] (2007), it can be said that fun is the source of culture, which superbly and incessantly plays with the serious/humorous opposition (Borysławski *et al.* 2016: 7). At the same time, culture has a dramatic impact on what we deem humorous, as even the most innocent anecdote may seriously offend culturally distant recipients… or even two different people belonging to the same cultural realm, yet differing in terms of psychographics, disposition, mood, taste, worldview, and the like. Thus, working towards a more comprehensive outlook on humour in use in the context of advertising discourse, the present paper will start with a few words on humour in general and on debatable humour in ads. Then, the cultural side of humour will be discussed. Finally, the author will discuss her research from the cultural standpoint.

2. A cognitive approach to humour

As any other type of communication, humour is cognitive, for it involves a host of mental operations and enriching implications and connotations, which make the perceiver interpret, compare, and transfer meanings appurtenant to various patterns of thought. It is said that people may find something funny provided that it "diverts from the cognitive model of reference" (Forabosco 2008: 48). In other words, humour itself rests on "the enjoyment of cognitive shifts, i.e., the enjoyment of sudden changes" (Dynel 2018: 3) between two (or more) script oppositions, which, in turn, are defined as prototypical knowledge structures and well-established routines of thinking evoked instantaneously by specific chunks of semantic data, both textual and visual (Raskin 1985: 46). Scripts usually involve chains of events, and therein lays their dynamic nature which differentiates them from more fixed cognitive schemata (Yule [1996] 2011: 85–86). On this account, scripts can be likened to narratives, for they are characterised by "a temporal sequence of events linked by a series of actions undertaken by characters" (Chłopicki 2017: 144). They consist of rudimentary mental representations of recurrent, structured plots, cause-and-effect links, prototypical figures, places and objects, and their stock features.

For these typical scripts (or scenarios) to produce humour in the course of shifting to the interpretation other than the most salient one, it is imperative that the said scenarios be *overlapping* and *opposing* at the same time. Overlapping occurs when the meanings retrieved are "compatible with more than one reading" (Attardo 1994: 203); it is therefore based on polysemous senses which match more than one interpretation. The opposing condition, on the other hand, "is satisfied when the two overlapping scripts also oppose each other in a certain way" (Kianbakht 2020: 4). Although they may be seen as belonging to one category, or one continuum, or as sharing certain marked points of resemblance, they are still incongruous, offering contrasting meanings, as in the case of the most basic sets of opposing scripts put forward by Raskin: actual/non-actual, normal/abnormal, and possible/impossible (Raskin

1985: 111). These oppositions collide in the mind of the perceiver, causing tension "between two frames of reference / worlds of discourse / codes / associative contexts" (Krikmann 2009: 17) and thus producing humour. As quickly noticed by Chłopicki (1987), Raskin's original list of script opposition types should further include necessary/unnecessary, much/little, and absence/presence so that it takes cognisance of full richness and diversity of possible binary oppositions. Note that humour may arise on several planes simultaneously, i.e., embrace more than one pair of oppositions at the same time (Chłopicki 2000, 2006; Krikmann 2006).

Opposition entails duality; consequently, it is imperative that the audience hold two cognitions, one of which represents a violation of expectation, known as an *incongruity*. For humour to emerge, it is vital that the scripts remain distinctly incongruous, that is, upon the activation of the less salient but congruent meaning, the one which was initially more salient must still linger in the mind of the perceiver (Giora 2003). This cognitive transition from one scenario to another is what marks humour and constitutes the bedrock of the incongruous juxtaposition theory.

3. The intricacies of (debatable) humour in advertising

While many humorous cognitions and resultant incongruous oppositions are quite universal across various perceivers and cultures, some topics and ways of picturing things may be considered inappropriate because joke tellers do not always play it safe and thus may upset people's sensibilities. Advertisers are no exception to the rule. They often reach for shockvertising strategies to attract consumers' attention, sometimes by means of abusive or insulting concepts, controversial themes, and graphic imagery; they gradually increase the dose of surprise and shock to get noticed, for yesterday's shock may come to be seen ordinary over time (Halvadia, Patel, Patel 2011: 33; *cf.* LaTour, Tanner 2006). Nonetheless, they sometimes forget that humorous creativity and freedom of expression do not necessarily mean "they have to be as offensive as possible in the mistaken belief that they are being funny and radical" (Peck 2008). It cannot be denied that "today's infotainment clutter puts pressure on advertisers to come up with more surprising and more memorable ads. This need for novelty, creativity, and astonishment does set the expectation bar high, steering ads towards various means of eliciting surprise, including humour, shock, and taboo" (Stwora 2020b: 113).

On the plus side, debatable humour in ads may increase attention levels. In general, since ads are parasitic upon emotions, whose impact is of crucial importance in advertising, both positive and negative feelings conveyed in ads can be used to capture the prospects' attention effectively (Pitrus 1999: 111). Humour in ads, controversial or not, can further contribute to building brand's image through positive association with something funny, increase ads' attractiveness, and aid in ad recall, as well as provide entertainment, which may "predispose an individual towards developing liking for a product" (Stwora 2020a: 135) and sometimes even reduce counterarguments to ads' claims. Nevertheless, a pinch of humour, if too caustic, grim or deprecating, may cause a reverse process and sour the feelings towards a given advertisement. Ads that employ such debatable humour may be interpreted as too shocking or offensive for a variety of reasons, such as "the presence of nudity, violation of societal norms, [the presence of] disgusting images, sexual references, vulgarity or moral offensiveness" (Halvadia, Patel, Patel 2011: 30). Some of these ads are benign, yet some may prompt an upheaval so extreme that they

spark off heated public debate on the appropriateness and limits of humour in certain cases (*e.g.*, famous advertising campaigns for Benetton spiralled into an uproar, as the audience erupted in protest at the impropriety of the images used for mostly commercial purposes). It is an axiom that the juiciest topics sell, yet there are ads which use humour to poke affectionate fun at others and ads which simply offend, and the line between the two varieties is sometimes really thin.

The problem is that humorous ads may not necessarily amuse different people, let alone cultural communities in the same way because, overreaching as it is, humour still presents a difficult conundrum for many researchers due to its interdisciplinarity and multifacetedness. Apart from the formal, linguistic, and paralinguistic markers of humour, there is a host of other aspects conditioning humour in ads, such as the audience, medium, and product factors. But the freedom of humorous expression and reception of humour itself are fundamentally rooted in social and cultural relations too, which makes the issue even more complex. In the case of global ads addressed to international audiences, it seems difficult to produce universal humour that would respect all group tastes and socioculturally-motivated audience circumstances (Milner Davis 2013: 11).

4. The cultural side of humour

While discussing humour, it is impossible not to mention the decisive role of culturally motivated conceptualisations, patterns, and presuppositions in linguistic theories of humour. In fact, it is cultural convention that moulds the approved forms of self-expression, both of humorous and non-humorous nature (Milner Davis 2013: 8). Following Hofstede, the term *culture* will be understood as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede 2015: 2), which shapes shared thinking patterns, attitudes, behaviours, and emotions alike.

The cultural side of humour seems to be best captured by the multidisciplinary field of research known as Cultural Linguistics (hereinafter CL) proposed by Sharifian (2017a, 2017b), which looks into the relationship between language, cognition, and cultural conceptualisations (Sharifian 2011, 2015). Being the tools of CL, cultural conceptualisations (i.e., cultural categories, cultural metaphors, and cultural schemas) are used "to study aspects of cultural cognition and its instantiation in language" (Peeters 2016: 1) because language communicates and embodies conceptualisations. It is particularly relevant to the topic under discussion since "culturally constructed elements, such as humour, are subject to significant influence from cultural contexts in which they are used" (Kianbakht 2020: 9).

Humour is dynamic and interactive, which means that it ultimately depends on (1) the scripts available and (2) the cultural context, which includes the community of practice in which it occurs (Sinkeviciute, Dynel 2017). As regards the former factor mentioned, incongruous scripts can produce humour only if the specific discursive context allows for the recognition of the scripts intended by the producer of humour; in other words, the incongruity between the scenarios involved needs to be resolved in the mind of the perceiver. And when it comes to the cultural factor of the community of practice, it embeds humour in a specific sociocultural setting, which is far more intricate a network than it appears because it consists of entangled, conventionally acceptable ways of communicating, showing, and saying things (Kecskes 2015: 114). For instance, some jokes, or ads, claimed to be funny in a particular cultural context by one audience may not be easily transferrable to other sociocultural contexts without losing

their humorous value to other recipients; it is a matter of semantics and pragmatics alike, for it is not only the form, but also content which has to be translatable into the target culture. One pertinent example of an English joke using local humour coupled with wordplay is shown below:

> My wife asked me if I was having an affair with a woman from Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndr obwyllllantysiliogogogoch. I said: "How can you say such a thing?" (Barrie 2016)

The multidimensionality of humour lies in both language and culture. Naturally, the unpronounceable single-word Welsh name denoting a village may seem funny just because of its ridiculous length, yet its jocularity is further enhanced by local sociocultural divisions within the United Kingdom that make Englishmen laugh at the Welsh. People in general are more likely to poke fun at the group they do not belong to because mirth flows from comparison to the other. When they joke about another group, they engage in a form of social bonding as regards in-group relations (Davies 2012), "albeit sometimes at the cost of denigrating other groups" (McKeown 2017). The same "us-versus-them" pattern can be seen all over the world, yet with regard to different groups. "For example, the French tend to enjoy a joke about the Belgians while Swedes make fun of Norwegians. Indeed, most nations have a preferred country that serves as a traditional butt of their jokes" (McKeown 2017) (*e.g.,* popular Polish jokes that subscribe to the Pole-German-and-Russian format). This pattern is traceable not only at the international, but also at the local level since the "us-versus-them" jokes can be found in many regions, cities or even neighbourhoods (*e.g.,* the Polish city Katowice often laughs at the neighbouring city called Sosnowiec).

Reverting to the joke above and its (un)translatability, one could think of replacing the name of the village with another pertinent tongue twister of a name, such as Szczebrzeszyn, whose difficult pronunciation stressed in the poem by Jan Brzechwa earned it a reputation as a Polish tongue twister. Nonetheless, such a solution would still be insufficient to convey all the humour expressed in the original since the humorous factor is also present in the punch line "How can you say such a thing?" It rests on witty wordplay, referring to several possible interpretations: (1) "How come you can actually pronounce such an unpronounceable name?" and (2) "How dare you say such a thing?" or (3) "Nonsense! Have you lost your mind?" This equivocal meaning would be lost in translation into Polish, for "Jak możesz tak mówić?" ('How can you say such a thing?') is not synonymous with "Jak udało ci się to powiedzieć?" ('How come you can actually pronounce it?').

These and similar constraints involved in the transfer of humour between SL and TL are legion not only in jokes, but also in certain ads whose contextual embeddedness is a necessary condition for humour to emerge and be understood by the target audience. Take, for example, the social media ad for Lidl Polska (2019) published on Lidl's Facebook profile. Its visual layer is rather simple; the bar of chocolate advertised is set against a white-and-green background and the slogan "Czekom" is written in a white font resembling the one used in memes. The body copy of the ad is located in the post that elaborates on the slogan and reads: "To ja, najczęściej kupowana mleczna czekolada z całymi orzechami laskowymi w Polsce! [slightly smiling face emoji] Czekom na Ciebie w Lidlu [red heart emoji]." Rendered into English, the former sentence would sound: "That's me, the most frequently chosen milk chocolate with whole hazelnuts in Poland!" The latter, on the other hand, is far more complex since it contains humour based on culture-specific references to the Silesian dialect whose jocular function is twofold in the ad discussed.

Firstly, the audience is faced with a linguistic (and cultural) clash between "czekać" ('to wait' in standard Polish) and the vernacular Silesian form "czekoć" that contributes to the creation of the pun and results in a comic effect. And secondly, it is a basis for wordplay because the verb "czekoć" ('to wait' in

Silesian) in "Czekom na Ciebie w Lidlu" ('I'm waiting for you at Lidl') and the Polish name for chocolate, i.e., "czekolada," share the same stem. Given the ads' strong localisation, any attempt to translate such humour would in all likelihood miss the mark. Thus, as the examples adduced above show, reference to foreign languages or language varieties and their speakers (who belong to the category labelled as "the other") as objects of ridicule seems not uncommon (see Bleichenbacher 2008).

With reference to cultural heritage expressed through visual language, another example of a strongly localised advertisement that would be difficult to transfer across cultures is the ad for LUX MED medical centres (Signs.pl 2006). It features an oil painting by Jan Matejko entitled "Rejtan. The Fall of Poland" (1866) which depicts the protest of Tadeusz Rejtan against the First Partition of Poland. In a desperate attempt to prevent other Polish noblemen from selling the country, Rejtan lies himself down in the doorway and bares his chest. Nonetheless, the ad for LUX MED healthcare providers does not focus on any patriotic symbolism but on Rejtan's chest, adding the picture of a doctor's hand holding a stethoscope. This shift of focus from Matejko's "vision of the events and people responsible (…) for the loss of freedom" (Kępa 2012) to bare chest exposed for medical examination is unexpected and (ridiculously) amusing since the scripts involved (actual/non-actual, possible/impossible, and historical/modern) are too incompatible to be reconciled. Note that it is unclear whether it was the advertiser's intention to produce humour, though. The slogan reads: "Medycyna jest sztuką" ('Medicine is art'), thus elevating healthcare provided by LUX MED into an art form, which may serve as an indication that the ad was conceived as a serious message. Notwithstanding, given the presence of formal humour indicators, such as script oppositions and divergence from prototypicality (and thus from the perceiver's expectations), the ad may be decoded as amusing (see Stwora 2020c). Ultimately, reception depends on the eye of the beholder irrespective of whether the meanings inferred were contained in the original message or not.

What is more, since it is cultural artefacts that determine human cognitive landscape and, hence, what we perceive as amusing, it comes as no surprise that differences in humour perception stem, *inter alia*, from disparities in terms of cultural heritage. Because Matejko's painting remains largely unknown to the global public outside Poland, the ad's trans-cultural rendition aimed at foreign audiences would require the abandonment of "Rejtan" and its replacement with another, locally recognised work of art featuring a bare chest. Nonetheless, such an alteration would change the whole message, for reaching sameness across artefacts of different cultures seems impossible a task; it appears unlikely that two works of art could possibly convey exactly the same mixture of meanings and emotions, not to mention the fact that time changes the general perception of artwork too. Therefore, an ad that draws from cultural heritage expressed through visuals would probably require verbal and visual translation, i.e., where the pictorial is changed so as to stay meaningful and appeal to the target culture (on cultural stereotypes in the translation of advertising material see Torresi 2004, 2008). The central question in this context is whether the output can still be considered a translation or already an adaptation, marked by culture-specific themes or their conspicuous absence in the form of taboo topics.

As stated by Prodanović Stankić, "cultural conceptualisations mark not only humorous discourse itself in terms of different levels and units of language (*e.g.*, speech acts, idioms, metaphors, grammar, etc.), but also language use and community practices (*e.g.*, when it is (in)appropriate to joke and which form of humour to use in the given situation)" (Prodanović Stankić 2017: 100). Since culture is an essentially cognitive, "intellectual construct" (Grucza 1992: 41), information retrieved from one's

cognitive landscape differs across individuals, depending on their cultural background. That is why it is imperative to conduct comparative studies investigating specific instances of language and humour in use, which can help to uncover cross-cultural variation. Such studies allow for more in-depth analyses and may lead to "breaking down cultures and examining their components (Sharifian 2015, 2017a, 2017b)" (Kianbakht 2020: 20).

> Sharifian (2011: 5) maintains [that] language is deeply rooted in a group-level cognition that emerges from the interactions between members of a cultural group. Since language and culture are inseparable, intertwined and closely related, it is evident that language is one of the tools for storing and conveying cultural conceptualisations that emerge from the group-level cognition across time and space. (Kianbakht 2020: 10)

Nonetheless, such studies on cross-cultural differences in terms of conceptualisations and humour are still nascent. That is why the present paper places emphasis on the cross-cultural standpoint of humour research with a view to opening up discussion on culturally motivated perceptions of jocular abuse, not only in the context of advertising.

5. Culture and controversial humour in ads – an exploratory discussion

For the purpose of her study, the author decided to choose several random multimodal ads in English she deemed controversial, i.e., the ones that were likely to be seen as abridging the freedom of expression by featuring nudity, sex, violence, blood, etc., thus potentially crossing the limits of what is acceptable to show in ads. The illustrative material was used in her previous studies (Stwora 2020a, 2020b) on attitudinal responses to controversial humorous ads in English and will be referred to herein in order to serve as one of the bedrocks on which an exploratory discussion on culture and controversial humour in ads will be based.

To begin with, the goal of previous studies carried out by the author was (1) to check ad appreciation of Polish and Taiwanese research participants based on a set of press and internet multimodal ads in English which could be perceived as bordering on distaste or controversy, and (2) to draw cross-cultural comparisons so as to trace similarities and differences in terms of ad appreciation. For the purpose of her first research into controversial humour (Stwora 2020a), the author prepared a research instrument in the form of an online questionnaire in Google Docs (Appendix A), in English, which she distributed to the students and graduates of the Institute of English and the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures of the University of Silesia, Poland; she thus gathered answers from 130 informants, 80 per cent of whom were females (18–30 years old). Subsequently, she gathered answers from 51 Taiwanese respondents, mostly from the National Taiwan Normal University (Stwora 2020b); again, female respondents prevailed, as 60 per cent of them were females. Also, it should be noted that 67 per cent of the said informants aged 18-30 while the remainder were in their 30s. The results provided by male and female participants were not that different in spite of unequal gender representation, which is why gender variable was not taken into account in the abovementioned studies. Both groups surveyed were composed of very fluent speakers of English. Their task was to fill in self-reports on rating scales with the aim of checking their liking of each of 15 multimodal ads intended to be humorous. Not only were they asked to choose the

"liking" or "disliking" option, but also to state whether they found the ads in the sample inappropriate, disgusting or offensive. Next, research participants rated each ad on a Likert-type scale so as to gauge the ads' humour value; the four-point scale ranged from very favourable, positive, and ambivalent, to a negative attitude towards the ads rated. A couple of further open-ended questions followed in order to check ad comprehension.

Having described research participants, objectives, and methodology, the comparative results for both Polish and Taiwanese surveys should be summarised. On the whole, the analysis of trans-cultural similarities and differences "revealed that cultural programming is capable of dominating one's liking for an ad and perception of its humour value" (Stwora 2020b: 124). Though the unevenness of those relatively small data samples should be borne in mind, the analysis yielded interesting results. Table 1 shows a comparative overview of Polish and Taiwanese taboo topics based on the study. Naturally, the findings herein presented may not generalize to all advertisements and the research sample itself could potentially limit transferability between research contexts. Notwithstanding, the observations made should be treated as indicators of certain marked tendencies.

Table 1. Comparative overview of Polish and Taiwanese taboo topics based on the study

Taboo topic	Poland	Taiwan
Hostility / Superiority		x
Religion	x	
Sexual orientation	x	
Sex (implicit depiction)		x
Sex (explicit depiction)	x	x
Politics		x
Violence		x
Blood		x
Death		x

For instance, it turned out that the humourisation of the controversial as regards religion was not received well by Polish informants, predominantly belonging to the Christian Catholic Church; religious themes were the main axis of humour in the ads for Antonio Federici Ice Cream and United Colours of Benetton (for a more detailed analysis see Stwora 2020a and Stwora 2020b), with the former showing sinful priests and the latter featuring the Pope and the Sheikh of the Al-Azhar Mosque kissing each other. Polish respondents found these ads neither funny nor appropriate, also because of the fact that the ads mentioned featured homosexuality. It turned out that Polish research participants were less tolerant when it came to the topic of homosexuality than their Taiwanese counterparts, which may suggest greater "mechanical inelasticity" (Revi 2014: 112) of the Polish group in terms of controversial humour aimed at religion and playing with the theme of sexual orientation. Conversely, because modern Taiwanese humour is considered a melting pot, as it "greatly overlaps with Chinese humour and is influenced by Hong Kongese and Japanese humour" (Chen 2017: 12), it may be said to display greater elasticity in terms of preference for religion as the butt of the joke. In Taiwan, "there are many religions and while some come from other cultures, many have developed locally" (Chen 2017: 194), making it easier for the local society to joke about the topic due to this plurality. As noted above, poking fun at those who

belong to the category labelled as "the other" is more common than laughing at oneself. At the same time, it should be stressed that the results "could have been reversed if the study had been based on more Eastern ads and jokes about Taiwan and its local cultural taboos" (Stwora 2020b: 124) since Taiwanese participants' religion was not the butt of the joke.

Parenthetically, it should be added that the ad with kissing religious leaders was deemed unfunny and rude by Polish respondents but the ad showing Merkel and Sarkozy in exactly the same situation was received well and was considered funny. Apart from their aversion to the topic of religion in advertising, one may suspect that laughing at political leaders is seen as not only less inappropriate, but also as more liberating, for "laughter at the expense of authority is a process of disregarding the power, a process of denial of subservience to the authority" (Revi 2014: 105), which does not threaten the spiritual side of the individual, so to speak, and thus the personal aspect of the self. Interestingly, in his book, Chen (2017) says that joking about Taiwanese politics in Taiwan would not win acclaim since such humour could be seen as a face-threatening act. With respect to conflict avoidance and maintenance of social harmony, Jiang, Li, and Hou (2019) observe that "Easterners tend to use more adaptive humour, while Westerners tend to use more maladaptive humour," which, to some extent, explains Poles' favourable attitude to political humour.

While Polish research participants were less tolerant when it came to the topic of religion or homosexuality than their Taiwanese counterparts, they had nothing against implicit sexual themes (though both groups surveyed opposed to any explicit depictions thereof). Furthermore, Poles often appreciated non-commercial ads that contained the images of blood or pertained to violence, saying that humorous yet shocking content is sometimes necessary in advertising to stir the audience's emotions and stimulate their interest. Conversely, any images of violence, blood or even implicit sexual themes were unfunny and distasteful to Taiwanese informants, and so were those which involved the topic of death, which is generally avoided in the Chinese culture as a deep-seated taboo (cf. Jacoby 2018). Moreover, whenever Taiwanese research participants "detected sexual or hostile humour, they did not appreciate it, unlike their Polish counterparts" (Stwora 2020b: 124). These observations bring one's attention to the culturally imposed sanctity of certain mental territories (Revi 2014: 98). In essence, when moral, ethical, aesthetic, political, religious, or emotional issues, either personally or culturally motivated "and held with unquestionable importance by specific subject(s), are trivialised into crude caricatures or humorous conjectures, this sanctity is threatened and offence is delivered" (Revi 2014: 112). These issues, however, differ across cultures which set different frameworks of good taste, appropriateness, tabooness, and (im)politeness, which, collectively, make up the realm of the ethics of mirth (Milner Davis 2013: 4).

It is certainly worth mentioning that the observations made on the basis of the author's yet unpublished doctoral thesis (Stwora 2020c) suggest that the issue of the intended audience and the place of origin of the ads examined may be vital, especially when humour is one of the parameters analysed. Cultural pre-conceptions may have the potential to change the ways people perceive concepts, and hence discourse, encoded in other languages than their mother tongue. CL and humour studies should therefore look into the possible influence of L1 mappings on the reception of any material expressed in L2 because such mappings may lead to creative, yet not always correct interpretations (Heredia, Cieślicka 2015). The cultural aspect heavily conditions the way people think; it determines what is laughable and what is not, as well as which topics can be subject to ridicule. That is why there are so many "differences in target themes of jocular behaviours, as well as the issues occasioning negative evaluations thereof" (Sinkeviciute, Dynel

2017), determining whether the audience finds something funny or not, based on "conventions and rules about humour designed to channel its expression and impact" (Milner Davis 2013: 4). It may therefore be argued that, with the help of appropriate cultural knowledge, we can predict the trajectories of humour in discourse and gauge the possible, culture-specific range of "issues related to the disruption of social harmony" (Sinkeviciute, Dynel 2017), *e.g.*, concerned with laughing at taboos and values or exploiting stereotype-based, potentially offensive jokes.

6. Conclusions

In view of this exploratory discussion, it seems evident that the question of extent to which humour is subject to cultural variation should receive consideration in further humour studies viewed through the lens of CL. Such studies on cross-cultural differences in terms of varying conceptualisations of humour in discourse are still nascent, yet necessary to understand the ways in which both humour and ad reception may be influenced by culture-specific forces. Given the cultural embeddedness of humour in the specific context in which it is produced, the pragmatic perspective should not overlook cultural factors while trying to understand the workings of humour. While there are many universally applicable theories of humour, the butts of jokes vary across cultures because of varying knowledge patterns and cognitions distributed across specific cultural groups (Sharifian 2011: 3). Looking into the discursive and cultural side of humour is, in fact, the only way to embrace its polyphonous diversity and universality at the same time.

Comparative studies can shed more light on the issue, for they can answer "the question of how to understand and predict failures better" (Stwora 2020b: 125), and the said failures are threefold. They are concerned with (1) failures to convey the meaning intended, which make the ads unsuccessful from the marketing point of view; (2) failures to produce humour, which can not only leave people unamused, but may also offend certain audiences; and (3) failures to observe culture-specific contexts in which the ads operate. As regards the use of debatable humour in advertising discourse, playing with broadly conceived tabooness, possibly controversial topics or potential elicitors of disgust should be preceded by opening one's mind to other cultures and their idiosyncrasies so as to avoid setting off controversy by cultural insensitivities.

On the basis of the author's previous studies cited in this paper, it can be claimed that "the assumption of cultural universalism often becomes less tenable with regard to cultural remoteness" (Stwora 2020d: 147). In order to make sure that the possibility of its falling short of the mark is lessened, humour, not only in ads, should be geared to its target audience since its ability to cross borders (and other broadly-conceived contextual boundaries) may many a time remain sharply limited by the joke teller, the butt of the joke, and the contextual factors (Gulas and Weinberger 2010). The list of factors that condition humour in discourse is very long, making it necessary to go beyond purely one-dimensional research. To the author's mind, it is imperative to take the cultural aspect into account at all times so as to paint a more holistic picture of humorous ads and their perception across cultures. Though it is tempting to focus solely on the individual level of conceptualisations, on idiosyncratic interpretations of the perceivers, which can lead to insightful generalisations, researchers should not lose sight of the fact that there are important overreaching patterns typical of specific cultures, which result from the

negotiation of meanings across time in a given culture (Kianbakht 2020: 10; see Sharifian 2017a). These complex patterns of collective cultural conceptualisations shape human perception of what is funny or controversial and should definitely receive more scholarly attention in future research because they are the key to understanding human cognition and communication, of humorous and non-humorous nature alike.

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Appendix A

Courageous or rude? A questionnaire on print and internet advertisements

READ THIS INTRODUCTION BEFORE PROCEEDING

Ladies and Gentlemen,

the following anonymous questionnaire is designed with the aim of investigating your responses towards advertising messages intended to be humorous. I would like to ask you about your interpretations of and feelings towards the ads presented, as well as to check ad liking.

DISCLAIMER!

It is not my intention to insult or repulse you by the sort of images you will see. However, some of the ads you will find here may be considered DISTASTEFUL or OBSCENE so if you do not wish to proceed, disregard the questionnaire and leave this site. The following selection of ads does not reflect my taste and will be used solely for the purpose of a scientific experiment concerning ad liking. The questionnaire is anonymous.

All content and images used in this questionnaire are owned or licensed by their rightful creators/owners.

Thank you!

1. Please indicate your gender:
☐ Female
☐ Male
☐ Prefer not to say

2. Please indicate your age:
☐ 18-30
☐ 30-50
☐ 50-65
☐ 65 +

Section n
Ad n: [title of the ad]

Do you like this ad?
☐ yes
☐ no

The ad above is:
☐ very funny
☐ funny
☐ I don't know
☐ not funny

Do you find this ad offensive / rude / disgusting / inappropriate?
☐ yes
☐ no

If yes, please explain why:
… …

Please try to describe the advertiser's intention behind the ad:
… …