

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE  
SYSTEMATIC EVALUATION OF HUMOR AND  
ITS EFFECT ON ATTITUDE CHANGE

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In addition to investigating current theoretical frameworks for the study of humor and its effect in persuasive communication, a technique is proposed for assessing the effect of humor on attitude change.

It is proposed that future research would benefit from focusing on possible aspects of the situation which render it humorous and by systematically evaluating the relative influence of these aspects as a function of the degree to which the isolated aspects are varied from some neutral position. Further, it is proposed that the critical aspects of pointedness of the topic portrayal, the overall importance of the topic dealt with, and the degree to which the individual agrees with the attitude inherent in the topic portrayal, are essential components of any model purported to assess the effect of humor in a persuasive message.

Assuming the above components in a model, it is proposed that research on persuasive communication indicates that a humorous message, would serve to polarize an individual on a topic to the degree that the individual is in agreement with the attitude expressed or to the degree that the topic is unfamiliar to the individual. Further, a widespread belief, which is less likely to encounter contradiction, should yield more readily to strong counter influence. This counter influence should be more effective when the topic at issue is of low importance, because of a weak internal representation.

Two complimentary research programs are presented which test the applicability of the proposed model. This research addresses the problem of the evaluation of humor and in a subsequent experimental design, focuses on the use of such evaluations for systematically varying aspects of humorous messages to assess the effect of the message as a persuasive vehicle. The complimentary research projects differ only the nature of the material used as the basis of the persuasive attempt. One project uses editorial cartoons on fifteen major issues, while the second project utilizes pictorial advertisements for fifteen major product categories. The present design allows assessment of the models applicability to issues as well as products.