How Humour Sells:
A Psychoanalytical Analysis of the Thinkbox Harvey advertising campaign asking why comedy helps sell products

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ABSTRACT:

When people are asked to think about advertisements, the image they will turn to is often negative, picturing a man telling you to buy this or that or the other, an undesired disruption from the regularly scheduled programming, an infomercial. In reality most advertisements rely on presenting short narratives, each with their own themes and conventions. I have shown through a psychoanalytical analysis of the Thinkbox Harvey television advertising campaign, that when the theme of Comedy is done well it has the power to entertain and create connections to the audience. It does this best when the narrative is presented in such a way that that negative connotations that are associated with advertising, and the capitalist ideology it stems from, are both interpolated and ignored due to the positive distraction of the humour. It is here that we see comedies true power.

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INTRODUCTION

Bill Bernbach, visionary advertiser and DDB founder once said that advertisements work best when they are true, he continued:

“The Truth isn’t the truth until people believe you, and they can’t believe you if they don’t know what you’re saying, and they can’t know what your saying if they don’t listen to you, and they won’t listen to you if you’re not interesting, and you won’t be interesting unless you say things imaginatively, originally, freshly.”

*Bill Bernbach Said...,* (1989, issue.58)

Similarly, Del Close; comedian, teacher and mammoth figure within modern improvisational comedy believed that the best comedy also comes from truth:

Simply put, in comedy, honest is the best quality.

*The Truth in Comedy.* (1994, p.16)

The fact that these men, both influential leaders in each of their fields, acquaint success to the exact same thing might explain why throughout the past sixty years many of the most successful, loved and memorable TV advertisements have used comedy and humour to sell their products. From the “For Mash get Smash” robots of the past to the Cadbury’s drumming gorilla advertisements of the new millennium, we have seen all manner of companies and products attempt to use comedy to appeal to the marketplace, this is the first reason why I will attempt to answer how, from a psychoanalytical point of view, humour helps to sell.

John Ward of B&B Dorland, once commented that:

Advertising is a craft executed by people who aspire to be artists, but is assessed by those who aspire to be scientists. I cannot imagine any human relationship more perfectly designed to produce total mayhem.

(1990, p.44)
It is here we find advertising’s biggest problem and greatest selling point. Due to the nature of the consumer society and the sheer amount of outside influences and factors that dictate the purchasing of a product, it is impossible to attribute what the effects of advertising are on a purchase. We can only analyse and make assumptions, because of this there is conflicting research that suggests that humour can be both good or bad for the advertising processes, but there is little analytical research into why it would work. This is the second reason why this research essay exists and is what it intends to answer.

Through my previous research and knowledge of advertising and comedy, I have developed a hypothesis. I hope to test this by doing a psychoanalytical analysis of a few advertisements; which I will then be able to apply to the advertising industry on a larger scale. My hypothesis is twofold:

a. Advertisements use comedy to create positive brand associations by creating recognisable humour that is built upon universal truths.

b. Advertisements use comedy to distract the audience from the hidden ideologies that advertising relies upon, which would cause negative brand association.

I will use research from a range of academic sources, which focus around the topics of Comedy, psychoanalysis and advertising in order to approach each advertisement from an informed perspective. I hope to be able to tackle the ideologies that advertisements embody, not in a way that criticises and demonises it but instead understands the techniques it uses and the reasons behind it.
PREVIOUS LITERATURE STUDIED

In order to be able to appropriately analyse the three Thinkbox advertisements featured in the Harvey campaign, we must explore the work that other researchers and academics have done in the three topics that the research question tackles; Comedy, Psychoanalysis and Advertising. Countless scholars have studied these topics both individually and in pairs, but there is little to no research done where all three are present.

In this section, I will discuss the three different theories of comedy; superiority, relief and incongruity in turn. Before covering the foundations of psychoanalysis and delving into advertising’s mixed opinion on humour.

COMEDY

*Philosophy of Humour: Laughter’s Bad Name*

I will begin by reviewing the origins of the philosophy of humour. By the late 6th Century BCE, the Ancient Greek writers, such as Aristophanes, created comedies that satirised kings, belittled Gods and poked holes in politics. Like their counterparts, Tragedy and Satyr, Comedies became embedded in the culture of ancient Greece. They had their own festivals and competitions, which were mandatory in some areas. They inspired discussions and were a cornerstone to their democracy. But at the same time, other influential thinkers, like Plato, were condemning humour from a philosophical point of view, a

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1 Ancient Greek Satyr plays were less to do with comically critiquing high society than the name insinuates, actually the Greek Comedies were more likely to
critique that would follow the topic of humour in philosophical writing for millennia.

Whilst many philosophers have used comedy and humour in their work, few have approached the topic of comedy and humour from a philosophical point of view, and those who have discussed it do not often do so at length. That being said, there have been notably influential thinkers who mentioned humour, laughter or comedy, and it is from these that we see the development of the Humour theories. I will now analyse the development of first theory, Superiority Theory.

Superiority Theory

The Superiority Theory developed around the idea that we find things humorous when an event takes place that makes us feel superior to another. People laugh at the fool because they recognise themselves as better than it. This emerged from respected philosophers like Plato who in *Philebus* (48-50) discusses the enjoyment of comedy as a form of scorn, which makes laughing at others malicious, and therefore morally bad. He also warns against violent laughter in *The Republic* (388e BCE) saying it could lead to ‘a violent reaction’. Similarly Aristotle agreed with Plato about laughter and scorn in *Nicomachen Ethics* (4,8) and he also creates a divide between acceptable levels of comedy describing those ‘slaves to their own humour’ as ‘buffoons’.

These attitudes can be seen within religious teachings, especially Christianity. The Bible tells stories that damn laughter, like that in the book 2 *Kings*, where a group of children jeered at a bald man. The bald man cursed the children in the name of the Lord ‘and two she-bears came out of the woods and
mauled 42 of them’ (2: 23). Gilhus (1997) discusses the Christian taught Benedict’s ladder of Humility. Steps 10 and 11 warn against joking and laughter in monastic life. Incidentally Kierkegaard (1846 [1941]) is noted for saying that ‘Humour is the last stage of existential awareness before faith,’ (p.259) speaking specifically of Christianity.

The combination of highly revered philosophers and huge religious institutions both condemning comedy continued throughout the centuries. In *Leviathon* (1651 [1982]), Thomas Hobbes describes human nature as individualistic and competitive. In life, we use signs that indicate whether we're succeeding or not, and laughter follows instances of ‘some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves’ (Part I, ch. 6). Similarly Descartes only discusses laughter in terms of scorn in book three of *Passions of the Soul* (1649 [1911]).

We sometimes see evidence of Superiority Theory in advertising, in ads that use comparative techniques to highlight the advantages of a product, though these ads are not always humorous and it is not a common trope. Many theories relied on only considering laughter as scornful, attributing comedy to jokes that relied on punch lines and characters behaving as fools. Contemporary superiority theorists like Scruton reason that ‘laughter devalues its objects in the subject’s eyes’ (p.168). But even modern reasoning only refers to a certain part of comedy and humour, as Hutcheson (1750) describes in his critique of Hobbes; we laugh at a lot of things, many of which do not require others to be the butt of the joke. We laugh at unexpected events, impressive feats of skill in wonderment, and ourselves.
Relief Theory

Superiority Theory began to lose its standing during the 18th century because of the emergence of two separate humour theories, Relief and Incongruity theory. I will now look at the development of Relief theory.

Lord Shaftesbury first spoke about laughter as a sort of pressure relief in An Essay on the Freedom of wit and humour (1709). This led to relief theory that, whilst is no longer supported by many modern psychologists or scholars, has had consequences on the theories we have today.

Spencer (1911) described emotions as taking the form of nervous physical energy. Whilst the physical responses from other emotions, for example jumping from small shocks, are indications of the first signs of greater reactions, like fleeing or fighting, laughter is only useful in the release of energy and does not lead to further action. Similarly, Dewey (1894) described laughter as the end ‘of a period of suspense or expectation’ (p.558), comparing it to sighing.

The most notable proponent of Relief Theory was Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, who in his work Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905 [1974]) deconstructs three types of laughter: Der Witz (translated to “jokes”), ‘The Comic’ and ‘Humor’ and in each case they happen due to the release of nervous energy after a psychological task is stopped halfway through. This can be due to the release of energy that normally represses feelings like in Der Witz, energy used for thinking (The Comic), or energy once used to control emotions (Humor).
Der Witz is often related to the repression of sexual or violent thoughts. Freud believed that, as humans, we are filled with repressed energy. Saying or hearing a sexual or violent joke allows us to bypass the energy that is repressing these thoughts. No longer believing in the point of the repression, the energy is superfluous, being released through laughter. ‘The Comic’ relies on a similar method but instead occurs when we’re using effort to concentrate on something that we wouldn’t expect to. Finally, Freud describes ‘The pleasure of humor... [as coming from] the cost of a release of affect that does not occur: it arises from an economy in the expenditure of affect.’ (1905 [1974], 239). This situation normally arises when a story is told where our emotions change quickly, causing us to laugh.

Scholars since then have critiqued Freud’s theories, as well as the works of Spencer and Relief theory in general, with many finding issue with the way that nervous energy is described as something that can overflow in a person. However, the idea that laughter comes at a point when a person is prepared for one outcome and the actual outcome is something completely different, thus releasing a tension in our psyche could translate into the more accepted theory of humour; Incongruity Theory.

*Incongruity Theory*

Incongruity Theory emerged around the same time as Relief Theory and is based around the idea that we laugh and find things humorous when our expectations are diverted from what we thought we understood. As Cicero describes, ‘the most familiar of these [jokes] is exemplified when we are
expecting to hear a particular phrase, and something different is uttered. In this case our own mistake makes us laugh ourselves.’ (BCE 55 [1967] p256).

This theory was supported by a number of different academics. In *Essay in Laughter and Ludicrous Composition*, James Beattie (1779) describes the cause of humorous laughter as that when ‘two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them’ (p.320). Following on from Beattie’s ideas and with some similarity to Relief Theory, Kant describes laughter as ‘an affection arising from a sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing’ (1790 [1987] p.203).

Incongruity theory was also discussed by scholars like; Clark (1987) who simplified the process of why we laugh, Schultz (1976) and Suls (1972, 1983) both argue that we find the resolution of the incongruity funny rather than the incongruity itself. Hazlitt (1819[1907]) wrote that we laugh when the incongruous is trivial, rather than serious. This is supported by Martin’s (1987) essay *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* when he discusses examples where incongruity doesn’t cause always cause humour.

The popularisation of Incongruity theory didn’t necessarily mean that scholars stopped analysing humour or comedy as a bad thing. Instead, it raised new problems. Incongruity is, in itself, illogical, and so to many older philosophers and psychologists finding it funny is an example of something going wrong. Schopenhauer (1818/1844 [1909]) wrote ‘the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and
laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity’ (p.95). He continues by describing how, ‘All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous’ (p.95). Similarly Kant believed that ‘convulsive laughter must contain something absurd’ (1790 [1987] p.203) though he also makes the distinction that we find things humorous in spite of not because of the incongruity.

Other Areas

Moving away from why we find things funny, different studies have been done into why we would need to find things funny, and the importance of comedy within society. Kant describes joking as a “play of thought” which Max Eastman delves into in Enjoyment of Laughter (1936), where he researches the way animals use humour in play. This work was furthered by Jan Van Hoof (1972) and Andrew (1963), with both researching the ways in which chimps and other primates display early forms of laughing and smiling through different facial patterns, and the ways in which this helped to create social bonds amongst groups.

Furthermore, Spinka (2001) discusses the ways in which young animals and young children test their bodies through play, seeing how far they can push themselves in fun and safe ways. In many ways humour allows us to push our social and mental constraints in the same fun and safe way. Through humour we can bend or even break the unspoken rules of conversation (Grice, 1975) that are normally enforced subconsciously. Like Cohen (1999) describes, joking can have numerous social benefits including lubricating social situations and lightening serious or sad situations so they are easier to handle.
Comedy and humour also plays an important role in our lives when it comes to larger social issues. In Žižek’s *Brand of Philosophical Excess and Treason of the Intellectuals*, Taylor (2014) discusses the use of comedy within intellectual political discussions, demonstrating the power that humour has at pushing the boundaries of what we are willing to discuss by analysing the role of Russell Brand’s (a comedian and actor) political voice and deconstructing the role of humour in Slavoj Žižek’s work. He writes, ‘Likewise, laugh with, or even at, Žižek for long enough… we may only belatedly realise that behind the engaging fashion of Žižek’s joke laden performances lurks material that, à la Brand, is full of correct information and which still has the power to stir’ (p.131).

It is through work like this that we can see the slow acceptance of comedy and humour as the important social tool it is, rather than the vice it was described as in ancient Greece. Ironically, Aristotle is noted as defending humour in some writing, even discussing incongruity as the main form of comedy. In his work *Poetics* (335e BCE) he discusses the roles of tragedy, but alludes to a second writing on comedy that has not survived through time. This means that all we know about Aristotle’s opinion of comedy is in relation to tragedy. Umberto Eco’s (1980) first novel *The Name of the Rose*, is centred around these lost works and the ways in which the Christian Church try to supress the works in the name of ideology. Žižek (2009) disagrees with this idea in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where he uses examples of absurd feudal festivals and traditions to demonstrate that one of the main parts of feudalism and any ideology is being able to laugh at the absurdity of the ideology, whilst also partaking wholeheartedly in it. With this, we move onto psychoanalysis.
PHYSCHOANALYSIS

I will now briefly cover the topic of psychoanalysis, commenting on the work of Freud and his followers and more contemporary theorists who’s work has influenced film theory and so can be used to deconstruct advertisements. Psychoanalysis is the belief that by making a patient aware of the subconscious, you can gain insight into a person’s psyche that allows them to heal and grow. Freud founded it in the early 1890’s, and both he and psychoanalysis have been criticized heavily\(^2\). Coiffi (2005) deemed it to be pseudoscience, others calling it a modern cult (Torrey, 1986, p.76) likening psychoanalysts to witch doctors (Freynman, 1998). This is not to say that the work of psychoanalysts should be disregarded, but instead viewed more theoretically.

Freud used psychoanalysis to discover the roots of his patient’s problems. In his early career he centred his work on his Seduction Theory, featuring in the paper The Aetiology of Hysteria (1896), but would abandon this after it proved to be too difficult in gaining conclusive evidence. Psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche took up Freud’s theory and developed it further in Théorie de la séduction généralisée (1987). However seduction theory is the starting point for Freud’s later work and would lead to the creation of the Oedipus complex and the development of psychoanalysis.

Freud would go onto discuss The Unconscious, in which he theorised that the unconscious mind would be used to repress certain ideas and events, he would develop these ideas in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) where he described dreams as evidence of the unconscious mind using events that had

\(^2\) The criticism between those for and against psychoanalysis have become so heated that they are now dubbed the Freud Wars. This is hilarious.
happened throughout the day (and life) to create ‘Manifest Content’ (1900) that would satisfy repressed areas of our unconscious through wish fulfilment.

As well as developing ideas on the psychosexual, what drives life and death, religion and femininity/female sexuality. Freud also argued that the human psyche could be split into three parts; Ego, Super-ego and Id. First mentioning this theory in Beyond Pleasure Principle (1920) and cementing it in the Ego and the Id (1922), he believed that the Ego is the balancing factor between the Super-Ego's moralities and the Id's hedonism. These three warring parts of the psyche are what lead us to create decisions and what drive our desires and motives, and are what advertisements often target in order to sell their products.

During Freud's career, the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society was created, home to other psychoanalysts such as Karl Abraham, who discussed the importance of the oral stage of development of children and caregivers (1991). Carl Gustav Jung was also a member and through psychoanalysis developed the concepts of the Anima/Animus (1917) and character and shadow archetypes that are often used in the analysis of narratives, and can be of use when discussing advertisements.

Two notable psychoanalysts who weren’t a part of the Wednesday group, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek used psychoanalysis in their own ways. Lacan’s theories returned to Freud's work, and in The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud (2006), he developed the idea that the unconscious is structured like a language. He then went onto discuss his own theories, such as the Other/other and his work on the three orders; The Imaginarey, The Symbolic and The Real.
Žižek however, instead of using psychoanalysis to get to the root of peoples problems, uses the techniques of psychoanalysis (focusing on Lacan’s theories) to critique ideologies, culture and institutions by using popular culture and films to illustrate his theories. Žižek’s philosophical theories include the concepts of subjective and objective violence (2008), and his critiques of western ideology (2002). Žižek (2008[b]) builds upon other theorists like Althusser (1970) and discusses the ways in which ideologies are best interpellated when you cannot tell where they are coming from. An example of which could be the role that advertising plays in interpellating you as a consumer, something of which Žižek has experience of after being asked to write the text for Bruce Weber’s photographs in an Abercrombie & Fitch advertisement.

**ADVERTISING**

In this section I will briefly discuss the research surrounding advertising before focusing on the debate considering humour’s effectiveness at persuasion. The study of advertising is relatively new, and whilst research have shown there to be advertisements ranging as far back as ancient Greece, Egypt, China and beyond (Bhatia, 2000, Hong Liu, 2013), only within the last one hundred and fifty years have we began to look into the science and consequences of advertising.

The basics of advertising have been discussed by academics like Yeshin (2006) who in the book *Advertising* gave a comprehensive overview of the theories and contexts of advertising, covering such theories like AIDA (Russell, 1921), AIETA (Rogers, 1962) and DAGMAR, which Colley proposed to the Association of National Advertisers in a report in 1961, as well as the criticisms that come with each theory.
Other writers, such as Luke Sullivan (2008), dole out advice for people who are just starting their advertising career, including how to start, how to create advertisements for various platforms, and detailed analysis of successful and forward thinking campaigns. Sullivan starts from the beginning, blaming the negative view of advertisements on the success of P&G Charmin’s irritating and repetitive Mr Whipple campaigns (pp.2-4), arguing that the economic and social context in America made it easier to cement the fundamentals of advertising in lazy techniques (p.5). It is this that led to ‘The Clutter’ (p.6) of bad advertising, which caused consumers to put up ‘The Wall’ (p.6) that they used in order to ignore the masses of advertising content.

Advertising’s effects are a much larger area of study. Many researchers have done studies into the ways in which different groups of people are represented in advertising and the consequences of these representations. Feminists like Jean Kilbourne (1999, 2002) have written numerous articles and books detailing the ways in which women are depicted in western advertising, building on the works of Goffman’s Gender Advertisements (1976), Bordo’s Hunger as Ideology (1993) and Wernick’s Advertising and Ideology (1983). Following on from their work, researchers like Howard (2010), D’Enbeau (2011), Winship (2000), and many more, have discussed the ways in which different companies advertise to women, and how this effects the representation of women in their advertisements.

**Humour in advertising**

As far as humour in advertising goes, there are many research papers that discuss the prevalence of humour usage in advertisement, with researchers
estimating that between 30% to 50% of advertisements were intended to be funny (Markiewicz, 1974; Speck, 1991). What we tend to find is that the effectiveness of humour as an advertising technique is something different research papers do not agree on. Riecken and Hensel (2012) describe comedy in advertising as something hard to get right. Weinberger and Gulas (1992), who updated Sternthal and Craig’s (1973) work, wrote that ‘the current conclusion from the overall literature concurs with the view that humour does not offer significant advantages over non-humour when persuasion is the goal’ (Weinberger and Gulas, 1992, pp.56-57).

However, there are many research papers that support the idea that humour is a useful persuasive tool, though only when done properly. Kelly and Solomon (1975) defined humour advertisements as containing at least one of the following; a pun, an understatement, a joke, something ludicrous, satire, irony or humorous intent. Knowing which humour techniques work best makes comedic advertising easier to get right. Eisend (2009) discusses in a similar research paper that updates Weinberger and Gulas’ (1992) work, that contrary to previous research ‘there is no evidence that humour impacts positive or negative cognitions and liking of the advertiser’ and Strick et al, (2013) believe that whilst humour can affect explicit brand recognition, this does not effect ‘implicit brand memory, which is a better predictor of persuasion’ (p.59).

Very few researchers have written about the theoretical side of comedy in advertising, and whilst some studies have drawn connections between neuron speeds to comedy and memory retention, it is difficult to find a paper that tackles why humour might work to sell products from a psychological point of view. Turner (1981) describes comedy advertising as a social drama tradition, and
Stern (1996) believes advertising comedies ‘create new myths about goods and services’ (p.54) describing their role as something that informs consumers ‘about the social structure necessary for its maintenance and survival, and second, they teach the community about the rewards of playing by the rules’ (p.54). It is this theoretical approach to comedy that this paper will focus on.

**METHOD**

Answering “How Humour Sells” was a difficult to start, and whilst it may have been interesting to test my hypothesis on a wider range of comedic advertisements, I chose to focus on a set of three in order to allow me to analyse the content of the advertisements in a deeper capacity. On top of this I was aware that many different academics like Sternthal and Craig (1973), Speck (1987) Weinberger and Gulas (1992) and Eisend (2009) who each were responsible for large scale quantifiable research projects that approached the question of if humour is a good tool for advertising. Because of these empirical studies I believed it would be better for my research if I were to use a small sample and analyse them rather than attempt to add to their research.

**WHY HARVEY?**

Due to the qualitative nature of my research, and the hand chosen texts, there are numerous academic criticisms to take into account. Hammersley (2007) writes that one major critique of research of this kind lies ‘on the grounds that it does not serve evidence-based practice well’ (p.287). I recognise these
criticisms and argue that my analysis is not attempting to create the final answer to the purpose of comedy in advertising, but rather to offer one response that could be used within a post-structuralist analysis of advertising effects. I hope that by explaining the reasons behind the choosing the Harvey campaign to validate my research further.

There were a number of different advertising campaigns that I could have used to base my research project on; The Lynx Effect advertising campaigns and the Should have gone to Specsavers advertising campaigns were both an option due to their use of humour. However both of these campaigns would have been harder to translate to advertising as a whole, due to their self aware nature and focus on relationships and wish fulfilment (Lynx), or their repetition of the same joke (Specsavers). This led me to choose the Thinkbox Harvey campaign.

The Harvey campaign has three advertisements, all similar lengths of around seventy seconds, and all feature the same two characters; Harvey (the dog) and his owner. I decided upon this campaign due to numerous reasons:

1. The campaign’s main theme was comedy
2. The campaign was incredibly successful, leading to the increase of traffic to their website by 400% and winning numerous awards (ITV’s “Ad of the Year”)
3. The product being sold was the concept of TV advertising.

This made it easier to apply some of the theories I developed from the advertisements to comedic advertisements in general.
ANALYSIS PROCESS

I began my analysis of the advertisements by researching the creators and contexts of each in a way that mimics the techniques of Freud and Lacan. Both of who wrote about the importance of understanding the context for each patient before beginning the analysis. I also used advertising theories to see how effective the advertisement was on paper. Combining these allowed me to see how well the advertisement performed before moving onto a psychoanalytical analysis of each advert.

I analysed the three advertisements using a psychoanalytical approach, there are many different versions of this and in many ways each psychoanalyst has their own way of analysing. Freud discusses his own in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) in which he discusses his psychoanalytical method for interpreting dreams. To interpret dreams he said you must first explore all the thoughts and ideas you have of a certain theme that is within said dream, the dream ‘may be interpolated in the psychic concatenation, which may be followed backwards from a pathological idea into the patient’s memory’, meaning that then the dream can be treated as a symptom that you can then apply ‘the method of interpretation which had been worked out for such symptoms’ (1900, ch.2, par.7).

Freud’s method on the interpretation of dreams has also been used on the analysis of literature and other texts. Treating each text as if it were a dream meaning it represents the repressed desires of the unconscious mind, which considering he states that dreams are something that is ‘built up, as a conglomerate of psychic formations’ (1900, ch.2, par.13), could be applied to the creations of certain texts. Especially modern advertisements, that Forest (2016),
considers to be ‘specifically concerned with the unconscious’ and if we
‘hypothesize that advertising works largely unconsciously, and that it is an
ambiguous representation, then it can claim to shape the unconscious like
dreams’ (p.339). However I will not be using Freud’s method has been criticized
and it is common belief that ‘one cannot psychoanalyse a writer from his text;
one can only appropriate him’ (Phillips, 1994, p.45). Instead I will make
reference to it and use it sparingly to explore certain ideas further, rather than as
the basis of my analysis.

Lacan’s approach focused more on the language and linguistics of the text,
and would often refer to the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and other such
literature to illustrate his theories and methods (Evans, 2005). When Lacan
discussed the role of the psychoanalyst, he emphasises the language of the
unconscious. He argues that this is only realised when the analyst remains quiet.
‘It is by suspending this impulse to respond that the analyst understands the
meaning of the discourse. He then recognizes in it an intention, one of the
intentions that represent a certain tension in social relations’ (2006, p.66). From
here Lacan says it is possible to analyse the language as a sign, asking, ‘How
complex is the problem of what it signifies, when the psychologist relates it to
the subject of knowledge, that is, to the subject’s thought’ (p.65). Lacan’s own
methodology and writing have also been critiqued like many psychoanalysts as
being an ‘incoherent system of pseudo-scientific gibberish’ (Roustang, 1990),
commenting on the phallocentric nature of his language and work (Rose, 1982),
or dismissing his work for lack of a scientific base that harms rather than helps
its patients (Evans, 1996). However, considering I will not being using Lacan’s
methods to psychoanalyse a patient, moreover an advert, these criticisms do not affect my own research greatly.

Lacan’s style of analysis has been translated into film theory by some Lacanians, which is of more use to me when it comes to analysing an advertisement, if we consider adverts as mini-narratives. Žižek is known for his connection to Lacan and due to his analysis of films and popular culture in order to criticise ideologies he is probably the most useful psychoanalyst in relation to the research question. Žižek’s own method of psychoanalysis is to analyse a film or text in detail and relate it to a wider cultural context, through psychological and philosophical theories, and it was this that I have tried to replicate. I took note of the themes and decisions in each advert and considered the audience intentions of the advertisers, a focus employed by the literary psychoanalytical critic Norman Holland (1966, 1973).

THE ISSUES WITH A PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH

There a number of issues that using psychoanalytical approaches on texts can have, a major problem stems from its overuse that creates the impression that it is the only answer. Psychoanalysis as a whole has been criticised for its lack of a scientific basis by academics such as Chomsky and Pinker (1997). Popper (1990) denounced it as pseudoscience due to the fact its analysis is untestable and so their theories are falsifiable, whilst Horvath (2001) demonstrates research that concludes that psychoanalysis is only as good as the person doing the analysis. This being said, the psychoanalytical approach for analysing texts have given insight into areas of the psyche and offer a fresh take on certain readings.
AN ANALYSIS OF THINKBOX’S HARVEY CAMPAIGN

In the next section of this paper, I will describe the events that take place within the Harvey campaign in order to create brief overview to put the theory I will discuss later into perspective, the full advertisements are available in via the links in the notes section. There are three advertisements in the Thinkbox Harvey campaign each of which follow the same story structure, the human(s) in the advertisement played by Robert Whitelock and Lindsay Allen are shown to have a certain belief or opinion, then the dog Harvey shows them a short video of around 30 seconds, that mimics a television advertisement, which makes them change their minds. Each of these videos feature the life of Harvey and his companions in a montage set to uplifting music with stylised cinematography that sets them apart from the rest of the advert which are often set in dull, quiet and realistic places.

BRIEF ADVERTISEMENT OVERVIEW

The first advertisement aired originally in November 2010 and introduces us to the concept of these advertisements and the main character Harvey. In it we see two youngish people, presumably a couple, choosing a dog from a dogs home. After seeing a couple of normal dogs they are introduced to Harvey, a mongrel that embodies scruffiness. They seem both confused and sceptical of Harvey, until they are shown the video. This video features Harvey performing a range of household tasks starting at the most feasible – fetching your slippers; to the most absurd – driving your children home from school and
cooking dinner. The video ends and the couple look surprised as Harvey sits ready with his suitcase to be adopted.

The video shown is around 29 seconds long, the shortest of the three even when this entire advertisement is the longest of the campaign by about ten seconds, though this is probably because it has more to set up at the beginning and the theme had yet to be established, and it features the song “You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet” by Bachman-Turner Overdrive. And is different from the other two advertisements because it ends with an extra end title screen, as well as “Discover the power of TV advertising at www.thinkbox.tv” that features in all three advertisements, it also has their older slogan “TV. Where brands get their breaks”.

The second instalment features the man from the first advertisement, Robert Whitelock, who is trying to throw away Harvey’s toy “Rabbit” without the dog knowing. He is subsequently caught by the seemingly omniscient Harvey, who appears next to him and shows him another film. This one follows the adventures of the two friends from their first meeting after Rabbit is thrown from a pram, to a scene in which Harvey rescues Rabbit from a burning building, to a shot where Harvey dances for rabbit to a mix tape he made for him. This time the video is only shown on the TV at the start and end, the advertisement itself becoming the video for most of the run time and it is set to the song “Friends” which was written and performed by Adam Buxton. The video ends and we see Harvey’s owner look ashamed and saddened by the prospect of throwing away his dog’s best friend and closes the bin and thus saving the toy.

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3 Or he may be upset at the irony of Harvey being mans best friend but not the other way round.
The final advertisement begins with the unexpected introduction of Harmony to the household; Harvey’s owner turns to him for an explanation and is given one in the form of a video. This time the remote isn’t even facing the screen as if the advertisements have become so self aware of their own story structure they poke fun at it within their own advert. The video is set to “Nothing’s Gonna Change My Love For You” performed by George Benson, and uses tropes from numerous romantic comedies that make the storyline within the video seem as timeless as the soundtrack.

This video follows the romance of Harvey and Harmony, a poodle who he meets at speed dating. It shows us their many dates and budding romance that ends with Harvey proposing and a reference to the love scene in the car in Titanic. Harvey’s owner steps aside to let Harmony into the house, but is surprised when a litter of puppies run in from the edges of the garden. This extra surprise creates an additional punch line to the advertisement that it needed due to the repeating of the themes and storylines of the previous advertisements.

THEMES

The themes that run throughout each of these advertisements fall into three main categories: relationships, life/death and comedy. Though these themes are broad, they each play an important part in the narrative and persuasive process of the advertisements. I will analyse each of these themes and the role they perform within the advertisements from a psychoanalytical point of view in order to determine their effectiveness. Looking first at relationships, then life/death and finally comedy.
One of the most integral purposes of these themes are for them to affect the dog Harvey, so that they humanise him thus allowing the audience to connect to his character. This is common for longer running promotions, the BT Family advertisement campaign for instance lasted for nearly six years, spanning around 40 different instalments that followed the ups and downs of the main characters Adam (Kris Marshall) and Jane (Esther Hall). They used long running themes of love, family and humour to create easily identifiable characters that the customer connected to, however it is interesting that due to the service that Thinkbox are a advertising and the way they go around it, the humanization of Harvey leads us to connect with TV advertisers rather than typical consumers, as it is this role that Harvey represents.

It is here which we see the most important aspect of the Thinkbox adverts, and the reason I chose these as a case study to base my arguments around. Thinkbox are the marketing body for commercial television advertisements, its shareholders represent over 99% of commercial TV advertising revenue. Their company offers platforms, training, events etc. to help companies create effective TV ads, and so in their own advertisements they are attempting to promote the idea of using TV as an advertising platform for businesses.

To achieve this in the Harvey campaign, they created an advert inside of an advert, to demonstrate the power that advertising has over people. The relationship that each of these meta-ads have with the promotional content they lay within can then be used to demonstrate the relationships we have with the advertising world. And so by analysing the themes involved in the Thinkbox ads,
I will be able to see what the intentions of the advertisers are for both the people who make adverts as well as the consumers they effect, and in so doing see if my hypothesis is correct.

**Relationships**

The theme of relationships is central to all three of the *Harvey* ads, and all revolve around the relationship that Harvey has or is seeking with another character. The two later adverts involve him trying to protect the relationships he already has, with Rabbit and Harmony, whilst the first is more interesting as in this he uses the meta-advert to foster a relationship with his potential owners. In many ways he uses the video as a kind of job interview in which Harvey is attempting to choose his parents, when in fact the couple came to the dogs home to choose their dream dog.

Let's explore this relationship further; to the potential owners Harvey represents a product or investment. They came into the Dogs Home with the supposed intention of taking a dog home and were met with three candidates. The first two were stereotypically adorable dogs; a Labrador and a Dachshund, that the couple have positive and engaging reactions with, even going so far as to bend down to their level to pet. Harvey is the third, he is revealed from the point of view of the couple as the approach his kennel and their initial reaction is one of disappointment and scepticism. Whilst the other dogs symbolically represented what might have been their fantasy dog, Harvey is obviously the least appealing and so he uses the video to highlight his own advantages. It is as if you were to walk into a garage and are met by a couple of sports cars and a
second hand sedan, only to be told that the sedan doesn’t need fuel and drives itself.

Žižek discusses that the role of fantasy figures, common sense describes a fantasy as something untouchable and distorted, whereas for psychoanalysis the opposite is true. We search for real people that best fit the holes our fantasies leave, be that in sexual partners or father figures, never to fully realise them thus continuing the theory of desire being something we can never fully realise (1992, p.6). Harvey understand he will never aesthetically fulfil the desires of his owners but instead appeals to them by demonstrating that he can fulfil desires they never knew they needed. This demonstrates the power of the advertisement and also what Thinkbox intend TV adverts to be, persuasive enough to make you overcome prejudices.

To Harvey the owners represent customers, of whom he is attempting to persuade to do something. In the second advertisement for example he is attempting to save to life of his friend, in many ways he becomes the defence attorney at his client's trial. Because Harvey is the condensed representation of Thinkbox the company, TV advertising in general and potential customers, we are placed at the same position of advertisers when he is humanized through the videos. We empathise with Harvey and so empathise with the advertisers. Meaning that when Harvey inevitably gets what he wants and the audience is happy with the happy ending, we are indirectly supporting the ideologies that advertising represents and are indeed happy when it works.

For Althusser an ideology is something that shapes and forms your own identity, though these ideologies are more often than not thrust upon people. He describes Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as a number of institutions that
instead of functioning through violence and repression first (for all repression is violence) like Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), instead function as an institution by ideology. This could be institutions like; the legal ISA, the religious ISA, the political ISA, etc. (1970). One such ISA is the cultural ISA, in which it can be argued consumer culture becomes a part of. Within our own society we find ourselves blind to the neoliberal ideology that controls much of our media, especially TV.

Advertisements are a by-product of trade, which is exacerbated by mass communication methods and neoliberal and capitalist ideologies, which have become so ingrained into our society that we are either unaware or unfazed by them. Interpellation is the process of you being given an identity through the enforcement of an ISA (or RSA), and Žižek (2008[b]) points out that interpellation works best when you are unaware of who or what is interpellating you. Advertising works in this way, they are not telling you to go out and buy a product, more often than not they are simply informing you of that product or that brand. Film trailers end with “coming soon to a cinema near you” in no way are they telling you to go out and buy a ticket for the film when it makes it to theatres but instead inform you of the event and allow you to make up your own mind. However through marketing analysis we can see the use of advertisements and trailers increases the probability of a better box office, so in reality the idea of buying a ticket is so ingrained into the trailer format that they never have to say it because the communication industry ISA has already convinced you subconsciously that that is what it means.

The most impressive thing about the Thinkbox advertisements is that they are able to turn the process of an advertisement persuading a consumer
into the product and then demonstrate it twice within sixty seconds. First within the storyline with Harvey and his meta-ads, and secondly with the use of the end title card: “Discover the power of TV advertising at www.thinkbox.tv”. This can be read in two different ways, the simplest reading of which is actually the one that is often missed. The title highlights the ways in which the meta-ad worked within the scene, spelling out what kind of power Harvey’s videos had, and thus proving to any potential business that TV advertising is a wise move. Showing advertising’s effectiveness within an ad – twice!

The second reading refers to all TV advertising. And may seem to the average viewer as if it is a congratulatory message to TV advertising in general, there to make you realise the effectiveness of the advertisement you just watched as a mini narrative and thus promoting a positive spin on what many consider to be the worst part of TV. As Sullivan (2008) describes the difficulty in this analogy, ‘your ad is the comedian who comes onstage before a Rolling Stones concert. The audience is drunk and they’re angry you’re not the Stones. And now the comedian has a microphone? You had better be great’ (p.20). It takes a lot for an advertisement to be good enough that people don’t actively hate it, never mind one that convinces you to commend advertisements in general.

This second reading however is an example of interpellation. If you finish the advert with the impression that TV advertisements aren’t that bad, then you begin to play into the hands of the company behind the advert. They are promoting a Thinkbox brand ideology that TV advertisements should be well made and commended, the worst thing that can happen to Thinkbox business wise is if people began to consider ads a nuisance, like in the 60’s and 70’s especially. If people watch the Harvey ads and so feel better about TV adverts in
general, then Thinkbox is creating an environment where TV ads can thrive which in turn builds their business and revenue streams. All of this is hidden within the Harvey advertisements, and they remain hidden because it is shown via a dog that you have connected to because of the themes like relationships that are featured within each of the adverts.

**Life/Death**

Life and death may not seem like an obvious theme within the *Harvey* advertisements, but it features in all three. The most obvious one being in the second advert: *Harvey & Rabbit*, in which as stated before Harvey is using the power of TV advertising, in a sense, to save the life of his best friend a toy rabbit, but we will discuss this later. The theme of life is featured in the end of the third advertisement, when we are introduced to new life in the form of puppies, symbolising the maturing of the advertisement campaign and creating a textbook happy ending. Though lets consider this from the owner's point of view, which we are physically shown with POV shots that feature throughout each advertisement highlighting decision-making processes. To Harvey's owner, he finds himself duped by his own pet, after accepting Harmony he has a litter of puppies forced upon him as well, which he is unable to reject due to the convincing nature of the TV advertisement.

However this is not a true representation of the TV advertising to purchasing process. For TV advertisements the aim is not to make you make a decision straight away, they do not expect you to see a advertisement for Budweiser for instance and immediately go to the store in order to buy a crate. TV advertisements main intention is to create a positive brand identity and
promote brand loyalty so that the next time you are faced with the decision of what beer to buy you choose Budweiser. This is not the case in the Harvey advertisements; instead we see an advert being met with an instant positive reaction. Interestingly in the same way that other advertisements show us (the customer) the best possible scenario that buying their product could lead to and so creating wish fulfilment and appealing to the midrange of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), The Thinkbox advertisements create the best possible scenario for TV advertising, instant purchasing reactions, something that is nigh impossible with TV advertising. If anything this kind of reaction would be more common (yet still unlikely) with online advertising.

The first advertisement is subtler with the themes of life and death, and does so through insinuation and symbolism. Lets consider the environment that Harvey is in during the first advertisement, a Dogs Home; he is scruffier and less affectionate than the other dogs, sitting in a slumped position far from the kennel walls. One could argue that without the video Harvey would never be picked, which in a best case scenario would mean he’d spend the rest of his life living in a kennel – hardly the life of a dog such as him, or he’d be put down. This is supported by what each of the characters symbolise, Harvey a business and the humans are customers. What would a business need a TV advertisement for? To allow them to grow and compete in our marketplace, i.e. live outside the kennel, or to save their business from failing i.e. death. With imagery like this within the advertisement so prevalent and yet so hidden, then it’s no wonder we instantly connect with Harvey and in doing so create a positive brand identity for Thinkbox.
Returning to the second advertisement where the theme of death is prevalent, in the purpose of the video and within the video itself – we see Harvey saving Rabbit from a burning building, but what if we consider this advertisement to represent something more? Advertisement’s often show us the lives we want to live, using wish fulfilment to persuade, we also see the same wish fulfilment presented in good dreams. Consider the text as a dream, as Freud would, if this were a dream then Harvey would no longer just be a representation of the Thinkbox company ideals or the customer but instead could also be a representation of the man’s unconscious.

There is evidence to suggest that this is all a dream beyond the absurd nature of Harvey the dog being so technically skilled and intelligent. For instance even outside of the edited meta-ad, Harvey displays powers of teleportation, literally appearing on top of a counter between shots. Considering the advertisements always make the distinction between reality and the meta-ads as obvious as possible; using dull colours and sounds for reality and non-diegetic music and filters in the videos to demonstrate a simulation. We can consider the meta-ads as a simulation by Baudrillard’s definition. That is, something that blurs the lines between what’s real and what’s fake. At the end of each advertisement, the owner makes a decision and we hear the return of the music outside of the meta-ad and then outside the advertisement narrative itself (continuing into the title frame). It seems interesting that Harvey seems to break the laws of physics outside of the meta-ads until you consider the second advertisement a dream, a dream that tackles the loss of innocence.

The concept here is that the man is going to dispel Rabbit – a toy, the representation of innocence, and is stopped by Harvey – a dog, a pet typically
connected to childhood. Could we consider that Harvey represents his younger self within his unconscious, conflicting with the life he lives now. Within the meta-ad we see references to older films and TV programs; Harvey and rabbit are depicted like Thelma and Louise in a car in one scene and Rabbit is buried in sand with a mermaid body like Joey from Friends in another. We also have the imagery of the Sony Walkman and mix-tapes, even the footage itself seems slightly grainy and not HD, an obvious stylistic choice. All of this connotes the early 90’s, which considering the apparent age of the man (around 30) would have put him on the cusp of puberty at this time. The ad suggests that TV advertising has the power to save your childhood from yourself, and we know that the loss of innocence is a constant anxiety that is featured in numerous psychoanalytical studies (Freud, 1900, Berne, 1974).

Could we consider that the rest of the advertisements are in fact dreams as well? They each feature extraordinary canine abilities, the blurring of the two parts of the advertisements at the end, and revolve around key stages of people’s young lives that often lead to psychological trauma in reality, yet always end happily in these dreams. The first advertisement shows Harvey, the representation of innocence, trying to impress the couple, who represent the father and mother figures. The last advertisement depicts Harvey, attempting to hold onto his first love only to have his older self/father figure stand in the way. Each of these three experiences are universally recognised and so along with the themes used, helps the audience to connect to Harvey on a much deeper emotional and psychological level and yet again supports brand identity.

*Comedy*
The final, and most important theme within the advertisements is comedy, by which I mean humour that is derived from intentional decisions. Whilst all of the themes create positive brand identity through the creation of recognisable content, comedy also performs the secondary service of distracting the viewer from the ultimate message or ideology and in turn fosters better brand identity. Whilst studies have shown that humour can harm explicit brand memory this does not mean that it harms persuasion, Strick et al. (2013) concludes that ‘humour promotes brand choice because it forestalls the development of negative brand associations due to its distractive properties, and engenders positive brand associations due to its positive emotional outcomes.’ (p.59).

To prove this you have to consider the comedic aspects of the advertisements from a mix of psychological humour theory and psychoanalytic theory. For example a common technique for creating comedy is the idea of upping the ante, being excessive, taking things a step too far. We can see this everywhere, Žižek uses the technique to shock and amuse in his writing and is often criticized for it, but Taylor (2014) describes the use of excess as something that both reveals and covers up hidden truths, he points out that through this excess philosophers like Žižek and entertainers like Russell Brand can bring topics into the limelight so they are explored whilst they are dismissed as being too excessive and aren’t of merit to take seriously (pp.144-145). We also see this technique in the meta-ads within each of the advertisements.

This technique is used within the first advertisement and reaches its pinnacle within the meta-ad when we’re shown Harvey behind the wheel of a car, doing the school run. This is funny because it both subverts something we
consider to be natural and run of the mill thus creating incongruity, whilst also being the highest point of escalation due to it being the most dangerous thing in real life. Consider Žižek’s argument ‘is even the most universal ethics not obliged to draw a line and ignore some sort of suffering?’ (2008, p.53), he demonstrates that societies can only function with the acceptance of subjective violence, then cars themselves are an example of this. Cars cost the lives of millions of people a year in car crashes and accidents, and whilst this may be tragic, it is also accepted as something that is to be expected, it is even a requirement that leads to the improvement of road safety. The imagery of Harvey sat behind the wheel of a car is funny because cars are so dangerous, and the idea of a dog driving brings about that realisation. This makes it incongruous; because what we are being shown changes the way we look at something that is as commonplace as cars.

Another example of the advertisement using a similar comedy technique of shock comedy is with the last shot the last of the three meta-ads. The final shot being a parody of the sex scene in Titanic, though instead of a human hand on the steamed window it is a dog’s paw. It may have once been argued that this is funny due to relief theory, though as described before, this theory has been dismissed. However it is important to fully explore the sexual nature of this joke, it is funny in two ways; it is incongruous and it is shocking, and both of these result in distraction. The joke is incongruous because the imagery is both completely at home on the screen and totally out of place. We see sex scenes between people in film for entertainment purposes all the time, and we see animals mating on film for infotainment purposes too. We recognise what we see but it is not what you’d expect due to the species of the participants.
The sex reference is also funny because of how shocking it is, we do not expect to see something this explicitly depicting the act of sex in progress in a TV advertisement, and we know that the Titanic parody is depicting this because it results in a litter of puppies. But it is against the law to depict something like this in TV advertisements that are aired during the day and across all television channels. We are therefore shocked to see it onscreen, Thinkbox have spent so long trying to humanise Harvey that this shot shocks you because you've connected to the dog throughout. It is only because they are not humans that they are even allowed to show it, but they are clever enough to do it through parody so that it only becomes explicit only if you are aware of the film they were referencing or the act of sex itself, thus creating a connection between the brand and anyone who “gets” the joke and distracts you from creating negative brand association.

Another example of comedy is when Harvey is shown in the second advertisement stealing sausages from a butchers only to realise his getaway driver is a toy rabbit that can’t drive, resulting in their probable demise (it isn’t shown). But why is this amusing? One could argue that with the later two meta-ads Harvey is depicted as a kind of pseudo-Id, enjoying life to the full and perusing things that make him happy. For Freud, the Id is the part of our unconscious that is driven by the “pleasure principle” (1895) and it ‘generates primitive impulses that press for satisfaction’ (Perlman & Brandell, 2011, p.53). The Id is something that advertisers appeal to, using sexualisation, violence and action among other themes, because we all have an Id within our psyche. This means that by showing Harvey behaving in such a way, we instinctively
recognise a bit of ourselves in him, or moreover we recognise the bit of our psyche that we’d like to indulge, in the same way that people often muse on how nice it would be live life as a dog, because they do not seem to have the ego or the superego holding them back. Ironically Harvey does seem to have a superego and an ego, as shown in the first advertisement when he is proving his worth through tasks, which could be why we find him easier to relate to.

The scene in which Harvey steals the sausages is also funny because it is an example of the reduction of the economic ISA. We use money to pay for food to eat, whereas Harvey cuts out the middleman and steals the food and in so doing undermines the ideologies of trade, economies and etiquette, and we commend him for it. Much like in our society people turn a blind eye to a child pocketing a chocolate bar, celebrate films like Oceans Eleven in which people steal millions of dollars, and yet denounce theft as a crime. Žižek believes that ideologies best work when they work against themselves, for people have to be fully aware of the systems faults yet take part in them all the same none the less. He uses the example of a myth about certain communist regimes, in which a secret police force had the task of creating and circulating jokes that went against the regime, because they were aware that the entire population are never going to be completely happy politically and they knew of ‘jokes positive stabilizing function’ (Žižek, 2014, p.vii). Though this same regime would punish anyone found spreading these jokes.

It should be noted that all of these jokes are found within the meta-ads, not outside, though that is not to say there is no comedy outside of the meta-ads. Infact the most important joke runs throughout all three, here instead of deriving comedy from incongruity, we instead find it humorous that each advert is the
same. The owner is persuaded, again and again, by the dog. Whilst it could be argued that we find this funny due to Superiority Theory, where we are looking down upon the owner, I would argue it is more to do with the absurdity of the advert.

For Camus (1942) to live with the absurd is to begin a board game, knowing the game is rigged and playing anyway. He uses the myth of Sisyphus, a man forced to push a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again, ready to be pushed back to explain this. Describing that Sisyphus experiences greater clarity not after reaching the top, but when he resigns himself to push the boulder again being fully aware of the outcome. Harvey’s owner is repeatedly shown the same montage, meta-ad structure, and repeatedly finds himself changing his mind because of it. This is what we find funny, the advertisers themselves became aware of it, having the actor roll his eyes as he lets Harmony into his home in the last ad. The fact that this character is being duped by his own dog over and over again is absurd. But we as the audience recognise the absurd because we all fall prey to it and so we connect to the character and the advertisement through this humour. This creates positive brand association whilst also distracting us from the main purpose of the advertisement, which is to sell us product or service – a fact that if we were to remember would oftentimes cause negative brand identification and would mean the failure of the
CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the analysis of the Thinkbox advertisements, both the advertisements and the meta-ads within use certain techniques and themes to connect to the viewer in order to sell the idea of TV advertising. They attempt to demonstrate the “power of TV advertising” by clearly showing a meta-ad changing the mind of its viewer, and each of the meta-ads they use are comedic. This would suggest that Thinkbox, a company that specialises in TV advertising, believes the best way to demonstrate advertising’s power is by using humorous ads.

Harvey is representative of Thinkbox and so the meta-ads he creates are representative of Thinkbox’s ideal advertising. Therefore the techniques the meta-ads use should mimic the techniques of good advertisements that are already in circulation. By asking how humour sells in advertising, we should look at how humour persuades the character within the advertisement and see if it can be applied to advertising as a whole. As discussed before, the advertisements use instantly recognisable and universal themes to connect Harvey’s owner to Harvey, the main theme being humour.

The humour in the meta-ads also serve to distract the owner from negative brand associations. If Rabbit represents a product in the second advertisement, then the meta-ad functions by removing the negative association that Harvey’s owner shows towards Rabbit in the beginning of the narrative and so by choosing not to throw him away we see him as effectively buying the product. This is the same for Harvey in the first advertisement, where he himself represents a product with negative brand association in the beginning, but none by the end. The way that he achieves this is by showing a meta-ad that
demonstrates the benefits of the product in a comedic way whilst never explicitly telling the owner what to do, instead stating: “Every Home Needs a Harvey!” This is Thinkbox’s ideal advert, it is informative and entertaining whilst allowing the viewer to make up their own mind about the product based off of the associations they have with the brand, all the while improving brand association.

There have been academic studies that would suggest that humour’s distracting qualities have negative effects on persuasion. Zilmann et al. (1980) argues that because we are required to pay attention in order for the comedy to work that we may find audiences spend all their attention on the jokes and then fail to receive brand related messages. Though this is not supported by Weinberger and Gulas’ (1992) conclusion that says that humour may even help rather than harm comprehension. Additionally it would be wrong to suggest that audiences cannot pay attention to more than one thing at the same time, with many comedic advertisements the humour within the advertisement works best when it is related to the product itself and so brand messages would be clear. It is also important to re-establish the effects of an end title card, usually used to highlight the brand or product without explicitly telling you to buy – “Harvey & Rabbit, Friends For Life”, “Discover the power of TV advertising at www.thinkbox.tv”. Due to their positioning at the end of the advert we find ourselves transferring our positive engagement from the humour in the narrative to the real world representation of it in brand form, because must remember that TV ads are not attempting to convince you to buy a product straight away but instead are trying to make you remember them fondly so you buy next time.
However, it must be made clear that psychoanalytical analysis of one advertising campaign does not fully represent the ideals and techniques of all humorous advertising. This is because just like comedy, all comedic advertisements are different and would create different psychoanalytical readings, depending on who was doing the analysis and the advertisement analysed. What this paper has attempted to do is use a psychoanalytical analysis of a campaign made by a company that’s soul purpose is to be experts on advertising. If there were any company’s advertisements that encapsulates the essence of TV advertising in at it’s best, it would be Thinkbox.

This does not mean that there aren’t any further areas of research to pursue within this topic, as we know approximately one television advert out of every five is intentionally humorous (Beard, 2005), and that’s only in America, in the UK it remains higher. This means that the themes that the other four advertisements feature, must also have some effect on persuasion, such as health, beauty, fear, etc. A psychoanalytical study of some of these themes would be useful, especially when tackling comedic advertisements that contain some of these other themes as well. It would be of interest to see how these themes work on a psychoanalytical level apart as well as together to truly distinguish the effects on persuasion of the each theme from one another. Because whilst the Harvey campaign uses other themes as well as comedy, these same themes work together in all three making it difficult to distinguish the effects of the comedy on its own.

Comedic advertising has been researched through focus groups, interviews and quantitative studies for decades to see if humour sells products, though many of them hit them same stumbling posts. Some of the main deciding
factors on what purchase decisions is outside influence and audience factors, Weinberger and Gulas (1992) discuss audience and product factors as potential reasons people would or wouldn't buy a product. It is the same reason why advertising effect models are criticized because ‘they all assume a passive customer who’s brand knowledge, attitudes and considerations to buy are influenced by advertising’ (Prune, 1998, p.1). But we know that ‘there is no evidence to show that people behave in this rational, linear way’ (Brierley, 1995, p.145).

This research paper has attempted to determine not if humour sells product, but why. In so doing I have given psychoanalytical evidence to support my hypothesis that humour in advertising works by connecting the viewer to the advertisement, creating better brand association and enhancing the product/brand, whilst also distracting the audience from the hidden ideology of the advertisement. The evidence provided has given us some insight into the ways in which humour can help sell products, but we must also recognise that the analysis comes from three advertisements that were undeniably effective and well made. Like everything in life, comedy and advertisements do not always “fire on all cylinders” (Sullivan, 2008) as the Harvey campaign does, so we might look towards the research conducted in this essay as evidence of how humour can sell products when it is done right.

When people are asked to think about advertisements, the image they will turn to is often negative, picturing a man telling you to buy this or that or the other, an undesired disruption from the regularly scheduled programming, an infomercial. In reality most advertisements rely on presenting short narratives, each with their own themes and conventions. Comedy is one of the themes
present in many of these narratives, and when it is done well, has the power to entertain and create connections to the audience due to the recognizable nature of humour. This creates a better band identity which is likely to improve sales and is therefore of use to the company. But it does this best when the narrative is presented in such a way that that negative connotations that are associated with advertising, and the capitalist ideology it stems from, are interpolated and ignored due to the positive distraction of the humour. It is here that we see comedies true power.

NOTES:

Thinkbox’s *Harvey* advertisements can be found with all relevant information concerning their production from Thinkbox’s website.

These are the hyperlinks:

Dogs Home, 2010:

Harvey & Rabbit, 2012:
https://www.thinkbox.tv/Thinkbox-TV-ads/Harvey-Rabbit-about-Thinkboxs-2012-TV-Ad

Harvey & Harmony, 2014:
https://www.thinkbox.tv/Thinkbox-TV-ads/Harvey-and-Harmony-about-ad
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