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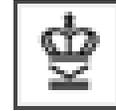






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**A CONCEPTUAL INVESTIGATION OF ABSURDISM IN PRINT ADVERTISING:  
ITS PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS**

**UNA INVESTIGACIÓN CONCEPTUAL DEL ABSURDISMO EN LA PUBLICIDAD IMPRESA:  
SUS RAÍCES FILOSÓFICAS**

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**Abstract**

The effects of absurd ads on consumers have not been investigated even though absurdism is often used by advertisers. The author suggests that absurdism fits within the marketing literature on pictorial stimuli. To begin the process of enhancing our understanding of absurdism, this study describes absurdism's philosophical roots and its use in the disciplines of art, literature, and finally, advertising. In addition, relationships between the domain of absurdism and other constructs (e.g., surrealism, allegory, anthropomorphism, and hyperbole) are discussed. Within this section, the construct of absurdism is defined and theoretical mechanisms for the possible impact of absurd images are identified.

**Keywords**

Absurdism – Print advertising – Pictorial stimuli – Absurd images

**Resumen**

Los efectos de los anuncios absurdos en los consumidores no se han investigado, aunque el absurdismo suele ser utilizado por los anunciantes. El autor sugiere que el absurdismo encaja dentro de la literatura de marketing sobre estímulos pictóricos. Para comenzar el proceso de mejorar nuestra comprensión del absurdismo, este estudio describe las raíces filosóficas del absurdismo y su uso en las disciplinas del arte, la literatura y, por último, la publicidad. Además, se discuten las relaciones entre el dominio del absurdismo y otras construcciones (por ejemplo, surrealismo, alegoría, antropomorfismo e hipérbolo). Dentro de esta sección, se define la construcción del absurdismo y se identifican los mecanismos teóricos para el posible impacto de las imágenes absurdas.

**Palabras Claves**

Absurdismo – Publicidad impresa – Imágenes pictóricas – Imágenes absurdas

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## Introduction

### Absurdism: Its Philosophical Roots

Historically, in the field of philosophy, “absurd” first surfaces with fully modern implications in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who applied it to man’s metaphysical condition; he maintained that religion, Christianity in particular, is “absurd” and cannot be explained or justified by rational means<sup>1</sup>. During this century, Martin Esslin<sup>2</sup> provides one of the first definitions of “absurd,” which he attributed to Eugene Ionesco: all that lacks purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and psychological roots, man is lost. All his actions are senseless, useless.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), an existential philosopher, is another progenitor of “absurdism.” He argues that the West has produced robots and monsters; for Nietzsche, Western civilization has stressed the wrong goals. He claims that one cause of enfeeblement results from an inordinate stress of the rational faculty. In addition, his declaration that “God is dead”<sup>3</sup> has become a catchword for the modern era and a slogan for the “absurdist” writers. As a result, absurdism is a philosophy derived from existentialism and is based on the belief that man exists in an irrational and meaningless universe and that his search for order brings him into conflict with his universe<sup>4</sup>.

### Artistic and Literary Explanation of Absurdism

Artistic absurdism has its origins in 1916 when a group of refugee artists got together in Switzerland under the name of “Dada.” The term denotes one of the most revolutionary artistic movements in modern art. World War I for the Dadaists contradicted the belief that humans are rational. According to Sandrow, Dadaism was born “out of the artists’ awareness of a society gone haywire and clinging to rational explanations of increasingly irrational twentieth-century experiences, chief among which was World War I.”<sup>5</sup> Dadaists declared that madness is the world’s true state; consequently, reason and logic must be replaced with incoherent thought and destructive spirit. The Dadaists’ attack on reason knew few limits. The group insisted on artistic expression independent of rational control.

According to Tristan Tzara<sup>6</sup>, most of the plays that the Dadaists wrote and produced are essentially nonsense pieces and poems. In 1920 the Dada movement was coming to an end. By 1921 certain Dada members began to infuse the now-fading movement with positive principles. The new group, sought order and methodology, and they reversed their revolt into a strict intellectual discipline<sup>7</sup>. As a result, they converted to Surrealism.

<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling”, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, edited by Robert Bretall (New York: Modern Library, 1946), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam- Webster Inc, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Nahma Sandrow, *Surrealism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Tristan Tzara, “Introduction to Georges Hugnet”, in *L’Aventure Dada*, edited by Georges Hugnet (Paris: Galerie de l’Institut, 1957), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 42.

In contrast to Dada's blatant nihilism and absurdity, Surrealism, under the guidance of its principal leader, Andre Breton (1896-1966), was characterized by an active commitment to the intellectual pursuit of an ideal despite its obvious iconoclastic—image destroyer—purpose.

Continuing with the artistic aspect of absurdism, Albert Camus<sup>8</sup> indicates that for an absurd work of art to be possible, thought in its most lucid form must be involved in it. But at the same time, thought must not be apparent except as the regulating intelligence. This paradox can be explained according to the absurd. The work of art is born of the intelligence's refusal to reason the concrete. The work of art embodies a drama of the intelligence, but it proves this only indirectly. The absurd work requires an artist conscious of these limitations and an art in which the concrete signifies nothing more than itself. The absurd work illustrates thought's renouncing of its prestige and its resignation to being no more than the intelligence that works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason. If the world were clear, art would not exist<sup>9</sup>.

Absurdist literature, on the other hand, has its origins in absurdist philosophy. The theater of the absurd (a literary style from this century) and the philosophy of existentialism have common themes, according to Dorczak<sup>10</sup>. The crisis in modern thought, represented by Nietzsche, spawned the "absurdist movement." However, it was not recognized as such until approximately 1950 when Martin Esslin applied the word "absurd" in relation to literature. The "Theater of the Absurd" as defined by the critic Martin Esslin<sup>11</sup>, was a significant style of dramatic writing which encompassed the works of numerous West European and American dramatists during the decade of the 1950's and 1960's. Esslin defines absurd as drama "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical."<sup>12</sup>

Esslin concurs that absurdism is the basis for the subtlest form of deceptiveness, because it disrupts conventional notions about meaning by questioning its very existence. The term "absurdism" was coined to define a type of modern drama in which characters behave irrationally, where causal sequences of events are illogical, and where incongruous juxtapositions of people and things occur<sup>13</sup>.

Although not recognized as such, the first unofficial "absurdist" drama was performed in 1896 in Paris with the premiere of Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu*. Jarry<sup>14</sup> stated that rendering a matter comprehensible only "weighs down the mind and falsifies the memory, but the absurd exercises the mind and makes the memory work." His thoughts could serve as a basis for investigation in the field of absurdity in advertising.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays", in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, translated from the French by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays"...98.

<sup>10</sup> Anita Dorczak, "Signs of Crisis: A Semiotic Approach to the Theatre of the Absurd" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta- Canada, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*...

<sup>12</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*... 5.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*...

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, translated by Barbara Wright (New York: New Directions, 1961).

According to Pratt<sup>15</sup>, a literary critic, the notion of the absurd has had a continuing, albeit erratic, development since at least the Greek Heroic Age. The Heroic Code of Homer's *Iliad* is an ancient paradigm created to generate order in an otherwise preposterous and untenable world. One also finds similar concerns expressed in such literary works as *Hamlet*, (Shakespeare), and *Candide* (Voltaire), all recognized masterpieces of the Western literary tradition. Delineating the theme of the absurd in each of these three works demonstrates a long-established preoccupation with the concerns characterizing the literature of the absurd, and, as will be explained later, this seems to have had a spillover effect which can be used to explain the current use of absurd advertisements.

The literature of the absurd includes those works of drama, poetry, and prose which have in common the theme that the human condition is illogical and without purpose. According to Pratt<sup>16</sup> the characters of absurd literature attempt to create programs for investing existence with a modicum of meaning, whether it be simple hedonism, comic detachment, or some form of social commitment. The works of Sartre, Camus, Kafka, and Hemingway exemplify this struggle.

On the other hand, the etymology and development of the term "absurdism" offers insights into the nature of "absurdist" literature, which in turn, will offer insights into the nature of "absurd" advertising. The Latin word *surdus*, which forms the root of the English word "absurd," has several meanings. Originally, it meant "deaf," but later it denoted "mute," "irrational," "inaudible." Combined with "ab," the word "absurd" came into the English language and was used in the disciplines of music and logic. In the former it meant "inharmonious" and characterized certain musical aberrations. In the latter, eighteenth-century logicians and rhetoricians designed faulty syllogisms violations of logic as "absurd"<sup>17</sup>.

The sense of these definitions of absurd coming from music, logic, or even philosophy, still prevails today. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*<sup>18</sup> offers the following:

Absurd. Harsh- sounding incongruous...

- 1.- marked by an obvious lack of reason, common sense, proportion, or accord with accepted ideas: ridiculously unreasonable; unsound or incongruous.
- 2.- self contradictory: fallacious by reason of contradiction.

### **Pursuing the absurd**

In this study, "Pursuing the absurd" focuses on the elucidation of the notion of the absurd in philosophy, art, literature, and, today, in marketing through the use of absurd characters in advertising. In the marketing literature, Stern<sup>19</sup> has related the contemporary

<sup>15</sup> Alan R. Pratt, "The Myth of Meanings: Reflections on the Absurd in Western Literature" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Florida State University, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Alan R. Pratt, "The Myth of Meanings: Reflections on the Absurd in Western Literature"...

<sup>17</sup> The Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (London: Oxford Press, 1953).

<sup>18</sup> Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Springfield, MA: Merriam- Webster Inc, 1963).

<sup>19</sup> Barbara B. Stern, "Marketing as Drama: Theatre of the Absurd", *Research in Consumer Behavior* Vol. 4: (1990a): 189-209.

dramatic movement of “theater of the absurd”<sup>20</sup> to marketing strategy. She discussed absurdism in terms of a standard dramatic framework for absurdism consisting of theme, action, characters, language, setting, and tone. Stern used advertising examples to illustrate these dimensions of absurdism.

### Literature and Advertising: A Comparison

According to Stern<sup>21</sup> literature is analogous to marketing in at least one important respect: an author (the firm) communicates a text (the advertisement) to a reader (the consumer). She suggests a literary framework is an additional way of approaching marketing as drama. Absurdity is seen as a literary form that advertising has adapted. In addition, Stern indicates that absurdity can mislead by conveying subjectively ambiguous meanings, so Arias-Bolzmann, Chakraborty & Mowen<sup>22</sup> suggest that the prior product category attitude (PCA) of consumers is one factor that will tend to bias consumers’ information processing in positive or negative directions. Stern indicates the need for balancing artistic creativity with the public policy need to protect the consumer from deception, especially in the case of cigarette advertising.

Stern<sup>23</sup> indicates that both literature and advertising share similar goals of getting inside audiences’ heads and inspiring them to experience things in fresh, new ways. In addition, they also employ similar creative techniques to say things in ways other than by direct statements of fact, because as Robert Frost noted, literary art is “the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another”<sup>24</sup>.

Today, the influence of absurdism extends to cinema and advertising<sup>25</sup>. Some absurdist advertisements create ambiguity by juxtaposing incongruous visual and verbal elements in sometimes humorous vignettes<sup>26</sup>. For example, a spot for Chung King chow mein says “Nine out of ten doctors recommend Chun King,” and the ad shows nine Chinese doctors with one Caucasian doctor. The ad challenges the reality of conventional meaning in two ways: first, medical specialists are used as spokespersons for a food as opposed to a medicinal product, and second, the ten doctors are gathered together in a formally posed picture for no other purpose than the ad. The spot mocks real medical endorsements<sup>27</sup>.

### Absurdism Related Constructs

In the current research, absurdism is defined as “the incongruous juxtaposition of pictorial images, words, and/or sound that viewers perceive to be unique, irrational, bizarre, illogical, or disordered.”

<sup>20</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* ...

<sup>21</sup> Barbara B. Stern, “Marketing as Drama: Theatre of the Absurd”...

<sup>22</sup> Leopoldo Arias-Bolzmann et al., “Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses”, *The Journal of Advertising* Vol 29: (2000): 35-49.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara B. Stern, ““Crafty Advertisers”: Literary Versus Literal Deceptiveness”, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* Vol. 11: No. 1 (1992): 72-81.

<sup>24</sup> Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 181.

<sup>25</sup> Bernice Kanner, “Youthful Contenders”, *New York Magazine*: (1988): 22-24.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara B. Stern, “Marketing as Drama: Theatre of the Absurd”....

<sup>27</sup> Barbara B. Stern, “Marketing as Drama: Theatre of the Absurd”...

By its nature, absurdism can be humorous or perhaps even pernicious and sinister. Absurdism can result from many illogical relationships that may result from surrealism, anthropomorphism, allegory, hyperbole, and humor. These constructs closely related to the absurdism construct are identified below. All these types and relationships can be seen in Figure 1.

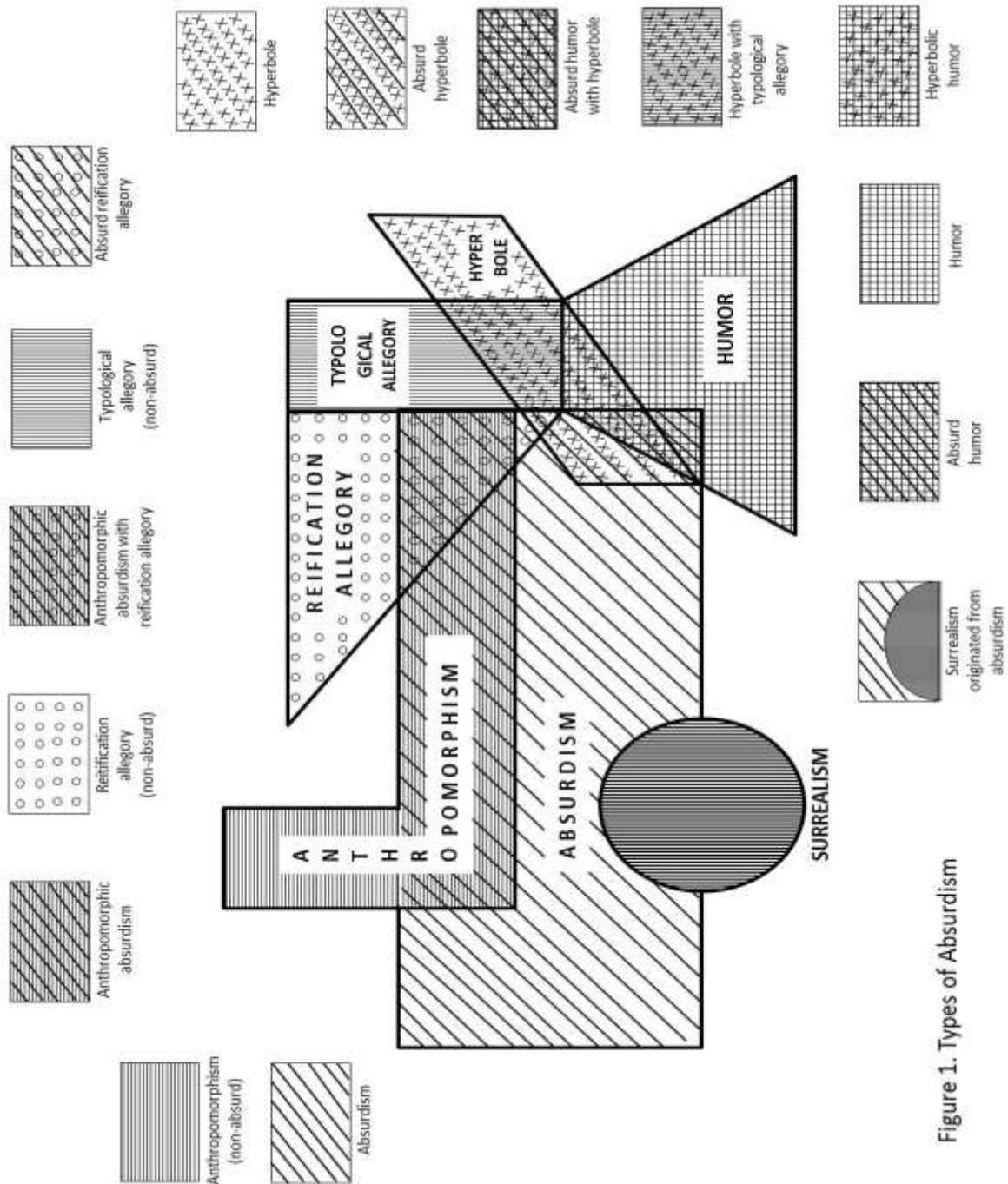


Figure 1. Types of Absurdism

Figure 1  
Types of Absurdism  
Own elaboration

## Surrealism

The term “surrealist” was first used by Apollinaire<sup>28</sup> in his play *The Breasts of Tiresias: A Surrealist Drama*. In the preface to the drama, he states that “to characterize my drama I have used a neologism... I have invented the adjective surrealist, which does not at all mean symbolic... but defines fairly well a tendency in art, which, if it is not the newest thing under the sun, at least has never been formulated as a credo, an artistic and literary faith.”

Breton gave a more precise definition of surrealism in his *Manifesto of Surrealism of 1924*:

“Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once for all other psychic mechanism and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.”<sup>29</sup>

Gershman<sup>30</sup> notes that Breton was especially concerned with the “other side of the coin called reality” a “surreality” and its relation to the creative process. Furthermore, by giving voice to the subconscious, he sought to provide a link between the irrational and rational components of man’s nature and, therefore, favored “events occurring in dreams” over those of the “waking” state<sup>31</sup>.

Surrealists, in their paintings, advocated a spirit of openness in all art forms in order to record the fluidity of the mind, especially during dreams<sup>32</sup>. The origins of surrealism can be placed within an interdisciplinary context. According to Rabinovitch<sup>33</sup> the frame of reference to examine surrealism can be shifted from the history of art to the history of religions. The conjunction between the surreal and the sacred is developed through the phenomenological clues of the uncanny, the weird, and the irrational—popular perceptions of the surreal. The origins of the surrealist impulse to “transform life” are traced to occultism, alchemy, and hermetic philosophy, that attempts to create “the union of opposites.” In so doing, surrealism creates a new orientation based upon the power of contradiction and ambivalence. By the late 1930s Surrealism as a movement began to collapse because of dissension among its adherents as well as increased political polarity<sup>34</sup>. Through the movement declined, its influence spread throughout the world, and surrealist’s achievements proved seminal to such a titan of “absurdist” literature as Esslin.

<sup>28</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, “The Breasts of Tiresias: A Surrealist Drama (1917)”, in *Modern French Theater*, edited by Michael Benedikt (New York: Dutton, 1966).

<sup>29</sup> Andre Breton, “Manifests of Surrealism” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert S. Gershman, *The Surrealist Revolution in France* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1974).

<sup>31</sup> Andre Breton, “Manifests of Surrealism”...11

<sup>32</sup> Andre Breton, “Manifests of Surrealism”...11

<sup>33</sup> Cecilia M. Rabinovitch, “The Surreal and the Sacred: Archaic, Occult, and Daemonic Elements in modern Art, 1914-1940” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University-Canada, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> Herbert S. Gershman, *The Surrealist Revolution in France*...

One of the rationales about surrealism indicated by Alquie<sup>35</sup>, is that surrealism inverts and modifies the basic attitude of consciousness, giving the “pleasure principle” an authority over the “reality principle.” This creates the freedom and power to assign meaning to objects. In essence, the basis of the surrealist procedure is liberty<sup>36</sup>. Along similar lines, Kahle and Homer<sup>37</sup> indicated that surrealism is a state of mind, with multiple meanings that cannot be easily expressed into words. This conclusion is consistent with De Alcuaz<sup>38</sup> who indicated that surrealism as a concept is a state of mind, a desire, an attitude. Surrealism is associated with dream imagery, imaginative worlds, and physical distortions. Surrealism is expressed by combining images in surprising ways. The clock, for example, is a classic surrealist image going back to Salvador Dali. For instance, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Surrealism tries to break every rule of photography and of editing so that the final visual graphics would be a visual surprise. For example, Grand Marnier’s ads depict in colorful paintings, a man and woman enjoying the liqueur in rather unusual settings, a hot air balloon floating over the New York skyline, or toasting each other aboard a rowboat at sunset, while elegantly dressed<sup>39</sup>. These ads are characterized by romanticism and fantasy. Fabrics such as silk, along with the hands of a faceless man and woman, provide the backdrop for an unusual juxtaposition of bottle and glass and life-style advertising. Clearly, surrealism requires the juxtaposition of several images, many of them are totally unrelated images.

Stein and Blount<sup>40</sup> said that surrealism means combining images in surprising ways. In T.V. advertising care must be taken to avoid that the visual power of the moving graphics will not overshadow the ad copy message or the brand name, thus making people not likely to pay attention to the message. This problem is known as “vampire creativity”<sup>41</sup>. A pre-test of the ad is always recommended since memorability of the message or brand has to be present. The same problem could be present when using absurd ads.

In the marketing literature, Homer<sup>42</sup> has pioneered the study of surrealism in advertising. According to Homer, “it is not surprising that advertisers would also seek to create unique, unexpected, and dreamlike images for use in promotions because advertisers often try to gain consumer’s attention, to fuel their fantasies, and to induce them to view a product in a new light.” Homer<sup>43</sup> describes an experiment investigating the effects of surrealistic design, Involvement, and strength of message arguments on the

<sup>35</sup> Ferdinand Alquie, *The Philosophy of Surrealism*, translation of *Philosophie du Surrealism* 1955 (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1965).

<sup>36</sup> Ferdinand Alquie, *The Philosophy of Surrealism*...

<sup>37</sup> Lynn R. Kahle and Pamela M. Homer, “Surrealism as Nonverbal Communication in Advertisements: A Social Adaptation Theory Perspectivem”, in *Nonverbal Communication in Advertising*, edited by Sidney Hecker and David W. Sterart (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1988), 145-252.

<sup>38</sup> Marie de Alcuaz, “Contemporary Idioms of Surrealism”, *Dreamworks Vol: 4 num.1* (1984): 59-69.

<sup>39</sup> Cara S. Trager, “Carillon and TBWA Smashing Stereotypes”, *Advertising Age Vol: 55* (1984): 48-49.

<sup>40</sup> John Stein and Steve Blount, “Campaign Backs Up Flying Tigers in Dogfight for Domestic Airfreight”, *Madison Avenue Vol: 25* (1983): 52-66.

<sup>41</sup> William D. Wells, et al., *Advertising Principles and Practice* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1989), 205.

<sup>42</sup> Pamela M. Homer, “Surrealism and Advertising: A Test of Alternative Explanations” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1986).

<sup>43</sup> Pamela M. Homer, “Surrealism and Advertising: A Test of Alternative Explanations”...

effectiveness of print advertisements in terms of recall, recognition, attitudes, affect towards the ad, and behavioral intentions. Her study was a serious attempt to make surrealism a topic of interest in the consumer behavior literature.

Two articles followed her unpublished dissertation about surrealism and advertising.

The first of these studies is from Homer and Kahle<sup>44</sup>, which examined the effects of surrealistic design and priming on the effectiveness of a print advertisement. They found a significant interaction of priming and surrealism which most effectively pushes purchase intentions in the desired direction.

In their second study, Kahle and Homer<sup>45</sup> employed social adaptation theory as a framework for understanding surrealism and guiding such research. They suggested that the use of surrealism is particularly useful for appealing to fantasy and core values. Two experiments were conducted that supported the prediction that social adaptation theory implies that the nonverbal material in surrealistic advertisements provides an important part of the impetus for optimal processing of information in advertisements.

When referring to the matchup hypothesis, Kahle and Homer<sup>46</sup> anticipated that a matchup between, for example, celebrity, target market, and message will foster increased effectiveness in surrealistic advertisements. They indicate that surreal elements of an ad ought to match with the message being conveyed. For example, a picture of ears on the product in an advertisement for stereos, may increase the effectiveness of the ad because good stereos sound good to ears. A picture of a sheep in that ad may not have the same effectiveness. Perhaps, such an image could be labeled as absurd, but not surreal.

### **Surrealism and Absurdism: A comparison**

The previous literature review about surrealism and absurdism leads the author to establish the following commonalities and distinctions between surrealism and absurdism.

#### **Commonalities**

- Both absurdism and surrealism are daring and innovative advertising. They both use eye catching graphics and offer a contrasting design that makes the ads break away from the clutter. Liquor and cigarette advertising perhaps use surrealism and absurdism in view of the fact that “the awareness of liquor and cigarette advertising is low relative to other categories”<sup>47</sup>. In general, surreal ads in advertising are an effort to set them apart from the crowd through creativity<sup>48</sup>. This statement could be equally applicable to absurd ads.

<sup>44</sup> Pamela M. Homer and Lynn R. Kahle, “A Social Adaptation Explanation of the Effects of Surrealism on Advertising”, *Journal of Advertising* Vol: 15 num 2 (1986): 50-60.

<sup>45</sup> Lynn R. Kahle and Pamela M. Homer, “Surrealism as Nonverbal Communication in Advertisements: A Social Adaptation Theory Perspective”...

<sup>46</sup> Lynn R. Kahle and Pamela M. Homer, “Surrealism as Nonverbal Communication in Advertisements: A Social Adaptation Theory Perspective”...

<sup>47</sup> Cara S. Trager, “Carillon and TBWA Smashing Stereotypes”...

<sup>48</sup> Teresa Barker, “Ad Promises May Steer Passengers Off Course”, *Advertising Age* Vol: 55: (1984): 26.

- The reader has to look deep and hard to see what's going on in the ad (high involvement may be achieved). Therefore, the consumer is expected to come up with cognitive responses.

### Differences

- The surrealist movement started in 1924 and collapsed in the early 1940s; absurdism was originated one century before surrealism.
- Surrealism's origins and development in advertising come from the arts during the XX century, as well as from religion in the European culture; whereas absurdism's origins come from existential philosophy and drama literature which can be traced back to the Greek Heroic Age.
- Surrealism conveys meanings that cannot be easily expressed through words by the average consumer. Surreal ads are more exclusively targeted and are found mostly in upscale magazines, while absurdism conveys meanings that can be more easily expressed in words and is found more frequently in several other mass communication media. Perhaps, this is a result of the "pleasure principle" mentioned earlier, which creates a freedom that provides the power to assign meanings to objects. This "power" may be of interest to individuals highly educated in the arts who are likely to read upscale magazines and experience pleasure trying to interpret or understand the meaning of the surreal ad. In contrast, absurd ads appear to be targeted to the middle class and can be found in television, radio, billboards, magazines, and newspapers. The meanings of absurd ads appears to be easily expressed through words.
- The "dreamlike nature" of surrealistic ads is not clearly present in absurd ads.
- Essentially, it could be argued that the use of the terms surrealism and absurdism differs primarily through the medium employed. Absurdism refers to philosophy, theater, and prose fiction, while surrealism refers more to the plastic arts—painting, sculpture, and photos.
- It is not clear that surreal ads use anthropomorphic animal characters.

### Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is defined as an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics<sup>49</sup>. Although the literature on anthropomorphism is scant and is non-existent in the marketing field, in advertising we find absurd images that use an anthropomorphic character to communicate meaning e.g., "Joe Camel." However, being anthropomorphic may not be a necessary condition for an advertisement to be considered absurd. There are several absurd ads described in this study that do not use anthropomorphic characters.

Possibly, once people become adapted to an absurd stimulus it may no longer be considered absurd. For example, for many Americans Mickey Mouse may not be considered an absurd image. Ascribing human characteristics to nonhuman things is widely used in many children's cartoons. Children's toys are another example to which one could attribute human characteristics e.g., stuffed animals<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1984).

<sup>50</sup> Seema S. Lodhi, "An Analysis of Automatic Verbal Behavior of Young Children" (unpublished EDD dissertation, Columbia University Teachers College, 1988).

## Allegory

Allegory involves the description of a thing under the veiled pretense of something else<sup>51</sup>. For example, the popular California Raisin commercials represent an absurd allegory in which the qualities of liveliness, high spiritedness, and energy are represented by singing and dancing raisins. The Camel's ad is an absurdist allegory as well, in which excitement, fun, and enjoyment are represented by this "smooth" character named "Old Joe." Mr Goodwrench can also be viewed as an allegorical figure representing service, quality, and courtesy. It represents the abstract quality of "good car service," appealing to the consumer's desire to avoid accident or death. Quaker Oats' Aunt Jemima is another form of allegorical figure representing sweetness, charisma, and trustworthiness among other humanized abstract qualities. It is important to highlight that these last two allegorical figures are not absurd. The common thread linking all allegory is discontinuity of form. This is a dislocation that happens when reader expectations of realistic narrative are jarred, and it is a source of double meaning<sup>52</sup>. Absurd allegory may require words and music (e.g., California Raisins television commercials), whereas other forms of absurdism could rely strictly on images only (e.g., print advertisements).

Allegories can take two forms of contrasting types: reification and typology<sup>53</sup>. Within reification allegory, the action and characters are bizarre in that trick photography or animation is used<sup>54</sup>. Advertising that personifies product attributes attracts attention by creating hybrid characters who split, evaporate...scatter, and converge weaving patterns made up of unfettered fancies, absurdities, and improvisations<sup>55</sup>. In short, reification often relies on bizarre humor and fantastic executions. The presentation of "conflict" between fantastic characters in order to attract the audience's attention connects reification with bizarre appeals, especially those presenting problems/solutions. Reification offers the reader a "conflict," show it resolved, and highlight the brand as the solution for reconciliation.

In contrast, with typology as a form of allegory, the reader is expected to be sufficiently aware of a juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated stories to try make sense out of the analogy by using one set of actions to interpret the other<sup>56</sup>. For example, a Reebook ad proclaims itself "Official shoe of the Varsity Cello Team, University of Wisconsin at Madison." This echoes Nike and Avia ads in which famous athletes are celebrity endorsers, and depends on knowledge of the others for impact<sup>57</sup>. Clearly, typologies are a non-absurd form of allegory, since the elements required for an image or statement to be considered absurd are not present. Once again, the creation of "discontinuity of form" is a common thread linking both types of allegory. In sum,

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<sup>51</sup> Barbara B. Stern, "Figurative Language in Services Advertising: The Nature and Uses of Imagery", in *Advances in Consumer Research*, edited by Michael Houston (Utah: Association for Consumer Research, 1988b), 185-190.

<sup>52</sup> Barbara B. Stern, "Other Speak: Classical Allegory and Contemporary Advertising", *Journal of Advertising* Vol: 19 num 3 (1990b): 14-26.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen A. Barney, *Allegories of History, Allegories of Love* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1979).

<sup>54</sup> John R. Rossiter and Larry Percy, *Advertising and Promotion Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1987).

<sup>55</sup> Barbara B. Stern, "Other Speak: Classical Allegory and Contemporary Advertising"...

<sup>56</sup> Phillip Rollinson, *Classical Theories of Allegory and Christian Culture* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981).

<sup>57</sup> Barbara B. Stern, "Other Speak: Classical Allegory and Contemporary Advertising"...

reifications and typologies seem likely to attract attention in advertisements; reifications rely on bizarre creations, and typologies on audience identification.

Reification allegory (typically absurd) uses personification of allegorical figures in order to permit abstract characteristics to be clothed in recognizably human garb. Allegory conveys meaning in a story-underneath-a-story, where something other than what is literally represented is also occurring<sup>58</sup>. In addition, motivational conflict is a necessary characteristic of allegory. Motivational conflict is a facet of everyday life, it often affects consumption patterns, and in many instances the marketer can provide a solution to the motivational conflict. The Mr. Goodwrench campaign illustrates a motivational conflict and uses allegory in its advertisements to communicate it. Advertisements stress the importance of regular car maintenance, “Pay me now, or pay me (more) later.” Allegory occurs only when the personified abstractions as terms in the metaphor act out inner conflicts<sup>59</sup>.

Whereas all other forms of absurdity are picturesque, visually oriented, and need less immersion, allegory contains a second meaning that may provide relief and pride when being unveiled, because is the only tale-telling form of absurdity<sup>60</sup>. In conclusion, reification allegory is a form of absurdism which is present in many advertisements.

## Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a gross exaggeration used in order to make a point. Hyperbole is frequently used to create “absurd allegorical humor.” Isuzu has taken this approach in its commercial where “lies” about their cars are presented in an entertaining way, in order to demonstrate the car real performance. Verbal absurdism is also found in this advertisement. “Joe Isuzu” is a good example of a humorous contradiction<sup>61</sup>. Outrageous lies are used to spread truth about the car. The celebrity becomes the equivalent to an absurdist hero in drama literature. Stern<sup>62</sup> indicates that the confounding of truth/falsity presents an entertaining spoof of reality that ultimately leaves viewers with the task of constructing the reality of the message.

Typological (non-absurd) allegory is also commonly associated with hyperbolic expression. A good example can be seen in a print advertisement for Alexander Proudfoot, a business-to-business service. The explicit surface action invokes a parallel struggle between Hercules versus Hydra and a manager versus lack of productivity<sup>63</sup>. Proudfoot’s ad uses a historical event to teach a modern lesson on a large scale: “our clients realize a 400% return on their investment in the first year installation of the system.” The goal of the ad is to get a telephone call--“if you’d like to here(?) how me(?) might work for you, call us at...-- promising this as “the most productive move” the caller can make. The ad depends on structural parallels, making it a typological allegory, not a reification (absurd) allegory

<sup>58</sup> Barbara B. Stern, “Other Speak: Classical Allegory and Contemporary Advertising”...

<sup>59</sup> Barbara B. Stern, “Medieval Allegory: Roots of Advertising Strategy for the Mass Market”, *Journal of Marketing* Vol: 52 (1988a): 84-94.

<sup>60</sup> Gelbrich, Katja et al., “Effectiveness of Absurdity in Advertising Across Cultures”, *Journal of Promotion Management* Vol: 18 (2012): 393-413.

<sup>61</sup> Wayne Walley, “Isuzu Man in Prime Time: Leisure Fabricates Success from Ads”, *Advertising Age* Vol: 58 (1987): 105.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara B. Stern, ““Crafty Advertisers”: Literary Versus Literal Deceptiveness”...

<sup>63</sup> Barbara B. Stern, “Other Speak: Classical Allegory and Contemporary Advertising”...

such as the Isuzu ad described earlier, where humor and bizarreness combine to produce a gross exaggeration.

This strategy to gain attention, inject humor, and emphasize product attributes, by depicting people, products, and objects in ways that far exceed their capability, is what hyperbole shows. Even though it has been virtually ignored, it is going through a growing popularity since we have entered into an era of advertising where the visual imagery has led to what might be labeled as visual hyperbole<sup>64</sup>. And as Callister and Stern<sup>65</sup> mention, hyperbole allows the visual to tell a story that is part fiction and part fact, and the ability of the consumer to separate out the two, to some extent, determines its effectiveness.

In conclusion, hyperbole can be absurd as long as the characteristics of humor and/or reification allegory are present.

### Empirical research

Throughout the years, research related with absurd advertising and its impact has been experimented. Arias-Bolzmann and Mowen<sup>66</sup> were the first to make an empirical investigation, testing out that the presence of an absurd image on cigarette advertisements diverts attention away from the cigarette's warning label. Similar research was made by Arias-Bolzmann<sup>67</sup> on alcohol warning label recall and the results support the hypothesis that absurdity into print advertisements increases subjects' recall of the brand name but reduces the unaided recall of the alcohol warning label. Arias-Bolzmann, Chakraborty & Mowen<sup>68</sup> suggest that the prior product category attitude (PCA) of consumers is one factor that will tend to bias consumers' information processing in positive or negative directions, when the presence or absence of an absurd image is manipulated.

Investigations with the related constructs of absurdism have appeared in the last decade. Mostafa<sup>69</sup> investigates Egyptian consumers' attitudes towards surrealism in advertising. The product category attitudes is statistically significant because products like alcohol and other harmful goods are viewed as damaging to the individual and society, so they are negatively viewed by consumers in Muslim countries whether Surrealistic art techniques are used in the advertisement or not. Also the results indicate a significant interaction between advertisement type and sex where the female consumers in Egypt have a positive outlook towards the use of surrealism in advertising compared to their male counterparts. These results lend to suggest that advertisements produced in one

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<sup>64</sup> Mark A. Callister and Lesa A. Stern, "The Role of Visual Hyperbole in Advertising Effectiveness", *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising* (2007): 29.

<sup>65</sup> Mark A. Callister and Lesa A. Stern, "The Role of Visual Hyperbole in Advertising Effectiveness"...

<sup>66</sup> Leopoldo Arias-Bolzmann and John C. Mowen, "Absurd Images in Cigarette Advertising: An Empirical Investigation", in *Marketing: Perspectives for the 1990s*, edited by Robert L. King (Proceedings) (Ohio: Southern Marketing Association, 1992), 295-299.

<sup>67</sup> Leopoldo Arias-Bolzmann, "Absurdity in Print Advertising: Its Impact on Brand Name Recall and Alcohol Warning Label Recall", *The Journal of American Academy of Business* Vol: 17 (2012): 78-83.

<sup>68</sup> Leopoldo Arias-Bolzmann et al., "Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses"...

<sup>69</sup> Mohamed M. Mostafa, "An Experimental Investigation of the Egyptian Consumers' Attitudes Towards Surrealism in Advertising", *International Journal of Consumer Studies* Vol: 29 (2005): 216-231.

country cannot be standardized or directly translated for use in another, particularly if they are culturally different.

Callister and Stern<sup>70</sup> have studied the role of visual hyperbole in advertising effectiveness where also providing an experimental test of the impact on consumers attitudes and responses, show that hyperbolic ads produce more ad liking than nonhyperbolic ads. Gelbrich, Gätke and Westjohn<sup>71</sup> examine the effect of absurd advertising on memory and persuasion across cultures. It is hypothesized that the effect of absurdity on recall is culturally invariant, whereas the effect on attitude toward the ad is contingent on the recipients' cultural orientation. The results support that recipients recall more and more precisely what is shown in absurd ads compared to ads with a non-absurd setting. Hence, cultural orientation does not interfere with memory formation. However, similar to Mostafa<sup>72</sup>, persuasion depends on culture. In particular, the moderating effect of masculinity is confirmed for three absurdity types: anthropomorphic, allegoric, and hyperbolic ads lead to a positive attitude toward the ad when masculinity is high. Respondents with a feminine value orientation, on the contrary, form a more positive attitude toward non-absurd ads.

Finally, Mai and Hutter<sup>73</sup>, suggest that the effects of absurd ads are curvilinear. That is, absurdity evokes both positive effects (resolving schema incongruence) and negative effects (cognitive overload) simultaneously. Consequently, distracted consumers are more apt to accept the ad's message. However, once an ad is perceived too absurd, advertising effectiveness peaks and then declines, owing to the fact that the decoding of such ads exceeds the (limited) cognitive abilities of the recipient. In turn, the authors demonstrate that PCA moderates the magnitude of the ambivalent effects on consumer attention, attitudes, and purchase intention. Apparently, absurdity in advertising is particularly beneficial for consumers with a negative PCA, and absurd ads are less beneficial for those recipients with a positive PCA.

## Conclusions and future research directions

Absurdism and its related constructs are usually used in advertising, associated to literature and arts, with its origins in philosophy at the ninetieth century. The use of innovative advertising by the eye catching graphics is what absurdism and surrealism have in common, where anthropomorphic characters may be employed. Nevertheless the two different types of allegory (reification and typology) can't rely on images only, they may require words and music also, with the presence of the motivational conflict because of its tale-telling characteristic. Additionally, the hyperbolic expression is commonly associated to allegory, as long as it uses humor and bizarreness in order to produce gross exaggeration.

The different empirical researches presented try to show the reactions towards the distinct constructs and some also have into consideration the cultural conventions that may vary the interpretations of the ads. Future research should compare different cultures

<sup>70</sup> Mark A. Callister and Lesa A. Stern, "The Role of Visual Hyperbole in Advertising Effectiveness"...

<sup>71</sup> Gelbrich, Katja et al., "Effectiveness of Absurdity in Advertising Across Cultures"...

<sup>72</sup> Mohamed M. Mostafa, "An Experimental Investigation of the Egyptian Consumers' Attitudes Towards Surrealism in Advertising"...

<sup>73</sup> Robert Mai and Katharina Hutter, "Absurdity in Advertising: Curvilinear Impact on Ad Effectiveness" (Abstract), American Marketing Association (2013): 453.

to have a multi-country study that observes the communalities or differences in terms of consumers' attitudes around the advertising strategies.

Another area of future research involves a study comparing the reactions on subjects among the related constructs of absurdism described in this investigation (surrealism, anthropomorphism, allegory, hyperbole) and not just the impact with one of them. The use of one advertising medium (print advertisements) or one product type (cigarettes) in these researches is also a limitation; therefore future research may include different media (TV) or different levels of product complexity (shoes / insurance) to increase the generalizability of the findings.

The author hopes to encourage researchers to collect data which will give additional insights into the theoretical construct of absurdism and its underlying effects on the consumer when used in advertisements. A task for future research is also to determine whether absurd object images, absurd animal images, and absurd human images differ in their effectiveness and impact. Other forms, including olfactory absurdism, could be explored as well.

Finally, the study of anthropomorphic images in advertising is long overdue and requires further empirical investigation. Today, there is no "animal theory" available to help explain its advertising impact. Among the many things that could be empirically supported is the charisma, beauty, warmth, etc. that certain animals portray could boost the impact of an ad.

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