

# Young consumers' views on humorous BELF-communication

## Abstract

**Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to gain understanding of how young consumers with varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience and perceive humorous Business English lingua franca (BELF) mediated communication used in transit contexts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – For the collection of qualitative data, the present study relies on focus group discussions in three European countries. The data were analyzed by the authors by applying the phenomenographic approach as a method.

**Findings** - Young European consumers expressed a preference for humor and playfulness in BELF-mediated communication, yet they can be a challenging group to be informed and entertained with humorous BELF-communication, as they differ in their taste of humor due to varying language- and culture-based identities. However, BELF as a communication tool was seen functional and unproblematic by the informants. These informants perceive the role of *resonant-wit* type of humor in BELF-messages with non-cultural references as fulfilling some of the aims of the messages. Yet, the role of *comic-wit* humor in BELF-messages with cultural references is more challenging to interpret.

**Originality/value** - The present results bring original viewpoints on the use of humor in cross-cultural corporate communication via a unique perspective of how young consumers perceive and value humor in BELF-mediated communication.

**Keywords** Humor, Playfulness, Transit advertising, Transit communication, BELF

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Advertising – domestic or international – cannot be overlooked. Not only does advertising shape what we want and thus how we spend our money, it also influences which businesses fail and succeed (Cluley, 2017). But how often does international advertising use and strategically utilize humor for persuasive purposes? The estimates of the percentage of humorous advertising vary from 30 per cent up to 66 depending on the medium used (Toncar, 2001; Weinberger *et al.*, 2015). As scholars have pointed out, there are not only opportunities, but also challenges of using humor and playfulness in advertising communication (Fugate *et al.*, 2000; Beard, 2008a; Oikarinen and Söderlund, 2016). Digital communication may even increase the use of humor, as companies are interested in spreading their messages as quickly as possible and as far as possible: a viral ad will do just that (Porter and Golan, 2006; Berger and Milkman, 2012). Even though English has been used in advertising for quite a while, the term Business English lingua franca (BELF) was created (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010) in order to

study ELF usage in business transactions. BELF may be an elf in the gaming culture (*World of Warcraft*) and BELFIE may have a specific meaning in the current 'selfie culture', but in this paper, we approach international corporate communication as 'BELF-mediated', which defines BELF as a tool for communication. *The objective of this paper is to gain understanding of how young consumers perceive humorous BELF communication in travelling contexts.*

Even though humor can be found in every country (Gulas and Weinberger, 2006), it has culture-specific features. Cross-cultural advertising studies have explored humor quite extensively from different angles (e.g., Hatzithomas *et al.*, 2009; Biswas *et al.*, 1992; Laroche *et al.*, 2014). Yet, within BELF-mediated advertising and corporate communication research, little attention has, as yet, been focused on humor, and the present study is filling this research gap. The paper attempts to contribute to this pool of research with a viewpoint of humorous advertising and communication via BELF in a transit communication space, i.e. international airport. The location sets special challenges for the successfulness of communication because people are moving fast there. The role of humor has previously been studied both in internal and external corporate communication (Vuorela, 2005; McIlheran, 2006; Oikarinen, 2018). In advertising, humor has been identified as a pivotal tool in the creation of advertising appeal (Voss, 2009). The broader concept, playfulness, has been considerably less studied, so it is quite a recent area of interest among researchers (Guitard *et al.*, 2005; Alatalo *et al.*, 2018) and calls for further research. We believe that our perspective on playfulness in communication – including the aspect of humor – has the potential to extend the discussion on humorous corporate communication, including advertising.

### **Background to humor in BELF-advertising**

In this chapter on the theoretical background of the present paper, we will discuss advertising in international spaces and introduce playfulness and humor as strategic components of effective advertising communication. As there is still limited knowhow of the effects of humorous advertising messages on international consumers (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2014), cross-cultural issues will need to be considered.

#### ***Playfulness and humor in advertising***

Playfulness and humor – humor being part of the concept of playfulness (Proyer and Ruch, 2011) – are the two core concepts of interest in the present study. Playfulness seems to be an inherent part of human nature (Glynn and Webster, 1992). It has also been defined as an individual characteristic; i.e. a person's ability to see a situation in a way which brings about humor, amusement and entertainment (Barnett, 2007; Glynn and Webster, 1992). To further define the concept of adult playfulness has been the interest of quite a few scholars; e.g. Proyer and Jehle (2013) included seventeen instruments in their determination of its components. They came up with five attributes, i.e. Humorousness, Cheerfulness-Uninhibitedness,

Expressiveness, Other-Directedness, and Intellectuality-Creativity. Of these attributes, humorousness refers to a person being seen humorous by others (ibid.).

In the context of advertising, humor has been approached from the viewpoint of mechanisms involved in the processing of what is considered humorous. Based on Speck's humorous message taxonomy (1991), Beard (2008b) has created a model of these mechanisms to apply to humorous ads. He established five different humorous ad types: *comic wit* (based on incongruity), *resonant humor* (based on relief), *resonant wit* (based on incongruity and relief), *satire* (based on incongruity and disparagement), and *full comedy* (based on all three mechanisms: relief, incongruity and superiority). These five types form basis for assessing the humorous messages in this study.

### ***BELF- mediated advertising***

Unlike any other language in the world today, the English language is truly global, with more than two billion speakers using English at least weekly to conduct business worldwide (Crystal, 2003). A *lingua franca* enables communication between people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds; the focus is on carrying out transactions rather than producing native speaker like pronunciation or grammatical accuracy. There are both geographical-historical and socio-cultural reasons for the fact that it is English and not another language (ibid). In addition to being an important medium in broadcasting and entertainment business, English has also been a significant medium for the press for several hundred years. This has even given rise to terms such as 'macdonaldization', as speakers of other languages started to feel this type of English-language-mediated communication threatening (ibid).

Some entrepreneurs are of the opinion that consumers should be able to receive service in their mother tongue. This could also apply to advertising. Still, what is the consumers' view on the importance of receiving advertising and communication in their mother tongue versus BELF when this communication takes place at locations of international travel? This is an interesting starting point for exploring the use of humor and playfulness in corporate communication at airports. Some scholars consider English in international business contexts as a cultureless code (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005) while others have found that consumers do not regard BELF as a neutral communication tool in advertising (Nickerson and Camiciottoli, 2014).

Speaking BELF involves negotiating the communication norms in context rather than automatically transposing native language norms (MacKenzie, 2014; see also Poppi, 2013). However, ignoring native English norms can cause comprehension problems, especially in writing (ibid). What will this mean for transit communication including advertising? What about when BELF-mediated advertising and other corporate communication is combined with humor, which can be cognitively challenging, depending on the type of humor used?

### ***Humor in BELF-mediated advertising***

Scholars are of the opinion that humorous advertising is used throughout the world (e.g. Toncar, 2001). As humor is the result of both individual and collective cultural perceptions of what is considered incongruous, exaggerated and distorted (Hofstede, 2005), differences in consumers reactions can be expected in different countries: it seems possible that different types of humor can bring about different effects in different countries. Humorous cross-cultural print advertisements have been studied by comparing the emotional appeal and humor in ads in France and the USA (Biswas et. al., 1992) and the study discovered interesting information about cross-cultural differences in advertising. French advertisers clearly used humor more than American advertisers in the magazines that were included in the data of that study.

The reasons for exploiting humor in BELF-based advertising can be presumed to be the same as in advertising in general: attracting consumers' attention, increasing their positive feelings and, hence, purchase intention, while at the same time enhancing consumers' attitudes towards a brand (see e.g. Eisend, 2009; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992). No studies have been undertaken as yet which combines humor and BELF with advertising and other corporate communication although humor in advertising, in general, has been studied extensively (ibid). This is not surprising as the amount of humor in award-winning advertising has increased significantly, as reported by Weinberger *et al.* (2015).

Based on research, humor has been found to be effective in boosting consumers' concentration and thus helping to recall advertising messages (Crawford and Gregory, 2015), although there are challenges involved in [understanding of the humorous messages](#) (see e.g. [Oikarinen and Sinisalo, 2017](#)): sometimes humor in advertising does not have the desired effect, and it can be distracting, even alienating. Crawford and Gregory (2015) warn against treating humor merely as a culture-bound phenomenon, because there are universal theories which may be more helpful when exploring the appeal of humor-based advertising. Poppi (2013) emphasizes the importance of exploiting the potential of English as *lingua franca* in order to adapt its use to the needs of international exchanges. The content of humor may require some adaptation when communicating advertising messages in different cultural contexts (cf. Oosthuizen, 2004); scholars point out that it would be more beneficial to focus rather on cultural values than purely on country-based differences (Crawford and Gregory 2015).

Although humor manifests itself in various shapes and forms, there is a common understanding amongst different schools of humor research that humor is a universal aspect of human experience (Apte, 1985; Martin, 2007). What is intriguing in exploring the social phenomenon of humor is the underlying notion that there also seems to be globally similar mechanisms on how we create, comprehend and interpret humor (Wagner & Uriosi-Aparisi, 2011). However, using and perceiving humor is undoubtedly associated with socio-cultural factors (Apte, 1985). In connection with humorous advertising and marketing communication, research has been

conducted on the cross-cultural dimension (Hoffman *et al.*, 2014; Weinberger *et al.*, 2012). With the dimension of BELF, we will attempt to add to this pool of research.

## **Method**

The present study aims to improve understanding of young consumers' perceptions of humor in BELF-mediated corporate communication. We have chosen to collect advertisements and other messages in spaces of international travel, as they seem a logical and natural place for companies to address consumers in English as a lingua franca (ELF). Humorous advertising has been studied extensively via quantitative studies (Eisend, 2009; Crawford and Gregory, 2015). Qualitative approach seems more appropriate when addressing consumers' perceptions, as it will yield a deeper insight into the informants' feelings and thoughts (Denscombe, 2014).

### ***Qualitative phenomenography***

Phenomenography belongs to the qualitative research tradition, and it is particularly suitable as a research approach when addressing people's perceptions of phenomena. The present research approach itself is related to the interpretivist paradigm which, according to Denscombe (2014), is one of the two main paradigms in social research. The paradigm takes a skeptical attitude towards the possibility of any person to ever view issues in a purely objective light. As phenomenographic research is concerned with people's views, this paradigm is consistent with the research of this paper.

The term 'phenomenography' has actively been employed by e.g. Marton (1981, 1988) to refer to the individual ways people have for experiencing, conceptualizing, perceiving and understanding phenomena around them. The object of interest in phenomenography is conceptions (Svensson, 1994), and this is the common element in this research orientation and approach; in other words, the aim is to describe conceptions. The object of research in the present study is the way potential consumers view the use of playfulness and humor in transit communication. The focus of the study is on the informants' thoughts; thus, the study falls logically under the phenomenographic research approach.

Apart from essentially being a research orientation, phenomenography also involves characteristics of a method (Svensson, 1994). Marton (1988) states that a researcher in this approach categorizes the informants' perceptions or descriptions. However, this does not merely mean sorting out the data, but it also involves looking for significant differences of informants' perceptions of some aspect of the world (*ibid.*).

As for ontological and epistemological assumptions, phenomenography does not have an articulated metaphysical basis, as it is primarily an empirical research tradition. Still, individual researchers may make metaphysical assumptions as the approach may involve such

assumptions implicitly (Svensson, 1994). Theory is seen as a result of people's interpretations of reality; and reality, in turn, is constituted by means of people's understanding of it (Flodén and Forsberg, 2009). Moreover, the knowledge gained via people's interpretations or conceptions is relational and created by thinking about external reality (Svensson, 1994). So, these ontological assumptions concern the nature of the research object itself. Epistemology in phenomenography refers to the relationship between reality and its descriptions (Uljens, 1996), and the most fundamental assumption is that people's conceptions can be reduced into categories, which act as reductions of the main parts of the phenomenon being conceptualized (Svensson, 1994). In sum, phenomenography is about describing people's conceptions and reducing them into categories, which represent the main parts of a phenomenon as people perceive it. This is what is done in the present paper.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Our main research question involves studying the perceptions of young consumers of two sets of humorous messages. We started the research process by collecting a pool of humorous ads and other messages in different European airports and selected two sets of humorous BELF-mediated messages to be used in focus group discussions in different European countries. The selection process of the ads involved a basic test: if the research group was amused, the message was selected in the pool of humorous messages of the study. In practice, this meant that the messages involved playfulness, e.g. anthropomorphism, and other elements that can easily be recognized according to the basic humor theories of incongruity, relief and superiority (Beard 2008b). The chosen messages were photographed in the baggage reclaim area of the international terminal of Helsinki airport in Finland in 2016.

As young people are active consumers, they were chosen as the focus group informants in the research process of the present study. The data was collected in the context of a university lecture by a visiting lecturer. The research process included three phases: collecting samples of English-language mediated advertising in transit spaces in Europe; organizing focus group discussions with potential consumers; and analyzing the data obtained in the focus group discussions.

### *Focus group data collection*

The messages acted as stimulus material for the focus group discussions with potential consumers. These messages represented forms where playfulness and humor seemed to be intentional. They represented two different forms of international travel messaging via BELF: one ad with 'cultural references' (Figure 1) and one message of another kind with 'non-cultural references' (Figure 2).

Here we study the perceptions of the messages by potential consumers. The participants in the focus group discussions responded to questions on perceived meaning, objective and appropriateness of the communication for advertising or information-sharing purposes.

Four different focus groups discussions were conducted with 110 participants in total, consisting of the following:

1<sup>st</sup> Focus group: Belgian (47 participants: 23 male, 24 female)

2<sup>nd</sup> Focus group: Multicultural: Chinese, Nepalese, German, Serbian, Finnish, Russian, Kazakhstani (25 participants: 12 male, 13 female)

3<sup>rd</sup> Focus group: Finnish (23 participants: 10 male, 13 female)

4<sup>th</sup> Focus group: Catalanian (15 participants: 5 male, 10 female)

The informants were presented with the two sets of messages and they discussed their likes and dislikes regarding the two examples of international transit communication in BELF. One was an *advertisement with cultural references* for travelers informing of the tourist attractions – sights in Finnish cities, and the new rail connection from the airport to Helsinki train station offered by Finnish Rail (VR); the second was an example of *a message with non-cultural references* advising passengers to be patient while waiting for their luggage.

The data was collected [by one of the authors](#). This assured that in all focus groups there was [only one moderator and that the same procedure was followed in each focus group discussion](#). The data was collected in the course of a tertiary-level business communication lecture, so the informants were first introduced to the topic of English *lingua franca* in business communication contexts (BELF) and humor in advertising. They discussed whether they, in general, prefer ‘serious’ or playful and humorous advertising and why, and they presented humorous communication examples they liked and remembered. They then moved on to analyzing the examples of travel-related messaging [of which they made notes during the analysis](#). [These notes, in turn, acted as the research data](#). [This helped moderator manage and organize the discussions and at the same time collect information from the participants](#).

The analysis of the data collected [by one and the same author](#) during the focus group discussions in three European countries was conducted by all the four authors. Firstly, the entire data was reviewed by one researcher to gain a holistic overview of the empirical data. The idea was to identify the key themes inductively. Secondly, the authors focused on the country-based data and summarized the responses in each group per each question. Next, the data was scrutinized more carefully by creating a matrix of the responses based on the two messages separately. This enabled multidimensional analysis of the complete data set and allowed for comparisons to be made.

### ***Description of messages***

The ads below (Figure 1) promote Finnish Rail (VR). The one on the left advertises train as a convenient way to see the country by referring to speed and eco-friendliness via imagery and choice of color (green) and exploiting pictograms of key sights in different cities. The ad can be interpreted as referring to literary and fairy tale figures and places known by Finnish people and this requires some incongruity resolution, as the viewer needs to connect the pictograms to the places they refer to. Thus, it represents *comic wit* type of ad which requires an incongruity to be resolved. The ad on the right promotes the newly opened rail connection from Helsinki airport to the city center and a convenient connection to the rest of the country, again by train. The word 'keep rolling on' refers to a popular song and in this context, possibly also to the round column on which it is placed. The line is also called the Ring Rail, which the pillar and the wording 'rolling' can be seen to reinforce. This again represents an unexpected combination, which would translate to *comic wit* type of humor.

[Add figure 1 here]

*Figure 1. Advertisement with cultural references by Finnish Rail.*

The second set of messages by Finavia (Figure 2) can be described as representing *resonant wit* as there is a danger of the luggage not appearing on the conveyor belt, but the traveler is assured that it will be solved by waiting patiently for a while. No cultural references are involved here. Apart from humorousness, there seems to be another kind of playful element included in the pictures, namely Intellectuality-Creativity, as the words and images are used in quite a creative manner. The messages are taped on the floor around the baggage reclaim area. They personify suitcases as animate creatures with human characteristics (see Catanescu and Tom, 2001).

[Add figure 2 here]

*Figure 2. Set of messages with non-cultural references by Finavia.*

## **Findings**

The informants were posed eight questions concerning the messages. The questions ranged from the informants' perceptions of the aims of messages, the role of humor in them, as well as the informants' opinions about the humor and the language of the messages.

### *Aims of messages and roles of humor*



The informants were asked to specify the aims of the messages. They first assessed what the initiator of the messages aimed to communicate. Further, they were asked to assess the role of humor in the messages. The answers revealed the informants' views on the two perspectives, and classifications were developed based on the content of their answers.

When the informants were asked to explain the message being communicated to customers, *providing information* was an answer to be found in relation to both messages. In the first message (Finnish Rail), quite a few informants stated that the message was to tell about and promote trains as a good, easy and fast means of travelling to places in Finland. In particular, the message *advertised* the possibility to take the train from the airport. In contrast, the second message (Finavia) aimed at *communicating* a specific message to the readers: *wait patiently for your baggage*, as this conception could be found in several answers. Moreover, based on the answers, the message was conveyed in a playful way in order to *make the wait more comfortable, fun* and even to *calm down and relax customers*. Some even suggested that the idea was also to *divert attention* away from the fact that the baggage is not yet there in the baggage reclaim area.

Based on the answers, the differences between the messages were basically of two types. Firstly, the informants mostly seemed to recognize the different aims of the messages: the first one advertised the services of the Finnish Rail, and the second one provided information and encouraged the readers, i.e. the passengers, to wait patiently for their baggage. Secondly, the advertisement by Finnish Rail posed more of a challenge to the understanding of it, as some informants did not seem to be able to determine the aim of that message. In a non-Finnish group, it was commented that “[w]e don’t get the message because we don’t get the advertisement”.

The informants were also asked to ponder about the role humor in the messages. Regarding both messages, it was suggested that the role of the humor was to *make* something, such as *travelling or waiting, more interesting and attractive*. The word playful and play with words were also used to describe the messages. In the first message, the humor, which can be detected in the figures or pictures of landmarks and characters, serves the role of *facilitating the conveyance of the message* according to some answers. Apart from the images, the reference to the song and the advertisement being attached to a round pillar were seen as ways to *make the message less boring*. Based on the answers, humor also acts as a way to show that *a train takes a traveler to places fast*. It was also suggested that the idea was “to make the people happy”. In turn, the informants advocated the idea of humor in the second message being employed as a method to *encourage people to be patient and to alleviate the waiting time by making something*

*boring fun, entertaining people, possibly older, and making people smile.* Further, it was regarded as a method to *make the message stand out* and *catch attention* as well as to *cheer up passengers and relieve tension and stress*. One answer even suggested that the role of *humor* was to act *as irony*. Furthermore, it was commented that “we don’t see any role [to humor] because it doesn’t fit in this kind of subject”.

Comparing the views on the role of humor in the two messages, there were similarities, e.g. *humor in these messages was seen as difficult to comprehend, or humor was seen as an entertainer making something less boring*. There were also message-specific views on the role of humor, such as *humor used to increase the attractiveness of travelling by train (Finnish Rail), or humor used to relive stress (Finavia)*. With regards to both messages, there were some informants who told that they did not understand the message and consequently, they could not assign any role to the humor used in the messages. In particular, this applied to the first message (Finnish Rail), as there were several informants holding this view, especially among the non-Finns. The informants’ views on the aims of the messages, as well as the roles of humor are integrated into Figure 3.

[Add figure 3 here]

*Figure 3. Aims of messages and roles of humor in the messages by Finnish Rail and Finavia.*

To summarize the informants’ views on the aims of the messages and the role of humor in them, it can be noted that the answers overlap to some degree, and some of the same ideas come up in both contexts. This overlapping especially applies to the second message as the ideas of the messages aiming at alleviating waiting, as well as enhancing people’s patience and relaxing them, can be found among the answers to both questions.

### ***Humorous or playful – or neither?***

The informants were also posed a question about the humorousness of the messages. As experiencing something to be humorous requires a person to understand and make the connections between what is said or shown and what is meant by it, the informants were also addressed questions about the understanding of the messages. Furthermore, the informants were asked for ideas on how to improve the messages to make them more effective.

On the whole, the *messages were found playful*, even though there were opposite views about the messages, as some found them not playful, nor humorous. In particular, this applied to the

non-Finnish group, as informants in the group expressed more diverse opinions about the messages, and quite a few of them did not find either of the messages to be humorous or playful. Thus, quite a few of the informants appeared to make a difference between playfulness and humorousness. Further, some suggested that the first message by Finnish Rail could be funnier to the local people.

When it comes to understanding the messages, there are distinct differences detectable in the informants' answers. Firstly, the second message (Finavia) did not seem to pose a significant challenge to the understanding of the message, as few informants expressed having problems with it. In contrast, the first message (Finnish Rail) – while understandable for the majority of the informants – was considered more obscure on account of the pictures of e.g. the Moomin characters, Santa Claus and buildings in the message. Secondly, even when the messages were understood, some informants expressed reservations regarding their functionality; e.g. *images were suitable for children, message was not powerful enough, message could have been communicated differently* and some could not relate to the images. In one comment, it was stated that “it looks more like something for children and it’s not original”.

More specifically, the informants were also asked to give their opinion about potential challenges regarding the language and culture-specific features of the messages. In keeping with the question covered above, there was a clear difference between the views on the two messages. No challenges were reported regarding the cultural features and few when it came to the language of the second message (Finavia). Still, some challenges were experienced with expressions like 'baggage is taking a little round trip' and 'baggage is currently busy'.

As already established, the message by Finnish Rail was experienced to be problematic by quite a few of the informants. While few comments were made about any challenges in the language itself, the message was considered more challenging because of the culturally related features in it. When the language was mentioned, it was mainly about the names of Finnish cities or the lyrics of the song being referred to. In the imagery, the fairy tale figures were experienced to be difficult for various reasons:

‘‘We don’t recognize the building & creature: it’s a cross-cultural issue. What does the creature have to do with ‘Turku’ ‘‘

Quite a few observations about the informants’ comments can be made here. Firstly, the Moomin figure is of a Finnish origin, although various products having the figure are also being exported worldwide. Consequently, some non-Finns may also recognize the figure. Secondly,

Santa Claus, as a fairy tale figure, is not necessarily associated with Finland, even if in Finland people are generally of the opinion that it is part of the Finnish culture. Lastly, the building depicting Helsinki Cathedral was mentioned as something the informants were not familiar with. Even though these issues were mainly reported by the non-Finnish groups, even the Finnish group, while not having problems understanding the message, recognized the fact that international travelers might not know the imagery in it.

In sum, it can be concluded that the informants could understand the second message (Finavia) without any greater difficulties. Even so, it was found to be more of a playful kind than humorous – or neither. Contrarily, the first message (Finnish Rail) did not appear to be as clear, and especially the non-Finnish groups reported having difficulties with comprehension. However, if understood, the views on this message bear similarities with the second message, as informants tended to find it rather playful than humorous, or neither. As for the problems with the messages, they tended to be related to the cultural features of the first message (Finnish Rail), while the second message (Finavia) did not appear to pose any greater problems to informants.

As the informants recognize challenges in the messages, some of them also convey their views on the possibility of how to improve the effectiveness of the messages. Basically, they have suggestions along two lines. Based on the opinions of several informants, the first message could be improved by making it more understandable in form by e.g. using internationally better-known figures or including explanations in the pictures. In addition, the messages - both of them - could be made funnier according to some students. On the other hand, some informants are of the opinion that nothing can be done, as cultural differences cannot be eliminated. Furthermore, even if the informants give suggestions for improvements of the messages, generally they think that to have their mother tongue used in the messages is not a solution that would make the messages more effective. However, not to use playfulness at all could work, as some of them think that the messages should be functional and that humor is not the right tool to be used but rather, it can make the message confusing.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

The aim of the present paper was to explore how young consumers of different cultural backgrounds perceived humorous and/or playful messaging in a transit space. The stimulus material was collected at a Finnish airport and the data in three different European countries. BELF as a medium was considered unproblematic to be used in advertisements and messages

placed in international airports; moreover, the informants did not feel that they would have liked to have the messages in their native tongue. Based on the informants' answers in the present research, young consumers seem to appreciate humor and playfulness in advertising, and they are able to recognize the role that the use of them plays in fulfilling at least some of the aims of the messages.

The stimulus material originated in a Nordic country, Finland, and Central and Southern Europeans seemed to expect more explicitness of the humor, as they found the material playful, but not specifically funny - thus making a distinct difference between playfulness and humor. Surprisingly, the Finnish informants were of the same opinion to the extent that they were not amused, either. Consumers seem to prefer humorous advertising to non-humorous, at least on-record as this is what they claimed in the introductory discussion of the focus group sessions. It is worth noting that in a study by Lallukka (2003) the definition of 'not being a child anymore' often included the idea of having stopped playing; this viewpoint featured in the comments by the young informants in the present data. Thus, it seems that informants being university students may still hold this view, and this notion may have had a bearing on the informants' perception of the messages in the present research. This might also be the reason why e.g. anthropomorphism was not found funny by the informants.

The findings in this study have several types of implications. Firstly, the issue of whether to use humor and playfulness in advertisements and other corporate messages seems fairly complicated, and it is not certain that all recipients of messages appreciate the humor/playfulness in them. Individuals have differing perceptions of humor as suggested by Hofstede (2005). However, people from different cultures do not necessarily view humor differently. Secondly, in keeping with e.g. Shultz (1976), the incongruity – whether involved in a *comic wit* or *resonant wit* type of humorous/playful message (Beard 2008b) – needs to be resolved in order to be able to evaluate and possibly appreciate the role of humor in a message. With culture-related features, this is not necessarily possible. Thirdly, in the case of the *resonant wit* type of humor (Beard 2008b), humor was experienced to help fulfil the aims of the messages. As there is an element of relief included in the *resonant wit* type of humor (Beard 2008b), the aim to make a situation more comfortable for the recipient of the message was quite naturally felt to be achieved with the help of such humor. Lastly, the aim was also – as expressed by the recipients of the messages – to increase attractiveness and positive feelings regarding the content of the messages. This resonates well with the reasons for using humor in advertisements found by other scholars (e.g. Eisend, 2009; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992).

There were several limitations in this study and taking these issues into account will facilitate further research on the topic. The students representing young consumers in the study were educated, and hence BELF was unproblematic for them. Also, the fact that students were used as informants in consumer behavior studies has been found problematic by some scholars (e.g. Pham, 2013). However, this study indicates what customer-focused humor and playfulness as appeals should be like in a BELF setting, at least regarding young consumers. We also acknowledge that to use written notes by the focus group informants as the primary data could have influenced how in-depth the information we obtained is. Still, we believe that we were able to gain the most relevant perceptions of the informants.

Another limitation was that the informants were not travelling in Finland; hence, they possibly had a different mindset than tourists would have as tourists may be more likely to specifically expect country-related input in transit communication. Thus, in the future, we will attempt to study consumer perceptions of ads through field studies with e.g. holiday makers and business travelers in Europe. Further, cultural differences in the informants' perceptions of humorous advertising could be detected more specifically: context dependence of a culture - high or low (Hall, 1976) - possibly has a bearing on consumers' interpretations of humorous advertising (cf. Garcia-Yeste, 2013), as well as the individualism versus collectivism index of a culture and society. Additionally, the relevance of politeness strategies detectable in humor ads: involvement or independence (Scollon and Scollon, 2000) could be a significant factor in the successfulness in different cultural contexts – with e.g. professional or age group related segmentation. The present study is the first part of a larger research scheme.

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