

PSYCHOLOGY OF PLAYFUL COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCE BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

The concept of playful communication or even the use of play in communication to grab and sustain audience attention is a rising phenomenon that is yet to be fully explored. Playful communication involves the use of humour, irony, creativity, characters etc. to interact with and engage the audience. Previous research has explored audience behaviour and playful communication as separate concepts not necessarily examining the influence of playful communication on audience behaviour, hence this paper. The Play Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory are used to theoretically frame the work. Using the desk research methodology, it is revealed that audience members are more emotionally connected to content with elements of humour and are more likely to recall and engage such messages as they enhance their mood and grab their attention. They also perceive humorous content as more relatable and authentic.

Introduction

Ever scrolled through social media and seen a video that made you laugh so hard while on a train? Have you seen a commercial that made you unconsciously smile so heartedly? The ubiquity of playful communication has become more apparent in recent times, garnering attention in media, advertising and entertainment. Playful communication involves the use of creativity, humour, figures of speech: irony, sarcasm, etc., characters and games to give the audience a more interactive and engaging communication experience. The humorous content of a message may have a persuasive effect, increase message liking, and create a positive mood (Djambaska et al, 2016).

It is pivotal for media content creators, educators, marketers, psychologists, etc to understand the behaviour and response of their audience to playful elements in communication, especially in the information age where skits, animations, mobile games and comic graphics are becoming prevalent and more appealing to the audience. The use of play in communication makes the audience emotionally attached to the source of communication, which is the brand that puts out the content. A vivid example is the Duolingo app (an app that teaches different languages) that uses animated characters to interact with the users when users do well in their quizzes and even sends funny reminders to the users when they stay a while without using the app. A user may be compelled to continue using the app, whether there is a personal benefit for the user or not, but to continue having that experience. The use of humour, therefore, in

communication fosters positive brand perception and loyalty. This obviously results from audience research and a commendable understanding of audience behaviour.

Humour is found everywhere in the movie industry, on television, in books and newspapers, in our conversations, and in graffiti (Djambaska et al, 2016). The use of exaggerated characters, absurd events, and sarcasm in movies provides comic relief or relief from tension in action movies or drama or even the use of satire to highlight political, social, or cultural concerns in comedy films. Television shows and radio programmes use ‘play’ to make concepts understandable to children, reach locales of a community, or generally explore everyday life, relationships, and work environments, making them very relatable to a wide audience. According to Karels and De la Hera (2021), there is the use of a playful visual design in prints that is meant to instil a playful mind-set; the use of strategies based on a pleasurable interactive experiential logic; the liberation of unspoken topics of a dark, solemn, and negative nature in a playful way. Daily conversations with friends, colleagues etc. have some elements of ‘play’ in them getting people so attached to the people that make them more joyful. With the use of graffiti, serious matters of concern are displayed in playful, relatable artistic language.

The psychology of playful communication and its impact on audience behaviour are fundamental in effective and strategic communication. This article therefore aims to explore the psychology of playful communication and its influence on audience behaviour, bearing in mind that playfulness goes beyond mere aesthetic choice to the human desire for creativity, amusement, and emotional connection. When used effectively, playful communication can improve cognitive engagement and arouse emotional responses; thus examining how playful communication influences audience engagement, retention, and interaction constitutes a reasonable chunk of the thrust of this article. Therefore, Play Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory provide the theoretical background for understanding how play influences human behaviour and exposes the cognitive and emotional state of playful communication.

Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored on the framework of the Play Theory and the Uses and Gratification Theory.

Play Theory

The Play Theory was propounded by a British social scientist William Stephenson, who started out in Physics but later transitioned to Psychology. He first introduced the theory in his book in 1967, titled “The Play Theory of Mass Communication.” Earlier communication

theories focused on media as a tool of education, persuasion, and control, thereby having some influence on the audience and shaping public opinion. Play theory is based on the idea that the media cannot have harmful effects because the audience uses them primarily for entertainment, rather than as serious sources of information. Play Theory of Mass Communication is a theory that holds that the first function of mass media is to provide entertainment (Eke and Adeyemi, 2024).

Regarding the newspapers, Stephenson developed and defended the Ludenic Theory of News reading: he argues they are read, to provide pleasure and relaxation instead of information and illumination, as believed by many media authors and readers. People's daily withdrawal from the mass media in their after-hours is a matter of subjectivity. The effect of mass communication is neither escapism nor seduction of the masses. Rather, it is seen as anti-anxiety-producing, and is regarded as communication pleasure (Akinjogbin and Kayode, 2011).

Stephenson's Play Theory underscores the significance of play in both individual and collective contexts (Eke and Adeyemi, 2024). It highlights the idea that play serves as a medium through which people can engage with one another and the world around them in a more profound and meaningful way. This engagement fosters creativity, innovation and a deeper understanding of oneself and others, ultimately contributing to the enrichment of human life and culture (Stephenson, 1967 as cited in Eke and Adeyemi, 2024). Although the most powerful implications of Play Theory relate to the individual, Stephenson's perspective on the value of play is rooted in the work of Johan Huizinga, whose theories dealt with the broad cultural value of play. Stephenson credits Huizinga's 'Homo Ludens', which was published in 1938, as marking the beginning of modern thinking about play. Stephenson suggests that before Huizinga's work, 'play' was viewed as a frivolous activity, whereas following Homo Ludens, play began to be recognised as a process that gave "rise to useful conventions that permit culture to evolve and stabilise".(Worsfold, 2007 as cited in Akinjogbin and Kayode, 2011).

William Stephenson's Play Theory, suggests that our interaction with various forms of mass communication helps us create and enhance our identities. Stephenson introduced the Play Theory with the words, "The media have been looked at through the ideas of morality, when, instead, what is required is a fresh glance at people existing in their own right for the first time." However, the most powerful implications of this theory relate to the individual (Eke and Adeyemi, 2024).

According to Akinjogbin and Kayode (2011), Play Theory generally postulates the following:

1. Play is distinguishable from work - play is self-sufficient, an interlude from work, and work is not an interlude; it produces goods and services;
2. Communication-pain is a command for work and action, production, education and development of skills, whereas communication-pleasure is enjoyment, contentment, and delight as found in entertainment;
3. Much work and play is subject to social control and some is a matter of convergent selectivity. Social control is how cultures function from involuntary categorical imperatives, whereas convergent selectivity is relative freedom from social control, tending toward individuality of choice in behaviour;
4. People are differently involved in conditions of social control and convergent selectivity. In situations of social control, people develop self-attitude and stature but in convergent selectivity people exist for themselves; the mass media offer an opportunity for convergent selectivity.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, developed by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1973, is critical to understanding audience behaviour as it relates to playful communication. This theory suggests that media users actively seek specific content to satisfy their various needs, such as pleasure-seeking, information and learning, and ease of use (Hornoiu et al., 2024).

Katz et al (1973), as cited in Wibowo (2022), posit that every audience is an active user and always has a reason to use media to satisfy his or her need. Uses and Gratifications theory explains why people satisfy a certain need and how they do it. This theory suggests that people freely and consciously choose their type of platform usage to meet their necessities (Sahu, 2021 as cited in Wibowo, 2022). This theory focuses on the effect of media on active audiences and not passive audiences, as the active audiences consume media content, not based on their availability but on their ability to offer them certain gratifications.

Media can be used by individuals to ease tensions and conflicts and give attention to social situations and problems (Fuchs, 2016 as cited in Yüksel et al., 2023). Media industries are absolved of responsibility when negative media effects result from audience members' media choices and usage of the content they produce or carry. The media simply gives people what they want (Baran, 2019, as cited in Yüksel et al., 2023). Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch mention five fundamental elements of the uses and gratifications theory:

1. The audience is active, and media use serves a specific purpose;
2. Individuals manage the relationship between meeting needs and media choices;

3. Media compete with other sources in meeting needs (human needs are diverse, and some can be satisfied through media use while others through different means, with the level of need satisfaction through media being variable);
4. Methodologically, it is important that people consciously use media and can identify interests and motives that provide an appropriate image of media usage;
5. Audience orientation should be investigated from individuals' perspectives, separate from value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973 as cited in Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023).

Methodology

The desk study research design was utilised to understand the psychology of playful communication and its influence on audience behaviour. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection (Ngobi, 2024). Desk research (secondary study) is a method that consists of the analysis of available data sources, including their compilation, mutual verification, and processing and it involves the collecting of data from existing resources; hence, it is often considered a low-cost technique (Nooraini, 2013 as cited in Turon and Kubik, 2021).

Play

Why do humans play? For well more than 100 years, this question has attracted the attention of researchers from a wide range of disciplines (Andersen et al., 2022). This may be because play, despite its omnipresence, is one of the few human universals that do not seem to have an obvious immediate benefit to the player visible to outside observers (Martin & Caro, 1985 as cited in Andersen et al., 2022). Although very challenging to define, play, generally, is understood to be spontaneous, internally motivated behaviour exclusively initiated by individuals who are free from sickness, stress and hunger (Burghardt, 2005 as cited in Andersen et al., 2022) and, typically, it is experientially associated with positive feelings (Bateson & Martin, 2013 as cited in Andersen et al., 2022).

People play because they want pleasure and satisfaction; they want to ease off some stress and tension. Johan Huizinga posited in his classic essay into the cultural history of play, *Homo Ludens*, 'play impulse' is the root of all culture, yet also as being outside of the ordinary order of things – play is capable of utterly absorbing the player, but there is no material interest as the primary motivation for play (Mäyrä, 2012). One may not need to be paid to play, for instance, but they play anyway; there is usually no tangible gain. Play brings joy, fosters creativity, and aids learning. For instance, if someone had a rough day at work, he or she may

want to stop over at a friend's place for a chat over dinner or maybe see a movie at home, these are different ways of relaxing and winding down, which makes up the concept of play. We enjoy playing for its own sake, and play activities create their subset of reality, within which the rules of 'play' determine the order of things (Huizinga, 1955 as cited in Mäyrä, 2012).

Karels and De La Hera (2021) outline the thoughts of scholars such as Sutton-Smith (1997) and, more recently, Stenros (2015), and Sicart (2014) describing play as, firstly, contextual, meaning it relies on the context that goes beyond physical space and includes people, objects, negotiations and cultures; secondly, carnivalesque, meaning that play is subversive and critical, balancing between creation and destruction based on player satisfaction or "embodied laughter"; play is also appropriative, meaning that it usurps the context it exhibits and is not totally predetermined by the context; next, play is disruptive, this being a result of its appropriative nature; it changes or disrupts the current circumstances and assumptions, seeing play as autotelic entails having its own goals and purposes, and its own sense of time and space, that are not rigid but open for negotiation, lastly, Sicart sees play as creative and personal as it permits a variety of expression and as the effects of play, even collective play, are internalized in each individual person (Sicart, 2014 as cited in Karels and De La Hera, 2021). Play is relative; what is play to one may not be same to another, and the environment that fosters or fits play for one may not be same for the other.

Playful Communication

The psychological measurements of playfulness dedicate attention to the defining characteristics of a playful personality, such as being 'fun-loving', having a sense of humour, being capable of enjoying 'silliness' or being informal and whimsical (Schaefer & Greenberg, 1997 as cited in Mäyrä, 2012). Barnett has produced a working definition of playfulness for personality study purposes:

Playfulness is the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment. Individuals who have such a heightened predisposition are typically funny, humorous, spontaneous, unpredictable, impulsive, active, energetic, adventurous, sociable, outgoing, cheerful, and happy, and are likely to manifest playful behaviour by joking, teasing, clowning, and acting silly. Mäyrä (2012)

Playfulness is a state, ability or disposition of a person to redefine situations or events to make them relieving, entertaining, or less stressful. While this state is believed to often accompany play, it is also believed to sometimes facilitate it. In the predictive processing theory of mood, repeated experiences of better-than-expected error slopes improve mood

(Rutledge et al., 2014), making the agent more optimistic, and expect attractive opportunities to reduce error (Andersen et al., 2022).

Sicart (2014), as cited in Karels and De La Hera, (2021), distinguishes play as an activity, in that it is composed of actions performed for a purpose, and playfulness as an attitude, in that it is a psychological, physical, or emotional stance towards an activity. This seemingly subtle distinction makes all the difference when it comes to studying how adults interact with the world in contemporary society (Karels and De La Hera, 2021). Adults want to the attitude of play but do not want to partake in the activity of play, as Sicart plainly states, “We want play without play.” There is the need for playfulness and its manifestation in play especially in communication; however, the mindset of wanting play without play has been the reason communicators are unable to connect with the audience. This is because some come off as too serious or using the wrong expressions. This is certainly one of the reasons many ads fail, because they do not resonate with the audience and are not memorable. Therefore, the definitive foundation that this study relies on is Sicart’s (2014 as cited in Karels and De La Hera, 2021).

a way of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context. [...] Playfulness is projecting some of the characteristics of play into non-play activities.

According to Karels and De La Hera (2021), Sicart further attributes the following five characteristics to playfulness: appropriative, disruptive, carnivalesque, creative and personal. In contradistinction to play, playfulness does not share the qualities of being autotelic and contextual because it does not carry a purpose and context in its own right, but rather has to respect the purpose and serve the context of the non-play activity it is applied to. One might wonder how playfulness can be studied in the context of communication when it is an attitude or mindset. To this end, Fiske’s (1987) understanding of the duality of playfulness provides enlightenment. In its relationship between a medium and its user, playfulness is something that a media text can have (design) and something that it, in turn, enables its user to develop: a playful interpretation of that text (experience). Therefore, in the context of communication, this portrays that communication can be given a playful approach that evokes some level of emotional connection, playful reaction, and interpretation with the audience.

Psychology of Humour and Audience Behaviour

Audience behaviour, in the light of playful communication, is influenced by a spectrum of factors especially psychological factors and audiences engage in playful communication differently depending on their needs, preferences, and literacy. Playful communication often

involves the use of humour, irony and creativity; it is, therefore, pivotal to understand how playful communication influences audience cognitive engagement and emotional response. Humour, as a concept, involves any spoken, written or published joke that provokes or elicits laughter or a smile in the audience, and its therapeutic effect has been acknowledged by research across different disciplines globally (Odunlami et al., 2020).

Emotional Responses

Humour, is a central component of playful communication, promoting engagement, fostering bond, providing pleasure, and stimulating positive emotions like joy, amusement, and relief and as a means of providing pleasure. Humour builds connection between the source and receiver of a message, as people are more responsive to messages that resonate with them and they can connect with; they could respond by sharing, commenting or liking it on social media. Humour has a positive effect on attention, persuasion, recall, memorability and attitude towards the message, which directly influences a positive effect on attitude towards the brand or message source, (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992 as cited in Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2019). It can enhance attention, name registration and mood (Weinberger & Spotts, 1989 as cited in Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2019) thereby fostering brand recall. For instance, the old time Blue Band Butter ad that featured children singing “B without BB is like a train without an engine”. This ad was one of the best at the time, as it was memorable and resonated with the audience using play on words. One would find it difficult to erase their memory off the mind. Evidently, humour influences audience behaviour. Mood and attention are mediators of humour strength, that is, they influence the recall of the message. Those positive effects are explained by the fact that humour is an anticipation of enjoyment. Therefore, there is a higher likelihood of attendance (Scott et al., 1990 as cited in Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2019) of the content.

Emotional resonance is important in communication, where humour can soften resistance to persuasive messages and create a positive association with the source (Chung & Zhao, 2003). While some people are just excited and amused, and laugh off the underlying meaning humorous messages intend to convey for their education, knowledge, or sensitisation, studies have suggested that the purpose of humour is not only to make others laugh or amuse the audience but to communicate serious messages in such a way as to relieve the receivers of emotional burden (Odunlami et al., 2020). It can be cognitively tasking to process a bulk of information or to take in a hard truth, but the use of humour, transcending just causing a feeling of excitement or relaxation, also helps convey serious messages or hard truths more subtly. Similarly, psychological studies have shown that exposure to humorous stimuli produces an increase in positive effect and mood of the audience. (Miltner, 2014; Boxman-Shabtai, 2015;

Shifman, Coleman & Ward, 2007 as cited in Odunlami et al., 2020). However, individual differences in humour styles and cultural backgrounds greatly influence emotional responses to playful communication, for example, what one may consider to be humorous in one culture, another from another culture, may find offensive or confusing, leading to different emotional reactions (Lynch, 2002); those who appreciate self-enhancing humour, may respond positively to humorous messages, while those who prefer affiliative humour, may find satire or sarcasm alienating (Martin, 2007). Humour plays an important role in driving audience conversations on social media (Ge et al., 2018), and the use of social media to communicate brand messages humorously cannot be overstated. Sadly, there is still a huge amount potential of social media, unharnessed by businesses and brands.

It is well-recognised that humour facilitates and creates positive interpersonal interaction (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006 as cited in Ge et al., 2018) and assists a speaker in receiving support and contributions from the audience (Holmes and Marra, 2002 as cited in Ge et al., 2018). In the social media context, the use of humour to encourage consumer interactions has become an emerging trend. A survey by Nielsen shows that firm-initiated humorous online activity is ranked as the top reason that consumers are willing to interact with firms. As opposed to non-humour posts, humour posts tend to have a longer life span, often still receiving responses after months (Highfield, 2015 as cited in Ge et al., 2018). On social media, brands could have increased followership, numerous reposts and shares in a very short time through the use of humour in the communication messages.

Cognitive Engagement

A substantial amount of empirical studies have been carried out on the ability of humour to attract and maintain attention (Banas et al., 2011 as cited in Ogba, 2021) and encourage deeper cognitive involvement as audiences are actively involved in the process of interpreting the message because these messages mostly contain connotative and denotative meanings. They can also activate heuristic processing, where they use mental shortcuts to quickly interpret the message without thinking deeply about it (Chaiken, 1980), so they associate humour with authenticity, especially in digital media where content is perceived as more relatable. It has been proven in various pedagogical studies that humour aids the learning process and can be a good device for spreading difficult messages in difficult times, for example, during the period of COVID-19 (Ogba, 2021). The encouraging nature of humour was capable of driving people to address Covid-19-related issues, because “people have a good recall for specific humorous examples” (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977 as cited in Ogba, 2021).

However, as individuals enjoy comedy messages and tend to have a positive view of the messenger, they are less likely to scrutinise and argue against the information. This improves the conditions for persuasion and creates a central route of reception, as can be deduced by the high motivation (Ogba, 2021). Humour is generally accepted by audiences in various media contexts because it entertains them (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989 as cited Barriopedro et al., 2019). Studies show that humor enhances memory retention when it is both convincing and relevant to the message, mediated by the consumer's interest and state of mind (Cline & Kellaries, 2007 as cited by Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This article examined the psychological impact of playful communication on audience behaviour, revealing that audiences connect more and are more likely to recall messages or content with humorous effects; the use of play in communication by marketers, and media content creators cannot be overstated. Playful communication involves the use of humour, creativity, irony, etc., to give audiences a more interactive and engaging experience.

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