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While to many, advertisements might represent the epitome of unwanted information, there is an increasing number of advertisements that, contrary to what we might be inclined to expect, provide the playful entertainment value and interaction we humans seek. This article explores the use of playful strategies in print advertising by tackling the research question: *How do advertisers make use of playful communication strategies in print advertisements to stand out in the contemporary attention economy?* The topic of this study—playful advertising—is a phenomenon that can be located by studying two broader cultural trends that govern our relationship to the media: the ludification of culture and the contemporary attention economy.

Stemming from the root word *ludus*, meaning 'play,' ludification of culture refers to a trend wherein people are becoming more aware and eager to find playful experiences as a form of entertainment in their lives (Frissen et al. 2015; Raessens 2014). Scholars ascribe the uprising of this trend to digital media technologies being introduced in the 21st century and the surge of video games and gamified applications to enrich our lives (Zimmerman and Chaplin 2013), but the ludification of culture goes far beyond just video games and gamified applications. In all aspects of their media experience, consumers have become open, receptive, and expectant of playful interaction that transcends functionality and offers emotional and playful experiences instead (Sicart 2014).

Meanwhile, these digital media technologies do not just enhance the ludification of culture, they have also shaped the advertising industry. The second trend that is important to consider is the present reality that the contemporary advertising industry is characterized by a highly competitive attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001). The scarcity of consumer attention due to an overload of information brought about by the internet, combined with an attitude of advertising avoidance, keeps advertisers searching for new strategies that ensure standing out from the overcrowded landscape (Vinaya Kumar and Mehrotra 2018). While this attention quandary touches all segments of the advertising industry, it troubles perhaps none more than the print advertising sector, which fiercely competes with digital advertising (Fitzgerald 2019). Despite reported budget decreases for print advertising—newspapers (39%), magazines (36%), and outdoor billboards (21%) (Kumar and Gupta 2016)—this study chooses to look at print advertising specifically, in line with scholars and practitioners who argue for a coexistence, rather than a dismissal, of print with digital formats (He et al. 2017).

Understanding how each of these cultural trends operate individually, we can identify the focus of this study to lie at the intersection of the ludification of culture and the competitive advertising industry. Academically, this intersection has been studied before by scholars focusing on the game-related aspects of ludification combined with digital advertising forms, such as the phenomena of advergaming (e.g., de la Hera 2019; Vashisht and Pillai 2017; Vashisht et al. 2019) and gamification for

advertising purposes (e.g., Deterding and Nacke 2017; Huotari and Hamari 2012; Lucassen and Jansen 2014). Within this intersection however, the present study places its focus on the more play-related side of ludification and print advertising. In relation to print advertising, recent studies have looked at developments related to the effects of implicit memory, QR codes, and visual metaphors respectively (Jones and Perfect 2019; Myers and Jung 2019; Trivedi et al. 2019). And within research of the distinct concept of playfulness studies have looked at its application in human-computer interaction design (Anderson 2011; Kors et al. 2016), education (Tanis 2012; Walsh 2015), and health (Grainger 2006; Tonkin and Whitaker 2019).

The connection between playfulness and print advertising is one that has not been researched to date, constituting a gap in literature this study intends to fill. Beyond answering academics calling for the study of playfulness and playification (the use of playfulness in non-play contexts) in new domains (e.g., Márquez Segura et al. 2016; Scott 2012; Sicart 2014), this study adds to the field by making contributions to an understanding of aesthetic interactivity and negative pleasurable experiences. The objective of the study has been to help identify specific aspects of playful advertising that might not be obvious to the naked eye, by giving them order and intelligibility. The study thus explores how advertisers are employing playfulness to stand out, by identifying playful aesthetics and their capacity to afford interactivity, resembling that of games, in static media forms such as print advertising. The following sections will highlight relevant theoretical concepts and models that will help position the article's working understanding of playfulness. We will briefly touch on the method and operationalization of the study and illustrate its findings. And finally, the article concludes by discussion its contributions and proposed avenues for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The Advertising Landscape

As previously noted, the current advertising landscape is governed by a scarcity of consumer attention which can be explained by the new, unique affordances of digital media technologies introduced in the late 20th century (Davenport and Beck 2001). Attention having become a valuable commodity, the logic of the attention economy dictates that advertisers want to come to the conclusion of their advertising message as quickly as possible; advertisers have begun to favor easily understandable and uncomplicated delivery because they are only allotted a few seconds to make their point (McStay 2016). Through multimedial enhancements such as moving visuals and soundbites; personalization tools like cookies, geolocation, and algorithms; and digital interactivity permitting active engagement, digital advertising is able to strengthen its appeals for attention compared to older, more traditional forms of advertising (Frissen et al. 2015; Truong et al. 2010).

Given these contemporary affordances, one can see how they further progress digital advertising's dominance in today's advertising landscape. However, digital media has in more recent years brought forth monotonous strategies, and consumers are catching on to the predictability of executions, effectively avoiding and experiencing irritation from advertisements (Rodgers and Thorson 2017). This inclination to recognize and block out advertising messages thwarts truly engaged attention that

would otherwise lead to interactivity and retention, making it hard to stand out from the crowd. This prompts a reconsideration of the importance of a diversified marketing mix, to which recent developments in print advertising can contribute advantageous strategies.

The advancements in digital media have caused print media to take a back seat, but when it comes to advertising, scholars argue against its dismissal and rather voice that online and offline forms of advertising should complement and activate, rather than substitute one another (He et al. 2017; van Dyck 2014; Vinaya Kumar and Mehrotra 2018). The static and often tangible nature of print advertisements adds to their being perceived as more trustworthy and credible, which in turn contributes to their staying power (Katz 2017). Interpreting these developments in light of the ludification of culture, we argue that even print media seem to adopt a ludic turn and begin to borrow interactive elements from the digital formats as an answer to society's desire to be entertained at all fronts of their media experience.

The Conceptualization of Play

This study's understanding of the concept of play starts by recognizing the work of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. With *Homo Ludens* originally published in 1938, Huizinga laid down some of the fundamental characteristics of play and described how it permeates all aspects of culture (Huizinga 1949). Extending Huizinga's work in his 1958 *Man, Play, and Games*, Caillois (2001) went on to introduce the poles of *paidia* and *ludus* which he used to distinguish play from game, respectively. The term *paidia* denotes a form of play that is free-from, care-free, improvisational, and may appear as tumultuous and uncontrolled. At the opposite pole, *ludus* is a form of play seen as more structured, contrived, goal-oriented and imbued with strife and competition. Along this continuum with poles of *paidia* and *ludus* on either end, Caillois introduces four dimensions of play, two of which—*ilinx* and *mimicry*—are noteworthy to mention as they entail playful paidic principles related to pleasurable vertigo and pretense, respectively.

Joost Raessens (2014), exploring the playful turn in digital media, argues that while the characteristics of play identified by Huizinga and Caillois are valuable, they perhaps draws too harsh a line between what is play and what is non-play. Instead, Raessens's (2014) line of thinking respects the ambiguity of play and recognizes the possibility for play to exist in realms that might initially been regarded as non-play. Miguel Sicart (2014), similarly to Raessens (2014), urges to take heed of the ambiguities of play, and does not "oppose play to reality, to work, to ritual or sports because it exists in all of them" (Sicart 2014, p. 3). Yet, where Raessens maintains a perspective that is broadly compatible with Huizinga's approach, Sicart choses to divert from it almost entirely and proposes his own view on play that is much broader and abstract. Sicart's view of play is a rather alternative one, as he quite explicitly contrasts the idea shared and emphasized by Huizinga (1949), Caillois (2001), and Raessens (2014) alike, that play is fun and enjoyable. Instead, he argues that play is pleasurable, in a way that can be fun and positive, but also in a way that hurts, offends, challenges, and potentially can be dangerous (Sicart 2014).

In line with the rhetoric of play adopted by scholars such as Sutton-Smith (1997) and, more recently, Stenros (2015), Sicart (2014) describes play as follows: First, he regards play as *contextual*, meaning it relies on context that goes beyond physical space and includes people, objects, negotiations, and cultures. Second, it is *carnivalesque*, meaning that play is subversive and critical, balancing between creation and destruction based on player satisfaction or "embodied laughter" (Sicart 2014, p. 11). 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.

Having evaluated a selection of relevant perspectives for the conceptualization of play, we can come to this study's working definition. On the one hand, and in line with Raessens (2014), our study focuses on the more paidic forms of play. This decision was taken to answer the academic calling for the exploration of paidic play in unknown sectors of which the advertising industry is one. On the other hand, our study follows Sicart's (2014) interest in the rhetoric of play, as opposed to choosing to view of play that follows the perspective of, for example, Huizinga (1949).

Playfulness

To study how playful communication strategies are used by advertisers to stand out, the conceptualization of play established above is pivotal in how we study what is *playful*. Sicart (2014) 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 we, as adults, interact with the world in contemporary society. As Sicart plainly states, "[w]hat we want is the attitude of play without the activity of play. […] We want play without play. We want playfulness—the capacity to use play outside the context of play" (2014, p. 21). Our study thus follows Sicart's definition of playfulness as

> 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 nonplay activities. (2014, pp. 21–22)

Sicart (2014) 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.

Understanding these fundamentals behind playfulness, one might now question how playfulness can be studied in another context such as advertising 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). Placed in the context of advertisements this entails that, hypothetically, by approaching the design of an advertisement with a playful mindset, an advertiser can make it playful in a way that invokes a playful attitude and interpretation with the consumer who interacts with the advertisement.

Experience	Description	*Experience*	Description
Captivation	Forgetting one's surroundings	Fellowship	Friendship, communality, or intimacy
Challenge	Testing abilities in a demanding task	Humor	Fun, joy, amusement, jokes, gags
Competition	Contest with oneself or an opponent	Nurture	Taking care of oneself of others
Completion	Finishing a major task, closure	Relaxation	Relief from bodily or mental work
Control	Dominating, commanding, regulating	Sensation	Excitement by stimulating senses
Cruelty	Causing mental or physical pain	Simulation	An imitation of everyday life
Discovery	Finding something new or unknown	Submission	Being part of a larger structure
Eroticism	A sexually arousing experience	Subversion	Breaking social rules and norms
Exploration	Investigating an object or situation	Suffering	Experience of loss, frustration, and anger
Expression	Manifesting oneself creatively	Sympathy	Sharing emotional feelings
Fantasy	An imagined experience	Thrill	Excitement derived from risk and danger

Table 1: The Playful Experience PLEX Framework (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013).

When it comes to tools used to guide this study of playfulness in print advertising, two academic works provide direction. First, in his study of seductive interaction design, Anderson (2011) finds that contrast, colors, jokes, and wordplay as well as principles of association, unpredictability, surprise, curiosity, and mystery are playful prompts used to draw consumers' attention, be it in the physical or digital world. Second, in their Playful Experiences Framework or PLEX framework, Lucero and Arrasvuori (2013) introduce 22 distinct playful experiences (see Table 1) that may be used to design for playfulness beyond the game context. A noteworthy self-identified critique of the PLEX framework is its bias towards positive experiences, containing only three that have a negative valence (cruelty, subversion, and suffering) (Lucero et al. 2014). Beyond the five characteristics of playfulness which have gone on to serve as the main indicators for the operationalization process, the works by Anderson (2011) as well as Lucero and Arrasvuori (2013) are included in our theoretical framework because their concrete design and experience-oriented concepts turned out to be helpful in the thematic analysis of the advertisement in the sample. Going forth, the concept of playfulness will be operationalized in the methods chapter, largely following the five adopted characteristics of playfulness.

Method

A qualitative thematic analysis of print advertisements was conducted to explore how advertisers are using playful communication strategies to stand out. A thematic analysis was deemed the appropriate method as it poses a systematic tool that allowed us to uncover the strategies within the advertisements themselves as part of a data-driven process. The units of analysis for this study were print advertisements defined as those that have been printed in newspapers, magazines, or on outside billboards that exhibit a static nature (Kumar and Gupta 2016). Purposive sampling (Flick 2018) was used to collect the appropriate playful data from the public archival website known as *Ads of the World* (https://www.adsoftheworld.com/). Containing award-winning advertisements spanning a variety of different countries, mediums and industries, the *Ads of the World* catalogue includes more than 100,000 advertisements. The medium categorization tool of *Ads of the World* was used to filter print advertisements. Another exclusion criterion was that of language; as mainly advertisements that matched our common language of comprehension, which is English, were eligible for data collection. Non-English languages were excluded unless (1) *Ads of the World* was able to provide an adequate explanation in the subtext, or (2) the non-English fragment was not considered an integral part to understanding and comprehending the playfulness in the advertisements' imagery and communication.

The collection of data was based on the desired time frame and informed projections based on the operationalization of the concept of playfulness. Based on the insight that digital advertising spending was set to surpass non-digital advertising in the U.S. and other western markets (Enberg 2019; Fitzgerald 2019), the years 2019 and 2020 were deemed a significant time period for print advertising's competition for attention. Working backwards through the catalogue, based on an initial exploration of the database, 10 in 60 surveyed advertisements were considered playful based on operationalization. This meant that for a final sample of approximately 100

advertisements, 600 advertisements needed to be surveyed. The definitive sample of 100 advertisements that displayed the widest range of playful strategies was chosen based on the principle of maximal variation to capture as much differentiation in the field as possible (Patton 2015). This process of sampling and data collection is summarized and shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Process of data collection.

The operationalization of playfulness was based on Sicart's five characteristics: *appropriative*, *disruptive*, *carnivalesque*, *personal*, and *creative.* These five descriptors were translated into indicators to guide the selection of playful print advertisements. The indicators took the form of several questions that each capture a different nature of playfulness (see Table 2). To be selected, the advertisement had to exhibit at least one of these five indicators of playfulness, but all advertisements in the final sample were found to exhibit multiple indicators to varying degrees.

In our thematic analysis we adopted a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning to generate a patterned response of meaningful recurring themes in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step model, the data was coded in several rounds moving from initial codes to groupings and finally three final themes.

Results

Given the interplay between the trends of the ludification of culture and the competitive attention economy, this study explored how advertisers make use of playful communication strategies in print advertisements. The findings of this study can be summarized in three themes: (1) the use of playful visual design that is meant to instill a playful mindset; (2) the use of strategies based on a pleasurable interactive experiential logic; (3) the liberation of unspoken topics of a dark, solemn, and negative nature in a playful way. Among these three central themes, one may spot a certain amount of overlap as each of these themes presents strategies that interact with and build on each other, rather than presenting entirely mutually exclusive strategies. The objective and implications of this will be further discussed in the conclusion.

Appropriative	- Does the playful element in the advertisement significantly transform how you interpret it? - Does the essence of the advertisement go from purely functional and informative to pleasurable and/or emotionally engaging? - Is the product or the main message is seen in a different light after the conclusion is reached?
Disruptive	- Does the advertisement cause a disruption of taken for granted assumptions or expectations? - Does the advertisement significantly disrupt your train of thought and cause you to ponder afterward? - Use of unusual and unexpected imagery or associations are likely indicators of disruption
Carnivalesque	- Does the advertisement subvert or liberate a dominant atmosphere or authority with humor, satire, and/or critique? - Does it make use of mockery or mischievous tactics to reach embodied laughter? - The advertisement likely creates or destroys an alternate reality and may be politically charged.
Personal	- Does the advertisement attempt to reach you or address you personally despite being collective in addressing the masses? - Do you experience or learn something about yourself in your unique interpretation of the advertisement? - Does the advertisement require your personal input in the form of creativity or prior knowledge to make sense of the advertisement?
Creative	- Does the advertisement allow or afford different degrees of expression and interpretation? - Does the advertisement rely on the receiver to be active and creative in finding and reaching the conclusion? - Likely to take shape by leaving essential parts of the advertisement hidden or incomplete, to be reliant on the audience's creative imagination to find or complete it.

Table 2: Operationalization of playfulness.

Playful Visual Design That Instills a Playful Mindset

Our qualitative thematic analysis challenges the misconception of print being static and lacking interaction, and instead show it to excel in playful design that is dynamic despite print's immovable nature. Playful design is meant to instill a playful attitude or mindset in the consumer by exuding an air of playfulness itself. Three kinds of imagery were identified within this theme: topical and personal imagery; eye-catching imagery; and disruptive imagery.

Topical and Personal Imagery: Strategies of topical and personal imagery rely on references made to current events, recognizable symbols, popular persons, or a certain style of diction. The key is to make sure that it goes beyond just a reference. Rather, the advertisers adopt a playful mindset in making reference to a topical matter to imbue the advertisement's design with the playful stance they hope their audience will develop towards their brand or product. An exemplary advertisement that made good use of both topical and personal imagery is seen in Figure 2. The topical occurrence of the coronavirus pandemic is combined with personal identification that is triggered by national symbolism of the American flag. Playfulness is enacted here because the strategy is guided by the underlying characteristic of being personal. Nationalistic symbols are an effective playful tactic to engage people's attention; a sense of pride and patriotism makes audiences especially acute and receptive to the message being conveyed out of a curiosity to see whether they identify with it or not. This relates to the pleasurable experience within the PLEX framework known as fellowship referring to "friendship, communality, or intimacy" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24).

Another kind of personal reference that was used is one that involves wordplay, slang, accents or speaking style. Usage of slang is for example seen in an advertisement for World Cancer Day where the Nigerian colloquial slang term *efiwe* referring to brilliant students is used to give a personal delivery that cancer does not discriminate (Figure 3).

Eye-Catching Imagery: Strategies of eye-catching imagery involve design that is not just eye-catching but eye-catching in a way that encourages a playful mindset or experience. Print advertisements using this strategy resonated with the pleasurable experiences of captivation, fantasy, and sensation found in the PLEX framework. Captivation refers to the pleasurable playful experience of "forgetting one's surroundings" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24) and invites audiences to inspect the advertisement on a deeper level. An example of such a strategy is seen in Figure 4, where close inspection of the busy pattern may momentarily captivate the audience possibly to the extent of forgetting their surroundings. This playful quality of captivation often resonates with tumultuous paidic qualities and the dimension of *ilinx* where a sense of disorder or vertigo is induced. Similarly, the playful pleasurable experience of fantasy is interpreted into an eye-catching dreamlike escapist design that transports its audience into "an imagined experience" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24). Figure 5 illustrates how an informative message of healthcare habits is appropriated into a pleasurable and emotionally engaging experience.
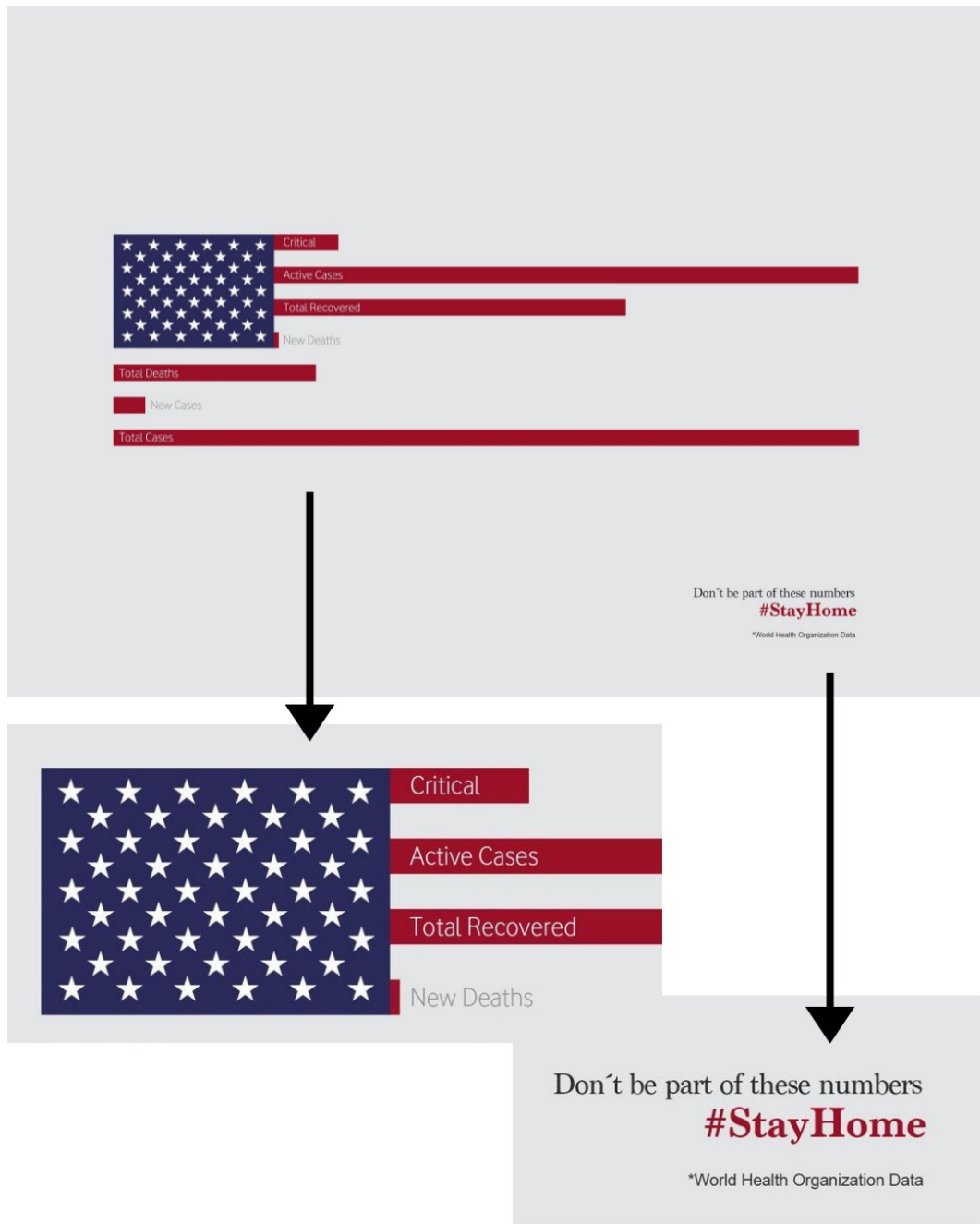
Figure 2: The stripes in the American flag are distorted to represent a graph of coronavirus cases (Wunderman Thompson, 2020).

Figure 3: Nigerian slang term "Efiwe" meaning brilliant students used to make personal delivery (Airtel, 2020).
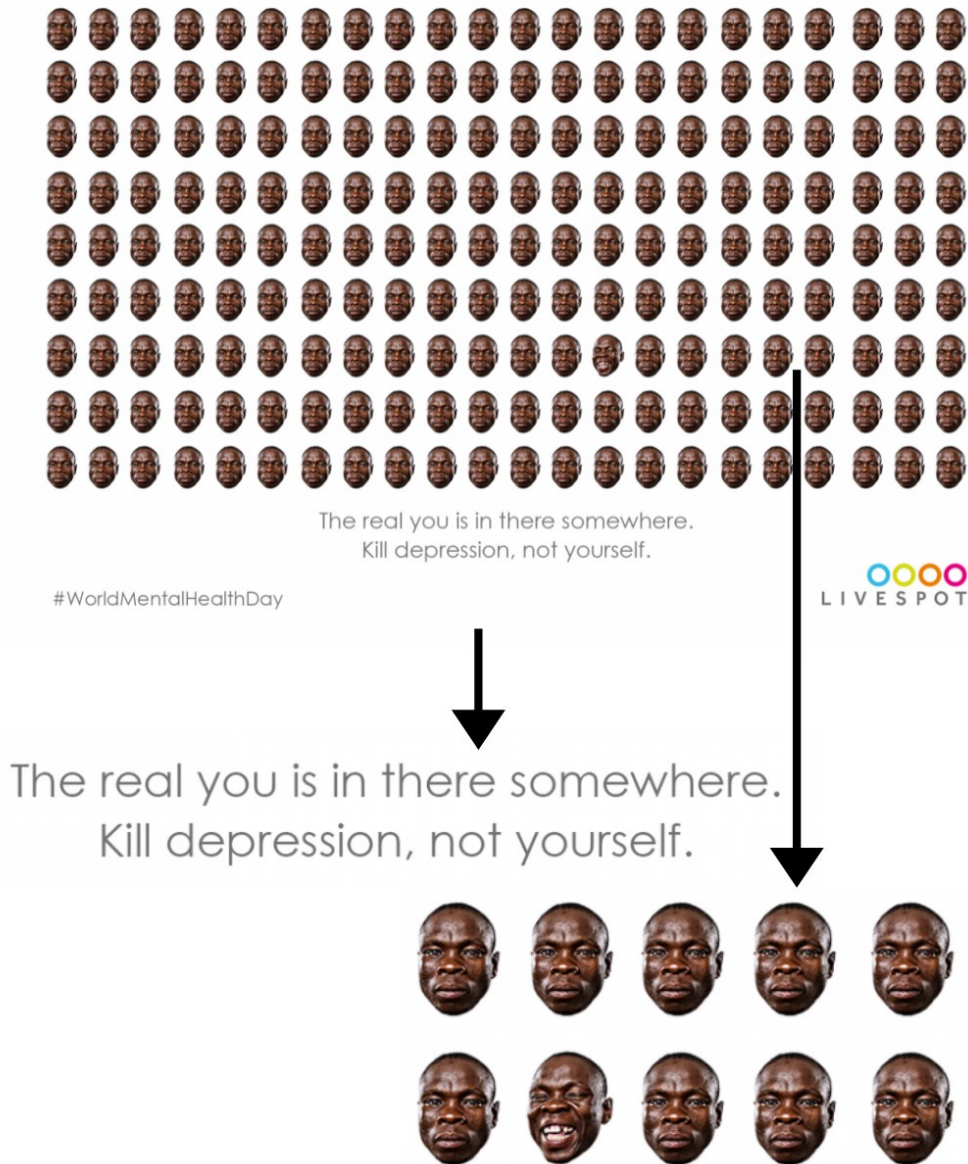
Figure 4: Captivating pattern of faces with a stoic expression and one hidden face with a happy expression (Livespot 360, 2019).

Figure 5: Fantastical scene of spacecrafts attacking an ear resembling a science fiction movie poster (NHS, 2020).

Disruptive Imagery: Lastly, strategies of disruptive imagery relate strongly to the playfulness characteristic of disruption. Going beyond taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations, and flaunting unusual imagery are the indicators that embody this quality, and this was observed in the sample in various ways. One form of attention-harnessing disruption is that of unusual or contrasting imagery in which case a familiar object or scene is distorted or altered in some way. This playful attention is intended to evoke a sense of curiosity and mystery and prompts inquiry for the unusual imagery's explanation. Another form of playful disruption is seen in design with unexpected imagery when it comes to the congruence of associations between

the visual and the brand. Advertisements that embody this strategy for harnessing attention lead with a visual that is unfamiliar or expected for the brand or product whose advertisement it serves. A good example of this strategy is seen in Figure 6, where a bundle of electrical wires alluding to a technological product being sold are instead used as a visual for selling hair wax. A third form of disruptive imagery is seen in advertisements that transcend the spatial boundaries of the print medium, often requiring some physical action or movement from the audience, or engaging the senses in a way that is uncommon for print, as seen in the *ilinx*-underpinned optical illusion simulating movement in the shoe advertisement in Figure 7.
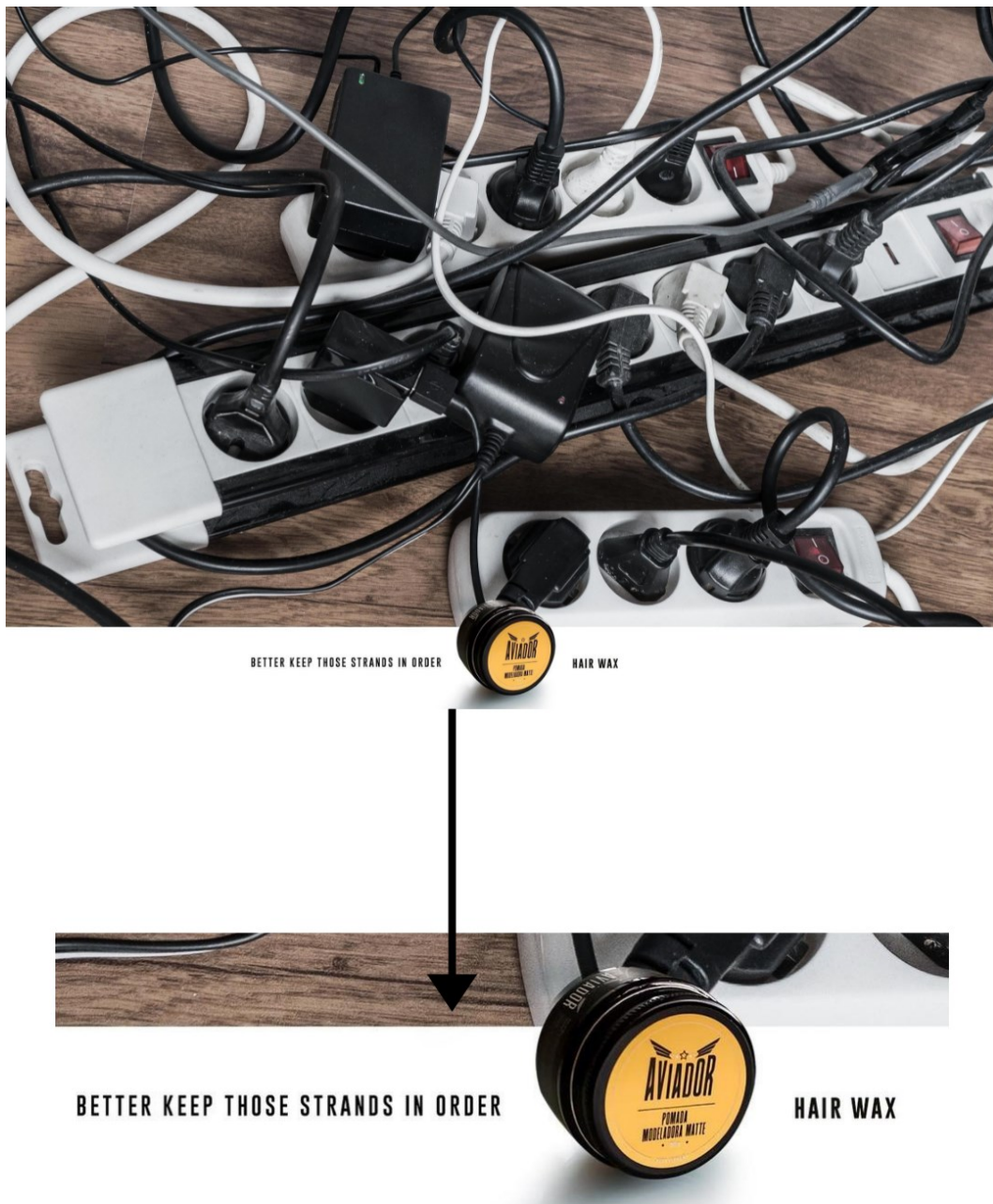

Figure 6: Tangled electrical wires are used in reference to tangled hair to be prevented by hair wax (Aviador, 2019).
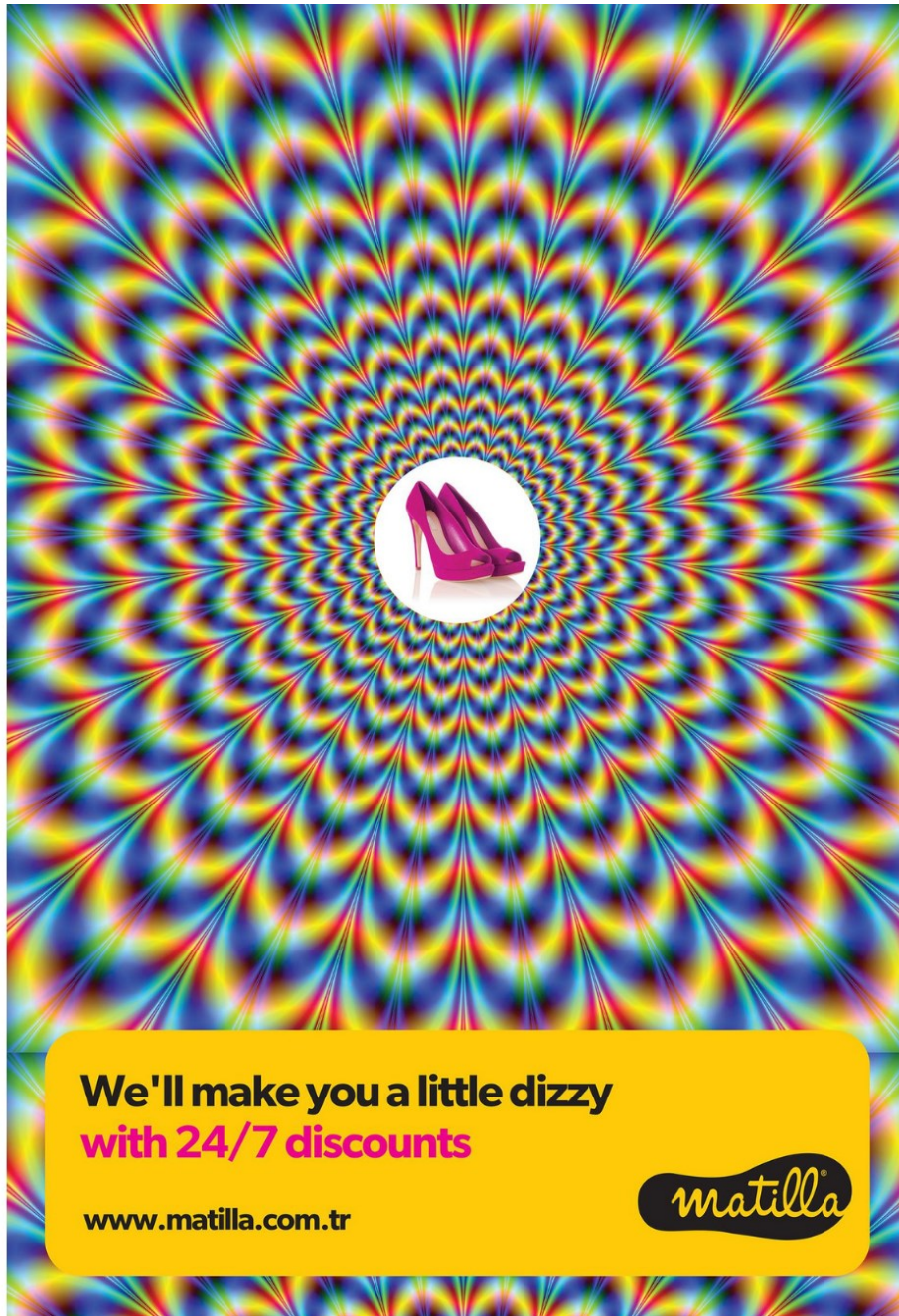
Figure 7: The vertigo inducing optical illusion references the excitement of buying new shoes (Matilla, 2019).

Pleasurable Interactive Experiential Logic

The second theme emerging from our qualitative thematic analysis uncovered playful strategies that do not to abide by the logic of bringing across the message as quickly and easily as possible. Instead, they are able to play around with the affordance of time and lengthen the time necessary to understand the advertisements. Playful print advertisements try to appropriate time by instilling a playful attitude and mindset in consumers through their playful design, which is intended to afford a pleasurable interpretive experience that is memorable. This refers to the concept of duality of

playfulness being exhibited through both design and experience. We found two different practical implementations of this strategy, that of a delayed punchline and that of an implied punchline.

Delayed Punchline: The strategy of a delayed punchline requires the audience's active engagement in connecting the dots to arrive at the conclusion. This strategy can be interpreted in light of playfulness having the quality of being creative which resonates to three pleasurable experiences from the PLEX framework, namely exploration, discovery, and completion that often work sequentially.
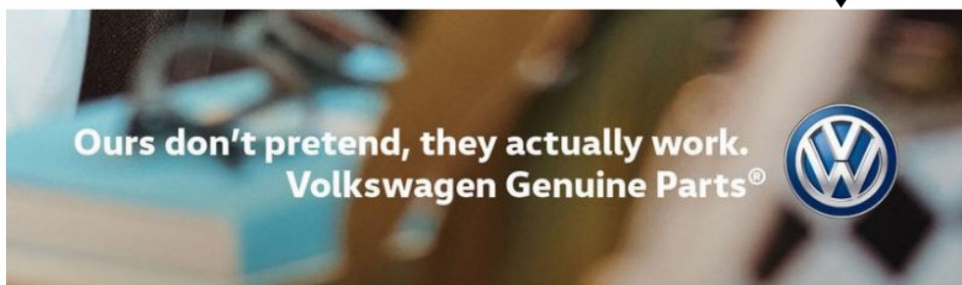

Figure 8: A woman is pictured working on her computer, but the reflection reveals a computer game being played (Volkswagen, 2019).
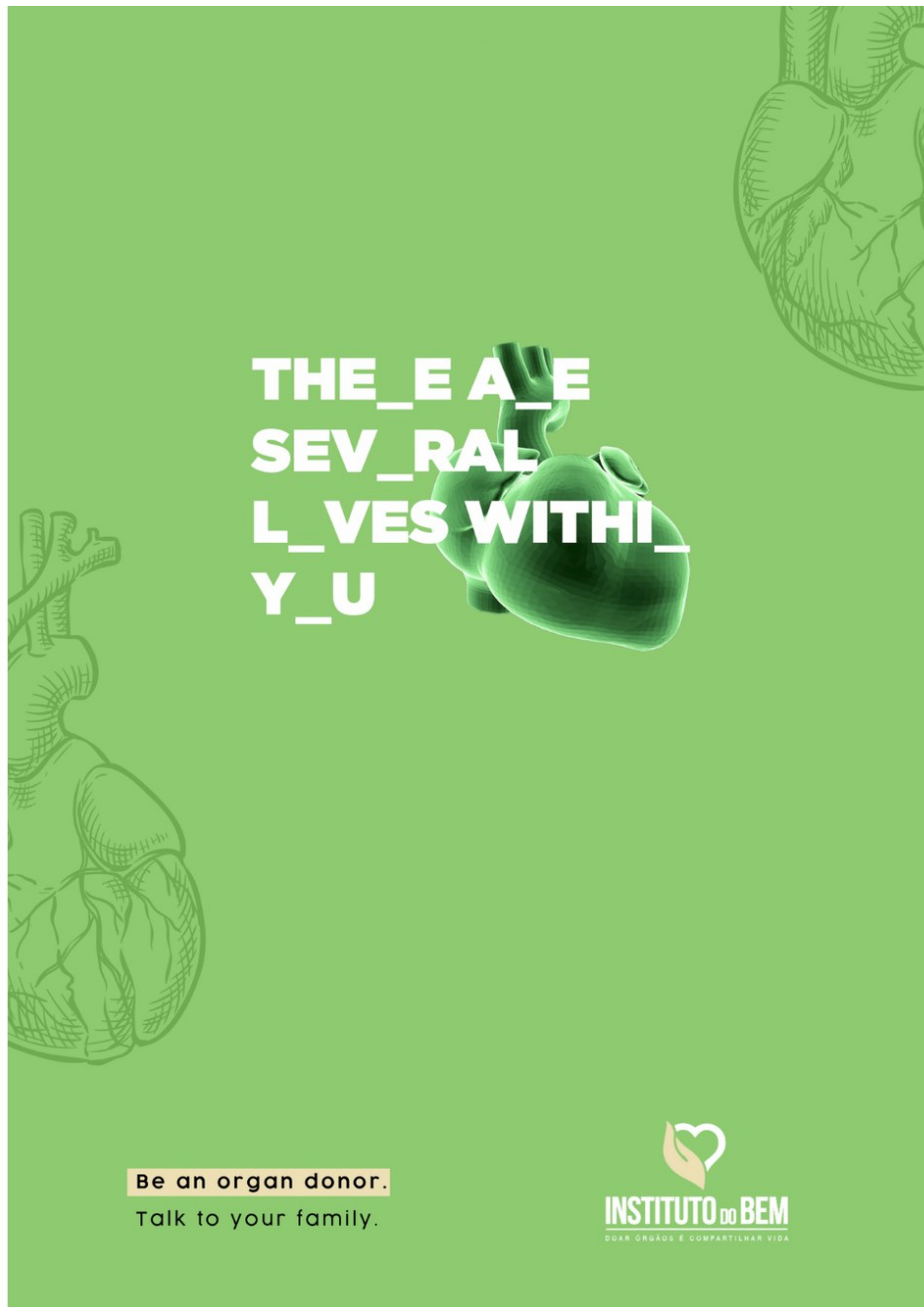
Figure 9: A sentence is seen with letters omitted which when completed spell out "There are several lives within you" (Instituto do Bem, 2019).

Figure 10: A woman swallowing a pill is pictured with a pinball machine for a stomach to indicate the medication's inefficiency (Otrivin, 2020).

Exploration is a playful and pleasurable experience gained from "investigating an object or situation" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24). At first glance, the woman portrayed in Figure 8 appears not unlike any modern-day businesswoman looking at her work on her computer. However, it is an audience's hypothetical exploration of this scene that reveals the real cause of her preoccupation. This "imitation of everyday life" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24) also coincidentally appeals to another pleasurable experience in the PLEX framework known as simulation and the concept of mimicry or make-believe. Another common pleasurable experience is that of discovery. Simply defined as "finding something new or unknown" one can see

how this playful experience in the PLEX framework operates under the principle of surprise (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24).

The concluding pleasurable experience in an audience's experiential journey towards understanding a playful advertisement with a delayed punchline is that of completion. Described as "finishing a major task, [or gaining] closure" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24) completion represents a proper or richer understanding of the advertisement's message through having found or understood the punchline. Completion is achieved in quite a literal sense in the case of Figure 9 where insertion of the correct letters completes both the puzzle and the message advertised. In other instances, some supplementary text delivering the punchline, often in a small font size, is included with the intention of instilling the fulfilling emotion of completion, as can be seen in Figure 10.

Implied Punchline: The strategy of an implied punchline follows the same experiential journey as the strategy of a delayed punchline. The difference between these two strategies is noticed in how the punchline is experienced by the hypothetical consumer; the strategy of an implied punchline is more advanced because the resolution is not just delayed but implied. The fact that the punchline is withheld likely leaves audiences lacking confirmation of having deduced the advertisement's message correctly.

Within the corpus we analyzed, advertisements of this kind would either display a complete lack of text with possibly only a logo featured or contain minimal text that is not supplementary or revealing of the punchline, leaving it implied. An example of such minimal design is seen in the McDonald's advertisement in Figure 11, where a clean kitchen devoid of any food is pictured alongside the restaurant logo and the word "McDelivery." These elements alone do not make an explicit argument; it is the audience's supposed implied understanding that ordering food through the restaurant's delivery service saves them the hassle of having to clean up dirty dishes in the kitchen that completes the argument being made. Through this strategy, the characteristics of playfulness as being personal and creative can be seen at work again. This experiential journey intending to give audiences the pleasurable experience of not just having completed but being a crucial part of the argumentation is especially favorable to retention. Theory on engagement suggests that audiences remember a message better when they have an active part in shaping that message (Frissen et al. 2015).

Another good example comes in the form of the Toyota advertisement for Valentine's Day seen in Figure 12. Exploration of the scene and discovery of the handprint alone do not explicitly convey the message. Again, it is the audience's assumed and implied understanding of the eroticism in this scene that lands the hidden message. It plays into the personal knowledge of an adult, who unlike a child, is made to feel like they are in on the joke.

Figure 11: A sparkly clean kitchen sink is pictured alongside the suggestive McDelivery logo (McDonald's, 2019).

Figure 12: Inspection of the car pictured leads to the discovery of the handprint carrying an implied meaning (Toyota, 2020).

Liberating the Unspoken in a Playful Way

The third and final theme emerging from our qualitative thematic analysis suggests that playfulness in print advertisements can also be pleasurable in a darker or more solemn fashion, a notion scholars sometimes refer to as bad play (Stenros 2015) or dark playfulness (Sicart 2014). A main finding of this study is that advertisers specifically use strategies related to dark playfulness in print advertising to stand out by liberating topics or dark truths that are often unspoken of, or difficult to convey in another format. We found that serious and heavy-loaded topics such as homelessness, climate change, or mental health stigma were especially conducive to

a playful approach. The darker side of playfulness as a strategy in service of liberating unspoken topics manifested in two distinct ways: in negative valence pleasurable experiences, and in dark subversive humor.

Negative Valence Pleasurable Experiences: Appealing to topics of a serious nature, strategies within this category use dark playfulness in their design with the intention of inflicting an emotional response or experience that in isolation is considered negative or painful, but for the purpose of the advertisement becomes pleasurable or productive. The advertisement for sex trafficking awareness in Figure 13 clearly displays suffering and cruelty, both of which are also included in the PLEX framework. While feelings of cruelty and suffering generally have a negative valence, the advertisement seems to aim at an at least partially pleasurable response or experience by inviting an audience to feel the injustice and gravity of the issue of sex trafficking (despite the fact that it may visually look different in real life). The resulting emotions can then become productive in so far as they intrigue us to alleviate and care for the troubled state of our fellow humans, corresponding to two more pleasurable experiences in the PLEX framework, those of sympathy and nurture. The contrasting, eye-opening, and thought-provoking delivery of such a serious issue is considered playful due to its qualities of being disruptive and carnivalesque in addressing commonly held misconceptions.

Another example where emotions with a negative valence seem to be intended to be transformed into pleasurable experiences in order to serve an overarching goal is seen in the advertisement in figure 14. Using the strategy of an implied punchline, the familiar and relatively innocent symbol of someone leaving a virtual group chat is juxtaposed against a somber scene of a family having lost a family member due to texting while driving. Again, suffering or the "experience of loss, frustration and anger" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24) is palpable for the audience, as many are likely able to relate to and sympathize with losing a loved one. Another negative valence pleasurable experience (that is not included in the PLEX framework) the advertisers might have intended to trigger among the audience is that of guilt or shame for having texted while driving in the past. While such dark emotions might not immediately be pleasurable, they can be productive in the long run when they are used to fuel a positive change in behavior going forth, as is also found in a study by Goldsmith, Cho, and Dhar (2012).

Dark Subversive Humor: The second strategy through which dark playfulness is used to liberate the unspoken is that of dark subversive humor. Advertisements that used this strategy were the best illustrators of the carnivalesque quality of playfulness and offered critique on some form of authority or dominant institution in a humorous, satirical, and mocking fashion. This form of dark playfulness works by making people feel mischievous and cheeky, thus helping to reveal—in a humorous manner—prejudices, convictions, or subversive opinions that people are normally not very honest or vocal about. An appropriate example of this strategy is seen in Figure 15, where the aging pictures of controversial Zimbabwean politician Robert Mugabe are used to ridicule and mock his dictatorship and uninterrupted rule as a ploy to sell battery energy. The pleasurable experiences from the PLEX framework that are applicable to this example and several others within this category are that of subversion which is a "breaking of social rules and norms," and thrill as "excitement derived from risk or danger" (Lucero and Arrasvuori 2013, p. 24). This subversion

may be imagined as pleasurable by an audience because it liberates the unspoken yet likely widely shared opinion of the controversial leader. And the desired thrill that the audience is intended to gain from this cheeky form of political incorrectness is pleasurable because they can likely appreciate the risk the advertisers are taking in making such a statement. The darker strategies discussed in this third theme contribute to a neglected aspect of playfulness and play at large, that has been identified and inquired after by both Lucero et al. (2014) and Sicart (2014). The addition of the pleasurable experience of guilt as described earlier may prove a valuable addition to the PLEX framework which thus far only includes three pleasurable experiences with a negative valence.

Figure 13: Distressing imagery of a woman tied down prompts attention for the unspoken topic (Covenant House, 2020).

Figure 14: A father and son are seen at an empty dinner table, the solemn scene casting a new light on the topic of texting and driving (Audi, 2019).

Figure 15: Portraits of an aging Mugabe are used for ridicule and to sell battery energy (ICellpower, 2020).

Conclusion

Aiming at the intersection of the ludification of culture and the competitive attention economy, this study has explored how advertisers are using playful communication strategies in print advertising to stand out. We have found that they do so as follows: They use playful visual design intended to instill a playful mindset; they use strategies based on a pleasurable interactive experiential logic to foster interaction; and they liberate unspoken topics of a dark, solemn, and negative nature through playful design. By identifying said playful aesthetics and their capacity for interactive experiences in the print advertising industry, the strategies found in this study can be

seen as an adaptation of the demands and needs of the current society. The central argument of this article is thus that the print advertising industry, one that continues to grapple with the challenges of the attention economy, is attempting to appease the ludification-of-culture trend by borrowing elements of interactive playfulness that are particularly common for traditionally digital mediums such as video games.

This study holds multiple theoretical implications and offers the following contributions for play-related fields of research: First, the playful strategies found in award-winning print advertisements from the years 2019 and 2020 confirm and extend the study of the ludification of culture by showing that it is not just confined to the digital media outlets this cultural turn was started by. Second, it has previously been concluded that print appears to borrow forms of interactivity that mainly tend to be attributed to digital formats. Within the typical one-dimensional flow of communication of print advertisements, playful strategies are still able to allow for interaction and participation in their own way (for example through an implied punchline), which grants a playability that comes with play competence. Third, this study contributes to the PLEX framework by proposing guilt as another category of playful experience, and extends this framework by showing how in addition to suffering, subversion, and cruelty, thrill can also have a negative valence when the excitement is derived from risk or danger that is inflicted upon another person.

On the one hand, then, the findings of this study offer opportunities for advertisers by introducing the use of playfulness (playification) as a mode of production for the creative industries. On the other hand, they also hint at the consequences and ethical considerations of the playful strategies that we identified. Consumers might feel that playful strategies used by advertisers are exploiting their innate human inclination towards play. The implication of these findings thus invite a discussion about how to minimize these ethical concerns in designing playful advertisements and about the role of possible regulation for the sake of impressionable audiences.

It is also worth highlighting the interpretive nature of the employed research method, which—among other things—has led to the identified themes proposed containing somewhat overlapping strategies. While these strategies can be seen to strengthen one another, it might at times be difficult to discern the differing perspectives taken in each—one of design, one of experience, and one of alternative dark playfulness. Yet, the objective of identifying these strategies has been to make visible how playfulness is being used within print advertising and to systematically identify specific aspects of playful advertising that might not be immediately obvious. To at least partially overcome this limitation and strengthen the validity and reliability of the results, a structured theoretical backbone was established, a detailed operationalization and data collection process was fashioned, and a systematic thematic analysis was conducted following the steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2006).

A recommendation for future research would be to explore other forms of advertising with alternative affordances and see whether they engage and adopt similar or differing playful communication and design strategies. No less importantly, because this study was an initial exploration of playfulness in print advertising no distinction was made between different brand, product, or service types. Hence, another interesting direction for further study would be to comparatively look at these different factors to observe possible nuances in strategies from one category to another.

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