CONSTRUCTING A CULTURALLY FIT AD:
A REVIEW OF CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH ON ADVERTISING

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Resumen

La premisa principal del trabajo es que los anuncios son una parte integral de la cultura, que ofrecen una visión excelente de los aspectos más ocultos de la misma, esto es, cuestiones de fondo, y creencias de diversos tipos. El estudio se centra en el debate entre la adaptación cultural y la estandarización de los anuncios y pone en cuestión las ideas de Levitt (1983) sobre la homogenización cultural de los públicos de todo el mundo y la recomendada estandarización de los elementos a los que los anuncios apelan. El artículo revisa un corpus seleccionado de investigación sobre anuncios centrándose en los valores culturales a los que estos apelan. En todos los estudios analizados se ha aplicado el modelo de cultura de Hofstede (2001) como marco teórico de referencia para el análisis al tiempo que el estudio del contenido se ha usado también como técnica de investigación. La investigación ha demostrado con claridad la existencia de diferencias culturales en la comunicación comercial que se estudian en la teoría de la comunicación intercultural. Estas pruebas apoyan la idea de que los anuncios si han de ser efectivos deben realizarse a medida de las cultural locales ineludiblemente.

Palabras clave: anuncios a través de las culturas; objetivos de los anuncios; anuncios y cultura.

Abstract

The main premise underlying this paper is that advertising is an integral element of culture, giving an excellent insight into its most hidden elements, i.e. core values, beliefs and assumptions. The paper contributes to the debate addressing the question of cultural adaptation *versus* standardisation of adverts, challenging Levitt's (1983) ideas concerning cultural homogenization of audiences worldwide and the recommended standardization of advertising appeals. It overviews a selected body of advertising research focusing on cultural values and appeals. In all the

reviewed studies Hofstede's (2001) model of culture has been applied as a theoretical framework for analysis, whereas content analysis has been used as a research technique. The critical review has clearly demonstrated the existence of cultural differences in commercial communication that could be accounted for by cross-cultural communication theory. This evidence supports the position that advertising should be tailored to local cultures in order to be effective.

Key words**:** cross-cultural advertising; advertising appeals; culture and advertising.

Artículo

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that today's world might be perceived as a global village, constructing an advertising message that persuades audiences across cultures appears a highly challenging task.Cross-cultural research on advertising, with its central question addressing cultural adaptation *versus* standardisation of adverts, has been to a large extent inspired by Levitt (1983). In his milestone article- "The globalisation of the markets"- Levitt (1983) stated that as a result of globalisation the world has become "homocultural" and, consequently, communication practices applied in advertising do not require adaptationto local markets. Levitt (1983) recommended standardisation of advertising, drawing on the idea that in the era of globalisation customers all over the world share common values and may be persuaded by the same appeals. Though initially entrancing, Levitt's (1983) standpoint was soon challenged by empirical research which demonstrated substantial differences in the structure and content of advertising messages across cultures. However, the aim of such research was not only limited to finding similarities and differences in advertising, but also to identify whether such differences may be predicted on the basis of cross-cultural communication theory.

In order to verify their hypothesis and account for the existing differences, most researchers referred to the classic and widely cited works of Hofstede(2001) and his model of culture. The popularity of Hofstede's model in advertising research might be explained by the fact that numerical scores attributed to each of the countries can be used for statistical analyses. Additionally, the model has an exploratory power and it has been accepted both in the academic and business settings (c.f. De Mooij, 2010; De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010).

Currently, the majority of cross-cultural advertising research supports the stance of adapting advertising messages to local cultures (c.f. De Mooij, 2010). Thispaper overviews a selection of subsequent cross-cultural advertising research studies where Hofstede's (2001) model of culture has been used as a framework for analysis, aiming at identifying determinants of cultural fitness of advertising.

The first section of the paper briefly presents the main assumptions of Hofstede's (2001) model of culture, followed by a discussion on the use of content analysis as the most frequently applied research technique to study cross-cultural advertising. Finally, a body of current cross-cultural advertising research focusing on cultural values and appeals is presented and critically discussed.

2. HOFSTEDE'S DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL VARIABILITY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION

Hofstede (2001) classifies cultures in accordance with five dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-/short-term orientation. This dimensional model of culture has evolved from Hofstede's perennial study conducted in 1970s which involved surveying a large number of people (116,000) from different countries about their values preferences and the use of the statistical technique of factor analysis. Even though the original study was conducted over forty years ago, its numerous replications have proved the validity of the data (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010: 88). The study has significantly contributed to many fields of human communication, with a particular reference to cross-cultural, intercultural and international communication, and has been verified by a large body of research on cultural differences in values systems.

2.1 Power distance

The concept of power distance is defined by Hofstede and Bond (1984: 419) as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally". A high Power Distance Index (PDI) reflects the acceptance of inequality over a range of fields of social relations and is the source of conflict between the powerful and the powerless. On the contrary, a low Power Distance Index relates to the balance between the powerful and the powerless. Cultures differ in their emphasis on low or high degrees of power distance, which is reflected not only in the hierarchical structures of organizations, but in communication between people of different statuses in a range of settings. In other words, in large power distance cultures one may observe a higher acceptance for social inequalities which are perceived as part of reality. Additionally, the place in the social hierarchy is firmly attributed to individuals and for this reason one's status must be clearly communicated. Advertising draws on these social distinctions by appealing to social status needs through, for example, luxury goods (De Mooij, 1998; 2010).

2.2 Individualism and collectivism

The second dimension proposed by Hofstede is individualism as opposed to collectivism. This dimension, most visible in intercultural contacts, is probably one of the most discussed, cited and researched concepts in the field of cross-cultural,

intercultural and international communication. Hofstede defines the concept of individualism and collectivism in the following way:

> individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (1991: 51)

Cultural systems high on collectivism emphasise group harmony and develop communication rules which involve individuals' adaptation to the group, so that the group speaks one voice (cf. Hofstede, 2001; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1996). People in collectivistic cultures construct their identity on the basis of their group belonging and they take the "we" orientation. In contrast, in cultures high on individualism (e.g. the U.S.A., Australia, the U.K.), individuals are "I' centred and the main point of reference for one's identity is in the person. One of the main goals of individuals is their well-being and self-actualisation, even at the cost of a group.

In terms of communication patterns collectivistic cultures may be categorised as high-context (c.f. Hofstede, 2001; Hall, 1976). High- context communication, characterized as ambiguous and indirect, requires the listener to identify the speaker's intentions. Additionally, in high-context communication interlocutors avoid losing face and expressing negative emotions or any form of criticism. In individualistic cultures people, on the other hand, prefer low-context communication which involves the speaker's openness, directness, precision, and consistency with their feelings. These issues have been addressed in a large body of research. For example, Frymier, Klopf, and Ishi (1990) have ascertained that in individualistic cultures people are more affect oriented and more prone to talk than members of collectivistic cultures. Clarity plays a significant role in the effectiveness of communication for members of individualistic cultures as opposed to members of collectivistic cultures (Kim, 1994; Kim and Wilson, 1994). Additionally, members of collectivistic cultures, members of individualistic cultures perceive direct requests as an effective communication strategy (Kim and Wilson, 1994).

This distinction is also manifested in marketing communication and affects construction of advertising messages. In individualistic cultures a hard-sell approach is more frequently taken and advertisements are expected to persuade the audience to buy a product. Contrarily, collectivistic cultures are more oriented towards relation-building and advertisements are expected to create trust (De Mooij, 2010: 89).

2.3 Masculinity-femininity

The dimension of masculinity and femininity is related to the way a particular society perceives the natural duality of male and female, focusing on the social roles attributed to each gender. As Hofstede defines it:

> Masculinity stands for a society in which social gender roles are clearly distinct: Men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life" (Hofstede, 2001: 297).

This aspect of culture also involves perception of achievement and life success. In cultural systems high on the masculinity index (MI) gender roles are distinct and people, either men or women, strive for personal achievements, especially work-related recognition and success. Thus, the acceptance of work interference in private life is widespread. For this reason, in masculine societies the public exposure of success is expected which is demonstrated by consumption of luxury goods, prestige and status appeals in advertising (De Mooij, 2010). Alternatively, people in cultural systems low on masculinity perceive roles ascribed to genders as more flexible, and value quality of life and interdependence more than independence and personal ambition.

2.4 Uncertainty avoidance

Following psychological research on tolerance of ambiguity (Adorno et al., 1950; Allport 1954/1979; Furnham and Ribchester, 1995), Hofstede (2001) proposes the dimension of uncertainty avoidance to discuss culturally dependent variances in tolerance/ intolerance of ambiguity at a national level. Hofstede defines the dimension of uncertainty avoidance as "The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations" (Hofstede, 2001: 161). In spite of superficial similarity, Hofstede (2001: 148) does not equate uncertainty avoidance with risk avoidance. In fact, individuals from cultures high on uncertainty avoidance often engage in situations which involve risk in order to reduce uncertainty. On the contrary, a low level of uncertainty avoidance is expressed in a greater acceptance of risk which refers to any domain of human activity, including communication.

According to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1996), in cultures with high Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), individuals develop patterns of communication for almost any possible situation in order to avoid ambiguity. This particularly refers to communication with strangers, which appears highly ritualistic and/ or polite. The patterns of communication seem far more complex in high-context than in low-context cultures. However, the rules concerning a particular situation are not clearly specified and strangers may be simply ignored (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1996: 43).

As regards consumer behaviours, people representing high uncertainty avoidance cultures are less open to innovation and change than representatives of low uncertainty avoidance cultures (De Mooij, 2010).

2.5 Long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation

The long-term orientation is the fifth dimension later introduced by Hofstede (1991) as a result of cooperation with Michael Bond. Despite different labeling, the dimension corresponds to Bond's *Confucian work* dynamism. According to Hofstede:

> Long Term Orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole, Short Term Orientation, stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of 'face' and fulfilling of social obligations. (2001: 359)

In other words, long-term orientation involves investment in the future and is characterised by the following values: "perseverance, ordering relationships by status, thrift, having a sense of shame" (De Mooij, 2010: 90). Short-term orientation, on the other hand, focuses on "pursuit of happiness rather than on pursuit of peace of mind" and involves respect for tradition and focus on one's firmness and stability.

3. CONTENT ANALYSIS IN ADVERTISING RESEARCH

The majority of subsequent cross-cultural advertising research has shared one important element: methodology based on content analysis. Content analysis of advertising is a popular research technique applied in interdisciplinary cross-cultural studies, valued over surveys of the audience who are usually incapable of identifying, or simply unconscious, of such underlying elements of culture as values, norms or beliefs (Frith and Wesson, 1991; Noth, 1990).

Content analysis, also known as textual analysis, is a widely used technique to study all forms of recorded human communication, including books, webpages as well as all media content, particularly popular in social sciences (cf. Babbie, 1983). Holsti (1969: 14) extends the definition of content analysis to "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages". This definition of content analysis does not limit the methodology to textual analysis, but makes it viable in any field of human communication. Except for being systematic, one of the key characteristics of content analysisis its replicability based on explicit rules of coding (cf. Krippendorff, 1984/2004).

Early analyses of the media content arose from interest in the possible effects of mass communication and perception of media attractiveness on the audience. Hence, they focused mainly on social issues related to the media, such as the portrayal of violence, sex, or the role of the media as propaganda. The underlying assumption of the early research was based on the principle that the media content may be regarded as a valuable source of knowledge of culture and society (cf. McQuail, 2005). In fact, this assumption underlies most recent research.

4. CULTURE AND ADVERTISING

Advertising, as a form of social communication, is firmly set within its socio-cultural context and, consequently, undergoes various cultural influences (e.g. Mueller, 1987; Rice and Lu, 1988; Tansey et. al, 1990; Frith and Wesson, 1991; Vestergaard and Schrøder, 1985; Hermerén, 1999). McCracken (1986) argues that advertising messages act as a tool for cultural transfer which is based on two elements: the product and the culture-determined setting. The advertised product possesses certain enduring qualities which, according to McCracken (1986), do not undergo manipulation. On the contrary, the reality presented in advertising messages plays a highly persuasive role and may be freely manipulated to present the required contents. In order to specify the factors concerning the relationships between culture and advertising, researchers often refer to the concept of value as one of the main cultural determinants.

Pollay (1987), however, labels advertising a "distorted mirror" of culture and society as it reflects only certain values and lifestyles. He also argues that values exploited in advertising messages are further reflected and reinforced in the cultural system: "Cultural evolution can be expected toward the values in commercial communication" (Pollay, 1987: 108). In other words, the underlying values may determine the interpretation of meanings conveyed by advertising messages (Hornik, 1980; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1983; Cundiff and Hilger, 1984; McCracken, 1986). At the same time, advertising replicates and strengthens the existing value systems, social norms and stereotypes of its addressees' (Holbrook, 1987; Vestergaard and Schrøder, 1985). Two recognized semioticians, Fiske and Hartley (1978, 1980), stated that advertising does not mirror socio-cultural reality but symbolically reflects the values of the audience. Vestergaard and Schrøder (1985) further argue that advertisements depict an idealised world, showing young, beautiful and happy people that reflects the addressees' goals and desires, and simultaneously portrays the advertised product as a pass to this ideal reality. As persuasiveness is the basic function of advertising and effectiveness is its tangible goal, an advertising message must be adapted to its audience and reflect their social values and norms. Therefore, advertisements are in fact a mine of information on the social and cultural system of their audience.

One of the methods of analysis of the implicit value systems underlying advertising messages, common in cross-cultural research, is the study of advertising appeals. Such research proceeds from the assumption that advertising appeals are not synonymous with values but they rather act as means of value expression (cf. Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). Accordingly, a selected body of research on cultural values and appeals in advertising across culture will be critically reviewed in the next section.

5. AN OVERVIEW OF CROSS-CULTURAL ADVERTISING RESEARCH: ADEVERTISING APPEALS AND VALUES

The extent to which advertising appeals reflect cultural values has been the aim of several cross-cultural studies (e.g. Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Martenson, 1987; Mueller, 1987; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989; Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). The researchers conducting such studies identified advertising appeals in particular advertisements using unified schemes. For example, Pollay's (1983) categoriza-

tion of 42 advertising appeals classified them into adequate cultural forms and applied statistical methods to count the correlation between the application of the relevant appeal and one of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. The results of the aforementioned studies have confirmed the hypothesized relationship between the presence of certain advertising appeals in advertising messages and the cultural values attributed to the particular countries by Hofstede (2001).

For example, Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) attempted to measure the extent to which cultural dimensions are reflected in advertising appeals (and values) in current advertising which appeared in business publications in eleven countries. The researchers used the list of 42 advertising appeals proposed by Pollay (1983). However, 12 out of 42 appeals were excluded from the study, since the coders found no relation between them and the dimensions. Afterwards, the relations between the remaining 30 appeals and Hofstede's cultural dimensions were hypothesised. The study encompassed only four dimensions, as the fifth dimension of the long- *versus* short-term orientation was not included in the study.

A sample consisting of 200 advertisements in four product categories, i.e. office equipment, financial services, clothing and accessories, and travel services, selected from the leading business publications of Chile, Brazil, Taiwan, Japan, India, Israel, Mexico, the United States, France, Finland and South Africa, was coded using 30 appeals identified as being culture related. The results of the study confirmed 10 of the 30 hypothesised relationships. Initially, before removing the outliers, 5 of 8 hypothesised appeals were found to be significantly correlated for power distance. However, after removing the outliers, one more appeal was found to be statistically significant, totalling 6 appeals. As regards uncertainty avoidance, 3 of 8 hypothesised appeals were found to be significantly correlated, with 2 more being statistically significant after the removal of the outliers. For the masculinity/femininity dimension, 2 of 6 hypothetically related appeals were found to be significantly correlated, with further two appeals being added after the removal of unexpected observations. Finally, for the individualism/collectivism dimension, originally none of the hypothesised appeals was found to be significantly correlated, however, after the removal of the outliers 3 appeals were found to be significantly correlated with this dimension. As a result, 18 of the 30 hypothesised relationships found confirmation. Concluding, Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) stated that advertising appeals may be related in a non-random way, i.e. that advertising values may vary to some extent in relation to Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions. Although the hypotheses put forward by Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) found only partial confirmation, the results of the study indicate that cultural dimensions have a predictive potential, on the basis of which a framework for hypothesis formulation concerning the use of advertising appeals could be developed. The researchers, bearing in mind the limitations of their study, suggested the use of other models of culture to verify their research hypotheses.

Albers-Miller and Gelb's (1996) study instigated a debate on the possible relationships between advertising appeals and cultural dimensions and inspired other studies. For example, De Mooij (1998) suggested some further alterations to the hypothesised relations and signalled the need to refer to other than Hofstede's models of culture.

Despite numerous recommendations for the use of other models of culture as a framework for analysis, Hofstede's (1991) model still overwhelmingly predominates in cross-cultural research and his cultural dimensions are often addressed in a range of studies in various countries. For instance, Hofstede's (1991) dimension of individualism as well as Hall's high-context/ low-context concept were used in the study conducted by Al-Olayan and Karande (2000). The researchers analysed 1604 advertisements from the U.S. and Arab world magazines for a number of concepts, including information content, application of price appeals and depiction of men and women. The results of their study revealed substantial differences in the portrayal of men and women across the studied cultures. In advertisements from the Arab world women were presented in accordance with adequate religious recommendation, for instance, wearing traditional garments and performing traditional roles, which sharply contrasted with the image of women in American advertisements. Moreover, Al-Olayan and Karande (2000) revealed that significantly more U.S. adverts use comparison as an advertising technique. In adverts from the Arab world pointedly direct comparisons to competitors' products are avoided. Moreover, U.S. commercials were characterised by frequent use of information cues, especially price information cues. However, Al-Olayan and Karande (2000) failed to link the results of their analysis with cultural factors and provide the resulting conclusions. The only observation they made concerned the negative relationship between the price/promotion information and high-context of the Arab culture.

A more comprehensive framework for analysis of the influence of culture on television commercials that addresses Hofstede's (1991) dimension of individualism/ collectivism, time orientation, relation with nature and contextuality, was provided by Cho et al. (1999), who analysed television commercials from the U.S.A. and Korea. The researchers studied both the general theme of the commercials and their execution (i.e. content of the commercial). The results of their study revealed that as regards thematic content, individualism indeed prevailed in the U.S. commercials. They failed, however, to support the hypothesis that Korean commercials would contain more past-oriented themes than U.S. commercials. Contrary to the hypothesized expectations, a preference for associating products with "youth" dominated in Korean rather than U.S. commercials. On the other hand, in U.S. commercials a frequent portrayal of short-term enjoyment and pleasure was observed. However, Cho et al. (1999) confirmed the hypothesized more frequent use of "oneness with nature" themes in Korean commercials, and "manipulation with nature" in their U.S. counterparts. Moreover, the results of the study also demonstrated that Korean commercials could be qualified as high-context, whereas American ones may be seen as low-context.

Another cross-cultural study of commercials from Korea and the U.S., as well as Germany and Thailand, was conducted by Alden, Hoyer and Lee (1993) who aimed at analysing differences in the use of humour in commercials classified as humorous. The researchers concluded that cognitive structures identified in humorous advertisements in the examined cultures seemed universal, though the specific content of advertisements differed and correlated with the principal cultural dimensions, such

as, for example, individualism and collectivism, which again confirmed the viability of Hofstede's (2001) model of culture.

Hofstede's (1980) model of culture was also referred to in Belk and Bryce's (1986) study. The researchers compared television commercials from Japan and the United States in order to determine the influence of cultural values. The results of the study showed that in the U. S. advertisements individual determinism and materialism were central.

Advertisements from Japan and the United States were also analysed by Mueller (1987) who focused on the themes in advertising messages. Though the researcher found no significant differences in basic advertising appeals in either country, the frequency of the application of a particular appeal differed. Thus, the author concluded that cultural differences are manifested in the degree of the same appeals while appeals such as product merit and status are universal.

Hong et al. (1987) compared Japanese and the U.S. advertisements to find out whether their content and advertising expressions differ in the two cultures. The analysis focused on emotional appeals, informativeness and comparativeness of advertising. The results showed that compared to Japanese advertisements, the U.S. advertisements were less emotional and more comparative. The study did not reveal any significant results as regards information content.

In order to determine the influence of cultural values on the content of advertisements, Tansey, Hyman and Zinkhan (1990) examined the use of work, urban and leisure themes in Brazilian and the U.S. advertisements targeted at businessmen. Their study revealed significant differences in the themes which were present. This led the authors to the conclusion supporting the diversification of advertising messages across cultures.

The manifestation of cultural values in advertising was also tackled by Frith and Wesson(1991). The results of their study of American and British magazine advertisements revealed that in the U. S. advertisements characters were compared in more "individualistic" stances than in British advertisements. These findings also advocate cultural adaptation of advertising messages and reject the application of uniform advertisements.

A similar study analysing cultural values in Chinese and American television advertising was conducted by Lin (2001). The results of Lin's (2001) study revealed a correlation between cultural values and advertising appeals. Thus, in accordance with the hypothesis, in American commercials hard-sell appeal was used more often than in Chinese commercials. A similar relationship was confirmed for the use of individualism/independence appeals. The analysis also demonstrated that commercials mirror cultural differences concerning the concept of time and relationships between people and nature.

6. CONCLUSION

The discussed empirical research on cross-cultural advertising clearly demonstrates the existence of cultural differences in commercial communication, as exempli-

fied by advertising, that could be accounted for by cross-cultural communication theory. This evidence supports the position that advertising should be tailored to local cultures, and contradicts Levitt's argument for the creation of universal, globally fit messages.

Methodologically the majority of current cross-cultural research has been conducted under the umbrella of content analysis that ensures systematic and replicable results. In the reviewed studies the analysis focused on advertising appeals which perceived manifestation of cultural values, information content, portrayal of gender roles and advertising style, as the main cultural determinants. Though Hofstede's (1991) model did not give support to all the hypotheses put forward by the researchers, it still proved to be a viable framework for cross-cultural research. However, the participation of national cultures in the studies has not been evenly distributed. An overwhelming majority of the comparative analyses focused on examining culturally distant countries, usually a western country (the U.S.A.) and an eastern country (Japan, China, or Korea).

It might be concluded that constructing a culturally fit advertising message requires an in-depth knowledge and understanding alocal culture and its communication patterns, as well as applying culture-specific advertising conventions and schemata. Thus, limiting cultural adaptation to translation of the body copy of an ad seems insufficient, since as Anholt (2000: 5) observes: "Advertising is not made of words, but made of culture".

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