Cultural Values As Advertisement Themes In International And Indian Advertising

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ABSTRACT

The present review paper discusses the importance of cultural themes that are manifested in International and Indian advertisements. The review highlights if the advertisements have been influenced by the indigenous cultural background of the nation or not. Furthermore, the paper states through various advertisement examples across nations, the fact that culture is not immune to change, and that the advertisers are always faced with a challenge to embed the right cultural themes in advertisements with changing culture over the years. The review reiterates that standardization of advertisements across nations is not an advisable strategy. The review also explores the scope of identifying certain cultural values with respect to India, which can be probable values open to Modernism and change.

Keywords: Advertising, Cultural Themes, Cross Culture, Standardization, Indigenous

INTRODUCTION

"Since advertising attempts to communicate the literal and symbolic meaning attached to a brand, and since cultures differ in the ways in which they construe and communicate meaning, successful advertising obviously requires a thorough understanding of the culture within which that advertising message is communicated." (Batra et al., 2000).

The strategy of manifesting cultural themes in advertisements by Ad agencies implies that it induces a positive influence on the target consumer. Therefore, use of cultural themes in the process of advertisement construction is not just a mere need, but this strategy itself needs constant vigil and research on the heterogeneity of societal culture, which is undergoing a change in generational values and preferences.

METHODOLOGY

This paper reviews the practice of using cultural values in advertisements globally and discusses the feasibility of standardization of advertisements across multi cultural societies and also examines the usefulness of using localized cultural themes in advertisements. For the purpose of this review, various examples of cultural themes used in advertisements across the world and in India within the last 50 years (1962-2011) are discussed under global and Indian scenarios.

CULTURAL THEMES IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Various cultural themes have been identified for use in advertisements, for instance, some of the cultural values identified by Pollay (1986) were Adventure, Economy, Effectiveness, Enjoyment, Family health and Leisure. Cultural values like Individualism, Tradition, and Respect for elders were identified by Mueller (1987). Modernity is another cultural theme characterized by Technology, Revolution, Professionalism, Fashion and Leisure as against Tradition, which has essence in Long history, Closeness to nature and Traditional elements (Cheng, 1994; Han and Shavitt, 1994; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Mueller, 1987; Pollay, 1983; Tse et al., 1989). Studies done by Cheng (1994), Cheng and Schweitzer (1996), Lin (2001) defined modernity as the notion of being New, Contemporary, Up-to-date, and Ahead of the times; whereas traditional values were interpreted as Respecting the past customs and conventions and venerating the quality of being Historical, Time-honored, and Legendary. Nations and societies within the nations have been categorized accordingly on the basis of certain cultural values that were identified. For instance, as per extensive cross-cultural research (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1996; Singelis, 1994), China, Korea and Japan are

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collectivist societies, whereas the United States is an individualistic society (Zhang and Shavitt, 2003).

Once a nation or society has been identified to have a certain set of cultural values, the representation of needs through advertisements of products must ,therefore, be consistent with those values of the people. If they are not, they will likely be rejected. Many researchers opined that the best (most effective) ads are those that best express and affirm core cultural values. Hence, a core American value like Individualism, which means predisposition to value the individual over the group, if is affirmed or depicted in an advertisement in the US, is more likely to succeed than ones that denigrate or ignore it (O'Guinn et al., 2009).

Also, comparison of cultural values existing in advertisements across nations and cross cultural societies illustrate that at times, some cultural values used may be the same across political boundaries, though they may differ in intensity of expression. For example, in cross-cultural comparison research of Brazilian and American Auto advertisements, it was found that the existence of cultural value themes like Wilderness, Work and Leisure were common. However, urban themes are more likely to be used in Brazilian advertisements as compared to American advertisements (Tansey et al., 1990). In some countries (as expected), the values are exhibited conforming to their indigenous cultural background, while a few show representation of values contrary to their indigenous culture. Marquez (1975) concluded in his research that Philippine ads reflect 'western' rather than indigenous culture, thus contradicting the indigenous culture. However, Unwin (1973) found that U.S. and international student responses to advertising are largely influenced by their respective cultural backgrounds. A research by Dhal (2000) on the use of cultural values for advertising Beer in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany suggested that different values are used to promote the same product in three geographically close countries. Standardization of advertisements in such a case can be dangerous, as an advertised message encoded in one culture may have distortion when decoded in the other cultural context. A standardized approach could hence be unconvincing, as it will not meet the psychological "trigger" necessary to induce a purchase decision with the consumer (Woods et al., 1985). Hence, a word of caution to companies who are tempted to achieve cost efficiencies through standardization as Jones (2000) also reported - that though consumers in each continent share similar needs, they vary in the way they characterize the products that can satisfy those needs. Cross-cultural studies also show U.S. ads to be more rational, manipulative towards nature and a low context culture as compared to the ads of Asian countries like Korea, Japan and China, which are emotional, have harmony with nature and have high context culture (e.g. studies by Belk and Bryce, 1986; Cho et al., 1999; Lin and Salwen, 1995; Zhang et al., 1996). De Mooij's (1998) study also suggested that factual, logical explanation in advertisements is a characteristic of low context cultures like U.S. Lin (1993) affirmed that in the Chinese ideology system, respect for the elderly and tradition play an important role, with a typical example being the illustration of seeking approval or advice from an elderly parent on a product choice.

Choice of cultural values represented in advertisements can also be influenced by the type of product which is meant to be advertised. For e.g., it is seen that "in Chinese ads, personal use products tend to use more individualistic appeals than shared products, whereas, shared products tend to use more collective appeals than personal use products." Hence, a commercial about an automobile will show how the purchase may reflect conformity to family preference rather than individual choice (Zhang and Shavitt, 2003).

Taking the debate over the standardization or localization of advertisements further, one sees an indication of both convergence and divergence of cultures through research done across different countries and different cross cultural societies within the countries themselves. For instance, a study done by Cervellon and Dube (2000), to compare the standardization in food advertisements aired on Canadian television network for English and French Canadians living in Canada established that the advertisements for French audience contained less product descriptive information with regard to sensory qualities of the food. Product information features, however, were found to be equally emphasized in standardized versus culture-specific advertisements. It is hence essential for the advertisement to reflect at least a proportion of values held by the target group or society at large. Comparative studies of print advertisements of U.S. and France have also revealed that advertisements produced in one country cannot simply be standardized or directly translated for use in another (Biswas et al., 1992). Quest for global or local strategy, therefore, depends upon the level of consumer involvement with the product and the cultural differentiation (Percy and Elliott, 2009). Change in indigenous culture brought about by 'globalization' may result in mixing of cultural values, which needs to be recognized as well before going for a completely localized strategy of designing advertisements. The co-existence of tradition and modernity values is vividly expressed in the study as the "melting pot" metaphor (Cheng, 1994; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Lin, 2001). The native cultures often "localize" the imported 'western' culture and make it

adaptable to local customs and traditions (Robertson, 1995). For e.g., Yan (2000) found that the U.S. fast-food products in China have been largely localized and are "actually a Chinese version of American culture and fast foods." This suggests that, when cultures change, the core values remain stable, but a contemporary interpretation of those core values may emerge (Lin, 2001).

CULTURAL THEMES IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

A lot has changed in the Indian marketing environment ever since the nation opened its doors to foreign companies and that influenced the Indian perceptions, attitudes, practices, values and beliefs, all of which constitute culture. Research introspects upon the influence of foreign products' entry in the Indian market, and the exposure of society to foreign movies, operas and songs through TV Channels on the indigenous culture of the country. It thus becomes extremely important for researchers, advertising agencies and the corporate world to know if at all the use of certain cultural values has had a positive impact on the consumers. A lot of research has already been done keeping the diverse cultural background of India, and the value such studies hold for multinational companies, who have always looked at growing economies like India and China as a huge business potential. Studies by Singh and Huang (1962) showed that print media advertisements of U.S. are not effective in India because their appeals are contrary to the indigenous cultural values. Consumers from different cultures tend to have different understanding of the self, which in turn influences their cognition, emotion, motivation and behavior (Wang, 2000). It,therefore, becomes imperative for the businesses in the West to understand the consumer buying behavior and other cultural aspects in order to make their products appealing to the people in the East. Frith and Sengupta (1991) identified a considerable difference in the use of 'individualism' in magazine advertisements of U.S., U.K. and India.

Indian TV commercials depict traditional, religious and family values (e.g. showing marriage, the concept of *Sindoor*, Goddess Durga). *Sindoor* (Vermillion), which symbolizes the married status of Indian Hindu women, is used to represent customs and celebrations as seen in the humorous 'Camlin' advertisement, which shows a woman using a Camlin marker to put a bindi on her forehead (Sodhi, 2010). Also, the "It's a boy! It's a boy!" "Definitely male", from Bajaj Pulsar advertisement signifies the masculine culture of the Indian society (Chaudhuri, 2009). Masculine culture is symbolized by assertiveness, competition and toughness; whereas in feminine societies, the emphasis is more on caring and tender attitudes (Dahl, 2000). The Indian society has a mix of modern and traditional themes in the advertisements as a result of western influences, a process similar to what China underwent after its liberalization policy. According to Nederveen (2000), the modernization process of a society is closely related to the globalization process, which is usually brought about by the industrialized western multinational corporations. One can see the modernization of the Indian society along with growing consumerism brought about by the foreign companies. An attempt to establish cultural values representations across various cultural groups within India is also difficult. Kumar et al. (2007) had taken three FMCG products (Tea, fairness cream and hair oil) to analyze the existence of dominant cultural values in different strata (upper and middle class) of the Indian society. The study revealed that the multinational brands still could not design their communication message according to the cultural values prevalent in the Indian society because of the presence of so many sub cultural groups throughout the country. Further, a study on ethical values in advertising of fairness creams by Mohideen (2009) revealed that advertising of these products is viewed as unethical and sexist by Indians. Pollay (1983) stated that even though advertising is a particularly persuasive proponent of a specific value system, a methodology for measuring the values manifest in advertising has not existed. Therefore, establishing prominent cultural values within sub cultural groups in India is a limitation.

Significant differences in the dominant cultural values were also observed between different social classes, although the gap appeared to be narrowing for the current generation, owing to the efforts of the middle class to aspire for higher standards of living (Kumar et al., 2007). Collectivists and individualistic intentions in India are also complex as Indians were found to be largely collectivist and any individualistic intent was also influenced largely by collectivist goals. Hence, the Indian society can be termed as collectivists or a mixture of collectivism and individualism, but never predominantly individualistic (Sinha et al., 2002).

Chandra et al. (2002) did a study on US multinational's strategy for advertising program standardization for the Indian market with regard to a firm's target market, firm's market position, firm's environmental factors and the nature of the product (durable vs. non-durable). It was found that while advertising standardization program was not positively related to durable goods in the west, it was negatively related in the east. Ramesh (2011) suggested a balanced approach between standardization and adaptation, as too much of standardization can be counterproductive.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The present paper has highlighted various cultural value representations across nations and within nations by identifying the cultural themes in advertisements globally. The review of cultural themes in advertisements depicts that cultural values can be common across political boundaries or the themes can be contrary to the indigenous culture and may have the influence of some foreign cultures. Studies across nations also highlighted segregation between the Eastern world (e.g. China, Japan, Korea and India) and Western nations (U.S., France, Germany) in the choice of cultural values used in the advertisements. While the Western advertisements had more representation of cultural values like Individualism, Modernity, Rationality and Being manipulative towards nature; the East was seen to be more Collectivist, Traditional, Emotional and in Harmony with nature. The review has not only established that localization is preferable over standardization of advertisements, but has also elucidated the difficulty in designing advertisement strategies as per the local culture . For instance, should an advertising agency feel that the advertiser's objectives would be fulfilled better if it follows the strategy of designing localized advertisements, then it would have to deal with the complex task of defining what 'localized' means for a country, as the review enumerates differences in cultural nuances within a sub- culture. Examples of customization as per differential culture were seen within the same country. Standardization, therefore, is not advisable unless the advertiser is absolutely sure of the homogeneity in representation and interpretation of cultural values.

Foreign cultures do influence the indigenous cultural values of a country, which in turn shape the advertising themes. The next step is to identify the modification in the cultural themes of advertisements, which could result in acceptance, rejection or partial acceptance by the people. The past two decades of liberalization and entry of foreign firms in the Indian market subjected the country to the "melting pot" phenomenon, and it is still evolving and adapting incessantly with regard to its cultural values. As a result, we do see a difference - from the "definitely male" of Bajaj NXT to current advertisement tag lines like "Why should boys have all the fun" in the Hero Honda Pleasure advertisement and the Scooty Pep advertisement, which portrays girls as career oriented and independent instead of following the traditional Indian stereotype of being a homemaker. By analyzing a society's ads, research can infer changes in consumption and cultural values from changes in advertising appeals (Pollay, 1986). Hence, one can deduce from the changing appeals and cultural values in the Indian advertisements that the consumption and cultural values of Indians have been influenced by foreign influences. It is expected that further research and study on current advertisements in the Indian and foreign context would quantify cultural themes in advertisements that exist after being modified, having gone through the "melting pot" phenomenon or are expressed as purely localized core values. This may further lead us to know if our world is moving towards a process where some cultural values could be standardized, while leaving the others intact and immune to foreign influences. However, this could be a slow process and inconsistent with other factors that affect the culture of societies. Hence, research is the only way for us to know the level of cultural mixing and co-existence and formation of sub-cultures within nations.

Localization of advertisements was, by and large, seen to be more widely practiced and a preferred strategy over standardization of ads in almost all cultural studies reviewed. However, advertisers might also face certain limitations while attempting to make use of such studies in designing their advertising message strategies. In some cases, the findings of a research are too complex for advertisers to implement it in the form of a practical advertising design process. In a study by Singh et al. (2008), multicultural clusters were identified within a nation on the basis of broad factors like social identity, historical context, economic parameters, institutional factors and geography. Based on the similarity of cultural clusters across political boundaries, the research went on to visualize the world on the basis of cultural maps rather than political boundaries. Peterson and Smith (1997) established the parameters of cultural contributions in language, economic development, geography, religion, economic system and development, national boundaries, climate, etc. It would, therefore, be a tall task for a company to design its message strategy based on cultural clusters or cultural maps or boundaries instead of political boundaries. Influence of individual factors in representation and understanding of same cultural values across cultures is one another complex aspect of implementation. De Mooij and Hofstede (2010) integrated the Hofstede model to understand mental processes, consumer self, personality, identity, image cultural values and social processes to link advertising style, brand positioning and advertising appeal as part of a cultural advertising strategy.

Culture was not found to be a consideration for designing ad message strategy in a study by McCarty and Hattwick (1992), who researched on cultural value orientations like Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculine vs. Feminine, Time orientation and Activity orientation, Human relationship with nature and uncertainty avoidance in the print

advertisements in magazines in U.S. and Mexico. They did not find cultural themes of advertisements consistent with cultural orientations, demonstrating that culture solely might not be the guiding parameter for advertising message strategy.

CONCLUSION

Since the advertising message strategy aims to fulfill the communication objectives of the company, it becomes imperative to continuously study cultural practices and changes brought about in indigenous cultures by foreign cultures so that the advertising strategy is in synch with the culture of the targeted segment. With foreign cultures continuously influencing the indigenous cultures, it is difficult to decide if advertisements should be customized completely according to the indigenous culture. In his conceptual paper, Gaurav (2008) discussed a similar difficulty of deciding either adaptation strategy or standardization and suggested a middle path in applying contingency approach for designing the advertising strategy. To conclude, the present review paper has outlined the popular trends and practices across the world regarding the use of cultural themes in advertisements and brings out the fact that though globalization may have had its influence in causing convergence of the societies towards a common culture, but standardization of advertisements is still not a safe strategy. However, since the world is shrinking, with globalization catching pace for countries like India, it would be interesting for the researchers to study its impact on the Indian culture and across other developing multi-cultural nations as well.

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