study 05
Universality in cross-cultural marketing communication

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

Advertisers, publicity agencies, brand and product identity designers, are increasingly faced with the challenges of a globalizing market. Marketing communication problems do not arise only on a large scale, between continents or religious cultures. Advertisers experience already cultural differences as from a language border or frontier is exceeded. In addition, value differences occur even between social groups in one culture, between conservatives and progressives, between young people and the elderly, between high and low trained etc. [16]. All those different target groups have their own values and find other things important.

What concerns brand identity, colour and iconography are important because they work as a factor for remembering the brand and arouse positive or negative associations. The colour, the shape, the iconography of a logo is the complete personality of a company, the image a philosophical and moral phenomenon. When local companies expand to a global market, their chromatic signs are also transposed. Local connotations may re-signify or neutralize the values attributed to the brands and identities that companies intend to communicate [4]. The question is whether for each target group/region, an adapted market strategy is necessary or that standardization is possible, which can save costs considerably.

There are a growing number of cultural studies on emotions and elements in visual communication, which defend several points of view. There is the idea that the world transforms into a 'homocultural' market place where all customers can be persuaded by the same advertising appeals and value, irrespective of the culture they belong. This has been based

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on Levitt's "Globalization of Markets"[17] and the proposition that marketing can be standardized across cultures. It is clear that this evolution for the advertisers can offer important advantages in production cost reduction. However, to what extent that standardization can be realized has already brought on many discussions under practitioners and researchers. Not in the least because some researches seem to demonstrate the opposite of Levitt's claim.

CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES

Cross-cultural studies have some commonly used approaches like f.i. looking at visual characteristics variables in advertising. These include visual story line, visual comparison, visual identification, pacing, subjective camera (in which the camera assumes the perspective of the viewer), and direct address (where a character speaks directly to the camera). There is also the approach of information content of advertising, the advertising style, creative strategies used in commercials, creative styles, the used themes like work themes, and different aspects like body shape, price appeals, sex appeals, or the number of people depicted, colours connected to emotions and iconography. Others have focused on the appeals or values used in ads across cultures. They used mainly Pollay's list of 42 advertising appeals [20]. Most researchers link the appeals to broader frameworks such as Hall's low- and high-context cultures [13] and Hofstede's five dimensions of culture from his study of national work related values [15]

Stephen Dahl [6] distinguishes three types of research: sociological research, ethnology inspired research and cross-cultural psychology inspired research. Where only the last type of research attempts to relate the findings back to established cross-cultural and intercultural research like that of Hofstede.

Dahl notices that little research has been done comparing the attractiveness of advertising to the consumer, rather than focusing on the advertising content. He indicates the difficulty of comparing research results from different studies and the limited countries that were examined.

The studies show therefore shortcomings, which make a statement concerning standardization difficult. However, the studies seem to support that, at least from the 'sellers' side, the claim that variation in the different aspects of advertising is quite substantial in different countries.

The little research that is performed on the 'buyer's side' seem to confirm that people appear to favour culturally congruent appeals and styles. The study of Censydiam [5] into the appreciation of consumers for creative publicity also shows that recognition is important. Recognition does not mean to identify oneself explicitly with the situation or protagonists, not the ordinary demonstration of reality or an explicit reference to a cultural identity, but at an implicit level, at the level of universal needs and emotions, that one can be sentient of the characters and situations. Whereas creation is a term of the makers, emotion is the mirror image on the recipient side. The adage 'is something happening' or 'does it touches me' is also the more natural manner of consumers to look at marketing communication.

LOOKING FOR UNIVERSALITY

The ideal approach for successful cross-cultural communication seems to be to use a certain degree of standardisation, but to adapt it locally. Gaining profit from both sides of the discussion: to reduce costs but also to favour the consumer with a congruent message. We must therefore go in search for cross-cultural universal factors and techniques, which make it possible to bridge cultural differences as much as possible, to avoid mistakes in communication and at the same time to give the message relevancy and meaning.

Now this seems on first sight impossible since even with simple researches, in which interviewees have to couple colours to emotional keywords, no univocal results emerge. Like e.g. the Colours in Cultures attempt by David Mc Candless & Always With Honor (2009) in which keywords were placed with colours for 10 different cultures. The comments from designers around the world show mainly negative [25].

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There are a number of reasons for the contradictory results. Firstly, on the meaning of words such as death or marriage another emphasis is laid in different cultures. The white colour of the bridal dress in a Western wedding ceremony indicates the virginity of the bride, whereas the red colour at Chinese weddings is a reference to happiness.

white at incinerations, but there the emphasis is laid on the reincarnation, the new beginning. White at Moslem burials is worn because of its simplicity and frugality. The meaning of the colours is everywhere the same but the event is differently experienced.

Wedding dresses billboard in Malaysia

Red is a happy colour.
Happy Buddha's Big Belly Wall
Scroll

Black clothing that is worn at a Western funeral lays the emphasis on the bereavement, on sadness. Death is considered as a terminus. In Hinduism, people wear

Marc Chagall
Here is my heart

In addition, it is so that the context in which a colour appears is important for the emotional value that it evokes [4, 18]. Red means love when it is the colour of a heart, but a face turning red can also indicate an approaching fit of anger.

The choleric type
from Gebr. Schmidt's Farbtemperamente

Lastly, there is a difference in giving of meaning concerning colours as such and colour combinations. According to Allegos and Allegos [2] it is the contrast between colours that allows them to generate an emotional response. "Specific combinations of colours are said to produce the best results in terms of appeal and meaning" [8]. In addition, Oberascher and Gallmetzer [18] come to the same conclusion: "Colour combinations seem better suited to characterise emotions. They seem to express a meaning that has a more comprehensive and differentiated 'semantic form', which cannot be explained completely by the constituent single colours".

Red-on-black is the combination, which one retrieves in courthouses with judges and jurisdiction. The reversed combination: black-on-red appears in all cultures for when it concerns punishments, hell, to portray demons and devils [18]. All this makes it difficult to compile a workable table such as that of Mc Candless, and cannot lead to the conclusion that giving of meaning is solely culturally determined.

concerns here an almost exclusively visual test. They decide that the association of colours with emotions is for a great deal dependant on universal, biological factors.

Darwin (1872) sees emotions as adaptations of the organism to typical recurrent situations like danger, death, birth, success ...; they are universal and intraspecifically inherited. On this basis Ekman [9,10,11] developed his "neurocultural" theory of emotion and expression; neurocultural refers to the interactionism of predisposition/brain with environment/culture. There is indeed increasing proof that the link between emotion and colour is rooted in human biology and with that it becomes possible to describe corresponding rules [7].

Genetic semantics offers thereby a useful method because it is based on a hereditarily processing of sensual and emotional stimuli. Ferre Alpaerts [3] compared the results of the research of colour sociologist Eva Heller [14] to those of genetic semantics. From Heller's enquiry it appears that the colours the interviewed connect to words usually have the same genetic semantic code as those words themselves. The conclusions of genetic semantics are thus in many cases the same as Heller's. A little arithmetic shows the more the interviewees agree on the colour with a word, the better the results agree with those of genetic semantics.

Judge John Deed BBC

Demons in a Buddhist hell, Sri Lanka

An interesting research is that of Osvaldo da Pos and Paul Green-Armytage [7]. They have looked at the relation between colours and basic emotions and have examined to what degree Australian and European observers associate in the same way colours with emotional facial expressions. This research differs from others where colours must be coupled to keywords; it

In addition, Oberascher and Gallmetzer [18] compare their study results with those of Heller.
"Considerable agreement is shown between our three studies on specific emotional colour-coding, both in relation to each other and in comparison with Heller's study, as well as between our study and those of others on colour associations".

In several fields of cross-cultural study: cultural psychology, colour psychology, iconography and advertising research results point in the direction of semantics, with antagonists and dimensions as a means to determine and to apply universality.

Low context (LC) culture and the contrasting high context (HC) culture are terms presented by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his book Beyond Culture [13]. He is one of the founders of intercultural communication study. He states that in LC-cultures, like USA, Canada, German-speaking countries, Scandinavia, France, people relate to informational content in an explicit manner, such that things are spelled out as concisely and thoroughly as possible. HC-cultures like Arab countries, Italy, Greece, Japan, Spain, Korea, China are characterized by the use of non-verbal and indirect verbal expressions.

Hofstede [15] created a semantic model of antagonistic cultural aspects like f.i. small vs. large power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, weak vs. strong uncertainty avoidance, long vs. short-term orientation. The individualism and collectivism framework f.i. has important implications for the content of advertisements. Content analyses of magazine advertisements suggest that Korean ads tend to use more collectivistic appeals, whereas U.S. ads tend to use more individualistic appeals. Similar results were found in Japanese versus U.S. ads. Zandpour et al. [22,23], Albers-Miller and Gelb [1], Xue [24] and many others based their research framework on Hofstede's and Hall's models, and seem to get the best results in terms of predicting advertising style and appeals.

CONCLUSIONS

Predictions concerning audio-visual content, style or appeals for a certain culture/target group can be made with the aid of cross-cultural psychology research. This type of research, based on a semantic model, could simplify local adaptation of an advertising campaign significantly, as the most likely factors may potentially be predictable.

Once the manner of presentation to transfer values is known a balance must be found between universal colour-, shape- and symbol-coding, that appeals on a subconscious level, and culturally/locally specific accents. Colours, forms, symbols and mythologies are the tools to recall an automatic, inherited response that bridges the cultural differences.

Two examples:
1. Soymilk packing from Alpro in UK and Belgium. The colour coding and style is the same for both countries. The difference is in the presentation of the product. In the UK people use soymilk mostly with cereals, while in Belgium it is more viewed as a drink.

UK

Belgium

2. Poster publicity for the Harry Potter movies, which
have been distributed worldwide.
The poster recalls a universally understood atmosphere
of death, mystery, secrets by using the colour combination
black-on-blue and the colour tint dark grey. The magic
touch is aroused with purple-on-blue.

China

Turkey

Brazil

Poland

Korea

Japan

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ASSOCIATED LINKS

Two studies on black-on-blue and dark grey:

1: "The meaning of vowels: AAO and death". F. Alpaerts
http://www.genecode.be/en/research02_en.pdf
2: "The meaning of black-on-blue and the link with dark grey". I. Michiels.
http://www.genecode.be/en/casestudy03_en.pdf

About the method of genetic semantics:

http://geneticcoding.wordpress.com/genetic-semantics-analysis-method/

Two analyses according to this method:

1: Schiphol new logo, the colours:
http://geneticcoding.wordpress.com/2010/04/16/schiphol-new-logo/
2: Schiphol new logo, the shape:
http://geneticcoding.wordpress.com/2010/04/28/schiphol-new-logo-shape/

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