

Understanding the Impact of Cross Cultural Issues in International Advertising

Ankita Chitkara

Northern India Engineering College, Delhi
E-mail: ankita_chitkara@yahoo.com

Abstract—Effective international advertising requires specialized cultural knowledge that considers differences between target audiences in different countries who vary from country to country in terms of how they perceive or interpret symbols or stimuli, respond to humour or emotional appeals, as well as in levels of literacy and languages spoken. Thus in international business managers treat culture as a success factor for performance in economic systems. The purpose of the paper is to analyse the cultural impact on international advertising by evaluating cultural variations across countries. Secondary data and supporting cases have been used to carry out the research based on fundamental objectives of the study. The study reveals that despite of globalization and increased cross border trade there exist deeper values that distinguish culture and countries across the world, thus making it imperative to understand these differences for successful international advertising.

Keywords: Cross-culture, Advertising appeals, Verbal and Non-verbal Cues

1. INTRODUCTION

International advertising entails dissemination of a commercial message to target audiences in more than one country. Target audiences differ from country to country in terms of how they perceive or interpret symbols or stimuli, respond to humor or emotional appeals, as well as in levels of literacy and languages spoken. The primary goal of advertising is to effectively communicate with the target audience. The communication process involves multiple aspects which are affected by media, culture, literacy and language. For example, a multinational company that wishes to place newspaper ads will find that their ads will most likely be unsuccessful in countries that have significantly low literacy rates. Additionally, cultural norms and values differ among countries.

The debate regarding the nature of culture and its implication has a long history. Taylor (1870) defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society”. Also, it is important to take consideration of what Hofstede (2003) defined culture as “the collective programming of mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another”.

The challenge for the Marketing Manager is to handle the differences in values and attitudes, and subsequent behavioral patterns that govern human interaction on two levels: first, as they relate to customer behavior and, second, as they affect the implementation of marketing programs within individual markets and across markets. During the last decades of the world’s internationalization process, importance of integrating cultural aspects into marketing activities has been arising along with the development of national and international culture, politics, law and economics. Culture by itself has more than 180 definitions (Baldwin et al, 2006) and has a very subjective meaning for each person or nation.

Coming to the intercultural environment, first of all it is very important for every manager to understand what culture is, and then develop in him- or herself cultural literacy and cultural competence. Thus, a manager/professional needs to know what cultural literacy is in order to be able to function effectively within different cultures and among different people, with various cultural backgrounds.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, many researchers have studied the subject of cultural differences and cross- culture comparisons within different sectors and areas (e.g. Kim, Forsythe and Gu, 2002; Sokling, S, 2004; Monika and Morven, 2005). When considering advertisements across cultures, the differences are significant; as a culture changes based on principles such as individualism or collectivism, and expected gender roles the advertisements that correctly appeal to that culture change as well. There are of course debates on how strict these lines can be drawn between differing cultural views and the impact it has on the advertisements of that culture, especially as Western culture passes beyond the borders of Western nations on increasing levels.

With media changing alongside culture, advertisers do their best to understand what methods will be the most effective in each unique culture and these infrequently overlap. To better understand what creates the differences between cultures and the most effective messages for each culture, Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimension on 5 levels will be the most

useful. If we do learn culture, as Hofstede suggests, than it comes as no surprise that there is no one culture that satisfies the ideals of societies from many different nations. The culture of Americans contrasts strongly with that of people in China (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997), for example. This global contrast is made possible by the different types of communication found acceptable in each nation. We are not born knowing that our culture expects females to do the laundry or that the progress of the group is more important than that of the individual. These things are taught to us through interacting with our peers, going to school, learning from our parents, listening to religion and most importantly, from viewing the mass media.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research has been conducted with the following objectives in view:

1. To understand and evaluate the cultural impact and variations between different countries on international advertising.
2. To determine the factors which maximise the adaptability of the advertisement in the International market
3. To find the opportunity and challenges for the International advertising for a particular brand

Based upon the fundamental objectives of the research the study attempts to understand the impact of cross cultural issues on international advertising and the effect of these cultural variations. The study attempts to identify the factors that maximise the adaptability of advertisements across cultures w.r.t cross cultural communication cues. Thus, finding out the opportunities and challenges for a particular brand w.r.t cross cultural issues.

The research under study is descriptive in nature to understand the impact of cross cultural issues in international advertising. For the purpose of analysis secondary data has been collected in the form of case studies along with Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Model as the Research Instrument.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

One area that has attracted a great deal of consideration in several disciplines during the last two decades is the analysis of mass media advertising content to gain insights into how cultural factors affect advertising strategies and expressions; how cultural values, norms and stereotypes are reflected in advertising; how advertising creates meanings and affects the audience and the larger society over time.

In recent years, the study of cross-cultural advertising has become a subject of increasing importance because of several important developments. There has been an increasing interest over the issue of how advertising reflects, reinforces and affects cultural values of its target audience.

US Advertisement



Fig. 1

IN THE ABOVE AMERICAN AD: McDonald's uses different approaches to profess its slogan "I'm lovin' it." The slogan not only promotes the food, but a whole lifestyle. The American ads displays images of individuals enjoying themselves with music and relaxation, and offers an in-depth explanation of the philosophy behind the new slogan: "You're immediately at the center of attention—your individuality, your everyday life, situations in which you recognize yourself and where you would like to see yourself."

INDIAN Advertisement

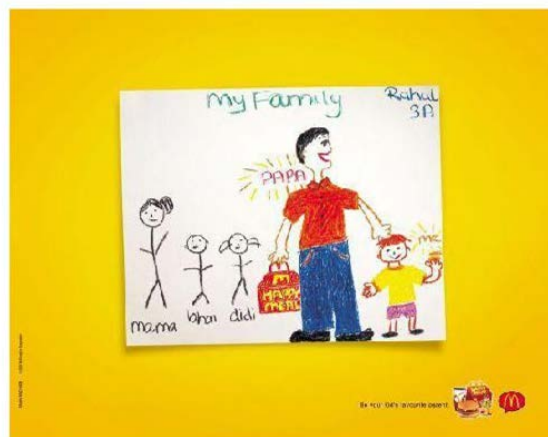


Fig. 2

The Indian ad emphasizes a different enjoyable experience, which is different to that of time which is spent by oneself, for instance by listening to music with earphones large enough to block out the outside world. McDonalds clearly lays more emphasis on family values and tries to promote itself as a family restaurant in India where people can come and have a good time. Hence the user imagery is that of families having fun time at McDonalds. This is a result and reflection of the collective society that India is.

McDonalds follow the strategy of "think globally act locally". The major reason behind the remarkable success of McDonalds is that it caters the markets according to the likes

and dislikes of the target market. McDonalds alters its Menu according to the region it is catering as well as their cultural norms.

In India, there are Macs available as Indians are not fond of eating Beef. They have Maharaja Mac, Which is Big Mac made of Lamb or Chicken Meat. They also offer Vegetarian burgers like McAloo tikki, Mc Veggie etc. because Indians have a majority of Population who are fond of vegetarian food only.

Whereas in US people are more fond of eating beef and Pork Food, therefore McDonalds offers more Products like Ham Burgers, Buffalo Ranch McChicken.

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

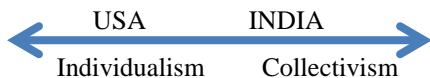
1. Power Distance Index



Power distance relates to a culture’s willingness to accept a difference in power over other members of a culture. Thus, according to Hofstede, countries that rank highest in power distance index mean they in general are willing to accept the fact that inequality in power is considered the norm. This also signifies that elders take the lead and be regarded as significant role models and wise elders. This cultural dimension seems to be most frequently used across culture studies, especially in differentiating Western and Asian cultures.

- India being on the higher side of the Power distance index, there is a larger acceptance towards inequality and the power in the Indian Society, which makes India more class divided. Therefore the Indian Advertisement shows the Parents going along with their children to make a purchase.
- USA being on the lower side of the Power Distance index, there is less inequality in the distribution of the power and the advertisements are generally based on an individual going to make the purchase without their parents because they have the power in their hands.

2. Individualism vs collectivism



The degree to which individuals are integrated into groups". In individualistic societies, the stress is put on personal achievements and individual rights. In contrast, in collectivist societies, individuals act predominantly as members of a lifelong and cohesive group or organization

- **US** being an **individualistic Country** the focus of the ads here is more on individual needs, concerns and self-

interest. For example, advertising that focuses on individual success, independence and stressing the word "I" would be received negatively in countries where teamwork is considered a positive quality.

- On the other hand **India** being a **collectivist country** the focus is more on emotional ties, family relations and strengthening the bonds thus the ads focus more on showing family outings, couples going on dates or kids enjoying with their parents or friend circles.

3. Long term orientation vs Short term orientation



- US being a country with a short term orientation with very less focus on saving for the future and living in the present while enjoying the weekend culture the ads emphasise less on showing the price sensitivity of the customers.
- On the other hand, India (long term oriented) is a country emphasising more on the importance of saving for the future and enjoying the present while securing the future, the market being a price sensitive market the ads emphasize more on price issues for e.g. in case of McDonalds, introducing the Mc Aloo Tikki for Rs.30 along with other options offering meals and combo offers which are price effective.

Another Ad of Masala Grill shows a man asking for discount on burger showing the long term orientation of Indian who believes in saving.

Masculinity vs Femininity



Masculinity is seen to be the trait which emphasizes ambition, acquisition of wealth, and differentiated gender roles. Femininity is seen to be the trait which stress caring and nurturing behaviors, sexuality equality, environmental awareness, and more fluid gender roles.

- Both the countries, **US and India** tend to be inclined more towards the masculine side of the spectrum though India scoring higher on this scale than **US**, indicating that both the countries believe in the power of dominance thus the ads being shown in both the countries depict the principles of power, authority and dominance.
- Thus it can be seen in majority of the **Indian ads** that they show a father Fig. paying for the meals bought by children or a boy purchasing a meal for the girl thus indicating more power in the hands of males.

4. Uncertainty avoidance



- When referring to these two countries Indian is much more averse to risk than **US**. Nationals of US have a **higher risk appetite** thus companies keep experimenting with their product and service offerings in the US markets as people easily try and experiment new offerings available in the market place
- While in **India** since the people are **conservative** and avoid taking risks the companies come out with variations of their offerings that match the needs and tastes of the Indian market, for example, McDonalds introduced the well-known Mc spicy burger since the Indian society loves binging on spicy food.

The factors which maximize the adaptability of the advertisement in the international market may be defined in context of verbal and non-verbal cues or as verbal and nonverbal communication patterns used in different cultures which may range from high context to low context falling anywhere on the spectrum.

There are basically two types of factors which affect the adaptability of the international advertisement:

- Verbal cues
- Non Verbal Cues

Verbal Cues: These are those cues which can be oral or written. Different types of verbal Cues are:

- **Language Error:** It represents the words used as names of the products or any written or oral connotations used in the print ads or ad commercials

Interpretation

Chinese translation also proved difficult for Coke, which took two tries to get it right. They first tried Ke-kou-ke-la because when pronounced it sounded roughly like Coca-Cola. It wasn't until after thousands of signs had been printed that they discovered that the phrase means "bite the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax", depending on the dialect. Second time around things worked out much better. After researching 40,000 Chinese characters, Coke came up with "ko-kou-ko-le" which translates roughly to the much more appropriate "happiness in the mouth".

- **Translation error**

Interpretation

For eg: In Chinese, the Kentucky Fried Chicken slogan "finger-lickin' good" came out as "Eat your fingers off".

Writing Patterns: It represents the design of the Logo or an identification mark

Interpretation

Nike brings back another classic. In 1998, the Nike Air Bakin made national headlines when Arab-American groups thought that the way "Air" was written on the shoe looked too similar to "Allah" written in Arabic. Nike recalled thousands of shoes, covered the logos with patches and the shoes made their way to the outlets.

The non-verbal cues: These are those cues which cannot be expressed in terms of word. Different types of Nonverbal cues are:

- **Proxemics:** Personal Space is the Distance someone wants between himself/herself and other people in ordinary, non-intimate interchanges.

Observations and limitations shows that most North Americans, North Europeans and Asians wants a bigger personal space than do Latin Americans, French, Italians.

Interpretation

Even companies as big and as smart as **Proctor and Gamble** can make brand blunders when cultural differences are not researched beforehand. Proctor & Gamble used a television commercial in Japan that was popular in Europe. The ad showed a woman bathing, her husband entering the bathroom and touching her. The Japanese considered this ad an invasion of privacy, inappropriate behaviour, and in very poor taste.

- **Chromatics i.e Through colours:** Different Colours can also carry cultural meaning in a culture. In some cultures there are lucky colors, such as red in China and unlucky colors, such as black in Japan. Some colors have certain significance; green is considered a special color in Islam and some colors have tribal associations in parts of Africa.

Interpretation

To commemorate its initial flights from Hong Kong, **United Airlines** handed out white carnations to the passengers. For many Asians white flowers represent bad luck and even death.

- Another example of colours observed in context of Indian and American culture relates to the use of the colours **Red** and **White**, Americans generally tend to use more of white colour during wedding alliances including the bride's dress however, on the other hand the colour white is considered to be inauspicious to be worn by brides in India. Similarly, the colour black is considered a neutral colour to be worn by natives of India at social gatherings but on the other hand black is associated to be worn on mourning's by the British people.

- **Through Gestures: A Gesture** is a movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning.

Interpretation

In **Greece and Turkey**, for example, this gesture can be taken as highly vulgar. You are telling someone that they resemble a similarly shaped part of the human body and, by extension, that they are homosexual. In some Middle Eastern countries, such as Kuwait, the okay sign signifies the evil eye.



Fig. 3

The “Thumps up” sign that means “good work” or “go ahead” in **Canada**, the **United States**, and most of the Western Europe is a vulgar insult in Greece.

The opportunity and challenges for the international advertising for a particular brand

Case of change of logo of Starbucks in Saudi Arabia

A major U.S. company Starbucks reportedly upholding gender apartheid in their franchise stores in Saudi Arabia. The company have made a number of changes to their business practices in "deference" to Saudi customs, including maintaining segregated seating in their restaurants and having separate entrances for women and men. Starbucks even changed its corporate identity to do business in Saudi Arabia by altering its trademark mermaid logo, because in Saudi Arabia any display of the female form, even as a stylized graphic, is considered indecent.

Opportunities

- It is already an established Brand all over the world
- Acceptance across all the cultures for complete variety of menu and offerings
- It enjoys a well-established brand image across the globe
- Saudi Arabia being a rich and affluent country has a good market for a retailer like Starbucks as people are not conservative in their spending.

Challenges

- Cultural Variations and the differences poses a major challenge for Starbucks
- Entry in the conservative country / low context culture was also a threat

- Strict follow-up of cultural practices, values or norms of a low context culture
- Cultural Bindings and orthodox mentality is a major influencing factor

5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is of utmost importance for companies/ Organizations to culturally adapt their marketing or advertising strategies in order to have maximum effectiveness of their ads and to have maximum impact on the consumers. To have maximum impact, ads should be perceived as culturally correct, verbal or non- verbal cues. In order to survive the competition and to match the pace of increasing globalization organizations have to ensure and carefully consider the cross cultural issues when advertising internationally

McDonald's has been successful in different markets because it has adopted its products and offerings according to the local markets and has adjusted keeping in mind the cultural norms, values and beliefs of the given region. It is evident that McDonalds has worked on the strategy to “think globally and act locally”

The Verbal and Non-verbal cues form a very important part of any form of advertisement. Both the forms of Communication reflect a wide range of ideas when used in context of various cultures. While in some cues which are acceptable in one culture may be considered as inappropriate in another. Despite of globalization and increased cross border trade there still exist deeper values that distinguish cultures and countries across the world. The advertisements tailored according to respective cultures by using signs and symbols that reflect consumer Preferences, values and norms are effective.

Cultural aspects are particularly important in advertising since the effectiveness of messages transmitted via the mass media is determined mostly by the appropriateness of the words and other symbols they employ. Nowadays, understanding cultural differences is frequently considered a prerequisite for successful international advertising. The reasoning is that consumers grow up in a particular culture and hence become accustomed to the value systems, beliefs, and perception processes of that culture. Consumers respond to advertising messages that are congruent with their culture, rewarding advertisers who understand that culture and tailor ads accordingly.

Thus, Advertisements that are tailor made to suit a particular culture are effective and have the desired impact on target audience. Organizations should develop their marketing or advertising strategies giving due consideration to the local culture.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH

The scope of the research paper was to discuss the impact of cross cultural issues on international advertising while

entering the foreign market. Since the research is restricted to only few companies and sectors, the research can be further validated by taking samples from other sectors as well as. This concept and discussion can also be extended through primary data collection methods to further strengthen the topic into various dimensions of cross cultural management and its impact on international advertising.

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