

Humour in print ads: Differences among the U.S.A., France and China

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Research Question

- Does the cross-culture literature explain the content of humorous ads?

Literature Review

- Humour can be an efficient tool in advertising, as it increases consumer attention, ad memorability and ad persuasiveness (Eisend 2009; Skalski et al. 2009).
- However, what is funny for some might be tremendously offensive to others (Beard 2008), particularly for those of different cultures (Alden, Hoyer and Lee 1993).
- There is still confusion in the literature:
 - Some studies found a congruency between the prominent values of a given country and the values expressed in ads (Javalgi, Cutler and Malhotra 1995; Milner and Collins 2000; Choi and Miracle 2004; Nelson and Paek 2008).
 - Other studies did not find such congruency (Mueller 1987; Alden and Martin 1995; Cho et al. 1999; Paek, Nelson and McLeod 2003).
- We used Schwartz's Value System (Schwartz and Bardi 2001; Schwartz, 2006):
 - USA:
 - Low on *universalism* (concern and tolerance for all people and nature).
 - High on *hedonism* (gratification of sensual desires), *Achievement* (achieve personal success according to social standards) and *social power* (pursue selfish interests at the expense of others).
 - France:
 - High on *egalitarianism* (social justice, loyal, equality, responsible) and *harmony* (care for nature, world of beauty, world at peace).
 - China:
 - High on *embeddedness* (social order, obedience and respect with tradition) and *hierarchy* (authority, humble), but low on *autonomy* (pleasuring life, curiosity, creativity) and *egalitarianism* (social justice, loyal, equality, responsible).
- About the types of Humour,
 - USA:
 - USA is a lower context culture (Hall and Hall 1990), so explicit humor should be more common in the USA than in China and France.
 - Humor in advertising is common (Beard 2005), indicating that it is socially accepted.
 - France:
 - French prefer puns better than the Americans or the British (Hill 2001).
 - It has been claimed that sarcastic type of humor is preferred in France (Hill 2001).
 - China:
 - Humor in Chinese literature had been marginalized and unappreciated, being associated with urban decadence (Suoqiao 2007).
 - Chinese culture promotes a strong desire to gain and maintain harmony among individuals (Zhang and Neelankavil 1997). In such setting, humor can be perceived as a selfish motivation that fail to promote courtesy and harmony.

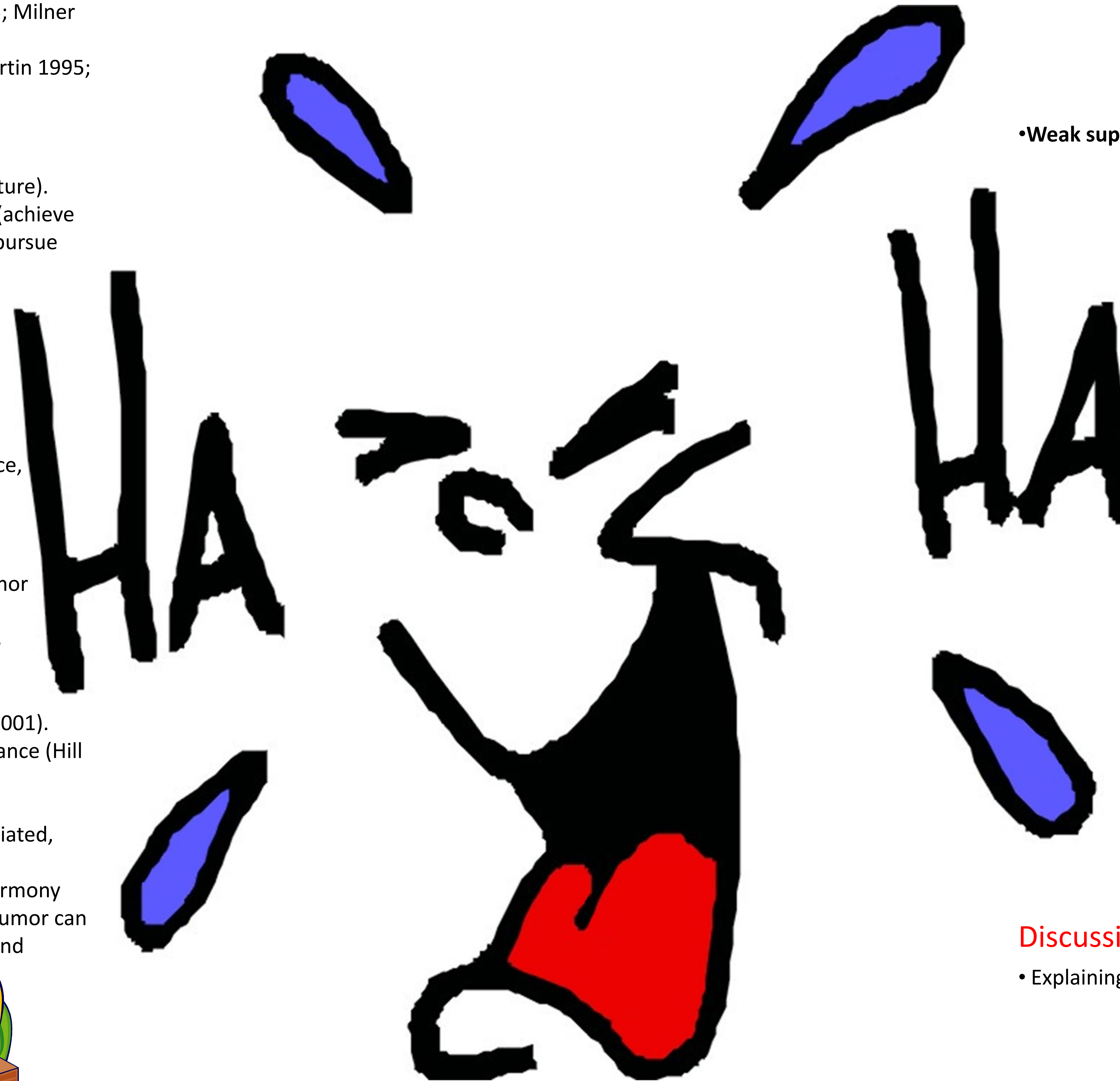


Hypotheses

- H1: Compared to Chinese and French ads, American ads express more frequently: (a) hedonism, (b) achievement and (c) social power.
- H2: Compared to Chinese and French ads, American ads use "joke" more frequently.
- H3: Compared to Chinese and American ads, French ads express more frequently: (a) benevolence and (b) universalism.
- H4: (a) Compared to Chinese ads, French ads use "satire/irony" more frequently; (b) Compared to Chinese and American ads, French ads use "pun" more frequently.
- H5: Compared to French and American ads, Chinese ads express more frequently (a) tradition and (b) conformity.
- H6: Compared to French and American ads, Chinese ads use more frequently (a) "surprise", (b) "personification," and (c) "comparison," as they are less likely to be offensive.

Method

- Identification of Humorous ads:
 - We selected similar magazines from each country.
 - We obtained 1098 Chinese ads, 965 French ads and 993 American ads.
 - We trained two coders from each country to identify the humorous ads.
 - 23.6% of American ads had humorous intent, 15.5% of French ads were considered humorous, and 15.6% of Chinese ads were deemed humorous.
- Content Analysis:
 - After training, coders had to identify the type of humour used
 - In a second stage, the coders had to identify the cultural values portrayed in the ads.



Coding Scheme

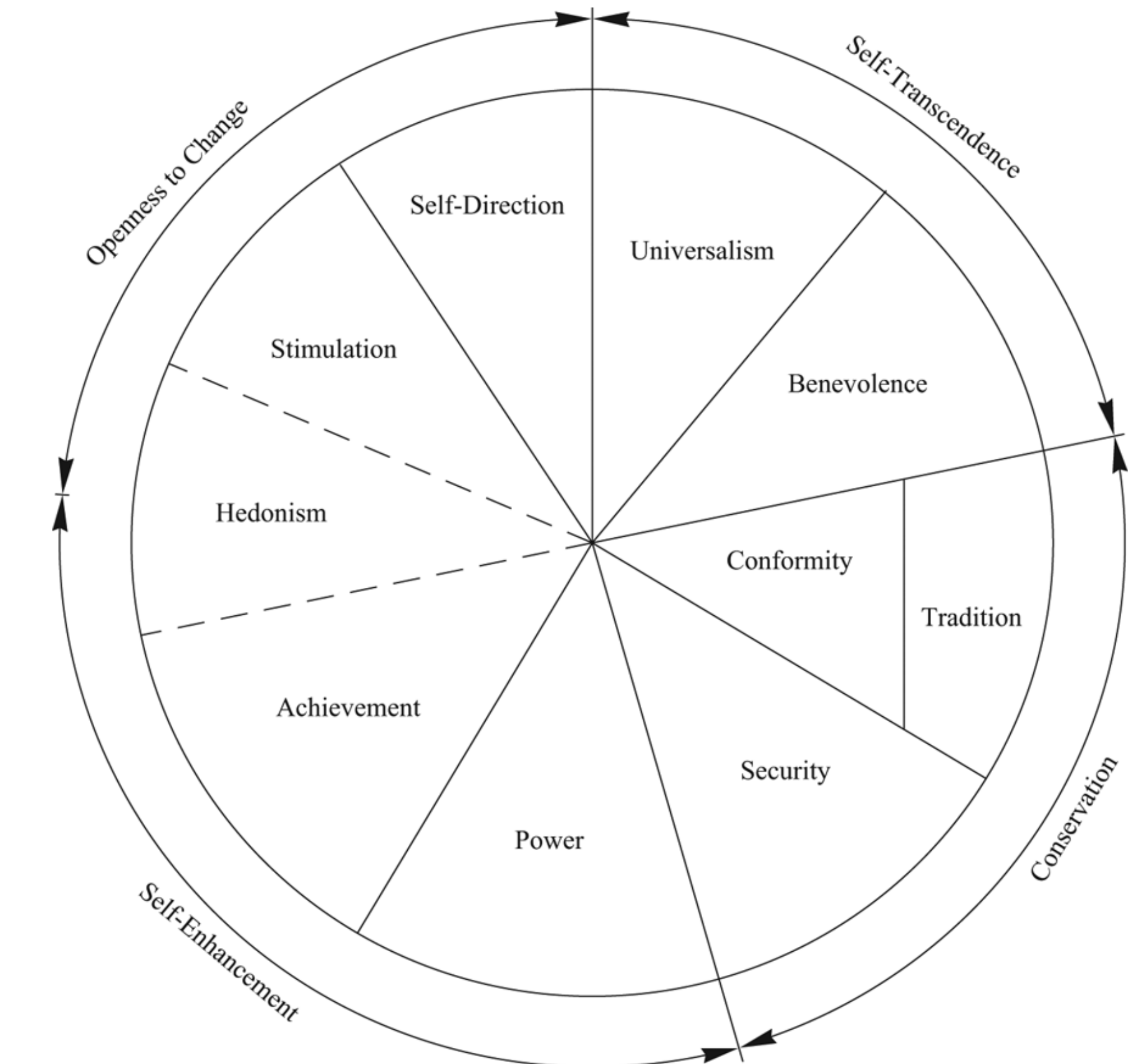
- Type of Humour:
 - Total of 8 types of humour.
 - Ludicrous/Silliness: Something that is laughable or ridiculous.
- Type of Value:
 - Total of 10 value types.
 - Stimulation: excitement, novelty and challenge in life (daring, a varied life, an exciting life).

Coders' Reliability

- For identifying the humorous ads, the PRL was .88 for US, .92 France and .97 China.
- For identifying the type of humour, the PRL was .87 for US, .89 France and .90 China.
- For identifying the cultural values, the PRL was .89 for US, .86 France and .89 China.

Results

- It is far too many results to present in detail (a total of 54 paired comparisons). Thus, I will focus only in the most important ones.
- Good support relating to the types of humour (H2, H4 and H6).**
 - We found support for H2, H4a, H6a and H6c. Also:
 - American ($\chi^2=9.84, p<.01$) and Chinese ($\chi^2=22.1, p<.01$) ads use "pun" more often than French ads. Chinese ads use it even more than American ones ($\chi^2=3.57, p=.06$).
 - Chinese ads used "personification" significantly less than American ones ($\chi^2=9.61, p<.01$) and not statistically different from French ads ($\chi^2=0.1, p=.76$).
 - The only type of humor more frequent in French ads were "understatement/exaggeration," but only when compared to China ($\chi^2=6.25, p=.01$).
- Weak support for the hypotheses related to cultural values (H1, H3 and H5).**
 - Support only for H1a and partial support for H3b. Also:
 - American ads expressed "achievement" considerably less than Chinese ($\chi^2=77.4, p<.01$) and French ($\chi^2=46.5, p<.01$) ads.
 - French ads expressed "social power" considerably more than American ($\chi^2=33.2, p<.01$) and Chinese ($\chi^2=21.4, p<.01$) ads.
 - American ($\chi^2=8.30, p<.01$) and Chinese ($\chi^2=9.39, p<.01$) ads expressed "benevolence" significantly more than French ads.
 - All three countries expressed "tradition" with similar frequencies.
 - American ads expressed "conformity" significantly more than Chinese ($\chi^2=4.27, p=.04$) and slightly more than French ($\chi^2=3.33, p=.07$) ads.



Discussion and Conclusions

- Explaining the surprising results:
 - It seems that advertisers are using humour to tap on cultural values not normally tackled in a given country.
 - Humour in advertising distracts the audience from non-humorous information (Strick et al. 2009).
 - The ads studied may be targeted to specific populations.
 - Biases inherent to the method.
 - Case of "security".
- Neutral humor is indeed preferred in China.
 - The rather high frequency of "pun" is probably due to ambiguous meanings in Chinese ideograms.

Research Limitations and Implications

- We only identified the presence/absence of a given value, but we did not look at the role of the value in the humorous content.
- We studied only one type of media and one style of ad.
- This study provides guidelines to practitioners on how to develop humorous ads.