Humour in print ads: Differences among the U.S.A., France and China
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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/Stillness: Something that is laughable or ridiculous.
  - Stimulation: excitement, novelty and challenge in life (daring, a varied life, an exciting life).
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Type of Value:
- Total of 10 value types:
  - Personal values: Hedonism, achievement, self-control, tradition, benevolence.
  - Cultural values: Social justice, liberal, egalitarianism, universalism.

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 (χ²=9.84, p<.01) and Chinese (χ²=22.1, p<.01) ads use "pun" more often than French ads. Chinese ads use it even more than American ones (χ²=3.57, p<.06).
      - Chinese ads used "personification" significantly less than American ones (χ²=9.61, p<.01) and not statistically different from French ads (χ²<0.1, p>.76).
      - The only type of humor more frequent in French ads were "understatement/exaggeration," but only when compared to China (χ²=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 (χ²=77.4, p<.01) and French (χ²=46.5, p<.01) ads.
      - French ads expressed "social power" considerably more than American (χ²=33.2, p<.01) and Chinese (χ²=21.4, p<.01) ads.
      - American (χ²=8.30, p<.01) and Chinese (χ²=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 (χ²=4.27, p=.04) and slightly more than French (χ²=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 context.
• We studied only one type of media and one style of ad.
• This study provides guidelines to practitioners on how to develop humorous ads.