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The perceptions of pan-European advertising communication: a cross-cultural study between UK and Spain

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ABSTRACT

One of the characteristics of globalisation is the increased level of standardisation in international marketing communications, and advertising in particular. As it has been a decade since the formation of European Union, it is imperative to re-assess how advertisements are perceived and consequently embraced in different nations, when audiences apparently have different cultural backgrounds.

This cross cultural study compares UK and Spanish perceptions of 16 carefully selected advertisements, where their consequent perceptions and levels of recall were tested. A stratified sampling process was used to generate 150 UK and 150 Spanish audiences in a survey. The valid samples for analysis comprised of 298 cases.

The results indicate that there is no significant difference in the levels of recall of the selected advertisements between the UK and Spanish audiences. Furthermore, evidence suggests that there is no significant difference in the way that the sample audience relate the advertisements to their own cultures. Nevertheless, the results revealed that there are significant differences in abilities of advertisement recall amongst different age groups, which suggest that some age groups are more prone to advertisement sensitivity than others.

These results are encouraging for both academics and practitioners as the standardisation of pan-European advertising campaigns can be recognised as a viable option, and the economy of scales of advertising can be exploited.

INTRODUCTION

The effect that national culture has on the international marketing communications environment is an area that still proves to be at the heart of much academic debate. Academicians such as Levitt (1983) argue that international marketing communications are justified in today's world, due to factors such as cheaper airfares, greater affluence and converging similarities, which all contribute to making the world a smaller place. The suggestion of the 'Eurobrand' has become more evident since the formation of the European Union (Wolfe, 1991; Farrall and Whitelock, 1999). While practitioners, such as Max Factor, have increased their confidence in international advertising campaigns, the principle argument remains; although we may be able to adjust to a foreign culture, can ever really empathise with it completely? Ten years on, marketers still see it as an opportunity as well as challenge. Is there any increased evidence indicating pan-European consumers and culture? Some have debated the difficulties in the development of the advertisements (Howard and Ryans, 1989; Whitelock, *et al*., 1995). This is the exact dilemma faced by many international advertisers around the world, in their endless quest to decide whether or not to standardise; and it is this very same dilemma, that we will seek to investigate in this paper.

The primary aim of this paper is to outline the role of national culture in the international marketing communications arena. In particular, the objective is to ascertain whether or not a *pan-European advertisement* can be well received in different countries in a cross-cultural context. In order to gain an informed appreciation of the degree of ethnocentricity portrayed in the advertisements, this study aims to examine whether there are any significant differences between Spanish and British audiences in relating the

selected advertisements to their own particular national cultures. It has been suggested that particular groups of consumers have common characteristics and interests that transcend national boundaries and that therefore, it is feasible to target them with international or global advertising campaigns (White, 2000). For example, teenagers around the world tend to listen to the same music, wear the same fashionable clothes, and eat the same fast food.

These findings, while based on tested hypothesises, will form the basis for a conclusion regarding the standardisation versus adaptation issue for international advertising campaigns.

GLOBAL CONSUMER/PAN-EUROPEAN CONSUMER SEGMENT

The essence of any culture can be seen in a number of important factors that interact to determine cultural patterns. They include language, religion, cultural institutions, class structure, aesthetics, and social patterns.

Cundiff and Tharp (1984).

The significance of language is of paramount importance in marketing communications as our perceptions of the world tend to depend on how language influences the way we think. Although translated campaigns may seem to be appropriate in many circumstances, they are not without their drawbacks, for example, problems may be encountered regarding the nuances of meaning for particular words that tend to vary from language to language. The advertiser will find that the majority of times a literal translation may change the message in its entirety. Many global advertisers have sought to maintain a completely standardised campaign in order to combat this problem;

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however, this too poses considerable ramifications, as complete levels of understanding are compromised. Having said that, Stella Artois and Budweiser are just two examples of advertisers that have successfully communicated in their native languages, without the requirement of a translated voice over.

The values imposed by the cultural institutions of any given country will directly influence the type of communications that will be appropriate and well received. For example, communicating to a culture where extended families are the norm is quite different to doing so where single-family households dominate in the society. It is likely, therefore, that the end user or target audience will be different for each national culture, and hence will require the different communication approaches.

Consumers Characteristics

The literacy levels, which are derived from the culture's educational system, are especially relevant as they will determine the campaign suitability for any given culture. An advertiser cannot expect to use a highly literate advertising campaign in a developing culture where literacy levels are low, instead, the campaign should be adapted into a more graphical and pictorial one. Furthermore, research has suggested that well educated individuals tend to demand more sophisticated information about products and tend to use increased sources of information when making purchase decisions (Cundiff and Tharp, 1984).

Peer groups have been identified as being of significant importance in the world of advertising as they have the strongest influence on consumption patterns in sophisticated and urban societies, and this is especially so for products that are visible when consumed (Cundiff and Tharp, 1984). Thus, the communication should be adapted for a culture where peer groups are dominant, as different groups of consumers will have to be targeted as opposed to individuals in a mass market. Hence the product/service must be accepted by the target audience group i.e. *gym goers* and it would have to illustrate their appropriate lifestyle. The following are the three most significant attributes of peer groups:

Some cultures welcome leisure time as a form of relaxation, however other cultures, such as the Japanese until the mid 1980's (Cundiff & Tharp, 1984), frown upon it and it is perceived to be *a waste of time*. Thus, communications will require adaptation for such cultures, with special reference to the depiction of the product use in the advertising, which should be manipulated to coincide with the perception of leisure time as an integral part of national culture. For example, children's toys for the Japanese market would more appropriately be advertised as being *educational* instead of *recreational* as one would expect it to be in the UK.

Typically, members of each different class will possess different requirements, which sustain Ernest Dichter's (1962) finding which identifies how the upper classes in almost all cultures seem to be more homogeneous than other classes of their own society, and vice versa for the lower classes.

Recall of the Adverting

The recall of advertising has long been used as a measure of the effectiveness of advertising campaigns, for instance the regular monitor report on ADWATCH *Marketing*. In contrast, Wood, *et al.* (1999) used factor analysis to examine the US and Japanese global or Pan-European product perceptions among Finnish consumers and what were the factors influencing their preferences. It is reported that the perceptions of attributes corresponding to the product competitiveness of Japan were, on average, more favourably perceived by respondents than were the competitiveness attributes corresponding to US products. More importantly, examining the results of Finnish consumer perceptions of communication practices, US competitors were perceived more positively in this dimension in all years compared with Japan. The question raised is that why the US adverting were attached to significant higher value judged by the sample but failed the persuade consumers when comes to the purchase decision? Therefore, the authors believe that the recall of the advertisements is more likely to be an influential factor in purchase than the likeability of the advertisements.

To standardise, or to adapt?

The debate over the standardisation versus adaptation issue has involved both advertisers and advertising researchers since the 1950's to the present day (Agrawal, 1995). The proponents of the standardisation school of thought contend that the differences between countries are more a matter of degree than direction and therefore advertisers must instead focus on the similarities of consumers around the world (Fatt, 1967; Levitt, 1983).

The literature concerning standardisation of international advertising called for a clarification of 'standardisation' (Backhaus, *et al.*, 2001) in relation to which elements of advertisements must be identical so that an international advertising campaign is perceived as standardised and found that visual aspects exert the most significant influence on the perceived similarity of advertising. Nevertheless, as the marketing concept holds that consumer needs vary and that marketing programs will be more effective when they are tailored to each target group (Varadarajan, 1993), one would be forgiven to believe that adaptation holds the key to successful marketing communications.

This view, however, is not maintained by Levitt (1983), who purported that the world was becoming a "global marketplace, in which people, no matter where they lived, desired the same products and lifestyles". This, he asserted, was a *converging commonality*, in which technology played a highly significant role in facilitating communication and awareness. He claimed that *almost everyone everywhere wants all the things they have heard about, seen, or experienced via the new technologies*.

In particular, many researchers argued that modern communications, homogenisation of consumer needs and purchasing and rising income levels promote a common culture world-wide (Levitt, 1983, Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, Duncan and Ramaprasad, 1995). Nevertheless, De Mooij (2000) insists that this is not the case, and that consumer's values are strongly rooted in history and tradition, and that with convergence of incomes people have more freedom to express themselves, which is done precisely through their own specific value patterns and consequent national culture. This view can be clearly seen by

Coca Cola's operations, and their motto *think global act local.* Coca Cola have embraced the issue of language as part of their communications campaign and adapted the name of its *'Diet'* version which is known as *'light'* in many European countries. Additionally, the company sought to adapt the degree of effervescence in the drinks, catering for differing cultural tastes. Furthermore, although the Coke campaign *"Just for the Taste of It"* was used in many different countries, the execution of the strategy was tailored to cultural differences. Not only have they adapted advertising campaigns for different countries, but they have also successfully managed to adapt campaigns to satisfy differing cultures within the same country.

Having said that, complete standardisation is possible, and it is demonstrated by the recent Budweiser and Stella Artois campaigns. However, although these campaigns have been significantly successful, it would be misguided to suggest that the same would be necessarily true for all advertisements and brands.

Levitt (1983) argues that as the desire for increased modernity prevails throughout the world, national culture is forgotten, and materialism takes over. Additionally, his view is that one should appreciate the many common needs that manifest themselves into common needs and wants, and subsequently, common purchasing patterns, particularly where there are similar levels of economic wealth. Nevertheless, the *best* is always demanded in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, however, to suggest that national culture would play no influential role in the communications is incorrect, as standardised campaigns depicting scenes of a provocative nature would surely fail.

The particular views that a culture share regarding foreigners will directly affect communications, and this is a point of view that Levitt (1983) fails to acknowledge in his argument. The majority of individuals will view that which is foreign as different and potentially threatening to existing patterns of action or behaviour (Cundiff and Tharp, 1984). Highly ethnocentric consumers, however, have been reported to possess more favourable attitudes toward products from culturally similar countries.

Hofstede (1991) claims that when people argue about convergence of cultures, the evidence cited is usually taken from people's behaviour and practices with regard to the products they wear and the food they eat. However, these rather superficial manifestations of culture are sometimes mistaken for all there is.

Thinking Global and Acting Local: *Glocal* advertising

Complete campaign standardisation is clearly the most economical venture, however, the advertiser must think to the long term, and query whether such campaigns would generate sufficient awareness to be profitable if the underlying message is confused and consumer empathy is subsequently lost. Furthermore, the advertiser must consider the negative corporate or brand image that may be reflected as a consequence, for example, by attempting to overcome the language barrier through the execution of a poorly dubbed and synchronised voice-over.

The advertiser may find the answer lies in *thinking global and acting local*, hence achieving awareness by appreciating local cultural mores, yet by maintaining lower costs.

Successful complete standardisation will be dependent on many factors, which will vary for each respective culture that the advertiser aims to service. The similarity of the motivations for purchase and use conditions within the different cultures will play a great role. Moreover, success will have much to do with the actual type or category of product being advertised. Advertising literature reports that with *culture free* products, such as industrial goods and some consumer durables, the purchase motivations are similar enough to permit high degrees of standardisation. On the other hand, traditionally *culture bound* products, such as food or clothes, typically require much adaptation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative research in Spain and in the UK. The cross-cultural analysis aims to place us in a more favourable position so as to examine to what extent national culture plays on the international marketing communications environment, with special emphasis placed on the international advertising spectrum. The results of the research therefore aid in the formation of learned conclusions and recommendations for practitioners.

Focus groups discussions were conducted in each country to generate opinions about the selected advertisements and refine the research hypothesises. This served to test the degree of feasibility of adaptation or standardisation, and in particular, which aspects of national culture, were the most significant and prone to variation. The discussions also facilitated the observation of any correlation between certain types of product and their advertising.

16 advertisements were selected for the cross-cultural survey (X1… X16) (see Appendix A). The advertisements were carefully selected and consisted of comparable English and Spanish versions. The recall rate of the selected advertisements were tested across the two countries, with the logic being that the higher the recall rate, the greater the understanding. The degrees of understanding were also assumed to be significantly related to the extent of ethnocentricity portrayed in the advertisement.

Hypothesises

Following the research objectives, the hypothesises are formulated as follows:

H1:   *There is no significant difference in perceptions of advertisements.*

H2:   *Different peer groups of consumers perceived and recalled advertisements*
         differently.

H3:   *There are increasing opportunities for standardisation of advertising for products*
         being sold across Europe.

Survey Design

A systematic investigation of attitudes and motivations regarding various advertising were conducted through a cross-cultural international advertising survey in Spain and the UK. 16 Spanish and British advertisements for the same product were demonstrated to both groups of respondents, thus ascertaining whether or not a unified message was

conveyed. The advertisements which were featured on the *advertising sheet*, attached to the survey, were gathered primarily from Spanish and UK current magazines.

The identification of the advertisement recall rate facilitated a general understanding of the degree to which the advertisement was understood. Logically, the greater the impact or understanding the advertisement has upon the audience, the greater the recall would be.

Furthermore, campaign success could be tested by investigating the extents to which the audience were able to relate the advertisements to their own national culture. For example, if a particular advertisement showed great levels of empathy from both cultural groups, in being able to relate to the advertisement, that campaign stands a very good chance of standardisation, and vice versa.

Consumer characteristics such as age and gender were investigated in order to ascertain whether or not these played a significant role in their degrees of recall and consequent empathy. Empirical evidence (White, 2000) suggests that certain age groups have homogeneous characteristics and are thus easily targeted via standardised campaigns.

Sample Selection

The survey sample comprised of 150 respondents in London (UK) and 150 respondents in San Sebastián (Spain). The questionnaires were distributed in public places, primarily streets (houses), universities and libraries, and collected once completed.

Although convenience sampling was drawn from these two cities, there are underlining similarities held by each from a commercial perspective and they both show affluence, *trendiness*, and fashion consciousness.

The questions for the survey were constructed and tested after successful completion of the focus groups, and therefore they largely depended on the various issues that were raised there.

The selection of advertisements were scanned onto the surveys, allowing the respondent to view the advertisement and write their comments in the space provided, which acted as an indicator for how much was expected to be written.

Questionnaire Design

16 (X1… X16) advertisements were incorporated in the questionnaire design. The self-completion surveys contained simple, direct and familiar language and thus did not require the presence of the interviewer at all times. Care was taken to ensure that the words used in the survey were able to be understood by all respondents, regardless of education level and national culture. Special care was taken to ensure that words with different meanings for the different cultures were avoided. The translated survey was approved by a native Spanish speaker and adequate changes were made, furthermore, the pilot study in each country confirmed the survey's effectiveness.

Developing and Pre-testing Structured Survey

The pilot survey, which was conducted amongst a representative sample of respondents both in Spain and the UK (n=25 in each country), allowed respondents to express their views on the questions and identify deficiencies in the scope of the questions.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed by using SPSS 10.0 window version. The valid sample for analysis comprised of 298 cases. 16 advertisements were tested and labelled as X1… X16. The levels of recall varied amongst the advertisements shown to the respondents. Those advertisements with the highest recall rates were X2, X1, X6 and X8 with a mean greater than 2 (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

T-test analysis was used in an attempt to analyse whether there was a difference between the UK and the Spanish audiences' level of selected advertisement recall. The significance level is set at 1%. The results suggest that there was significant differences between the UK and Spanish audiences in recalling X1 (P=0.03), X7 (P=0.001), X9 (P=0.001), X10(P=0.002), X14 (P=0.001) and X16 (P=0.000). The results indicate that only 6 out of the total 16 advertisements have different levels of recall but 10 out of 16 do not (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

T-test analysis is used to compare if there is any difference in recall the advertisements between men and women but no difference has been found. One-way ANOVA is used for the analysis of the levels of advertisement recall among different age groups. The results indicate that there are significant differences in recalling advertisements amongst different age groups (see Table 3). Only X7 (P=0.448), X15 (P=0.024) and X16 (P=0.029) have a significance value greater than 0.01. The remaining 13 advertisements tested in the survey indicated that different age groups have different levels of advertisement recall.

Insert Table 3 here

The extent to which audiences relate the advertisements to their own cultures was examined. Generally, the cross-cultural audience attached a greater degree of cultural indication to X12, X13, X10, X14 and X10, compared to the rest of the advertisements tested in the survey (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 here

T-test was used for testing whether there were any differences in the audiences'
perceptions of the 16 advertisements, while relating to their national culture. The results
suggest that there is no significant difference with respect to the extent to which the UK
and Spanish audience relate the advertisements (X1 … X16) to their own cultures (see
Table 5). The results suggest that the perceptions differ between these two groups only in
one advertisement, namely X16 (P=0.001).

Insert Table 5 here

An analysis of the extent to which the audience relate the advertisements to their own
cultures between men and women and the different age groups was conducted. The t-test
analysis result suggests that there is no difference between men and women in relating
the advertisements to their own culture. However, the ANOVA results indicate that,
apart from X5 (P=0.044) and X12 (P=0.098), the cross-cultural audience related the
advertisements differently to their own cultures amongst different age groups (see Table
6).

Insert Table 6 here

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The statistical analysis indicates that there is no significant difference between the UK and Spanish audiences with respect to the level of advertisement recall tested in the survey. Neither is there any significant difference in the way that they attach their own cultural perception to those advertisements.

The increased globalisation that is seen today undoubtedly leads to standardisation, and there is evidence in this paper to suggest that Pan-European or standardisation of advertising could be a viable option. Nevertheless, different age groups present different levels of advertisement recall and degrees of cultural attachments to the advertisements. This finding is particularly significant as it suggests to advertisers that the nationality and the consequent national cultures of their audiences represent a less effective segmentation base when compared to their audiences' social grouping, such as age.

The results of the statistical analysis support H1. The reference to *peer groups* in H2 is identified as age groups therefore H2 is also accepted. Nevertheless, H3 is true in the context of marketing communication and advertising however, the recognition of 'brands' may need to be tested, particularly the audiences' perceptions of an Eurobrand so that the hypothesis can be conclusive.

In this study, the UK is considered representative of northern European culture and Spain southern. As the results indicated that there is no significant difference in terms of cultural perceptions of the advertisements between the UK and Spanish audiences, it suggests that the consumers are increasingly homogeneous across Europe and it is plausible for marketers to draw Pan-European consumer segments. On the other hand,

the evidence suggests that the advocator of the localisation of advertising communications is presented with a challenge. The results of this study suggest that in situations comparable to UK and Spanish audiences, the standardised advertisements were perceived in the same light and the national boarders are therefore less of an effective differentiation factor, but the consumers' characteristics, such as age, are. This finding is important for international marketing with regard to the targeting and segmentation of the market. It suggests that the national boundary is no longer an effective or significant factor while identifying target groups. Of greater importance is to understand consumers' characteristics with respect to their personal profiles and lifestyles.

The standardisation versus the adaptation of marketing communications has long been the subject of much debate amongst international marketers. The results of this study reveal that there is considerable support for the standardisation of the international advertising campaign strategy, which has consequently shifted the focus from national boundaries to other segmentation bases such as consumer characteristics when international advertising is concerned.

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Table 1: The Levels of Recall of Selected AD

		N=298
Advertisements	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
X2	2.74	1.53
X1	2.15	1.54
X6	2.06	1.61
X8	2.00	1.53
X14	1.99	1.43
X4	1.96	1.56
X11	1.91	1.50
X7	1.90	1.53
X13	1.82	1.39
X3	1.81	1.37
X16	1.71	1.39
X5	1.70	1.44
X12	1.62	1.31
X9	1.61	1.40
X10	1.22	1.17
X15	1.09	.97

Table 2:   The Levels of Recall: UK vs. Spain

Independent Samples T-Test

AD Recall	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std.Error Difference
X1	-.52	-2.969	297	.003	.18
X2	0.052	.292	297	.770	.18
X3	0.032	.203	297	.840	.16
X4	-.22	-1.225	297	.222	.18
X5	-.35	-2.114	297	.035	.17
X6	.47	2.532	297	.012	.19
X7	-.61	-3.506	297	.001	.17
X8	.31	1.739	297	.083	.18
X9	.52	3.266	297	.001	.16
X10	.42	3.180	297	.002	.13
X11	-.36	-2.098	297	.037	.17
X12	0.058	.381	297	.704	.15
X13	.29	1.786	297	.075	.16
X14	.55	3.366	297	.001	.16
X15	-.15	-1.310	297	.191	.11
X16	.61	3.904	297	.000	.16

P<0.01

Table 3: Advertisement Recall in relation to Age Groups

One-way ANOVA

	Total Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square between groups	F	Sig.
X1	702.923	6	14.032	6.622	.000
X2	695.652	6	11.977	5.606	.000
X3	560.134	6	13.205	8.018	.000
X4	726.595	6	21.617	10.575	.000
X5	616.910	6	4.393	2.172	.046
X6	776.916	6	8.713	3.511	.002
X7	698.187	6	2.266	.967	.448
X8	702.000	6	19.319	9.625	.000
X9	580.997	6	13.823	8.104	.000
X10	405.987	6	4.153	3.183	.005
X11	669.739	6	9.564	4.560	.000
X12	508.769	6	3.694	2.217	.042
X13	576.883	6	13.534	7.973	.000
X14	611.946	6	7.835	4.050	.001
X15	279.739	6	2.251	2.469	.024
X16	576.100	6	4.497	2.391	.029

Table 4: The Degrees of the Advertisements Reflecting the Cultures

N=298

Advertisements	Mean	Std. Deviation
X12	2.88	1.58
X13	2.58	1.57
X10	2.50	1.59
X14	2.56	1.50
X11	2.47	1.46
X8	2.45	1.54
X7	2.44	1.54
X9	2.39	1.56
X3	2.36	1.51
X4	2.33	1.51
X16	2.32	1.50
X5	2.30	1.48
X2	2.23	1.38
X1	2.20	1.52
X6	2.18	1.51
X15	2.16	1.44

Table 5:   The Degree of Reflection of the Cultures: UK vs. Spain

Independent Samples T-Test   N=298

AD	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Difference
X1	9.67E-02	.548	296	.584	.18
X2	8.37E-02	.522	296	.602	.16
X3	-7.57E-02	-.431	296	.667	.18
X4	-2.34E-03	-.013	296	.989	.18
X5	.15	.884	296	.377	.17
X6	.16	.899	296	.369	.17
X7	-.41	-2.310	296	.022	.18
X8	.25	1.391	296	.165	.18
X9	.12	.661	296	.509	.18
X10	.38	2.049	296	.041	.18
X11	8.02E-02	.472	296	.637	.17
X12	.39	2.166	296	.031	.18
X13	8.84E-02	.484	296	.628	.18
X14	-9.32E-02	-.534	296	.594	.17
X15	.43	2.565	296	.011	.17
X16	.55	3.232	296	.001	.17

Table 6: Adverts Reflecting the Cultures amongst Different Age Groups

One-way ANOVA

	Total Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square between Groups	F	Sig.
X1	685.919	6	13.240	6.353	.000
X2	567.557	6	6.922	3.830	.001
X3	680.859	6	21.647	11.433	.000
X4	675.426	6	22.786	12.308	.000
X5	650.013	6	4.682	2.191	.044
X6	672.849	6	8.022	3.737	.001
X7	707.530	6	8.726	3.876	.001
X8	703.745	6	15.719	7.506	.000
X9	721.064	6	17.462	8.245	.000
X10	752.500	6	16.750	7.476	.000
X11	636.285	6	6.826	3.337	.003
X12	742.406	6	4.438	1.804	.098
X13	734.403	6	15.139	6.846	.000
X14	671.413	6	6.809	3.142	.005
X15	618.943	6	15.388	8.503	.000
X16	672.349	6	7.326	3.393	.003

APPENDIX A

Advertisements	Variable
Benetton	X1
Christian Dior	X2
Dolce & Gabanna	X3
Gucci	X4
Christian Dior	X5
Clinique	X6
L'Oreal	X7
Absolut Vodka	X8
Diesel Jeans	X9
Dolce & Gabanna	X10
Omega	X11
Rover75	X12
Smimoff Vodka	X13
Peugeot 206cc	X14
Ray Ban	X15
Toyota Avensis	X16