

Understanding and Connecting Cultures within the World of Advertising

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Abstract

The advertising industry is a human enterprise at its core, constantly relying on and affecting human thoughts and behaviors. Advertisements for products and services reflect cultural messages and the values that shape our daily lives. This two-part article first offers a literature review of the effect of antismoking ads on teenagers' behavior and attitudes towards smoking across Western, English-speaking societies within a cultural psychology framework. Then, it applies the themes from this literature review in presenting the results of a qualitative study exploring how employees at gyro, a business-to-business advertising agency, incorporate cultural thinking into their advertising process. Conclusions drawn in my review indicate that visceral negative and personal testimonies appealing to the emotions of a teenage audience positively affect youth and discourage them from smoking across cultures. Moreover, the digital age is transforming youth culture because adolescents are increasingly interacting by sharing posts and photos online via social media. Consequently, stronger reliance on online communication can extensively impact communities by closing some of the major cultural gaps. The review indicates that youth antismoking advertising evolves as a subculture in much the same way that larger cultures do. The qualitative study complements this underlying cultural evolution by demonstrating that advertisers actually do use methods of advancing culture in their work. In fact, the study reveals that culture is central to the creative advertising process. For instance, advertisers adjust the content of a message depending on whether a client is asking for a global, national, or regional campaign, in order to appeal to the right audience and deliver interesting and emotional experiences. Advertisers use tools, drawing from cultural psychology, to make their messages maximally effective and attractive. It is important to understand culture in order to create connections between societies around the globe within the world of advertising.

Introduction

Culture is the blend of ideas, institutions, and interactions that encompasses how a group thinks, feels, and acts. It helps create a network of thoughts, behavior, and feelings around an idea, and this network of information activates when we encounter something that reminds us of this idea. Thus, culture comes to dynamically shape the way we think (Markus & Conner, 2014). Advertising is also linked to our thoughts and behavior. Marketers define advertising as “messages that impart information about products which consumers use to make brand choices,” (Frith, 1997, p.3), yet advertising does more than just convey product information. In fact, it tells us what products signify and mean by associating aspects of the product to aspects of culture. This marketing communication appears to us in forms such as posters, videos, and social media posts, as technology moves us deeper into the digital age.

Advertisements are not just messages about goods and services but social and cultural texts about us. Embedded within these messages are the cultural roles and values that define our everyday lives. Ads reflect society and by undressing them, we can begin to see the role advertising plays in the creation of culture, since the products we consume are generally cultural signifiers that express who we are (Frith, 1997). The “background” of ads creates the context without which there can be no meaning associated with the ad for consumers to understand (Frith, 1997). In the end, advertising only makes sense when it resonates with certain deeply held belief systems.

Antismoking Advertising

Antismoking ads are a type of advertising that seek to demonstrate the detrimental effects of smoking on a person's health and change people's behavior and attitudes towards it. Smoking is a leading cause of death around the world, and despite declines in adolescent smoking in developed countries such as the US and Australia, smoking among young adults continues to be relatively high, with a 16.7% participation rate in the US and 23.2% in Australia (Dunlop, Freeman, & Jones, 2016). Attempts have been made to limit the exposure of younger generations to cigarette consumption to save them from health issues because 80% of smokers initiate their cigarette use before the age of 18 and continue to become regular, addicted smokers (Kim, 2006). Teenagers are being educated in school about the health concerns regarding tobacco usage; nonetheless, “knowledge of the consequences has not deterred many youths who feel they are personally invulnerable to [its] risks” (Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1994, p. 236).

Given the evidence demonstrating the impact of tobacco promotion on tobacco use, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) requires an inclusive ban on tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship. However, the continually evolving landscape of social media offers a prime opportunity for tobacco companies to promote products to adolescents when advertising in traditional media is prohibited (Dunlop et al., 2016). While most social network sites, such as Facebook and YouTube, have policies restricting the direct advertising of tobacco products, the definition of advertising is only applied to paid forms of promotion like ads embedded in videos or ads that appear for keyword searches (Dunlop et al., 2016). Data from the 2011 National Youth Tobacco Survey showed that around 50% of US middle and high-school students had received tobacco ads or promotions via Facebook or MySpace in the past 30 days (Dunlop et al., 2016). Moreover, Liang and colleagues' study of the top 70 popular cigarette brands found that 43 of the brands had created 238 Facebook fan pages with almost 1.2 million page likes and circa 19,000 posts (Liang et al., 2015). Antismoking advertising in the US has been a prominent component of tobacco control initiatives, and it has been associated with declines in smoking prevalence among youth and adults in states where such advertising has been used. Similarly, in Australia, it has been an important effort since the early 1980s and it has generated public awareness and positive responses among youth and adults (Wakefield et al., 2003). Britain has also employed tobacco control programs but has only achieved limited success, as evidence shows British American Tobacco (BAT) employees have promoted BAT and BAT brands on Facebook by joining and administrating groups and posting photographs of BAT events, products, and promotional items (Dunlop et al., 2016).

Over the years, research has been conducted to observe teenagers' reactions to advertising campaigns that either enhance or detract from the smoking image. This literature review provides an analysis of a number of these studies focusing on how teenagers are affected by antismoking ads, and whether or not this differs across cultures. Specifically, this section will explore the following question: What are the effects of antismoking ads on teenagers' behavior and attitudes towards smoking across Western, English-speaking cultures?

Ideas are made more communicable by creating emotional connections and embracing the resources of our digital age (Dunlop et al., 2016). These elements of cultural evolution tend to characterize antismoking ads and affect culture through advertising. Not all antismoking ads are equal in terms of efficiency in changing smoking related beliefs and behaviors. Our emotions are grounded in the belief systems that shape our interpretations, and they are influenced a great deal by culture. Wakefield and colleagues (2003) found that ads with visceral negative or personal testimonial executional characteristics were assessed more positively by youth across the US, Australia, and Britain. Specifically, they compared the similarity in how youth in these nations evaluate antismoking ads with different characteristics and found that adolescents from the three cultures responded in very similar ways to the same ads. Out of the ten adverts that received the highest impact scores, four were aimed at a youth audience and contained themes that included health effects, secondhand smoke, and industry manipulation. These four all featured personal testimonial or visceral negative characteristics and were rated as 'very good' antismoking adverts by over 90% of the participants (Wakefield et al., 2003). Executional features associated with emotional reactions carried the strongest and most consistent effect on advert appraisal and engagement, and since the three Western, English-speaking cultures had similar reactions, such advertisements and emotions might be more actively shared among the nations. Even though British participants remembered significantly fewer ads (27% vs 43% in the US and Australia), the ones they did recall were the same ones as youth in Australia and the US. While these three cultures differed in some ways, the visceral negative and personal testimonies were a major force in how adolescents responded to the ads.

Ideas in advertising are often made more emotional in order to be communicated, and antismoking ads are designed to appeal to adolescents to be more persuasive (Kim, 2006). Edwards, Oakes, and Bull (2007) conducted a study regarding portrayal of tobacco in movies in Australia. Results demonstrated that placing an antismoking ad before movies containing smoke scenes can help immunize non-smokers against the influences of movie star smoking (Edwards et al., 2007). This supports the findings of Pechmann and Shih (1999), who conducted a similar study in California: subjects that saw an antismoking ad tended to have negative thoughts about smoking. While movie scenes featuring celebrities smoking produced elevated levels of positive arousal, advert appearance moderated the emotions associated with wanting to follow in the footsteps of the celebrity (Pechmann & Shih, 1999). Anger, fear, and disgust are part of the set of basic emotions that are universally recognized (Heine, 2012) and these are the emotions marketers want to emphasize when getting people to avoid cigarettes. Therefore, making emotional connections via ads seems like a universal opportunity to affect youth in relation to antismoking.

Youth take up the smoking habit because they think smokers look cool and adventurous

and because they want to enhance their own image and self-esteem. Cigarette advertising effectively enhances positive smoker stereotypes causing subjects to think favorably of peers who smoke (Pechmann & Knight, 2002). However, showing an antismoking ad in conjunction with cigarette advertising can make salient negative smoker stereotypes (Pechmann & Knight, 2002). Pechmann and Ratneshwar (1994) exposed nonsmoking teens in Southern California to cigarette, antismoking, or control ads embedded in a magazine and subsequently presented information to the subjects about a peer who was either a smoker or not. They concluded that young adolescents who are exposed to antismoking ads produce more negative smoker inferences and recall more negative items about him or her (Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1994). A decade later, the study by Pechmann and Knight (2002) produced very similar results.

Similarly, adolescents are often concerned about finding ways to fit in with a certain group or trying to match a certain image (Kobus, 2003). While cigarette advertising can promote this activity, antismoking ads can positively affect youth within the American culture when they capitalize on the motivation to fit in. The fewer teenagers who smoke, the less popular it will be for others to begin; hence, the cultural trend will be to not smoke. Celebrities can also have an impact in shaping teenagers' behavior through the products they endorse in advertising, videos, and movies. Content analysis of US Top 40 YouTube music videos showed that tobacco imagery appeared in 22% of the videos. Of the 32 most popular YouTube music videos containing alcohol or tobacco content, 81% of British adolescents had seen at least one and the average number of videos seen was 7.1 (Dunlop et al., 2016). However, antismoking advertising before movies in which characters smoke has a distinct effect on attitudes regarding smoking in the US and Australia, and so placing an antismoking ad before the movie's start can help dissuade smoking admiration and cigarette consumption in these Western cultures (Edwards et al., 2007). Antismoking advertising can prime or remind adolescents of their preexisting negative stereotypes. In fact, one antismoking ad can offset the effect of three cigarette ads (Pechmann & Knight, 2002).

As we transition into a digital age, the Internet has provided marketers with new channels and tools to disseminate messages as well as a potential to reach young people more quickly and directly. The rise of social media has taken place concurrently with changes in the way people access the Internet. The use of mobile devices, which allow access from anywhere at any time, means that people are exposed to marketing messages on social media near or at the point of purchase (Dunlop et al., 2016). Data from Pew Research Centre shows that 92% of 13-17-year-olds in the US report going online daily (Dunlop et al., 2016). Facebook is the most common social networking site, and while most usage data comes from the US, Australia had 12M users in 2014, and in the UK more than 40% of 6-14-year-old and 90% of 15-24-year-old Internet users were accessing Facebook in 2011 (Dunlop et al., 2016). Facebook, integrated into the lives of many young adults, represents a promising strategy to deliver smoking cessation interventions through the use of accessible technologies that enable user-driven participation and interaction.

Campaigns have used social media integrated with smart-phone apps to encourage smoking cessation among young adult smokers. For example, visitors to the Canadian "Break It Off" website could upload a video of their "break up with smoking" experience as well as announce their break-up status to friends via Facebook. In the first four months of

the campaign, total visits to the website equaled 44,172, and there were 3,937 installations of the app and 339 interactions via social media components (Dunlop et al., 2016). Another example, “Crush the Crave”, was promoted through Google and Facebook ads from April 2012-April 2013, and the campaign Facebook page had 34,690 likes and a total reach of 7,892 people (Dunlop et al., 2016). The large-scale engagement and involvement with these online campaigns demonstrates that digital communication can have extensive impact on communities.

With social media being used on a global level there is a strong likelihood for transmitted culture to occur through a virtual nature. Transmitted culture is when people come to learn about particular cultural practices through social learning or by modeling others who live near them (Heine, 2012). By engaging online and sharing posts, photos, and videos via social media, people may be far apart but they are interacting and learning very much about each other and different cultural practices. This means that cultural gaps are becoming smaller, so in the design of effective antismoking ads, attention needs to be paid to characteristics that appear to optimally engage youth to encourage them to share the ads and its messages across different social and consequently cultural environments. Unsurprisingly, advertising, especially through the Internet, is evolving youth culture and setting new universal cultural norms.

Implications

Smoking depictions in mass media can shape behavior by influencing social norms and through behavioral modeling. For years, tobacco practitioners have recognized a need to counter the prevalence of pro-smoking messages with social marketing campaigns discouraging the uptake of smoking among youth and encouraging smokers to quit. Considering the research that has been performed and the results that have been observed, one takeaway is that by establishing characteristics of advertisements that are effective in a variety of contexts, the development of new ads can be undertaken in ways that are likely to best achieve tobacco control objectives. Research has highlighted the role of personal testimonies in delivering persuasive antismoking messages, and the efficacy of negative visceral images is supported by a mass communications theory emphasizing the importance of emotional engagement in communicating messages to audiences who may not be particularly interested in the subject matter (Wakefield et al., 2003).

Given that emotional engagement is key, messages need to align to sentiments that are culturally fit and emotionally effective in different areas. Specifically in Wakefield's (2003) study, there was no effect of target audience; in other words, the four ads that received the highest impact score were all targeted at a general audience and included vivid portrayals of negative health consequences of smoking. One implication of this is that if youth in different countries respond similarly to ads, a strong case can be made for the sharing of such ads with aligned positive effects across nations resulting in financial savings. In fact, findings could encourage the open exchange of antismoking advertisements between countries, extending the budgets of tobacco control programs. This could pave the way for the more global use of mass media tobacco control campaigns encompassing and accounting for cultural differences.

This literature review indicates that elements of cultural evolution impact advertising in youth antismoking and it is clear how these ads can change youth culture, but do advertisers

actually seek to create this cultural change and use these tools in their real work? Examining advertising from a broader perspective and considering the increasing exposure to media we are experiencing today, as well as the explosive growth of content and campaigns that are created at different agencies and delivered regionally, nationally, and globally, a two-part question can be posed: (1) What methods do advertisers exploit when trying to sell an idea? (2) Are these strategies modified by the culture to which they are selling?

Qualitative study with gyro

For the qualitative study section of this paper, semi-structured interviews were conducted with gyro employees and general observations concerning their advertising process were recorded from meetings and status calls. Employees were asked about their perceptions of the ways in which culture influences their creative and content strategies and about their experiences in the agency.

gyro: UNO.

gyro is a business-to-business advertising agency with a global presence guided by a culture termed “UNO.” UNO culture means that gyro offices around the world are not in competition with each other but instead work together: “We talk to each other, we work together and we share the challenges and triumphs the creative life brings” (C. Becker, internal communication, July 25, 2016). The idea is to have no borders or walls, just diverse talents around the world, working as one, for the good of all clients; this culture is extremely beneficial to understand and develop content strategies for worldwide campaigns (O. Reed, personal communication, July 11, 2016). gyro’s single mission is to produce ideas that ignite and, most importantly, ideas that are humanly relevant; thus, UNO is how the company ensures that nothing comes between their clients and ideas that can transform the clients’ businesses. gyro employees are proud of their culture and follow what it stands for to heart: “Three, two, one... UNO!” (C. Becker, internal communication, July 25, 2016).

Content Strategy Across Borders

Physically moving to a new environment with a different culture requires adjustment over a variety of domains including language, interpersonal and social behaviors, understanding of accustomed values, and regulation of one’s self-concept. Acculturation is the process by which people migrate to and learn a culture that is different from their original or heritage culture (Heine, 2012). The acculturation process is applicable to advertising as well, and gyro employees agree that advertising content has to be adjusted as it travels across cultural borders. If a client wants a worldwide campaign, then headlines, images, and copy (the text of a print, radio, television, or other advertising message that aims to catch and hold the interest of the audience) have to be adequate in English but also translatable to all regions to which the client is selling or targeting around the world. In order to accomplish this goal, most agencies with an international presence like gyro will work parallel with their other offices to ensure timelines and content is aligned for major outreach (D. Rosenthal, personal communication, July 11, 2016). Social strategies need to be developed in tandem to achieve powerful and comparable results across regions.

Research is often performed on markets either by the agency, the client itself or a third party to test how images and headlines will perform in front of different audiences. This process is followed by substantial communication between gyro offices and between the account management team and the client. One creative director discussed the importance of stepping into the shoes of the consumer and visualizing the life and the preferences of this character for the tactical creative brief and development of deliverables (T. Oldershaw, personal communication, July 14, 2016). The creative brief is a document generated from initial meetings and discussions between a client and creative design team to guide and inform the work that will be produced; furthermore, deliverables are the ads and additional advertising content that is produced from the brief. Strategy can be different across regions, but most large corporations want to produce global advertising content for their products and services (unless it is a campaign directed at a singular event like the Black Hat Conference in Las Vegas this year sponsored by HP, for which gyro created all social and physical deliverables). Therefore, the advertising agency has to discuss how to create globally approved content while not diluting the messages. This is the greatest challenge for worldwide campaigns: delivering unified content that is not weakened by the global approach, but strong enough to impact all consumers (O. Reed, personal communication, July 11, 2016).

The natural approach, especially for gyro via their UNO culture, is to coordinate internally when the client wants non-geo-specific content. The office that originates the work with the client will provide a baseline creative strategy and will work and open up conversation with other countries after having thought out a clear general creative journey. Then, between the regional offices, the account management teams and creative directors discuss anything that seems “off” with an asset for a particular region or “culture.” For example, recently the copy of a print ad for a client’s campaign was changed to refer to a sushi boat during lunch instead of a rye sandwich because eating sushi is more universal. The rye sandwich was associated as being very American (O. Reed, personal communication, July 11, 2016). Interestingly, while Western regions are very similar in terms of appreciation and understanding of media messages, some things are simply considered “American.” Another similar example was a visual asset put together in an office in the US and showed a man with his feet on the table to depict relaxing, but in many East-Asian nations this is disrespectful, and some countries in Europe would also find this a strange act in the presence of others. For gyro, APJ is the region that poses most concern (O. Reed, personal communication, July 11, 2016). While gyro has an office in Singapore, they are the most removed and different from the West, but gyro employees collaborate to find ways to incorporate and fit into the APJ regional expectations and cultural outlook since this is a large and important area to market to for their clients (A. Yom, personal communication, July 11, 2016). In the end, the amount and breadth of coordination across gyro offices depends on whether the requested campaign is to be international, national, or regional.

Moreover, agencies often test headlines in multiple languages because they want a unified message that is impactful and identifiable across languages. Sometimes the English versions of headlines work in countries even where the primary language is not English, but occasionally ads have to be translated because citizens will not understand the English communication. Translations, however, can be complicated too. A literal translation might not be enough to deliver a message, since sayings and jargon may not be applicable cross-

culturally. Names and sentences should flow in all tongues, and as a result, there is a need to understand culture, in which language is embedded, to reflect a particular meaning both verbally and visually. Finally, making content specific to different areas for visual and verbal appeal is not the only reason advertising agencies need to be careful when creating ads, but there are also different regulations and laws that have to be followed in different countries around the world. For example, the boundaries imposed by the US concerning the creative process in terms of law and cultural concerns are different than those of France: “When advertising in the US, I’m allowed to do an open comparison between two brands like Apple and Samsung within my advertising, whereas this is completely forbidden in France (E. Navarrete, personal communication, August 1, 2016). This is very important to consider when looking at the campaign landscape and how it is going to be delivered. In summary, an agency begins with a creative framework, develops a planned journey, and then the countries and offices in all regions that are included in the campaign need to approve and accept content deliverables.

Engagement

The most basic needs of marketing are to forge differentiation and be useful and valuable to people, so brands and agencies need to put real people at the center of everything they do. Great communication ideas act as a bridge between what people are interested in and care about and what advertisers make; it is a bridge between real life (i.e., culture), and commerce. Advertisers need to help brands have a point of view on the world, not just a position in their category, while still following a brand’s guidance. gyro’s mission to create humanly relevant ideas means “bringing real emotions to people and having an added value; not just advertising out of nowhere and for no one” (E. Navarrete, personal communication, August 1, 2016). The goal is always to create delightful and interesting experiences between companies and people, and this is almost always inspired by emotion. Engagement has always been fundamental in advertising and it is even more apparent now given the rise of participatory platforms and the ability for people to interact with brands. While there is no single definition or variable to measure engagement on, for Gareth Kay, the co-founder of Chapter, it is about true emotional engagement—making a brand matter more and making it more top of mind (Kay, 2012). In fact, Peter Field, a marketing consultant, studied the database of the IPA awards to show that the most successful ads that drove business were also the most emotional. Creative director at gyro SF, Trevor Oldershaw, says it is important to inspire a story and not just deliver individual messages when producing a marketing campaign. In the end, emotion is the key to intimacy between brands and people.

Diversity is also important in advertising content. Most companies are interested in delivering images of diversity and unity. This means they want people of different ethnicities when they are selling ideas related to people and connections. Teams and families presented in content should be of diverse races, ethnicities, and backgrounds, but this should not be overly forced, just representative of reality. In other words, it is important to match casting so that grouping for images makes sense. Most business-to-business marketing requires that talent should be real people to sell a concept and make sure members of the audience can put themselves in that position. The idea is to capture fluidity with what happens on a set while also making some direct placements, but it is not helpful to make it feel idealized

(T. Oldershaw, personal communication, July 14, 2016). Photo shoots for advertising can be of two kinds: a product shoot or a conceptual shoot. For the first, lighting and product-centricity in the images is essential while capturing an emotional connection is key in the latter. In terms of location, for international campaigns, the spaces must resonate globally as well. Consumers selectively attend to ads that support their prevailing product-related attitudes and behaviors to avoid cognitive dissonance and preserve self-esteem (Pechmann, 1999).

While delivering and achieving emotional connection with consumers is key, it cannot always happen via facial expressions and reactions in the print ads. When creating content for clients running global campaigns, it is important to avoid showing non-geo-specific images of people. Images of human faces can generate different reactions or sentiments across audiences, so simply showing products or human bodies is the best method for creating a unified reaction across an international audience (S. Welborn, personal communication, July 14, 2016). Strategists and creative directors strongly consider cultural norms and differences across regions to produce adverts that engage audiences emotionally and successfully.

The Advertising Industry and its Future

The advertising industry consists of many agencies working together. Often clients request many deliverables, which are completed by different agencies; in other words, there can be a combination of work performed by agencies including gyro, Brain Juicer, Aniden, and DesignKitchen for a single campaign. These agencies are sometimes called “frenemies” because while they are direct competitors, they need to work together to deliver marketing research and final work to the client, and in the end all social content, videos, print ads, etc. need to be aligned regarding the creative design and messaging. The industry is thus intricately connected and requires teamwork across offices both internally and externally. Moreover, the industry is changing, and clients are always challenging agencies to adapt faster (Robinson, 2016). The industry’s strategic and creative skills can be more useful in shaping the products and services that clients make and the way they operate rather than just being storytellers on behalf of products (Robinson, 2016). Advertising is moving away from simple promotion to product innovation (V. Patil, personal communication, July 19, 2016). Product innovation means creating innovative and original ideas or improving existing products to help brands explore beyond their core products and services. Many new agencies have departments allocated to this or are completely immersed in product innovation to create experiences that genuinely make lives better. It is becoming increasingly difficult for companies to keep up with the changing expectations of consumers, and hence product innovation enables agencies to offer an added value and service not only to their clients but also to people in general.

Storytelling is important, as emphasized by Oldershaw, but how stories are told has transformed with culture, and technology has shaped emerging culture and behavior dramatically over the last two decades. Today, brands need to create real value in order to be meaningful, distinct, and humanly relevant. Advertisers need to think less about what a client’s brand says and more about how it can be useful. The future of advertising is less promotional activity and more innovation that will fit in to cultures and behaviors and

enhance experiences. Advertising is constantly evolving to be able to support and deliver the commercial creativity pioneering businesses need today and in the future.

Conclusion

Interconnections among cultures through advertising are resulting in the formation of a global culture. These interconnections are developing much faster with increasing technology and the spread of ideas across the Internet. In other words, while the sharing of ideas across cultures and contact has always existed, technological innovations have eased long-distance communication and transportation allowing information to spread instantly and virally (Dunlop et al., 2016). Moreover, research and results regarding the impression of antismoking adverts across different Western, English-speaking cultures shows that emotion drives behavior (Wakefield et al., 2003). This knowledge is extremely useful for advertisers; in fact, agencies observe elements of cultural evolution and apply tools of creativity, emotion, and cultural appeal to produce a wide variety of advertisements and forms of marketing communication.

Large companies are now global entities that have outgrown their cultural boundaries, and people from cultures around the world are encountering many similar experiences in this age of globalization. However, the consideration of culture is still critical in marketing and advertising campaigns. Agencies plan photo shoots, develop planned journeys, and produce creative frameworks with cultural values in mind. Considerable thought, communication, and teamwork goes into creating and delivering content and messages that are suitable and impressionable for regions across the globe (O. Reed, personal communication, July 11, 2016). Advertising is a very complex, yet incredibly interesting and dynamic industry evolving, changing, and connecting with cultures across the globe.

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