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A Comparison of Print Advertisements from the United States and France

Abhijit Biswas, Janeen E. Olsen and Valerie Carlet

This study extends the research on cross-cultural advertising by comparing print advertisements from the United States and France in terms of emotional appeals, information content, and use of humor and sex. A content analysis of advertisements from two types of magazines from the United States and France revealed that French advertisements make greater use of emotional appeals, humor, and sex appeals. Advertisements from the United States were found to contain more information cues.

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Introduction

There is an increasing desire among marketers to utilize similar advertising campaigns throughout the world. Among the benefits of such a uniform approach, two of the most frequently mentioned are savings in costs and the ability to create a unified image for a brand (Tansey, Hyman and Zinkhan 1990). Although most marketers recognize the benefits of standardized advertising, there are still formidable cultural barriers that often render its use impractical. Consequently, cross-cultural differences in advertising expression is a growing and important area of research, primarily because an understanding of these differences is needed in order to take on the creative challenge of communicating to people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Over the past decade, a number of studies have made valuable contributions to the understanding of the differences among cultures in terms of informational and emotional contents in advertisements as well as use of humor, comparative cues, and sex role portrayal. Most of the studies examining cross-cultural differences in advertising expressions can be grouped into two broad categories. The first category of studies has examined advertising expression across cultures (e.g., Japan and the United States) that clearly have very dissimilar value systems (Belk and Bryce 1986; Gilly 1988; Hong, Muderrisoglu, and Zinkhan 1987; Mueller 1991; Tansey, Hyman, and Zinkhan 1990). The other category has analyzed advertising expressions in countries (e.g., the United States and Great Britain) that have less obvious cultural differences (Dowling 1980; Weinberger and Spotts 1989).

This paper extends the research in cross-cultural advertising by investigating the differences found in advertising expressions in print advertisements from the United States and France. To the authors' knowledge, only one study has analyzed French advertising (Whitelock and Chung 1989), and no one has ever examined the differences between advertising in France and the United States. In this study, we specifically investigated the differences between French and United States advertisements in terms of the degree of emotional appeal in general and in terms of informativeness of the advertisements. We also examine the differences between U.S. and French advertisements in terms of the use of sex appeal and humor.

Emotional appeals are widely used in advertising because of the positive effect they have on consumers' reactions to advertisements (Holbrook 1986; Shimp 1981). Emotion has been conceptualized in multiple ways in the literature. The two typologies that have received wide usage in studying emotion in consumer research are the categorical and dimensional approaches. According

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to the categorical approach, all emotions stem from a relatively small number of basic categories that are qualitatively distinct (e.g., Plutchik 1980). The dimensional approach, on the other hand, posits that pleasure, arousal, and dominance are the three underlying dimensions of emotion (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). Some researchers have recently argued that emotional response is tri-modal, namely, descriptive, empathic, and experiential (Stout and Leckenby 1986; Stout and Leckenby 1988). For this study, we defined emotional appeal as the extent to which advertising tries to build affective or "subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product" (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1984), and we measured emotional response by using the scale developed by Plutchik (1980).

An advertisement's informativeness is a reflection of the extent to which advertisements focus on the consumers' practical, functional, or utilitarian need for the product (Belch and Belch 1990; Mueller 1991; Resnick and Stern 1977) so that they might make a sound choice between products or brands. Johnstone, Kaynak, and Sparkman (1987) claim that the study of informational content of advertisements has become an issue of considerable concern throughout the world because of the increase in international trade and promotion across diverse cultures.

Sex appeal in advertising can be executed in a number of ways; some examples include double entendre, sexual attractiveness, nudity, and suggestiveness (Belch et al. 1982; Bello, Pitts and Etzel 1983; Rothschild 1987). For this study, use of sex appeal in an advertisement was considered as the extent to which the advertisement used nudity, scantily dressed models of either gender, and any form of sexual suggestiveness including the implicit or explicit benefit of gaining attractiveness in sexual or sensual ways through the use of the item advertised.

Finally, use of humor was considered as the extent to which an advertisement used expression devices like pun, understatement, joke, ludicrousness, satire, and/or irony (Kelly and Solomon 1975; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). As defined by Kelly and Solomon (1975), pun implies the humorous use of words or phrases in a way that suggests two interpretations. An understatement is defined as a statement not strong enough to express facts or feelings with full force. A joke is words or action that lacks seriousness. Ludicrousness is something laughable or ridiculous. Satire is defined as sarcasm used to expose vice or folly. Finally, irony is the use of words to express the

opposite of what one really means.

Background and Hypotheses

It is rather easy to identify broad similarities in the cultural patterns of two Western countries. France and the United States basically share the same value system (Plummer 1989). To a degree, both cultures refer to the universe as being mechanistic; and both cultures believe that the earth can be mastered and that people are radically different from any other form of life (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1990). Taken from this perspective, the dissimilarities between French and American cultures seem to be minimal compared to the differences that exist between American and Asian cultures.

France and the United States are also similar to each other with respect to many other socioeconomic factors that can affect advertising expression. For example, both countries belong to the industrialized world, have similar per capita incomes (U.S. \$20,800, France \$17,145), have comparable living standards, and have similar literacy rates (both countries: 99%) (*World Almanac and Book of Facts* 1991).

Despite the similarities shared by the United States and France with respect to many socioeconomic factors and some aspects of culture, there remain many points on which their cultures differ (Green and Langeard 1975; Hall 1960). One important difference between the Americans and French is their respective views about the purpose of communication. Americans view communication as a process of transmitting messages for the purpose of control. It is a means of persuading others, changing attitudes, and influencing or conditioning behavior. By contrast, Europeans (including the French) view communication as a process through which shared culture is created, modified, and transformed. According to this view, the goal of communication is to create, represent, and celebrate shared beliefs (Carey 1973).

Another important difference between the Americans and the French is the type of context to which their culture belongs. According to Hall (1976), a high-context culture is one where the context of the message may be more important than the words themselves in communication. In a high-context culture, a message is interpreted based not only on its content but on the situation, or context, in which the message occurs. The hidden or suggestive meanings that may be alluded to indirectly in the message may be important (Cundiff and Hilger 1984). Therefore, in high-context cultures where communication is shared, a recipient

of a message is likely to derive meaning from the context in which communication occurs, reducing the need for explicit verbal messages. A low-context culture is one where messages are direct, and words contain most of the information to be sent. Messages must be explicitly stated or the meaning will be lost (Hall 1976).

Although there are no clear guidelines for ranking cultures according to context, France is generally perceived to be a higher context culture than the United States (Campbell et al. 1988; Cateora 1983). The French people tend to let their interlocutors' imagination and intuition make up for the unsaid. The French are also more interested in the general effect from an aesthetic point of view. Americans, on the other hand, are fond of directness and pay more attention to details.

The cultural differences in communication between France and the United States are likely to be reflected in the advertisements of the two countries. Not surprisingly, French advertising is known for its attempts to release a positive emotional response through image (Hall and Hall 1990). Also, French advertising has been labeled as sophisticated because it is more artistic and the finish is of extremely high quality (Stollerman 1980). American advertising, by contrast, tries to prove the merits of the product "clearly, logically and reasonably by directly presenting information, facts and evidence related to product merits and purchase reasons" (Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan 1987; Lannon 1986).

In sum, Americans and the French differ in terms of purpose of communication and the context to which their culture belongs; and these differences are likely to be reflected in the nature or type of appeals used in advertising in the two countries. Consequently, we offer the following hypotheses.

H1: French advertisements use more emotional appeals than American advertisements.

H2: American advertisements contain more information cues than French advertisements.

The next two hypotheses deal with two commonly used advertising execution styles, sex appeals and the use of humor. The French are said to be more involved sensually with each other, leading to closer interpersonal relationships (Hall 1969). Also, there is a general perception that France is more sexually liberated than the United States. Consequently, the French are more tolerant and receptive to sexual appeals and nudity in advertising, whereas in the United

States, this form of advertising is considered risqué (Belch and Belch 1990). French advertisements are thus likely to use sexual appeals more often than the American advertisements.

H3: Sexual appeals are more frequently used in French advertisements than in American advertisements.

Finally, the culture of a country may affect the use of humor in advertisements. Humor is primarily a social phenomenon, providing commentary on the details of life (Morreall 1983; Zinkhan and Gelb 1990). As such, humor derives meaning from the culture. Research suggests that while all human beings have a basic need for play, silliness, and humor (Morreall 1983), the nature of humor preferred is a function of culture (Speck 1990). Consequently, devices used to express humor in advertisements may differ between France and the United States.

Humor, however, may have both affective elements leading to emotional arousal and cognitive elements associated with problem solving (Speck 1990; Winick 1976). As a result, humor may be used to the same extent in the advertisements of high- versus low-context cultures, such as France and the United States. Hence, we offer the following hypotheses.

H4a: There is no difference between French and American advertisements in the extent of humor used.

H4b: Devices used to express humor are different between French and American advertisements.

Method

This study compared American and French advertisements in terms of content and expression by using content analysis (Kassarjian 1977). The Mood Rating Scale developed by Plutchik (1980) and used by Hong, Muderrisoglu, and Zinkhan (1987) was employed to measure the level of emotion contained in the selected advertisements. The judges rated the degree of emotional arousal for each advertisement by rating it on an eight-item (happy, fearful, pleasant, angry, interested, disgusted, sad and surprised) five-point scale, where 1 = does not make me feel at all, and 5 = makes me feel very strongly.

The information classification system established by Resnik and Stern (1977) was used to evaluate the level of informativeness of the advertisements. For the purpose of this study, we selected the twelve categories described in Hong, Muderrisoglu, and Zinkhan (1987), as well as the two categories "taste" and "nu-

trition" that were excluded from their study.

The use of sex appeal in the advertisements was evaluated by the judges who participated in the survey. The judges were asked to identify if an advertisement used sex appeal and, if so, whether the sex appeal was depicted pictorially or verbally. The judges also identified whether there was nudity in the advertisements and whether the setting was romantic or non-romantic.

The judges were asked to rate each advertisement for the use of humor, identify the humorous device used, and judge whether the humor was expressed by words only, by pictures only, or by a combination of words and pictures. The definitions of the humorous devices were provided to the judges in writing to facilitate the coding process.

Selection of Magazines

One news and one women's magazine was selected from each country for the purposes of this study. In France, there are four different news magazines: *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *L'Express*, *Le Point*, and *L'Evenement du Jeudi*. We selected the news magazine with the least political orientation and the largest circulation: *L'Express* (circulation in 1989: 600,000). The same criteria were taken into account while selecting the U.S. news magazine, *Time* (circulation in 1989: 4 million). The two women's magazines used in this study were *Madame Figaro* (France; circulation in 1989: 800,000) and *McCalls* (U.S.; circulation in 1989: 5.1 million). Next, we selected six issues of each magazine to choose the advertisements for coding purposes. The magazines were chosen from the time period December 1989 through November 1991.

Selection of Advertisements

For each magazine, the judges were asked to evaluate all color and back-and-white product advertisements a full page or larger in size. The study considered only full-page or larger advertisements because of their dominant use in magazines and also because this procedure controls for advertisement size (Harmon, Razzouk and Stern 1983). In cases where more than one advertisement was found for the same brand, one was randomly chosen in order to reduce the effect of brand-specific advertising expression (Hong, Muderrisoglu, and Zinkhan 1987). The final sample consisted of 279 American and 259 French advertisements.

Coding Procedures

In the first phase, the advertisements were coded by two judges. An American judge coded the American advertisements and a French judge coded the French advertisements. The primary reason for using native judges was to make certain that cultural differences in the expression of emotion as well as information were properly captured during the evaluation process. In the second phase a third judge, fluent in both English and French, evaluated 90 advertisements from each country. The third judge's evaluations were used to assess coding reliability.

Results

Reliability Checks

The data were first analyzed to measure inter-rater reliability. As indicated in Table 1, the mean reliability scores (coefficient α) for the emotion and informativeness scales were .89 and .93 respectively. Inter-rater agreement for the use of sex appeal and humor was assessed by calculating Scott's π . Scott's π represents the ratio of the actual difference between obtained and chance agreement to the maximum difference between obtained and chance agreement (Scott 1955). As shown in Table 1, the mean values for Scott's π for the use of sex appeal and humor were both 1.0. However, there was some disagreement between the French judge and the bilingual judge regarding the types of humorous devices used in four of the French advertisements. The disagreement was solved by using a fourth judge fluent in both English and French. The fourth judge sided with the French judge in all four cases. All reliability values are within acceptance levels established by Kassarian (1977) and Nunnally (1978).

Hypothesis Tests

The first two hypotheses were tested by ANOVA, given the continuous nature of the dependent variables. The remaining hypotheses dealt with categorical measures, so chi-square analysis was chosen as the appropriate statistical technique.

Emotional Appeal

According to the first hypothesis, the emotional content of French print advertisements was expected to be higher than that for the American advertise-

Table 1
Inter-Rater Reliability

	Emotion Scale ^a	Informativeness Scale ^a	Use of Sex Appeal ^b	Use of Humor ^b
Between American and bilingual rater	.84	.92	1.0	1.0
Between French and bilingual rater	.94	.95	1.0	1.0
Mean reliability	.89	.93	1.0	1.0

^a coefficient α

^b Scott's π

Table 2
Mean Values of Emotional Appeal and Information Cues

Advertisements	Emotional Appeal	Information Cues
American	1.31	3.59
French	1.67	2.25

ments. As the results in Table 2 indicate, French advertisements did convey more emotion (mean score = 1.67) than American advertisements (mean score = 1.31). An analysis of variance showed that the difference was significant ($F=145.46$, $df=1,536$, $p<.01$). Hence, H1 was supported.

Information Content

The second hypothesis stated that American advertisements contain more information cues than French advertisements. As shown in Table 3, 84.6% of French advertisements have at least one information cue versus 97.8% for American advertisements. Also, a larger percentage (28.7%) of American advertisements have five to ten information cues compared to only 7.3% for French advertisements. In fact, no French advertisement was found to contain more than seven information cues. The difference in the number of information cues between American and French advertisements was significant ($\chi^2=82.63$, $df=10$, $p<.01$), and this result is confirmed by the mean scores reported in Table 2. American advertisements (mean score = 3.59) were found to contain more information

cues than French advertisements (mean score = 2.25) ($F=90.07$, $df=1,536$, $p<.01$), thus supporting H2.

Use of Sex Appeal

Hypothesis 3 proposed that French advertisements use sex appeals more than American advertisements. As the results in Table 4 show, 23.94% (62/259) of the French advertisements in the sample used sexual appeal compared to only 8.60% (24/279) for American advertisements. The difference in sexual content between the French and the American advertisements was significant ($\chi^2=23.52$, $df=1$, $p<.01$), supporting H3.

Sex appeal was mainly depicted pictorially in advertisements for both countries. As far as the nature of expression is concerned, the majority of the French advertisements used attractive models. With regard to the type of models used, 8.06% (5/62) of the French advertisements using sex appeal contained only males, 72.58% (45/62) only females, and 6.45% (4/62) both male and female models. Only 1.61% (10/62) of the French advertisements with sexual appeal used nudity. Finally, 44.77% (29/62) of the advertisements used a romantic setting to depict the sexual appeal.

Table 3
Number of Information Cues

Number of cues	French Ads		American Ads	
	n	Total (%)	n	Total (%)
10	0	0	1	0.4
9	0	0	1	0.7
8	0	0	5	2.5
7	2	0.8	5	4.3
6	3	1.9	21	11.8
5	14	7.3	47	28.7
4	33	20.1	63	51.3
3	62	44.0	58	72.0
2	58	66.4	49	89.6
1	47	84.6	23	97.8
0	40	100.0	6	100.0
Total	259		279	

$\chi^2 = 82.63$, d.f. = 10, $p < .01$

Table 4
Number of Advertisements Using Sex Appeal

Use of Sex Appeal	French Ads	American Ads
Yes	62	24
No	197	255
Total	259	279

$\chi^2 = 23.52$, d.f. = 1, $p < .01$

In comparison to the French advertisements, 75% (18/24) of the American advertisements using sex appeal had only female models, 4.17% (1/24) had only male models, and 12.5% (3/24) used both male and female models. Finally, 16.67% (4/24) of the American advertisements used a romantic setting to depict the sexual appeal.

Use of Humor

Hypothesis 4a stated that there is no difference between French and American advertisements in the extent of humor used. The results in Table 5 indicate that 22.78% (59/259) of the French advertisements used humor compared to 10.75% (30/279) of the

Table 5
Number of Advertisements Using Humor

Use of Humor	French Ads	American Ads
Yes	59	30
No	200	249
Total	259	279

$\chi^2 = 14.07$, d.f. = 1, $p < .01$

American advertisements. A chi-square analysis showed that the difference in use of humor in French and American advertisements was significant ($\chi^2=14.07$, $df=1$, $p<.01$); hence, Hypothesis 4a was rejected.

Finally, Hypothesis 4b proposed that types of humorous devices used in French advertisements will be different from those used in American advertisements. As expected, chi-square analysis reveals that there is a significant association between the country of origin and types of humorous devices used in advertisements ($\chi^2=11.99$, $df=5$, $p<.05$). Hence, Hypothesis 4b was supported.

Table 6 presents the types of humorous devices used in French and American advertisements. Pun

Table 6
Types of Humorous Devices Used in Advertisements

Types of Humor	French Ads	American Ads
Pun	19	16
Understatement	3	3
Joke	20	3
Ludicrousness	10	4
Satire	0	2
Irony	7	2
Total	59	30

$\chi^2 = 11.99$, $df = 5$, $p < .05$

(32.20%) and joke (33.90%) were the predominant types of humorous devices used in French advertisements. Ludicrousness (16.95%) and irony (11.86%) were also used as humorous devices in French advertisements. The use of satire as a humorous device was nonexistent in French advertisements. In the American advertisements, the most frequently used styles of humor were pun (53.33%), followed by ludicrousness (13.33%), joke (10%), and understatement (10%).

We also tested for difference between the percentages of each humorous device used in the two countries. The tests revealed that pun ($z = 1.93$, $p < .05$) and satire ($z = 2.09$, $p < .05$) were used significantly more in the U.S. advertisements. French advertisements, on the other hand, made significantly greater use of joke as a humorous device ($z = 2.45$, $p < .01$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine differences between French and American advertising expressions—specifically, how French advertising and American advertising differ in terms of emotional and informational contents, use of sex appeals, and use and nature of humor. The results obtained from content analysis of those advertisements selected for the study reveal that there are interesting differences between French and American print advertising.

As expected, French advertisements were found to

resort more to emotional appeals than American advertisements. Also, it was found that American advertisements contain more information cues than French advertisements. These results support the notion that differences in the cultural contexts of the two countries (the United States being low-context and France being high-context) are reflected in the emotional and the informational contents of their print advertisements. However, it should be noted that in spite of significant difference between U.S. and French advertisements, both countries scored relatively low on emotional appeal.

Sex appeals were found to be used more frequently in French advertisements than in American advertisements. This finding is consistent with the perception that France is a more sexually liberated country than the United States and, hence, more receptive to the use of sex in advertising. The results of our study also showed that the devices used to express humor differed between French and U.S. advertisements. U.S. advertisements made greater use of puns and satire, whereas French advertisements made greater use of jokes as humorous devices. However, our expectation of finding no difference in the extent of humor used between France and the U.S. was not confirmed. The findings suggest that American advertisements used less humor than French advertisements. One possible explanation for this unexpected outcome may be the nature of the message itself. If the message is complex or there are a number of

ideas related to the central theme (as is possible with more informative American ads), humor may add another element that may not only distract from the message, but create information overload as well (Ray 1982).

As with many of the studies that have investigated cross-cultural advertising, the findings of this study suggest that the advertisements produced in one country cannot simply be standardized or directly translated for use in another. The results of our study provide insight into the differences that may exist in the advertising expressions of the U.S. and France, two countries belonging to the Western world and having many socioeconomic similarities. Multinational corporations attempting to advertise in France should be aware of the greater use of emotional appeals, sex appeals, and humor in French advertising and adapt accordingly.

One must keep the following limitations in mind while interpreting the results of this study. First, more detailed studies should be carried out to compare advertising content by specific product category (cf. Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan 1987). The differences in advertising expression may be due to different products being advertised in the U.S. and France (Johnstone, Kaynak, and Sparkman 1987). Also, it is possible that technologically demanding products, as well as new products, might call for more informational advertising regardless of culture. Likewise, humor may be more acceptable for some product categories in France than in the United States.

Second, the issues of different magazines used in this study were selected at random, so it is possible that some advertisements used for seasonal products may not be adequately represented in our sample. Also, the use of only news and women's magazines in this study may have resulted in the exclusion of advertisements that are usually found in other special-purpose magazines (e.g., sports magazines) or general interest magazines. Third, the results reflect the subjective views of a few raters who may not be representative of the United States and French population. This may be particularly troublesome for the measurement of emotion.

Fourth, some of the differences we found in our study may be attributable to the relative importance of magazine advertising in the United States and France. In France, for example, magazine advertising accounts for 38.1 percent of total advertising dollars; but in the United States, 12.0 percent of the total amount spent on advertising is for magazines (Waterson 1988).

Finally, it may not be appropriate to generalize the findings of this study to other media. For example, it may be interesting to investigate television and billboard advertising. The former is heavily used in the United States, while the latter is extremely sophisticated and widely used in France.

It is evident that the cultural differences of the United States and France account for some of the variations in print advertisements examined in this study. Also to be considered, however, are factors other than culture which may have an effect on the content of an advertisement. This includes product type, the country's preferred medium of advertising, and the target to which the advertisement is appealing. These factors must be examined more thoroughly in order to determine how large a portion of the difference in advertisements is attributable to the cultures of the two countries. Such information would be especially valuable in light of increased international trade and the subsequent need to communicate effectively to people of various cultures. The more we understand the nature of these differences, the better able we will be to design advertisements that are effective on an international level.

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