

Perceptions of Offensive Advertising Elements: A China-US Comparison

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ABSTRACT

China is a country that is arousing a large amount of interest as a new mega-market, as it opens itself to a market-orientated economy and expands at a remarkable rate. However, the influx of international investment, new business opportunities and advertising from overseas has seen Chinese consumers being exposed to potentially offensive advertising products and images. While some products and images may seem acceptable in the West, there are some that may offend Chinese cultural sensitivities. The overall purpose of this study is to better understand cross-cultural advertising offensiveness by comparing perceptions of advertising offensiveness between United States and Chinese residents, specifically college students. The results indicate that there are a number of statistical differences that have business implications for international marketers.

Keywords: advertising, controversial, images, culture

Track: Social Responsibility, Ethics and Consumer Protection

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s the Chinese economy has undergone a revolution that has resulted in major changes for the people of China (Chang 1989; Ho and Chan, 1989; Parsons, 1993; Liang and Jacobs, 1994; Cheng, 1996). The economy has changed the phasing out of collectivised agriculture and a centrally planned system, largely closed to international trade, to a more market-oriented economy with “the gradual liberalisation of prices, fiscal decentralisation, increased autonomy for state enterprises, the foundation of a diversified banking system, the development of stock markets, the rapid growth of the non-state sector, and the opening to foreign trade and investment” (CIA 2006). China has now become a major player in the global economy.

As well as changes in the economy there were also great changes in the advertising industry with massive growth, particularly with the influx of foreign advertisers, mostly from Japan and the United States (Parsons, 1993; Ha, 1996). So as China emerged and expanded as a new mega-market, the Chinese consumers have been exposed to potentially offensive advertising images, particularly via regional pay television stations and the internet (Tai, 1997; Waller & Fam 2002). China has also benefited from a huge expansion in computer Internet use, with more than 100 million users at the end of 2005, which has also been a concern for the central government. Therefore, the Chinese people have a greater opportunity of exposure to different types of advertising, including the advertising of potentially controversial products, which could clash with traditional Chinese values, like having few desires, respect for tradition, and having a sense of shame (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987).

Although consumers generally experience advertising offence, measurement of specific factors contributing to offence has been inconsistent. Documented examples of offensive advertising elements, including sex, nudity, stereotypical portrayals, and fear appeals are ever-present in both academic and professional publications (Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005). However, as Christy (2006) explains, advertising offensiveness is largely a contextual phenomenon subject to several influences such as the product type being advertised, the medium used to deliver an advertisement, the executional style and message conveyed in an advertisement, and, most importantly, the demographic and psychographic profile of an audience member. The existence of these various contributors to offensiveness, considered both by themselves and as interactive variables, produce infinitely different offence conditions, hampering the generation of unequivocal results. As the offensiveness construct is so complex, research that further describes the many factors surrounding the phenomenon is essential.

One such factor that has received considerable attention lately is cultural influences on perceptions of offensive advertising (Fam, Waller, and Erdogan 2004; Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005). This growing research stream centers on the measurement of advertising offence, particularly in Asia and across countries other than the United States (Prendergast, Ho, and Phau 2002; Prendergast and Hwa 2003; Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005). Relevant studies have begun to highlight both similarities and differences found across very divergent cultures. Currently, most research that measures advertising offence within and across varying countries exclude attitudes of American consumers.

Therefore, this study has chosen to focus on observing cross-cultural perceptions of offensive advertising by comparing respondents from China and the United States. China was chosen as it would reflect a relatively newly opened eastern culture, while the United States reflects a western culture with a long history of capitalism. The objectives of the paper are to:

- (1) identify advertising elements that US and Chinese respondents find offensive; and
- (2) identify differences in attitudes across two different cultures that vary along several dimensions.

BACKGROUND

An early attempt to conceptualise advertising offence was made by Barnes and Dotson (1990) who identified the construct as consisting of the interplay between an advertised product and the subsequent advertising execution used to promote the product. This two-dimensional conceptualisation has seemingly established the precedent for offensive advertising studies, which predominately focus on attitudes toward controversial products and executions (Waller 1999). A more recent conceptualisation of the construct (Christy 2006), however, has begun to demonstrate the importance of looking beyond these two factors when investigating offensive advertising, in particular, the highlighting the overriding influence of values on the formation of perceptions surrounding potentially offensive advertising.

While there has been little research in the US examining the influence of values on experienced offence (Treise, Weigold, Conna, and Garrison, 1994 is an exception), a number of international studies have alluded to the importance of this neglected variable. Studies in this area have again adopted the view of offensiveness as centering on products and/or executions; however, when looking at this research stream holistically, the influence of culturally generated values can be seen (Fam, Waller & Erdogan 2005). Waller (1999) measured offensiveness among Australian university students according to product and execution. The results indicated that advertisements for racially extremist groups were the only product-specific messages that initiated substantial offence and that the use of racist portrayals generated the highest level of offensiveness. Phau and Prendergast (2001) found that consumers in Singapore, regardless of age and education level, regarded chatline services and advertisements for sexual disease prevention as most offensive.

Although the above studies begin to highlight the influence of values and culture on perceptions of controversial products and advertising executions, the findings provide limited perspective since individual countries are examined in isolation. Waller and Fam (2002) and Waller, Fam, and Erdogan (2005) have explored consumer perceptions across varying cultures (China and Malaysia, and Malaysia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Turkey, respectively). Results highlighted differences between countries that most vary in cultural values. Hence, differences that exist across the countries seem to be a result of cultural disparity (e.g., Turkey is dominated by Muslim values, while the United Kingdom is largely Christian) rather than geographic proximity. However, consistent with results elsewhere, Waller, Fam, and Erdogan (2005) found that all consumers,

regardless of country of origin, have the strongest negative views toward racism, indicating the universal offensiveness of racist portrayals in advertising.

Although previous studies have examined the attitudes of ethnic groups living in the United States toward advertising both in the context of offensiveness (Santos, 1976) and advertising in general, research that compares other countries' perceptions of offensive advertising with American perceptions is scant. American perspectives have largely been omitted from cross-cultural examinations of offensive products and executions. As illustrated by the review above, understanding the influence of cultural discrepancies is important when examining perceptions surrounding offensive advertising elements, and comparing with US respondents would seem to be very important as the US has such a major role in global business and advertising. To further the understanding of cross-cultural offensiveness, this study will compare perceptions of controversial products and advertising executions between the US and China, which are countries which differ historically, geographically, and culturally.

METHODOLOGY

A survey to gauge levels of offence towards the advertising of various controversial products was distributed to students in universities in St Paul USA, and Wuhan, China. The rationale for using university students as subjects has been a research method practiced for many years in the area of controversial advertising (Rehman and Brooks 1987; Waller 1999; Waller and Fam 2002, 2003; Waller, Fam, and Erdogan 2005), mainly for their accessibility to the researcher and homogeneity as a group (Calder, Phillips and Tybout 1981). It is also important to note that while students' views may not be representative of the mainstream population, as there would be a bias towards younger, more broadminded respondents, there are advantages. In particular, when comparing attitudes cross-culturally, it is accepted that purposive samples, such as with students, are superior than random samples for establishing equivalence, and it controls a source of variation, thus is more likely to isolate any cultural differences if they exist (Dant and Barnes 1988).

The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was administered in a classroom environment. The format of the survey instrument included two main sections that comprised of a five point Likert type scale from which respondents were given: (i) a list of products/services and (ii) a list of reasons for offensive advertising. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of personal "offence" on a five point scale, where 1 means "Not At All" offensive and 5 means "Extremely" offensive. For this study, the list of 17 controversial products were categorised based on Fam, Waller and Erdogan (2004):

Addictive Products: Cigarette/Tobacco, Gambling, Alcohol

Gender/sex-related Products: Condoms, Feminine Hygiene Products, Female Birth Control, Women's Underwear, Men's Underwear.

Health & Care Products: Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention), Weight Loss Programs, Prescription Drugs, Charities

Social/Political Groups: Racially Extreme Groups, Guns And Armaments, Political Parties, Religious Denominations, and Funeral Services.

The reasons for offence were also taken from past literature (Shao and Hill 1994). The list of reasons included: Anti-social Behaviour, Indecent Language, Nudity, Racist Images, Sexist Images, and Personal Subject Matter.

To further assist in ensuring sample equivalency, the age of those used for this analysis were limited to 18 to 25, which resulted in an overall total of 297 students sampled: 115 male and 182 female. The sample from the US sample resulted in a total of 163 students: 63 male and 100 female; and the China sample resulted in a total of 134 students: 52 male and 82 female. The results were analysed in total and then comparisons were made based on country to determine whether there are any possible variations in perceptions by the groups towards the advertising of various controversial products, thereby answering the objectives.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

According to the results, there appears to be a clear division between the US and Chinese sample. Of the 17 products presented, only one item had a score above the mid-point of "3" for the US sample (Racially extremist groups), indicating a degree of offence, while there were seven products that the Chinese sample perceived as offensive (Racially Extreme Groups, Guns And Armaments, Political Parties, Religious Denominations, Cigarette/Tobacco, Gambling, and Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention)). Further, comparing the two samples using ANOVAs, there were 13 differences between the samples, with the Chinese respondent being significantly more offended. In relation to the execution, of the six reasons presented, there were two executions that the US found to be offensive – racist and sexist images, while the Chinese found four of them offensive – Anti-social Behaviour, Indecent Language, Nudity, and Racist Images. Comparing the two groups, all but Personal Subject Matter had a statistical difference between the samples however, two items were perceived as more offensive by the US sample than the Chinese – Racist and Sexist Images. These differences could be attributed to different cultural background. Asians are generally more conservative compared to the more liberal West. Most Chinese are somewhat influenced by Confucian doctrine from a very young age and hence are likely to view anti-social behaviour, nudity and vulgar languages contrary to their upbringings and hence tended to view these advertisements as offensive. Additionally, in the Chinese society, males are the dominant gender. Unlike in the West, women in China are seen as an object for selling things. As such, males are likely to view women and sexy images as part and parcel of marketing. Racism was more

tolerated in China than US could be due to the latter's slavery history and the desire to prevent re-occurrence. A more detailed presentation of the results will occur at the conference, plus a discussion of business implications for those advertising in China.

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