

A comparative study of advertising methods in India and the United States

You wake up in the morning and get a newspaper to go with your first cup of coffee, but what you read is freshly brewed content — most of it advertisements. On the long commute to work, you turn on the radio to listen to music — but instead tune in to ads you can't skip. You reach your desk and open your mailbox, only to find it bombarded with “flat 50% off” and “hurry while offer lasts.” Now you just want to get home and watch some television, but guess who is waiting with a new marketing mission. By the end of the day, you've been convinced to fly to Bali, buy insurance for your cat, and find true love on a dating app.

Introduction

According to classic communication theory, the means and ends of communication is persuasion, i.e., the ability of one mind to influence the thoughts of another (Mooij, 2010). The American Marketing Association defines advertising as “The placement of announcements and persuasive messages... to inform and/or persuade members of a particular target market or audience about their products, services, organizations, or ideas” (Lakó, 2016, p. 131). This model construes communication as a process that involves the encoding of a message by the sender through a medium for a receiver to decode. Since the sender, message, medium, and receiver are the four pillars of the process, it is relevant to study them as products of culture because according to Dutta, people belonging to the same culture are likely to think and behave in similar ways (cited in Vila-López, Kuster-Boluda & Patel, 2013). A country's level of economic

development and technological advancement can also explain the nuances of advertising in today's globalized marketplace and hence inform the results of this research. For the purposes of this study, a developed country (USA) and a developing country (India) are compared to understand advertising practices in two contrasting environments as a reflection of differences in cultural values, norms and beliefs.

Hofstede defines culture as “The collective mental programming of the people in an environment who were conditioned by the same education and life experience” (Mooij, 2010). From this definition, we can infer that consumer attitudes and behaviors are influenced by culture which is a system of meaning created over time. For Simon Anholt, “Advertising is more than words; it is made of culture” (Mooij, 2010). In the words of Martin, Okigbo and Osabuohien, (2005) “Advertising not only tells us about the products we consume, it also tells us what those products signify in our culture” (314). In this study, advertising methods in India and the United States will be analyzed in light of five significant dimensions of culture developed by Hofstede that are mirrored in customer preferences and consumption patterns.

Power Distance Index (PDI)

The first dimension of culture is called the Power Distance Index (PDI). It indicates the presence and acceptance of social hierarchy in a society. According to Dr. Freda Swaminathan, “Culture is projected with high levels of power distance, where advertising assumes hierarchy and class differences.” (Irani, 2016) An affinity for global brands and niche products could be an indicator of a high power distance culture like India where these serve as status symbols. While this may also be true of the United States, the country's core value of equality and absence of

veritable social stratification, position it as a culture with relatively low power distance. Even high profile celebrities make a public appearance in casual clothing to depict a level of informality and the idea of a classless society — even if that may not be the case in reality. Although campaigns such as “Bold is Beautiful” by Myntra — a clothing brand in India, are initiating a dialogue on these hierarchical structures of discrimination, in high power distance cultures, the voices of the powerful are likely to dominate. In contrast, the powerful and/or old in low power distance cultures seem to be obsessed with looking less powerful and younger (Mooij, 2010).

These factors translate into the advertisement content of the two nations with plausible differences in information cues and emotional appeals of the messages. American advertisements for instance, appear to be more straightforward and easily deciphered by the average customer. The message often resonates with the self-concept of the audience or in some cases serves to bridge the gap between the real and ideal self. Accordingly, the language tends to be aspirational in nature. For example, watching Ellen DeGeneres as the new face of Maybelline makeup and Diane Keaton advertise the line of L’Oreal skin care for middle aged women could reflect the desire of that group to look younger and closer to their ideal self (LaWare & Moutsatsos, 2013). The familiarity of these celebrities makes the advertisement more relatable and the product more promising. Andie MacDowell’s line “Every morning I fight age with everything I’ve got” illustrates how advertisements that sound authentic and have the audience nodding their head and thinking “She’s just like us!” have been successful in the United States.

In India however, communication is abstract and not very direct because of the high power distance. Advertisements tend to be highly contextual and a lot of information depends on

the consumers' meaning making ability of the unspoken (Patel et al., 2013). Olay, a global skincare brand (popular for its anti-aging products) launched a campaign called, "You are best beautiful" in the year 2015. The ads targeted towards the Indian market show a celebrity and mother of two, anxious about her ageing skin. She uses the product and it works wonders on her skin. Her husband notices a new glow on her face and asks her if she has conceived again — indirectly implying that she looks beautiful. In India, a married woman with glowing skin is often assumed to be pregnant. Therefore, it is up to the audience to infer the underlying idea from this format of roundabout communication (Nair and Ramakrishnan, 2016). The same campaign in the US takes the trajectory of "Look 10 years younger in 4 weeks" which is more direct and result oriented. As Nair et al., (2016) explain, it is a "problem-solution" advertisement (1499).

Individualism and Collectivism

The second aspect of culture is the contrast between individualism and collectivism as is observed in the "I" versus "we" centric societies. Three fourths of the world's population and Asians in particular are known to place group membership above individual needs. The "Indian jati" is an example of one such kinship. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey categorize the communication styles of these two cultures into verbal personal and verbal contextual. The former uses individual-centered language (personal pronouns such as you and we) and is more verbal whereas the latter conforms to a contextualized role-centered language (drama and metaphors) that relies on visuals (Mooij, 2010). An advertisement of RevitaLift Deep-set wrinkle repair found in Oprah magazine (2011) that tells the reader to "Stop living with your wrinkles,

start seeing younger, smoother skin.” shows how the personal pronoun *your* is employed for direct communication (cited in LaWare et al., 2013). Advertisements from the beauty industry in India take an approach that draws parallels between fairness/flawless skin and success, confidence, receiving proposals for marriage, etc. The use of context metaphors is common since the communication is often indirect. The use of visual metaphors such as an elephant to signify strength in a cement commercial or a dog as symbolic of loyalty as seen in the ads for Vodafone — a mobile network provider, are also a common occurrence.

Another point of contrast is that advertising meant for collectivist cultures often contains families or groups of people in their visual communication (Patel et al., 2013). Since people belonging to individualistic cultures tend to be independent, advertising focused towards this group may contain visuals that portray characters that are alone. For instance, a billboard advertisement for an American real estate firm called Splendor Homes shows a young woman with arms wide open, looking up to the sky from the balcony of her plush home — depicting the “individual freedom frame”. Now, one would expect that an advertisement for a home would typically contain images of a family/group of people. Eszter Nucz (2011) recognizes how even the language uses first person singulars such as “I am independent,” “I want,” and “Be yourself,” embodying the culture of individualism (9). A similar frame and concept is observed in an advertisement from Adidas which shows a woman standing on a cliff, wind in hair, hands on hips symbolizing the ability to take risks and stand out from the crowd. Furthermore, the copy reads, “To be seen and noticed,” thereby depicting the culture of individualism.

However, the argument that advertising often appeals to what is missing in a society suggests that advertising takes an opposite approach. According to this perspective, the happy

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family is more likely to feature in the advertisements of cultures where family coherence is low and less likely to be prevalent in countries where family is part of one's identity (Mooij, 2010). The advertisement of Vodafone illustrates this paradox. In its "Happy to Help" campaign (conceptualized by Ogilvy and Mather which has its roots in the US), Vodafone features a little girl and her four-legged companion (a pug) who accompanies her wherever she goes. An advertisement of this genre that features a child outside of a family-setting is not typical of Indian advertising and carries a strong individualistic appeal (Laxman & Krishnakumar, 2013). In a series of advertisements, the girl is seen getting ready for school, attending ballet class, etc all by herself. This could either be an indication of a latent shift in culture, i.e., an underlying aspiration for change or refer back to Mooij's (2010) statement that advertising portrays what is uncommon in a society. It is also a case in point for how advertising may exert a cultural or ideological influence on a group through exposure to a new way of life.

Long/short term orientation

The third dimension of culture is based on long/short term orientation emphasized by a practical far-sighted approach versus a near-sighted one. According to Hofstede, the American culture could be situated in the category of short-term thinking since it appears to be concerned with the here and now of things. People who belong to this culture are seen as constantly in pursuit of a better and new lifestyle. This can be inferred from their preference for credit over debit cards (Mooij, 2010). Advertisements targeted towards this group often contain photographs and realistic visuals (also a feature of low PDI cultures). The dominant value of self-gratification as reflected in the "appetite, taste or pleasure" appeal is followed closely by

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health-consciousness (self-care) and self-sufficiency. Coca-Cola's famous tagline "Thirst asks nothing more" captures the value of self-sufficiency, appetite/taste as well as pleasure, thus representing the dominant value of self-gratification. Product outcomes are made explicit because short-term future oriented consumers are keen on knowing how their life can be altered with immediate effect (Martin et al., 2010). As mentioned in a previous section, the "Look 10 years younger in 4 weeks" also supports this dimension of American Advertising.

Indian culture on the other hand is rooted in tradition and hence more resistant to change. It is characterized by high brand loyalty and low intention to seek variety. As a result, advertisers are more likely to use illustrations to wrap information in aesthetically pleasing formats to find their niche in the market. For instance, when McDonald introduced the Big Mac in India, they had to change the name of the burger to "Maharaja" meaning "Emperor" as well as design their print ads with marigold flower garlands to appeal to the masses. For a Chicago-based company to enter a traditional market mainly composed of Hindus who do not consume beef and Muslims who do not eat pork, was a challenge in itself (O'Barr, 2008). The introduction of vegetarian options and replacement of pork and beef with chicken meat were some of the crucial steps taken by the brand. The new items on the menu had an Indian flavor with the McAloo tikki closely resembling the "Vada pav," a popular Indian snack. In India, new products are not readily embraced and brands may have to go the extra mile to land in a customer's shopping basket.

Additionally, the practical far-sighted approach is captured in a humorous advertisement from Maruti, a car manufacturer in India. The commercial shows a visibly excited owner boast about his new car to his colleague with a laundry list of latest features. The punch line delivered by the protagonist "How much mileage does it give?" shows his lack of interest in new features

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and primary concern with the serviceable aspect of the vehicle. Fuel-efficiency is a major concern in the congested roads of India and therefore “How much mileage does it give?” is a common question asked when a new car is purchased. Maruti seized the opportunity to sell this concept to a utilitarian culture with long term orientation.

Masculinity and Femininity

The fourth aspect of culture is that of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity is defined by the values of achievement and success whereas femininity is characterized by caring for others and an emphasis on the quality of life (Mooij, 2010). An extension of individualism/short-term orientation of the United States can also be observed in the competitive/masculine tone of a TV commercial for Discover Card in which the protagonist splurges on holiday decorations until his house outshines the neighbor's. Feminine cultures are considered more modest and masculine cultures are known to be driven by the desire to stand out. In masculine cultures, the presenters are often famous people as opposed to feminine cultures that do not give much importance to the presenter. According to Blum (2003), America's obsession with celebrities explains Advertisers' reasons for using them as the face and voice of their product or service. For McCracken, celebrities are “super consumers” who have a profound impact on viewers by virtue of being perfect in public eye and therefore, admirable (cited in LaWare et al., 2013). The voice of “opinion leaders” or self-proclaimed experts in a field is an American word-of-mouth communication strategy that may point towards a culture of masculinity.

However, this is not to claim that celebrity endorsements are not popular in India. In fact,

mainstream advertising feeds on fandom to build brand loyalty. Bollywood stars are looked up to as authority figures whose approval influences purchase decisions. The advertisements of Lux beauty bar have a long history of featuring actresses in their commercials. Nike follows suite by using cricketers for endorsements in a country where the craze for the sport surpasses all limits. In Hofstede's study, India scored lower (56) than the United States (62) in masculinity (Nair et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it is still masculine in its approach. This also supports the placement of India in high PDI (where the voices of the powerful dominate) as articulated in a previous section. Interestingly, the woman in Olay's campaign in the US discussed earlier is not a celebrity. According to W. Karen Page, G. Rajdeep, and G. Manish, people in the United States would rather go by facts and reasoning than take a celebrity's word as a credible source (Nair et al., 2016). These inherent contradictions reflect intra-cultural diversity and the absence of absolutes in advertising.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The final dimension of culture is uncertainty avoidance (UA), i.e., the tendency to move away from ambiguity. Cultures that are inclined towards UA prefer structured messages that ascribe to rules and are validated by an expert. They may also resort to highly emotive communication as a means to navigate tense situations and are not as receptive to innovations. The use of cultural stereotypes in Indian advertising such as the middle-class man, nagging mother or wife, or carefree millennials also signal towards a lower acceptance of change. According to Paul, "a highly competitive and volatile environment like India leaves little room for experimentation. Set formulas are at play and diversity is just a spoken word." (Irani, 2016)

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This perspective can also be traced back to India's reference as a country with high power distance where hierarchical structures seem to be set in stone.

According to Mooij, the voice of Advertising in the United States, which is a low UA culture, is humorous and innovative because of the creative freedom the Country enjoys (2010).

A contrasting view is presented by Patel et al., who argue that American culture is more law-oriented and likely to abide by rules and guidelines to avoid uncertainty (2013). Take for example TV commercials for pharmaceutical and medical products. Following the

problem-solution communication is a detailed list of possible side effects which abide by the United States' law that requires advertisers to inform consumers about all risks involved. In contrast, commercial pharmaceutical advertising is near to nil in India. The few ads for OTC drugs that are aired on TV do not convey any information about drug composition or undesirable effects.

Advertising methods in the United States are also found to rely more on detailed reasoning based on logical arguments that emphasize product specifics. In the words of David Ogilvy, the father of Advertising, "the more informative your advertising, the more persuasive it will be." This statement reflects the North American "saxonic" approach — a tendency to use facts and evidence to categorize the world into comparable extremes. The assumption that duality facilitates decision making and that the primary purpose of advertising is to persuade customers could be why emotions are sometimes underplayed in American commercials. However, an overload of information may lead to undesirable consequences such as consumer desensitization and losing the current customer base (Martin et al., 2010).

Patel et al., further claim that emotions have a profound influence on the purchase decisions of customers (2013). In their study, India is presented as a culture with low UA that sways away from information and towards emotion. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that emotive advertising could also be representative of a high UA culture and a country cannot be situated in the low UA category solely based on a lack of focus on informative advertising. Advertisers need to understand that emotional appeals are in close juxtaposition with rational voices. Feeling and thinking are two sides of the same coin of advertising although the understanding and expression of emotions may vary across cultures.

Conclusion

Since culture and advertising are inseparable, it is necessary to conceive strategies that are relevant to the target audience. On the other hand, the introduction of new ideologies through advertising may have the potential to foster cultural change as is observed in present day India. Therefore, the relationship between culture and advertising is reciprocal. In other words, culture can be perceived as both a tool and product of advertising. To quote Harish Bijoor, “Advertising is not just a mirror but also a perception creator. It makes and molds generations of attitudes.” (Irani,2016) Indian culture characterized mainly by high power distance, collectivism and long-term orientation makes the rules of communication implicit and rooted in tradition. The USA on the other hand seems to employ more explicit and direct communication owing to lower power distance, individualism and short-term orientation. Masculinity seems to be a common cultural aspect shared by both the countries. Uncertainty avoidance is still a grey area and highly

contested by researchers. However, a linear, cause-effect relationship does not exist between the collective culture of a country and individual behavior. Therefore, the results of this study are speculative, not conclusive. This research is explorative in nature and could serve as a reference point in identifying distinct patterns in Advertising methods and the cultural values they represent. The scope of this comparative study can be extended to an in-depth analysis of dominant subcultures that may represent different regions in India and the United States but also identify with a common national culture and/or language.

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