Literature Review – Advertisements across cultures

What makes a consumer remember an advertisement when so much clutter exists in the media? In creating an ad, producers consider multiple different aspects of who they are targeting as their main consumers and what makes up their consumer profile. When considering advertisements across cultures, the differences are significant; as a culture changes based on principles such as individualism or collectivism, and expected gender roles the advertisements that correctly appeal to that culture change as well. There are of course debates on how strict these lines can be drawn between differing cultural views and the impact it has on the advertisements of that culture, especially as Western culture passes beyond the borders of Western nations on increasing levels. Regardless of this homogenization, there is no debate that a culture does shape how persons within it view and understand their surrounding world.

In order to discuss how the differences in a culture impact what is seen as effective media in that culture, it is necessary to completely understand what culture truly is. Geert Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another (Hofstede, 1983).” To paraphrase, Hofstede is assuming that different groups, whether they are religious, national or otherwise, can differentiate based on how they have learned to view the world. These differences can be extreme, as seen later while discussing individualistic and collective societies, or much more general: for instance, Morris and Lee argue that sex roles are often one of the traits found more similar as cultures change (Morris & Lee, 2009).

If we do learn culture, as Hostede suggests, than it comes as no surprise that there is no one culture that satisfies the ideals of societies from many different nations. The culture of Americans contrasts strongly with that of people in China (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997), for example. This global contrast is made possible by the different types of communication found acceptable in each nation. We are not born knowing that our culture expects females to do the laundry or that the progress of the group is more important than that of the individual. These things are taught to us through interacting with our peers, going to school, learning from our parents, listening to religion and most importantly, from viewing the mass media. The images that surround us, teach us our culture. (O’Barr, 1994 & Morris & Lee, 2009)
When it comes to how culture plays a role in the world of advertising, it is essential to understand the culture of a targeted audience so that an effective advertisement can be crafted. Morris and Lee argue that advertisers must research the people they are marketing to including things such as what guides “their purchase decisions... their lifestyles, attitudes, perceptions, habits, behaviors, wants and needs (Morris & Lee, 2009, 5).” It would be foolish to assume that every person is equally receptive to the same message. This reason is what drives advertisers to understand the culture that shapes their audience so that the message they intend to send, is the one that they actually send. Just like the media, advertisements should mirror the real life occurrences that inspire them (Goffman, 1979) in order to be acceptable and effective to the viewers.

With media changing alongside culture, advertisers do their best to understand what methods will be the most effective in each unique culture and these infrequently overlap. To better understand what creates the differences between cultures and the most effective messages for each culture, Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimension on 5 levels will be the most useful. This theory supposes that 5 factors distinguish the members of one culture from another: the power distance index, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity and femininity, the uncertainty index and the long-term orientation. Each of these plays into the explanation of the need for advertisers to specifically tailor their messages differently depending on each culture but the first and largest factor that will be considered here is the individualism of a culture.

As the name suggests, an individualistic culture emphasizes the success of the individual stronger than that of the group. It takes on the attitude that each person looks after his or her self and that personal triumphs are the most celebrated. (Gregory & Munch, 1996) These cultures define the separation between self-concept or personality and society or culture (Morris & Lee, 2009). The most common example of an individualistic society is that of America where individuals are praised for their achievements more often than receiving (or caring to receive) communal success. An advertisement featuring a product or service with qualities to enhance personal perseverance would likely do better in this marketplace than in that of a collectivist society.

On the opposite end of the individualist culture, lies the collectivist lifestyle where importance of community success and strength dominates. In these societies, groups are tightly knit and families are often larger or at least more extended to include aunts, uncles and several
generations unlike what is expected with individualism (Morris & Lee, 2009). Here distinctions between in-groups and out-groups are sharply recognized and the goals, needs and views of the in-group are more important than those of the individuals involved (Mooji, 2010, 77). Collectivism involves a feeling of mutual obligation to those within the in-group and strong individual or liberalism is seen as threatening to the society as a whole (Mooji, 2010 & Morris & Lee, 2009). Common examples of this type of culture are seen throughout Asia, with China being the most popular and recognized collectivist culture.

To apply this understanding of the differences between collectivist cultures and individual cultures, multiple different levels can be evaluated. First, from the view of advertisers, a major difference between these cultures that influences consumers is their motivational value types (Gregory & Munch, 1996). One way to approach these is with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. On the lower four levels, the pyramid in Figure 1 (J. Finkelstein) lists the deficiency needs which occur out of deprivation or a lack of something. These are physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, and esteem which can each be elaborated on further. The highest level in the pyramid is referred to as a growth need that stems from the desire to grow on a personal level. At the pinnacle of the pyramid, self-actualization is found. (Maslow, 1943) These can be extended to consumer decision making and linked to the differences between collective and individual cultures. The first two levels of physiological and safety needs often will cross the cultural gap and be sought equally by all consumers, although advertisers can use different tools to correctly market these which will be evaluated later. Moving higher up the pyramid, cultural differences will become stronger.

On the level of love and belonging, both individualistic and collectivist cultures will values these, but to different degrees. In a collectivist culture, “friends” often feel a reciprocal commitment to one another (Mooji, 2010) that is lacking on a similar level in individualistic
cultures. Friends are more of a commodity in individualistic cultures since a certain level of time and energy must be invested to actually gain this relationship. In the cultures where personal achievement is highly valued, this time and energy is not prioritized to fostering friendships. Just like collectivist societies have in-groups, similar groups exist in individualist societies but these have less influence and are joined willingly by those in cultures where the self is the most important. People in similar in-groups in individualistic cultures are often thought of as friends, but they still lack the stronger kinship bond found between members of in-groups in collectivist cultures. (Mooji, 2010)

Moving further up the pyramid, the levels of esteem and self-actualization will speak more directly to an individualistic culture than the needs for love and belonging which mesh well in a collectivist society. The traits that explain these two levels are similar to the values of the “I” cultures – achievement, respect from others, self-esteem and confidence. These strong characteristics would be seen as contrary to the harmony and survival of a group in a collectivist culture. Satisfying these needs through an advertisement would benefit an advertiser who is working in an individualistic marketplace whereas it would hinder the same message in a collectivist society.

Returning to the first two levels of the pyramid, advertisers have the easier task of marketing these since these needs are fundamental regardless of the culture being looked at. However, the message and appeal used to promote the product or service can still be influenced by the type of culture that the advertisement is found in. For example, a person in an individualistic society would be much more likely to find a message promoting job security through means of satisfying their personal success or other personal benefits more effective. On the other hand, in a collectivist society, a similar feature of employment could be advocated by emphasizing that personal job security protects the financial means of the extended family of that individual. (Morris & Lee, 2009) Both of these are similar ideas but different tactics would be necessary for the message to be effective for the target audience involved.

Gregory and Munch looked further than these five levels of needs to consider “personal needs, social motives, and social institutional demands (Gregory & Munch, 1996, 10).” They considered a study that looked at what influenced consumers based on several motivational behaviors which were determined to be either more individualistic or collective traits. The categories included, for example, self-gratification or hedonism, against traditional values or
acceptance. While they found that these motivations did follow the expected trend for an individualistic culture versus a collectivist society, the sharp dichotomy between these two types of cultures was diminished by their findings. That is to say, the study could argue that persons within an individual culture can show collectivist traits and vice versa. This redeeming factor suggests that if an advertiser misconstrues his or her study of a culture to better adapt a message to that culture’s communication style, the message could still be successful in a percent of the population. However, the overall positive trend between the self-importance words with the individualist responses and that between the group words and the collectivist societies does support the importance of understanding a culture before advertising to it.

Another study considered the importance of advertisement techniques when considering if a culture is more individualistic or collective. As mentioned previously, the American culture is considered to be a largely individualistic society. To contrast with this, the Chinese society is much more collective in nature where the success of the group triumphs over individual achievements. A study by Zhang & Neelankavil aimed to test whether the appeals used in advertising should focus on matching the communication style of a society. This experiment tested two different audiences made up of students from the Chinese collectivist culture and then Americans from the individualistic culture with advertisements portraying the same images, just with different ad copy. (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997)

Choosing different language to specifically appeal to the important values of an individualist or a collectivist culture can completely change the message and effectiveness of an advertisement (Morris & Lee, 2009). In the above study, one example of language choice turns “Come and indulge in the joy of self-expression” into “Share the moments of happiness with your friends and family” (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997, 138). The first message clearly targets the individualistic desires of self importance and self-gratification by asking the consumer to personally ‘indulge’ and take advantage of the ‘self-expression’ opportunity. Contrastingly, the second message appeals more to the ideas of collectivism by invoking a group to ‘share’ their success and joy with more than just one person but with ‘friends and family.’ No images were changed between the ads, only the vocabulary choices were modified but the results did show a difference.

The message of individualism was found more effective with the American audiences while that with the collectivist terminology resonated stronger with the Chinese participants.
This illustrates that understanding the language used to communicate on a normal basis within a culture can have a strong effect on whether or not an advertisement will be found successful. Another factor that was found to impact the effectiveness of the messages was the actual product being displayed. Certain products naturally appeal to a consumer for personal purposes while others can be utilized for less personal reasons (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1997). This again causes the collectivism or individualism of a culture to impact the advertisement’s success because products that are more personal would already be stacked to do well in an individualistic market while the contrary is true for non-personal products. This reverts back to the argument of motivation on the lower two levels of Maslow’s pyramid.

The theory of motivation in respects to individualistic and collectivist cultures is simply one way that cultures in different areas of the world respond better or worse to similar messages in advertising. Another factor is the overall masculinity or femininity of the culture. The differing in gender views of a society refers to the expected distribution of roles for males and females in that culture (Hofstede, 1983). Much like the theory of a group mentality or not, these roles are not inbred into individuals upon birth. Instead, these roles are learned through experiences and interactions with others in society as well as through the portrayed differences found in the media. As soon as a child is born, the importance of gender beings to weigh in and influence the choices they are able to make including those made for them. (O’Barr, 2006)

Although it is often assumed that views of masculinity and femininity are the most similar across various cultures, this is not a factor that is set in stone. Gender roles beyond the basic biological expectations are created through socialization that occurs with each generation (Morris & Lee, 2009). These roles are socially constructed and do not always follow the assumed idea that males are more aggressive and economically or politically interested leaving the females to hold the more care-taker role. One trend that can be seen cross-culturally is the gender life cycle where traits specific to males or females begin at an early age in advertising and are subsequently emphasized as the gender ages in the media. (O’Barr 2006). Much like discussions from class, this idea suggests that the more important traits to each gender are shown more and more strongly as the life cycle progresses (until the point when advertisements reach the older age group and gender becomes less of an issue).

Cultures that are deemed to be more masculine in nature often show values that fit with the stereotypical ideal of masculinity. These societies value material success and progress as
well as the accumulation of monetary and material things (Morris & Lee, 2009). Even though these values are seen in the entire culture, they are underlined more for the males who are expected to be assertive, ambitious, tough, physically strong and able to suppress their emotions.

Contrary to these masculine cultures, feminine cultures are dominated by mostly the opposite values. Societal values would include care-giving, perseverance, warm relationships, and sympathy as important aspects to their culture. In these cultures, emotions are not seen as a weakness but as a necessity, and compassion is much more evident than in the contrasting masculine culture (Morris & Lee, 2009 & O’Barr, 2006).

Inspired by the readings in Advertising and Societies as well as lectures from class, the idea that gender may be one of the more cross-cultural traits required some research. Stereotypes of the portrayed gender roles in advertising are reflecting those from Western media in more and more cultures. While it is still important for the specific gender roles of a culture to be represented in advertisements so that these messages will be effective, the Western ideals of gender roles are increasingly globalizing what is expected for each gender (Luther, McMahan & Shoop, 2008).

The female stereotype is more readily criticized in advertisements since the Western cultures are considered more masculine so one aspect of the media often portrays women in inferior roles. Females are often seen as “decorative” in advertisements or placed as the object of sexual pursuit (Frith & Mueller, 2003) in American advertising, which is starting to bleed past the borders of this nation and appear in other cultures as well. Two common ways of achieving this is through the seductive gaze of the female models who engage the camera and the audience or with the model touching herself in either a coy or sexually suggestive way. Further elements often include a female in a lounging or recumbent pose, being withdrawn or having downward eyes, and using a body cant where odd angles make the model’s body something to be looked at and nothing more. (Frith & Mueller, 2003) These things can be used in a sexual light but almost always force the female into a position where she is inferior to the male whether this gender is present or not. Female models become objectified or even dehumanized through these suggested positions. Advertisements reflect these ideals after gathering the stereotype from the culture and the media, which does display females as beings whose beauty is emphasized and submissive characteristics are desired.
“Men and women featured in advertisements generally have been typecast to adhere to the dominant concepts that are held regarding men and women (Luther, McMahan & Shoop, 2008, 187).” While the women in the masculine society of America display the sexual and submissive characteristics that control the female stereotype portrayed by the media, males in advertisements are as equally susceptible to being stereotyped in order to fit the cultural standard. Considering the Western culture as the standard that is starting to appear cross-culturally in advertisements, the typical masculine figure is displayed as the sharp contrast to the meek and risqué female. A study completed by Morris & Lee analyzed which gender would be more often portrayed as the professional in a masculine culture and found a positive trend between males in professional occupations and the masculinity of the culture (Morris & Lee, 2009, 16-17). Western culture dictates that the males are the bread-winners while females more traditionally remain at home (although this stereotype is slowly changing and more equal depictions are starting to appear in the media). To be a man means to be powerful, strong, active, physically enduring, and stoic (O’Barr, 2006). These characteristics are provided to young boys through culture and then encouraged as they continue to grow in the media that surrounds them, truly defining what is culturally acceptable for males.

Even though these traits are most typical in the Western cultures, they have spread to other nations. Several comparisons of masculine versus feminine cultures reveal the gender stereotypes for each of these and do show the different effective levels of advertising geared specifically to that culture instead of advertising that simply follows the Western culture standards. While the level of gender stereotyping is independent of the masculinity of a culture, the portrayals of each gender in advertisements do often follow the masculinity of that nation. For example, a comparison between the masculine societies of the UK to the more feminine culture of the Netherlands found females were shown in a more liberated light professionally in the Netherlands (de Wulf, Oderkerken-Schroder & Hofstee, 2003, 12). Even though only 5.9% of females in Dutch advertisements were shown in a working role, this still was significantly about the 3.2% of females holding a similar role in UK advertisements (de Wulf, Oderkerken-Schroder & Hofstee, 2003, 11). One interesting comment on this overall low number is the point that Western culture still dictates feminine qualities that leave women out of the workplace more often than not. This could have been an integral reason behind the failure of the other hypotheses, which hoped to find females in masculine societies more often as decorative, sexual
objects, seductively dressed and less equal than men, to name a few (de Wulf, Oderkerken-Schroder & Hofstee, 2003, 8). These traits seem to be more normalized as Western gender portrayals branch into other cultures which lessens the gap of female stereotyping in advertising between masculine and feminine cultures. De Wulf, Oderkerken-Schroder and Hofstee suggest this as well in their final analysis by proposing they “could argue that the portrayal of women is increasingly converging across western European societies, resulting in fewer differences in gender stereotyping between countries that differ on their masculinity scores (2003, 13).”

Still, nuances between representations of each gender in advertising do exist between different cultures and this Western takeover is not absolute. Like the study mentioned above, women in cultures that value female independence more do get to take on a professional role more often than those cultures with masculine domination. Research presented in Advertising and Societies supports this by marking that women in Swedish advertisements were shown in high-powered professional roles more than women in American advertisements (Frith & Mueller, 2003, 235). According to Hofstede’s cultural dimension scale and masculinity index, Sweden received a 5 on the masculinity index (Hofstede, 1991, 83). This reveals Sweden to be a more feminine culture where it will be culturally acceptable for females to be portrayed as more than just sexual objects and actually enter the professional workplace.

This contrasts with higher ranked masculine nations such as France and America where sexual appeal is emphasized in importance for female traits. In France, women in advertisements often receive extra emphasis on the characteristics proposed by Western culture. Nudity and additional sexual appeal are more culturally acceptable in French society than in American society (Frith & Mueller, 2003, 237). This culture has a masculinity score that gives the gender expectations a much closer role to those of Western culture. Hofstede ranks France as lower on the masculinity index than the world average of 50, giving this country a 43 suggesting that more feminine qualities will be emphasized – such as sexuality. The more liberal atmosphere of the French culture lets these sexual freedoms appear in advertisements and the media more than in the Western culture which its media emulates, revealing that subtle differences can still exist even as Western culture tends to dominate.

When comparing the higher masculinity ranking of France to the low level found in Sweden, the chasm found between their advertisements follows the suggestion that gender expectations in a culture will impact that culture’s media messages. France is found to be more
masculine so the typical ideals of assertiveness and dominance will prevail in advertisements. Males will display these characteristics more strongly than their female counterparts who are not expected to fill these roles of superiority. On the other hand, in the more feminine society of Sweden, women have the luxury of being seen outside of the typical inferior, objectified role placed upon them by the physically dominant males that are found in masculine societies. These women are not held down by the gender expectations that they exist in the media as caregivers and items to be looked at to fulfill a sexual appeal. Their culture has given them the option to fill professional roles that other more masculine and Western cultures reserve for just the male gender.

One final study further underlines that the cultural preferences and expectations for gender roles influence the advertisements found in that culture – “Advertisements are seen as mirroring a society’s gender-related beliefs in an effort to attract a greater number of consumers (Luther, McMahan & Shoop, 2008, 189).” In this study, magazine ads from similar American and Japanese publications were compared to analyze the female portrayals anticipated for each culture. The results supported most of the hypothesized expectations which focused on masculine characteristics being emphasized more in the male-dominated Japanese society. Several of the results included Japanese females being shown as less serious than American female models and Japanese male models were being shown as more serious than American males. Both content analyses revealed that in each culture, males were overall seen as more serious than females, suggesting that both societies still rely on the male-dominance in their expected gender roles. (Luther, McMahan & Shoop, 2008, 194-196)

An aspect of the Asian culture that was not found in American cultures was the preferred beauty ideal. While the Eurocentric idea of beauty is taking over the advertisement industry in most marketplaces by displaying ethnic models that have fairer skin than what is expected for those ethnicities (Frith & Mueller, 2003), the Japanese ads show their own preferences. The Western ideal of fairer skin does come through in this culture, much like other cultures where darker skin is the norm but paler skin has become the ideal. However, reconsidering the less serious female models found in Japanese magazines a cultural expectation of gender can be found. The attitudes and expressions of the Japanese women were younger and more girlish than their American counterparts (Luther, McMahan & Shoop, 2008 & Frith & Mueller, 2003). American advertisements show a certain maturity in their sexually appealing models that is more
advanced than this younger standard found in Japan. This contrast implies that certain advertisements using the sexual appeal of females from each culture would not successfully bridge the cultural gap and convey the same effective message since what is found to be appealing changes.

No culture is exactly the same and not everyone will agree on what are the best overall techniques for an advertisement. There are some normative characteristics that can help influence the assumption of which advertisements will be most successful in one culture or another. Significant differences in cultural values found between individualistic societies and collectivist societies make specific language choice important when creating ad copy that will be used in various cultures. The expected gender roles also differ across cultures and appropriately portraying these through positioning of male and female models in advertisements is essential to their success. Although research shows a growing trend of globalization where Eurocentric and Western culture ideals are infiltrating other cultures, an assumption that advertising will be consistently effective cross-culturally cannot be supported. It is extremely true that the communication of our culture shapes our understanding of the world and successful advertisers should understand this concept as well as these different worlds.