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Advertising of controversial products: a cross-cultural study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to determine attitudes towards the advertising of certain controversial products/services and reasons for being offensive across four different countries, Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK.

Design/methodology/approach – This was achieved by analyzing the responses to a questionnaire that was distributed to a convenience sample of university students in the four countries. A total of 954 were sampled for this study. The results indicated that geography is not a major determinant of attitudes, and that religious and historical factors play a very important role.

Findings – Of the 17 products presented, 11 resulted in similar answers for New Zealand and the UK, and seven were similar for Malaysia and Turkey. However, it was apparent that the two countries mostly populated by Muslims had some differences as Malaysia has a multicultural society that must make some allowances for other ethnic groups. It also appears that racism and racist images are of concern to all those sampled.

Originality/value – The opening up of regional markets and the development of regional and global media, such as satellite television and the internet, will mean that marketers will try to take advantage of the associated benefits of a standardized approach to advertising and promotional activities. For those involved in international marketing, it is important that they are aware of possible differences and cultural sensitivities when entering a new market or undertaking a standardized mass-media campaign across a region, whether it be Australasia or Europe.

Keywords Advertising, Classes of goods marketed, Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing number of advertisements being broadcast, printed or exposed to the public that are for products considered by some to be controversial, or socially sensitive, and the portrayal of controversial images in advertisements. Reasons for this include:

- the use of global promotional strategies;
- creative thinking of less offensive ways of communicating the message;
- the desensitizing of the community;
- the growth of new media;
- people becoming more aware of some products; and
- agencies try to “cut through the clutter” to gain awareness.

The issue of controversial or offensive advertising has been raised in western countries (Wilson and West, 1981; Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Shao, 1993; Fahy *et al.*, 1995; Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Crosier and Erdogan, 2001), but little has focused on Australasian countries (Waller, 1999; Waller and Fam, 2000).

While this is a global phenomenon, the showing of some advertisements in a culturally diverse, and sensitive, region like Australasia can cause some offence to some members of the public. The opening up of countries to foreign advertisements has meant that people across Australasia have a greater opportunity of exposure to potentially offensive advertising (Waller and Fam, 2000). This includes advertising of products such as alcohol, contraception, underwear, and feminine hygiene products, and the use of indecent language and anti-social behavior. While the degree of controversy generated may, or may not, assist the brand with added publicity, it is important to analyze products and images that can cause offense to different cultures around the world.

Australasia is a very diverse region, for example there are countries that are predominantly British-influenced (Australia; New Zealand), French-influenced (New Caledonia; Tahiti), Polynesian (Vanuatu; Samoa), Melanesian (New Guinea), Muslim monoculture (Indonesia), Muslim multicultural (Malaysia), Asian Buddhist (Thailand), Asian Christian (Philippines), and so on. To undertake a broad, standardized promotional strategy could result in offending some members of the country's population. Therefore, care should be taken to ensure that

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particular images in one culture are acceptable in other cultures, otherwise some embarrassing mistakes can occur (Ricks, 1983).

This paper will analyze the results of a survey that expands on Waller's 1999 study and is undertaken across four particular countries which look at the attitudes towards the advertising of certain controversial products and reasons for being offensive. The countries chosen were Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK. The reasons why these countries were chosen is that they have certain elements about them that are both similar and different, which make them worthy of such a cross-cultural analysis. Malaysia and New Zealand are both part of Australasia, however, there are very different in culture, language, history and religion. The UK and Turkey are both in Europe (although Turkey could be classified as Eurasia, it is currently undertaking reforms in order to prepare for accession to the European Union). Further, while the UK and Turkey are very different European countries, the UK and New Zealand have strong historic and cultural ties, and Malaysia and Turkey both have populations that are mostly Muslim, and would have some cultural similarities. This study of cross-cultural attitudes of people toward the advertising of controversial products can be used to help global marketers and advertising agencies develop an understanding of cultural sensitivities and differences, and what advertising is perceived by some people to be offensive.

Controversial products

Various types of products, both goods and services, have been suggested by past studies as being controversial when advertised. This includes cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, and political advertising. Academic research in this area has described these products as: "unmentionables", "socially sensitive products", "decent products", or "controversial products" (Wilson and West, 1981; Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Shao, 1993; Shao and Hill, 1994a, b; Fahy *et al.*, 1995; Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 1999; Waller and Fam, 2000). Wilson and West (1981, p. 92) described them as:

[...] products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented.

Wilson and West (1981) presented a number of examples, including:

- "products" (for personal hygiene, birth control, warfare, and drugs for terminal illness);
- "services" (for abortion, sterilization, venereal disease (VD), mental illness, funeral directors, and artificial insemination); and
- "concepts" (for political ideas, palliative care, unconventional sexual practices, racial/religious prejudice and terrorism).

While revisiting this issue Wilson and West (1995) suggested how the AIDS issue had changed what was previously thought of as "unmentionable".

Feminine hygiene products was the main focus of Rehman and Brooks (1987), but they also included undergarments, alcohol, pregnancy tests, contraceptives, medications, and VD services, as examples of controversial products. When asked about the acceptability of various products being advertised on television, only two products were seen as unacceptable by

a sample of college students: contraceptives for men and contraceptives for women. Feminine hygiene products has also been mentioned in industry articles as having advertisements that are in "poor taste", "irritating" and "most hated" (Alter, 1982; Hume, 1988; Rickard, 1994).

Triff *et al.* (1987) presented an overview of the area of "advertising ethics", and surveyed 100 people regarding various aspects of advertising. The three types of advertising chosen in this study were advertising directed towards children, alcoholic beverage advertising and political advertising. Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1994) began their study on ethical judgments of political advertising by discussing its "controversial status", pointing out that political advertising is "one of the least regulated form of marketing communication" as it is excluded from the rigorous surveillance undertaken on commercial advertising. The main ethical criticisms they found focused on deceptive or misleading statements, unfairness as some practices would be illegal if in a commercial context, the use of emotional persuasion and negative messages and the potential detrimental effects resulting from electing the "wrong" candidate.

Alan Shao undertook a large global study of advertising agency attitudes regarding various issues, including the legal restrictions of advertising of "sensitive" products, which can be controversial for the agency which handles the account (Shao, 1993; Shao and Hill, 1994a, b). The products/services discussed in these studies were cigarettes, alcohol, condoms, female hygiene products, female undergarments, male undergarments, sexual diseases (e.g. STDs, AIDS), and pharmaceutical goods.

In a study that focused on advertising sensitive products, Fahy *et al.* (1995) asked a sample of over 2,000 people their attitudes toward the advertising on certain products on television. The products were grouped into three main categories: alcoholic beverages, products directed at children and health/sex-related products. Comparing the attitudes according to sex, age, income, region, education and race, they found that women, particularly aged 50 and over, had much higher disapproval levels for such commercials.

Barnes and Dotson (1990) discussed offensive television advertising and identified two different dimensions: offensive products and offensive execution. The products which were in their list included condoms, female hygiene products, female undergarments, and male undergarments. Waller (1999) and Waller and Fam (2000) looked further at the issue of offensive products and offensive execution in studies in Australia and Malaysia respectively. In fact, this study will expand on Waller's (1999) original study.

However, the majority of these studies looked at a few or a larger grouping of these products within a sample from the one western country (Shao (1993) and Shao and Hill (1994a b); with Waller and Fam (2000) being exceptions). This study will develop this area of study by expanding Waller (1999) by introducing a cross-cultural perspective. This will be done by comparing the results from four very different countries (Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK). The cultural implications will be discussed at the end of the paper.

Methodology

To obtain some measure of attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products, a questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of university students in four countries

(Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK). The rationale for using university students as subjects has been a research method practiced worldwide for many years, mainly for their accessibility to the researcher and homogeneity as a group (Calder *et al.*, 1981). A student sample had already been used by Rehman and Brooks (1987), Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1994) and Waller (1999). Further, the use of students in a potential cross-cultural comparison of attitudes has other advantages, as 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 ten 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 a list of products/services and 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. The list of products/services presented was based on Waller (1999), which was, in turn, based on past literature (Wilson and West, 1981; Triff *et al.*, 1987; Shao, 1993; Fahy *et al.*, 1995). The aim of the list is to have a wide range of potentially controversial products/services from extremely offensive (racially extremist groups; cigarettes) to those that are not considered offensive at all (pharmaceuticals; charities) from which respondents can rate their personal level of offensiveness. A total of 17 products were presented in the final questionnaire:

- (1) alcohol;
- (2) charities;
- (3) cigarettes;
- (4) condoms;
- (5) female contraceptives;
- (6) female hygiene products;
- (7) female underwear;
- (8) funeral services;
- (9) gambling;
- (10) guns and armaments;
- (11) male underwear;
- (12) pharmaceuticals;
- (13) political parties;
- (14) racially extremist groups;
- (15) religious denominations;
- (16) sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention); and
- (17) weight loss programs.

The reasons for offence were also taken from past literature (Shao and Hill, 1994a, b). Western/US images were added to determine whether Western images were perceived to be offensive, particularly to the Asian respondents. The change was included after the New Zealand sample was implemented. The list of reasons included:

- anti-social behavior;
- indecent language;
- nudity;
- racist images;
- sexist images;
- subject too personal; and
- Western/US images.

A total of 954 were sampled for this study. The demographic profile of the respondents is found in Table I. The Malaysian sample resulted in a total of 379 students: 137 (36 percent) male and 242 (64 percent) female; the New Zealand sample had 196 students: 84 (43 percent) male and 112 (57 percent) female; the UK sample had 170 students: 48 (28 percent) male and 122 (72 percent) female; and the Turkish sample had a total of 209 students: 134 (64 percent) male and 75 (36 percent) female. The modal score for the sample groups showed that similar aged people responded to the survey: 20 years old (New Zealand and UK) and 21 years old (Malaysia and Turkey). As religion is perceived as a key cultural variable, the respondents were asked their religion and the intensity with which they perceive their own belief. The strongest belief was from the Turkish respondents where 99 percent identified themselves as Muslim and somewhat devout followers (modal score of 4 out of 5). Malaysia, which is a multicultural Islam-based country, had an equal cross-section of religions, with 30 percent identifying themselves as Buddhist/Taoist, Islamic and Christian. In New Zealand and the UK the majority identified themselves as Christian with New Zealanders saying that they are not devout followers. The basic demographics from the four sample groups, including age, gender, religion and intensity of religious belief is found in Table I.

Results

For this study a comparison was made using the total responses from four different countries (Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK). As mentioned earlier, the countries were chosen for particular reasons. Malaysia and New Zealand represent different parts of Australasia, while the UK and Turkey are in Europe/Eurasia; Malaysia and Turkey both have populations that are mostly Muslim, while the UK and New Zealand are Western/Christian-based countries; and each are very different countries. In Table II

Table I Demographic profile of respondents

	New							
	Malaysia		Zealand		UK		Turkey	
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
Age								
Mode years	21		20		20		21	
Gender								
Male	136	36	84	43	48	28	134	64
Female	243	64	112	57	122	72	75	36
Religion								
Buddhism/Taoism		30		5		1		0
Islam		30		2		2		99
Hinduism		2		6		0		0
Christianity		30		48		73		0
Non-believers		7		21		21		1
Others		1		18		3		0
Intensity of belief^a								
Mean		3.34		1.80		2.50		3.49
Mode		3		1		3		4

Note: ^a Scale: 1 = not a devout follower, 5 = a very devout follower

Table II Offensive advertising: a comparison between Malaysia, New Zealand, the UK and Turkey

	Malaysia <i>n</i> = 380	New Zealand <i>n</i> = 195	UK <i>n</i> = 170	Turkey <i>n</i> = 209
Racially extremist groups	3.52 ^a (1.5)	4.14 ^{b,c} (1.2)	4.48 ^c (1.6)	4.95 ^d (1.0)
Gambling	3.22 ^a (1.5)	1.87 ^{b,c} (1.1)	2.86 ^c (2.0)	4.98 ^d (1.2)
Cigarettes	3.16 ^a (1.5)	2.12 ^{b,c} (1.3)	2.34 ^c (1.4)	3.65 ^d (1.6)
Guns and armaments	3.13 ^a (1.5)	2.95 ^{a,b} (1.4)	4.18 ^c (1.8)	4.14 ^{c,d} (1.7)
Religious denominations	2.97 ^a (1.4)	2.93 ^{a,b} (1.4)	3.45 ^c (1.9)	4.27 ^d (1.5)
Alcohol	2.9 ^a (1.5)	1.49 ^{b,c} (0.9)	1.31 ^c (0.7)	3.49 ^d (1.7)
Political parties	2.81 ^a (1.3)	2.62 ^{a,b} (1.4)	2.18 ^c (1.4)	3.68 ^d (1.4)
Condoms	2.74 ^a (1.5)	1.45 ^{b,c} (0.8)	1.69 ^c (1.3)	2.62 ^{a,d} (1.6)
Female underwear	2.65 ^a (1.3)	1.24 ^{b,c} (0.5)	1.46 ^c (1.0)	2.54 ^{a,d} (1.5)
Female contraceptives	2.63 ^a (1.3)	1.55 ^b (0.9)	2.72 ^{a,c} (2.2)	2.42 ^{a,c,d} (1.5)
Male underwear	2.53 ^a (1.3)	1.31 ^b (0.7)	1.48 ^c (1.1)	2.72 ^{a,d} (1.5)
Female hygiene products	2.49 ^a (1.3)	1.74 ^{b,c} (1.0)	1.64 ^c (1.0)	2.58 ^{a,d} (1.4)
Funeral services	2.41 ^a (1.3)	1.84 ^b (1.0)	2.38 ^{a,c} (1.8)	4.36 ^d (1.56)
Weight-loss programs	2.38 ^a (1.3)	2.09 ^{a,b,c} (1.2)	1.81 ^c (1.1)	2.68 ^{a,d} (1.6)
Sexual diseases (STD, AIDS)	2.28 ^a (1.5)	1.61 ^{b,c} (0.8)	1.58 ^c (1.0)	2.72 ^d (1.5)
Pharmaceuticals	2.00 ^a (1.1)	1.49 ^{b,c} (0.9)	1.48 ^c (1.2)	2.26 ^{a,d} (1.7)
Charities	1.90 ^a (1.2)	1.55 ^{b,c} (0.9)	1.68 ^c (1.0)	2.29 ^d (1.6)

Notes: Scale: 1 = not at all offensive, 5 = extremely offensive; ^{a,b,c,d} indicate between country differences as per Bonferroni *post hoc* test. Each country has a superscript letter and extra letters indicate countries that have a statistically similar response. For example with respect to Alcohol, there is significant ($p = 0.01$) difference between the means of Malaysia and New Zealand, Malaysia and the UK or Malaysia and Turkey (all have different superscripted letters ^{a,b,c,d}) but no significant difference between New Zealand and the UK as there is a common superscripted letter ^c

the total mean scores and standard deviations for each of the countries are presented with superscript letters identifying each country and the country with which it has a statistically similar response at the 0.01 level.

In general, the Australasian respondents indicated that the majority of the products were not perceived to be producing offensive advertising. Of the 17 products presented, four products resulted in scores above the mid-point of “3”, indicating a degree of offence. These products/services were: racially extremist groups (from both samples); gambling, cigarettes, and guns and armaments (from the Malaysian sample). As for differences between the two groups, based on

means of the total scores, the ranking of the products for the Malaysian sample resulted in:

- (1) racially extremist groups;
- (2) gambling; and
- (3) cigarettes

The New Zealand sample resulted in:

- (1) racially extremist groups;
- (2) guns and armaments; and
- (3) religious denominations.

The results from Europe indicated that eight of the 17 items were perceived to be offensive by the Turkish sample (alcohol, cigarettes, funeral services, gambling, guns and armaments, political parties, racially extremist groups, and religious denominations) while three of the items were considered offensive by the UK sample (racially extremist groups, guns and armaments, and religious denominations). Ranking the products/services by means, for the Turkish resulted in:

- (1) gambling;
- (2) racially extremist groups; and
- (3) funeral services.

For the UK sample this resulted in:

- (1) racially extremist groups;
- (2) guns and armaments; and
- (3) religious denominations.

A statistical comparison was made between the four sample groups using a Bonferroni *post hoc t*-test that observes and adjusts for multiple comparisons. As there are many statistical differences amongst the four different sample groups, it is more meaningful to identify where there are similarities in attitudes, i.e. no statistical difference in responses. The Bonferroni identifies statistical differences between the four groups, however, it also helps to identify where there are similarities in responses from group members. According to the results of the Bonferroni (Table II), the countries that had the greatest number of similar responses were New Zealand and the UK where there were 11 similar responses (alcohol, charities, cigarettes, condoms, female hygiene products, female underwear, gambling, pharmaceuticals, racially extremist groups, sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention), and weight loss programs). Seven similar responses occurred between Malaysia and Turkey (condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, guns and armaments, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, and weight loss programs). As mentioned above, there were 13 items different between Malaysia and New Zealand, which means that four items were similar between these samples (guns and armaments, religious denominations, political parties and weight-loss programs). Only two items were similar between Turkey and the UK (guns and armaments and female contraceptives).

A similar pattern resulted when observing similarities for the reasons an advertisement is perceived as offensive (Table III), with New Zealand and the UK having the biggest number of similar responses. The New Zealand and the UK samples had four similarities out of the six items where there is a possible comparison (racist images, sexist images, subject too personal, and anti-social behavior). Two items were similar between Malaysia and Turkey (sexist images and nudity), one item was similar between Malaysia and New Zealand (anti-social behavior), and there were no similar responses between Turkey and the UK.

Table III Reasons for offensive advertising: a comparison between Malaysia, New Zealand, the UK and Turkey

	Malaysia <i>n</i> = 380	New Zealand <i>n</i> = 195	UK <i>n</i> = 170	Turkey <i>n</i> = 209
Racist images	3.63 ^a (1.3)	4.18 ^{b,c} (1.1)	3.97 ^c (1.3) (1.3)	4.52 ^d (0.8)
Sexist images	3.44 ^a (1.3)	2.88 ^{b,c} (1.4)	2.94 ^c (1.3)	3.44 ^{a,d} (1.4)
Nudity	3.31 ^a (1.4)	1.83 ^b (1.1)	1.94 ^c (1.1)	3.30 ^{a,d} (1.3)
Subject too personal	3.10 ^a (1.2)	2.07 ^{b,c} (1.2)	2.26 ^c (1.1)	3.77 ^d (1.0)
Anti-social behavior	3.09 ^a (1.3)	2.84 ^{a,b,c} (1.4)	2.60 ^c (1.2)	4.00 ^d (1.0)
Indecent language	3.08 ^a (1.3)	2.09 ^b (1.3)	2.46 ^c (1.1)	4.14 ^d (1.0)
Western (US) images	2.85 ^a (1.2)	n/a	1.87 ^c (0.9)	3.79 ^d (1.2)

Notes: Scale: 1 = not at all offensive, 5 = extremely offensive; n/a = not available; ^{a,b,c,d} indicate between country differences as per Bonferroni *post hoc* test. Each country has a superscript letter and extra letters indicate countries that have a statistically similar response. For example with respect to Nudity, there is significant ($p = 0.01$) difference between the means of Malaysia and New Zealand, Malaysia and the UK or New Zealand and the UK (all have different superscripted letters ^{a,b,c,d}) but no significant difference between Malaysia and Turkey as there is a common superscripted letter ^a

Discussion

The first, and most obvious, point that arises from these results is that geography or location is not a major determinant of attitudes. It is clear that the countries located in the same regions do not have similar views regarding what offends them when it comes to advertising certain controversial products and advertising execution. What is important relates to the issues of culture, language, history and, particularly, religion. The countries that did have similar views are New Zealand and the UK (English-speaking, historically Christian-based members of the Commonwealth) and Malaysia and Turkey (secular-democracies populated by mostly Muslims). While this may seem an obvious point, the ramifications for some marketers must be reinforced.

The aim of the list of products, first used in Waller (1999) with an Australian sample, is to have a wide range of potentially controversial products/services from extremely offensive to those that are not considered offensive at all from which respondents can rate their personal level of offensiveness. It would appear that this scale of products has held after being replicated in four different countries. Although some of the mean scores are different, which may be due to cultural factors, the general rank order is fairly similar among the sample groups tested, with a few exceptions that will be discussed below.

Racism is an issue that causes offence to all sample groups. Racially extremist groups was the highest scoring offensive item in three of the four countries (the Turkish sample ranked it second behind gambling); it was the only item identified as offensive in all four countries; and racist images was the

highest scoring reason across all four groups. The item, racially extremist groups, was meant to be a very controversial item and was suggested by Wilson and West (1981) when discussing “concepts” which could be identified as an “unmentionable”. In each country there are particular racial tensions, or sensitivities, which exist. For the Australasian countries, there are tensions between the indigenous Maori population and the dominant European settlers, while in Malaysia the government aims to achieve racial and national harmony in its multiracial society, particularly since race riots in 1969. The Malaysian Advertising Code (Ministry of Information, 1990) promotes cultural sensitivity and social harmony in advertising and prohibits advertisements that “contain statements or suggestions which may offend the religious, racial, political or sentimental susceptibilities of any section of the community”.

Although there was not a statistical difference, the Turkish sample ranked gambling as more offensive than racially extremist groups, and in Malaysia gambling was ranked second. This is may be because Islam prohibits gambling. religion is a very important factor in shaping cultural values, which is reflected in the results. The Turkish sample indicated that 99 percent of them are Muslims and were somewhat devout followers, while 30 percent of the Malaysian sample were practicing Muslims, Islam is the national religion and is responsible in shaping the culture of Malaysia. In these countries the advertising must respect Islamic values and principles, which would especially relate to items like gambling, sex/gender-related products and nudity.

For example, the women in Malaysian advertising must be portrayed as having “good behavior acceptable to local culture and society” (Ministry of Information, 1990, p. 7). Furthermore, female models must adhere to the Advertising Code’s decent dress code which stipulates that a female model must be “covered until the neckline, the length of the skirt worn should be below the knees, the arms may be exposed up to the edge of the shoulder but armpits cannot be exposed”. This has restricted the images used in the advertising of female and male underwear. Also, the sale of female contraceptives and female hygiene products were strictly limited on the mass media. Accordingly some of the items where the Malaysian and Turkish samples resulted in similar results are: condoms, female underwear, female contraceptives, male underwear, female hygiene products, sexist images and nudity.

However, even though they both have populations that are mostly Muslim, there are some differences between them as Malaysia is a multicultural country which is more liberal in its rules so it can maintain social and cultural harmony between the various ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indian (Deng *et al.*, 1994). Alcohol, for example, which is also prohibited by Islamic law, did not receive as high a score of offence in Malaysia as it did in Turkey, even though it is not governed by Islamic law. This is because Malaysia will allow alcohol advertising in Chinese, English and Hindu language newspapers and magazines provided that the advertisements do not encourage the readers to gamble nor increase alcohol consumption (Waller and Fam, 2000). Advertisements regarding sexual diseases, such as STD and AIDS prevention, also received a fairly low score in Malaysia. This is because of the rise in sexually-related diseases, especially AIDS, the Malaysian Government has relaxed the ruling on such advertisements as long as the advertisements inform the

public about the danger of AIDS and in no way encourages promiscuity.

One fairly unusual result, from a Western point of view, is the high offence score for funeral services in Turkey. With a mean score of 4.36, it was perceived, on average, as being more offensive than advertisements for other religious denominations, guns and armaments, and cigarettes. This is because the hiring of a funeral service to handle a relative's death would be a disgrace to family members who are living.

Managerial implications

The opening up of regional markets and the development of regional and global media, such as satellite television and the internet, will mean that marketers will try to take advantage of the associated benefits of a standardized approach to advertising and promotional activities. The result will be that in some markets people will have a greater opportunity of exposure to different types of advertising, including the advertising of potentially socially sensitive or controversial products, which can clash with traditional local values or religious beliefs. For those involved in international marketing, it is important that they are aware of possible differences and cultural sensitivities when entering a new market or undertaking a standardized mass-media campaign across a region, whether it be Australasia or Europe.

Advertisements for products such as alcohol and gambling, or those that have potentially racist or sexist images, may arouse feelings of offence that can have a negative effect on the campaign, or the brand name in general. International marketers must then take into account the possibility of offending part of their market and the unintentional consequences of a controversial campaign when undertaking a mass regional campaign. It may be important to try to develop creative, less offensive ways to send their message, or use more creative media strategies to contact the target market. Public relations activities, such as press releases and interviews, may also be needed, or at least planned for, and a clear procedure followed to answer any complaints from those who might be offended.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed the attitudes toward the advertising of certain controversial products and reasons for being offensive across four different countries: Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK. This resulted in the point that geography is not a major determinant of attitudes, and that religious and historical factors play a very important role. Of the 17 products presented, 11 resulted in similar answers for New Zealand and the UK, and seven were similar for Malaysia and Turkey. However, it was apparent that the two countries mostly populated by Muslims had some differences as Malaysia has a multicultural society that must make some allowances for other ethnic groups. It also appears that racism and racist images are of concern to all those sampled in all four countries. Even though racist images were perceived to be the main reason for offence, the execution reasons were generally given higher scores than the products presented, which confirms previous studies (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 1999).

Further research should be undertaken into controversial advertising and offensive advertising images, particularly in a

cross-cultural context. As globalization and the advantages of standardized promotional program increases the potential to offend people will also increase. By researching attitudes in other than Western countries, to include countries in transition or with specific cultural values, a more realistic picture of the world market can be created, and a standardized approach can be used by international marketers which does not clash with local values.

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Culture is as important to our international marketing as geography

We know from our personal experience that one person’s idea of something offensive often differs from another’s. However, within the confines of our domestic cultures, the advertising industries (sometimes voluntarily, sometimes required by governments) act to reduce the incidence of offence. We can never wholly eliminate offensive advertising especially when some products are innately offensive to some people. The question is, however, the manner in which advertisers deal with “offensive” products – assuming they are legal – and how consumers respond to such advertising and promotion.

Waller *et al.* concentrate on the issues around “offensive” products, which they define as “... products services or concepts that, for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented”. Waller *et al.* also distinguish between products that are, of themselves, offensive and offensive advertising execution.

Although the definition used by Waller *et al.* is straightforward, the authors raise and investigate the question as to whether there are differences between cultures as to the offensiveness of products and product categories. The study our authors undertook casts light on this distinction and also contributes to the continuing debate about the alternatives of global standardization in brand presentation and local specifics. Although most marketers accept the need for adaptation this tends to reflect a desire to encompass tactical considerations at a local level rather than a genuine strategy.

Put simply, standardized global campaigns are more cost-efficient and easier to manage compared to a strategy that requires variation at the regional, sub-regional or individual market level. And us managers are always attracted to what seems a simpler approach!

Culture and attitudes to offensive products

Although Waller *et al.* find a considerable amount of consistency in what products consumers in different cultures find offensive, it is also clear that different cultures do differ – in this study the two less developed, predominantly Muslim cultures (Turkey and Malaysia) were very different from two “Anglo-Saxon” cultures (the UK and New Zealand). This seems to suggest that the cultural make-up of a given market has a considerable impact on consumer attitudes – and we can assume behavior.

What is difficult to unravel in the degree to which it these differences reflect the mores associated with Muslim cultures or the different mores we might see in a less well-developed market. However – and helpfully – Waller *et al.*’s sample of students leads us towards it being the domestic culture rather than the level of economic development. Students are more likely to be from more economically successful backgrounds so the study ameliorates the effect of economic development.

This finding takes us back to the question of marketing and advertising strategies – not just for products that may be seen as offensive but also for any global brand. It is possible that the impact of culture is greater than marketers have often assumed. We have tended to take the view that a consumerist perspective trumps local cultural preferences. So long as we do not actually offend cultural preferences or mores, a standardized advertising and promotional strategy will deliver the goods. Waller *et al.*’s findings suggest otherwise and that we should pay greater attention to cultural differences.

The weakness with regional strategies

The second significant implication of Waller *et al.*’s findings relates to regional strategies. Chopping the world up into distinct regions – East Asia, Australasia/South-east Asia, Europe, etc. – is a tidy approach. Management is geographically convenient as is sales and merchandising support. But it seems from the work here that such convenience results in a misplaced strategy – there is more in common between Turkey and Malaysia despite their geographical separation.

Regional strategies – if that is the right word – should be based as much on cultural commonalities as they are on geographical proximity. The culture of Muslim countries, for example, provides a basis for marketing strategies, as does the association of countries with an Anglo-Saxon heritage (which raises a big question, beyond the language issues, about pan-European strategies). However, we should still recognize that shared media, strong economic links and cultural overlap still suggest the need for a regional perspective to marketing planning.

Some products – and we see this here – have more cultural resonance than others. Tidy regional advertising will work for some products since they do not have that cultural resonance. For others we need to adapt promotions and advertising so as to pick up important cultural themes. And, as we should note here, there are some products that we cannot promote in the same way in, for example, Muslim countries – female sanitary products are a good example here.

Politics, offence and communications

In all the countries surveyed, the advertising of “racially extremist groups” is seen as offensive. On one level it is welcome to see that this is the case since all the countries

involved have, to a greater or lesser extent, ethnic and/or religious minorities.

However, this begs both definitional questions (what do we mean by a racially extreme group) and issues relating to the control – or lack of control – for political advertising. In the UK, political advertising falls outside the core codes of practice although it does have to comply with other

constraints such as those relating to racial discrimination or incitement to racial hatred. It would be interesting to see how the conception of racial extremism varies with political and cultural distinctions.

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