

Advertising Controversial Products in the Asia Pacific: What Makes Them Offensive?

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ABSTRACT. The advertising of controversial products/services and the use of controversial images to “cut through the clutter” in the marketplace appears to be increasing around the world. However, apart from the general ethical issue regarding the deliberate use of controversial/offensive images for public viewing that may offend some people, it is important to determine what makes a controversial advertisement offensive? A questionnaire was distributed to 1014 students across four different countries in the Asia Pacific region to determine what type of products are seen as offensive and the reasons they are offensive. The results present some important implications for international marketers.

KEY WORDS: Asia Pacific, Asian values, collectivism, controversial products, religion

Introduction

Asia is where approximately 60 percent of the world's population lives, with a total population well in excess of three billion people. Its people speak several hundred different languages and dialects, and the region is characterized by a cultural, political, economic and social diversity far greater than anywhere else in the world (Birch et al., 2001). However, despite the diverse cultural characteristics, many leaders of these Asian countries openly adhered to one value system – the Asian values. In fact, the economic miracle of the 1990's in Asia was, according to some political leaders, the result of adhering to these Asian values. These values are usually associated solely with East and South East Asia, and include:

“a stress on the community rather than the individual, the privileging of order and harmony over personal freedom, refusal to compartmentalize religion away from other spheres of life, a particular emphasis on saving and thriftiness, an insistence on hard work, a respect for political leadership, a belief that government and business need not necessary be natural adversaries, and an emphasis on family loyalty” (Sopiee, 1995).

These core beliefs and values are inherited from parents to children and are emphasized by social institutions such as schools, religious groups, businesses and government (Kotler et al., 1996). In short, Asians eat, breathe and sleep with these values. Asian values are a part of everyday lives

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amongst the people of Asia, and assist in formulating their ethical and moral principles that help govern their actions and decision-making. Yet, Asia cannot be considered a homogeneous entity. There are vast variations of cultural and historical traditions amongst the people within a country let alone the region.

With the growth of standardized advertising campaigns and media being available across large geographic regions, the ethical issue arises that the showing of advertising images in a culturally diverse, and sensitive, region like Asia can cause offence to some members of the public. The opening up of countries to foreign advertisements and media, particularly through regional pay television and the Internet, has meant that people across Asia 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 advertising of a controversial product or the use of a controversial image in advertisements may not be an illegal or unethical practice, international marketers must take a decision, based on ethical considerations, on whether it is appropriate, or even worthwhile, to run a campaign which may have the effect of offending some people in the marketplace.

The present study discusses the area of controversial advertising by trying to determine what is perceived to be offensive and reasons why certain types of advertising is perceived to be offensive. Specifically, it will examine how the people of three Asian countries (Malaysia, China and Taiwan) where their political leadership and the official interpretation of Asian values is very powerful, view advertisements relating to controversial products/services like female underwear, contraceptives, funeral services, etc. as opposed to New Zealand, a western country where Asian values receive little attention.

Background

There have been many ethical issues relating to advertising, including the use of untruthful or deceptive claims, containing offensive images such as sexual appeals, stereotyping of particular groups, advertising towards children and encouraging materialism and buying things that people don't need (Belch and Belch, 2001). However, these ethical concerns have not stopped companies from being deliberately controversial. Many companies, such as Benetton, Pizza Hut, and Calvin Klein, have courted controversy as a strategy in their marketing communications (Evans and Sumandeeep, 1993; Anon, 1995; Waller, 1999a; Irvine, 2000). Also some advertisers may be perceived as controversial, just by the nature of product, and any promotion of their product may generate negative responses, for example cigarettes, alcohol or condoms (Wilson and West, 1995; Waller, 1999b). Controversial advertisements which cause a negative reaction, and thereby offence, can result in a number of actions like negative publicity, attracting complaints to advertising regulatory bodies, falling sales, and product boycotts.

Therefore, any international advertisers wanting to undertake a promotional campaign in a new market that may be perceived as controversial must then tread the line between successfully communicating to the marketplace and offending some people in the marketplace. However, there appears to be an increase in the amount of controversial advertising being broadcast and printed. Some of the reasons for this include that society has become more complex, increased awareness of the harmful effects of some products and as agencies try to become more creative to "cut through the clutter" to gain attention and brand awareness (Waller, 1999b). As this study looks at the attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products in various Asia Pacific countries, the following discussion will look at cultural values and controversial products.

Cultural values

Culture can be thought of as a social system that possesses identifiable and interdependent structures which is associated with a common set of shared beliefs, attitudes, and values among its members. These shared beliefs/attitudes/values are derived from many inter-related influences including religion, language, ecology, social organization, political, education and technological systems. Culture is a society's personality. Culture exists to satisfy the needs of the people within a society and offers order and guidance, in the form of standards and rules, by providing known methods of satisfying personal and social needs (Bednall and Kanuk, 1997).

Hofstede (1991) claims culture consists of four layers (symbols, rituals, heroes, and values). Symbols include words, pictures, and objects meaningful only to those who share the same culture while rituals refer to collective activities essential to a society, like the way greetings should be exchanged. Heroes are persons (dead, alive, real or imaginary) who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a society. Collectively these layers are termed an *expression of culture* – visible only to the outside observer. In contrast, values refer to the governing ideas and guiding principles of people's thoughts and actions, and they are "*often endorsed, glamorized and reinforced in advertising*" (Cheng, 1997, p. 773).

One of the major frameworks for understanding culture has been Hofstede's (1980) typology of cultural dimensions which include: individualism/collectivism; power distance; uncertainty avoidance; masculinity/femininity; and Confucian dynamism. However, only two dimensions namely individualism/collectivism and Confucian dynamism will be discussed as they are deemed relevant to this study.

The *individualism/collectivism dimension* pertains to the importance of the group versus the individual. Collectivistic societies are tightly integrated, and individuals belong to "in-groups" from which they cannot detach themselves. People think in "we", as opposed to "me", terms and obtain satisfaction from a job well done by the group. In contrast, people in individualistic societies are expected to look after themselves.

Under individualism, "laws, rules and regulations are institutionalized to protect individual rights" (Kim et al., 1994), whereas "morality among collectivists is more contextual and the supreme value is the welfare of the collective" (Triandis, 1995).

The *Confucian dynamism* is also known as a long/short term orientation. Long-term orientation indicates people in this society are persistence (perseverance), ordering relationships by status and observing this order, thrift, and having a sense of shame. Short-term orientation includes personal steadiness and stability, protecting face, respect for tradition and reciprocation of greetings, favours and gifts (Hofstede, 1991). According to Lu (2001), although this dimension applies mainly to East Asian cultures based on Confucian philosophy, people in non-Chinese societies also experienced these salient Chinese cultural values.

In any culture, the core beliefs and values are inherited from parents to children and are emphasised by social institutions such as schools, religious groups, businesses and government. However, de Mooij (1998, p. 61) claims:

"Understanding the concept of culture and the consequences of cultural differences will make marketing and advertising people realise that one message, whether verbal or visual, can never reach one global audience, because there is not one global culture comprised of people with identical values. Worldwide, there is a great variety of values".

Intuitively in any advertising the more similarity between the presenters in commercials and the viewers the more the advertised product will be liked. This is true in terms of marketing using a culture's value and attitude system as a base, as the target culture will be more likely to recognize the advertised product as "fitting" with their beliefs and way of life. The literature also claimed that differences in value and attitude systems across various cultures is associated with the major differences in consumers behavior and that the dominant attitudes found in Asian culture shape "consumers' motivations, lifestyles, and product choices" (Lowe and Corkindale, 1998, p. 843).

Controversial products

A number of products, both goods and services, have been suggested by past studies as being “controversial” when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, feminine hygiene products, 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, 1994; Fahy et al., 1995; Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 1999b; Waller and Fam, 2000). These studies have mainly looked at the negative aspects of specific advertising and general attitudes towards these types of advertising. Little has been done on *why* these advertisements may be controversial or cause offence.

Feminine Hygiene Products, in particular, has been mentioned in several articles as having advertisements that are in “poor taste”, “irritating” and “most hated” (Alter, 1982; Hume, 1988; Rickard, 1994). Feminine Hygiene Products was the main focus of Rehman and Brooks (1987), but also included undergarments, alcohol, pregnancy tests, contraceptives, medications, and VD services, as examples of controversial products. In a study that focussed on advertising “sensitive products”, Fahy et al. (1995) asked a sample of over 2000 respondents their attitudes towards 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”. 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 (1999b), and Waller and Fam (2000) looked further at the issue of advertising offensive products and offensive execution in studies in Australia and Malaysia respectively.

Importantly, the strategic use of controversial images has been successful in gaining attention

and increasing profits for a number of organizations (for example, Evans and Sumandeeep, 1993; Waller, 1999a; Irvine, 2000; McIntyre, 2000; Waller, 2002). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that controversial advertising can have both positive and negative effects. However, there is an important ethical dimension on whether it is appropriate to deliberately use controversial/offensive images for public viewing that may offend some people. While this may be a personal decision for the managers responsible, it can be valuable for them to understand what it is that makes an advertisement controversial. By having a better understanding of this, international marketers may be aware of particular elements that they could be removed, or lessen, to reduce the degree of controversy in the campaign.

Also, previous studies have primarily looked at a few or one large grouping of products. There has been little research on grouping these controversial products or comparing cross-cultural samples, particularly from Asian countries. This study will, therefore, examine attitudes towards the advertising of certain controversial products and the reasons for offence across sample groups in four different countries. Further, it will be determined the reasons why an advertisement is seen as controversial.

Methodology

To obtain some measure of offensiveness towards the advertising of specific controversial products, a questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of university students in four Asia Pacific countries (Malaysia, Taiwan, China, and New Zealand). The reasons why these countries were chosen is that they have certain elements about them that are both similar and difference that make them worthy of such a cross-cultural analysis. Malaysia is a multi-cultural country with Islam as the main religion; Taiwan is a Buddhist society while China has no officially sanctioned state religion; and New Zealand is historically a Christian-based society. In terms of Hofstede’s (1980) and Hofstede and Bond’s (1988) cultural dimensions, New Zealand is very individualist

(rank 6), while Taiwan is very collectivist (rank 44). Malaysia is moderate to high collectivism (rank 36). For the long/short term orientation dimension, Taiwan (rank 2) has a very strong value in long term orientation while New Zealand is not (rank 13). There was no such study conducted amongst Malaysians and mainland Chinese. For ease of explanation, we grouped Malaysia, Taiwan and China as Asian countries versus New Zealand which is a Pacific western country.

There is a note of caution regarding some of these findings as they are based on student samples, which are not always accurate in reflecting attitudes of an entire population and so the amount of generalizability may be questioned. The rationale for using university students as research subjects in this study includes that this 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). Student samples have already been used in a number of controversial advertising studies by Rehman and Brooks (1987), Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1994) and Waller (1999b). Further, and importantly, the use of students in a 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).

Survey development and data collection

The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was administered in a classroom environment. The survey instrument included a list of 17 products/services from which 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 (1999b) which was, in turn, based on past literature (Wilson and West, 1981; 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:

Alcohol, Charities, Cigarettes, Condoms, Female Contraceptives, Female Hygiene Products, Female Underwear, Funeral Services, Gambling, Guns & Armaments, Male Underwear, Pharmaceuticals, Political Parties, Racially Extremist Groups, Religious Denominations, Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention), and Weight Loss Programs.

The reasons for offence were also taken from past literature (Shao and Hill, 1994). The list of reasons included:

Anti-social Behavior, Indecent Language, Nudity, Racist Images, Sexist Images, and Subject Too Personal.

Respondent profile

A total of 1014 students were sampled for this study. Overall there were 380 in the Malaysian sample, 238 in the Chinese sample, 201 in the Taiwanese sample and 196 in the New Zealand sample. Overall, there were more females than males in the sample of respondents and the average age is 22 years old. The Chinese sample had a higher than average number of males and age group (25 years old) due to the participation of post-graduate students (Table I).

Results

The data was subjected to a multivariate analysis of variance test (MANOVA) to examine the overall country effect on all four controversial product groups (dependent variables). First the significant Box's test (Box's $M = 349.644$, $p < 0.001$) of the multivariate test for homogeneity of dispersion matrices indicated that the variances among the dependent variables are not the same

TABLE I
Respondent profile

	Malaysia	China	Taiwan	New Zealand	Total
No. of respondents	380	238	201	196	1014
Gender (%):					
– Male	36%	76%	20%	43%	42%
– Female	64%	33%	80%	57%	58%
Average age (mean)	21	25	22	20	22

for all four countries. Second, the overall MANOVA test yielded a statistically significant finding (Wilks' lambda $F = 46.102$, $p < 0.001$). Third, the results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in *Gender/Sex Related Products* ($F = 80.441$, $p < 0.001$); *Social/Political Groups* ($F = 26.930$, $p < 0.001$); *Health & Care Products* ($F = 42.924$, $p < 0.001$); and *Addictive Products* ($F = 94.802$, $p < 0.001$) between the four countries. These findings helped confirm that it may be appropriate to assess the four controversial product groups' level of advertising offensiveness in each of the countries separately.

Construct validity and reliability of dependent variables

Table II presents the results of the principal components factor analysis using a varimax orthogonal rotation on the 17 product items. To obtain these results, the procedures involved dividing the total sample into two sub-groups using "even" and "odd" numbers. Factor analyses were performed on the two sub-groups independently until both groups showed comparable factors with eigenvalue over 1.0 and factor loading > 0.40 . The two sub-groups were combined into one and another set of factor analyses was performed. Only one item relating to pharmaceutical was deleted due to low factor loading. The result was four different groups: *Gender/Sex Related Products* (e.g. condoms, female contraceptives, male/female underwear, etc.); *Social/Political Groups* (e.g. political parties,

religious denominations, funeral services, etc.); *Addictive Products* (e.g. alcohol, cigarettes, etc.); and *Health and Care Products* (e.g. Charities, sexual diseases like AIDS, STD prevention, etc.). The final results showed reliabilities of between 0.51 and 0.85 for the four controversial product groups. Of the four factors, three have a moderate to high reliability, while the fourth factor, "Health and Care Products" has an alpha of 0.51. It was felt that this was due to the wide variety of products – weight-loss programs, charities, sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention) – and it was decided to include this factor in order to provide a more complete picture of controversial products advertising. Moreover, there were a number of studies using Likert type scales, similar to the one used in this study, have adopted the 0.5 alpha coefficient as the threshold of acceptable reliability. These studies include Hornsby et al. (1994), and Jarratt (1996).

Degrees of offence

To explain the reasons for the offence, we divided the responses into high (mean > 3.0), moderate (mean between 2 and 3) and low (mean < 2). Based on this categorization, we found that advertisements relating to *Social/Political Groups* and *Addictive Products* were most offensive in China, Taiwan and Malaysia. New Zealanders were moderately offended. Among the three Asian countries, China in particular, found *Social/Political Groups* advertising offensive. The Chinese also ranked *Addictive Products* advertisements more offensive relative to Taiwan

TABLE II
Factor analysis of offensive products/services

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
<i>Gender/Sex Related Products</i>				
– female underwear	0.859			
– male underwear	0.849			
– condoms	0.741			
– female contraceptives	0.719			
– female hygiene products	0.647			
<i>Social/Political groups</i>				
– racially extreme groups		0.710		
– religious denominations		0.697		
– guns & armaments		0.681		
– funeral services		0.594		
– political parties		0.556		
<i>Addictive Products</i>				
– cigarettes			0.847	
– alcohol			0.847	
– gambling			0.769	
<i>Health & Care Products</i>				
– weight-loss programs		0.716		
– charities		0.703		
– sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention)		0.490		
Eigenvalue	4.56	2.28	1.44	1.21
Cronbach alpha	0.85	0.71	0.80	0.51
Percent of variance	28.5	14.3	9.0	7.5

and Malaysia. For Gender/Sex Related Products advertisements, the three Asian countries found them moderately offensive, but not in New Zealand. Relative to China and Taiwan, Malaysians were more likely to be offended by Gender/Sex Related Products advertisements even though they were not statistically significantly different from the Chinese. New Zealanders were least likely to find advertising of these products offensive. In the case of Health & Care Products, again the Asian countries found these advertisements moderately offensive compared with New Zealand. Of the three Asian countries, the Chinese found advertising of these Health & Care Products more offensive than their counterparts in Taiwan and Malaysia.

Correlating product groups with degrees of offence

Table IV highlights the differences in reasons for offensiveness based on country. For Malaysia, the top three reasons were “*racist images*”, “*sexist images*” and “*nudity*”. The top three reasons for China were “*indecent language*”, “*anti-social behaviour*” and “*racist images*” while Taiwan’s top three reasons include “*indecent language*”, “*racist images*” and “*anti-social behaviour*”. New Zealand’s top three reasons were “*racist images*”, “*sexist images*” and “*anti-social behaviour*”.

To help determine what makes controversial advertising offensive, a correlation of the results between the four controversial product groups and reasons for the offence was made (Table V). For Gender/Sex Related Products, there were significant relationships in all the reasons for

TABLE III
Differences in degrees of offensiveness based on country

Country	Gender/Sex related products	Social/Political groups	Health & care products	Addictive products
Malaysia ($N = 380$)	2.61 ^a (1.05)	3.01 ^a (1.00)	2.15 ^a (0.92)	3.09 ^a (1.32)
China ($N = 238$)	2.51 ^{a, b} (0.95)	3.59 ^b (0.72)	2.60 ^b (0.79)	3.46 ^b (0.97)
Taiwan ($N = 201$)	2.11 ^c (0.77)	3.31 ^c (0.79)	2.32 ^{a, c} (0.76)	3.38 ^{b, c} (0.95)
New Zealand ($N = 195$)	1.44 ^d (0.65)	2.96 ^{a, d} (0.93)	1.71 ^d (0.75)	1.83 ^d (0.94)

Note: 1 = Not at all offensive, 5 = Extremely Offensive, Standard Deviation is in parenthesis. Superscript letters ^{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 *Gender/Sex Related Products*, there is significant ($p = 0.05$) difference between the means of Malaysia and Taiwan, Malaysia and New Zealand, and China and Taiwan (different superscripted letter ^{a, c, d}), but no significant difference between Malaysia and China as there is a common superscripted letter ^a.

TABLE IV
Differences in reasons for offensiveness based on country

	Indecent language	Subject too personal	Nudity	Sexist images	Racist images	Anti-social behaviour
Malaysia ($n = 380$)	3.08 ^a (1.27)	3.10 ^a (1.18)	3.31 ^a (1.36)	3.44 ^a (1.34)	3.63 ^a (1.27)	3.09 ^a (1.29)
China ($n = 238$)	3.47 ^b (1.32)	2.68 ^b (1.17)	3.19 ^{a, b} (1.33)	2.74 ^b (1.35)	3.27 ^b (1.37)	3.43 ^b (1.29)
Taiwan ($n = 201$)	3.64 ^{b, c} (1.28)	3.27 ^{a, c} (0.95)	2.99 ^{b, c} (1.04)	3.40 ^{a, c} (1.12)	3.53 ^{a, b, c} (1.10)	3.49 ^{b, c} (1.12)
New Zealand ($n = 195$)	2.09 ^d (1.26)	2.07 ^d (1.19)	1.83 ^s (1.11)	2.87 ^{b, d} (1.41)	4.18 ^d (1.06)	2.84 ^{a, d} (1.39)

Note: 1 = Not at all offensive, 5 = Extremely offensive, Standard Deviation is in parenthesis. Superscript letters ^{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 *Indecent Language*, there is significant ($p = 0.05$) difference between the means of Malaysia and China, Malaysia and Taiwan, and Malaysia and New Zealand (different superscripted letter ^{a, b, c, d}), but no significant difference between China and Taiwan as there is a common superscripted letter ^b.

offence except “Racist Images”. In particular, this controversial product group has strong relationships with “Subject too Personal” and “Nudity”. In the case of Social/Political Groups,

the strongest relationships were with “Racist Images” and “Anti-Social Behaviour”, although it also has significant relationships with the other reasons for offence. The two most obvious

TABLE V
Correlation between product groups and reasons for the offence

	Indecent language	Subject too personal	Nudity	Sexist images	Racist images	Anti-social behaviour
Gender/Sex related products	0.222**	0.357**	0.425**	0.266**	-0.015	0.191**
Social/Political groups	0.273**	0.240**	0.281**	0.273**	0.349**	0.429**
Health & Care products	0.186**	0.199**	0.138**	0.059	-0.068*	0.137**
Addictive products	0.432**	0.361**	0.495**	0.315**	0.115**	0.348**

Note: Pearson Correlation Test, ** significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), * significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), $N = 1014$.

reasons for offence for Health & Care Products were “Subject too Personal” followed by “Indecent Language”. For Addictive Products, five of the six reasons for offence showed strong relationships (greater than 0.30), except “Racist Images”.

Discussion

The findings show the degrees of and reasons for the offence in each of the four countries were varied. The correlations tests showed strong correlations between product groups and reasons for the offence. Based on these findings, we proposed the following three issues that international advertisers/marketers should consider before venturing into a market: (1) individualism/collectivism dimension; (2) Confusion dynamism; and (3) religion. Each of these issues will now be discussed.

(1) Individualism/Collectivism dimension

Based on the findings, it seems that the degree of “Asianness” is strongly correlated with the level of offensiveness and types of controversial products. Most Asian societies are collectivist in nature. For instance, based on Hofstede’s individualism/collectivism dimension, Taiwan is the most collectivist of the four countries in this investigation. Although China was not included in the original study, it would be safe to state that China is also a collectivist society closer to

Taiwan than say Malaysia. Meanwhile, New Zealand with a ranking of 6 from a list of over 50 countries is clearly an individualist society. Within the Asian society, individualism is usually submerged to fit in with what is acceptable in society as a whole (Hofstede, 1980). Robinson (1996, p. 3) says of Asia, that:

“We do not see children walking around with spikey day-glo hair, even in trendy cities such as Hong Kong . . . vandalism, getting drunk, or losing one’s cool are all frowned upon as being unacceptable . . . it is still uncommon to have lots of girlfriends or boyfriends. None of the above is uncommon in Sydney, London, Los Angeles or even in today’s Moscow”.

Collectivistic cultures are “shame” societies according to de Mooij (1998, p. 75). People in these societies often try to avoid losing “face”. In addition, it is also acceptable for the government and local authorities to ridicule their populace with an advertising slogan like “*It is Shame to Litter*”. Being a collectivist society, Taiwan and China clearly disliked advertisements that could disrupt the harmony of the whole society. In particular, this includes advertisements that relate to political parties, religious denominations and/or racially extreme groups where propagation of one party, religion or race might be interpreted as more superior than others. The closed political arena of China further exacerbated the need to be transparent for the sake of national unity. For instance, Lingle (2002) claims that China deliberately inflated her economic data in order to create a rosy image for interna-

tional investors. Apparently this move is designed to showcase to the world investors that China is their best bet even though most of the economic data provided was dubious. Guns and armaments are closely associated with violence and anti-social behavior that could disrupt a harmonious co-existence. Advertising of these products will not be tolerated as owning a firearm will intimidate the neighbours who might “up the ante” and hence lead to a cycle of violence.

Funeral services advertisements will be completely rejected by collectivist Asians given that death is a bad omen befallen to a family. Advertising these services would be seen as glamorising death. Advocating the elderly to purchase a pre-paid funeral service for themselves would be unacceptable given that it is the responsibility of the children to bury their parents. In addition, it would also be highly insulting to the children to plan for their parents funeral well in advance of their death, as Asians believe death should only occur when one has lived a long life.

Advertisements relating to Addictive Products were less acceptable amongst the three Asian countries than in New Zealand. In Asia, gambling, smoking and drinking alcohol are regarded as social ills with negative effects on society that most governments trying to reduce. Among Asians, one often hears gambling was the cause of a marital break-up as on most occasions the addicts would sell and pawn whatever the family has to pay off their gambling debts. Such incidents often lead to violence, indecent languages, thefts and even murders. As this study revealed, the respondents were more concerned about the social and health effects of drinking, smoking and gambling. In this regard, the Chinese and Taiwanese were more offended than Malaysians in relation to advertising of Addictive Products. One can attribute this level of offensiveness to the failure to check the increasing number youngsters taking up smoking and drinking in China and Taiwan relative to Malaysia where Government restriction on these activities have been in placed for many more years.

The New Zealand view is that of an individualist. Owning a firearm is the right of every

individual while drinking alcohol is positively related to social function rather than social ills. To the New Zealanders, everyone has the right to freedom of information and the right to choose whichever political party to represent him/her or religion to adhere to, hence the society is more acceptable of advertisements relating to *Social/Political Groups*. Although New Zealanders ranked Social/Political Groups and Addictive Products lower than the three Asian countries, they nevertheless are less tolerant of racist images. Despite having some racial tensions within the community, any political party that would openly advertise their racist views would not be accepted by the New Zealand public.

Confucian dynamism

The Asian cultural values are closely aligned with Confucianism. Asian values are said to place more emphasis on morality and family cohesion. However, according to George (1997), in the East extended families in particular are closer than Western families, but this difference may not be caused by a difference of culture or values. This may be through the deep respect that the Asians, and Chinese in particular, have of their elders and ancestors plus the combined feeling of reciprocity. Asian values have also been credited for the tremendous economic growth in countries like Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Referring to Hofstede, Taiwan has a strong value in long-term orientation versus New Zealand. China and Malaysia should sit comfortably between these two countries.

The four key principle of Confucian teaching according to Hofstede and Bond (1988, p. 8) include:

“the stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people; the family is the prototype of all social organisations; virtuous behaviour toward others consists of treating others as one would like to be treated oneself; and virtue with regard to one’s tasks in life consists of trying to acquire skills and education, working hard, not spending more than necessary, being patient, and persevering”.

With this in mind, it is understandable that Taiwan and China respondents found advertisements relating Social/Political Groups and Addictive Products more offensive than Malaysians and New Zealanders. These two controversial products groups have strong correlation with “*Indecent Language*” and “*Anti-Social Behaviour*” (see Table V).

According to the first principle, it is obligatory that the junior partners owe respect to the seniors. Behaving anti-socially and uttering indecent language as a result of being drunk are behaviors that will destabilize the “*hierarchy oriented*” society. Furthermore, as young people are required to show respect to their parents and the community elders, one should refrain from getting drunk, exerting racist views, or being addicted to gambling, as these anti-social behaviors would tarnish his/her family’s respect in the community. Additionally, the use of indecent language like swearing and cursing in public, whether directed or not directed at anyone, would be interpreted as not treating the others respectfully as one would be treated oneself. Finally, drinking, smoking and gambling are activities closely related to people who are lazy, unemployed, and interested only in making a “quick buck” without working for it.

Further examples of the second Confucius principle of family being the prototype of all social organizations include the two social issues of poverty and sexual disease. According to Ingle (2002) China is as equally impoverished as India, however, the world does not generally know this because under the authoritarian nature of the Beijing regime, orders are issued to round up beggars and the unemployed from urban centres and send to the countryside where they are less visible. Similarly the Beijing Government was initially hesitant in releasing the exact number of AIDS patients in China. These two actions are examples of where a small unfortunate group should not be allowed to tarnish the image of the country as a whole. Hence, as shown in Table III column 4, the Chinese respondents found advertising of *Health & Care Products* like AIDS and STD prevention, and charities much more offensive to their counterparts in Taiwan, Malaysia and New Zealand.

Being more individualists and less Confucius, New Zealanders in contrast were more tolerant of advertisements relating Social/Political Groups and Addictive Products. The marketing implications could include painting a positive image of the benefits of the products. For instance, alcohol and funeral services were positively depicted in New Zealand. Alcoholic drinks were depicted as a drink for social occasions with friends and family, while buying a pre-paid funeral service is more to do with convenience, reducing the monetary burden of love ones and meeting one’s wishes.

Religion

Religious beliefs play a significant part in sculpting social and ethical behavior. Differences in religious affiliations tend to influence the way people live, the choices they make, what they eat and with whom they associate. According to Hirschman (1983), the religious affiliations of Catholics, Protestants and Jews significantly shaped their attitudes towards dancing, magazines, restaurants and political ideas. There is also a strong relationship between religious persons and greater concern for ethical and moral standards (Wiebe and Fleck, 1980), being conservative (Barton and Vaughan, 1976), and possess more traditional attitudes (Wilkes et al., 1986). The impact of religion on consumption patterns usually relates to the restriction of certain foods and beverages, for example, Jews and Muslims do not eat pork, Hindus do not eat beef, and the drinking alcohol is frowned upon if not forbidden by Islam and strict Christians. One needs to understand that in Asia the religious sphere has been characterized by a multiplicity of influences. According to Birch et al. (2001):

“What many in the West understand as ‘Chinese religions’ or ‘Indian beliefs’ are the results of long and complex periods of interactions between a range of beliefs and practices involving other human endeavours and identities. It would be impossible, then, to speak of an ‘original’ Chinese or Indian religious system without also taking into account the interactions between Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in the former case, and the

long history of coexistence of Hindus and Muslims within the shared spaces in the latter.” (p. 105).

Table III, for example, indicates that Malaysians were particularly offended by Gender/Sex Related Products advertisements relative to the other three countries. The higher degree of offence could be attributed to Islam, as Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country. According to the principles of Islam both men and women must cover their torso and upper legs at all times and in the case of women only her face's skin may be exposed (Deng and Hassan, 1994). Table V shows Gender/Sex Related Products are strongly correlated with “Nudity” and “Sexist Images” and they are the top two reasons for offence in Malaysia (see Table IV). From these findings, it can be inferred that the reasons Malaysians found advertisements related to Gender/Sex Related Products, like male/female underwear, condoms, female contraceptives and female hygiene products offensive, are due to these products have closely associated with nudity and sexist images, which are deemed contradictory to their religious belief.

This is not to say that other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Non-religious Believers condoned such advertisements, or that Non-Religious Believers, who do not adhere to a particular religion, do not have morality. In Table III, although China has no officially sanctioned religion, the Chinese sample found advertisements of Gender/Sex Related Products offensive. New Zealanders showed some degree of offensiveness, but tend to tolerate Gender/Sex Related products advertisements, which could also be attributed to New Zealand being more liberal than the three Asian countries.

There is also a strong correlation between Addictive Products and Social/Political Groups and issues relating to nudity, indecent language, subject too personal, sexist images, anti-social behaviour and even racist images. There are some consistencies with regards to these reasons for offence. Take, for example, many alcohol advertisements use women and women in sexy clothing to advertise the brand. In addition, many people who are drunk tend to hail abuse and use other anti-social behaviors at innocent

people. Hence, people would find these behaviors unacceptable and relate it to the source – alcoholic beverages. Smoking is also becoming uncool in today's health conscious society. Most religions would appose cigarette advertising, particularly relating cigarette sponsorship and sporting events where women in sexy clothing are often employed to promote the respective brands at the sporting field or motor racing circuit. It would be felt to be inappropriate as those attending, and particularly young children, might associate smoking, sexy girls and sport/racing all go together in the one event.

Conclusion

The main objective of this research was to determine what makes controversial advertising offensive, particularly in the Asia Pacific region where there are cultural differences between the countries in the same large geographic region. From the responses of this convenient sample of 1014 students across four countries, four controversial product groups (Gender/Sex Related Products, Social/Political Groups, Health & Care Products, and Addictive Products) were created. Among the results it was found that the Malaysian sample found the most reasons to find offence when advertising, while New Zealand were not generally offended. A correlation between the products and reasons resulted in Table V, which presented a summary of what reasons and images make controversial advertising offensive. The correlations tests showed strong correlations between product groups and reasons for the offence, and these were discussed relating to the issues of (1) individualism/collectivism dimension; (2) Confusion dynamism; and (3) religion.

For international marketers, they are reminded that care should be used when deciding what images should be included when advertising controversial products or undertaking a controversial campaign. This is particularly important when entering new markets with strong cultural sensitivities. This study has linked types of products with reasons for offence and managers can play an important role in downplaying

certain images that they know could generate offence, particularly in Asia, where adherence to the norm is more important than individualistic need or want. If there is a need to advertise in the mass media, like in Malaysia, these advertisements may appear in specialist magazines, newspapers, direct mails and in cinemas. In this case the advertiser would need to develop the appropriate media strategy as well as the creative strategy, resulting in a more targeted campaign.

With an increase in potentially offensive advertising and advertising images in the marketplace through global promotional campaigns, some important ethical decisions must be made. International marketers should, therefore, become aware of the possibility of offending the marketplace and the reasons for offence. It is advisable to devote considerable time and resources on understanding cultural, and particularly religious beliefs, upon entering a new market where advertising images can cause offence to people. Opportunities to diffuse possible areas of offence by varying potentially controversial images in the mass media or being more targeted in the media strategy generally are also suggested. This is an important area for further research as international marketers expand the global marketplace and are faced with new ethical issues and responsibilities.

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