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GLOBAL IMAGERY IN ONLINE ADVERTISEMENTS

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A WELL-DESIGNED ONLINE advertisement is essential for effective communication with potential customers and contributes to successful e-commerce. However, creating online sales messages that appeal to a broad range of cultures can pose unique challenges (Tsotra, Janson, & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2004). Internet ads must offer both a globally appealing and a culture-specific message that in turn “enables localization of marketing communication” (Luna, Peracchio, & de Juan, 2002, p. 399). These authors also suggest that “cultural congruity” is essential for effective Internet Web sites. Thus, the inclusion of verbal and nonverbal content that is congruent with a range of cultures allows for ad elements that will be successful both locally and globally.

In order to examine cultural congruity in various cultures, we conducted consumer interviews of individuals of six nationalities about their reactions to two online Internet advertisements to reveal how the underlying meanings of ad elements vary from culture to culture.

Study Methods

We wondered whether consumers would interpret the signs and symbols in two ads for comparable products in different ways. Further, we wondered to what extent viewers’ cultures influenced the way that they interpreted the meanings of the signs and symbols used in
Internet advertisements. Specifically, our study focused on two mobile phone advertisements: one by Nokia of Finland (http://www.nokia.fi/) and one by Ericsson of Sweden (http://www.ericsson.com/se/) (see Figure 1 and the following link that contains the images for both advertisements: www.mjanson.com/Hynes_Janson/ABC/NokiaEricsson.pdf). We analyzed the two advertisements’ text and images with the aim of comparing their meanings across cultures.

The Nokia advertisement features the following elements: (a) a Nokia phone on a white background, (b) an image on the phone screen comprising two hands extending towards each other, and (c) a brand name that appears twice. The Nokia ad can be interpreted in terms of genius—the outreached hands are similar to Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* (1508-1512), a symbolic depiction of the life-giving act found in the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the Vatican, symbolizing a connection and communication in a non-Earth environment. The idea of connection is also the company’s ideology. According to Nokia’s Web site, their slogan is “Connecting People.”

The Ericsson advertisement features the following elements: (a) an Ericsson phone, (b) an image on the phone’s screen stating “welcome home 12-June 19:03” and the name Ericsson on the phone’s

![Figure 1. The Nokia Advertisement (left) and the Ericsson Advertisement (right)](sagepub.com)
screen, and (c) a wooden table with cutting board, tomatoes, bread, metal object, and a bottle of oil. The Ericsson ad reflects the company’s ideology in terms of ability to use the phone while doing other things.

Watching cartoons, doing the laundry, taking photos, playing with the kids, . . . sitting in traffic, . . . chatting in the gym, . . . walking in warm rain, just wondering aloud. . . . Every moment of every day millions of consumers are accessing fast, colorful, easy-to-use mobile Internet services. (Ericsson, 2007)

We showed the Nokia and the Ericsson mobile phone advertisements to a convenience sample of 32 interviewees from six cultures. Fifteen graduate business students of American nationality from two major universities, one in the midwestern United States and one in the southwestern United States, volunteered to participate in this study. An additional 17 respondents who were natives of five other countries—Finland, Sweden, Taiwan, India, and China—were interviewed by the researchers in Europe and the United States. In semistructured interviews, respondents were asked to interpret the advertisements’ external characteristics and forms, including the text, images, colors, and objects, and to disclose which ad they preferred.

**Consumer Reactions to Nokia Advertisement**

Analysis of the elements of the online advertisements shows that individuals belonging to different cultural groups create meaning in starkly different ways. The Chinese, Indian, American, and Taiwanese respondents’ first impression of the Nokia ad was positive. They all agreed it was “clear,” “neat,” “clean,” “simple,” and “businesslike.” While the U.S. respondents thought the phone looked “heavy” and “standard,” the Chinese felt it looked “high tech.” The Swedes reacted to the simplicity of the ad negatively, considering it “boring” and “old fashioned.”

The predominant blue and white colors, recognized by the Finnish respondents as their country’s flag’s colors, provoked a positive impression. Further, the Finns found the colors “reliable,” “natural,” “old,” “trustworthy,” and “comfortable.” By contrast, the Chinese and Taiwanese respondents said that white is a funeral color for them, creating a negative impression. The Swedes knew that blue and white are “Finnish
colors” and rejected them as “boring” and “cold.” The respondent from India thought the colors warm and summery. The U.S. respondents were inconsistent about whether the blue and white colors were warm or cold, summery or wintery. Interestingly, several Americans connected the blue and white colors to “unlimited freedom” and “innovation,” which no informants from other cultures mentioned.

The outreached hands on the phone screen had global appeal, reminding all the respondents of parents and children, connecting, and helping. The Chinese went further, saying the ad is “based on humanity and love.” However, the Chinese and Taiwanese were unfamiliar with the Michelangelo painting and did not perceive any spiritual or godlike imagery. While the Finns recognized the God imagery, they disregarded it and focused primarily on a “safety” factor, explaining that while outdoors driving or cross-country skiing in winter, Finns count on their cell phones to summon help. The Swedes and Americans also recognized a resemblance between the outreached hands and the Michelangelo painting, but the Swedes were unimpressed: “I would never make this connection myself.” The U.S. respondents liked the allusion to a deity and parental help. Going further, they interpreted the Michelangelo reference as “a high attention to detail” that makes the phone look like it’s “empowering you with information and knowledge.”

**Consumer Reactions to Ericsson Advertisement**

Across all cultures in our study, the first impression of the Ericsson ad was one of brightness, warmth, summer, and “everyday life.” But these reactions were not always positive. The Finnish respondents did not like the ad, calling it “silly,” “messy,” “crowded,” “strange,” and “complicated.” They denied a connection between the food imagery and a cell phone, denigrating it as “quite Swedish.” The Chinese and Taiwanese also did not see a correlation between the food items and the phone. They recognized that the ad gave an impression that the phone is part of home life but did not like that connection, saying that the phone belonged on an “office table,” not a kitchen table. The Americans also found the ad disagreeable, “small town,” and “bland.”

The predominant yellow and red colors of the Ericsson ad universally were interpreted as “warm” and “homey” colors, which the
Indian respondent especially liked. But the Chinese did not like the colors of the ad because they are “just so personal,” preferring more “serious” colors for a product that they consider appropriate for business only. The Chinese also reacted negatively to the “welcome home” message on the phone’s screen, saying that Chinese never say welcome home among family. They only say this word when a guest comes or when you go to the hotel; then “we say ‘welcome’ . . . ‘welcome to Beijing.’”

The U.S. respondents agreed with the Swedes that the mixture of images was “normal” and “homelike,” even developing dramatic scenarios that could explain why the phone was sitting on a kitchen table among food items at dinnertime.

**Consumer Comparisons of the Advertisements**

Not surprisingly, our Finnish interviewees preferred the Nokia ad, while the Swedish preferred the Ericsson. Most cited loyalty to their culture and familiarity with the product as their primary reasons.

More interesting, perhaps, were the preferences of respondents from the four other cultures. Across the board, they preferred the Nokia ad because of its universal appeals. The Chinese said they like the Nokia ad because it is clear, simple, timeless, and focused. In China, Nokia phones have a reputation for quality. Our Asian respondents considered the phone to be “serious” and good for business, but not for personal use or for fun. The Americans concurred that they could “relate to” the Nokia because it was more for business, “efficient,” “cool looking,” and “technologically advanced.”

The U.S. respondents agreed with the Chinese in considering the Ericsson phone to be more “suited to home life . . . you know for the kids or for the wife.” One U.S. respondent predicted that his mother would like it.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Comparisons of 32 interviewees’ reactions to the symbolic elements of two Internet advertisements confirm that culture plays a key role in assigning meaning to symbols.

Effectiveness of symbols in online advertising will be determined by their universal appeals as well as ties to certain cultural values. Our respondents overwhelmingly preferred the Nokia ad to the
Ericsson ad, providing evidence that its design elements are more globally attractive.

The results of this study suggest that Internet marketers can improve the impact of promotional techniques by doing the following:

(a) Designing product ads appropriate to specific markets.
(b) Developing communication strategies that are culturally, socially, nationally, and historically sensitive.
(c) Developing online ads with global reach that should appeal to the product but also to the experience associated with the product.

References


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SALES COMMUNICATIONS IN A MOBILE WORLD: USING THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY AND RETAINING THE PERSONAL TOUCH

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SALESPEOPLE INCREASINGLY HAVE the opportunity to use technology to more quickly communicate with a larger number of