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Differentiation in digital print advertisements.

A comparative perspective

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR

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Table of contents

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The thesis begins with a couple of introductory thoughts on international advertising and comparative studies, setting the ground for present research. According to literature, the interest in global advertising and cross-cultural frameworks is on the rise. Previous studies had USA as the point of reference, focusing on comparing it with two or more countries. Yet, too few tackle a more in-depth weaving of the American-European relationship. The present study proposes a parallel between several international countries and Romania, with a focus on the brands' executions in these countries, revealing characteristics for each category. The analysis paves the path to seeing how brands opted differentiation in their advertising message, from language to visual metaphors.

The first chapter of the literature review section is dedicated to a general approach to communication, interculturality, and trends in the advertising sphere. One of the main aspects stressed by literature is the increased pace in which the international advertising strategies had to adapt to the expansion of global cultures (while trying to preserve the local perspectives), as well as update their digital means and instruments (while maintaining the same level of quality of the messages). The experts were faced with new challenges of finding enriched perspectives for the continually evolving consumers, through the media outburst and all the technological absorption.

Although the thesis did not propose a cultural study, small parts of it can always be traced in advertising. It is the element which breaks the groups within a society based on their preferences, professions, coupled with social aspects such as age and social class. And its manifestations are plentiful from the eating customs and patterns, to the unique clothing characteristics, and dominant duties of people. The intersections appear in the groups which reveal the same levels of homogeneity for any of these traits. These are the ones exploited by advertising. However, deviant elements can also prove to be an essential source of inspiration.

More and more research accentuated the need to consider the importance of language and how the linguistic assets of a specific group impact the reception of a message. Going back to the issue of culture, the multiple alternatives in which a consumer interprets an ad are always rooted in his socio-cultural background. It is the primary argument why propelling the same material across countries might not be a conquering solution. The intersections mentioned above of the cultural features of groups are essential, as they indicate the conventional capabilities of consumers of interpreting the ad's message similarly. Also, the literature suggests another necessary aspect for the analysis, reminding the critical dimensions of

entertainment and metaphorical significances. The latter was of interest in the upcoming chapters.

To better understand a subject, one must also understand the context. The executions used in this thesis have been part of digital campaigns, thus requiring a special section dedicated to the newest changes in the online medium. Thus, the third chapter was dedicated to one of the most potent changes which marked the evolution of online strategies: the platformization phenomenon. It ensured the development of what experts define as a "web ecosystem." This relocations to the digital sphere also determined several cultural ramifications, having the platforms as digital mediators and emissaries. They also shaped the economic implications of advertising as a whole and how its messages will face new metamorphoses.

A significant advantage for advertising with online platforms has been the capacity to reach consumers with more accuracy and in the proper location. It allowed for the *deep personalization* of the messages that started getting their way. This practice involves choosing and using data about them, based on the presuppositions generated by the big-data collection. It offered routes toward their points of interest and customized the offers which are delivered to them based on various information: recent searches, location, propensity toward specific products or services. Besides empowering them with personal information about the customer, the platforms have also registered another victory. They have the freedom to edit and select the content they prefer—an aspect that was essential for the methodological section.

The fourth chapter focused on the conceptualization of *differentiation*, the main pillar of the paper, and its subsequent constructs. To best understand its meaning and implications, it was put alongside an opposing notion: *standardization*. Previous studies had evoked its outdated nature in the present communicational landscape, as the standardization of textual elements remained the sole strategy for the brands which still use this tactic. As international advertising increasingly came face to face with local cultures, the preservation of the same message became, as the literature suggests, the exception. It also introduced the concepts of *official language distance* and *ad types,* which will be used in the empirical section.

There are no recipes for the conception of a good ad. There are individual tracks that proved a good alternative. One of these is the full adaptation of the copy. Based on the insights of the social environment, the literature proposes differentiating the message according to countries—many invested energy into researching how the slogan was perceived by the audience. Being a carrier of a quintessential promise of the brand increases the positive perception of the brand's identity.

The following chapter reviewed in a comprised manner the primary studies which empirically analyzed the differentiation topic. They also tested part of the theory and brought a clearer perspective on many of the abstract concepts and pointing toward practical uses. The first observation from the beginning of the chapter was the frequent use of the content analysis and the experiment as main research methods, coupling the constructs extracted from reviewing materials with the impact they have on the consumer. These inspired the choices for the research design of the thesis.

Regarding the sense of distinction that international brands inspire, it was observed that showing the brand name in English- while preserving the body copy in the local language- was the right approach for raising the levels of brand recall and the message. In the countries where English is not the mother tongue, the participants in the experiments had difficulties in grasping the significance of the word. Thus, halting the standardization tactics for the ad copy, as well. A misunderstood message or the inability to understand it makes the consumer develop negative feelings toward the brand, as for the advertisements in English, in general.

The methodological section depicted the entire research design for both methods. The first one was the content analysis. The chosen period is 2014-2018, and the ads sample was 1010. The issue is still of significant importance in the age of digital platforms, as we discuss the implications of such source variety on the consumers' online behavior.

The research questions which guided the content analysis were:

Q1. What is the official language distance in the print ads?

Q1.1. What is the official language distance according to years?

Q1.2. What is the official language distance according to countries?

Q2. What is the perceived brand globalness of the ads?

Q2.1. What is the perceived brand globalness according to countries?

Q3. Is the same copy used in several countries by the same brand in the same year?

Q4. Are the visual scenarios from the ads congruent or incongruent in most ads?

Q4.1. Which type of incongruity is most prevalent?

Q5. Which type of ad is most used?

Q6. Which are the categories which have most print executions, and which ones have the least?

Also, for the content analysis, there were four hypotheses formulated:

H1. The countries are constant in their evolution regarding standardized or differentiated approaches toward print ads over the years.

H2. The countries with smaller scores for the perceived brand globalness tend to have the most differentiated and locally adapted print ads.

H3. The countries with smaller scores for the official language distance tend to have most ads in the local languages.

H4. A high number of incongruent print ads is a predictor of the artificial symbiosis scenario.

The results section reviews the main concepts employed in the analysis. The official language distance was the first concept revised. It concentrated on the language employed in the print ads. Contrary to what might have been expected, there was a revival of the use of local languages, especially in the final year of analysis. In terms of copy used in the ads, the headlines were the sole component that had the most usage in the English langauge. The other textual cues, such as the subhead, the body copy, or the slogan, were adapted to the local language. More than this, most ads preserved one langauge in their use. However, Romanian revealed to be a particular case, gathering the most consistent number of mixed language ads.

The perceived brand globalness was the second concept which disclosed insights about the textual, as well as visual dimensions of the ad. One thread of analysis was dedicated to identifying the executions which were standardized across countries and the ones who had different messages or visual elements. With an overwhelming majority, the international brands prefer differentiating their ads. The standardized materials were few in comparison to the total number, becoming the exception, rather than the rule, remaining the attribute of some of the big campaigns. The product categories with most standardized executions were automotive and beverages. The brands shifted toward the local cultures and cultural specifics, especially in terms of small campaigns and witty performances. This was also observed in the case of the spokesperson employed in the ads, as most of them were selected to reflect the local communities. Nevertheless, the brand identity remains untouchable, with a couple of ads distorting the representation of the logo and using a local adaptation.

The visual metaphors brought in the spotlight the creative and uncanny aspects of the print executions, proposing three frames of analysis: the realistic symbiosis, the replacement, and the artificial symbiosis. It was interesting observing which type of scenario was mostly preferred by the brands. In all of the analyzed countries, artificial symbiosis was the most appraised type of situation. It implied that the brands from the analysis, which have high levels of communicational maturity, prefer the superposition of different and unexpected symbols. Thus, they offer abstract interpretations of their messages. The salience of space and colors also revealed that, even though the colorized photos are the primordial choice, the countries with a well-rounded communication history (such as the USA), will also employ black and white photos and drawings in a significant amount. It could also be linked to the abstracting

capacity of the brands and an increased lightness of the communicational gestures. All four hypotheses, H1, H2, H3, and H4 were supported.

The experiment complemented the content analysis by measuring the impact of the official language distance concept on N=154 participants. Reviewing the effects of using the English language in the print ads, there was a survey-based experiment conceived. It had a 1x3 factorial design, manipulating the absence/ presence of the copy, using the English and the Romanian languages. For the execution of the visual material, the multinational brand employed was KFC. The 154 participants were students, with ages ranging from 18-21 (77.9%), 22-25 (20.8%), and 26-30 (1.3%). They were randomly assigned in the three groups, as it follows: N1=50 participants who viewed the print ad without copy, N2=52 participants in the group that viewed the print ad in the English language, and N3=52 participants who viewed the print ad in Romanian.

The main hypotheses for the experiment are the following:
H1. The language of the ad is the strongest predictor for the attitude toward the brand.
H2. The language of the ad is the strongest predictor for purchase intention.
H3. The language of the ad is the strongest predictor for the attitude toward the ad.
H4. The language of the ad is the strongest predictor for the symbol value of the foreign language.

There were four dependent variables. The first one was the attitude toward the brand (Spears & Singh, 2004). It is a variable composed of five items, measured with a 7-point Likert scale, *M=28.42, SD=4.582, α=.861*. The second was the purchase intention (Spears & Singh, 2004), composed of four items, also measured through a 7-point Likert scale, *M=20.94, SD=5.405, α=.953*. The third variable was the attitude toward the ad (Olney et al., 1991) was composed of five items, also measured with a 7-point Likert scale, *M=12.37, SD=5.089, α=.890*. The last dependent variable was the symbol value of the foreign language (van Hooft et al., 2017), counting seven items, *M=29.93, SD=8.143, α=.831*.

The randomization check did not reveal significant differences in the participants' distribution in the three groups according to gender, age, knowledge of the English language, as well as fast-food consumption. Several tests were performed, among which the one-way ANOVAs compared the three groups and revealing significant tendencies. The first was in the case of the attitude toward the brand between the control group (the one with the ad without copy) and the experimental group which received the ad with the English language copy *F(2, 154)=2.538 (p=.082)*. From all the dependent variables mentioned above, the purchase intention *F(2, 154)=1.455 (p=.237)*, and the attitude toward the ad *F(2,154)=1.180 (p=.310)*

did not render significant results in terms of language use. However, the symbol value of foreign language was significantly different between the Romanian ad group and the English ad group $F(2,154)=5.450 (p=.005)$. The hypotheses H1 and H4 were supported, while H2 and H3 were not supported.

The conclusions section revised the major findings and themes derived from the two research methods. The scope of this thesis was discovering how differentiation is transcribed in digital print advertisements. A subsidiary objective was also exploring how language impacts the message received on the consumers and how it intermediates their relationship with the brand.

There were four concepts involved in the analysis: the official language distance, the perceived brand globalness, visual metaphors, and advertising types. There were adjacent concepts such as salience of space and colors which complemented the visual dimensions of the ads. Or the incongruent element, the single qualitative column of the codebook, which deepened the understanding of the metaphors used. The language distance was measured through four concepts, each accompanied by a scale: the attitude toward the brand, the purchase intention, the attitude toward the ad, and the symbol value of the foreign language. The scales were chosen so they would cover most of the constructs encompassed in a print ad, while focusing on the central aspects: the message of the ad and the significance of the language used.

The last chapter covered the limitations and future perspectives. Regarding the content analysis, for more qualitative information about the differentiation particularities in print ads, each of the four concepts could be addressed in separate research (official language distance, perceived brand globalness, visual metaphor, and ad types). Starting from this quantitative basis, a more thematical overture would provide details regarding how exactly each brand differentiates its ads according to each of the five countries. Last but not least, the dominant research perspective that has not yet sufficient data is how brands differentiate their executions in the Romanian advertising landscape. How they do it when they prefer to standardize or differentiate their campaigns, and which is the main drive to choose one of the two alternatives. All these could converge to one of the most challenging and enduring dilemmas: which are the textual or visual approaches most suitable for the Romanian landscape.