

OFFENCE TO THE ADVERTISING OF GENDER-RELATED PRODUCTS: ATTITUDES IN CHINA AND MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The recent opening up of the Chinese economy has seen a rapid growth in the advertising industry, which has also led to the exposure of advertising for socially sensitive, or controversial, products to the Chinese community. Another Asian country, Malaysia, is an Islamic country that also has problems related to the exposure to controversial advertising. This paper surveys 238 Chinese and 379 Malaysians to determine their level of offence towards various gender-related products and the main reasons for offence towards advertising.

Introduction

In recent years, many countries in Asia have been facing some enormous changes: politically, economically, technologically, and socially. The causes of these changes vary, but include the diffusion of western ideas, the changing role of women in society, new technological advances (especially in production, computerisation, and new media), the opening up of previously closed countries, and the Asian meltdown of the 1990s (Frith 1996). Two Asian countries that have particularly seen changes, which the respective government have had to deal with, are: China and Malaysia. China's economy being in a state of transition from a strict communist state to a modernized socialist economy, open to foreign investment and competition (Ho & Chan 1989; Liang & Jacobs 1994); while Malaysia, is a multicultural Islamic country which has a government which also wants to modernize and become an international player in business and the cyberspace (Deng, Jivan & Hassan 1994; Waller & Fam 2000). Both countries have highly regulated media industries, however, the opening up of these economies has meant that there will be some advertisements for products or visual/verbal images that may offend certain people in the community, or clash with the traditional Chinese or Malaysian values (Chinese Culture Connection 1987; Waller and Fam, 2000). The opening up of the Asian economies, the use of a standardized approach to advertising across Asia and new media, such as satellite television and the Internet (Tai 1997), has meant that people across Asia have a greater opportunity of exposure to potentially offensive advertising. This includes advertising of products such gender/sex-related products as contraception, underwear, and feminine hygiene products.

This paper will determine levels of offence towards the advertising of various gender/sex-related products and the main reasons for offence by analyzing the results of a survey of 238 Chinese and 379 Malaysian students. The questions asked in the study were developed from those used in Waller (1999). To gain an insight into possible variations in perceptions towards the advertising of offensive products in Asia, comparisons will be made of members of the two sample groups (China and Malaysia) to determine whether there are any significant differences between the responses of these groups.

Gender-Related Products

Advertising literature analysing controversial advertising is found in studies describing the products as: "unmentionables", "socially sensitive products", "decent products", or the advertising as "acceptable advertising", "controversial advertising" or "offensive advertising" (Wilson & West 1981; Rehman & Brooks 1987; Shao & Hill 1994; Fahy, Smart, Pride & Ferrell 1995; Barnes & Dotson 1990; Waller, 1999; Waller & Fam 2000). However, most of these have focussed on western countries, and there has been little research on Asian countries (Waller & Fam 2000).

Various types of products, both goods and services, have been suggested by past studies as being controversial when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, and political advertising. This study is primarily focussing on gender/sex-related products as it was felt that these products may generate a stronger response of "offensiveness". They were also aimed to be potentially socially sensitive in the Asian community, particularly which could clash with traditional values, like keeping oneself disinterested and pure, having few desires, respect for tradition, and moderation, i.e., following the middle way and having a sense of shame (Chinese Culture Connection 1987, pp 147-148).

Methodology

A survey to gauge levels of offence towards the advertising of various gender products was distributed to students of a large, regionally based multi-campus university in Wuhan, China, and students from universities in East and West Malaysia. (Note that the Malaysian sample consists of mostly ethnically Chinese students.) Both samples contained Arts and Business students. The rationale for using university students as subjects has been a research method practised for many years in the area of controversial advertising (Rehman & Brooks 1987; Waller 1999), mainly for their accessibility to the researcher and homogeneity as a group (Calder, Phillips & Tybout 1981). The Chinese sample resulted in a total of 238 students: 160 (67.2%) male and 78 (32.8%) female; the Malaysian sample resulted in a total of 379 students: 137 (36.1%) male and 242 (63.9%) female. This would indicate a higher number of female enrolment in Arts and Business courses in the Malaysian sample compared to the Chinese sample.

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of personal "offence" to a list of controversial products on a five point scale, where 1 means "Not At All" offensive and 5 means "Extremely" offensive. Only the gender-related products were analysed for this paper (Condoms, Female Contraceptives, Female Hygiene Products, Female Underwear, and Male Underwear). The reasons for offence were also asked and the list was taken from past literature (Shao & Hill 1994), although Western/US Images was added to determine whether Western images were perceived to be offensive to the Asian respondents. The list of reasons included: Anti-social Behaviour, Indecent Language, Nudity, Racist Images, Sexist Images, Subject Too Personal and Western/US Images.

Results

Overall, the respondents indicated that advertisements for gender-related products were not perceived to be a very offensive type of advertising. As for differences between the two

groups, based on means, ranking the products resulted in [1] Condoms, [2] Female Contraceptives, and [3] Female Hygiene Products from the Chinese sample, and [1] Condoms, [2] Female Underwear, and [3] Female Contraceptives, from the Malaysian sample. There were two items which had a statistical difference, using ANOVAs, with the Malaysians were more offended by female and male underwear advertisements.

As for the reasons they found advertisements offensive, the Chinese sample indicated five items (“Indecent Language”, “Anti-Social Behaviour”, “Racist Images”, “Nudity” and “Western/US Images”) and the Malaysian indicated six items (“Indecent Language”, “Anti-Social Behaviour”, “Racist Images”, “Nudity” and “Sexist Images” and “Subject Too Personal”) that had a mean score above “3” indicating a level of offence. The Chinese respondents perceived “Indecent Language” the most offensive, while the Malaysians perceived “Racist Images” to be the most offensive. There were statistical differences between the two groups on six of the seven items presented. The Chinese were more offended by advertisements with “Indecent Language”, “Anti-Social Behaviour”, and “Western/US Images”, while Malaysians are more offended by “Racist Images”, “Sexist Images” and “Subject Too Personal”. The results, including mean scores, standard deviations and ANOVA results (F value and p significance) for the total Chinese and Malaysian sample is found in Table 1.

TABLE 1 HERE

Discussions and Implications

From the results, the products which resulted in a statistically significant difference in the responses of the two groups were Female and Male Underwear advertisements, where the Malaysian sample was significantly different to the Chinese counterparts. In Malaysia, most of the cultural values are actually shaped by various religious practices, particularly the main religion of Islam. The Advertising Code for Television and Radio (1990) was heavily influenced by the government’s effort to promote Islamic values throughout the country. This includes the imposition of stricter regulations on the mass media content based on Islamic principles and values. For example, 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 ruling has restricted the advertising of female and male underwear on mass media, and would explain the degree of offence towards such advertising.

As for the reasons for advertisements being offensive, six of the seven reasons given resulted in a statistically significant difference. The Chinese found “Indecent Language”, “Anti-Social Behaviour”, and “Western/US Images” more offensive, while the Malaysians found “Racist Images”, “Sexist Images” and “Subject Too Personal” more offensive than the Chinese sample. The use of “Indecent Language” is considered rude and lack of parental guidance, which if uttered would bring shame and loss of face to the family, in particular the Chinese parents. The use of “Anti-Social” and “Western/US” Images would be against Chinese traditional culture which promotes social harmony. While in Malaysia, a multi-cultural society, the Advertising Code (1990) promotes cultural sensitivity in advertisements, and prohibits advertisements that “contain statements or suggestions which may offend the

religious, racial, political or sentimental susceptibilities of any section of the community". A party political broadcast that targets a specific racial group or incites one group to rise against another is strictly prohibited. Such prohibition stemmed from the 1969 racial riots. This prohibition is deemed to be vital in achieving racial and national harmony in a multiracial country such as Malaysia. Further, in Malaysia, a Muslim dominated society, the public display of "Sexist Images" would be against their cultural values (Deng, Jivan & Hassan 1994).

Conclusion

As in no other time, the Asian community is now capable to be exposed to advertisements for socially sensitive or controversial products that may cause offence. This paper surveyed 238 Chinese and 379 Malaysian Chinese students to determine their level of offence towards various gender-related products and the main reasons for offence towards advertising. A number of reasons were perceived to be the cause of offence in both China and Malaysia. This would also indicate that the execution of an advertisement is a greater reason for offence than type of product, which would also support (Barnes & Dotson 1990; Waller, 1999). This is also important for international marketers who may want to undertake a standardised approach when marketing across Asia, not considering any cultural differences between different Asian countries.

Further research should be undertaken into attitudes towards controversial and offensive advertising, particularly observing the influence of culture, which can affect the degree of standardisation which can be undertaken in a particular geographical region. Ways should also be found to effectively advertise such issues as contraceptives, and underwear that do not offend the community but still clearly communicates the intended message. Such issues are very important for the future of the Asian community, and should not be ignored because the advertising of the message has the potential of causing offence.

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Table 1: Products and Reasons for Offensive Advertising: Malaysia versus China

PRODUCTS	Malaysia N = 379	China N = 238	F-value (p, sig.) (* = 0.05, ** = 0.01)
1. Condoms	2.74 (1.5)	2.92 (1.4)	2.14 (0.144)
2. Female Contraceptives	2.63 (1.3)	2.55 (1.2)	0.59 (0.444)
3. Female Hygiene Products	2.49 (1.3)	2.49 (1.2)	0.000 (0.986)
4. Female Underwear	2.65 (1.3)	2.35 (1.3)	7.52 (0.000)**
5. Male Underwear	2.54 (1.3)	2.26 (1.1)	7.19 (0.008)**
REASONS			
1. Indecent Language	3.08 (1.3)	3.47 (1.3)	12.97 (0.000)**
2. Anti-social Behaviour	3.10 (1.3)	3.43 (1.3)	9.83 (0.002)**
3. Racist Images	3.64 (1.3)	3.27 (1.4)	11.22 (0.001)**
4. Nudity	3.32 (1.4)	3.20 (1.3)	1.14 (0.286)
5. Western/US Images	2.85 (1.2)	3.13 (1.4)	6.53 (0.011)*
6. Sexist Images	3.45 (1.3)	2.74 (1.4)	39.91 (0.000)**
7. Subject Too Personal	3.10 (1.2)	2.68 (1.2)	18.62 (0.000)**

Scale: 1 = Not at All Offensive, 5 = Extremely Offensive