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# Consumers' response to offensive advertising: A cross cultural study

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## **Consumers' response to offensive advertising: A cross cultural study**

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## **Consumers' response to offensive advertising: A cross cultural study**

Research paper

### **Purpose**

To examine how Chinese and German consumers react to print advertisements that are potentially offensive. Using culture theories about information context, individualism and feminine consciousness, we hypothesize that Chinese consumers will be less accepting of the advertisements than German consumers. We also compare the dimensions of consumer perceptions for both countries and how consumer perceptions are related with intentions to reject the products and the brands because of the ads.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

A survey of 563 respondents aged 17 to 58 from urban China (Shanghai) and Germany was conducted in October 2005 and June 2006. A questionnaire with six print advertisements containing sexism and other themes was constructed. Data were collected through five universities.

### **Findings**

Findings on perceptions of the offensive advertisements among Chinese and German respondents were mixed. Overall, as expected, Chinese respondents were less accepting of offensive advertising, as they liked the advertisements less than German respondents. However, they were also more likely than German respondents to find the advertisements convincing and informative. Results showed that Chinese respondents and German respondents had different dimensions of advertising perceptions. The two print advertisements that received the most negative perceptions both contained sexually-oriented body images. The study also found that advertising perceptions had a significant impact on consumers' intentions to reject the products and the brands.

### **Research limitations**

The city surveyed in China is highly advanced in terms of economical and advertising development when compared with all other Chinese cities. Consumer responses were derived from a student sample. Only the "manner" of offensive advertising was studied, and the "matter" as well as "media" were not covered.

**Practical implications**

Useful advice for marketers and advertisers to understand how far they can stretch the line for controversial advertisements and to assess the possible risk involved.

**Originality/value**

This paper offers insight to design communication and message strategies for consumers of very different cultural backgrounds.

## **Consumers' response to offensive advertising: A cross cultural study**

### **1. Introduction**

More and more advertisers and marketers believe that consumers around the world have similar needs as well as desires and that the global market is growing increasingly homogeneous. Levitt (1983) proposed that the global consumer market can be tapped by standardized advertising messages. The rapid emergence and expansion of global media have helped speed up the development of international advertising campaigns. Because of the speed of technology, many advertisers rely on global campaigns in order to grasp the market a step before the competitors (Kaplan, 1994). Advertisers are becoming more sensitive to how consumers from different cultural and social backgrounds perceive these “standardized” messages (Frith and Mueller, 2003). Most empirical studies have implications that advertising messages should tie in with the local cultural tastes in order to be acceptable to the consumers (e.g. Cheng, 1997; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992).

China has become one of the biggest consumer markets in the world, which international advertisers eye covetously. China contributes to one fourth of the world's population, and in recent years, has registered a fast growing economy and societal changes.

Trade relationships between China and Germany are close, and their trade volume has increased massively during the last three decades. Today, Germany imports goods worth about US\$ 40 billion from China per year, while China imports

goods worth about US\$ 21 billion from Germany. Germany is China's most important European trade partner (German Federal Foreign Office, 2006). Total advertising expenditure in Mainland China surged from US\$13 billion in 2002 to US\$23 billion in 2004 (CTR Market Research, 2005). In Germany, advertising expenditure totaled US\$ 20 billion in 2005 (ZAW, 2006). Hence, both countries analyzed in this study are among the five biggest advertising spenders worldwide.

Some recent global advertising campaigns launched in China were found offensive. This may have been caused by cultural insensitivity or a deliberate attempt to cut through a cluttered advertising environment. In the latter case, advertisers are seizing every opportunity to draw attention, boldly treading the line between "edgy" and "offensive" (Fogul, 2002).

Take McDonald's as an example. A television commercial featuring a Chinese man kneeling down to beg for a discount was charged with insulting the Chinese consumers. The answer lies in the cultural meaning of "kneeling down". The advertisement was perceived to present unequal power distribution between the Chinese consumers and the advertiser. It hints of American imperialism. Toyota's Prado MPV print ad, featuring two stone lions saluting a Japanese car, aroused immediate national resentment (Xinhuanet, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005). Nike's "Chamber of Fear" advertising campaign featured the American basketball star LeBron James fancily beating down Chinese-styled cartoon allegorical figures, including a Kung Fu

master, some ancient fairies and two dragons. The ad was accused by the Chinese people of seriously hurting their feelings, denigrating Chinese culture and blatantly insulting China. The commercial was banned by China's State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television so as to "protect national honor and traditional Chinese culture" (China Business Review, 2005).

In Germany, offensive advertising can be found as well. Probably the most prominent example of such advertising was the campaign by Benetton that was run in various countries, among them Germany. The Benetton campaign showed varying offending visuals, for instance, blood-covered dirty clothes, an overcrowded boat with refugees jumping into the sea in despair, people with tattoos reading "HIV positive," dying people etc. The Benetton campaign was perceived offensive by many Germans and led to many debates, especially among advertising practitioners (e.g., Clemens and Stahlschmidt, 1994; Voigt, 1994; Happel, 1995).

A recent example of offensive advertisement (an ad used by Freenet, an Internet provider) showed a group of elderly men sitting at an open grave, and a boy who, though standing in the middle of mourners, is laughing and celebrating because he has won an I-Pod. Recently, an advertisement by Dolce & Gabbana received massive protests in Europe. The ad showed a woman, surrounded by four men, barely clothed, one of them bending over her and forcing her down. The action is suggestive of a gang rape.

These examples demonstrate that offensive advertising is consistently used in different countries and spell out the need to gain a deeper understanding of their impact on consumers. Which types of advertising appeals and message executions will offend consumers? Do consumers from different cultures have different perceptions of offensive advertising? What will consumers do if they find an advertisement offensive? Will they reject the products or will they reject the brands? This study attempts to shed more light on these questions.

## **2. Literature review**

Discussions of offensive advertising are found in the past 25 years, scattered among topics such as “unmentionables” (Wilson and West, 1981), offensive/intrusive/irritating advertising (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985; Bartos, 1981; Li *et al.*, 2002; Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Waller, 1999), advertising ethics (Treise *et al.*, 1994), sex and decency issues (Boddewyn, 1991; Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991), shocking appeals (Dahl *et al.*, 2003), advertising targeting special groups (Wood, 1990; Zhang and Shavitt, 2003), and feminist criticism (Kilbourne, 1990; Seger, 1990; White, 1990).

Early definitions of the subject focus on studies of “unmentionables” (e.g., female hygiene products, condoms, birth control, etc.). For example, Wilson and West (1981) discuss the marketing of unmentionables by referring to products, services or concepts that are distasteful, disgusting, offensive or outrageous when shown in public by the media. A more consumer-oriented perspective for understanding offensive advertising was proposed by Dahl

*et al.* (2003). They propose that offensive advertising is an act and/or a process that violates the norm. Offensive advertising includes messages that transgress laws and customs (e.g. anti-human rights), breach a moral or social code (e.g., profanity, vulgarity) or outrage the moral or physical senses (e.g., gratuitous use of violence, use of disgusting images). This definition is more comprehensive and instrumental as it extends the concept of offensive advertising from the marketing of unmentionables (the product or services) to a broader spectrum about advertising contents and forms.

Previous studies proposed that offensive advertising is compiled of several dimensions (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Waller, 1999). Phau and Prendergast (2001) investigated “the matter” (products or services being advertised), “the manner” (advertising executions) and “the media” (advertising media/vehicles) of offensive advertising. Consumers find an advertisement offensive because the product is not suitable for public display or open discussion, the advertising execution is considered to be vulgar, obscene or irritating or the type of advertisement is not appropriate for a particular medium. Hong Kong and Singapore consumers were more concerned about “the manner” than the other two dimensions for arousing offense among consumers (Prendergast *et al.*, 2002). It is “the manner” that would commonly be perceived controllable by the advertisers and thus inexcusable if it is the cause of offensiveness in the eyes of consumers.

Sexism and racial discrimination are two offensive appeals of major concern in Western literature (Boddewyn, 1991; Ma, 1996). The former is about discrimination against

people based on their sex and prejudice towards women in particular. Sexism appeals include female stereotypes (Ford and LaTour, 1993) and sexual appeals (LaTour, 1990). This execution in advertisements is seen when women are portrayed as sexual toys or victims of violence, reinforcing cultural values of subservience, domination and inequality between sexes (White, 1990). Racial discrimination is about disrespecting people based on their race, often in the form of depreciating the customs, religions and cultures of the minority.

In the Asian context, empirical studies found that sexist themes, fear, nudity and cultural insensitivity were the most frequently cited reasons for finding advertisements offensive (Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Prendergast *et al.*, 2002). Offensiveness falls in the “soft issues” of advertising. It has nothing to do with “hard matters” such as improper substantiation or deception. As Boddewyn (1991) argued, offensive advertisements involve products, services, concepts, claims and/or imageries that elicit reaction of distaste, disgust or outrage. Quite often, ads accused of offense are legal and truthful.

Offensive advertising is context sensitive. As Ma (1996) suggested, the word “offensive” is highly associated with the subtleties of relational and situational context. Whether a word or an image is perceived to be offensive depends on the relationship between the parties involved and the occasion/situation where it is exposed. Offensive advertising is also culture specific (Boddewyn, 1991). It is perceived and judged by different criteria across cultures. For example, Chinese consumers were most offended by advertisements with indecent language, anti-social behavior, racist images, and nudity (Waller and Fam, 2001).

Time, place and demographics are factors affecting consumers' levels of perceived offensiveness of an advertisement (Prendergast *et al.*, 2002). The degree of unmentionability varies according to time and geographical locations. The female hygiene napkin, an example of sensitive products, was once considered indecent to show in public in certain places. Now, it is gradually gaining acceptance and is commonly advertised even on prime-time television. Female consumers had a lower tolerance level toward advertisements illustrating nudity than male consumers (Prendergast *et al.*, 2002). Education plays a role in the perception of offensive advertising but not in the same direction for different cultures.

Offensive advertisements can be harmful for both the products and the brands. Burke and Edell (1989) found that consumers' feelings generated by an advertisement would transfer to their evaluation of the brand. Such negative perceptions would also lead to low-purchase intention. Consumers were less likely to buy products from a company using offensive advertisements if a similar alternative was available from a non-offending company (An and Kim, 2006). Consumers in Hong Kong were likely to boycott a company using offensive advertising (Prendergast *et al.*, 2002).

In Germany, though offensive advertising campaigns are found from time to time, systematic academic research on the topic is scarce. Several articles by practitioners can be found that report opinions towards specific advertising campaigns incorporating potentially offensive approaches (e.g., Beck, 1999; Prenger, 2004; Roth, 2003; Schroeter, 1999).

Pirowsky (1993) reports results of a survey among advertising experts, and according to that

study, the Benetton campaign in Germany led to increases in brand awareness but massive decreases in brand sympathy. From an academic perspective, potentially offensive advertising in Germany is first of all analyzed with regard to juridical issues (e.g. Hartwig, 2003; Henning-Bodewig, 1992; Kassebohm, 1995; Orthmann, 2004).

### **Cultural dimensions and offensive advertising**

Culture is the “collective mental programming” that distinguishes societies from one another (Hofstede, 1983, p.76). Several studies attempt to explain the differences in consumers’ responses to offensive advertising using culture as explaining factors. The underlying belief is that cultural values will influence the consumers’ response to advertising executions in general and offensive executions in specific. The cultural theories tested include Hall’s (1976) cultural theory of information context as well as Hofstede’s (1984) theory of cultural dimensions.

Hall (1976) describes societies as high-context societies and low-context societies according to the importance of the communication message elements to provide meanings. In high-context cultures, there is very little information in the coded message because most of the information is shared by members of a society. In low-context cultures, mass information is embedded explicitly in the communication messages. Hall and Hall (1990) describe Americans, Germans, and northern European countries as low-context cultures while Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China and southern European countries are high-context cultures. Hofstede’s (1980; 1983) typology of

cultural dimensions is adopted by scholars to explain cross-cultural differences in advertising (e.g., Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Taylor *et al.*, 1997; de Mooij, 1998).

Hofstede's original work described four cultural dimensions:

individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity and later included long-term/short-term orientation (Hofstede, 1991). An and Kim (2006) reviewed the two cultural theories and propose that Hall's (1976) information context and Hofstede's (1984) individualism/collectivism cultural dimension would be most relevant for the study of offensive advertising in a cross-cultural setting.

Shao and Hill (1994) argue that high-context societies rely more on social norms in restricting marketing communications than explicit laws and regulations. The analysis of regulations of advertisements of socially-sensitive products supported the hypothesis that sexually-oriented products were more strictly controlled by regulations in high-context countries than in low-context countries.

An and Kim (2006) found that sexually-oriented and addictive products were more offensive among Korean consumers than among U.S. consumers. The authors attributed it to the argument that high-context societies tend to be more strait-laced about sexually intimate matters. Low-context societies tend to be more liberal towards sex and pornography (Shao and Hill, 1994). Korean consumers were found less accepting of addictive products. It is probably because these products are perceived as

social ills with negative impacts on society. So, consumers from collective societies will find them less acceptable (An and Kim, 2006).

Regarding the cultural dimension of individualism, Fam and Waller (2003) compared the acceptance of potentially offensive products across four Asia-Pacific countries. The results shed light on the influence of individualism on the perception of offensive products. New Zealand (an individualistic culture) consumers found all four groups of products (political products, addictive products, sex-related products, and healthcare products) less offensive than Malaysian, Taiwanese and Chinese consumers (collective cultures).

While the above studies examine culture and offensive products, the next two studies examine culture and consumers' responses to offensive advertising executions. In An and Kim's (2006) study of Korean and U.S. consumers, the largest country difference in reasons for offensive ads were anti-social behavior, followed by sexual connotations and nudity. Korean consumers were less accepting of these three executions. The authors attributed the difference to the importance of harmony in the collective society. Consumers in collective societies would be less accepting of advertising executions that violate societal norms. As sexually-oriented products are less acceptable in high-context societies, sexually-oriented appeals and executions are less acceptable in high-context societies.

To conclude, the literature review indicates that culture plays an important role in influencing consumers' responses toward offensive advertising. Among the cultural values analyzed, the concept of high/low context cultures and the concept of individualism/collectivism seem to be most promising for explaining reactions toward offensive advertising in a cross-cultural setting. Generally speaking, consumers from high-context and collective cultures are more critical of sexually-oriented products and advertising appeals, as well as advertisements of products that may have negative social impacts. Consumers from low-context and individualistic cultures are more accepting of sexually-oriented products and advertising appeals, as well as advertisements believed to be bad for society.

It is noticeable that in the studies that were reviewed very few of them exposed consumers to potentially offensive advertisements. Advertisers and marketers will benefit if concrete examples of advertisements are shown and consumers' responses are measured. By doing so, advertising professionals will have a more solid idea of the visuals, or the advertising copy, that are offensive.

### **3. Hypotheses**

Previous studies support that the differences in cultural characteristics are important influencers affecting the acceptability of certain advertising appeals that are potentially offensive. In this study, Germany was selected to represent a low-context

and more individualistic society. China was selected to represent a high-context and more collectivistic society.

China and Germany are described based on the concepts of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (2001) as well as GLOBE (House et al. 2004). GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program) is a recently published typology of cultural dimensions and stems from organizational and management science literature. It reports data on cultural dimensions from a large number of countries (62 nations). It may prove relevant for advertising and marketing purposes, as well (Terlutter, Mueller, and Diehl, 2005; Terlutter, Diehl, and Mueller, 2006).

According to Hall (1976), Germany is a low-context country, whereas China is a high-context country. Hence, Chinese people are likely to gather more information from the context in which the product or brand is shown. It can be expected that in high-context cultures, the offending elements in the advertisements play a more important role for the evaluation of the ads and the product being advertised than they do in low-context cultures.

According to country scores for China and Germany by Hofstede (2001), China is a collectivistic country (country score on the individualism dimension of 20), whereas Germany represents a more individualistic nation (individualism score of 67).

Additional information on China and Germany can be derived from the GLOBE project (House et al., 2004). GLOBE outlined nine cultural dimensions, among them a

cultural dimension labelled “in-group collectivism,” reflecting the degree to which individuals have pride in and loyalty to their families. This dimension is similar to the dimension of collectivism as typically understood in literature (for instance, Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Triandis, 1989, 1995). GLOBE explicitly differentiates between societal values and societal practices. Practices are the visible products, processes and behaviors of a culture. They mainly reflect the “as is.” Values are the individuals’ or society’s sense of what ought to be, as distinct from, what is. They primarily reflect the “should be.” According to the GLOBE country scores reported, in-group collectivism values are quite similar in the two countries (5.15 in China versus 5.18 in Germany on a seven-point scale). However, practices which reflect the current state in the society (the “as is” in society) are much higher in China (country score of 5.18) than in Germany (country score of 4.02). Hence, the GLOBE scores on societal practices support that China is a more collectivistic country than Germany.

To summarize, the fact that China is a more collectivistic and high-context culture whereas Germany is rather an individualistic and low-context culture leads to the assumption that Chinese people are more critical toward offensive advertising than German people. In addition, based on previous findings that respondents who considered themselves liberal were less critical about controversial advertisements than those who considered themselves conservative (Yoon and Nam, 2001), the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Chinese respondents will perceive offensive advertisements more negatively than German respondents.

A number of empirical studies have given evidence to support the positive correlation between advertising perception and attitudes toward the advertisement, as well as positive correlation between attitudes toward the advertisement and attitudes towards the brand (Chan, 1996; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; MacKenzie et al., 1986; Moore and Hutchinson, 1983). In general, the more positive an advertisement was perceived, the more positive attitudes toward the advertisement would result, which in turn creates more positive attitudes toward the brand. We therefore offer the following two hypotheses:

H2: The more negative the advertisements are perceived by the respondents, the more likely the products are rejected.

H3: The more negative the advertisements are perceived by the respondents, the more likely the brands are rejected.

Previous studies indicate that U.S. consumers are more likely not to purchase products and brands using offensive advertising than Chinese consumers in Hong Kong (An and Kim, 2006; Prendergast et. al., 2002). Previous observations indicate that Chinese consumers often advocate on the Internet and other public forums boycotting a product or a brand that use offensive advertising. We did not find

literature that document such a strong consumer advocacy in Germany. We therefore offer the following two hypotheses:

H4: Chinese respondents are more likely to reject the products than German respondents.

H5: Chinese respondents are more likely to reject the brands than German respondents.

Reject the products or the brands in this paper means “intend not to purchase the product or the brand”.

#### **4. Research methodology**

##### **Participants**

A survey study was conducted to investigate Chinese and German consumers' perceptions and reactions toward the potentially offensive advertisements. Chinese participants were recruited in four universities in Shanghai. A total of 286 undergraduates as well as postgraduate students from four universities in Shanghai participated in the survey. Data were collected in August 2005 during normal classes. Eleven questionnaires were not usable as over half of the questions were not answered. The final Chinese sample consisted of 275 respondents. German participants were recruited in one university in South-Western Germany. A total of 307 undergraduate students participated in the survey. Nineteen questionnaires were omitted due to a large number of missing values. The final German sample consisted of 288

respondents. Data collection took place in July 2006. A student sample was adopted mainly for their accessibility and homogeneity as a group (Calder et al., 1981). They were the target market for five out of the six constructed advertisements including the laptop computer, a restaurant, a soft drink and clothing.

### **Measurements of constructs**

A questionnaire was first constructed in Chinese. The questionnaire was translated to German by a native German speaker and back-translated to Chinese using a German-Chinese dictionary. A language instructor with proficiency in German and Chinese examined the adjectives used and all the questions in the questionnaires and concluded that they were very similar or equivalent in meaning. The English adjectives in this paper should be used for indicative purpose only. The set of adjectives used in English, Germany and Chinese are shown in Table 2. Six print advertisements were shown in the questionnaire (see Figure 1). The advertisements were pre-tested among a group of 12 university students from Mainland China studying in Hong Kong using focus-group interviews. Only those advertisements were included which the participants of the focus group considered as offensive.

The visuals were sourced from Web sites and magazines in Hong Kong. The headline and the body copy were written by one of the authors. To the best of our knowledge, these advertisements had not been used in Mainland China or in Germany. Following each advertisement, respondents were asked to check 12 adjectives that they found

appropriate to describe the advertisement. They could check none or they could check all the adjectives listed. Six of the adjectives were negative (i.e., offensive, uncomfortable, irritating, disgusting, ridiculous and impolite). These adjectives were collected from a previous discussion with a panel of eight postgraduate students from Mainland China studying in Hong Kong. The same language, i.e. Putonghua, was used in the pilot as well as in the field study. The other six positive adjectives (convincing, lively, interesting, informative, creative and clever) came from Chan's (1996) study of viewers' perceptions of television commercials. Positive adjectives were added to avoid probing respondents with negative adjectives only. Allowing for both positive and negative adjectives provided additional information concerning the relationships between consumers' negative and positive perceptions toward the advertisements. Respondents were then asked to indicate their intentions to reject the product because of the advertisement and reject the brand because of the advertisement using a five-point scale (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely). Demographic data were also collected.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **Method of analysis**

Perception profiles were compiled for each of the tested advertisements by counting the percentage of respondents who checked each of the twelve adjectives. Overall perception profiles were calculated by compiling the mean perception profiles

of the six advertisements. A series of t-tests were used to compare the perception profiles between Chinese and German respondents.

Next, principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted to examine the dimensions of consumer perceptions. PCA was conducted three times, one for the total sample and one for each of the country sub-samples. Multiple linear regressions were conducted to examine if the consumer perceptions were able to predict consumers' behavioral intentions. Factor scores from PCA of the 12 adjectives were used as predictors. Two regression equations were constructed. Likelihood of rejecting the products and the brands because of the advertisements were the predicted variables in the regression equations.

## **5. Results**

The final sample consisted of 563 respondents, 275 from China and 288 from Germany. The mean ages were 22.4 for the Chinese sub-sample and 22.0 for the German sub-sample. Fifty-three percent of the Chinese sub-sample was male and forty-nine percent of the German sub-sample was male. The two sub-samples were not statistically different in age or sex.

### **Overall perception**

Table 1 shows the perception profiles of each of the six selected advertisements as well as the mean perception of the six advertisements. The negative adjectives most frequently used by respondents to describe the advertisements were “uncomfortable”,

“offensive” and “ridiculous”. The positive adjectives most frequently used were “creative” and “interesting.” However, only a small proportion of respondents considered these advertisements “convincing” or “informative”. On average, 16.6 percent of the respondents selected at least one of the negative adjectives and 15.6 percent of the respondents selected at least one of the positive adjectives. Pair-wise t-test ( $t = -1.1$ ,  $p = 0.28$ ) indicated that respondents were equally likely to select negative or positive adjectives.

Advertisements 1 and 6 received the strongest negative perception among the total sample. Over 30 percent of respondents found them offensive and over 18 percent found them disgusting. Advertisement 1 featured a woman opening her legs when approached by a diamond. Advertisement 6 featured a man embracing a woman. Both advertisements contained sexual connotations through the body posture and the advertisement copy. Advertisement 4 received the strongest positive perception. Forty-four percent of respondents considered it creative, thirty-one percent considered it interesting and 28 percent considered it lively. Advertisement 4 featured a man trying to lose his girlfriend. Twenty percent of respondents considered it informative, probably because of its price information.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 2 compares the mean perception profiles among Chinese and German respondents. Results indicate that there were significant differences between Chinese

and German respondents' perceptions towards the selected sample of advertisements. All adjectives, with the exception of "lively," reported significant differences in mean perception. Among the negative adjectives, Chinese respondents more often considered the advertisements offensive, uncomfortable, disgusting and impolite than German respondents. German respondents more often considered the advertisements irritating and ridiculous than Chinese respondents. Among the positive adjectives, Chinese respondents more often considered the advertisements informative and convincing than German respondents. German respondents more often considered the advertisements creative, interesting and clever than Chinese respondents. To summarize, as perceptions of the advertisements were not all more negative among Chinese respondents, H1 was partially supported.

The largest difference in perceptions was the use of the adjectives "informative", "uncomfortable" and "disgusting". Chinese respondents were more likely to find the advertisements informative, uncomfortable and disgusting. On average, 17 percent of Chinese respondents perceived the advertisements informative while only three percent of German respondents perceived them informative.

According to the classification by Resnik and Stern (1977), five of the six selected advertisements did not contain objective facts about the products. The remaining one advertisement contained information about price. Especially for the advertisements that did not contain objective information, the results seem to suggest that Chinese

respondents will perceive the advertisements informative if the advertisements help them to understand the brand more. On the other hand, German respondents will perceive the advertisements informative only if they contain factual information. This finding is in line with the high- versus low-context culture as discussed above. Germans (low-context culture) are looking for straightforward and direct information to a higher extent than Chinese people (high-context culture) do.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

### **Factor analysis**

To examine the underlying dimension of respondents' perceptions, PCA were conducted. Perceptions toward individual advertisements were grouped. For example, if respondent 1 checked the adjective "offensive" for advertisements 1 and 2 only, the mean percentage of checking the adjective "offensive" was 33 percent (two out of six). In such way, the dichotomous data towards six individual advertisements are transformed into interval data ranging from zero to 100 percent. Factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the 12 adjectives. Factor analysis of transformed dichotomous data was used in analyzing viewers' perception of television advertising (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1981). Three factor analyses were conducted, including all respondents, the Chinese sub-sample and the German sub-sample respectively. The results of the factor analysis are summarized in Table 3.

Results of the three factor analyses shared one similarity. All the three factor analyses generated a three-factor solution. In the factor analysis of the total sample, the eigen values for the three factors were 3.4, 2.0 and 1.4. The three factors were labeled: dislike, creative/appealing, and persuasive. The first factor was labeled “dislike” as it combined all the six negative adjectives. The remaining six positive adjectives were split into two dimensions. The second factor combined the adjectives creative, clever, interesting, as well as lively. It refers to the extent to which respondents found the advertisement creative and appealing. It was therefore labeled “creative/appealing.” The third factor combined the adjectives informative and convincing. It refers to the extent that the respondents found the advertisement useful and persuasive. It was labeled “persuasive.”

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In the second factor analysis conducted for the Chinese respondents, the eigen values for the three factors were 4.1, 2.2 and 1.0. The three factors were labeled: like/relevant, emotionally disturbing, and negative judgment. Factors two and three shared much commonality as two adjectives (irritating and disgusting) loaded high on both factors. The first factor combined all the six positive adjectives and was labeled “like/relevant.” The remaining six negative adjectives were split into two dimensions. The second factor combined the adjectives offensive as well as uncomfortable. These two adjectives were related to people’s emotional consequence. The factor was

therefore labeled “emotionally disturbing.” The third factor combined the adjectives ridiculous, impolite, irritating and disgusting. It related to the subjective ethical judgment and was labeled “negative judgment.”

In the third factor analysis conducted for the German respondents, the eigen values for the three factors were 2.9, 2.3 and 1.2. The three factors were labeled: dislike, creative/appealing, and persuasive. These labels were the same as that in the first factor analysis because they had the same sets of constituting adjectives.

To summarize, negative perceptions toward the advertisements were one-dimensional for German respondents but were two-dimensional for Chinese respondents. Positive perceptions toward the advertisements were one-dimensional for Chinese but were two-dimensional for German respondents.

### **Perception and consumers’ behavioral intentions**

How are respondents’ perceptions related to their consumption behaviors? If respondents do not like the advertisements, will they reject the products or even the brands? Multiple regression models to predict consumers’ behavioral intentions were conducted using factor scores of 563 individual observations as input (i.e. factor scores of the first factor analysis). The results are displayed in Table 4 and 5.

Results indicate that advertising perceptions are strong predictors of intention to reject the products and the brands. The three factors of advertising perception together

explained 33 percent of variation in rejecting the products and 32 percent of variation in intention to reject the brands.

For the prediction of intention to reject the products because of the advertisements, the “creative/appealing” factor was the largest contributor (the less creative/appealing the higher the intention to reject the products). It had the largest beta estimate and contributed 16.9 percent of the variation of rejecting the products. After the “creative/appealing” factor, the most useful predictor was the “dislike” factor. It contributed an additional 16 percent of variation. Stepwise regression indicated that the “persuasive” factor did not make significant additional contribution when the first two factors were included in the regression model. The F-statistic for the regression model was 89.6 and was significant at 0.001 level. The result indicates that the more negative the advertisements are perceived by the respondents, the higher the intention to reject the products. As a result, H2 was supported. Almost identical regression results were reported for the prediction of intention to reject the brand. As a result, H3 was supported.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

We also conducted regression analysis separately for the Chinese and German sub-samples. As the two sub-samples had different dimensions of advertising perception, factor scores of the respective dimensions were used for prediction. In the

prediction of intention to reject the products because of offensive advertising, the factor “like/relevant” had a negative and significant standardized beta value for the Chinese respondents and the factor “persuasive” had an insignificant standardized beta value for the German respondents. The results suggested that if Chinese consumers perceive the advertisements as informative and convincing (hence more relevant), they would be less likely to reject the products. This was not so for the German respondents. The same pattern was reported for the prediction of intention to reject the brands.

Overall speaking, both Chinese and German respondents did not show a strong urge to reject the products and the brands after being exposed to the offensive advertisements. The intention to reject the products and reject the brands because of the advertisements were significantly below the mid-point of three (mean value = 2.5;  $t = -13.7, p < 0.05$  and mean value = 2.3;  $t = -16.2, p < 0.001$ , respectively). The mean values for intention to reject the products were 2.8 for Chinese respondents and 2.1 for German respondents. Pair-wise t-tests indicated that Chinese respondents were more likely to reject the products because of the offensive advertisements ( $t = 9.2, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore H4 was supported. The mean values for intention to reject the brands were 2.7 for Chinese respondents and 2.0 for German respondents ( $t = 10.4, p < 0.001$ ). Pair-wise t-tests found that Chinese respondents were more likely to reject the brands because of the offensive advertisements. Therefore H5 was supported.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The study compared the effects of offensive advertising on Chinese and German consumers. China represents a high-context and collectivistic culture whereas Germany is a low-context and more individualistic country. The results of the study were mixed.

It was expected that the Chinese respondents would perceive the advertisements more negatively than the German respondents, but this was only partly the case. They considered the ads more often offensive, uncomfortable, disgusting and impolite than the German consumers, but the Germans judged them to be more irritating and ridiculous. It was also only partly true that German respondents will perceive the ads more positively than the Chinese respondents, as the Germans considered the advertisements as more creative, interesting and clever than the Chinese consumers, but less convincing and informative. It seems to suggest that German consumers are more likely to appreciate the creative elements in the potentially offensive advertisements than Chinese consumers. On the other hand, Chinese consumers are more likely to appreciate the informative elements in the potentially offensive advertisements than Germans consumers.

The study clearly showed that Chinese and German consumers evaluated the advertisements very differently. There were significant differences in 11 of 12 adjectives that the respondents were asked to use to characterize the advertisements

(the exception was the item lively). As the PCAs showed, the dimensions of perceptions of the advertisements were different between Chinese and German subjects, as well. The negative perceptions of the ads were one-dimensional for German respondents but two-dimensional for Chinese respondents. For the positive perceptions of the advertisements, it was vice versa: two dimensions for German and only one dimension for the Chinese consumers.

The study also demonstrates that advertisers in both countries have to be careful when using potentially offensive advertisements. Results indicate that the more negative the ads are perceived, the higher the likelihood of rejecting the products and the brands. This was especially true for Chinese respondents, which showed a significant higher tendency to reject the products and the brands. The less creative/appealing the ad was the higher the likelihood of rejecting the products and the brands. The “creative/appealing” factor was the most important factor to explain and predict the rejection of the products and the brands.

The analyses revealed that the factor “persuasive” had a significant influence on the likelihood to reject the products in China but not in Germany. Though the coefficients were modest, the findings do suggest that a higher level of perceived information mitigates the negative effects of offensive advertising in China but probably not in Germany.

The cultural concept of high- versus low-context cultures as well as the cultural dimension of individualism/collectivism, which were used to characterize the two nations, proved to be useful in explaining cultural differences in the perception and evaluation of the advertisements. With regard to individualism/collectivism, the respondents from China (China being a more collectivistic country) found the ads more offensive than the German respondents (Germany being considered as a more individualistic country). Likewise, the low-context and high-context dimension of Hall was able to explain differences in the evaluation of the ads. The Chinese respondents as members of a high-context culture considered the ads as significantly more informative than the German respondents. For the adjective “informative”, the largest difference in perceptions between Chinese and German consumers was found, compared to the other adjectives used in this study. According to the classification of Resnik and Stern (1977), there was only one advertisement which contained objective information (price information). This result provides evidence to support that Chinese subjects perceive the advertisements as informative if the ads help them to understand the product and brand more. Therefore advertisers targeting Chinese consumers should pay special attention to the context of the ad as it plays a more important role in the acceptance of the ad and the brand than in Germany as a low-context culture. If advertisers want an advertisement to be considered informative in Germany, it should contain objective, straightforward information.

To conclude, the current study provides evidence that students in the two cultures react differently to offensive print advertising of a limited type of offensiveness. As six concrete advertisements were shown to the respondents of the two nations, compared to other studies about offensive advertising, the study further provides useful advice for marketers and advertisers to understand how far they can stretch the line for these particular types of controversial advertising in the two countries. The two print ads (ads 1 and 6) that received the most negative perceptions both contained sexually-oriented body images. When using such images, advertisers have to check in advance whether the selected images are accepted within their target group. The current study had some contribution to public policy. As consumers react to offensive advertising differently in different cultures, the self-regulatory guidelines as well as the laws and regulations regarding offensive advertising should be different in different cultures.

## **7. Limitations and further research**

The study has the following limitations. First, though a thorough translation/back-translation process was carried out, it is difficult to achieve total equivalence, including functional, conceptual, and linguistic equivalence between the German and the Chinese survey documents for all respondents, including the adjectives. This insufficiency may affect the validity of the findings. Second, the types of offensiveness investigated were limited. It includes offensive elements in gender

portrayal, sexual connotation and disrespecting authority. Further research should extend it to cover other offensive types such as nudity, racist images and anti-social behaviors. Third, consumer responses in China and Germany were derived from a student sample. This particular age group may not be representative of the culture of the rest of the populations. A general sample should be considered. Also, additional cities in China and Germany should be included in the future and the investigation should be expanded to other countries differing on cultural dimensions in order to get a still deeper insight to the effects of offensive advertising. Fourth, the current study uses a country as a proxy for individualistic or collectivistic culture. It has the limitation that within a specific culture, individuals can endure both individualistic as well as collectivistic cultural values in different contexts or for different product categories. Further study should include measures of cultural variable at the individual level. Fifth, only the “manner” of offensive advertising was studied and the “matter” as well as “media” were not covered. Further study should also consider types of products (e.g. public or private goods) and the advertising media (e.g. print or outdoor media) as predicting variables to predict consumers’ perceptions and behavioral intentions.

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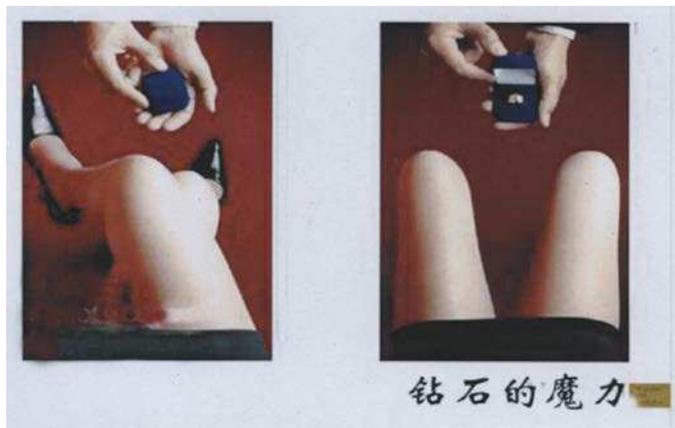
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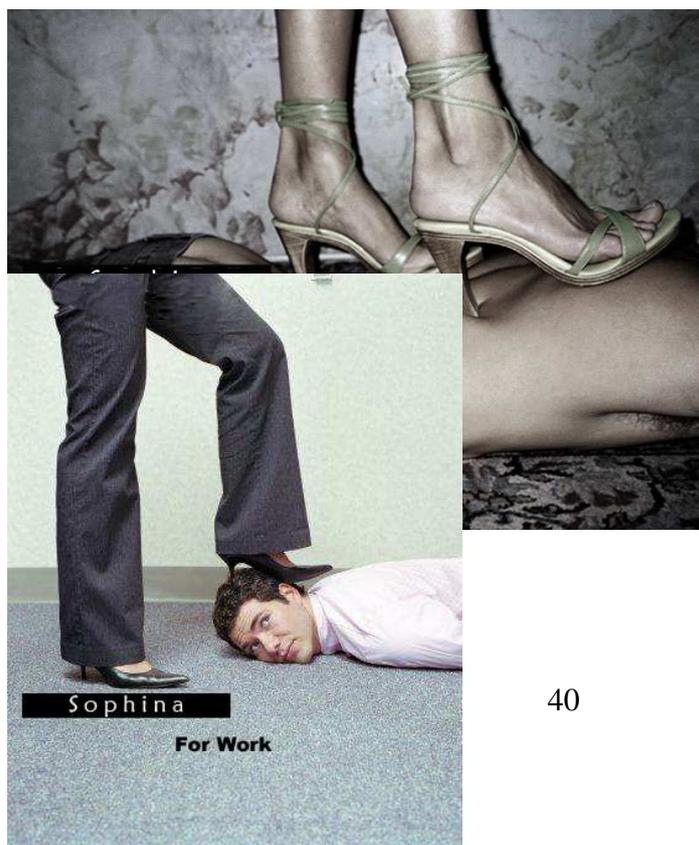
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**Figure 1**

Ad 1

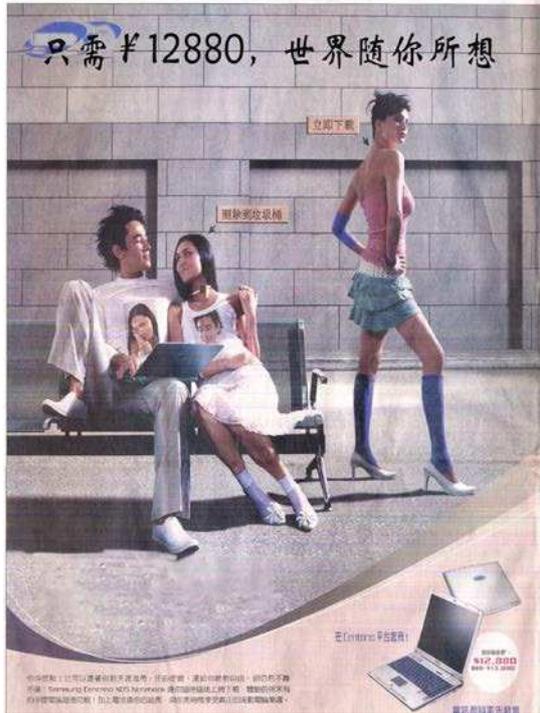


Ad 2

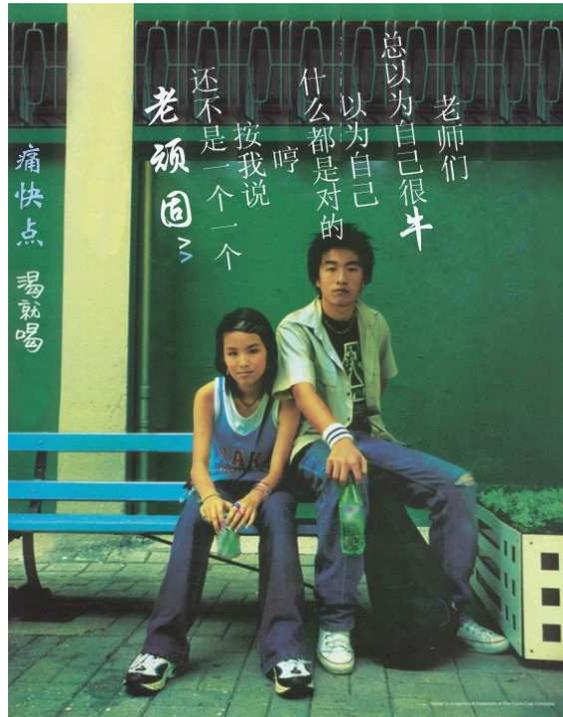


Ad 3

Ad 4



Ad 5



Ad 6

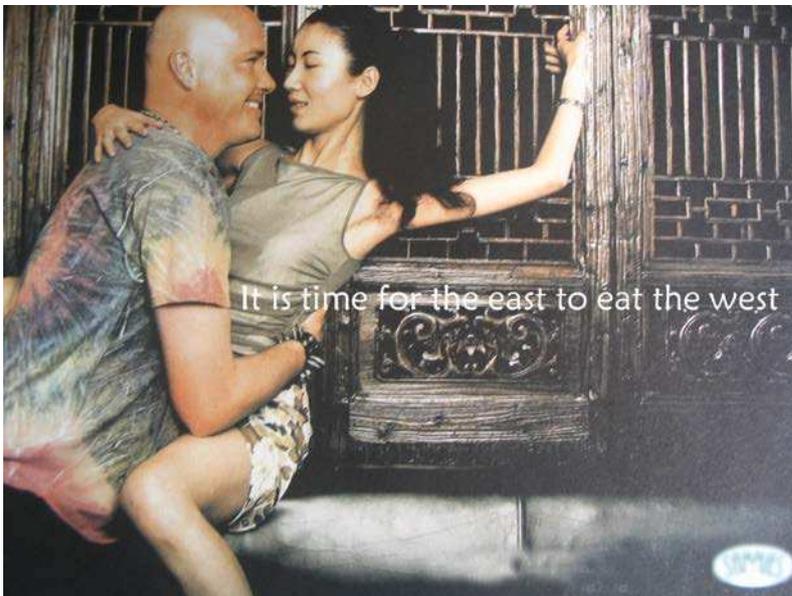


Table 1 Mean perception profiles of six advertisements, each viewed by 563 respondents

Adjectives	Ad 1	Ad 2	Ad 3	Ad 4	Ad 5	Ad 6	Mean percentage	Standard deviation
<i>Negative</i>								
Uncomfortable	19	27	23	10	14	25	19.8	23.2
Offensive	31	11	17	8	11	33	18.3	20.8
Ridiculous	17	15	22	11	25	18	17.9	20.0
Irritating	15	22	17	9	29	13	17.8	19.7
Impolite	18	10	22	8	17	20	15.8	19.0
Disgusting	18	9	6	4	2	20	9.8	15.7
<i>Positive</i>								
Creative	37	27	24	44	11	30	29.0	24.5
Interesting	22	25	23	31	11	15	21.1	21.7
Lively	13	14	12	28	7	15	15.1	19.2
Clever	18	9	11	23	5	15	13.4	17.5
Informative	11	7	8	20	8	5	9.8	18.0
Convincing	6	4	6	11	5	2	5.5	12.5
Negative adjectives	19.6	15.6	17.8	8.3	16.4	21.9	16.6	
Positive adjectives	17.6	14.4	14.0	26.2	7.9	13.6	15.6	

Table 2 Difference in perceptions among Chinese and German respondents

Perceptions	Mean for Chinese respondents	Mean for German respondents	t-stat
<i>Negative</i>			
Uncomfortable/unangenehm/令人不舒服	28.0	11.9	75.9***
Offensive/anstößig/惹人反感	22.0	14.7	17.8***
Ridiculous/lächerlich/荒谬	15.7	20.1	-6.9**
Irritating/irritierend/让人生气	11.4	23.9	-62.0***
Impolite/unhöflich/无礼	18.2	13.4	9.3**
Disgusting/ekelhaft/恶心	15.3	4.6	72.3***
<i>Positive</i>			
Creative/kreativ/有创意	22.7	35.0	-37.2***
Interesting/interessant/趣味性强	18.0	24.1	-11.1***
Lively/lebhaft/生动形象	16.2	14.0	1.9
Clever/clever/做法聪明	8.4	18.2	-47.5***
Informative/informativ/传递信息	17.3	2.6	110.7***
Convincing/überzeugend/有说服力	8.6	2.6	35.3***

\*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 3 Factor analysis of mean perception

Adjectives	Total sample	Chinese sub-sample	German sub-sample
<i>Factor 1: Dislike</i>			
Impolite	0.74		0.73
Disgusting	0.67		0.64
Offensive	0.66		0.59
Irritating	0.66		0.53
Ridiculous	0.65		0.60
Uncomfortable	0.60		0.74
<i>Factor 2: Creative / appealing</i>			
Creative	0.73		0.67
Clever	0.72		0.72
Interesting	0.67		0.65
Lively	0.54		0.58
<i>Factor 3: Persuasive</i>			
Informative	0.83		0.95
Convincing	0.78		0.94
<i>Factor 1: Like / relevant</i>			
Clever		0.75	
Creative		0.73	
Lively		0.72	
Informative		0.69	
Convincing		0.68	
Interesting		0.52	
<i>Factor 2: Emotionally disturbing</i>			
Offensive		0.79	
Uncomfortable		0.78	
<i>Factor 3: Negative judgment</i>			
Ridiculous		0.83	
Impolite		0.77	
Irritating		0.59	
Disgusting		0.57	
Variance explained by factor (%)			

1	28	34	24
2	17	18	10
3	11	9	19
Cumulative variance explained (%)	56	61	53

Note: Decimal figures are factor loadings (after rotation), which indicate the strength with which a particular item is linked to the factor as a whole.

Table 4 Prediction of rejection of products because of the advertisements

Factor	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		R-square
	B	Standard error	beta	t-stat for beta = 0	
<i>All respondents</i>					<i>0.32</i>
1. Dislike	0.36	0.03	0.38	10.7***	
2. Creative / appealing	-0.38	0.03	-0.40	-11.2***	
3. Persuasive	0.09	0.03	0.10	2.7**	
<i>Chinese respondents</i>					<i>0.30</i>
1. Like / relevant	-0.28	0.05	-0.30	-5.8***	
2. Emotionally disturbing	0.40	0.05	0.43	8.3***	
3. Negative judgment	-0.16	0.05	0.17	3.3***	
<i>German respondents</i>					<i>0.31</i>
1. Dislike	0.42	0.04	0.51	10.2***	
2. Persuasive	-0.00	0.04	-0.00	-0.1	
3. Creative / appealing	-0.17	0.04	-0.2	4.0***	

\*p<0.05;\*\*\*p<0.001

Note: Statement used: "Ich würde mich aufgrund der Anzeige weigern, das Produkt zu kaufen" / 我会因为这个广告拒绝购买这个产品

Table 5 Prediction of rejection of brands because of the advertisements

Factor	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		R-square
	B	Standard error	beta	t-stat for beta = 0	
<i>All respondents</i>					0.32
1. Dislike	0.36	0.03	0.38	10.7***	
2. Creative / appealing	-0.38	0.03	-0.40	-11.2***	
3. Persuasive	0.09	0.03	0.10	2.7**	
<i>Chinese respondents</i>					0.28
1. Like / relevant	-2.6	0.05	-0.27	-5.1***	
2. Emotionally disturbing	0.4	0.05	0.43	8.1***	
3. Negative judgment	0.2	0.05	0.17	3.2***	
<i>German respondents</i>					0.25
1. Dislike	0.37	0.04	0.47	9.1***	
2. Persuasive	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.3	
3. Creative / appealing	-0.13	0.04	-0.16	-3.1**	

\*\*p<0.01;\*\*\*p<0.001

Note: Statement used: "Ich würde mich aufgrund der Anzeige weigern, andere Produkte der Marke zu kaufen" / 我会因为这个广告拒绝购买这个品牌的其他产品

