THE IDEAL OF FEMALE BEAUTY IN TWO DIFFERENT CULTURES:
Socio-Cultural Analysis of Belgian and Malaysian Print Advertisements[1]

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Abstract: This paper will examine to what extent cultural and social values are reflected by advertisements. Most advertisements stress the functional qualities of a product, but simultaneously they also convey implicit messages. Through these messages, advertisers can diffuse socio-cultural values such as the importance of beauty, femininity, virility, pleasure, youth, etc.

A content analysis study of print advertisements for facial and body creams for women appearing in Belgian and Malaysian women's magazines will be performed. The research focuses on how language and images can be manipulated in a strategic way to pass on implicit messages to the receiver and on how this indirect aspect of communication is used by advertising agencies to reach their target groups without openly admitting their intention, namely selling the product or increasing brand awareness.

On one hand, the feminine stereotypes used in the advertisements will be studied. What kinds of women are represented and how are they brought into vision? On the other hand, reflected cultural values will be examined in order to analyze if these values transmit the character of two different societies. Do advertising agencies adapt their marketing strategies to the socio-cultural background of the consumers they wish to target? The purpose of my research is to reveal if advertisers diffuse totally different values in the Belgian and the Malaysian magazines or if there are some similarities.

Key words: Advertising (in Belgium and in Malaysia), beauty ideals, socio-cultural values, visual and verbal signs, women.

Özet: Bu makale kültürel ve sosyal değerlerin reklamlarda nasıl yansıtıldığını incelemektedir. Çoğu reklam ürünlerin işlevsel niteliklerini vurgulamakta, aynı zamanda gizli mesajlar taşımaktadır. Bu mesajlar vasıtası ile reklamcılar güzelliğin, kadınlığın,erkekliğin, zevkin ve gençliğin önemi gibi sosyo-kültürel değerleri yayabilirler.

Çalışmada Belçika ve Malezya'da yayımlanan dergilerdeki kadınlar için yüz ve vücut kremi reklamlarının içerik çözümlemesi gerçekleştirilecektir. Araştırma, dil ve resimlerin ne yolla stratejik bir biçimde işlenerek okuyuculara gizli mesajlar aktarıldığına ve iletişimin bu dolaylı şeklinin reklam ajansları tarafından hedef gruplara ulaşmak için niyetleri açıkça belli edilmeden nasıl kullanıldığına yoğunlaşmaktadır.

Bir taraftan reklamlarda kullanılan dişil stereotipler çalışılacaktır. Ne tür kadınlar gösterilmekte ve nasıl göz önüne koyulmaktalar? Bir diğer yandan, yansıtılan kültürel değerler incelenip bu değerlerin iki farklı toplumun değerlerini aktarıp aktarmadığı çözümlenecektir. Reklam ajansları pazarlama stratejilerini hedefteki tüketicilerin sosyo-kültürel altyapılarına adapte ediyor mu? Çalışmamın amacı reklamcıların Belçika ve Malezya'da tamamen farklı değerler yayıp yaymadıklarını ve, eğer varsa, benzerlikleri açığa çıkarmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Reklamcılık (Belçika ve Malezya'da), güzellik idealleri, sosyo-kültürel değerler, görsel ve sözel göstergeler, kadınlar.

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[1] The findings of this study were presented at the International Conference on Discourse, Communication and the Enterprise in Nottingham (September 2007) and at the 4th Newcastle Postgraduate Conference in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (27 March 2009).

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Introduction

Advertisers often stress the functional qualities of a product, but simultaneously they also convey "hidden" messages. According to Hermerén, « (…) the promotion of a product or service must go beyond a mere description of the product or service and make claims above and beyond the functional value of the product » (Hermerén,1999 : 170). By means of "hidden" messages, advertisers can diffuse socio-cultural values such as the importance of beauty, femininity, pleasure, youth, etc. "The repetition of advertising messages creates and reinforces cultural beliefs and values" (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004: 410). Language and images can be manipulated in a strategic way to pass on implicit messages.

This paper discusses the content of written and pictorial communications. An analysis of the differences in linguistic and cultural variations concerning beauty will be conducted. On one hand, the feminine stereotypes used in the advertisements will be studied. What kinds of women are represented and how are they brought into vision? Are they Asian or Caucasian stereotypes? On the other hand, the transmission of cultural values will be examined. Do these values reflect the character of different cultures and can they be used to identify the characteristics of these cultures? According to Hoecklin,

Differences in national culture affect the way in which messages are perceived. In order that effective communication may take place, consumers' *perceived* meaning of a product or service must coincide with the advertiser's *intended* meaning. The most cost-effective way of doing this seems to be to develop a global product and communication concept and to allow for local adaptation of the message. (Hoecklin, 1994: 111)

The purpose of this paper is to reveal if advertising agencies diffuse totally different values in the Belgian and Malaysian magazines or if there are some similarities.

Advertising, culture and language

Since the goal of this study was to analyze the advertisements in a cross-cultural context, we tried not to refer to our own value system (this is called the "self-reference criterion" in the marketing literature) in order to be as objective as possible. This paper builds on the current literature on advertising, culture and language.

These three fields are closely connected. Advertising, which consists basically of language and images, is unmistakably influenced by culture. Usunier (2000: 453) asserts that "advertising (…) is the most culture-bound element of the marketing mix." This medium and its strategy have to be adapted to the prevailing cultural and linguistic standards of the target groups. To understand fully the references that are being made, we have to place a certain context or social situation within a culture. The way we read a text and interpret it, depends largely on our cultural knowledge.

According to Usunier (2000: 455), "advertising mirrors changing social behavior." Dyer (1982: 78), on the other hand, states that advertisements "do not mirror or reflect social meanings and conditions, but teach us ways of thinking and feeling, generally trough fantasy and dreaming." Goddard (1998: 3-4) claims that "advertisements are forms of discourse which make a powerful contribution to how we construct our identities." Schiffman and Kanuk (2004: 410) maintain that "in a sense, although specific product advertising may reinforce the benefits that consumers want

from the product (as determined by consumer behavior research), such advertising also "teaches" future generations of consumers to expect the same benefits from the product category."

According to our opinion, advertising can't really reflect changing social behavior or have a strong influence on the way people form their identity. The world of advertising is idealistic; real life is not that easy and simple. Of course, we recognize aspects of society, but only parts of it. Advertising doesn't mirror life in its entirety. Especially the bright side of life is shown.

If advertising agencies take into account the socio-cultural background of the target groups, aspects of Asian society should be put into vision in the Malaysian corpus and aspects of European society in the Belgian one. This will be discussed in the following part.

Transmitted values

The data consist of print advertisements for facial and body creams for women. These advertisements were selected from three Belgian women's magazines in French, named *Elle*, *Gael* and *Marie-Claire* and four Malaysian magazines in English, named *Cleo*, *Elle*, *Female* and *Marie-Claire*. The same method was used to classify the advertisements for both countries. Excluded from the database are advertisements that were identical repetitions of previous ones. Dyer explains that

The classification system can be used to uncover any prevalent or recurring pattern in the material, and eventually to discover its possible meanings and messages. A preliminary classification will help to sort out just what is being investigated; what types of advertisements, for what products, in what media and so on. Once the analyst-researcher has decided on a particular focus of attention, the ads can be examined in terms of their constituent features. (Dyer, 1982 : 88)

The advertisements of the corpus were content-analyzed in terms of visual and verbal signs. Macro-level analysis consists of a focus on the content and micro-level analysis on the lexical choice. The analysis is based on a progressive narrowing of reference frames: first, the isolation of a discourse genre, i.e. advertisements; secondly, the isolation of a sub-genre, i.e. print advertisements for creams. We opted for print advertisements because "Printed advertisements and billboards are ideal for the analysis of word and image relations; they provide a complete word and image text in a very limited space/time span" (Forceville, 1996: 70). The advertisements of the corpus have furthermore the same target (women) and they are written for the same specific purpose (to promote a product). In this way, they form a unit.

Different topics were discerned in the database. Three of them will be discussed in this paper: (1) What about the model? (2) Creams, a precious ally and (3) How to remodel body and face? To talk about these three topics, 44 advertisements were selected from the Belgian magazines and 30 from the Malaysian ones (editions of April and May 2005).

What about the model?

The models used in the advertisements are all women. This is of course not surprising since women are the targeted group. First, it was interesting to verify on the one hand if the advertisements in the Belgian magazines would show especially Caucasian models with fair hair and skin and light eyes; on the other hand, if the models in the Malaysian magazines would be particularly Asian types with dark hair and slit-eyes.

In the Belgian advertisements most of the models are indeed Caucasian types and no Asian types can be found. Some advertisements show different models, but most of them bring just one model into vision. A few advertisements show only a part of the women's body and not their face or bring only the product into vision. One campaign shows four African women.

Figure 1: Example of a Caucasian type. (From: *Marie Claire*, Belgium, April 2005)

Among the Malaysian advertisements more than half of the models are Caucasian ones, only one fourth are Asian and one fourth of the women are darker and have slightly slit-eyes, but they aren't real Asian types. One advertisement doesn't show the face of the model, but only a part of the body and a few advertisements bring only the product into vision.
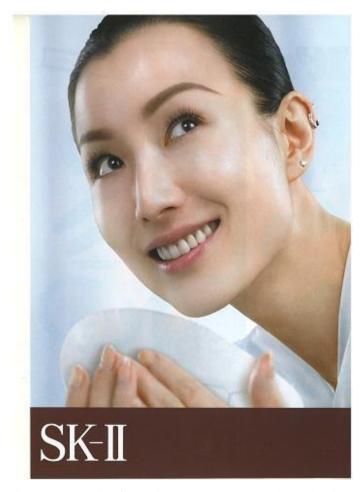
Figure 2: Example of an Asian type. (From: *Female*, Malaysia, April 2005)

This result might be surprising; we would think that advertisers would bring Asian models into vision in the Malaysian magazines so that women can more easily identify themselves with the models. It seems that multinationals can use the same model in Europe and in Asia because Western beauty ideals have become increasingly universal. Asian women want to look like Caucasian ones (Takeuchi Cullen, 2002: 2).

Even though the models are quite similar, the way they are represented is slightly different. In the Belgian magazines, the women's body is visible in around 60% of the advertisements. The body is entirely or partly (upper or lower part of the body) naked in approximately one fifth of the advertisements.

Figure 3: Example of a "not real Asian type". (From: *Female*, Malaysia, April 2005)

Nipples and the pubic hair, however, are never brought into vision. This remains apparently taboo. In the Malaysian magazines, on the other hand, the model's body is visible in less than ten percent of the cases and the models are never naked.

In a nutshell, some of the models are naked in the Belgian magazines and you see more often the model's body than in the Malaysian ones. Differences of culture seem to influence the way in which models are represented.

Figure 4: Example of a naked model. (From: *Marie Claire*, Belgium, April 2005)

Creams, a precious ally

To look beautiful, women have first of all to fight against wrinkles. Creams are "a new weapon against deep wrinkles" ("une nouvelle arme contre les rides profondes"). Tanaka calls "skin care war" (Tanaka, 1994: 91). Linguistic varieties like "weapon against" and "protection against" are war metaphors in which wrinkles are personifications of the enemy and creams personifications of the winner. According to Hermerén, « (…) a war metaphor makes it clear that [wrinkles] are far from harmless (…). The personification of the [wrinkles] reinforces the seriousness of the situation, because personification suggests a thinking, reasoning entity" (Hermerén, 1999: 149).

It seems that especially European women have to join battle. In the Belgian corpus, almost 50% of the advertisements assure women that creams reduce visibly the number of wrinkles, whereas only 10% of the advertisements do so in the Malaysian corpus. In the Belgian advertisements, the adverb "visibly" appears in 25% of the cases. There is in Belgium a "strong uncertainty avoidance" (Hofstede, 1991: 141) and this can perhaps explain why advertisers stress this visibility.

In the Malaysian corpus, the number of advertisements assuring women that creams are the best weapon against wrinkles is not only inferior; wrinkles seem also to be an enemy among others and not the big enemy number one. One can read that creams are "against skin problems such as wrinkles, dry, rough, dull and ageing skin".

It seems to be more important for Asian women that creams protect their skin. The lexical term "protection" is more present in the Malaysian corpus (four times more) than in the Belgian one, but its contribution isn't that big as that of the lexical term "anti-wrinkles" in the Belgian corpus. A big difference between the two is that in the Belgian advertisements creams offer protection in general. In the Malaysian advertisements, it's specified against what exactly creams will protect women's skin: creams "ensure intensive protection against the daily harmful effects of the sun's

rays", they offer "daily UVA / UVB sun protection" and they protect "skin against heavy metals and the ozone". This of course has probably first of all to do with the location of Malaysia on the globe, but another factor seems to play a part. The advertisements in the Malaysian corpus are reflecting that Asian women aspire to have a fair skin. No advertisement upholds a tanned skin. Malaysian women want a cream against "age-spots" and "skin's yellowish appearance". "Skin darkening and brown spots are two major concerns of Asian women." This is explicitly formulated in some advertisements. It was exactly the opposite in the Belgian ones. European women believe that having tanned skin is a symbol of health and beauty. In the Belgian magazines, advertisers are always promoting a tanned skin and never celebrate the beauty of a fair skin.

Figure 5: Example of a cream for a fair skin. (From: *Cleo*, Malaysia, April 2005)

How to remodel body and face?

Apart from promising the reduction of wrinkles and the protection of the skin, advertisers make women believe it's time to remodel their body and face. Thanks to creams, the facial "skin is firm (…) [again] with contracted facial contours". The number of advertisements promoting a cream to change the face is quite limited in the two corpora, but there is one big difference between the advertisements in the Belgian and in the Malaysian magazines. In the Belgian corpus we discover that creams will "strengthen" and "refine" the outlines of the face to remodel its *oval* form. This lexical term is never mentioned in the Malaysian advertisements. This has probably to be due to the fact that Asian people's faces generally don't have an oval form and advertising agencies can't make Asian women believe they can change the form of their face by using creams. It would be an unlikely publicity stunt. For this, you need cosmetic surgery, which is becoming very popular in Asia; Western beauty ideals have become so universal that women dream of big, round eyes, longer noses and fuller breasts – all features not typical of the race (Takeuchi Cullen, 2002: 2).

If we take a close look at the advertisements promoting body creams, we notice again some differences between the two corpora. First of all, the number of advertisements proposing creams for the body is different in the two. Around 30% of the advertisements are promoting body creams in the Belgian magazines, whereas less than 10% do so in the Malaysian ones. Would this mean Belgian women are more preoccupied with their body? It's possible because they seem to wrestle with more problems. This brings us to the second difference between the two corpora. Not only the number of advertisements is higher in the Belgian magazines, but also the number of lexical terms used to sell body creams. In all advertisements, we read that creams are the new weapon against cellulite and orange peel skin. Advertisements tell us that women are "victims" and that thanks to creams "success" is finally proven "in the fight against cellulite". Women can now "Say goodbye to the "orange peel" effect caused by cellulite." In the Belgian advertisements two other lexical terms, referring to the same idea, are frequently used: "anti-rondeurs" and "mincir", which can be translated by "anti-rounding" and "to lose weight". Creams offer "a new road leading to a thinner body". Some of the results are impressive; the contour of the thigh will be reduced according to some advertisements up to 2.5 centimeters!

A reason for the two additional lexical terms, "anti-rondeurs" and "mincir", might be that Belgian women have more frequently to contend with excess weight. This may change, however, with the spread of American fast food in Asia under the influence of the globalization.

Figure 6: Example of a cream promising to strengthen the outlines of the face and to remodel its oval form. (From: *Elle*, Belgium, April 2005)

Figure 7: Example of an "anti-rounding" cream promising a reduction of the contour of the thigh. (From: *Elle*, Belgium, April 2005)

Conclusion

To conclude, the results of this study suggest that advertising agencies work at the same time within a cultural and a global context. Examining advertisements can illuminate some cultural differences in spite of the globalization. They do reflect the character of different cultures in a certain way.

With regard to the models, we discovered that advertising agencies use first of all Caucasian models in the Belgian and in the Malaysian advertisements. Western beauty ideals seem to have become so universal in Asia that advertisers don't need to bring Asian models into vision to sell their products. The way the models are represented remains different however; more emphasis is laid on the body in the Belgian advertisements and some of the models are naked.

This study furthermore showed that Belgian and Malaysian women use creams for a slightly different purpose. In Belgium it is to defeat their big enemy, namely wrinkles. Besides, creams offer protection to the skin. Malaysian women also want to be released from wrinkles, but creams have first of all to protect their skin from the sun's rays and procure them a fair skin.

Regarding the remodeling of the face, we found that creams firm facial contours with one supplementary detail in the Belgian advertisements; that is to say that creams remodel the *oval* form of the face, a feature typical of the Caucasian race. Body creams are against cellulite and orange peel skin in the two corpora, but the presence of two extra lexical terms has to be emphasized in the Belgian one. Belgian women using body creams will also be delivered from all kind of rounding and from excess weight.

This paper finally revealed that advertising for beauty creams is becoming more global. It seems that Western beauty ideals are taking Asia by storm. Advertisers from Western brands can apparently maintain a big number of their campaigns and have to adapt them only slightly to the prevailing cultural standards of the Asian target group.

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