Humor is one of the most widely employed message techniques in modern American advertising. Indeed, several of the most memorable American television advertising campaigns (e.g., “Bud Light” and “Joe Isuzu”) have incorporated humor as a central component of their communication approach. Given the widespread use of humor by the advertising industry, academic researchers in the United States have sought to identify potential benefits (e.g., reduced counterargumentation and enhanced affect toward the ad and brand; Scott, Klein, and Bryant 1990) as well as potential problems (e.g., impaired recall; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986) associated with the use of humor in advertising.

Though preliminary evidence suggests that humorous advertising can be effective in foreign markets (cf. Weinberger and Spotts 1989), few studies have focused on ways in which humorous content varies across national cultures. Because information is limited, it is unclear which aspects of humorous television advertising, if any, can be globally standardized and which should be adapted to match local expectations. Seeking commonalities as well as differences, we attempt to identify dimensions in humorous television advertising that could be global as well as those that are likely to vary across nations by examining advertising from (former West) Germany, Thailand, South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea), and the United States. We begin by reviewing relevant research from the domestic and international advertising streams.
The Advertising Research Stream on Humor

Domestic Research

Communication managers in the United States have generally assumed that humor enhances advertising's effectiveness (Madden and Weinberger 1984). To determine whether this assumption is true and, if so, why, advertising research in the U.S. has centered on three topics: (1) analysis of humor effects on recall, evaluation, and purchase intention (cf. Zhang and Zinkhan 1991), (2) study of mediating factors such as repetition of the ad (Gelb and Zinkhan 1985), social setting in which the ad is viewed or heard (Zinkhan and Gelb 1990), and prior attitude toward the brand (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1989), and (3) examination of whether humor influences consumers more through cognitive processes such as enhanced recall (Zhang and Zinkhan 1991) and reduced counterargumentation (Gelb and Zinkhan 1986) or through affective mechanisms such as transfer of liking for the ad to the brand (Aaker, Stayman, and Hagerty 1986; Zinkhan and Gelb 1990).

One overall conclusion drawn from these streams is that humor is more likely to enhance recall, evaluation, and purchase intention when the humorous message coincides with ad objectives, is well-integrated with those objectives, and is viewed as appropriate for the product category. Under such circumstances, humorous advertising is more likely to "secure audience attention, increase memorability, overcome sales resistance, and enhance message persuasiveness" (Scott, Klein, and Bryant 1990, p. 498; see also Krishnan and Chakravarti 1990).

Cross-National Research

Several cross-national studies of international advertising in general have been undertaken. For example, researchers have examined print and television advertising from various national markets for similarities and differences in (1) levels and types of information (Dowling 1980; Hong, Muderrisoglu, and Zinkhan 1987; Madden, Caballero, and Matsukubo 1986), (2) reflection of cultural attitudes toward consumption (Mueller 1987; Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989), and (3) portrayal of sex roles (Gilly 1988). With the exception of Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989), whose sample did not include U.S. ads, these researchers found significant differences between U.S. and foreign advertising on key variables of interest.

Other researchers have documented ways in which multinational firms attempt to globally standardize advertising. For instance, Peebles, Ryans, and Vernon (1978) distinguish between firms' use of "prototype" standardization (same ad with only translation and necessary idiomatic changes) and "pattern" standardization in which the overall campaign is designed (e.g., theme) for application in several national markets with some adaptation of content and execution (Walters 1986). Killough (1978) differentiates between "buying proposals" that state the basic offer and "creative presentations" that package the buying proposal. On the basis of reports from senior executives involved in more than 120 multinational campaigns, Killough concludes that buying proposals can be used successfully across cultures without modification more often than creative presentations, which tend to interact with local cultural factors (see also Onkvisit and Shaw 1987).

Though such issues have been examined in a cross-national context, only one study appears to have looked at the use of humor in advertising within other national markets. Comparing television advertising in the U.S. and the U.K., Weinberger and Spotts (1989, p. 39) report that a significantly greater percentage of ads in the U.K. (35.5% vs. 24.4%) were characterized by humorous intent. In both countries, humor was employed most often with "low involvement/feeling products" and least often with "high involvement/feeling products." Knowledge of such differences is clearly important. However, another dimension yet to be examined may serve as a construct common to humorous advertising in multiple national markets. That dimension is the potential similarity in the cognitive structures underlying humorous television advertising from around the world.

Meyers-Levy and Tybout (1989) demonstrate the usefulness of the cognitive structure approach in a domestic consumer behavior context. They examined the evaluative effects of moderate differences or "incongruities" between new product information and humorous advertising in multiple national markets. That dimension is the potential similarity in the cognitive structures underlying humorous television advertising from around the world.

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the Bud Light beer commercial, the character arriving with a flashlight versus the other character exclaiming, "I said Bud Light!"

Structural analysis of humorous advertising from several national cultures could help determine whether cognitive principles such as those hypothesized by Raskin are global or culture-specific. To explore potential applications of these theories to cross-national analysis of humorous advertising, we now turn to the psychological and linguistic literature on humor.

Psychological and Linguistic Perspectives on Humor

A major school of humor has focused on the cognitive structures and processing pathways that are central to a humorous response (Herzog and Larwin 1988). Key to such theories is the notion of incongruity or deviation from expectations. One group of theorists argues that incongruity is a necessary and sufficient condition to produce humor (Suls 1983). In line with this position, Nerhardt (1970) found that the greater the unexpected deviation from normally expected occurrences, the greater the humor response. A second group hypothesizes that incongruity alone is not always sufficient to produce a humor response. Rather, "according to this account, humor results when incongruity is resolved; that is, the punch line is seen to make sense at some level with the earlier information in the joke" (Suls 1983, p. 42). A key tenet of this school is that humor is a form of problem solving, as incongruity without resolution leaves listeners confused or frustrated because they do not "get the joke."

Not all problem solving, however, is humorous. Incongruity-resolution theorists suggest that a humorous response depends on (1) rapid resolution of the incongruity, (2) a "playful" context, that is, with cues signifying that the information is not to be taken seriously, and (3) an appropriate mood for the listener (Suls 1983). Support for this position has been provided by several studies of different humorous stimuli (cf. Herzog and Larwin 1988; Opplinger and Sherblom 1988; Wicker et al. 1981). Suls (1983) concludes that both incongruity and incongruity-resolution styles of humor exist, but that the latter predominates, particularly for verbal humor. In addition, even researchers who advocate greater integration of motivational and cognitive models of humor acknowledge a central role for incongruity theory within their proposed framework (cf. Kuhlman 1985).

From a linguistics perspective, Raskin (1985) suggests a script-based semantic theory, "a linguistic theory which interposes a cognitive step in the perception of what's funny" (MacHovec 1988, p. 92). This theory states that a verbal or written communication is considered a joke when the "text . . . is compatible fully with two distinct scripts and the two scripts are opposite in certain definite ways such as good-bad, sex—no sex, or real-unreal." The third element, the punchline, "switches the listener from one script to another creating the joke" (Raskin 1985, p. 34–35). More often than not, according to Raskin, the humorous scripts will be opposite in terms of a "real" and an "unreal" situation. For example, consider the following joke (Raskin 1985, p. 106):

An English bishop received the following note from the vicar of a village in his diocese: "My lord, I regret to inform you of my wife's death. Can you possibly send me a substitute for the weekend?"

Here, the joke initially evokes the real situation of a vicar wanting a substitute vicar because his wife has just died. The unreal script involves a vicar wanting a substitute wife. In addition, there is a playful oppositeness in the two scripts on which the humor turns. That opposition involves the contrast between the expected "piousness" of a religious figure and the unexpected implied sexual interaction between the vicar and his "substitute" wife. Following the incongruity-resolution model, one can hypothesize that the incongruity of a vicar seeking a substitute "wife" is resolved with the realization that the vicar undoubtedly means one thing but has inadvertently implied another.

According to Raskin, contrasts such as these can be more finely categorized as (1) actual/existing and nonactual/nonexisting, (2) normal/expected and abnormal/unexpected, and (3) possible/plausible and fully/partially impossible or much less plausible. For the first subtype, consider the preceding joke. Here, it is actually the case that the vicar wants a substitute for himself, but it is not actually the case that the vicar wants a substitute for his wife. Thus the humorous contrast involves actual versus nonactual. An example of an expected/unexpected contrast is seen in the following joke.

A doctor tells a man, "Your wife must have absolute rest. Here is a sleeping tablet." "When do I give it to her?" the man asks. "You don't," explains the doctor, "you take it yourself."

In this case, the contrast involves the normal or expected action of a doctor prescribing medication for an ill person versus the abnormal or unexpected prescription for the healthy but talkative spouse. Playfulness in the joke is captured in the contrast between the expected care-giver role and the unexpected irritation-inducing role of the spouse.

The third contrast specified by Raskin involves a possible or plausible versus an impossible or much less plausible situation. For example (p. 47):

Samson was so strong, he could lift himself by his hair three feet off the ground.
Though it seems likely that Samson was strong enough to lift another person off the ground, it would be impossible for him to lift himself off the ground.

Raskin's theory can be interpreted within the incongruity-resolution school of humor. First, as with incongruity-resolution theory, Raskin's theory posits a switch from "bona-fide" communication to a playful, nonthreatening mode (p. 140). Incongruity is then established by the presence of two partially or fully contrasting scripts that are compatible with the text, as discussed previously (i.e., possible/impossible, etc.). Finally, a "trigger, obvious or implied" (e.g., a punchline), helps the listener or reader resolve the incongruity by fully realizing the oppositeness of the situation. Thus, from the incongruity-resolution school, Raskin's theory can be supplemented with the hypothesis that the sudden realization of oppositeness quickly reduces the listener's felt tension and decreases "arousal back to base-line," creating pleasure in the process (Suls 1983, p. 44).

Raskin's script-based humor theory along with incongruity and incongruity-resolution theories could prove helpful to understanding cognitive structures that may characterize humorous advertising around the world. Though developed for verbal humor, Raskin's script-based semantic theory may well predict the types of incongruent contrasts one is likely to find in humorous advertising, whether verbal or visual.

Application of Humor Theory in a Cross-National Context

Cognitive factors underlying humorous communication in the U.S. may also be found in humorous advertising from other national markets. For example, cross-cultural researchers report evidence suggesting universal use of cognitive categories and summary representations for storage and application of the continuous stream of information to which human beings are exposed (e.g., Pick 1980; Rosch 1977). Global use of such structures supports a central assumption of the incongruity school of humor—that people develop expectations based on category norms that are capable of being violated, sometimes in a humorous fashion.

Within the humor stream itself, several scholars conclude that humor is indeed universal and that incongruity is one of its central cognitive-structural principles. Fry (1987, p. 68) notes that humor was a part of life in dynastic Egypt and that "contemporary records in the Old Testament speak of laughter, joy, and amusement." As Berger (1987, p. 6) states:

Humor is . . . all pervasive; we don't know of any culture where people don't have a sense of humor, and in contemporary societies, it is found everywhere—in film, on television, in books and newspapers, in our conversations, and in graffiti.

Similarly, anthropologists have found that "joking relationships" involving "joking, teasing, banter, ridicule, insult, horseplay, usually, but not always, involving an audience" are present in both traditional and more industrialized societies (Apte 1983, p. 185). From the Amba people of southern Africa (Apte 1983) to machine operators in the United States (Fine 1983), such joking relationships appear to be commonplace. Joking behavior has even been observed in primates (Fry 1987).

Furthermore, "incongruent, outrageous or deviant manifestations of personalities, behavior and so forth, are also important in such joking activities" (Apte 1983, p. 186). For example, evidence for the universal importance of incongruity in humor is found in "contrary behavior" (e.g., "sitting on animals backwards while riding"), which has been reported to be a major component of ritual humor among American Indians, tribespeople in Africa, and villagers in India (Apte 1983, p. 190). Suls (1983) takes the argument a step further when he states that most humor around the world has an incongruity-resolution structure. As evidence, he cites Schultz (1972), who examined verbal humor in the folklore literature of non-Western societies, and reports (p. 47):

The presence of incongruity and resolution features was found in the vast majority of materials (for example, of 242 Chinese jokes examined, 210 possessed incongruity and resolution).

Hypotheses 1 and 2: Global Principles

The foregoing review suggests that humor is universal. Furthermore, the cognitive-structural characteristic, incongruity, appears likely to be present in much of the humor around the world. Hence, incongruity may well be a major global component of humorous advertising. Though Raskin's (1985) theory does not specify whether the frequencies of his three hypothesized contrasts vary by national culture (i.e., whether culture A's humor will emphasize expected/unexpected contrasts whereas culture B's will emphasize real/unreal), it appears to predict that the contrasts will be discernible in a given national culture's humor in some proportion. On the basis of this theory, we propose our first hypothesis.

H₁: Most television advertising from diverse national markets in which humor is intended exhibits incongruent contrasts.

In addition to establishing the presence of incongruity in humorous advertising, a goal of our study is to identify specific types of contrasts. If these contrasts can be identified, researchers and practitioners will better understand which aspects of the ad can be standardized and how such standardization can occur.
For example, finding that none of the humorous ads from several national markets employ Raskin's possible/impossible contrast would suggest that this form of incongruity may not work well in global advertising campaigns that intend to be humorous. In contrast, if Raskin's theory is to be relevant to international advertisers, one or more of the contrasts it predicts (i.e., actual/nonactual, expected/unexpected, and possible/impossible) should be identifiable in substantial numbers in television advertising from several diverse national markets. Our second hypothesis proposes that the three specific contrasts predicted by Raskin are identifiable in television advertising from different markets.

H2: Across diverse national markets, three specific types of contrasts (actual/not actual, expected/unexpected, and possible/impossible) are identifiable in television advertising that is intended to be humorous.

Though we expect national markets to differ in the proportion of humor ads that stress one or more of the three types of contrasts, there is little prior theory on which to base any related predictions. Therefore, our investigation of differences in the relative use of the specific contrasts is exploratory.

Hypotheses 3 and 4: Culture-Specific Differences

As McCracken (1986, p. 75) notes, “advertising is a conduit through which meaning constantly pours from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods.” As a result, an important goal of advertising is to bring the cultural world and the good together in a “special harmony” that enables the viewer to see “this similarity and effect the transfer of meaningful properties” (McCracken 1986, p. 75). Because the “content of ads mirrors a society” (Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989), one would expect actual message content (versus the underlying structure) to reflect the culture in which it appears. Hence, despite possible similarities in humorous structures and principles across national cultures, significant differences seem likely to be found in the situations, settings, and themes used to convey humor. Furthermore, such differences seem likely to reflect major national culture distinctions such as those documented both in previous advertising research (e.g., Gilly 1988; Mueller 1987; Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989) and nonadvertising research (e.g., Hofstede 1983).

Hofstede (1983), for example, found that national cultures could be differentiated on several dimensions. Two of the dimensions he identified were “individualism-collectivism” and “power distance.” Looking at the first dimension, Triandis et al. (1988) note that subordination of individual goals to the goals of a few large in-groups is central to collectivist cultures. Individualist cultures, in contrast, tend to be characterized by multiple in-groups that are smaller and less demanding of their members. Reflecting these differences, intended humor ads from cultures high in collectivism (e.g., Thailand and Korea) should involve larger groups of relatively close associates whereas those from cultures low in collectivism (e.g., Germany and the U.S.) should involve smaller groups or no group at all. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: The number of individuals or characters playing major roles in ads in which humor is intended is greater in high collectivism (low individualism) cultures than in low collectivism (high individualism) cultures.

Hofstede’s second dimension, power distance, involves the extent to which power within a national culture is unequally distributed (Ronen 1986). National cultures high on power distance tend to be hierarchic in their interpersonal relationships and decision making whereas those low on power distance tend to be more egalitarian. Advertising should differ on this dimension, with high power distance cultures exhibiting more relationships between characters that are unequal and low power distance cultures exhibiting more relationships that are equal. Our fourth hypothesis follows.

H4: Relationships between central characters in ads in which humor is intended are more often unequal in high power distance cultures than in low power distance cultures, in which these relationships are more often equal.

Method

Sampling National Cultures

To improve reliability while enhancing generalizability, we chose two sets of countries that had similar characteristics within each set but differed between sets on several important dimensions. The United States and Germany made up the first set. These nations are similar inasmuch as both are Western, developed nations having high scores on Hofstede’s (1983) individualism-collectivism dimension (i.e., low on collectivism) and low scores on the power distance dimension (see Table 1). The second set, Korea and Thailand, are similar to each other yet different from the first set inasmuch as both are Asian, rapidly developing nations having high scores on collectivism and high scores on power distance. Though hypothesized cognitive-structure principles (H3 and H4) were predicted to hold across all four nations, the content of humorous advertising was expected to differ between the matched pairs of nations on Hofstede’s individualism and power distance dimensions (H5 and H6).
Scores and Ranks of Countries on Collectivism and Power Distance Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power Distance</th>
<th>Individualism/Collectivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on Hofstede (1983).
*Rank is based on 50 countries in sample; for example, U.S. is 16th from the lowest on power distance and Thailand is 31st from the lowest. Germany is 6th highest on individualism but only 14th on collectivism whereas Korea is the 11th highest on individualism but 39th from the lowest on collectivism.

Sampling Ads Within Country

Randomized cluster samples of national brand TV ads shown on major networks in each country were collected. Local advertising and duplications of national brand ads were eliminated along with ads that contained more than 50% sales promotion information (e.g., a tie-in promotional ad for Pepsi with a local supermarket). Ads for the same brand that differed in 50% or more of the content remained in the sample. As other sampling plan details varied slightly among countries, we describe each plan.

Sampling in the U.S. was conducted over three days in early November 1990. On each day (randomly chosen), one of the three major privately owned national networks (randomly assigned to each day) was recorded (6 a.m. to midnight). All ads were then logged. We obtained a total of 497 unduplicated ads for national brands from the three major American networks. In Thailand and Korea, a similar procedure was followed. However, in those countries, the tapes and master lists of cluster-sampled ads (three days from three stations with days randomly selected) were obtained from market research firms that monitored TV and radio advertising. Also in both countries, one or more government-owned stations that carried ads for national brands were included. In Thailand, ads were recorded during April 1990, resulting in 351 unduplicated ads. In Korea, recording was done during February 1990, resulting in 520 unduplicated ads.

Finally, in Germany, the two major national television channels are strongly regulated by the government (Clemens 1987). As a result, advertising on these channels is very limited in terms of frequency and content. With the advent of cable television, however, German viewers are now exposed to a wider variety of programming options and advertising (Clemens 1987). Therefore, to provide a representative sample of German advertising, three privately owned and operated channels that carry ads for national brands were sampled over a three-day period during October 1990. As in the United States, a log of all advertising was created. Duplicates, promotional ads, and local brand ads were eliminated, leaving a total of 244 ads for analysis.

Humorous Ad Identification

Three native, bilingual coders in Germany and four in each of the other countries were instructed in their own language and in English on how to rate ads in terms of humor. Following Weinberger and Spotts (1989, p. 40), we did not ask judges to determine whether they personally felt the ad was humorous; instead, the humorous intent of the ad was coded in an effort to reduce subjectivity. In other words, because certain ads seem likely to appeal more to specific segments of the culture than to others, coders did not judge how funny each ad was, but only whether humor was intended.

An ad was assumed to contain intended humor when at least three coders agreed. In all countries, interjudge agreement (calculated as the percentage of three or more agreements that humor either was or was not intended) exceeded 80% (cf. Sujan 1985). In the U.S., 80 ads were judged by three of four coders to contain intended humor. In Germany 48 ads and in both Thailand and Korea 51 ads were judged by three or more coders to contain intended humor. To reduce the subsequent in-depth coding task for the U.S. sample, only ads on which all four coders agreed were used, resulting in 52 ads for analysis.

In-Depth Coding Procedures

Three new native coders used a standard coding form to evaluate intended humor ads in each country. All coders received extensive training prior to the actual coding task. Much of this training was conducted in the coders’ native languages, though foreign researchers were usually present. Originally written in English, coding forms were subsequently double back-translated to assure maximal equivalency, except in Germany where the coders’ high English proficiency allowed use of the original forms. Each intended humor ad was viewed two to three times and coders then independently evaluated the ad. Subsequent viewing was allowed when coders had questions about the ad’s content, style, or some other aspect. The coding forms took 10 to 15 minutes to complete for each ad. For all items in all country samples, interjudge agreement exceeded 85%. Disagreements were resolved among the coders without the involvement of the investigators beyond simple clarification of coding guidelines.

Measures

First, coders were asked to indicate (yes/no) whether the ad contained any of the contrasts such as those
specified by Raskin (1985)—actual/nonactual, expected/unexpected, or possible/fully or partially impossible. Second, coders were asked to determine which specific contrasts were present in the ad. In addition, when more than one contrast was identified in the ad, coders were asked to determine which contrast was most emphasized (i.e., the main type). These measures were used to evaluate the study’s two global hypotheses (H1 and H2).

Next, coders were asked to determine how many people or characters were featured in the ad. To be included, characters had to be actively involved in the ad’s plot. For example, if the story was set in a supermarket checkout stand and involved interaction between the shopper and the checker, with other individuals walking by in the background but not interacting with the main characters, the coders would indicate that two characters were featured in the ad. On the basis of Triandis et al.’s (1988, p. 325) statement that “the emphasis is usually on people more than on task in collectivist cultures; and the reverse happens in individualist cultures,” we operationalized H3 by assuming that a larger proportion of ads in collectivist cultures (Korea and Thailand) would feature three or more characters whereas a larger proportion in individualist cultures (U.S. and Germany) would feature two or fewer characters.

Finally, coders indicated whether the people or characters featured in the ad were portrayed as having generally equal or unequal status. This variable was defined to include explicit and/or implicit differences between two or more individuals or characters in terms of age, wealth, education, power, and general knowledge. In ads featuring one individual or character, status differences between individuals or characters were assumed to be absent. Following Hofstede (1983), we operationalized H4 by predicting that cultures with high power distance scores (Korea and Thailand) would have a larger proportion of humorous ads containing individuals of unequal status than cultures with low power distance scores (U.S. and Germany), which would have a larger proportion of humorous ads containing individuals of equal status.

**Results**

Our study strongly supports both H1 and H2 on the global presence of incongruent contrasts in humorous television advertising. In all four countries, a majority of the humorous television ads contained one or more incongruent contrasts such as those described in Raskin’s (1985) theory. As shown in Table 2, higher proportions of ads with contrasts were found in Germany (92%) and Thailand (82%) than in the United States (69%) and Korea (57%). Chi square tests for differences in the proportions of ads with any one of the three contrasts are significant (p < .05) for three of six paired nation comparisons: United States versus Korea, Germany versus Thailand, and Korea versus Thailand. Despite such differences, the fact that almost 60% of the humorous ads in all four nations contain contrasts such as those specified by Raskin suggests that incongruent cognitive structures may be present globally in a majority of television ads that are intended to be humorous.

In support of H2, the specific types of contrasts theorized by Raskin were identified in all four countries (see Table 3). Interestingly, there is relatively little variation in the proportions of contrast types across national cultures. For example, in all four country samples, 15% or fewer of the contrasts were found to be actual/nonactual. Though in the German sample 70% of contrasts were expected/unexpected, the percentages of actual/nonactual and possible/impossible were fairly consistent and evenly divided across the three other country samples. Thus, advertising in which humor is intended appears to feature greater proportions of certain types of contrasts. Furthermore, these proportions may be relatively consistent across national cultures, though some variation undoubtedly is present.

Patterns similar to those just discussed emerge when
one looks at the main type of contrast in ads with one or more contrasts (see Table 4). First, very few actual/nonactual contrasts were identified as the main contrast type in each country (i.e., fewer than 10%). Second, distributions of the main types of humor contrast in the U.S., Thai, and Korean ads do not vary significantly (p > .96). However, overall, the distribution of the main type of contrast across all four country samples is not independent of country ($\chi^2 [6] = 21.61, p < .001$). This result appears to be due to the fact that substantially more expected/unexpected contrasts (84.1%) constituted the main type of contrast featured in the German ads. There is a fairly even split between expected/unexpected and possible/impossible main contrasts in the three other national culture samples.

In addition to supporting $H_1$ and $H_2$, our findings provide evidence on behalf of $H_3$. As seen in Table 5, the two nations high on Hofstede's collectivism dimension (Korea and Thailand) had a substantial number of humorous ads with three or more central characters whereas the two that were low (U.S. and Germany) had substantially fewer ads with three or more characters. Within each matched country sample, there was no significant difference between the proportion of ads with three or more and the proportion with two or fewer characters (for Korea and Thailand, $p > .17$; for Germany and the U.S., $p > .82$). Combining the results for Korea and Thailand, we see that 75% of the sampled ads contained three or more characters and 25% contained two or fewer. In contrast, only 26% of the ads in the combined sample for Germany and the U.S. had three or more characters and 74% had two or fewer. Chi square analysis indicates that the relationship between differences in the numbers of characters and the matched country pairs is significant ($\chi^2 [1] = 47.53, p < .001$).

Finally, $H_4$ is supported. As shown in Table 6, more humorous ads featured unequal status between main characters in the two nations that are high on Hofstede's power distance dimension (Thailand and Korea) than in the two that are low on that dimension (U.S. and Germany). In both Thailand and Korea, more than 60% of the humorous ads portrayed characters of unequal status and there is no significant difference between the two nations on this variable ($p > .68$).

Differences in the distributions of equal and unequal status ads are significant for Germany and the U.S. ($\chi^2 [1] = 9.32, p < .003$). These differences appear to result from the fact that the percentage of ads judged to contain equal status characters was larger for Germany (85%) than for the U.S. (58%). However, a majority of ads in both countries featured equal status characters. Thus, the two country samples were combined and results at the aggregate level were compared with those for Thailand and Korea.

Combining the results for Korea and Thailand, we found that 63% of the sampled ads featured relationships between characters that were unequal. In sharp contrast, for the combined U.S. and German sample, 71% of the ads featured equal status relationships. Chi square analysis indicates that the relationship between status and the combined country pairs is not independent ($\chi^2 [1] = 23.15, p < .001$).

Last, the content differences found may be due in part to differences in products advertised. To test this possibility, three native coders in each country categorized featured products along three dimensions: (1)
avoidance nondurable (goods associated with undesirable events and activities such as aspirin, cf. Stayman, Aaker, and Bruzzone 1989), approach nondurable (goods associated with desirable events and activities), durable, or service; (2) high, medium, or low involvement, and (3) pleasure-oriented, function-oriented, or both. Interrater agreement was again 80% or higher in each country and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Though certain significant differences (p < .05) on each product dimension are present across countries, the differences are not substantial. For example, in each country, consumer approach nondurable goods comprise the modal category (i.e., 50% or higher). In addition, lower involvement products are predominant (i.e., 50% or higher) in every nation’s sample, and in three of four countries the modal category consists of pleasure-oriented products. Thus, although differences in product types featured in the ads may have contributed to observed differences in terms of the collectivism-individualism and status measures, it appears unlikely that product-related differences could account for the extent of systematic variation in advertising content documented in our study.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to examine the nature and content of humorous appeals across national cultures. The first goal was to identify an underlying global principle that might provide a deeper understanding of the basic structure of humorous appeals. Second, we attempted to identify dimensions along which national cultures might meaningfully differ in terms of specific television advertising content.

In reference to the first goal, coding results for humorous ads in four different cultures (Thailand, Korea, Germany, and the U.S.) lend support to Raskin’s (1985) script-based semantic theory, which focuses on incongruity of scripts as the central element of humor. In all four cultures, a majority of the ads were classified as containing incongruent cognitive structures. In two countries, Thailand and Germany, the presence of such contrasts was even significantly higher (82% and 92%, respectively). These findings extend Suls’ (1983) conclusion that humor globally exhibits incongruity to advertising.

The implications of this finding are twofold. First, from a theoretical perspective, it appears that the basic cognitive structure approach underlying humorous appeals may not be “culture-bound.” Thus, our study supports and adds to a growing body of research indicating that certain aspects of consumer cognition are “universal” (Pick 1980; Rosch 1977). More important, the seemingly global applicability of the incongruity principle suggests that a cognitive structure approach has the potential to provide a more basic understanding of how humorous appeals operate across different cultures.

Second, from a global strategy perspective, our study may provide valuable insights to attempts to standardize humorous appeals across national cultures. Specifically, our results suggest that ads constructed in line with the incongruity and/or incongruity-resolution principles may have the ability to generate humor in diverse national cultures. However, our study examined only the presence of incongruent structures in ads classified as humorous in intent. The study did not address the issue of the effectiveness of the ads in generating a humorous response. Hence, an important topic for future research would be to examine the extent to which ads containing “incongruent” versus “incongruent with resolution” cognitive structures are more or less effective in generating desired affective responses.

It is also interesting that very few actual/nonactual contrasts were found in any country. Thus a substantial portion of humorous advertising around the world appears to rely on expected/unexpected or possible/impossible contrasts. Furthermore, for the United States, Thailand, and Korea, distributions of these two contrast types are very similar, with proportions for both types ranging from approximately 40% to 50% of the total number of main contrasts. The German results are distinct in that so many of the ads (more than 80%) featured expected/unexpected contrasts. Unfortunately, present theory and research are inadequate to explain this difference. Similarly, from a theoretic perspective, it is not clear why humorous advertising in Korea exhibited fewer contrasts than that in any other country. Such unanswered questions clearly indicate a need for future research into possible cultural factors that might relate to a preference for certain types of contrasts as well as humor without contrasts.

The second goal of our study was to identify dimensions along which the specific content (as opposed to structure) of the humorous appeals might vary across national markets. Two dimensions from Hofstede’s (1983) work were chosen for hypothesis development: collectivism-individualism and power distance. The collectivism-individualism dimension pertains to how much the national culture emphasizes either the subordination of individual goals to the goals of a few large groups or the association of the individual with multiple smaller groups that tend to be less demanding. Results support the hypothesis that ads in countries high on collectivism (Korea and Thailand) contain more group-oriented situations than ads in countries that stress individualism (Germany and the U.S.). The suggestion is that consumers in collectivist societies are more likely to respond to hu-
morous appeals involving large groups than consumers in individualist cultures, where use of smaller groups or individuals may be more appropriate.

Power distance was the second national culture dimension examined. Cultures high on power distance tend to be hierarchic whereas cultures low on power distance tend to be more egalitarian. We examined this dimension by looking at the status relationships between the characters in the ad. The results support our hypothesis that cultures high on power distance (Thailand and Korea) have more ads with characters of unequal status than countries low on this dimension (Germany and the U.S.). This finding is reflective of the fact that in the U.S. and Germany, more emphasis is placed on equality than is the case in the Asian cultures studied.

Though our findings suggest that it may be possible to standardize the basic structure of humorous appeals by employing the incongruity principle, the ad’s content (i.e., numbers of characters and their status relationships) may require modification for markets with widely varying values and norms. Hence, our findings are consistent with previous research on the ways in which multinational firms standardize or modify advertising across national cultures (Killough 1978; Peebles, Ryans, and Vernon 1978). In particular, the results are similar to Killough’s (1978) findings about the possibilities of standardizing an ad’s “buying proposal” (i.e., a structural characteristic akin to the incongruity principle of humor found in our study) but culturally adapting the ad’s “creative presentation” (i.e., a thematic content characteristic similar to differences in the numbers of individuals and their status relationships).

Our findings also support Onkvisit and Shaw’s (1987, p. 54) conclusion that standardized advertising strategies incorrectly assume that communications designed for the U.S. market can be used abroad without modification. Those authors describe such approaches as “ethnocentric” and argue that they are likely to be unsuccessful for any one of the following reasons: (1) failure to gain attention if the message is irrelevant, (2) failure to be understood, or (3) failure to motivate action. Instead of a globally standardized advertising approach, Onkvisit and Shaw recommend a “geocentric” strategy that requires (p. 54):

... the advertisement to be designed for the worldwide audience from the outset to appeal to a shared intercountry denominator while allowing for some modification to suit each market.

Our study identifies a potentially important “intercountry denominator” in humorous advertising. That is, incongruent cognitive structures were found in a majority of television advertising that was intended to be humorous despite significant differences on major cultural dimensions. Thus, following Onkvisit and Shaw, we suggest that these structures may provide a dimension on which to standardize because their use is likely to enhance the communication effectiveness of humorous advertising around the world. At the same time, the study demonstrates that advertisers are likely to benefit from “allowing for some modifications to suit each market” (Onkvisit and Shaw 1987, p. 54).

Finally, while remaining alert to differences, managers may be able to group countries strategically on the basis of national culture dimensions. For example, our findings suggest that appeals emphasizing collectivism and unequal status relationships are much more frequent in Thailand and Korea (and perhaps other collectivist national cultures) than in more individualistic cultures such as the U.S. and Germany. Future research should test the extent to which such value dimensions may assist development of standardized humorous appeals for various groupings of national cultures.

Limitations

The many difficulties associated with cross-national research have long been recognized (Albaum and Peterson 1984) and some of these problems are present in our study. For example, one of the key challenges in cross-cultural data collection is the attainment of measurement equivalency (Hui and Triandis 1985). In other words, the data collection is valid only to the extent that the researchers can demonstrate that the constructs and measures are conceptually and operationally equivalent across the various cultures studied.

In our study, we devoted extreme effort to ensuring that the coders clearly understood the constructs and categories and could demonstrate the ability to make judgments as we intended. Nevertheless, cultural biases inherent in the coders could have somewhat influenced the results and accounted for some of the variance between countries. The differences observed, however, were on culturally sensitive measures (e.g., individualism-collectivism) and were typically very large. Therefore it is unlikely that all of the meaningful variance in categories is attributable to coder biases. Second, the coders were all extremely well trained and exhibited high interrater agreement.

We also recognize that the samples studied represent only a portion of the ads that appear on television in the respective countries. Future research employing larger numbers of ads is needed to verify our findings. Finally, we examined only one medium (i.e., television). Future research should examine humorous appeals in other media as well because the cultures studied differ in terms of exposure to ads in the various media. For example, in Germany, print advertising (in particular magazines, newspapers, and bill-
boards) plays a more significant advertising role than it does in the U.S. (Toyne and Walters 1989).

**Conclusion**

Our study makes an important contribution by discovering that humorous television advertising in four national cultures employs incongruent cognitive structures. Furthermore, the incongruity in humorous advertising was found in every culture to be expressed in identifiable structures such as the expected/unexpected contrast specified in Raskin's (1985) model. Message content in humorous advertising, however, appears to vary along major national culture dimensions such as collectivism/individualism and power distance documented by Hofstede (1983). As a result, though the notion of incongruent contrast structures may ultimately prove capable of serving as a guide to the development of globally standardized communications, certain aspects of the ad's message may continue to benefit from adaptation to the targeted national culture.

Finally, we emphasize again that our study did not address the issue of ad effectiveness. In the future, relationships between use of alternative cognitive structures (e.g., expected/unexpected vs. possible/impossible) and effectiveness in generating desired humorous responses should be examined. For example, an important question is whether and when incongruity or incongruity with resolution is more effective as a humorous communication strategy. Regardless, the search for global and culture-specific principles in international marketing communications appears to be a promising area for future research.

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