Perception of offensive advertising: Cross-cultural peculiarities

Nowadays advertising clutter in almost all media is forcing advertisers to use offensive and provocative appeals in ads. However, the various techniques used in such advertising, as well as effects of these ads, have not been adequately studied, especially when adapting advertising on the global market. The perception of offensive advertising varies according to different parameters: gender, age, social class, religion, etc. In particular, an important role in the perception is played by national and cultural traditions and features. In the study there is the comparative analysis of the perception of offensive advertising young people of different nationalities: attitude towards ads, techniques and brands.

Introduction

The global advertising market is estimated at nearly USD 550 billion in 2015 and continues to grow, despite the financial crisis, due to the emergence of new media and the development of new markets (Global Advertising Growth (2006-2019)).

Advertising noise in the developed markets is very high, for example, in Russia only through the TV people contact with more than 500 ads per week. Of course, this situation may reduce the effectiveness of each individual advertising message, and media planners are learning to deal with it: it is possible to increase quantity of ads and budgets; it is possible to search for new channels of communication, and search for points of growth efficiency in the content of the advertising message.

Some basic approaches can be distinguished when planning advertising campaigns on global markets:

1. Advertising messages are standardized (universal) for all markets (countries), it is the only element in the text adaptation (translated). An example is the manufacturers of cosmetics and cars. Obviously, this reduces the costs, but such advertising is not always clearly understood by consumers on a rational level.

2. The advertising idea is universal, but in some regional markets a different message is produced, which takes into account some features of the region. The most of it is about the people appearing in the message. As an example, it can be specifying the McDonald’s, which adapts posts by filming people of a certain race. It is obvious that the advertising idea may be universal only when it is perceived equally by all cultures. For example, family values, good humour, joy and smiles, etc.

3. Advertising messages are unique, fully adapted to the particular market. In this case, of course, it is a question of increasing the budget for the production of advertising and more attention to the creative component. Sometimes advertisers use in their campaigns some provocation, a challenge to the society. In this case, probably, standardization is impossible, because such effects can be perceived in different ways in different cultures.

In the study, researchers tried to show that there is not only positive, socially acceptable, but also negative, insulting content of advertising messages that is equally perceived in different national cultures and attitudes towards it depend on the socio-demographic characteristics of consumers (gender, age, life stage). If the repulsive, provocative, abusive ads are desired then the same can be
standardized for different national cultures. The hypotheses that have been put forward:
(1) Emotional perception of advertising depends on the socio-demographic characteristics.
(2) It is possible to standardize the disgusting advertisement for different national cultures.
(3) If the advertising causes more negative emotions (in the aggregate), the attitude towards the brand is getting worse.

The objective of the study is to reveal the emotional attitude towards different advertising contents in different national cultural, social and demographic groups. The study examined two aspects of offensive advertisements of the three, according Phau and Prendergast (Phau and Prendergast 2001):
(1) emotional attitude to the style, the manner of supplying offensive advertisements (manner),
(2) in what communications channels it is permissible to place such advertising (media).

In the study researchers did not investigate the question insulting advertising items (matter): objects, according to the consumer, are offensive for advertising (e.g., female hygiene products). In addition, there are advertising items (e.g., HIV / AIDS prevention) for which the offensive advertising fits more than any other (Darren, Frankerberger and Manchanda 2003).

1 Emotions and offensive advertising

There are different terms for the advertising that causes negative emotions. The term «offensive» is selected based on the analysis of several publications, although there are other terms such as, “disgust” (Dens, Pelsmacker and Janssens 2008), “shock advertising or shockvertising” (Darren, Frankerberger and Manchanda 2003) for such advertising. The most used term is “offensive”. In the questionnaire of the study, researchers used the term “offensive and provocative advertising”.

A lot of attention has been paid to the study of cross cultural aspects of perception the offensive advertising (An and Kim 2008), (Chan, Diehl and Terlutter 2007), (Waller, Deshpande and Erdogan 2013).

One of the hypotheses about the increasing volumes of offensive advertising is the belief that any advertising in the first place should be emotional. The people, in addition to the visual memory have very stable emotional memory, which works on the principle of “pleasant – unpleasant, like – not like it.” It was found that emotional memory is much stronger than other types of memory, affects the decision-making, that is, the buying behavior. It is manifested in the emotional form there are numerous individual differences of potential consumers. Any promotional video is not just information, it is a few emotionally charged minutes, personally experienced by man at the time of viewing.

An emotional advertising does not act according to the formula AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action). On the one hand, advertisers seek above all for using positive emotions to attract attention, it turns out an overabundance of “positive” advertising. On the other hand, the increasing volumes are not emotional, “unleavened”, advertising, created on the principle of “do no harm”. In these circumstances, the advertiser refers to “negative” emotions.

Increasing volumes of offensive advertising and Internet trading changes the AIDA formula to AISAS (Attention, Interest, Searches for information, Action, after which information is Shared with others) (Dentsu 2004) or AIDAS (AIDA and S – Share) and even AISDA. According to the AIDAS authors of the article assume, that after buying goods and obtaining satisfaction, the buyer is to share information about it with their friends, relatives, colleagues, etc. According to the AISDA communication «Share» comes before the consumption of the goods. Advertising itself cause a desire to share it with their friends, relatives, colleagues, etc. The Internet Society to do this is quite simple. And, probably, offensive ads cause this desire to a greater extent than positive ads, because offensive ads “shower”.
Of course, it is not a fact that the offensive advertising leads to Desire and Action. In the study, researchers ask respondents about their attitudes to the brand before and after seeing the offensive advertising. But, as it was said above, different people may have different perception of offensive advertising. In terms of total (virus) spread offensive advertising: who seen ad can find enough people for who this ad is not very provocative, perhaps, rather funny, and will encourage them to buy. Authors also assume that the positive advertisement is less the nature of the spread of viral and worse working formula AISDA. Thus offensive advertising by total distribution over the Internet and ambiguous effects on the different socio-demographic groups has a greater effect of the plan to purchase than positive ads.

The fact that to “wash away” the bad reputation is very difficult, and people remember the bad longer than the good, is opposed to the total use of offensive advertising.

Researchers have built the study of perception of advertising images in video and print ads in two classifications of emotions. Paul Ekman highlights 7 basic emotions: Happiness, Sadness, Fear, Surprise, Anger, Disgust, Contempt (O’Carroll 2014). Carroll Izard described 12 discrete emotions: Interest, Joy, Surprise, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, Contempt, Self-Hostility, Fear, Shame, Shyness, and Guilt (Izard, Libero, Putnam and Haynes 1993). For the most part researchers focused on the scale of emotions by Carroll Izard.

It is not the fact that the offensive advertising will only cause negative emotions among representatives of different national cultures and socio-demographic groups, so for research purposes, researchers used 3 positive (Joy / Fun / Happiness, Interest, Surprise) and 3 negative emotions (Disgust, Anger, Shame) (Table 1). Similar statements were used for print advertising. After watching the commercials on YouTube the respondent had to classify each of the statements (Table 1) on the scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). This scale does not allow the respondent to take a middle position, to avoid a clear expression of emotions (Malhotra 2010). Perhaps it is better to explore the emotional impact on the reaction on people’s faces (O’Carroll 2014), but the anonymous study has its advantages – the respondent is not trying to hide his emotions.

In addition, the offensive advertising is often a combination of positive and negative emotions (seems to be disgusting but funny). The final criterion whether decent or not decent advertising is to consider opinion of respondent as to whether it is possible to display ad and where.

Table 1: Emotion in the questions about video ads
Source: Authors

2 RESEARCH

2.1 Questionnaire

Primary data collection was carried out with the help of typeform.com service (questionnaire is posted on https://tixan.typeform.com/to/g14mTR). As socio-demographic factors were used: gender; age; Life Stage; country of residence; nationality; religion. Next, respondents were asked to evaluate their attitude to a particular brand (Axe, Skittles, Mentos, Samsung, New Yorker, Dove, Sysley, Dolce & Gabbana, McDonald’s). Then they can see the video ads (Axe, Skittles, Mentos, Samsung, New Yorker) and see posters (Dove, Sysley, Dolce & Gabbana, McDonald's) and to assess its consent on 6 statements expressing positive and negative emotions. After this, respondents were asked about the attitude towards the brand again (after contact with advertising). Next they chose the brand offered from certain product categories with the intention to make a purchase: the choice of represented brand from advertising, its competitor and the option “Other”. Finally, respondents expressed their opinion on what the media could be used for demonstration of such advertising.
Table 2 shows the brand, the short name (content) of advertising and why (direction, subject), in our opinion, this ad is offensive (see ads on https://tixan.typeform.com/to/g14mTR).

Table 2: Brands, ads and offensiveness  
Source: Authors

2.2 Answers and opinions

The survey is currently ongoing, so in this article we present the preliminary results and some conclusions that are already available. After working with outliers and extremes the sample size is 193 respondents, so maximum error of research is 7% with 95% probability. In this case a certain number of respondents’ categories were estimated separately on significant level:

- gender (male; female),
- life stage (16-34 years, not married, no children, live with parents; 16-34 years, not married, no children, live separately from parents),
- region (Western Europe; Eastern Europe),
- religion (Christians; Atheists).

Cronbach’s alpha was used as an estimate of the reliability of a test (scale). The value is equal to 0.81, so internal consistency can be classified as good. Consider the results of the study on changes in attitudes towards the brand after viewing the advertisement. The H0 hypothesis is: it estimates the attitude towards a brand before and after viewing the ad does not differ. T-test for dependent variables (two-tailed) was used to verify the hypothesis (theoretical value of t (Student) with p-level 0.05 is 1.97). The results for each ad are presented in table 3. H0 is accepted for two cases (Axe and New Yorker). In other cases, the difference between means is significant.

Table 3: The change of attitude  
Source: Authors

The results for the answer about media for display ads are presented in table 4. The mode was chosen as an estimate in this case. It can be noted that the advertisement with the “Bun – chest” (McDonald’s) should not be shown at all. Atheists are more tolerant from the point of view of public acceptability. Mockery of old age and drug promotion as appeals has differences in chosen media by respondents’ categories.

Table 4: Media for display ads  
Source: Authors

T-test for independent variables (two sided) with separate variance was used to verify the following hypothesis: there are no differences in the attitude towards the brand after viewing an ad between respondents’ categories based on cross-cultural and socio-demographic characteristics (the significant level was fixed at 0.05). The cases where the hypothesis is rejected are highlighted in the table. The significant differences are mostly based on gender and religion characteristics but not recognized for the country.
Figure 1 presents the average scores of positive and negative emotional scale and answers to the question about choosing a brand from ad when buying the product category (size of bubbles). It is noticeable that the upper right quadrant is empty, there are no brands, advertising which has caused both positive and negative emotions above mean, but the reverse situation is typical for the brand New Yorker. Despite the high negative ratings of the advertisement, the respondents are ready to buy food in McDonald’s, but the positive assessment of the advertising Axe, does not help a large percentage of its purchase.

2.3 Conclusions

After making calculations and comparison of ratings by different categories of respondents, researchers can draw the following conclusions.

(1) Attitude towards the brand became better or did not changed just in two cases: Axe and New Yorker. In the other cases, the attitude became more negative, especially for brands Sysley and McDonald’s.

(2) Despite the positive emotions caused by the ad, the attitude towards the brand may deteriorate.

(3) Respondents tend to avoid extreme rates: there is only a little number of mean values less than 2 and more than 5.

(4) The biggest negative emotions were caused by the following ads: Mentos (anger), Sysley (shame, disgust) and McDonald’s (shame, anger). In the first two cases respondents allowed to show such ads (for brand Sysley just some categories of respondents), but the ad of the brand McDonald’s may not be on display anywhere. It talks about the greatest opposition to the use in advertising of children, regardless of socio-demographic and cross-cultural differences.

(5) The ratings of religious people and the atheists on positive emotions are often the same, but Christians rate negative emotions in a more uncompromising way. There are also differences between residents of Eastern and Western Europe: the first give more negative ratings of negative emotions; the second – higher in positive. The same differences were found between men and women. Significant differences between people of different life stages have not been identified. We can only say that people living separately from their parents permit a large number of media for offensive ads.

(6) We can say that all hypotheses formulated in the beginning of the article, are confirmed. For example the ad of Mentos with torture was differently rated by men and women like a disgust ad. D&G ad was rated in the same way by respondents from other parts of Europe. Mockery of people can be standardized as advertising appeal on global market.

Literatúra/List of References


Kľúčové slová/Key Words

advertising, offensive advertising, perception, global market reklama, útočná reklama, vnímanie, globálny trh

JEL klasifikácia

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Résumé

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