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# A COMPARISON OF PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS FROM EGYPT, LEBANON, KUWAIT, SAUDI ARABIA, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AND THE UNITED STATES

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines cultural differences between the United States and the Arab world regarding low/high context, collectivism/individualism, time orientation and man's relationship with nature in print advertising. Study reveals that the main differences between the United States and the Arab world include cultural values that are embedded in religious values and beliefs.

## INTRODUCTION

The review of the literature indicates that in spite of globalization and its wide spread, the pros and cons of international advertising and adaptation versus standardization in particular continue to be debated (Agrawal 1995; Cervellon and Dube 2000; Hill and Shao 1994; Solberg 2001; Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos 1997; Zhou and Belk 1989). The purpose of this study is to investigate cultural differences between the U.S. and the Arab world by investigating differences in newspaper advertising appeals. Specifically, this study investigates advertising appeals conveyed in newspaper advertising in a representative sample of the Arab world including: Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and the United States.

Abernethy and Franke (1996) found 40 out of 59 content analysis studies dealt with the United States media and concluded, "Much less is known about advertising information in other countries. For example, no study has examined the advertising information in any African nation, any part of the Middle East other than Saudi Arabia, or any of the 'economies in transition' associated with the former USSR" (p. 15). Elbasher and Nicholls (1983, p. 68) stated that, "it is perhaps somewhat surprising that academics have not gone further and attempted to examine the impact of cultural differences in Arab countries on marketing, as there is a considerable field of literature suggesting that several aspects of 'the marketing mix' are culturally sensitive." An extensive review of the literature suggests that the situation has not changed substantially. To the best of our knowledge, there have

been only two studies (Al-Olayan and Karande 2000; Kalliny 2006) that compared magazine advertisements and TV advertising of some Arab countries and the United States. To the authors' knowledge, there has not been a single study that compared newspaper advertising of the Arab world to the United States or to any other nation.

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Understanding the nature and influences of cultural differences is central to international marketing. Man throughout the ages has been trying endlessly to simplify and organize his environment to be able to have a better understanding of it. Over the years, a number of social scientists attempted to discover a generalized framework of culture to assist in explaining cultural differences. Because there are hundreds of values by which societies and cultures could be compared, organization of cultural values into a manageable number of dimensions is vital. Gannon (1994) argued that cultural dimensions can be used as instruments to compare and cluster cultures according to behavioral characteristics.

### High and Low Context

Hall's 1976 theory of high versus low context culture has been used frequently to understand and explain cultural differences (see Cho, Up Kwon, Gentry, Sunkyu, and Kropp 1999; Hall and Hall 1989; Lin 1993; Miracle, Chang, and Taylor 1992; Mintu-Wimsatt and Gassenheimer 2000; Mueller 1987). Hall (1976, p. 91) describes the difference between high and low context cultures as:

A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial.

The Arabic language is one of the richest languages in both context and code (Kanso 2001). Arabs are more conscious of their language than any people in the world (Hourani 1983) and that the Arabic language plays a vital role in constituting the Arab identity (Barakat 1993). The Arabic language holds a high place among the Muslim believers because it is the language of the Koran and the language used in prayers throughout the Muslim world. The Arab culture is high context, meaning the communication style is embedded in the context of the message, therefore the listener must understand the contextual cues in order to interpret the meaning of the message.

On the other hand the American culture is low-context. U.S. customers rely more on direct communication. Biswas et al. (1992) and Mueller (1987) argued that because American consumers are interested in more information and details, the American consumer seeks more information from ads. The American communication style requires clarity of communication which is evidenced by the many expressions such as: "Say what you mean," "Don't beat around the bush," and "Get to the point." Thus, we propose:

H1: Advertising appeals in the Arab newspaper advertisements will be more high-context, whereas U.S. newspaper advertisements appeals will be more low-context.

### **Individualism/Collectivism**

Hofstede (1984) describes individualism as the assumption that individuals should take care of themselves. In collectivistic societies, people are integrated into strong and cohesive in-groups which care for them in exchange for a high degree of loyalty. Collectivists are more willing than individualists to sacrifice their personal goals for group's goals (Perea and Slater 1999). Additionally, social norms are very important in guiding the behavior of individuals in collectivist societies. In individualistic cultures, it is expected that people will try to gain attention for themselves and get credit for their achievements.

Triandis (1995) found that individualism-collectivism influences the individual's communication style. For example, collectivists are likely to say "what is mine is yours" whereas individualists are likely to stress that "what is mine is not to be used without my permission." In addition, collectivists are likely to employ "we" but individualists are likely to employ "I" in speech. Moreover, the interpretation of the message in a collectivist society is often dependent on the context such as tone of voice and body language. Collectivists are likely to avoid confrontation and feelings of others are stressed in communication.

Hofstede (1991) reported that the United States was the most individualistic country among the 53 countries analyzed, with a score of 91 on a 100-point scale. The Arab world; however, scored 38 on this individualistic dimension. Members of Arab culture have a high need for affiliation and value mutual dependence (Yousef 1974). Success is measured by what one does for his/her family rather than individual earnings or achievement. Consequentially, loyalty to one's primary group is an integral part of Arab culture. This sense of loyalty is exemplified by this Arab proverb, "I against my brother; my brother and I against my cousins; I, my brother, and my cousins against the outsider" (Bates and Fratkin 2003, p.272). Thus:

H2: Arab newspaper advertisements appeal will be more collectivistic compared to their U.S. counterparts.

### **Time Orientation**

The time orientation dimension is concerned with whether cultures are primarily oriented toward the past, the present, or the future. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) argue that one's time orientation is a product of one's socialization and that time orientation is one major cultural value varying across cultures. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) identified three types of time orientation: past-time orientation, present-time orientation, and future-time orientation. Cultures that have a past-time orientation are likely to emphasize respect for tradition and belief that the way things have always been done is the way they should continue.

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) point out that the U.S. is a very future oriented society. Members of this society tend to be optimists, believing that the future will bring good things and members of this culture are oriented toward that eventuality. Thus, members of this culture plan for the future and look forward to it. In doing so, they exert an effort to be ahead in time and strive to conquer the future. This dimension has been used to explain cultural differences across countries. For example, Yau (1988) noted that the values of past-time orientation imply that the Chinese tend to have great brand loyalty and unless the product or brand being used proves very unsatisfactory, they are not likely to switch to other brands or products. Mueller (1987) found Japanese advertising to have a greater tendency to reflect tradition compared to U.S. advertising.

The basis of the Arab culture goes back thousands of years. Before the introduction of Islam in the seventh century AD, many of the Arab countries such as Egypt have already been in existence for thousands of years. As a result, the Arabs have a long history and traditions.

Khalid (1977) stated that some of the recurring themes within the Arab value system are those of group cohesion, personal and family honor and self-respect, and the idolization of Arab tradition, language, and creed. Therefore, Arabs are likely to emphasize respect for tradition and belief that the way things have always been done is the way they should continue. Thus:

H3: Appeals in Arab newspaper advertisements will be more past time-oriented, whereas U.S. newspaper advertisements appeal will be more future-time-oriented.

### **Human Relationship with Nature**

This dimension measures the degree to which people are oriented toward nature and suggest three relationships between man and nature: subjugation-to-nature, harmony-with-nature, and mastery-over-nature. Subjugation to nature suggests the belief that nothing can be done to control nature and its fate must be accepted because man is dominated by nature (Carter 1991). From this perspective, man is to adhere to the natural forces and not fight them, for fighting them will only result in a wasteful effort. Therefore, nature guides one's life. Harmony with nature suggests the belief that man is one with nature and nature is man's partner in life. The mastery over nature preference suggests that humans are separate from the physical, mechanical, and rational world. Therefore, the world (natural forces) is an object that can be controlled and modeled for human benefit (Carter 1991). From this perspective, man is to conquer nature.

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) noted that the U.S. is more prone to emphasize mastery over nature while many African cultures tend to be subjugated to nature. To most of the U.S. population, the expression, "you can do it" and "nothing is impossible" is not a metaphor symbolizing the impossible, but rather an optimistic view based on past experiences. Therefore, in the U.S. culture, it is the individual's responsibility to overcome whatever obstacles may come his/her way to achieve one's goals. Thus, the correct course of action would be to challenge nature and change it to fit one's needs. In contrast, in those cultures that believe man is subjugated to nature tend to emphasize expressions such as, "God willing" or "it is God's will." Therefore, there is nothing that man can do to change the course of events and nature is not to be challenged. In these cultures man is to adapt to nature rather than change natural events to fit one's needs.

Ajami (1976) stated that the Arab culture has always viewed the world with a large measure of fatalism. There is a wide spread belief in the Arab world that man's destiny has already been determined by God. No wonder expressions such as, "Inshallah" meaning "God willing"

is probably one of the most frequently used expressions in the daily life of an Arab. Thus, we propose:

H4: The Arab newspaper advertisements will contain more of subjugation to nature appeals compared to their U.S. counterparts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

One of the main objectives in our sampling procedure is to obtain a representative sample of the Arab countries. It is our hope that this study will point out not only similarities and differences between the Arab countries and the United States, but also point out differences and similarities among the Arab states. Three factors were taken into consideration in the selection process: (1) The cultural commonalities and differences between the Arab states. Our objective is to get a representative sample of the Arab world that would include various cultural and religious backgrounds. (2) The geographical location of the Arab States. As stated previously the Arab countries are located in Africa and Asia and we wanted to include a sample of both. (3) The economic importance of each state. Based on these factors, five Arab countries were selected (Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates).

### **Sampling Method**

Two main criteria were developed in selecting newspaper advertisements. First, each newspaper chosen was either the leading newspaper or one of the leading newspapers in each country. Second, the newspaper had to be a daily newspaper. Because not much information is available to help in the evaluation of each newspaper in the Arab countries included in the analysis, a consultation with the embassy of each country was conducted and the following newspapers were selected: (*Al-Ahram* from Egypt, *Al-Nahar* from Lebanon, *Al-Watan* from Kuwait, *Al-Watan* from Saudi Arabia, *Al-Bayan* from U.A.E, and *U.S. Today* from the U.S.). Issues from April 1, 2005 to April 15, 2005 were considered. A total of 900 ads were analyzed where 150 ads were taken from each country in the sample. A stratified sample was selected whenever possible to cover a wide range of products.

### **Coding Procedure**

The U.S. ads were coded by three U.S. undergraduate students. Three bilingual Middle Eastern students, two graduates and one undergraduate coded the Arab sample. Following the suggestion of previous studies (Kassarjian 1977; Perreault and Leigh 1989; Stempel and Westley 1989), the percentage of agreement among the three coders was calculated. The number of times coders were in agreement was divided by the total number of ads

coded. Consistent with the procedures of Gilly (1988) and Schneider and Schneider (1979), disagreements among the coders were settled via discussion and consensus. The inter-rater reliability was calculated using the percentage of similar classifications for all ads. Duplicate ads were eliminated to increase product category.

## RESULTS

A 150-newspaper advertisements were analyzed from each country included in this study. Table 1 presents a detailed description of the distribution of sample advertisements according to product category. The most frequently advertised product in the Egyptian, Lebanese, Kuwaiti, and U.S. A newspaper sample is automobiles with 27 percent, 14 percent, 25 percent, and 27 percent respectively. The most frequently advertised product in the Saudi newspaper sample is watches with 31 percent while the most frequently advertised product in the U.A.E. is health/insurance with 21 percent. Alcoholic products (2%), cellular phone (14%), and food (4%) appeared more frequently in the Egyptian sample than in any other. Tobacco products (2.6%) appeared more frequently on in the Lebanese sample than in any other while cosmetics (7.3) appeared more frequently on in the Kuwaiti sample

than any other. In the Saudi sample, credit cards (4.6%), hair care products (8%), and watches (31%) appeared more frequently than in any other sample while in the U.A.E. sample, health/insurance (14.0%) appeared more frequently than in any other sample. Finally, computers/printers (10%) and medicines (8%) appeared more frequently in the U.S.A. sample than in any other. For a detailed description of the sample distribution, see Table 1.

Hypothesis 1 stated that advertising appeals in the Arab newspaper advertisements will be more high-context, whereas U.S. newspaper advertisement appeals will be more low-context. As Table 2 indicates, all the Arab countries, except for Kuwait, scored significantly higher than the U.S. on the high context which indicates support for hypothesis 1. The U.S. scored higher than all the Arab countries and the difference was significant in most cases on the low context appeals, which also indicate support for hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 stated that Arab newspaper advertisements appeal will be more collectivistic compared to their U.S. counterparts. There were no significant difference between the U.S. and the Arab countries, except for U.A.E. where the U.S. scored significantly higher, on the

**TABLE 1**  
**Distribution of Newspaper Advertisements on Product Category**

Product Category	Egypt	Lebanon	Kuwait	Saudi	U.A.E	U.S.A
1. Alcohol	3 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
2. Automobiles	27 (18%)	14 (9.0%)	25 (16.6%)	10 (6.6%)	4 (2.6%)	27 (18.0%)
3. Cellular phone	14 (9.0%)	3 (2.0%)	2 (1.3%)	3 (2.0%)	4 (2.6%)	7 (4.6%)
4. Coffee/tea	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
5. Credit/card						
Banking	4 (2.6%)	4 (2.6%)	5 (3.3%)	7 (4.6%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (3.3%)
6. Cosmetics	2 (1.3%)	3 (2.0%)	11 (7.3%)	6 (4.0%)	3 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)
7. Computer/ printer/software/ internet	5 (3.3%)	6 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (4.6%)	2 (1.3%)	15 (10.0%)
8. Hair care	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (3.3%)	12 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
9. Health						
insurance	2 (1.3%)	2 (1.3%)	8 (5.3%)	0 (0.0%)	21(14.0%)	2 (1.3%)
10. Laundry/soap	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
11. Medicines	2 (1.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (2.6%)	4 (2.6%)	12 (8.0%)
12. TV/VCR	3 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (2.0%)
13. Tobacco	0 (0.0%)	4 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
14. Toothpaste	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
15. Watches	6 (4.0%)	3 (2.0%)	1 (0.6)	31 (20.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)
16. Contraceptive	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
17. Food	6 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.3%)	4 (2.6%)	1 (0.6%)	3 (2.0%)
18. Other	78 (52%)	111 (74%)	88 (58.6%)	71 (47.3%)	111 (74%)	76 (50.6%)
Total	150	150	150	150	150	150

collectivistic dimension. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 posited that advertising appeals in Arab newspaper advertisements will be more past time-oriented, whereas U.S. newspaper advertisements appeal will be more future-time-oriented. The U.S. scored higher than all the Arab countries, except for Egypt, on the past time orientation. On the future time orientation, the U.S. scored higher than Lebanon, Saudi and the U.A.E. but lower than Egypt and Kuwait. Therefore, there is partial support for hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 stated that the Arab newspaper advertisements will contain more of subjugation to nature appeals compared to their U.S. counterparts. Advertising appeals related to subjugation to nature were virtually absent in both the U.S. and the Arab sample, except for Lebanon; therefore, hypothesis 4 was not supported.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study provides some interesting results not only in regard to the differences and similarities between the Arab countries and the United States but also in regard to differences among the Arab states. There were significant differences between the U.S. and the Arab states in regard to high versus low context communication in advertising appeals. The difference was consistent across the entire sample. This was not the case with regard to the other advertising appeals where significant differences existed between the United States and the Arab states but also among Arab states. This probably has to do with the

argument that the Arab identity has been seen as based primarily on language since its inception (Barakat 1993). Language is one of the most influential unifying forces in the Arab world. Unlike religion, sociopolitical experiences, economic interests, language is unified throughout the Arab world. This is not to say there are no variations in the Arabic language for there are about 20 different dialects (Al-Olayan and Karande 2000) but to say that the foundation of the language are the same. In spite of these variations, the communication styles are similar in most cases due to the strong ties between Islam and the Arabic language. Therefore, this study points out that communication styles are one of the main differences in advertising appeals between the United States and the Arab world.

Another significant difference between the United States and the Arab world is the use of exaggerations. Exaggerations were higher in the U.S. sample compared to the Arab sample. Although exaggerations such as I did this, (whatever it is a person is doing) a million times are common in Arab states such as Egypt, these expressions are never taken literally. There is a common understanding that when a person uses such expressions, he/she is only trying to emphasize a point without actually giving an account of how many times he or she has tried to do something. By looking only to such common expressions, one can easily be misled to think that presenting inaccurate information in advertising may be acceptable in the Arab culture. Barakat (1993) stated that Arab culture is viewed as basically religious in form and literary in expression. Islam stresses that people be truthful and honest in their communication with others. An advertisement that uses exaggeration may be viewed as lying and

**TABLE 2**  
**MANOVA Results**

Appeal	USA N=150	Egypt N=150	Mean Difference	Lebanon N=150	Mean Difference	Kuwait N=150	Mean Difference
Collectivistic	1.20	1.19	0.01	1.08	0.12	1.06	0.14
Individualistic	1.49	1.53	-0.04	1.65	-0.16	1.30	0.19
Past Time	1.15	1.26	0.11	1.02	.13**	1.09	0.04
Present Time	1.42	1.17	0.25	1.70	-0.28	1.14	0.28
Future Time	1.10	1.22	-0.12	1.01	0.09	1.25	-.12**
High-contexts	1.42	1.43	-0.01	1.92	-.50**	1.17	.25**
Low-context	1.78	1.59	.19**	1.50	.28**	1.62	.16**
Mastery over Nature	1.39	1.31	0.08	1.00	.39**	1.39	0.0
Oneness with Nature	1.06	1.17	-0.11	1.00	0.06	1.05	0.01
Subjugation to Nature	1.00	1.00	0.00	1.01	-0.01	1.00	0.00
Exaggeration	1.74	1.26	.48**	1.00	.74**	1.74	0.0

\* significant at the 0.05 level ( $p < .05$ )

\*\* significant at the 0.01 level ( $p < .01$ )

TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

Appeals	USA N=150	Saudi N=150	Mean Difference	U.A.E. N=150	Mean Difference
Collectivistic	1.20	1.15	0.05	1.04	.16**
Individualistic	1.49	1.53	-0.04	1.82	-.33**
Past Time	1.15	1.07	0.08	1.03	.12**
Present Time	1.42	1.28	0.14	1.40	-0.02
Future Time	1.10	1.08	0.02	1.00	0.10
High-contexts	1.42	1.62	-.20**	1.77	-.35**
Low-context	1.78	1.42	.36**	1.66	0.12
Mastery over Nature	1.39	1.00	.39**	1.00	.39**
Oneness with	1.06	1.00	0.06	1.00	0.06
Subjugation to Nature	1.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Exaggeration	1.74	1.20	.54**	1.13	.61**

\* significant at the 0.05 level ( $p < .05$ )

\*\* significant at the 0.01 level ( $p < .01$ )

deceiving the public. Therefore; advertisers may feel safer focusing on the actual benefits rather than the perceived benefits of the product.

Although the Arab world ranked high on Hofstede's collectivistic dimension, there was no significant difference between the U.S. and the Arab world. Although Islam attempted to destroy tribal solidarity by providing the Arabs with a common message and ideological framework to establish a community based on unity of belief, Islam was not totally successful in eliminating tribalism. This can be seen in what has recently been happening in Iraq, Lebanon, and other Arab states. Unlike the language factor discussed above, being collectivistic or individualistic is part of culture that probably can be changed easily. With TV sets, satellite, and Internet, Arabs now are exposed to outside influence more than ever. For example, Al-Makaty et al. (1996) argue that television advertising until recently was virtually unknown in the Saudi home, except for about 30 percent of the population in the Eastern Province who were able to receive broadcasts from neighboring states such as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. With all these outside influences it is possible that certain aspects of the Arab culture are slowly changing.

This, however, should be interpreted with caution. International advertisers are advised to identify cultural values that are deeply rooted in the Islamic faith and should adhere to them. Violating those cultural values may be viewed as insulting or attacking the Islamic faith. For example, Muslims believe that eating, greeting, and serving others should be done with the right hand. This

belief is based on the following Hadith by Jabir, "I heard the Messenger of Allah (Prophet Muhammad) saying: "Do not eat with your left hand, because Satan eats and drinks with his left hand" (Reported by Muslim). This can be illustrated through the following example. Lugmani, Yavas, and Qureshi (1989) stated that a major tea company alienated Saudi customers after it aired a commercial that showed a Saudi host serving tea with his left hand to one of his guests. Moreover, the guest was wearing shoes while seated, which is considered disrespectful by traditional Saudis. International advertisers are advised to exert an effort to understand what cultural values are rooted in tradition and which are rooted in religion."

This study also reveals that there are differences among the Arab states. Barakat (1993) argued that Western orientalis have tended to emphasize the constant rather than the changing nature of the Arab culture and the oneness of the Arab mind rather than the pluralism inherent in a distinctive Arab culture. International advertisers are advised to find the differences between the Arab states. Advertisers should realize that although most Arabs are Muslims who speak Arabic and believe in Islam, there are also significant differences such as religious affiliation, level of secularism, level of democracy and economic status. In summary, in spite of globalization, there are still significant differences between the United States and the Arab world. In addition, there are also differences among the Arab states that should not be ignored. Advertisers could focus on what is common such as linguistic aspects, but they also should pay attention to significant differences.

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