

## Introduction

Is it possible to persuade consumers in different markets with the same advertising message? Will they respond favourably? Or should the advertising message be customised to reflect local culture? This question is one of the most fundamental decisions when planning an advertising campaign in different cultural areas, and, not surprisingly, one of the most frequently discussed issues in advertising today.

One fraction in this debate emphasises that the world is growing ever closer, and that the world can be treated as one large market, with only superficial differences in values (Levitt, 1983). In their view, advertising and marketing can be standardised across cultures, and the same values can be used to persuade customers to buy or consume the product. Another fraction is content with the fact that the basic needs may well be the same around the world, however the way in which these needs are met and satisfied differs from culture to culture. Any marketing (and advertising) campaign should, in their view, reflect the local habits, lifestyles and economical conditions in order to be effective. In 1985, Woods et al. concluded in a study of consumer purpose in purchase in the US, Quebec and Korea, that "important differences are found in the reasons why they [the consumers] purchase products familiar to all three countries".

Central to this debate, are two issues: The product position and usage within the culture of the market, and the decoding of the advertising message. Both are, obviously, linked to some extent.

An advertising message encoded in one culture has to be decoded in another culture in the case of standardised marketing. This process may be subject to severe distortions, as the receiver will decode the message in his/her own cultural context. A standardised approach could hence run into the danger, that the message will be unconvincing, as it does not meet the psychological "triggers" required to evoke a purchase decision with the consumer. Given Woods et al. research, this appears to be a problem that marketers should be clearly aware of.

In order to understand the decoding process in the target market, it will be essential to study the product perceptions and reasons for purchase, as well as the product's place in the target culture. An example of this would include wine, perceived as a relative "special occasion" drink in most northern European countries, however understood as an every day drink in most Southern European countries, where it is seen similar to the beer's perception in Northern Europe. To market a table wine as "add a touch of luxury to every day" (German advertising) would undoubtedly appear strange and possibly confusing to Southern European consumers. Conversely, when advertising washing powder, consumers in both northern as well as southern European markets may expect information on the effectiveness of the product to dominate the commercial.

As an increasing number of researchers has pointed out (Caillat & Mueller, 1996), that it is important not only to study advertising in general, but to concentrate on differences in product categories in order to find prevailing differences in advertising style and values. Caillat & Mueller (1996) themselves published a comparison for beer advertising in the UK and the US, concluding that the "differences between British and American advertising were significant, indicating that consumers of the two countries are currently exposed to distinct styles of commercial messages based on different cultural values". Equally, Cheng & Schweitzer (1996), after examining Chinese and US television commercials, concluded: "We also found that cultural values depicted in Chinese television commercials have much to do with product categories...".

This paper focuses, like the Caillat & Mueller study, on the values portrayed in beer advertising. The countries studied are the UK, the Netherlands and Germany, all of which possess a long tradition in brewing and the consumption of beer. Equally, in all three countries, beer is similar in market positioning, i.e. it is viewed as an every-day drink, consumed dominantly by males. No assumptions were made which values were to be expected in any one country to be dominantly displayed in beer commercials, but all commercials were studied a priori empirically to identify dominant themes. Additionally, the use of humour and the occasion for product usage were recorded in all three countries.

## The Market for Beer

Beer is the most popular alcoholic drink in all three countries, and the per capita consumption is higher than the European average of around 70 l /p.a.p.c.. In 1998, the per capita beer consumption was the highest in Germany, with 127.4 l, followed by the UK, with 99.4 l and the Netherlands, with 84.2 l (World Drink Trends, 1999). The beer consumption in all three countries has declined steadily over the last years. This development has put additional pressure for effective marketing communications on the breweries.

**Table 1: Evolution of beer consumption per capita in selected countries**

Rank	Country	1995	1996	1997	1998
1	Czech Republic	156.9	157.3	161.4	161.8
2	Republic of Ireland	138.6	145.4	152.0	150.5
<b>3</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>135.9</b>	<b>131.9</b>	<b>131.2</b>	<b>127.4</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>100.9</b>	<b>101.9</b>	<b>103.6</b>	<b>99.4</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>85.8</b>	<b>85.5</b>	<b>86.3</b>	<b>84.2</b>
13	US	83.6	83.5	83.2	82.0
39	Italy	25.4	24.0	25.4	26.9

Litres p.c. / Source: World Drink Trends, 1999

## Advertising regulation

Advertising for alcoholic beverages is heavily regulated in all three markets. In the UK, advertising of alcoholic beverages is regulated by a self-imposed code of conduct of the *Advertising Association*, as well as the regulations of the *Independent Television Commission* (for television). In Germany, the *Zentralverband der deutschen Werbewirtschaft* and the *Deutscher Werberat* have published similar rules governing the advertising on television. In the Netherlands, the *Stichting Stuurgroep Reclame* and the *Vereniging van Communicatie-adviesbureaus* has also published appropriate guidelines. An overview of the legal environment, and the restrictions imposed by these guidelines, is given in the table below.

## Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to determine whether or not the same advertising themes and appeals are used in all three countries to persuade customers to buy (or consume) beer, and to identify the dominant appeals used.

In order to achieve that objective, television commercials for beer have been collected in all three countries. In order to minimise distortion, only advertising for beers originating from the country have been selected. The commercials were recorded during March/April 2000 from the following television channels:

**Table 3: Channels used for collection of television commercials**

Country	UK	Netherlands	Germany
Channels	ITV-Carlton Channel 4 Channel 5 Sky One Granada Plus	Nederland 1/2/3 RTL 4 RTL 5 Veronica SBS 6 Net 5	ARD ZDF RTL Plus Sat 1 Pro 7 Kabel 1

During this time, a total of 25 unique television commercials were recorded: 9 for the UK, 6 for the Netherlands and 10 for Germany. Although the population in this study is fairly small, it is hoped that the results are sufficient to establish an exploratory overview of advertising appeals used.

The commercials were then qualitatively content analysed to establish the dominant appeal used in each commercial. In order to be as open minded as possible, no list of expected appeals or themes were identified prior to the analysis.

Once the dominant appeal used in each commercial had been identified, these appeals were combined to form five categories of dominant appeals: friendship, sex, sport, tradition and relaxation.

The category friendship included all commercials that focused around drinking beer in a group of friends, or with a friend, where the consumption of beer was depicted overwhelmingly as a social activity, or implied as such.

A commercial was judged to use "sex appeal", if it depicted members of the opposite sex making advances towards the main character, if they spoke seductively or were dressed in a manner that may be interpreted as erotic.

Sport includes all commercials that make a clear reference to sports of all forms, show main characters involved in sporting activities or after sports.

Commercials focusing on the tradition of the brewery or the product, showed historic buildings or images or were set in a historical background were judged to have "tradition" as the dominant appeal.

Finally, commercials showing the main character in a clearly relaxing situation, where the main character consumed beer primarily as a way to unwind and relax (mostly alone), were judged to use "relaxation" as the dominant appeal.

Mueller (1996) reported a large number of British commercials used humour to advertise beer. In order to see if this was equally true for Dutch and German commercials the use of humour was equally coded as present or not present.

Alcohol commercials, particularly in Britain, have often been criticised that they imply that the consumption of alcoholic beverages may enhance sexual attractiveness. In order to establish if this appeal is used, special attention was given to the role of characters of the opposite sex to the main character(s) in the commercials. This appeal is especially complicated to establish, particularly as the UK-code of conduct rules this appeal out, and an open display of this appeal would lead to the suspension of the commercial. However, as anecdotal evidence of this theme was evident, it was included in the study. If these characters appeared to display any form of erotic symbol or gesture to the main character after or during consumption of beer, or if their dress was found to be explicitly erotic in nature, the appeal was judged to be present. This was particularly upheld if these characters were shown full screen. If they appeared merely as present, alongside other secondary characters, this appeal was judged not to be present.

The occasion for product usage was also recorded. As Mueller (1996) described a significant difference between the usage of beer in US- and British commercials, the product usage was coded using Mueller's coding procedure. This involved to scan the commercials for either regular (or every-day type) usage, special occasion usage or usage not shown in the commercial.

Each commercial was analysed by a resident native of the country, and by the researcher, who is fluent in all three languages. Each coder coded the respective commercials independently, and later conferred with the researcher. All differences in coding were discussed, and finally resolved.

## Results

### Humour

Humour was analysed by trying to identify a joke or some funny twist in the commercials, and was classified as either present, or absent. Typical examples of humorous advertising include where the commercial tells a funny story, uses irony or makes fun of typical situations. Humour dominated British commercials, whereas it was more sparingly used in German or Dutch commercials.

**Table 4: The use of humour**

	UK	NL	D
Used	88%	33%	10%
Not Used	12%	66%	90%

### Occasion for Product Usage

The occasion for drinking beer was analysed by either being an everyday event, a special occasion or not shown/inconclusive. An everyday-event included drinking beer in a pub, in a bar, while being with friends or while watching television. A special occasion included drinking as a special reward or celebration. A commercial was coded as "Not shown/inconclusive" if none of the characters consumed (or was about to consume) beer, or no characters were shown at all.

Everyday-usage dominated the British commercials to a large extent, and also was dominant in Dutch advertising, whereas it was relatively infrequently used in German advertising.

**Table 5: Occasion for product usage**

	UK	NL	D
Everyday	77%	50%	20%
Special Event	11%	33%	40%
Not shown	11%	16%	40%

### Dominant Themes

Each commercial was coded for one dominant theme, and those themes were then grouped into a list of 5 possible themes: friendship, sex, sport, tradition and relaxation.

Friendship and affiliation were the most dominant themes in both German and Dutch beer commercials.

Whereas 55% of British commercials were found to have some sexual appeal, none of the Dutch or German commercials were found to use this appeal for the promotion of beer.

The link between sport and beer was highlighted only in the Netherlands and in the UK, it was however not used in any German commercial.

A trend of advertising beer using the history and tradition of the beer or brewery was observed exclusively in Germany, whereas beer was presented as a drink for relaxation in both the UK and the Netherlands.

**Table 6: Dominant Themes**

	UK	NL	D
Friendship	-	50%	60%
Sex	55%	-	-
Sport	22%	16%	-
Tradition	-	-	40%
Relaxation	22%	33%	-

### **Discussion**

The results clearly support the argument, that different values are used to promote the same product in the three markets, and that different associations and techniques are used to convey the advertising message. In the UK, the use of humour in advertising is a long standing tradition, and is also dominant in beer advertising, with 88% using this feature. This result supports Mueller's claim, that the majority of British beer advertising uses humour to sell its product. In Germany, beer is not directly associated with humorous advertising, and only 10% of the sample used humour. In the Netherlands humour was more frequent, however it was less dominant (33%).

Equally in support of Mueller's study is the result for the occasion for product usage. The every-day drink, as beer is portrayed in British advertising, is clearly dominant, however it is less frequent in the Netherlands (50%), and even in the minority in Germany. Although the portrayed product usage has little in common with the real-life product usage, it demonstrates a desire to position the product differently in the various markets. In the German market, beer consumption is depicted as a social phenomena. It goes hand in hand with meeting friends, going out for the day or having a picnic, a day at the sea etc., where the reunification of the friends is celebrated with a beer. Alternatively, beer is positioned to be a high quality

product with a long tradition. This appeal is unique to the German market, and can not be found in either Dutch or British advertising. There may, however, be some explanation in the abolition of the Reinheitsgebot, an antique law ensuring the purity of the beer, by the EU in the late 1980s. Although this is certainly not the only possible explanation for the use of this particular appeal, consumers will understand, that the beer in question is brewed in line with the regulation of the Reinheitsgebot. This theory is supported by the fact that 3 out of the 4 commercials using this type of appeal state that they brew according to the Reinheitsgebot.

In the Netherlands, the friendship appeal equally dominates the beer advertising. Beer is consumed with friends - however much more in an everyday situation than in Germany. Equally, beer can be consumed at home, even alone to relax - a depiction that is not at all used in German advertising. Another link found in the Netherlands, and not used in Germany, is the link between beer and sport events, where beer is consumed accompanying the activity of watching a game of football.

This appeal is however somewhat different from the sports-appeal used in the UK, where beer is positively connected with either achievement in sports or as a "creator" of sport. Another appeal used in both the UK and the Netherlands is display of beer consumption as a relaxing activity. However most dominant in the UK is the use of female characters in beer commercials. A majority of beer commercials has at least one female "main supporting character" (i.e. not actually the main, beer consuming, character - however someone with a key role). Whereas there are virtually no female characters to be found in Dutch or German beer advertising, or if so, they are depicted as just another person with no major impact on the advertising as a whole, the female characters play a relatively dominant role in a majority of British commercials. Nearly all female characters are lightly dressed or are depicted wearing tight dresses, and a majority of them seems to be(come) attracted to the main character.

The results of this study have very clear limitations, particularly as the amount of data is extremely small. Equally, only one dominant appeal per commercial was coded - whereas many commercials display a number of appeals. Although some more clarification of the appeals is given above, the variety and different flavour of certain appeals used should not be underestimated.

However, the results suggest, that anecdotal difference in advertising strategies is not merely a myth, and clearly demonstrates that different values are used to promote the same product in three geographically close countries. Clearly, such a clear difference may not be observed in all commercials for all product categories, as beer is a culture bound product. However, differences in persuasion techniques and advertising appeals are to be expected in a variety of product categories, whereas in others, there may be little or no variation in appeals used. Further research is required to identify these categories, and more clearly establish the appeals used.

#### **References:**

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