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Color Usage in International Business-to-Business Print Advertising

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The use of appropriate color in international business-to-business advertisements can profoundly impact the success of an advertised product. This study compares the usage of colors in business advertisements in France, the United States, and Venezuela. The findings conclude that Venezuelan ads use significantly more red, orange, and green colors, while advertisements from France and the U.S. use higher proportions of black and brown colors. The U.S. also utilizes significantly more black-and-white ads than either France or Venezuela. These findings differ from prior theories of color preferences, indicating that cultural meanings may influence business' color selections for advertisements. Managerial implications for color usage in advertising across national boundaries are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.
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INTRODUCTION

Color decisions in international business-to-business advertising have typically been based upon personal tastes, anecdotal evidence, or successful home country campaigns. Because of a vacuum in decision-making knowledge, international marketing managers often follow a trial-and-error selection process that originates with color schema developed in other regions of the world, in essence, a de facto standardized color strategy [1, 2]. However, given the complexities of this situation,

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marketing managers may not make the best color selections for global advertisements without well-developed empirical guidance frameworks [3–5].

As global harmonization continues, business-to-business advertising may have greater potential than consumer advertising for standardized global advertisements [6, 7]. Globalization of industrial markets, web-based advertising, and increased pressure to achieve market efficiencies have motivated business-to-business marketers to consider the adaptation of standardization strategies in international promotions, including the colors utilized in advertisements. The color choices made in standardization efforts are integral to industrial product success [8]. That is, if people in various cultures and/or geographical areas possess disparate perceptions of colors, a standardization color strategy is unlikely to succeed. Hattwick et al. [9] explain the importance of color in advertising:

> Color is an important tool for shaping customers' feelings and responses. It is a tool which can do greater harm than good if indiscriminately used. The advertiser who chooses colors on the basis of broad generalizations or of personal bias is in danger of making gross mistakes (p. 3).

Ricks [10] documented numerous international product failures resulting from inappropriate color decisions. It is generally believed that both color preferences and color usage influence advertising effectiveness [11]. Although studies of standardization and color are well documented in the trade press, few empirical studies have examined the color schemes utilized in business-to-business advertisements across national boundaries [12]. The purpose of this study is to gain a greater in-depth understanding of the color strategies used in business-to-business advertisements across countries. To operationalize this study, selected French, U.S., and Venezuelan business magazine ads were analyzed to provide managers with a richer level of knowledge about the ability to standardize colors in international business-to-business advertising.

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BACKGROUND

Advertisers understand the importance of color. For more that 60 years, researchers have studied the effect of colors in print ads [13]. They have found that colors are multifaceted in nature and can stimulate emotional responses, affect persuasiveness [14], prestige [15], and the consumer's overall perceptions of the product [11, 16, 17]. Colors have been shown to reinforce copy claims [18], improve learning [19], and increase readership [20] and sales [21]. The average magazine reader also recognizes that utilizing color increases advertising costs [22].

Early studies concluded that color ads were more attractive and interesting than black-and-white ads [15, 23]. However more contemporary evidence suggests that, in a competitive market place, a black-and-white ad may be a useful differentiation tool [24]. For example, in recent Nuprin commercials, a small yellow pill is contrasted against a black-and-white environment to illustrate the pain medicine's uniqueness relative to the competitors. In the U.S. market, insurance, banking, investment firms, jewelers, and even soft drink companies have successfully used black-and-white advertisements [25].

Demographic variables and culture influence the color effectiveness of an ad. Gender comparative studies have demonstrated differences in color preferences [11, 26], although no such difference appears to exist between white and black Americans [27]. However, when Lee and

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