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UNDERSTANDING FRENCH CULTURE THROUGH ADVERTISEMENTS

For years, the United States dominated the advertising world with France as one of its main followers. Essentially, the intellectual leaders were American since the marketing and advertising think tanks were identified with American universities. However, since the 1970s, French advertising has come into its own and now clearly distinguishes itself from American advertising. A case in point is found in the fact that success in global marketing requires the understanding of distinct patterns of communication in each target country, since these patterns are in direct correlation with broader cultural, historical, and linguistic variations. Therefore, American multinationals advertising in France must turn to French agencies in order to vaunt the merits of their products in order to succeed. For example, Fred Zandpour, Cypress Chang, and Joelle Catalano demonstrated that “while strong product identification, use of celebrities, and testimonials are acceptable in the United States, French and Taiwanese people are more accustomed to subtle and symbolic advertising with very few direct and reasoned arguments” (36). The goal of this study is thus two-fold: 1) to show how French advertising is distinct from American advertising in terms of strategy, content, and form of execution, proving that French advertising directly reflects its culture; and 2) to provide student activities directly connected to advertising so that students better understand French culture.

The examples of advertisements we provide were selected from a variety of French magazines. Two such magazines are *L'Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Instructors should not limit their activities to these two magazines since the French press reflects a myriad of orientations

Global Business Languages (1998)

and attention should be drawn to as many different perspectives as possible. The level of the course will determine the depth of discussion on the subtle nature of the French press and how the advertisements for the same product will vary from one magazine to another. We also selected advertisements from French television.¹ In addition, a comparison is drawn to Quebec advertisements. Most importantly, the activities we provide have been successfully integrated into several different types of French courses: Composition and Conversation, French Civilization and Culture, Modern France, and Business French. The beauty of the activities lies in their ability to be easily adapted to the various course levels. For example, in a Composition and Conversation class, students become engaged quickly in discussing the strengths and weaknesses of a particular advertisement and what makes it unique to French culture. A French Civilization and Culture course might investigate the historical implications of that aspect of French culture that is echoed in such an advertisement. A Modern France course could concentrate on how the advertisement is reflective of current times. A Business French course would take the discussion even one step further by analyzing the differences in marketing strategies between an American and a French company and whether or not the advertisement could appear in many different types of French magazines or only a selected few. In the interest of all readers, we therefore provide a foundation of advertisements upon which the individual teacher can expand to suit the needs of her/his students.

Although the United States is still perceived as the mecca of advertising innovation, French advertising has clearly developed its own unique style. In order to demonstrate how French advertising mirrors French culture, we will provide examples of French advertisements that are aimed at stimulating rich discussions with students. After having discussed these examples of French advertisements, students can design two different advertisements for the same product: one advertisement being “French” and the other being “American.” This type of activity allows the instructor to assess how her/his students perceive themselves in contrast with how they perceive French culture.

¹The video *97 Publicités télévisées* and accompanying class manual, produced by Hachette, is available in the United States by contacting Houghton Mifflin Companies: D. C. Heath, Great Source, and McDougal Littell at 1-800-235-3565. The ISBN for the video is: 0-669-13062-1. The ISBN for the manual is: 0-669-13063-X.

In advertising, attention is drawn to the product by various types of communication: media, direct, point-of-purchase, corporate, etc. But advertising in the broad sense is media based and uses the channels of mass media: press, television, radio, and cinema. Jacques Lendrevie and Denis Lindon explain that “la publicité est l’outil des grands annonceurs sur les marchés de grande consommation” (334). Therefore, its purpose is to reach very large audiences. Advertising delivers a simple, strong, and unique message that will be repeated for days, weeks, months, or even longer.

Advertising is not only multifaceted but can be found everywhere: on television, on the radio, at the movies, in the subway, on the sides of buildings, on roadside billboards, on buses and at bus stops, and of course, in newspapers and magazines. Advertising is therefore a linguistic treasure, because it is first and foremost a verbal message. This message can be long or summed up in a single word. It can be clear or obscure. And as the French love to do, it can even be a play on words or refer to certain cultural or literary items.

In the 1994 Delsey advertising campaign, devised by Publicis Conseil—the second leading advertiser in France—two young people embrace. But the product, a knapsack, is almost edged out of the advertisement. The passionate kiss immediately attracts the eye’s attention. As for the message, “Dans certains transports, il est plus agréable d’avoir les mains libres,” reference is only made indirectly to the product, in a vague manner. The word “transport,” which is usually used in its literal sense (to transport merchandise), must be taken here in its figurative sense (transport = passion). In a similar vein, the expression “avoir les mains libres,” generally used idiomatically, must be interpreted literally here. This intentional mixing of literal and figurative language introduces an element of humor, which the French enjoy.

In the Delsey advertisement, it is not obvious, at least from first view, that the product being promoted is a bag. In the black and white photograph, the eye is not drawn to the otherwise barely noticeable bag. However, Delsey is a very well-known brand; its reputation comparable to that of Samsonite in the United States. The eye, which is first drawn to the kiss or the couple’s interaction, will consequently search for the product and then establish the relation between the image and the message. This indirect advertising technique of making the product a secondary element generates a strong communication link to the point of being

almost subliminal. Later, a kiss may remind potential consumers of the Delsey bag.

While the advertisement utilizes the resources of language (implicit, polysemous, implied, presupposed, equivocal) and equally offers enticing and seductive images to admire, it uses many cultural references also. They are sometimes subtle, but none the less present and always carefully calculated. In the Delsey advertisement, the principal cultural reference pays homage to 1950's photographer Robert Doisneau. Doisneau became famous with his photographs of couples embracing on Parisian streets. As was the case with Doisneau's work, the advertisement for the Delsey bag is in black and white, portraying a couple embracing in broad daylight, and in public. The second cultural reference, although less evident, is the reference to America. The form of the bag immediately brings to mind the single-shoulder knapsack worn by many young American students. The reference becomes more clear if it is known that Delsey baptized this new bag "Jazzy." For many French, particularly adolescents, jazz is synonymous with the United States. Therefore, to buy a "Jazzy," is to buy oneself a small piece of the "American dream." To carry a "Jazzy," is to acquire the American "look" and justifies the wearing of other extremely popular American clothing, such as jeans, sneakers, and sweatshirts.

Nonetheless, advertising does not always need a verbal message. For example, in the advertisement for "Habit Rouge," an eau de toilette for men, Guerlain chose to superimpose on the image, which occupies the entire surface of the poster, only the following: the brand name (Guerlain), a photograph of the bottle, and the name of the product (Habit Rouge). This Parisian perfume company is known for being one of the best French brands as well as one of the most expensive. Its products are definitely not within everyone's means and furthermore, the company does not deny itself the opportunity to reinforce this image of elitism. "Habit Rouge" obviously makes reference to the vest worn by men who go fox hunting, a rich man's sport. In addition, the image shows elegantly dressed men on beautiful horses with one man distinguishable by his red hunting jacket. Curiously enough, the photograph only shows the backs and the profiles of the hunters, as if to suggest that it is not necessary to see the face in order to recognize the man who wears "Habit Rouge." The cultural and historical references are evident for the French: class, tradition, etiquette, respect for conveniences. But even in this chic

environment, there are some men who are more chic than others, and who know how to make themselves truly distinguishable.

For its perfume “Coco,” Chanel essentially relies on the beauty of the model, Vanessa Paradis, and on the cultural references to fine art. Paradis, barely recognizable in the photograph, is a young singer and child prodigy discovered by Serge Gainsbourg and Lenny Kravitz. Wearing a long elegant black dress and perched on a pedestal, the young woman adopts the exact pose as the famous “Source d’Ingres,” on exhibit at the Musée d’Orsay. Ingres himself had drawn his inspiration from Greco-Roman mythology. In the Chanel advertisement, the Source’s vase is replaced by a giant bottle of “Coco.” As in the Ingres painting, the young woman seems frozen in a statue’s posture, contrasting sharply with the movement of the perfume pouring out of the bottle. Yet, whereas the water falls vertically in the Ingres painting, the Chanel perfume seems to follow the curves of the young model’s body. Thus, while the water of the Source meets the stream that will become a river, “Coco” becomes one with the body of the woman wearing the scent. Moreover, the woman is not really a woman, or maybe she is more than woman. There is, in effect, assimilation between the ancient goddess and the young singer whom fans have raised to star status and revered like a goddess. Moreover, the expressions on the face of Vanessa Paradis and Source d’Ingres are similar: a piercing look with an absence of a smile. Indirectly, the woman who buys “Coco” desires to resemble her idol, acquire a bit of her natural beauty and be put on a pedestal by the man she loves.

In the Chanel advertisement, the distinction between denotation (what the image shows) and connotation (what it suggests) is very great: without a cultural reference, it would be difficult for the public to interpret this advertisement. The universe of reference or the known public domain used in French advertising, is made up not only of masterpieces (Chanel advertisement) and social situations (Guerlain advertisement), but also of known stories, legends, familiar landscapes, monuments, and all that creates a cultural complicity between the advertiser and the public. Louise Mirande and Yannick Le Bourdonnec explain that “la publicité se doit d’être intelligente, profonde et authentique” (75).

Maurice Lévy, president of Publicis, maintains: “la publicité française a conservé ses spécificités: humour, sensibilité, sexe” (in Mirande and Le Bourdonnec 75). The amount of humor is extensive in television com-

mercials. For example, an advertisement for EDF (Électricité de France) parodies the film “Monsieur Hire” where a voyeur falls in love with a young woman who drives him to ruin. In the EDF advertisement, the voyeur writes to EDF in order to complain about the neon lights that disturb his nocturnal observations, while the young woman writes to EDF to report that the man opposite her does not seem to have electricity. The company’s good customer relations is stressed, as is evident that EDF undertakes the responsibility to read and to respond to all the letters sent to them. The epistolary style of the advertisement refers back to literary references that are quite present in the French consumer’s universe of reference.

Humor can lie also in the change of character roles. Thus, in a “Gourmet” advertisement, a cat gives advice to television viewers on how to “bien élever votre maîtresse.” Humor also can be found in the double meanings of certain words. For example, Slang Shoes’ slogan is “La fin des pompes funèbres.” The expression “pompe” means “shoe” in slang. Often, the association of two words creates a double meaning, making the consumer chuckle and remember the product more easily and more readily. Thé Éléphant, a brand of tea, speaks of “nouveau thé” (nouveau) and Mobilier de France, a furniture company, makes us discover the furniture of “Rome antique” (romantique).

Nevertheless, it is the use of more daring images that separates French advertising from American advertising. No doubt more nudity occurs in French advertising, whether it be in the press, on billboards, or on television. Abhijit Biswas, Janenn Olsen, and Valerie Carlet confirm:

Sex appeals were found to be used more frequently in French advertisements than in American advertisements. This finding is consistent with the perception that France is a more sexually liberated country than the United States and hence more receptive to the use of sex in advertising. (79)

In the EDF advertisement cited above, the young woman undresses under the voyeur’s gaze. Even more explicit is the advertisement for the perfume “Jaipur” by Boucheron. In fact, the poster depicts a young nude woman with her hands tied behind her back. Two bottles of perfume serve as handcuffs. The image has a strong sado-masochistic emphasis, and the sexual fantasies of the “Divin Marquis” readily come to mind.

This advertisement, which would have created shock waves across the entire United States, did not provoke even a single spark of agitation in the feminist movements (who could have easily become indignant that the woman was glorified as a sex object) nor any reaction in the consumer association (who could have tried to protect the public against the overly explicit excesses of this advertisement). Moreover, the perfume sold exceedingly well. It would therefore seem that women loved this daring proposition that goes well beyond the norms of social convention: a non-traditional perfume that provides access to an unknown world of sexual fantasy where the unexpected can happen. The effect of exoticism is reinforced by the exotic sound of "Jaipur."

It is not only women who are nude in French advertisements. In a series of commercials for the perfume "Masculin," Bourjois chose to depict a man, seen from the back as he comes out of the shower, totally nude. However, the use of sex in French advertising is not always so explicit. In the advertisement for "Gourmet" cited above, the cat who gives advice on the art of best educating a mistress informs us that it is necessary to make "sacrifices," such as to "aller dormir la nuit avec elle." The cat, with the voice of an adult male, thus finds itself in the satin sheets of a pretty young woman. The word "maîtresse" possesses a double meaning that surprises no one.

In an advertisement for the beer "Adelscott," the poster shows a vending machine for condoms with a popular neighborhood bistro in the background. One sees that "au Piston, 15 rue de Bagnolet à Paris, on y sert aussi de l'Adelscott." The cultural elements contained in this advertisement are numerous. Immediately, one notices that for the French, the condom is not a taboo subject. It is a part of everyday life, as evidenced by the condom vending machine that is integrated into the décor of the majority of Parisians bistros. Like beer, the condom should be part of bar scene dynamics. However, this advertisement is misleading because it could imply that drinking is as safe as protected sex.

Sexual inferences are numerous in advertisements for alcohol, as the temptation of the "Dive Bouteille" is as close as the temptation of the flesh. Gold beer has the following message: "C'est bon d'en avoir envie." "Suze," an alcoholic beverage, has its advertising spokespeople say: "J'ai osé. J'ai goûté. J'ai aimé." Nonetheless, sexual images are not limited to advertisements promoting alcohol. The fast-food restaurant chain "Free Time," no longer in existence, promoted its sandwich: "Plus c'est

long, plus c'est bon." Thus, following the lead of Biswas et al., it can be noted that "multinational corporations attempting to advertise in France should be aware of the greater use of emotional appeals, sex appeals, and humor in French advertising and adapt accordingly" (80).

Patterns of advertising appear to have come full circle since American advertisers are now turning to French advertisers for new and creative ideas. Witness, for example, the marketing of French cosmetic products, such as "Coco" and "Égoïste" (both Chanel products, the latter for men), and Lancôme skin care in the United States. In the "Coco" television commercial, Vanessa Paradis appears once again, this time as a tiny black bird in a huge cage, perched on a swing and whistling like a bird. Not a single human voice is heard. At the end of the commercial, a bottle of "Coco" is superimposed in the lower right-hand corner. In two different "Égoïste" commercials, women behind many different colored doors of beautiful, whitewashed buildings overlooking the Mediterranean Sea repeatedly and quickly open and close the doors while shouting "égoïste." English is not spoken in the commercial. At the end of the commercials, the "Égoïste" bottle is superimposed in the lower right-hand corner also. In Lancôme magazine advertisements, Isabelle Rossellini models the products with descriptions first in French and then in English. In both the Chanel and the Lancôme advertisements, the style of the French advertising campaigns combined with the use of European models enhances the product's enticing effect on the American consumer. Asking students to find other examples where French culture and advertising seems to have had an effect on American advertising once again provides an excellent method for an instructor to assess how her/his students perceive their own culture and the culture of the "other."

As stated above, American multinationals are beginning to recognize the need for cultural sensitivity. However, another interesting point to consider is the failure experienced previously by American advertisers in Quebec. American advertisers failed to market American products successfully because they had not taken into consideration the cultural differences between the United States and Quebec, one of North America's most unique marketplaces. They fell victim to the common mistake that the United States and Canada are culturally the same. Even though two countries may share some, or even many, cultural similarities, and even though the United States and Canada have had the world's largest (in financial gain and in the number of and variety of products traded) free

trade agreement since World War II, their cultural differences can neither be ignored nor quickly dismissed. Moreover, US advertisers need to avoid the generalization that Quebecers and the French (in France) are the same. American advertisers should follow the advice of Philip Harris and Robert Moran: “Culture knowledge provides insight into people, so both managers and other professionals benefit when we understand both culture general and specifics to facilitate intercultural communication, client relations, and productivity” (24).

Because of the problems that Americans had encountered with advertising in Quebec, the Association of Quebec Advertising Agencies (AQAA) at McGill University developed a video, *The Great American Advertiser*, in 1991 to help Americans promote their products.² As their main theme, they declare:

If you're spending important money advertising in Quebec, the last thing you need to hear is that your efforts are working at only 40% capacity. But according to a recent survey, that's exactly what could be happening—if you're not working with a Quebec-based agency!

The survey, conducted by Processus Marketing from March 1989 to February 1990, showed that advertisements produced and developed in Quebec had a favorability rating of 71–78% by Quebecers. This same survey also claimed that advertisements developed and produced outside of Quebec only received a favorability rating of 11–17% by Quebecers. Consequently, according to the video, if an American advertiser does not use a Quebec-based agency, the American advertiser could be selling her/himself about 60% short.

The Great American Advertiser is an excellent resource for the classroom. Promoting Quebec as a “hard-to-crack” marketplace, the video demonstrates how effective and arresting advertising that is in tune with the distinctive nature of Quebec's cultural references, tastes, and star system can generate highly measurable results. For example, with the assistance of a local Quebec-based agency, Dristan tabs increased sales by more than 20% in the first cold season. “Labatt Bleue,” a major brand

²This video may be obtained free of charge by contacting the Association of Quebec Advertising Agencies at: 1800 McGill College, Suite 2610, Montréal, Quebec H3A 3J6; tel.: 514-848-1732; fax: 514-843-6079.

of beer, more than quintupled its market share to go from two percent of the market share to the market leader. GEO automobiles became the market leader within two years. Pepsi became the leading brand of soda for seven consecutive years.

Even within Quebec, the importance of cultural sensitivity cannot be overestimated. The Quebec Automobile Insurance Authority redesigned its advertising campaign for seat belt use with the assistance of Quebec-based advertising agency. The results were dramatic: seat belt use increased from 67.7% to 93.5% to become the highest use of seat belts in all of North America. Finally, *The Great American Advertiser* proudly states that Quebec-based advertising agencies won five out of sixteen awards, including best of show, at the First Annual Cassies Awards. A Cassies Award can only be won if the advertisement generated significant results.

Working with locally-based advertising has obviously worked for American advertisers. In 1996, trade between the United States and Quebec was \$45 billion. Terence Nevett had an analogous finding to the research done by the Association of Quebec Advertising Agencies when investigating American and British advertising. He states:

Despite cultural similarities between the United States and the United Kingdom, there are substantial differences between American and British television advertising. British commercials tend to contain less information, employ a soft sell rather than a hard sell approach, and attempt to entertain the viewer. (61)

The Great American Advertiser video developed at McGill University and Nevett's research thus clearly demonstrate the need for continued guidance in understanding the nature of cultural differences in order to lead successful international advertising campaigns. Cross-cultural understanding will become even more essential as the number of free trade agreements, such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATT), increases.

In conclusion, French advertising has often been criticized for focusing too much on sex. We prefer to affirm that "l'esprit gaulois" appears throughout French advertising. Humor and sex join forces, while the absence of Puritanism makes the images more powerful and the words more explicit. Obviously, French advertising is not uniquely sex with a

sense of humor. The universe of reference for the French consumer is all of France: its regions, its history, its art, its literature, the character of the people who live there and their mentality. French advertising continually makes reference to French culture rather than just simply to the product itself. Maurice Lévy confirms this fact when, appearing to complain, he comments that: “le publicitairement correct est de ne pas parler des produits” (in Mirande and Le Bourdonnec 73). *The Great American Advertiser* video shows the danger of generalizing the cultural differences between not only the United States and Quebec but also between the Quebec and France. Each country’s culture is distinct and advertising agencies must value the uniqueness of each individual culture. Those who teach culture can rejoice over it. Advertisements are rich resources of linguistic and cultural material, and their success or failure exemplify the immediate need for cross-cultural understanding.

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