



Can visual familiarity influence attitudes towards brands? An exploratory study of advergame design and cross-cultural consumer behaviour

Vanissa Wanick^{a,*}, James Stallwood^a, Ashok Ranchhod^a, Gary Wills^b

^a Winchester School of Art (WSA), University of Southampton, Park Ave, Winchester, Hampshire, SO23 8DL, UK

^b Electronics and Computer Sciences (ECS), University of Southampton, University Rd, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between advergame design, advergame experience and consumer behaviour across cultures. For this purpose, a study was designed to compare and contrast behaviour patterns across Brazilian and British cultures. An advergame (*Colheita de Café* (CC)), featuring the Fairtrade mark was developed through a semiotics approach. Participants from both Brazil (N = 30) and the UK (N = 34) were invited to play the advergame and answer a questionnaire before and after gameplay. The results indicate that Brazilians felt more familiar with the visual elements incorporated by the advergame when compared to British consumers. Brazilians also had more favourable attitudes towards the brand, suggesting that visual familiarity could influence consumer behaviour. Contrary to our expectations, both Brazilian and British respondents had the same attitudes towards the advergame, showing that visual familiarity did not particularly influence the advergame experience. The main contribution of this paper is the suggestion that visual familiarity could influence consumer behaviour across cultures. We expect that our findings can be used in future research that examines cultural nuances in advergame design.

1. Introduction

In the engagement economy, getting the attention of the consumer is not enough. Today, there is a focus on strategies that could evoke consumer engagement and promote a lasting relationship between consumer and brands. Games can strengthen brand associations, creating conditions that support product placement [1] and product engagement through interactivity. Advergames are one possibility for building stronger links with consumers. Advergames, as a combination of the words “advertising” and “gaming”, are games designed around a persuasive message, usually sponsored by a brand [2]. However, the main challenge for advergame design is to promote meaningful experiences for consumers, since positive game experiences have a positive impact on brand attitudes [3]. Advertisers also need to look at the influence of interactive experiences in consumer engagement on a global scale as people across cultures often have different values and beliefs [4].

Research in advergames has looked at the influence of the characteristics of the brand and the game in terms of a consumer’s psychological aspects, such as leaning, emotions, intentions to buy and behavioural responses such as recommendations or sharing the message

with friends [5]. However, in a global world, the impact of advertising on consumer behaviour does not occur in a vacuum. Hence, the understanding of culture is crucial, since culture is a reflection of a composition of shared values, patterns and meanings within a group [6]. Therefore, the opportunities to study advergames in a cultural setting are huge.

People from different cultures perceive advertising messages in different ways [7]. Generally, studies that investigate the influence of culture in advertising effectiveness and consumer behaviour tend to focus on the role of cultural dimensions, mostly inspired by the work of Hofstede, Hall and Schwartz [8]. Hall’s dimensions of low vs. high context cultures in communications were used in advertising research [9]. For example, high-context cultures (e.g. Japanese, Arabic, Latin American, French and Italian) tend to value nationalist and patriotic brand imagery in advertising messages, if compared to low-context cultures (e.g. Swiss, German, Scandinavian and English) [9]. Thus, advertising design influences people’s perceptions about a brand, particularly if considering their cultural background. Since advergames are a form of advertising via games, the same principles might be applicable.

Latin America is living an intense transformation. As mentioned in a report from McKinsey Global Institute [10], countries like Brazil are

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: v.w.vieira@soton.ac.uk (V. Wanick), J.E.Stallwood@soton.ac.uk (J. Stallwood), a.ranchhod@soton.ac.uk (A. Ranchhod), gbw@ecs.soton.ac.uk (G. Wills).

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living in a recessionary environment, plagued by political crises that affects the way consumers decide to buy products and services. Yet, there is little research dedicated to a wider understanding of Latin American countries in this sector, particularly in Brazil, which is the biggest country in South America and one of the largest markets for digital games, commanding 35% of the worldwide gaming market [11].

Research in consumer behaviour across cultures has mainly focused on nuances between individualistic and collectivist cultures, particularly comparing Eastern and Western nations [12]. This opens an opportunity for other cross-cultural comparisons, such as studies involving Latin American countries like Brazil. When studies of advergames across cultures are undertaken, research shows that compared to Americans, Hispanic players have a more favourable attitude towards advergames that are more negatively viewed in the developed nations [13]. This indicates that if people from different cultures have different attitudes towards an advergame, it is possible that they are influenced by their cultural values and the design of the advergame.

Another aspect to be considered is the influence of overall gameplay experience on brand attitudes. Players who feel more immersed in advergames tend to have more positive attitudes towards the brand [3]. The level of interactivity of the advergame [14] and the integration between the game and the brand [13] also play an important part in brand attitudes. Thus, there is a connection between advergame experience and consumer behaviour, which would be influenced by the way the advergame was designed and developed.

Taking the above discussion into consideration, the research question that guided this study is:

- What is the connection between advergame design, advergame experience and consumer behaviour, when comparing Brazil and UK consumers?

In order to address this question, we analyse the current literature in cross-cultural games, cross-cultural advertising, cross-cultural Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) principles and the cultural dimensions from both Brazil and the UK. After this review, an advergame sponsoring *Fairtrade* coffee using specific design manipulations was developed followed by a questionnaire designed to measure the influence of advergame design on consumer behaviour. The main objectives of this study are to:

- Explore the connection between advergame design, advergame experience and consumer behaviour across cultures (in that case Brazil and the UK)
- Compare the attitudes from Brazilian and British consumers after gameplay
- Understand the main principles of advergame design that could be used to influence advergame experience and brand attitudes for Brazilian and British consumers

The next section addresses the research background and the main constructs that supported the theoretical framework proposed by this research.

2. Research background

In order to address our research question, we started by analysing three main areas of the literature: (1) advergame experience and consumer behaviour, looking at main determinants of the influence of gameplay in consumer behaviour, (2) cross-cultural advergames, including aspects that influence the design of games across cultures and comparative studies in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) that could give us main elements to advergame design, and (3) the cultural characteristics of Brazil and the UK, particularly focusing on cultural dimensions and country context that could enlighten our theoretical foundations and hypotheses.

2.1. Advergame experience and consumer behaviour

Since advergames promote interactive content through gaming experiences [15], it is crucial to understand the impact of positive or negative experiences in consumer brand attitudes. Usually, advergames offer an emotional connection between the game, the brand and the consumer [16], which could help to build brand awareness and brand associations [17]. Research indicates that brand familiarity [18,19], product involvement [15,17,20], flow [21,22], arousal [22,23], congruity [17,20,24,25], brand fit [26] and product-game congruity [27–29] influence advergame effectiveness while influencing consumer behaviour. Mostly, advergames can shape consumer behaviour through consumers' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. For example, the perception of familiarity with a brand inside advergames can determine a consumer's attitudes towards the brand [19]. Taking this into consideration, it is possible to categorise advergame effectiveness in two areas:

- (1) the actual advergame experience, promoted by the attitudes towards the advergame design; and
- (2) consumer behaviour, such as attitudes towards the brand and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) [30].

In the light of cultural influences in communications for marketing purposes, consumer behaviour can be strongly shaped by cultural values, such as symbols, rituals and heroes [31]. That is, since advergames communicate an advertising message, they should incorporate symbolic communications, (e.g. relevant language and visual aspects), heroes (e.g. ethnicity representations) and rituals (e.g. models of buying products, events, cultural identity by actions). However, to what extent is it possible to incorporate all these elements in advergames? Hernandez et al. [13] found that people from different cultures have different levels of advergame enjoyment based on the way the advergame is designed. Taking this into account, it is crucial to understand the elements could be manipulated in advergames in order to fit one's cultural values and cultural expectations.

2.2. Cross-cultural advergames, games and cross-cultural HCI

The field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) has given a lot of attention to cultural issues within this context, which could be represented by several strands such as internationalisation [32], globalisation [33], *culturalisation* [34] and localisation [35]. What these strands have in common is the concept that while designing interfaces and interactive systems for people from different cultures, it is necessary to adapt aspects of the system in order to suit the user's cultural background. This suggests and supports the idea that the concept of "one-size-fits-all" is not suitable in a global world. Hence, adaptations of content and symbolic meaning within interactive systems should be considered. The difference between these terms is the level of adaptation; *culturalisation* means different versions for systems, whereas internationalisation is about sharing a common system between cultures [34]. In other words, culture and HCI create different levels of adaptation. Most of the times, these adaptations occur in the representational dimensions, such as colours, icons and symbols; however the challenge is to understand which representations would be changed in order to suit one's culture [34]. Hence, representations still play a big part in the understanding of cultural nuances in interactive systems.

The understanding of one's cultural preferences is a key aspect when dealing with acceptance and trust of interactive systems. For example, Evers and Day [36] proposed that if a system is designed according to people's cultural preferences, it would trigger cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions towards this system, promoting its acceptance and satisfaction. Systems that promote cultural preferences also incorporate symbolic meaning, mediated by cultural values and symbolic associations [37]. Hence, there is a link between a cultural-oriented design and positive experiences.

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