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**Can Shocking Advertising Improve Charity Engagement?  
A Cross-cultural Study on Controversial Charity Advertisements**

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**La pub choc pour l'engagement caritatif - Une étude interculturelle sur les publicités  
controversées des organisations caritatives**

**Résumé**

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Afin de se démarquer de l'encombrement publicitaire, plusieurs spécialistes du marketing utilisent, actuellement, l'élément choc pour attirer l'attention de leur clientèle potentielle. Cette étude analyse les effets de la publicité controversée dans le secteur caritatif. Des études expérimentales ont été menées afin d'examiner les effets sur la participation aux activités caritatives dans cinq pays. Nos résultats révèlent que, bien que la publicité controversée semble être fructueuse en France, ses effets sont moins clairs dans les autres pays. Les conclusions donnent aux organisations caritatives des éléments sur lesquels des campagnes commerciales innovatrices peuvent être basées.

**Mots-clés :** engagement, publicité choquante, marketing caritatif, étude interculturelle

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**Can Shocking Advertising Improve Charity Engagement?**

**A Cross-cultural Study on Controversial Charity Advertisements**

**Abstract**

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To break through the advertising clutter, many marketers currently use the element of shock to attract attention of their potential customers. This study analyses consumer perceptions of controversial advertising in the charity sector. A series of experimental studies was conducted to investigate the effects of shocking ads on individuals' engagement for the cause in five different countries. Our results reveal important differences: whereas controversial advertising seems to be fruitful in France, the effects are less concluding in other countries. The findings give charities an insight into consumer perceptions that can be used as a basis to develop innovative marketing campaigns.

**Key words:** charity engagement, shocking advertising, charity marketing, cross-cultural study

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## **Introduction**

Over the past decade, research in the field of social marketing, i.e. anti-drug, anti-drinking, healthy movement campaigns, charitable causes, etc. has been growing (e.g. Parry et al., 2013; Chang & Lee, 2010; Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). For marketers, it is individual giving in particular that is of interest. Consequently, studying the effectiveness of different advertising strategies and subsequently developing effective campaigns for the various charity causes are of utmost importance for every marketer in the charitable sector and has become an important subject of study in academia (Chang & Lee, 2010).

To stand out from the advertising clutter, shocking or controversial advertising strategy has been developed to help companies and brands to attract their audience's attention (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). The effects of this technique have been studied within the field of social marketing; however, research lacks in the charity sector.

This research extends on previous work of cause-related applications (Chang & Lee, 2010) by exploring the perceptions of charity advertising across different nations, namely France, Slovakia, Chile, UK and Germany. Relevant matters are examined among a sample of respondents from each of these countries. Its main purpose is to address an important question of how to effectively market charitable organisations towards individuals.

## **1. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

In order to cut through the daily clutter of advertising, that causes a decline in terms of its effectiveness perceptions, many marketing communicators opt for an offensive strategy that would stand out, attract attention and be memorable (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). Different terminology is used when discussing this topic: shocking appeals (Parry et al., 2013; Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003), offensive advertising (Boddewyn, 1991; Phau & Prendergast, 2001), irritating advertisements (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985), or sexual imagery in advertising (Lass & Hart, 2004), ethics of advertising (Day, 1991). According to

Phau & Prendergast (2001), there are three ways of offending the audience: the *matter* – products that people find inappropriate to be publicly advertised, i.e. the unmentionables (Wilson & West, 1981), the *manner* – advertising execution that is considered vulgar, and the *media* – incongruence of advert type and media. Within this study, the *manner* will be discussed as it is the most controllable one by advertisers (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985).

Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda (2003) define shock advertising as one that deliberately violates social norms. They also provide a framework of offense elicitors, their description, examples and published reactions. Elicitors, for example, include sexual references, vulgarity, moral offensiveness, impropriety, disgusting images, religious taboos and profanity/obscenity. However, research on this topic and its implications is still needed (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). Existing research commonly addressed the perception of the advertising, rather than the consequences. Furthermore, most of the previous research focuses on the product itself (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985; Wilson & West, 1981), rather than the technique and messages used in the advertising (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). And that is why this study is not only analysing the perceptions but also the outcomes or influences on the donations and the charity in general; as well as focusing on the effectiveness of the shocking aspect of the advertising content or technique.

Shock is proven to facilitate message comprehension and retention (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003), as well as behavioural changes (Sutton, 1992), particularly if provided with a solution (Arthurs, 2009). Emotional imagery has also been found to trigger sadness and empathy and consequently to increase charity engagement (Small & Verrochi, 2009; Bennett & Kottasz, 2000). Thus, to fill the research gaps, it is hypothesised that a shocking execution of a charity ad will lead to a higher engagement with the charity and that the message of the shocking ad will be perceived as more relevant than that of an informative charity ad.

**H1:** The shocking advertisement will encourage a higher intention of charity engagement than the informative advertisement will.

**H2:** The message of the shocking advertisement will be perceived as more relevant than the message of the informational advertisement.

According to van Doorn & al. (2010, p. 254), “customer engagement behaviors go beyond transactions, and may be specifically defined as a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”. Thus, to encompass all the dimensions, not only behaviours such as donations and time contribution but also word-of-mouth – sharing and recommendations to friends – as well as learning more about the charity and becoming a part of it are measured in this study. In addition, to be able to place the respondents’ reactions to stimuli into a context of previous attitudes to charities, their general involvement, i.e. the extent to which the consumer perceives the focal object as important, meaningful and a central part of their life (O’Cass, 2002), is measured.

Considering no advertisement appears in a vacuum, a contextual prime, i.e. an article or other ads placed in its immediate environment forming the ad context, is believed to have a positive effect on the overall ad evaluation (Yi, 1993). Most research focuses on product features that can be primed; we will analyse the prime’s influence on the likelihood of charity engagement.

**H3:** Respondents who have been subjected to a priming article related to the cause (i.e., child poverty) will have a higher intention to engage with the charity than the respondents not subjected to this prime.

Furthermore, according to theoretical underpinnings of the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and prior studies on the effects of an ad message’s relevance (Wang, 2006), we expect the following mediation effect:

**H4:** The effect of the advertising type (i.e. shocking, informative) on the respondent’s intention of charity engagement is mediated by his attitude towards the ad.

Furthermore, Boddewyn (1991) suggested that there is a strong cultural specificity in the perceptions of offensive advertising, as the norms and beliefs of what is indeed offensive vary across cultures. It is also known that the consumer’s attitudes generated by the advertising

campaign often transfer into their attitudes towards the brand (Burke & Edell, 1989). Therefore, it is crucial that advertisers understand the possible consequences of running a campaign potentially damaging their brand image, which, in case of shocking advertising can happen, especially in a culture that is not accepting it (Chan & al., 2007).

Only two previous studies are known to have analysed charity advertising on an international level (Laufer & al., 2010; Nelson & al., 2006). Given this lack of cross-cultural research into the ad perception within the charity sector, the question now is whether it is in fact so in the case of charity appeals and particularly those with a shocking execution.

## **2. Methodology**

A series of experimental studies with between-subjects factorial designs were carried out to investigate the proposed hypotheses. In study 1, the advertising type (shocking versus informational) as well as the priming condition (prime versus no prime) were manipulated. This first study to research the impact of a controversial charity advertisement was carried out in a single-country context, in France. The second study followed, in which it was aimed at replicating the findings from a single country perspective by expanding the research to four additional countries, Chile, Germany, Slovakia, and UK.

An online questionnaire has been designed to collect the respondents' answers. Previous involvement and attitudes towards charities were measured. The experimental part consisted of the contextual prime (i.e. a press article describing child poverty issues), the description of a children charity, and the presentation of the ad. Common practice in survey and stimuli development suggests a creation of fictitious organisations and no use of existing advertising (Chang & Lee, 2010; Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchanda, 2003). Therefore, an imaginary charity organisation, *Save the Children in Poverty*, and two print ads were created especially for this survey. The messages in both stimuli concern child poverty while each of the versions was developed both visually and with a message consistent with its type of appeal – shocking

or informational (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was presented in local languages. It was initially constructed in English and then translated by master's students of translation, double and triple checked by two other bilingual individuals, also students of translation.

Existing scales were adapted to the context and used a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree". The participant's general involvement with charity was measured through a scale adapted from O'Cass (2002). Message relevance was measured through three responses adapted from Laczniak & Muehling (1993). The respondent's intention to engage with the charity was measured through five items adapted from Khaddam (2011) as well as three additional items adapted from Venable & colleagues (2005), thus including intentions beyond purchase (van Doorn et al., 2010). The used measurement instruments satisfied conventional criteria of reliability and quality.

As it is common in a large proportion of available research, due to its accessibility and homogeneity, a student sample was used for study 1. All respondents were approached by an identical email, suggesting taking part in an international survey, sent to students of a large French university. A total of 1205 completed responses were collected. The final sample consisted of 1091 respondents who were randomly assigned a version of the questionnaire. In terms of socio-demographics, the mean age of the sample was 22.42. The sample was predominantly feminine with 70.5% of women and 29.5% of men.

The study 2 sample was taken from 4 different countries: United Kingdom, Slovakia, Chile and Germany. These countries represent significantly different cultures, different values and traditions, and they vary in their individualism score (Hofstede, 2001) as well as in ranking in the World Giving Index: the UK placed 6<sup>th</sup>, Germany 22<sup>nd</sup>, Chile 35<sup>th</sup>, France 77<sup>th</sup> and Slovakia 101<sup>st</sup> (CAF, 2013). The final sample for Slovak Republic counted 265 respondents whose mean age was 31.81. 65.3% of the sample were women, and 34.7% were men. The final Chilean sample consisted of 135 respondents whose mean age was 28.71. The gender counted 51.9% male respondents and 48.1% female respondents. The final German sample consisted of 110



respondents whose mean age was 25.37. 70% of the respondents were female, 30% were male. Lastly, the final UK sample counted 92 respondents whose mean age was 28.33. The sample was predominantly feminine (73.9%).

### 3. Main Results

Multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA) were carried out to test hypotheses 1, 2 and 3. The proposed dependent variables were charity engagement and message relevance; whereas the respondent's general involvement with charity was included as a covariate to control for unintended effects. Table 1 shows the results for the 5 considered countries.

Factor	DV		FR (n=1091)	CL (n=135)	DE (n=110)	SK (n=265)	UK (n=92)
Ad Type	Charity	F	<b>17.03***</b>	.23	.61	.31	2.01
	engagement	$\eta^2$	.015	.002	.006	.001	.023
		M	M <sub>s</sub> =2.71 M <sub>i</sub> =2.42	M <sub>s</sub> =2.97 M <sub>i</sub> =3.10	M <sub>s</sub> =2.15 M <sub>i</sub> =2.32	M <sub>s</sub> =2.65 M <sub>i</sub> =2.57	M <sub>s</sub> =2.40 M <sub>i</sub> =2.81
Message	relevance	F	<b>11.81**</b>	.84	.57	.26	<b>2.79<sup>+</sup></b>
		$\eta^2$	.011	.006	.005	.001	.031
		M	M <sub>s</sub> =4.72 M <sub>i</sub> =4.40	M <sub>s</sub> =4.39 M <sub>i</sub> =4.68	M <sub>s</sub> =4.29 M <sub>i</sub> =4.06	M <sub>s</sub> =4.24 M <sub>i</sub> =4.34	M <sub>s</sub> =4.02 M <sub>i</sub> =4.58
Prime	Charity	F	1.29	.09	2.33	2.64	1.41
	engagement	$\eta^2$	.001	.001	.022	.010	.016
		M	M <sub>p</sub> =2.60 M <sub>np</sub> =2.52	M <sub>p</sub> =3.07 M <sub>np</sub> =2.99	M <sub>p</sub> =2.06 M <sub>np</sub> =2.40	M <sub>p</sub> =2.49 M <sub>np</sub> =2.73	M <sub>p</sub> =2.78 M <sub>np</sub> =2.44
		F	1.92	2.32	.096	.308	<b>3.26<sup>+</sup></b>

	Message	$\eta^2$	.002	.018	.001	.001	.036
	relevance	M	$M_p=4.63$	$M_p=4.78$	$M_p=4.22$	$M_p=4.23$	$M_p=4.60$
			$M_{np}=4.49$	$M_{np}=4.30$	$M_{np}=4.12$	$M_{np}=4.34$	$M_{np}=4.00$
COV:	Charity	F	<b>167.47***</b>	<b>26.18***</b>	<b>13.39***</b>	<b>25.95***</b>	<b>5.31*</b>
Charity	engagement	$\eta^2$	.134	.168	.113	.091	.058
involvement	Message	F	<b>97.37***</b>	<b>13.48***</b>	<b>6.48*</b>	<b>33.19***</b>	<b>5.57*</b>
	relevance	$\eta^2$	.082	.094	.058	.113	.060

Adjusted mean values.

Abbreviations: DV = dependent variable; M = mean;  $M_s$  = mean *shock*;  $M_i$  = mean *info*;  $M_p$  = mean *prime*;

$M_{np}$  = mean *no prime*;  $\eta^2$ =partial eta squared; FR = France; CL = Chile; DE = Germany; SK = Slovakia; UK

= United Kingdom. Significance levels: +  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (significant effects are bold, non-significant effects in italics)

**Table 1: MANCOVA results for study 1 (France) and replication studies**

As supposed in hypothesis 1, the type of the advertisement (i.e. shocking versus informative) has a significant impact on charity engagement ( $F = 17.03***$ ;  $\eta^2 = .015$ ) in the expected direction ( $M_{shock} = 2.71$ ;  $SE = .05$ ;  $M_{info} = 2.42$ ;  $SE = .05$ ) in our initial study 1 (France). Furthermore, as expected in hypothesis 2, the message of the shocking ad is also perceived to be more relevant than the informative one ( $F = 11.81**$ ;  $\eta^2 = .011$ ;  $M_{shock} = 4.72$ ;  $SE = .07$ ;  $M_{info} = 4.40$ ;  $SE = .07$ ). Hypothesis 3 supposed that a cause-related prime would influence the subjects' intention to engage with the charity. However, the analysis does not provide support for this expected effect ( $F = 1.29$ ;  $\eta^2 = .001$ ). The two-way interaction effect is not significant. Yet, the results show highly significant effects of the charity involvement control variable. As in study 1, MANCOVAs were conducted in study 2 to test the formulated hypotheses including charity engagement and message relevance as dependent variables and general charity involvement as a proposed control variable. The inclusion of the nationality of the

respondents as a factor in the analysis resulted in a quasi-experimental design of 2 (ad type: shock, info) by 2 (prime: yes, no) by 4 (country: Chile, Germany, Slovakia, UK). The results point at two significant main effects. Firstly, the priming condition significantly, but weakly, influences the relevance of the message ( $F = 3.51^+$ ;  $\eta^2 = .006$ ), what provides some support for the relevance of an activation of participants' charity engagement through a priming condition: the message is perceived to be more relevant by the primed subjects than by the non-primed ones ( $M_{\text{prime}} = 4.43$ ;  $M_{\text{no\_prime}} = 4.16$ ). Furthermore, the nationality has a significant effect on the respondents' intention to engage with the charity ( $F = 5.72^{**}$ ;  $\eta^2 = .029$ ). This effect confirms the initial motivation to include the selected four countries as they varied in terms of the World Giving Index. All potential interaction effects were non-significant. However, the fact that the ad type does not significantly affect charity engagement or message relevance, but that the direction of the effect seems to be ambivalent, is puzzling. Thus, it was decided to split the international sample of study 2 to analyse the effects country-by-country using multiple MANCOVAs, for which the results are depicted in Table 1.

To test for mediation in hypothesis 4, we applied the procedure proposed by Preacher & Hayes (2008) using the recently published macro PROCESS for IBM SPSS Statistics (Hayes, 2013). The approach uses ordinary least squares (OLS) regression and includes bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals to test for the indirect effect. From the simple mediation analysis conducted using OLS path analysis, the advertisement type directly and indirectly influences the charity engagement intention through its effect on message relevance. The results show that respondents who were exposed to the informative ad, as compared to the shocking one, perceived the message to be less relevant ( $a = -.329$ ), and participants who evaluated the ad to be more relevant, have a higher intention to engage in the cause ( $b = .417$ ). A bias-corrected 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect ( $ab = -.137$ ) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples was entirely below zero ( $-.218$  to  $-.063$ ). The results provide further support for the

direct effect of the advertisement type on charity engagement intention independent of its effect on message relevance ( $c' = -.157$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

As for the mediation analysis in study 1, we used the OLS path analysis on the international samples to investigate the indirect effect of the ad manipulations on charity engagement through message relevance. The advertisement type had a significant effect only on message relevance and only in the UK sample. However, the conducted mediation analysis provides no support for the indirect effect ( $ab = .283$ ) as the interval includes a zero ( $-.023$  to  $.595$ ).

#### **4. Discussion**

Looking at the findings from the international sample, in congruence with many other cross-cultural studies (e.g. Chan & al., 2007; Laufer & al., 2010; Nelson & al., 2006), this research has confirmed that advertising perceptions differ across borders. Yet, although the majority of the results in the replication studies were not significant, the direction of the effect is not clear. Whereas the French participants consider the shocking ad more relevant and display a higher intention to engage with the charity as compared to the informative ad - proving the effectiveness of shock advertising in Study 1, the respondents in the UK sample perceive the informative ad as being more relevant, thus stimulating higher charity engagement.

In regards to the contextual priming effects, we found no empirical evidence that the presence of the priming article would improve, or lower, charity engagement of the respondents, which is contrary to Yi's (1993) theory that suggested its positive impact on ad evaluation. This reverse effect (or at least not a positive one) of a contextual priming article might be explained by Small & Verrochi's (2009) theory that reading up on a charity or the necessity to act brings the brain into a cognitive mode and disrupts the audience's emotional state, in which they would be more likely to get involved.

As it was not the main focus of the present study, the general charity involvement of the respondents was included as a covariate. Its highly significant effects on the results showed that

the more the respondents were previously involved with charities, the more likely they were to engage in charitable actions following the exposure to the stimuli. This finding can be a significant factor when segmenting the market as it highlights effectiveness of targeting current and previous donors and volunteers.

## **Conclusion**

The two present studies compared the effects of shocking charity advertising on French, Slovak, Chilean, German, and British consumers. The first study focused on the perceptions of shocking advertising with the aim of proving whether it is effective in the charity sector. We came to the conclusion that in France, shocking execution of charity advertising is recommended for marketers. The second study focused on the cultural differences when it comes to perceptions of this type of charity advertising. The results of this study were mixed; however, as predicted, it provided evidence that different cultures react differently when exposed to a controversial charity advertisement.

The research limitations concern the samples used: although often used in research, neither a purely student sample in study 1, nor a convenience, yet more diverse, sample in the replication studies, is representative of the whole population or a national culture. Moreover, the dominance of female respondents could have biased the results. Yet, women are globally found to be more participative in giving actions (CAF, 2013) and to respond more positively to charity advertising (Brunel & Nelson, 2000) which was confirmed by the present study.

In conclusion, when using shocking material in charity advertising, marketers have to be careful and should get to know the culture's societal norms in order to understand how far they can stretch the line for this particular type of controversial advertising. The current study also considerably contributed to the growing body of literature on charity advertising and shocking advertising on an intercultural level.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Stimuli for the advertisement

 <p><b>SAVE THE CHILDREN IN POVERTY</b></p> <p>THERE ARE NO SILVER SPOONS FOR CHILDREN BORN INTO POVERTY</p> <p><b>HELP A CHILD. Call 0800 123 123</b></p>	 <p><b>SAVE THE CHILDREN IN POVERTY</b></p> <p>Out of about 2 billion children worldwide, every second child lives in poverty.</p> <p><b>HELP A CHILD. Call 0800 123 123</b></p>
<p><b>Shocking advertisement</b></p>	<p><b>Informational advertisement</b></p>