



# Humor and cultural values in print advertising: a cross-cultural study

Humor and  
cultural values

Leonidas Hatzithomas, Yorgos Zotos and Christina Boutsouki  
*School of Economics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The present study aims to discuss the role of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism, on the use of various humor types in print advertising, across culturally diverse countries.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A sample of 12,351 ads (3,828 humorous) from the largest circulated UK and Greek magazines was content-analyzed in light of Speck's humorous message taxonomy, emphasizing humor types and intentional relatedness.

**Findings** – The results indicate that cultural diversity is reflected in the types of humorous devices that tend to be used in the UK and Greece. British advertisements incorporate not only sentimental but also disparaging humor types such as sentimental humor and full comedy, providing a great deal of pure entertainment. On the contrary, Greek print ads emphasize cognitive humorous appeals, in an attempt to provide credible information to the uncertainty-avoiding Greek audience.

**Practical implications** – The findings of this study highlight some key aspects of UK and Greek print advertising that can be extended in other homogeneous cultures. In individualistic countries with low uncertainty avoidance, it seems that consumers prefer humor-dominant messages. On the contrary, in collectivistic countries with high uncertainty-aversion attitudes, humor can be used as a Trojan horse to convey the required information to the target group.

**Originality/value** – The present study points out how advertisers' intentions to entertain or to inform the target audience are expressed in the use of various humor types in advertising, underlining, also, the effect of cultural values on these communication decisions.

**Keywords** Humour, National cultures, Advertising, United Kingdom, Greece

**Paper type** Research paper

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## 1. Introduction

Humor is one of the most commonly used emotional appeals in global advertising (Koudelova and Whitelock, 2001; Hanna *et al.*, 1994; Biswas *et al.*, 1992), but only a few descriptive studies have examined the ways in which it varies across national cultures (Toncar, 2001; Alden *et al.*, 1993; Biswas *et al.*, 1992; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). Most of these studies have been concerned mainly with TV advertising, although the majority of the experiments in the field of humorous advertising have analyzed print ad executions. Moreover, they have focused on the operational use of humorous ads, employing mainly Kelly and Solomon's technique typology (pun, understatement, joke, ludicrous, satire and irony) (1975) (Koudelova and Whitelock, 2001; Toncar, 2001; Alden and Martin, 1995; Biswas *et al.*, 1992; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). However, this typology does not provide a stable basis for strategy making, since it does not recognize some individual motivations for the creation and interpretation of humor (in particular, sentimental motives) (Speck, 1987, p. 199). Moreover, it cannot reveal how advertisers use humorous appeals to accomplish their communication objectives in culturally diverse countries.

Thus, it is the objective of the present study to fill this research gap by investigating the use of humor in international print advertising, shedding light not only on customers' motivations, but also on advertisers' communication intentions.

At the customer level, one stream of research in the advertising field (Lee and Lim, 2008; Beard, 2008; Shabbir and Thwaites, 2007; Spotts *et al.*, 1997; Speck, 1991) has



stressed the role of cognitive, affective and interpersonal processes on the generation and interpretation of humor. Each process sheds light on different aspects of individual motivations that lead to the creation of humor and only together they are able to provide a total explanation for the use of it (Lynch, 2002). The combination of the three processes leads to five types of humor (comic wit, sentimental humor, satire, sentimental comedy and full comedy), providing a more conceptual starting point for the examination of humor in a cross-cultural context (Speck, 1991). However, to date the usage of various humor types in the advertisements of culturally diverse countries has not been explored. The present study, based on the content analysis of 7,337 UK and 5,014 Greek print ads, attempts to provide a comparative analysis on the use of the five humor types in UK and Greek print advertising illustrations.

The study also focuses on intentional relatedness and identifies the specific humor types that are used by advertisers either to entertain (humor-dominant ads) or to inform the target audience (information-dominant ads) or to emphasize brand image (image-dominant ads). Intentional relatedness refers to the primary advertisers' intentions for the humorous, verbal or visual content of ads (Speck, 1991), and it can provide insights into the creative strategies used in different cultures. The present paper examines how the differences in cultural values (uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism) could affect both customers' motivations and advertisers' objectives in the two countries, using Hofstede's theory of international cultures. In that manner, it introduces new directions in the design of humorous ads with respect to cultural values and adds to the emerging discussion for the role of visual and verbal cues of advertisements in the success of communication campaigns (Decrop, 2007; Tavassoli and Lee, 2003; Babin and Burns, 1997; Abernethy and Franke, 1996).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 *Humor in international advertising*

Contemporary international market places bring about the need for global campaigns and cross-cultural approaches. However, a few studies appear to have analyzed the global use of humorous advertising (Alden *et al.*, 1993) (Table I). Content analysis seems to be the most frequently employed methodology in these research papers (Koudelova and Whitelock, 2001; Toncar, 2001; Hanna *et al.*, 1994; Alden *et al.*, 1993; Alden and Martin, 1995; McCullough and Taylor, 1993; Biswas *et al.*, 1992; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989), while experimental and quasi experimental designs (Lee and Lim, 2008; Nevo *et al.*, 2001; De Pelsmacker and Geuens, 1998; Unger, 1995) have been rarely used.

Kelly and Solomon's typology (pun, understatement, joke, ludicrous, satire and irony) (1975) has been employed as the main methodological instrument in descriptive studies (Table I). A synthesis of findings across papers provides evidence on the global pervasiveness of ludicrousness (Toncar, 2001; Alden and Martin, 1995; Alden *et al.*, 1993; Hanna *et al.*, 1994; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). However, some exceptions do exist. For instance, Koudelova and Whitelock (2001) indicated the prevalence of jokes in UK and Czech TV advertising, while Biswas *et al.* (1992) found high percentages of puns in USA and of jokes in France. This lack of consensus may be due to the operational nature of Kelly and Solomon's typology (1975) that recognizes neither the individual motivations in humor nor the mechanisms that interpret these motivations.

Psychology research indicated three groups of mechanisms, namely cognitive, affective and interpersonal that determine the humor processing and humor appreciation (Beard, 2008; Shabbir and Thwaites, 2007; Lynch, 2002; Cho, 1995;

Authors and date	Type of study and sample	Countries	Main findings
<i>Humorous message taxonomy (Speck, 1991)</i>			
Lee and Lim (2008) <sup>a</sup>	Experiment in TV commercials 222 Chinese MBA students	China	They indicated that the uncertainty avoidance and the individualism influence the effectiveness of humorous TV commercials
<i>Kelly and Solomon's typology (1975)</i>			
Koudelova and Whitelock (2001)	Content analysis 102 Czech and 210 UK TV commercials	UK and Czech Republic	Humor was used more in the UK (25.8 percent) than in the Czech TV ads (8.9 percent) Joke was the most popular humor type in both countries
Toncar (2001)	Content analysis of 848 US and 282 UK TV commercials	USA and UK	Humor was used more in the UK (33 percent) than in the US commercials (28 percent) Ludicrousness was the most popular humor type in both countries (37 percent in the UK and 45 percent in the USA)
Hanna <i>et al.</i> (1994)	Survey on 29 Japanese-owned agencies Content analysis of 259 Japanese TV ads	Comparisons with other countries	28 percent of the TV ads incorporated humor Ludicrousness was the most popular humor type (77 percent)
Alden and Martin (1995)	Content analysis of 472 Japanese TV ads	Comparisons with other countries	Incongruities and ludicrousness were the most frequently used humorous devices in Japanese TV commercials
McCullough and Taylor (1993)	Content analysis of 270 American, 203 British and 192 German print ads (trade magazines)	USA, UK and Germany	26 percent of UK ads, 21 percent of US ads and 23 percent of German ads were used humor Pun was the most popular humor type
Biswas <i>et al.</i> (1992)	Content analysis of 279 US and 259 French print ads	USA and France	Humor was used more in French (22.78 percent) than in the US print ads (10.75 percent)
Weinberger and Spotts (1989)	Survey on US and UK ad agency executives Content analysis of 450 US and 247 UK TV commercials	USA and UK	Humor was used more in the UK (36 percent) than in the US commercials (24 percent) Ludicrousness was the most popular humor type in both countries (59.1 percent in the UK and 66.4 percent in the USA)
<i>Raskin's script semantic theory (1985)</i>			
Alden and Martin (1995)	Content analysis of 472 Japanese TV ads	Comparisons with other countries	Incongruities and ludicrousness were the most frequently used humorous devices in Japanese TV commercials
Alden <i>et al.</i> (1993)	Content analysis of 497 US ads, 520 Korean ads, 244 German ads and 351 ads from Thailand They used TV commercials.	USA, Germany, South Korean, and Thailand	The incongruity process is a universal humorous language
<i>Other studies for humorous intent</i>			
Lin (1993)	Content analysis of 464 US and 863 Japanese TV commercials	USA and Japan	Humor was used more in US than in the Japanese TV commercials

(continued)

**Table I.**  
Cross-cultural studies for the use of humor types in advertising

Authors and date	Type of study and sample	Countries	Main findings
Unger (1995)	Quantitative study of 44 Finnish and 68 US students 10 TV commercials	USA and Finland	They indicated that their affect-based model can be applied across cultures. There are no implications for humor types
Nevo <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Survey regarding verbal communication 119 Singaporean students, 365 US and 88 Israeli students	USA and Singapore	Singaporeans used more conservative humor
De Pelsmacker and Geuens (1998)	Quantitative study of 100 Polish students and 115 Belgian students. They focused on print advertising	Poland and Belgium	Humor was more favorable to Polish students than to Belgians students
<i>Theoretical approaches</i> Six (2005)	Literature review. She focused on TV commercials	USA and Russia	US advertisers use more aggressive humorous devices (such as gag humor) compared to their Russian counterparts

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>Although, it is not a cross-cultural study *per se*, it examines the issues of uncertainty avoidance and individualism, issues that are also discussed at the present study

Table I.

McGhee, 1974). Despite attempts to provide a general theory of humor (Veatch, 1998; Morreall, 1983; Feinberg, 1978), it seems that it is the parallel use of the three humor conceptions that provides a more comprehensive interpretation of this individual phenomenon (Gulas and Weinberger, 2006; Lynch, 2002). However, advertising researchers have concentrated mainly on cognitive (Alden and Martin, 1995; Alden and Hoyer, 1993; Alden *et al.*, 1993) and affective mechanisms (Lee and Lim, 2008). Only McCullough and Taylor (1993) have tried to account for the three mechanisms that generate humor in an cross-cultural advertising context, based on Freud's (1905) theory of wit (nonsense, sexual and aggressive humor). They did not find statistically significant differences by type of humor among different cultures due to the small sample size (the USA, the UK and Germany).

### 2.2 Speck's humorous message taxonomy

Speck's (1991, 1987) humorous message taxonomy is the only humor typology that links cognitive, affective and interpersonal mechanisms with advertisers' communication intentions. To date, there are only five research papers that employ elements of this taxonomy confined in the USA (Beard, 2008; Spotts *et al.*, 1997; Speck, 1991), the UK (Shabbir and Thwaites, 2007) and in China (Lee and Lim, 2008). Only two studies; Speck (1991) and Spotts *et al.* (1997) have employed the complete form of typology, incorporating humor types and intentional relatedness, to content analyze, respectively, TV commercials and print ads in the USA.

Speck suggested that three underlying processes (incongruity – resolution, arousal – safety and humorous disparagement) lead to humorous appreciation. In *incongruity resolution process* (cognitive mechanism), some type of schema incongruity is perceived, since the advertising content “differs from the generally expected beliefs,

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attitudes and/or behaviours” (Alden *et al.*, 2000). Then some advertising cues provide an explanation on the stimulus-incongruity and lead to the appreciation of humor. In the *arousal-safety process* (affective mechanism) “laughter occurs when a person has experienced heightened arousal but at the same time (or soon after the arousal) evaluates the stimulus as safe or inconsequential” (Rothbart, 1973, p. 249). Finally, *humorous disparagement* is an interpersonal mechanism for creating humorous expressions, where humor is a disguised aggression and serves as a reward for the joke-teller.

The combination of the three aforementioned humor processes leads to five types of humor, namely: *comic wit*, *sentimental humor*, *satire*, *sentimental comedy*, and *full comedy*. *Comic wit*, involving only the incongruity resolution process, is a mind-game that leads to a humorous interpretation. *Sentimental humor* is based only on the arousal-safety process and constitutes an emotional way to engender humor. *Satire* combines incongruity resolution and humorous disparagement processes. The audience laughs at a “victim” in an indirect way (McGhee, 1974). *Sentimental comedy* is the product of cooperation between incongruity resolution and the arousal safety processes. Hence, it provides cognitive pleasure such as comic wit and affective pleasure similarly to sentimental humor. *Full comedy* is based on the combination of all three humor processes (Beard, 2008; Speck, 1991). It is the most complex type of humor and thus the riskiest communication strategy.

Speck (1987) also analyzed the relationship between the humor elements and the message elements and yielded a structure that comprises of three types of relatedness in an ad. The present study concentrates on *intentional relatedness* that refers to the primary intention of the source (advertisers) and divides humorous advertisements into humor-dominant, information-dominant and image-dominant. Humor-dominant ads have a message-within-humor structure. The main purpose of these creative executions is to entertain the target audience through humorous stories and playful copy. Humor is the message and there is no message without humor. Information-dominant humorous ads intend to inform rather than to amuse consumers and use humor as an attention-getting device. Finally, image-dominant ads illustrate humorously either the advertised products or the users of the products in order to trigger a pleasant visual imagery. In this case, humor just enriches the advertising experience.

### 2.3 Cultural dimensions and humor in advertising

A few frameworks have been developed to outline cultural dimensions that interpret differences in diverse cultural environments (De Mooij, 1998). From a marketing and advertising perspective, the most useful models are Hofstede’s cultural values (1984), Hall’s high/low-context theory (1984), Schwartz’s theory (1992), Inglehart *et al.*’s world values survey (2000) and House *et al.*’s GLOBE project (2004). Perhaps, the most prominent one is Hofstede’s study (Kirkman *et al.*, 2006) that identifies five national cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity and long- vs short-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001). This classification originally developed as an interpretation of work-related behaviors and values in IBM Corporation. It was soon adopted and validated in the field of advertising by many researchers (Chan *et al.*, 2007; Fam and Grohs, 2007; Moon and Chan, 2005; Lepkowska-White *et al.*, 2003; De Mooij, 1998; Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). Two studies in particular, suggest that Hofstede’s work can be the basis for investigating the use of humor in ads (Lee and Lim, 2008; De Mooij, 1998).

The present study focuses on two out of the five cultural dimensions, namely uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism, since they seem to affect the use and effectiveness of humor in advertising (Lee and Lim, 2008; De Mooij, 1998). Uncertainty avoidance is “the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and try to avoid these situations” (De Mooij, 1998, p. 83). Individualism can be defined as “people looking after themselves and their immediate family only” while collectivism as “people belonging to in-groups that look after them in exchange for loyalty” (De Mooij, 1998, p. 75).

The UK and Greece are used as reference countries in this study, since they provide two culturally diverse environments based on Hofstede’s Framework (2001). The UK and Greece indicate significant differences with respect to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, especially in terms of uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism. In particular, the UK seems to be a very individualistic society (89 – the highest score in the EU) compared to Greece (35 – the fourth lowest score in the EU). At the same time, the UK is a society with extremely low uncertainty avoidance (35, the fourth lowest score in the EU) vis-à-vis Greece that represents the highest score in the EU (112) (Hofstede, 2001).

The UK is an economically developed member of the EU with a distinct advertising style. Direct and subtle communication, soft-sell techniques, trend-setting images, embellished with humorous puns and understatements have a long tradition in the UK (De Mooij, 1998; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). British advertisements reflect individualistic values and are often directed at particular social classes, preserving social divisions (Nevett, 1992; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). About 10 percent of advertising budgets is allocated to magazines, since practitioners prefer online and TV (national) advertising to print ad executions (Advertising Association, 2008). Besides, the increased ratio of national to local commercials creates a wide audience for the British ads (Nevett, 1992). Hence, UK advertisers aim at designing witty ads with high entertainment value, which have been described as the least intrusive ads in the world (Bernstein, 1986). The UK shares cultural meanings with other English-speaking countries such as the USA, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and South Africa (white sample) (Ashkanasy *et al.*, 2002).

Greece, a less economically developed member of the EU, has undergone tremendous change over the past two decades and is going through a transition period in which the Greek economy is trying to harmonize with the rest of the EU (Lysonski *et al.*, 2004). It seems that this transition is expressed in the advertising content, since globalized modern/western symbols are integrated with traditional Greek communication approaches (Zotos and Lysonski, 1994). Magazines are the primary media selection for Greek advertisers, since more than €1 billion (40 percent) is spent on print advertising on an annual basis (Media Services, 2009). Greece shares some cultural similarities with Southern Italy (Naples, Sicily and South Sardinia) (Guido, 1992), and especially with Greek speaking Cyprus (Georgas *et al.*, 2001).

### 3. Hypotheses development

#### 3.1 *Humor types*

Only a few studies for the usage of humor types (as defined by Speck) in advertising have been conducted (Spotts *et al.*, 1997; Speck, 1991). However, the literature related with the presence of humor mechanisms in culturally diverse countries (Lee and Lim, 2008; De Mooij, 1998; McCullough and Taylor, 1993; Hillebrand, 1992) could provide the

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basis for formulation of research hypotheses, regarding the use of humor types in UK and Greek magazine ads. Each humor mechanism accumulates some advantages, as well as some disadvantages that can either enhance or diminish the effectiveness of advertisements (Speck, 1987). It seems that the humorous disparagement process (interpersonal mechanism) is the riskiest humor form as it may irritate and annoy consumers, when it crosses the line from tolerance to offensiveness (Meyer, 2000). If the target audience does not share the opinion being communicated, it may identify with the victimized advertising character and consider the ad insulting or offensive (Stern, 1996; Cho, 1995; McGhee and Duffey, 1983; Zillmann and Stocking, 1976). Offensive humor is considered funnier in low uncertainty avoidance than in high uncertainty avoidance cultures (Kalliny *et al.*, 2007). Also, collectivists are less favorable to offensive advertisements than individualists (Chan *et al.*, 2007).

The arousal safety process (affective mechanism) may be perceived as offensive by the advertising audience (Beard, 2008). It is possible that the initial discomforting stimulus causes strong negative emotional responses such as irritation, fear and anger, inhibiting the safe judgment and humor appreciation (Schützwohl and Borgstedt, 2005; Speck, 1991). Collectivistic cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance react consistently more favorably to humorous advertisements, when the arousal safety process uses a safe judgment than when it does not. When there is no safe judgment, they have difficulty in understanding the joke and they are more critical about these ads compared to individualist consumers from low uncertainty avoidance cultures (Lee and Lim, 2008).

The incongruity resolution process (cognitive mechanism) is the simplest humor process and the best to clarify a brand's positioning (Shelley, 2003; Meyer, 2000). According to Freud (1905), comic wit, which is based only on the incongruity resolution process, seems to have a lower emotional impact than sexual (involves arousal safety process) and aggressive humor (requires the humorous disparagement process), decreasing negative emotional reactions.

Thus, a risk aversion strategy in advertising would favor the incongruity resolution process to the other two humor processes, since it seems a more neutral and less offensive way to create jokes. For instance, a risk-avoiding attitude in Germany directs advertisers to prefer incongruity and surprise to other more offensive humor processes (Hillebrand, 1992). In Russia (a collectivistic society with high uncertainty avoidance), gag humor, a type of farce, is an unpopular humor device, since Russian consumers cannot understand it, whereas, in the USA, advertisements that incorporate gags are considered extremely hilarious (Six, 2005). Furthermore, in Japan, a collectivistic, high uncertainty-avoiding culture, advertisers use offensive humorous appeals less frequently compared with their US counterparts (Lin, 1993).

Thus, it is suggested that UK advertisers use those types of humor that involve humorous disparagement and arousal-safety processes (sentimental humor, satire, sentimental comedy and full comedy) more frequently than their Greek counterparts. On the contrary, Greek advertisers avoid using the arousal safety and humorous disparagement processes, since they are riskier than the incongruity resolution process. It is expected that Greek advertisers will make frequent use of comic wit, as this type of humor involves only the incongruity resolution process.

*H1a.* Comic wit is more likely to be used in Greek than in UK humorous print advertisements.

*H1b.* Sentimental humor, satire, sentimental comedy and full comedy are more likely to be used in UK than in Greek humorous print advertisements.

Despite the diversity in cultural environments, several multinational advertising agencies such as BBDO, FCB and Saatchi & Saatchi favor standardized advertising campaigns, and propose that some creative strategies could be transferred across borders (Agrawal, 1995). With respect to humorous advertising, De Mooij (1998), Alden and Martin (1995) and Alden *et al.* (1993) suggested that the incongruity resolution process can travel in different cultural environments. Indeed, a high percentage of humorous ads in the USA (88 percent), Germany (92 percent), Thailand (82 percent), South Korea (57 percent) and Japan (60 percent) emphasize humorous incongruent scripts (Alden and Martin, 1995; Alden *et al.*, 1993; Speck, 1991).

Incongruity resolution seems to be a culture-free, all-pervasive technique for the generation of humor, since it can be recognized in the behavior of American Indians, of tribes people in Africa and of villagers in India (Apte, 1985, p. 190), as well as in the writings of Christians (Hempermann, 2003), Jews (Perlmutter, 2002) and Buddhists (Clasquin, 2001). Incongruity resolution is a cognitive process that aids learning, as well cognitive and emotional growth of humans (Caron, 2002). Incongruity or novelty causes the neutral emotion of surprise while the resolution of incongruity colors surprise, leading either to humor or to fear (Alden *et al.*, 2000).

Given that comic wit is the only type of humor that involves only the incongruity resolution process, it is expected that it will be the most popular humor type both in the UK and Greek advertisements. Speck (1991) and Spotts *et al.* (1997) pointed to a consensus regarding the use of comic wit in advertising. However, it emerges that comic wit is employed mainly in print advertising (82 percent) and to a lesser extent in TV advertising (31 percent), while the other types prevail in TV commercials and to a lesser extent in print ad illustrations. Advertisers in TV commercials are able to exploit the whole sensory spectrum, designing more complicated humorous ad executions (Eisend, 2009) such as satire, sentimental comedy and full comedy. On the other hand, magazine context confines creative decisions, increasing the use of simple humorous devices such as comic wit. Thus, it could be assumed that comic wit will be the most frequently used humor type both in the UK and Greece.

*H2.* The use of comic wit will be greater than the use of the other humor types both in UK and Greek print advertising.

### *3.2 Intentional relatedness between humor and message*

Intentional relatedness refers to the primary advertisers' intentions, regarding the content of humorous advertisements and the desirable communication outcomes (Speck, 1991). Information-dominant ads try to inform consumers about the brand claims, image-dominant ads emphasize brand images, while humor-dominant ads aim at entertaining the target audience. In information-dominant humorous ads, advertisers have to combine creative elements with information cues to form effective messages. Janssens and De Pelsmacker (2005) indicated that information-dominant emotional and humorous ads outperform rational information-dominant ads on measures of attitudes and purchase intention. However, a few research papers have focused on the interactions between humor and the level of information content in international advertising (Spotts *et al.*, 1997). On the other hand, the amount of information present in advertisements of culturally diverse countries has attracted

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research attention (Akan, 2007; So, 2004; Ji and McNeal, 2001; Al-Olayan and Karande, 2000; Whitelock and Rey, 1998; Taylor *et al.*, 1997; Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Lin, 1993; Nevett, 1992; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989; Rice and Lu, 1988; Johnstone *et al.*, 1987; Hong *et al.*, 1987; Madden *et al.*, 1986; Dowling, 1980).

Hofstede's cultural dimensions and in particular the uncertainty-avoidance seem to affect people's propensity to engage in information search (Yeoh, 2000; Hofstede, 1980) and the level of information included in advertisements (Akan, 2007; Ji and McNeal, 2001; Abernethy and Franke, 1996). Consumers from countries with high uncertainty avoidance are seeking to reduce their perceived risk (Hofstede, 1980). In advertising, they search for technical information and experts' advice (De Mooij, 1998). For instance, Japanese advertisements provide more information cues, compared to American ads, to assist consumers' decision making. Japanese consumers are seeking for specific price or value information to reduce their perceived uncertainty (Madden *et al.*, 1986; Hong *et al.*, 1987). Germans that represent a high uncertainty avoidance culture are seeking for technical explanations and detailed advertising messages (De Mooij, 1998). US advertisements seem to contain less information than French Canadian (Johnstone *et al.*, 1987), Australian (Dowling, 1980) and Turkish ads (Akan, 2007), while at the same time are more detailed than UK ads (Nevett, 1992). American culture indicates lower scores on the uncertainty-avoidance dimension compared with French Canadian, Australian and Turkish culture and higher scores than British culture. Thus, it would be safe to assume that information-dominant ads are more likely to be used in Greek than in UK advertising.

With respect to the individualism/collectivism dimension, Taylor *et al.* (1997) suggested that informative advertisements lead to higher positive attitudes towards the ad and the brand in individualistic countries. In these countries, advertisements focus on the key benefits of the brand and strive to achieve differentiation. Only customers' post-purchase satisfaction can increase the perceived credibility of the company and its products (Taylor *et al.*, 1997). On the other hand, in collectivistic countries advertising audience favor indirect communication approaches that have been at the same time creative and informative such as information-dominant humorous ads. For instance, Korean collectivistic advertisers initially try to build friendly relationships with potential customers through entertaining creative devices. Only, when consumers feel that the enterprise is reliable, Korean advertisers provide information about the advertised brand (Taylor *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore, in Japanese TV ad executions, brand names are mentioned at a later stage than in US ads. The first part of the advertisements tries to gain the audience's trust, while the second part highlights brand benefits (Miracle *et al.*, 1992).

Similarly to information-dominant ads, it is expected that the use of humor-dominant and image-dominant ads in culturally diverse countries depends on the uncertainty avoidance and the individualism/collectivism dimensions. Generally, in low uncertainty avoidance countries, consumers not only dislike advertisements that present testimonials by professional experts but they also enjoy parodies of the experts. Moreover, in individualistic societies consumers are seeking direct advertising messages, with clear communication objectives (Taylor *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, British advertising is explicit and direct, concentrating on brand benefits without providing enough information for the use of the product (De Mooij, 1998). Very often it incorporates, puns, word games and intelligent humor (Whitelock and Rey, 1998; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989), while at the same time it emphasizes visual advertising cues (Mooij, 1998). The primary communication objectives of British advertisers are to

provide pure entertainment and to build a strong brand image. Thus, it is expected that UK advertisers will use more frequently humor-dominant and image-dominant ads, compared to their Greek counterparts. The following hypotheses are formulated:

*H3a.* Humor-dominant humorous advertisements are more likely to be used in UK than in Greek advertising.

*H3b.* Information-dominant humorous advertisements are more likely to be used in Greek than in UK advertising.

*H3c.* Image-dominant humorous advertisements are more likely to be used in UK than in Greek advertising.

#### 4. Methodology

##### 4.1 Sample of print advertisements

Hypothesis testing was based on a content analysis approach, a method suitable for the scientific analysis of communication messages (Samiee and Jeong, 1994; Wheeler, 1988). Content analysis allows researchers to study the advertising content in a reliable, validated and quantitative manner (Kassarjian, 1977; Berelson, 1952). A sample of 12,351 (7,337 UK and 5,014 Greek) print advertisements from the largest circulation magazines (Table II) were content analyzed. The same magazine titles were used in the two cultural environments when possible (Table III). The total number of print advertisements raised during 2006, on the aforementioned magazines, constituted the sample of this study. The unit of analysis was very colored, A4 size or larger (8.5 × 11 inches) print ad. This was to facilitate the coding procedure, since the creative

Variables	UK % (7,337)	Greece % (5,014)	Significant differences
Total sample			
Humorous ads	33.6** (2,465)	27 (1,363)	( $\chi^2 = 57.274$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.0001$ )
Humor processes			
1. Incongruity – resolution	86.0 (2,121)	89.0** (1,213)	( $\chi^2 = 6.797$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.009$ )
2. Arousal – safety	26.6* (656)	23.2 (316)	( $\chi^2 = 5.446$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.020$ )
3. Humorous disparagement	11.2 (276)	9.5 (129)	
Humor types			
1. Comic wit	63.6 (1,568)	67.1* (914)	( $\chi^2 = 4.575$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.032$ )
2. Sentimental humor	12.5** (307)	9.2 (125)	( $\chi^2 = 9.451$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.002$ )
3. Satire	9.2 (226)	8.1 (110)	
4. Sentimental comedy	11.6 (286)	12.8 (175)	
5. Full comedy	2.0** (50)	1.0 (14)	( $\chi^2 = 5.352$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.021$ )
Intentional relatedness			
1. Humor-dominant	55.5** (1,368)	43.5 (593)	( $\chi^2 = 50.090$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.0001$ )
2. Information-dominant	31.8 (784)	44.5** (606)	( $\chi^2 = 58.054$ , $df = 1$ , $p < 0.0001$ )
3. Image-dominant	12.7 (313)	12.0 (164)	

**Table II.**  
The content-analyzed  
magazines

**Note:** \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Magazines	Issues	Circulation <sup>a</sup>	Description of content
<b>UK</b>			
<i>Women's magazines</i>			
Marie Claire	12	285,307	Fashion and beauty, relationships, real stories, sex and health (middle-aged women)
Cosmopolitan	12	441,663	Fashion and beauty tips, sex, relationships and career (20-60 years old)
Vogue	12	210,435	Fashion and beauty, interviews, art and design (20 years and over)
<i>Men's magazines</i>			
FHM	12	235,027	Relationships and everyday life, advice on sex, women in bikinis (20 and 30 years old)
GQ	12	120,019	Men's lifestyle magazine, women in bikinis, expensive fashion advice (20 and 30 years old)
Loaded	12	72,679	Sports, drinking, some "joke" sexism; plus fashion (20 and 30 years old)
<i>General audience</i>			
Reader's digest	12	541,282	Health news, true stories, jokes, crime-fighting tips and save money tips (25 years and over)
National geographic traveler	12	715,090	World travel tips, destination ratings, photo galleries and road trips (18 years and over)

Magazines	Issues	Magazines readership <sup>b</sup> (%)	Description of content
<b>Greece</b>			
<i>Women's magazines</i>			
Marie Claire	12	6.9	Fashion and beauty, relationships, real stories, sex and health (25-54 years old)
Cosmopolitan	12	8.5	Fashion and beauty tips, sex, relationships and career (13-34 years old)
Vita	12	4.4	Health, weight-loss, nutrition, relationships and psychology tips (25-54 years old)
<i>Men's magazines</i>			
Men's health	12	3.9	Men's health, fitness, relationships, nutrition, weight-loss and muscle building (18-34 years old)
V Men	12	7.2	Fashion and lifestyle for men, interviews with celebrities and women in bikinis (25-44 years old)
Esquire	12	2.1	Fashion and lifestyle for men, female celebrities, interviews and sexy celebrities pictures (25-44 years old)
<i>General audience</i>			
Life&style	12	6.1	Style advices, restaurant tips, public events, fashion clothes and interviews with celebrities (18-44 years old)
Free	12	2.1	Music, culture, fashion, trends, lifestyle and travel tips (18-34 years old)

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) for the British magazines (2009); <sup>b</sup>Focus Bari for the Greek magazines (2009)

**Table III.**  
UK and Greek humorous  
print advertisements

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quality of ads enabled coders to determine the right humor process and type. Duplicate ads were removed.

A large sample size was considered necessary, because of the complexity of the humorous message taxonomy that postulates three humor processes, five humor types and three types of relatedness between humor elements and message elements, leading to 80 different humorous forms of advertising (Spotts *et al.*, 1997; Stern, 1996). Out of the 7,337 UK and 5,014 Greek ads that were content analyzed, 2,465 UK and 1,363 Greek advertisements were humorous and constitute the focus of the present study. The large sample of ads, enabled the examination of the whole set of hypotheses, even those that referred to the combination of the five humor types with the three types of relatedness. Prior studies that employed smaller sample sizes, faced difficulties in dealing with these hypotheses (Spotts *et al.*, 1997).

#### 4.2 Coders

In total, 16 English native speakers recruited from the Erasmus Program[1] and 12 Greek native speakers from the Department of Business Administration, in Aristotle University of Thessaloniki were trained as coders. The large number of coders was considered necessary in order to control and eliminate possible fatigue effects due to the large sample of ads. This enhanced the importance of analytical training and that of close supervision (Durbin and Stuart, 1954). The researchers were trained on the details of the task and the dimensions of the constructs being measured, the methodology of the humorous message taxonomy (Speck, 1991). The operational definitions of the constructs were translated into Greek using the translation/back-translation technique to secure the linguistic equivalence (Okazaki and Mueller, 2007). The two groups were formed from an equal number of male and female students with an age range of 21-26 years old.

#### 4.3 Procedure

All 28 coders were instructed in their own language and were trained on a considerable number (200) of related examples. All coders watched the same 200 examples that were collected from international advertising campaigns. Those ads were not included in the sample. English native speakers were divided in four four-member teams and Greeks in three four-member teams. English-speaking students analyzed the British ads, while Greek students focused on the Greek print ads, since humor appreciation depends on the cultural characteristics of the researchers. Each coder worked independently and had to content analyze approximately 1600-1800 print ads.

Every coder watched each advertisement at least three times in order to determine humorous intention. Humor was defined according to Speck's (1991) classification of the five types of humor. A print ad was considered humorous when at least three coders agreed (see Alden *et al.*, 1993). Furthermore, the coders were asked to determine the relationship between humor elements and message elements; namely intentional relatedness, structural relatedness and semantic relatedness. Discrepancies in coding were resolved by a third judge.

#### 4.4 Reliability

Inter-coder agreement was estimated based on Cohen's conditional Kappa (1960). The values range between 0.0 (no reliability) and 1.0 (perfectly reliable). The reliability coefficients were  $K=0.88$  for humorousness,  $K=0.73$  for the humor processes,

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$K = 0.72$  for the humor types,  $K = 0.83$  for the types of intentional relatedness for the UK sample.

Similar values were calculated for the Greek sample ( $K = 0.92$  for humorousness,  $K = 0.82$  for the humor processes,  $K = 0.81$  for the humor types,  $K = 0.92$  for the types of intentional relatedness). The reliabilities for the majority of measures can be regarded as acceptable since, as Rust and Cooil (1994) suggested, Cohen's kappa may be overly conservative.

## 5. Results and discussion

Overall, 33.6 percent of UK ads and 27 percent of Greek advertisements had a humorous intent, a statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 57.274$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ) (Table II). This is consistent with De Mooij's (1998) proposition that humor is used more in low or weak uncertainty avoiding cultures, than in high uncertainty avoidance ones. In addition, comic wit appeared significantly more frequently in Greece than in the UK ( $\chi^2 = 4.575$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.032$ ), whereas the frequency of sentimental humor ( $\chi^2 = 9.451$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ) and full comedy ( $\chi^2 = 5.352$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.021$ ) were significantly higher in the UK (12.5 and 2 percent, respectively) than in Greece (9.2 and 1 percent, respectively) (Table II). Thus, hypothesis *H1a* is accepted, while hypothesis *H1b* is partially supported.

The aforementioned statistically significant differences in the use of humor types result from the use of the three underlined processes in UK and Greek ads. Particularly, Greek advertisers concentrate on the incongruity resolution process (89 percent) ( $\chi^2 = 6.797$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.009$ ), while UK advertisers seem to favor the arousal safety process (26.6 percent) ( $\chi^2 = 5.446$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.020$ ) (Table II). Although the frequency of humorous messages that incorporate the humorous disparagement process is higher in the UK (11.2 percent), it is not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 2.784$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.095$ ). These findings provide evidence on prior studies (Lee and Lim, 2008) suggesting that offensive humor may irritate collectivists and risk aversion people.

Moreover it seems that comic wit, the simplest form of humorous executions, constitutes the dominant humorous technique in the UK (63.6 percent) and Greece (67.1 percent), according to hypothesis *H2*. Humorous illustrations incorporate mainly the incongruity resolution process both in the UK (86 percent) and in Greece (89 percent). These results are consistent with the perspective that cognitive mechanisms (comic wit and incongruity resolution) constitute a global humorous language and the core of many international standardized advertising campaigns (Alden and Martin, 1995; Alden *et al.*, 1993). However, it appears that UK advertisers use comic wit with the intention to entertain the target audience (humor-dominant ads) ( $\chi^2 = 11.335$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.003$ ), while their Greek counterparts use comic wit aiming both to amuse (humor-dominant ads) and to inform (information-dominant ads) the consumers ( $\chi^2 = 5.786$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.055$ ) (Table IV).

Content analysis on intentional relatedness revealed that 55.5 percent of the humorous ads in the UK are humor-dominant, while the respective percentage for Greek ads is 43.5 percent ( $\chi^2 = 50.090$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). This is consistent with Lannon's (1986) claim that British advertisers prefer soft sell methods, which would signify greater use of humor. On the contrary, Greek advertisers seem to prefer more information-dominant print ads (44.5 percent) than UK advertisers (31.8 percent) ( $\chi^2 = 58.054$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Thus, information-dominant humorous ads seem to be a common creative strategy in high uncertainty avoidance countries such as Greece. This confirms previous findings that suggest this cultural dimension as an indicator of



people's tendency to seek for explanations and long copy in advertising (Akan, 2007; Ji and McNeal, 2001; De Mooij, 1998; Abernethy and Franke, 1996). Hence, hypotheses *H3a* and *H3b* are supported (Table II). Although image-dominant print ads are more frequent in the UK (12.7 percent) than in Greece (12.0 percent) this is not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 0.381$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.537$ ). Thus, hypothesis *H3c* is rejected.

Advertisers in the UK use comic wit ( $\chi^2 = 11.335$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.003$ ), satire ( $\chi^2 = 15.504$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), sentimental comedy ( $\chi^2 = 13.417$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and full comedy ( $\chi^2 = 6.765$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.034$ ), when they try to entertain the advertising audience (humor-dominant ads) (Table IV). They focus on sentimental humor when aiming at informing (information-dominant ads) the audience or building a brand image (image-dominant ads) ( $\chi^2 = 1.610$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Greek print ads follow a different pattern, providing detailed information through the use of comic wit ( $\chi^2 = 5.786$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.055$ ) and sentimental comedy ( $\chi^2 = 7.460$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.024$ ). On the other hand, they incorporate satire ( $\chi^2 = 6.960$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.031$ ) and full comedy ( $\chi^2 = 14.107$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), when they try to entertain consumers.

It can be assumed that the closer integration between the member countries of the EU may partly explain the insignificant results (hypotheses *H1b* and *H3c*) of the present study. Particularly, the convergence of culture (Meyer, 2005), media (Marsden and Verhulst, 1999) and technology (Hills and Michalis, 2000) between EU countries may lead to some homogenous advertising approaches such as the use of satire, sentimental comedy and image-dominant illustrations in humorous ads. Alternatively, these findings may imply that advertisers from countries in cultural transition, such as Greece, often mitigate communication strategies that are used in the UK, regardless of their effectiveness.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite the significant role of humor on advertising effectiveness, relatively few studies focus on the use of humorous advertising content across cultures (Toncar, 2001; Koudelova and Whitelock, 2001; Nevo *et al.*, 2001; De Pelsmacker and Geuens, 1998; Unger, 1995; Alden and Hoyer, 1993; McCullough and Taylor, 1993; Biswas *et al.*, 1992; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). None of these studies have examined the cross-cultural use of humor based on Speck's humorous message taxonomy (Speck, 1991).

Content analysis revealed that there are statistically significant differences between UK and Greek humorous advertising. In an individualistic culture that ranks low on the uncertainty avoidance dimension, such as the UK, more risky, aggressive and affective humorous advertisements are used. In particular, UK ads seem to incorporate more frequently humorous appeals compared to the Greek ads. Advertisers in the UK favor the arousal safety process, sentimental humor and full comedy and give emphasis on humor dominance. In collectivistic, strong uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Greece, more neutral humorous advertisements whose appeal is not perceived as very offensive are considered more suitable. In Greece, there is a lower percentage of print ads that use humor. The simplest forms of humor, namely incongruity resolution and comic wit constitute the core of the majority of the humorous ads in Greece.

Advertisers in the UK prefer to entertain consumers, through the use of humor-dominant advertisements, rather to inform them through the use of information-dominant humorous ads. British advertisers often use sentimental humor, when they try to build a brand image (image-dominant ads). Advertising practitioners in Greece approach humorous ads, as creative devices that can engender positive mood in order to gain consumers'

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trust. Their actual aim to provide information for the brand is disguised with the help of a humorous message. Greek advertisers have to harmonize the uncertainty aversion attitudes of Greek consumers that increase the need for concrete information and their collectivistic values that are in favor of indirect messages. Information-dominant humorous illustrations seem to be able to convey accurate information in an indirect way.

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## 7. Managerial implications

The findings of this study can be used as a strategic tool for the design of humorous advertisements in culturally diverse countries. In particular, key implications for international advertisers stem from the combination of intentional relatedness with the types of humor (Table IV). Intentional relatedness reflects advertisers' communication objectives (amuse target audience, provide information or emphasize brand image). On the other hand, the use of humor types in advertising allows us to discern what can motivate (cognitive, sentimental or interpersonal pleasure) consumers of different cultural backgrounds to process these humorous ad executions. Hence, this study presents a novel approach for the development of a communication strategy that links advertisers' communication objectives with particular creative devices in an approach that takes into account both consumers' motives and their cultural characteristics.

International advertisers should adapt their humorous advertising strategies to the cultural characteristics of collectivistic and uncertainty avoidance cultures in order to effectively target consumers in these markets. The majority of humorous ad illustrations in these environments either informs or amuses the advertising audience, following information-dominant and humor-dominant creative approaches (Table II). As far as information-dominant ads are concerned, advertisers should provide information about the brands using comic wit and sentimental comedy (Table IV). Comic wit can play a pivotal role in generating consumers' interest (Speck, 1987), since it reduces their perceived uncertainty and lays the ground for brand claims to be accepted. The sentimental comedy, adopting a problem-solution format, initially induces negative arousal and subsequently provides a relief (Speck, 1991). Given that consumers from risk aversion countries favor the sense of relief from anxiety and tension (De Mooij, 1998), an information-dominant ad that incorporates sentimental comedy can be a successful creative device, since it works as a relief function. Both comic wit and sentimental comedy can satisfy consumers' need for entertainment (humor-dominant ads) (Table IV). Nonetheless, practitioners should be careful when designing humorous ads based on sentimental comedy, because high levels of anxiety and tension can induce negative attitudes towards the ad and the brand, in high uncertainty avoidance countries (Lee and Lim, 2008).

When international advertisers aim at entertaining collectivistic consumers with high uncertainty aversion attitudes, they can, also, use satire and full comedy (Table IV). However, a more cautious use of these types of humor is suggested as they may insult or irritate collectivists. In collectivistic countries, citizens distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, and dislike those ads that humiliate the members of the group (Chan *et al.*, 2007). Thus, international advertisers could reduce the possibility that collectivistic consumers identify with the victimized characters of the ad.

On the other hand, international advertisers, before targeting UK target audience, should take into consideration the cultural characteristics of individualistic consumers

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from low uncertainty avoidance countries. In the UK, four out of five humor types, namely comic wit, satire, sentimental comedy and full comedy, can, for the most part, satisfy the communication objective of entertainment (Table IV). Small copy and subtle humor can positively affect the effectiveness of the communication campaign. Advertisers can provide useful information and highlight brand images through print ads that incorporate sentimental humor (Table IV), which can constitute a gentle humorous device that emphasizes the triumph of pleasant people (Stern, 1996).

The present cross-national content analysis can benefit international advertisers not only with practical but also with theoretical implications. The humorous message taxonomy (Speck, 1991) seems to be an effective theoretical tool for analyzing advertisers' intentions and consumers' motives in an integrated way. Furthermore, in this study it becomes obvious that practitioners and advertising theorists to fully understand the influences of cultural values on advertising content should examine both the usage of creative devices in advertisements and the communication objectives that are expressed through these devices. They can see the whole picture in one glance, resulting in useful managerial implications. However to date, the majority of content analyses has concentrated on the presence of creative forms in advertisements, ignoring the role that advertisers' intentions play in the planning of international campaigns.

### **8. Directions for future research and limitations**

The findings of the present study could serve as a baseline for future cross-cultural studies on the use of humor in advertising. Hofstede's cultural dimensions can be used additionally or in conjunction with other cultural typologies such as House *et al.*'s GLOBE project (Chan *et al.*, 2007). Although, some cultural dimensions keep the same labels across the different culture frameworks such as collectivism (labeled as in-group collectivism in GLOBE's typology) and uncertainty avoidance, they are not congruent (Hofstede, 2006). Future research should examine the explanatory potential of these cultural variables with respect to customers' motivations and advertisers' intentions in a set of countries that have scores in Hofstede's and House *et al.*'s frameworks.

Experimental approaches can add to the growing knowledge on humorous advertising in the global arena, representing causal relationships between key variables. At the same time, they can help overcome the reliability problems of content analysis due to the researchers' subjectivity (Kassarjian, 1977). Future research may wish to manipulate advertisers' intentions, determining how humor-dominant, information-dominant and image-dominant humorous ads affect attitudes towards the ad and the brand in different cultural environments. Researchers can also examine the relationships between humor types and attitudes, as moderated by the intentional relatedness in culturally diverse countries. It can be assumed that collectivists from high uncertainty avoidance cultures will prefer information-dominant ads with comic wit to other humorous advertisements. On the other hand, humor-dominant ads that emphasize complex humor types (such as satire and full comedy) will lead to more positive attitudes in individualistic, low uncertainty avoiding cultures.

According to the findings of this study, the incongruity resolution process and comic wit constitute the core of most of the international humorous advertisements. Another direction for future research would be to analyze how advertisers could maximize the communication outcomes of this humorous device in different cultural

environments, facilitating the resolution of incongruity. For instance, symbols may help collectivists, while small copy individualists to get a joke (De Mooij, 1998).

Given the increasing popularity of humorous advertising in the last two decades (Beard, 2005), the present study could be a basis for the development of longitudinal studies to provide further insights into the long-term use of humorous appeals in international advertising. In that manner, researchers could better illustrate the effects of western culture on humorous print advertising in a country undergoing a cultural transition.

Besides, prior studies have indicated that there are significant differences between print and broadcast media, regarding the use and the effectiveness of humorous ads (Eisend, 2009). For instance, it seems that humorous content is incorporated mainly in radio and TV commercials and to a lesser extent in print advertisements (Weinberger *et al.*, 1995). Future research might explore whether the findings of the present study could extrapolate to broadcast media.

Finally, we need to note a limitation of this study. Although, English-speaking students content-analyzed the British print ads, while Greek students concentrated on the Greek ads, the cultural orientation of those coders was not measured. Future research papers could adopt items from Hofstede's scale (1991) or other more up-to-date instruments, such as Furrer *et al.*'s questionnaire (2000), to determine coders' cultural orientation (see Lee and Lim, 2008).

#### Note

1. Erasmus Program (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is a European student exchange program.

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### About the authors

Leonidas Hatzithomas is a PhD student of Marketing in the Department of Business Administration, School of Economics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He received his BA in Business Administration and his Master's degree in Management and Informatics at Aristotle University. He has taught in Universities and Technological institutions in Greece since 2005. His research interests include advertising effectiveness, consumer culture and consumer behavior. His publications on communication effects of advertising appeared, among others, in *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising* and *Journal of Applied Business Research*. In addition, he is the author of *Humor in TV Advertising*, a monograph for the use of humorous executions in TV advertising. He has presented his work at a number of international academic conferences such as European Marketing Academy Conference (EMAC), International Conference on Research in Advertising (ICORIA) and International Conference on Corporate and Marketing Communications. Leonidas Hatzithomas is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: leonidasnoe@yahoo.com

Yorgos Zotos is Professor of Marketing in the Department of Business Administration School of Economics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He was Visiting Assistant Professor in the Marketing Department at the University of Rhode Island, the Wharton Business School University of Pennsylvania and the University of Canterbury New Zealand. He has published, among others, in the *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of*

*Current Issues and Research in Advertising, Journal of International Consumer Marketing and International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management.* He is also the author of an advertising textbook (5th edition).

Christina Boutsouki is Assistant Professor of Marketing in the Department of Business Administration School of Economics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, where she has been on the faculty since 2002. She was Research Associate at Leicester University, Management Centre and Visiting Lecturer in Distance Learning MBA of Hong Kong University. She received a Doctoral Research Scholarship from Manchester Metropolitan University to pursue her PhD in Retail Marketing. Her research interests are in retail marketing, branding and advertising. Her research has appeared, among others, in *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising, International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management* and *Agricultural Economics Review*.