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# Does humour travel? Advertising practices and audience effects in the United States and People's Republic of China

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## ABSTRACT

Humour in advertising is long-established, but whether such appeals travel across cultures is debatable. Two studies investigated the impact of country and individual-level cultural differences on the use and effectiveness of humorous advertising in the United States (USA) and People's Republic of China (PRC). The first study examines current practice and replicates previous findings that certain humour mechanisms (incongruity-resolution contrasts) are universal across cultures. The second study examines audience effects for a specific humour type (aggressive). At the national level findings are contrary to expected with Chinese showing higher perceived humour for aggressive themes than did Americans. At the individual level, cultural values best explain the varying effectiveness of aggressive humour appeals. Interestingly, the findings of both studies show that what advertisers practice is not always in line with audience expectations. Implications on how humour can transfer successfully across cultures is discussed, and directions for future research offered.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Cross cultural; humour; advertising; cultural values; ad appeals

## Introduction

Humour is a constant presence in popular culture around the world through movies, television programmes, print and online entertainment and advertising. Advertisers have long been aware of their audience's desire for entertainment and have increasingly chosen humorous appeals for global ad campaigns. Worldwide advertising expenditures is expected to exceed \$579 billion in 2018 (ZenithOptimedia 2018) with a conservative estimate indicating that at least 20% of all ads and 50% of ads in the Super Bowl use humorous appeals (Fortune 2016). Humour has a strong effect on consumer attitudes and is considered one of the most persuasive forms of advertising (Eisend and Tarrahi 2016). Global consumer brands are among the forefront of those attempting to use humour in global campaigns; some successfully such as Heineken (Cannes\_Lions 2009) and Google, others unsuccessfully such as Belvedere Vodka

(White 2012). As the popularity of humour in advertising increases worldwide so does the need to determine the current usage and effectiveness across cultures.

Though much is known about humour in advertising (see Weinberger and Gulas 1992; Eisend 2009; Weinberger, Gulas, and Weinberger 2015), little is known about how it travels across cultures. Humour can be difficult to understand across cultures; what can be funny to some is often offensive to others (Beard 2008; Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno, and Richard 2014). Eisend (2018) noted the absence of theoretical background that explains cross-cultural variations in humour use and provided a structure when conducting research on humour in advertising. Two key research areas emerged: humour *mechanisms* and humour *types* (Eisend 2018). As well-established streams of research on humour in advertising, these two areas allow us to understand what mechanisms of humour are universal and can be transferred to different cultures/markets, and what types of humour are considered funny and by whom.

Past research suggests that advertising featuring certain humour mechanisms (incongruity-resolution, or INC-RES) may be universal (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Hatzithomas, Zotos, and Boutsouki 2011). Adapted from the cognitive school, INC-RES contrasts argue that cognitive processing of humour is based on incongruity and then a resolution (Raskin 1985). Findings support that INC-RES is a universal mechanism in US, Germany, Korea, Thailand (Alden and Hoyer 1993) and Japan (Alden and Martin 1995). Whether humour mechanisms continue to be used in current advertisements and can be extended to other cultures is an important research question.

Research on humour underlines the importance of novelty and shock in ad executions and believes the effectiveness of humour could depend on such (Swani, Weinberger, and Gulas 2013). More specifically, evidence suggests that one particular *humour type* (aggressive humour) is used in a significant number of television ads (Scharer et al. 2006). Aggressive humour is a style or type of humorous advertising using disparagement or humiliation as a source of humour (Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010). Like all aggression, using disparagement as a source of humour has the potential to offend, particularly in certain cultures (e.g. collectivistic) where conformity to group goals, norms and expectations is more distinct. The increased usage of aggressive humour in advertising leads to questions about how such ads are processed (Swani, Weinberger, and Gulas 2013) and whether they are effective across cultures (Crawford and Gregory 2015).

With half of all worldwide advertising spending occurring in just two countries (USA and China (PRC)) very little research has focussed on the usage and effectiveness of humour mechanisms and types between the two largest and most culturally diverse markets (e.g. Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno, and Richard 2014). In 2017, the USA ranked as the largest advertising market with \$197 billion ad spend; whereas China, the second largest advertising market and biggest emerging economy, reached \$86 billion in advertising expenditure (ZenithOptimedia 2018). The increasing competition in emerging markets indicate that global firms have been exposed to a risk of using inappropriate humorous techniques due to cultural unfamiliarity (Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno, and Richard 2014). As global brands are likely to increase the usage of standardized advertising (Akaka and Alden 2010; Taylor and Okazaki 2015) researchers need to assess current practice in use of humour and identify similarities and

differences in audience responses. Therefore, it is vital to understand the application of humour mechanisms and humour types and their effectiveness between western countries and emerging countries from a different cultural zone.

The present research builds on our understanding of humorous advertising in cross-national settings in two important ways. First, we investigate the extent to which cultural context influences advertiser choice of humour mechanisms and humour types in two large culturally diverse national environments. We compare the frequencies of intended humour, and the proportions of INC-RES contrast mechanisms and aggressive humour types in television ads between the United States (USA) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). We then explore how cultural values influence responses to humorous appeals. We compare audience responses with advertiser choice of humour appeals by national context to determine whether practice and preference are matched. Assessing responses in both the USA and PRC allows analysis of groups of young consumers who consume a broad spectrum of media and are clear targets for multinational and global marketing communications.

Second, this research contributes to the body of literature on humour in cross-cultural advertising. Study one extends theory on the universality of humour mechanisms and types across cultures (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Alden and Martin 1995; Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000) and determines their validity and use globally. These findings are then used to develop a framework to examine effectiveness and establish congruence across cultures. Study two tests this framework at the cultural and individual level to compare ad effectiveness. Together these studies integrate research methods to test both the use and effectiveness of humour mechanisms and types across cultures to better understand what can or cannot be transferred globally. By exploring both advertiser choice of humorous appeals and audience responses to those choices, we build on previous theory on humour in cross-cultural advertising to advance our understanding of the effects and effectiveness of humorous appeals and offer key criteria for effective global consumer segmentation.

## **Theory and hypothesis**

### ***Humour as a universal advertising practice***

Humour in advertising has rich history worldwide (Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Eisend 2009) and can be dated back to mid- to late-1800s (Beard 2008). Though there is little academic research on the use of humorous appeals in international advertising and their impact on audiences across cultures. A recent study revealed only 19 studies in the period 1940–2012 investigating humorous advertising across more than one cultural or national context (Crawford and Gregory 2015). An increasing trend was discerned over the period, but there remains a scarcity of theoretical foundation for how humour travels across borders (Eisend 2018), and how such standardized messages are received by different audiences.

There is support that particular humour mechanisms may be universal (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Alden and Martin 1995; Hatzithomas, Zotos, and Boutsouki 2011) but the evidence is limited. Indeed, most cross-cultural advertising research investigates differences, rather than similarities leading to a well-known call for investigation

of 'true cultural similarities on which successful global or standardized advertising campaigns can be based' (Samiee and Jeong 1994, 215).

Research into the persuasiveness of humour in advertising utilizes both cognitive and affective theories to attempt to explain the conative effects (Vakratsas and Ambler 1999). Affective responses to advertising are moods or feelings evoked by the ad (Batra and Ray 1986). These responses can change during the exposure to the ad (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Padgett 1997) and contribute to  $A_{ad}$  and  $A_{br}$  (Mehta 2000). As it is also believed that positive  $A_{ad}$  leads to purchase (Mitchell and Olson 1981) then it follows that humour used appropriately can lead to increased purchase intention by consumers. For example, Eisend (2009) conducted a meta-analysis and found out that humour in advertising significantly enhances  $A_{ad}$ ,  $A_{br}$  and purchase intentions. Cognitive-based humour research posits that humour presents a distraction, thereby reducing counter-argumentation (Lammers et al. 1983). Humour provides both an increase in tension, and a release of that tension which is a reward for attention (Madden and Weinberger 1982). Therefore, the key to processing of humour is based on incongruity in the ad, as well as the resolution to produce the response (Alden and Hoyer 1993). Within the cognitive school, Raskin (1985, 34) theorized a script-based semantic model of incongruity which suggests that a joke contains two distinct scripts that are opposites, and the third element, the punch line (or resolution), 'switches the listener from one script to another creating the joke.' Raskin's INC-RES contrasts have been identified to be present in advertising globally and are believed to be the predominant mechanism in executing humour (Speck 1990; Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons 1997; Hatzithomas, Zotos, and Boutsouki 2011). Additionally, past research found similar proportions of each contrast across cultures (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993) suggesting some aspects of humour are universal. Many consider INC-RES the most frequently used humour mechanism globally (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993; Hatzithomas, Zotos, and Boutsouki 2011). Though in recent years there are few studies examining the universalism of humour mechanisms in advertising. To replicate and validate past findings and determine if certain aspects of humour are universal, the following hypotheses are offered:

**H1:** The frequency of ads using INC-RES humour mechanisms will be significantly greater than the use of non-INC-RES humour mechanisms.

**H2:** The relative frequency of use of INC-RES contrasts in ads will not vary across national contexts.

### ***Humour type and culture***

Content is the subject or theme and can form the humour type (e.g. dry, sarcastic and aggressive), and in an advertising context, includes the executional elements of visual and/or auditory facets, spokesperson, brand and product factors and the core promotional message. This research extends the examination of humour and culture to the type of humour and will investigate the use of one popular form of humour and aggressive humour.

Aggressive humour is frequently used in humorous advertising (Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010; Swani, Weinberger, and Gulas 2013; Weinberger et al. 2017)

and its prevalence showed an increasing trend in television commercials (Scharer et al. 2006). Aggressive humour may be about deriving amusement from the misfortunes of these 'others' (*schadenfreude*) or by actively seeking to 'humiliate, embarrass or ridicule them in some way' (Martin 2007, 18) thereby enhancing one's own status or reinforcing group norms. For example, the long running 'Mac vs. PC' advertising campaign, or the Snickers 'You're not you ...' campaign are intended to be humorous, with an obvious object or target of aggressive humour. Despite the common use of aggressive humour, its use can be controversial, and even marketing heavyweights such as Snickers can get it wrong, as their 2008 Mr T 'Speedwalker' ad was pulled from air globally after complaints of homophobia (Sweeney 2008).

We suggest that the use of aggressive vs. non-aggressive humour by advertisers will vary based on the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism. Cultures that evidence higher concern for the rights and privileges of individuals will tend to lower levels of concern for the group, or for anyone other than that individual. Thus, aggressive themes which denigrate 'others' will be used by practitioners as intended humour based on superiority and competitiveness and should therefore be more common in individualist cultures (e.g. USA). Furthermore, humour singling out and making fun of an individual (aggressive themes) may reduce harmony within the group and thus be seen as a less attractive appeal by advertisers in collectivist cultures (e.g. China, Zhang 2005). Based on the notion that humour type selected by the advertiser should reflect cultural norms, it is expected that:

**H3:** Use of humour type will vary by national culture. There will be a higher relative proportion of aggressive humour ads in individualist cultures than in collectivist cultures.

### **Audience effects**

Cultures by their nature have both differences and similarities. People are part of those cultures and gain some of their values from the institutions and society around them (Briley and Aaker 2006). The response to humour types in advertising will be affected by cultural values because themes are content, or *emic* forms of humour. The most commonly cited cultural element in research into cross-cultural advertising is the individualism/collectivism dimension (e.g. Chan et al. 2007). Examination of this key similarity/difference has been undertaken in numerous international advertising studies, but rarely in studies of humorous appeals (Lee and Lim 2008).

Audience response to aggressive ads which disparage 'others' should be perceived as more humorous in individualist cultures (e.g. USA), where competitiveness and superiority to other individuals is closer to the norm. In contrast, humour making fun of an individual could be seen as aggressive and may draw attention away from the group, leading to a feeling of anxiety within members of collectivist cultures (e.g. China, Zhang 2005), and degradation of harmonious relations within the group. Based on the notion that positive responses to ads should match cultural orientation, it is expected that:

**H4:** The effect of humour aggression on perceived humour will be moderated by national culture.

- a. Individualist cultures will perceive more humour in aggressive ads than in non-aggressive ads.
- b. Collectivist cultures will perceive more humour in non-aggressive ads than in aggressive ads.

### ***Humour and values***

As focus has shifted in marketing research away from traditional national comparisons of cultural influences, Schwartz's (1992) value framework can be used to undertake this meaningful analysis at an individual-level. Following calls for explicit measurement of cultural variables Schwartz (1992) derived a set of nine 'universal' values that discriminate on the basic principles of the cultural value orientation, individualism-collectivism. These values act to represent the individual and collective interests of an individual based on the motivational concern of whose interests were being served. A key theoretical advantage of the use of the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) is that it is designed to capture and enable analysis of individual-level cultural values. The SVS has been used in studies which compare the values portrayed in advertising between cultures, (e.g. Zhang and Shavitt 2003; Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno, and Richard 2014), but little published research investigates the impact of values on responses to the ads across cultures. Importantly, the SVS explicitly indicates that individuals may hold both strong individual and strong collective values concurrently, and that these are not necessarily in direct conflict. This view more accurately represents the reality that variation exists within cultures *and* individuals.

In this study we investigate the effects of the level of aggression in humorous ads at the individual level. Building on past research on violent or aggressive ads that deliberately violate societal norms and values (Swani, Weinberger, and Gulas 2013), we expect that aggressive ads that aim to denigrate 'others' even if intended to be humorous, will elicit greater perceived humour from those high in individual values based on superiority, competitiveness and schadenfreude. In contrast, aggressive ads may lead to anxiety among those high in collective values as it damages harmonious relations within society. Thus, in testing how cultural values influence individual-level responses to an advertisement, we expect that:

**H5:** The effect of humour aggression on perceived humour will be moderated by individual cultural values.

- a. Those high in individual values will perceive more humour in aggressive ads than in non-aggressive ads.
- b. Those high in collective values will perceive more humour in non-aggressive ads than in aggressive ads.

This research is separated into two studies of humour in cross-cultural advertising. The first study conducts a content analysis of advertiser choice of humorous appeals (i.e. frequency of use, humour mechanisms and humour types), while the second study tests effectiveness through audience response to humour type (i.e. effect). [Figure 1](#) summarises the research model and hypotheses.

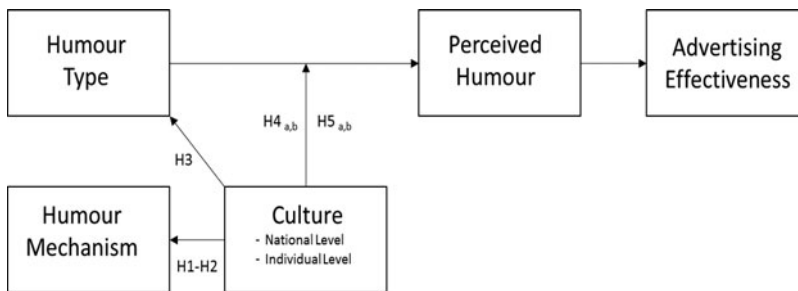


Figure 1. Research model.

## Study 1: Content analysis

The first study assessed the extent to which advertising content in the USA and PRC reflects the impact of culture on selection of humorous mechanisms and types. This study examined hypotheses 1–3 from the model in Figure 1.

### Method

#### National culture

The USA and PRC were selected to test the hypotheses in this research based on Hofstede's (1983, 2001) individualism index (from 0 to 100). A rating of 91 for USA indicates very high individualism, and a rating of 20 for PRC indicates low individualism (or high collectivism).

#### Sample of advertisements

The sample was collected through recording a continuous 72 hours of programming from each of 3 free to air national networks in the United States (NBC, CBS, ABC), and China (CCTV, Dong Fang, Hunan Satellite and Phoenix). Thus, every network and day-part had the same proportional representation in the final set of ads. Repetitions of ads were removed from the sample where the subsequent ads contained more than 50% of the same content, and a total of 561 unique ads remained for analysis in the USA and 362 in China. The ads were recorded in digital format to allow judges to code independently on a personal computer, and to enable pause or instant replay.

#### Coding of advertisements

Judges for coding were university students from each country sourced from business, education and engineering schools. Selection was based on nationality, age and education level, with three American students coding the USA ads and three Chinese students coding the PRC sample. The use of native coders ensured that any cultural nuances in the advertisements would be detected (Frazer, Sheehan, and Patti 2002).

The instructions to judges and coding sheets were partly based on work undertaken by Alden et al. (1993) in their examination of the Raskin contrasts. Vigorous discussion between coders and with researchers ensured a clear and common understanding of the schema. Extensive training was given in both individual and group formats with a set of national ads unrelated to the main sample. When coders



**Table 1.** Content analyses: Reliabilities and frequencies.

	USA <i>n</i> = 561			PRC <i>n</i> = 362		
	Intercoder Reliability	Accuracy	PRL Reliability	Intercoder Reliability	Accuracy	PRL Reliability
Intended Humour	.78	.77	.91	.86	.84	.97
Contrast	.71	.71	.84	.72	.72	.85
Aggression	.71	.70	.84	.75	.76	.85
Average	.73	.73	.86	.77	.77	.89

could reliably code in the pilot sample, they were released to code the full sample. Coders then worked independently, viewing each ad as many times as necessary to assess the fit with the coding criteria.

The sample was first coded on the dichotomous classification of the advertiser's humorous intent (Yes/No). An ad was designated as intending humour if at least two of three judges agreed (Toncar 2001) that the advertiser was attempting to be funny or amuse the audience. Following Weinberger and Spotts (1989) and Alden, Hoyer, and Lee (1993), we did not ask judges to determine whether they personally felt the ad was humorous; instead, the humorous intent of the ad was coded in an effort to reduce subjectivity. Since the Raskin's script-based semantic theory of humour is primarily focussed on verbal humour, judges were instructed to focus on verbal humour only. Judges then coded whether the ad contained any of the Raskin contrasts—actual/nonactual, expected/unexpected, or possible/fully or partially impossible. If the judges could not identify any of the three Raskin contrasts, they indicated 'none' to represent other non-Raskin humour mechanisms. Judges were asked to code the aggressiveness of humour present in the ad. The target of the aggression could be an individual, group, or competitor brand and the aggression could be explicit or implicit. Finally, judges were asked to code the advertisement by product/service type: product category, tangible-intangible or utilitarian-hedonic.

For this research, we have adopted two of Krippendorff's (2013) types of reliability testing—*reproducibility*, measured by percent agreement between judges, and *accuracy*, measured by assessing the proportion of agreement between the judges and a standard coding prepared by an expert judge and Rust and Cooil (1994)'s PRL approach. In doing so, percent agreement (intercoder reliability) was calculated between judges within each country for all measures. This schema was selected as it enables the use of more than two simultaneous coders. The combined judgments were compared to an independent coding by an expert judge to assess percent accuracy. Moreover, the PRL reliability was calculated by referring to Rust and Cooil's (1994) PRL Reliability Table. Table 1 represents results from coding. As we can see, none of the three reliability ratios were below the critical point of 0.7, indicating an adequate level of reliability of the coding.

## Results

Preliminary analysis was performed on those ads coded as intended to be humorous. In the USA 163 of the 561 ads (29%) use humour as an appeal, while in the PRC 89 of the 362 ads (25%) used humour. These findings support past estimates that 24% of ads in the USA are humorous (Weinberger and Spotts 1989), and establishes a benchmark that frequency of humorous ads is relatively consistent across countries. There were

no observable differences in use of humour between tangible-intangible or utilitarian-hedonic product types. However, we did notice that humour was used more in low-involvement product categories (e.g. food, drink and household goods) than in high involvement categories (e.g. financial services and personal care).

To test hypothesis 1, we compared proportions of INC-RES contrasts against other mechanisms of humour in all ads coded as 'intended humour'. We found that the use of INC-RES contrasts (85%, frequency = 213) was significantly higher than the use of other mechanisms (15%, frequency = 39), providing support for hypothesis 1 ( $\chi^2(.5, 1) = 68.48, p = .00$ ). These proportions are higher than found by Alden, Hoyer, and Lee (1993) for the USA (69%), but comparable to Germany (92%) and Thailand (82%).

Since the test statistic did not exceed the critical value ( $\chi^2(.5, 1) = 3.82, p = .148$ ), we found support for hypothesis 2 and conclude that there is no significant difference in the proportions of the INC-RES appeals from country to country (USA: 77%,  $n = 163$ , frequency = 126; PRC: 98%,  $n = 89$ , frequency = 87). Our results support past findings (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993) and confirm that INC-RES contrasts are used consistently across the USA and PRC.

Investigation of the theorized differences in practitioner choice of humour type (aggressive vs. non-aggressive) in ads (H3) indicated a significant difference in proportions between countries ( $\chi^2(.05, 1) = 297.39, p = .00$ ). The USA (individualistic culture) showed a significantly higher proportion of aggressive humour (49%, frequency = 80) than the PRC (6%, frequency = 5) (collectivistic culture) ( $\chi^2(.5, 1) = 35.30, p = .00$ ). Thus, full support was established for hypothesis 3(a) on the link between individualism and use of aggression in humorous ads. When investigating the use of non-aggressive themes, the PRC (92%, frequency = 82) had a significantly higher proportion than the USA (30%, frequency = 49) ( $\chi^2(.5, 1) = 33.28, p = .00$ ). This finding confirmed the link between non-aggressive themes and collectivist cultures (PRC); thus, supporting hypothesis 3(b). Overall, findings of H1–3 suggest that advertiser choice in humour mechanism and humour type aligns with a matching or congruence hypothesis (culture to appeal).

## Study 2: Measuring effectiveness

The second study examines the impact of cultural (H4) and individual-level (H5) differences on perceived humour (PH) and the subsequent effects on advertising effectiveness. Based on a matching hypothesis, we expect cultures high on individualism (USA) to perceive greater humour in aggressive appeals (H4(a)), while cultures high on collectivism (China) would find non-aggressive appeals more humorous (H4(b)). This is tested at the country level using Hofstede's value orientation individualism/collectivism as a moderator. At the individual level, we use Schwartz's cultural values to predict parallel differences between individuals high on individualistic/collectivistic values and the moderating role on the humour type–PH relationship (H5(a/b)). We also controlled Need for Humour (NFH) (Cline, Altsech, and Kellaris 2003) and Need for Cognition (NFC) (Zhang 1996) in this model as these individual differences may influence the effectiveness of humorous appeals (Weinberger and Gulas 1992; Yoon and Mayer 2014).

## Method

The primary purpose of this second study was to test the hypotheses that the effect of aggressive humour type on PH is moderated by culture (national and individual) and thus influences advertising effectiveness. Using an experimental design, we manipulated 2 levels of aggressive strength (aggressive vs. non-aggressive) and measured 2 levels of culture (individualism/collectivism) in a between-subjects design. In our model we also included two covariates (NFH, NFC). The dependent variables are PH intensity and ad effectiveness measures.

## Participants

Subjects were recruited from business, engineering and humanities faculties at large universities in PRC and the USA. All instructions and materials were in the local language (USA: English; PRC: Chinese–Mandarin). A total of 268 participants completed the experiment (PRC 138, USA 130). In PRC, ages ranged from 18–33 (median 22), with 57% female respondents. In the USA, ages ranged from 18–47 (median 23), with 45% female respondents. Subjects were randomly assigned to conditions. Testing of potential within-country differences was achieved through ANOVA testing by city location, which indicated homogeneity of variance within countries for SVS ( $p = .763$ ), NFH ( $p = .629$ ), and NFC ( $p = .284$ ).

To increase sample equivalence we selected university students in major urban centres as our sampling frame. University students are acknowledged for their relative homogeneity as a group (Calder, Phillips, and Tybout 1981, Chan et al. 2007), with comparable education level, social class and age. Students attending university in relatively large urban settings also have similar access to media and exposure to advertising. This was also considered an appropriate sample as the stimulus advertisements were designed for a product used in similar quantities and ways in multiple cultures (e.g. Choi and Miracle 2004).

**Independent variables.** Similar to the first study, the index for Hofstede's (1983) cultural value orientation was used to classify the USA as high individualism and PRC as low individualism (or high collectivism) at the national level. Individual level cultural values were measured using a 27-item short form of the SVS using a nine-point scale ranging from 'extremely important' to 'opposed to my values'. The SVS is considered an etic (or culture-free) instrument that captures responses to a set of nine universal values: five individual (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement and power) and four collective (security, conformity/tradition, benevolence and universalism). In each of the nine domains, three items were chosen. For the PRC sample, the Mandarin version of the scale and demographic questions were adopted from the original back-translation of the SVS.

Internal reliability of the short form of the SVS was achieved across the samples ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and within the samples (PRC:  $\alpha = .87$ ; USA:  $\alpha = .85$ ). Each subscale had adequate internal reliability (IDV:  $\alpha = .82$ , COL:  $\alpha = .76$ ). Because individuals use the SVS differently, one must correct individual differences in use of the response scales. To correct, we centre each person's responses on his or her own mean (Schwartz and Littrell 2009). This converts absolute value scores into scores that indicate the relative

importance of each value to the person (i.e. the person's value priorities). Prior to pooling data for individual level analyses, each individual's total score on all value items was computed and divided by the total number of items to obtain a mean rating (MRAT) for the particular individual. This was included as a covariate in all individual level analyses (Schwartz and Littrell 2009).

**Covariates.** Need for Humour (NFH) was measured using an 11-item revised form of the scale developed by Cline, Altsech, and Kellaris (2003). Need for Cognition (NFC) was measured using an eight-item shortened scale developed by Cacioppo, Petty, and Feng (1984) where subjects used a seven-point scale anchored by strongly agree/strongly disagree. Construct equivalence was tested through translation/back translation (Brislin 1970) for the Mandarin version. We further tested measurement equivalence as suggested by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) prior to pooling of data and were able to achieve acceptable levels of measurement equivalence for both NFH and NFC. This allowed us to pool all respondents into a single sample in order to assess individual differences.

**Stimulus materials.** To manipulate aggressive strength, we developed two versions of a television advertisement (highly aggressive and non-aggressive) for a fictitious brand of energy drink. The stimulus advertisements were created by an international advertising agency to ensure that production quality was as high as possible (Eisend 2009). A fictitious brand of energy drink was devised, selected from the product category which most commonly uses humour appeals. Energy drinks are a familiar product in both national contexts, predominantly targeted at young, urban dwelling individuals, thereby increasing functional equivalence of the product category selected.

All elements of the product, brand and advertisement were carefully selected to be as culturally neutral as possible, with care taken to avoid unwanted connotations associated with brand, colour and situation. Agency creatives worked with the researchers to develop the product, brand, ad message and execution Ads used an INC-RES mechanism (Raskin 1985). Testing of concepts and specific ad elements was undertaken in parallel with the ad development process at all stages. To ensure that the ads were as equivalent as possible, except for the manipulation of aggression, the ads were developed in a 'doughnut' format. The beginning and ending was identical, and the middle sections manipulated. The ads were filmed with two Caucasian actors and voiceovers added for the Mandarin versions by two Chinese actors. Qualitative measures indicated no effect of ethnicity on recall, comprehension or perceived humour. (See Appendix 1 for a more detailed description of the ads).

Conceptual equivalence testing of the stimulus was undertaken with a multicultural sample of university students in conjunction with manipulation testing. Translation/back translation of the Mandarin voiceover was conducted with two bilingual Chinese academics, following a decentering process (Brislin 1970). Recall and comprehension items indicated participant understanding of the key elements of the ad. These were confirmed through interviews with a small sample of participants in each country.

**Dependent measures.** Two quantitative dependent variables were measured in the study ( $A_{ad}$  and PH strength/intensity). Aad was measured with a seven-item, seven-

point semantic differential scale (e.g. strongly persuasive/not at all persuasive, very appealing/not at all appealing, etc.; coefficient:  $\alpha = .92$ ). PH strength was measured with a single-item seven-point semantic differential scale (I found this ad extremely funny/not at all funny). One seven-point semantic differential scale item was included as an additional manipulation check, asking to what degree the central character in each ad displayed anger (high degree of anger/not at all angry). Two qualitative elements were included to assist in determining effectiveness of ads: unaided recall, and comprehension, explored with open ended questions.

**Procedure.** Participants were informed that the study was commissioned by a television production company concerned with their reactions to the first of a projected series of short documentaries. Five filler ads and one version of the stimulus ad were placed around the documentary (2 preceding, 2 mid-way and 2 following) to form the treatment. Filler advertisements were selected from television commercials never broadcast in our subject countries to reduce brand familiarity. After the viewing, participants were asked to complete the independent variable scales along with two additional questions about the programme content and participants' likes and dislikes about the content. Subjects were then asked to recall as many ads as possible from the preceding programme; listing brand, product features, ad features and any other pertinent information, after which participants were debriefed and thanked. Once all subjects had completed these sections, they were told that as an additional piece of research, they were to be asked their opinion of the ads surrounding the programme. Each ad was then shown individually, with participants recording their responses on  $A_{ad}$ , PH and the manipulation of aggressive theme.

A pre-test of the manipulation of humour aggression was conducted with an independent multicultural sample of 57 Chinese and Western undergraduate marketing students. Ages ranged from 18 to 31 (median 20) with 56% female. To verify the integrity of the manipulation, four items assessed the perceived intensity of aggression/hostility, physical violence, laughing at someone's pain and the anger displayed in the ad between the two experimental conditions. A significant difference was revealed between the two conditions on all four items (means ranging 4.68–6.32 vs. 1.04–2.88,  $p = .00$ ), indicating that aggression was perceived as higher in the aggression condition vs. the non-aggression condition. To validate the manipulation of aggression in the final experiment, one item on a seven-point semantic differential scale was included in the two-country study as an additional manipulation check, asking whether the main character in the ad displayed anger (high degree of anger/not at all angry). Perceived anger scores were significantly higher in the aggression condition vs. the non-aggression condition (5.68 vs. 2.57,  $p = .00$ ). The humour type manipulation, therefore, achieved its desired effect.

## Results

Since hypothesis 4 and 5 assume that Hofstede's (1983) national culture scores on individualism-collectivism represent an aggregate of individual-level values, two independent t-tests were run first to check whether this assumption holds true. Results,

however, were mixed: while there was a significant difference on individualism between Chinese ( $M=5.00$ ,  $SD = .88$ ) and Americans ( $M=5.30$ ,  $SD = .76$ ),  $t(266) = -2.91$ ,  $p = .00$ , there was no significant difference in terms of collectivism between Chinese ( $M=5.10$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) and Americans ( $M=5.25$ ,  $SD = .88$ ),  $t(266) = -1.48$ ,  $p = .14$ .

Hypothesis 4 was tested using ANOVA in a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design, testing main and interaction effects between two levels of national culture (IDV/COL) and two levels of humour (aggression/non-aggression) on PH. ANOVA results confirmed that PH was influenced by culture and aggression of humour. Results indicate that there was both a main effect of culture,  $F(1, 268) = 13.05$ ,  $p = .00$ , and a culture  $\times$  humour interaction effect,  $F(1, 268) = 7.78$ ,  $p = .00$  (see Table 2). A comparison of means, however, shows patterns contrary to that predicted. That is, the collectivist culture (PRC) ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=2.00$ ) overall had greater PH than the individualist culture (USA) ( $M=3.63$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ). Additionally, there was significantly greater PH in the aggressive condition in the collectivist culture ( $M=5.00$ ,  $SD=1.96$ ) vs. the individualist culture ( $M=3.39$ ,  $SD=2.20$ ). Figure 2 (Panel A) shows the mean PH across cultures and humour conditions. Based on these findings, there is no support for hypothesis 4(a) or hypothesis 4(b).

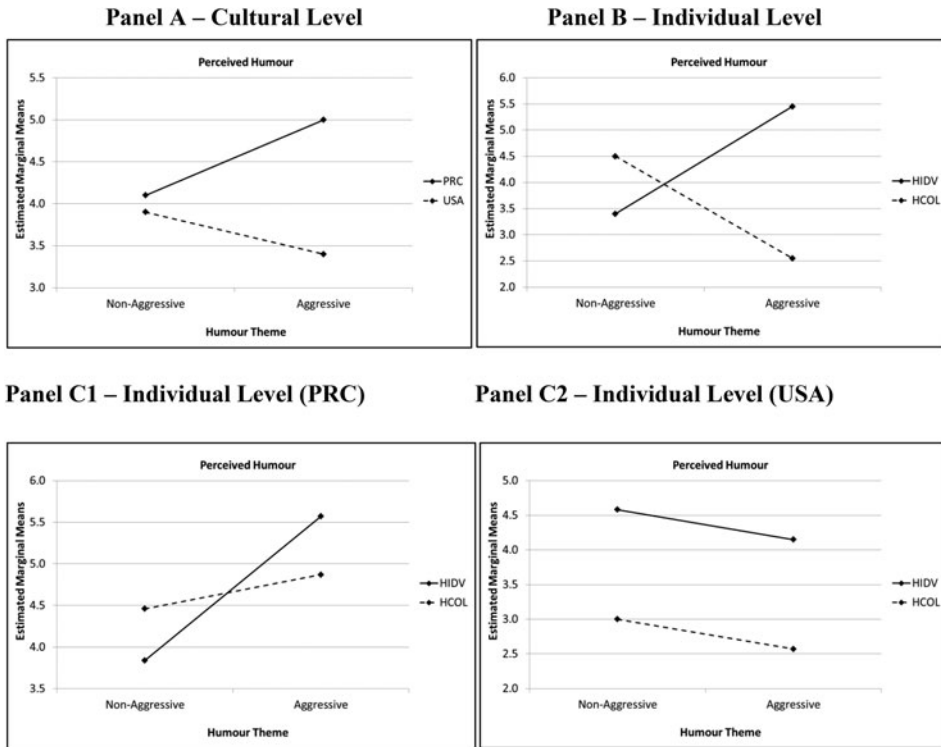
Hypothesis 5 was tested using ANOVA with pooled data across the two cultures in a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design, testing main and interaction effects between two levels of individual cultural values (IDV/COL) and two levels of humour (aggression/non-aggression) on PH. Using a quartile split, a subset of data were divided into high individualism (HIDV) and high collectivism (HCOL) groups (top 25% of scores). ANOVA confirmed that PH was influenced by individual cultural values and humour aggression. Results indicate that there is a main effect of individual cultural values,  $F(1, 116) = 4.21$ ,  $p = .04$ , and an individual cultural values  $\times$  humour interaction effect,  $F(1, 116) = 28.43$ ,  $p = .00$  (see Table 2). A comparison of means showed patterns that supported the predicted direction of relations. Those high in individual (collective) values had significantly greater PH in the aggression (non-aggression) ad. Figure 2 (Panel B) shows the mean PH for individual cultural (values) and humour type conditions. Based on

**Table 2.** Anova results culture  $\times$  humour interaction.

Measures	Perceived Humour (Mean) Culture Level		Type III sum of squares	df	F	Sig.	
	USA	PRC					
Intercept	Aggressive:	3.39	5.00	4441.18	268	1066.32	.000
Humour				2.16	268	.52	.472
IND-COL (Culture)	Non-aggressive:	3.91	4.12	54.20	268	13.05	.000
Humour $\times$ IND-COL				32.31	268	7.78	.006

Measures	Perceived Humour (Mean) Individual Level		Type III sum of squares	df	F	Sig.	
	IND	COL					
Intercept	Aggressive:	5.40	2.67	1804.19	116	458.48	.000
Humour				.57	116	.14	.345
IND-COL (Individual)	Non-aggressive:	3.29	4.50	16.57	116	4.21	.043
Humour $\times$ IND-COL				111.88	116	28.43	.000

USA: United States of America; PRC: People's Republic of China; IND: individualism; COL: collectivism.



PRC – People’s Republic of China; USA – United States of America  
 HIDV – subjects with high individual values; HCOL - subjects with high collective values

**Figure 2.** Means plot of perceived humour (culture and individual level).Panel A: Cultural Level;Panel B: Individual Level;Panel C1: Individual Level (PRC);Panel C2: Individual Level (USA).PRC: People’s Republic of China; USA: United States of America. HIDV: subjects with high individual values; HCOL: subjects with high collective values.

these findings, there was full support for both hypothesis 5(a) and hypothesis 5(b).

In order to further examine the disparity between country level and individual level effects of PH, we further employed a three-way factorial analysis (country × individual culture × aggression). While the three-way interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 130) = .90$  ( $p = .35$ ), we found significant interaction effects between individual values and aggression in the PRC sample: PH was stronger for HIDV subjects than HCOL subjects in the aggression condition ( $M_{HIDV} = 5.57, SD = 1.34; M_{HCOL} = 4.87, SD = 2.36; p = .01$ ) while PH was weaker for HIDV subjects than HCOL subjects in the non-aggression condition ( $M_{HIDV} = 3.84, SD = 2.34; M_{HCOL} = 4.46, SD = 1.86; p = .01$ ) (see Figure 2, Panel C1). This interaction effect was not evident in the USA sample (see Figure 2, Panel C2). We also found a significant country effect,  $F(1, 130) = 38.35, p = .02$ : PRC samples consistently rated higher PH ( $M = 4.59$ ) than USA samples ( $M = 3.66$ ).

Although not hypothesized, we also tested the effects of PH on  $A_{ad}$  by incorporating the covariates of NFH and NFC as well as demographics, such as country, gender and age. We employed an ordinary least square (OLS) regression analysis approach and the results were presented in Table 3. The  $R^2$  of this model was .29. After controlling the effect of NFH and NFC, as well as some demographic factors, PH has a

**Table 3.** Ordinary least square (OLS) regression analysis.

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Model		
		$\beta$	t-value	p-value
<b>Attitudes toward A<sub>ds</sub> (A<sub>ad</sub>)</b>				
	Perceived Humour (PH)	.48	8.83	.00
	Need for Humour (NFH)	.04	.69	.49
	Need for Cognition (NFC)	-.08	-1.38	.17
	Country	.17	2.82	.01
	Gender	.07	1.17	.25
	Age	.05	.86	.39
	Individualism	-.02	-.29	.78
	Collectivism	.07	1.10	.27

positive and significant effect on A<sub>ad</sub> ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $t = 8.83$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Interestingly, country also has a positive effect on on A<sub>ad</sub> ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.82$ ,  $p = .01$ ), which indicated that the Chinese subjects were more likely to have a positive A<sub>ad</sub> than the American subjects. None of the other co-variate factors were significant.

## Discussion and implications

Reviews of humour in advertising have been undertaken (e.g. Gulas and Weinberger 2006; Eisend 2009) but to date, the cross-cultural extension of this phenomenon has attracted only limited attention. The aim of our research was to replicate theory on the universality of humour mechanisms across cultures (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993) and investigate the extent to which cultural context influences advertiser choice and effectiveness of humorous ad appeals in different national environments. Our findings provide further evidence for the premise that humour is a universal appeal in advertising and suggest that Raskin's INC-RES humour mechanisms are the predominant typology used in executing humour appeals in advertising. Our investigation into the choice of aggression in humorous appeals in study one did indicate that aggressive humour was used more frequently in individualist cultures than collectivist cultures. However, our findings in study two indicated that culture alone is a poor predictor of ad effectiveness and that there are key individual-difference variables that capture similarities/differences within cultures (Chang 2007; Okazaki and Mueller 2007). These may be better predictors for specific consumer groups (e.g. global young adults); thus, allowing for possible standardization across cultures. The findings of both of our studies have implications when transferring humorous appeals across cultures.

The content analysis determined that the high proportions of advertisements using INC-RES humour appeals were consistent between the two culturally diverse nations of USA and PRC. However, the type of humour selected by advertising practitioners consistent with national cultural inclinations was not that to which young individuals respond most positively. Contrary to expectations, at the aggregate level the collectivist culture, PRC, perceived greater humour in both the aggressive and non-aggressive humorous ads vs. the individualistic culture, USA. Interestingly, USA preferred the non-aggressive theme over the aggressive theme, though there is a tendency towards the increasing use of aggressive themes in that market. Advertisers in the USA are increasingly using aggressive humour appeals, but our results from study two suggested that



their audience was more responsive to non-aggressive appeals. Similarly, advertisers in the PRC were using more non-aggressive humour than aggressive, yet their audiences found aggressive humour more interesting and effective. This result is similar to the findings from Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno, and Richard (2014)'s empirical study that French favoured benevolence and universalism values in humorous ads more than the Americans and Chinese, which was contradictory to the congruency theory (matching hypothesis) that states that the content of the ads should match the salient values in a given country. At the individual level, our findings confirmed the hypotheses that high collective customers would find more perceived humour for non-aggressive ads while high individual customers would find more perceived humour for aggressive ads. This contradictory finding between national and individual culture leads us to reconsider the validity of using national culture as a summarized construct to represent cultural values and the role of possible omitted factors that could lead to the disparity.

One explanation for the apparent contradiction could be the fact that national culture, as summarized in Hofstede (1983)'s studies, cannot represent the cultural diversity for those countries under unprecedented economic and social reform in the past twenty years, such as PRC. Recent studies have addressed this issue that Chinese people are becoming less collective, especially among young generations (Zhang and Shavitt 2003; Hamamura and Xu 2015; Shuai, Mi, and Zou 2015). Our study confirmed that there was no significant difference in terms of collectivism between the USA and PRC samples.

Another explanation for the apparent contradiction could be the fact that aggressive ads (vs. non-aggressive ads) in China (vs. USA) increase the novelty of the information, which subsequently draw individuals' cognitive attention to them (Hirschman 1980). The advertising market in USA has been saturated. In order to break through the clutter and gain audience attention, advertisers may select more aggressive humour appeals. US subjects live in a society where violence and aggression are omnipresent through popular entertainment, media and the community and the link between fictional and authentic aggression is perhaps more obvious, leading to a lesser appreciation of its inclusion in humorous appeals. In the PRC, on the contrary, advertising is still in the relatively early stages of development and to maintain social harmony, advertisers may select more non-aggressive humorous appeals. The level of societal violence is less present in popular media, allowing them to suspend disbelief in pictorial aggression more easily and enhancing a possible novelty effect (Jeon and Beatty 2002). As a result, humour that addresses values not usually tapped in a society could effectively heighten the novelty of the ads and facilitate the acceptance of it (Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno, and Richard 2014; Rößner, Kämmerer, and Eisend 2017).

For advertisers that face fierce competition in the world's top markets, it is important to know whether ad campaigns can be transferred to other global markets and what (if any) adaptation is needed. While there are mixed findings on this issue, one commonly accepted approach is that of a congruency hypothesis, which suggests advertising appeals/themes match that of the cultural values in that market. Undeniably, practitioners need to understand the markets they advertise in and identify values being portrayed in ads in those markets. But of greater importance is the need to identify what specific values are most relevant to their target audience when

evaluating ads, especially those depicting humour. Our research findings demonstrate that advertising practice at the country/cultural level is not necessarily aligned to audience reaction at the individual level, suggesting that companies need to align their ads to the values of their target audience rather than to a broader set of societal values. By investigating the effects of one prevalent type of humour (aggressive) we examined the link between individual-level cultural values with reactions to types of humour and found this a better determinant of success in predicting ad perceptions than country level values. This research also confirmed the persistent use across cultures of certain humour mechanisms (INC-RES). Together these findings can help campaign managers move towards identifying possible universal approaches in ad development that might transfer in diverse cultural settings with similar target audiences.

### **Limitations and further research**

There are some limitations in our research that warrant further investigation. While internal validity of these studies was high external validity was limited to the two national contexts and subject cohorts under investigation. Other media should also be investigated, particularly the use of humour in interactive communications (Brown, Bhadury, and Pope 2010). The choice of national contexts limits generalizability and further research should extend this investigation to compare results in other large advertising markets such as Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as emerging ad markets such as Russia, Brazil and Indonesia (ZenithOptimedia 2018). In addition, further research is needed to evaluate within-culture and between-culture differences in humour content preferences, with sampling from numerous diverse populations within each country. Subcultures exist in each of these nations and generalizability will depend on replication of results and longitudinal studies. Additionally, we only identified the use of Raskin's (1985) INC-RES contrasts. Further research into other humour mechanisms (e.g. Speck's 1990, humour taxonomy) could be useful to identify patterns of usage of alternative mechanisms.

Study two tested the effectiveness of a single advertisement, but not the effect of an integrated marketing campaign that includes different media, messages or target audiences. The impact of repetition, ad spend, communication clutter and competitive action should also be included in further research. In addition, further research of PH on additional ad effectiveness measures such as persuasiveness of the ad, attitude toward the brand and purchase intention measures is needed to determine not only immediate effects of humour, but longer term effects on brand and purchase behaviour. Investigation of responses to humour is always complex with a plethora of potential influences on reactions. The content of the humour, executional variables, context and individual differences within audience members all require systematic exploration to determine message transferability across cultural borders while retaining effective levels of PH and ad effectiveness.

There are also some methodological issues. First, the sample size of Chinese humour advertisements was relatively small compared with the sample size of US humour advertisement, which could lead to some generalizability issues. Future

research should investigate advertisements across numerous channels including digital media to capture the full extent of the use and effectiveness of humour and aggression in communications. Second, the perceived humour was measured using a single-item scale, which could put the reliability of the measurement into question (Wanous, Reichers, and Hudy 1997). Third, the use of Caucasian actors in the tested commercial ads could have primed individualistic values among our Chinese subjects, which confound the findings from the experiment (Oyserman and Lee 2007; Hong 2008). Aggression against Caucasian actors may also not be an extreme violation of social norms in China, while aggression against certain members of society (e.g. elders) may be considered an extreme violation. Recent research suggests looking at a more 'fine-tuned' approach investigating both the vividness of aggression (Weinberger et al. 2017) and extremity in aggression and degree of violation of social norms (McGraw et al. 2012). Fourth, we did not distinguish the aggressiveness in terms of superiority and disparagement (Ferguson and Ford 2008), which could have differential effect on PH. Last, we did not consider the product category when comparing and analyzing the effectiveness of humorous advertising while recent studies have shown the significant effects at product level (Chung and Zhao 2003). Future research should address the above limitations of the current study.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## **Appendix 1. Description of the ads in experiment.**

The ads pictured the stereotypical aging rock star (think Rolling Stones!) in the back of his white stretch limousine, travelling along with his red Gibson guitar beside him. Nessun Dorma plays in the background. He is engrossed in his needlepoint of a flaming skull. His phone rings ...

### ***Version A—no aggression***

The rock star answers the phone with 'Hi Max' and we cut to a shot of his tour manager on the other end of the line. Resigned to the familiar litany, he puts the phone on speaker on the seat beside him and reaches for the energy drink he knows he will need. As he drinks, the music changes to the rock anthem 'Hit me with your rhythm stick', and we see the tour manager continuing with his listing of engagements. The refrain rises of 'hit me, hit me, hit me' as he arrives at the venue and explodes out of the limo to camera flashes and screaming girls. A product shot follows, with the voiceover and super of the brand name and tagline 'Hamma. The big hit energy drink'.

### ***Version B—extreme aggression***

The rock star answers the phone with a resigned 'Hit me'. The tour manager launches directly into a rapid-fire recital of the star's appointments for the day, reading from a white board. The star attempts to interrupt but is unable to do so. Angry at the intransigence of his manager he picks up his embroidery needle and stabs the phone, to no effect. Placing the phone on the seat beside him he punches it repeatedly, to grunts and cries from his manager, finally crushing the phone underfoot. Satisfied, he grabs his energy drink and sits back. As he drinks, the music changes to the rock anthem 'Hit me with your rhythm stick', and we see a shot of the manager withering in pain on the ground. The refrain rises of 'hit me, hit me, hit me' as he arrives at the venue and explodes out of the limo to camera flashes and screaming girls. A product shot follows, with the voiceover and super of the brand name and tagline 'Hamma. The big hit energy drink'.