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The Effects of Reciprocity in a Triadic Relationship

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This study offers an investigation of the influence of the norm of reciprocity on recommendation decisions in a triadic relationship. We evaluate the effects of a sample in the context of a salesperson-healthcare provider-patient relationship, where the sample may be transferred through the triad or retained by the physician for his or her own use (dyad). This research attempts to resolve competing hypotheses about the comparative strength of obligations in the dyad and triad. Based upon the findings of a pretest, we propose an experimental study with physician assistants as subjects, and we plan to utilize indirect-report questioning formats in order to mitigate social desirability bias.

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The Effects of Reciprocity in a Triadic Relationship

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Extended Abstract

The norm of reciprocity reflects both a socially stabilizing function as well as a relationship-initiating role, and is universal (Gouldner 1960). Reciprocity involves both rights and duties for each side of a gift exchange (Gouldner 1960), such that individuals have the obligation to give, to receive, and to give back (Mauss 1954 (1925)). Studies within dyadic relationships have shown that gifts, whether or not they are searched for or expected, elicit a sense of obligation in the recipient (Regan 1971). Despite the fact that these theories were developed to explain the role of reciprocity in networks, research designed to understand effects beyond the context of dyads has not been done. It has been proposed that "triadization either supports and reinforces or inhibits and upsets a dyadic reciprocity" (Lebra 1975). Examining the effects of reciprocity beyond dyads has important implications for researchers of social influence in many disciplines, public policy makers, and practitioners.

Consider the following scenario: A pharmaceutical salesperson visits a healthcare provider, intent on increasing prescriptions for a particular product. After delivering a sales message about the product and its benefits, the salesperson leaves some samples. The samples are presented so the provider can facilitate initiation of therapy with a patient, with purported convenience and financial benefits. But the provider may also utilize these pharmaceutical samples for his or her own use, to treat an existing condition. In practice, both transference and personal use are fairly common (Tesoriero 2006).

In healthcare, voluntary professional guidelines developed by both physician groups like the American Medical Association and the pharmaceutical industry, have limited gifts to items of relatively low value, such as pens and pads, as well as the distribution of free samples (AMA 1998-1999; PhRMA 2002). While it has been argued that items of nominal value such as pens and pads may elicit obligations that alter provider behavior (Katz, Caplan, and Merz 2003), in practice their use has become more limited recently (Tesoriero 2006). We focus instead on the effect of samples, as these are *designed* to be utilized in a triadic relationship.

We hypothesize that samples will be perceived as gifts, both in the dyad (salesperson-provider) and in the triad (salesperson-provider-patient) scenario, and will elicit obligation due to the norm of reciprocity. The provider will feel obligated to the salesperson in either situation, personal use or transference; the end-user patient will feel obligated to the provider or the pharmaceutical firm, or both. But in which scenario (dyad or triad) are obligations the strongest? How can the salience of a message of obligation affect compliance behavior? What is the nature of the underlying relationship, whereby each member of a triad can repay another? Finally, can liking be ruled out as an alternative explanation?

Instances when samples are retained by the provider, creating a dyad, seem to converge with research showing positive effects on reciprocal behavior (Guéguen and Pascual 2003; Regan 1971). Marketing literature has documented small positive effects of samples upon prescribing behavior (Gönül, Carter, Petrova et al. 2001; Mizik and Jacobson 2004). These studies, however, remain empirical in nature, not explicitly examining the underlying theoretical mechanism. Our study utilizes a similar context, yet diverges in its purpose: we aim not to explain an empirical observation, but instead to test and extend theory and to resolve competing explanations for underlying causes.

Among seven proposed triadic relationships (Lebra 1975), we suspect that acts of repayment in this context may be explained by either circular transference, where the end user attempts to repay the initial giver, or lineal transference, where the provider is involved in linked dyads as a 'middleman.' The role of the provider is such that "there is a distinct breach in the traditional buying decision process: the decision maker...chooses among an array of...alternatives" (Gönül, Carter, Petrova et al. 2001); the end user ultimately acquires the product and evaluates its utility. For us, a gift is a tangible sample relevant to a recipient's role as a decision-maker, an object capable of either being utilized by the expert or transferred through to a third party.

Two arguments offer divergent predictions of the strength of the norm of reciprocity between dyadic and triadic relationships. On one hand, "triadization may bind the actor more effectively than does a dyadic bond," while on the other hand, a triad may "reduce the intensity of an interpersonal bond characteristic of a dyad" (Lebra 1975). The conditions under which triads are more or less binding than dyads will be investigated here.

The first perspective stems from work on dyadic reciprocation. Posing as a vehicle for information, this "not-so-free sample" can automatically invoke a "natural indebteding force" (Cialdini 1993), in a healthcare setting (Wazana 2000), and represents a lineal transference, where the provider is involved through the linking of two dyads.

Alternatively, when a sample is transferred to the patient, it is being utilized as intended, and the provider may feel indebted from value provided to the patient. However, in this situation the provider does not realize the direct benefits of the sample, and may be less apt to reciprocate. The patient's receipt of the sample, however, may lead to a desire to reciprocate directly to the pharmaceutical firm (Oldani 2004), creating a circular transference. We suspect that the effects found in a circular transference are weaker than those in a lineal transference.

Salience of the obligation may play a significant role. In conditions of high message salience, the salesperson may be exhibiting “creditor ideology,” where “creditors prefer to have others in their debt because they believe that the norm of reciprocity will produce generous repayments” (Eisenberger, Cotterell, and Marvel 1987). This may be perceived by the recipient, thereby producing ‘reciprocation wariness’ (Cotterell, Eisenberger, and Speicher 1992) or ‘persuasion knowledge’ (Friestad and Wright 1999). A recipient can mentally acknowledge that a gift is a ‘sales device,’ thereby sidestepping the obligation altogether (Cialdini 1993). This may be true in both dyads and triads. In conditions of low message salience, a sense of obligation may not manifest at all.

A pretest on high-expert students (n=52), utilizing sunscreen samples, found a significant interaction between sample condition, motivation orientation (extrinsic/intrinsic), and likelihood to recommend ($F(1, 33) = 4.88, p = .05$). Our next experiment will be a 2 (gift retained/transferred) x 2 (high/low salience) + 1 (control group) experiment conducted with approximately 150 physician assistant (PA) students. Our instrument will be a questionnaire where hypothetical scenarios focus on a fictitious PA’s liking of the salesperson, likelihood to recommend the sampled product, the perceived benefits of the samples, and sense of obligation toward the salesperson.

Healthcare providers overwhelmingly believe that the acceptance of gifts has little or no impact on their recommendation decisions (Harris 2006; Murray 2002). Therefore, conducting an experiment with providers requires overcoming some level of social desirability bias (Neeley and Cronley 2004). We propose an experiment that will utilize indirect-report questioning formats to mitigate this bias, where “participants will project their own opinions and behaviors onto [an in-group] referent person” (Cronley, Neeley, and Silvera 2006).

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Comparative Content Analysis of Thai and Vietnamese Ads, 1994 and 2004

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Abstract

Thai and Vietnamese print advertisements were content analyzed to examine how content and advertising expression differed in the two countries at two different time periods, 1994 and 2004. Analysis focused on traditional Eastern and Western, and Informational and Emotional appeals. As hypothesized, Vietnamese ads contained more traditional and informational appeals than Thai ads, while Thai ads were found to contain fewer informational and traditional Eastern appeals than Vietnamese ads. Implications for practitioners and theoreticians are discussed.

In Southeast Asia, Vietnam and Thailand are among the countries most visible in the West. Although adjacent and culturally quite similar, they differ dramatically in their political systems and economic foundation. Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, with a widely revered king who exercises his powers through the National Assembly, the Council of Ministers (Cabinet), and the Courts. Vietnam is a socialistic democracy governed by a single-party parliamentary system, with an Executive and Judiciary chosen by the party. Vietnam, of course, was deeply affected by the war, while Thailand managed to stay largely out of the conflict.

Thailand enjoys a vital consumer economy built on gold, gemstones, and other natural resources, and has been active trade with the West since the 1970s. Only in recent years have international trade and modern consumerism begun to emerge in Vietnam, and then only in the large cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). In economic terms, the Thai per capita GNP was roughly \$ 5,500 in 1994 and \$ 6,500 in 2004, an 85% increase. Vietnam's was \$1,200 in 1994 and \$1,700 in 2004, a 70% increase (Global EDGE, 2004). This promising growth has attracted the attention of business leaders throughout Europe and North America.

With economic growth often comes an increasing interest in advertising, along with new challenges for Western advertising agencies that want to work in non-Western cultures (Zhou and Belk, 2004). Advertising practitioners and researchers are well aware of the dangers of applying American and British approaches in other countries. Many scholars have warned of the perils, e.g., Hofstede (1980), and some have done empirical studies in their efforts to understand international audiences better. For example, Biswas, Olsen, and Carlet (1992) observed that French advertisements employed more emotional appeals, humor, and sex, while American advertisements used more informational cues. Partially consistent with these findings, Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) reported that more Westernized countries such as France, the US, Finland, the UK, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Philippines use emotional appeals more often than do traditional Asian countries such as China, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

In Southeast Asia, Wongthada and Leelakulthanit (1997) in Thailand and Schutlz and Que (1997) in Vietnam pointed out the substantial effects of socio-political transition on advertising, and Sar and Doyle (2002) showed that Thai ads expressed more Western values than Cambodian ads. The importance of all these studies, of course, is that they help refine the practice of advertising, especially advertising designed by Western firms for use in Eastern countries. They may also contribute to cross-cultural audience analysis and theory-building, and to theories of cultural transmission and "hegemony."

The present study tries to advance our understanding of Southeast Asian audiences and culture by focusing on changes in the content of advertising in the ten years from 1994-2004. It applies tried-and-true comparative techniques, and adds a development dimension seldom seen in the cross-cultural advertising literature.

Method

This is a content analysis in which we draw inferences about the development of Thai and Vietnamese cultures from the Eastern versus Western content of Thai and Vietnamese magazine advertisements over the past ten years. We shall argue that practitioners who understand this cultural development better will be able to produce more effective ads and campaigns, and that theorists who peruse these data will be able to make finer distinctions than they previously could, particularly within Southeast Asia.

The Magazines. According to the Thai daily newspaper *Thairath* (2004) the three most widely read monthly magazines in Thailand are *Bangkok Metro*, *Prail* ("Shining"), and *Bambi News*. According to the Vietnamese daily newspaper "*Vietnam News*" (2004), the three most popular monthly magazines in Vietnam are *Song Manh*, *Phu Nu Viet*, and *Que Huong* ("People"). In both sets, the first magazine is a general-interest publication similar to *Life* or *Look* in the United States; the second is a women's magazine similar to *Home and Garden*; and the third is a popular magazine similar to *People*.

The Ads. In the twelve 1994 and twelve 2004 issues of each of these magazines, we identified all ads for household products, personal and non-personal. Personal household products included shampoo, soap, body lotion, sanitary pads, and toothpaste; non-personal household products included detergent, fabric rinse, and dishwashing liquid.

From the total number of these ads—79 in 1994 and 90 in 2004 for Thailand; 56 in 1994 and 45 in 2004 for Vietnam—we randomly selected 35 from each year and each country, for a total final sample of 140 ads.

Content Analysis. The focus of the analysis was the relative frequency of traditional Eastern versus Western appeals (per our literature review) and emotional versus informational cues, in the two countries in the two years.

To define the first of these terms, twenty Thai and Vietnamese students studying at a large Midwestern university in the United States participated in a focus group in which they were asked to define traditional "Eastern" appeals. This discussion identified four principle characteristics of traditional appeals: Respect for Elders, Collectivism, Conservative Sexual Morality, and Modesty.

To define the second of these terms, Western Appeals, we used Hong and Zhu's (1995) scales: Sexy, Humorous, Comfortable, and Convenient. These scales have been used in numerous studies of international advertising, e.g., Lai Man So (2004), Zhang and Shavitt (2003), Tai (1997), and Wang, Pinkleton, and Morton (1997), and Graham, Kamins, Oetomo (1993).

To define Emotional Appeals, we used Plutchik's abbreviated Mood Rating Scale (1980), which relies on four adjectives selected from his longer checklist. The four elements on the abbreviated scale are Happiness, Pleasantness, Interest, and Surprise. These scales were used in Hong, Muderrisoglus, and Zinkhan's (1987) study of cultural differences in Japanese and American magazines.

Finally, we defined Informational Appeals with four elements from Stern and Resnick's (1981) conception of "informativeness": Price/Value, Quality, Guarantees/Warranties, and New Ideas, or Novelty. These scales, too, were used in Lai Man So's (2004) study of cross cultural comparison between Hong Kong and Australia's women magazines; Hong, Muderrisoglus, and Zinkhan's (1987).

We created a five-point semantic differential scale for each of the 16 elements, e.g., Not Happy to Very Happy. Four judges then used these scales to code the Thai and Vietnamese ads for Eastern versus Western appeals, including emotional versus informational cues. Two Thai graduate students, one male and one female, coded the Thai ads, and two Vietnamese graduate students, also one male and one female, coded the Vietnamese ads. All coders were fluent in English as well as in their home languages. Reliability coefficients for this coding ranged from .79 (Traditional, Thai 1994) to .85 (Emotional, Vietnamese, 2004), with an average of .81, well within the recommended range for studies of this sort (Kassarjian, 1977); and Nunnally, 1978).

Results

With regard to Traditional Eastern Appeals in Vietnamese versus Thai ads for the two years combined, Table 1a indicates significant differences on Respect, Collectiveness, and Modesty, and a borderline-significant difference ($p=.08$) on Sexual Morality. These differences uniformly depict Vietnam as the more traditional of the two countries:

With regard to differences in the extent of Traditional Eastern Appeals between 1994 and 2004, Table 1b show significant difference across years on all four variables for the Vietnamese ads, and on two of the four variables—Collectivity and Sexual Morality—for the Thai ads.

In the Vietnamese ads, the Respect, Collectivity, and Modesty means are higher for 2004 than for 1994, the Morality mean lower. In the Thai ads, the situation is partially reversed: The Collectivity mean is lower for 2004, the Morality mean higher. At the same time, the Respect and Modesty means are unchanged. According to these data, over the past decade the Vietnamese ads have become more Respectful, more Communal, and more Modest, but also more sexual (lower Morality). The Thai ads have become less Communal and less sexual (more Moral), but remained unchanged in Respect and Modesty.

With regard to Traditional Western Appeals in Vietnamese versus Thai ads for the two years combined, Table 2a indicates significant differences on all four dimensions: Convenient, Sexy, Comfortable, and Humorous. These differences again depict Vietnam as the more traditional Eastern, the less Western, of the two countries.

With regard to differences in the extent of Traditional Western Appeals between 1994 and 2004, Table 2b shows significant differences on three of the four dimensions—all except Comfortable—for both the Vietnamese and the Thai ads. In the Vietnamese ads, the Convenient, Sexy, and Humorous means are all higher for 2004 than for 1994. In the Thai ads, the situation is again reversed: The 2004 means are all lower. In the Vietnamese ads, the 2004 mean ratings are always higher than the 1994 mean ratings. According to these data, the Vietnamese ads have become a little more Western than they used to be, but they remain less than Thai ads.

With regard to Emotional Appeals in Vietnamese versus Thai ads for the two years combined, Table 3a shows higher Thai means on Surprised, Pleasant, and Interesting, and a non-significant difference on Happy. The Thai ads for the most part use more emotional cues than the Vietnamese ads.

With regard to differences in the extent of Emotional Appeals between 1994 and 2004, Table 3b shows significant differences on two of the four variables—non-significant on Surprised and Pleasant—for the Vietnamese ads, and on all four variables for the Thai ads. In the Vietnamese ads, the Happy mean is higher for 2004 than for 1994, the Interesting mean lower. In the Thai ads, all 2004 means are higher than the corresponding 1994 means. According to these data, the Thai ads have increased in all four kinds of emotional content, while the Vietnamese ads have increased in Happy content, decreased in Interesting content. The ads depict Thai culture as more emotional than Vietnamese culture, and Thai ads more emotional—happier, more interesting, more surprising, more pleasant—and growing still more so.

With regard to Information Appeals in Vietnamese versus Thai ads for the two years combined, Table 4a indicates significant differences on all four dimensions of Informational Appeal: Price Value, Quality, Warranty, and New Ideas (Novelty). These differences consistently depict Vietnam as using more informational cues than Thailand.

With regard to differences in the extent of Informational Appeals between 1994 and 2004, Table 4b shows significant differences on two of the four variables (Quality and Warranty), a borderline significant difference on one variable ($p=.07$ for New Idea), and a non-significant difference on one variable (Price Value) for the Vietnamese ads. Table 4b also show significant differences on two variables (Price Value and Quality), a borderline difference ($p=.06$ on New Idea), and a non-significant difference (Warranty) on the Thai ads.

Again, the Vietnamese and Thai patterns are substantially opposite. On Quality—the only Informational dimension on which the change is significant for both countries—the 2004 Vietnamese mean is lower than the 1994 mean, but in the Thai ads, the 2004 mean is higher. On Novelty, borderline-significant for both countries, the 2004 Vietnamese mean is higher than the 1994 mean, but the 2004 Thai mean is lower. Vietnamese culture, per the above less emotional than Thai culture, is growing less concerned with quality information and more interested in novelty, while Thai culture, more emotional, is growing more concerned with quality information, and less concerned with Novelty. The inference we draw is that, just as the two cultures are moving toward each other in terms of emotional cues, so they are becoming more similar in terms of informational cues.

Discussion

The principal strengths of this study are that it is built on random samples of ads from the most widely read magazines in Thailand and Vietnam and that it evaluates those ads according to attributes identified as important in respected previous studies. The principal weaknesses are that the study analyzes only print ads, indeed only magazine ads, and that it samples ads from only two points in time. Despite these weaknesses, we believe the results are consistent enough that practitioners and theorists may draw conclusions from them.

Our analysis identified a number of important patterns: First, that Vietnam is the more traditional, less Westernized of the two cultures; second, that Vietnamese ads have become more Western over the past ten years, Thai ads in many (but not all) ways less Western (Collective, Sexual, Humorous); third, that Vietnamese ads have become more emotionally cued in the past ten years; and, fourth, that Thai ads have become more informationally cued in some ways (Quality), less so in others (Novelty), while Vietnamese ads showed just the opposite pattern, less informationally cued as to Quality, more so as to Novelty. The Thai patterns were often just the opposite of the Vietnamese patterns, despite the proximity and apparent cultural similarity of the two countries.

What are advertising practitioners and theorists to draw from these findings? The most obvious conclusion is that, despite the proximity and superficial similarity of the two cultures, they should not be treated the same. In more technical terms, they are not samples from the same population.

More specifically, practitioners and theorists can expect that Vietnamese print-ad audiences will respond positively to more traditional Asian appeals—those that rest on Conservative Sexual Morality, Collectivity, and Product Information—while Thai audiences will respond positively to somewhat more Western appeals. We cannot escape the image of a fundamentally Confucian culture (Doyle, 1999, pp. 89ff) in Vietnam growing increasingly Western as it sheds its Communistic history and takes its place on the international stage.