

Cross-Cultural Advertising Execution Style: Past Trends and Future Directions

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Abstract

Objectives: To provide a comprehensive review of cross-cultural advertising content literature and synthesize the conclusions of research studies of cross-cultural execution styles of advertising in past years, namely during 1988-2003 period. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** Sixty articles covering comparison of more than 30 countries are collected and analyzed from 18 business leading journals. The study focusses on the four most studied ad dimensions: level of information, emotional/rational appeal typology, elements of advertising appeal, and gender role portrayal. The results of past research on the ad execution styles differences between countries are conformed; with some of opposite conclusions. **Findings:** Results show that the ads content across countries are significantly different in the level of information, emotional/rational, and advertising appeal dimensions; and often similar with regards to gender role portrayal dimension. Cross-cultural execution styles of advertising on the three dimensions found to be generally different due to the cultural differences; these differences, however, are moderated by other factors such as product type and the lack of a uniform theoretical model for measuring cultural values across countries. **Application/Improvements:** A qualitative emic approach should be developed to enable establishing data equivalence, and similar sampling frames and methods in all cultural groups.

Keywords: Advertising, Ad Content, Ad Execution, Cross-Cultural Research, Literature Review

1. Introduction

In the cross-cultural advertising studies, content analysis, which sets out to examine whether difference in advertising executions vary among two or more countries, is replete in the literature¹⁻⁴. Content analysis has covered a wide variety of advertising executional variables in addition to information level and become an important research methodology for understanding the ways advertising depicts value-laden subjects, such as level of information, gender role portrayal and appeal type^{2,4}.

The purpose of this paper is to 1. Provide a review of the sample and trend in country/culture selection in cross-cultural advertising studies; 2. Summarize the research topics and synthesize conclusions of cross-cultural execution styles of advertising in past years, namely during 1988-2003 period 3. Indicate the opportunities for the future studies.

2. Overview of Articles

2.1 Sample

The cross-cultural advertising research is defined as any empirical study that compares advertising content more than one culture⁷. More precisely, this paper only focuses on the dominant culture differences across national boundaries instead of within one country. Due to a large volume of cross-cultural advertising research, this study is aimed at assessing cross-cultural content analysis of advertising literature during 1988-2003 periods. Based on the definition, 60 articles are collected (Appendix 1).

As shown in Table 1, 18 journals have published cross-cultural content analysis of advertising. In terms of the number of the article, Journal of Advertising ranked the number one with 15 articles, followed by International Marketing Review and Journal of Advertising Research

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(8 articles for each journal), Journal of International Consumer Marketing (6 articles) and European Journal of Marketing (5 articles). The remaining articles were published in 13 journals.

2.2 Countries Studies

As shown in Table 2, United States is the most frequently investigated country (n=46), and then followed by Japan and Korea (n=14), British and China (n=11) and Taiwan (n=10). Total 27

Table 1. Individual review of cross culture content analysis of advertising study

		Number of Articles	
	Journal Title	(n = 60)	Percentage
1	Journal of Advertising	15	0.25
2	International Marketing Review	8	0.13
3	Journal of Advertising Research	8	0.13
4	Journal of International Consumer Marketing	6	0.10
5	European Journal of Marketing	5	0.08
6	Journal of Marketing	4	0.07
7	International Journal of Advertising	3	0.05
8	Asia Pacific Journal of Management	1	0.02
9	International Journal of Commerce & Management	1	0.02
10	Internet Research	1	0.02
11	Journal of Business Research	1	0.02
12	Journal of Consumer Behavior	1	0.02
13	Journal of Consumer Research	1	0.02
14	Journal of Global Information Management	1	0.02
15	Journal of International Business Studies	1	0.02
16	Marketing Intelligence & Planning	1	0.02
17	Psychology & Marketing	1	0.02

18	The Journal of Consumer Marketing	1	0.02
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countries have been studied in our sample. With respect to the countries has be examined in Table 3. The major studies compared two countries (n=39) and remaining studies compared more than two countries (n=21). In these studies, the range of number of countries has been examined in each article from 2 to 24.

Table 2. Countries studied (1988-2003)

Name of Country	Total (n=60)	Percentage
U.S.	46	0.77
Japan	14	0.23
Korea	14	0.23
China	11	0.18
UK	11	0.18
Taiwan	10	0.17
France	9	0.15
Germany	7	0.12
India	5	0.08
Mexico	4	0.07
Brazil	3	0.05
Hong Kong	3	0.05
Netherlands	3	0.05
Australia	2	0.03
Singapore	2	0.03
Sweden	2	0.03
Thailand	2	0.03
Arab World	1	0.02
Chile	1	0.02
Dominica Republic	1	0.02
Finland	1	0.02
Israel	1	0.02
Malaysia	1	0.02
South Africa	1	0.02
Spain	1	0.02
The Czech Republic	1	0.02
Turkey	1	0.02

Note: Multiple counting was permitted since studies involved more than one country.

The most compared countries in our sample are U.S. versus Korea, U.S. versus Japan and U.S. versus China, and then followed by U.S. versus French and U.S. versus

U.K. shown in Table 4. The investigation between U.S. and Asian countries, especially China, has been increased in recent years.

Table 3. Number of culture selected (1988-2003)

Number of Country	Total (n=60)	Percentage
2	39	65.00%
3	10	16.67%
4	4	6.67%
5	1	1.67%
7	1	1.67%
8	1	1.67%
11	2	3.33%
23	1	1.67%
24	1	1.67%

Table 4. The most frequently compared country

Country Pair	Total
U.S., Korea	9
U.S., Japan	9
U.S., China	9
U.S., France	8
U.S., UK	7
U.S., Taiwan	6
UK, France	5
U.S., India	5
Japan, Taiwan	5
Japan, Korea	5

3. Content Analysis Methodology

Content analysis is a frequently used method for academic research in marketing communication, and especially advertising studies. It also has been used extensively for examining international differences in advertising content among nations^{1,2,3,4}. It involves the interaction of three processes: 1. Establishing specifications for the advertising characteristics to be measured in each ad, 2. Applying these specifications for classifying and recording the characteristics when they occur in the ad, and 3. Measuring the extent to which content classification produces the same results when the same ad is coded by more than one person (inter-coder reliability)⁴.

4. Advertising Execution Style

Many elements in ads are influenced by cultures². When these elements combine, they make up the advertising executional style, which covers different elements of advertising content including those more frequently studied: level of information, emotional/rational appeal typology, elements of advertising appeal, and gender role portrayal².

4.1 Level of Information

The most commonly used information content classification system in the literature is the Resnik and Stern's³ criteria. Resnik and Stern specified fourteen categories (or "cues") of advertising information based on the assumption that consumers make choices by paying attention to relevant information about products and service. The role of comparing of information content in advertising has been a center factor in discussion of how advertising works across nations⁴. In general, information cues in advertising are influenced by varying national cultures. Advertising in high context cultures tends to apply less information cues than advertising in low context cultures does⁸.

Most of these type studies concluded that the U.S. ads contained more information content than other countries. Comparing U.S. and British commercials. In⁵ indicated that U.S. advertising contained more information cues than British commercials. In⁶ investigated the media of information content in U.S, Japan, Korea and China and found that the U.S. had more information cues than other countries. In⁷ compared the print ads from U.S and France and found that the U.S. ads contained more information cues than French ads. In⁸ proved that the U.S. TV commercials contained more information than Japanese commercials. In⁹ confirmed that the TV ads in U.S. had more information than Korean ads. In¹⁰ indicated that the ads in Arabic magazines contain few information cues than U.S. magazines do.

Still, some studies reached an opposite conclusion. For example and in their investigation of U.S. and India ads, researchers¹¹ concluded that the number of information cues in U.S. and India is not significantly different. This finding was attributed to the fact that most Indian ad agencies have partnerships with U.S. ad agencies, and as such, are greatly influenced by U.S. advertising. In¹² investigated the ads of Webs in U.S., U.K and China. They found

that all the ads in these countries were informative and no significant differences existed in the percentage of informative ads or the mean number of cues. Moreover, other in¹³ found the number of information cues in Spanish web pages were less than Japanese and U.S. ads. Surprisingly, they identified the number of information cues in ads were the same in Japan and in U.S. They explained that the inconsistent conclusion in regards to ads in Web in that the Internet users appear to be more active information researchers.

The main problem of the information content studies may derive from using the Resnik and Stern⁹ typology. Employing the typology, which was developed in U.S. and applied in other cultures without proper adjustment, is a typical pseudo etic approach. In¹⁴ criticized the typology because it assumed that consumer search for information to make “intelligent choices”. The assumption that universal role of advertising is to help consumers make intelligent choices has been disputed for years.

It is difficult to compare the findings of cross-cultural advertising studies on information content. In¹² claimed such difficulty is derived from: 1. Advertising executions and appeals change over time, 2. The placement of an ad can affect the results of this test, 3. Information content sometimes varies by type of product. However, reviewing these studies provide an insight into the way international advertising actually works. Based on these studies, it seems that the number of information cues in different countries’ ads can be predicted through the high-context versus low-context culture dimension. People in high-context culture, where the interpretation of a message is based not only on words, but also on the text in which message takes place, do not need many messages because they obtain such information from their network. On the other hand, people who are in low-context culture do not have many information networks hence require detail information from other resources. Such distinction may explain why ads in high-context cultures, such as Japan, China and Middle East, contain few information cues than ads in low-context cultures do^{9,14}.

4.2 Emotional/Rational

The emotional/rational framework has been studied extensively in the advertising literature¹⁵. Rational advertising stems from the traditional information processing models of decision making where the consumer is believed to make logical and rational decisions; such

approaches are designed to change the message receiver’s beliefs about the advertised brand and rely on their persuasive power of arguments or reasons about brand attributes¹⁶. In contrast, emotional appeals are grounded in the emotional, experiential side of consumption. They seek to make the consumer feel good about the product, by creating a likeable or friendly brand; they rely on feelings for effectiveness. Emotional appeals attempt to stir up either negative or positive emotions that can motivate purchase^{17,18}.

The emotional/rational typology has been examined in many cross-cultural advertising studies. Researchers¹¹ investigated the TV content in U.S. and U.K. and found that the U.S. ads more frequently adopted the think (rational) approach whereas the U.K. ads use emotional approaches more, no matter if the product is high-involvement or low-involvements. Researchers¹³ stated that the French ads conveyed more emotion than U.S. ads. However, both countries used relative less emotional appeal. Other in¹⁹ stated that the Japanese ads tend to apply more symbolism and appeal to the emotions than the U.S. ads. In²⁰ indicated that the Korean magazines ads show greater use of rational appeals than U.S. magazines ads overall. In²² identified that the U.S. ads applied more rational theme and the Taiwanese ads tended to use more emotional theme due to the distinct national culture. Researchers²¹ observed that the Chinese websites contained more Chinese symbols but U.S. websites depicted of a realism theme, where direct to point is presented with less fantasy and imagery. Regarding the ads in web pages, researcher¹⁸ found that U.S. ads were more likely to use rational visual appeals than U.K. and Korea ads; whereas Korean ads were more likely utilizes a symbolic or emotional visual appeal.

The decision of adopting emotional/rational ads seems to be related to the choice between soft/hard sell, and indirect/direct approach. The soft sell relies on using subtlety, intrigue, and ambiguity to sell products. It is an approach that sells moods and dreams rather than products²². In contrast, hard sell advertising can be equated with information advertising, particularly the kind that uses strong arguments and demands for action²⁸. Therefore, the soft sell ads tend to contain less information and direct comparisons are viewed unfavorably¹⁰. Hard sell ads, however, favor using direct and confrontational appeals in the form of discounts, sales promotions and other forms of aggressive selling²³. According to previous studies²⁷, the U.S. ads on Internet frequently used superlatives, such as “we

are leaders”, or “world’s largest”, in promotions and coupons more than ads in Chinese web pages. Researcher¹⁴ confirmed that the U.S. commercials preferred hard-sell approach ads and the Japanese with Chinese commercials preferred soft-sell approach. U.S. ads focused on product merit appeals (more direct and boastful approach) than did their Japanese and Chinese counterparts (indirect, modest and vague). The same conclusion are also found in previous study⁹ which confirmed that the Arabic ads tended to apply indirect comparative ads instead of direct comparative ads that are commonly adopted in U.S. In general, the use of emotional/rational ad seems to have a close relation with the low/high information content and soft/hard sell.

4.3 Elements of Advertising Appeal

In addition to information content and emotional rational typology, some studies also analyzed the component differences in ads²⁴. These studies tended to find the similarities and differences between countries and seldom included theoretical model or culture explanation. In²⁹ have compared the visual components of print advertising in many countries. They analyzed the elements of the visual (size, color and photograph/illustration) and found that the visual component differences are not only between countries but also between product lines. They stated that ads of these countries showed more differences than similarities. Even in countries of the same region, such as in Pacific basin, or European community, the ads are still distinctive. Investigating the component level in U.S. and Japan, other in²⁵ found that 50% of the components in ads were significant. They cautioned advertisers about the awareness using standardizing ads in these two countries.

Another field that has been under research is whether Western style advertising can be applied in Asian countries. In⁴⁰ studied the ads in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. They found that 97% ads in Hong Kong contained English but only 55% Korean ads using Western words. Japan and Korea were less receptive to Western culture influences and were more insistent on retaining strong sense of national identifies. Hong Kong is the place that was most tolerant of Western cultural influence and has adopted a unique blend of Asian and Western values as its own.

The conclusions from these studies implied that the attempt to standardize advertising all around the world seems quite difficult because countries share more dif-

ferences than similarities. The studies of advertising appeal, in general, discover the elements in different kind of ads across nations^{21,25,26}. However, only a few studies have focused on this field and consequently only visual component and language usage have been commonly examined²⁴. In³⁰ founded other elements, such as music and lyric, or camera shot, have been ignored³⁰. The problem of such kind of study is that the authors did not link these differences with any conceptual framework²⁷. Without the proper explanation for the differences in ads, it is difficult to develop an effective international advertising strategies and a framework for future studies⁷.

4.4 Gender Role Portrayal

One of the major differences between cultures is the traditional notion of gender (male/female) roles. The role and status positions found within a society are affected by the dictates of social organizations in which rules for each of these roles vary from country to country²⁸. Visual imagery of general roles of portrayals in a culture’s advertising can be categorized²⁹ dimension of masculinity, which identifies sexuality of roles in society. The center of the gender role portrayed in the area of international advertising is how different cultures perceive the role of gender in advertisements³⁰.

In general, these papers identified some similarities in role portray across the countries. First, the ads from different countries still reflected stereotypes of male and female roles. In³¹ examined role portrayals by comparing television commercials from Australia, Mexico and the U.S. Common characteristics were shared by all three countries. These included the more frequent use of masculine voiceovers. Youth was more often a characteristic of the women than of a men depicted in the ads. Furthermore, women had a higher probability of begin portrayed in roles with relationship than men, who were often depicted as independent. In³² compared the role portrayals of men and women from the U.S. and Sweden. They suggested that men were more often shown in work roles in U.S. ads and in non-work roles in Swedish ads. If the study had included the Netherlands³³, the result would remain unchanged. Researchers⁷ studied the gender stereotyping between UK and Netherlands. They found that females were portrayed as young, mid-level business working level.

The stereotype of gender only occurs in Western-culture countries, rather, it seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. In a study of women portrayed in U.S.

and Japanese advertising, researcher³³ found males were shown more often than females. Males were more likely to appear as high-level business executives and as blue-collar workers while women were more often depicted as mid-level business executives and non-professional white-collar workers. Researcher³⁴ compared the ads in U.S. and Taiwan. She found that the ads in both countries used more male-voiceover than others. She also confirmed that the youth female model is widely used in ads. Researchers³⁵ investigated the sex role portrayal between Singapore and Malaysia. They recognized that the practice of using male-voiceover dominates in both countries and women were significantly more likely to appear younger than men by comparison. In terms of occupation, they found that women are more widely portrayed as housewives than management. Researchers³⁶ found that both cultures are similar that both showed a greater preference of youthfulness in females as opposed to males. Researcher³⁷ compared the gender role portrayed in China and U.S. He found that the both countries portrayed more men in high-level business/professional roles and more women in mid-level business/non-occupational ones, and depicted more men in recreational activities and more women in decorative situations. The male voice-overs, young models were portrayed more frequently in both countries' ads.

Even though there are some similarities of the gender role portrayals around the world, the difference still exists. Researcher³⁵, for example, argued that Australia ads in role portrayals were more equalitarian than U.S. and Mexico. Women are less likely to appear in male product ads than men are to appear in female product ads in these two countries. In U.S. ads, women were likely to appear at home or outdoors and men were likely to be shown in occupational settings. Meanwhile, she also found that while women in Mexican commercials received help from men more often, women in U.S. commercials received advice from men more frequently. In³⁸ presented that the men were more frequently depicted in work-related roles while women more frequently depicted in both work-related and recreational-related roles in Germany. In contrast, Japanese ads showed female models in decorative roles and male models in both decorative and family roles. Collectivism, youth and sex were used as target-group specific value in Japan while nature, status, leisure and work were used in Germany.

The differences between U.S. and Asian countries have also been identified by the studies. In a study of

women portrayed in U.S. and Japanese ads, in³⁷ found the differences that women appeared in working roles nearly twice as frequently in U.S. commercials as in Japanese ones, and that more U.S. women were shown in family roles, whereas more Japanese women were shown in decorative roles. He attributed these differences to the perception that Japan is still more male-dominant than the U.S. Unexpectedly; he found that female voice-overs were used more than twice as frequently in Japanese as in U.S. commercials. In⁴⁰ found the U.S. ads placed a greater emphasis on an active outdoor life style and on new work roles for women than Korean ads. In²⁵ argued that the sex role portrayed more traditional in U.S. than in Japan. In³⁸ found the difference in sex roles between U.S. and Taiwan. She identified that working relationship between men and women are less frequently portrayed in U.S. ads than in Taiwan. Furthermore, the women were frequently portrayed as less working, less authority figures and needing help and advice in U.S. ads than in Taiwan's ads. In⁴² compared the differences between U.S. and China. Male models portrayed relaxing roles more often but family roles (such as cooking and cleaning) appeared less often in Chinese commercials.

The reasons that cause the divergence are not well-recognized. There are some possible explanations for this issue. National culture probability has the pervasive effect³⁹. In³⁵ stated that the degree of MAS of a culture display difference in the sex portrayals. He MAS index, low MAS index scores of a nation would indicate a belief in equality of the sexes. In addition, the low MAS index scores would indicate fluid sex roles in the culture as compared to clearly differentiated sex roles in high MAS scoring countries. It appears that the MAS index of national culture provides some insight into what advertising role models would be acceptable within the culture^{33,34,38}. Another reason may well be the segmentation of target customers, law, and other factors. Researcher³⁷ argued that the finding of comparative ads from Japan and U.S. were not the consistent with previous studies because Japanese young 'office ladies', who often had more disposable income than most other customers, are the targeted market during that period. In addition, religion⁹ and laws³⁴ also influence the general portrayals in the ads.

5. Conclusion and Implication

The purpose of this paper is to review the cross-cultural advertising studies during 1988-2003 periods. We found

sixty articles, which were published in eighteen different journals. As previously predicted, U.S has been the most frequently studied country. Due to the distinct culture between U.S. and Asian countries, most studies attempt to identify the ads are cultural-bound.

In term to the advertising content, the study shows that the ads across countries and media are significant different. The ads in low-context cultures, such as U.S., contain more information cues than high-context cultures. The dimension also explains the usage of emotional/rational advertising appeal and hard-sell/soft-sell approaches. It is expected that the emotional ads, which contain less information content and tend to use soft sell approach, appear more frequently in high-context cultures. In contrast, the rational ads, which provide more information, appear more frequently in low-context cultures.

Another issue that has garnered attention is gender role portrayal. Ads from different countries still reflect stereotypes of male and female roles, no matter if the ads are in Western or Eastern countries and societies. The increasingly frequent uses of male-voiceover and young women are significantly more likely to appear in the worldwide advertising. In terms of the difference in gender role portrayal amongst countries, advertising in masculine countries portrays less female in working role than in feminine countries. However, the difference may be moderated by other factors and product type⁴⁰.

In general, Cross-cultural advertising literature has offered an opportunity to solve the standardization versus localization paradox. From the previous studies, it specifies the totally standardization advertising strategies around the world seems unfeasible. Even in the same region, such as East Asia or European countries, the difference is still significant. The content of ads seems still cultural-bound and regional variations are truly diverse. Therefore, when creating customized ads for local markets, the difference in cultural trends, social norms, product needs and medial channels should be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, managers also must recognize that the differences between nations are not absolute but a matter of degrees on a continuum⁴¹. The homogenized customer culture is continued formatting. Some values, such as “modernity” and “youth” are used more often in advertising across nations. Also the subcultures of young generation in different countries look more similarities than distinctiveness. Advertisers should utilize such shared value as a basis to create a more standardization advertising which can achieve optimal efficiencies⁴².

6. Suggestions for Future Studies

The main problem of the cross-cultural content analysis of advertising is the pseudo-etic. Many authors adopted the theoretical model, which was developed in U.S., to examine the other cultures without any modification. Such the bias weakens the validity of these studies^{14,44}. Thus, a qualitative emic approach should be developed to fix the problem. Another issue raised by this study is that many authors did not link the studies subjects or conclusion with the theoretical model. Consequently, many studies, which only described the findings without identify the cause and effect, could not make contribute for the literature and direct for the future studies^{43,44}. Therefore, future studies should try to connect the finding with literature in a more integrated attitude.

The lack of analysis related to prevailing information content in different cultures weakens the power of the model^{32,44}. Researchers¹² for example - argued that some cues are straightforward (such as independent research or special offer) and not sufficient as an information cue. Furthermore, the typology does not provide for multiple bits of information in each cue type. Additional research is needed to develop a more through and competitive methodology to measure information content more efficiently⁴⁵.

Furthermore, the design for many studies of the cross-cultural advertising is too subjective and has methodology problems. It is the limitation of the content analysis in the nature. Many authors examined the ads content lacking explanations why they did so^{21,14,45}. Without an integrated, theoretical model, it cannot accurately identify the phenomenon and shed light for the knowledge. Also, lacking the data equivalence cross nationally is a flaw in our samples. Many studies did not report whether or not the sample from each culture is comparable⁴⁵. It caused the conclusions to be biased; and such comparison becomes questionable⁴⁵. Future studies should attempt to employ similar sampling frames and sampling methods in all cultural groups.

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