



**THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL VALUES IN ADVERTISING:
EXAMPLES FROM CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES**

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ABSTRACT

The perspectives of collectivism vs. individualism and high vs. low context provide a useful framework to study how culture affects various aspects of mass media. In advertising, hard sell appeals versus soft sell appeals provide another useful perspective. In this study, the authors examined numerous video advertisements from China and the United States, and then selected four brands and product categories to compare in detail via these three perspectives. The brands and products include Coca Cola (drink), IKEA (home furnishings), Mercedes-Benz (automobiles), and Johnson & Johnson (health care). Based on the literature review, the authors expected to find (and did) more soft sell, collectivistic, and high context appeals in the Chinese advertisements. The study resulted in specific and interesting examples that can be used to teach students concretely how culture affects advertising appeals and provides a useful framework for similar studies.

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing growth of the world's economy, commercial products and services of giant multinationals have increasingly transcended national and political boundaries and have been marketed to people from different cultural environments.

The ambitious aim of effective global marketing communications is not an easy target to reach. Samli (1995) explains that in most cases, consumers' attitudes, awareness, and behavior are largely driven by the framework of their own culture, which is not only communicated to people but also forms and modifies the communication among the people of a society. As Mooij points out, global marketing strategies are not culture-free. Conversely, such strategies should be culture-relevant because influences of culture on consumer behavior and perception of global marketing communications are powerful and profound (1998, 2005). Because of the prevailing trend of globalization, Ricks (1988) pointed out over two decades ago that one of the greatest challenges in marketing communications is the problem of communicating to people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

In an educational setting, departments and schools of journalism and mass communication that teach advertising and marketing face the challenge of preparing students to design advertisements and related material that communicate effectively to diverse cultures. To do so, students need to obtain a knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures. To help students see clearly how culture affects advertising appeals, examples are a powerfully useful teaching tool.

The purpose of this paper is simply to (1) outline the basic, foundational concepts of individualism versus collectivism, high versus low context, hard sell versus soft sell, and (2) provide examples of how these concepts are apparent in actual advertisements.

LITERATURE

Cultural Values and Advertising

One of the most useful frameworks for understanding culture in the past three decades was Hall's high and low context model (1976, 1984), which has been widely used and recognized by many scholars interested in cross-cultural research. Hall (1976), an anthropologist who spent many years writing and teaching about intercultural behavioral differences and their applications to business, demonstrated that

A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. (p. 91)

In addition, individualism versus collectivism provides a useful framework to teach how culture impacts advertising appeals. As Hofstede (1984) said, "the relationship between the individual and the collectivity in human society is not only a matter of ways of living together, but it is intimately linked with societal norms" (p. 149). Individualistic cultures specify that individuality and independence are a priority in the society, while collectivistic cultures indicate that social ties are paramount within the group.

Most scholars have determined that cultural values in Western countries, such as some European countries and North America, manifest a culture's level of individualism to largely emphasize "I" — being conscious of private opinions and self-actualization. Oppositely, collectivistic societies, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America, mostly express "we" — being conscious of the relationship with groups.

The dimension of individualism vs. collectivism has received a great deal of attention by researchers who examine cross-cultural advertising and marketing. For example, Zhang and Gelb (1996) hypothesized that U.S. ads would use more culturally congruent individualistic appeals than culturally incongruent collectivistic appeals, while China would follow an opposite pattern. The results showed that the advertising appeals varied from culture to culture as predicted.

Lin (2001) compared and explored cultural differences in American and Chinese advertising, choosing three U.S. TV networks (NBC, ESPN, and A&E) and three Chinese TV stations (Channel 1 and 2 of China Central Television, and a local channel of Beijing TV Station) to analyze primetime program content. The results were not surprising. Collectivistic appeals were much more powerful, while individualism and independence were paid less attention in Chinese commercials than in U.S. ads.

Hofstede (1991) suggested that high context cultures would generally be associated with collectivism, whereas, in contrast, low context cultures would typically be correlated with individualism. In collectivistic countries, messages flow more easily because of the interpersonal relationships within a group, while there is more need for explicit and direct communication in individualistic societies.

Another useful, easy-to-grasp concept to consider when teaching students how culture affects advertising appeals is a hard sell versus a soft sell. Mueller (1987) compared advertisements in Japan and the U.S. for similar products to examine whether advertising tended to reflect cultural values of these two countries. She found that Eastern advertising, like that in Japan, tended to be less direct and the appeals had more emotional mood and atmosphere than Western styles of advertising, such as in the U.S. Japanese ads lacked hard sell appeals because indirect, implicit, and nonverbal communication styles had been embedded as a result of high context cultural background. They preferred higher usage of soft sell (indirect and image-based) appeals than hard sell (direct and information based) themes, which were used more frequently in U.S. advertisements. In contrast, Western-style advertising appeals were designed to convey more comparative and competitive statements to emphasize a brand's superiority.

Okazaki, Mueller and Taylor (2010) also explored how soft sell and hard sell appeals impacted the effectiveness of global consumer culture positioning (GCCP) between the U.S. and Japan. The researchers selected representative advertisements and conducted a quasi-experimental study in both countries. In the U.S., hard sell appeals were more effective than soft sell appeals in the areas of consumer attitude, believability, irritation, and purchase intention. Japanese respondents unexpectedly rated the hard sell advertisements considerably higher in terms of believability, purchase intention, and attitude toward the ad. The authors suggested that soft sell appeals with more



image-oriented messages were more suitable for providing implicit and symbolic information, including global brand creditability and quality, social responsibility, prestige, and relative price.

Using these three basic concepts — low/high context, collectivism/individualism, hard/soft sell — the authors looked for examples from China and the United States to illustrate clearly how culture impacts advertising.

METHODOLOGY & FINDINGS

One of the researchers initially reviewed more than 150 video-based advertisements from YouTube, Tudou, and Youku, the two later sites being regarded as “the video hub for the Chinese.” All the brands observed were well-known international giant trademarks dominant in both markets, such as Adidas, IKEA, Coca-Cola, Olay, Nike, Apple. Advertisements of similar products were reviewed.

Four well-known brands were selected: IKEA, Coca-Cola, Mercedes-Benz, and Johnson & Johnson. Based on Cheng & Schweitzer’s (1996) determination that dominant values are mainly manifested in visuals, this study examined video ads ranging from 30 to 120 seconds long. For the four companies, one of the authors examined one ad from China and one from the U.S. in regard to soft sell versus hard sell, individualism versus collectivism, and high context versus low context.

Examples

IKEA. This Swedish company aired a video ad in the U.S. that showed various homes, such as a cloth tent made near the desert, a brick house within a tall building, or a room in a recreational vehicle (see Figure 1). To emphasize that wherever one is in the world, home could give a feeling of comfort, warmth and relaxation, the ad contained the audio message, “*It’s a place for love. It’s a place for memories. It’s a place for laughter. It’s a place to share. It’s a place for peace. It’s your home place. Because wherever you live, whoever you are, home is the most important place in the world.*” Further, a banner and the IKEA logo were shown clearly at the end.

The ad used direct and verbal communication, regarded as a typical characteristic of low context cultures. The advertiser reflected the consumer’s practical, functional, or utilitarian needs in promoting IKEA products and improving the company’s brand image. In sum, this commercial contained a higher level of low context cultural characteristics.

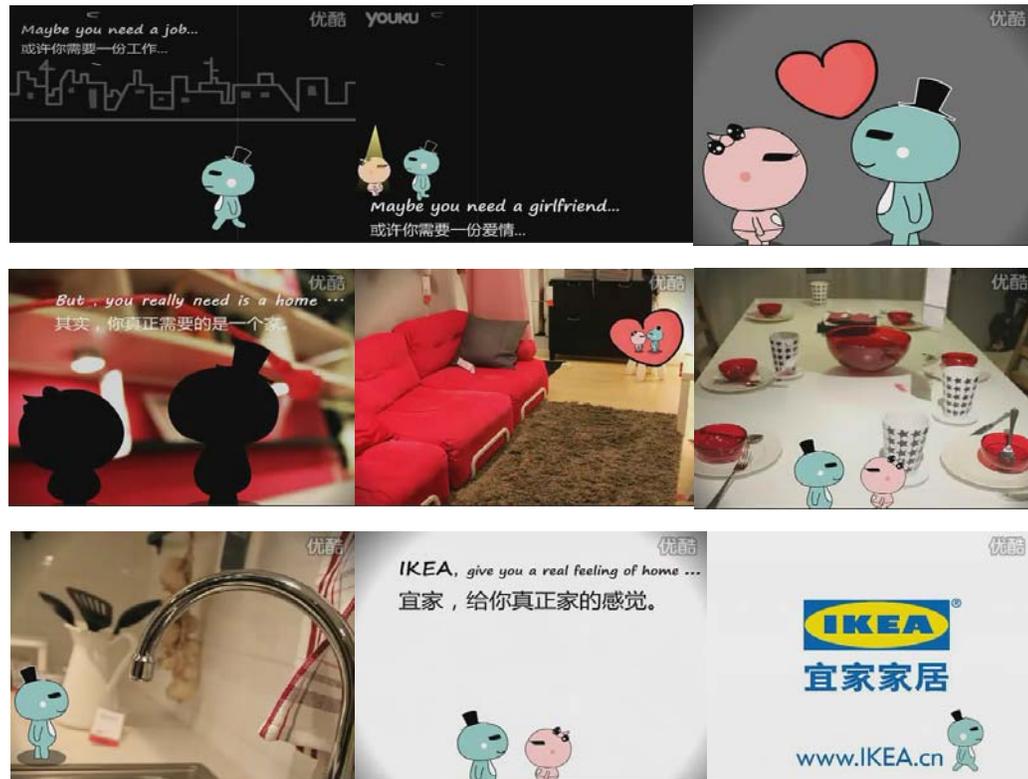
In China, IKEA used an ad presenting a similar theme with animated characters. A little guy is walking on the street. Then, a bilingual (Chinese and English) subtitle turns up on the screen, asking “*What do you need? Maybe you need a job... Maybe you need a girlfriend...*” As the guy meets a girl and falls in love with her at first glance, sweet music plays “*But, what you really need is a home... IKEA, give you a real feeling of home.*” Then, the IKEA logo is displayed (see Figure 2).

The ad, with subtitle texts only, unfolds an emotional scene as the newly-married couple moves into their new warm house and set up a long life journey. The video displays IKEA furniture, associating the products with a particular lifestyle and addressing more affective or subjective impressions. The Chinese ad displays high context cultural values by expressing emotional feelings.

Figure 1 — Screenshots of IKEA “Home” Commercial (U.S)



Figure 2 — Screenshots of IKEA “Home” Commercial (China)



Coca-Cola. A Super Bowl Coke ad aired in the United States and one Beijing Olympic Coke ad broadcast in China were compared.

For the 2010 Super Bowl, Coca-Cola produced a 60-second ad called "Sleepwalker" that featured a somnambulist with a thirst. He got up and went on a sleepwalking safari walk across the African veldt in the darkness. With his closed eyes, he fearlessly encountered dangerous wild animals — elephant, panther, and hippopotamus. Finally, he reached his destination, opened an outdoor refrigerator and got a Coke he wanted in his dream (see Figure 3). This commercial displayed a high level of individualism and the individualistic cultural spirit of self-fulfillment and self-realization.

For the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, Coca-Cola launched a series of video commercials, one of which was known as "Red Carpet Road for China." The creativity of the ad was tied to the red color of Coke's cans and bottles. The idea of a red carpet road symbolized that 1.3 billion Chinese people would enthusiastically welcome every athlete and visitor and would entertain all of them as distinguished guests.

The ad displayed millions of Chinese people in a cooperative effort. They pushed and moved the huge rolled red carpet from the center of Beijing, passing through Taklimakan Desert located in Xinjiang Uyghur Region, to the final destination of Mount Everest in Tibet. Then, dramatically, at the top of the world, they firmly pushed down the rolled carpet, which was rushing, unfolding, and laying along the side of the mountain (see Figure 4). The video also showed other famous places, such as the Great Wall, the Oriental Pearl Television Tower in Shanghai, the City Wall in Xi'an, the Terra-Cotta Warriors and Horses, and pandas. In the end, professional basketball player Yao Ming runs with the Olympic Torch on the red carpet, followed by 10s of thousands of Chinese people holding one bottle of Coke.

Collectivistic appeals were reflected dramatically in this ad, which expressed a collaborative spirit that "Union is strength" and nothing is impossible through the combined effort of teamwork. The content emphasized interdependent relationships, cooperation, and harmony within social groups.

Figure 3 — Screenshots of Coke "Sleepwalker" Commercial (U.S)





Figure 4 — Screenshots of Coke “Red Carpet Road” Commercial (China)



Mercedes-Benz. This German manufacturer aired an ad in the U.S. with the text: “What is performance? Zero to sixty? Or sixty to zero? How is the car’s performance in the quarter mile or quarter century? Is performance about the joy of driving or the importance of surviving? To us, performance is not hard to do one thing well, it is about doing everything well. Because in the end, everything matters. The best or nothing — that is the one that drives us” (see Figure 4). This ad displays hard selling illustrated by the “The best or nothing” statement.

The Chinese Mercedes-Benz ad displays collectivistic values, emotional expression, and soft sell appeals using a famous celebrity couple, Lu Yi and Bao Lei. The video talks about love and emphasizes the enduring attachment of belonging to a family. It features an emotional image of persons in harmony with family.



Figure 5 — Screenshots of Mercedes-Benz “Performance” Commercial (U.S)



Figure 6 — Screenshots of Mercedes-Benz “Surprise” Commercial (China)



Johnson & Johnson. This global American pharmaceutical, medical devices, and consumer packaged goods manufacturer produced a commercial aired in the U.S. to promote baby bubble bath wash. A cute baby is taking a bath and playing with the bubbles and soapy water with his mother. In the sweet scene, a voice-over speech runs through the entire video: “Bubbles, they make good heads and even better memories. Now, you can make them every day with Johnson’s baby bubble bath. The first and only one clinically proven so mild, so gentle — you can use it every day. New Johnson’s baby bubble bath: Pure, mild, gentle, fun!” (see Figure 7).

This commercial reflects the assertiveness of American culture characterized by the direct approach and verbal communication. It employs a hard sell appeal with data-based arguments and explicit conclusions to persuade. The benefit or merit of the product merit is promoted directly.

In contrast, Johnson & Johnson launched a nationwide television campaign in China titled “Born with love” and broadcast a commercial on CCTV (China Central Television), showing that some medical professionals and volunteers went into the countryside and cared for local children and senior citizens with love and passion. The voice-over states that

“Johnson & Johnson believes there are many humanitarian giants living among us. (Actor A: “Does the kid feel better?” An elderly female doctor asks. “He’s fine, thanks.” The mother replies.) These giants do even small things with the greatest love and passion to help those who are in need. (Actor B: “Everything is okay, don’t worry!” A young male doctor with glasses patiently tells an old lady.) This brings great comfort to the hearts of those in need, healing their wounds and assuring them of loving care. Johnson & Johnson, using its abundant experience and intelligence in the field of medical health and personal care, works shoulder to shoulder with these giants to spread love to everyone. Born with love — Johnson & Johnson” (see Figure 8).

Compared with many U.S. ads, the content in this “Born with love” commercial is more ambiguous and indirect. It focuses more on the feelings and emotions of the audiences, which would elicit affective responses including warmth and inspiration. Aaker, Stayman and Hagerly (1986) defined warmth as “a positive, mild, volatile emotion involving physiological arousal and precipitated by experiencing directly or vicariously a love, family, or friendship relationship” (p. 366). This description positions warmth in a positive role. Concerning high/low



context culture and soft/hard sell appeals respectively, this “Born with love” commercial involving a higher level of affective impressions and emotional resonance about love is a typical example to reflect Eastern cultural characteristics.

Figure 7 — Screenshots of Johnson & Johnson “Baby Bubble Bath Wash” Commercial (U.S)



Figure 8 — Screenshots of Johnson & Johnson “Born with Love” Commercial (China)



CONCLUSION

The video advertisements from these four world-wide companies show that, as expected, the United States commercials used hard sell appeals, displayed individualistic values, and exhibited low context culture values, whereas Chinese commercials relied more on soft sell appeals, displayed collectivistic values, and exhibited high context culture values.

The study's limitations include: it only examined video-based advertisements, the results may be biased due to subjective impressions from the author who selected the brands and advertisements to compare, it was not done randomly, and the sample size was small. Further, the authors realize that using the low/context, individualistic/collectivistic, and hard/soft sell perspective is a somewhat



simplistic framework by which to examine culturally based advertising. Although Hofstede's model is generally accepted as the most comprehensive framework of national cultures by those who study business culture, its validity and its limitations have been criticized.

Despite these limitations, this study provides easy-to-understand examples of culturally relevant and divergent advertisements that can be used for teaching purposes. By studying examples like the ones presented in this paper, future advertising and marketing practitioners can see clearly how culture affects appeals and, then, build on this base-level awareness to develop more nuanced and sophisticated knowledge of how cultural differences impact their work.

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