The Interplay among Visual Image, Communication Style, and Culture in Determining the Persuasiveness of Sport Advertising

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Advertising has become a crucial communication method for sport brands aspiring to reach international markets. In communicating with international markets, one of the key issues is culture. Particularly, visual and communication norms are significant cultural elements which influence advertising effects in international markets (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006). Given the significant role of cultural convention in inducing advertising effects, prior communication literature suggests that visual and communication culture are different between Western and Asian countries and influence advertising effects (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Callow & Schiffman, 2002).

A vast array of empirical work conceptualized visual images and preferences as two distinct entities: simple and complex (An, 2007; Mooij 2004; Phillips, 1997). A simple visual image is a depiction that relies largely on explicit meaning. Many product and service advertisements tend to use simple visual framing by merely portraying the products’ appearance. Communication research suggests that consumers of individualist cultures are more accustomed to simple visual images than to implicit visual images. A complex visual image is a representation that relies on implicit meaning. Communication studies suggest that complex visual images are more easily processed by consumers in collectivist cultures. Also, communication literature posits that while consumers in individualist cultures value explicit verbal communication (i.e., low context communication), those in collectivist cultures regard implicit verbal messages (i.e., high context communication) as more effective (Hofstede, 2001; Mooij, 2009). This suggests that cultural differences in visual and communication preference have the potential to influence advertising effects in international markets. However, no empirical research has been conducted on how these cultural elements affect sport advertising campaigns. This study established hypotheses of the impact of these two cultural elements on sport advertising effects and tested them using a mixed method design.

Three fictitious ad sets for athletic shoe brands (i.e., TIZA, Hi-Kicks, and Allsports) were created and tested. Manipulation tests identified the ad series with the most distinctive profiles (i.e., the 4 ads in the series that best portrayed the four style combinations SL: Simple visual image – Low context communication style; SH: Simple visual image – High context communication style; CL: Complex visual image – Low context communication style; CH: Complex visual image – High context communication style). TIZA ads were selected for the experiment and interview. In addition, linguistically equivalent measures were developed via a translation/back-translation method. An experiment was conducted using a 2 (culture: American vs. Korean) × 2 (visual images: complex vs. simple) × 2 (communication contexts: high vs. low) design with product involvement as a covariate. College students were recruited from the United States and South Korea. Americans (n = 120), were assigned to a group (n = 30) with a uniform proportion of males (n = 15) and females (n = 15); and were exposed to one of four TIZA ads (i.e., SL, SH, CL, and CH). Similarly, 120 Korean students were assigned to one of four conditions. For data analysis, a 2 × 2 × 2 MANCOVA was conducted for the set of two dependent variables: attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand. To better understand the experimental results, interviews were conducted with 12 American and 12 South Korean subjects.

Results of ANCOVA on attitudes toward advertising revealed two significant 2-way interactions. No other interactions or main effects were significant. Visual image interacted with communication style: F(1, 231) = 20.20, p < .001. For both cultures, the combination of complex visual and high context communication (MCH = 5.11) induced the most favorable attitude toward the ad. Culture also interacted with communication style: F(1, 231) = 9.17, p = .003. Americans gave generally high ratings to ads using both low (M = 4.09) and high context verbal messages (M = 4.44). Similar findings were reported in American interviews. Americans evaluated the low context verbal message positively, showing a sense of perceived credibility. Also, they perceived the high context verbal message as unusual, yet they viewed it as curious and charming. This led them to become involved in the ad. For Koreans, high context verbal style (M = 4.02) induced more favorable attitudes toward the ad than did the low context verbal style (M = 2.62). Interview data show that while Koreans evaluated the low context verbal message as plain and with questionable credibility, they perceived the high context verbal message as mysterious and symbolic. These perceptions aroused their curiosity and stimulated them to become more involved in the ad, which increased their probability of ad recall.

Results of ANCOVA on attitude toward the brand present a 3-way interaction; F(1, 231) = 4.78, p = .03. Americans showed positive brand attitudes for all four visual-communication style combinations (i.e., SL, SH, CL, and CH), ranging from 3.48 to 4.39 on a 7-point scale. Similar findings were obtained from the interviews. Americans positively evaluated the brand using the simple visual image because they can directly see the advertised product. Unexpectedly, Americans also perceived the complex...
visual image as creative and attention grabbing. Notably, this motivation (e.g., curiosity) enticed Americans to research the advertised product and brand. Concerning communication style, Americans exhibited generally positive responses as they did for visual images. For Koreans, the combination of a complex visual image and a high context communication style (MCH = 4.49) induced more favorable attitudes to the brand than the other three combinations (MSL = 2.51, MSH = 2.49, and MCL = 2.71). Similar responses were observed from the Korean interviews. The interview findings demonstrated that Koreans clearly prefer complex visual and high context verbal styles.

The current results support expectations of consumers in collectivist cultures. For both new sport brands and existing sport brands, the implicit visual and verbal superiority model would be effective in communicating with Asian sport markets. However, the findings of Americans were unexpected. Americans evaluate positively the explicit visual and verbal communications, but also were likely accustomed to symbolic interactions and enjoyed decoding the metaphorical meanings of complex visual and high context verbal messages. Given Americans’ dualistic orientation in evaluating the advertised sport brands, this study suggests the schism-bridge effects framework in persuading American markets. This perspective posits that in order to improve sport advertising effects, cognitive schism (e.g., cognitive incongruity) between cultural convention (e.g., explicit visual-verbal culture) and symbolic processing orientation (e.g., enjoy decoding the complex visual and implicit verbal messages of sport ads) should be bridged. The primary concern in this framework is to lessen cognitive conflicts and find connections between cognitive incongruities, which are otherwise likely to induce negative attitudes toward the brand and hinder the formation of desirable brand personality. Cognitive schism can be bridged by appealing to both symbolic and utilitarian concerns. Given the interests in appealing to both concerns, this framework could be utilized for both emerging and existing sport brands to persuade American markets.