An Investigation of Super Bowl Advertising Trends from 2011 to 2016: A Categorical Content Analysis

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The Super Bowl has become one of the most attractive sporting events for businesses (Hartmann & Klapper, 2015; Matheson, 2010). Four of the five most watched TV programs in U.S. history were Super Bowls, and the average number of TV viewership of the last five Super Bowls in the U.S. has reached approximately 112 million, which is a 20% increase from the previous five years (2006-2010) (Parker, 2015). Super Bowl 50, which had 111.9 million TV viewership in the US alone, had an astonishing Nielsen’s TV rating of 49 (Statistia, 2016). In addition, its global reach makes the Super Bowl a similarly attractive event for international companies. Super Bowl 50 was broadcasted live in 25 different languages in 170 countries, with over 167 million people watching (Price, 2016). Building a globally recognized brand is an ultimate goal for companies because of the value a “global” moniker creates in consumers’ minds. Most of the value creation comes from consumers ascribing products that are of a global nature to be of superior quality (Steemkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003), and consumers show stronger preferences for brands with global images rather than local brands (Kapferer, 1997).

The Super Bowl can help build an association between brands and viewers, which ultimately leads to increases in sales and market shares (Dotterweich & Collins, 2005; Hartmann & Klapper, 2015). An investigation of nearly 200 media markets in six years of Super Bowl ratings and sales data found that, for some brands, advertising alone in the Super Bowl increased revenue per household by 10 to 15% in the eight weeks following the game (Hartmann & Klapper, 2015). Specifically, Budweiser earned an extra $96 million from their Super Bowl advertisements, receiving a 172% return on advertising investment, and the sales revenue in the short run after the Super Bowl was about 15.8% higher per household than their competitors. The conclusion is that Budweiser’s long-standing association with the Super Bowl has paid off during this peak sales period. Movies advertised during the Super Bowl from 1998 to 2001 have generated twice as much revenue as movies which were not advertised during the Super Bowls (Yelkur, Tomkovick & Traczyk, 2004).

Despite the fact that the analysis of advertising content has become an important area to investigate in many fields, only a few studies have been conducted on premier sporting events, like the Super Bowl (Blackford, Gentry, Harrison & Carlson, 2011; Kim, Cheong, & Kim, 2013). Moreover, the majority of studies conducted on the Super Bowl have focused on the effectiveness of the event, such as sales, return on investment, and market share, or on the advertising content of a single Super Bowl event (Dotterweich & Collins, 2005; Hartmann & Klapper, 2015; Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2014; Yelkur, Tomkovick, & Traczyk, 2004). To the best of our knowledge, no studies have been conducted to investigate recent trends in the contents of Super Bowl commercials. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap by examining trends in Super Bowl commercials’ contents over the last five years (2011-2016).

Two trained researchers (one sport management professor and one sport management master’s student) independently analyzed and coded 329 Super Bowl advertisements from 2011 to 2016. A code scheme, which was created during a pilot study, was used to code contents more accurately and efficiently. The authors completed a pilot study on Super Bowl commercials of 2011 and created coding categories. Throughout the pilot study, the authors focused on four main categories; product industries, types of appeals (emotional vs. rational), targeted gender, and targeted age group. The emotional appeals were further analyzed. After the pilot study, the authors reconciled any coding differences. Cohen’s Kappa was used to measure inter-coder reliability for each factor. Cohen’s kappa (κ) is a measure of inter-coder agreement for categorical scales when there are two coders (Viera & Garret, 2005). The Kappa coefficient for each category ranged from 0.72 (target gender) to 0.92 (product industry categories), which indicated substantial agreement. Furthermore, all kappa (κ) coefficients were statistically significant.
Face validity, as suggested in Riffe et al. (1998), was used to assess if the categories were well-defined with a logical and consistent coding scheme.

The descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages for entire data revealed that automobiles (32.8%, n = 108) were the most advertised products followed by food (13.4%, n = 44), alcoholic beverages (9.4%, n = 31), e-businesses (8.8%, n = 29), soft drinks (26%, n = 7.9), and financial businesses (6.4%, n = 21). With regard to the types of advertising appeals, 208 (63.2%) commercials used only emotional appeals, 108 commercials (32.8%) included both emotional and rational appeals, and only 13 commercials (4%) used solely rational appeals. In terms of the targeted age groups, the majority of advertisements focused on consumer ages 18 to 25 years (51.4%, n = 169), followed by youth ages 7 to 18 (34.3%, n = 113), and adults ages 35 to 50 (13.4%, n = 44). In the case of gender, advertisements for both genders were 75.1% (n = 247) of total advertisements, followed men only (23.7% n = 78), and women only (1.2% n = 4). For the types of emotional advertisements, humor (52.6%, n = 173) was the most frequently used emotion, followed by excitement (12.2%, n = 40), and empathy (9.1%, n = 30).

The results of the trend analyses on the product categories showed that although automobile commercials appeared most frequently in all six years, they decreased significantly each year from 44.8% in 2011 to 22.4% in 2016. In addition, the number of alcoholic beverage commercials also decreased from 10.3% in 2011 to 8.6% in 2016. However, the number of food commercials increased from 8.6% in 2011 to 15.5% in 2016. These findings suggested that the trend of commercials previously targeting mainly adults has been extended to include groups such as children and families.

The trend analysis on types of appeals revealed that emotional appeals have been used consistently during from 2011 to 2016. For the types of emotional commercials, humorous commercials have decreased while empathetic and excitement commercials have significantly increased. While Blackford et al. (2011) claimed the number of humorous commercials have increased, the result from this study indicate and opposing trend. One possible reasons is the decrease in alcoholic beverage commercials; humor has been a primary theme for most of those commercials. The result of trend analysis on ages groups showed that the commercials targeting younger consumers (ages 5-21) have increased from 60.4% in 2011 to 77.6% in 2016. Furthermore, commercials targeting consumers ages 5-18 have significantly increased from 25.9% and 26.3% in 2011 and 2012 to 37.5% and 41.4% in 2015 and 2016. While there have not been significant changes in targeted genders, the commercials targeting women have gradually increased during the six-year period.

In conclusion, the result of this research revealed that the target group of Super Bowl advertisements seems to be shifting from adult male viewers to encompass more diverse groups, particularly younger audiences and women. One of the primary reasons for such a change is because of changing viewer demographics; the Super Bowl has become an event for a greater variety of different demographic backgrounds. Women audiences grew to a total of 47% of total viewers in 2016, up 3% from 2006 (Nielsen, 2016). In addition, the number of viewers ages 18 to 34 decreased 2%, while viewers ages 2 to 17 increased by 2%. These results also support the NFL’s new marketing strategies to extend targeting to include women and youth (Walker, 2011). This study contributes to the body of knowledge on advertising in sport marketing by investigating the trends in Super Bowl commercials. For marketing and advertising executives, it is recommended to predicate commercial planning based on viewer demographic in order to maximize their effectiveness and cost-return ratios.