Case Studies on Cultural Differences in TV Advertising:
Focus on South Korea and USA

Wonjun Choi¹, Kyung Mi Bae²

Abstract

This study focuses on cultural differences between South Korea and United States in TV advertising by analyzing eight different cases. Cultural differences, while difficult to observe and measure; are very significant that a business can not merely rely on current method of conducting business, when the corporation decides to jump into international level in such competitive world. Despite cultural aspects are vital to grasp, little research has been proceeded, thus this study serves the purpose of utilizing the Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to compare the cultural values of South Korea and the United States to observe the impact of cultural factors regarding commercials. In this study, TV commercials of Hyundai Motors, Samsung Mobile, and Absolute and Soju as cases of liquors are used for comparison between two countries and the commercials of Emart’s world beer and Christian Dior’s Miss Dior are analyzed to reflect the current cultural similarities. Thus, corporation ought to exercise cultural insights to ensure that the developed marketing tactics would generate the necessary reactions required to propel the corporation’s image forward.

Keywords : advertising in Korea, advertisement in USA, cultural factors in advertisement, Hofsted’s cultural dimension

1. Introduction

Today, with increasing connectivity and cross-cultural interactions, corporations are beginning to seek the opportunities to go global if company wishes to sustain economic growth and position as a brand. In international marketing and advertising practices, understanding a country’s core cultural values is important and these core values have a powerful influence on a country’s characteristics and consumer behavior [1]. South Korea belonging in the eastern hemisphere and United States in the west, both countries carry very different sets of cultural values.

This paper will further go in depth of two cultural values with Hofstede’s Cultural
Dimensions [2]. Every country carries a set of diverse variables in which can be difficult for offshore companies to adapt. Regulations, religions, language barriers are some of the many hurdles globalized firms have to cope with. With the globalized economy, acknowledging cultural differences can be a springboard to target world-wide consumers. Cultural understanding in successful international firms is reflected from marketing strategies which are grounded in the cultures of the targeting community [3]. Hofstede’s dimension is a guideline commonly used to classify schemes in global marketing and by scoring both United States and South Korea. Analysis can be made based on the scores to observe essentialness of cultural factors as well as common factors. A prospering international advertising campaign should be based on a reliable and valid assessment of cultural differences, while avoiding aspects of culture that might lessen the impact of advertising investment.

2. Literature Review

To begin with, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions’ theory is a frame work for cross-cultural communication which describes the influences of a society’s culture on the values of diverse members and how people’s value relates to behavior, applying a structure derived from factor analysis. According to Hofstede, a Dutch researcher, cultural differences tend to spin around five key dimensions. First of all, power distance is the expectance and acceptance of unequal distribution of powers amongst the people in institutions within a country [4]. Uncertainty avoidance can be defined as “the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations, and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid in such situations” [5]. Furthermore, individualism and collectivism relate on the level of dependence of one to an associated group and the importance of “I” or “We” [6]. The fourth dimension are masculinity and femininity that masculinity is defined as “a situation in which the dominant values of society are success, money, and things” while femininity is defined as “a situation in which the dominant values of a society are caring for others and quality of life” [2]. Last but not the least, long-term and short-term orientation.

These dimensions play a vital role in understanding national culture as well as corporate culture. Proper usage of the dimensions to be able to successfully interact in international business and communications. By cognizing the cultural differences and similarities of one country to one’s home country, one can understand and improve the relationship with the other nation, gaining much more benefits than before [7]. The dimension scores of the two countries demonstrates the difference between the two distinctive cultures as it shows in Figure
1. Result is very much noticeable that the countries portray the broader view of Western and Eastern cultures. With such opposite background, the comparison of South Korea and the United States was very unique and contrastive.

![Hofstede’s Six Cultural Dimensions](source: Hofstede’s Insights)

**3. Analysis**

Moreover, putting together national scores, Hofstede’s dimension model allows international comparison between South Korea and America. The major difference between eastern and western culture is that people in the east are more conservative and traditional than the general population lives in the west. Nevertheless, the advertisement Korean and American encounter does not vividly reflect these cultural differences regarding Hofstede’s dimension.

As shown in Figure 1, Korean tends to take hierarchical order without reasoning which leads to a collectivist society. Since the most essential aspect in a collectivist community is loyalty, South Korean commits to long-term relationships, from family members to extended relationships. What is more, Korea is counted as a feminine culture that Korean focuses on working in order to sustain life. In economic perspective, majority of Korean citizens consume necessities rather than luxuries. Therefore, opportunity of taking risk is unlikely to happen in Korea. In contrary, Americans emphasize on equal right amongst individuals and focuses on quality of life. As the richest country in the world, American’s consumption pattern lies on the
necessity, thus United States is counted as a masculinity nation. To help better grasp, case analysis has been proceeded to assure the credibility of the case studies, well-known global brands were chosen for analysis.

### 3.1 Hyundai Motor Cases


The Hyundai Motor company is a South Korean multinational automotive manufacturer which operates the world’s largest integrated facilities. According to Jocheon Sengpiehl [8], the vice president marketing at Hyundai expressed its global success as

“Embarking on an intensive period of change, fuelled by inventive and emotional brand marketing, Hyundai Motor has boosted significantly its brand awareness with customers. Creating an enhanced profile across the areas of culture, sport, and corporate social responsibility and through its new, high quality products, Hyundai Motor has advanced its caring outlook to connect with customers around the world.”

As it were, recognition of diverse culture has helped today’s Hyundai Motors to be as one of the best company in global market. Korea is categorized as a collectivistic country with a high-context communication style that depends on symbols and implicit expression rather than explicit words [9]. It is also categorized as a country with high uncertainty avoidance, which refers to having a preference for a well-known source rather than an unknown source [10]. As a result, in Korean version of Hyundai’s commercial market agents adapted the strategy of avoiding uncertainty by only illustrating its functions and exterior designs. In Korean version of Genesis g80 series, Hyundai emphasized its fanciness of the design and functions by airing car itself.

On contrary, America is categorized as an individualistic country with a low-context communication style conveying contents with the means of storytelling. Since America is classified as a country with low uncertainty avoidance, audiences fairly brace unknown sources.
To take an instance, Hyundai’s American commercial "First Date" featuring comedian Kevin Hart was the winner of USA annual poll of favorite Super Bowl spots in 2016. Hyundai clearly knew how to catch audience’s attention by taking viewers on a hilarious journey of over protective dad, Kevin Hart, using Hyundai’s exceptional GPS tracking abilities to sabotage his daughter going on her first date. Furthermore, in the aftermath of 9/11, the relationship between citizenship and consumption in the U.S. market has tightened dramatically in the use of patristic aspects in advertising. As it were, Hyundai Motors has pulled tears and cheers through uniting American troops and their families over 5,000 miles apart through the live advertisement in Super Bowl 2017.

As an individualistic country, American citizens value their time and freedom; and have high expectation of rewards for hard work. Serving as a military officer illustrates, scarifying their individualism to protect their loved ones. In this respect, advertisement did not include any of its merchandise or related footage, compensating their services with recognition of their sacrifice while boosting brand loyalty. KIA, Samsung, LG and other reputable Korean multinational company’s commercials are using the same strategies as Hyundai Motors does domestically and in United States.

3.2 Samsung Mobile Phone Cases


Samsung is recognized as an unique global industry which capable of taking advantage of distinct initiatives. Samsung plays an active role in each region in which it operates and understands that cultures can be subtly different [15]. Samsung believes that understanding and utilizing cultural dimension is necessary principal to create the best possible outcome. Therefore, Samsung creates and design advertisements base on cultural differences. Samsung’s Galaxy 7 commercial focused on its functions that it displays all series of newly adapted technologies and utilities to lure Korean customers consumption. By doing so, views can eliminate uncertainties by observing Galaxy 7’s features covered in the advertisement. Whereas,
in American version of Galaxy 7, Samsung mobile applied sense of humor in the advertisement Lil Wayne, a reputable rapper in US pours champagne on Galaxy 7 and also puts Galaxy 7 into the fish tank to creatively emphasize its waterproof ability. In Korean perspective, water proof can be highlighted through linking its functions to daily life. Since American fairly accepts unique concepts and open-minded about expressions of the others, pouring champagne and putting Galaxy 7 into fish tank can be acceptable.

What is more, Korean advertisement tries to convey all of the information at once to reduce the risk of uncertainty that in Korean version, it demonstrates all aspects of the product such as long battery lasting, Samsung Pay, Samsung Gear, waterproof and more. Yet, American version simply focus on one aspect at a time that communicating through humor that is peculiar to consumers.

3.3 Alcoholic Beverage Cases

[Fig. 4] Chamisel for Korean market [16] vs. Absolute Vodka and Heineken for American market [17]

Celebrity endorsement is one of the most popular advertising strategies [18]. With the high uncertainty avoidance, Koreans inherently feel uneasy with a brand new product or a product they are not very familiar with. Koreans prefer to take their time and observe what others do. They decide to make a purchase only after closely observing others using a product that is why celebrity endorsed products and campaigns that use Word of mouth strategy are highly effective in the Korean market. Korean companies, in their television advertisements, display corporate identity logos more frequently than U.S. and German companies do [19]. With basis of collective society, the Korea has emphasized the values of respect and social class, this longing to increase one’s status and respect explains the strong dependence on celebrity endorsements and status appeals in Korean advertising [20]. For that reason, celebrities are expected to show a socially desirable and credible image to consumers, and thus, Koreans are more likely to be positively influenced by advertising with celebrity endorsements than by
advertising with non-celebrity endorsements [21].

Yet consumers do not see all celebrities as equally credible. Research has found that consumers determine the credibility of an endorser through their own subjective judgments [22]. Therefore, all of the Korean liquor company have adapted celebrity endorsement to build up accountability with customers. What is more, Soju commercials are most likely dominated by female celebrities whereas beer commercials are dominated by male celebrities, clarifying its specific gender targets to avoid uncertainties.

Korea is a feminine country focuses on sustaining life, however, as masculine country, American liquor commercials have high tendency of applying humor and stories regarding it advertisement. For instance, Heineken is one of the favorite drink in America, in the process of producing advertisement, product itself does not matter, storytelling and humor aspects are all that matter to draw audiences' attention. "Walk in fridge" is one the advertisement ran by Heineken in 2009 that the name itself represents masculinity of America that their life are beyond sustaining life but to enjoy their life. "Walk in fridge" starts with a women introducing her closet to her friends and screaming over the fanciness of dress room, on the other hand, man went wild over a room piled with Heineken beer. Another example would be Absolute Vodka's "One night." The concept of the advertisement is "Create a better tomorrow, tonight" emphasizing that creativity is the essence of progress and notify consumers that the vodka was very much back on the creative scene with a bang. Creative storytelling and sense of humor can be wildly accepted by the viewers due to they can fairly accepts unusual material, uncertainty, as well as flourishing life.

3.4 Common Theme Cases

[Fig. 5] Emart's World Beer Promotion, Korea [23] and Christian Dior's Miss Dior [24]

Furthermore, although Hofstede’s cultural dimension have been praised throughout the
world, the data is relatively old, and every culture undergoes gradual changes and cultural values which have proven beneficial are adopted and incorporated into different cultures through intelligent selection. A fine instance is that E-mart, which took the sentimental features of Korean culture and American factor humor; adapting and unifying two different values. According to international business theory, multinational organizations try to expand into countries which have more similarities and fewer differences in two cultures so that cultural mismatch can be avoided [25]. Another example would be Dior’s commercial utilizing common factor to eliminate any differences. Shared aspects such as love, parenthood and friendship do not have boundaries between countries which can be worked world-wide. To sum up, regarding to Hofstede’s theory Korea and America share less similarities along with diverse differences.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, to develop a successful marketing strategy, an organization must take into consideration the cultural influences of the society where a new product is being introduced. As a result, companies must acknowledge the differences in cultural factors in order to achieve business goals. Even though Hofstede’s model is generally accepted as the most comprehensive framework of national cultures values by those studying business culture, the validity and limitations have been extensively criticized. Hofstede’s theory and methodology were conducted in the seventies, influencing mostly on traditional marketing strategies. Hofstede’s did not consider the fact the shifts of culture or cultural diffusion. Aside from Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions, there are number of factors on which culture can be analyzed. Consequently, though Hofstede’s cultural dimension shed lights to the differences that both countries not have a lot in common, yet managers insights to grasp the trend of advertising is much more influential these days.

References


Issue-4, pp.1178-1185.


[13] Samsung Mobile Phone Case 1, Galaxy S7 & S7 Edge: Official product introduction commercial, Korea https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K1xdlkUTrM

[14] Samsung Mobile Phone Case 2, Lil Wayne Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge Commercial Champagne https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18UxWUjKlIQ


[16] Alcoholic Beverages Case 1, Chameisel: IU’s renewal Chamisel advertisement - Targeting college students https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbEHmMv_qwY

[17] Alcoholic Beverages Case 2, Heineken: Walk in fridge https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1ZZreXEqSY


[22] On Common Themes Case 1, Emart’s web-drama, my precious world. Korean market
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qyjLIqIRmo

[23] On Common Themes Case 2, Miss Dior – What would you do for love. World’s market
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3G1O443U_gA