

Use of Ambiguity in Advertising Creativity: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore a tendency of using ambiguity for advertising creativity and to compare the differences of ad message presentation in American ads and Korean ads. Data come from content analysis of winners of advertising awards. Results reveal that Cannes awards show higher scores in ambiguity than Korean Advertising Awards, and overall ambiguous cues in Asia advertising are higher than those in Northern and African Advertising.

Keywords: Informativeness, Strategic Ambiguity, Uncertainty Avoidance

1. Introduction

Today, of particular concern to advertising scholars and practitioners is the use of strategic ambiguity for effectiveness of persuasion. Strategic ambiguity, an equivalence of purposeful polysemy, has been considered a strategic resource of communication¹⁴. Despite these recent theoretical and managerial developments, studies have been scant to focus on the ambiguity in advertising creativity interpretation⁹.

The present study aims to explore a tendency of using ambiguity for advertising creativity and to compare the differences of ad message presentation in general American ads and Korean ads. Data come from in-depth interviews with former or/and present judges of international advertising awards.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ambiguity as a Creative Strategy

Ambiguity in communication occurs when the intended meaning of a message is not clearly delivered to a receiver¹³. Ambiguity has often been used for the effectiveness of persuasion^{1,17}, which can be termed as strategic ambiguity.

Present advertisers often deliberately design ads to

spawn ambiguity especially for certain product categories such as fashion and alcoholic drinks. For example, Absolut vodka is often described as a brand that tailors its meaning to different audiences by using visual cues that are amenable to multiple interpretations¹⁶. Faier and Unger report that 44 percent of ads contain ambiguities or instances in which information is unresolved or incomplete, thereby rendering it open to multiple interpretations⁴. In political campaign, strategic ambiguity is considered as a game of imperfect information. Candidates make strategic decisions to provide information via informative advertising or to withhold information about policy positions in the perspective of the effects of campaign².

2.2 Cultural Perspectives of Ambiguity: Uncertainty Avoidance Perspectives

Uncertainty Avoidance focuses on how societies deal with unknown aspects of the future. Ambiguity in advertising can be understood in terms of cultural values¹⁴.

Compared with the United States, China has a high index of uncertainty avoidance⁶. Ji and McNeal's (2001) study also shows the results, supportive of previous scholars' hypotheses, that a higher percentage of Chinese children's commercials contains informational content than do those of United States to avoid ambiguity⁸.

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Total level of information content has to do with the quantity of factual information that is presented in the message. It is expected that a country with high uncertainty avoidance indexes will provide their audiences with more detailed, factual, and quantifiable information that is needed for decision-making.

RQ 1. Does the use of ambiguity differ between Cannes winners and general ads?

RQ 2. Does the use of ambiguity in Cannes winners differ between U.S. and Korean ads?

3. Methods

3.1 Content Analysis of Cannes Winners, U.S. and Korean Ads

This study is to investigate how the strategic use of ambiguity in ad differs among the winners of international awards, general advertisements of United States and of South Korea. Analysis items were selected on such theoretical backgrounds as creativity⁵, ambiguity¹⁷, informativeness and imagery in cross-cultural perspectives¹⁵.

3.1.1 Texts and Analysis Items

Winners of 'Cannes Creativity Festivals 2013', general television commercials and print ads of U.S. and Korea from July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013 are selected. Cannes winners are surveyed through Ads of the World site (<http://adsoftheworld.com>), an ad archive run by the US media group 'mediabistro'. General U.S. and Korea ads are selected from TVCF (<http://tvco.kr>), a world-scale advertising archive that has approximately 364,000 ads including print, online ads and television commercials. Along with TVCF, 'Ads of the World' is utilized to compensate for the possible omission of TVCF. AdsoftheWorld has approximately 62,880 selected ads of worldwide creativity, including winners of international ad awards such as Cannes.

Since this study focuses on ad creativity, samples of general ads are required to have high level of ad creativity. We selected 120 U.S. TV ads, as the samples to check its creativity, which amounts to 20% to be analyzed, and match them with those in Ads of the World site, a well-known site for its high creative archives. As a result, 98 percent of ads turned out to be matched with each other. Considering the quality of archive in Ads of the World site, we perceived TVCF well stocked with high creative ads. Accordingly, general ad samples from TVCF achieve

are considered well-qualified for the current study on advertising creativity in a cross-cultural perspective.

3.2 Measurement of Ambiguity: Ambiguous Cues and Information Cues

This study measures ambiguity by the use frequency of ambiguous cues. Thus, it is proposed that both ambiguity and informativeness should be considered to judge the ambiguity degree in ad messages. If ad messages with high informativeness contain high ambiguity (e.g., many promotional words expressed in vague and imagery typefaces), the ad possibly have difficulty in conveying intended messages. Such an ad hardly can be informative. Therefore, the current study attempts to count informativeness as well as ambiguity for the measurement of overall ambiguity of ad messages.

3.2.1 Ambiguous Cues

Ambiguity in ad messages is related with how words and visual image are expressed in an advertisement¹⁷. Ambiguity involves dimensions such as: be less informative, contain more ambiguous cues and contain nonverbal images over verbal message¹². The ambiguous cues reflecting the ambiguity of advertising have been proposed as imagery over words and the absence of the information content, while informativeness is described as presentation of unadorned facts, merely "news about" the product concerned¹⁹.

1 is coded for the ad when an item listed in this study is shown; 0 is coded when none of the items is present in an ad. Specifically, imagery-related item is coded 2 in total following Zaharna's study¹⁸. That is, 1 is coded "when soft imagery is shown whether or not promotional language is used" according to affect and Imagery item, and another 1 is coded "when soft imagery is accompanied by no promotional language" according to soft imagery without promotional language item. As a result, an ad is given 2 points if it has soft imagery without promotional words. Soft imagery is thus weighted because it is proposed to be closely related with ambiguity of ad messages¹⁸.

3.2.2 Information Cues

The information cues reflecting the informativeness of advertising have been measured by the presence or absence of the information content. The most widely criteria for classification of information content are

Resnik and Stern's cues¹⁵. A commercial is considered to contain informational content if it communicates any of the 14 criteria.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

The general ads of U.S. and South Korea were published or aired from July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013, falling on the period when the entries of 2013 Cannes were published. To address creative advertisements, we attempted to select those praised highly for the creativity. Around 10% of the total samples were selected considering the huge size of total samples. As for Korean ads, "Hot" ads had been selected according to the consumers' hit on TVCF (tvco.kr), Korea's largest ad archive. As for U.S. ads, no prior ads were listed on the archive for high creativity. 562 were randomly selected from the archive sites, amounting to more than 11% of total listed ads (4,821) during that period and matched them with those in a popular ad archive, Ads of the world (adsoftheworld.com).

3.4 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was 2013 Cannes winners, and U.S. and Korean general ads (TV and print ads). The total number of sample ads was 1,160: 222 Cannes winners, 562 American general ads (345 TV, 217 Print) and 376 Korean ads (211 TV, 165 Print). If the selected general ads turned out to be Cannes winners, they were excluded to avoid overlapping.

3.5 Measurement

All ads were classified into eleven product categories and assigned a category number between 1 and 11. The classification is based on Katz and Lee's study, with the category name adjusted on the practices of Cannes Creativity Festivals; they are automotive, health and beauty, clothing and shoes, food, alcoholic drinks, household appliances, electronics and technology, service, travel and leisure, public interest and industrial products and the others (miscellaneous)¹⁰.

3.6 Coding Procedure

The coding scheme and instructions were developed on the basis of the conceptual and operational definitions discussed previously. Two graduate students—a native English speaker and a native Korean speaker—were recruited to assist in coding. A native English speaker is a

second-generation Korean American born and educated in United States, and a native Korean speaker is presently a graduate student of United States, majoring in marketing.

4. Results

4.1 Reliability

Before coding the items, coding reliability was checked by comparing each coder's results with those of the researcher. Then, coders received an additional training session and recoded the misunderstood or confused items. The final intercoder reliabilities for the 232 ads, 20% of 1,160 samples of the current study, averaged 86%~90% for the 22 items of coding procedures. Overall, the coding reached the satisfactory requirement, exceeding the critical value of 85% as suggested by Kolbe and Burnett¹¹.

4.2 Informativeness (Inf)

Compared Cannes winners to general ads, information content Cannes 1.03 (1.063), U.S. 1.54 (1.271), Korea 2.06 (1.301). Specifically, the use frequency of 'performance' is the highest among Cannes winners; 'components or contents' item is the highest in both U.S. and Korean ads.

4.3 Ambiguity (Amb)

A total of 847 ads contained more than one ambiguous cue. This amounts to 73 percent of the samples. An ad is considered ambiguous if it has one ambiguous cue or more. It is revealed that, among total samples, 'affect and imagery' are most frequently appeared (61.3%); followed by 'symbolism' (in Cannes and in Korean ads), or 'Hidden or abbreviated visual' (in U.S. ads) as second frequent ones. Overall mean value of ambiguous cues = 1.45 (standard deviation = 1.286). Minimum value = 0; maximum value = 6. Compared Cannes winners to general ads, Cannes 2.19 (1.259), U.S. 1.48 (1.350), Korea .99 (.959).

4.4 Inf in Cannes Winners

One-way ANOVA was conducted to find out whether the frequency of information content in Cannes-winners differs according to the regions. Results reveal that information content is significantly different according to those six regions ($F = 3.619$, $df = 5$, $p = .004$) as in Table 6.

Posteriori tests through Scheffe and Bonferroni indicates that the mean of ambiguous cues of Asia ads is 1.004 higher than that of North America ($p = .004$).

4.5 Amb in Cannes Winners

One-way ANOVA was conducted to find whether the use frequency of ambiguous cues in Cannes-winners differs according to the regions (North America, South America, Asia, Europe, Africa and Australia). Results reveal that the use frequency is significantly different according to those six regions ($F = 4.052$, $df = 5$, $p = .002$).

Posteriori tests through Scheffe and Bonferroni indicates that the mean of ambiguous cues of Asian ads is 1.149 higher than that of North American ads; 1.349 that of African ads. The results are significant at $p = .005$, respectively.

4.6 Mean of Ambiguity According to Product Category

Of all the products surveyed in Cannes winners 2013, clothing and shoes have the highest mean value of ambiguity (3.80) with informativeness .40 as in Table 7. The second highest one is for health and beauty category ads with ambiguity 3.19, informativeness .25. The lowest one is automotive category ads with ambiguity 1.44, informativeness 1.00. As for general ads, clothing & Shoes have the highest mean value of ambiguity (2.03) with informativeness 1.22. The second highest one is alcoholic drinks category with ambiguity 2.00 and informativeness 1.09. The lowest one is automotive category ads with ambiguity .95, informativeness 2.44.

One reason industrial products and others in U.S. ads have high degree of ambiguity is that image stock company and ad agency's ads with relatively high number of ambiguous cues are classified into this category. Notably enough, Korean automotive ads are the highest both in ambiguity mean (1.54) and in informativeness mean (2.42). It is because Korean ads tend to make frequent use of image appeals and to present plenty of information in parallel. Such creative strategy aiming for both informativeness and ambiguity is likely to decrease the information clarity, consequently enhance the ambiguity in ads. Meanwhile, the lowest Korean category in the use of ambiguity is household appliances: ambiguity .50, informativeness 2.00.

Overall, health and beauty are found to contain large number of ambiguous cues. This coincides with Warlaumont's reporting that advertisements of fashion and cosmetics have been found to contain more ambiguity¹⁷. On the other hand, ads in electronics and technology category are overall low in the use frequency of ambiguity; but high in informativeness.

4.7 Use of Ambiguity between Cannes Winners and General Ads <RQ 1>

The use frequency of ambiguous cues in Cannes ads (mean = 2.03) is significantly higher than that of TV ads (mean = 1.28), as shown in Table 1 ($F = 41.247$, $p = .000$). However, no interaction effect was found between Cannes winners/general ads and media types ($p = .802$). As for informativeness, comparisons of the use frequency of informativeness between awards-winners and general ads show interaction effect with media types ($F = 4.769$, $p = .029$).

Specifically, TV ads have more information content (1.52) than print ads (1.07) in Cannes winners, while print ads have more information content (1.85) than TV ads (1.67) in general ads. The mean of information content in Cannes winners is lower (1.18) than that of general ads (1.75). This finding of a high value of informativeness in print ads is partly consistent with other studies on ad information.

Table 1. Mean of INF, AMB: cannes/general ads x media

US/Korea		INF	AMB	N
Cannes	Print	1.07(.992)	2.18(1.229)	95
Cannes	TV	1.52(1.299)	1.55(.870)	29
Cannes	Total	1.18(1.082)	2.03(1.182)	124
General Ads(U.S. and Korea)	Print	1.85(1.331)	1.69(1.283)	382
General Ads(U.S. and Korea)	TV	1.67(1.288)	1.00(1.109)	556
General Ads(U.S. and Korea)	Total	1.75(1.308)	1.28(1.231)	938
Total	Print	1.70(1.307)	1.79(1.286)	477
Total	TV	1.66(1.288)	1.03(1.105)	585
Total	Total	1.68(1.296)	1.37(1.248)	1062

Figures in brackets are standard deviations.

4.8 Use of Ambiguity between U.S. and Korean Ads <RQ 2>

Two-way ANOVA was conducted to find interaction effects between cross-cultural differences (U.S. vs. Korea) and media types (print vs. TV). The results are as in Table 9: First, as for ambiguity, both in U.S. and Korean ads the use frequency is higher than in print than in TV ads. However, the differences are greater in U.S. ads (Print 2.06, TV 1.11) than in Korean ads (print 1.21, TV .81). The differences between nationality and media turned out statistically significant ($F = 12.102$, $p = .001$).

As for informativeness, in U.S. ads, the frequency

of informativeness of TV (mean=1.62) is higher than that of print (1.40), while, in Korean ads, the frequency of informativeness of print (2.44) is higher than that of TV (1.76). Hence, the use frequency of informativeness between U.S ads and Korean ads shows interaction effect with media types ($F = 27.937$, $p = .000$).

Table 2. Mean of INF, AMB: US/Korea x Media

US/Korea		INF	AMB	N
U.S.	Print	1.40(1.089)	2.06(1.315)	217
U.S.	TV	1.62(1.367)	1.11(1.240)	345
U.S.	Total	1.54(1.271)	1.48(1.349)	562
Korea	Print	2.44(1.390)	1.21(1.069)	165
Korea	TV	1.76(1.144)	.81(.824)	211
Korea	Total	2.06(1.301)	.99(.959)	376

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The results seem to reflect the cultural characteristics of ad creativity between Korea with high UAI (Uncertainty Avoidance Index) and United States with low UAI construct⁷. That is, in United States, ad messages are presented rather in low clarity, or high ambiguity, while in Korea with high UAI, ad messages tend to be presented in a clear or concrete way. Based on the results, ad creativity can strategically reflect the cultural differences in the use of ambiguity, if needed, of ad messages.

In addition, the results came out to be different either when applied by Hall³ theoretical frameworks or by Hofstede⁶ concept as information content (and/or ambiguous information). When the criteria were applied to product information per se such as Resnik and Stern¹⁵ items, for example, precedent studies dealt with in perspective of Hall's context, thus produced the result of supporting hypothesis³. However, in contrast with visual items, verbal information items such as products in use, factual information were dealt in the study based on Hofstede's UAI perspectives^{6,8}. This study is based on both Contextual perspective and UAI perspective (e.g., amount of narrated copy)¹⁵.

6. References

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