



Cross-cultural advertising communication: Visual imagery, brand familiarity, and brand recall

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 May 2007

Received in revised form 1 October 2007

Accepted 1 November 2007

Keywords:

Advertising

Cross-cultural

Imagery

Brand familiarity

Brand recall

ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is to address the issue of visual imagery in cross-cultural consumer research. The authors investigate the relationship between visual imagery, brand familiarity, and brand claim recall in two distinct cultural environments – the U.S. and Russia. The paper consists of two studies that explored imagery potency from the point of view of memory-evoking effects. The results suggest that image-intensive tools generate different returns depending on the level of brand familiarity and cultural media. The research findings may be of interest to marketing scholars studying cross-cultural consumer behavior as well as to practitioners operating in international advertising and global brand building.

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1. Introduction

With the dynamic growth of cross-cultural marketing communications, marketers give more consideration to the selection of visual imagery communication tools. They believe that visual imagery-intensive carriers such as TV, magazines, and product packages are also the most powerful ones in terms of influencing brand recall. However, the efficiency of this, as well as other visual imagery-evoking tools, differs depending on consumer memory-related factors, such as brand familiarity, product category experience, and degree of consumer involvement.

Richardson (1969) defines imagery as quasi-sensory or quasi-perceptual experiences that we are self-consciously aware of and that exist in the absence of stimulus conditions, producing their genuine sensory or perceptual counterparts. According to Lutz and Lutz (1977), imagery is a mental event involving visualization of a concept or relationship. MacInnis and Price define imagery as a process... “by which sensory information is represented in working memory (1987, p. 473).” Hence, imagery can be multisensory processing, which may lead to better recall of information (Babin and Burns 1997).

Imagery has been studied extensively in the cognitive psychology field and has drawn increased interest among consumer researchers (Babin and Burns, 1997; Andrews et al., 1994). The reliance on imagery has grown sharply over the recent decades for a number of reasons, including the drive for global marketing and development of international brands, such as Coca-Cola, Nike, Pizza Hut, Pepsi, and Mercedes (Branthwaite, 2002). Therefore an investigation of the role of imagery in cross-cultural format is important as more and more U.S. and foreign multinationals are reaching consumers in foreign markets, especially in transition economies (e.g., Russia).

Researchers (e.g., Cleveland and Laroche, 2007) note that international consumer research primarily focuses on one of two areas: the search for common groups of consumers with similar tastes and preferences across countries; and understanding consumer differences from the perspective of cultural, social, economic, and marketing programs. While the first area emphasizes the importance of the emergence of global consumers, the second area suggests that successful marketing and communications strategies begin with cultural sensitivity – being tuned to the nuances of behavior of consumers in foreign markets. Competition for world markets and the increasing sophistication of foreign consumers have led to an increasing need for sophisticated advertising and communication strategies. The effects of the imagery in cross-cultural context are of practical relevance, especially countries such as Russia, which are embracing a market based economy. Russian consumers may hold entirely different views toward advertising than those held in the U.S., even though U.S.-based advertisers and brands are predominantly

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featured in Russia (Andrews et al., 1994). Research is needed on cross-cultural understanding and applicability of advertising communications to countries such as Russia. Companies that compete globally need to take cultural differences into consideration when making the decision regarding the advertising strategies applied in each country.

The present study investigates the relationships between the brand familiarity, visual imagery of an ad, and the brand claim recall in two distinct cultural environments – the U.S. and Russia. These two cultures are chosen as they are highly distinct in terms of social and cultural values, economic and political conditions, and media habits. The marked differences between the U.S. and Russia help marketers to test cross-cultural impact on advertising communications. The paper concludes with an interpretation of the findings and implications for cross-cultural advertising research.

2. Literature overview

In the area of cognitive psychology, a great deal of research has been devoted to imagery. Various studies make a distinction between different types of imagery in terms of their sources, cognitive and affective associations, bases of raw stimuli, and avenues of information processing (Richardson, 1969; Burns et al., 1993). Though imagery is believed to be multisensory (olfactory, auditory, tactile, taste), any considered type of imagery is related to a human's visual sensoric complex. Based on this categorization scheme, imagery-related studies operationalize 'imagery' and 'visual imagery' constructs as theoretical equivalents.

2.1. Research on imagery and advertising effectiveness relationship

Rossiter and Percy (1980), and LaBarbera et al. (1998) document memory recall to be higher if associated with more intensive visual imagery activity rather than under conditions that are believed to be less imagery stimulating. Multiple code theory (Paivio, 1986) explains this effect by the fact that visual imagery creates multiple cues in human memory, and multiple retrieval processes associated with these cues increase the probability of recall. Based on this theoretical framework, some studies in marketing literature consider effect of imagery on brand attitude and brand claim recall (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990; Burns et al., 1993). The results of these studies demonstrate positive relationships between various dimensions of imagery (vividness, concrete vs. abstract wording, instructions vs. no instructions to imagine, etc.) and the subsequent advertising effects (attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, intention to buy, etc.).

2.2. Cross-cultural aspects

The role of imagery in consumer perception and elaboration of information received in the process of international marketing communications has been a subject of the extensive scholarly and practical research within the last two decades. The distinctions in information processing, including its visual component, are caused by

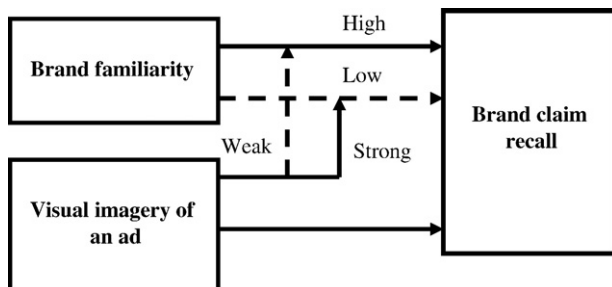


Fig. 1. The hypothesized model of relationship between brand familiarity, visual imagery of an ad, and brand claim recall.

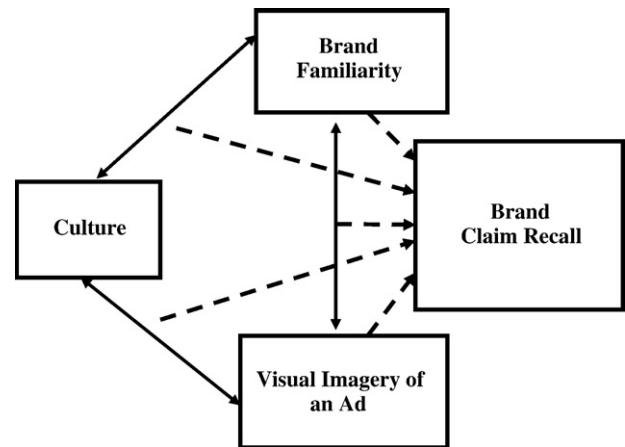


Fig. 2. The hypothesized interactions between culture and familiarity – recall and imagery-recall relationships.

the fact that cultural environment is the complex set of beliefs, values, norms and attitudes acquired by consumers as part of their national heritage. Mueller (1992) and Harvey (1993) consider cultural environment to have a significant influence on international marketing communications strategy and corresponding choice of brand claim recall evoking communication tools.

Some researchers tended to cluster the countries to determine the degree of international marketing communications standardization (Sriram and Gopalakrishna, 1991; Katz and Lee, 1992). Sriram and Gopalakrishna (1991) identify six groups of countries and argued that communication strategies and imagery tactics could be attempted within each group by employing similar but not identical messages. The researchers figured out a number of environmental variables as important determinants of transferability of imagery communication, such as rate of economic growth, attitudes towards wealth and monetary gain, development and acceptance of international trademarks, religious norms and beliefs, etc. (e.g. Dunn, 1976).

Scholarly studies pay a great deal of attention to the psychographic and behavioral segmentation of image communication recipients in cross-border settings. Pollay (1986) and Green et al. (1975) recognize the U.S. advertising as heavily imagery-loaded, given its pervasiveness (9 min of TV advertising per hour, one of the largest imagery advertisers in the world). The research indicates that an American consumer has a higher degree of predisposition to perception of visual imagery and generates greater numbers of image-related responses than consumers in most of the other countries in the world (Andrews and Lysonski, 1991).

3. Hypotheses

The hypothesized link between brand familiarity, visual imagery, and brand claim recall is shown in Fig. 1, and the hypothesized cross-cultural differences can be represented as shown in Fig. 2.

3.1. Relationship between brand familiarity and brand claim recall

Brand familiarity reflects the 'share of mind' of a given consumer attained to the particular brand and the extent of a consumer's direct and indirect experience with a brand (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Kent and Allen, 1994). Campbell and Keller (2003) argue that brand familiarity is determined by strength of associations that the brand name evokes in consumer memory, and in this way it captures the consumer's brand attitude schemata. Their findings demonstrate a main effect of brand familiarity on uncued brand recall such that familiar brands were better recalled than were unfamiliar brands.

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