CULTURAL VALUES REFLECTED IN U.S. ONLINE BANNER ADVERTISEMENTS

Lin Zhunag, Louisiana State University
linzhuang@yahoo.com

Xigen Li, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
lixigen@siu.edu

ABSTRACT

This study explores dominant cultural values in banner advertisements of the Top 100 U.S. Web Sites. The findings reveal that the dominant cultural values presented in U.S. online banner advertisements reflect the prevailing values of the society and technology features of the Internet. U.S. online banner advertisements exhibit more utilitarian appeal than symbolic appeal. The study also found that type of advertising appeal is associated with product type possessing the corresponding appeal. The results indicate that online banner advertisements reflect a convergence of the typical cultural norms of the American society and the particular features of Internet advertising medium. The dominance of utilitarian appeal in the banner advertisements corresponds to the nature of Internet advertising development. It also fits the American low-context culture, which prefers logical and factual manners to communicate thoughts and actions.

Cultural values in advertising have been studied in a variety of media setting (Cheng, 1997; Tansey, Hyman, & Zinkhan, 1990). Scholars argued that advertising messages convey and reinforce cultural norms (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). As the communication technology advances, scholars suggest a link between the communication technology and the key features of a culture. As a rapidly growing medium, the Internet provides a platform to connect technology and culture.

The advertisements by AT&T, Sprint, MCI, Volvo, and others on the Hotwired site in 1994 marked the beginning of the Internet advertising (Meeker, 1997). Advertising revenue in the Internet space has been relatively small but growing rapidly. According to eMarketer, U.S. online advertising spending would increase by 20.2% in 2005, reaching $11.3 billion by year's end, up from $6 billion in 2002. That means Internet advertising would account for 4% of all U.S. advertising spending during 2005, up from approximately 3.5% in 2004 (Butler, 2005).

The growth of Internet advertising has sparked numerous studies. However, studies have concentrated either on economic roles of online advertising or the efficiency of Internet ads from the advertisers' perspective. Advertising on the Web not only distributes messages about products and services, it also transfers cultures. A review of literature indicates that although a few studies looked at relationship between Internet advertising and culture, few examined the relationship between the dominant cultural values and the specific products and services advertised on the Internet. Other advertising cultural studies used traditional media (TV, newspaper and magazine) as research subjects, and only revealed cultural values reflected through traditional media. From a cultural perspective, whatever messages Internet advertising

conveyed remains a question largely unanswered. This study attempts to explore the cultural content of the online advertising. By applying the traditional cultural value measurements used in previous studies, this study content analyzed the banner ads of the Top 100 U.S. Web Sites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linking Advertising to Culture

Scholarly research indicates a subtle connection between advertising and culture. These theoretical and empirical works concerning advertising and culture can be organized into two approaches. The first approach proposes that as a reflection of social fabric, advertising conveys cultural norms. A content analysis of American advertising found that advertising conveys, directly or indirectly, evaluations, norms, and concepts that comprise an ideology of the society (Andren et al., 1978, p113). Cultural attributes are transmitted and assigned meanings through advertising (McCracken, 1986, p.121).

Empirical studies on cross-cultural studies have also yielded evidence that advertising plays a critical role in transmitting cultural norms (Tansey et al., 1990; Hong, et al., 1987; Belk & Pollay, 1985a; Culter & Javalgi, 1992; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996). For example, Japanese culture was found to orient its advertising toward respect for nature, tradition and elders while the Western spirit of adventurism and conquest guided American advertising to express more challenges to the status quo (Belk and Pollay, 1985a). In examining cultural themes in Brazilian and U.S. auto ads, Tansey et al. (1990) found that urban themes appear more frequently in Brazilian ads than in U.S. ads, while U.S. ads employ more leisure themes than in Brazilian ads. Western cultures endorse communications that are explicit, direct, and unambiguous, while Asian cultures endorse less verbal communication modes (Hall, 1977).

The second approach suggests that advertising has powerful influence on the culture. By identifying advertising as a powerful media institution, scholars argue that advertising alters and even creates cultural values. Advertising is not simply a selling business; it "has joined the charmed circle of institutions which fix the values and standards of society (Pollay, 1983, p.72)." Belk and Pollay (1985b) evaluated the image of life depicted in advertisements in U.S. popular magazines between 1900 and 1980 and found that the themes used in advertising have an effect on the perception of a progressively more luxurious and comfortable lifestyle in that period. Leach (1994) described how American capitalism had produced the culture of commercial aesthetic. The advertising had lured Americans into the pleasure of consumption and indulgence. Advertising as "a vibrant and provocative social discourse" played a determining role in creating the postmodern culture (Gross et al., 1996).

Measuring Cultural Values

Cultural value is a complex and multifaceted construct. The term "value" has been defined as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to alternative modes of conduct or end-state of existence (Rokeach, 1968, p. 160)." Cultural differences could be identified by examining culturally generalizable aspects of a value system (Munson & McIntyre, 1979). Hofstede (1984, 34-37) proposed a cultural value system, which is one of the few studies stemming from both theoretical and practical standpoints. Hofstede's model first initiated the concept of "dimension of culture" and proposed four value dimensions on which societies differ: Individualism (IDV), Power Distance (PDI), Uncertainty

Avoidance (UAI), and Masculinity (MAS). Although Hofstede's model has rarely been applied to advertising research, it established a framework for cultural value studies.

Cultural value is the core of advertising messages. It refers to intangible beliefs, norms, and characteristics that are embedded in advertising appeals (Zhang & Gelb, 1996). Advertising is a particularly "persuasive proponent of a specific value system" (Pollay, 1983, p.72). Among approaches testing advertising culture hypotheses, a specific applicable method for value analysis was missing for a long time. Pollay (1983) developed a measurement scheme to describe the cultural characters of advertising. He recognized that cultural values, norms, and characteristics are integrated into advertising appeals. Constructing a list of 42 ad values, Pollay covered almost all common cultural values in advertising. Exhaustive and comprehensive, Pollay's typology was conventionally applied in later advertising cultural studies.

Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) coded advertisements in business publications from 11 countries to examine the systematic cultural differences in advertising content. They matched advertising values identified by Pollay (1983) to four cultural dimensions originally defined by Hofstede (1984). Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) conducted a comparative study that looked into cultural values reflected in Chinese and U.S. television commercials. They constructed a list of 30 cultural values, which is primarily derived from Pollay's (1983) typology of the advertising values. With a list of value items derived from Pollay (1983), Meuller (1987), and Cheng and Schweitzer (1996), Zhang and Harwood (2004) analyzed Chinese television commercials and identified 13 dominant value themes. These measurement instruments formed the basis for this study in measuring cultural values in online banner advertisements.

Advertising Appeals and Advertising Evolution

Advertising appeal is the specific approach advertisers use to communicate how their products will satisfy customer needs. Advertising appeals are typically carried in the illustration and headlines of advertisements (Arens & Bovee, 1994). Described as the two most common approaches used in advertising (Snyder & DeBono, 1985), symbolic and utilitarian ad appeals have been examined extensively in the advertising literature. Symbolic appeal holds a creative objective to construct an image of the generalized user of the advertised product and evoke emotions and thinking. Utilitarian appeal highlights the functional features of the product, such as the performance, quality, and price (Johar & Sirgy, 1991).

Researchers related the adoption of utilitarian or symbolic appeal to advertising evolution (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996). Advertising evolution refers to the progression of a certain advertising industry. Through a longitudinal content analysis of print ads from Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, Tse et al. (1989) found that advertising evolves with economic development, moving from functional, utilitarian benefits to more symbolic benefits.

Leiss et al. (1990) identified a historical pattern of advertisement growth in a historical analysis of U.S. advertisements. The pattern indicates a shift from "informational to symbolic presentation" of human values in advertising, as the advertising industry grows "mature." Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) applied Leiss' historical model to their comparative study of Chinese and U.S. television commercials, and found that Chinese television commercials tend to use values with symbolic appeal. They argued that advertising in China has stepped beyond the product information phase described in Leiss et al.'s (1990) model. Zhang and Harwood (2004) found the

dominant value themes in the Chinese advertising indicated the prevalence of values with utilitarian appeal and the coexistence of both traditional and modern values. They argued that the prevalence of values with utilitarian appeal was a reflection of the developing stage of Chinese advertising.

Other Factors Influencing Cultural Values

Although previous studies indicated that cultural values and appeals in advertising are related in a nonrandom way, some scholars have noticed that cultural values may not match advertising appeals in some circumstances. It is especially true when some external factors are weighted to enhance advertising effectiveness. For example, product-related characteristics, such as product use condition, product life cycle, and differentiation, play a key role in determining advertising content. Zhang and Gelb (1996) reported that product use conditions have strong impact on the effectiveness of different advertising appeals across contrasting cultures.

Furthermore, the traditional view of advertising effectiveness suggests that a particular message appeal is contingent on the type of product being advertised. Research in advertising effectiveness has claimed an appeal-by-product interaction. This notion implies that effectiveness of message appeal type is a function of the product type being advertised (Shavitt, 1990; Sewall & Sarel, 1986; Aaker, Batra, & Myers, 1992; Dube et al., 1996). More specifically, Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy (1984) argued that the type of appeal should "match" the type of product. Johar and Sirgy (1991) also summarized the arguments in favor of such a relationship in positing that "value-expressive" (similar to emotional or feeling) appeals work best for value-expressive products, whereas "utilitarian" (similar to rational or thinking) appeals work best for utilitarian products.

Studies on the likely effects of new media technologies upon culture have showed that information technology introduces new types of human interactions and alters the structure of people's interests (Rogers, 1986; Meyrowitz, 1985; Neuman, 1991; Postman, 1993; Turow, 1997). By evaluating advertising activities on the Internet, Turow (1997) claimed that online services emphasize a greater array of lifestyle interests than any other medium. He predicted that Internet database capabilities would reinforce lifestyle segregation and extend the splits in social fabric (Turow, 1997). However, other scholars questioned whether the Internet would create drastic social and cultural changes. Turkle and Brail (as cited in Gersch, 1998) argued the Internet in many ways is merely a reflection of traditional media. The Internet only reproduces the content of existing media, particularly with respect to commercial content.

A large part of the literature on cultural reflections in advertising dealt with the issues in traditional media. Numerous studies focused on the market mechanism of Internet advertising. A few studies looked at the cultural themes of Internet advertising, but few examined how advertising appeal is reflected in Internet advertising and relates to product category. Cultural value is critical in advertising success in traditional media. As a technically advanced medium, does the Internet bring new notions to the existing cultural themes? It is assumed that the cultural value structure of traditional advertising media also exists in Internet advertising and plays an important role in the Internet as in traditional media. The reasoning here is that consumers grow up in a particular culture and become accustomed to that culture's value systems, beliefs and perception processes. Consequently, they respond to advertising messages that are congruent with their culture. Advertising effectiveness will be greatly enhanced if advertisers understand

the culture and tailor the ads to reflect its values (Zhang & Gelb, 1996). The Internet advertising is expected to continue the practice in traditional media to achieve its effectiveness.

This paper intends to test the reasoning about Internet advertising reflecting specific cultural values through a content analysis of the banner advertisements on the Top 100 U.S. Web Sites. The study mainly applied Cheng and Schweitzer's (1996) measurement instrument to identify the cultural values embedded in online banner advertisements. It also looked at how product categories influenced cultural values of Internet advertising. The study will test the following three hypotheses.

> H1: The dominant cultural values presented in U.S. online banner advertisements are likely to reflect the prevailing values of the society and technology features of the Internet.

According to the literature, U.S. Internet advertising, like advertising in other media, will reflect cultural values of the American society that creates it. At the same time, Internet advertising is expected to convey some special themes such as "technology" and "information" with respect to its unique communication technology characteristics.

> H2: The majority of U.S. online banner advertisements reflect values with utilitarian appeal instead of symbolic appeal.

According to the Leiss et al.'s (1990) historical pattern of advertising evolution, the preference for using values with utilitarian or symbolic appeals reflects the maturity level of consumers. In the highly competitive U.S. market, advertisers have to provide solid information in advertising to attract their target consumers, who are living in a low-context culture and prefer directness in speech (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996). A low-context culture relies heavily on its Western rhetoric and logic tradition to relate thoughts and actions to people and their environment (Hall & Hall, 1987). The Internet environment also has its unique features. The small amount of space for banner ads on a Web page requires conciseness and brevity. Different from other media users, Internet users are actively looking for information (Sterne, 1997), which may result in that Internet advertising bears more values with utilitarian appeal that consumers could perceive immediately.

> H3: Type of advertising appeal is associated with the type of product possessing the corresponding appeal (product categories).

As the literature indicates, product-related characteristics have much to do with advertising appeal. Type of appeal is likely to match the type of product possessing the specific appeal (Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1984). Value-expressive (emotional) and utilitarian appeals will work best for the corresponding products (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). To be effective in promoting the products advertised, Internet advertising is assumed to follow the pattern appeared in the traditional media. This hypothesis would test whether type of advertising appeal in the online banner advertisements is associated with product-related characteristics, in this case, product categories possessing the corresponding appeal.

This study will also answer the following research question:

RQ1. To what degree are cultural values of online banner advertisements associated with advertising appeal?

This research question attempts to confirm the relationship between cultural values and advertising appeal. "Economy," "convenience," and "effectiveness" were considered typical cultural values with utilitarian appeal, whereas "enjoyment" was considered typical cultural values with symbolic appeal in the studies of traditional media. The answer to this question will clarify to what degree cultural values match advertising appeal in the Internet setting.

METHOD

This study employed a content analysis. Content analysis is frequently used at various levels to examine variables as words, themes, characters, items, and space-and-time measures (Kassarjian, 1977). There are three types of Internet advertising: keyword search (analogous to paid search), banner ads, and online classified. The banner ad is the most prevalent method of Internet advertisement and generates the largest ad revenue (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2003). Using interactive techniques, banner ads represent dynamic contents for Internet cultural studies.

Sampling

This study used a nonrandom sample by selecting banner ads from the Top 100 U.S. Web Sites. The Top 100 Web Sites were the most popular Web sites in the United States at the time when this study was conducted. The ranking of the Top 100 Web Sites was provided by the monthly Internet Ratings report from PC DataOnline, one of three leading companies that specialize in ranking Web site popularity. Web site popularity was ranked by the unduplicated audience reach and the number of unique visitors. These Web sites were also online ad publishers, which listed the CPM (cost of per thousand impressions) for their ad space, along with the prices for products like buttons or keywords, all tailored to the particular vehicle that a site might provide (Meeker, 1997).

Banner ads on Web sites "decay" or are updated very quickly. The time frame for banner ads update varies across the Web sites. Some sites change every five seconds, others update their ads at a much slower pace. Through an observation of the 10 Web sites out of the Top 100 one month before data collection, it was found in five minutes, the numbers of unduplicated banner ads appeared at the 10 Web sites ranged from zero to 12. Five minutes at one site was considered a functional time frame to obtain a sufficient number of banner ads for this study. Five minutes at each site would probably generate 300 unduplicated ads from the 100 Web sites. The sampling process lasted 10 days, from May 19, 2003 to May 28, 2003. All banner ads on the home page or the front page of the Top 100 U.S. Web Sites were collected. A total of 268 banner ads were downloaded.

Key Concepts and Operational Definitions

Banner Ad refers to a typically rectangular graphic element that displays brief information of a product or service, and entices the viewer to click it for further information. Using eye-catching designs and logos, banner ads usually run on the top and bottom of Web pages to generate traffic and create brand awareness. A banner ad usually includes some text, such as a phrase or a slogan and the advertiser's name and Internet address. If a user finds the ad intriguing enough, he or she

may then click on the ad, which activates an embedded link, to visit the advertiser's Web site (Sterne, 1997).

Cultural value is defined as intangible beliefs, norms, and characteristics that are embedded in advertising appeals (Zhang and Gelb, 1996). The measurement of cultural value in this study is largely based on Cheng and Schweitzer's (1996) measurement instrument. Cheng and Schweitzer's study applied Pollay's 42 cultural value typology, a comprehensive and exhaustive measurement instrument of cultural values. The instrument has been frequently applied in advertising cultural studies to identify cultural values of advertising messages. Because some of the values do not apply to the Internet medium, this study measured cultural value using 32 items. Most of them were adapted from Cheng and Schweitzer's study.

Advertising appeal is divided into two groups: symbolic appeal and utilitarian appeal. *Symbolic appeal* evokes a wide range of emotional responses from the ad's audience. The cultural values with symbolic appeal include those suggesting human emotions such as "enjoyment," "individualism," and "social status." *Utilitarian appeal* involves informing consumers of one or more key benefits that are perceived to be highly functional or beneficial to the target consumers. Cultural values with utilitarian appeal emphasizes product features or qualities, such as "convenience," "economy," and "effectiveness."

Product Category. The products or services advertised in Internet banner ads are divided into 16 categories. The product categories of Cheng and Schweitzer's (1996) study were modified to create a list of products for this study by adding Internet-related categories such as online shopping and online community/service.

The unit of analysis is one banner ad on the homepage or the front-page of each Web site. A homepage is the initial page of a Web site. It provides information both directly and via links to other files on the same site or to files on computers located on remote networks. A front-page is similar to the concept of the print version, and usually appears as a section on the homepage (Li, 1998). The data were collected mostly from homepages. Some Web sites may not post ads on their homepage. If there was a link to front page, then front page was used to collect the data. If no front page was linked, the first left link on the home page was chosen to collect banner ads. The page initiated from the first left link was a page similar to the front-page, and its prior position is likely to attract more attention than pages from less noticeable links on the homepage.

Data coding and analysis

Two coders participated in the coding. The coders were first trained according to the coding protocol and learned the operational definitions of variables and the procedures to code the banner ads. A subsample of 40 banner ads was used to test intercoder reliability. Scott's (1955) *pi* formula was used to calculate intercoder reliability. The Intercoder agreement averaged 87.7%, which is higher than the 85% standard for content analysis (Kassarjian, 1977).

The frequencies of cultural values and product categories were recorded. Using the coding scheme adapted from Cheng and Schweitzer, the 32 cultural values were further divided into two advertising appeal groups: symbolic and utilitarian. By following the coding protocol, the coders identified the most dominant value in each ad based on the key elements of banner ads, accompanied by online animated elements, background audio or captions.

Two statistic procedures were used in this study: frequency distribution and cross-tabulation. The frequency distribution was used to identify the most dominant cultural values presented in the banner ads. The cross-tabulation and the Chi-square test were used to determine the relationship between cultural values and advertising appeal, and product category and advertising appeal.

FINDINGS

Hypothesis 1, that the dominant cultural values presented in U.S. online banner advertisements are likely to reflect the prevailing values of the society and technology features of the Internet, was supported. The analysis of the data revealed six most dominant values, which consisted of nearly three fourth (72.7%) of the 32 value items. They were "economy" (25.7%), "effectiveness" (12.3%), "incentive" (11.2%), "enjoyment" (10.1%), "informative" (6.7%), and "convenience" (6.7%). Of the six dominant values, "economy," "effectiveness," "incentive," and "enjoyment" were the prevailing values similar to those found in the traditional media. "Informative" and "convenience" were associated more with the business and technology features of the Internet. (Table I)

The four dominant product categories were "business and finance" (17.6%), "computer and Internet product" (16.0%), "online community/service" (14.6%), and "Entertainment" (9.4%). Two of the categories were Internet specific, which comprised nearly one third (30.6%) of the 16 product categories.

Hypothesis 2, that the majority of U.S. online banner advertisements reflect values with utilitarian appeal instead of symbolic appeal, was supported. About three fourths (74.6%) banner ads reflected values with utilitarian appeal, whereas 25.4% banner ads displayed values with symbolic appeal. Among the 16 product categories examined, six categories were dominated by cultural values with utilitarian appeal whereas only two categories were more symbolic-centered percentage wise. "Online service/community" ads reflected values with utilitarian appeal such as "informative" and "economy;" "computer and Internet products" ads demonstrated utilitarian values such as "effectiveness" and "economy;" and "business and finance" ads featured utilitarian values such as "economy." Meanwhile, "entertainment" ads reflected more values with symbolic appeal such as "enjoyment." (Table II)

The findings also supported hypothesis 3 that type of advertising appeal is associated with the type of products possessing the corresponding appeal (product categories) ($X^2 = 38.47$, $df = 15$, $p < .01$). Advertising appeal was more likely to be associated with the product categories that possess the characteristics of the type of advertising appeal. The Chi-square test showed a statistical significance in the relationship between type of advertising appeal, utilitarian or symbolic appeals, and the product category (type of product or service). For example, the value "economy," the dominant value with utilitarian appeal, was more frequently used in "business and finance" (27.5), "computer and Internet product" (14.5%), and "online community/service" (17.4 %). "Effectiveness," the second dominant value with utilitarian appeal, occurred most frequently in "computer and Internet products" (30.3%). "Incentive," the third dominant utilitarian values, was more frequently used in "business and finance" (13.3), and "computer and Internet product" (13.3%). "Enjoyment," the dominant value with symbolic appeal occurred most frequently in "entertainment" (37%). However, exception was also found in the value with utilitarian appeal, such as "incentive" in "entertainment" (26.7%), which possesses more characteristics of symbolic appeal than utilitarian appeal. (Table II)

**TABLE I. CULTURE VALUES IN BANNER ADS PRESENTED
BY THE TOP 100 U.S. WEB SITES**

Cultural Value	Symbolic		Utilitarian		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Adventure	1.0	0.4	2.0	0.7	3	1.1
Beauty	1.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	1	0.4
Collectivism	3.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	3	1.1
Competition	5.0	1.9	1.0	0.4	6	2.2
Convenience	1.0	0.4	17.0	6.3	18	6.7
Economy	0.0	0.0	69.0	25.7	69	25.7
Effectiveness	0.0	0.0	33.0	12.3	33	12.3
Enjoyment	27.0	10.1	0.0	0.0	27	10.1
Family	3.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	3	1.1
Health	0.0	0.0	5.0	1.9	5	1.9
Incentive	0.0	0.0	30.0	11.2	30	11.2
Informative	0.0	0.0	18.0	6.7	18	6.7
Modernity	5.0	1.9	0.0	0.0	5	1.9
Patriotism	1.0	0.4	1.0	0.4	2	0.7
Popularity	4.0	1.5	1.0	0.4	5	1.9
Quality	2.0	0.7	8.0	3.0	10	3.7
Safety	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.7	2	0.7
Sex	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.4	1	0.4
Social Status	1.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	1	0.4
Technology	0.0	0.0	9.0	3.4	9	3.4
Tradition	5.0	1.9	0.0	0.0	5	1.9
Uniqueness	1.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	1	0.4
Wisdom	5.0	1.9	0.0	0.0	5	1.9
Others	3	1.1	3	1.1	6	2.2
Total	60	25.4	200	74.6	268	100

$X^2 = 236.25$, $df = 26$, $p < .01$

**TABLE II. ADVERTISING APPEAL BY PRODUCT CATEGORIES
ON THE TOP 100 U.S. WEB SITES**

Product Categories	Symbolic		Utilitarian		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Automotive	5	1.9	1	0.4	6	2.3
Business and Finance	8	3.0	39	14.6	47	17.6
Publishing and Media	0	0.0	3	1.1	3	1.1
Travel	4	1.5	22	8.2	26	9.7
Health	3	1.1	12	4.5	15	5.6
Entertainment	13	4.9	13	4.9	25	9.8
Telecomm	2	0.7	6	2.2	8	2.9
Computer and Internet products	6	2.2	37	13.8	43	16
Online shopping	2	0.7	13	4.9	15	5.6
Food	5	1.9	3	1.1	8	3
Beauty and Personal care	3	1.1	3	1.1	6	2.2
Apparel	1	0.4	3	1.1	4	1.5
Household Appliance	1	0.4	5	1.9	6	2.3
Gifts	0	0.0	2	0.7	2	0.7
Online Community/Service	9	3.4	30	11.2	39	14.6
Miscellaneous	6	2.2	8	3.0	14	5.2
Total	68	25.4	200	74.6	268	100

$X^2 = 38.47, df = 15, p < .01.$

This study also provided the answer to the Research Question 1: To what degree are cultural values of online banner advertisements associated with advertising appeal?

The results showed a relationship between type of cultural value and advertising appeal ($X^2 = 236.25, df = 26, p < .01$). The Crosstab analysis revealed that several cultural values were closely linked to the specific advertising appeal. "Economy" (25.7%), "effectiveness" (12.3%), "incentive" (11.2%), and "informative" (6.7%) only appeared in the banner ads with utilitarian appeal. "Collectivism" (1.1%), "enjoyment" (10.1), "modernity" (1.9%), and "wisdom" (1.9%) only appeared in the banner ads with symbolic appeal. While other cultural values may appear in banner ads with both utilitarian and symbolic appeals, "convenience" (6.3% vs. 0.4%) was more likely to be associated with utilitarian appeal, whereas "competition" (0.4% vs. 1.9%) was more likely to be associated with symbolic appeal. (See table I)

DISCUSSION

This study explored dominant cultural values in U.S. Internet banner advertising. The Results suggest that U.S. online banner advertisements tend to reflect six cultural values: "economy," "effectiveness," "incentive," "convenience," "informative," and "enjoyment." Of the six values, "economy," "effectiveness," and "convenience" are typical utilitarian cultural values (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996). The results showed a heavy repetition of utilitarian appeal that promote practical attributes such as inexpensive, cost saving, powerful, and easy to use.

The United States is regarded as typical of the Western culture (Belk et al., 1985). The value profile of the six dominant values in this study indicates that online advertising in many ways conveys cultural norms of the Western societies. Like in traditional media, U.S. online advertisers have tailored ads to reflect the prevalent cultural perceptions of the Western societies, such as "enjoyment" and "incentive." Meanwhile, the particular characteristics of the Internet medium in some way have influenced Internet advertisers' preference of cultural values such as "informative."

The findings are consistent with Cheng and Schweitzer's (1996) television advertising study on dominant cultural values in advertising. Their explanation for the dominance of the cultural values with utilitarian appeal is that there is a partial shift from symbolic values back to utilitarian values in advertising and the shift might be caused by the maturity of U.S. consumers. By looking closely at how advertising works on the Internet, this study found that the dominance of utilitarian values was more likely due to online adverting environment and the technology features of the Internet.

According to Leiss et al.'s (1990) historical pattern, the level of advertising maturity has impact on symbolism and utilitarianism of ads value. The pattern suggests that the less the advertising maturity, the greater the likelihood of using utilitarian appeal. Despite its rapid growth, online advertising is still in the process of getting mature. In this relatively new realm, advertising strategies are constantly changing, adapting, and developing with the advancement of technology. Therefore, the frequent use of values with utilitarian appeal such as "economy," "effectiveness," and "incentive" reflects the fact that Internet advertising is still in the process of evolution.

The dominance of the three values with utilitarian appeal also fits the unique characteristics of the online advertising environment. Television watchers or magazine readers might digest ads in a mood of relaxation. The mood is different when it comes to surfing the Internet. Online users browse Web pages and links so quickly that many of them seldom give a second glance to ads. Therefore, messages in banner ads have to be direct and enticing instead of being symbolic and subtle (Cho, 2003). Banner ads containing "economy," "convenience," or "effectiveness" are usually clear, straightforward, and compelling.

A comparison of low-context culture to high-context culture is also useful in explaining the high percentages of values with utilitarian appeal in this study. A "high-context culture" requires symbols and icons rather than logical recommendations to communicate thoughts and actions. Within a high-context culture, specific comparative or logically based appeals may not be desirable (Lin, 1993, p.40). For example, advertisements in Japan, which is regarded as a "high-context society," reveal an indulgence in sensitive crafting of product image and appearance and lag in the mentioning of product price, warranty, safety, because stating price or other utilitarian

attributes is considered too direct or even rude (Lin, 1993). In contrast, the United States is regarded as a "low-context culture," which relies heavily on its Western rhetoric and logic tradition to relate thoughts and actions to people and their environment (Hall & Hall, 1987). Therefore, advertisements in the United States were presented in a more factual and logical manner. This pattern of presenting facts and attributes to show product superiority reflects American indigenous cultural norms (Lin, 1993). For the same reason, the low-context culture of the United States orients its Internet banner ads to show more utilitarian values that emphasize product attributes and quality.

The consumer's level of involvement in online settings might be another reason to explain the predominance of values with utilitarian appeal in the online advertising (Cho, 2003). Consumers are flooded with information and squeezed for time and they are unwilling to spend too much time on advertising with their own specific direction for information searching (Sterne, 1997). Marketing researchers also argue that banner ads are so prevalent that they are in danger of being ignored (Notess, 1999). Since the banner ads are usually at the top or bottom position on a page, it is easy for Web users to ignore the banner. In order to survive from the fierce market competition, Internet advertising must provide solid information to its savvy online users, who prefer conciseness and lucidity. Symbolic values evoke human emotions, which are often intangible in a quick glimpse. It is not surprising that utilitarian values, which convey more tangible and straightforward information, would be favored in online ads strategies.

The dominance of the value "enjoyment" is consistent with hedonism, the origin of consumer culture in the West. Hedonism is a key feature of consumer culture, and results in an endless and ultimately unfulfilling quest for novelty, primarily through consumption. Hedonistic consumption values involve fun, gratification (e.g., an exciting life), and pleasure (Campbell, 1987). In seeking economic productivity, Western advertising has nourished an indulgence of consumption and the good life. Consumers in the United States are inclined to value benefits (e.g., luxury, prestige, enjoyment) beyond the product's basic functions (Leach, 1994). The high percentage of "enjoyment" values in online banner advertisement reflects the American society's consumption characteristics.

Johar and Sirgy (1991) found that value-expressive (symbolic) advertising appeal is effective when the product is value-expressive (symbolic), while utilitarian appeal is effective when the product is utilitarian. In their view, when values match rooted cultural characteristics of products or service, ads are more likely to elicit positive responses from their audience. The result of hypothesis 3 yielded evidence consistent with previous studies with regard to relationship between advertising appeal and product category. Cultural value varies greatly from ad category to category, but the type of advertising appeal works more effectively with the product categories possessing the corresponding appeal.

Although overall the percentage of the values of the product categories exhibits a consistent pattern as Johar and Sirgy's (1991) found in their study, part of the findings of this study suggests something different. For example, the value with the highest percentage in the "business and finance" was "competition" (16.7%), which is not a utilitarian value but a symbolic value. Also, the most frequently found value in "entertainment" was "Incentive" (26.7%), which is not a symbolic value but a utilitarian value. As Johar and Sirgy (1991) pointed out, the pattern is moderated by a variety of factors including product-related characteristics such as product life cycle, scarcity, and differentiation or consumer-related factors such as consumer involvement, prior knowledge and self-monitoring. In other words, under some situations, advertising

utilitarian/symbolic appeals may not match the product's utilitarian or symbolic characteristics. Johar and Sirgy's view on pattern moderation offers some explanations for the unexpected high percentages of unmatched advertising appeal in some product categories in this study.

This study has several limitations. It included only banner ads from the Top 100 Web Sites in the United States. Thus, the results could not be generalized beyond this context. Another limitation is the adaptation of Cheng's cultural value scheme. Cheng' measurement instruments were developed for television advertising and did not fully apply to Internet advertising. Seven out the 32 value items did not appear in the banner ads. The high missing rate of values suggests a further revision of the measurement scheme is needed for future studies.

Future studies in cultural value of online advertising could be improved by 1) selecting a random sample from a broader range of Web sites; (2) sampling ads of other categories such as online classifieds and directory listings; and (3) revising the value measurement to make it more suitable for online advertising analysis. Also, further research might expand this study by examining the relationships between cultural values and external aspects other than product categories, such as Web site categories, country origins or reliance on consumer involvement.

CONCLUSION

This study found six dominant cultural values reflected in U.S. online advertising. This value profile showed a convergence of the typical culture of the American society and the particular features of Internet advertising environment. Online banner advertisements reflected more cultural values with utilitarian appeal than symbolic appeal. This finding adds empirical evidence to Leiss' (1990) advertising historical pattern and corresponds to the nature of online advertising development, which requires conciseness and brevity. The preference for utilitarian values reflects the American low-context cultural environment, which prefers logical and factual manners to communicate thoughts and actions.

The utilitarian and symbolic appeals reflected in the online banner advertisements were found to be related to product category. This finding conforms to the traditional advertising effectiveness theory. It suggests that when Internet advertisers choose utilitarian or symbolic appeals for their ads, the particular characteristics of product or service have been considered to make the ads more effective.

Advertising effectiveness relies partly on the degree to which the ads reflect the culture and its specific values. Advertising on the Internet, although different in format and delivery channel, strives for success by transforming cultural norms as the traditional media. However, the findings of this study question the notion that the Internet in many ways is merely a reflection of traditional media, and the Internet only reproduces the content of existing media. What set Internet advertising apart from advertising in traditional media are the dominance of utilitarian appeals, reflection of proper cultural values through the specific product, and the reliance on technology and consumer involvement, all of which call for further investigation. Simple reproduction of the content of existing media is in no way of leading to effectiveness of Internet advertising.

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