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A Cultural Lens on Advertising in the Digital Age: YouTube Ads in Japan and South Korea

Topic and Research Question

The field of international advertising raises an essential question: how can a persuasive message cross cultural boundaries without losing its relevance or impact? This issue has become increasingly complex in the digital era, where advertisers communicate through global online platforms yet address audiences embedded in distinct cultural environments.

Building on this context, this thesis compares the advertising appeals used in top-performing YouTube advertisements from Japan and South Korea and examines whether the observed patterns correspond to the cultural norms of each country. Examining Japan and South Korea—two neighboring countries belonging to the Confucian Asia cluster with shared historical, linguistic, and geographic ties—allows an investigation into whether even subtle cultural variations affect digital advertising content.

Ultimately, the study evaluates whether cultural differences endure in digital video advertising or if global platform trends are driving cross-national convergence by answering the research question: *Do the similarities or differences in advertising appeals used in YouTube advertisements from Japan and South Korea, sampled from 2016 to 2020 and 2025, correspond to the countries' cultural norms?*

State of the Art

The theoretical foundation of cross-cultural marketing rests on the tension between Levitt's thesis of global market homogenization and proponents of local cultural adaptation. Traditional cross-cultural advertising literature has predominantly contrasted culturally distant nations—such as the United States and Japan—using individual-level cultural value models, most notably Hofstede's dimensions. Nevertheless, contemporary scholars critique this subjectivist approach, citing a persistent discrepancy where aggregated personal values fail to align with actual societal practices. Consequently, recent literature emphasizes descriptive cultural norms—behaviors commonly exhibited and socially reinforced within a culture—as superior predictors of real-world outcomes.

In the digital era, where online video platforms like YouTube introduce standardized formats and global engagement metrics, the degree to which national advertising cultures converge or retain localized differences remains an unresolved empirical question.

This study addresses these literature gaps by integrating Pollay (1983) and Shen (2013) for advertising appeal operationalization with the GLOBE study's (House et al., 2004) societal-practices framework, establishing a methodology to examine whether digital video advertising mirrors observable cultural practices.

Methodology and Approach

The analytical framework of this thesis applies quantitative content analysis to evaluate advertising appeals in 200 top-performing YouTube in-stream video advertisements, comprising 100 Japanese and 100 South Korean campaigns sampled from historical Leaderboards and "Best in Ads" rankings across 2016–2020 and 2025. Using each advertisement as the unit of analysis, content was coded for 47 binary rational and emotional appeals derived from Shen (2013). To test for cultural alignment, 44 appeals were operationalized into mapped indicators for eight societal-practice ("As Is") dimensions of the GLOBE framework (House et al., 2004).

Cross-national comparisons were conducted at the advertisement level using Pearson's Chi-Square and Fisher's Exact tests, with Holm's p-value adjustment applied to strictly control for Type I error across all 47 appeal tests and 16 dimension-pole variables, supplemented by product-category contextual checks.

Main Facts

Across 47 individual advertising appeals tested across 200 top-performing YouTube ads, cross-national similarity emerged as the predominant empirical pattern. *Effectiveness* (28% KR vs. 29% JP), *enjoyment* (16% KR vs. 25% JP), and *affiliation* (12% KR vs. 10% JP) served as the leading persuasive appeals in both markets, while overall presence of rational appeals (72% KR vs. 76% JP) and emotional appeals (69% KR vs. 71% JP) showed no statistically significant cross-national differences. *Modernity* represented the single most robust differentiator, remaining statistically significant after Holm adjustment ($\chi^2 = 23.95, p < .001, \phi = .346$) by appearing in 30% of South Korean advertisements compared to only 4% of Japanese advertisements.

Nominal, unadjusted differences ($p < .05$) revealed exploratory tendencies, with *technology* (11% vs. 2%) and *uniqueness* (6% vs. 0%) appearing more frequently in South Korea, whereas *family* (18% vs. 8%) and *leisure* (9% vs. 2%) occurred more frequently in Japan. While both samples shared a similar product mix dominated by

food and drink (32% KR, 34% JP) and *services* (21% KR, 27% JP), South Korean goods, services, and automobiles consistently emphasized *modernity* and *technology*, whereas Japanese counterparts prioritized *economy*, *convenience*, and *family*.

Results

Interpreting the findings within the broader literature reveals that YouTube video advertising reflects national cultural norms only selectively, serving as a commercially curated representation rather than a direct cultural mirror. Broad cross-national similarities in core appeals (effectiveness, enjoyment, affiliation) and balanced rational-emotional strategies point to platform-level media convergence and shared East Asian consumer motivations.

When evaluated against the GLOBE framework, societal-practice scores proved useful for qualitative interpretation but lacked strict predictive validity at the individual message level; notably, South Korea's dominant emphasis on modernity contradicted GLOBE's higher future orientation score for Japan, demonstrating that advertising content might be driven by national industrial development narratives rather than abstract cultural scores alone.

Theoretically, the study extends cross-cultural advertising research by demonstrating that culturally proximate markets exhibit meaningful symbolic variations despite broad structural convergence. Practically, the results advocate for selective adaptation, where international advertisers maintain a standardized core of functional and affective benefits while strategically customizing creative narratives.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/at>.

About the Author

Thanh Trang Pham holds a Bachelor's degree in Management and Technology from the Technical University of Munich. Her academic and professional interests focus on the intersection of business, strategy consulting, and cross-cultural dynamics in East Asia.

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