

INFORMATIVENESS OF CHINESE TELEVISION ADVERTISING FOR AUTOMOBILES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In order to communicate with target consumers, advertisers have two basic types of creative strategy at their disposal: informational and emotional advertising. Informational advertising communicates rational, logical facts about the product or brand, whereas emotional advertisements try to establish a favorable feeling between the consumer and the product or brand (Chan and Chan, 2005). Advertising scholars have explored and debated the effectiveness of the two approaches extensively since the 1970s. Proponents of informative advertising argue that informational or rational advertising may help reduce purchasing uncertainties (Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Golden and Johnson, 1983; Stafford and Day, 1995). Informativeness is defined as the extent to which advertisements focus on consumers' practical, functional or utilitarian needs for the product (Resnik and Stern, 1977; Mueller, 1991).

In this study we focus on the informativeness of Chinese car commercials for the following reasons. First, Chinese advertising deserves increasing attention from practitioners and academic researchers because in parallel with China's economic growth, its advertising market has grown from RMB 10 million in 1979, to RMB 47.7 billion in 2001, and RMB 343.7 billion in 2010 (China Advertising Industry Report, 2011). Second, even though many prior empirical studies have explored advertising informativeness and have concluded that the level and nature of informativeness tends to vary across product categories (i.e., high versus low involvement products, think versus feel products, durable versus non-durable products), few studies have concentrated on the informativeness of advertising for one single product category. We focus on car advertising in this study due to the fast development of China's automobile industry. The total sales of automobiles in China reached 13.64 million vehicles in 2009, surpassing the U.S., and China became the largest automobile market worldwide for the first time (CAAM, 2010). In addition, television has long been the most important advertising medium in china since 1995 (Cheng and Chan, 2009). In 2007, television accounted for 25.4% of total advertising billings, attracting 350 million households to watch TV for an average of three hours per day (Cheng and Chan, 2009). As a result, since it is crucial for both practitioners and academicians to understand the level and nature of informativeness of car advertising in China, this exploratory study fills the gap by exploring the extent to which Chinese automobile television commercials are informative and the type of information cues that are most

frequently used.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Advertising informativeness

The informativeness of advertising has been extensively studied worldwide since the 1970s. In their pioneering study Resnik and Stern (1977) developed an objective measurement in which an advertisement is operationally defined as informative if it contains one or more of 14 possible information cues. About half of the sample of U.S. network television advertising in 1975 was classified as informative (Resnik and Stern, 1977). In a follow-up study, Stern, Krugman and Resnik (1981) found that 86% of magazine advertisements contained at least one information cue. Henceforth, researchers have applied this de facto standard to measuring advertising informativeness in such countries as the U.S. (Harmon, Razzouk and Stern, 1983; Tom et al., 1984; Stern and Resnik, 1991; Keown et al., 1992), the U.K. (Weinberger and Spotts, 1989), Australia (Dowling, 1980), Canada (Pollay, Zaichkowsky and Fryer, 1980), Japan (Madden, Caballero and Masukubo, 1986; Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkham, 1987; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992; Keown et al., 1992), China (Keown et al., 1992), and Turkey (Akan, 2007).

A group of studies have compared the informativeness of advertisements between Eastern and Western countries. Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkham (1987) compared magazine advertisements from Japan and the U.S. and reported that Japanese magazine advertisements used more informational and emotional elements whereas U.S. magazine advertisements used more logical descriptions and direct speech. Keown et al. (1992) compared the information contents of advertising in the U.S., Japan, South Korea and China across 4 media (i.e., television, radio, magazine, and newspaper) and concluded that informativeness both varied by country/culture and by media. Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) compared the creative strategies used in U.S. and Japanese TV advertising. Cho et al. (1999) conducted a comparison of commercials from the U.S. and South Korea and found that even though both the U.S. and South Korean commercials seemed to emphasize emotion and mood, the U.S. commercials emphasized product features and utilitarian needs more often than South Korean commercials did. So (2004) reported that Hong Kong magazine advertisements contained more information cues than Australian advertisements did.

Researchers have also conducted comparative studies of advertisements from similar cultures such as Canada and United States (Pollay et al., 1980), the U.S. and the U.K. (Weinberger and Spotts, 1989), and China and Hong Kong (Chan, 1995).

Finally, some longitudinal studies have explored the levels of informativeness and patterns of using information cues in advertisements from one country over time (e.g., Stern and Resnik, 1991; Chan and Chan, 2005).

Several empirical studies have investigated the informativeness of Chinese

advertising. Rice and Lu (1988) reported that 100% of Chinese magazine ads were informative with an average of 2.26 cues per ad and that the top five cues were availability, performance, quality, price, and independent research. Keown et al. (1992) reported that 100% of Chinese magazine advertisements were informative with an average of 3.27 cues, whereas 92% of Chinese TV commercials were informative with an average of 1.9 cues per ad. Chan (1995) reported that 58.3% of Chinese commercials were informative with an average of 1.5 cues per informative commercial. In a follow-up study, Chan and Chan (2005) reported that 55.2% of Chinese commercials were informative with an average of 1.3 cues per informative commercial and suggested that the level of informativeness of Chinese television advertising is declining. In both studies, performance, components, and quality constituted the top three information cues (Chan, 1995; Chan and Chan, 2005).

2.2. Factors affecting the level of advertising informativeness

The results of previous research indicate a wide variability in informativeness of advertising and especially in average cues per advertisement. Various explanatory factors underlying differences in findings have been examined, such as product category (e.g., Resnik and Stern, 1977; Stern, Krugman and Resnik, 1981; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989; Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Herpen et al., 2000; Choi et al., 2006; Akan, 2007), government control (e.g., Dowling, 1980; Zandpour et al., 1994; Akan, 2007), advertising medium (e.g., Stern, Krugman and Resnik, 1981; Keown et al., 1992; Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Choi et al., 2006), cultural differences (e.g., Biswas et al., 1992; Keown et al., 1992; Zandpour et al., 1994; Taylor et al., 1997), execution strategies of advertisers (e.g., Mueller, 1991), the level of industrialization and advertising development in the country (e.g., James and Hill, 1991; Zandpour et al., 1994; Chan and Chan, 2005), the difference between market and transition economies (Herpen et al., 2000), the product life cycle (e.g., Stern and Resnik, 1991), and research design and method effects (Abernethy and Franke, 1996).

2.3. Research questions and hypothesis

A number of prior studies have examined to what extent advertising in general is informative. Results show that due to the influence of product category, higher percentages of informativeness and more information cues are observed in ads for high involvement products (e.g., automobiles, appliances) than in ads for low involvement products (e.g., food & drinks, household products) (Stern, Krugman and Resnik, 1981; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989). Ads for 'think' products for which consumers use rational decision criteria tend to contain more information cues than ads for 'feel' products for which consumers use emotional decision criteria (Weinberger and Spotts, 1989; Choi et al., 2006). In this study we are interested in the level of informativeness of car commercials and formulate the following research questions:

R 1: To what extent are Chinese automobile commercials informative?

R 2: What are the most frequently used information cues in Chinese automobile commercials?

We apply the classification scheme according to product origin (i.e., domestic, joint venture, and imported products) for Chinese advertisements from prior studies on cultural values in Chinese advertising in general (Cheng, 1994, 1997) and in Chinese automobile advertising in particular (Wang and Praet, 2012) to formulate the third research question:

R 3: what are the differences, if any, in the informativeness of Chinese automobile commercials across different automobile origins?

Wang and Praet (2012) report that cultural values manifest in Chinese automobile commercials differed across car price levels (i.e., low end, middle class, luxury) because the positioning strategy and target users for low-end cars differ from those for luxury cars. Following a similar logic, it is also well conceivable that the informativeness of Chinese automobile commercials may also differ across these price categories. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: The informativeness of Chinese automobile commercials differs across low end, middle class and luxury automobile categories.

3. METHODOLOGY

We employed content analysis to analyze the information content of Chinese car television commercials. Content analysis has been the standard analytical tool in advertising studies (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991).

We systematically collected Chinese car commercials through an entire year of 2010 as the sample of this study. We selected the channels of CCTV1 and CCTV2, the largest national television broadcaster with coverage of over 97% of the PRC's population. In order to cover the time slots with the highest audience concentration we recorded all programming during the six hours from 18:00 to 24:00. The recording was conducted once a week in an interval of 8 days, i.e., January 1st (Friday), January 9th (Saturday), January 17th (Sunday), and so forth. In order not to bias the sample by too many repeated advertisements (Stern and Resnik, 1991), the unit of analysis was each unique (non-duplicated) Chinese TV commercial. As a result, 191 car commercials constitute the sample of this study.

Resnik and Stern's (1977) 14 information cues and their operational definitions were employed as the coding framework of this study. However, since Resnik and Stern's

(1977) information evaluation criteria were designed for measuring advertisements of all types of product categories, some information cues (i.e., taste, nutrition, packaging) in the original framework do not apply to car commercials. We thus used the remaining 11 information cues in this study (see Table 1).

Two Chinese native speakers fluent in English coded the sample. First, coders were trained with written instructions containing coding procedures, detailed explanations and definitions of the 11 information cues. Coders judged information cues included in any part of the visual (e.g., on-screen descriptions, captions, characters' body language, background setting, visual symbols) and audial aspects (e.g., speech by on-screen characters or a voice-over, musical words) of the advertisements. To check the inter-coder reliability –i.e., the proportion of agreement between the 2 coders– we conducted a pretest in which the coders each coded 30 commercials that were randomly selected from the sample. The actual proportion of agreement for each of the 11 information cues in this study was between 0.90 and 1.00. Based on the proportional reduction in loss (PRL) approach suggested by Rust and Cooil (1994), given the number of coders (2) and the number of categories (2), the PRL reliability measures for all the coding variables were above 0.89. Therefore, coding reliability was deemed satisfactory. After discussing and resolving all differences, coders each coded a different half of the sample.

4. RESULTS

Table 2 shows that 21.47% of commercials contained no information cues, whereas the remaining 78.53% contained at least one information cue and can thus be considered informative. Furthermore, 51.31% of the sample contained 2 information cues or more; 27.23% contained 3 cues or more; and 10.47% contained 4 cues or more. Altogether 327 cues are identified, i.e., the average commercial contained 1.71 information cues. Table 3 presents the frequencies across the 11 information cues. The four most frequently used information cues are availability (43.46%), performance (31.94%), components/contents (27.23%), and new ideas (21.99%). In contrast, the least frequently used information cues are guarantees/ warranties (0.52%), independent research (2.09%), company research (3.66%) and price (4.16%). This answers RQ1 and RQ 2.

Regarding the differences in the level of informativeness of car commercials by car origin, table 2 indicates that the more foreign the car is, the higher the level of informativeness tends to be: while 69.51% of commercials for domestic cars contain at least one information cue, 84.54% of joint-venture and 91.67% of foreign cars contain at least one information cue. This difference is statistically significant ($X^2=7.26$, $p<0.05$, $df=2$). We can identify the same tendency for the use of at least two, three and four cues respectively. However, these differences are not statistically significant. In addition, the average number of cues per ad also exhibits the same tendency, i.e., 1.59

(domestic), 1.77 (joint-venture), and 2.08 (imported). These differences are not significant ($F=0.91$, $p=0.40$, $df=2$). The frequencies of type of information cue used in car commercials are different across the three car origins (see Table 3). However, the only cue for which the difference is significant is the new ideas cue ($X^2=17.68$, $p<0.01$, $df=2$), which is less frequently used in ads for domestic cars but relatively much more frequently used in ads for joint-venture and imported cars. In addition, the frequencies of availability and new ideas show a tendency to increase as automobiles become more foreign.

Concerning price level, automobiles in the Chinese market are generally classified into three categories: low end (under 100,000RMB), middle class (100,000RMB - 250,000RMB), and luxury (above 250,000RMB). Since automobile prices in the Chinese market differ by regions and dealers, we further considered automobile positioning strategies as an additional basis for categorization when prices were close to the cut-off point between two price categories.

Table 2 indicates that the level of informativeness of ads increases as automobile prices go up, i.e., 65.08% of commercials for low-end cars contain at least one information cues, whereas 84.69% for middle class and 86.67% for luxury cars are informative by the one-cue criterion. This difference is statistically significant ($X^2=10.15$, $p<0.01$, $df=2$). When further comparing the levels of informativeness of commercials containing two cues or more, three cues or more, and four cues or more respectively across the three price categories, none of the differences were significant. The average number of cues per ad also increases in parallel with price category, i.e., 1.41 (low-end), 1.86 (middle class), 1.87 (luxury). However, the difference is not significant ($F=2.32$, $p=0.10$, $df=2$). Thus, H1 is only partially supported.

Table 4 demonstrates the different frequencies of information cue types across the three price categories. Of all 11 cues, only the use of the availability cue was significantly different across the price categories ($X^2=8.49$, $p<0.05$, $df=2$). Availability, performance and components/contents constitute the three most frequently used cues for low end and middle class cars whereas the top three for luxury cars are availability, performance and new ideas. In addition, the performance and new ideas cues tend to increase with automobile price.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The level of informativeness of automobile commercials

This study clarified the proportion of informative commercials (78.53%) and the average number of information cues per commercial for cars in general as well as across origin and price categories. The level of informativeness in this study is higher compared to the levels reported by Chan (1995) and Chan and Chan (2005). These studies however, do not report data for automobiles as a separate category.

As pointed out by many prior studies, various factors influence the level of

informativeness and the use of information cues. In the present study, one obvious factor influencing the level of informativeness is the nature of automobile products. Automobiles are a typical high involvement product type. Compared with low involvement products that are characterized by high purchase frequency and relatively low price, high involvement products tend to be purchased less frequently and cost more. This increases the perceived risk and consequent need for more information to assist consumer purchase decision-making (Mueller, 1987). It is therefore logical that automobile advertising would contain a higher percentage of information cues. Moreover, automobiles are high-tech and complex products featuring many different features and types of functionality. When consumers try to decide which car they want among hundreds of models, they are typically interested in detailed information regarding product merits and benefits. We thus would suggest that the high-tech character might be an additional factor causing a relatively high level of informativeness in automobile TV commercials.

One factor amplifying the high-involvement character of decision-making is the limited experience of most Chinese citizens with automobile purchases (Rice and Lu, 1988). Consumers in transition economies care more about information on products and product variety and want advertisements to be product-related in order to help them in purchase decisions (Herpen et al., 2000). China is one such transition economy. According to World Bank data, in 2010 the number of passenger cars per 1,000 Chinese people was 44. This suggests that indeed most of the Chinese car consumers are first-time buyers. Consequently, these consumers are more likely to search detailed car information through all possible information channels before making a purchasing decision. It is therefore necessary for all types of advertising in a transitional economy such as China to provide ample product-related practical information.

Furthermore, the current stage of automobile industry development and market competition in China may have an influence on the frequencies of specific information cues used in Chinese automobile commercials. The Chinese automobile industry has been developing at such a rapid speed that no automobile manufacturers are willing to lose market share in this largest automobile market in the world. All major manufacturers have entered the Chinese automobile market. Meanwhile, Chinese local automobile manufacturers are growing quickly and have captured more than 40% of the passenger car market share since 2010 (CAAM, 2012). Consequently, as competition in the Chinese automobile market is becoming increasingly fierce, it is necessary for automobile manufacturers and advertisers to differentiate their products by providing specific information of product merits and benefits.

5.2. Information cues in automobile commercials

The use of the new ideas cue differs significantly across commercials for domestic, joint venture, and imported car manufacturers, i.e., the new ideas cue is used most

frequently in imported automobile commercials and least frequently in domestic automobile commercials. This is probably due to the present differences in technological prowess among automobile manufacturers in the Chinese market. Compared with the major foreign manufacturers, the productivity and technology level of Chinese local automobile manufacturers is still low. Even though some local major manufacturers such as FAW, CHERY, BYD, and GEELY, have their own research & development centers in China and even overseas, Chinese local automobile manufacturers are still far behind their foreign competitors in design process and production skills. Therefore, Chinese local manufacturers would presumably find it difficult to confidently emphasize “new ideas” in advertising for their automobiles. On the other hand, most of the imported automobiles are high-priced models that feature new design and state-of-the-art technology, i.e., these foreign manufacturers can credibly claim and emphasize “new ideas” as a sales point and strategy for differentiating their products from those of local competitors. This may explain the trend of “new ideas” increasing from low end to luxury car models.

Availability messages can be divided into two types: one type is redirection messages through which consumers can find more information on or physical access to advertised cars, such as telephone numbers, websites, and motor show addresses; the other is the announcements of new model launches. Many commercials featuring the availability cue contain both types of availability messages. A possible explanation to the significant difference of the frequency of availability is the unbalanced quality of manufacturers. Joint ventures and foreign manufacturers possess more advanced technology and a superior capability to frequently launch new models. The launches of these new models need to be announced. On the other hand, local manufacturers have less capability in developing new models and thus create fewer opportunities to provide information on availability. The same logic is applicable to the difference between low end (i.e., domestic) and the other two price categories (i.e., mostly joint-venture and imported cars). Furthermore, imported car dealers have much less automobile showrooms and instead consumers can access necessary information through telephone numbers and websites provided in commercials. This relative lack of showrooms may thus explain the finding that more than a half of imported and luxury car commercials contain the availability cue.

5.3. Implications

This study demonstrates some interesting patterns of the level of informativeness across car origins and across price categories that car manufacturers and advertisers may not be consciously aware of. Practitioners could reevaluate their commercials based on the patterns found in this study. A possible suggestion to practitioners of local and low-end car manufacturers is that they may need to use more information to assist consumers' purchasing decisions. Advertising agencies working for joint venture and

middle class car manufacturers may further differentiate their advertising by using more useful information like new ideas. Furthermore, except for the top six frequently used cues, the remaining five cues are usually used in less than 10% of commercials. Even though we did not evaluate the effectiveness of advertising, it does not mean that these less-used information cues are not effective. Practitioners may consider using these cues more frequently (e.g., price, special offers, guarantees/warranties) in order to develop differentiated advertising strategies.

5.4. Limitations

Some limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings of this study. First, this study reports the dominant information cues used in Chinese television automobile commercials. However, these cues are only what manufacturers and advertisers deem to be effective. We did not test the effectiveness of these cues. Future research needs to evaluate how effective each information cue is in Chinese advertising and television automobile advertising in particular. Second, the sample of this study only consists of commercials from CCTV1 and CCTV2. Even though CCTV is the largest TV station and covers nearly all areas of China, it is still necessary to pay attention to provincial and local TV stations. Future studies should also compare whether differences of informativeness exist across CCTV, provincial and local TV stations. Finally, we only focused on television commercials and thus the findings cannot be generalized to advertising in other media.

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Table 1 The operationalizations of Resnik and Stern's (1977) information cues

Information cues	Operational definitions
Price	What does the product cost? What is its value-retention capability? What is the need-satisfaction capability/dollars?
Quality	What are the product's characteristics that distinguish it from competing products based on an objective evaluation of workmanship, engineering, durability, excellence of materials, structural superiority, superiority of personnel, attention to detail, or special services?
Performance	What does the product do and how well does it do what it is designed to do in comparison to alternative purchases?
Components/ Contents	What is the product comprised of? What ingredients does it contain? What ancillary items are included with the product?
Availability	Where can the product be purchased? When will the product be available for purchase?
Special Offers	What limited-time non-price deals are available with a particular purchase?
Warranties	What post-purchase assurances accompany the product?
Safety	What safety features are available on a particular product compared to alternatives?
Independent Research	Are results of research gathered by an "independent" research firm presented?
Company Research	Are data gathered by a company to compare its product with a competitor's presented?
New Ideas	Is a totally new concept introduced during the commercial? Are its advantages presented?

Source: Resnik and Stern (1977).

Table 2 Information level of Chinese car commercials by car origin and price categories

	Total (191) %	Joint			Middle		
		Domestic (82) %	venture (97) %	Foreign (12) %	Low-end (63) %	class (98) %	Luxury (30) %
No cue	21.47	30.49	15.46	8.33	34.92	15.31	13.33
At least 1 cue	78.53	69.51	84.54	91.67	65.08	84.69	86.67
2 cues or more	51.31	42.68	56.70	66.67	41.27	54.08	63.33
3 cues or more	27.23	26.83	25.77	41.67	26.98	27.55	26.67
4 cues or more	10.47	12.20	9.28	8.33	6.35	13.27	10.00
Total No. of cues	327	130	172	25	89	182	56
Average No. of cues per ad	1.71	1.59	1.77	2.08	1.41	1.86	1.87

Chi-square for difference in informativeness level by one-cue criterion across car origins: $X^2=7.26$, $p<0.05$, $df=2$.

Chi-square for difference in information level by one-cue criterion across price categories: $X^2=10.15$, $p<0.01$, $df=2$.

ANOVA for difference in average number of cues per ad across car origins: $F=0.91$, $p=0.40$, $df=2$.

ANOVA for difference in average number of cues per ad across price categories: $F=2.32$, $p=0.10$, $df=2$.

Table 3 Frequencies of information cues of Chinese car commercials by car origins

	Total (191) %	Domestic (82) %	Joint-venture (97) %	Imported (12) %
Availability	43.46	37.80	46.39	58.33
Performance	31.94	26.83	37.11	25.00
Components/ contents	27.23	26.83	29.90	8.33
New ideas **	21.99	8.54	29.90	50.00
Quality	17.28	18.29	15.46	25.00
Safety	10.47	14.63	6.19	16.67
Special offers	8.38	8.54	6.19	25.00
Price	4.19	6.10	3.09	0.00
Company research	3.66	7.32	1.03	0.00
Independent research	2.09	2.44	2.06	0.00
Guarantees/ warranties	0.52	1.22	0.00	0.00

** The frequency of new ideas is significantly different across 3 car origins ($X^2=17.68$, $p<0.01$, $df=2$).

Table 4 Frequencies of information cues of Chinese car commercials by price categories

	Low end (63) %	Middle class (98) %	Luxury(30) %
Availability *	28.57	51.02	50.00
Performance	28.57	30.61	43.33
Components/ contents	25.40	30.61	20.00
Quality	17.46	17.35	16.67
New ideas	15.87	21.43	36.67
Safety	11.11	10.20	10.00
Special offers	6.35	10.20	6.67
Price	3.17	6.12	0.00
Company research	1.59	6.12	0.00
Guarantees/ warranties	1.59	0.00	0.00
Independent research	1.59	2.04	3.33

* The frequency of availability is significantly different across 3 price categories ($X^2=8.49$, $p<0.05$, $df=2$).