

## Cultural Differences in Advertising Strategy:

### Comparison between Japanese and Thai Television Commercials<sup>\*</sup> 広告戦略の文化的差異—日本とタイのテレビ広告の比較

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*This research result shows that there are cultural differences between Japanese and Thai television commercial. This confirms that advertising reflects culture in both countries and cultural difference is very crucial factor to concern when developing cross-cultural advertising.*

The question of “standardization” versus “localization” in advertising strategy has been controversial since Elinder in 1961. Advertising strategy comprises the “what is said” in an advertisement rather than the “how it is said,” which is an execution idea. Advertising strategy precedes implementation. Although there are theories and empirical research about this debate, no conclusion has been reached. Most studies of standardization versus localization in Japanese advertising have compared Japanese and American advertising (Tanaka

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1984<sup>1</sup>; Madden, Caballero, and Matsukubo 1986<sup>2</sup>; Mueller 1987, 1992<sup>3</sup>; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa 1990, 1992<sup>4</sup>; Benedetto, Tamate and Chandran 1992<sup>5</sup>; Lin 1993<sup>6</sup>). These studies tried to determine whether standardization or localization is a better strategy. They find that Japanese ads use emotional strategy, while American ads use informational strategy. However, far more rare is advertising research on this topic that compares Japan and Asian countries, especially South East Asia.

In this project, I propose to compare television commercial advertising strategies in Japan and Thailand. Such a comparison may be

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<sup>1</sup> Tanaka (1984) reports that functional values are used more frequently in U.S. magazine ads than Japanese ones.

<sup>2</sup> Madden, Caballero, and Matsukubo (1986) find Japanese ads to be less informative than American ads.

<sup>3</sup> Mueller (1987) reports in an analysis of Japanese and American ad appeals that there are numerous differences. In 1992, she examines Westernization in Japanese ad and finds that it is still far from being westernized.

<sup>4</sup> Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1990) find that the emotional strategy (74.9%) is utilized in Japanese advertising more than the informational strategy (25.1%) in every product involvement level.

<sup>5</sup> Based on Kishii, they explain seven characteristics that distinguish Japanese from American creative strategy.

<sup>6</sup> The study results of Lin (1993) also suggest that Japanese ads are less informative than their U.S. counterparts.

able to shed light on the question of “standardization” versus “localization”. Though both countries are in Asia, there are some cultural differences between them. The percentage of nationwide television ownership in Japan and Thailand is very high (99% and 94%) and television is also the most popular advertising medium in both countries. Obviously, television commercials can represent advertising in each country.

Concerning how strategies are implemented, the *research objectives* are to find similarities and differences in the *advertised products*, the *length*, and the *overall and specific strategies* used by Japanese and Thai television commercials.

The advertising industries in Thailand and Japan seem to be different in many aspects. The size of advertising market between Japan and Thailand is very different. In 1996, the Japanese advertising market was more than twenty-eight times larger than Thai advertising market. In addition, adspend per capita in Thailand was only twenty seven US dollar, which is lower than Japan more than ten times (Advertising Association 1998). Moreover, Thai advertising industry has been dominated by Western advertising agencies, while Japanese advertising industry has been led by Japanese companies.

## Methodology

Following the Transmission model (H. Lasswell, 1948) and the Ritualistic model, this research methodology focused on sender, message and receiver.

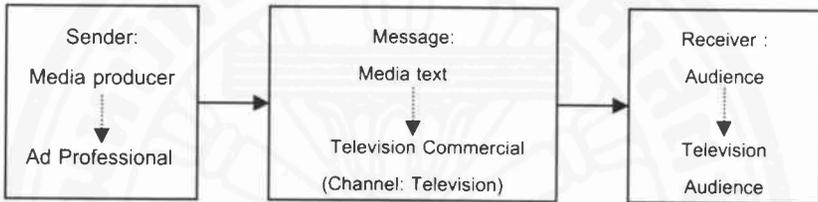


Figure 1: *Research strategy*

First, in term of “Sender,” to obtain information about the process of advertising strategy in Japan and Thailand and to interpret the advertising samples, in-depth interviews with four Japanese and four Thai advertising professionals were conducted.

Second, “Message” or content was the main part of this research. To examine the similarity and difference between Japanese and Thai advertising, ad samples were collected randomly during August and September, 2003, and May, June and July, 2004 from the three highest rating commercial channels in Osaka (channel 8 and 10) and in Bangkok (channel 3, 5 and 7). For each day, one channel was picked randomly for each country. The dates included all seven days of the week and were picked by the “constructed week” method. The same sampling dates were

used for both countries. The samples were recorded from programs aired in the prime time in Japan (7.00 – 10.00 p.m.) and Thailand (7.00 – 9.00 p.m.). All commercials were coded and analyzed by SPSS program.

To standardize the characteristics of *advertised products*, as concept of product types in marketing theory; all samplings were separated into 2 groups: tangible and intangible products. Tangible products were categorized by product involvement theory as the following: High involvement; Auto/parts, Appliances/furniture, Medium involvement; Entertainment/toys, Cosmetics/Fashion apparel and Alcohol/cigarettes, Low involvement; Household supplies, Food/ Beverage.

On the other hand, for intangible products (services) samplings, they were grouped for analysis. They were composed of: Services/ Image improvement/ Retail/ Other categories (television program promotion, which could not be compared between these two countries).

In particular of *advertising length* in Japan and Thailand, there were 3 types. The samplings were grouped and coded as followed: 15/ 30/ 60 second-length advertising/ others (not include in analysis).

In terms of *advertising strategy*, advertising were classified in two steps. The first step was overall strategy and the second one was specific strategy as in chart below.

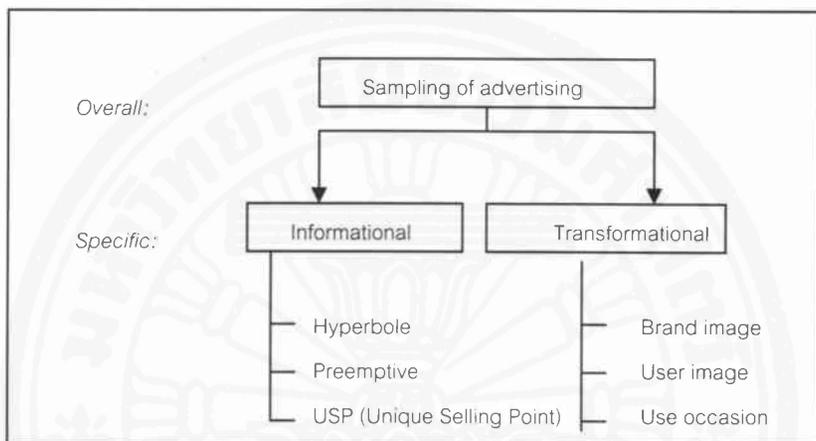


Figure 2: *Classification of advertising strategy*

Third, to determine the reliability of the coding scheme of television commercial samples, to understand the audiences in both countries as to cultural difference in advertising strategy, and to interpret the results of content analysis, data was collected in Japan and Thailand through ten in-depth interviews with Japanese audiences and ten in-depth interviews with Thai audiences.

### Research findings

The research findings are divided into three main parts as research strategy.

First, following interviews with advertising professionals, there were some similarities and differences in Japanese and Thai advertising. The advertising process was not much different and client controlled advertising in both countries. In contrast, Thai advertising seems to be influenced by US more than Japanese advertising. For example, global client, number of foreign staff, know-how from westerners, etc. However, Thai ad professionals stated that localization (local ad) was suitable to Thai advertising more than standardization (global ad). In addition, Japanese participants agreed that there were too much talent ads and 15-second ads in Japanese commercials.

Second, the total number of samples was 1,817. The Japanese and Thai samples had 999 (55%) and 818 (45%) commercials, respectively. The Japanese commercials included 19 program promotions and 24 similar promotions were provided in the Thai sample. These were removed from subsequent analyses of advertising length and strategies. The final sample size then was 980 and 794, respectively, with the Japanese programs averaging 35 commercials per hour and the Thai programs averaging 28 commercials per hour.

From the content analysis, the modal product category was low involvement product (Household supplies, Food/ Beverage) for both Japanese (44.3%) and Thai commercials (50.1%). The modal length was 15 seconds for both Japanese (80.2%) and Thai commercials (61.3%). The modal of the overall strategy was transformational for both countries (64.1% and 50.4%). Both countries used brand image from among transformational strategy (66.2% and 67.8%) and unique selling point

(USP) strategy from among informational strategy (61.3% and 74.5%) most often. Though most results between Japanese and Thai samples were the same, they were different in degree. The significant relationships among variables were analyzed by Chi-Square test. The conclusion of this content analysis is stated in Table 1.

Table 1 : *Distribution of Commercials by Product Category, Length, and Strategy by Country*

Variable and their categories	Japanese commercial	Thai commercial
Grand total	999 (55.0%)	818 (45.0%)
Grand total minus TV promos and others	980 (55.2%)	794 (44.8%)
<b><i>Product category</i></b>		
High Involvement	201 (20.1%)	109 (13.3%)
Middle Involvement	142 (14.2%)	136 (16.6%)
Low Involvement	443 (44.3%)	410 (50.1%)
Service	194 (19.4%)	139 (17.0%)
Total	980	794
Chi-square = 20.549; <i>p.</i> = .00.		

<b>Length</b>		
15 seconds	786 (80.2%)	487 (61.3%)
30 seconds	192 (19.6%)	266 (33.5%)
60 seconds	1 (0.1%)	26 (3.3%)
Others	1 (0.1%)	15 (1.9%)
Total	980	794
Chi-square = 99.172; $p$ . = .00.		
<b>Overall strategy</b>		
Informational strategy	352 (35.9%)	394 (49.6%)
Transformational strategy	628 (64.1%)	400 (50.4%)
Total	980	794
Chi-square = 33.803; $p$ . = .00.		
<b>Informational strategy</b>		
Hyperbole	45 (12.8%)	15 (3.8%)
Preemptive	74 (21.0%)	112 (28.4%)
USP	233 (66.2%)	267 (67.8%)
Total	352	394
Chi-square = 22.783; $p$ . = .00.		

<b><i>Transformational strategy</i></b>		
Brand Image	385 (61.3%)	298 (74.5%)
User Image	52 (8.3%)	31 (7.8%)
Use occasion	191 (30.4%)	71 (17.8%)
Total	628	400
Chi-square = 21.865; <i>p.</i> = .00.		

Third, from interviews with audiences, Thai commercials were more western than Japanese commercials. Furthermore, most Thai participants did not like Japanese advertisings, since they thought that Japanese commercials were nonsense (no information, no story, talent ad). Other issues of cultural differences were also discovered from interviews. In addition, the degree of reliability test of advertising strategy both in Japan and Thailand was approximately 80 %.

According to in-depth interviews with ad professionals and audiences, it can be concluded that the characteristics of Japanese advertising are emotional strategy, talent ad, and 15-second ad, while the characteristics of Thai advertising are humorous ad in Thai style, creative, and easy-to-understand.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study revealed some similarities and differences in Japanese and Thai commercials. Research problems can be answered as the following;

1. There are differences in the products advertised in Japanese and Thai television commercials.
2. There are differences in the length of Japanese and Thai television commercials.
3. There are differences in the overall and specific strategies used by Japanese and Thai television commercials.

First, the differences in *advertised products* can be accounted for by economic and market development. Since Japan's economy has developed more than the Thai economy and Japan is a high-technology country, the high involvement products are advertised in Japan (20.1%) more than in Thailand (13.3%). On the other hand, low involvement products are advertised more in Thai commercials (50.9 %) than in Japanese commercials (44.3%). Additionally, the differences may also be an indication of differences in media audiences, consumer behavior in terms of purchase decision-makers, season, culture, and society.

Second, Japan and Thailand also differ in the *commercial lengths*. This point can be explained by the concept of "*Context*." In a high context culture, which is comparatively more visually oriented, it is expected that the length of commercials will tend to be shorter than in a low context culture, which is oriented comparatively more toward verbal messages. Japan is a higher context culture than Thailand. Therefore,

Japan has more 15-second commercials (80.2%) than Thailand (61.3%). Moreover, this issue can be explained by differences in cultural dimension of individual-collectivism, economic perspective, and geographic viewpoint.

Third, in the frequency of use of *informational and transformational strategies*, and of the *particular informational and transformational strategies*, the two countries were significantly different. *Context* culture is also one of the best explanations of why Japanese advertising uses more emotional strategy than informational strategy. Well (1987) states that, in a high context culture, communication tends to be indirect, but in a low context culture communication tends to be direct and explicit. Consequently, Japanese commercials tend to use transformational strategy (indirect communication) (64.1 %) more often than Thai commercials do (50.4 %). In addition, these differences can be depicted by differences in cultural concept of confrontation or consensus seeking, uncertainty avoidance, and gender in cultural dimension.

Apart from the research conclusions, there are other issues and recommendations. Because of Confucianism and group culture, corporate image is very crucial in Japanese advertising to make consumers feel more comfortable and secure (Tanaka 1993).

On the other hand, humorous ad in Thai style reflects to "*sabaai-sabaai*" culture (easy-going) in Thai culture. Moreover, "glocalization" or the melding of three cultures: USA, Japanese, and Thai culture, appears in Thai advertising. Jory (1999) defines Thai advertising

as a sample of “glocalization.” Additionally, Punyapiroje, Morrison and Hoy (2002) conclude that Thai advertising easily adapts to Western and Eastern styles that are seemingly at odds: the rationale cognitive approach of U.S. advertising coupled with the “in your face” shock value that characterizes Japanese advertising. Nevertheless, tactical characteristics influenced by Thai culture still exist, such as use of humor, positive and high status user image, and the depiction of warm relationships.

As a recommendation, because there are cultural differences in Japanese and Thai television commercials, complete standardization of advertising between these two countries is not recommended. However, from the commonality of ad characteristics in these two countries, the suitable advertising style in both countries is the 15-second humorous advertising that is creative and easy to understand for Japanese and Thai people. Ad locations both in Thailand and Japan should reflect the uniqueness of each country.

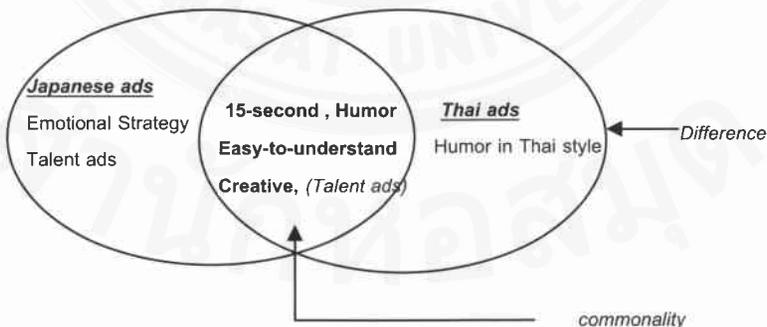
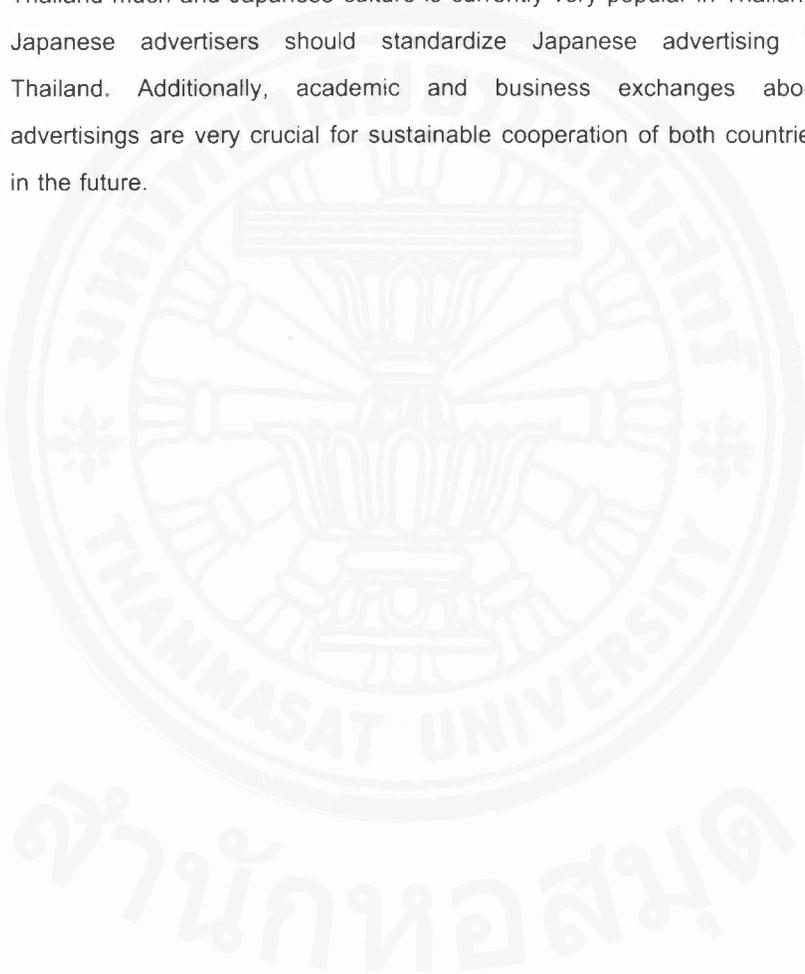


Figure 3: Commonality between Japanese and Thai ads

Moreover, since Japanese advertisers do not standardize ads in Thailand much and Japanese culture is currently very popular in Thailand, Japanese advertisers should standardize Japanese advertising in Thailand. Additionally, academic and business exchanges about advertisings are very crucial for sustainable cooperation of both countries in the future.



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